

Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
Remarks as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense John J. Hamre, Fort Myer,
Virginia, Saturday, November 13, 1999

Neale [Cosby, President of the Society of the Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier], thank you. We have gone back a long ways. I didn't know that you were one of the founding forces here in bringing the Society together. I agreed to do this just when I heard it was for the Sentinels [of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier]. I would have done it if I'd known it was you, too, but I really did it because of the Sentinels, I must say.

I remember very clearly when I brought my parents [to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier]. It was, of course, the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to them, to be able to participate and put a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns. [Sgt.] Kevin [Grubel] was very helpful that day. Thank you, Kevin. I went up just to say hello again and introduce myself, and I said, "I understand you're working your way up in the world. He said, "Yeah, just one heartbeat away." [Laughter] But he laughed. That's a good sign.

My wife asked me, "How long is this going to be?" So I'm not going to punish you long here tonight, but I am so honored to have a chance to be here.

I don't mean to correct Neale, but it was the day of my swearing-in that I came to the Tomb, and it will be the last thing I do when I leave, to go back to the Tomb. I'd like to, in part, tell you why as this speech unfolds.

I've asked myself many times, "Why is the Tomb such a special place?" It's probably one of the three or four, maybe five sites in America that most embodies the spirit of America. Think about it. There's the Capitol. You stand and you look across the Mall. Probably if you're up at the Lincoln Memorial, and you can see the Capitol--especially at night when it's lit up--that image is so powerful. There's the Statue of Liberty. Mount Rushmore--one of those very powerful images in our mind. Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. And the Tomb.

Probably those are the images that are fixed in any American's mind about America. When you look at the Capitol building, of course, you think about democracy and what it means to live in a country where you and I get to decide our own future. So many other people in history and even today don't have that privilege, to be able to help shape their own future through their government. We do.

You look at the Statue of Liberty, and you think about freedom and opportunity and the kinds of things that still make America such a revolutionary country.

You look at Mt. Rushmore, and you think about courage and character and what a difference that makes at a time when the country needs it.

So what do we think about when we look at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier? I think that it, more than probably anything else, manifests our nation's deepest hopes and, honestly, some of our deepest fears when we call young men and women to serve this country.

One of the reasons that I admire all of you so much who wear the uniform of this country and love working for the Department of Defense is because, as one very great American once said, [of] the content of the character that's underneath those uniforms. There's something about you that's different from average Americans, something that cuts you apart, sets you on a different path.

The average American probably thinks the big deal of the weekend is to go out shopping at the mall, or maybe it's watching Monday night football or going to Georgetown on Saturday night. Those are fun things, but that's not what we live for. It's not what you live for. It's not why you chose to put on that uniform. You decided you were going to live a much bigger life, bigger than we could ever do on our own. That sets you apart and makes you very different kind of people. I think that's very typical of most of the military, the men and women that serve in our armed forces. It isn't these little trivial things in life that move your spirit, it's the big things in life.

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all people are created equal." Isn't that still the most revolutionary sentence that's ever been written? Doesn't that still stir your heart when you think about it? Isn't that why remarkable young men and women like you are willing to put on the uniform of this country and to fight for it and, if necessary, die for it?

I think America owes you an astounding debt of thanks for that. But America owes you something more than just thanks. We've all heard and probably sometimes said an expression that's very common: "a fate worse than death." You may say it when you've screwed up in front of the first sergeant. But that expression, "a fate worse than death," I think we in the Department know what that means. It isn't dying that's so worrisome. I don't think that's really the fate that we worry about. I think it is much deeper than that. I think it is the fear of being forgotten for that sacrifice.

My wife and I are both religious people and one of the very basic foundation principles of theology is the relationship between identity and existence. When God was creating the heavens and the earth, every day when He stopped, He named what He created. He gave it a name. We were all given names, and we think about our identity in terms of those names that we've been given. There is a very deep powerful force inside all of us, [a longing] not to be forgotten. I think that's what the Tomb is actually all about. It's about that linkage between one's identity and one's sacrifice.

Sadly, war has always resulted in the loss of soldiers who at the same time lost their identity to everyone else. It's probably only been in the last 20 years, and Neale referred to this, that technology has given us the tools so that we will be able to always identify people in the future. We have made it a priority in the United States that we will do full

accounting. That is a national commitment that we make to everyone who puts on the uniform of this country.

We went through a very painful process. This spring and summer we disinterred The Unknown from the Vietnam era in the goal and the quest to determine his identity. We will probably never again in the future have an unknown.

But I don't believe that diminishes by one degree the importance of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The Tomb is that one place where we say to those Americans who have died, and to those who serve today and who will serve in the future, "We will not ever forsake you. We will never forget you."

It isn't necessarily what we say, it's that [the Tomb] is there, and that you Sentinels are there. Isn't that what those words mean that are carved in the marble? "Keeping faith of the nation." Keeping faith, that's why I think the Tomb is so unique. That's why I think it's one of the four or five places in America that captures the very heart of America, and will always be there no matter who is entombed in the Tomb of the Unknown.

That is why your mission, Sentinels, is so crucial. It's why you are so indispensable for this country. We have placed in your hands the very sacred duty of the entire nation. Everyone in the country is looking at you and counting on you. No soldier, sailor, Marine, airman or civilian in the entire Department of Defense has a more important job than you do. It's for that reason I'd like to say thank you.

I often pause and think to myself how lucky we are in America that there are still young men and women like you who are willing to put on the uniform of this country and serve. We don't have an excess of people like you. It's getting harder every day [to recruit]. And I'm grateful, frankly, to see people like you who are still prepared to do that.

I don't know who it was that put that seed of imagination in your heart that said that your life was supposed to be about something big, grand, and important. I'm glad it happened. I don't know if it was a mother or a father who did that. I don't know if it was a favorite uncle who encouraged you. Or was it a ceremony you may have seen? A parade? I don't know what it was. I'm just grateful that it happened.

I know in the countless times when I've gone to the Tomb and I've seen the ceremony, I see the look in those kids' eyes and I know what's happening. You are putting in those hearts that seed of commitment that we're going to need to get Sentinels in the future. I don't know that they're going to be up to the job of becoming a Sentinel, but we need them some place in these armed services. And some of them are going to be good enough to follow in your steps. We need that.

So it isn't just that you already serve in a grueling and frankly painful job. It's that you're actually creating those future Sentinels who are going to stand in your place in the future for all Americans to honor that pledge and commitment we've made: We will never, ever

forget. Even if we don't know your name, whoever is laying there, America will not forget.

Thank you very much. [Applause].