

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks on Signing the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 at Fort Belvoir, Virginia

August 7, 2014

Hello, Fort Belvoir! Everybody, have a seat. I think I'm going to take Sergeant Major McGruder on the road. *[Laughter]* I'm just going to have him introduce me wherever I go. *[Laughter]* He got me excited, and I'm being—I get introduced all the time. So thank you, James, for your incredible service to our country. Give James a big round of applause.

I also want to say a big thanks to America's new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Bob McDonald, who is here. Stand up, Bob. As some of you may know, Bob headed up one of the biggest, most successful companies in the world. But he also was a West Point grad, also a Ranger who served valiantly on behalf of his country. And this a labor of love for him, and he has hit the ground running. He's heading out to VA hospitals and clinics around the country, starting with Phoenix tomorrow. So thank you, Bob, for accepting this charge and this challenge and making sure that we're doing right by our veterans. I know you're going to do a great job. *[Applause]* Really proud of him.

I want to thank all the Members of Congress who are here today, and I especially want to thank those who led the fight to give Bob and the VA more of the resources and flexibility that they need to make sure every veteran has access to the care and benefits that they have earned: Senator Bernie Sanders, Senators Richard Burr, Representative Mike Michaud, Representative Jeff Miller. Give them a big round of applause. Thank you. Thanks for the good work.

And we are all grateful to our outstanding veterans service organizations for all the work that they do on behalf of our veterans and their families. So thank you very much to all the veterans service organizations. Most of all, I want to thank General Buchanan and Sergeant Major Turnbull and all of you who serve here at Fort Belvoir.

For nearly a century, this base has helped keep America strong and secure. Seventy years ago, troops from here—the 29th Infantry Division, the Blue and Gray—were some of the first to storm Omaha Beach. And in recent years, many of you have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. And you've risked your lives on multiple tours to defend our Nation. And as a country, we have a sacred obligation to serve you as well as you've served us, an obligation that doesn't end with your tour of duty.

Every day, hundreds of thousands of dedicated public servants at the VA help us honor that commitment. At VA hospitals across America, you've got doctors and nurses who are delivering world-class care to America's veterans. You've got millions of veterans and their families who are profoundly grateful for the good work that is done at the VA. And as Commander in Chief, I'm grateful too.

But over the last few months, we've discovered some inexcusable misconduct at some VA health care facilities: stories of our veterans denied the care they needed, long wait times being covered up, cooking the books. This is wrong. It was outrageous. And working together, we set out to fix it and do right by our veterans across the board, no matter how long it took.

And we've already taken the first steps to change the way the VA does business. We've held people accountable for misconduct. Some have already been relieved of their duties, and investigations are ongoing. We've reached out to more than 215,000 veterans so far to make

sure that we're getting them off wait lists and into clinics both inside and outside the VA system.

We're moving ahead with urgent reforms, including stronger management and leadership and oversight. And we're instituting a critical culture of accountability, rebuilding our leadership team, starting at the top with Secretary McDonald. And one of his first acts is that he's directed all VA health care facilities to hold town halls to hear directly from the veterans that they serve to make sure that we're hearing honest assessments about what's going on.

Now, in a few minutes, we'll take another step forward when I sign into law the VA reform bill that was passed overwhelmingly, with bipartisan majorities, and that doesn't happen often in Congress. It's a good deal. *[Laughter]*

This bill covers a lot of ground, from expanding survivor benefits and educational opportunities to improving care for veterans struggling with traumatic brain injury and for victims of sexual assault. But today I want to focus on the ways this bill will help us ensure that veterans have access to the care that they've earned.

First of all, this will give the VA more of the resources that it needs. It will help the VA hire more doctors and more nurses and staff more clinics. As a new generation of veterans returns home from war and transitions into civilian life, we have to make sure the VA system can keep pace with that new demand. Keep in mind that I have increased funding for the VA since I came into office by extraordinary amounts. But we also have extraordinary numbers of veterans coming home. And so the demand, even though we've increased the VA budget, is still higher than the resources that we've got. This bill helps to address that.

Second, for veterans who can't get timely care through the VA, this bill will help them get the care they need someplace else. And this is particularly important for veterans who are in more remote areas, in rural areas. If you live more than 40 miles from a VA facility or if VA doctors can't see you within a reasonable amount of time, you'll have the chance to see a doctor outside the VA system.

Now finally, we're giving the VA Secretary more authority to hold people accountable. We've got to give Bob the authority so that he can move quickly to remove senior executives who fail to meet the standards of conduct and competence that the American people demand. If you engage in an unethical practice, if you cover up a serious problem, you should be fired. Period. It shouldn't be that difficult. And if you blow the whistle on an unethical practice or bring a problem to the attention of higher-ups, you should be thanked. You should be protected for doing the right thing. You shouldn't be ignored—you shouldn't be ignored—and you certainly shouldn't be punished.

"To care for him [or her] who shall have borne the battle." That's the heart of the VA's motto. That's what the bill I'm about to sign will help us achieve. But I want to be clear about something: This will not and cannot be the end of our effort. Implementing this law will take time. It's going to require focus on the part of all of us. And even as we focus on the urgent reforms we need at the VA right now, particularly around wait lists and the health care system, we can't lose sight of our long-term goals for our servicemembers and our veterans.

The good news is, we've cut the disability claims backlog by more than half. But let's now eliminate the backlog. Let's get rid of it. The good news is, we've poured major resources into improving mental health care. But now let's make sure our veterans actually get the care they need when they need it. The good news is, we've helped to get thousands of homeless veterans off the street, made an unprecedented effort to end veterans homelessness. We should have

zero tolerance for that. But we've got to—still more work to do in cities and towns across America to get more veterans into the homes they deserve.

We've helped more than a million veterans and their spouses and children go to college through the post-9/11 GI bill. But now we've got to help even more of them earn their educations and make sure that they're getting a good bargain in the schools they enroll in.

We've rallied companies to hire hundreds of thousands of veterans and their spouses. That's the good news. With the help of Jill Biden and Michelle Obama, two pretty capable women—[laughter]—they know what they're doing, and nobody says no to them, including me. [Laughter] But now we've got to help more of our highly skilled veterans find careers in this new economy.

So America has to do right by all who serve under our proud flag. And Congress needs to do more also. I urge the Senate, once again, to finally confirm my nominee for Assistant Secretary for Policy at the VA, Linda Schwartz; my nominee to lead the Board of Veterans' Appeals, Constance Tobias; my nominee for CFO, Helen Tierney. Each of them have been waiting for months for a yes-or-no vote, in Constance's case for more than a year.

They're ready to serve. They're ready to get to work. It's not that hard. [Laughter] Didn't used to be this hard to just go ahead and get somebody confirmed who is well qualified. Nobody says they're not. It's just, the Senate doesn't seem to move very fast. As soon as the Senate gets back in September, they should act to put these outstanding public servants in place. Our veterans don't have time for politics. They need these public servants on the job right now.

So let me wrap up by saying 2 months ago, I had the chance to spend some time with some of America's oldest veterans at Omaha Beach. Some of you may have seen on television the celebration, the commemoration of those incredible days, of the 70th anniversary of D-day. And this is my second visit to democracy's beachhead. It's the second time I had gone as President. And it's a place where it's impossible not to be moved by the courage and the sacrifice of free men and women who volunteer to lay down their lives for people they've never met, ideals that they can't live without. That's why they're willing to do these things.

And some of these folks that you met, they were 18 at the time. Some of them were lying about their age. They were 16, landing either at the beach or sometimes behind the lines. The casualty rates were unbelievable. Being there brought back memories of my own grandfather, who marched in Patton's army, and then came home. And like so many veterans of his generation, they went to school and got married and raised families. And he eventually helped to raise me.

And on that visit to Normandy, I brought some of today's servicemembers with me because I wanted to introduce them to the veterans of D-day and to show the veterans of D-day that their legacy is in good hands, that there's a direct line between the sacrifices then and the sacrifices that folks have made in remote places today. Because in more than a decade of war, today's men and women in uniform—all of you—you've met every mission we've asked of you.

Today, our troops continue to serve and risk their lives in Afghanistan. It continues to be a difficult and dangerous mission, as we were tragically reminded again this week in the attack that injured a number of our coalition troops and took the life of a dedicated American soldier, Major General Harold Greene. Our prayers are with the Greene family, as they are with all the Gold Star families and those who have sacrificed so much for our Nation.

But 4 months from now, our combat mission in Afghanistan will be complete. Our longest war will come to an honorable end. In the years to come, many from this generation will step out of uniform, and their legacy will be secure. But whether or not this country properly repays their heroism, properly repays their patriotism, their service, and their sacrifice, that's in our hands.

I'm committed to seeing that we fulfill that commitment. Because the men and women of this generation, this 9/11 generation of servicemembers, are the leaders we need for our time, as community leaders and business leaders, I hope maybe some leaders in our politics as well.

From the greatest generation to the 9/11 generation, America's heroes have answered the call to serve. I have no greater honor than serving as your President and Commander in Chief. And I have no greater privilege than the chance to help make sure that our country keeps the promises that we've made to everybody who signs up to serve. And as long as I hold this office, we're going to spend each and every day working to do right by you and your families. I'm grateful to you.

God bless you. God bless America. With that, I am going to sign this bill. Thank you very much, everybody.

All right. Squeeze in, everybody. This is good work.

[At this point, the President signed the bill.]

Really appreciate it. It's a good piece of legislation, and it will help. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:05 p.m. in the Wallace Theater. In his remarks, he referred to Sgt. Maj. James McGruder, USA; Maj. Gen. Jeffrey S. Buchanan, USA, commanding general, and CSM David O. Turnbull, USA, command sergeant major, National Capital Region and Military District of Washington; Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden; Maj. Gen. Harold J. Greene, USA, deputy commanding general, Combined Security Transition Command—Afghanistan, who was killed in Afghanistan on August 5. H.R. 3230, approved August 7, was assigned Public Law No. 113–146.

Categories: Bill Signings and Vetoess : Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, signing, remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Buchanan, Jeffrey S.; Burr, Richard; Greene, Harold J.; McDonald, Robert A.; McGruder, James; Michaud, Michael H.; Miller, Jeff; Obama, Michelle; Sanders, Bernard; Schwartz, Linda S.; Tierney, Helen; Tobias, Constance B.; Turnbull, David O.

Subjects: Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Army, Department of the : Fort Belvoir; Congress : Senate :: Presidential nominations, confirmation process; Legislation, enacted : Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014; Veterans : Access to health and medical care; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Disabled veterans; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans : Homelessness; Veterans : Job training and education assistance; Veterans : Service and dedication; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Veterans Affairs, Department of the : Board of Veterans' Appeals; Veterans Affairs, Department of the : Chief Financial Officer; Veterans Affairs, Department of the : Policy, Assistant Secretary for; Virginia : Fort Belvoir; Virginia : President's visits.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400598.