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## Newsroom

### Remarks of Senator Obama: A Sacred Trust

Kansas City, MO | August 21, 2007

Thank you, Commander Kurpius, for that introduction and for your leadership, and let me acknowledge the incoming National Commander George Lisicki. I want to thank all of the members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States of America for inviting me here today. I'm glad to see Rich Coombe, the State Commander for Illinois. And let me say a word of acknowledgment to the 90,000 Illinoisans who are VFW members.

To America's veterans, our country must speak with one voice: we honor your service, and we enter into a sacred trust with you from the moment you put on that uniform. That trust is simple: America will be there for you just as you have been there for America.

As a candidate for the presidency, I know that I am running to become Commander-in-Chief - to safeguard this nation's security, and to keep that sacred trust. There is no responsibility that I take more seriously.

We know that the America we live in is the legacy of those who have borne the burden of battle. You are part of an unbroken line of Americans who threw off the tyranny of a King; who held the country together and set the captives free; who faced down fascism and fought for freedom in Korea and Vietnam; who liberated Kuwait and stopped ethnic cleansing in the Balkans; and who fight bravely and brilliantly under our flag today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Keeping faith with those who serve must always be a core American value and a cornerstone of American patriotism. Because America's commitment to its servicemen and women begins at enlistment, and it must never end.

Without that commitment, I probably wouldn't be here today. My grandfather - Stanley Dunham - enlisted after Pearl Harbor and went on to march in Patton's Army. My mother was born at Fort Leavenworth and my grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line. After my grandfather stood up for his country, America stood by him. He went to college on the GI Bill, bought his first home with help from the Federal Housing Authority. Then he moved his family west to Hawaii, where I was born, and where he and my grandmother helped raise me. He is buried in the Punchbowl, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, where 776 victims of Pearl Harbor are laid to rest.

I knew him when he was older. But I think about him now and then as he enlisted - a man of 23, fresh-faced with a wise-guy grin - when I see young men and women signing up to serve today. These sons and daughters of America are the best and bravest among us. And they are signing up at a time when the dangers that America faces are great.

Since the end of the Cold War, threats from distant corners of the world increasingly pose a direct danger to America. Killing fields in Rwanda, Congo and Darfur have offended our common humanity and set back the world's sense of collective security. Weak and failing states from Africa to central Asia to the Pacific Rim are incubators of resentment and anarchy that can endanger those countries and ours. An assertive Russia and a rising China remind us - through words and deeds - that the primacy of our power does not mean our power will go unchallenged. A new age of nuclear proliferation has left the world's most deadly weapons unlocked by more and more countries, with thousands of weapons and stockpiles poorly secured all over the world. At the dawn of the 21st century, the threats we face can no longer be contained by borders and boundaries.

That is the lesson of 9/11. We will never forget the 3,000 Americans killed on 9/11 - more than we lost at Pearl Harbor. The threat did not come from a dictator, a state, or an empire - it came from stateless terrorists. These violent extremists are a small minority in the Muslim world. They distort Islam. They hate America. They kill man, woman and child. And they seek

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a repressive caliphate that would resemble Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Our brave young men and women have signed up to make these burdens their own. They have come face to face with the threats of the 21st century, and they have been asked to bear an evolving and ever-increasing load. Peacekeeping missions. Intelligence gathering. Training foreign militaries. Earthquake and tsunami relief. Fighting with Afghan allies to topple the Taliban. Persevering in the deserts and cities of Iraq. The U.S. military has answered when called, and the verdict on their performance is clear: through their commitment, their courage, and their capability they have done us all proud.

What we need is civilian leadership that lives up this service. We had a chance to deliver a decisive blow to the Taliban and al Qaeda and to bring this country together with unity of effort and purpose. Instead, we went to war in Iraq - a war that I opposed - with no plan for how to win the peace, shifting our focus, straining our military, splitting our country, and sacrificing our global standing.

I want to be clear. Our troops have performed brilliantly in Iraq. They have done everything we have asked of them. They have won every battle they have fought. They have built schools and trained battalions. I know there are honest differences about the next steps that we should take. And the truth is - there are no good options.

All of our top military commanders recognize that there is no military solution in Iraq. And no matter how brilliantly and bravely our troops and their commanders perform, they cannot and should not bear the responsibility of resolving grievances at the heart of Iraq's civil war. No military surge can succeed without political reconciliation and a surge of diplomacy in Iraq and the region. Iraq's leaders are not reconciling. They are not achieving political benchmarks. The only thing they seem to have agreed on is to take a vacation. That is why I have pushed for a careful and responsible redeployment of troops engaged in combat operations out of Iraq, joined with direct and sustained diplomacy in the region. And that is why I will continue to push the President to change our policy.

One reason to stop fighting the wrong war is so that we can fight the right war against terrorism and extremism. And my judgment - based in part on the clear findings of the National Intelligence Estimate - is that the most direct terrorist threat to our homeland comes from al Qaeda operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

That's why earlier this month, I laid out a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. That plan has five elements. First, we need to end the war in Iraq and focus on the terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and I would re-enforce our mission in Afghanistan with at least two brigades. Second, we need to develop our capabilities to take down terrorist networks and secure nuclear weapons. Third, we need to dry up support for extremism, because we cannot win the long war unless we win more hearts and minds in the Muslim world. Fourth, we need to restore our values, because as the counter-insurgency manual reminds us, torture sets back our mission to keep the people on our side. And fifth, we need to protect our homeland by setting common sense priorities.

In laying out this strategy, I am guided by the understanding that there is no more awesome responsibility that is placed in a President's hand than protecting our country and our security. I believe that this strategy is one that we must pursue, guided by the principle that we must act swiftly and strongly against clear and imminent threats to our security. I will act with proper regard for the costs and consequences of action, based on the advice of military commanders and with a clear statement of purpose and policy to the American people. Because a President can choose to go to war, but the country must be prepared to sustain it. That depends upon knowing why we are fighting, what clear goal we are fighting for, and how we plan to win the peace.

And as we implement this comprehensive strategy, and phase out of Iraq and bolster our mission in Afghanistan, I believe we can then focus on rebuilding our military and taking better care of our servicemen and women. In an Obama Administration, I will ensure that America goes to war with the armed forces it needs. Our troops should not be over-stretched. We need to ensure that our ability to respond to threats around the world is never compromised. And I will always respect - and not ignore - the advice of military commanders. But I will also make clear that when I am President, the buck will stop in the Oval Office.

We know our troops will answer the call. But we must issue that call responsibly. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been marked by repeated and unpredictable deployments. Aircraft bound for home have been turned around. Soldiers and Marines have served two, three or four tours. Retention rates of West Point graduates are approaching records lows. We need to keep these battle-hardened majors and captains so they can become tomorrow's generals. We need predictable rotations. We need to deploy troops at an appropriate state of

readiness.

I will add 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 Marines to relieve the strain on our ground forces. I will maintain our technological edge and invest in the capabilities we need to succeed in the missions of the 21st century. That means training for critical languages like Arabic, for civil affairs, and for increased Special Forces. And I will heed the call for greater civilian capacity. Our troops, trained for war, are serving as water and electricity experts in Baghdad and agricultural advisors in Kandahar. The finest military in the world needs civilian partners who can carry out critical missions. We need to strengthen and integrate all aspects of American might.

And this is not just about programs and policies. It's about people. Part of our sacred trust with the men and women who serve is also providing the equipment they need. We've had troops deploying to Iraq who had to buy life-saving equipment on-line. That's not America. That's not who we are. As President, I will ensure that every service-member has what they need to do the job safely and successfully.

And the strain of service is great in a place where a threat can come from a pile by the side of the road, a seemingly friendly face in the crowd, or a mortar lobbed into a base. Just the other day we learned there were at least 99 suicides in the Army last year - the most in a quarter century.

To keep our sacred trust, I will improve mental health screening and treatment at all levels: from enlistment, to deployment, to reentry into civilian life. No service-member should be kicked out of the military because they are struggling with untreated PTSD. No veteran should have to fill out a 23-page claim to get care, or wait months - even years - to get an appointment at the VA. We need more mental health professionals, more training to recognize signs and to reject the stigma of seeking care. And to treat a signature wound of these wars, we need clear standards of care for Traumatic Brain Injury.

We also need to provide more services to our military families. Let me thank the VFW for helping families with everything from repairs and errands to calling cards that bring a loved one nearer. Efforts like Operation Uplink make a huge difference. You are filling in some of the painful spaces in peoples' lives. And anyone who has visited our military hospitals has seen wonderful spouses who don't see visiting hours as part-time. That's why I passed a bill to provide family members with a year of job protection, so they never have to face a choice between caring for a loved one and keeping a job.

I have also fought to improve shameful care for wounded warriors. I led a bipartisan effort to improve outpatient facilities, slash red tape, and reform the disability review process - because recovering troops should always go to the front of the line, and they shouldn't have to fight to get there.

But we know that the sacred trust cannot expire when the uniform comes off. When we fail to keep faith with our veterans, the bond between our nation and our nation's heroes becomes frayed. When a veteran is denied care, we are all dishonored. It's not enough to lay a wreath on Memorial Day, or to pay tribute to our veterans in speeches. A proud and grateful nation owes more than ceremonial gestures and kind words.

Caring for those who serve - and for their families - is a fundamental responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief. It is not a separate cost. It is a cost of war. It is something I've fought for as a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. And it is something I will fight for as President of the United States.

It's time for comprehensive reform. When I am President, building a 21st century VA to serve our veterans will be an equal priority to building a 21st century military to fight our wars. My Secretary of Veteran's Affairs will be just as important as my Secretary of Defense. No more shortfalls - it's time to fully fund the VA medical center. No more delays - it's time to pass on-time VA budgets each and every year. No more means testing - it's time to allow all veterans back into the VA. I will immediately reverse a policy that led the VA to turn away nearly 1 million middle and low-income veterans since 2003.

The VA will also be at the cutting edge of my plan for universal health care, with better preventive care, more research and specialty treatment, and more Vet Centers, particularly in rural areas.

I will revamp an overburdened benefits system. The VFW has done a remarkable job helping more than 120,000 veterans a year navigate the broken VBA bureaucracy, but you shouldn't have to do it alone. I will hire additional workers, and create an electronic system that is fully linked up to military records and the VA's health network.

One of the most admired principles of the U.S. military is that no one gets left behind. Yet too often America does not keep faith with this principle. On any given night, more than 200,000 veterans are homeless. We're already hearing about hundreds of homeless Iraq War vets. That's not right. That's not keeping our sacred trust. We must not leave these men and women behind. My principle will be simple: zero tolerance. Zero tolerance for veterans sleeping on the streets. I've fought for this in the Senate, and as President I'll expand housing vouchers, and I'll launch a new supportive services housing program to prevent at-risk veterans and their families from sliding into homelessness.

I'll also keep faith with America's veterans by helping them achieve their dreams. We need a G.I. Bill for the 21st century. An Obama Administration will expand access to education for our veterans, and increase benefits to keep pace with rising costs. All who wear the uniform of the United States are entitled to the same opportunity that my grandfather had under the G.I. Bill.

And our sacred trust does not end when a service-member dies. The graves of our veterans are hallowed ground. When men and women who die in service to this country are laid to rest, there must be no protests near the funerals. It's wrong and it needs to stop. .

Over 100 years ago, a handful of veterans from the Spanish-American war came together in places like a tailor shop in Columbus, Ohio. At the time, America had no medical care, no pensions for its returning warriors. Folks could raise their voice, but Washington didn't listen. So these men banded together and started a movement. They cared for each other and made the case for their rights. They founded local organizations all across this country. In 1915 there were 5,000 members. Today, you have nearly 2 million members.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars represents the best of America - the courage to fight for our country abroad, and coming together at home for a cause.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that "To fight out a war, you must believe something and want something with all your might."

The Americans who fight today believe in this country deeply. And no matter how many you meet, or how many stories of heroism you hear, every encounter reminds you that they are truly special. That through their service, they are living out the ideals that stir so many of us as Americans - pride, duty, and sacrifice.

Some of the most inspiring are those you meet at places like Walter Reed Medical Center. Young men and women who may have lost a limb or even their ability to take care of themselves, but will never lose the pride they feel for serving their country. They're not interested in self-pity, but yearn to move forward with their lives. And it's this classically American optimism that makes you realize the quality of person we have serving in the United States Armed Forces.

I know all of us don't agree on everything. I have heard those of you who disagree with me. I want you to know that I respect the views of all who come to this hall today. I will listen to them as a candidate, and I will listen to them as President. And I will be clear that whatever disagreements we have on policy, there will be no daylight between us when it comes to honoring these men and women who serve, and keeping faith with our veterans. This is not a partisan issue. This is a moral obligation. This must be a beachhead for bringing our country together.

Some like to say this country is divided. But that is not how I choose to see it. I see a country that all of us love - a country that my grandfather served, and that my father crossed an ocean to reach. I see values that all of us share - values of liberty, equality, and service to a common good and a greater good. I see a flag that we fly with pride. I see an America that is the strongest nation in the history of the world - not just because of our arms, but because of the strength of our values, and of the men and women who serve.

As President Franklin Roosevelt said in his final inaugural: "The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. He has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world." With that strength comes great responsibility - to join our strength with wisdom, and to keep that light of hope burning as a beacon to the world. And there is no responsibility greater than keeping faith with the men and women who serve, so that our country serves them as well as you have served us. Let that be our calling. And let history find us never wanting.

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