

Remarks on Signing the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act

February 12, 2015

Thank you so much. Everybody, please have a seat. Well, good afternoon, everybody. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House. And thank you, Jake, for a moving tribute to your friend and your brother-in-arms. I think it's clear that Clay Hunt lives on in you: in your devotion to his memory and your commitment to our country. So, Jake, on behalf of all of us, but especially, I think, on behalf of Clay's family and all his friends and fellow veterans who loved him too, thanks for your extraordinary service.

Today we honor a young man who isn't here, but should be here. Clay Hunt was a proud Texan. As a boy, I understand, he collected turtles—*[laughter]*—which was ironic for a kid who, by all accounts, never sat still. *[Laughter]* He loved the outdoors; he knew every inch of his grandparents' ranch, where he fished and hunted all year long. A decorated marine, he served with distinction in Iraq and Afghanistan. He suffered physical injuries—injuries that healed, and he suffered invisible wounds that stayed with him. And by all accounts, he was selfless, and he was brave. And when he died in 2011, it was a heartbreaking loss for his family, his fellow marines, and our Nation. Because Clay had already done a great deal of good in the world, and the truth is, he was just getting started.

So we're here today to pick up where Clay left off. The best way to honor this young man who should be here is to make sure that more veterans like him are here for all the years to come and may—able to make extraordinary contributions, building on what they've already done for our safety and our security.

Clay was a passionate advocate for veterans. And now, more than ever, that's something we're all called to be. After 13 years, our combat mission in Afghanistan is over, and a new generation of veterans is coming home. And like Clay, they are talented, and they are ready to roll up their sleeves and begin the next chapter of their lives: starting companies, going back to school, reentering the workforce, raising families, becoming leaders in every field. And whether they found a new path or are just starting out on their new civilian life, one thing is certain: Every single veteran in America has something extraordinary to give to this country—every single one.

And at the same time, too many of our troops and veterans are still struggling. They're recovering from injuries. They're mourning fallen comrades. They're trying to reconnect with family and friends who can never fully understand what they went through in war theater. For many of them, the war goes on: in the flashbacks that come rushing forward and in the nightmares that don't go away.

And that tension between then and now, that struggle to make the transition from war to home, is one that Clay Hunt knew all too well. In Iraq and Afghanistan, he lost good friends. After one buddy died, Clay slept in his empty bunk for a while, to stay close just a little longer. A few weeks later, another friend was fatally shot right in front of him. There was nothing Clay could do to save him, but he was still wracked with grief and guilt. And when he got home, he found it hard to sleep and hard to go football games or anywhere that was loud or crowded.

Now, part of what made him remarkable was, he was able to name the problem; he understood it. Like many of our troops and veterans, Clay had posttraumatic stress. And as a country, we've been doing more to help our troops and veterans deal with injuries like posttraumatic stress. We've been doing more awareness and more outreach, and more counselors have been put in place to improve access to care. We've been doing more research and prevention—into prevention and treatment. And we've been saying loud and clear to anyone out there who's hurting: It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help, it's a sign of strength.

And Clay Hunt was strong that way. He asked for help. In fact, he did everything that we urge people with posttraumatic stress to do. He reached out to his family; they embraced him with love. He opened up to other veterans, and they were there for him too. He sought treatment, and not once, but repeatedly. And he channeled his stress into service. As part of Team Rubicon, as Jake described, he went to Haiti after the earthquake to help families rebuild. He refurbished bikes for injured veterans so they could join wounded warrior rides. He even appeared in a public service announcement, encouraging veterans having a tough time to reach out for help, because he knew that even though you can't see it, posttraumatic stress is an injury just like any other and the stigma has to end.

And Clay received care through the VA, but he struggled to get the right medication and the right disability rating. And by the time the severity of his condition was recognized, it was too late, and Clay had taken his life just weeks before. And he was 28 years old.

Amid unimaginable grief, Clay's family, Jake, and his fellow veterans made it their mission to spare any more families the pain they endured. So they shared Clay's story far and wide. And they reached out to Members of Congress, and they lobbied, and they testified and made personal appeals.

And thanks to their tireless efforts—and we are particularly grateful to Clay's family being able to transform grief into action—today I will sign the Clay Hunt SAV Act into law. And SAV stands for "Suicide Prevention for American Veterans." It helps fill critical gaps in serving veterans with posttraumatic stress and other illnesses. It increases peer support and outreach to servicemembers transitioning to civilian life. It recruits talented psychiatry students to work at the VA after graduation. It makes it easier for veterans to find the care they need when they need it. And it includes strict accountability measures so we can track and continually improve these efforts as we learn more.

Now, this law is not a complete solution. We've still got a lot more work to do. Our Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Bob McDonald, is here and is doing a terrific job pushing reforms to get our veterans the care that they deserve. But one of the messages I want to make sure to deliver today, and I know that the First Lady and Jill Biden and others have been delivering this continually through their Joining Forces effort: This is not just a job for government. Every community, every American, can reach out and do more with and for our veterans. This has to be a national mission. As a nation, we should not be satisfied—will not be satisfied—until every man and woman in uniform, every veteran, gets the help that they need to stay strong and healthy.

And this law will not bring Clay back, as much as we wish it would. But the reforms that it puts in place would have helped. And they'll help others who are going through the same challenging process that he went through. So this is a good day, and we pay tribute to everyone who helped to make it possible.

We want to thank Clay's family, especially his mom and stepfather, Susan and Richard Selke; his father and stepmother, Stacy and Dianne Hunt. You guys never stopped fighting for Clay, and for all the families who have lost sons and daughters as well. And as a Commander in Chief and as a father, I can't think of a more beautiful and special way to honor your son. So we thank you very much.

We want to thank Jake and all those who served with Clay, who protected him and loved him like a brother, and all the veterans service organizations that fought for this law and who advocated so passionately for those who have served. We thank all the military families who have lost a loved one, families here today who channeled their grief into helping others. They believe, as we all do, that we have to end this tragedy of suicide among our troops and veterans.

I want to thank the Members of Congress, Republican and Democrat, who worked to get this done. I want to give a special acknowledgement to somebody who knows a little bit about service, Senator John McCain. Dick Blumenthal, we're grateful for your efforts. Representative Jeff Miller. My homegirl from the Chicago area—[laughter]—Tammy Duckworth. Couldn't be prouder of her. And, Tim Walsh—Tim Walz, thank you so much for the great work.

And just to be clear about the bipartisanship here, this is one of those areas where we can't have an argument. Clay's parents are Texas Republicans. [Laughter] I mean, that's just not run-of-the-mill Republican. [Laughter] And they worked with this entire spectrum: conservatives, liberals. And that's just a reminder of what we can accomplish when we take a break from the partisan bickering that so often dominates this town and focus on what really matters to the American people.

I wish I had gotten a chance to know Clay. But in a way, I feel that I do, because there are a lot of incredible men and women all across this country who, like Clay, just love their country and want to serve. Michelle and I have had a chance to meet so many of them, and it's such an incredible privilege.

I think of the soldiers I sat down with at Fort Bliss a few years ago, and they told me they were proud to serve, but struggled with challenges like posttraumatic stress. They told me about the challenges they had in getting support and treatment and managing their medications, staying strong for their families and their fellow soldiers, and most of all, the challenge of asking for help, which is hard to do for folks who are used to helping others.

I think of Staff Sergeant Ty Carter, whom I awarded the Medal of Honor. He survived an unimaginable battle in Afghanistan and carried a badly wounded comrade to safety. As tough as they come. But he too acknowledged before the ceremony—and talked about it publicly—his struggles with posttraumatic stress. At first, he resisted even seeking help, but eventually, he reached out for the care that he needed. Today, he is transitioning to civilian life. He's started his own business, and he travels across the country as an advocate, helping veterans and other Americans turn their struggles into a source of strength.

I think of the college student who recently wrote me a letter on Christmas Day. This is as tough a letter as I've received since I've been President. She talked about her father, who's a retired marine, and told me about how her dad used to love to hunt and fish and spend time with her and her little brother. But gripped with posttraumatic stress, he became less and less like himself and withdrew from the family. And yet, despite these struggles, she wrote: "I knew that my dad was still in there somewhere. . . . He is still my father. And I am still his little girl." And she was writing, she said, to ask for help—help her father find his way back—"not for my

family, Mr. President," she said. "I'm asking you to help the others," other families like hers. And she said, "Don't forget about them."

And that's really what today is about: Don't forget. So today we say again, to every person in uniform, every veteran who has ever served: We thank you for your service. We honor your sacrifice. But sometimes, talk is cheap. And sometimes, particularly at a time when we've got an All-Volunteer Force and so often we can celebrate them at a ball game, but too many are insulated from the impacts, we've got to also act. We can't just talk.

So we're ready to help you begin the next chapter of your lives. And if you are hurting, know this: You are not forgotten. You are not alone. You are never alone. We are here for you. America is here for you, all of us. And we will not stop doing everything in our power to get you the care and support you need to stay strong and keep serving this country we love. We need you. We need you. You make our country better.

So I thank all of you. God bless our troops, our veterans, our military families. God bless the United States of America.

And with that, I want Michelle to—and Clay's family and our other guests to join us on stage so I can sign the Clay Hunt SAV Act into law.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:08 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jacob Wood, cofounder and executive director, Team Rubicon; Bill and Muriel Knotts, grandparents of Clay W. Hunt; and Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden. H.R. 203, approved February 12, was assigned Public Law No. 114–2.

Categories: Bill Signings and Vetoes : Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, signing remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Blumenthal, Richard; Carter, Ty M.; Duckworth, L. Tammy; Hunt, Dianne; Hunt, Stacy; Knotts, Bill; Knotts, Muriel; McCain, John S., III; McDonald, Robert A.; Miller, Jefferson B.; Obama, Michelle; Selke, Richard; Selke, Susan; Walz, Timothy J.; Wood, Jacob.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), treatment efforts; Congress : Bipartisanship; Legislation, enacted : Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act; Veterans : Access to health and medical care; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans : Suicide rate; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500094.