



Remarks By John McCain At The American GI Forum

July 25, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the 2008 American GI Forum of the United States National Convention in Denver, CO, today at 11:30 a.m. MDT (1:30 P.M. EDT):

Thank you for that kind introduction and warm welcome. I want to begin by talking about an issue in this campaign that I know concerns you as it concerns all Americans: the war in Iraq. Thankfully, the news from Iraq today is much more encouraging than I could have reported to you last year.

Eighteen months ago, America faced a crisis as profound as any in our history. Iraq was in flames, torn apart by violence that was escaping our control. Al Qaeda was succeeding in what Osama bin Laden called the central front in their war against us. The mullahs in Iran waited for America's humiliation in Iraq, and the resulting increase in their influence. Thousands of Iraqis died violently every month. American casualties were mounting. We were on the brink of a disastrous defeat just a little more than five years after the attacks of September 11, and America faced a profound choice. Would we accept defeat and leave Iraq and our strategic position in the Middle East in ruins, risking a wider war in the near future? Or would we summon our resolve, deploy additional forces, and change our failed strategy? Senator Obama and I also faced a decision, which amounted to a real-time test for a future commander-in-chief. America passed that test. I believe my judgment passed that test. And I believe Senator Obama's failed.

We both knew the politically safe choice was to support some form of retreat. All the polls said the "surge" was unpopular. Many pundits, experts and policymakers opposed it and advocated withdrawing our troops and accepting the consequences. I chose to support the new counterinsurgency strategy backed by additional troops -- which I had advocated since 2003, after my first trip to Iraq. Many observers said my position would end my hopes of becoming president. I said I would rather lose a campaign than see America lose a war. My choice was not smart politics. It didn't test well in focus groups. It ignored all the polls. It also didn't matter. The country I love had one final chance to succeed in Iraq. The new strategy was it. So I supported it. Today, the effects of the new strategy are obvious. The surge has succeeded, and we are, at long last, finally winning this war.

Senator Obama made a different choice. He not only opposed the new strategy, but actually tried to prevent us from implementing it. He didn't just advocate defeat, he tried to legislate it. When his efforts failed, he continued to predict the failure of our troops. As our soldiers and Marines prepared to move into Baghdad neighborhoods and Anbari villages, Senator Obama predicted that their efforts would make the sectarian violence in Iraq worse, not better.

And as our troops took the fight to the enemy, Senator Obama tried to cut off funding for them. He was one of only 14 senators to vote against the emergency funding in May 2007 that supported our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. He would choose to lose in Iraq in hopes of winning in Afghanistan. But had his position been adopted, we would have lost both wars.

Three weeks after Senator Obama voted to deny funding for our troops in the field, General Ray Odierno launched the first major combat operations of the surge. Senator Obama declared defeat one month later: "My assessment is that the surge has not worked and we will not see a different report eight weeks from now." His assessment was popular at the time. But it couldn't have been more wrong.

By November 2007, the success of the surge was becoming apparent. Attacks on Coalition forces had dropped almost 60 percent from pre-surge levels. American casualties had fallen by more than half. Iraqi civilian deaths had fallen by more than two-thirds. But Senator Obama ignored the new and encouraging reality. "Not only have we not seen improvements," he said, "but we're actually worsening, potentially, a situation there."

If Senator Obama had prevailed, American forces would have had to retreat under fire. The Iraqi Army would have collapsed. Civilian casualties would have increased

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dramatically. Al Qaeda would have killed the Sunni sheikhs who had begun to cooperate with us, and the "Sunni Awakening" would have been strangled at birth. Al Qaeda fighters would have safe havens, from where they could train Iraqis and foreigners, and turn Iraq into a base for launching attacks on Americans elsewhere. Civil war, genocide and wider conflict would have been likely.

Above all, America would have been humiliated and weakened. Our military, strained by years of sacrifice, would have suffered a demoralizing defeat. Our enemies around the globe would have been emboldened. Terrorists would have seen our defeat as evidence America lacked the resolve to defeat them. As Iraq descended into chaos, other countries in the Middle East would have come to the aid of their favored factions, and the entire region might have erupted in war. Every American diplomat, American military commander, and American leader would have been forced to speak and act from a position of weakness.

Senator Obama told the American people what he thought you wanted to hear. I told you the truth. From the early days of this war, I feared the administration was pursuing a mistaken strategy, and I said so. I went to Iraq many times, and heard all the phony explanations about how we were winning. I knew we were failing, and I told that to an administration that did not want to hear it. I pushed for the strategy that is now succeeding before most people even admitted that there was a problem.

Fortunately, Senator Obama failed, not our military. We rejected the audacity of hopelessness, and we were right. Violence in Iraq fell to such low levels for such a long time that Senator Obama, detecting the success he never believed possible, falsely claimed that he had always predicted it. There have been almost no sectarian killings in Baghdad for more than 13 weeks. American casualties are at the lowest levels recorded in this war. The Iraqi Army is stronger and fighting harder. The Iraqi Government has met most of the benchmarks for political progress we demanded of them, and the nation's largest Sunni party recently rejoined the government. In Iraq, we are no longer on the doorstep of defeat, but on the road to victory.

Senator Obama said this week that even knowing what he knows today that he still would have opposed the surge. In retrospect, given the opportunity to choose between failure and success, he chooses failure. I cannot conceive of a Commander in Chief making that choice.

A new hope is rising in Iraq today. Across the country, Iraqis are preparing for upcoming provincial elections. And security has improved enough to permit the Iraqi government to begin seriously providing services and opportunities to the Iraqi people. This progress is encouraging but reversible if we heed those who have always counseled defeat when they now argue to risk our fragile gains and withdraw from Iraq according to a politically expedient timetable rather than the advice from the commanders who so brilliantly led this stunning turnaround in our situation in Iraq.

I said that the surge has succeeded, and it has. That is why the additional surge brigades are almost all home. I said we can win, and we will. I'm confident we will be able to reduce our forces in Iraq next year, and our forces will be out of regular combat operations and dramatically reduced in number during the term of the next President. We have fought the worst battles, survived the toughest threats, and the hardest part of this war is behind us. But it is not over yet. And we have come too far, sacrificed too much, to risk everything we have gained and all we could yet gain because the politics of the hour make defeat the more convenient position.

Because of the choice we made and all the surge has accomplished, the time will soon come when our troops can come home. But we face another choice today. We can withdraw when we have secured the peace and the gains we have sacrificed so much to achieve are safe. Or we can follow Senator Obama's unconditional withdrawal and risk losing the peace even if that results in spreading violence and a third Iraq war. Senator Obama has suggested he would consider sending troops back if that happened. When I bring them home in victory and with honor, they are staying home.

Senator Obama might dismiss defeat in Iraq as the current President's problem. But presidents don't lose wars. Nations do. And presidents don't fight wars. You do, the men and women of the greatest fighting force in the history of the world. The sacrifices you've made deserve to be memorialized in something more lasting than bronze or in the fleeting effect of a politician's speeches. Your valor and devotion have earned your country's abiding concern for your welfare. When our government forgets our debts to you, it is a stain upon America's honor. The Walter Reed scandal recalled not just the government but the people who elect it, to our responsibilities to those who risk life and limb to meet their responsibilities to us.

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 ensure that those who serve today and 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 will not be forgotten. Nor will 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. In addition to strengthening the VA, 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. I will not stand for 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.

Let me close by expressing my gratitude for the contributions Hispanic-Americans have made to the security of the country I have served all my adult life. I represent Arizona where Spanish was spoken before English was, and where the character and prosperity of our state owes much to the Arizonans of Hispanic descent who live there. And I know this country, which I love more than almost anything, would be poorer were we deprived of the patriotism, industry and decency of those millions of Americans whose families came here from Mexico, Central and South America.

When you take the solemn stroll along that wall of black granite on the national Mall, it is hard not to notice the many names such as Rodriguez, Hernandez, and Lopez that so sadly adorn it. When you visit Iraq and Afghanistan you meet some of the thousands of Hispanic-Americans who serve there, and many of those who risk their lives to protect the rest of us do not yet possess the rights and privileges of full citizenship in the country they love so well. To love your country, as I discovered in Vietnam, is to love your countrymen. Those men and women are my brothers and sisters, my fellow Americans, an association that means more to me than any other. As a private citizen or as President, I will never, never do anything to dishonor our obligations to them and their families.

No story better exemplifies the sacrifices Hispanic Americans have made for our country than the story of Roy Benavidez. I have told it before, and this won't be the last time I tell it. All Americans need to hear it.

Roy Benavidez was the son of a Texas sharecropper, a seventh grade dropout who suffered the humiliation of being constantly taunted as a "dumb Mexican." He grew up to become a master sergeant in the Green Berets, and served in Vietnam. He was a member of that rare class of warriors whose service was so honorable and brave they are privileged to wear the Medal of Honor. He was decorated by Ronald Reagan, who said that if the story of his heroism were a movie "you would not believe it."

On May 2, 1968, in an outpost near the Cambodian border, Sergeant Benavidez listened on his radio as the voice of a terrified American, part of a 12 man patrol surrounded by a North Vietnamese battalion, pleaded to be rescued. Armed with only a knife, Roy jumped into a helicopter and took off with a three-man crew to rescue his trapped comrades.

When they arrived at the battle, the enemy was too numerous for the helicopter to evacuate the surrounded soldiers. It had to land seventy-five yards away from their position. After making the sign of the cross, Sergeant Benavidez jumped out of the helicopter as it hovered ten feet above the ground, and ran toward his comrades carrying his knife and a medic bag.

He was shot almost immediately, but he got up and kept moving. A grenade knocked him down again, shrapnel tearing into his face. He got up and kept moving. Reaching the Americans' position, he found four men dead, and all the others badly wounded. He armed himself with an enemy rifle, and began to treat the wounded, distribute ammunition and call in air strikes. He was shot again. He then ordered the helicopter to come in closer as he dragged the dead and wounded aboard. After he got all the wounded aboard, he ran back to retrieve classified documents from the body of a fallen soldier. He was shot in the stomach, and grenade fragments cut into his back. He got up and kept moving, and made it back to the helicopter.

The pilot was shot and the helicopter crashed. Roy pulled the wounded from the wreckage and radioed for air strikes and another helicopter. He kept fighting until air support arrived. He was shot several more times before a second helicopter landed. As he was carrying a wounded man toward it, a North Vietnamese soldier clubbed him with his rifle and stabbed him with a bayonet. Sergeant Benavidez fought him hand to hand, to death. After rescuing three more soldiers, he was finally flown with them to safety.

Bleeding profusely, and completely immobile, a doctor thought him to be dead. Roy was placed in a body bag, before anyone discovered he was still alive. He spent a year in hospitals recovering from seven serious gunshot wounds, twenty-eight shrapnel wounds, and bayonet wounds in both arms.

It took thirteen years for Roy Benavidez to receive his Medal of Honor. But it didn't

seem to matter to him. He stayed in the Army. The war, and his forgotten heroism never embittered him. He spent his retirement counseling troubled kids, encouraging them to stay in school and off drugs.

"I'm proud to be an American," Roy Benavidez said as he lay dying in a San Antonio hospital ten years ago. May God bless his soul. And may Americans, all Americans, be very proud that Roy Benavidez was one of us. I wouldn't want to live in a country that didn't recognize how much we needed such a good man.

I prefer to live in a bigger place. I prefer to live in a growing America, as proud of its variety as it is of the ideals that unite us. I prefer to live in a hopeful country. I prefer to live in Roy Benavidez' America. Thank you very much.

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