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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
PRESENTATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
MEDALS FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

THE PENTAGON

11:50 A.M. EST

Secretary Rumsfeld, honored Ambassadors, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I greatly welcome the opportunity to join you here today in honoring these three outstanding men who have served as their countries' representatives in the North Atlantic Council -- Ambassador deStaerck of Belgium, Ambassador deRose of France, and Ambassador Bruce of the United States.

In paying this tribute we reaffirm our commitment to our defense, to our way of life and to the cause of freedom everywhere. This is the responsibility of all of the Nations of the North Atlantic Alliance and, most particularly, it is the responsibility of the world's most powerful country, the United States.

In this American Bicentennial year we are reminded of our duty to safeguard the heritage of democracy and of liberty. If we fail, there is no one to take our place.

Over the past year it has been my privilege to meet both in Washington and in Brussels with the Ambassadors that we honor here today. I have found a very remarkable new unity among all the Nations of the Alliance on political developments in Europe and on the continuing responsibilities of collective defense. Each of the men we honor has given more than his full measure of clear sighted and dedicated service that we are all called upon to show.

Ambassador deStaerck has given more than 25 years of service to NATO, spanning the service of 10 U.S. Ambassadors and making in the truest sense of the world a lasting contribution to the solidarity of the West. I would note that our ties with Belgium bilaterally and in the Alliance are truly outstanding.

The strength and the durability of our ties are expressed in special measure by one of the countries represented here today. France is our oldest ally and in our Bicentennial year it is with special warmth that we reaffirm the closeness of the United States' relations with France.

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Ambassador deRose, in a long and distinguished diplomatic career, has earned an enviable reputation for the skill with which he has represented France, whose role is so important to the security and well-being of the West. I know from Secretaries Kissinger and Rumsfeld that Ambassador deRose's analytical powers and eloquence enlivened and dignified the deliberations of the North Atlantic Council and were a source of much wisdom.

A little more than a month ago it was my pleasure to confer the highest civilian award of the United States, the Medal of Freedom with Distinction, on David Bruce. His outstanding service over half a century of public life has been a unique contribution to American diplomacy and Atlantic unity that will never be equalled.

What we should do and what we must do to honor these men today in a truly meaningful way is to insure that we maintain our strength and that with that strength we safeguard the peace and defend the values that have made our societies great and produced men such as these.

In the final analysis, the success of our diplomacy for peace depends upon our strength. The world's security depends upon our knowledge and the world's knowledge that we are strong and prepared to defend ourselves when challenged.

Our adversaries know that the military strength of the United States is unsurpassed anywhere in the world today. They know that the United States is committed to a strong and powerful alliance in Europe but they also know that the trend of relative military strength has been changing over the past decade and more. We remain unsurpassed and we shall keep it that way.

That is why we must not only persevere in seeking greater stability in the world but we must also be willing to spend greater amounts of our own defenses in the United States.

Since becoming President I have submitted the two biggest defense budgets in peacetime history. I am deeply disturbed that some Members of our own Congress, apparently oblivious to the realities of today's world, now seek to make sizeable reductions in the defense budget that I submitted for the coming year. That budget is a minimum budget. There is no room for major reduction.

I want to serve notice today that if the Congress sends me a defense budget that shortchanges the future safety of the American people, I will veto that defense bill, unprecedented though that might be, and go directly to our fellow citizens, 215 million strong, on this life and death issue. Nothing is more vital than our own national security.

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All of us recognize that the aim of our Alliance is not strength for its own sake but strength for peace. Our aim in Europe is security and the true relaxation of tension -- not perpetual confrontation. The stability that we have insured in Europe by maintaining the military balance for 30 years, which we must maintain, creates opportunities for confident diplomacy. To diffuse powder kegs such as Berlin or to negotiate on mutual and balanced force reductions -- this has been NATO's declared policy for nearly a decade.

The stability also creates opportunities for building bridges, for seeking greater communication and understanding among peoples of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and the West. It builds an environment in which free movements of people and ideas can take place.

As I stated emphatically before all of the leaders of the Communist as well as the Western countries of Europe, there can be no true security and cooperation in Europe until human rights and freedom are expanded everywhere. The United States and the Atlantic Alliance stand for freedom. That is our policy and that is the policy of the American people.

And so, gentlemen, as we honor each of you we also honor our own highest principles and we are reminded of our duty. May we serve it as well as each of you have served.

END (AT 11:57 A.M. EST)