

Remarks For The Opening
Of The
HMAS Perth & USS Houston Exhibition
March 1, 2017
Houston, Texas

It is such an honor to be here tonight to celebrate the opening of the Australian National Maritime Museum's exhibition on the Battle of the Sunda Strait.

It is well for us to remember 75 years after the fact how bleak the first months of 1942 were for the allies. Australia had already been at war for two years. The United States had just suffered a devastating defeat at Pearl Harbor and the Japanese were moving throughout Asia without pause. It is easy now to see that it would all come out right but it wasn't easy then to know that it would.

History has always been a love of mine. So much so that my reading is almost always confined to non-fiction. To me the stories of events and the men and women who were a part of them are more interesting than anything that can be imagined. Early 1942 is a case in point.

It reminds us that nothing worth having is inevitable. We were on the right side of history in World War II. The right ideals prevailed. But, there was nothing inevitable about it. That came home to me when I visited Darwin on the 60th anniversary of its bombing an event that preceded the loss of the USS Houston and HMAS Perth. I knew that the Japanese had attacked there, but I had no idea of the magnitude of the battle that was fought.

After Pearl Harbor, the USS Houston and the USS Peary had been dispatched to Darwin from the Philippines to shore up the defenses of Australia and the Dutch Indies. Both ships had literally fought their way out of the Philippines and engaged the Japanese multiple times along the way to Australia. Often steaming together, the Houston and Peary left Darwin Harbor on the evening of February 18th to join other American, British, Dutch and Australian ships in the waters around Timor. The Peary broke off to chase a Japanese submarine. In the process it expended so much fuel that it had to return to Darwin the next morning to refuel. About an hour after the Peary's arrival the Japanese attacked with more aircraft than were used at Pearl Harbor.

Commander John Bermingham immediately ordered the Peary to weigh anchor and make a run for the open sea where it would have more room to maneuver and engage the enemy more effectively. But it was too late. Japanese dive bombers scored five direct hits on the Peary in the harbor. Still its crew continued to fire its weapons for another two and a half hours before it went to the bottom with 91 Americans. It was the largest loss of American lives in Australian waters during the entire war. Before the day was over, twenty three ships were damaged or sunk and at least 252 Australians and Americans were killed as well as 186 Japanese.

It was such a devastating and humiliating defeat for the Australians that its results were censored by the Australian government until years after the war had ended. Yet, the stories of heroism there were the beginning of the unique bond that has existed between Australians and Americans ever since.

Australians dived into the crocodile infested waters of Darwin Harbor to swim through waves on fire from the fuel of sinking ships in an effort to rescue their American brothers in arms. More often than not they found dead men but time and time again they went back on the chance there might be injured survivors. They didn't know each other. They hadn't served with each other. They just knew that they -Americans and Australians were in the fight - together. That was February 19, 1942, four days after the fall of Singapore and a little more than two months after Pearl Harbor. The USS Houston had luckily escaped Darwin to fight more days in other places.

In the Battle of the Java Sea, eight days later American, Australian, British and Dutch forces suffered another devastating loss in the largest surface ship engagement since the Battle of Jutland in 1916. The allies had one heavy cruiser damaged, two light cruisers and three destroyers sunk and 2,300 sailors killed! The HMAS Perth and the USS Houston were ordered by the Dutch Commander of the Operation to retire from the fight because they were partially damaged and low on fuel and ammunition. Again, Houston's luck held but it was about to run out. Unable to rearm or refuel fully, both the Perth and Houston were ordered the next day back into the Sunda Strait. As we know from what we have seen tonight they were lost. Yet, what heroism they showed. No one on either of those ships could have been confident they would return when they were ordered back into the fight. How could they? They had seen what had happened the night before. They knew of the losses at Darwin. They knew their numbers were thin. They knew so many ships had been sunk. They knew the Japanese would have an overwhelming numerical advantage. But, still they went. Heroes are like that.

They did not know that the following May the Battle of the Coral Sea would blunt the Japanese advance. They did not know that the Battle of Midway in June would turn the tide in the Pacific. They just knew that the democracy they had, the freedom of speech they enjoyed, the free press they read, the freedom of religion they practiced were all at stake. And, they – Australians and Americans alike - were prepared against all odds to do whatever they could whenever they could to stop those who were arrayed against them. What courage. What partners. What an example.

Perhaps we should also remember tonight that seventy-five years ago the Nazis controlled the European continent, France had fallen and the Japanese had known only victory. Just twelve democracies still existed in the world – twelve. Six of those democracies were English speaking and traced their origins to Magna Carta. Five of those six, the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand were in the war and they were losing. There were only four democracies in Latin America, and two in Europe – Switzerland and Sweden who were under tremendous pressure from the Nazis. None, none existed across the full face of Asia. The light of democracy grew dimmer with each passing month. The forces of darkness were in the ascendancy.

Winston Churchill rightly argued that the fate of civilization hung in the balance. “If we fail,” he said, “the whole world, including the United States, and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age...”

And yet, Americans and Australians looked deep into their souls and found the character to endure, the reason to hope, and the fellow citizens to share the ordeal that was to come, if good was to defeat evil.

Here in Houston on Memorial Day, May 30th, 1942 three months after the USS Houston was sunk the citizens of this great city took action. One thousand young men known as the Houston Volunteers stood and took an oath to join the Navy. They wanted to take the place of the brave men who had gone down with the USS Houston. Eighty five million dollars in war bonds had also been sold here in three months to build another USS Houston. Blood and treasure were committed. As those Houston Volunteers marched through the streets of Houston, a crowd estimated between 150 and 200 hundred thousand cheered them on.

In a congratulatory message President Roosevelt said, “ Our enemies have given us the chance to prove that there will be another USS Houston, and yet another USS Houston if that becomes necessary, and still another USS Houston as long as American ideals are in jeopardy.”

Those young men and millions of other Americans of both gender embraced the cause that Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and a myriad of other countries had already been fighting two years to defend. Together – not alone – we could change the world.

When your whole existence, your whole way of life is at stake, you remember who showed up to help, especially when the outcome was very much in doubt. Australians and Americans have been remembering each other ever since those early months of 1942. For seventy-five years every time America was prepared to shed its blood, Australia was prepared to go with us. We appreciate each other in a way that only mutual sacrifice can explain. We have built an alliance, a relationship, a friendship, second to none. We should be proud of what that friendship has produced for ourselves and others. In the end it created a better world for victor and vanquished alike.

Who could have imagined 75 years ago when the Perth and Houston were lost that a defeated Japan and Germany would emerge as model citizens of a new international order? That they would be allies. That they would build the third and fourth largest economies of the world. That they would champion with Australia and the United States democratic values that have made the world safer, healthier and more prosperous than ever before.

After his first term, President Bush asked me to move from Australia to Japan to serve as the United States Ambassador there. It gave me a unique perspective. I went from an ally that had helped win the war to an ally that had lost the war. It made me appreciate even more the wisdom of the post war foreign policy followed by both the United States and Australia.

President Bush was very fond of Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and often recounted to audiences the irony of their friendship. Both had fathers who served their countries in the war. Had their fathers met in the war years, mortal combat would have followed. Yet the healing power of freedom, democracy and justice had made their sons allies and friends.

As Prime Minister Koizumi's term in office was coming to an end, the President wanted to show his appreciation for their relationship by inviting him to Washington for a State visit. No country does State visits better than the United States. The pomp and circumstance that surrounds them is truly awe inspiring. This one was memorable though not so much for what anyone from the United States said or did, but because of what the Prime Minister told us at the dinner that night. Standing under the portrait of a wise and contemplative Abraham Lincoln in the State Dining room of the White House, Mr. Koizumi said this in English, "During the war, people in Japan were taught to fear and hate the Americans as if they were monsters. But, the Americans... in fact, came with warm and generous hearts. The Japanese people are still impressed with (and) grateful for the generosity of the United States and the American people." Then the Prime Minister quoted Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, "With malice toward none, with charity for all...let us strive on...to bind up the nation's wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

"I believe," the Prime Minister said, "it was this American spirit that lifted the hearts of Japan's people, made Japan's reconstruction possible and built a foundation for the solid friendship between our two nations." There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Before we forget our history and begin listening once again to the voices of isolation and protectionism, we should remember that our post war success in the world flowed out of one firm conviction - that we could create a better world when we acted together rather than alone. The United States and Australia and, yes, Japan and Germany should take pride in that. Together, we made a better world.

We should remember liberty will never be finally won. Civility and understanding will never be finally observed. Tolerance for all will never be finally accepted. To make those ideals realized in any society at any time, good men and good women must believe them worth having. And they must, like those brave men on board the Perth and Houston that night have the courage to do whatever they can at the moment they are challenged to ensure their survival. That is who we are. That is what made us successful in the post-war world and, that is what will lead us to a better world.