

State of Kansas



RICHARD WILBORN

Senate Vice President

February 13, 2024

RE: Proponent Testimony for SB 431

Dear Chairman Thompson, members of the Senate Federal & State Affairs Committee,

There are so many stories, some you heard today, about how Chaplain Father Kapaun's story has captured the admiration of so many in our state and nation. Fr. Kapaun was born in Pilsen, Kansas, which is located inside Marion County, a part of Senate District 35. Let me speak briefly to the wide recognition Chaplain Father Emil Kapaun has enjoyed at home and around the world.

This week, Former CIA Director Mike Pompeo wrote a press release highlighting the importance of this bill. Secretary Pompeo was instrumental in the bipartisan effort to honor Father Kapaun with the Medal of Honor. For the committee's reference, I have also included in my testimony President Barack Obama's comments from the Medal of Honor ceremony in 2013, which captures the story of Chaplain Kapaun's service to his fellow POWs.

On May 30, 2023, I attended the dedication ceremony in Herrington, Kansas renaming the Post Office building for Chaplain Emil Kapaun. Both Houses of Congress unanimously voted to honor Chaplain Kapaun, passing HR 2044 in 2022, a bill sponsored by all four Kansas Congressmen and signed into law by President Joe Biden.

In 2021, when the remains of Chaplain Father Kapaun returned to Kansas, Governor Laura Kelly proclaimed September 29th as Father Emil Kapaun Day. Her comments, tweeted along with the Proclamation, are significant: "Father Kapaun was known to care for all prisoners – regardless of their background or religion, and we are proud to honor his service and sacrifice for his country." As a non-Catholic, I wholeheartedly agree with our Governor that Father Kapaun's sacrifice soars above any cultural division, making him a hero for our times.

Chaplain Father Kapaun is the most decorated U.S. Army Chaplain in history. He is a native Kansan, and an American hero. He has been recognized by President Obama with the highest military honor that our nation can bestow, and his name adorns federal buildings, military installations, and memorials across the globe. I know our Statehouse visitors and all elected Kansas leaders would profit from a daily reminder of his example made present before our eyes, gracing the halls of our State Capitol. Thank you for your support of this bill.

Sincerely,

Senator Richard Wilborn, Vice President



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
February 13, 2024

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70th Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Honoring the Life and Legacy of Father Emil J. Kapaun

During his time representing Kansas' 4th District in Congress, 70th Secretary of State Mike Pompeo advocated for Father Emil J. Kapaun, a former Wichita resident and Army chaplain who perished in the Korean War, to posthumously receive the Medal of Honor - which Father Kapaun was honored with in 2013. Now, as Kansas state officials consider proceeding on bill SB 431, "Directing the capitol preservation committee to approve plans for a memorial honoring Emil Joseph Kapaun," Secretary Pompeo issued the following statement of support:

"Father Kapaun was an exemplary and heroic man, a courageous servant of God to his last day who never wavered in his commitment to bring the light of God's grace into even the darkest places. In the Korean War, with his battalion facing encirclement by the enemy, he ventured forth into the battlefield to retrieve the wounded and comfort those who were suffering. As a prisoner of war, Father Kapaun inspired his fellow soldiers with acts of true bravery and utter selflessness. He spread his own meagre rations among the other prisoners to ensure they retained their strength and health. He routinely said Mass and heard confessions regardless of race, color, or creed. Two months before his own death in 1951 he held an Easter sunrise service, reminding his fellow prisoners, and perhaps even some of his captors, that Christ's love and mercy shall never be overcome by mortal strife.

Father Kapaun lived his life in the service of God, and died in His service also. That such a man hailed from Kansas is a source of great pride to everyone who calls the Sunflower State home, including myself, and we should teach our children and grandchildren about his life and legacy for generations to come. For these reasons and many more, I hope the current efforts to establish a memorial to his life and deeds in the form of a statue at the statehouse in Topeka proceed. There is no Kansan more worthy of this honor."

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

April 11, 2013

Remarks by the President at Presentation of the Medal of Honor to Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun, U.S. Army

East Room

2:22 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House. Thank you, Chaplain.

This year, we mark the 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War -- a time when thousands of our prisoners of war finally came home after years of starvation and hardship and, in some cases, torture. And among the homecomings, one stood out.

A group of our POWs emerged carrying a large wooden crucifix, nearly four feet tall. They had spent months on it, secretly collecting firewood, carving it -- the cross and the body -- using radio wire for a crown of thorns. It was a tribute to their friend, their chaplain, their fellow prisoner who had touched their souls and saved their lives -- Father Emil Kapaun.

This is an amazing story. Father Kapaun has been called a shepherd in combat boots. His fellow soldiers who felt his grace and his mercy called him a saint, a blessing from God. Today, we bestow another title on him -- recipient of our nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. After more than six decades of working to make this Medal a reality, I know one of Father Kapaun's comrades spoke for a lot of folks here when he said, "it's about time."

Father, as they called him, was just 35 years old when he died in that hellish prison camp. His parents and his only sibling, his brother, are no longer with us. But we are

extremely proud to welcome members of the Kapaun family -- his nephews, his niece, their children -- two of whom currently serve in this country's National Guard. And we are very proud of them.

We're also joined by members of the Kansas congressional delegation, leaders from across our armed forces, and representatives from the Catholic Church, which recognizes Father Kapaun as a "Servant of God." And we are truly humbled to be joined by men who served alongside him -- veterans and former POWs from the Korean War. (Applause.)

Now, I obviously never met Father Kapaun. But I have a sense of the man he was, because in his story I see reflections of my own grandparents and their values, the people who helped to raise me. Emil and my grandfather were both born in Kansas about the same time, both were raised in small towns outside of Wichita. They were part of that Greatest Generation -- surviving the Depression, joining the Army, serving in World War II. And they embodied those heartland values of honesty and hard work, decency and humility -- quiet heroes determined to do their part.

For Father Kapaun, this meant becoming an Army chaplain -- serving God and country. After the Communist invasion of South Korea, he was among the first American troops that hit the beaches and pushed their way north through hard mountains and bitter cold. In his understated Midwestern way, he wrote home, saying, "this outdoor life is quite the thing" -- (laughter) -- and "I prefer to live in a house once in a while." But he had hope, saying, "It looks like the war will end soon."

That's when Chinese forces entered the war with a massive surprise attack -- perhaps 20,000 soldiers pouring down on a few thousand Americans. In the chaos, dodging bullets and explosions, Father Kapaun raced between foxholes, out past the front lines and into no-man's land -- dragging the wounded to safety.

When his commanders ordered an evacuation, he chose to stay -- gathering the injured, tending to their wounds. When the enemy broke through and the combat was hand-to-hand, he carried on -- comforting the injured and the dying, offering some measure of peace as they left this Earth.

When enemy forces bore down, it seemed like the end -- that these wounded Americans, more than a dozen of them, would be gunned down. But Father Kapaun spotted a wounded Chinese officer. He pleaded with this Chinese officer and convinced

him to call out to his fellow Chinese. The shooting stopped and they negotiated a safe surrender, saving those American lives.

Then, as Father Kapaun was being led away, he saw another American -- wounded, unable to walk, laying in a ditch, defenseless. An enemy soldier was standing over him, rifle aimed at his head, ready to shoot. And Father Kapaun marched over and pushed the enemy soldier aside. And then as the soldier watched, stunned, Father Kapaun carried that wounded American away.

This is the valor we honor today -- an American soldier who didn't fire a gun, but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all, a love for his brothers so pure that he was willing to die so that they might live. And yet, the incredible story of Father Kapaun does not end there.

He carried that injured American, for miles, as their captors forced them on a death march. When Father Kapaun grew tired, he'd help the wounded soldier hop on one leg. When other prisoners stumbled, he picked them up. When they wanted to quit -- knowing that stragglers would be shot -- he begged them to keep walking.

In the camps that winter, deep in a valley, men could freeze to death in their sleep. Father Kapaun offered them his own clothes. They starved on tiny rations of millet and corn and birdseed. He somehow snuck past the guards, foraged in nearby fields, and returned with rice and potatoes. In desperation, some men hoarded food. He convinced them to share. Their bodies were ravaged by dysentery. He grabbed some rocks, pounded metal into pots and boiled clean water. They lived in filth. He washed their clothes and he cleansed their wounds.

The guards ridiculed his devotion to his Savior and the Almighty. They took his clothes and made him stand in the freezing cold for hours. Yet, he never lost his faith. If anything, it only grew stronger. At night, he slipped into huts to lead prisoners in prayer, saying the Rosary, administering the sacraments, offering three simple words: "God bless you." One of them later said that with his very presence he could just for a moment turn a mud hut into a cathedral.

That spring, he went further -- he held an Easter service. I just met with the Kapaun family. They showed me something extraordinary -- the actual stole, the purple vestment that Father Kapaun wore when he celebrated Mass inside that prison camp.

As the sun rose that Easter Sunday, he put on that purple stole and led dozens of prisoners to the ruins of an old church in the camp. And he read from a prayer missal that they had kept hidden. He held up a small crucifix that he had made from sticks. And as the guards watched, Father Kapaun and all those prisoners -- men of different faith, perhaps some men of no faith -- sang the Lord's Prayer and "America the Beautiful." They sang so loud that other prisoners across the camp not only heard them, they joined in, too -- filling that valley with song and with prayer.

That faith -- that they might be delivered from evil, that they could make it home -- was perhaps the greatest gift to those men; that even amidst such hardship and despair, there could be hope; amid their misery in the temporal they could see those truths that are eternal; that even in such hell, there could be a touch of the divine. Looking back, one of them said that that is what "kept a lot of us alive."

Yet, for Father Kapaun, the horrific conditions took their toll. Thin, frail, he began to limp, with a blood clot in his leg. And then came dysentery, then pneumonia. That's when the guards saw their chance to finally rid themselves of this priest and the hope he inspired. They came for him. And over the protests and tears of the men who loved him, the guards sent him to a death house -- a hellhole with no food or water -- to be left to die.

And yet, even then, his faith held firm. "I'm going to where I've always wanted to go," he told his brothers. "And when I get up there, I'll say a prayer for all of you." And then, as was taken away, he did something remarkable -- he blessed the guards. "Forgive them," he said, "for they know not what they do." Two days later, in that house of death, Father Kapaun breathed his last breath. His body was taken away, his grave unmarked, his remains unrecovered to this day.

The war and the awful captivity would drag on for another two years, but these men held on -- steeled by the memory and moral example of the man they called Father. And on their first day of freedom, in his honor, they carried that beautiful wooden crucifix with them.

Some of these men are here today -- including Herb Miller, the soldier that Father Kapaun saved in that ditch and then carried all those miles. Many are now in their 80s, but make no mistake, they are among the strongest men that America has ever

produced. And I would ask all of our courageous POWs from the Korean War to stand if they're able and accept the gratitude of a grateful nation. (Applause.)

I'm told that in their darkest hours in the camp in that valley, these men turned to a Psalm. As we prepare for the presentation of the Medal of Honor to Father Kapaun's nephew, Ray, I want to leave you with the words of that Psalm, which sustained these men all those years ago.

Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely, your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
Ray, would you please join me on stage for the reading of the citation?

MILITARY AIDE: The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, March 3, 1863, has awarded in the name of Congress the Medal of Honor to Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun, United States Army, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the all of duty.

Chaplain Emil J. Kapaun distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy at Unsan, Korea, from November 1st to 2nd, 1950.

On November 1st, as Chinese Communist Forces viciously attacked friendly elements, Chaplain Kapaun calmly walked through withering enemy fire in order to provide comfort and medical aid to his comrades and rescue friendly wounded from no-man's land.

Though the Americans successfully repelled the assault, they found themselves surrounded by the enemy. Facing annihilation, the able-bodied men were ordered to evacuate. However, Chaplain Kapaun, fully aware of his certain capture, elected to stay behind with the wounded.

After the enemy succeeded in breaking through the defense in the early morning hours of November 2nd, Chaplain Kapaun continually made rounds as hand-to-hand combat

ensued. As Chinese Communist Forces approached the American position, Chaplain Kapaun noticed an injured Chinese officer amongst the wounded and convinced him to negotiate the safe surrender of the American forces.

Shortly after his capture, Chaplain Kapaun, with complete disregard for his personal safety and unwavering resolve, bravely pushed aside an enemy soldier preparing to execute Sergeant First Class Herbert A. Miller. Not only did Chaplain Kapaun's gallantry save the life of Sergeant Miller, but also his unparalleled courage and leadership inspired all those present, including those who might have otherwise fled in panic to remain and fight the enemy until captured.

Chaplain Kapaun's extraordinary heroism and selflessness above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Cavalry Division and the United States Army.

(The Medal of Honor is presented.) (Applause.)

CHAPLAIN RUTHERFORD: And let us pray together:

Lord, God, let us go forth into the world in peace and dedication to your service. Let us follow Chaplain Kapaun's example and hold fast to that which is good; render to no person evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted. May we support the weary, encourage the tired, and honor all peoples. Let us love and serve, and may God's blessing be upon us, pray with us today and always, as we ask and pray in your Holy Name. Amen.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I can't imagine a better example for all of us -- whether in uniform or not in uniform, a better example to follow. Father Kapaun's life I think is a testimony to the human spirit, the power of faith, and reminds us of the good that we can do each and every day regardless of the most difficult of circumstances. We can always be an instrument of his will.

So I hope all of you have enjoyed this ceremony. I certainly have been extremely touched by it. To the Kapaun family, God bless you. To all our veterans, we're so proud of you.

And my understanding is that the White House has pretty decent food -- (laughter) -- so I hope all of you enjoy the reception. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

END
2:42 P.M. EDT

Public Law 117–91
117th Congress

An Act

To designate the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 17 East Main Street in Herington, Kansas, as the “Captain Emil J. Kapaun Post Office Building”.

Mar. 10, 2022
[H.R. 2044]

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. CAPTAIN EMIL J. KAPAUN POST OFFICE BUILDING.

(a) DESIGNATION.—The facility of the United States Postal Service located at 17 East Main Street in Herington, Kansas, shall be known and designated as the “Captain Emil J. Kapaun Post Office Building”.

(b) REFERENCES.—Any reference in a law, map, regulation, document, paper, or other record of the United States to the facility referred to in subsection (a) shall be deemed to be a reference to the “Captain Emil J. Kapaun Post Office Building”.

Approved March 10, 2022.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY—H.R. 2044:

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD:

Vol. 167 (2021): Oct. 20, considered and passed House.

Vol. 168 (2022): Feb. 15, considered and passed Senate.





Governor Laura Kelly ✓

@GovLauraKelly



Today, I proclaimed September 29, 2021 as Father Emil Kapaun Day. Father Kapaun was known to care for all prisoners – regardless of their background or religion, and we are proud to honor his service and sacrifice for his country.

