I am very honored to be here today, to join all of you in the commemoration and remembrance of those who have sacrificed for their country, particularly those who did so during the Cold War, defending the United States from potential threats.

In honoring these individuals its also important to understand the historical era in which their sacrifices were made. Historians have written that World War II produced our nation’s “greatest generation.” , well … Tom Brokaw has written … that WWII produced the greatest generation. But the Cold War has spanned multiple generations, and has called upon many Americans to sacrifice for their country. Individuals who defended America from an enemy that was not always clearly defined, or easy to see; An enemy that operated in distant lands or within our very borders; an enemy that had the potential to attack in an instant with weapons more devastating than any that had been used before. Americans, such as the ones we are gathered to recall today, stood ready to protect us not from military invasion, but from sudden bombing assaults which offered only mere minutes for a reaction. For 46 years, citizens of this country sacrificed to protect our nation and prevent the spread of tyranny and oppression throughout the world. So perhaps it would be fair to suggest that the Cold War produced our nation’s greatest collection of generations.

65 years ago, in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill made what many consider to be the first “Declaration of the Cold War.” Churchill’s metaphor of the ‘Iron Curtain’ that had divided the world into two communist and non-communist camps, was one of the first major public announcements by a leader on either side, that the Grand Alliance between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, forged during WWII, was over. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who had previously promised his Western counterparts to promote freedom and democracy to the peoples of Eastern Europe, failed to deliver. Churchill indicated the growing Soviet threat in his speech:

*From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an "iron curtain" has descended across the continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject, in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow.*

This concept of iron curtain would serve as the ideological and physical boundary between the two sides.

Following the advice of American diplomat George Kennan, President Harry Truman ushered in a policy of containment to stop the spread of Communism around the globe. The Truman Doctrine, as it would be known, now charged the people of the United States with the defense of not only their own borders, but of those nations that were potentially vulnerable to falling behind the Iron Curtain. The United States offered economic aid to the countries of Europe via the Marshall Plan, which sent money, food, bricks, mortar, tractors, factory equipment – even kitchen sinks - to the beleaguered continent in an effort to strengthen her against Communist influence. In 1948, American and British pilots ferried much needed supplies to the city of West Berlin, which found itself in the tyrannical grasp of Joseph Stalin. Millions of tons of food, medicine, and fuel were flown into the city which Stalin had ordered cut off from any ground based transportation. One American pilot even devised mini-parachutes which he attached to candy bars that were dropped into the eager hands of young German children. He called it, “Operation Little Vittles.” Interesting tidbit: All told Operation Little Vittles delivered 850 pounds of candy! (We don’t have any statistics on how many toothbrushes were sent.)

So we see, even in the early stages of the Cold War, Americans were already being called to serve and sacrifice for the safety of the world.

From 1950-53, Americans found themselves on the other side of the globe, when Communist North Korea (utilizing military equipment provided by the Soviet Union) invaded US ally South Korea. In response, President Truman spoke the following words to his nation:

*Korea is a small country, thousands of miles away. But what is happening there is important to every American. The fact that communist forces have invaded Korea is a warning that there may be similar acts of aggression in other parts of the world …*

These words represent US Cold War policy in a nutshell: Any where communist aggression appeared, the US was poised to act. During the course of the Korean War, which culminated in the removal of communist forces (from North Korea and China) north of the 38th Parallel, more than 30,000 Americans would lose their lives.

The Korean War was considered a successful implementation of containment, but there were setbacks: the Central Intelligence Agency’s attempts at aiding guerilla fighters facing off against Soviet troops in the Baltic States were thwarted by Soviet intelligence forces. In 1956, the people of Hungary attempted to throw off the shackles of communist control, only to be met in the streets by Soviet tanks. The Soviet Union’s successful detonation of their own atomic bomb (the plans for which they had obtained through espionage) ended America’s monopoly on nuclear weapons, and initiated an Arms Race that would continue into the 1980s. It was the advent of this proliferation of nuclear weapons which lead to the creation of the type of defense systems, such as the one restored here at Fort Hancock, that would eventually occupy nearly two dozen locations in the New York New Jersey area and more than a hundred around the country. In 1958, of course, 10 Americans serving at a NIKE missile site near Middleton, were killed in a tragic missile explosion. It is their memory, of course, that we honor today.

NIKE-Hercules units like those displayed at our site here were rushed to Florida in 1962, when Soviet nuclear missile emplacements were discovered on the island of Cuba. While a nation held its breath, and American school children were taught to “duck and cover,” NIKE-Hercules missiles stood poised to protect the nation. Thankfully, they were not needed, as cooler heads prevailed and nuclear war was averted.

In Berlin, the communist authorities turned the Iron Curtain metaphor into reality by erecting a 93 mile long Wall, preventing citizens in East Germany from traveling to the American-held side of West Berlin. Almost overnight, Berlin was torn in two. Families were split, freedom of travel was extinguished, and East German border guards were ordered to shoot on sight, anyone attempting to cross the Wall. Infamously, Peter Fechter, a young East German boy who attempted to cross the Wall, was shot by border guards and lay, for hours, in the no-mans-land between east and west, slowly dying as the Communist guards watched, while those on the West were helpless to do a thing. 171 people would die attempting to escape to the West. One East German women wrote of the widespread sense of desperation that had infected those sealed in behind the wall:

*Our lives have lost their spirit…we can do nothing to stop them*

President John F. Kennedy would visit the site of the Wall in 1963, and voice a memorable speech in which he offered the citizens of Berlin solace by saying:

*… We look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one, and this country and this great continent of Europe, in a peaceful and hopeful globe.*

By famously declaring, *Ich bin ein Berliner* (I am a resident of Berlin), President Kennedy essentially made Berlin and the Berlin Wall the eternal city and symbol of the Cold War for the people of Europe and the United States as well.

The war in Vietnam thrust a new generation of Americans into the front line of the Cold War and, called for another wave of sacrifice and service from the people of the United States. No conflict, however, would serve to be as divisive and controversial as the Vietnam War. While America’s role as the world’s anti-communist defense force had been accepted and supported for decades, many in the US grew impatient with the efforts to prevent communism’s spread to South Vietnam (and perhaps beyond, to all of Southeast Asia), and America grew weary of the growing number of American casualties. Perhaps for the first time during the Cold War, and possibly in all of America’s history, people began to question if the level of sacrifice was warranted. After seven long years of active military combat, and nearly 25 years of involvement in the country, the United States abandoned the containment of communism in Vietnam. Almost 60,000 Americans lost their lives in this conflict.

Following nearly a decade of détente in the 1970s, where the two Cold War combatants sought to ease the tensions and animosities that existed between the superpowers, while at the same time reducing nuclear arsenals, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 brought this period of truce to an end. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the United States became more aggressive in its efforts to contain communism and end the global influence of what President Reagan dubbed, the “Evil Empire.” Not only was the rhetoric raised, but so to was military spending. The US government spent billions, and eventually, trillions of dollars in the 1980s on the development of new weapons, but also in the pursuit of more elaborate and comprehensive defensive systems. Even though it proved to be unfeasible, the multi-billion dollar Strategic Defense Initiative – a defense system which proposed to destroy incoming ballistic missiles with a ground and spaced based network of lasers – nonetheless forced the Soviet Union to try and keep up. If they couldn’t devise their own “Star Wars,” as SDI was later dubbed, the Soviets had to spend their own billions to make sure their nuclear arsenals were sufficient to deal with a possible threat such as SDI.

It turns out, these were billions the Soviets just didn’t have. Most historians agree that is was the economic pressures of keeping up in the Cold War, that finally did the Soviet Union in. Soviet Premiere Leonid Brezhnev implemented a policy known as *Moguchestva*, loosely translated to mean “bullets before butter,” as the Soviet government devoted much of its spending on military technology at the expense of its civilian economy. By the 1980s Soviet healthcare, education, and its consumer economy had reached third world levels. The Soviet Union’s ability to control both the Eastern European satellite states upon which it had imposed communist rule, and the Socialist Republics that made up the USSR, had weakened greatly. In 1985, newly appointed Soviet Premiere Mikhail Gorbachev attempted to save the dying beast that was the Soviet bloc, by implementing gradual democratic and economic reforms. His people, however, had been shut up in the dark, dank closet that was Communist Totalitarianism for decades. Gorbachev’s reforms, to them was like someone opening that closet door just a tiny crack to let a mere sliver of fresh air and daylight in. To Gorbachev’s surprise, now that the closet door had been opened, the people wanted out.

In the dramatic year of 1989, one by one, the Eastern bloc countries of Europe shed their communist governments. President Kennedy’s words proved prophetic, as the collapse of the Berlin Wall came to symbolize the collapse of communism in Europe. By 1991, the Soviet Union too, had faded into oblivion.

A few semesters ago, I was teaching my Contemporary World History course, and we had just finished discussing the end of communism in Europe, and I had shown my students the images and video clips of the people of Berlin literally dismantling the wall. One young lady raised her hand and said, “so, we saw them tearing down the wall, what …. What did they do with the Iron Curtain?” No, no, there was never an actual curtain…

But, in truth, sites like these represent that curtain. They represent that nearly 50 year period of global division that was the Cold War. Sites like these remind us of the sacrifices millions of Americans made, some even making the ultimate sacrifice for their country and for the Free World. I tell my students that remembering and studying our past is vital to understanding our present, and comprehending our future. Much like the events and decisions that we’ve encountered in our own personal lives, have shaped the people we’ve become today, in order to truly understand our nation and our world as it is today, we must closely learn and understand the events that have brought us to this moment in time. Commemorations like the one we are having today, historical sites, such as the one we all have come to visit today, individuals like yourselves who have come to remember and learn, and of course, the continued study of our nation’s history and our world’s history, will insure that we not only remember the sacrifices of the past, but that we will inspire future generations to serve and sacrifice for their country as well.

Thank you very much. God Bless America.