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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Veterans Remarks

Charleston, WV | May 12, 2008

I want to thank Senator Rockefeller, not only for that generous introduction, but for his friendship and support in this campaign. I want to thank Secretary Richard Danzig, Admiral John Natham, and General Jim Smith for being here with us today and for their distinguished record of service to our country.

And I want to thank the people of West Virginia - particularly those who have worn the uniform of our country. More of you are veterans here than in almost any other state in the nation. So many Guard members from this very armory have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan on tour after tour, year after year. And that means there are more West Virginians who've had to say goodbye to these heroes; who've borne the burdens of their absence in ways that are often immeasurable - an empty chair at the dinner table or another Mother's Day where mom is some place far away. Your sacrifice and the sacrifice of your loved ones is immense, and it must never be forgotten.

There is an election here tomorrow. I'm honored that some of you will support me, and I understand that many more here in West Virginia will probably support Senator Clinton. But when it's over, what will unify us as Democrats - what must unify us as Americans - is an unyielding commitment to the men and women who've served this nation and an unshakable fidelity to the ideals for which they've risked their lives.

Without that commitment, many of us wouldn't be here today. I am one of those people. My grandfather - Stanley Dunham - enlisted after Pearl Harbor and went on to march in Patton's Army. My grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line while he was gone, and my mother was born at Fort Leavenworth. When he returned, it was to a country that gave him the chance to college on the GI Bill; to buy his first home with a loan from the FHA; to move his family west, all the way to Hawaii, where he and my grandmother helped raise me. Today, my grandfather is buried in the Punchbowl, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, where 776 victims of Pearl Harbor are laid to rest.

I knew him when he was older. But whenever I meet young men and women along the campaign trail who are serving in the military today, I think about what my grandfather was like when he enlisted - a fresh-faced man of twenty-three, with a heart laugh and an easy smile.

These sons and daughters of America are the best and the bravest among us. They are a part of an unbroken line of heroes who overthrew a King for the sake of an ideal; who freed the slaves and faced down fascism; who fought for freedom in Korea and Vietnam, from Kuwait to the Balkans - who still wake up every day to face down the gravest dangers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and all over the world.

When our troops go into battle, they serve no faction or party; they represent no race or region. They are simply Americans. They serve and fight and bleed together out of loyalty not just to a place on a map or a certain kind of people, but to a set of ideals that we have been striving for since the first shots rang out at Lexington and Concord - the idea that America could be governed not by men, but by laws; that we could be equal in the eyes of those laws; that we could be free to say what we want and write what want and worship as we please; that we could have the right to pursue our individual dreams but the obligation to help our fellow citizens pursue theirs.

Allegiance to these ideals has always been at the core of American patriotism - it's what unites a country of so many different opinions and beliefs. It's why some of us may disagree on our decision to start this war in Iraq, but all of us stand united in our support for the brave men and women who wage it. That's how it should be. But it's not how it's always been.

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DELEGATE COUNTDOWN

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Table with columns: WHERE WE ARE, OBAMA, CLINTON. Rows: Contests (34, 19), Total Delegates (2187.5, 1927)

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One of the saddest episodes in our history was the degree to which returning vets from Vietnam were shunned, demonized and neglected by some because they served in an unpopular war. Too many of those who opposed the war in Vietnam chose to blame not only the leaders who ordered the mission, but the young men who simply answered their country's call. Four decades later, the sting of that injustice is a wound that has never fully healed, and one that should never be repeated.

The young men and women who choose to serve are defending the very rights and freedoms that allow Americans to speak out against government actions we oppose. They deserve our admiration, respect and enduring gratitude.

At the same time, we must never forget that honoring this service and upholding these ideals requires more than saluting our veterans as they march by on Veterans Day or Memorial Day. It requires marching with them for the care and benefits they have earned. It requires standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our veterans and their families after the guns fall silent and the cameras are turned off. At a time when we're facing the largest homecoming since the Second World War, the true test of our patriotism is whether we will serve our returning heroes as well as they've served us.

We know that over the last eight years, we've already fallen short of meeting this test. We all learned about the deplorable conditions that were discovered at places like Fort Bragg and Walter Reed. We've all walked by a veteran whose home is now a cardboard box on a street corner in the richest nation on Earth. We've all heard about what it's like to navigate the broken bureaucracy of the VA - the impossibly long lines, or the repeated calls for help that get you nothing more than an answering machine. Just a few weeks ago, an 89-year-old World War II veteran from South Carolina told his family, "No matter what I apply for at the VA, they turn me down." The next day, he walked outside of an Outpatient Clinic in Greenville and took his own life.

How can we let this happen? How is that acceptable in the United States of America? The answer is, it's not. It's an outrage. And it's a betrayal - a betrayal - of the ideals that we ask our troops to risk their lives for.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Not in this country. Not if we decide that this time will be different. There are many aspects of this war that have gone inalterably wrong, but caring for our veterans is one thing we can still get right. When I arrived in the Senate, I sought out a seat on the Veterans Affairs Committee so I could fight to give our veterans the care they need and the benefits they deserve. We fought to make sure that the claims of disabled veterans in Illinois and other states were being heard fairly, and we forced the VA to conduct an unprecedented outreach campaign to disabled veterans who receive lower-than-average benefits. I passed laws to get homeless veterans off the streets and prevent at-risk veterans from getting there in the first place. I led a bipartisan effort to improve outpatient facilities at places like Walter Reed, and slash red tape, and reform the disability process - because recovering troops should go to the front of the line, and they shouldn't have to fight to get there. I passed laws to give family members health care while they care for injured troops, and to provide family members with a year of job protection, so they never have to face a choice between caring for a loved one and keeping a job.


But there is so much more work that we need to do in this country.


It starts with being honest about the sacrifices that our brave men and women are making. For years, this Administration has refused to count all of our casualties in uniform. In Iraq alone, tens of thousands of troops who were injured or fell ill have not been counted in our casualty numbers, going against the military's own standards from past wars. It's time to stop hiding the full cost of this war. It's time to honor the full measure of sacrifice of our troops, and to prepare for the cost of their care.

That's why I've pledged to build a 21st century VA as President. It means no more red tape - it's time to give every service-member electronic copies of medical and service records upon discharge. It means no more shortfalls - we'll fully fund VA health care, and add more Vet Centers, particularly in rural areas. It means no more delays - we'll pass on-time budgets. It means no more means-testing - it's time to allow every veteran into the VA system. And it means we'll have a simple principle for veterans sleeping on our streets: zero tolerance. As President, I'll build on the work I started in the Senate and expand housing vouchers, and launch a new supportive services housing program to prevent at-risk veterans and their families from sliding into homelessness.

I'll also build on the work I did in the Senate to confront one of the signature injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - PTSD. We have to understand that for far too many troops and their families, the war doesn't end when they come home. Just the other day our own government's top psychiatric researcher said that because of inadequate mental health care, the number of suicides among veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan may actually exceed the number of combat deaths. Think about that. Think about how only half of the returning soldiers with PTSD receive the treatment they need. Think of how many we turn away - of how many we let fall through the cracks. We have to do better than this.

In the Senate, I've helped lead a bipartisan effort to stop the unfair practice of kicking out troops who suffer from them. And when I'm President, we'll enhance mental health screening and treatment at all levels: from enlistment, to deployment, to reentry into civilian life. We also need more mental health



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professionals, more training to recognize signs and to reject the stigma of seeking care. And we need to dramatically improve screening and treatment for the other signature injury of the war, Traumatic Brain Injury. That's why I passed measures in the Senate to increase screening for these injuries, and that's why I'll establish clearer standards of care as President.

We have called on our troops and their families for so much during these last years, but we haven't always issued that call responsibly. Yes, we need to restore twelve month Army deployments, but we also need to restore adequate training and time at home between those deployments. My wife, Michelle, met with Army spouses the other day in North Carolina who told her about the toll it takes to watch your loved one serve tour after tour of duty with little to no time off in between. And they told her something we all need to remember: "We don't just deploy our troops overseas, we deploy families." That's why we also need to provide more counseling and resources to help families cope with multiple tours.

And when our loved ones do come home, it is time for the United States of America to offer this generation of returning heroes the same thanks we offered that earlier, Greatest Generation - by giving every veteran the same opportunity that my grandfather had under the GI Bill.

There is no reason we shouldn't pass the 21st Century GI Bill that is being debated in Congress right now. It was introduced by my friend Senator Jim Webb, a Marine who served as Navy Secretary under President Ronald Reagan.. His plan has widespread support from Republicans and Democrats. It would provide every returning veteran with a real chance to afford a college education, and it would not harm retention.

I have great respect for John McCain's service to this country and I know he loves it dearly and honors those who serve. But he is one of the few Senators of either party who oppose this bill because he thinks it's too generous. I couldn't disagree more. At a time when the skyrocketing cost of tuition is pricing thousands of Americans out of a college education, we should be doing everything we can to give the men and women who have risked their lives for this country the chance to pursue the American Dream.

The brave Americans who fight today believe deeply in this country. And no matter how many you meet, or how many stories of heroism you hear, every encounter reminds that they are truly special. That through their service, they are living out the ideals that stir so many of us as Americans - pride, duty, and sacrifice.

Some of the most inspiring are those you meet at places like Walter Reed Army Medical Center. They are young men and women who may have lost a limb or even their ability to take care of themselves, but they will never lose the pride they feel for their country. They're not interested in self-pity, but yearn to move forward with their lives. And it's this classically American optimism that makes you realize the quality of person we have serving in the United States Armed Forces.

This, after all, is what led them to wear the uniform in the first place - their unwavering belief in the idea of America. The idea that no matter where you come from, or what you look like, or who your parents are, this is a place where anything is possible; where anyone can make it; where we look out for each other, and take care of each other; where we rise and fall as one nation - as one people. It's an idea that's worth fighting for - an idea for which so many Americans have given that last full measure of devotion.

I can still remember the day that we laid my grandfather to rest. In a cemetery lined with the graves of Americans who have sacrificed for our country, we heard the solemn notes of Taps and the crack of guns fired in salute; we watched as a folded flag was handed to my grandmother and my grandfather was laid to rest. It was a nation's final act of service and gratitude to Stanley Dunham - an America that stood by my grandfather when he took off the uniform, and never left his side.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. But I also like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him."

There is no doubt that we are a nation that is deeply proud of where we live. But it is now our generation's task to live in a way that Stanley Dunham lived; to live the way that those heroes at Walter Reed have lived; the way that all those men and women who put on this nation's uniform live each and every day. It is now our task to live so that America will be proud of us. That is true test of patriotism - the test that all of us must meet in the days and years to come. I have no doubt that this nation is up to the challenge. Thank you, and may God Bless the United States of America.

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