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Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Phoenix, Arizona
August 17, 2009

Thank you. Please, be seated. Thank you so much. Commander Gardner, thank you for your introduction and for your lifetime of service. I was proud to welcome Glen and your executive director, Bob Wallace, to the Oval Office just before the Fourth of July, and I look forwarding to working with your next commander, Tommy Tradewell. I want to also acknowledge Jean Gardner and Sharon Tradewell, as well as Dixie Hild and Jan Tittle and all the spouses and family of the Ladies Auxiliary. America honors your service as well.

Also Governor Jan Brewer is here, of Arizona, and Mayor Phil Gordon, our host here in Phoenix. I want to acknowledge president—Dr. Joe Shirley, Jr., president of the Navajo Nation. And this wasn't on my original card, but this is just an extraordinary story. And you may have already heard from her, but I just want to publicly acknowledge and thank Ms. Helen Denton, the secretary to Dwight Eisenhower, who typed up the orders for the Normandy invasion and is here today, and what an extraordinary story that is.

Members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, I am honored and humbled to stand before you as Commander in Chief of the finest military the world has ever known. And we're joined by some of those who make it the finest force in the world, from Luke Air Force Base, members of the 56th Fighter Wing.

Whether you wear the uniform today or wore it decades ago, you remind us of a fundamental truth: It's not the powerful weapons that make our military the strongest in the world. It's not the sophisticated systems that make us the most advanced. The true strength of our military lies in the spirit and skill of our men and women in uniform. And you know this.

You know this because it's the story of your lives. When fascism seemed unstoppable and our harbor was bombed, you battled across rocky Pacific islands and stormed the beaches of Europe, marching across a continent—my own grandfather and uncle among your ranks—liberating millions and turning enemies into allies.

When communism cast its shadow across so much of the globe, you stood vigilant in a long cold war, from an airlift in Berlin to the mountains of Korea to the jungles of Vietnam. When that cold war ended and old hatreds emerged anew, you turned back aggression from Kuwait to Kosovo.

And long after you took off the uniform, you've continued to serve: supporting our families, our troops when they go to war and welcoming them when they come home; working to give our veterans the care they deserve; and when America's heroes are laid to rest, giving every one of them that final fitting tribute of a grateful nation. We can never say it enough: For your service in war and peace, thank you VFW. Thank you.

Today, the story of your service is carried on by a new generation, dedicated, courageous men and women who I have the privilege to lead and meet every day.

They're the young sailors, the midshipmen at the Naval Academy, who raised their right hand at graduation and committed themselves to a life of service. They're the soldiers I met in Baghdad who have done their duty, year after year, on a second, third, or fourth tour. They're the marines of Camp Lejeune, preparing to deploy and now serving in Afghanistan to protect Americans here at home. They're the airmen, like those here today, who provide the close air support that saves the lives of our troops on the ground. They're the wounded warriors at

Landstuhl and Walter Reed and Bethesda and across America for whom the battle is not to fight, but simply to speak, to stand, to walk once more. They're the families that my wife Michelle has met at bases across the country: the spouses back home doing the parenting of two; the children who wonder when mom and dad may be coming home; the parents who watch their sons and daughters go off to war; and the families who lay a loved one to rest, and the pain that lasts a lifetime.

To all those who have served America, our forces, your families, our veterans, you have done your duty. You have fulfilled your responsibilities, and now a grateful nation must fulfill ours. And that is what I want to talk about today.

First, we have a solemn responsibility to always lead our men and women in uniform wisely. And that starts with a vision of American leadership that recognizes that military power alone cannot be the first or only answer to the threats facing our Nation.

In recent years, our troops have succeeded in every mission America has given them, from toppling the Taliban to deposing a dictator in Iraq to battling brutal insurgencies. At the same time, forces trained for war have been called upon to perform a whole host of missions. Like mayors, they've run local governments and delivered water and electricity. Like aid workers, they've mentored farmers and built new schools. Like diplomats, they've negotiated agreements with tribal sheikhs and local leaders.

But let us never forget we are a country of more than 300 million Americans. Less than 1 percent wears the uniform. And that 1 percent—our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen—have borne the overwhelming burden of our security. In fact, perhaps never in American history have so few protected so many.

So the responsibility for our security must not be theirs alone. That is why I have made it a priority to enlist all elements of our national power in defense of our national security—our diplomacy and development, our economic might and our moral example—because one of the best ways to lead our troops wisely is to prevent the conflicts that cost American blood and treasure tomorrow.

As President, my greatest responsibility is the security and safety of the American people. As I've said before, that is the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning, it's the last thing that I think about when I go to sleep at night. And I will not hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests.

But as we protect America, our men and women in uniform must always be treated as what they are, America's most precious resource. As Commander in Chief, I have a solemn responsibility for their safety. And there is nothing more sobering than signing a letter of condolence to the family of service men or women who have given their lives for our country.

And that's why I have made this pledge to our Armed Forces: I will only send you into harm's way when it is absolutely necessary. And when I do, it will be based on good intelligence and guided by a sound strategy. I will give you a clear mission, defined goals, and the equipment and support you need to get the job done. That's my commitment to you.

Which brings me to our second responsibility to our Armed Forces: giving them the resources and equipment and strategies to meet their missions. We need to keep our military the best trained, the best led, the best equipped fighting force in the world. And that's why, even with our current economic challenges, my budget increases defense spending.

We will ensure that we have the force structure to meet today's missions. And that's why we've increased the size of the Army and the Marine Corps 2 years ahead of schedule and have approved another temporary increase in the Army. And we've halted personnel reductions in the

Navy and Air Force. And this will give our troops more time home between deployments, which means less stress on families and more training for the next mission. And it will help us put an end, once and for all, to stop-loss for those who've done their duty.

We will equip our forces with the assets and technologies they need to fight and win. So my budget funds more of the Army helicopters, crews, and pilots urgently needed in Afghanistan; the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance that gives our troops the advantage; the special operations forces that can deploy on a moment's notice; and for all those serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, including our National Guard and Reserve, more of the protective gear and armored vehicles that save lives.

As we fight in two wars, we will plan responsibly, budget honestly, and speak candidly about the costs and consequences of our actions. And that's why I've made sure my budget includes the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Iraq, after more than 6 years, we took an important step forward in June. We transferred control of all cities and towns to Iraq's security forces. The transition to full Iraqi responsibility for their own security is now underway. This progress is a testament to all those who have served in Iraq, both uniformed and civilian. And our Nation owes these Americans, and all who have given their lives, a profound debt of gratitude.

Now, as Iraqis take control of their destiny, they will be tested and targeted. Those who seek to sow sectarian division will attempt more senseless bombings and more killing of innocents. This we know.

But as we move forward, the Iraqi people must know that the United States will keep its commitments. And the American people must know that we will move forward with our strategy. We will begin removing our combat brigades from Iraq later this year. We will remove all our combat brigades by the end of next August. And we will remove all our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. And for America, the Iraq war will end.

By moving forward in Iraq, we're able to refocus on the war against Al Qaida and its extremist allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. That's why I announced a new, comprehensive strategy in March; a strategy that recognizes that Al Qaida and its allies had moved their base from the remote, tribal areas—to the remote, tribal areas of Pakistan. This strategy acknowledges that military power alone will not win this war, that we also need diplomacy and development and good governance. And our new strategy has a clear mission and defined goals: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida and its extremist allies.

In the months since, we have begun to put this comprehensive strategy into action. And in recent weeks, we've seen our troops do their part. They've gone into new areas, taking the fight to the Taliban in villages and towns where residents have been terrorized for years. They're adapting new tactics, knowing that it's not enough to kill extremists and terrorists, we also need to protect the Afghan people and improve their daily lives. And today, our troops are helping to secure polling places for this week's election so that Afghans can choose the future that they want.

Now, these new efforts have not been without a price. The fighting has been fierce. More Americans have given their lives. And as always, the thoughts and prayers of every American are with those who make the ultimate sacrifice in our defense.

As I said when I announced this strategy, there will be more difficult days ahead. The insurgency in Afghanistan didn't just happen overnight, and we won't defeat it overnight. This will not be quick, nor easy. But we must never forget this is not a war of choice, this is a war of necessity. Those who attacked America on 9/11 are plotting to do so again. If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaida would plot to kill

more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting, this is a—this is fundamental to the defense of our people.

And going forward, we will constantly adapt to new tactics to stay ahead of the enemy and give our troops the tools and equipment they need to succeed. And at every step of the way, we will assess our efforts to defeat Al Qaida and its extremist allies and to help the Afghan and Pakistani people build the future that they seek.

Now, even as we lead and equip our troops for the missions of today, we have a third responsibility to fulfill. We must prepare our forces for the missions of tomorrow. Our soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen adapt to new challenges every day. But as we know, much of our defense establishment has yet to fully adapt to the post-cold war world, with doctrine and weapons better suited to fight the Soviets on the plains of Europe than insurgents in the rugged terrain of Afghanistan. Twenty years after the cold war ended, this is simply not acceptable. It's irresponsible. Our troops, and our taxpayers, deserve better.

And that's why our defense review is taking a top-to-bottom look at our priorities and posture, questioning conventional wisdom, rethinking old dogmas, and challenging the status quo. We're asking hard questions about the forces we need and the weapons we buy. And when we're finished, we'll have a new blueprint for the 21st-century military that we need. And in fact, we're already on our way.

We're adopting new concepts because the full spectrum of challenges demands a full range of military capabilities, both the conventional and the unconventional: the ability to defeat both an armored division and the lone suicide bomber, the intercontinental ballistic missile and the improvised explosive device, 18th-century-style piracy and 21st-century cyber threats. No matter the mission, we must maintain America's military dominance.

So even as we modernize our conventional forces, we're investing in the capabilities that will reorient our force to the future: an Army that's more mobile and expeditionary and missile defenses that protect our troops in the field; a Navy that not only projects power across the oceans but operates nimbly in shallow, coastal waters; an Air Force that dominates the airspace with next-generation aircraft, both manned and unmanned; a Marine Corps that can move ashore more rapidly in more places.

And across the force, we're investing in new skills and specialties, because in the 21st century, military strength will be measured not only by the weapons our troops carry, but by the languages they speak and the cultures that they understand. But here's the simple truth: We cannot build the 21st-century military we need and maintain the fiscal responsibility that America demands unless we fundamentally reform the way our defense establishment does business. It's a simple fact. Every dollar wasted in our defense budget is a dollar we can't spend to care for our troops or protect America or prepare for the future.

You've heard the stories: the indefensible no-bid contracts that cost taxpayers billions and make contractors rich, the special interests and their exotic projects that are years behind schedule and billions over budget, the entrenched lobbyists pushing weapons that even our military says it doesn't want. The impulse in Washington to protect jobs back home building things we don't need has a cost that we can't afford.

This waste would be unacceptable at any time, but at a time when we're fighting two wars and facing a serious deficit, it's inexcusable. It's an affront to the American people and to our troops, and it's time for it to stop.

And this is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. This is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue; it's about giving our troops the support that they need. And that's something

that all Americans should be able to agree to. So I'm glad I have as a partner in this effort, a great veteran, a great Arizonan, and a great American who has shown the courage to stand and fight this waste, Senator John McCain. And I'm also proud to have Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who has served under eight Presidents of both parties, leading this fight at the Pentagon.

So already I've put an end to unnecessary no-bid contracts. I've signed bipartisan legislation to reform defense procurement so weapons systems don't spin out of control. And even as we increase spending on the equipment and weapons our troops do need, we've proposed cutting tens of billions of dollars in waste we don't need.

Think about it: hundreds of millions of dollars for an alternate second engine for the Joint Strike Fighter when one reliable engine will do just fine, nearly $2 billion to buy more F–22 fighter jets when we can move ahead with a fleet of newer, more affordable aircraft, tens of billions of dollars to put an antimissile laser on a fleet of vulnerable 747s, and billions of dollars for a new Presidential helicopter—now, maybe you've heard about this—among its other capabilities, it would let me cook a meal while under nuclear attack. [*Laughter*] Now, let me tell you something, if the United States of America is under nuclear attack, the last thing on my mind will be whipping up a snack. [*Laughter*]

So this is pretty straightforward: Cut the waste, save taxpayer dollars, support the troops. That's what we should be doing. The special interests, contractors, and entrenched lobbyists, they're invested in the status quo, and they're putting up a fight. But make no mistake, so are we. If a project doesn't support our troops, if it does not make America safer, we will not fund it. If a system doesn't perform, we will terminate it. And if Congress sends me a defense bill loaded with a bunch of pork, I will veto it. We will do right by our troops and taxpayers, and we will build the 21st-century military that we need.

Finally, we will fulfill our responsibility to those who serve by keeping our promises to our people. We will fulfill our responsibility to our forces and our families. That's why we're increasing military pay. That's why we're building better family housing and funding more childcare and counseling to help families cope with the stresses of war. And we've changed the rules so military spouses can better compete for Federal jobs and pursue their careers.

We will fulfill our responsibility to our wounded warriors. For those still in uniform, we're investing billions of dollars for more treatment centers, more case managers, and better medical care so our troops can recover and return where they want to be, with their units.

But as the VFW well knows, for so many veterans the war rages on: the flashbacks that won't go away, the loved ones who now seem like strangers, the heavy darkness of depression that has led to too many of our troops taking their own lives. Post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury are the defining injuries of today's wars. So caring for those affected by them is a defining purpose of my budget—billions of dollars more for treatment and mental health screenings to reach our troops on the frontier—on the frontlines and more mobile and rural clinics to reach veterans back home. We are not going to abandon these American heroes. We are going to do right by them.

We will fulfill our responsibility to our veterans as they return to civilian life. I was proud to cosponsor the post-9/11 GI bill as a Senator. And thanks to VFW members across the country, and leaders like Arizona's Harry Mitchell in Congress, it is now the law of the land. And as President, I'm committed to seeing that it is successfully implemented.

For so many of you, like my grandfather, the original GI bill changed your life, helping you to realize your dreams. But it also transformed America, helping to build the largest middle class in history. We're saying the same thing to today's post-9/11 veterans: You pick the school; we'll help pick up the bill.

And as these veterans show—start showing up on campuses, I'm proud that we're making this opportunity available to all those who have sacrificed, including Reservists and National Guard members and spouses and children, including kids who've lost their mom or dad. In an era when so many people and institutions have acted irresponsibly, we choose to reward the responsibility and service of our forces and their families.

Whether you've left the service in 2009 or 1949, we will fulfill our responsibility to deliver the benefits and care that you earned. And that's why I've pledged to build nothing less than a 21st-century VA. And I picked a lifelong soldier and wounded warrior from Vietnam to lead this fight, General "Ric" Shinseki.

We're dramatically increasing funding for veterans health care. This includes hundreds of millions of dollars to serve veterans in rural areas, as well as the unique needs of our growing number of women veterans. We're restoring access to VA health care for a half a million veterans who lost their eligibility in recent years, our Priority 8 veterans.

And since there's been so much misinformation out there about health insurance reform, let me say this: One thing that reform won't change is veterans' health care. No one is going to take away your benefits; that is the plain and simple truth. We're expanding access to your health care, not reducing it.

We're also keeping our promise on concurrent receipt. My budget ensures that our severely disabled veterans will receive both their military retired pay and their VA disability benefits. And I look forward to signing legislation on advanced appropriations for the VA so the medical care you need is never held up by budget delays.

I've also directed Secretary Shinseki to focus on a top priority, reducing homelessness among veterans. After serving their country, no veteran should be sleeping on the streets—no veteran. We should have zero tolerance for that.

And we're keeping our promise to fulfill another top priority at the VA, cutting the redtape and inefficiencies that cause backlogs and delays in the claims process. This spring, I directed the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to create one unified lifetime electronic health record for the members of the Armed Forces, a single electronic record, with privacy guaranteed, that will stay with them forever. Because after fighting for America, you should not have to fight over paperwork to receive the benefits that you've earned.

Today I can announce that we're taking another step. I've directed my Chief Performance Officer, my Chief Technology Officer, and my Chief Information Officer to join with Secretary Shinseki in a new reform effort. We're launching a new competition to capture the very best ideas of our VA employees who work with you every day.

We're going to challenge each of our 57 regional VA offices to come up with the best ways of doing business, of harnessing the best information technologies, of cutting redtape and breaking through the bureaucracy. And then we're going to fund the best ideas and put them into action, all with a simple mission: cut those backlogs, slash those wait times, deliver your benefits sooner. I know you've heard this for years, but the leadership and resources we're providing this time means that we're going to be able to do it. That is our mission, and we are going to make it happen.

Now, taken together, these investments represent a historic increase in our commitment to America's veterans, a 15 percent increase over last year's funding levels and the largest increase in the VA budget in more than 30 years. And over the next 5 years, we'll invest another $25 billion to make sure that our veterans are getting what they need.

These are major investments, and these are difficult times. Fiscal discipline demands that we make hard decisions, sacrificing certain things we can't afford. But let me be clear, America's commitment to its veterans are not just lines on a budget, they are bonds that are sacred, a sacred trust we're honor bound to uphold. These are commitments that we make to the patriots who serve, from the day they enlist to the day that they are laid to rest. Patriots like you. Patriots like a man named Jim Norene.

His story is his own, but in it we see the larger story of all who serve. He's a child of the Depression who grew up to join that greatest generation; a paratrooper in the 502d Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne, jumping in a daring daylight raid into Holland to liberate captive people, rushing to Bastogne at the Battle of the Bulge where his commanding general—surrounded by the Germans and asked to surrender—declared, famously, "Nuts."

For his bravery, Jim was awarded the Bronze Star. But like so many others, he rarely spoke of what he did or what he saw, reminding us that true love of country is not boisterous or loud, but rather, the "tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime."

Jim returned home and built a life. He went to school on the GI bill. He got married. He raised a family in his small Oregon farming town. And every Veterans Day, year after year, he visited schoolchildren to speak about the meaning of service. And he did it all as a proud member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Then, this spring, Jim made a decision. He would return to Europe once more. Eighty-five years old, frail and gravely ill, he knew he might not make it back home. But like the paratrooper he always was, he was determined.

So near Bastogne, he returned to the places he knew so well. At a Dutch town liberated by our GIs, schoolchildren lined the sidewalks and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." And in the quiet clearing of an American cemetery, he walked among those perfect lines of white crosses of fellow soldiers who had fallen long ago, their names forever etched in stone. And then, back where he had served 65 years before, Jim Norene passed away, at night, in his sleep, quietly, peacefully—the "tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime."

The next day, I was privileged to join the commemoration at Normandy to mark the day when the beaches were stormed and a continent was freed. There were Presidents and Prime Ministers and veterans from the far corners of the Earth, but long after the bands stopped playing and the crowds stopped cheering, it was the story of a departed VFW member that echoed in our hearts.

Veterans of Foreign Wars, you have done your duty to your fallen comrades, to your communities, to your country. You have always fulfilled your responsibilities to America, and so long as I am President of the United States, America will always fulfill its responsibilities to you.

God bless you. God bless all our veterans, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. at the Phoenix Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Glen Gardner, outgoing commander-in-chief, and his wife Jean Gardner, Robert E. Wallace, executive director, and Thomas Tradewell, incoming commander-in-chief, and his wife Sharon Tradewell, Veterans of Foreign Wars; Dixie Hild, national president, and Jan Tittle, senior vice president, Veterans of Foreign Wars Ladies Auxiliary; Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki; White House Chief Performance Officer Jeffrey Zients; White House Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra; and White House Chief Information Officer Vivek Kundra. He also referred to his great uncle Charles Payne.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention in Phoenix, AZ.

Locations: Phoenix, AZ.

Names: Brewer, Janice K.; Chopra, Aneesh ; Denton, Helen; Gardner, Glen; Gardner, Jean; Gates, Robert M.; Gordon, Phil; Hild, Dixie; Kundra, Vivek; McCain, John; Mitchell, Harry E.; Obama, Michelle; Payne, Charles; Shinseki, Eric K.; Shirley, Joe, Jr.; Tittle, Jan; Tradewell, Sharon; Tradewell, Thomas; Wallace, Robert E.; Zients, Jeffrey.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Afghanistan : Former regime; Afghanistan : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Afghanistan : Presidential and Provincial elections, 2009; Afghanistan : Terrorism; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Afghanistan : U.S. military personnel :: Deployment; Afghanistan : U.S. policy review; Arizona : President's visits; Armed Forces, U.S. : Expansion; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military family benefits, expansion of; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military spouses, employment eligibility for Federal Government jobs; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military technologies, development and funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : Pay and benefits, increase; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Medical care and treatment facilities, expansion; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Traumatic brain injuries, treatment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Stop-loss policy, elimination of; Budget, Federal : Appropriations :: Veterans Affairs, Department of; Budget, Federal : Deficit; Budget, Federal : Fiscal year 2010 budget; Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Defense, Department of : Defense contracts :: Contracting policies, reform; Defense, Department of : Defense contracts :: Cost overruns; Defense, Department of : Defense contracts :: Weapon systems development, delays and inefficiencies; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Defense, Department of : Weapons and structure review; Defense, Department of : Weapons System Acquisition Reforms Act of 2009; Economy, national : Recession, effects; France : D-Day, 65th anniversary; Government organization and employees : Military spouses, employment eligibility for Federal jobs; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Iraq : Insurgency and terrorist attacks; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Graduated withdrawal from urban centers; Pakistan : Federally Administered Tribal Areas, suspected terrorist safe havens; Pakistan : Terrorism; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Veterans : Disabled veterans, military retired pay and VA disability benefits for; Veterans : Health and administrative records, information technology; Veterans : Homelessness; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Funding; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Information technology, improvement efforts; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Medical care system, expansion; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Medical care system, funding; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Medical care system, restoration of access for Priority 8 veterans; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Veterans of Foreign Wars; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Chief Performance Officer; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Chief Technology Officer; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Chief Information Officer.

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