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Remarks By John McCain On Memorial Day

May 26, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the New Mexico Veterans Memorial in Albuquerque, New Mexico, today at 10:30 a.m. MDT (12:30 p.m. EDT):

Thank you. I'm always grateful for the opportunity, and pleased to be in the company of Americans who have had the burden of serving our country in distant lands, and the honor of having proved your patriotism in difficult circumstances.

I was blessed to have been born into a family who made their living at sea in defense of our security and ideals. My grandfather was a naval aviator; my father a submariner. And it was nearly pre-ordained that I would find a place in my family's profession, and that occupation would one day take me to war. Such was not the case for many of you. Your ambitions might not have led you to war; the honors you sought were not kept hidden on battlefields. Many of you were citizen-soldiers. You answered the call when it came; took up arms for your country's sake; and fought to the limit of your ability because you believed America's security was as much your responsibility as it was the professional soldier's. And when you came home, you built a better a country than the one you inherited. It's a privilege to be in your company.

The sacrifices made by veterans deserve to be memorialized in something more lasting than marble or bronze or in the fleeting effect of a politician's speeches. Your valor and devotion to duty have earned your country's abiding concern for your welfare. And when our government forgets to honor our debts to you, it is a stain upon America's honor. The Walter Reed scandal recalled, I hope, not just government but the public who elected it, to our responsibilities to the men and women who risked life and limb to meet their responsibilities to us. Such a disgrace is unworthy of the greatest nation on earth. As the greatest leaders in our history, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, instructed us, care for Americans who fought to defend us should rank among the highest of national priorities.

Those who have borne the burden of war for our sake must be treated fairly and expeditiously as they seek compensation for disability or illness. We owe them compassion, knowledge and hands-on care in their transition to civilian life. We owe them training, rehabilitation and education. We owe their families, parents and caregivers our concern and support. They should never be deprived of quality medical care and mental health care coverage for illness or injury incurred as a result of their service to our country.

As President, I will do everything in my power to ensure that those who serve today and those who have served in the past have access to the highest quality health, mental health and rehabilitative care in the world. The disgrace of Walter Reed must not be forgotten. Neither should we accept a situation in which veterans are denied access to care due to great travel distances, backlogs of appointments, and years of pending disability evaluation and claims. I believe we should give veterans the option to use a simple plastic card to receive timely and accessible care at a convenient location through a provider of their choosing. We should no longer tolerate requiring veterans to make an appointment to stand in line to make an appointment to stand in line for substandard care of the injuries you have suffered to keep our country safe. Whatever our commitments to veterans cost, we will keep them, as you have kept every commitment to us. The honor of a great nation is at stake.

I also believe we should provide veterans with a substantial increase in educational benefits. I have joined with colleagues to offer legislation that will do just that. The bill we have sponsored would increase monthly education benefits to \$1500; eliminate the \$1200 enrollment fee; and offer \$1000 annually for books and supplies. Importantly, we would allow veterans to transfer those benefits to their spouses or dependent children or use a part of them to pay down existing student loans. We also increase benefits to the Guard and Reserve, and even more generously to those who serve in the Selected Reserve.

I know that my friend and fellow veteran, Senator Jim Webb, an honorable man who takes his responsibility to veterans very seriously, has also offered legislation that would provide more generous benefits. Both Senator Webb and I are united in our deep appreciation for the men and women who risk their lives so that the rest of us may be secure in our freedom. And I take a backseat to no one in my affection, respect and devotion to veterans. I grew up in the Navy; served for twenty-two years as a naval officer; and, like Senator Webb, personally experienced the terrible costs war imposes on the veteran. The friendships I formed in war remain among the closest relationships in my life. The Navy is still the world I know best and love most.

But, as you might know, I am running for the office of Commander-in-Chief. That is the highest privilege in this country, and it imposes the greatest responsibilities. And this is why I am committed to our bill, despite the support Senator Webb's bill has received. It would be easier politically for me to have joined Senator Webb in offering his legislation. More importantly, I feel just as he does, that we owe veterans the respect and generosity of a great nation because no matter how generously we show our gratitude it will never compensate them fully for all the sacrifices they have borne on our behalf.

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The most important difference between our two approaches is that Senator Webb offers veterans who served one enlistment the same benefits as those offered veterans who have re-enlisted several times. Our bill has a sliding scale that offers generous benefits to all veterans, but increases those benefits according to the veteran's length of service. It is important to do that because, otherwise, we will encourage more people to leave the military after they have completed one enlistment. At a time when the United States military is fighting in two wars, and as we finally are beginning the long overdue and very urgent necessity of increasing the size of the Army and Marine Corps, one study estimates that Senator Webb's bill will reduce retention rates by 16 percent.

Most worrying to me, is that by hurting retention we will reduce the numbers of men and women who we train to become the backbone of all the services, the noncommissioned officer. In my life, I have learned more from noncommissioned officers I have known and served with than anyone else outside my family. And in combat, no one is more important to their soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen, and to the officers who command them, than the sergeant and petty officer. They are very hard to replace. Encouraging people to choose to not become noncommissioned officers would hurt the military and our country very badly. As I said, the office of President, which I am seeking, is a great honor, indeed, but it imposes serious responsibilities. How faithfully the President discharges those responsibilities will determine whether he or she deserves the honor. I can only tell you, I intend to deserve the honor if I am fortunate to receive it, even if it means I must take politically unpopular positions at times and disagree with people for whom I have the highest respect and affection.

Now, I would like to end by discussing the subject that concerns all of us more than anything else, the war in Iraq. When I was five years old, a car pulled up in front of our house in New London, Connecticut, and a Navy officer rolled down the window, and shouted at my father that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. My father immediately left for the submarine base where he was stationed. I rarely saw him again for four years. My grandfather, who commanded the fast carrier task force under Admiral Halsey, came home from the war exhausted from the burdens he had borne, and died the next day. In Vietnam, where I formed the closest friendships of my life, some of those friends never came home to the country they loved so well. I detest war. It might not be the worst thing to befall human beings, but it is wretched beyond all description. When nations seek to resolve their differences by force of arms, a million tragedies ensue. The lives of a nation's finest patriots are sacrificed. Innocent people suffer and die. Commerce is disrupted; economies are damaged; strategic interests shielded by years of patient statecraft are endangered as the exigencies of war and diplomacy conflict. Not the valor with which it is fought nor the nobility of the cause it serves, can glorify war. Whatever gains are secured, it is loss the veteran remembers most keenly. Only a fool or a fraud sentimentalizes the merciless reality of war. However heady the appeal of a call to arms, however just the cause, we should still shed a tear for all that is lost when war claims its wages from us.

As we meet, 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 American people have grown sick and tired of the war in Iraq. 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 those 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 sure of this -- seriously endanger the security of the country I have served all my adult life.

We have new commanders in Iraq, and they are following a counterinsurgency strategy that we should have been following 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. The Government of Iraq and the Iraqi Army are now taking more responsibility for the security of their own country and fighting successfully in Basra, Sadr City and Mosul. 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 walk away now -- before the Iraqi government can fully protect its people from ruthless enemies -- 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.

Our defeat in Iraq would be catastrophic, not just for Iraq, but for us. I cannot be complicit in it. I will do whatever I can, whether I am effective or not, 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 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 the opportunity to succeed we must try to succeed. And I firmly believe that, with the continued right course of action, we will succeed.

I have many responsibilities to the American people, and I take them all seriously. But I have one responsibility that outweighs all the others and that is to use whatever 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 reasonable prospect for succeeding in 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.

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.

Many of them have served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many have had their tours extended. Many have returned to combat sooner than they had been led to expect. It is a sad and hard thing to ask so much more of Americans who have already given more than their fair share to the defense of our country. Few of them and their families will have received the news about additional and longer deployments without aiming a few appropriate complaints in the general direction of people like me, who helped make the decision to send them there. And then they shouldered a rifle and risked everything -- everything -- to accomplish their mission, to protect another people's freedom and our own country from harm.

It is a privilege beyond measure to live in a country served by them. 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 our inspiration, as I suspect all of you were once theirs. And I pray to a loving God that He bless and protect them.

Thank you.

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