



Remarks by John McCain to the 87th Annual Convention of the Disabled American Veterans

August 11, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery to the 87th Annual Convention of the Disabled American Veterans in Las Vegas, NV, today at 1:15 p.m. PDT (4:15 p.m. EDT):

Thank you all very much. Commander Rob Reynolds, thank you for the kind introduction. National Adjutant Art Wilson, Senior Vice Commander Ray Dempsey, Auxiliary National Commander Kathryn Wiley, Auxiliary National Adjutant Judy Hezlep, Past National Commander Brad Barton, and Senior Vice Commander Sandra Dobmeier: I thank you all for the warm welcome. I am honored to be in the company of all my fellow members of the DAV, including all my friends in the Arizona delegation.

Better than most, the men and women in this room know the hardships and costs of war. You were there when your country needed you. You shouldered heavy burdens and accepted great risks. I'm sure many of you will also recall from your experiences in war, as I do from mine, that when you're somewhere on the other side of the world in the service of America you pay attention to the news from back home. It affects morale. And even during this election season, with sharp differences on the wisdom and success of the surge in Iraq, Americans need to speak as one in praise of the men and women who fight our battles. They are the best among us, as you were before them, and I know you will join me in applauding the courage and skill that will see America through to victory.

Though victory in Iraq is finally in sight, a great deal still depends on the decisions and good judgment of the next president. The hard-won gains of our troops hang in the balance. The lasting advantage of a peaceful and democratic ally in the heart of the Middle East could still be squandered by hasty withdrawal and arbitrary timelines. And this is one of many problems in the shifting positions of my opponent, Senator Obama.

With just three months to go before the election, a lot of folks are still trying to square Senator Obama's varying positions on the surge in Iraq. First, he opposed the surge. Then he confidently predicted that it would fail. Then he tried to prevent funding for the troops who carried out the surge. Not content to merely predict failure in Iraq, my opponent tried to legislate failure. This was back when supporting America's efforts in Iraq entailed serious political risk. It was a clarifying moment. It was a moment when political self-interest and the national interest parted ways. For my part, with so much in the balance, it was an easy call. As I said at the time, I would rather lose an election than lose a war.

Thanks to the courage and sacrifice of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines and to brave Iraqi fighters the surge has succeeded. And yet Senator Obama still can't quite bring himself to admit his own failure in judgment. Instead, he commits the greater error of insisting that even in hindsight, he would oppose the surge. Even in retrospect, he would choose the path of retreat and failure for America over the path of success and victory. Behind all of these claims and positions by Senator Obama lies the ambition to be president. What's missing is the judgment to be commander in chief.

In short, both candidates in this election pledge to end this war and bring our troops home. The great difference is that I intend to win it first.

It will also fall to the next commander in chief to make good on the obligation our government accepts every time any man or woman enters the proud ranks of the United States military, and again when they receive their DD 214. Those we depend on as troops should know, when they become veterans, that they can depend on us.

The DAV has defined some of these obligations in your Stand Up for Veterans pledge. And though it's not my practice to sign pledges as a candidate, I will give you my word that as president I will see that these obligations are kept. 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 was a disgrace unworthy of this nation. As Washington, Lincoln, and other great leaders reminded us, Americans who fought to defend this nation should always rank among the

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highest of national priorities.

In practice, veterans must be treated fairly and expeditiously as they seek compensation for disability or illness. We owe them compassion 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. Veterans 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 all that is 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. And I will not accept a situation in which veterans are denied access to care on account of travel distances, backlogs of appointments, and years of pending disability evaluation and claims. We should no longer tolerate requiring veterans to make an appointment to stand in one line for a ticket to stand in another. And it's even worse if the line winds eventually to substandard care for America's veterans.

I'm not here to tell you that there is a cost that is too high to be paid in the care of our nation's veterans. I will make sure that Congress funds the VA health care budget in a sufficient, timely, and predictable manner. But I will say that every increase in funding must be matched by increases in accountability, both at the VA and in Congress. And this requires an end to certain practices and abuses that serve neither our veterans, our country, nor the reputation of Congress itself.

Exactly because funding VA programs command bipartisan support, some in the Congress like to attach unrelated appropriations and earmarks to VA bills. The result is to mix vital national priorities with wasteful and often worthless political pork. Earmarks show up in bills of every kind, and not just VA bills. That's how we end up budgeting hundreds of millions of dollars for bridges to nowhere, or lesser sums for Woodstock museums and the like. When that earmark for a million bucks to fund a Woodstock museum didn't come through, I don't imagine that many veterans had to change their vacation plans. And the principle here is simple: Public money should serve the public good. If it's me sitting in the Oval Office, at the Resolute desk, those wasteful spending bills are going the way of all earmarks straight back to the Congress with a veto.

When we make it clear to Congress that no earmark bill will be signed into law, that will save many billions of dollars that can be applied to essential priorities, and above all the care of our veterans. But reform doesn't end there. We must also modernize our disability system to make sure that eligible service members receive benefits quickly, based on clear, predictable, and fair standards. And we must address the problems of capacity and access within our VA health care system. While this will involve a wide range of initiatives, I believe there is a simple and direct reform we should make right away.

My administration will create a Veterans' Care Access Card to be used by veterans with illness or injury incurred during their military service, and by those with lower incomes. This card will provide those without timely access to VA facilities the option of using high-quality health-care providers near their homes. Many of these providers are already familiar with the most common needs of veterans. And often what's missing is a system for sharing medical records among VA, DOD, and civilian hospitals and doctors. This reform will improve care, reduce risks, and broaden access all at the same time.

This card is not intended to either replace the VA or privatize veterans' health care, as some have wrongly charged. I believe the VA should always be there to provide top-quality care for our veterans. And I believe that the VA should continue to provide broad-spectrum health care to eligible veterans, in addition to specialized care in areas such as spinal injuries, prosthetics, and blindness -- services in which the VA sets the standard in medical care.

Even so, there are veterans eligible for care who are not currently able to receive it, on account of distance, wait times, or the absence of certain specialties. And for this group, the new card I propose will offer better alternatives, to provide the benefits they have earned.

Reform must also recognize that greater care is needed for certain types of injuries. In the Senate, I co-authored the Wounded Warrior Act, which was the first major legislative initiative to address post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. As president, I will build on this legislation to improve screening and treatment for these severe injuries suffered by many who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The VA must also broaden its care for the women who are entering the armed forces in greater numbers than ever. The growing ranks of women in uniform have left the VA lagging behind in the services it provides. And here the Veterans Care Access Card will prove especially valuable, affording women medical options while the VA improves capacity and expands services.

All reforms bring change, and even the best changes can be a little unsettling. What you should know about this reform is that it is an extension of the current system, not a replacement. As a matter of duty and of honor, whatever our commitments to veterans cost, those commitments will be kept.

Many veterans of war will tell you that best among us never came home. Those of you in this room remember the names and faces of many such heroes you were privileged to call comrades and friends. I recall more than a few myself. And that is only one reason that America must care for the families of the fallen. During the last two major military conflicts, I worked to increase death gratuity payments. I sponsored legislation during the first Gulf War to increase the death gratuity payment and to double the soldier and veterans' group life insurance. I cosponsored legislation to double the death gratuity payment in 2003 for service men and women killed in the line of duty, and also increase the survivor benefit plan for widows or widowers of retired veterans. There is more to be done on behalf of the families that our fallen troops leave behind, and as commander in chief I will never break faith with the ones who never came home.

The next president will 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.

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 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 had their tours extended. Many returned to combat sooner than they had been led to expect. It was 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 or climbed in a cockpit 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 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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