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SPEECH

For the second year in a row, Memorial Day looks a little different than in years past. In many cases, our backyard barbecues and get-togethers are replaced by video chats and other marvels of modern technology. Still, we hold on to some semblance of what life was and what we know it will return to. And the memories and emotions this day brings are always the same.

For countless families across the nation, Memorial Day is a stark and often painful reminder of those who were never afforded the opportunity to be honored as veterans for their service to our country.

Their sacrifice is a true expression of selfless service—one that no one would pick for themselves. Whether they volunteered at a time of war, served during peacetime or never expected to

wear our nation's uniform until their draft card arrived, they represent the best America has to offer.

We feel their loss roaming the sacred hills of Arlington National Cemetery and in other final resting places around the world. Too many mothers, fathers, siblings and children feel the immense weight of seeing an empty chair year-round. For them, Memorial Day brings to the forefront what is always operating in the background.

Please join me in recognizing those family members here today who have lost a loved one in service.

<PAUSE>

Your courage and grace after such unimaginable loss are inspiring.

Sending off a loved one so they can serve in combat must be a surreal experience. I suspect conflicting emotions of fear and pride are present in the minds of both service members and

their families. Like any other send-off, you hold them tight, tell them you love them and watch them head out until they are no longer in sight. But what makes sending a loved one off to war very different is the all-too-real possibility that a uniformed military officer and chaplain may show up at your doorstep to deliver devastating news.

This will be the 20th year we've been at war, longer than any American conflict that came before. About 2.7 million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and over half of them deployed more than once. Those who returned are now our community members, neighbors and friends.

In fact, I'm confident if you take the time to learn about any veteran where you live, you'll be floored by the stories of service and sacrifice, known only to those who witnessed it firsthand. Then, there are the unbelievably brave accounts of heroes who can no longer speak for themselves. It's up to us to not only tell their stories but to honor their service and memory by ensuring their families and survivors are cared for.

For instance, Army Sergeant 1st Class Alwyn Cashe (ALL-WIN CASH) will become the first Black service member to receive the Medal of Honor for actions in Iraq or Afghanistan. Sergeant Cashe died on November 8, 2005, 22 days after his Bradley Fighting Vehicle struck a roadside bomb in Iraq.

It was the 35-year-old's second combat deployment to Iraq since the 2003 invasion. The explosion that rocked the Bradley ruptured its fuel cell, engulfing the heavily fortified vehicle and its occupants in flames. Not long after that, enemy bullets rained down on their position. But that did not stop Sergeant Cashe from acting to save his soldiers.

Drenched in fuel, he pulled the driver, who was still on fire, from the burning vehicle. Once those flames were put out, he returned to the Bradley only to have fire catch on his gas-soaked uniform. By the time he got each of the six other soldiers out alive, more than 70 percent of his body was covered in second- and third-degree burns. Despite all of this, he insisted on being the last person on a medical evacuation helicopter.

Four of those soldiers ended up making the ultimate sacrifice. Along with Sergeant 1st Class Cashe, they join the ranks of heroes taken from us far too soon.

It is impossible to know what was going through his mind during those critical moments following the attack. But we may catch a glimpse by listening to former Army Captain Flo Groberg, a Medal of Honor recipient who, in Afghanistan in 2012, put himself between a suicide bomber and his soldiers. Thankfully, Groberg survived as the vest exploded, and the terrorist was pushed away from the formation.

He said, “In combat, there might be a moment where you have to make a decision that will more than likely dictate whether or not you live or die. When you are willing to put yourself in front of that bullet, in front of that suicide bomber, in front of that mortar, in front of anything that is going to kill you for your men—that’s love.”

We may not know what was going through his mind, but we know Sergeant 1st Class Alwyn Cashe loved his soldiers. The

harsh reality of war, and military service in general, is that not everyone will make it home. Let us honor the memory of heroes no longer with us. And let us strive to live up to the example set by such selfless patriots each and every day.

Thank you all for being here today.

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