

18 Dec 2004 -17:00

PR-commemoration of the Battle of the Bulge / speech Prime Minister

Please find enclosed the speech of the Prime Minister on the occasion of the commemoration of the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne.

An EMBARGO applies up to saturday 18th December on 4.00 pm. Only the spoken word prevails.

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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GUY VERHOFSTADT TO MARK THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE BASTOGNE, 18 DECEMBER 2004
Your Majesty, Veterans, Ladies and Gentlemen, December 18th, 1944. The enemy's final offensive had been under way for three days in a desperate bid to drive a wedge between the allied troops. It was a last attempt to undermine the morale of America and liberated Europe. The day before, another 86 American prisoners had been executed in Malmedy. For nearly a month, more than one million soldiers would fight in Germany's last major offensive of the war in the Ardennes. Soldiers from America, Germany, Britain, Belgium, Luxembourg and elsewhere. The circumstances in which they fought were as bad as they could be. The only thing they could see was fog. The only thing they could hear were gunshots and the screams of their wounded buddies. The only thing they could smell was lead and death. The only thing they could feel was fear, pain, hunger and cold. It was so very cold. But it was precisely these circumstances that made their actions so heroic and unique. For despite the surprise offensive, despite the fact that the situation sometimes looked hopeless, they continued to fight back. Every hour and every day - for weeks on end. How do you carry on? How can you stand up and keep going when your buddies are being shot down all around you? Where do you find the strength to brave a barrage of enemy fire and to bring your wounded friends to safety at great risk to your own life? Conviction. The conviction that ideas which threaten our freedom, our democracy and our families can never be allowed to win. This conviction is what kept the soldiers and citizens in the Ardennes going. It is this conviction that led the free world to victory. On behalf of my country, I would like to thank every veteran, every nurse and every citizen who made a contribution to that victory. December 18th, 2004. Ninety years after the Battle of the Yser, sixty years after the Battle of the Bulge. These were the catalysts that led to the creation of the major international organisations: NATO, the UN and the European Union. Since the Battle of the Bulge, we Europeans and Americans have learned that while our good relationship may sometimes bulge, it will never burst. Our tactics may sometimes differ, but our strategic goals remain the same. For centuries we have shared the same values, the same ideals, the same conviction. Hostile ideas have often put us to the test. But on every occasion, the strength of our convictions wins the day. It will be no different tomorrow. That is what we learned from the horrors that took place here sixty years ago. The Battle of the Bulge brought us closer together. The bond of Allies became a band of brothers. Brothers in suffering, brothers in resistance, brothers in ideals and conviction. It is now our duty to further strengthen this bond in order to secure this hard-won freedom for future generations. I thank you