

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

Remarks at a Dinner Honoring Veterans of Military Operations in Iraq
February 29, 2012

Thank you so much, everyone. Please, please. Please, everyone, have a seat.

Thank you, Joe Biden, for not only outstanding remarks, but the extraordinary leadership you showed in helping to guide our policies.

To Secretary Panetta, General Dempsey, to all the commanders who are here and did so much under such extraordinary circumstances to arrive at an outcome in which the Iraqi people have an opportunity to chart their own destiny, thank you for the great work that you've done.

I do have to say, despite Deanie's advice, I thought Dempsey was going to burst into song. [*Laughter*] You have not lived until you hear him belt out an Irish ballad. His voice is better than mine. I think you're never a prophet in your own land, Marty, so your wives are there to cut you down a peg. [*Laughter*]

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: This house has stood for more than two centuries, through war and peace, through hardship and through prosperity. These rooms have hosted Presidents and Prime Ministers and kings and queens. But in the history of this house, there's never been a night quite like this. Because this evening, we welcome, not the statesmen who decide great questions of war and peace, but citizens, men and women from every corner of our country, from every rank of our military, every branch of our service, who answer the call, who go to war, who defend the peace.

And in a culture that celebrates fame and fortune, yours are not necessarily household names. They're something more: the patriots who serve in our name. And after nearly 9 years of war in Iraq, tonight is an opportunity for us to express our gratitude and to say once more: Welcome home.

This is not the first time that we've paid tribute to those who served courageously in Iraq. This will not be the last. And history reminds us of our obligations as a nation at moments like this. This year will mark the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam war, a time when our veterans didn't always receive the respect and the thanks that they so richly deserved, and that's a mistake that we must never repeat.

The good news is, already, we've seen Americans come together—in small towns and big cities all across the country—to honor your service in Iraq. And tonight, on behalf of Michelle and myself, on behalf of over 300 Americans—300 million Americans, we want to express those simple words that we can never say enough, and that's thank you.

In your heart, each of you carries your own story: the pride of a job well done, the pain of losing a friend, a comrade. Ernie Pyle, who celebrated our GIs in World War II, said that your world can never be known to the rest of us. Tonight what we can do is convey what you've meant to the rest of us, because through the dust and the din and the fog of war, the glory of your service always shone through. In your noble example, we see the virtues and the values that sustain America, that keep this country great.

You taught us about duty. Blessed to live in the land of the free, you could have opted for an easier path, but you know that freedom is not free. And so you volunteered, and you

stepped forward, and you raised your hand, and you took an oath to protect and defend, to serve a cause greater than yourself, knowing, in a time of war, you could be sent into harm's way.

You taught us about resolve. Invasion turned to insurgency and then sectarian strife. But you persevered, tour after tour, year after year. Indeed, we're mindful that even as we gather here, Iraq veterans continue to risk their lives in Afghanistan, and our prayers are with them all tonight.

In one of our Nation's longest wars, you wrote one of the most extraordinary chapters in American military history. Now the Iraqi people have a chance to forge their own destiny, and every one of you who served there can take pride in knowing you gave the Iraqis this opportunity, that you succeeded in your mission.

You taught us about devotion to country and to comrades, but most of all, to family. Because I know that some of the hardest days of war were the moments you missed back home: the birthdays, the anniversaries, when your little girl or boy took their first wobbly steps. And behind every one of you was a parent, a spouse, a son or a daughter, trying to stay strong and praying for the day that you'd come home safe. And that's why Michelle and Dr. Biden have made it their mission to make sure America takes care of your families, because they inspire us as much as you do. And they deserve that honor as much as you do.

That's why I'd ask all the spouses and the partners and families to stand up and accept our gratitude for your remarkable service, especially because you look so good tonight.

You taught us about sacrifice, a love of country so deep, so profound, you were willing to give your lives for it. And tonight we pay solemn tribute to all who did. We remember the first, on that first day of war: Major Jay Thomas Aubin, Captain Ryan Anthony Beaupre, Corporal Brian Matthew Kennedy, Staff Sergeant Kendall Damon Waters-Bey. And we remember the last, Specialist David Emanuel Hickman, November 14, 2011.

Separated by nearly 9 years, they are bound for all time, among the nearly 4,500 American patriots who gave all that they had to give. To their families, including the Gold Star families here tonight, know that we will never forget their sacrifice and that your loved ones live on in the soul of our Nation, now and forever.

You taught us about strength, the kind that comes from within, the kind that we see in our wounded warriors. For you, coming home was the start of another battle: the battle to recover, to stand, to walk, to serve again. And in your resilience we see the essence of America, because we do not give up. No matter the hardship, we push on. And just as the wounds of war can last a lifetime, so does America's commitment to you and all who serve to give you the care you earned and the opportunities you need as you begin the next proud chapter in your lives.

And finally, all of you taught us a lesson about the character of our country. As you look across this room tonight, you look at our military—we draw strength from every part of our American family—every color, every creed, every background, every belief, and every day, you succeed together, as one American team.

As your Commander in Chief, I could not be more proud of you. As an American, as a husband and father of two daughters, I could not be more grateful for your example of the kind of country we can be, of what we can achieve when we stick together.

So I'll leave you with a picture that captures this spirit. It's from that day in December, when the last convoy rolled out, five American soldiers standing beside their vehicle, marked

with the words, "Last vehicle out of Iraq." They're young, men and women, shoulder to shoulder, proud, heads held high, finally going home. And they were asked what it was like to be, literally, the last troops out of Iraq. And one of them gave a simple reply: "We completed the mission." We completed the mission. We did our jobs.

So I propose a toast: To the country we love, to the men and women who defend her, and to that faith—that fundamental American faith—that says no mission is too hard, no challenge is too great, through tests and through trials, we don't simply endure, we emerge stronger than before, knowing that America's greatest days are still to come, and they are great because of you.

Cheers.

[At this point, the President offered a toast.]

God bless you and your families, and may God continue to bless those in uniform and the United States of America.

Thank you very much, everybody. May dinner be served.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Deanie Dempsey, wife of Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, USA, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Gen. Dempsey, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta, and Vice President Biden. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 1.

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