

VFW National Convention - Afghanistan, VA Services Are Top Obama Priorities

Aug 18, 2008

ORLANDO, Fla. — Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) addressed VFW's Business Session today, saying political contenders should "debate disagreements on the merits of policy" only. The U.S. cannot "secure our country by just talking tough without acting tough and smart," he said. He outlined his foreign policy views on Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Georgia.

In addition, he presented proposals regarding VA improvements as well as other forms of service programs.

On the war in the Middle East, he said "the long-term solution in Iraq is political," advancing several reasons for the recent success there. He explained that the U.S. spends "\$10 billion a month in Iraq" while "Iraq's government is sitting on a \$79 billion budget surplus from windfall oil profits." Using these monies to achieve political reconciliation is the answer in the end, he said.

Obama recognized U.S. troops for succeeding in their missions in the Iraq War. But now it is time for "an Iraqi government that reconciles its differences and spends its oil profits to meet the needs of its people." He advocates redeploying combat brigades over 16 months, with most U.S. troops out of Iraq in 2010. According to his plan, a residual force would remain to target al Qaeda after turning Iraq over to its own government. "It's time to press the Iraqis to take responsibility for their future," he said.

Afghanistan the 'Central Front in the War on Terrorism'

In contrast to his stance on the war in Iraq, Obama called Afghanistan the "central front in the war on terrorism." He said that the first priority of the United States should be "finishing the fight against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan." Saying that "finishing the job against the Taliban" is his top focus, he said of the war in Afghanistan: "This is a war that we have to win." Obama called for two more U.S. combat brigades and an additional \$1 billion in non-military assistance for the government.

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Referring to the “terrorist safe haven in northwest Pakistan,” Obama said: “We must take action against bin Laden and his lieutenants if we have them in our sights and Pakistan cannot or will not act.” He went on to say that he has cosponsored a bill to triple non-military aid to the Pakistani people.

Meanwhile, concerning political turmoil in the nation of Georgia, Obama has called for “active international engagement to resolve the disputes” in the region. He is pushing for \$1 billion in reconstruction assistance for the people of that country.

Improving VA Services

Obama credited VFW for doing “an extraordinary job of standing by our military families, helping out with everything from a phone card for a soldier who is overseas to an extra hand around the house.” Despite the efforts of veterans groups, there is a need for what he called a “Military Families Advisory Board.” Moreover, he reiterated VFW’s desire to keep military pay on par with private sector wages.

As part of a “21st century VA,” Obama called for fully funded VA health care, more Vet Centers, abolishing means-testing and increasing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI) screenings. He went on to call for “revamping an overburdened benefits system,” including converting to an electronic records system.

An enthusiastic supporter of the GI Bill, both old and new, he touted its success in altering the lives of veterans forever. In further vet initiatives, Obama recommended expanding programs like Troops to Teachers and national service programs. He is proposing a so-called “Green Veterans Initiative” to provide training to help them succeed in “the green jobs of the future” tied to what he called “a new American energy economy.” These and other initiatives are the least “we owe our troops and our veterans,” he said.

INTERNAL UPDATES: AWARDS, CONTRIBUTIONS

Jan Scruggs, president and founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation, received a check from VFW for \$320,714 of our pledged \$1 million for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Center. Scruggs, a member of VFW Post 2979 in Washington, D.C., said, “VFW, as always, is the first to help.” Through slides, he presented an overview of what the center will look like. Construction is slated to begin in 2010.

Army National Guard Lt. Gen. H. Steven Blum received the Armed Forces Award. Lt. Col. Charles Dryden, a Tuskegee airman, was awarded the Americanism Award posthumously. Earl Morse, founder and operations manager of Honor Flight, Inc., urged VFW members to get involved in helping WWII veterans visit the National WWII Memorial in Washington, D.C. Patrice Green, executive director of VFW’s National Home for Children, showed a video and provided an update on Home activities. Ralph Corno, supreme commander of the Military Order of the Cooties, noted that his group recruited 6,031 VFW members last year.