



Remarks By John McCain At the 90th Annual American Legion National Convention

August 26, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery at the 90th Annual American Legion National Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, today at 10:00 a.m. PDT (1:00 p.m. EDT):

Thank you all very much. National Commander Marty Conatser, thank you for the kind introduction. National Adjutant Bob Spanogle, Auxiliary President Jan Pulvermacher-Ryan, Auxiliary Secretary Pam Gilley: thank you all. If I may speak for the gang at Tempe Post 2, we are honored to be in the company of our fellow members of the American Legion. Apparently it falls to me as well to offer an official welcome the Great State of Arizona. Our governor is out of town, up in Denver for some big party they're throwing there. I guess my invitation got lost in the mail.

All of us take pride in being members of this great organization. After its founding in 1919, the Legion served many of the more than four million American veterans of the First World War. Today just one of those veterans survives, a man of 107 named Frank Buckles. Frank lives in West Virginia, and last week in Orlando the folks at the VFW convention gave him a standing ovation. I have a feeling that you, too, will want to join in a round of applause for the last doughboy.

In all the years since, the men and women of the Legion have stayed faithful to their mission of service to one another and to country. In Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, America's veterans have faced different enemies, but they have always found the same friend and ally in the Legion, the VFW, and other veterans' service organizations. All of us returned from war with a few experiences we'd gladly forget, but the friendships and camaraderie we brought home are forever. For keeping us all together, and helping those most in need, we're all in the debt of the American Legion.

The men and women of the Legion believe in their country's cause in the world, and you have served and sacrificed for it. You know that when our leaders speak of this nation's history and purposes in the affairs of the world, they should do so with confidence, gratitude, and above all with moral clarity.

There are those who say that our day as the free world's leader has passed, that our moment is waning. They point to the anti-Americanism that is sometimes heard in Europe and elsewhere, and take this as a sign that America no longer has the strength or the moral credibility to lead. The criticisms tend to pass or quiet down when global threats and dangers appear. In times of trouble, free nations of the world still look to America for leadership, because they know the strength of America remains the greatest force for good on this earth.

My opponent had the chance to express such confidence in America, when he delivered a much anticipated address in Berlin. He was the picture of confidence, in some ways. But confidence in oneself and confidence in one's country are not the same. And in that speech, Senator Obama left an important point unclear. He suggested that the end of the Cold War proved that there was, "no challenge too great for a world that stands as one." Now I missed a few years of the Cold War, as the guest of one of our adversaries, but as I recall the world was deeply divided during the Cold War -- between the side of freedom and the side of tyranny. The Cold War ended not because the world stood "as one," but because the great democracies came together, bound together by sustained and decisive American leadership.

All of this is more than an academic debate. For the sake of our own security, and the defense of our values in the affairs of the world, American leadership is critical. While we have our share of critics around the world, when people in the oppressed nations of the world need support, and solidarity, and hope, they look to America. When they talk about our country, it is not with distrust or disdain, but with respect and affection. They do not resent or resist America's democratic influence in the world -- they thank God for it.

Just days after the Russian invasion of Georgia, Senator Obama had this to say about the crisis: "We've got to send a clear message to Russia and unify our allies. They can't charge into other countries. Of course it helps if we are leading by example on that point." End of quote. I guess we are left to figure out the rest for ourselves. It's unlikely he was alluding to Afghanistan, the nation we liberated after 9/11, and continue to help despite Russian complaints about our related deployments in Central Asia. And he probably didn't have Kosovo in mind either -- although Russia didn't care much for that military action, either. We and our NATO allies had to end the Serbian slaughter of civilians in Kosovo without UN approval, because the Russians blocked the effort in the Security Council.

If I catch Senator Obama's drift, then, our failure to "lead by example" was the liberation of Iraq. And if he really thinks that, by liberating Iraq from a dangerous tyrant, America somehow set a bad example that invited Russia to invade a small, peaceful, and democratic nation, then he should state it outright -- because that is a debate I welcome.

In the end, confusion about such questions only invites more trouble, violence, and aggression. To promote stability and peace, America must stand firmly on the side of freedom and justice. The next president must bring to office a clear-eyed view of our nation's role in the world, as the defender of the oppressed and a force for peace.

Through decades of struggle, free nations prevailed over tyranny in large measure because of the sacrifices of the men and women of the United States armed forces. And it will fall to the next commander in chief to make good on the obligation our government accepts every time any man or woman enters the military, and again

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when they receive their DD 214. Those we depend on as troops should know, when they become veterans, that they can depend on us. Honoring this obligation will require leadership. And I pledge to you that as president I will lead -- from the front -- to reform our VA system and make sure that veterans receive the respect and care they have earned.

The Walter Reed scandal was a disgrace unworthy of this nation -- and I intend to make sure that nothing like it is ever repeated. There are other problems as well that have not received as much media attention. And my administration will do the hard and necessary work of fixing them, even when the press and the public are not watching.

Reform begins with appointing a secretary of veterans affairs who is a leader of the highest caliber, and who listens to veterans and veterans' service organizations. My VA secretary must be a forceful advocate for veterans and forthright advisor to me, so we can make the right choices about budgeting, health care, and other veterans' benefit issues. He or she will also need to be a high-energy leader, too, because we'll have a lot of work to do in improving service to veterans.

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.

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, and for other wasteful projects that do not serve the public interest. 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 to 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. For many veterans, the closest VA facility isn't close enough. And many of their local providers are already familiar with the most common needs of veterans. Often, all that prevents them from receiving local care is a system for sharing medical records among VA, DOD, and civilian hospitals and doctors. My 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 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, and who are suffering from the same war wounds -- visible and invisible -- suffered by other veterans. The American Legion was founded just one year before the women of America received the right to vote, in a constitutional amendment that became law 88 years ago today. Among the many wrongs that have been righted in that time, women are now welcomed and respected as equals in the ranks of the armed forces of the United States. Yet the growing ranks of women veterans have left the VA lagging behind in the services it provides. As rapidly as possible, we must improve the VA system so that it can fully assess and treat conditions that predominantly or exclusively affect women. And here the Veterans Care Access Card will prove especially valuable, affording women medical options while the VA improves capacity and expands services.

These are among the elements of my reform agenda for the VA system. And today, as other occasions, I have stated in the plainest, most straightforward terms that the Veterans Health Care Access Card will expand existing benefits. I don't expect this will deter the Obama campaign from misrepresenting my proposals, but lest there be any doubt you have my pledge: My reforms would not force anyone to go to a non-VA facility, and do not signal privatization of the VA. Use of the Card would be optional. Only high quality health care providers would be used. Participating veterans would incur no additional charges. And my reforms will not replace any scheduled expansion of the VA network -- including those facilities designed to serve veterans living in rural and remote areas. This is, very simply, an effort to expand care to a group of eligible veterans who are not now receiving care.

I suppose from my opponent's vantage point, veterans concerns are just one more issue to be spun or worked to advantage. This would explain why he has also taken liberties with my position on the GI Bill. In its initial version, that bill failed to address the number one education request that I've heard from career service

members and their families -- the freedom to transfer their benefits to a spouse or a child. The bill also did nothing to retain the young officer and enlisted leaders who form the backbone of our all-volunteer force.

As a political proposition, it would have much easier for me to have just signed on to what I considered flawed legislation. But the people of Arizona, and of all America, expect more from their representatives than that, and instead I sought a better bill. I'm proud to say that the result is a law that better serves our military, better serves military families, and better serves the interests of our country.

No one who has worn the uniform of his or her country can ever take these matters lightly. We all learned an ethic in the service of looking after one another, of leaving no one behind, and this commitment did not end when we left the service. As a matter of duty and of honor, whatever our commitments to veterans cost, if I am president those commitments will be kept.

The next president will have many responsibilities to the American people, and I take them all seriously. But if I am elected, I will 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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