



Ronald Reagan

Address at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial



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Before I begin, let me take a moment to congratulate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and the other distinguished guests without whom the construction and operation of this memorial would not have been possible. Let me also say that America is grateful to the hundreds of Vietnam veterans who, when I asked them to join my Administration, did so, and have and are serving our nation so proudly. For your devotion to America, I salute you.

We're gathered today, just as we have gathered before, to remember those who served, those who fought, and those still missing, and those who gave their last full measure of devotion for our country. We're gathered at a monument on which the names of our fallen friends and loved ones are engraved, and with crosses instead of diamonds beside them, the names of those whose fate we do not yet know. One of those who fell wrote, shortly before his death, these words: "Take what they have left and what they have taught you with their dying and keep it with your own. And take one moment to embrace those gentle heroes you left behind."

Well, today, Veterans Day as we do every year, we take that moment to embrace the gentle heroes of Vietnam and of all our wars. We remember those who were called upon to give all a person can give, and we remember those who were prepared to make that sacrifice if it were demanded of them in the line of duty, though it never was. Most of all, we remember the devotion and gallantry with which all of them ennobled their nation as they became champions of a noble cause.



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I'm not speaking provocatively here. Unlike the other wars of this century, of course, there were deep divisions about the wisdom and rightness of the Vietnam war. Both sides spoke with honesty and fervor. And what more can we ask in our democracy? And yet after more than a decade of desperate boat people, after the killing fields of Cambodia, after all that has happened in that unhappy part of the world, who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just? It was, after all, however imperfectly pursued, the cause of freedom; and they showed uncommon courage in its service. Perhaps at this late date we can all agree that we've learned one lesson: that young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win.

But beyond that, we remember today that all our gentle heroes of Vietnam have given us a lesson in something more: a lesson in living love. Yes, for all of them, those who came back and those who did not, their love for their families lives. Their love for their buddies on the battlefields and friends back home lives. Their love of their country lives.

This memorial has become a monument to that living love. The thousands who come to see the names testify to a love that endures. The messages and mementos they leave speak with a whispering voice that passes gently through the surrounding trees and to out across the breast of our peaceful nation: a childhood teddy bear, a photograph of the son or daughter born too late to know his or her father, a battle ribbon, a note -- there are so many of these, and all are testimony to our living love for them. And our nation itself is testimony to the love our veterans have had for it and for us. Our liberties, our values, all for which America stands is safe today because brave men and women have been ready to face the fire at freedom's front. And we thank God for them.

Yes, gentle heroes and living love and our memories of a time when we faced great divisions here at home. And yet if this place recalls all this, both sweet and sad, it also reminds us of a great and profound truth about our nation: that from all our divisions we have always eventually emerged strengthened. Perhaps we are finding that new strength today, and if so, much of it comes from the forgiveness and healing love that our Vietnam veterans have shown.

For too long a time, they stood in a chill wind, as if on a winter night's watch. And in that night, their deeds spoke to us, but we knew them not. And their voices called to us, but we heard them not. Yet in this land that God has blessed, the dawn always at last follows the dark, and now morning has come. The night is over. We see these men and know them once again -- and know how much we owe them, how much they've given us, and how much we can never fully repay. And not just as individuals but as a nation, we say we love you.

These days, we show our love in many ways -- some of it through the Government. We now fly the POW - MIA flag at this memorial on Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and POW - MIA Recognition Day. This is a small gesture, but a significant one. America also keeps a vigil for those who have not yet returned. We have negotiated with the Vietnamese to bring our nation's sons home, and for the first time to have joint teams investigating remote areas of Vietnam that might shed light on the fate of those we list as missing.



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In Laos, we have also begun a new round of surveys and excavations of crash sites. And we have told Hanoi that it must prove to the American people through its cooperation whether men are still being held against their will in Indochina. Otherwise we will assume some are, and we will do everything we can to find them.

Here at home, a new Department of Veterans Affairs and extended veterans benefits are merely outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace that has come to our land. Vietnam service is once more universally recognized as a badge of pride. Four years ago, I noted that this healing had begun and that I hoped that before my days as Commander in Chief were over it would be completed. Well, now as I approach the end of my service and I see Vietnam veterans take their rightful place among America's heroes, it appears to me that we have healed. And what can I say to our Vietnam veterans but: Welcome home.

Now before I go, as have so many others, Nancy and I wanted to leave a note at the wall. And if I may read it to you before doing so, we will put this note here before we leave:

"Our young friends -- yes, young friends, for in our hearts you will always be young, full of the love that is youth, love of life, love of joy, love of country -- you fought for your country and for its safety and for the freedom of others with strength and courage. We love you for it. We honor you. And we have faith that, as He does all His sacred children, the Lord will bless you and keep you, the Lord will make His face to shine upon you and give you peace, now and forever more."

Thank you all, and God bless you.