



Former Senator Sam Nunn
Co-Chairman, Nuclear Threat Initiative
“Taps at Twilight” Memorial Day Speech
May 31, 2010
St. Simons Island

Thank you, Martin, for your generous introduction. I am grateful to you, to President Pridmore, Reverend Strength, Tim Atkins, Rhonda Hambright, and all gathered here tonight to pay tribute to those who have served our nation with honor and courage.

General Winne and Colonel Barnum, we thank you for your dedicated service to our nation and, through you, we thank all of the American men and women in uniform today, who continue to guard the sea lanes and airways and man the distant and dangerous outposts of the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq and Korea, to protect our nation. We also thank members of our National Guard and Reserve units, as well our homeland security personnel, including policemen, firemen, and health officials, who recognize each day -- in an age of terrorism -- that our homeland can quickly become the front line of danger.

My father, a World War I veteran, grew up in our hometown of Perry, Georgia and had a classmate by the name of Courtney Hodges, who also fought in World War I. Courtney Hodges became one of the great leaders of World War II, and succeeded General Omar Bradley as commander of the First Army --- known as the “Big Red One.” The First Army was the first to liberate Paris, the first to cross the Seine into Belgium, the first to capture a German town and the first to cross the Rhine, meeting the Russians at the Elbe. They then headed to the Pacific to complete the war with Japan. When I was six years old, Perry, Georgia welcomed home our hero, General Courtney Hodges -- the biggest thing that had ever happened to Perry.

I remember my father sitting on the platform next to General Hodges in front of Perry High School. Courtney Hodges was a very quiet and modest man, and he insisted that the celebration be in honor of all of those who fought in World War II -- not just one general. Very few American veterans who have served our nation are welcomed home with such fanfare after such a clear and decisive global victory. But all of our veterans have made sacrifices for our nation, and all deserve our profound gratitude.

On Memorial Day, we honor the patriotism and service of American veterans in all wars, and we also honor those who, by being prepared to fight, served our nation by deterring and preventing conflict. To all of those who served in military uniform -- whether you returned to parades and adoring crowds or to the silent drums of an inner

voice that tells you that you did your duty -- all Americans owe you a debt that cannot be repaid.

Our Memorial Day tradition builds character in all of us as we remember the courage and sacrifice of those who served and those who gave their lives. Let us also remember those who grieved: mothers and fathers who buried their sons and daughters, young women who were planning a wedding that never happened and young mothers left to raise their children alone. Let us never forget the family's share of the sacrifice that comes with military service, including the families of those in uniform today who protect our nation around the world. No one teaches the virtue of selflessness as well as the women and men in our Armed Forces.

Even among these heroes, some stand out. General Winne just spoke of the courage of Medal of Honor recipient Colonel Harvey Barnum. Some acts are so courageous that they need to be recognized -- not just to reward a courageous individual like Colonel Barnum -- but to highlight their example. Because courage is contagious, and the more we know about the courage of others, the more it strengthens our own. General Pershing who led our World War I effort once said -- "I would give up all my stars for the medal of honor."

As we honor those in life and in death that have given so much, we must do so with a firm determination that America will only commit our young men and women to battle or put them in harm's way with a clear understanding of our vital goals -- how their danger attributes to the achievement of these goals -- and a national commitment to give them the tools and support that they need to get the job done. These decisions have never been easy, but today they're being made in an even more complicated and challenging global environment.

In a nuclear, chemical, and biological age -- with the materials required for catastrophic terrorism spread around the globe -- many nations, many military leaders, many scientists and many citizens of other nations are on the front lines of protecting both American security and global security. Earlier this year, an article in the *Scientific American* magazine stated that recent computer modeling shows that in a nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, a release of 100 nuclear weapons would result in 20 million people killed instantly, but because of debris blocking the sun globally, as many as 1 billion people would starve to death around the globe over the next few years. Albert Einstein said prophetically, a number of years ago: "I know not what weapons may be used to fight World War III. I do know, however, that World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones."

Today, the world is no longer divided simply between the "good guys" and the "bad guys," although clearly these types still exist. We live in an age of globalization, with a number of revolutionary changes occurring simultaneously, including population, resources and the environment, technology and innovation, information and knowledge, economic and finance -- and perhaps the most difficult -- governance.

James Madison suggested more than 200 years ago that a democracy requires more trustworthy human qualities and virtues from its citizens than any other form of

government. Our nation could not have survived and prospered if our Founding Fathers' confidence in the capacity of democratic citizens had been misplaced. Today, these qualities are needed more than ever. Even beyond the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, homeland security and terrorism, we face many fundamental challenges that can only be met successfully by recognizing that we are all in this together. Too often we forget this important point.

Today our airwaves and our public discourse are too often filled with attempts to demonize opponents.

Today there are too many people in the political arena and the talk show arena whose political and economic incentive is to promote a divided America.

Will Rogers once joked that politicians are like diapers – they need to be changed often – and for the same reason. Today I think that Will Rogers would enlarge this category.

I am often asked by young people, “How do you decide who to vote for?” In an increasing polarized partisan and ideological political arena, I suggest two fundamental questions:

- 1) Does the candidate display the willingness to put our nation's interest ahead of political party or their own election?
- 2) Does the candidate seek out the facts and then let the facts have some bearing on his or her conclusions?

It sounds simple but you would be surprised how many people start with a conclusion and then selectively gather facts to support their preconceived answers.

Each of us is blessed to be an American, and each of us has citizen duties.

When members of the armed forces enlist in the military and risk their lives to serve our country, they set a standard for the rest of the nation for what it means to be a patriot and a citizen. If our nation is to remain truly great and a beacon for the world, the burden must be broadly shared. No nation that leaves the sacrifice to only a few can sustain world leadership. Citizen patriots have duties that go far beyond cheering our troops and paying our taxes. We govern America through our vote and our participation in the political process.

One important step that all of us can take as patriotic citizens is to insist on civility in our public policy and political arena. Civility does not mean eliminating passion and debate from our public discourse -- nor does it mean agreement on every issue for agreement's sake. Civility means disagreeing with others without demonizing them. It means respecting others as sincere patriots and partners in a shared quest for policy answers that are practical, effective and morally persuasive.

Citizen patriotism -- like military service -- requires courage. It has been said that courage is like a muscle -- it is strengthened when we use it. Courage is a moral quality, not a happening of nature.

What is the message here for all of us on Memorial Day? How do we strengthen the courage and the virtues required for both military service and patriotic citizenship? How do we pass these on to our children and grandchildren?

Why do some among us -- like Colonel Barnum -- have so much uncommon courage and valor in moments of challenge and peril? In answering these questions, I am sure that there are many variables, but also a few common denominators.

I think that President Ronald Reagan gave the best answer to these questions with his words: "The character that takes command in moments of crucial choices has already been determined. It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier, in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all of those 'little choices' of years' past -- by all of those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation. It has been determined by all of those day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy, and crisis seemed far away -- the decisions that -- piece by piece -- bit by bit -- developed habits of laziness or of discipline -- habits of self-indulgence or self-sacrifice -- habits of dishonor and shame, or habits of duty, honor and integrity."

Tonight -- I salute all of our veterans and heroes -- as well as our citizen patriots - - who serve our nation, and who spread the inspirational lessons of duty, honor, integrity, courage and character. Thank God for your inspiration and example for our security and our nation.

###