

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at a Veterans Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
November 11, 2013

The President. Thank you. Please be seated. Good morning, everyone.

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. Thank you, Secretary Shinseki, for your lifetime of service to our Nation and for being a tireless advocate on behalf of America's veterans, including your fellow Vietnam veterans. To Vice President Biden and Dr. Jill Biden; Secretaries Hagel and Perez; Admiral Winnefeld; Major General Buchanan; most of all, to our outstanding veteran service organizations, our men and women in uniform, and to the proud veterans and family members joining us in this sacred place: Michelle and I are incredibly honored to be with you all here today again.

To the Gold Star families and the brothers- and sisters-in-arms who walk the paths of these hallowed grounds and the cemeteries around the world, we join you as you remember your loved ones who wore America's uniform. And here at Arlington and Section 60, we've ensured that you can continue to bring the small mementos of your love and affection to the final resting place of these American heroes.

Today we gather once more to honor patriots who have rendered the highest service any American can offer this Nation: those who fought for our freedom and stood sentry for our security. On this hillside of solemn remembrance and in veterans halls and in proud parades across America, we join as one people to honor a debt we can never fully repay.

In the life of our Nation, across every generation, there are those who stand apart. They step up, they raise their hands, they take that oath, they put on the uniform, and they put their lives on the line. They do this so that the rest of us might live in a country and a world that is safer, freer, and more just. This is the gift they've given us. This is the debt that we owe them.

They fought on a green at Lexington so that we could make independent the country they imagined. They fought on the fields of Gettysburg so that we could make whole a nation torn asunder. They fought on the beaches of Europe and across Pacific islands. And from their sacrifice we emerged the strongest and most prosperous nation in the history of the world. And this year, as we mark the 60th anniversary of the end of the fighting in Korea, we pay special tribute to all those who served in the Korean war.

From the jungles of Vietnam to Desert Storm, to the mountains of the Balkans, they have answered America's call. And since America was attacked on that clear September morning, millions more have assumed that mantle, defining one of the greatest generations of military service this country has ever produced.

On tour after tour after tour in Iraq and Afghanistan, this generation—the 9/11 generation—has met every mission we have asked of them. And today we can say that because of their heroic service, the core of Al Qaida is on the path to defeat, our Nation is more secure, and our homeland is safer.

They're men and women like the soldier—and soon to be veteran—I met a few months ago, Jacare Hogan. Jacare deployed to Iraq twice, and she survived not one, but two—excuse me, three—separate IED explosions. And when she was well enough, she deployed again, this

time to Afghanistan, where she was often the only woman at our forward operating bases. She proudly wears the Combat Action Badge. And today, Jacare is committed to helping other wounded warriors recover from the trials of war. "Helping the troops," she says, "is what I'm all about." And, my fellow Americans, that's what we should be all about.

Our work is more urgent than ever, because this chapter of war is coming to an end. Soon, one of the first marines to arrive in Afghanistan 12 years ago, Brigadier General Daniel Yoo, will lead his Camp Pendleton marines as they become one of the last major groups of marines to deploy in this war. And over the coming months, more of our troops will come home. This winter, our troop levels in Afghanistan will be down to 34,000. And by this time next year, the transition to Afghan-led security will be nearly complete. The longest war in American history will end.

As is true after every conflict, there's a risk that the devoted service of our veterans could fade from the forefront of our minds, that we might turn to other things. But part of the reason we're here today is to pledge that we will never forget the profound sacrifices that are made in our name. Today reminds us of our sacred obligations. For even though this time of war is coming to a close, our time of service to our newest veterans has only just begun.

Think about it: Our troops wear the uniform for a time, yet they wear another proud title, the title of "veteran," for decades, for the rest of their lives. As a nation, we make sure we have the best led, best trained, best equipped military in the world. We have to devote just as much energy and passion to making sure we have the best cared for, best treated, best respected veterans in the world.

So when we talk about fulfilling our promises to our veterans, we don't just mean for a few years, we mean now, tomorrow, and forever, and not just for generations past, but for this generation of veterans and all who will follow.

And that's why, as Commander in Chief, I'm going to keep making sure we're providing unprecedented support to our veterans. Even as we make difficult fiscal choices as a nation, we're going to keep making vital investments in our veterans. We're going to keep improving veterans health care, including mental health care so you can stay strong. We're making sure that veterans not covered by the VA can secure quality, affordable health insurance.

We're going to keep reducing the claims backlog. We've slashed it by a third since March, and we're going to keep at it so you can get the benefits that you have earned and that you need, when you need them. We're going to keep helping our newest veterans and their families pursue their education under the post-9/11 GI bill. We just welcomed our 1 millionth student veteran, and we're ready for all those who come next.

And we're going to keep demanding that the rights and dignity of every veteran are upheld, including by pushing for the Disabilities Treaty so that our disabled veterans enjoy the same opportunities to travel and work and study around the world as everybody else. And with the help of Michelle and Dr. Jill Biden and Joining Forces, we're going to keep fighting to give every veteran who has fought for America the chance to pursue the American Dream, a fair shot at the jobs and opportunity you need to help us rebuild and grow here at home. Because you're bringing home the skills and the work ethic and leadership necessary to start companies and serve your communities and take care of your fellow veterans.

And that's our promise to you and all who have served: to be there, to support you, when you come home, every step of the way. And as a nation, we will strive to be worthy of the sacrifices that you've made. That's what we owe all our veterans. That's what we owe veterans

like Richard Overton, who served in the Army in World War II. He was there, at—*[applause]*—now, everybody, I want you to know a little something about Mr. Overton here. He was there at Pearl Harbor, when the battleships were still smoldering. He was there at Okinawa. He was there at Iwo Jima, where he said, "I only got out of there by the grace of God."

When the war ended, Richard headed home to Texas to a nation bitterly divided by race. And his service on the battlefield was not always matched by the respect that he deserved at home. But this veteran held his head high. He carried on and lived his life with honor and dignity. He built his wife a house with his own two hands. He went back to work in the furniture business. In time, he served as a courier in the Texas State Capitol, where he worked for four Governors and made more friends than most of us do in a lifetime.

And today, Richard still lives in the house that he built all those years ago. He rakes his own lawn. And every Sunday he hops in his 1971 Ford truck and drives one of the nice ladies in his neighborhood to church. *[Laughter]* So this is the life of one American veteran, living proud and strong in the land he helped keep free.

And earlier this year, the great folks at Honor Flight Austin brought Richard to Washington, DC, for the first time. And he and his fellow veterans paid their respects at the World War II Memorial. And then they visited the memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. And as Richard sat in a wheelchair beneath that great marble statue, he wept. And the crowd that gathered around him wept too to see one of the oldest living veterans of World War II bear witness to a day—to the progress of a nation—he thought might never come.

Richard Overton, this American veteran, is 107 years old. And we are honored that he's here with us today. So let's ask Richard to stand again, because he can stand.

And this is how we'll be judged: not just by how well we care for our troops in battle, but how we treat them when they come home, and by the America we build together; by what we do with the security and peace that they have helped grant us; by the progress that allows citizens from Richard Overton to Jacare Hogan to play their part in the American story.

Today our message to all those who have ever worn the uniform of this Nation is this: We will stand by your side, whether you're 7 days out or, like Richard, 70 years out. Because here in America, we take care of our own. We honor the sacrifices that has been made in our name, for this Nation that we love. And we commit ourselves to standing by these veterans and their families, for as long as we're blessed to walk this Earth.

God bless you all. God bless our veterans. God bless our men and women in uniform. And God bless these United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:35 a.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Maj. Gen. Jeffrey S. Buchanan, commanding general, National Capital Region and Military District of Washington; Staff Sgt. Jacare Hogan, USA; and Brig. Gen. Daniel Yoo, USMC, commanding general, I Marine Expeditionary Force.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Veterans Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Buchanan, Jeffrey S.; Hagel, Charles T.; Hogan, Jacare; Obama, Michelle; Overton, Richard; Perez, Thomas E.; Winnefeld, James A. "Sandy," Jr.; Yoo, Daniel.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Civil rights : Disabled persons :: Assistance and accommodation efforts; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Holidays and special observances : Veterans Day; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Terrorism : Al Qaida terrorist group; Veterans : Access to health and medical care; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Virginia : President's visits; White House Office : Vice President.

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