

## **17th Annual Peace Officers' Memorial Service**

**May 15, 1998**

### **Remarks as Prepared by Vice President Al Gore**

Beneath the great dome of this Capitol, men and women of every generation have sworn to protect this nation from "all enemies, foreign and domestic." Today, we stand in the shadow of the Capitol to honor the men and women who do daily battle against the enemies of peace and security; life and liberty.

Our 700,000 sworn law enforcement officers serve in small hamlets and in teeming metropolises. They serve on the backways of our country roads and on the broadways of our stately avenues. They truly are the thin blue line.

But on this day, we pay a special tribute to the points at which that line became even thinner--and the law enforcement officers who gave their lives so that we may live in safety.

Some may think it's fashionable to proclaim that the age of heroes has passed. I think they're wrong. If you're looking for heroes--look around. Look at your next door neighbor, the woman who plays catch with her children on the front lawn. The man who invites you over for a backyard barbecue on the Fourth of July. For it could well be that these men and women shunned a life of comfort and ease, and instead awoke every morning, put on their badges, and put their lives at risk for the rest of us. And some of these heroes paid the ultimate price. We honor them not because they died, but because of how they lived.

They lived the life of Highway Patrol Officer Saul Martinez. Officer Martinez saw an oncoming car speeding toward him and reacted quickly enough to push his partner to safety, only to be struck and killed by the car himself. In remembering him, his fellow officers described him as "the epitome of all you could possibly be as a human being." He was a true hero.

They lived the life of Officer Scott Williams, a corrections officer who was stabbed from behind by an inmate. Though he fell to the ground bleeding profusely, he saw his murderer moving on to attack a fellow officer. With his last sliver of life, Officer Williams pulled himself up and charged the assailant--saving the life of his partner, while exhausting his own. He was a true hero.

Today, and every day, we honor the true heroes who walked among us. But they are not the only ones who made a sacrifice. Now they are in a better place, but their mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters are left behind to carry on and find meaning in their tragedy. Today, many of these families are here with us. It was you who gave a smile as you saw your loved ones off in the morning, and whispered a silent

prayer that you would see them return that evening. But some evenings stretch into an endless night, and sometimes the morning never comes.

Words are of cold comfort at a time like this. Nothing we can say will bring back those who were dearest to us; those who made your families, your hearts, and your lives complete. Yet, just as you were always with them when they walked the beat or patrolled the streets, know that they will always be with you--wherever you may be.

And we will be with you, too. That's why President Clinton and I support legislation to provide college scholarships for the children of slain state and local law enforcement officers. These children should be celebrated, not held back because of their parents' sacrifice.

One hundred thirty-five years ago, the man whose statue stares down upon us from across this National Mall wrote to a grieving mother who lost her five sons in the cause of liberty and peace. Abraham Lincoln wrote these words to her: "I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom." Today, because of the sacrifice your families have made, the house of freedom is stronger, sturdier, and more secure.

The names of these heroes and all the others who fell join the 14,000 officers whose names are etched for all eternity onto the blue-gray marble walls of the National Law Enforcement Officers' Memorial. As is sung at the candlelight vigil that dedicates those names and rededicates our commitment:

A man in blue has lost his life  
In service of the law.  
The love that makes this sacrifice  
Is the greatest love of all.

Running our hands across the hollow, gouged depressions on the Memorial's marble slabs, we remember the words of the prophet Habakkak, "The stone shall cry out." On behalf of all those who honor America's law enforcement officers, I vow to you today: We hear that cry. We will answer its call.

Today, on behalf of President Clinton, I am proud to announce three ways in which we are honoring our police and putting government on the side of those who serve. First, just this morning a bipartisan bill passed through Congress that provides bulletproof vests for police officers. I celebrate the spirit of this action. And I am pleased to announce to you today that the moment that bill reaches President Clinton's desk, he will sign it and make it the law of the land.

These men and women put their lives on the line for us every day--and we must do all we can to make their jobs safer. Today, buying a vest is a great burden for a rookie cop. In departments where police officers have to buy vests on their own, only 43% of them use

this shield. In departments that provide their officers with this protection, all but 4% use it.

Never doubt that these vests make a difference for the men and women who have dedicated their lives to making a difference. Myron Kelly and Eugene Kelly of the Osceola, Arkansas Police Department were more than brothers in blue; they were brothers in life. That's why they made a solemn vow to each other that they would "be together until the end." And it is why Eugene Kelly went along with his brother to serve warrants to a suspect, even though he was off-duty. As they entered the bedroom, the suspect, who was hidden in a closet, fired upon the officers. They were both hit. Eugene Kelly was wearing a vest; Myron Kelly wasn't. Eugene Kelly lived; Myron Kelly didn't. Today, Eugene continues the fight undaunted, and I hope he knows that even without his brother, he is never alone. We need to protect those who protect us.

Second, even while we provide bulletproof vests to police officers, we need tougher penalties, including longer sentences, to clamp down on criminals who commit federal crimes while wearing vests. In this case, a level playing field isn't close to enough. We have the moral high ground, now we need the battle high ground.

Last year, two gunmen clad from head-to-toe in heavy body armor kept more than 100 police officers at bay on the streets of North Hollywood in one of the fiercest shoot-outs in American history. Detective Gordon Hagge said, "They had body armor. It stopped everything we had." Our law enforcement officers' battle against the forces of evil is tough enough. We need to give them the advantage. That's why we are calling for tough legislation.

Third, we must do more than help our police; we must honor them as well. That's why today I am challenging Congress to create a law enforcement medal of valor to honor law enforcement officers who have fallen in the line of duty. I would like to thank Representatives Bill McCollum and Charles Schumer for their leadership on this issue. This idea was first proposed by U.S. Park Police Officer Jeffrey Muller--a hero himself, who risked his life to rescue a 79-year-old woman trapped in a car that was sinking into an icy river. He is here with us today. To Officer Muller, and all the officers here today, I thank you for all you do.

We honor the service and sacrifice of our nation's fallen law enforcement officers not only for the sake of those that have departed, but as a reminder to all of us who remain. Winston Churchill once said, "A medal glitters, but it casts a shadow." And what is a shadow but a moment when the sun is blocked, a moment when our lives are a little darker. The shadow of loss weighs heavily upon our souls, but I hope the gleam of this medal of valor will light the way to a more peaceful tomorrow.

We rarely know it when a hero walks among us. Tim Galvin's neighbors probably never suspected it. He just called himself "a Bronx guy who married a Bronx girl," and he and his wife went about the work of raising their three kids. One day a fleeing suspect shot

Officer Galvin in the face. I was honored to meet with him when I visited New York last month, and I'm pleased to report to you that he is back in uniform.

Officer Galvin was lucky; some heroes are not. Some heroes are veterans; some are rookies. In the case of Denver Police Officer Ron DeHerrera, his police career lasted less than 48 hours. On just his second day on the job, the 32-year-old was on a routine patrol when his squad car was slammed by a teenager driving a stolen car through a red light at 80 miles per hour. Just two weeks before his death, Ron had been selected to speak at his graduation from the Denver Police Academy. There he said, "People ask: Why do you want to be a police officer." And he gave his answer, "To help people...to make a difference." Officer DeHerrera never got that chance. But we will not let his passing be for naught. It is up to us to pick up his fallen standard, honor his memory, and ensure that he did not die in vain. On behalf of President Clinton and a grateful nation, thank you for all you have done and all you continue to do. We honor your service and your sacrifice.