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Remarks By John McCain At The National Rifle Association Annual Meeting

May 16, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the National Rifle Association of America Annual Meeting, in Louisville, KY, today at 4:30 p.m. EDT:

It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon. I know you have heard from a number of my friends and colleagues today -- Governors Huckabee and Romney, Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, Ambassador John Bolton, and Kentucky's own, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell. And you have heard from an American hero, Greg Stubbe, who sacrificed greatly so that Americans might be secure in our freedom. We wish him well in his recovery.

At the outset, let me recognize the life of a great American, Charlton Heston. All Americans remember him as a great actor, and for the memorable roles he played. Many of us also remember him as a man who stood up for the oppressed. He marched for civil rights in the 1960s. And his firm commitment to defending the constitutional rights of Americans -- all Americans and all constitutional rights -- led him to serve as President of the NRA. It was not a popular stand at the time with many of his friends in Hollywood, but his principles mattered more to him than popularity. We will miss Charlton Heston, and we can best honor him by honoring the good he did and the causes he served.

When I first ran for Congress in 1982, I was proud to have the support of gun owners. For more than two decades, I've opposed efforts to ban guns, ban ammunition, ban magazines, and dismiss gun owners as some kind of fringe group unwelcome in "modern" America. The Second Amendment isn't some archaic custom that matters only to rural Americans, who find solace in firearms out of frustration with their economic circumstances. The Second Amendment is unique in the world. It guarantees an individual right to keep and bear arms. To argue anything else is to reject the clear meaning of our Founding Fathers.

Self-reliance is the ethic that made America great, and our Founders understood that. They knew there would be circumstances where Americans might need to use firearms to protect themselves and their families. Some Second Amendment detractors think this is a mere abstraction, or a relic of America's distant past. But Americans exercise their Second Amendment rights every day to protect themselves from criminals, as happened in Scottsdale, Arizona where earlier this year, a 74-year-old woman defended her home from a man who repeatedly attempted to break in, extort money and threatened to set fire to her garage. The Second Amendment -- and its guarantee of an individual right to keep and bear arms -- is certainly not an abstraction.

But the clear meaning of the Second Amendment has not stopped those who want to punish firearms owners -- and those who make and sell firearms -- for the actions of criminals. It seems like every time there is a particularly violent crime, the anti-gun activists demand yet another restriction on the Second Amendment. I opposed the ban on so-called "assault weapons," which was first proposed after a California schoolyard shooting. It makes no sense to ban a class of firearms based on cosmetic features. I have opposed waiting periods for gun purchases.

I have opposed efforts to cripple our firearms manufacturers by making them liable for the acts of violent criminals. This was a not-so-cleverly disguised effort by some to use lawsuits to bankrupt gun manufacturers. They sued gun manufacturers to hold them legally responsible for the actions of lawbreakers. Had they prevailed, they would have bankrupted manufacturers, driven the costs of guns and ammunition sky high, and forced government and military customers to buy from foreign sources.

Like your members, I am a committed conservationist. I have long supported multiple uses for public lands that ensure they are available for this and future generations to hunt, fish and explore. Over 12 million hunters in the United States contribute \$25 billion to the economy, much of it in rural areas. Hunters pay billions of dollars in federal revenue through license and other fees. Here in Kentucky, hunters spend over \$400 million and support thousands of jobs. Senators Obama and Clinton claim they support our hunting heritage, but they voted to allow lawsuits that would force American gunmakers out of business and to ban ammunition commonly used for hunting. Their votes reveal their real views -- far more than their occasional statements of theoretical support for the Second Amendment heard on the campaign trail.

Over the years, I haven't agreed with the NRA on every issue. I have supported efforts to have NICS background checks apply to gun sales at gun shows. I recognize that gun shows are enjoyed by millions of law-abiding Americans. I do not support efforts by those who seek to regulate them out of existence. But I believe an accurate, fair and instant background check at guns shows is a reasonable requirement. I also oppose efforts to require federal regulation of all private sales such as the transfer between a father and son or husband and wife. I supported campaign finance reform because I strongly believed our system of financing campaigns was influencing elected officials to put the interests of "soft money" donors ahead of the public interest. It is neither my purpose nor the purpose of the legislation to prevent gun owners or any other group of citizens from making their voices heard in the legislative process.

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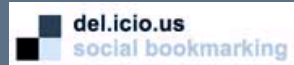


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Those disagreements do not detract from my long record of support for the Second Amendment and the work we have done together to protect the rights of gun owners from the political attitudes of the moment in Washington that view the Second Amendment as a once quaint custom that must now yield to the judgment of modern enlightened opinion. We have real differences with the Democratic candidates for President. They have learned something since 2000. They don't talk about their plans for gun control. They claim to support hunters and gun owners. But just because they don't talk about gun control doesn't mean they won't support gun control. Let's be clear. If either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama is elected President, the rights of law-abiding gun owners will be at risk. They have both voted as Senators to ban guns or ban ammunition or to allow gun makers to be sued out of existence.

It seems every election, politicians who support restrictions on the Second Amendment dress up in camouflage and pose with guns to demonstrate they care about hunters, even though few gun owners fall for such obvious political theater. After Senator Obama made his unfortunate comment that Pennsylvanians "cling to guns and religion" out of bitterness, Senator Clinton quickly affirmed her support for the Second Amendment. That drew Senator Obama's derision. "She's running around talking about how this is an insult to sportsmen, how she values the Second Amendment," he said. "Like she's on the duck blind every Sunday, packin' a six shooter!" Someone should tell Senator Obama that ducks are usually hunted with shotguns.

Senator Obama hopes he can get away with having it both ways. He says he believes that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to bear arms. But when he had a chance to weigh in on the most important Second Amendment case before the U.S. Supreme Court in decades, *District of Columbia v. Heller*, Senator Obama dodged the question by claiming, "I don't like taking a stand on pending cases." He refused to sign the amicus brief signed by a bipartisan group of 55 Senators arguing that the Supreme Court should overturn the DC gun ban in the *Heller* case. When he was running for the State Senate in Illinois, his campaign filled out a questionnaire asking whether he supported legislation to ban the manufacture, sale and possession of handguns with simple, "Yes."

The *Heller* case should be decided soon. But however that case is decided, the federal judiciary will continue to be an important forum for protecting Second Amendment rights. The next President will appoint literally hundreds of federal judges, and is likely to have the opportunity to nominate one or more Supreme Court justices.

In America, the constitutional restraint on power is as fundamental as the exercise of power, and often more so. Yet the Framers knew these restraints would not always be observed. They were idealists, but they were worldly men as well, and they knew that abuses of power and efforts to encroach on individual rights would arise and need to be firmly checked. Their design for democracy was drawn from their experience with tyranny. A suspicion of power is ingrained in both the letter and spirit of the American Constitution.

In the end, of course, their grand solution was to allocate federal power three ways, reserving all other powers and rights to the states and to the people themselves. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches are often wary of one another's excesses, seeking to keep each other within bounds. The framers knew exactly what they were doing, and the system of checks and balances rarely disappoints.

Quite rightly, the proper role of the judiciary has become one of the defining issues of this presidential election. It will fall to the next president to nominate qualified men and women to the federal courts, and the choices we make will reach far into the future. My two prospective opponents and I have very different ideas about the nature and proper exercise of judicial power. We would nominate judges of a different kind, a different caliber, a different understanding of judicial authority and its limits. And the people of America -- voters in both parties whose wishes and convictions are so often disregarded by unelected judges -- are entitled to know what those differences are.

Federal courts are charged with applying the Constitution and laws of our country to each case at hand. But a court is hardly competent to check the abuses of other branches of government if it cannot control its own judicial activism.

Real activists seek to make their case democratically -- to win hearts, minds, and majorities to their cause. Such people throughout our history have often shown great idealism and done great good. By contrast, activist lawyers and activist judges follow a different method. They want to be spared the inconvenience of campaigns, elections, legislative votes, and all of that. Some federal judges operate by fiat, shrugging off generations of legal wisdom and precedent while expecting their own opinions to go unquestioned.

The decisions of our Supreme Court in particular can be as close to permanent as anything government does. And in the presidential selection of those who will write those decisions, a hunch, a hope, and a good first impression are not enough. I will not seek the confidence of the American people in my nominees until my own confidence is complete -- until I am certain of my nominee's ability, wisdom, and demonstrated fidelity to the Constitution.

There are many other differences between my views and Senator Obama's. I favor lower taxes, less government spending, and less federal bureaucracy. Senator Obama has clearly stated his preference for raising the tax burden on Americans, increasing government spending and giving the government more authority over the lives of American families and businesses. We have differences on health care. I prefer to give American families more control over their health care decisions. Senator Obama would prefer the government exercise greater control. Senator Obama would meet unconditionally with some of the world's worst dictators and state sponsors of terrorists. I would not add to the prestige of those who support violent extremists or seek to destroy our allies.

But I would like to close my remarks with an issue that I know is much on the mind of Americans -- the war in Iraq. Senator Obama has said, if elected, he will withdraw Americans from Iraq quickly no matter what the situation on the ground is and no matter what U.S. military commanders advise. But if we withdraw prematurely from Iraq, al Qaeda in Iraq will survive, proclaim victory and continue to provoke sectarian tensions that, while they have been subdued by the success of the surge, still exist, and are ripe for provocation by al Qaeda. Civil war in Iraq could easily descend into genocide, and destabilize the entire region as neighboring powers come to the aid of their favored factions. A reckless and premature withdrawal would be a terrible defeat for our security interests and our values. Iran will view it as a victory, and the biggest state supporter of terrorists, a country with nuclear ambitions and a stated desire to destroy the State of Israel, will see its influence in the Middle East grow significantly.

The consequences of our defeat would threaten us for years, and those who argue for premature withdrawal, as both Senators Obama and Clinton do, are arguing for a course that would eventually draw us into a wider and more difficult war

that would entail far greater dangers and sacrifices than we have suffered to date. Thanks to the counterinsurgency instigated by General Petraeus, after four years of terribly costly mistakes, we have a realistic chance to succeed in helping the forces of political reconciliation prevail in Iraq, and the democratically elected Iraqi Government, with a professional and competent Iraqi army, impose its authority throughout the country and defend its borders. We have a realistic chance of denying al Qaeda any sanctuary in Iraq. We have a realistic chance of leaving behind in Iraq a force for stability and peace in the region, and not a cause for a wider and far more dangerous war. I do not argue against withdrawal because I am indifferent to war and the suffering it inflicts on too many American families. I hold my position because I hate war, and I know very well and very personally how grievous its wages are. But I know, too, that we must sometimes pay those wages to avoid paying even higher ones later. I want our soldiers home, too, just as quickly as we can bring them back without risking everything they suffered for, and burdening them with greater sacrifices in the years ahead. That I will not do. I have spent my life in service to my country, and I will never, never, never risk her security for the sake of my own ambitions. I will defend her, and all her freedoms, so help me God. And I ask you to help me in that good cause. Thank you, and God bless you.

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