

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:46 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida.

Remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio

August 16, 2004

Thank you all very much. Thanks for the warm welcome. And thanks for inviting me for your 105th national convention. I'm proud to be here.

One of the great honors of being Commander in Chief is meeting the courageous men and women who stand watch for freedom. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to look them in the eye and say on behalf of our country, "Thank you for your service." The same is true of each of you here today. When the enemies of freedom were on the march and our country and the world needed brave Americans to take up arms and stop their advance, you stepped forward to serve. And today I'm proud to stand before you as Commander in Chief, look you in the eye, and say, America thanks you for your service.

I want to thank Ed Banas for his service in being an effective commander of the VFW. I appreciate the job he's done, and I want to thank his wife, Sandra, for standing by his side during this important time for the VFW. Ed, thank you, sir, for your service. I also thank my friend Bob Wallace, the executive director of the VFW.

I want to thank Governor Bob Taft for joining us today, from the State of Ohio; my friend Tony Principi—I'll say something about him here in a minute; and Congressman Rob Portman, Congressman from Ohio, is with us as well. I'm honored that these elected officials—and in Principi's case, appointed official—is with us today.

I want to thank John Furgess, the incoming VFW national commander in chief, and Alma. I want to thank Evelyn McCune, the VFW Ladies Auxiliary national president, and her husband, Don. I want to thank JoAnne Ott. I want to thank the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary members for letting me come and address you.

In the audience today are two people I've gotten to know during a very traumatic period during their lives. Carolyn and Keith

Maupin are with us today. They're from this part of the world. Their son, Matt, has been missing in action for 4 months in Iraq. I have vowed to them we will do everything we can to find their loved one, Matt. I appreciate their courage. I continue to send my prayers to these two fine Americans during these difficult times for them. May God bless you, Keith and Carolyn.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars have always stood up for our Nation and those who wear the uniform. Since your founding in 1899, the members of the VFW have been serving the men and women who served America. I appreciate your dedication. The VFW and its Ladies Auxiliary are volunteering by transporting sick and disabled vets to and from their medical appointments. You're showing great compassion. You're supporting the men and women who serve today. Some 1,500 VFW posts have adopted military units deployed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other distant theaters. You've distributed more than 3.5 million prepaid calling cards to our deployed forces. You've sent thousands of care packages to our troops in the field. You've helped the families back home with groceries and home repairs and other necessities. America respects our military and their families. I thank you for showing that respect every day.

All our Nation's veterans have made serving America the highest priority of their lives, and serving our veterans is one of the highest priorities of my administration. To make sure my administration fulfills the commitments I have made to America's veterans, I selected one of the finest men ever to serve as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, a combat-decorated Vietnam veteran, Secretary Tony Principi.

Thanks in large part to Tony's leadership, my administration has a solid record of accomplishment for our veterans. When my 2005 budget is approved by Congress, we will have increased overall funding for our Nation's veterans by almost \$20 billion or 40 percent since 2001. We have increased funding for our veterans more in 4 years than the previous administration did in 8 years. To provide health care to veterans, we've increased VA medical care funding by 41 percent over the past 4 years.

We are bringing care to more veterans more quickly. Since 2001, we've enrolled 2.5 million more veterans in health care services. We've increased outpatient visits from 44 million to 54 million. We've increased the number of prescriptions filled from 98 million to 116 million. We're getting the job done. We've reduced the large backlog of disability claims by about a third. We will reduce it even further. We've cut the average time it takes to process disability claims by 70 days.

We have focused resources on the veterans who need it most, those with service-related disabilities and low incomes and special needs. We've established a new scheduling system to make certain that veterans seeking care for a service-connected condition are first in line. For more than a century, Federal law prohibited disabled veterans from receiving both their military retired pay and their VA disability compensation. Combat-injured and severely disabled veterans deserve better. I was proud to be the first President in over 100 years to sign concurrent receipt legislation. We're getting the job done in Washington, DC.

My administration has launched a \$35 million program to provide housing and health care and other support services to homeless veterans. No veteran who served in the blazing heat or bitter cold of foreign lands should have to live without shelter, exposed to the elements, in the very country whose freedom they fought for.

We are modernizing VA health centers and building new ones, especially in the South and West, where increasing numbers of our veterans live. Since 2001, we have opened 194 new community-based clinics nationwide. And through the CARES initiative, we are providing \$1 billion—and have requested another half-billion for next year—to modernize VA facilities and to provide better care for veterans in areas where the need is growing, including here in Ohio. Our VA hospitals are, on average, 50 years old. That's why we are modernizing our facilities to make sure our veterans have 21st century health care. For example, here in Ohio, we're building one of the largest new VA clinics in America in Columbus, Ohio. We're spending more than \$100 million to consolidate

two VA hospitals in Cleveland into a single 21st century facility. When it comes to providing first-class care for our Nation's veterans, we are getting the job done.

Our Nation's debt extends not just to the veterans who served but to the families who supported them in war and depend on them today. Last December, I signed the Veterans Benefits Act, authorizing \$1 billion in new and expanded benefits for disabled veterans and surviving spouses and their children.

America's veterans have defended America in hours of need. And to honor the veterans from the Second World War for their service to our country, the World War II Memorial now stands on the Washington Mall. And I thank you for your efforts and your hard work to get this memorial built. And we honor all of those here today who fought to defend freedom in the Second World War.

Like the Second World War, the war we face today began with a ruthless surprise attack on America. The world changed on that September morning, and since that day, we have changed the world. Before September the 11th, Afghanistan served as the home base of Al Qaida, which trained and deployed thousands of killers to set up terrorist cells around the world, including our own country. Because we acted, Afghanistan is a rising democracy; Afghanistan is an ally in the war on terror; Afghanistan is now a place where many young girls get to go to school for the first time. America and the world are safer.

Before September the 11th, Libya was spending millions to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Today, because America and our allies sent a clear and strong message, the leader of Libya has abandoned his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. America and the world are safer.

Before September the 11th, the ruler of Iraq was a sworn enemy of America. He was defying the world. He was firing weapons at American pilots who were enforcing the world's sanctions. He had pursued and he had used weapons of mass destruction. He had harbored terrorists. He invaded his neighbors. He subsidized the families of suicide bombers. He murdered tens of thousands of his own citizens. He was a source of instability in the world's most volatile region. He was a threat.

One of the lessons of September the 11th, a lesson this Nation must never forget, is that we must deal with threats before they fully materialize. I remembered what Saddam Hussein was like; I looked at the intelligence. I called upon Congress to remember his history and look at the intelligence. I thought it was important to bring Congress—get their opinion on the subject of Saddam Hussein. So members of both political parties, including my opponent, looked at the same intelligence and came to the same conclusion that I came to: Saddam Hussein was a threat. I went to the United Nations. The U.N. Security Council looked at the intelligence and came to the same conclusion: Saddam Hussein was a threat. As a matter of fact, they passed a resolution, 15 to nothing, which said to Saddam, “Disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences.” As he had for the past 12 years, he refused to comply. He ignored the demands of the free world. He systematically deceived the weapons inspectors.

So I had a choice to make: Either forget the lessons of September the 11th and trust a madman, or take action to defend America. Given that choice, I will defend our country every time.

Even though we did not find the stockpiles that we thought we would find, Saddam Hussein had the capability to make weapons of mass destruction, and he could have passed that capability on to our enemy, to the terrorists. It is not a risk, after September the 11th, that we could afford to take. Knowing what I know today, I would have taken the same action. America and the world are safer because Saddam Hussein sits in a prison cell.

We have more hard work to do. I’ll continue to work with friends and allies around the world to aggressively pursue the terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere. See, you can’t talk sense to these people. You cannot negotiate with them. You cannot hope for the best. We must aggressively pursue them and defeat them in foreign lands, so we do not have to face them here at home.

America will continue to lead the world with confidence and moral clarity. We have put together a strong coalition to help us pursue the terrorists and spread the peace. There are over 40 nations involved in Afghanistan, some 30 nations involved in Iraq.

I appreciate the sacrifices of the mothers and fathers from those countries, to have their sons and daughters stand with our troops to spread freedom and peace. I’ll continue to build on those alliances and work with our friends for the cause of security and peace. But I will never turn over America’s national security decisions to leaders of other countries.

We’ll keep our commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. We’ll help them become peaceful and democratic societies. These two nations are now governed by strong leaders; they’re on the path to elections. We set a clear goal that Iraq and Afghanistan will be peaceful and democratic countries that are allies in the war on terror. We’ll meet that goal by helping secure their countries, allowing a peaceful political process to develop, and by training Afghan and Iraqi forces so they can make the hard decisions, so they can defend their country against those who are preventing the spread of freedom. Our military will complete this mission as quickly as possible so our troops do not stay a day longer than necessary.

It’s important we send the right signals when we speak here in America. The other day, my opponent said if he’s elected, the number of troops in Iraq will be significantly reduced within 6 months. I think it sends the wrong signal. It sends the wrong signal to the enemy; they could easily wait 6 months and 1 day. It sends the wrong message to our troops, that completing the mission may not be necessary. It sends the wrong message to the Iraqi people who wonder whether or not America means what it says. Our friends and allies must know that when America speaks, we mean what we say. We will stay until the job is completed.

In the long run, our security is not guaranteed by force alone. We will work to change the conditions that give rise to terror: poverty and hopelessness and resentment. A free and peaceful Iraq and a free and peaceful Afghanistan will be powerful and examples in a neighborhood that is desperate for freedom. You see, by serving the ideal of liberty, we are bringing hope to others, and that makes America more secure. By serving the ideal of liberty, we’re spreading the peace. Free countries do not export terror. Free

countries are peaceful countries. And by serving the ideal of liberty, we're serving the deepest ideals of America. We believe that freedom is not America's gift to the world; freedom is the Almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world.

These are crucial times. We have an historic opportunity to win the war on terror by spreading freedom and peace. Our commitments are being kept by the men and women of our military. I've had the privilege of traveling to bases around our country and around the world. I've seen their great decency and their unselfish courage. I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, the cause of freedom is in really good hands.

Those who wear our uniform deserve the full support of our Government. For almost 4 years, my administration has strengthened our military. We have enacted the largest increases in defense spending since Ronald Reagan served as the Commander in Chief. We've increased military pay by 21 percent. We have provided better housing and better training and better maintenance.

And last September, while our troops were in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, I wanted to make sure they had the very best, so I proposed supplemental funding to support them in their mission. The legislation provided funding for body armor and vital equipment, hazard pay, health benefits, ammunition, fuel, and spare parts. The VFW strongly supported my request. I thank you for standing up for our troops. Your work on Capitol Hill paid off. After all, the funding received strong bipartisan support—so strong that in the United States Senate, only 12 Members voted against the funding, 2 of whom were my opponent and his runningmate.

When pressed, he explained his vote, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion, before I voted against it." [Laughter] He went on to say he was proud of the vote and the whole thing is a complicated matter. There's nothing complicated about supporting our troops in combat.

We have more work to do to defend freedom and protect our country. We will ensure that our forces are well-prepared and well-positioned to meet the threats of the future.

Our Armed Forces have changed a lot. They're more agile and more lethal. They're better able to strike anywhere in the world over great distances on short notice. Yet for decades, Americans' Armed Forces abroad have essentially remained where the wars of the last century ended, in Europe and in Asia. America's current force posture was designed, for example, to protect us and our allies from Soviet aggression. The threat no longer exists.

More than 3 years ago, we launched a comprehensive review of America's global force posture, the numbers, types, locations, and capabilities of U.S. forces around the world. We've consulted closely with our allies and with Congress. We've examined the challenges posed by today's threats and emerging threats. And so, today I announce a new plan for deploying America's Armed Forces.

Over the coming decade, we'll deploy a more agile and more flexible force, which means that more of our troops will be stationed and deployed from here at home. We will move some of our troops and capability to new locations, so they can surge quickly to deal with unexpected threats. We'll take advantage of 21st century military technologies to rapidly deploy increased combat power.

The new plan will help us fight and win these wars of the 21st century. It will strengthen our alliances around the world, while we build new partnerships to better preserve the peace. It will reduce the stress on our troops and our military families. Although we'll still have a significant presence overseas, under the plan I'm announcing today, over the next 10 years, we will bring home about 60,000 to 70,000 uniformed personnel and about 100,000 members and civilian employees—family members and civilian employees.

See, our servicemembers will have more time on the homefront and more predictability and fewer moves over a career. Our military spouses will have fewer job changes, greater stability, more time for their kids and to spend time with their families at home. The taxpayers will save money as we configure our military to meet the threats of the

21st century. There will be savings as we consolidate and close bases and facilities overseas no longer needed to face the threats of our time and defend the peace.

The world has changed a great deal, and our posture must change with it, for the sake of our military families, for the sake of our taxpayers, and so we can be more effective at projecting our strength and spreading freedom and peace.

Today, our troops have the most advanced technologies at their disposal. Weapons are more lethal, more precise than were available for you. Our troops are more mobile. They can communicate better. Yet their success in the wars we fight is being made possible by the same things that made your success possible, personal courage, love of country, dedication to duty.

As our troops fight today in Baghdad, in Najaf, in the Hindu Kush mountains, and elsewhere, I know America's veterans feel a special pride in them. They're carrying on your legacy of sacrifice and service. They're determined to see the mission through. This country stands with them.

I want to thank you for the example you have set for our men and women in uniform. I want to thank you for your idealism, for your dedication to God and our country. May God bless you all, and may God continue to bless the United States of America. Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:04 a.m. at the Dr. Albert B. Sabin Cincinnati Cinergy Center. In his remarks, he referred to Edward S. Banas, Sr., commander in chief, Bob Wallace, Washington Office executive director, and John Furgess, senior vice commander in chief, Veterans of Foreign Wars; and Evelyn McCune, national president, and JoAnne Ott, national senior vice president, Ladies Auxiliary VFW. He also referred to the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) initiative of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Remarks in Traverse City, Michigan August 16, 2004

The President. Thank you all. Thanks for coming. Boy, I'm glad to be here. This is a beautiful part of our country. It turns out I'm the first sitting President to come up

here since Gerald Ford was the President. Good to be here in cherry country. Today it looks like Bush-Cheney country too.

I'm looking forward to this race. I want to thank you all for giving me a chance to come out and ask for the vote. I'm traveling your important State asking for the vote. You got some big differences in this campaign. One of them is that my opponent thinks you can find the heart and soul in Hollywood. I think you find it right here in Traverse City, Michigan.

We're going to be spending a lot of time in your important State, and there's no doubt, with your help, we'll carry Michigan, and we'll win in November of '04.

Audience members. Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!

The President. I'm sorry Laura is not here.

Audience member. We love you, Laura!

The President. Yes. She is a fantastic mom, a great wife. Listen, I'm going to give you a lot of reasons to be for me, but perhaps the most important one is to keep Laura as the First Lady for 4 more years.

And I'm running with a good man in Vice President Dick Cheney. I admit it—I admit it, he is not the prettiest face in the race. [Laughter] I didn't pick him for his looks. I picked him because he can get the job done.

I want to thank my friend Dave Camp, the Congressman from up here in northern Michigan. What a good man. I'm proud to work with him—good, honorable man. I want to thank Congressman Nick Smith for being here as well. Nick, I appreciate you coming. I appreciate Trick Pony, the band that was playing here. I'm glad they're here. It's good of them to come.

Listen, I want to thank Betsy DeVos and all the grassroots activists. Let me tell you, grassroots activists are the people that put up the signs, make the phone calls, register the voters. We have a duty in this country to vote. We have an obligation to do our duty to show up at the polls. Do you realize, over 9 million people have registered to vote in Afghanistan? These people have got a taste of freedom, and they're showing up to vote. And so—our fellow citizens—so I urge you to register people. Head people to the polls,