

Monday, Aug. 17, 2009
Joint Opening Session

OBAMA PLEDGES TO FULFILL RESPONSIBILITIES TO TROOPS, VETS

President Barack Obama told delegates at VFW's joint opening session that he will fulfill four key responsibilities: lead America's troops wisely, give them the resources, equipment and strategies to complete their missions, properly prepare them for the missions of tomorrow and keep promises made to troops and veterans.

He noted that less than 1% of Americans serve in the military. Perhaps never in American history, he said, have so few protected so many. Obama added that he "will not hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests." He pledged that he would only send the military into harm's way when "absolutely necessary," and only when it is based on good intelligence and sound strategy. "I will give you a clear mission, defined goals and the equipment and support you need to get the job done," he added. "That's my commitment to you."

Obama defended an increase in his defense budget by noting that the U.S. armed forces should be the "best-trained, best-led and best-equipped" fighting force in the world. He emphasized that troops in Afghanistan and Iraq would have "more of the protective gear and armored vehicles that save lives." Obama noted that he has increased the size of the Army and the Marine Corps and halted personnel reductions in the Navy and the Air Force. "This will give our troops more time home between deployments, which means less stress on families and more training for the next mission," he said. "And it will help us put an end once and for all to 'stop-loss' for those who have done their duty."

The President stated that he will remove all U.S. combat brigades from Iraq by the end of August 2010, "and we will remove all our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. For America, the Iraq War will end."

Noting that "the fighting has been fierce" in Afghanistan, Obama said "this is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity ... this is fundamental to the defense of our people." He added that there will be more difficult days ahead. "Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again," he said. "If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans."

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Obama said the nation has a responsibility to prepare U.S. forces for the missions of tomorrow. “We’re investing in new skills and specialties because in the 21st century military strength will be measured not only by the weapons our troops carry, but by the languages they speak and the cultures that they understand,” he said. “So this is pretty straight forward: Cut the waste. Save taxpayer dollars. Support the troops.” This is all part of the Administration’s defense review, which is “taking a top-to-bottom look at our priorities and posture.”

Obama emphasized the need for better military family housing, child care and counseling to help families cope with the stresses of war. “We will fulfill our responsibility to our forces and our families,” he said.

Criticizing bloated defense contracts, Obama said that the Pentagon’s budget must be reformed: “Our troops and taxpayers deserve better.” Citing “indefensible” no-bid contracts, he said “this waste would be unacceptable at any time, but when we’re fighting two wars and facing a serious deficit, it’s inexcusable. It’s time for it to stop.”

Reform Will Not Change VA Health Care, Obama Says

For wounded veterans, Obama says, “We are investing billions of dollars for more treatment centers, more case managers and better medical care so our troops can recover and return where they want to be—with their units.” He also pledged “billions of dollars more” for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury treatment, as well as more mobile and rural VA clinics.

Obama also addressed two VFW priority goals: concurrent receipt and advanced VA appropriations. “My budget ensures that our severely disabled veterans will receive both their military retired pay and their VA disability benefits,” he said. Advanced appropriations would ensure that “the medical care you need is never held up by budget delays.” Over the next five years, he said he will propose an additional \$25 billion in VA spending “to make sure that our veterans are getting what they need.”

Moreover, earlier this year, Obama directed the Pentagon and VA to create “one unified lifetime electronic health record for the members of the armed forces—a single electronic record with privacy guaranteed that will stay with them forever.”

On the issue of health care reform, Obama noted: “One thing that reform won’t change is veterans health care. No one is going to take away your benefits—that is the plain and simple truth. We’re expanding access to your health care, not reducing it.” To that end, he is encouraging employees at VA’s 57 regional offices to offer ideas on how to cut backlogs, slash waiting times and deliver benefits sooner.

In conclusion, Obama praised VFW’s service: “You have always fulfilled your responsibilities to America,” he said, “and so long as I am President of the United States, America will always fulfill its responsibilities to you.”

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SPEAKERS/AWARD WINNERS ADDRESS TROOP NEEDS

Michael Hayden, a retired four-star Air Force general and former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, received VFW's *Eisenhower Distinguished Service Award*. He spoke of visiting wounded troops at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., and the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and coming away "feeling energized." He added that a "great burden" is put on military families, so he donated his \$15,000 honorarium to the National Military Family Association. Among other things, it sent 10,000 military children to summer camps in 2009.

Actress and musician Connie Stevens received VFW's *Hall of Fame Award*. Stevens is well known in the military community for her 33 years of service to the USO. "I have gone and will go anywhere for the military and veterans," said Stevens, who has performed at the White House for four presidents.

Army Col. David Griffith, director of Freedom Team Salute, asked VFW members to help spread the word about his program, which aims to recognize the support parents, spouses and employers provide troops. Started in 2005, the program—with some 850 ambassadors in all states and nine countries—has sent out 1.3 million commendations to spouses, parents and employers of reservists. "This is a free program," he said. "We only need the name and address of the recipient."

Craig Whelden, head of the Army's Community Covenant Task Force, urged VFW members to ask their legislators and community leaders to sign covenants vowing to support America's troops. "It's time for Americans to stand and say, 'We are here to support you, we are here to take care of you,'" he said.

VARIOUS SPEAKERS, RECOGNITION

Mike DeRosa, past president of the Mid-America Franchisee Association, received the Commander-in-Chief's *Gold Medal of Merit*. He was the chief volunteer for a Burger King project that raised \$250,000 for VFW's Unmet Needs program.

Arizona Gov. Janice Brewer and Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon welcomed VFW attendees. Ruslan Aushev, president of Russia's War Veterans Committee, spoke and presented Commander-in-Chief Glen Gardner, Jr., with tokens of appreciation from his country. A representative from China's Veterans Affairs Commission also spoke. VFW's 2009 All-American Commanders were recognized.

Bruce Withers of Post 10436 in the Department of Europe received the *National Recruiter of the Year Award*.

Dixie Hild, Ladies Auxiliary president, accepted the *VFW Gold Medal of Merit*.

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