

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks Announcing Efforts To Strengthen Government Support for Military Families

January 24, 2011

Thank you, everybody. Everyone, please have a seat. Thank you so much.

Well, good morning, everyone. I want to thank Michelle and Jill—although I have to say, I hate following both of them. [*Laughter*] As I think all of you sense, when they speak, the Government listens. You should know—and I know Joe Biden would agree with this—when they speak, the President and Vice President listen. [*Laughter*]

So, Michelle and Jill, on behalf of all of us, thank you for being such extraordinary champions for our military families and making sure that their priorities are America's priorities.

To all the Members of Congress who are here, the members of my Cabinet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, leaders from across the administration, and most of all, our troops, their families, their advocates: Thanks for joining us as we make an unprecedented commitment to America's military families.

Now, last month I was in Afghanistan to visit our troops and to thank them for their service, especially during the holidays. And I think as some of you are aware, we fly in, in the dark of night for security reasons, unannounced. Folks, I'm sure, have to scramble on the other end to make sure that our visit works. And we had a wonderful crowd, a great rally. And then afterwards, I took the time not only to meet with General Petraeus and some of the other commanding officers, but I also met with a group of our special ops forces. Now, anybody who's met with SEALs and Deltas, you know these are some of the toughest, most battle-hardened troops in our military. They are involved in some of the most dangerous fighting that there is.

These are tough guys. Looking at them, you can tell they're tough. Some folks end up being tough, but these—you can just tell these guys are tough. [*Laughter*] And they embody the courage and character that makes our military the finest in the world. And just to give you some sense, these guys are going out on helicopter raids at night with very little support and carrying out extremely dangerous assignments each and every day.

So I asked them, I said, "What do you need from me? What can I do to support you better?" And without missing a beat, they looked me in the eye and they gave me their answer. It wasn't about more equipment. It wasn't about more resources on the battlefield. In fact, it wasn't about them. They said—to a man—"Sir, take care of our families. Take care of our families. If we know our families are all right back home, then we can do our jobs."

So we are here today because nearly a decade of war has been taking place, and our Armed Forces—you and your families—have done everything you've been asked to do. You've been everything we could ask you to be. You have done your duty. And as a grateful nation, we must do ours. We have to make sure that America is serving you as well as you have served us.

This isn't just a military or—this is not just a moral obligation. This is a matter of national security. With millions of military spouses, parents, and children sacrificing as well, the readiness of our Armed Forces depends on the readiness of our military families.

As Michelle mentioned, she and I see this in the spouses we meet. During vacation, while we were in Hawaii, we had a chance to see a whole bunch of military families out on Kaneohe Marine base. And what was true then in the conversations we had is what we find wherever we go around the country: truly heroic wives and husbands who become single parents on the homefront and somehow keep it all together—the house, the kids, maybe even a job of their own.

We see it in the resilience of so many military kids, boys and girls who, like all the other kids, are just trying to grow up, trying to find their way, but who, unlike other kids, are also having to worry about whether their mom or dad is going to come home safe.

We see it in the devotion of caregivers who tend to their loved ones, our wounded warriors, around the clock, day in, day out. And we see it in the quiet pride of our veterans, who only ask that we live up to those words from President Lincoln, that as a nation, we truly care for all those who have "borne the battle." We see it in the unending love of the families of the fallen, our Gold Star families, who've given their Nation the people they loved most in the world.

As Commander in Chief, I am determined to do everything in my power to make sure that we are fulfilling that request from our troops, that we are taking care of their families. And that's why over the past 2 years, we've made major investments: more military housing, more childcare, new schools for our military kids; more counseling and career support for spouses; more help for those tireless caregivers; dramatic increases in veterans health care; and helping hundreds of thousands of veterans and family members pursue their education through the post-9/11 GI bill.

And that's why I ordered this Government-wide effort, a Presidential Study Directive, to bring together the resources of the Federal Government for this mission. Now, for those of you who aren't familiar with these Presidential directives, these are reserved for some of the most important and complex national security challenges. I think Mike Mullen will share with you, since becoming President, I've only ordered about a dozen, including this one, which we believe is the first one ever on behalf of military families.

Today I'm proud to announce that for the first time ever, supporting the well-being of our military families will be a priority not just for the Departments of Defense and the Departments of Veterans Affairs, but all across the Federal Government. That's why all these Cabinet folks are here today. Sixteen members of my Cabinet have committed their departments and agencies to making military families one of their highest priorities.

We're focusing on four areas, the things you said matter most to you, whether you're Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine, or Coast Guard; Active, Guard, or Reserve; a veteran or a member of a family of the fallen. We didn't wait for today to launch these efforts. Many of these efforts have already been underway. And that includes innovative new partnerships so that, in tough fiscal times, our Government is more efficient and serves you better.

So let me just list our primary areas of focus. First, we are putting new emphasis on the quality of life for our military families. The Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services, for example, have joined forces to improve community mental health services and prevent suicides. A new office in the Treasury Department is working to protect military families from abusive practices like predatory lending. It turns out that military families are more subject to some of these financial scams than just about any other group.

The Agricultural Department is expanding its support for families in rural areas. A disproportionate number of our military families come from rural areas or are stationed in rural communities.

The Interior Department—we use our national parks to help our wounded warriors recover. And we are going to remain relentless—not just at VA, but at HUD and HHS and across the Government—in our fight to end homelessness among our veterans. We have to have zero tolerance for homelessness among our veterans.

Second, we're putting a new focus on the education and development of our military children, most of whom go to public schools. So for the first time ever, the Department of Education will make military families a priority for some of its grant programs. And that's going to give States and communities new incentives to address the unique needs of military children.

The Interior Department, which is already one of the largest Federal employers of young people, will create more opportunities, like summer jobs, for young people from military families. And today we are renewing our call for every State to adopt the Interstate Compact, which makes it easier for military children to transfer between schools and succeed in the classroom.

Third, we're redoubling our efforts to help military spouses pursue their educations and careers. As Michelle said, we've brought in the Departments of Labor and Commerce and the Small Business Administration. We're going to help spouses to get that degree, find that job, or start that new business. We want every company in America to know our military spouses and veterans have the skills and the dedication, and our Nation is more competitive when we tap their incredible talents.

And finally, we're going to keep increasing childcare for our military moms and dads with young children. This is not just a job for the Department of Defense. As Michelle said, the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture are now helping too. And working together, we believe we can find new childcare options for tens of thousands of military children.

So these are just some of the nearly 50 specific commitments that my administration is making today. In other words, we're not simply reaffirming our responsibility to our military families, we are upping our game. In fact, these 16 members of my Cabinet have signed their name to this report, pledging personally to see this through. So, gang, you are all on the hook. *[Laughter]* We know where to find you—and not only to fulfill these commitments, but to make sure that as we go forward, our military families are being heard across the Government. That's what we're looking for here.

Michelle and Jill said they're going to keep pushing, and I promise you, they are not kidding. *[Laughter]* And as President, I'm going to make sure that we get this done.

We also recognize that this can't be a mission for government alone. Government has its responsibilities. But 1 percent of Americans may be fighting our wars; 100 percent of Americans need to be supporting our troops and their families—100 percent.

So to help launch this effort, Michelle will be on "Oprah" this week to urge every American to join a new national campaign to support our military families. That's a pretty good plug.

You see, this is one of those challenges and one of those moments when we have to remember what unites us as Americans, what we can achieve together, and what we owe to each other, especially to those who serve and sacrifice so we can live free and be safe.

I want every servicemember who's deployed to know that when you're over there taking care of the country that you love, your country is back here taking care of the families that you love. I want every military wife and husband to know that we're going to help you keep your family strong and secure. I want every military kid to know that we're going to be there for you too, to help you grow and to live your dreams.

I want our Gold Star families to know that this Nation will never forget and will always honor the supreme sacrifice that your family has made to our Nation.

And I want every single American to remember that as the beneficiaries of their service, each of us has an obligation, a sacred duty, to care for those who have "borne the battle."

These are my commitments, these are Michelle and Jill's commitments, these are my administration's commitments, and they must be America's commitments. And as long as I am President, we're going to keep working to fulfill those commitments for all who serve.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:57 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan; and Adm. Michael G. Mullen, USN, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady and Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

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