

Mr. Ratte, Commissioner Kriesel, Mayor Koslowski, Councilman Junker, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you all this Memorial Day 2017.

It is truly a great honor and privilege to be here today and let me just start off by saying that it is great to be back home. (PAUSE)

For most Americans, Memorial Day Weekend marks the beginning of summer. We head out to our cabins or a lake, fire up our grills and enjoy the great Minnesota outdoors and its' many blessings. But there is a much more important meaning to this weekend and to this day.

Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, is a day of remembrance for those who have died in service to the United States of America. Since 1775 all the way up to this very day, 666,441 Americans have died in combat. That is a staggering number to comprehend and keep in mind that over 214,000 of those killed were from the American Civil War alone. That number does not include another 3-400,000 who died during the Civil War from disease.

Hence, Memorial Day was borne out of the American Civil War and a desire to honor our dead.

A little history about Memorial Day, originally known as Decoration Day. Decoration Day was officially proclaimed on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1868 by General John Logan, the national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, in his General Order No. 11. And I quote, “The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land.”

Memorial Day did not become the more common name until after World War II, and was not declared the official name until 1967.

If there is an overarching theme to my words today it would be the word grateful. Grateful to live in this exceptional land known as the United States of America. Grateful to have citizens that are willing

to give everything in our nation's defense and grateful to know that we will never forget our fallen heroes. (PAUSE)

Unlike so many other wars of the past, we are currently engaged in a long war, far from home, against enemies that can accurately be described as the forces of utter evil.

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, 1,958 Americans have been killed in action in Afghanistan while since 2003, 3,840 Americans have died in Iraqi-Syria area of operations.

Coming home two weeks ago from Afghanistan, I had time to reflect on the many sacrifices that our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines have brought about in the past year. During the time I was away from home, in Afghanistan, fourteen American servicemen were killed in action. In Iraq and Syria, another twenty-three have given what President Lincoln called "that last full measure of devotion." (PAUSE) We ARE grateful.

CHANGE OF VOICE. Stillwater, our hometown, is the birthplace of Minnesota. But in a larger sense it is the birthplace of the Minnesota

values and beliefs that we all share. Those values include a deeply engrained sense of duty to protect America against all its' enemies, foreign and domestic. Minnesotans have always stood up for what is right and they always will.

Behind us stands a 53-foot stainless steel spire. A spire is a geometric shape and symbol of great strength. Its' power grows from the ground up until it reaches the tip and becomes from many points, a single point of strength. At its' base lies the Wall of Honor, on each tablet are the names of our hometown service members who lost their lives while fighting for our freedoms in every war from the Civil War to the present.

One hundred and twenty-two of our fellow citizens' names lie on that wall of honor. One hundred and twenty-two of several thousand of our Stillwater brothers and sisters who have served over the last 155 years in our nation's times of need. They didn't step forward seeking glory or fame, they stepped forward to be a part of a movement that was

greater than themselves. Most importantly, with great bravery, determination and an uncompromising commitment, they set an example of citizenship and unabashed patriotism to their generation ... and to ours.... In the Gospel of John it is written, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

These patriots came from all walks of life. In 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, Company B (The Stillwater Guards) of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota were farmers, merchants, teachers and of course lumberjacks. During Vietnam, many of the fallen had their Draft number come up just as they graduated from Stillwater High School, while others volunteered. What all these heroes had in common was *a willingness to sacrifice*. I willingness to protect their home and hearth at any cost from a menace they knew was evil, inhuman and just plain wrong. Not only did they fight against evil but they fought for our very freedoms.

As President Roosevelt spoke to America on the eve of World War II, he cited four fundamental freedoms that people "everywhere in the

world" ought to enjoy. These four freedoms symbolize what our Stillwater fallen have so unselfishly given to us. They are: Freedom of Speech, Freedom to Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. Let me share some experiences from the Middle East.

That first being the Freedom of Speech. Today's speakers have peaceably assembled to express their unhindered opinions of our honored dead. We do so without fear of retribution or punishment. In ISIS controlled towns across Syria and Iraq and in Taliban controlled areas in Afghanistan, there is no such freedom and the price for that action is most certainly death. In Kabul we watched first-hand as a suicide bomber targeted a group of protesters last August just days after we arrived. Just outside the Green Zone we observed the protesters peacefully pass by, a suicide bomber detonated and left six dead and many more wounded. As the dead and wounded were evacuated, the remaining fifty or so continued their march, more determined than ever to make their voices heard.

The next freedom is The Freedom to Worship. Look at all the Church Spires across our wonderful town. We practice tolerance, understanding, and worship to the dictates of our conscience. I can personally tell you after having spent three years in the Middle East that real Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance, and justice. Not the high-jacked and perverted brand that the ISIS and Taliban advocate.

The Third Freedom is the Freedom from Want. In Iraq and Afghanistan most of the locals keep their priorities quite simple. A small home with a roof, water, not necessarily from a faucet, and enough food for the next 24 hours. Electricity is nice but there are frequent rolling blackouts. When I think back to the poverty and desperation I've seen on the streets of Baghdad and Kabul it makes me reflect deeply on what we have here in Minnesota. You know, it funny, I walked into one of our large local grocery stores just the other day for the first time in over ten months. I proceeded to walk up and down each aisle in

absolute stunned silence as I gazed upon the rows and rows of food.

We are so blessed here.....words just can't describe it.

The final freedom is Freedom from Fear. In wartime, you just never

know when fear will strike. During one of the rocket attacks last

October on Camp Resolute Support, a fellow soldier and I were walking

the camp perimeter when the Indirect Fire Alarm sounded. All we

could do was hit the ground, cover our head and hope for the best.

This was the first deployment to Afghanistan for the Soldier I was with

and I don't think she knew what to expect. Moments before the first

rocket hit, she grabbed my hand and looked me in the eyes with fear.

With just seconds left before the rocket was to hit I told her, "Have

faith, not fear." Moments later the rockets landed around 200 meters

away outside our perimeter and luckily there were no casualties. We

had fought fear with faith.

Which brings us back to these honored dead. (PAUSE and TURN)

To all 122 Stillwater Veterans who gave their lives for our freedom. WE ARE GRATEFUL. Thank you for your life, thank you for your honor, thank you for your sacrifice. (PAUSE)

Finally, I have a favor to ask of each of you on behalf of all of our veterans. For those who died in battle or passed away after long life, make it a point to visit their graves and render them proper respect. As General Douglas MacArthur once said, "I do not know the dignity of their birth, but I do know the glory of their death." For our living veterans, thank them for their service and try to get them to tell you about their experiences. There has been much sacrifice on their part and in the words of Philosopher Plato: "Only the dead have seen the end of war." For those brother and sister veterans struggling with the memories, reach out, be resilient and use the strong battle mind and skills you were trained to use.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for the great honor of speaking to you today, God Bless America, God Bless our fallen warriors and God bless the great citizens of Stillwater, Minnesota.