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Fred Thompson Speaks to The Citadel

[As prepared for delivery.]

Thank you all very much. I appreciate the warm welcome to Charleston and to The Citadel.

It's good to see Congressman Gresham Barrett. He is a friend, a leader, and a graduate of this great military college. I appreciate your generous words.

I thank your president, General [John] Rosa ... the Board of Visitors ... and the staff and the faculty for their hospitality. It's an honor to be with you all - and especially to be in the company of the Corps of Cadets.

I've been traveling a lot lately around the country and it's especially nice to receive a warm welcome back here in the South. In my last film role, I played President Ulysses S. Grant. I want you to know that I drew the line at playing General Sherman.

Of course, playing a President is a lot easier than running for the job in real life. In a Presidential campaign, you've always got to look your best ... you're always being marched from place to place ... people are always giving you orders or shouting questions at you.

Does that sound familiar to anyone?

But I've learned what you know: That your shared hardships and challenges... being put to the test... expecting a lot from yourselves and your fellow cadets.... will result in your taking away from here strength in character and a sense of purpose.

The Citadel is unique because the path after graduation doesn't lead straight into required military service. Wherever you go in life, the qualities of leadership you will have achieved here will make you an asset to our country in a time of our greatest challenge.

That challenge grows out of the defining conflict of our age - the direct and relentless threat to the safety and security of America and its friends, from terrorist groups and terror states.

I spent some time recently with a book called *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900*, by the historian Andrew Roberts. He describes the strengths that have seen America and England through danger and adversity. But there's one quality in particular that no nation can do without in such a time. As Roberts observes, "The will of a people is at least as important as their military might in overcoming an enemy."

This is true in our day as well. But in some ways it runs against our nature to accept and deal with the world we live in. We're a free society, and it's not really in the character of free people to seek conflict. We prefer to go about the business of life - to work and raise our families in the security of communities achieved by hard-won struggles. And though these traits speak well of us, they are now being used by our enemies against us.

We are a nation that haphazardly maintains its borders in the face of mounting evidence that such an approach is irresponsible. It is border insecurity that failed us on the morning of 9/11. Thus, when darkness fell that day, a more terrible prospect loomed into view - that unless we are vigilant and prepared, even small actors in the world can inflict catastrophic harm on the United States.

to explain to the men and women of The Citadel how much our national security challenges have changed in the last generation. Some of you are old enough to have taught or served here in the days when the supreme threat took the form of one vast rival power - of an empire whose name has now vanished into history. It is ironic, in retrospect, that there were certain advantages to our Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. The enemy was clear to see ... its boundaries defined ... its armies and weapons numbered and known.

In a period lasting through nine American presidencies, the Soviets and their satellite states were formidable adversaries. But at least we knew who they were, where they were, and most of the time what they were up to. In today's cold and passionless jargon, the Soviets represented a "symmetrical threat." Over time, there developed certain rules and limits that allowed us to negotiate, control arms, and avoid direct confrontations.

The adversary had a homeland to protect, assets to defend, and with those came a deterrent against attack. We held back the danger until finally the Soviet empire collapsed from the rot within.

It was not so long after the Cold War was concluded that I joined the United States Senate. And I marvel now at some of the assumptions of the American foreign policy establishment back then. The period has been described as a "holiday from history," and I witnessed some of its false hopes and foolish assumptions for myself.

It was a "different world" we were assured. Gone was the need for unquestioned American military supremacy. So our government began one of the largest unilateral reductions of military power in history. Well-intentioned diplomats led the way. And so, today, we face hostile regimes advancing their nuclear weapons programs, in part, because of treaties never honored and frameworks that failed.

It turned out to be a New World, all right - with new threats rising up in place of the old. Chief among them the threat of violent Islamic radicals - men who make the Soviets of the past seem like the model of reason and moderation. Today's threat is complex, dispersed, and opportunistic. The enemy observes no rules and no restraints of conscience.

The threat takes different forms - as a terrorist cell within the United States ... or a network similar to al Qaeda with ties to a nation-state ... or a nation-state itself, with the infrastructure and wealth needed to develop the most horrible weapons known to mankind.

But whatever form it takes, the great danger is terrorists or terrorist states with these weapons of mass destruction. To overcome this danger, we need a clear and consistent strategy, and the means to achieve it.

Whether we act in time to prevent the worst from happening will be the final measure of America's leadership in the world for years to come. With 9/11 still fresh in memory, it is for America to shape events, and not be left at their mercy. Wherever dangers appear, we must be prepared to meet them with clarity and resolve.

When terrorists in their video performances pledge more and bigger attacks to come, these are not to be shrugged off as idle boasts. They must be taken at their word. When the president of Iran shares his nightmare vision of nuclear annihilation before cheering crowds, those are not just the fanatic's version of an empty applause line. The only safe assumption is that he means it.

If we know anything from modern history, it is that when fanatical tyrants pledge to "wipe out" an entire nation, we should listen.

This radical threat we face today is committed to a hundred year war, and has been waging one against us for decades ... in Beirut, Somalia, embassies in Africa, Saudi Arabia, on the USS Cole. Each time Americans were killed. Yet each time our response sent the wrong signals. This is an enemy that understands only the language of power. Today, the focus of this war is Afghanistan and Iraq, but it is clear that this struggle and our enemies extend far beyond those borders. To defend ourselves, we in the democratic world must assert our intentions in the clearest possible terms.

Diplomacy, economic influence, and other means of persuasion are always to be preferred in our dealings with dangerous regimes and rival states. But the words of our leaders command much closer attention from adversaries when it is understood that we are prepared to use force when force is necessary. And for that deterrent to exist, the will of our people and the strength of our military must be unquestionable.

All of this requires a President who doesn't require a learning curve when it comes to our nation's security.

I believe the Cold War began to end when President Ronald Reagan made this pledge on Inauguration Day, 1981, quote: "Our forbearance should never be misunderstood. Our reluctance for conflict should not be misjudged as a failure of will. When action is required to preserve our national security, we will act."

He backed up his words with America's military power, and that kept the peace. Rebuilding our military from the neglect of the previous years sowed the seeds for the collapse of the USSR. We must recognize today that a similar undertaking is essential.

No one will ever doubt the quality of those who serve our nation in the Armed Forces. They have answered every call to duty and defended our freedom with honor. But we are fighting a war in two theaters, against an enemy not bound by borders. With 20th century equipment in a 21st century war, our material support for our troops has not matched the demands we have placed on them. Their readiness and capability could soon be in doubt. We have been asking too few troops to do too much for too long.

The reality is this: as we have asked our military to take on an ever-greater role in our defense, the financial commitment we have made to our cause has become smaller. We must build a military force ready to meet any challenge now. And be prepared to protect later generations from any future threats, whomever or wherever they may be.

To be sure, America has other needs that require our attention. We must strengthen our homeland by securing our borders and enhance our domestic counter-terrorist capabilities. Our entitlement programs will bankrupt the next generation if this generation chooses not to act, and our tax system limits our economic growth and our global competitiveness.

It's a matter of priorities.

In my view, the first priority of the federal government is the defense and security of its citizens and should be reflected in everything we do in government. We must begin by rebuilding our military with the full recognition that national security comes at a price. It is measured in many ways. The most common is the amount of money we spend--indeed, the priority we make of it--as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product.

The U.S. has historically spent well over 5 percent of GDP on defense. During the Gulf War it was at 5.1%; during the Reagan build up it was over 6%; in 1968 it was over 8%; and during the Korean War it was well over 11%. However, defense spending declined significantly at the end of the Cold War to levels approaching 3% as we cashed in our so-called "peace dividend."

- Our military forces were cut 30% on average.
- The Army alone went from 18 active duty divisions to 10.
- Our Air Force was drastically down-sized and it became difficult to even maintain a 300-ship Navy, much less the 600-ship Navy that Reagan once envisioned.
- Our Research and Development programs were reduced, and we lost some of the world's best innovators.
- And worse, we asked our young men and women to do more with less--less training dollars, less equipment, and less time at home with their families.

We are still feeling the effects of these reductions today. We have major shortcomings in U.S. defense capabilities. To confront these shortcomings, we must address several key priorities:

First, we must spend more on defense, and we must do so carefully and wisely. Spending today as a percent of GDP is estimated at 4.1 percent - and that includes funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, defense spending is expected to decline down to 3.1 percent in 2011. I believe we must be prepared to increase defense spending to at least 4.5 percent of GDP, not including what it takes to fund operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. When it comes to matters of budgets with Congress they say all numbers are fungible. But in this area of appropriation, there should be little room for negotiation.

Second, we must admit to ourselves, as Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated, that our military is simply too small. Too many commitments today leave our Armed Forces capable of meeting too few contingencies tomorrow. I

propose today that we build a "Million-Member" ground force. We should increase Army end strength to 775,000 organized into 64 brigade combat teams and increase active duty Marine Corps forces by 50,000 to 225,000. Half-measures and small increases will no longer do. We need the best all-volunteer force that can meet the security needs of this country, and they must be organized, trained and equipped to deal with tomorrow's threats as well as today's.

Third, we must modernize our Armed Forces. The average age of our military aircraft is 24 years; some are over forty years old...twice the age of most of you. The Army's main battle tank and fighting vehicles were designed in the 1970s and 80s. And the entire fleet of vehicles is not aging gracefully either, with an average age of 13 years, made worse by years of tough use.

We must fully field and fund the next generation of military systems to ensure U.S. forces retain dominance in the full battle space: On the battlefield, in the skies above it, and in the waters surrounding it. The investments we make today provide the means to defend our nation tomorrow. They will make our military personnel more effective and safer. We need sustained technology development, and we need the best and brightest working on our defense programs.

Finally, and most importantly, we must take better care of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. They are the life-blood of our defense establishment. Whether they are active duty, Guard or Reserve, they are entitled, as well, to expect the best pay and benefits our country can afford, including a modern GI Bill with educational assistance that will help us recruit and keep our nation's finest in uniform. They also deserve the best healthcare and the best support possible for their families.

And for those who have already served, we need to fix the VA system and implement many of the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission and the Veteran's Disability Benefits Commission report.

These four pillars of a revitalized national defense are part of a much more detailed plan that must include, among other initiatives, enhancing the capabilities of our Special Operations Forces to hunt down terrorists; rebuilding the Navy to show American resolve, full time, in trouble spots; strengthening our intelligence gathering and analysis; procuring modern long-range cargo aircraft to project power anytime, anywhere; building a robust missile defense system to defend our homeland, our troops and our allies from ballistic missiles; and ensuring the means to protect our space-based assets and cyber systems

Some will say that this plan is "too much," or "too big." Others will say that building a large military will encourage our involvement in more conflicts. But these views are out step with reality, out of touch with our nation's needs, and overlook our nation's history.

The fact is, we can and must do this. The world, our foes and friends alike, will not allow us to do otherwise. We can either build up and deter war, or we can allow our forces to wither and risk conflict.

Among our great American patriots was a son of the Port of Charleston. Thomas Gadsden served in the Continental Congress and briefly commanded the military forces of South Carolina in 1776. He conceived a flag to depict the resolve of our emerging nation: a curled rattlesnake famously warning: "Don't tread on me."

Our patriots knew then what we need to be reminded of today: an America that is weaker does not make the world safer.

This great state of South Carolina and these grounds and all of you in this corps of cadets are tangible reminders of the legacy of Thomas Gadsden and the importance of men and women who choose to secure our nation and defend our freedom.

It has been my honor to have been with you here today.

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