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Michelle Obama

Speech Honoring Women in the Military



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Thank you everybody. Thank you so much. Thank you. Isn't this nice? Just so very nice.

Let me begin by thanking Secretary Napolitano for that very kind introduction and for her outstanding work in keeping this country safe. She is a true friend and she has been doing an amazing job and we are so proud to have her on our team.

I'd also like to thank to Dr. Jill Biden -- a Blue Star Mom, by the way -- and a dear friend of mine as well. She has just been a tireless advocate of highlighting the service of the National Guard and Reserve members and families. It has just been a thrill for me to be able to work with her on this issue and many others. Jill, thank you for everything you've done.

And I also would like to acknowledge Representatives Susan Davis, Gwen Moore, as well as Jan Schakowsky, who are here, for their terrific work and for joining us here today; it's good to see you all. And I also want to recognize General Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, along with the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who are here, and their wonderful wives -- and this wasn't in the script, but please stand so that we can recognize and thank all of you -- I know you weren't supposed to this, but you can do it, it's my house.

You know, Jill and I are particularly grateful to the wives of the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff because they have -- from day one we sat down with them and got advice and guidance on sort of how to develop our initiatives. So we're grateful to you.

And I also want to thank to the senior enlisted advisors who are here today and their wives -- and I'd also like to ask them to stand as well so we can give them a round of applause. Thank you so much.



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Again, with the spouses, we met with shortly thereafter and we had a terrific conversation. The guidance that you have given us has meant a great deal. It's really ensured that the efforts that we've undertaken are substantive and accurate. So thank you all. Thank you for your support and thank you for being here today.

Let me also thank Patty Shinseki for her tremendous efforts on behalf of our nation's military children. Her husband, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki, is doing a terrific job and Patty has become just one of my dearest friends and just always a spot of courage in a sea of work. So where's Patty? Patty, where are you? Thank you, Patty.

And if any of you are still wondering why you're here -- it's not just tea. You have to thank General Wilma Vaught. General. I had the privilege of meeting this amazing woman at the Women in Military Service Memorial that occurred at Arlington National Cemetery -- when was that? That was a few months ago. And as you all know, she has just poured her heart and soul into that memorial, just to ensure that America's servicewomen receive the recognition that they've earned.

And I had a tremendous visit that day and one of the things that she said -- she turned to me -- who was there? You remember, she said, Eleanor Roosevelt did a tea, and she said something else, and she said, "We're coming for tea, right?" I said, of course we're going to have tea. And here we are. So this is why you're here. It was an excellent idea -- excellent idea.

But I also want to honor two very special ladies who are here today, and I got to meet them as well, earlier this year: Esther Corcoran, who was born in 1905 -- I hope you don't mind me telling on you. Esther was one of the first women in the Army to achieve the rank of Lieutenant Colonel -- pretty amazing. And she is joining us today with Alyce Dixon, who was born in 1907 -- Alyce. And Alyce served with the famous 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion during the Second World War. So let's give them both another round of applause.

These ladies have contributed a great deal to this country, and while their lives may span a century, they're both young at heart -- I've talked to them, they're pretty spunky -- and we are thrilled to have you both here today, thrilled and honored and grateful for your service.

And finally, I want to thank all of you -- all the women who have served this nation with courage, determination, and distinction, from World War II to today in Iraq and Afghanistan. You have served in times of war and in times of peace -- an all-volunteer force right from the beginning -- part of a proud tradition that stretches back more than two centuries.

Long before women had the right to vote -- long before we even had the right to vote -- or own property, before America even existed, women were serving this country -- facing danger, risking their lives, even dressing up like men so they'd be allowed to serve.

And it's never been an easy path. I can only imagine how challenging it has been and continues to be. I know that some of you have faced skepticism and ridicule. Some of you had to contend not just with the challenge of doing your jobs, but with others' perceptions that you weren't up to the job simply because of your gender.



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As Air Force veteran Dr. Donna Loraine put it -- this is a quote -- "To be a success, a woman had to be confident, self-assured, persistent and have a great sense of humor. At times you had to employ a certain desperate deviousness to get the job done."

So maybe you had to work a little harder -- and a little smarter. You may have felt a little lonely at times. At times, you may have gotten downright discouraged. But you stuck it out, each and every one of you. You found colleagues who supported you -- of all genders and all races and all backgrounds. You found superiors who pushed you and encouraged you. And then you rose to the challenge. You rose and you found opportunities to advance and to build exciting, amazing careers. And along the way, you all broke one "brass ceiling" after another.

In this room alone, we have the first female four star general. We have the first woman in the Navy to be promoted to Master Chief. The first woman in the Army Reserve to be promoted to the general officer rank. We have the first woman in the Army to receive the Expert Field Medical Badge. We have the first African American woman to serve as Chief Nurse at Walter Reed Hospital. And so many more "firsts" and "onlys" -- and that's the result of your hard work and your courage and your persistence.

But we know these achievements aren't yours alone. That's something that Jill and I have talked about, we've learned more about over the course of this year, because we know that service doesn't just end with the person wearing the uniform. You all know that. We know that our servicemen and women's sacrifices are their families' sacrifices as well. And many of you have spouses, partners, children, parents who stood by you and encouraged you and prayed for you every step of the way. And this day is their day too, as far as we're concerned. So let's take a moment to recognize those members of our families who supported you in your service as well.

But I hope you all know that your service -- that your legacy is more than just your own service. I hope that you know that your legacy will be measured in the service of every woman who follows in the trails that you've blazed -- every woman who benefits from your daring and determination. It will be measured in the inspiration that you provide to our daughters and our granddaughters -- and to our sons and our grandsons as well.

Because of you, when young women wonder how high they can rise in our military, they can look at General Ann Dunwoody and her four hard earned stars. That can see that, it's real. When they ask what kind of jobs they can do, they can look to women like all of you who've played just about every kind of role imaginable. And when they ask whether they can cut it -- whether they have what it takes to succeed -- all they have to do is to look at your lives, to look into your lives and to look at the careers that you've developed that inspire us all.

They can look to the example of Coast Guard Commander Dorothy Stratton, who led the SPARS during World War II. She stated, "We wanted to serve our country in its time of need." She said, I'm proud to sponsor -- oh, she didn't say this, but I am proud to sponsor a new Coast Guard cutter bearing her name to ensure that her service will be remembered for generations.



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They can look to Jennifer Grieves, who made history by becoming the first woman Marine One aircraft commander, and by commanding the first-ever flight with an all-female crew -- I remember this -- proudly carrying my husband from the White House to Andrews Air Force Base back in July. That was a wonderful day.

They can look to Tammy Duckworth, who flew combat missions in Iraq and lost both her legs when her helicopter was hit by a grenade. She went on to become a fearless advocate for veterans and wounded warriors, and now serves as Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Veterans Affairs Department. Thank you, Tammy.

And they can look to the example of women like Amy Krueger, who lost her life in the unthinkable violence at Fort Hood two weeks ago. Amy had enlisted in the Army after the September 11th attacks. And when her mother told her that she couldn't take on Osama bin Laden all by herself, Amy replied, simply: "Watch me."

She said, "Watch me." And I think that more than anything, that phrase "watch me" sums up the spirit of our women in uniform throughout our history. When others doubted you, or dismissed you, or questioned whether you could endure the training or complete the mission -- that was your response: "Watch me." Right?

Watch me succeed. Watch me risk everything I have for the country I love. Watch me do my part to protect this nation and protect this union. Watch me.

So we thank you for your courage and your service. We're honored to have you in our presence. We're thrilled, General, that you came up with this brilliant idea. And we hope that you don't spike the tea until after we leave. But we are thrilled to have you here. Welcome to the White House and thank you so much for your service. Thank you and God bless.