

Senator Leahy Offers A Perspective On Memorial Day From Flanders Fields  
May 30, 2011

We are gathered in a cemetery consecrated by the sacrifice of soldiers of our countries who died in the final days of what, in their time, was called the "Great War" and "The War To End All Wars."

It was a battle so fierce that almost a century later, as we gaze across their places of rest, we can still feel their valor and their anguish. These crosses, row on row, carry remembrance forward, and so does the annual reappearance of the poppies in these fields.

Like the Vermonters who have fallen in Afghanistan and Iraq, and their numberless comrades in conflicts before and after the strife of these nearby battlefields, these brave soldiers made no appointment with death. We hail these fallen patriots for braving the violence and tragedy of war.

But more than that, we honor our fallen here because they sacrificed all for a cause larger than themselves - defending humanity, freedom, and the ties of family and friendship that irrevocably bind our countries together.

They were of a generation of Americans, Belgians British and French who fought, shoulder to shoulder, and gave their all so we and others could live in freedom.

Four of them were sons of the states of Alabama and Iowa, which two of my Senate colleagues, who are here today, represent.

I am the second United States senator to speak at this solemn resting place. The first was Senator Francis Ryan Duffy of the state of Wisconsin, who came to dedicate the chapel, 74 years ago.

It is worth recalling what Senator Duffy said here in 1937, as the spreading shadow of war was once again darkening Europe:

He said:

"If the boys who are buried out here could sit up in their graves and speak to us today, it would be to give voice to the agonizing question -"Cannot some other means be found to settle international disputes?"

Just two years later the world was plunged into the Second World War, and every generation of Americans since has known war's brutality.

Across the globe, in the century since then, innocent civilians increasingly have joined the ranks of those in uniform as the victims of war.

Over the years, standing with families from Vermont as they bid farewell to loved ones sent away to fight, I have seen the terrible costs: wives and children left alone, parents who must bury a child.

Lives with so much possibility suddenly cut short, as were those of the soldiers we honor here.

The men who sacrificed everything at Flanders Field -- and who are commemorated so vividly through Colonel John McCrae's poetic tribute, heard 'round the world -- believed that some things are worth fighting for.

They knew that vanquishing tyranny, and defending the ideals our countries share, were among them. Of course those same values are worth pursuing peacefully. Our obligation to our fallen, and to all of humanity, is to use every peaceful means at our disposal before committing any of our countrymen to battle.

We are here today to solemnly affirm that we remember their sacrifice, and that we will never forget.

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