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Barack Obama

Address to Military Personnel in Pensacola, Florida

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Well, hello, Pensacola! It is great to be here. I want everybody, first of all, to give a big round of applause to Chief Elison Talabong for leading us in the pledge and singing our National Anthem -- to Lieutenant Commander Randy Ekstrom for the wonderful invocation.

I want to thank your outstanding local leaders for welcoming me here today, including Captains Chris Plummer, Mike Price and Brad Martin. Give them a big round of applause. And your great senior enlisted leaders, including Master Chief Mike Dollen, give them a big round of applause.

I want to thank all the spouses and families who are joining us here today. You hold our military families together, so we honor your service as well.

It is great to be here in Pensacola -- America's oldest naval air station, "the cradle of naval aviation." We've got Navy -- all the students of the Naval Air Technical Training Center. We've got Training Wing Six, maybe a few Blue Angels. We've got the United States Marines in the house -- maybe a few Air Force and Army, too.



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Now, I don't know how many could be here, because they're out there on the water right now, responding to the spill -- but I want to thank all the folks at Coast Guard Station Pensacola for their outstanding work. And I know somebody who is especially proud of them, and that's the former Commandant of the Coast Guard who postponed his retirement to answer his country's call once more and coordinate the federal response effort to the spill -- and that's Admiral Thad Allen. Please give him a big round of applause.

Now, I was just down at the Pensacola Beach Gulf Pier, at the Fish Sandwich Snack Bar. Now, I don't know if any of you ever checked it out. It's a nice spot. We were there with some of Florida's state and local leaders to discuss the situation here. I want to acknowledge the hard work that's being done by the governor of Florida, Charlie Crist; Florida's Chief Financial Officer, Alex Sink; Senators Bill Nelson, George LeMieux, representatives who are here today -- we got Jeff Miller and Corrine Brown and Ted Deutch. Please give them a big round of applause.

We've got Escambia County Commissioner Grover Robinson and Pensacola Mayor Mike Wiggins. Thank you very much for your outstanding efforts.

I know all of you join me in thanking these leaders and their communities -- because they're your neighbors -- for the incredible support that they give all the men and women and your families here in Pensacola. So we're grateful to you.

But this is my fourth visit to the Gulf Coast since the start of this spill. Yesterday, I was over in Gulfport, Mississippi; Theodore, Alabama; and now Pensacola -- assessing the situation, reviewing the response, seeing what needs to be done better and faster, and talking with folks -- whether fishermen or small business people and their families -- who are seeing their lives turned upside-down by this disaster.

Here in Pensacola, the beautiful beaches are still open. The sand is white and the water is blue. So folks who are looking for a good vacation, they can still come down to Pensacola. People need to know that Pensacola is still open for business. But that doesn't mean that people aren't angry. That doesn't mean that people aren't scared. That doesn't mean that people have concerns about the future -- we all have those concerns. And people have every right to be angry.

Those plumes of oil are off the coast. The fishing waters are closed. Tar balls have been coming ashore. And everybody is bracing for more.

So I'll say today what I've been saying up and down the Coast over the last couple of days and over the last month. Yes, this is an unprecedented environmental disaster -- it's the worst in our nation's history. But we're going to continue to meet it with an unprecedented federal response and recovery effort -- the largest in our nation's history. This is an assault on our shores, and we're going to fight back with everything we've got.



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And that includes mobilizing the resources of the greatest military in the world. Here at Naval Air Station Pensacola, you've been one of the major staging areas. You've helped to support the response effort. And I thank you for that, and I know the people of Pensacola thank you for that. And all along the Gulf coast, our men and women in uniform -- active, Guard, and Reserve -- from across the country are stepping up and helping out.

They're soldiers on the beaches putting out sandbags and building barriers and cleaning up the oil, and helping people process their claims for compensation from BP. They're sailors and Marines offering their ships and their skimmers and their helicopters and miles of boom. They're airmen overhead, flying in equipment and spraying dispersant. And, of course, there are Coast Guardsmen and women on the cutters, in the air, working around the clock.

And when I say this is the largest response of its kind in American history, I mean it. We've got more than 5,000 vessels on site -- skimmers, tugs, barges, dozens of aircraft. More than 27,000 personnel are on the scene, fighting this every day, putting out millions of feet of boom and cleaning the shores.

All told, we've authorized the deployment of 17,500 National Guardsmen to respond to this crisis. So far, only about 1,600 have been activated. That leaves a lot of Guardsmen ready to help. And if our governors call on them, I know they'll be ready, because they're always ready.

So I want the people of this region to know that my administration is going to do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to deal with this disaster. That includes the additional actions I announced yesterday to make sure that seafood from the Gulf is safe to eat. It includes steps we've taken to protect the safety of workers involved in the cleanup. It includes the new command structure I announced this morning to make sure states and local communities like Pensacola have the autonomy and the resources that they need to go forward.

And that includes something else -- making sure BP pays for the damages that it has caused -- use this isn't just an environmental disaster. For many families and communities, it's an economic disaster. Here in Pensacola and the Panhandle, tourism is everything. And when the tourists stay home, it ripples out and hits folks across these communities -- the charter boats, the hotels, the restaurants, the roadside stores, the shops, the suppliers, the dive shops. And if your inland waters are contaminated -- if the bays and bayous are contaminated -- it could be devastating, changing the way of life down here for years to come.

I'm going to speak to the nation tonight about this. But let me say to the people of Pensacola and the Gulf Coast: I am with you, my administration is with you for the long haul to make sure BP pays for the damage that it has done and to make sure that you are getting the help you need to protect this beautiful coast and to rehabilitate the damaged areas, to revitalize this region, and to make sure that nothing like this happens ever again. That is a commitment I am making to the people of Florida and people all across this Gulf.



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Now, that spirit -- that spirit of resolve and determination and resilience, that's the same spirit we see in all of you, the men and women in uniform, the spirit we'll need to meet other challenges of our time. Obviously the news has been dominated lately by the oil spill, but our nation is at war and all of you have stepped forward. You volunteered. You took an oath. You stood tall and you said, "I will serve."

And here at Pensacola, you're carrying on the proud tradition of naval aviation that spans a century. Here at the Barrancas National Cemetery, our heroes from yesterday's wars are still inspiring us. And like generations before you, you're no strangers to sacrifice. Our prayers are with the families and friends of the crews that you lost in that training exercise two months ago. Today, we send out our thoughts and prayers to all the folks from Pensacola on the frontlines at this very moment, including Iraq and Afghanistan. They are making us incredibly proud.

And so are you. As naval aviators and naval flight officers, you'll soon earn your "Wings of Gold." Many of you will prove yourselves as indispensable air crews -- the mechanics, the engineers, the electricians, the maintenance crews -- people's lives depending on what you do each and every day.

I know you're looking ahead to your first operational tours -- to join the fleet and your squadrons. And within weeks, some of you may find yourselves serving on a carrier deck in the Arabian Sea or working a busy flight line in Afghanistan. And as you begin your careers, as you look ahead to a life of service, I want you to know -- on behalf of the American people -- that your nation thanks you, your nation appreciates you, your nation will stand with you every step of the way.

And as your Commander-in-Chief, I want you to know something: I will not hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests. But I will also never risk your lives unless it's absolutely necessary. And if it is necessary, we are going to back you up to the hilt with the strategy and the clear mission and the equipment and the support that you need to get the job done right. That's my promise to every one of you, every man and woman who wears America's uniform.

That includes the right strategy in Iraq, where we're partnering with the Iraqi people for their long-term security and prosperity. And thanks to the honor and the heroism of our troops, we are poised to end our combat mission in Iraq this summer -- on schedule.

As we end the war in Iraq, we're pressing forward in Afghanistan. We're working to break the momentum of the Taliban insurgency and train Afghan security forces, strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government and protect the Afghan people.

We will disrupt and dismantle and ultimately defeat al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates. And we will support the aspirations of people around the world as they seek progress and opportunity and prosperity, because that's what we do -- as Americans.



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As you meet the missions we ask of you, we're going to make sure you're trained and equipped to succeed. That's why we halted reductions in the Navy. That's why we increased the size of the Marine Corps. That's why we're investing in the capabilities and technologies of tomorrow. And as we come up on the 100th anniversary of naval aviation next year, we're committed to the next generation of aircraft. We're going to keep you the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped military that the world has ever known.

Some of that is about technology. But the most important thing in our military is our people - it's all of you. And as you advance through the ranks and start families of your own, we want to be there for your loved ones, too. This is one of the defining missions of the First Lady, Michelle Obama. On Sunday, she visited the Navy-Marine Corps team and their families at Camp Pendleton. And they had a tough week, because five outstanding Marines from Pendleton gave their lives last week in Afghanistan. During her visit, Michelle had a message for their families and for all military families: America is going to keep faith with you, too.

When a loved one goes to war, that family goes to war. That's why we're working to improve family readiness and increase pay and benefits, working to give you more time between deployments, increasing support to help spouses and families deal with the stresses and the separation of war.

But this can't be the work of government alone. As Michelle has been saying, 1 percent of Americans may be fighting our wars, but 100 percent of Americans need to be supporting our men and women and their families in uniform. You guys shouldn't be carrying the entire burden. That's why Michelle is challenging every sector of American society to support our military families -- not just now, with our nation at war, but at every stage of your lives.

So we're improving care for our wounded warriors, especially those with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. We're funding the Post-9/11 GI Bill -- to give you and your families the chance to pursue your dreams. We've made a historic commitment to our veterans with one of the largest percentage increases to the VA budget in the past 30 years.

Those are concrete actions we've taken to meet the commitment I have to you and that the American people have to you. Because you've always taken care of America, America needs to take care of you. And that's my main message here today. We're all in this together. In our country, there isn't a "military world" and a "civilian world." We're all Americans. There's not Democrats and Republicans, when you take the long view -- we're all Americans. We all rise and fall together. And we all need to do our part to get through the challenges we face as a people.

So, yes, we're emerging from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Too many folks are still out of work here in Florida and around the country. Yes, we're a nation at war with adversaries who will stop at nothing to strike our homeland and would kill innocent people, women and children, with no compunction.



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Yes, we're now battling the worst economic -- environmental disaster in American history. Any one of these challenges alone would test our country. Confronting them all at once might overwhelm a lesser nation.

But look around you. Look at the person standing next to you. You look around and you see the strength and resilience that will carry us through.

You look at this installation and the forts that have stood watch over this bay and its people for centuries -- through the rise and fall of empires, through a terrible Civil War -- and as a nation healed itself, we became a beacon to the world. We've endured.

All of these men and women in uniform, all of you represent the same spirit of service and sacrifice as those who've gone before -- who defeated fascism, defeated tyranny, prevailed in a long Cold War over communism. And now, in our time, you've toppled regimes based on terror and dictatorship, and you've given new hope to millions of people. You've earned your place among the greatest of generations.

And look at the people of this city and this region -- fishermen who've made their lives on the water, families who've lived here for generations, hardworking folks who've had to endure more than their share -- tough economic times and hurricanes and storms that forced so many families and communities to start over from scratch. But they never gave up. They started over, and they rebuilt stronger than before.

As Americans, we don't quit. We keep coming. None of these challenges we're facing are going to be easy. None of them are going to be quick, but make no mistake, the United States of America has gone through tough times before and we always come out stronger. And we will do so again.

And this city and this region will recover. It will thrive again. And America's military will prevail in the mission to keep our country safe. And our nation will endure from these trials stronger than before. That is the history of the United States of America. That is the legacy of our Armed Forces. And I promise you that we will not falter.

Past generations have passed on this precious gift to us, and future generations are depending on us. And as I look out on each and every one of your faces, I'm absolutely confident that you will meet that challenge.

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