

VFW National Convention - McCain Offers Specific Foreign Policy, VA Proposals

Aug 17, 2008

ORLANDO, Fla. — Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain opened his address before VFW's Joint Opening Session today by reminding attendees that all Americans must "speak as one" and praise the men and women fighting the Iraq War.

"Though a victory is finally in sight," said the VFW life member of Post 7401 in Chandler, Ariz., it "could still be squandered by hasty withdrawal and arbitrary timelines."

He continued: "The surge has succeeded," referring to the addition of some 30,000 troops to the war zone over the last 18 months. He noted that both he and his Democratic opponent "both want to bring home the troops. The great difference is that I want to win [the war] first." This is in keeping with the sentiments of the troops, McCain said.

Referring to the early debate over the Iraq War, McCain said, "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."

Crisis in Georgia

Fighting in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, which McCain called the "strategic crossroads of the Caucasus," shows that Russia has reverted to "Soviet-style tyranny" that threatens the "struggling" democracy. "As I have long warned, Russia under the rule of Vladimir Putin is becoming more aggressive toward the now-democratic nations that broke free of the old Soviet empire." Georgia, he said, "should be able to count on the Free World for support. If I am elected President, it will."

McCain added that "the Cold War is over, the Soviet empire is gone, and neither one is missed. Least of all is that empire missed by the once-captive nations of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine and Georgia. These brave young democracies have joined the Free World, and they are not going back."

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Russian aggression, McCain said, could give it control of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which brings oil from the Caspian Sea to points west and traverses Georgia. McCain fears that if the pipeline were destroyed or seized by Russia, it could cause a worldwide energy crisis. "For that reason, we should drill offshore and we should drill now. Congress should come off its five-week vacation and go to work for us," he said to thunderous applause.

The situation in Georgia, McCain explained, is important to the United States. While Georgia may seem "small, remote and obscure," VFW members "know better than anyone how inattention to small crises can invite much larger ones."

"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," said the Arizona senator.

VA Reform

Announcing that he will "lead from the front" to reform VA, McCain said he plans to appoint a VA secretary of the "highest caliber," and "increases in funding will be matched by increases in accountability." He was emphatic: "I will make sure that Congress funds the VA health care budget in a sufficient, timely and predictable manner." McCain also criticized unrelated appropriations and earmarks as "worthless political pork," citing a proposed \$1 million for a Woodstock museum as a prime example.

Veterans, he said, should have access to the highest quality health, mental health and rehabilitative care in the world. He said he will not accept denial of care because of travel distances, backlogs of appointments or 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."

The centerpiece of his reform would be a Veterans Care Access Card, which would provide options to veterans who are not currently able to receive VA care because of distance, wait times or the absence of certain specialties. He said it also would broaden care for women veterans by offering them more medical alternatives while VA improves capacity and expands services. "My reforms will not force anyone to go to a non-VA facility. They will not signal privatization of the VA. And they will not replace any scheduled expansion of the VA network, including those facilities designed to serve veterans living in rural and remote areas."

McCain explained his opposition to the original new GI Bill, now called the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act. "In its initial version, that bill failed to address the No. 1 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," he said. "That bill also did nothing

to retain the young officer and enlisted leaders who form the backbone of our all-volunteer force.”

McCain concluded by paying his respects to those who “sacrificed and shed blood” while serving America. He noted that today’s troops “are our inspiration, as I suspect all of you [VFW members] were once theirs.”

Air Force Overview, Family Support Group

Acting Secretary of the Air Force Mike Donley updated VFW members on Air Force operations. He revealed that 68,000 airmen are currently serving in 98 countries, including 26,000 in 63 locations in the Middle East. Donley said some 3,000 airmen are embedded with ground forces in Central Command. Another 4,800 actually serve in the role of ground troops. He related the success stories of several Air Force special operators, including those who were involved in a June 2006 raid in which Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed. “The world is a better place without him,” Donley said.

“There is no question that we are joint partners with the Army and Marine Corps in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” he said. The Air Force can provide unique capabilities in the war on terrorism. “Our technology allows us to ensure the safety of personnel and precisely deliver devastating firepower, all in a matter of seconds,” emphasized the secretary. Donley said proudly, “As an Army veteran myself, I’m thankful to be counted among the ranks of all veterans.”

Craig Whelden, director of the Army Community Covenant (ACC), asked VFW members to support his organization, which is designed to develop and foster effective state and community partnerships with the Army in improving the quality of life for soldiers and their families. Whelden urged members to obtain some of the 6,000 ACC brochures available at the convention. ACC is especially concerned about families who suffered a loss. “They’ll see that they’re not alone,” he said. “They’ll know that they’re not the only ones who lost somebody.”

Various Speakers, Recognition

Virginia Carman, Ladies Auxiliary president, accepted VFW’s Gold Medal of Merit and presented Commander-in-Chief George Lisicki a check for \$5,000 for VFW’s Military Assistance Program.

Peter Mascetti received the 2007-08 National Recruiter of the Year Award. The member of VFW Post 10658 in Schweinfurt, Germany, recruited 527 new members. 2008 All-American Commanders also were recognized.

Past Commander-in-Chief Gary Kurpius received VFW’s Distinguished Service Medal.

Richard Crotty, mayor of Orange County, Fla., welcomed VFW attendees. Ruslan Aushev, president of Russia's War Veterans Committee, spoke and presented the Chief with a book about the history of the Kremlin. Kao Hua-chu, deputy minister of China's Veterans Affairs Commission, made a presentation.