

On Memorial Day, Trump honors fallen soldiers and celebrates political wins

Trump's Memorial Day speech delivered an explicitly partisan message during what is traditionally a nonpolitical commemoration of the nation's fallen soldiers.

By Martine Powers
Washington Post

President Donald Trump commemorated his first Memorial Day back in office with a speech at Arlington National Cemetery that reflected on the tragedy of fallen soldiers, grieving Gold Star families and — in Trump's telling — the “hard four years” between his administrations.

“People pouring through our borders unchecked, people doing things that are indescribable — and not for today to discuss,” Trump said in front of a crowd of several thousand on Monday, including many Gold Star families who had come to the cemetery to honor their deceased loved ones.

Since becoming president again, Trump said “the republic ... is now doing so very well ... considering the circumstances.”

It was an explicitly partisan message during what is traditionally expected to be a nonpolitical speech.

Trump's remarks echoed comments he had posted to Truth Social earlier in the day, in which he started with a holiday message that veered into criticisms of political opponents and judges who delivered rulings that he thinks are hindering his policy agenda.

“HAPPY MEMORIAL DAY TO ALL,” wrote the president. “INCLUDING THE SCUM THAT SPENT THE LAST FOUR YEARS TRYING TO DESTROY OUR COUNTRY THROUGH WARPED RADICAL LEFT MINDS.”

In person, Trump's remarks received laughs and cheers, as people in the audience wearing red, white and blue outfits took videos of the president on

their phone, held up their children for a better look and applauded some of the more provocative lines.

Online, however, Trump's Truth Social post and remarks at the cemetery prompted an outcry from observers who argued it was inappropriate to use a moment of national remembrance to harp on political vendettas, and took issue with the president wishing people a "happy" Memorial Day.

Memorial Day honors military members who died in service, and the Wounded Warrior Project encourages wishing people a "meaningful Memorial Day" rather than a "happy Memorial Day" in recognition of the solemnity of the occasion.

Surrounded by huge American flags in the cemetery's marble amphitheater, Trump also spoke about his pleasure at having the opportunity to be the president during the nation's 250th anniversary next year, and during high-profile international sporting events coming in 2026 and 2028.

"We're going to have a big, big celebration, as you know — 250 years. In some ways, I'm glad I missed that second term where it was, because I wouldn't be your president for that, most important of all," Trump said.

"In addition, we have the World Cup and we have the Olympics," Trump added. "Can you imagine? I missed that four years, and now look what I have. I have everything. Amazing the way things work out. God did that."

The audience broke into applause, as many people laughed. "Yes, he did!" yelled one woman in the crowd.

Trump was accompanied by Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, whom Trump called "a tough cookie" because "he went through a lot."

Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran who has expressed in the past his skepticism about the place of women in combat roles, spoke largely about the courage and fortitude of men who have historically paid the ultimate sacrifice to protect Americans' freedom.

"You see, the American soldier fights not because he hates what's in front of him, but because he loves what's behind him," Hegseth said. "We honor his selfless sacrifice, his courage, his duty, and his love."

Vance, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 2003 to 2007, spoke in broader terms about the fallen troops honored at the nation's most esteemed military cemetery.

“Each life honored here in Arlington was once full of the ordinary moments and quiet dreams of early sunrises, of good days and bad days, of celebrations and disappointments,” Vance said. “They stood not apart from us, but among us, ordinary men and women who chose to shoulder an impossible burden.”

Trump has a complicated relationship with the military, with a long history of disparaging remarks about veterans. The Atlantic notably reported that Trump skipped a visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery, where many American soldiers who died in World War I are buried, saying it was “filled with losers.”

But at Monday's ceremony, he spoke at length about several different families in the crowd whose loved ones had died in combat. In particular, Trump homed in on Senior Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent, a 35-year-old cryptological technician and linguist with the Navy. During a deployment to Syria in 2019 where she was working on a counterterrorism mission, Kent was killed in a suicide bombing — leaving behind her husband and two young sons.

After her death, Kent's husband, Joe Kent, went on to run unsuccessfully for Congress in Washington state twice. In February, Trump announced plans to nominate Joe Kent to lead the National Counterterrorism Center; he is still waiting to be confirmed.

Trump asked the Kents' sons — now 7 and 9 years old — to stand in the crowd.

“Let me say, your mom was a hero,” Trump said, as the boys beamed in their matching suits, their father standing between them. “And her love, her strength and her spirit are always with us and always be with you.”