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Barack Obama

Address at the Disabled Veterans of American Conference

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It is -- Thank you. It is a great honor and -- it is true, I will be 49 this week. I have a lot more gray hair than I did last year.

It is an extraordinary honor to be here. Thank you, Commander Barrera, for your kind introduction and for your lifetime of service, in the Marines in Vietnam -- but also as a tireless advocate for your fellow disabled veterans. We are grateful to you. Thank you for everything that you've done.

I want to thank your great leadership team for welcoming me today: Chairman Ray Dempsey -- absolutely -- incoming commander Wally Tyson. National adjutant Art Wilson. Judy Hezlep of the DAV Auxiliary. And your outstanding Executive Director in Washington, Dave Gorman. And I am pleased to be joined by a decorated Vietnam veteran, wounded warrior, and a lifetime member of the DAV -- my outstanding Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Ric Shinseki.

Disabled American Veterans, I valued your advice and counsel when I was a senator, when I co-sponsored the Post-9/11 GI Bill. You were one of the first veterans organizations that I called upon when I began my presidential campaign. And as President, it's been my pleasure to welcome you to the White House -- to make sure America is serving our veterans as well as you've served us. And, most recently, to sign advanced appropriations into law so that veterans health care will never again be held hostage to the budget battles and the political games in Washington.



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Now, there's another visit I won't forget. I was in the Oval Office expecting a visit from the DAV. And in comes Bobby carrying a baseball bat. Now, it's not every day that somebody gets past the Secret Service carrying a baseball bat. You may have heard about this. It turns out it was a genuine Louisville Slugger -- a thank you for going to bat for our veterans on advanced appropriations.

So I'm grateful for that symbol of our partnership, and I'm proud of the progress we've achieved together. But as one of your outstanding DAV members from Illinois just reminded me, this is a promise I made during the campaign -- it was a promise made and it was a promise kept. And I intend to keep on keeping my promises to the veterans of America.

In the life of our nation, not every generation has been summoned to defend our country in its hour of need. But every generation to answer that call has done so with honor and with courage.

Among you are members of that generation that saved the world from fascism. I was honored to stand with our World War II vets at Normandy last year for the anniversary of D-Day. And this year, as we mark -- this year, as we mark the 65th anniversary of our victory in that war, we once again salute our veterans of the Second World War.

Others among you faced a brutal foe on a cold Korean Peninsula. This year, as we mark the 60th anniversary of that conflict, I will be proud to travel to the Republic of Korea in November to pay tribute to our veterans of the Korean War.

Many of you served in the jungles of Vietnam. You also served with honor, exemplary dedication and courage, but were often shunned when you came home. That was a national disgrace and it must never happen again. And that's why we're making sure our veterans from today's wars are shown the respect and the dignity they deserve.

And whether you served in the Gulf to free a captive Kuwait or fought in the streets of Mogadishu or stopped an ethnic slaughter in the Balkans, you too are part of an unbroken line of service stretching across two centuries.

For you, coming home was the beginning of another battle -- the battle to recover. You fought to stand again and to walk again and to work again. You fought for each other and for the benefits and treatment you had earned. You became leaders in our communities, in our companies, and our country -- including a former Vietnam vet and senator, Max Cleland, who reminded us that America's disabled veterans are "strong at the broken places."

Today, your legacy of service is carried on by a new generation of Americans. Some stepped forward in a time of peace, not foreseeing years of combat. Others stepped forward in this time of war, knowing they could be sent into harm's way. For the past nine years, in Afghanistan and Iraq, they have borne the burdens of war.



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They, and their families, have faced the greatest test in the history of our all-volunteer force, serving tour after tour, year after year. Through their extraordinary service, they have written their own chapter in the American story. And by any measure, they have earned their place among the greatest of generations.

Now, one of those chapters is nearing an end. As a candidate for President, I pledged to bring the war in Iraq to a responsible end. Shortly after taking office, I announced our new strategy for Iraq and for a transition to full Iraqi responsibility. And I made it clear that by August 31st, 2010, America's combat mission in Iraq would end. And that is exactly what we are doing -- as promised and on schedule.

Already, we have closed or turned over to Iraq hundreds of bases. We're moving out millions of pieces of equipment in one of the largest logistics operations that we've seen in decades. By the end of this month, we'll have brought more than 90,000 of our troops home from Iraq since I took office -- more than 90,000 have come home.

Today -- even as terrorists try to derail Iraq's progress -- because of the sacrifices of our troops and their Iraqi partners, violence in Iraq continues to be near the lowest it's been in years. And next month, we will change our military mission from combat to supporting and training Iraqi security forces. In fact, in many parts of the country, Iraqis have already taken the lead for security.

As agreed to with the Iraqi government, we will maintain a transitional force until we remove all our troops from Iraq by the end of next year. And during this period, our forces will have a focused mission -- supporting and training Iraqi forces, partnering with Iraqis in counterterrorism missions, and protecting our civilian and military efforts. These are dangerous tasks. There are still those with bombs and bullets who will try to stop Iraq's progress. And the hard truth is we have not seen the end of American sacrifice in Iraq.

But make no mistake: Our commitment in Iraq is changing -- from a military effort led by our troops to a civilian effort led by our diplomats. And as we mark the end of America's combat mission in Iraq, a grateful America must pay tribute to all who served there.

Remember, our nation has had vigorous debates about the Iraq War. There are patriots who supported going to war, and patriots who opposed it. But there has never been any daylight between us when it comes to supporting the more than one million Americans in uniform who have served in Iraq -- far more than any conflict since Vietnam.

These men and women from across our country have done more than meet the challenges of this young century. Through their extraordinary courage and confidence and commitment, these troops and veterans have proven themselves as a new generation of American leaders. And while our country has sometimes been divided, they have fought together as one.



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While other individuals and institutions have shirked responsibility, they have welcomed responsibility. While it was easy to be daunted by overwhelming challenges, the generation that has served in Iraq has overcome every test before them.

They took to the skies and sped across deserts in the initial charge into Baghdad. And today we're joined by an infantryman who was there as part of the 101st Airborne Division -- Sergeant Nicholas Bernardi is here.

When invasion gave way to insurgency, our troops persevered, block by block, city by city, from Baghdad to Fallujah. As a driver in a transportation company, this soldier endured constant attacks but never wavered in his mission -- and we thank Sergeant Dan Knabe. Thank you, Dan.

When terrorists and militias plunged Iraq into sectarian war, our troops adapted and adjusted -- restoring order and effectively defeating al Qaeda in Iraq on the battlefield. And among those who served in those pivotal days was a scout with the 1st Cavalry Division -- Specialist Matt Seidl. Matt.

For each of these men and women there are countless others. And we honor them all: Our young enlisted troops and noncommissioned officers who are the backbone of our military; the National Guardsmen and Reservists who served in unprecedented deployments; more women tested by combat than in any war in American history. Including a Marine here today -- Sergeant Patricia Ruiz. Patricia. I teased Patricia. I said she looks like she's still in high school. But she's a Marine.

And we salute the families back home. They too have sacrificed in this war. That's why my wife, Michelle, and the Vice President's wife, Dr. Jill Biden, have made it their mission to make sure America takes care of our remarkable military families, including our veterans.

Now, this summer, tens of thousands of our troops in Iraq are coming home. Last week, Vice President Biden was at Fort Drum to help welcome back members of the legendary 10th Mountain Division. Families are being reunited at bases across the country, from Fort Bragg in North Carolina to Fort Riley in Kansas to Fort Lewis in Washington. And in this season of homecomings, every American can show their gratitude to our patriots who served in Iraq.

As we do, we are humbled by the profound sacrifice that has been rendered. Each of the veterans I have mentioned carried with them the wounds of this war. And as a nation, we will honor forever all who gave their lives -- that last true measure of devotion -- in service in Iraq -- soldiers, sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen -- active, Guard, Reserve.

Even as we end the war in Iraq, even as we welcome home so many of our troops, others are still deployed in Afghanistan. So I want to remind everyone, it was Afghanistan where al Qaeda plotted and trained to murder 3,000 innocent people on 9/11.



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It is Afghanistan and the tribal regions of Pakistan where terrorists have launched other attacks against us and our allies. And if Afghanistan were to be engulfed by an even wider insurgency, al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates would have even more space to plan their next attack. And as President of the United States, I refuse to let that happen.

The effort in Afghanistan has been long and been difficult. And that's why after years in which the situation had deteriorated, I announced a new strategy last December -- a military effort to break the Taliban's momentum and train Afghan forces so that they can take the lead for their security; and a civilian effort to promote good governance and development that improves the lives of the Afghan people; and deeper cooperation with Pakistan to root out terrorists on both sides of the border.

We will continue to face huge challenges in Afghanistan. But it's important that the American people know that we are making progress and we are focused on goals that are clear and achievable.

On the military front, nearly all the additional forces that I ordered to Afghanistan are now in place. Along with our Afghan and international partners, we are going on the offensive against the Taliban -- targeting their leaders, challenging them in regions where they had free reign, and training Afghan national security forces. Our thoughts and prayers are with all our troops risking their lives for our safety in Afghanistan.

And on the civilian front, we're insisting on greater accountability. And the Afghan government has taken concrete steps to foster development and combat corruption, and to put forward a reintegration plan that allows Afghans to lay down their arms.

In Pakistan, we've seen the government begin to take the fight to violent extremists within its borders, and major blows have been struck against al Qaeda and its leadership -- because in this region and beyond, we will tolerate no safe haven for al Qaeda and their extremist allies. We will disrupt, we will dismantle, and we will ultimately defeat al Qaeda. And we will give our troops the resources and the equipment to get the job done and keep our country safe.

At the same time, every American who has ever worn the uniform must also know this: Your country is going to take care of you when you come home. Our nation's commitment to our veterans, to you and your families, is a sacred trust. And to me and my administration, upholding that trust is a moral obligation. It's not just politics.

That's why I've charged Secretary Shinseki with building a 21st century VA. And that includes one of the largest percentage increases to the VA budget in the past 30 years. We are going to cut this deficit that we've got, and I've proposed a freeze on discretionary domestic spending. But what I have not frozen is the spending we need to keep our military strong, our country safe and our veterans secure. So we're going to keep on making historic commitments to our veterans.



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For about 200,000 Vietnam vets who may have been exposed to Agent Orange and who now suffer from three chronic diseases, we're making it easier for you to get the health care and benefits you need.

For our Gulf War veterans, we've declared that nine infectious diseases are now presumed to be related to your service in Desert Storm.

For our disabled veterans, we've eliminated co-pays for those of you who are catastrophically disabled. We've kept our promise on concurrent receipt by proposing legislation that would allow severely disabled retirees to receive your military retired pay and your VA disability benefits. It's the right thing to do.

We've dramatically increased funding for veterans health care across the board, and that includes improving care for rural veterans and women veterans. For those half-million vets who had lost their eligibility -- our Priority 8 veterans -- we're restoring your access to VA health care.

And since the rumors continue to fly, even though they are wrong, let me say it as clearly as I can: The historic health care reform legislation that I signed into law does not -- I repeat, does not -- change your veterans benefits. The VA health care benefits that you know and trust are safe, and that includes prosthetics for our disabled veterans.

Thanks to advanced appropriations, the delays for funding for veterans medical care are over. And just as those delays were unacceptable, so too are long delays in the claims process. So Secretary Shinseki is working overtime to create a single lifetime electronic record that our troops and veterans can keep for life.

And today -- today I can announce that for the first time ever, veterans will be able to go to the VA website, click a simple "blue button," and download or print your personal health records so you have them when you need them and can share them with your doctors outside of the VA. That's happening this fall.

We're hiring thousands of new claims processors to break the backlog once and for all. And to make sure the backlog doesn't come back, we're reforming the claims process itself with new information technologies and a paperless system.

We got an Amen over here.

As a result of the innovation competition that I announced last summer, our dedicated VA employees suggested more than 10,000 new ways to cut through the red tape and the bureaucracy. And we're already putting dozens of these innovative ideas into action. Additionally, we're enabling more veterans to check the status of their claims online and from their cell phone.



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As a next step, we're opening this competition to entrepreneurs and academics so the best minds in America can help us develop the technologies to serve our vets, including those of you with multiple traumatic injuries. And we're going to keep at this until we meet our commitment to cut those backlogs, slash those wait times, and deliver your benefits sooner. This is a priority and we are going to get it done.

We're making progress in ending homelessness among our veterans. Today, on any given night, there are about 20,000 fewer veterans on the streets than there were when we took office. But we're not going to be satisfied until every veteran who has fought for America has a home in America. We will not stop.

Finally, we're keeping faith with our newest veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. We're offering more of the support and counseling they need to transition back to civilian life. That includes funding the post-9/11 GI Bill, which is already helping more than 300,000 veterans and family members pursue their dream of a college education.

And for veterans trying to find work in a very tough economy, we're helping with job training and placement. And I've directed the federal government to make it a priority to hire more veterans, including disabled veterans. And every business in America needs to know our vets have the training, they've got the skills, they have the dedication -- they are ready to work. And our country is stronger when we tap the incredible talents of our veterans.

For those coming home injured, we're continuing to direct unprecedented support to our wounded warriors in uniform -- more treatment centers, more case managers -- delivering the absolute best care available. For those who can, we want to help them get back to where they want to be -- with their units. And that includes service members with a disability, who still have so much to offer our military.

We're directing unprecedented resources to treating the signature wounds of today's wars -- traumatic brain injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And I recently signed into law the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act. That's a long name, but let me tell you what it does. It not only improves treatment for traumatic brain injury and PTSD, it gives new support to many of the caregivers who put their own lives on hold to care for their loved one.

And as so many of you know, PTSD is a pain like no other -- the nightmares that keep coming back, the rage that strikes suddenly, the hopelessness that's led too many of our troops and veterans to take their own lives. So today, I want to say in very personal terms to anyone who is struggling -- don't suffer in silence. It's not a sign of weakness to reach out for support -- it's a sign of strength. Your country needs you. We are here for you. We are here to help you stand tall. Don't give up. Reach out.



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We're making major investments in awareness, outreach, and suicide prevention -- hiring more mental health professionals, improving care and treatment. For those of you suffering from PTSD, we're making it a whole lot easier to qualify for VA benefits. From now on, if a VA doctor confirms a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, that is enough -- no matter what war you served in.

These are the commitments my administration has made. These are the promises we've worked to keep. This is the sacred trust we have pledged to uphold -- to you and all who serve.

I want to make special mention of a truly inspiring American, Staff Sergeant Cory Remsburg. He was at Bethesda during one of my periodic visits to see our wounded warriors. And as I walked into his room, I saw a picture on the wall -- and it was a picture of the two of us together. See, I had met Cory before, back at the D-Day anniversary in Normandy. A good looking young man, a proud Army Ranger, he had joined in a reenactment of that historic paratroop jump.

Then soon after, Cory served on his 10th deployment since 9/11 -- that's right, his 10th deployment. And that's when an IED nearly took his life. The traumatic brain injury was severe. Cory was in a coma for months. It seemed possible that he would never wake up.

But then something happened. His doctors still can't explain it. His parents called it a miracle. Cory opened one of his eyes. Then a few weeks later, he moved a leg. Then he moved an arm.

And there at Bethesda, we were meeting again. And Cory still couldn't speak. But he looked me in the eye. He lifted his arm and he shook my hand firmly. And when I asked how he was feeling, he held up his hand, pulled his fingers together and gave a thumbs up.

Today, Cory is at a VA hospital in Florida. And with the support of his family and VA staff, he's working hard every day to regain his strength. He's got to learn to speak all over again. He's grateful for the visits he's received from friends and supporters -- including the Disabled American Veterans.

And Cory is only 27 years old. He knows he's got a long and very hard road ahead. But he pushes on, and he's determined to get back to his fellow Rangers. And when someone at the hospital said, "Cory, you're going to walk out of here someday," he said "No, I'm going to run out of here."

So to Staff Sergeant Cory Remsburg, to the Disabled American Veterans -- I want to say to all of you, you are the very essence of America, the values that sustain us as a people, and the virtues our nation needs most right now. And the resilience that, in the face of great loss, so many of you experienced, I know you, like Cory, know what it means to pick yourselves up and keep pushing on.



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And that sense of purpose that tells us to carry on, not just when it's easy, but when it's hard, even when the odds seem overwhelming -- that's what we're about. The confidence that our destiny is never written for us, it's written by us. The faith, that fundamental American faith, that there are always brighter days ahead; and that we not will not simply endure, but we will emerge from our tests and trials and tribulations stronger than before -- that is your story. That is America's story. And I'm proud to stand with you as we write the next proud chapter in the life of the country we love.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.