

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021

Remarks on Signing Veterans Benefits Legislation

November 30, 2021

The President. Well, I think it's still morning. Good morning, everyone. Please——

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. ——please be seated. I feel like we have a quorum in the House. [*Laughter*] I miss the quorums. [*Laughter*]

Vice President Harris, honored guests: I want to thank you all for being here. Secretary McDonough, thank you for your work to ensure that the VA provides world-class care and support for those who bore the battle.

In a moment, I'm going to have the honor of signing into law four bills that the women and men in this room had—have written and gotten passed, bipartisan bills to honor one truly sacred obligation we have as a nation. We have many obligations, but we only have one truly sacred obligation, in my view, and that is prepare those we send into harm's way, care for their families when they're gone, and care for them and their families when they're home.

And that's a lifetime commitment—a lifetime commitment—the Nation owes to every one of our veterans, and it's one that I embrace as Commander in Chief. For me, for Jill, and for the entire Biden family, it's also personal. And it's a commitment that we are helping to keep today because of the leadership of the women and men in this room.

The first bill I will sign requires the Government Accounting [Accountability]* Office to assess whether there are disparities associated with race and ethnicity when it comes to VA benefits and disability ratings. The weapons of war and the nature of the injuries they inflict don't differentiate based on race. And the types of disabilities our veterans carry with them don't differentiate based on race. So the claims approved and the benefits delivered should not differentiate either.

We've heard from veterans of color who, upon returning home from their service, are treated differently from White veterans. This bill will help us understand how this happened, keep better records, expose the facts to the light of day, and allow us to do the necessary work of making sure that all of our Nation's veterans—all of them—are treated with equal dignity and equal equality throughout their entire time, with the consideration being no different for—based on race.

And I want to thank and congratulate Senator Warnock, who is here in the room, who has such a—has been a moral leader in the U.S. Senate since he got here and leading on this issue, as well as Representative Takano, who has done a yeoman's work in the House.

The second bill I'll sign is the Hire Veterans Health Heroes Act. I want to thank Senator Hassan and Senator Braun and Representatives Rice and Latta for their work to help veterans find a way to continue to serve their country.

In 2019, the Inspector General of the VA reported that staff shortages are one of the causes of the many problems we face in veterans care. And at the same time, with our military, there are nearly 200,000 dedicated, well-trained workers in nearly every area of health care: doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians, and physical therapists.

* White House correction.

They understand the health challenges our women and men in uniform face. One thousand—actually, 13,000 of them are separated from Active Duty every single year. And we can do more by helping the separated servicemembers with backgrounds in health care continue their work in health care in the Federal Government at places like the VA. This bill directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to create a program to recruit military medical personnel who have less than a year left in their service to work in Federal health care occupations.

This new program will build upon existing efforts to create a pipeline for former military health professionals. For both our veterans and our military medical personnel, service isn't just what they do, it's who they are. This bill is going to allow those professionals to continue their service to each other and to our Nation.

And the third bill I will sign is the Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness and [for]^{*} Survivors Act. For so many of our servicemembers, their service to us is also about building a better life for themselves and for their families. And part of keeping our commitment to them means helping survivors get the education they need and to fulfill their dreams.

This law ensures that surviving spouses and children of veterans who access the Survivors' and Dependents' Education Assistance program are eligible for in-state tuition wherever they choose to go to school, whether they live in that State or not. I want to recognize Senator Tester and Moran, Representatives Trone and Moore for their work they've done on this bill.

I also want to recognize the very special guest, Kelly McHugh-Stewart. Kelly, where are you? Kelly, thank you for being here. Thank you for being here. And the—she is the daughter of Colonel John M. McHugh. For being here today, I want to thank her.

Kelly, your dad was an American hero, but he wasn't the only one in the family who is a hero. Your work to share your story, to advocate for other surviving families, and to turn loss into progress and understanding is heroic as well. So we thank you for it. Really, thank you, personally.

The final bill I'll sign today is the Protecting Moms Who Served Act. The Senate was—and this—and in the Senate, it was championed by Tammy Duckworth—a mom, a veteran, a Senator—and Senator Susan Collins. And it's also—was one of the pet projects that the Vice President had when she was a United States Senator, and it sticks with her. I don't know how many times I've heard about what we have to do, and she's right. In the House, it was championed by a former nurse, Representative Lauren Underwood, and Representative Bilirakis.

And our country continues to have the highest maternal mortality rates in the developed world, which is hard—it's just—especially among Black and Native American women. For many years, President—Vice President Harris has led the fight to address this tragedy of maternal mortality in our Nation. Her efforts in the Senate are reflected in our Build Back Better framework and our investments in maternal health.

We're going to help expand and diversify the maternal health workforce, improve mental—improve maternal mental health, and bolster community-based programs, train providers, enhance research, and ensure maternal care is coordinated.

As we continue that work, we recognize that women veterans—and there are more than a half a million women veterans in this country under the age of 40—they face additional maternal health challenges. They frequently have other health risks that can complicate pregnancy. For example, expecting moms with physical disabilities or with mental illness are much more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications and have their children prematurely.

^{*} White House correction.

This bill will commission a comprehensive study of maternal health challenges facing veterans and will invest in maternal care coordination programs at the VA. It's an important step in making sure we meet the needs of American mothers who have served.

Earlier this month, I commemorated Veterans Day at Arlington National Cemetery. On that solemn day, we lay a wreath and renew our oath. But keeping faith with American veterans requires much more than laying wreaths or making more oaths. It requires acts. That's what you've done today—all of you—acts. That's why I'm so proud to sign these bills.

May God bless you, and may God protect our troops and their families.

And now I'd like to invite the folks to the stage as I sign the first bill. Thank you very much. Thank you.

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

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:25 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Reps. Kathleen M. Rice and F. Barry Moore; and Michael J. Missal, Inspector General, Department of Veterans Affairs. He also referred to H.R. 5376, the Build Back Better Act. S. 1031, S. 894, S. 1095, and S. 796, approved November 30, were assigned Public Law Nos. 117–66, 117–67, 117–68, and 117–69, respectively.

Categories: Bill Signings and Vetoes : Veterans benefits legislation, signing remarks.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Bilirakis, Gus M.; Braun, Michael K.; Collins, Susan M.; Duckworth, L. Tammy; Harris, Kamala D.; Hassan, Margaret Wood; Latta, Robert E.; McDonough, Denis R.; McHugh-Stewart, Kelly; Missal, Michael J.; Moore, F. Barry; Moran, Gerald W.; Rice, Kathleen M.; Takano, Mark A.; Tester, R. Jon; Trone, David J.; Underwood, Lauren; Warnock, Raphael G.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Civil rights : Racial equality; Congress : Bipartisanship; Health and medical care : Maternal care, improvement efforts; Health and medical care : Mental health programs and services; Health and medical care : Research and development; Legislation, enacted : Colonel John M. McHugh Tuition Fairness for Survivors Act of 2021; Legislation, enacted : Hire Veteran Health Heroes Act of 2021; Legislation, enacted : Protecting Moms Who Served Act of 2021; Legislation, enacted : To require the Comptroller General of the United States to conduct a study on disparities associated with race and ethnicity with respect to certain benefits administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes; Legislation, proposed : Build Back Better Act; Veterans : Benefits; Veterans : Disabled veterans; Veterans : Health and medical care; Veterans : Hiring incentives; Veterans : Job training and education assistance; Veterans : Women veterans; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Inspector General; Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; White House Office : Vice President.

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