

**Statement of
Brian Alexander
President & CEO, National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial
Kansas City, Missouri
Before the
Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
December 3, 2009**

Chairman Udall, Ranking Member Burr and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the National World War I Museum on H.R. 1849 and S.760 to designate the Liberty Memorial as the National World War I Memorial and to establish a World War I Centennial Commission.

The events of 1914 through 1918 profoundly shaped world history and forever changed America's role on the world stage. Shortly after the 1918 Armistice, citizens in the heart of our nation raised money to build a memorial in Kansas City, Missouri to honor the four million American men and women who served during the First World War.

In two weeks they raised over two million dollars – the equivalent of more than 26 million dollars today. Following this successful fundraising drive, a national architectural competition for a monument design was held.

The 1921 site dedication in Kansas City was attended by the military commanders of the five Allied nations – France, Italy, Great Britain, Belgium and the United States, represented by General John J. Pershing of Missouri. It was at the Liberty Memorial that these five leaders met together for the first time.

The Liberty Memorial opened on November 11, 1926. During the dedication, President Calvin Coolidge addressed the more than 100,000 attendees, saying:

“It is with a mingling of sentiments that we come to dedicate this memorial. Erected in memory of those who defended their homes and their freedom in the World War, it stands for service and all that

service implies. Today I return ... in order that I may place the official sanction of the national government upon one of the most elaborate and impressive memorials that adorn our country.

Today we are here to request that you formalize President Coolidge's official sanction of the national government. For eight decades all American veterans from the Great War have been honored by the words carved on the limestone base of the 217-foot tall Liberty Memorial Tower – "In Honor of Those Who Served in the World War in Defense of Liberty and Our Country."

In 1961 former Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, both World War I veterans, joined together to rededicate the Liberty Memorial – further recognizing it as the national memorial.

H.R. 760 also establishes a Centennial Commission to prepare for and oversee the 100th anniversary of World War I. While this matter is not directly before this committee, the National World War I Museum is strongly supportive of this legislation that will properly coordinate a national program to commemorate the great sacrifices of those who served by making available the vast resources of the Museum.

Through the years, more than 60,000 historical objects from the war have been donated to the Liberty Memorial from around the world – resulting in the most comprehensive collection of World War I materials in our country.

Our ability to share the stories and honor those who served in the First World War was greatly enhanced with the massive expansion of a new museum built directly beneath the Liberty Memorial. In 2004 the 108th Congress enacted legislation designating the museum as the National World War I Museum. The new state-of-the-art Museum opened its doors to critical acclaim in 2006. That same year, the Liberty Memorial was also designated by the Department of the Interior as a National Historic Landmark.

Since the 2006 grand opening, more than a million guests have visited the museum and its historic grounds including more than 55,000 students on school sponsored field trips.

For 83 years, the Liberty Memorial has honored all those who served this country in the First World War. Since then, American soldiers on their way to subsequent conflicts have visited the memorial to honor those who came before them. As an example, General David Petraeus toured the Museum shortly before his deployment to Iraq.

Other dignitaries have acknowledged the importance of the Memorial and Museum through their visits including Vice President Dick Cheney, former Secretary of State General Colin Powell and then Senator Barack Obama.

On Veterans Day 2009, the son and grandson of Sergeant Alvin York, the most decorated American World War I doughboy, were special guests of the Museum and Memorial. We are proud that the York family has endorsed our legislative efforts, and that members of the York family are here today. As the Centennial approaches and world attention focuses on this event, other family descendants, historians and organizations throughout the world are turning to us to help in their remembrance.

We are proud to have two national member-based organizations, representing nearly five million veterans, endorse our efforts for National Memorial designation and the creation of a Centennial Commission. I have with me a resolution to this effect that was passed unanimously at the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention, as well as a letter of support from the American Legion and its members, who also formally endorsed our proposed legislation. We are grateful that both organizations are represented here today.

I ask unanimous consent that these letters and the letter from the York family be included in their entirety along with my full statement.

We are not asking that ongoing operational funding be tied to the designation as national memorial. Our request is to simply recognize the Liberty Memorial as the nation's official World War I Memorial – fulfilling President Coolidge's pronouncement in 1926.

In conclusion, since the guns fell silent on November 11, 1918, the American people established hundreds of memorials throughout our nation to honor their countrymen who served in the Great War. Right here in the District of Columbia one can find several memorials dedicated to soldiers from this area. However, the Liberty Memorial stands apart from all other efforts – in size, in scale and in our ongoing commitment in honoring and interpreting this event.

For more than 80 years, the Liberty Memorial has served as the de facto national memorial. The grandeur of the Liberty Memorial combined with nearly a century of honoring ALL United States veterans from the First World War positions the Memorial uniquely as the national symbol for World War I.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or any members of the subcommittee may have.