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Barack Obama

Address to the 113th Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

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Thank you! Hello VFW! Thank you so much. Please, please, everybody have a seat.

Commander DeNoyer, thank you for your introduction, and your service in Vietnam and on behalf of America's veterans. I want to thank your executive director, Bob Wallace; your next commander, who I look forward to working with, John Hamilton. And to Gwen Rankin, Leanne Lemley, and the entire Ladies Auxiliary, thank you for your patriotic service to America.

I stand before you as our hearts still ache over the tragedy in Aurora, Colorado. Yesterday I was in Aurora, with families whose loss is hard to imagine -- with the wounded, who are fighting to recover; with a community and a military base in the midst of their grief. And they told me of the loved ones they lost. And here today, it's fitting to recall those who wore our nation's uniform:

Staff Sergeant Jesse Childress -- an Air Force reservist, 29 years old, a cyber specialist who loved sports, the kind of guy, said a friend, who'd help anybody.

Petty Officer Third Class John Larimer -- 27 years old, who, like his father and grandfather before him, joined the Navy, and who is remembered as an outstanding shipmate.



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Rebecca Wingo -- 32 years old, a veteran of the Air Force, fluent in Chinese, who served as a translator; a mother, whose life will be an inspiration to her two little girls.

And Jonathan Blunk -- from Reno, just 26 years old, but a veteran of three Navy tours, whose family and friends will always know that in that theater he gave his own life to save another.

These young patriots were willing to serve in faraway lands, yet they were taken from us here at home. And yesterday I conveyed to their families a message on behalf of all Americans: We honor your loved ones. We salute their service. And as you summon the strength to carry on and keep bright their legacy, we stand with you as one united American family.

Veterans of Foreign Wars, in you I see the same shining values, the virtues that make America great. When our harbor was bombed and fascism was on the march, when the fighting raged in Korea and Vietnam, when our country was attacked on that clear September morning, when our forces were sent to Iraq -- you answered your country's call. Because you know what Americans must always remember -- our nation only endures because there are patriots who protect it.

In the crucible of battle, you were tested in ways the rest of us will never know. You carry in your hearts the memory of the comrades you lost. For you understand that we must honor our fallen heroes not just on Memorial Day, but all days. And when an American goes missing, or is taken prisoner, we must do everything in our power to bring them home.

Even after you took off the uniform, you never stopped serving. You took care of each other -- fighting for the benefits and care you had earned. And you've taken care of the generations that followed, including our newest veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. On behalf of all our men and women in uniform, and on behalf of the American people, I want to thank you, VFW. Thank you for your outstanding work.

Of course, some among you -- our Vietnam veterans -- didn't always receive that thanks, at least not on time. This past Memorial Day, I joined some of you at The Wall to begin the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War. And it was another chance to say what should have been said all along: You did your duty, and you made us proud. And as this 50th anniversary continues, I'd ask all our Vietnam vets to stand, or raise your hand, as we say: Thank you and welcome home.

Every generation among you served to keep us strong and free. And it falls to us, those that follow, to preserve what you won. Four years ago, I stood before you at a time of great challenge for our nation. We were engaged in two wars. Al Qaeda was entrenched in their safe havens in Pakistan. Many of our alliances were frayed. Our standing in the world had suffered. We were in the worst recession of our lifetimes. Around the world, some questioned whether the United States still had the capacity to lead.



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So, four years ago, I made you a promise. I pledged to take the fight to our enemies, and renew our leadership in the world. As President, that's what I've done. And as you reflect on recent years, as we look ahead to the challenges we face as a nation and the leadership that's required, you don't just have my words, you have my deeds. You have my track record. You have the promises I've made and the promises that I've kept.

I pledged to end the war in Iraq honorably, and that's what we've done. After I took office, we removed nearly 150,000 U.S. troops from Iraq. And some said that bringing our troops home last year was a mistake. They would have kept tens of thousands of our forces in Iraq -- indefinitely, without a clear mission. Well, when you're Commander-in-Chief, you owe the troops a plan, you owe the country a plan -- and that includes recognizing not just when to begin wars, but also how to end them.

So we brought our troops home responsibly. They left with their heads held high, knowing they gave Iraqis a chance to forge their own future. And today, there are no Americans fighting in Iraq, and we are proud of all the Americans who served there.

I pledged to make it a priority to take out the terrorists who had attacked us on 9/11. And as a candidate, I said that if we had Osama bin Laden in our sights, we would act to keep America safe -- even if it meant going into Pakistan. Some of you remember, at the time, that comment drew quite a bit of criticism. But since I took office, we've worked with our allies and our partners to take out more top al Qaeda leaders than any time since 9/11. And thanks to the courage and the skill of our forces, Osama bin Laden will never threaten America again, and al Qaeda is on the road to defeat.

I pledged to finish the job in Afghanistan. After years of drift, we had to break the momentum of the Taliban, and build up the capacity and the capability of Afghans. And so, working with our commanders, we came up with a new strategy, and we ordered additional forces to get the job done. This is still a tough fight. But thanks to the incredible services and sacrifices of our troops, we pushed the Taliban back; we're training Afghan forces; we've begun the transition to Afghan lead.

Again, there are those who argued against a timeline for ending this war -- or against talking about it publicly. But you know what, that's not a plan for America's security either. After 10 years of war, and given the progress we've made, I felt it was important that the American people -- and our men and women in uniform -- know our plan to end this war responsibly. And so by the end of this summer, more than 30,000 of our troops will have come home. Next year, Afghans will take the lead for their own security. In 2014, the transition will be complete. And even as our troops come home, we'll have a strong partnership with the Afghan people, and we will stay vigilant so Afghanistan is never again a source for attacks against America.



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We're not just ending these wars; we're doing it in a way that achieves our objectives. Moreover, it's allowed us to broaden our vision and begin a new era of American leadership. We're leading from Europe to the Asia Pacific, with alliances that have never been stronger. We're leading the fight against nuclear dangers. We've applied the strongest sanctions ever on Iran and North Korea -- nations that cannot be allowed to threaten the world with nuclear weapons. We're leading on behalf of freedom -- standing with people in the Middle East and North Africa as they demand their rights; protecting the Libyan people as they rid the world of Muammar Qaddafi.

Today, we're also working for a transition so the Syrian people can have a better future, free of the Assad regime. And given the regime's stockpiles of chemical weapons, we will continue to make it clear to Assad and those around him that the world is watching, and that they will be held accountable by the international community and the United States, should they make the tragic mistake of using those weapons. And we will continue to work with our friends and our allies and the Syrian opposition on behalf of the day when the Syrian people have a government that respects their basic rights to live in peace and freedom and dignity.

Because we're leading around the world, people have a new attitude toward America. There's more confidence in our leadership. We see it everywhere we go. We saw it as grateful Libyans waved American flags. We see it across the globe -- when people are asked, which country do you admire the most, one nation comes out on top -- the United States of America.

So this is the progress that we've made. Thanks to the extraordinary service of our men and women in uniform, we're winding down a decade of war; we're destroying the terrorist network that attacked us; we're strengthening the alliances that extend our values. And today, every American can be proud that the United States is safer and stronger and more respected in the world.

And all this allows us to fulfill another promise that I made to you four years ago -- strengthening our military. After 10 years of operations, our soldiers will now have fewer and shorter deployments, which means more time on the home front to keep their families strong; more time to heal from the wounds of war; more time to improve readiness and prepare for future threats.

As President, I've continued to make historic investments to keep our armed forces strong. And guided by our new defense strategy, we will maintain our military superiority. It will be second to none as long as I am President and well into the future. We've got the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military in history. And as Commander-in-Chief I am going to keep it that way.

And by the way, given all the rhetoric lately -- it is political season -- let's also set the record straight on the budget. Those big, across-the-board cuts, including defense, that Congress said would occur next year if they couldn't reach a deal to reduce the deficit?



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Let's understand, first of all, there's no reason that should happen, because people in Congress ought to be able to come together and agree on a plan, a balanced approach that reduces the deficit and keeps our military strong. It should be done.

And there are a number of Republicans in Congress who don't want you to know that most of them voted for these cuts. Now they're trying to wriggle out of what they agreed to. Instead of making tough choices to reduce the deficit, they'd rather protect tax cuts for some of the wealthiest Americans, even if it risks big cuts in our military. And I've got to tell you, VFW, I disagree. If the choice is between tax cuts that the wealthiest Americans don't need and funding our troops that they definitely need to keep our country strong, I will stand with our troops every single time.

So let's stop playing politics with our military. Let's get serious and reduce our deficit and keep our military strong. Let's take some of the money that we're saving because we're not fighting in Iraq and because we're winding down in Afghanistan -- use half that money to pay down our deficit; let's use half of it to do some nation-building here in the United States of America.

Let's keep taking care of our extraordinary military families. For the first time ever, we've made military families and veterans a top priority not just at DOD, not just at the VA, but across the government. As Richard mentioned, this has been a mission for my wife, Michelle, and Vice President Joe Biden's wife, Dr. Jill Biden. Today, more people across America in every segment of society are Joining Forces to give our military families the respect and the support that they deserve.

And there's another way we can honor those who serve. It may no longer be a crime for con artists to pass themselves off as heroes, but one thing is certain -- it is contemptible. So this week, we will launch a new website, a living memorial, so the American people can see who's been awarded our nation's highest honors. Because no American hero should ever have their valor stolen.

This leads me to another promise I made four years ago -- upholding America's sacred trust with our veterans. I promised to strengthen the VA, and that promise has been kept. In my first year, we achieved the largest percentage increase in the VA budget in 30 years. And we're going to keep making historic investments in our veterans. When Richard came to the Oval Office, we talked about what those automatic budget cuts -- sequestration -- could mean for the VA. So my Administration has made it clear: Your veteran's benefits are exempt from sequestration. They are exempt. And because advance appropriations is now the law of the land, veterans' health care is protected from the budget battles in Washington.

I promised you that I'd stand up for veterans' health care. As long as I'm President, I will not allow VA health care to be turned into a voucher system, subject to the whims of the insurance market. Some have argued for this plan. I could not disagree more. You don't need vouchers, you need the VA health care that you have earned and that you depend on.



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So we've made dramatic investments to help care for our veterans. For our Vietnam veterans, we declared that more illnesses are now presumed connected to your exposure to Agent Orange. As a result of our decision, Vietnam-era vets and your families received nearly 4 billion dollars in disability pay. You needed it; you fought for it. We heard you and we got it done.

We've added mobile clinics for our rural veterans; more tailored care for our women veterans; unprecedented support for veterans with Traumatic Brain Injury. All tolled, we've made VA health care available to nearly 800,000 veterans who didn't have it before. And we're now supporting caregivers and families with the skills and the stipends to help care for the veterans that they love.

Of course, more veterans in the system means more claims. So we've hired thousands of claims processors. We're investing in paperless systems. To their credit, the dedicated folks at the VA are now completing one million claims a year. But there's been a tidal wave of new claims. And when I hear about veterans waiting months, or years, for your benefits -- it is unacceptable. And we are doing something about it.

We're taking all those folks who processed your Agent Orange claims -- more than 1,200 experts -- and giving them a new mission: Attack the backlog. We're prioritizing veterans with the most serious disabilities. And the VA and DOD will work harder towards a seamless transition so new veterans aren't just piled on to the backlog. And we will not rest -- I will not be satisfied until we get this right. And today, I'm also calling on all those who help our vets complete their claims -- state VAs, physicians and veteran groups like the VFW -- to join us. You know how this can work better, so let's get it done, together.

We're also focused on the urgent needs of our veterans with PTSD. We've poured tremendous resources into this fight -- thousands of more counselors and more clinicians, more care and more treatment. And we've made it easier for veterans with PTSD to qualify for VA benefits. But after a decade of war, it's now an epidemic. We're losing more troops to suicide -- one every single day -- than we are in combat. According to some estimates, about 18 veterans are taking their lives each day -- more every year than all the troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. That's a tragedy. It's heartbreaking. It should not be happening in the United States of America.

So when I hear about servicemembers and veterans who had the courage to seek help but didn't get it, who died waiting, that's an outrage. And I've told Secretary Panetta, Chairman Dempsey and Secretary Shinseki we've got to do better. This has to be all hands on deck.

So our message to everyone who's ever worn the uniform -- if you're hurting, it's not a sign of weakness to seek help, it's a sign of strength. And when you do, we'll be there and do more to help -- including more counselors and clinicians to help you heal. We need to end this tragedy, VFW. And we're going to work together to make it happen.



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So, too with our campaign to end homelessness among our veterans. We've now helped to bring tens of thousands of veterans off the streets and into permanent housing. This has to be a core mission, because every veteran who has fought for America ought to have a home in America.

And this brings me to the last promise I want to discuss with you. Four years ago, I said that I'd do everything I could to help our veterans realize the American Dream, to enlist you in building a stronger America. After all, our veterans have the skills that America needs. So today, our economy is growing and creating jobs, but it's still too hard for too many folks to find work, especially our younger veterans, our veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. And with a million more troops rejoining civilian life in the years ahead -- and looking for work -- we've got to step up our game, at every stage of their careers.

So today, I'm announcing a major overhaul of our transition assistance program. We're going to set up a kind of "reverse boot camp" for our departing servicemembers. Starting this year, they'll get more personalized assistance as they plan their careers. We'll provide the training they need to find that job, or pursue that education, or start that business. And just as they've maintained their military readiness, we'll have new standards of "career readiness."

In addition, by making the Post-9/11 GI Bill a priority, we've helped more than 800,000 veterans and their families pursue their education. And I've issued an executive order to help put a stop to schools that are ripping off our veterans.

I've directed the federal government to step up on jobs. Since I took office, we've hired more than 200,000 veterans into the federal government. We made it a priority. And we're keeping track -- every agency, every department: What are you doing for our veterans?

I've challenged community health centers to hire thousands of veterans as physicians and nurses. And as we help local communities hire new police officers and firefighters and first responders, we're giving a preference to veterans.

We're also fighting to get more vets hired in the private sector. With new tools like our online Veterans Jobs Bank, we're connecting veterans directly to jobs. We're helping thousands of veterans get certified for good-paying jobs in manufacturing. We succeeded in passing tax credits for businesses that hire our veterans and our wounded warriors. And this morning, I signed into law the Veteran Skills to Jobs Act -- making it easier for veterans to transfer their outstanding military skills into the licenses and credentials they need to get civilian jobs.

If you are a young man that is in charge of a platoon or millions of dollars of equipment and are taking responsibility, or you're a medic out in the field who is saving lives every single day -- when you come home, you need to be credentialed and certified quickly so you can get on the job. People should understand how skilled you are. And there shouldn't be bureaucrats or runarounds. We've got to put those folks to work.



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Last summer, I also challenged the private sector to hire or train 100,000 veterans or their spouses. Michelle and Jill Biden have been leading the effort, through Joining Forces. And so far, thousands of patriotic businesses have hired or trained more than 90,000 veterans and spouses. And our message to companies is simple: If you want somebody who gets the job done, then hire a vet. Hire a vet. Hire a vet and they will make you proud just like they've made America proud.

And we're fighting for veterans who want to start their own businesses, including more training in entrepreneurship. It's one of the reasons we've cut taxes -- 18 times for small businesses, including veteran-owned businesses. And the effects ripple out, because vets are more likely to hire vets.

So today, we can point to progress. More veterans are finding jobs; the unemployment rate for veterans has come down. Yes, it's still too high, but it's coming down. And now we've got to sustain that momentum. It's one of the reasons I've proposed to Congress a Veterans Jobs Corps to put our veterans back to work protecting and rebuilding America. And today, I am again calling on Congress: Pass this Veterans Jobs Corps and extend the tax credits for businesses that hire veterans so we can give these American heroes the jobs and opportunities that they deserve.

So, VFW, these are the promises that I made. These are the promises that I've kept. Where we still have more to do, we will not rest. That's my vow to you. I've got your back. I've got your six. Because we have a solemn obligation to all who serve -- not just for the years you're in uniform, but for all the decades that follow, and because even though today's wars are ending, the hard work of taking care of our newest veterans has only just begun.

Just as you protected America, we're going to pass our country to the next generation, stronger and safer and more respected in the world. So if anyone tries to tell you that our greatness has passed, that America is in decline, you tell them this: Just like the 20th century, the 21st is going to be another great American Century. For we are Americans, blessed with the greatest form of government ever devised by man, a democracy dedicated to freedom and committed to the ideals that still light the world. We will never apologize for our way of life; we will never waver in its defense.

We are a nation that freed millions and turned adversaries into allies. We are the Americans who defended the peace and turned back aggression. We are Americans who welcome our global responsibilities and our global leadership. The United States has been, and will remain, the one indispensable nation in world affairs.

And you, you are the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen, the Marines and the Coast Guardsmen who have kept us strong. We will honor your legacy. And we will ensure that the military you served, and the America that we love, remains the greatest force for freedom that the world has ever known.



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God bless you.

God bless all of our veterans.

And God bless the United States of America.