

President Theodore Roosevelt
July 4, 1903 Speech at Huntington's 250th Anniversary

Mr. Chairman, and you, my fellow citizens, my old time friends and neighbors, men and women of Huntington: I thank you for having given me the chance of saying a few words to you this afternoon, and in greeting all of you I wish to say a word of special greeting to those whom none of us will object to my greeting. First, to the men, because of whom we have today a country and a president—and to the men of the National Guard, wearing the uniform I have worn myself, for having come out to serve as my escort today.

And, now, men and women, in speaking to you today, I want not only to join with you in an expression of thankfulness for the nation's mighty past, but to join with you in expressing the resolution that we of today will strive in our deeds to rise level to those deeds which in the past made up the nation's greatness. Each generation so far, in this country, has been blessed, first, with the chance to resolve, and to put into effect the resolution so as to conduct itself that the next generation in turn would have the opportunity to feel a like gratitude. It is a good thing, on the Fourth of July and on all other occasions of national thanksgiving, for us to come together, and we have the right to express our pride in what our forefathers did, and our joy in the abundant greatness of this people.

We have the right to express those feelings, but we must not treat greatness achieved in the past as an excuse for our failing to do decent work in the present, instead of a spur to make us strive in our turn to do the work that lies right at hand. If we so treat it we show ourselves unworthy to come here and celebrate the historic past of the nation. In 1861, when Lincoln called to arms you men of the great war, how did you show your loyalty to the men of 1776, to the spirit of '76? You showed it by the way in which your hearts leaped to the performance of the task that was ready in those days.

You people here in Huntington showed it by the way in which your young men went to the front. You showed that the spirit of Nathan Hale still lived in America. No amount of talking of what had been done in the Revolution would have availed anything if you had not had it in you to add to these great memories by the deeds which were to make, in their turn, forever memorable the years between the firing

of Fort Sumter and Appomattox. So we come here together on the Fourth of July to see what a great people we are; to see how well the generations of our dead have done their duty. If we fail to realize that there is before us the obligation of handing down unimpaired to our children the courage that we have received from our fathers, then the truth is not in us. We can pay to the great men of the past the only homage really worth paying if we show by our deeds that their spirit still lives in our souls. Only by so doing can we show that we have a right to celebrate this day that marks the birth of a nation.

You, the men of 1861, you, the men of the great war, you left us more than a reunited nation; for you left to us the undying memory of the deeds by which it was kept united, and you left examples not merely for war, but examples for peace. And we can continue to keep this nation as it was and is only as we so handle ourselves in meeting the lesser tasks of to-day, as you handled yourselves in the face of the great crisis of the past. You left us the right of brotherhood and an example in what brotherhood means; not the brotherhood that is merely talked about, but the brotherhood that is acted and felt. First and foremost you left us, you most fortunate of victors, the right of brotherhood with the gallant vanquished.

Wherever I go, from one end of this country to the other, I find that there is one body to which I can speak with a certainty of immediate response when I speak of the courage of the men who wore the gray, and that is the men who wore the blue. Not another war of recent times left what those terrible four years of war left this nation—the right to feel proud of each American who did his duty, as it was given to him to see his duty, whether he followed Grant or followed Lee.

Having paid the fullest tribute not merely to the valor, but to the self-devotion and steadfastness of the brother in gray, it yet remains true that the men in blue fought in the one contest which our history has seen in which success for the Union, in which success for the flag of the Republic, meant not merely greatness for this nation, but welfare for all mankind in the future. To you it was given to fight in the one contest wherein failure would have meant that all our past history was meaningless. If when Lincoln called, if when Grant came into the field, the people of this country had not rallied to uphold the statesmanship of the one and to make good the generalship of the other, the Declaration of Independence would have rung as an empty platitude, and this nation's history would have counted only

because it would have been another example in the failure of free government. The men of the great war, the veterans of 1861 and 1865, have a proprietary interest in this day that we now celebrate. For to them as much as to the men of '76 we owe the existence of this nation as a nation.

We do not intend to let slip away from our minds the fact that everything we now have as a nation, all that we now glory in, would be non-existent if the men of '61 had not shown in the supreme hour those qualities for the lack of which no nation and no individual can atone. You showed those qualities. Now, what qualities?

In the first place, power of disinterested loyalty to the idea, the power of being stirred to lofty emotions, of casting aside considerations of self when the welfare of the people as a whole was at stake. Patriotism first; the spirit which manifests itself in time of war, in ability to serve the flag in time of peace, ability to do a citizen's work squarely and decently. First that spirit. Now that was not enough, no matter how patriotic a man was in 1861. If he did not have a fighting edge, his patriotism did not count. It was absolutely necessary to have patriotism, but patriotism was of no use if the man ran away.

Exactly. Now so it is in the ordinary workaday tasks of citizenship at the present day. If the man is not decent, in the first place, then he is not merely useless to the community but a menace to it. In time of war, if the man did not have in him the power of loyalty to the flag, loyalty to the nation, loyalty to his regiment, the more dangerous he was. He had to have that quality first of all. In civil life we need decency, honesty and the spirit that makes the man a good husband, a good father, a good neighbor and a good man to work alongside of or to deal with. That makes a man, consequently, who does his duty by the State. The worst crime against this nation which can be committed by any man is the crime of dishonesty, whether in public life, or whether in private life, and we are not to be excused as a people if we ever condone such dishonesty, no matter what other qualities it may be associated with.