

## Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson Memorial Day 2023

For nearly twenty years, I have given brief remarks at this ceremony, but have never before been asked to deliver the keynote. And although greatly honored by Lupita's invitation, I must confess at the outset a feeling of inadequacy for this role. To comment on the sacrifice of the fallen seems an almost sacred duty, best reserved for those who have worn the uniform, or lost a loved one in service to country. So I offer my words today with the utmost humility and respect.

And I make another confession. Here, surrounded by symbols of patriotism, the symbols that enwrap so many civic and national commemorations – the flag above all – I confess doubt that such symbols are truly capable of honoring the dead.

Please don't mistake my meaning. All of us are rightly moved by the red, white, and blue. We weep at its placement at graveside, we are stirred by its meaning to those seeking freedom, we cheer the athletes competing under its banner. Indeed, there are some scenes so iconic and powerful that they almost transcend normal description: our standard pushed aloft on Iwo Jima, or even unfurled on the surface of the moon. And back here on Earth, with decidedly less grandeur, but no less sincerity, each and every month, hand on heart, I proudly lead the City Council in the Pledge of Allegiance.

And yet symbols of patriotism are, in the end, just that: symbols, and not the thing itself. And how easy it is for symbols to be subverted, or placed in substitution for the principles they are supposed to represent.

There is a short and strange film that should be required viewing in every high school history class. It is called "A Night at the Garden." It was shot in 1939, and it features footage from a rally at Madison Square Garden, in the very heart of New York, mere miles from where we stand today . . . and where 20,000 Americans gathered then to cheer on the Nazis.

And how was the cavernous arena decorated? With portraits of Hitler and Himmler and Goring, and the rest? Not at all. Instead, with an enormous floor-to-ceiling image of George Washington. With American flags and bunting festooned everywhere. A pageant of stars and stripes, reflected also in the seemingly patriotic pronouncements of the speakers. In its outward appearance, not un-American in the slightest, but almost hyper-American.

It is disorienting, this film, and a disturbing, yet absolutely necessary, reminder that the symbols we love can be enlisted by any philosophy, any at all, even the most perverted.

That for all their power to inspire – and maybe because of their power to inspire – symbols, if we are not careful, also have to power to blind and to deceive.

This is true, really, of any physical representation. Even monuments, like those on this plaza, which are so valuable as instruments for concentrating our attention and, at their best, giving individual names to a loss so vast it can become an abstraction or a statistic – even monuments specifically dedicated to the memory of the dead carry with them the risk of distraction or displacement. The risk of forgetting that the most important tribute to the fallen can not be cast in stone or metal – the most important tribute is the character of our nation itself, and our commitment to the freedom and dignity of all humankind.

In this spirit, let me share with you, again with the greatest humility and respect, what I keep foremost in mind when I consider the sacrifice we honor today.

In my office in City Hall are five black-and-white photographs. They hang directly across the room from my desk, constantly within my field of vision. And, especially in moments of frustration or self-pity, I find them potent reminders of what is truly important.

- First, on the far left, is Martin Luther King, delivering his last speech in Memphis, the night before he was shot down, appearing at once both weary and determined, like a prize-fighter in a late round, as he spoke prophetically and chillingly of a promised land he would not see;
- second, Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas. 1956. Elizabeth Eckford in the foreground, walking with almost superhuman dignity, amidst a scene of barely suppressed violence, surrounded by hecklers, whose young faces are twisted and aged by hatred;
- in the center, American troops exiting a landing craft on D-Day, viewed from behind as they struggle toward the beach and the ominous darkness beyond. A harrowing image, made more so by the knowledge that, for many wading through the water, this would be their last day;
- fourth, Jewish refugees in 1939, children on the deck of a ship in New York Harbor, waving to the Statue of Liberty and the sunlit uplands of America – about the same age as my own parents at the time, who were also refugees, though half a world away and with far less hope of salvation;
- fifth and last, Robert F. Kennedy, mobbed by well-wishers during his 1964 Senate campaign, in an image captured right here in New Rochelle at the Quaker Ridge Shopping Center, a moment of joyful exuberance and seemingly limitless possibility, a few short years before the tragedy to come.

These five images, which seem in some respects to be of entirely different things, have for me always been pieces of a larger whole, speaking to the noblest aspirations of our great nation, to the obstacles and setbacks and failures which have dogged our uneven progress, and to the resilience with which we strive to overcome those obstacles and setbacks and failures – marching on, with physical and moral courage, sometimes at enormous cost.

And it is no accident that D-Day is placed in the center, for it is the fulcrum on which all the others balance. The troops on the Normandy beach were not risking life and limb for land or treasure or conquest, they were rescuing children very much like those in New York Harbor, very much like my parents. They were coming to the aid of strangers, with whom they shared no language, no government, no currency – only a shared belief in freedom and a shared rejection of tyranny. They were making possible a world in which King could offer his stirring words, in which Eckford could defy hatred, in which Kennedy could inspire us to imagine what might have been and might still be.

Every nation honors its troops, honors those who fall in battle, honors the pain of loved ones left behind; mothers and fathers in all lands grieve their sons and daughters with equal sorrow. Every nation salutes its flag and builds its monuments.

And yet those five images speak to something more. They speak to the higher purpose of service in a nation that strives to be good. And to the truth that sacrifice is ennobled and given its greatest meaning by the justice of its cause.

It is for us to uphold that cause, in peace no less than in war. Not merely as passive observers, but as active citizens, with all the privileges and duties assigned to the citizens of a free society. It is for us to cherish the Star Spangled Banner, but never more than we cherish the land of the free and the home of the brave.

May we prove worthy of those we remember today. May we recall not just that they died, but what they died for. And may we in our words, our prayers, and above all our deeds, preserve, protect, and defend a nation good enough to warrant the awesome sacrifices made on her behalf.

God bless the United States of America and all people of good will.