

Remarks by Donald C. Winter  
Secretary of the Navy  
Cupertino Veterans Memorial Dedication Ceremony  
Memorial Park  
Cupertino, CA  
Sunday, November 11, 2007

Mayor Wang, Ms. James, the Axelson and Suh families, distinguished guests, veterans, ladies and gentlemen, today the citizens of Cupertino have come together to honor and thank hometown heroes, and veterans from across the country.

It speaks very highly of the people of Cupertino to have gathered here on this day of remembrance to recognize not only the great contributions and sacrifice of local hero Matthew Axelson, but of all the Nation's veterans.

Of all the official duties I perform and ceremonies I attend, there is nothing so humbling, so moving, and so inspiring as those which bring me in personal contact with the heroes who have made such great sacrifices on our behalf, and with the families that have nurtured them and supported them throughout the years.

When Donna Axelson asked me if I would come here to speak at this event, no request could have left me feeling more honored, or more eager to pay public tribute to her son and his fallen teammates, and the company of heroes they have joined in God's eternal domain.

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Remembering the fallen is our duty.

This memorial will serve as a reminder to citizens today, and to future generations, that our liberty is never free, but comes at a cost.

A very high cost.

Those who have served, and, in particular, paid the ultimate sacrifice, in the defense of the Nation, deserve to have their stories told.

Those in government responsible for the safety and welfare of the people they represent, in turn, owe the citizenry an accounting—an explanation for why the fate of the Nation is dependent on the willingness of patriots to take up arms and defend the blessings of liberty that we enjoy.

And so today we would do well to consider the history of Veterans Day, and

reflect on matters of war and peace.

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In 1918, at the end of World War I, on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month, an armistice between the Allied nations and Germany went into effect.

For that reason, 11 am, November 11, 1918 was widely regarded as the final hour of “the war to end all wars.”

Armistice Day was declared, and men of goodwill among the victorious powers vowed never to go to war again.

War was a thing of the past.

Nothing could possibly be worth the horrors of the world conflict known at the time as “The Great War.”

At long last, world peace was at hand.

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It was not to be.

When Hitler’s army invaded Poland in September of 1939, the two decades of disarmament, the treaties and agreements outlawing war, the goodwill of millions of peace-loving citizens, all came to naught.

Preserving the hard-won peace was not as easy or as natural as people had hoped.

Those who failed to keep the peace should not have been surprised.

Nor should we.

Over the past two centuries, the only thing more common than predictions about the end of war has been war itself.

In 1968, two prominent historians calculated that there had been only 268 years free of war in the previous three and a half millennia.

War has been a persistent part of the human condition, however much we wish it were otherwise.

Because there is evil in the world, we must confront it.

That is the theme of the German theologian Martin Niemoller 1946 speech about our moral responsibility when confronted by evil, and I quote:

“First they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a

Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me.”

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Yes, some things are worth fighting for.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a speech in Detroit shortly before he died, asserted that “If a man hasn’t discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”

King understood the sentiment of our Founding Fathers, that God grants liberty only to those who love it, and are always ready to guard and defend it.

The country that emerged from our war of independence with the slogan, “Don’t tread on me!” adopted certain ideas about liberty that they were willing to fight for.

And when the republic was in danger, and the call to duty was sounded, the American people were always able to count on brave patriots to step forward and take up arms in defense of the land they loved.

Those patriots stand between our freedom and those who wage war against us, those who wish to impose their will on us, and those who wish to change our way of life.

Those are the patriots we honor today.

In World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Balkans, Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, and in operations in every theatre, they took a stand in opposition to aggression, and in opposition to the threats that we face.

Today our peace is threatened by global jihadists who openly seek our destruction.

The attacks of 9/11—which killed more Americans than were lost on December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor, including, by the way, 49 Californians—were not the first terrorist attacks on the United States.

They were merely the most spectacular.

Those attacks were a wake-up call to America and to the West that it was time to fight back.

This war against our terrorist enemies has been costly.

It demands great sacrifice of those who take up arms under our Nation’s banner.

It also demands that our citizenry recognize that sacrifice—and support in word and deed the patriots who fight on our behalf.

There are many ways to serve our Nation, but those who serve in the military—and their families—make a unique sacrifice.

We owe it to them and to our country to let them know that we stand with them—always.

The citizens of Cupertino, inspired by the extraordinary heroism of so many American service members, past and present, have joined together to honor those patriots, and, with this memorial, offer a clear statement of support for those who have proudly worn the uniform in our nation's defense.

This memorial is a fitting tribute to our veterans, and to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsman from Cupertino, from the Bay area, from the State of California, and from all across America, who have given their lives so that others might live and enjoy the blessings of liberty.

Alongside this memorial is a beautiful sculpture depicting two warriors representing those of every service—our guardians, defenders of the Republic.

It is impossible to remain unmoved by the artist's compelling representation of these two men.

He has brilliantly captured the drama, the heroic stature, dignified devotion to duty of warriors in combat.

Inspired by extraordinary heroism of Navy SEAL's Matthew Axelson and James Suh, the sculpture is a powerful tribute to the silent bond between two brothers in arms and all that they represent—courage in the face of danger, esprit de corps, selfless sacrifice.

Many Americans do not know the story of Operation Redwing and the heroes that emerged from the tragic events that took place in Afghanistan in June 2005.

It is a story that cannot fail to leave one humbled, inspired, and moved to feel intense gratitude towards them, and towards all those who have served.

Matthew Axelson, James Suh, and all the SEAL's and Special Operators who died so heroically and tragically in June 2005 in Afghanistan represent the best of their generation, and they follow in the heroic footsteps of generations past.

They also join a long line of heroes from the Bay Area and from the great state of California.

The list of names of Californians who have earned the Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross, and similar awards from the other branches of military service is 37 pages long—and Santa Clara County alone is the home of eleven such heroes.

The same spirit of courage and patriotism of those who served in the past, who now serve today, and who will serve in the future, is vital to our destiny as a free Nation.

Legitimate disagreements about politics are the very essence of a free society.

But there should be no disagreement about those who serve—they have earned our respect and our gratitude.

Please allow me to take this opportunity to thank all of you who are with us today—veterans from World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Balkans, Desert Storm, ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and all of our campaigns.

I salute you for all you have done for our great country.

I speak for all patriotic Americans in saying that we deeply appreciate your service.

God bless our veterans, and may God continue to bless America.