

Speech delivered at the
National World War II Memorial
Washington, D.C.

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The Miss America Organization, our volunteers and our 52 contestants are nothing less than honored to take part in this auspicious occasion.

I'd like to thank some important people and organizations that made this very special event possible: The Mayor's office for making time in a busy schedule to create an official Salute to the Miss America Organization; the National Parks Service for welcoming us to the beautiful new World War II Memorial; and corporate benefactors the Washington Marriott, U.S. Airways, International Limousine Service and Freedom Decorating Company for helping to make this day come together. [check list and add or delete as needed.]

I'd like to recognize some very special guests today - they are both veterans of World War II - and family to some of the 52 young women who will compete for the Miss America crown next week in Atlantic City.

[recognize WWII-era family members in attendance]

Finally, thanks to the Washington, DC Convention & Tourism Corporation and The American Experience Foundation - the driving force behind *America Celebrates*, dedicating 100 days of the summer of 2004 to celebrate the sacrifice and contributions of the men and women that led the Allied Forces to victory in World War II.

From where I'm standing, I can think of no better reason to set aside 100 days of commemoration. Launched with the May dedication of this amazing national treasure - the National World War II Memorial - 2004 will be forever known as the year that we as a nation came together to officially pay our respect, honor and appreciation to the men and women who served in the armed forces, those who supported their efforts at home - and especially to the families and loved ones of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice during the 20th century's defining moment in world history.

It's almost inconceivable - as we stand here nearly 60 years after the last shots were fired - to imagine what our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents did to assure victory over the forces of darkness that threatened to spread misguided policies of oppression, racism, fanaticism and dictatorship across the globe.

Joined by their Allies in the Americas, Europe and the Pacific Rim, an entire generation of Americans rose to the challenge. From children collecting scrap rubber to women building war machinery - one nation joined in a common cause - to give the men in the field every advantage over a tough, relentless, well-equipped and intelligent enemy.

The Miss America Organization is proud to have played a small role. Faced with the crisis of wartime, the Miss America competition was transformed into an emblem of patriotism and national pride.

It was during the 1940s that the Miss America program began to award scholarships to its winners and participants - casting a vote for the future of American women during a time of uncertainty and fear.

During the war years Miss America winners sold more war bonds than any other public figures. And the 1940s saw the origins of the Miss America tradition of traveling overseas to boost morale for American troops - a tradition our titleholders are proud to continue to this day.

Then, as now, every theatre of operations brought unthinkable hazards. And an entire generation of young men took up arms to daily risk life and limb to keep the world safe for freedom and democracy.

Regular Joes, almost to a man ... a coalminer's son, a tailor, a construction worker, a farmer. On December 6, 1941 plying their trade, doing business as usual. And on December 7th, their lives changed forever. One day delivering milk, the next training to deliver bombs to destroy Hitler's war machine. One day driving a fishing boat, the next training to drive a Higgins boat into unknown hazards on an enemy-held foreign beach.

And life and limb they left behind. Their blood was spilled from one corner of the globe to the other - on the sands of North Africa, the snow-covered fields of Belgium, the beaches of Northern France, the icy waters of the North Atlantic, the steaming jungles and depths of the Southern Pacific and in the skies over thousands of hostile targets, day after day, night after night, until the regimes Tojo and Hitler were pounded to submission, inch by inch after years of unimaginable struggle.

They traded their wrenches for rifles, their pitchforks for bayonets ... they answered the call ... and they saved the world.

Millions completed their service heroically and without injury. Millions more came home disabled - and at least 400,000 never got to see their hometowns again. The families of 400,000 young men and women received the War Department telegram and changed the blue star hanging in the front window to the dreaded gold, signifying a family member had been killed in the line of duty.

Without the hard work and sacrifice of the men and women who defeated the forces of evil in World War II, we would not be standing here today. It's easy to take our freedom for granted, to focus on the needs of our families and ourselves, to fret about jobs, money, school and the price of gasoline.

But it's hard to remember that none of it could be possible if, 60 years ago, the world had not stood up and stamped out the ugliness of dictatorships committed to world domination.

That's why the National World War II Memorial is so important. It's why *America Celebrates* is so important. And it's why the Miss America Organization is very proud to play a role in the 100-day celebration.

Thank you for the opportunity, thank you for having us, and thank you for this magnificent gift to the world.