

Address by Senator John McCain
Dedication of the Mayaguez Memorial
November 11, 1996

Thank you, Ambassador Quinn. I am grateful and honored to be able to participate in this moving ceremony on this most appropriate of occasions, Veterans Day.

I was very touched by the previous speakers' recounting of the events of the Mayaguez incident, and the tribute to the men who gave their lives to save their fellow Americans. And I was very moved by the account of the lost fire team, a tragic tale of Americans lost to this day, whose ultimate fate we may never know, but whose sacrifice was a lantern of courage and faith that should illuminate for us all the path of honor.

The Mayaguez fight, we know, was the last combat action of America's longest war. Of course, war continued in Indochina after May 1975, and indeed here in Cambodia the conflict can even be said to continue to this very day, as the last, dwindling remnants of the Khmer Rouge defy the dreams of the Cambodian people and the tide of history to keep the bitter and brutal legacy of war alive.

But for Americans, the Mayaguez should have been an end point, a final chapter. Yet this proved not to be the case, and sadly so.

For more than a generation, Americans have let the arguments and divisions that afflicted our country during the war in Southeast Asia, distort our present perceptions about the countries where we once fought and the people here who have struggled since to move beyond the ravages of war.

Things have changed in Cambodia, and in the other countries where the Mekong River flows. And very recently American attitudes about Southeast Asia have also begun to change. We have established formal diplomatic relations with Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. And I am proud to say that in the last Congress, we passed legislation which I sponsored to extend most favored nation trading status to Cambodia.

We have, I believe, truly begun to move beyond the lingering animosities of war, and work with the people of Cambodia, and Laos and Vietnam, to support our mutual aspirations for peace and prosperity. It is right that we do so. American memories should not always be haunted by the ghosts of what we lost here in those terrible days of long ago. Nor should the memories of Cambodians forever be haunted by all the unspeakable horrors that were visited on the people of this beautiful country. We should not and cannot forget these tragedies, but there must be room in our hearts for hope and understanding.

Many years from now, I hope that those of our children and our children's children whose fate it becomes to work in association with the children of Cambodians, will, when they are old, cherish happier memories of this country than those of us whose fate it was to live in more violent and crueler times.

For us, although our hope for better times grows stronger and has begun to be realized, our memories of this place will always be made of somber reflections on loss and sacrifice; on courage and devotion. Our memories will turn to the thousands of heroic acts that make up the crucible of war. And sometimes they will turn, as they do on this fitting occasion, to the events of May 1975, when U.S. Marines came to a small island of Cambodia's southeast coast to rescue the American crew of the Mayaguez.

I have memories of a place so far removed from the comforts of America that I have learned to forget the anguish it once caused me. But my happiness these many years has not let me forget the friends who did not come home with me. The memory of them, of what they bore for honor and country, causes me to look in every prospective conflict for the shadow of Vietnam.

I do not let that shadow hold me in fear of my duty as God has given me light to see that duty. Yet it no longer falls to me to bear arms in my country's defense. For those who now bear this responsibility, I pray that if the time comes to answer the call to arms, the battle will be necessary and the field well-chosen. It is, sadly, not always thus. But as it was for the Americans who served in Southeast Asia, so it will be for them. Their honor will be in their answer, not their summons.

There was much honor in the answer provided by the Americans who came to rescue the crew of the Mayaguez. Some came home; others did not. We may never know the full extent of suffering and heroism that distinguished those Marines whose final resting place is known but to God. But we know this:

When the time came for them to answer their country's call and fight on a field they did not know, they came. And on that small island they served well the country that sent them there. In the fog of a hard battle gone wrong, they held high a lantern of courage and faith that illuminated the way home with honor. Where they all rest is unknown, but their honor is eternal, and lives in our country for so long as she remains worthy of the sacrifice of such brave men.

This memorial is a long overdue tribute to their honor. I commend my friend, Ken Quinn, for his efforts to create this memorial, and all those helped to commemorate the sacrifice of Americans -- comrades and friends to some; heroes to us all -- who lived, fought and died for the honor of a free people.

Thank you.