

Alaska's Strategic Importance

REMARKS BY GEN JAMES N. MATTIS, USMC, RETIRED

On Saturday, 11 June 2022, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) hosted retired general and former Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis at the Fairbanks Military Appreciation Banquet. In his remarks, Secretary Mattis highlighted Alaska's growing role in global security as the Arctic warms and the Indo-Pacific region becomes the primary theater of concern for our nation's military defense. With the general's kind permission, a transcript of his remarks are shared below.

Thank you, Senator Murkowski, for the very kind introduction, for inviting me and for being such a stalwart supporter of our military in good times—and especially in the tough times.

To be in the great state of Alaska is exhilarating, for who can't come to America's frontier without feeling born again? Plus, to be back among the troops—you were my daily inspiration, those to whom I owe a debt because by your blood, sweat, and tears you Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines represent all the young troops who built my reputation by getting me out of every jam I got them into, you who stand firmly in defense of our Constitution in a tumultuous time.

In the spirit of the chaplain's invocation this evening, I come here humbled and happy to be among you, and with an attitude of gratitude for what you servicemen and women represent, and for our military supporters in a state known for its embrace of our troops and their families. Perhaps it's the frontier environment that makes for this fabulous marriage between our military and civilian communities, for on the frontier and on the battlefields for which our troops train daily, it's **ONLY** by pulling together that we succeed against the odds.

It's also a delight to be here when an old friend of many decades, a native son of Alaska, is recognized. As a fighter pilot extraordinaire, Keith Stalder and I represent the manner in which our Marine Air-Ground team lives and fights, and it's wonderful to see Alaskans embrace this all-American Marine, recognizing his superlative leadership through thick and thin. Keith, shipmate, I salute you. Since your first teenage “bombing mission” dropping toilet paper rolls over your Fairbanks high school, you have always led by example!

To the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce, thank you for continuing the legacy bequeathed by Jim and Rosemary Messer. Alaska has long experienced a key role in our national defense, from the ALCAN Highway days when Kiska and Attu

were seized by our foes, to Alaska's swiftly increasing importance as the Arctic warms and the Pacific emerges as our priority theater of this tumultuous century.

Geography is reality, and Alaska's reality is that it will play a key role if we're to hang onto the promise of democracy in this world, one where autocrats make clear that we are now engaged in opposition to diametrically opposed political systems.

Now I recognize there is some jealousy about Alaska. I was in Texas recently and asked what I was doing. I mentioned I would be visiting the largest state in the Union.... Well, my host fervently tried to convince me that were all of Alaska's snow and ice melted, Texas would be larger. I'm uncertain if he believed it; suffice that he did not convince me. As a born and bred Washingtonian, Alaska is the only state we can proudly point to as both further *north* and further *west* of the Pacific Northwest.

As Senator Murkowski noted, it's fortuitous that we meet this week, when Army tradition and Alaska's geography are given voice with the stand-up of the newest combat division in our nation's fighting forces. The 11th Airborne Division and the reflagged 1st and 2nd Brigade Combat Teams send an unmistakable message about America's awesome determination to defend ourselves and, as a Pacific power, training in Arctic warfare, assigned a most demanding mission.

Inheriting the 11th Airborne's legacy of fighting in the Pacific, of a daring raid to free civilians held captive in a POW camp, of house-to-house fighting to free Manila . . . that division's legacy is now in your strong hands.

To you Soldiers who must test yourselves in this often-harsh environment in Alaska, you will be strengthened knowing that nothing you face can be tougher than what faced your predecessors in World War II, when lads your age threw themselves out aircraft doors to jump on Tagaytay Ridge in the Philippines. You have what it takes to overcome every challenge, sticking *together* in tough times the way we Americans always have when the going gets tough. It's *always* about sticking together.

A couple weeks ago, I sat down to draft my remarks to this audience. Honored to be invited to a state where both its senators are admired and respected for their independence of thought, a state whose support of our military can be relied upon even in a time of unhealthy partisanship, I searched for words to share my deep appreciation and respect to our military, to your state, and more broadly to our beloved nation. Wouldn't you know it, it was Memorial Day weekend, an especially somber day for an officer who has written too many letters to the next of kin of our fallen.

Memorial Day is not meant to be a "day off" nor a day of celebration; it is a day of solemn contemplation of the cost of freedom. As Winston Churchill said when talking of fallen soldiers, "Never was so much owed by so many to so few."

Those thoughts colored my message here today.

Good Lord willing, all of you active-duty troops will one day be veterans, and sometimes we can best understand our lives by looking backward, especially to *When We Were Soldiers Once, and Young*.

Of more than 42 million servicemen and women who have served in all our nation's wars from the American Revolution to Iraq, more than 666,000 have been killed. These deaths extend far into a family and community and friends left behind, and children unborn. As we salute our serving military members, the men and women serving today and their families who carry a special burden, this reality frames our thinking, for the dignity of danger comes with every one of you who voluntarily have made this commitment.

We welcome the chance to take a moment to think of those who have given their lives for our freedom, and especially their families. There isn't a word in the English language that is widely known, used, and accepted to describe a parent whose child has died, as we do when a person loses their spouse and becomes widowed, or they lose their parents and are known as orphans.

So, these mothers, fathers, wives . . . of our military fallen are called Gold Star families, based on the tradition of the service flag that hung in homes during the World Wars. Each blue star on the banner stood for a loved one overseas. Gold stars honored those never coming home. As General Joshua Chamberlain of the 20th Maine said when writing to a family who had lost their son during the Civil War, "We pray daily to be worthy of your sacrifice."

In that spirit, it is important to remember that democracy is not a spectator sport, and we should all reflect daily on the values and principles of our nation, those for which those Soldiers gave their lives.

What do all of us, the living, owe our fallen and their families? Remembrance, for sure, yet we also owe a keen awareness of what they fought to defend and what you who wear our nation's cloth sustain in that tradition: this great big experiment we call America.

The Founders—most of whom were military veterans—knew that the nation they were forming was an experiment, a test of the idea that people could live together and rule themselves, guided by the spirit of cooperation. The Constitution they devised was itself hammered out among those willing to compromise, giving birth to this experiment.

In President Abraham Lincoln's short address dedicating a military cemetery at Gettysburg in 1863, he exhorted his listeners to resolve "that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that the government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln knew he had to say it out loud: This republican form of government could, in fact, perish—unless we fought for it, unless we dedicated our lives to living up to its ideals, unless we were willing to compromise with one another, while working always to improve the fairness of life for every American.

Generation after generation of patriots have given their all to keep this precious legacy alive. That is why we gather every year to pay our respects to those who went down swinging to protect and defend our Constitution and our way of life, and even why we pause this evening, gathered together paying respect to those in the service, who put themselves on the line.

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines serve a country that, even in its most raucous times, is worth defending. As a World War II Marine put it, America didn't have to be perfect to be worth fighting for.

Our veterans have learned the hard way, having lost buddies in battle, that this nation has no ordained right to exist. America's freedoms do not stand unassailed. Dictators and authoritarians look with fear on our freedom, our experiment, our republican model—a model that has long served as an inspiration to oppressed peoples everywhere.

We are most indebted to our veterans who fell, and their families, for the survival of this experiment, and in our current moment to each of you who voluntarily serve today. None can ever be fully repaid, but we listen to our better angels by respecting one another in this land of boundless possibilities, because those who faced down danger and paid the price on our behalf deserve no less from us the living.

We enjoy America's freedom by an accident of birth or immigration, yet we all live free in this land by our own choice. It's our responsibility to show respect and genuine friendship to each other as fellow citizens—including those with whom we may disagree—by unifying around our radical idea of what is said in our Constitution. That is how we can meet our ultimate responsibility to our fallen: to turn over to the next generation a republic in better shape than we received it.

On our Civil War's Antietam battlefield, we fought to overcome our country's birth defect of slavery, a heinous practice imported from the Old World. To this time, that one day of battle stands as the bloodiest day in our nation's history.

A couple years ago, as a reminder of our troops' sacrifices, during a Washington DC conference of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combatant Commanders—the less than two dozen four-stars who command our troops worldwide—the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs took us to the cemetery covering acres of ground.

Overlooking the rows of gravestones is a 44-foot-tall memorial of a private Soldier, called "Old Simon."

- Not a general on a prancing horse
- Not an officer with drawn sword

Rather a private Soldier . . . standing at rest . . . looking out across the graves, reminding us of the coequal status of all hands who served and who fell, rank being no separator.

Carved across that monument's base are the words: "Not for themselves, but for their country."

This is the same spirit, the same motivation, handed down from George Washington's revolutionary army, and in a direct bloodline that reaches straight through our Vietnam veterans when they were "Soldiers once . . . and young" to you troops serving today.

Yes, from Washington's crossing of the Delaware, to bloody Shiloh. From Belleau Wood to Midway. From Normandy to Iwo Jima. From Pork Chop Hill to the Pleiku Highlands. From Khe Sanh and the Ia Drang Valley, to Falluja and the Hindu Kush, the echoes remain with us in the tradition of our national treasure, the US military, where our national motto—"E pluribus unum" or "Out of many, one"—is what we are, the unified military of men and women, of all races and creeds, of all political persuasions, yet united on every battlefield for the sustenance of our beautiful country, our wonderful experiment, our America.

The honor roll of veterans and their families' devotion is why we meet this evening in safety and in freedom in the great state of Alaska, vice facing the barbarity we see in the Russian assaults on the Ukrainian people. Here we join in our tradition of nonpartisan fellowship honoring our patriots who put it all on the line for this great big experiment that we call America.

I searched for words that could adequately convey my respect for those of you committed to keeping our republic alive. Sometimes in life, though, words fail us. It's hard to find the words, yet we sense that our country is like a bank: it's a repository of freedom. And like any bank, if you wish to take something out, you must prove willing to put something in.

For the sake of future generations, we must try to capture and live up to the spirit of those who have gifted us this magnificent country with all its freedoms that we so often take for granted. We do recognize that no monument, no matter how grand, can fully capture or match the raw courage of

- our air combat pilots who strap into those cockpits
- our shipmates sailing into harm's way at sea
- our infantrymen who cross into the enemy's field of fire.

Yet we are duty bound to honor every day our military's service to our country as well as the sacrifices of our Gold Star families, they who hold dear our fallen buddies' memories. We must sometimes pause as we do this evening, to rekindle the love of country that will ensure that sacrifices on the altar of freedom are not

left in the dustbin of history, for if we want to inspire others to carry on this tradition of perilous service, we are duty bound to pay respect.

Jackie Robinson, that sparkling, valiant player who broke through major league baseball's color barrier, thus making us better versions of what our country stands for, was an Army veteran himself. He wrote his own epitaph to be chiseled into his gravestone.

One chilly, windy, rainy January day in New York, when I was there for a UN meeting, I visited Cypress Hills cemetery to read the obituary on Mr Robinson's gravestone. It says: "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

It echoes with the inscriptions on Old Simon's monument at Antietam: "Not for themselves, but for their country."

Let me close with a short story. I have often learned much about our country and what it represents from foreigners. I have even learned from our enemies.

As a young man I joined the Marines at age 18 in the face of the draft. I served many years because once in the military, I simply fell in love with my Sailors and Marines—those selfless, rambunctious, and valiant young infantrymen.

Very young men: infantry, infant soldier, young soldier, how they got their name, most not old enough to buy a beer in Alaska . . . America, in a dangerous world, needs the CIA and the military to defend us, fundamental source of power.

But there is another, even stronger fundamental source of our power: that being the power of America's inspiration.

Let us remember what all of us stand for, in the words of our founding documents. Let us sustain respect for each other, concern for each other, friendliness towards each other, and, yes, love for each other, as we cooperate and compromise on our quest to together make America the best version of our Founding Fathers' vision. What better place to demonstrate that than here on our frontier?

Thank you for inviting me this evening. For you in the military, keep the faith, hold the line, take care of each other, and stick together as America comes home to its roots, and comes home to respect for all who are devoted to finding a path forward to a more perfect union.

Thank you and Godspeed to our troops wherever they are tonight. ✪

Gen James N. Mattis, USMC, Retired

General Mattis served as the Secretary of Defense under President Donald Trump. Mattis was commissioned into the Marine Corps after graduating from Central Washington University. He has commanded Marines at the company, battalion, regiment, brigade, division, and Marine Expeditionary Force levels. He also command the Marine Corps Combat Development Command, US Central Command, and US Joint Forces Command, where he was dual-hatted as the Supreme Allied Commander Transformation. He retired from active service in March 2013.

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