

18th Annual National Peace Officers' Memorial Service

May 15, 1999

Remarks as Prepared by Vice President Al Gore

When I spoke at this service last year, I think all of us said a prayer that when we came back this year, there wouldn't be any new names to add to the wall. The fact that some of the officers who sat in this audience last May are among the names we add to the Wall today reminds us just how thin the blue line really is.

It is appropriate that we come to this place today to honor their memory. This great National Mall honors Americans who dedicated their lives to freedom and democracy. While George Washington helped create our union; Thomas Jefferson helped shape it; and Abraham Lincoln helped save it; the 312 names we add to the wall today helped preserve, protect and defend it with every last ounce of their being.

As much as any soldier who ever landed on any beach, the men and women we honor today are true American heroes. Scripture tells us that "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" [John 15:13]. The courageous officers we honor today laid down their lives for us. They paid the ultimate sacrifice so that we may live in safety. And we honor them today not just because of how they died, but how they lived.

We honor Trooper Linda Huff. Trooper Huff and her husband Chad were the first husband and wife team to make it through the Idaho State Police Academy. She loved her job so much that she used to speak at local high schools, trying to convince kids to become officers. Last June, a crazed gunman stormed the state police office. While helping to defend her fellow officers, Linda was shot nine times. While she was lying on the floor, the gunman picked up a shotgun and shot her in the head.

Officer Huff was one of 12 women officers who died in the line of fire in 1998. She left behind three young children. Linda Huff was a hero.

We honor Officer Dale Claxton. Officer Claxton joined the force at the age of 42, because he wanted to keep his community safe. In his last hours on this earth, he watched his seven-year-old daughter perform in a talent show, and visited his wife's seventh grade class—before being brutally shot by masked gunmen driving a stolen truck. In eulogizing him, his fellow officers remembered that "Andy Griffith had nothing on Dale." Dale Claxton was a hero.

We honor Officer J.J. Chestnut and Detective John Gibson who protected me so many times as I walked beneath the Dome behind me. Last summer, when gunfire erupted in the Capitol, they could have ducked for cover—but they chose instead to stand their ground. In saving countless lives, they sacrificed their own. J.J. Chestnut and John Gibson were heroes.

For the 40,000 men and women who lost their lives protecting us, the National Law Enforcement Memorial stands as a testament that their lives will never be forgotten. It also stands as a tribute to all of you. I would do anything to take away the pain and sorrow all of you are feeling today. I think of the young girl named Sarah who left a note at the Memorial to her dad that read, "I love you so much, but I miss you even more. Does the hurt ever stop?"

Or the wife who left a note to her husband on what would have been their 25th wedding anniversary, that read: "your little girl has become a beautiful young lady, and many say she looks just like her daddy."

Or the 14-year-old who simply asked: "why must the good guys die?"

Only God can answer that question. But the highest honor we can pay today—to those who died young—is to make sure they did not die in vain. As a nation, we must stand behind the badge not just on Police Officers' Memorial Day, but every day.

You never walk away from your responsibility, and that is why I make you this pledge today: we will never walk away from you.

We have worked hard together the past seven years to fund 100,000 new community police on the streets of this nation—walking the beat and restoring pride in America's protectors. Now we're trying to hire up to 50,000 more—and that should be just the beginning. The crime rate in America has now dropped for an unprecedented six years in a row. Let's not fool ourselves into believing we can continue this trend and really win the war on crime and drugs, without more police.

Today, in some quarters, it has become fashionable to attack American law enforcement, to let the actions of a few bad actors tarnish every badge. I know that most of you agree with me that in the exceptional cases where police officers do wrong, they cannot be above the law that they are sworn to enforce, and must be subjected to that law. And those practices that divide us, or treat fellow citizens unfairly, like racial profiling, must be ended right away.

But make no mistake; if we want to strengthen our communities, we must make them safer communities. To build safe communities, we need more police officers, not less. Police officers drawn from all backgrounds, from all races, from all walks of life.

And as these new officers join your ranks, we must continue to do everything we can to protect those who protect all of us. I was especially proud that we recently passed legislation I called for at this memorial service last year, which provides money to help state and local governments defray the costs of purchasing bulletproof vests for police officers. These men and women put their lives on the line every day for us, and we must do all we can to make their jobs safer. And cases where our efforts to protect officers fail, I believe that those who take the life of a law enforcement officer should pay the ultimate penalty. Today, that is the law of our land.

We still have a long way to go to build the safe, strong nation we all seek. And it is not the job of law enforcement alone. We all have to do a better job teaching our kids right from wrong,

teaching them that actions have consequences. We all have to do a better job creating a society that is less violent, less dangerous, less crime-ridden, and more hopeful. We owe it to the people we honor today, we owe it to their families; and we owe it to the 700,000 men and women who are carrying on the work they left behind.

There are children here who will never see their parents again. When we leave here, some of them will go to the Wall to be healed—to remember—and sometimes, to leave mementos behind. Not long ago, a young girl named Courtney visited the Wall, found the name she was looking for, and left a letter by its side. It read: “Dad, what's up? Nothing much down here...I'm now in the seventh grade and I'm trying to decide what high school I should go to. Mom is doing okay, but she's having a hard time without you—and trying to fix all the broken things in the house...I've tried to help her but nothing seems to help. I wish I could do something. Dad, could you please ask God if he could go easy on Mom for awhile? She's been having a hard time since you died. I love you and miss you a lot. Signed: your favorite (only) daughter, Courtney.”

We can't bring Courtney's dad back.

But let us continue to work toward the day when no child ever has to write a letter like this again. Let us work toward the day when the thin blue line is sturdy and strong. And let us do all we can to carry out what must have been the last wish of those who served so bravely: that no other generation of young men and women will ever have to share their sacrifice. In the end, that is the highest tribute we can pay.