

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks at an Armed Forces Farewell Tribute in Honor of Secretary of Defense Charles T. Hagel at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Virginia
January 28, 2015

Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. Michelle and I, as some of you know, just spent the past few days in India. I returned about 3 o'clock this morning. So I don't know exactly what time it is—[*laughter*]—or what day it is. But I was determined to be here with you this afternoon to honor and celebrate a great friend: to me and to all of us.

In October of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson traveled to a military base in New Mexico to review a top-secret weapons program. And he went down to the White Sands Missile Range and out to the testing grounds. There, out in the desert, the President watched as soldiers demonstrated what would later become the famed Stinger missile. And one of those soldiers was a 21-year-old private from Nebraska named Charles Timothy Hagel.

Now, the Secret Service does not usually let me get too close to an active weapons system. It makes them nervous. But clearly, they did things a little differently back in LBJ's days. And, Chuck, I can only assume that you were careful not to point the missile at the President, because what followed was a life of dedicated service to our Nation spanning nearly 50 years.

With Vice President Biden, Members of Congress, General Dempsey, leaders from across this department, members of the Joint Chiefs, and service Secretaries; to the men and women of the greatest military in the world: We gather to pay tribute to a true American patriot. And let me assure you that I checked with the Secret Service, and Chuck will not be demonstrating any missile launchers today. [*Laughter*]

As we all know, and we've heard again, Chuck loves Nebraska. The Cornhuskers. Red beer. Runzas—I don't know what those are, but I hear they taste pretty good. [*Laughter*] But above all, what Chuck loves most about his home State is the people, his fellow midwesterners. There are just under 2 million people in Nebraska; there are more than 7 billion people on the planet. But as so many of our troops have found out themselves, no matter where Chuck goes in the world, if you are from Nebraska, he will find you. [*Laughter*] And he'll talk with you and listen to you and ask you about your family back home. And chances are, he knows them too.

So today is a celebration of a quintessentially American life, a man from the heartland who devoted his life to America. Just imagine, in your mind's eye, the defining moments of his life. The kid from Nebraska who, as Marty said, volunteered to go to Vietnam. The soldier outside Saigon, rushing to pull his own brother from a burning APC. The deputy at the VA who stood up for his fellow Vietnam vets who were exposed to agent orange. The Senator who helped lead the fight for the post-9/11 GI bill, to give this generation of heroes the same opportunities that he had.

I asked Chuck to lead this Department at a moment of profound transition. And today we express our gratitude for the progress under his watch. After more than 13 years, our combat mission in Afghanistan is over, and America's longest war has come to a responsible and honorable end. Because of Chuck's direction, a strategic review has made difficult choices in a time of tight budgets, while still making sure that our forces are ready to be called on for any contingency.

Today, our troops are supporting Afghan forces. They continue to face risks, and they remain relentless in their pursuit of Al Qaida networks. They're leading the coalition to destroy ISIL, a coalition that includes Arab nations, in no small measure because Chuck strengthened key partnerships in the Middle East. And under his leadership, our forces in West Africa are helping to lead the global fight against Ebola, saving lives and showing American leadership at its very, very best.

Even as we've met these pressing challenges, Chuck has helped us to prepare for the century ahead. In Europe, a stronger NATO is reassuring our allies. In the Asia-Pacific, one of my foreign policy priorities, Chuck helped modernize our alliances, strengthen partnerships, bolster defense posture, improve communications between the United States and Chinese militaries, all of which helps to ensure that the United States remains a strong Pacific power.

Because Chuck helped build new trust, we'll expand our defense cooperation with India. I just demonstrated during my visit there the degree to which that partnership is moving in a new direction. That's partly attributable to work that Chuck did.

And the reforms he launched will help make this Department more efficient and innovative for years to come. Thanks to Secretary Hagel's guiding hand, this institution is better positioned for the future.

But, Chuck, I want to suggest today that perhaps your greatest impact—a legacy that will be felt for decades to come—has been your own example. It's not simply that you've been the first enlisted combat veteran and the first Vietnam veteran to serve as Secretary of Defense. It's how your life experience—being down in the mud, feeling the bullets fly overhead—has allowed you to connect with our troops like no other Secretary before you.

You've welcomed our junior enlisted personnel to lunch in your office and made them feel at home, and they told you what was really on their minds. When you spoke to our newest sergeant majors about the true meaning of leadership and responsibility, they knew they were learning from one of their own. And in those quiet moments, when you've pinned a Purple Heart on a wounded warrior, you were there not just as Secretary of Defense, but as an old Army sergeant who knows the wages of war and still carries the shrapnel in your chest.

And these aren't fleeting moments, they reflect the driving force of Chuck Hagel's service: his love of our troops and his determination to take care of them after more than 13 years of war. Today, our military hospitals are getting stronger, our women are more integrated into the force than ever before. We're making progress in combating sexual assault. We'll bring home the remains of fallen heroes faster, and more Vietnam veterans will finally be eligible for the disability pay they deserved all along. And, Chuck, that's because of you. That's part of your legacy.

Of course, I'm grateful to Chuck on a very personal level. Exactly 10 years ago this month, I joined you in the United States Senate, along with the Vice President. I was new and green; you were a veteran legislator. I was the student, and you shared some of the lessons of your service. I was young, and you were—well. [*Laughter*] And though we came from different parties, we often saw the world the same way, including our conviction that even as we must never hesitate to defend our Nation, we must never rush into war. We both believed that America should only send her sons and daughters into harm's way when it is absolutely necessary. And when we do, we make sure they've got everything that they need to succeed; they've got a mission that is worthy of their sacrifice.

In an era of politics that too often descends into spectacle, you've always served with decency and dignity. And in a town of outsized egos, you've never lost your midwestern humility. You've always been frank and honest and said what you thought. And I have so profoundly benefited from that candor. You represent a tradition of bipartisanship in national security that we need more of today. And Joe Biden reflects that. I see Dick Lugar in the stands; he reflects that. That's when we're at our best. And from sergeant to Secretary, you've always been guided by one interest: what you believe is best for America. And I thank you for your friendship and your counsel, and all of us thank you for your character and your integrity.

Of course, nobody serves alone. Lilibet, Allyn, Ziller, thank you for sharing your husband and father with us and for the sacrifices that your family has made for all of ours. And, Chuck, since our lives are so often the reflection of those closest to us, today I also want to acknowledge the service of your brother Tom; the World War II service of your father Charles; the sacrifices of your late mom Betty, who worked day and night to raise her four sons. We salute this American family.

Our men and women in uniform here today, those who stand where Chuck once stood, they don't ask for much. They volunteered; they accept the risks that come with military service. But they do ask this: that this Nation take care of them as well as they've taken care of us, that we provide them with the resources to do their jobs and meet the missions that we ask of them. After all that they've given for us, after all that they've sacrificed, they have the right to expect that we will meet our obligations as well. And that's my duty as Commander in Chief. And this will be the work of my nominee to be the next Secretary of Defense, Mr. Ash Carter. But this must be the work of us all, as Americans grateful to those who serve in our name. And that's the story of Chuck Hagel's life.

I'll close with a story that came about last year. I was going to tell the story about when we were traveling in Iraq, and Chuck wore these pair of sort of Hush Puppy bedroom slipper shoes out into the desert, and the flaps started opening up and his toes were sticking out. But I'm going to skip that story. *[Laughter]* He then ended up buying me a pair, which I have never worn, I'm proud to say. *[Laughter]*

This is a different story. One day last year, I was in the Oval Office, and Chuck came in for what I thought would be our regular weekly meeting. But he had a guest, and he introduced us. And his name was Jerome "Skip" Johnson, a friendly guy, a grandfather, and he was from my hometown of Chicago. And Chuck explained that Skip—Lieutenant Johnson—had been his platoon commander in Vietnam. But they had lost touch, until Chuck tracked him down. This was the first time they had reunited in nearly 50 years. And Chuck just wanted to bring Skip to the Oval Office to say hello to the President—to meet his family, including his young grandsons.

And Chuck told me about how it had been 1968, with protests and race riots back home causing tensions among our troops in Vietnam. And Chuck's unit was mostly White, but Skip is African American, and as the platoon commander, he was not going to tolerate division or distrust. And he went to his men and made himself clear: We are all Americans. We're going to live together. We're going to take care of each other. We're fighting together. We're going to get each other's backs. Let's get it done.

And at that moment in the Oval Office, as these two soldiers stood before me—with Skip's grandsons looking on—it wasn't lost on any of us how far our Nation has come. And I want to thank Chuck for that moment, because part of the reason we've traveled that distance is, we've had men like Chuck Hagel serving and representing what's best in America.

In moments when we are tested—as a military, as a nation—sometimes we get distracted by what divides us and lose sight of what unites us. And at those moments, we can draw strength from the example of a sergeant from Nebraska and a lieutenant from Chicago. We are all Americans. We live together. We sacrifice together. We take care of each other. Sometimes, we have to fight together.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to introduce to you my friend, our 24th Secretary of Defense, and an outstanding American: Mr. Chuck Hagel.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:37 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas and Michael, brothers, Lilibet, wife, and Allyn and Ziller Hagel, children, of Secretary Hagel; and former Sen. Richard G. Lugar. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Secretary of Defense Charles T. Hagel, Armed Forces farewell tribute at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, VA.

Locations: Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, VA.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Carter, Ashton B.; Dempsey, Martin E.; Hagel, Allyn; Hagel, C. Ziller; Hagel, Charles T.; Hagel, Lilibet Z.; Hagel, Michael P.; Hagel, Thomas L.; Johnson, Jerome "Skip"; Lugar, Richard G.; Obama, Michelle.

Subjects: Afghanistan : Afghan military and security forces; Africa : West Africa, Ebola epidemic, response and containment efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Military compensation and retirement systems, modernization efforts; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Sexual assault; China : Security cooperation with U.S.; Civil rights : Racial equality; Decorations, medals, and awards : Purple Heart; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Homeland Security, Department of : U.S. Secret Service; India : Security cooperation with U.S.; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; New Mexico : White Sands Missile Range; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Veterans : Access to health and medical care; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of; Virginia : Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall; Virginia : President's Visits; White House Office : Vice President.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500061.