Neil Armstrong Eulogy

It is a special honor to be able to share some thoughts this morning about Neil Armstrong with those closest to him – his wonderful family and dear friends, those blessed to be in Neil’s orbit.

Those who loved and respected him not for what he did but who he was.

Speaking for myself, and I suspect most of you, this past week has been a time to grieve his loss, and recall sweet memories. But it’s also been an opportunity to remember his unique place in history.

Over the years, the enormity of Neil’s professional accomplishments had, with his strong encouragement, receded somewhat in our minds. We became comfortable with the man and to a degree, let go of the legend.

It was there of course, under the surface. But when we thought about Neil we thought about his charm, quick wit, intellect, gentle spirit and zest for life.

Within hours of the devastating news of his passing on Saturday, the television, print and online stories reminded us of what we knew but had dimmed in our memories… the magnitude of what our friend had accomplished for his nation came flooding over us.

Some of the words spoken around the world this week, about the heroism of this gentle man, bear repeating:

“Armstrong's greatest accomplishment will never be forgotten as long as man roams the earth”

“As long as there are history books, Neil Armstrong will be included in them”
“A towering figure”

“An iconic legend of a man”

“The purist of American Heroes”

From Mitt Romney last night:
“The soles of Neil Armstrong’s boots on the moon made permanent impressions on OUR souls and in our national psyche.

And from the President of the United States:
“Neil was among the greatest of American heroes -- not just of his time, but of all time.”

We heard Neil’s own words again when he said so eloquently, “The important achievement of Apollo was demonstrating that humanity is not forever chained to this planet and our visions go rather further that that and our opportunities are unlimited.”

Popular culture also captured the moment: Here are two tweets I particularly liked:

“If God had intended man to fly he would have created Neil Armstrong.”

And “In 2009 we lost Michael Jackson. Now we lost Neil Armstrong. We are running out of moonwalkers!”

This week we were reminded, that Neil was a genuine American hero long before Apollo 11. He had already served his Nation with bravery and skill on Gemini 8, as a test pilot pushing the envelope he had strapped himself into terrifying looking contraptions with gigantic, flame-belching engines tied onto big fuel tanks. And
before he was a test pilot he distinguished himself by flying 78 combat missions in Korea.

Including one mission where he had to eject from his plane and was fortunate to be rescued by Marines, before the enemy found him. Amazing.

For all of these accomplishments this son of Ohio received the highest honors a grateful nation could bestow: Presidential Medal of Freedom, a Congressional Gold Medal and Congressional Space Medal of Honor.

To millions he was -- and remained -- a hero, a giant. Yet to all of us -- he had become Neil.

Now and again we would experience how he touched the lives of others, in the most profound ways. All of you have stories – better than mine – but allow me to recall one:

Neil and Carol honored us by coming to my swearing-in, in Washington a year and a half ago. At a dinner the night before, I introduced Neil to another hero of mine, Col. Tom Moe, a decorated combat pilot who was shot down in Vietnam and spent years in a prison cell at what he calls the Hanoi Hilton near the prison cell of another POW named John McCain. Tom said he wanted Neil to hear a story. Col. Moe told Neil how their ‘Vietnamese captors tried to break them down by keeping good news from America from reaching them - they wanted the POW’s to believe America was in decline, losing the war, and giving up on them.

In particular, They didn’t want to tell them about Apollo– they wanted them to think that President Kennedy’s stirring call to land a man on the moon had not been accomplished before the decade was out.
Then one day one of Col. Moe’s fellow prisoners got a letter from his mom. Somehow, the Vietnamese guard allowed that letter to get through, and the postage stamp, which they had failed to remove, was the stamp of Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon. Col Moe. said, “Mr. Armstrong, when he saw that postage stamp and we all heard about it, it gave all of us incredible inspiration and strength. I want to thank you for that.” Neil was noticeably moved. Today, behind my desk in Washington, I have a treasured photograph of Neil Armstrong and Tom Moe to remind me of that evening – and how Neil touched the lives of the best and bravest among us.

As Neil’s heroics played out on our screens again this past week, I was not only jolted into remembering his impact but also was reminded about how extraordinary it was that this towering figure had truly been … such a modest, loving, unassuming man despite all this notoriety.

How he handled the spotlight into which he was thrust said as much about Neil as the time he spent on the moon two score and three years ago. He was a humble Midwesterner, a proud Ohioan, who believed the honor of serving his country, and meeting great challenges in his quiet way, was all the reward he deserved. He was a refreshing counterweight to the celebrity society we seem to have become.

He was a private man in some respects, yes, but only because he never believed it was about him. It was about his country, it was about others, it was about doing your duty and doing it well.

Even the heroic phrase he is most famous for was deeply modest at its core. It was actually “That’s one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind.” Neil was -- in his view -- -- a man, one man, not an icon, and that’s how he carried himself for all his life.
For us, Neil’s true greatness was not so much his feats as a pilot and an astronaut, but rather in the way he comported himself once back on earth.

He was first a loving father, son, husband, brother and grandfather. And he was a grateful friend to many of you.

God smiled upon Neil Armstrong throughout his extraordinary life. Neil returned the favor by living his life with honor and dignity. How appropriate that on the day his family set aside to honor Neil, God’s creation that Neil first touched will be blue, too, but full and shining brightly in the night sky, waiting for your wink.

On behalf of a grateful nation, thank you Neil Armstrong, for your dedication to your country, for your bravery, your sacrifice, your pioneering spirit, your outstanding example to our children, and yes, for your humility and your humanity.

We were truly blessed to have known you, Neil. To have been in your orbit. Rest peacefully friend, you richly deserve it.

Rob Portman
United States Senator from Ohio
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