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Colin Powell

Military Retirement Ceremony Address

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President and Mrs. Clinton, Vice President and Mrs. Gore, President and Mrs. Bush, Vice President and Mrs. Quayle; Justices of the Supreme Court; Secretary Aspin and Members of the Cabinet, Service Secretaries, Members of the Diplomatic Corps; my fellow Chiefs of Defense who have traveled from afar to be here; my dear friend Field Marshal Vincent, the Chairman of the military committee of NATO; my fellow Members of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], and the Commanders-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States who are here today; distinguished guests, members of my beloved family, friends old and new -- but all treasured; men and women of the Armed Forces of the United States represented so magnificently by the Joint Forces Honor Guard before you:

I express my sincere thanks to each and every one of you for being here to share my final day in uniform.

The Army has officially advised me that for record purposes, I have served 35 years, 3 months, 21 days, and as we say in the infantry, a wake-up. I love every single day of it and it's hard to leave. It is made easier by your presence.

Mr. President, Secretary Aspin, I thank you for your very, very kind words and your presence here today as well as the great honor you do to me Mr. President, by awarding me the [Presidential] Medal of Freedom with distinction.



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I also thank you both and Vice President Gore for the support and the openness that you have shown to me and to my colleagues and the Joint Chiefs of Staff over the past eight months. During those eight months, we've dealt with some very, very difficult issues but Mr. President, as you once said to me, if the issues were easy, if the problems were so quick to receive a solution, they would have been solved earlier by somebody else.

Mr. President, you and Secretary Aspin have pledged yourselves to keeping our Armed Forces strong and of the highest quality. I can't tell you how much that means to each and every one of us in uniform to know that we have that kind of support, that kind of dedication, that kind of commitment from our Commander-in-Chief. On behalf of all of the members of the Armed Forces of the United States, I thank you for that pledge; and I can pledge back to you on behalf of each and every one of these wonderful young men and women, that they will never, never let you down when it becomes necessary for you to call on them.

President and Mrs. Bush and Vice President and Mrs. Quayle, let me also say that it means a great deal to Alma and to me to have you here today. You have been our dear friends over the years and you have been treasured friends and supporters of our Armed Forces. Your presence here today with President Clinton and Vice President Gore speaks volumes about the nature of our political system and its relationship to the military, and I thank you both very, very much for being with us.

There are too many distinguished guests here to recognize them all, but let me welcome, especially my dear friend, Secretary of Defense Cheney and Secretary Weinberger, who had such an important influence in my life over the last 10 years. I also want to recognize my predecessors as Chairman, Admiral Crowe, who's here, and General Jones, General Vessey, and Admiral Tom Moorer. I also recognize all the former members of the JCS and former commanders of our unified and specified command.

As the President and Secretary have noted, much has happened over the past four years. I need not catalogue for this audience the events attendant to the demise of the Cold War and the beginning of a new year in world history. We have seen war and we have seen peace. We have seen suffering and we have seen the promise of democracy. We have seen hope mixed with danger and uncertainty. We have seen the path open to a better world; and to you Mr. President, America will lead the way to that better world.

The aspiring nations of the world trust the United States. They need the United States. They need our political leadership. They need our economic strength. They need our value system as a model to learn from. They need our military strength. They need our military commitment to help keep order and to help prevent aggression. America's Armed Forces will have a busy future, busier than in the predictable garrison days of the Cold War.



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As we sit here on this gorgeous fall afternoon, at this historic post, elsewhere, American aviators are patrolling over the Persian Gulf. American infantrymen are in danger in Mogadishu, dealing with the difficult challenge, [the] kind of challenge that is perhaps very, very typical of what we will be seeing more of in the future. Americans are flying desperately needed supplies in the Bosnia. Other GIs are preparing for the possibility, a hopeful possibility of implementing a peace agreement in Bosnia. Our Navy patrols the Adriatic Sea, and the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. Our Marines provide a reassuring presence in troubled regions of the world. The Army stands watching Korea and Europe. Our Coast Guard goes after the drug enemy infiltrating our country, and at the heart of each of these services is a young American boy or girl, perhaps only 19 years old, a volunteer, well trained, proud, selflessly serving a nation wherever that nation, whenever that nation calls upon it to go and to serve.

They carry on a tradition of over 200 years of service and sacrifice. They go into harm's way to protect us and to provide for the common defense. They are the best and the very brightest of America's youth, and the greatest of all honors I have had was the honor of being one of them and of being their senior representative over the past four years. They have succeeded in every mission, and by their performance, have bonded once again with the American people in a way we have not seen for decades. I thank each and every one of them with their service to country.

For me, today is a day of memories and a day of thanks; and for the last several days, memories have been flooding in and I have been having difficulty sorting them all out. Some are very, very vivid. Some are vague. They aren't entirely coherent to me except perhaps the deepest recesses of my mind's eye.

The memories come to me in so many different ways. I remember vividly the day that my father many, many years ago, for the first time, put me on a bus to New York City and saw me off to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, my first military experience. I remember fondly my ROTC days at CCNY. I remember cold nights in Korea and Germany with the sergeant coming along to offer me a hot cup of coffee. I remember miserably hot and terrifying days in Vietnam. I remember the warmth and presence of family reunions between assignments or coming home from overseas.

I remember meeting Alma for the first time. I remember the memory of the birth of each of our three wonderful, perfect children and the birth of a treasured grandson.

I remember the thrill of moving from post to post, the excitement of working in the White House during historic times, the exhilaration of Operation Desert Storm, the faces of old friends and former commanders and fellow soldiers, and family members have been marching by in a steady cadence for the last several days. I especially see the faces of comrades, comrades in arms, who gave their lives and service to this country. I see the faces of those who trained me, those who disciplined me, those who inspired me, those who served with me, those who cared for me and loved me over this past 35 years.



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Many of you are here today and I can't possibly thank you all. You know who you are and I need not name all of the hundreds present. These events and people have given me a great life and have given me a great career. I have never wanted to be anything but a soldier, and my dream has been fulfilled for almost four decades. I find myself on this beautiful afternoon, the most fortunate, fortunate man.

By my side, for most of that time, has been Alma. For over 31 years, I have distilled from our life together one lesson that I will pass on to any young person contemplating marriage -- marry high, marry high and with Alma, I hit the heights. She raised three wonderful children. Over those 31 years, we move to 22 different houses but she made sure that we never change homes. She shared every dark moment. She has been my partner and my supporting pillar over all those years. She has been a perfect Army wife, inspiring others and representing the nation so well around the world. Without her love and caring, I cannot imagine what my life would have been like. So Alma, darling, and this is your day too, I thank you. I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for sharing this journey. I will never be able to fully express my gratitude so let me just say, "Thank you darling."

For the three Powell kids and for the last five years joined by a wonderful daughter-in-law, let me just say that you have brought me incredible joy and pride and I thank you so much. You are all hereby relieved of further duty as The General's Kids: You no longer need to call me sir. You no longer need to stand at attention when I speak to you. You no longer need to refer to me behind my back as The Great Santini. I also promised to be a bigger passé for you in the future, than I've been in the past. You are treasures.

I also must say thank you to my remarkable extended family who have come from around the country to be here today -- from Birmingham, from New York, from California, from Canada, from all over. My sister Marilyn is here and is now the matriarch and she represents all of those first and second generations present who descend from an incredible group of Jamaicans who came to this country in the 1920s, seeing and seeking opportunities that existed only here. As one news article once put it, "It was a darn good thing for Colin Powell that the boats that Luther and Ariel Powell got on in Kingston ended up in America and not somewhere else." I wish all of you here had known Luther and Ariel Powell, two remarkable people who are still with me and every member of my family every day. They are here today on this field as surely as I am, and I love them very much and I thank them very much.

I thank my office family, Nancy and Kenny and [unclear at 12:08] and Otis, and all the others who have been indispensable over the last several years. I especially must thank Admiral Dave Jeremiah, my Vice Chairman, for his outstanding friendship and support. I thank my JCS colleagues. We have been a remarkable team of six officers who have worked as brothers-in-arms to do our very, very best for the nation and I am proud of each and every one of them and the leadership that they have provided to the services and to the support that they have given to me.



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I thank the brilliant Joint Staff and I thank all of my friends who are here today from Kelly Street, from my White House fellow days, from CCNY, from Germany. I thank a couple of special, special friends, who know who they are, who call me every day to make sure that I'm all right.

I also share with the President in congratulating General John Shalikashvili. He will be a brilliant chairman. He will be absolutely splendid in the job. He and Joni are great military team.

For a moment, with your permission, I wish to stop being the ecumenical chairman and just for a moment, I want to return to my beloved Army. The Army has been my home. The Army has been my life. The Army has been my profession. The Army has been my love for all these many years. The Army has invested in me. It has taken chances on me. It has cared for me. When my career, over the years, took rather bizarre political turns, that should have been fatal.

Great Army leaders such as General John Wickham and General Carl Vuono always let me know that I could come home, that I had a place to go to in the Army. I am where I am today because the Army takes care of its own. I was allowed to rise based on performance. The Army took in a young black kid from ROTC in the South Bronx and brought him to this point. The Army allowed me to climb on the shoulders of the Buffalo Soldiers and other African Americans who had blazed the trail of 300 years of American history. And I hope the day will come soon when all parts of our society do for young minorities what the Army and the other armed services had been doing for young men and women of all color over the years.

And finally, I want to thank the American people and the nation for the privilege of serving. I love this country with all my heart and with all my soul. It is a love without limit. I have a bottomless faith in the goodness of this land and the goodness of its people. I am proud to be an American. I am so proud to have been an American soldier.

So on this, my last hour in uniform, my heart is filled with gratitude, with love and with thanks for the blessings of family, blessing of friends and above all, a blessing, the unique blessing of being a citizen of this nation which God has blessed and which we are all very, very proud to call America.

Thank you all for being here today. Goodbye and God bless you.