

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2013*

## **Remarks to the Disabled American Veterans National Convention in Orlando, Florida**

*August 10, 2013*

*The President.* Hello, DAV! Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Do we have an extraordinary First Lady? So I—we will be celebrating our 21st anniversary in October. The first time I saw her, I knew she was something special. *[Laughter]* She was a little more skeptical about me. *[Laughter]* But persistence is the key. You just got to stay on it. Eventually, you can marry up. *[Laughter]*

To Michelle and Jill Biden and Joining Forces, we are so proud of the work you've done to help rally America around military families and veterans. I'm inspired by what they are doing. So thank you, Michelle, for your extraordinary work.

DAV, I was proud to join at your convention 3 years ago. It is wonderful to be back. I want to thank your national commander. Larry Polzin, thank you so much to the entire leadership team, Joe Johnston, Marc Burgess, Donna Adams; all the incredible spouses and families of the DAV Auxiliary. I want to thank Barry Jenichoski—Jesinoski. *[Laughter]* I got it. *[Laughter]* They used to mispronounce Obama too. *[Laughter]* I want to thank Barry and your great team in Washington.

Disabled American Veterans, like all veterans, you carry in your hearts the story of brave service that took you to every corner of the Earth. As young men and women, you left home, left everything and everyone you ever knew because storm clouds gathered far across the sea. You had your whole lives ahead of you, but you were willing to risk all of it for this land that we love. Because you know, from hard experience, what we must never forget: Our country endures because in every generation there are Americans like you who stand beside her and guide her and protect her.

You fought across the Pacific, island by island. You fought into the heart of Europe, mile by mile, freeing millions from fascism. That's your legacy as veterans of the Second World War. You held the line at the Pusan Perimeter and survived the bitter cold of the Chosin Reservoir. And on this 60th anniversary of the end of that war, we salute all of our veterans of the Korean war.

To our Vietnam veterans, you served with valor not just in the thick of the jungle, but through intense urban combat. And let it be remembered that you won every major battle that you fought in. And so in the decades since, whenever our country has needed you, you said, "Send me"—from the sands of Desert Storm to the mountains of the Balkans to the villages of Afghanistan and Iraq. And next year, your profound sacrifice will be recognized in the heart of our Nation's Capital when our country dedicates the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial.

That memorial will honor your courage in war. But it will also pay tribute to your bravery in the other battle you have fought: the fight to recover from the wounds of war. And this may be your greatest triumph of all. Because rather than being defined by what you lost, by what you can't do, you've inspired America with what you can do.

And maybe you lost your sight, but you can still see the truth that our disabled veterans make extraordinary contributions to our country every single day. Maybe you lost an arm, but

you still have the strength to pick up a friend or neighbor in need. Maybe you lost a leg, but you still stand tall for the values and freedoms that make America the greatest Nation on Earth.

I think of the wounded warrior who spoke for so many of you when he said, "Your life will never be the same, but that doesn't mean you can't go on to do amazing things with the second chance you were given." I think of wounded warriors across America and how they've used that second chance: volunteering in communities; building homes; being a mentor to local kids; showing up after tornadoes, after Hurricane Sandy, to help folks rebuild. I think of the wounded warriors who reached out to the survivors of the Boston Marathon bombing with the example of their own recovery and with a simple message: "We stand with you."

I think of all the inspiring wounded warriors that Michelle and I have met: their resilience, their resolve, their determination to push through and to carry on. That's the fighting spirit of our wounded warriors. That's the spirit of DAV, dedicated not just to your own recovery, but to taking care of each other. Every day, you work to ensure that America is fulfilling its promises to our men and women who have served. That's your mission. And I want you to know it is my mission too.

I believe that this work is more important than ever, because this time of war that we've been in is coming to an end. For nearly 12 years—ever since we were attacked on that clear September morning—our Nation has been at war. Our fight in Afghanistan is now America's longest war. At the same time, our troops fought courageously in Iraq for 9 long years. And among us today are proud veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Now we've marked another milestone in Afghanistan: As of this past June, Afghan forces have taken the lead for security across their entire country. So instead of leading the fight, our troops now have a different mission: supporting Afghan forces. Our war in Afghanistan has entered the final chapter. More of our troops are coming home. This winter, we'll be down to 34,000. By the end of next year, the transition will be complete. Afghans will take full responsibility for their security, and our war in Afghanistan will be over.

For this progress, we thank all who have served in Afghanistan, including DAV members here today. Just a few I want to mention. We salute folks like Timothy Duke. Where's Timothy? Right here. In the early days of the war, Timothy's helicopter unit served in some of the most remote parts of Afghanistan. On another tour, in Iraq, his convoy was hit by an IED. He endured three spinal surgeries. Then he went to school on the post-9/11 GI bill. Today, he is helping at the DAV, helping veterans and their families access their benefits. That's the kind of spirit the DAV represents. Thank you, Timothy, for your outstanding service and work.

We salute Staff Sergeant Jacare Hogan. Where's Jacare? In Iraq, she was hit by IEDs three times. She's endured surgeries, rehab—which continue to this day—but she refused to stop serving. She deployed again to Afghanistan. As a logistics specialist, she served at forward operating bases, keeping them running, flying between bases, getting shot at along the way. At those remote outposts, she was often the only woman on base. She proudly wears the Combat Action Badge. But her service hasn't stopped. So here at DAV, she counsels others as they recover. "Helping [the] troops is what I'm about." That's what she says. And we are grateful to you, Jacare, for your extraordinary service.

And we salute Jason Hassinger. Where is Jason? Right here. When Jason's unit was ambushed and pinned down, he was hit five times in the chest. But he pushed on, helped lead

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<sup>\*</sup> White House correction.

his men to safety, for which he earned the Silver Star. After months of care and rehab, he returned to his unit: going out on patrol, gritting his teeth through the pain in his chest. And today, at DAV, Jason helps his fellow vets access the benefits that they have earned. It is "my job" to "help people heal." That's what Jason says. Thank you.

So Timothy, Jacare, Jason, they're just examples of all who have served in these years of war, the 9/11 generation. And now you're beginning the next chapter in your lives wearing a proud new title: veteran of the United States Armed Forces. So this time of war may be coming to an end, but the job of caring for our veterans goes on, and our work caring for our newest veterans has only just begun.

I mean, think about it: We lost the last veteran of the First World War 2 years ago, but we still care for the children of our World War I veterans. To this day, we still help care for children of men who fought in the Spanish-American War, even the daughter of a Civil War veteran. So when we talk about fulfilling our promises to all who serve, we're not just talking about a few years, we're talking about decades, for as long as you and your families walk this Earth.

With a new generation joining your ranks, I believe that now is the time to make sure our Nation is truly ready: organized and structured to get this right: not just for this year, not just for next year, but for decades to come; not just for the veterans of today's wars, but for all wars. And I believe we need to focus on five key priorities.

Number one, we need to make sure we've got the resources, the budgets our veterans deserve. Since I took office, we've made historic investments in our veterans. Even in these tough fiscal times, we've boosted the VA budget by more than 40 percent. We now budget for veterans health care a year in advance. And I've proposed a further increase in veterans funding for next year.

Now, some of you may be aware, right now we've got these reckless, across-the-board budget cuts called the sequester that's hitting a lot of folks hard. And it's cost jobs. It's hurting our military, slashing investments in education and science and medical research. I made it clear that your veterans benefits are exempt from this year's sequester. I've made that clear. But I want to tell you: Going forward, the best way to protect the VA care you have earned is to get rid of this sequester altogether. Congress needs to come together and agree on a responsible plan that reduces our deficits and keeps our promises to our veterans and keeps our promises to future generations. That's what I'm fighting for. That's what you deserve.

Number two, we need to make sure you're getting the veterans' health care you've been promised. We're already making record investments: more outreach, more clinics, more service. For our Vietnam vets, we made sure that you and your families finally got the disability pay you deserve because of your exposure to agent orange. For our Desert Storm veterans, we made it easier for you to get the care you need for illnesses connected to your service. For our veterans with PTSD, we made it easier for you to get the VA care you need as well, regardless of the war that you served in.

For our women's veterans—and there are more of you than ever—we're offering more tailored care, more clinics just for women, more clinicians trained to treat you with respect and dignity. So all told, we've made VA health care available to more than 2 million veterans who didn't have it before.

I've proposed more funding for prosthetics for our disabled vets to help you work and walk and run again. And for you—the caregivers and families—we're going to keep empowering you with the skills and support you need as you care for the veterans that you love.

We also need to keep improving mental health services, because we've got to end this epidemic of suicide among our veterans and troops. Last year, I said this had to be an all-hands-on-deck approach, not just at DOD and the VA, but across our Government. I issued an Executive order to step up our game, and we have—hiring more counselors, hiring more mental health providers, new awareness campaigns—so that those who are hurting know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it's a part of staying strong, it's a part of getting back up. Hundreds of medical and nursing schools have committed to improving research and care for our veterans and their families. And I've proposed more funding for mental health. We can't just promise better care, we've actually got to deliver better care.

So today I'm proud to announce the next step in this fight. We're unveiling a new national action plan to guide mental health research across government, industry, and academia, so that we're going to focus on developing more effective ways to prevent, diagnose, and treat mental health conditions like TBI and PTSD. And to get it done, we're moving ahead with more than \$100 million in new research. So I'm not going to be satisfied until every veteran and every man and woman in uniform gets the support and the help they need to stay strong.

Now, on the subject of veterans health care, you may have noticed there's still a lot of misinformation out there about the new health care law, Affordable Care Act. Some folks are out there trying to scare people, including veterans. So let me say this as plainly as I can. If you already have health insurance or health care from the VA, you do not have to do a thing. Your VA health care does not change. It is safe. There are no new fees. Don't let them hoodwink you.

But the good news is, if you're among one of the more than 1 million veterans who don't have health insurance, starting October 1, you'll have a new option. Online marketplaces will let you shop and compare and buy private health insurance plans, just like you can go online to compare prices when you buy a TV or airplane ticket or a car. And because of the Affordable Care Act, insurance companies will no longer be able to discriminate against you or deny you coverage because of preexisting conditions like PTSD. So you'll have more security in being able to get health insurance. So don't let them fool you. No one is taking away your benefits. Your veterans health care is safe. We're not reducing veterans access to health care, we're expanding it. That's the truth.

And that leads me to the third priority we've got to focus on. We've got to attack this claims backlog. Now, the last time I was with you, I pledged to cut the backlog, slash those wait times, deliver your benefits sooner. And I'm going to be honest with you: It has not moved as fast as I wanted. Part of it is all these new veterans in the system who came in: agent orange, PTSD. It means a lot more claims, and despite additional resources, it's resulted in longer waits. And that's been unacceptable: unacceptable to me, unacceptable to Secretary Shinseki.

So we put more of our VA folks to work as claims processors, we hired more claims processors as well. We've got them working overtime, completing more than a million claims a year. We prioritized the oldest claims. Veterans groups like the DAV have pitched in as well, helping vets with their claims, getting them ready so when they bring them, they're in better shape, and they can move a little quicker. And today I can report that we are not where we need to be, but we're making progress. *[Applause]* We are making progress. So after years

when the backlog kept growing, finally the backlog is shrinking. In the last 5 months alone, it's down nearly 20 percent. We're turning the tide.

And we're not going to let up until we eliminate the backlog once and for all. And we'll keep moving ahead with paperless systems so the backlog doesn't come back and so your claims are processed right the first time, on time. After years of military service, you shouldn't have to wait for years for the benefits you have earned.

Fourth, just like you fought to defend our rights and freedoms, we need to uphold the dignity and rights of every veteran. And that starts by keeping up our campaign to end homelessness among veterans. We're not just bringing our veterans off the streets, we're doing more to reach at-risk and low-income vets so they don't become homeless in the first place. And we're not going to rest until every veteran who has fought for America has a home in America.

Yesterday I was proud to sign into law the Helping Heroes Fly Act, to end those intrusive airport screenings so you—our wounded warriors and disabled vets, especially those of you with prosthetics—can travel with dignity. And I know how disappointing it was last year when the Senate failed to approve the Disabilities Treaty despite the fact that we had a former Senator and World War II veteran, Bob Dole, in the Senate Chamber. But we're going to keep fighting to ratify that Treaty, because the United States has always been a leader for the rights of the disabled. We believe that disabled Americans like you deserve the same opportunities to work and to study and to travel in other countries as any other American. It's the right thing to do. We need to get it done.

Which brings me to the final priority we need to stay focused on, and that's making sure that our veterans have every opportunity to pursue the American Dream, starting with the education and jobs worthy of your extraordinary talents.

With our new transition assistance program, we're doing more to help departing servicemembers and their spouses plan their careers and find that new job. We're going to keep helping our newest veterans and their families pursue their education under the post-9/11 GI bill. We're building on the Executive order I issued last year to protect you as you go looking for schools. I said we're going to stand up against dishonest recruiting and predatory practices that target our veterans. So we set new standards. And so far, more than 6,000 schools across the country have signed on and pledged to do right by you and your families. We don't want our veterans cheated.

I also said that schools need to step up their support so we're doing more to help our veterans succeed on campus. So today we're announcing what we call 8 Keys to Success, specific steps that schools can take to truly welcome and encourage our veterans. And so far, more than 250 community colleges and universities have signed on, and today I'm calling on schools across America to join us in this effort. Let's help our veterans get that degree, get that credential, and compete for the high-skilled jobs of tomorrow.

Now, I'm also going to make sure that the Federal Government keeps doing its part. I'm very proud of the fact that, since I took office, Federal departments and agencies have hired nearly 300,000 veterans, including many disabled veterans. And I'm going to keep calling on Congress to pass the veterans job corps to put our veterans to work protecting and rebuilding America.

And we're also doing everything we can to help you get those private sector jobs: more help with job searches, more tools like our online jobs bank to connect veterans to jobs that are

open right now, making it easier for you to transfer your skills to the licenses and credentials you need for civilian jobs. And because tens of thousands of our veterans have already been helped, Congress needs to make permanent tax credits for companies that hire our veterans and wounded warriors. It's the right thing to do.

And we're going to keep urging companies across America to do the smart thing: hire some of the best workers you'll ever find; hire a vet. Michelle and Jill have done great work on this. And responding to our challenge, working with Joining Forces, America's businesses have already hired or trained 290,000 veterans and military spouses, and they've committed to hiring over 400,000 more. More companies are signing up all the time. We are going to get companies to understand that you can't get a better deal than hiring a veteran.

Because of all the efforts I've described and because of a growing economy, veterans unemployment is going down, more veterans are finding jobs, and we're going to keep at this. Because with your skills and drive, we don't just want you fighting for America overseas, we want you to be right here, building a stronger America, fighting for a better future for our kids.

So ensuring the resources and budgets you deserve, delivering on the health care that you've earned, making sure you can count on it, continuing to reduce the backlog, standing up for your rights and dignity, creating jobs and opportunities so you can realize your dreams—that's what I'm focused on. That's what I have told my entire administration to be focused on. That's what our country needs to stay focused for the many years to come.

And nobody knows this better than you, our disabled veterans. The road of recovery is often such a long haul. And America needs to be there for you during that long haul. And that's the lesson of the extraordinary young man I told you about when I spoke to you 3 years ago, an Army Ranger, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg.

A massive IED in Afghanistan nearly killed him. He was in a coma for months with severe traumatic brain injury. And I told you then how, when I saw him in the hospital, he had come out of the coma, but he still couldn't speak. And when I asked him how he was feeling, he slowly brought his hand up, and he pulled his fingers together, and he gave a thumbs up. His mom was sitting there with him.

A few days ago, I saw Cory and his family again, this time in Phoenix, where they live. So I wanted to give you an update on how he's doing. I won't—I suspect it won't surprise you to know that for Cory, the years since he was injured have been very hard: brain surgeries, half a dozen of them; surgeries to replace part of his skull; eye surgeries; special procedures on his lungs; skin grafts, skin flaps. All told, dozens of surgeries and procedures.

Rehab has been grueling. On a typical day, Cory wakes up and spends hours in therapy: physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy. So progress has come slowly, but it has come. He had to learn the simple things all over again: how to speak, how to write his name, how to throw a ball. And this past spring, he reached another milestone. After years in the hospital and rehab facilities, he finally came home, greeted by hundreds of neighbors and friends waving American flags.

And so when I saw Cory a few days ago, he is still blind in one eye. He still struggles to move his left side. But the young man I had seen in that hospital bed unable to speak, barely able to move, this time he was in a chair sitting up, alert, smiling, talking. And then, he wanted to show me something. And he leaned out of his chair. And he reached out, and he grabbed his walker. And with the help of his parents, he pulled himself forward, and he stood up. And he looked at me, and he gave me a sharp salute. And he said, "Rangers lead the way."

And his stepmom held one arm for balance, and I held the other. And then, Cory took a step, then another, and then another one after that, all the way across the room. Little by little, Cory is learning to walk again. And he's starting to get good on his recumbent bike. He hopes to bike in a race this fall, 42 miles. He's scheduled to move into his own home, adapted to his needs with the help of a caregiver, another step towards the greater independence he seeks. And so Cory says: "My recovery has not been easy. Nothing in life that's worth anything is easy." But he says, I don't "give up." I don't give up.

The war in Afghanistan may be ending, but for Cory and our disabled vets, the work has only just begun. Cory is 30 years old. His recovery, like so many of yours, will last a lifetime. But he won't give up, because you haven't given up. And when it comes to our work, to making sure that our Nation is fulfilling its promises to the men and women who served and sacrificed, America cannot give up either. I will not give up. We cannot give up.

So long as I'm the United States President, I will make it my mission to make sure that America is right there beside you every step of the way, every step with Cory, every step with the DAV. God bless you. God bless our veterans. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 12 p.m. in the ballroom of the Hilton Orlando hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden; Larry A. Polzin, chairman of the board of directors, Joseph W. Johnston, national commander, J. Marc Burgess, secretary of the board of directors, Donna M. Adams, auxiliary national commander, and Barry A. Jesinoski, executive director of the Washington headquarters, and Timothy Duke, national service officer, Disabled American Veterans; Staff Sgt. Jacare Hogan, USA; Cpl. Jason M. Hassinger, USMC; Juanita Tudor Lowrey, daughter of Civil War veteran Hugh Tudor; and Karen Petersen, mother, Ken Remsburg, father, and Anne Remsburg, stepmother, of Staff Sgt. Cory Remsburg. He also referred to H.R. 1344, which was approved August 9 and assigned Public Law No. 113-27. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady.

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armistice agreement, 60th anniversary; Terrorism : September 11, 2001, attacks; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Disabled veterans; Veterans : Health care; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans : Homelessness; Veterans : Job training and education assistance; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans : Unemployment and underemployment; Veterans : Women veterans; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Agent orange exposure, disability benefits; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Health and medical care system :: Electronic recordkeeping; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Medical care system, funding; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Persian Gulf and Iraq operations-related illnesses; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

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