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Address to the Mackinac Republican Leadership Conference

September 22, 2007

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain delivered remarks to the Mackinac Republican Leadership Conference on Saturday, September 22nd at 8:00 p.m. EDT. Below are McCain's remarks as prepared for delivery:

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is an honor to speak to this 27th biennial Republican Leadership Conference. I stand before you at a perilous time, a perilous time for our party but, far more important, a perilous time for our country.

We face an implacable enemy dedicated to our destruction. We face criticism at home and abroad. Some doubt that we can prevail against our enemies -- Islamic extremists that operate in Europe, the Americas, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Just this month, terrorist plots were uncovered in Denmark and Germany that had the potential to kill hundreds or thousands demonstrating how serious the threat is, yet much of Washington remains mired in irresolution and defeatism.

Your conference theme of "Relying on our Roots" is appropriate for my message today. Michigan has a fine tradition of leadership in the Republican Party, including the late President Ford. But I would like to speak to you about another exemplary leader of our party whose roots of leadership and wisdom we should also remember and rely on. Three decades ago, a visionary politician described the dangers in the world. It was, like today, a time when some doubted America's goodness and greatness. Many argued for reconciliation with our global adversary. But this man held firm. He did not care what editorial boards wrote about him. He did what he thought was right. He criticized the liberal Democrats' foreign policy of weakness and vacillation. He called for resolve and firmness in dealing with the Soviet Union. And, he refused to condemn millions to perpetual Communist tyranny in the false hope that accommodating the Soviet Union would contribute to America's security.

Fortunately, this man, Governor Reagan, became President Reagan. How different would our lives be had he not won election in 1980 and 1984? Does anyone believe a liberal Democratic President would have called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" or would have stood up to the nuclear freeze movement? Can you imagine a liberal Democratic President saying communism should be left on the ash heap of history, or calling on Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall? While many Democrats tried to defund weapons systems and freedom fighters, Ronald Reagan was steadfast -- and he was right. Thanks to his leadership, the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War was won on our terms.

Today, the challenges are at least as severe as they were when Ronald Reagan stood tall. And, today, the differences between Republicans and Democrats on national security are every bit as stark as they were 30 years ago. Today, leading Democratic presidential candidates vote against funding for our troops engaged in war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today, leading democratic presidential candidates question whether there is a war on terror, offer to enter into unconditional negotiations with our worst enemies, and talk about countering the forces of radicalism by advocating surrender to them in Iraq. If the Democrats get their way in Iraq, if we cede Iraq to al Qaeda, how long will they stay the course in Afghanistan? We face grave challenges in the Middle East: halting Iran's nuclear ambitions; protecting our democratic ally, Israel; supporting moderate voices against the killers of Hamas and Hezbollah; defending Lebanon's sovereignty against Syrian and Iranian aggression. Does anyone seriously believe that we can better meet those challenges in the aftermath of an American defeat in Iraq? It is irresponsible to think so, and any man or woman who does isn't prepared to lead our country in the struggle against Islamic extremism.

The world Ronald Regan faced was a dangerous one, but more stable than the world today. It was a world where we confronted a massive, organized threat to our security. Our enemy was evil, but not irrational. And for all the suffering endured by captive nations; for all the fear of global nuclear war; it was a world made fairly predictable by a stable balance of power until our steadfastness and patience yielded an historic victory for our security and ideals. That world is gone, and please don't mistake my reminiscence as an indication that I miss it. If I'm nostalgic for it at all, it is only an old man's nostalgia for the time when he misspent his youth. That world, after all, had much cruelty and terror, some of which it was my fate to witness personally.

Today, we glimpse the prospect of another, better world, in which all people might someday share in the blessings and responsibilities of freedom. But we also face a threat, and a long war to defeat it, that is as difficult and in many respects more destabilizing than any challenge we have ever faced. We confront an enemy that so despises us and modernity itself that they would use any means, unleash any terror, cause the most unimaginable suffering to harm us, and to destroy the world we have tried throughout our history to build.

As we meet here today, in Iraq and Afghanistan, American soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen are fighting bravely and tenaciously in battles that are as dangerous, difficult and consequential as the great battles of our armed forces' storied past. As we all know, the war in Iraq has not gone well, and the American people have grown sick and tired of it. I understand that, of course. I, too, have been made sick at heart by the many mistakes made by civilian and military commanders and the terrible price we have paid for them. But we cannot react to these mistakes by embracing a course of action that will be an even greater mistake, a mistake of colossal historical proportions, which will and I am as sure of this as I am of anything seriously endanger the country I have served all my adult life. Like you, I want our troops to come home, but I want them to come home with honor. The honor of victory that is due all of those who have paid with the ultimate sacrifice so that sacrifice is not in vain.

We have new commanders in Iraq, and they are following a counterinsurgency strategy that I have called for from the beginning, which makes the most effective use of our strength and doesn't strengthen the tactics of our enemy. This new battle plan is succeeding where our previous tactics failed. Although the outcome remains uncertain, we must give General Petraeus and the Americans he has the honor to command adequate time to salvage from the wreckage of our past mistakes a measure of stability for Iraq and the Middle East, and a more secure future for the American people. To concede defeat -- as many leading Democrats now advocate -- would strengthen al Qaeda, empower Iran and other hostile powers in the Middle East, unleash a full scale civil war in Iraq that could quite possibly provoke genocide there, and destabilize the entire region as neighboring powers come to the aid of their favored factions. The consequences would threaten us for years, and I am certain would eventually draw us into a wider and more difficult war that would impose even greater sacrifices on us.

Let me be clear: choosing to lose in Iraq would hand a victory to the radicals in control of Iran. As Iran's president recently crowed, "soon, we will see a huge power vacuum in the region [and] we are prepared to fill the gap ..." Iran has been engaged in a proxy war against our forces in Iraq for years. They are actively arming Sunni and Shia radicals with advanced weapons and on the ground training. Twenty seven years ago, the radical mullahs in Iran released American hostages held illegally for more than 400 days rather than face President Reagan. It was the first victory of his presidency and we should heed the lesson it holds for dealing with Iran today: determination and resolve, not accommodation and appeasement, are what Tehran heeds. And I certainly think a man who is directing the maiming and killing of Americans troops should not be given an invitation to speak at an American university. Rather than rolling out the red carpet for the leader of a terrorist-sponsoring regime, Columbia should be welcoming the Reserve Officers' Training Corps back on campus to honor the men and women who put their lives on the line every day defending our freedom.

Ronald Reagan warned of the need for firmness and vigilance in the 1970s. Unfortunately, we did not heed his wisdom and we paid a horrible price for weakness and inattention toward the threat posed by Islamic extremism in the 1990s. But today, our defeat in Iraq would be even more catastrophic, not just for Iraq, but for us, and I cannot and will not be complicit in it. I will do whatever I can to help avert it. That is all I can offer my country. It is not much compared to the sacrifices made by Americans who have volunteered to shoulder a rifle and fight this war for us. I know that and am humbled by it. But though my duty is neither dangerous nor onerous, it compels me nonetheless to say to my fellow Americans, as long as we have a chance to succeed we must try to succeed. And I believe that if we persevere we can succeed on the battlefield of Iraq and in the larger war against Islamic extremism.

I have many responsibilities to the American people, and I try to take them all seriously. But I have one responsibility that outweighs all the others and that is to use whatever meager talents I possess, and every resource God has granted me to protect the security of this great and good nation from all enemies foreign and domestic. And that I intend to do, even if I must stand athwart popular opinion. I will attempt to convince as many of my countrymen as I can that we must show even greater patience, though our patience is nearly exhausted, and that as long as there is a prospect for not losing this war then we must not choose to lose it. That is how I construe my responsibility to my country. That is how I construed it yesterday. It is how I construe it today. It is how I will construe it tomorrow. I do not know how I could choose any other course.

War is a terrible thing, but not the worst thing. Our military men and women have endured the dangers and deprivations of war so that the worst thing would not befall us, so that America might be secure in her freedom. The war in Iraq has divided the American people, but it has divided no American in our admiration for the men and women who are fighting for us there. It is every veteran's hope that should their children be called upon to answer a call to arms, the battle will be necessary and the field well chosen. But that is not their responsibility. It belongs to the government that called them. As it once was for us, their honor will be in their answer not their summons. Whatever we think about how and why we went to war in Iraq, we are all -- those who supported the decision that placed them in harm's way and those who opposed it -- humbled by and grateful for their example. They now deserve the distinction of the best Americans, and we owe them a debt we can never fully repay. We can only offer the small tribute of our humility and our commitment to do all that we can do, in less trying and costly circumstances, to help keep this nation worthy of their sacrifice for us and for the world.

In 1974, Ronald Reagan gave his famous "Shining City Upon a Hill" speech and concluded by saying:

"We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us in the little hall of Philadelphia. In the days following World War II, when the economic strength and power of America was all the stood between the world and the return to the dark ages, Pope Pius XII said, 'The American people have a great genius for splendid and unselfish actions. Into the hands of America, God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.'

We are indeed, and we are today, the last best hope of man on earth."

It was my privilege to hear Governor Reagan deliver that speech. I had recently been released from a long involuntary captivity and was seated as Governor Reagan's guest. His words ring true today when, once again, it falls to America to lead the world against a global threat, to remain the last best hope of man on earth.

It is a privilege beyond measure to live in a country that has sacrificed so much for the cause of freedom. I have lived a long, eventful and blessed life. I have had the good fortune to know personally a great many brave and selfless patriots who sacrificed and shed blood to defend America. But I have known none braver or better than those who do so today. They are my inspiration. And I pray to a loving God that He bless and protect them.

Thank you.

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