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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0918

May 19, 2020

The Honorable Robert Wilkie
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Wilkie,

As you know, next week Americans from all across our country will come together to honor our fallen heroes for Memorial Day. The traditions associated with this reverent day are deeply important to those who have lost loved ones and to all communities who wish to pay their respects. Unfortunately, a decision made recently by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will restrict access to these events and traditions. As a result, while Americans will still come together, they will not be able to attend memorial services or volunteer to place American flags at the national cemeteries run by your agency. I am writing to urge you to reverse this decision.

With many parts of our country now in the process of a phased re-opening, I find it appalling that beaches will be open for the holiday but that access to VA cemeteries will remain restricted. While I understand your desire to limit large gatherings, the reality is that the government cannot manage the risks for each individual. Every person in our country, especially on a day like Memorial Day, should have the freedom to mourn and pay their respects in the manner they judge is best for themselves and their groups.

For me personally, here's why I believe this freedom is important: every year, I attend Memorial Day ceremonies in Florida, but on one Memorial Day in particular, I made a request of my wife Brianna that I have come to deeply regret. That year, I asked that she stay home with our two little boys so that I could attend the ceremonies by myself. I made this selfish request because I didn't want my boys to see me in pain, and I didn't want my wife to have to answer the question, "why is Daddy crying?" I regret this moment, because at the time, I mistook those tears for weakness. I now realize that those tears represent strength. I believe it is important that, instead of mourning apart from each other, we share this emotion for each person who gave the last beat of their heart to defend our freedom. Our children and everybody across our nation should join in this emotion together to truly appreciate that there were brave men and women who showed strength, courage and patriotism with every bit of life they had so that we may live free.

We are blessed beyond words to be citizens of the greatest country on Earth. Restricting Memorial Day ceremonies and preventing the tradition of volunteers placing our beautiful flag on each grave flies in the face of the freedoms that so many have died to protect. So, respectfully, I ask you to reconsider so that we may all join in the shared experience of Memorial Day.

Sincerely,



Brian Mast
Member of Congress