

9/11 Speech

September 11, 2011

Thank you, Mayor. It is a special honor to be invited to join with all of you today.

A decade after the September 11th attacks, we gather in Tulsa as people are doing across the United States and the world, where words of prayer, reflection and affirmation unite us as we remember the victims and pay tribute to those who offered assistance...where we remember the outpouring of support and compassion extended by Tulsans and Oklahomans.

News stories leading to this day have included a mixture of heart wrenching personal accounts of loss, combined with stories of unparalleled heroism, and of people whose extraordinary kindness and generosity of spirit reminded us on that day, there were no strangers.

Last week, I talked with State Senator Andrew Rice whose brother, David, was killed in the World Trade Center attacks. Senator Rice is in New York City with his family today. He agreed I could share with you a story of the human spirit that sustained his family after David's death. David's body was recovered... but the family did not know where he was found or by whom. Several months after the attacks, Andrew was contacted by a man from New Jersey...someone who decided to travel into New York City that unforgettable day to provide whatever assistance he could. With no training as a rescue or recovery worker, he worked alongside emergency responders. He found David, took note of his name, date of birth...and later began to research as much about David as he could, working to find the family. He told Senator Rice that he was determined to go to any lengths for as long as it took to reach them....for them to know as much about David from that day as he knew. The Rice family derived enormous comfort from the compassion, from the actions of one ordinary individual who reached out to them in their time of deep grief in such an extraordinary way.

As today's commemoration approached, my mind replayed the events of September 11, 2001—what began as an ordinary Tuesday morning for me, as it likely did for you. It was ordinary; it was routine; each of us going about our business in likely an unremarkable way.

Just like those who boarded four separate aircraft that morning; just like David and those at work at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. All were ordinary folks going about their ordinary business...and ten years later still we ask, why were they targeted by terrorists? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that what they and we were doing on that fateful day, and indeed every day, was no ordinary business at all.

What they were doing was exercising their freedom. Exercising their freedom by doing a job they chose to do. Exercising their freedom in order to support their families...to make the best of their lives. Exercising their freedom to pursue a dream, whether the dreamer was a Harvard MBA or a newly arrived immigrant seizing the opportunity to make a good life free from oppression and poverty.

Those doings, the pursuit of those dreams is—no ‘ordinary business’. Rather...the freedom to live our everyday lives according to our own best lights is extraordinary business.

What we see as ordinary business--the daily demonstrations of freedom and liberty that are our way of life--often represent the highest aspirations of millions across the world--a hope beyond their grasp. The ordinary and everyday business on September 11th was the most potent threat and affront to the malevolent ambitions of those who want to live their own lives by stealing the lives of others... of those who want to impose their will, their way of life and their world view on the rest of us.

To those enemies of liberty, ordinary people going about their ordinary business constitute the infantry who occupy and defend the land of the free, the very lands which they seek to overwhelm and destroy through terror, through fear, through intimidation and by undermining our collective identity and our confidence.

Terrorists on 9/11 did not discriminate based upon race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin or legal status...each of the nearly 3,000 victims who lost their lives in the attacks and those injured were part of an occupying force...a reflection of James Madison’s view that “the best keepers of the people’s liberty...are the people themselves”. And, as the keepers of what Madison called that “sacred trust”, we the people, like those on 9/11 and we here today, are and will remain joined in the pursuit of and struggle for liberty and freedom as individuals within our communities and as members of the human family.....a pursuit and struggle we know often carries a heavy price.

A decade after the horrors of 9/11, our domestic and international focus has been to increase security measures and initiatives to find ways to ensure the safety of our citizens. We ask ourselves...are we safer today than we were ten years ago? Research shows that most Americans believe we are safer, but Americans also believe we remain vulnerable and will be attacked again. And, increasingly, Americans also understand that, over time, expanded powers of security to eliminate every potential risk come at a price to liberty and to freedom and must be measured and balanced.

Those responsible for our security will always be subject to criticism that too little has been done to keep us safe. Pressures to increase security, to expand powers of surveillance, detention and investigation in the quest to do everything possible to prevent future attacks remain an essential focus of our public discourse. Yet, it is those times where it becomes vital that, as the trustees of liberty, we the people, the ordinary people, resist the tendency to close the doors of our communities and ourselves by turning inward, even though the threats from terrorism remain, and are real. Once the terrorist believes he can drive us into dismantling our own liberties through his criminal acts and through intimidation or fear, he will persist until the freedoms we value as Americans and share with others around the world are no more.

September 11th changed our view of the world forever...an inevitable fact...it created a new reality for us.... In remembering those who died and whose lives were shattered on 9/11, we recognize and honor them. We join with the rest of the world in remembering their sacrifices; and in paying tribute to all who worked and continue to work to enable us to live in a free society.

In honoring the victims, we also acknowledge a powerful individual and collective responsibility . Reaffirming our resolve as individuals to preserve and protect the ordinary business of living is how we ultimately defend against those who would threaten and erode our freedoms....our individual and collective resilience as people connected to one another here and around the world must be a mandate for strength even when it means we stand in harm's way.

It was President Abraham Lincoln who so powerfully stated in the Gettysburg Address..“It is for us the living..... that from these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion...”.

To the victims of the September 11th attacks...and to all Americans and others across the world engaged in the cause of freedom; engaged in the pursuit of dreams to live their lives according to their own best light; and engaged in the ordinary business of living their lives as free people.....we recognize those who died and suffered stand in a company of citizens who have been called upon to defend freedom. Their legacy, and our inalienable duty to honor them for the future, is to have faith in one another and ourselves, to be united in our common humanity, and to be resolute that we will live our lives in a way to preserve, protect and defend our freedoms.