

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on the First Anniversary of the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 in Salt Lake City, Utah

August 10, 2023

Hello, hello, hello. Please, have a—take a seat if you have one.

Sarge, thank you for that introduction. You know, it's important for two reasons. One, I have been in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan over 38 times. And I don't think most people know—this audience may know—how many women we have in combat, how many women are not only doing their part, but doing jobs that most people didn't think women would do or could do.

And the Sarge is an example of just that. You know, a Black Hawk helicopter is a—anyway. I won't go into it all. But the point is that, you know, Sarge, you—what happened to you has happened to thousands of people. The Gov and I talked about that earlier—the Governor and I—about what we're doing here.

You know, you and your fellow veterans are the heart, the soul, and the very spine and sinew of this generation. I mean, that's a fact. You know, only 1 percent of you volunteer to protect all of us. That's what it is. And it's all volunteer.

And I want to thank Dr. Angela Williams and the great team here at the Salt Lake City VA for hosting us and for taking care of our heroes.

Mayor Erin Mendenhall, thank you for the passport into the city. I appreciate that opportunity.

And, Governor Spencer Cox, thank you for your hospitality. But much more importantly, thank you for taking care of our veterans and for bringing along your beautiful family.

And by the way, you know, years ago—this is a little ad lib here. But years ago, when John Kerry was the nominee for the—for President of the Democratic Party, he talked with me about the possibility of being Vice President and—on his ticket. And I wasn't—we just—it was a—we were old friends. I said no, I didn't want to be Vice President.

But had I known that as Vice President, I get Secret Service, and had I known that meant my daughters had Secret Service—*[laughter]*—and my granddaughters, I would have fought even harder for him at the time. *[Laughter]*

And now my—I have a bunch of grandchildren. They all have Secret Service, and my daughter has Secret Service. And you know, it's just wonderful. *[Laughter]* I'm not sure what they think about it, but it's just wonderful.

Any rate, thank you very, very much.

Wildfires in Maui, Hawaii

And look, before I begin, I want to say a word about the devastating wildfires that have claimed at least 36 lives in Maui, in Hawaii. I—we have just approved a major disaster declaration of—for Hawaii, which will get aid into the hands of the people desperate—desperately needing help now. They've lost—anyone who's lost a loved one, whose home has been damaged or destroyed is going to get help immediately.

And I've directed that we surge support to these brave firefighters and first responders and emergency personnel working around the clock risking their lives.

I just got off the phone, before I got here, for a long conversation with Governor Josh Green this morning and let him know I'm going to make sure the State has everything it needs from the Federal Government to recover.

The FEMA Administrator Griswell [Criswell; White House correction] will be in Miami tomorrow—in Maui tomorrow. And I've directed her to streamline any process which requests for help and survivors registered for immediate Federal assistance without delay. FEMA is surging disaster assistance personnel on the island, and they're going to help survivors get access to Federal assistance.

And you know, anybody who wants to know out there where to go—if this is televised—that they can go to disasterassistance.gov—disasterassistance.gov—to learn if you're eligible for assistance.

And I've ordered all available Federal assets on the island—including the U.S. Coast Guard, the Navy 3d Fleet, and the U.S. Army—to assist local emergency response crews from the—along with the Hawaiian National Guard. We're working as quickly as possible to fight these fires and evacuate residents and tourists.

In the meantime, our prayers are with the people of Hawaii, but not just our prayers—every asset we have will be available to them. And we've seen—they've seen their home, their business destroyed, and some have lost loved ones. And it's not over yet.

Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022

But now for the reason I'm here today. I've said it many times before—when I started saying it 30 years ago, I got criticized occasionally for saying it. I said: We have many obligations as a nation, but we only have one truly sacred obligation, and that's to equip those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they come home and when they don't.

One year ago today, we met that sacred obligation when I signed—after fighting so damn hard for the PACT Act—to sign it into law. And I want to thank all the veterans organizations for helping make that happen, because it matters.

The PACT Act is one of the most significant laws ever signed to help veterans exposed to toxic materials and their—help their families recover as well as receive compensation.

You remember what we mean by burn pits. You know, when we first using the phrase "burn pits," people kind of looked at us. But a burn pit is what you saw—basically, the giant burn pit, the first one everybody was aware of, was in 9/11 when the buildings came down. Remember all those firemen that died of cancer and how we—they got covered? Well, when firefighters first responded, that's what happened.

Now, the burn pits in Iraq—where we're talking about—and in other countries—in Afghanistan, even in parts of—throughout the Middle East—they're the size of football fields. A hundred—up to 100 yards long, 20 yards to 30 yards wide, and 8 to 10 feet deep. And everything you can imagine is thrown into these pits to incinerate them—the wastes of war: tires, poisonous chemicals, jet fuel, and so much more. Toxic smoke thick with poison spreads through the air and into the lungs of our troops in their hooches, where they lived nearby these facilities.

I know. I've been. I've been there in Iraq and Afghanistan. I've seen them. And you can smell it in the air. You can sometimes see it.

And when these troops came home—many of them the fittest and best trained warriors that we ever sent anywhere—were exposed to these burn pits, they weren't the same. And thousands

of troops and their—they had to live in their hooches not far from—proximity from these burn pits.

The one in Iraq—my son was about 400 yards from one of the burn pits, living there for a year in his hooch. They breathe that toxic material sometimes for months at a time—in the case of my son and his buddies, for an entire year—causing headaches, numbness, dizziness, cancer.

This is not about my son, but just an example of how close it was. My son Beau was one of those—[*inaudible*]. He went the fittest guy in his unit and came home and—and he came home, but died of glioblastoma. It's personal for my family, but it's also personal for so many of you.

Under Secretary—Secretary of the VA McDonough and I just had a long talk. He couldn't be here today, but he can tell you we're determined to address this problem come hell or high water and compensate these veterans and their families who have suffered from the consequence of this tragedy.

It was part of my unity agenda, as I called it, when I did my first State of the Union—last State of the Union to try to bring the country together on things I thought we all could agree on.

First was beating the opioid epidemic, and we're working like hell on that. Tackling the mental health crisis, and there is a mental health crisis in America. Supporting our veterans—supporting our veterans.

Look, I delivered that speech in March of last year. And a few months later in August, with veterans groups making the case and never giving up, the bipartisan PACT Act was on my desk to sign into law. And don't tell me we can't get things done when we work together. Democrats and Republicans worked together to get that done.

In particular, I want to thank Senator Jon Tester, the chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and Representative Mark Taka—excuse me, Takano, as well, the ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, for their leadership. They never stop fighting on behalf of the veterans and their families.

We learned a horrible lesson after Vietnam: how harmful effects of exposure to Agent Orange took years to manifest themselves in veterans, leaving too many veterans unable to access care when they needed it and deserved it. And we had—they had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that that was the cause of their problem, which was difficult to prove in the long term.

That's why I supported the Agent Orange Act of 1991 supporting veterans exposed to the harmful substances in Vietnam.

Well, I didn't want to see that again. The PACT Act means today's veterans and their families won't suffer those same painful, frustrating delays and denials.

And here's what it—the law does: It empowers the Veterans Administration, the VA, to move quicker to determine if a veteran qualifies for the benefits of the law—benefits like monthly disability compensation and regular toxic exposure screenings.

It also means new facilities, new research, and more health care workers at VA hospitals. It includes nearly—and one of the veterans raised this with me today—nearly \$30 million for new outpatient clinics right here in Salt Lake City. Right here.

And for families who have suffered the ultimate loss, it means potential access to life insurance, tuition benefits for their surviving family members, home loan assistance, and monthly stipends—which cannot replace one bread—one of the breadwinners in their home, but it sure in hell can help.

For example, a surviving spouse of a veteran who died from toxic illness with two children could be eligible for roughly \$2,300 a month for the rest of his or her life. I'm proud to announce that over 340,000 veteran survivors are already benefiting from the law just 1 year after it was signed, including over 2,000 veterans here in Utah.

Veterans are getting the—[*applause*—]—veterans are getting the care they deserve in every corner of the country. For example, there's an Army veteran who served in Iraq now receiving care for prostate cancer via the—at the VA in Seattle. He heard about the PACT Act, and he applied for benefits the day I signed the law. Because he's already a VA patient, he didn't need to submit medical records or get separate exams. His application was approved, and he's now received retroactive payments from the date the law was signed.

Another Army veteran, now in New Hampshire National Guard, with multiple deployments to Iraq and Kuwait learned that he had a that a friend and soldier she deployed with were diagnosed with breast cancer. Just in case, she decided to get a toxic exposure screening free at all veterans enrolled in the VA health care. She too was diagnosed with breast cancer. They caught the cancer early, and she's currently being treated for it. And she's been granted 100 percent service-connected eligibility under the PACT Act, tripling her monthly payment benefits.

For—folks, it matters. This matters. Folks, we have a moral obligation. This goes beyond the financial. We have a moral obligation to respond to this. And I'm here today to spread the word so every veteran or surviving family member knows how to access benefits of this law.

And because these conditions have already taken such a toll on so many veterans and their families, I directed the Department of Veterans Affairs to treat all 23 presumptive conditions in this law as applicable immediately, like chronic bronchitis—chronic bronchitis; asthma; many types of cancer, including any type of reproductive cancer; and something we have been fighting for for a long time: veterans-era veterans—Vietnam-era veterans are entitled to compensation for hypertension.

This is now the law. And let me give you an example of why it matters.

The widow of a 28-year Army veteran in Connecticut applied for survivor benefits after her husband died from gastrointestinal cancer. That was before the PACT Act was passed, and her claim was denied. In April of this year, she learned about the PACT Act and reapplied. One month later, because of her husband's cancer, she's now presumed to be a service-connected under the PACT Act. She—claim was approved. Now, she's eligible for survivor's compensation for her son and further his education and the GI Bill.

I'm urging veterans from these decades of war in Vietnam, and Iraq, Afghanistan to enroll in the VA health care, to get screened for toxic exposure, and to promptly file your claim. And for those watching this home—at home, visit VA.gov/PACT—p-a-c-t. VA.gov—I want to say it again—VA.gov/PACT. File a claim or apply for VA health care now.

Or go to your local VA hospital and reach out to the veterans service organization—like Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, the Wounded Warriors Project, the Veterans of Foreign Wars—if you need additional assistance. There is no deadline to submit a claim. But if you want to be eligible to receive retroactive benefits for last year, you have to sign up by Monday.

So apply today. The VA will move as quickly as possible to resolve your claim and get the benefits you deserve.

We're also taking other important steps to help the Nation's veterans and servicemembers. We're helping connect veterans to registered apprentice programs so they can transfer the skills

they learned in the military to good-paying jobs here at home, now that we're having the largest building boom in 40 years.

The VA is launching a Transition Assistance grant program for organizations that help veterans and their spouses find jobs when they leave the military. The unemployment rate for veterans has hit an alltime low. It is now at 2.8 percent—[*applause*]*—*2.8 percent. And we're damn proud of that. We've made that a priority since we got into office.

This spring, I signed an Executive order directing the VA to cut redtape and give veterans who need assistance at home more flexibility in picking who will be their caregiver.

Earlier this summer, I went to North Carolina, and I signed an Executive order at Fort Liberty. It's—calls the most comprehensive set of administrative actions in the history of this—and to support the economic security of military veterans, their spouses, caregivers, and survivors—like making it easier for a military spouse to find a job in the Federal Government, expanding access to childcare for military families.

You know, when I first took office, I signed the American Rescue Plan, which invested \$17 billion for veterans health care, including mental health care and suicide prevention, to deal with the fact that more veterans—more veterans—have been and continue to die of suicide than in battle over the past two decades. More veterans die of suicide.

And all the stories I heard in my home State—people would call up and be looking for help. "My husband, he needs help. He needs"—and couldn't get through. "We'll get back to you." Seventeen—seventeen—a day dying of suicide nationwide. Seventeen a day. Even one veteran dying of suicide, particularly because you couldn't get the help immediately, is one too many.

The VA is doing everything it can do, including expanding mental health screening, increasing access to legal and financial support, hiring more mental health professionals, which was one—where—where's my commander that was here?—one that you brought up. We're hiring more. We're hiring.

Including through a proven program that recruits veterans to help other veterans understand what they're going through to get the help they need.

I can notice—if you can stop for another second. You know, one of the things about the military, you're taught to be tough, stand alone, do what you need to do. And it's awful hard when you're having problems and you think you have a mental health problem to ask for help. It's really hard.

There is no difference between having a mental health problem and breaking your arm or your leg. No difference. And you should not be worried about asking for help any more than you would if you had broke your leg. We have to make sure people know there's nothing to be ashamed of in seeking that help.

You know, think about this. I don't know how many—of my tens of thousands of miles that I've traveled through war zones, I don't know anybody who would not wonder whether or not what these veterans have seen caused—could cause posttraumatic stress. It's enormous. It's an enormous problem. They just need help to get through this.

We're working to the end veterans homelessness as well. No one should be homeless in this country, especially not those who served it. Period.

Last year, the VA found permanent housing for over 40,000 veterans and set a goal of permanently housing at least another 38,000 this year. And I'm proposing that the Congress join in and triple the number of rental assistance vouchers for extremely low-income veterans—[*applause*]*—*now. Now. Now.

In securing a bipartisan budget agreement earlier this summer and preventing an economic collapse, we stopped draconian cuts in veteran services. That agreement including dedicated funding for our veterans health so that the health care of those who served so bravely in this country won't be used as a bargaining chip going forward to try to get other things cut.

The agreement also fully funds the PACT Act and expands nutrition benefits that will now be available to our veterans. After serving this Nation, no veteran should go hungry. No veteran should go hungry.

Just 2 weeks ago, I signed an Executive order to significantly strengthen how the military handles sexual assault. We're moving the authority for addressing sexual assault claims to a specialized independent military unit outside the chain of command. That was a long time in coming. But it's a big deal.

And we all owe a thanks to Senator Gillibrand in New York for her leadership in this because she did not give up until she got it done.

And there is more to do. But we've made a lot of progress. And we've got to keep going.

Let me close to this. After I signed the PACT Act into law last August, I handed the pen—there is a tradition when you sign a piece of legislation, particularly a significant piece, you have the people who are responsible for getting it done for you on the stage with you when you sign it. And you traditionally give the pen to the most consequential person who helped that happen.

We got finished, and I signed—the pen to the widow and daughter of Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson, a veteran for whom the bill was named. His widow was also my wife's guest at the State of the Union. A family that suffered the greatest of losses, but turned their pain into purpose.

And I handed the pen not to the mother, but to Sergeant Robinson's little girl. A lovely little kid sitting next to me. And she looked at me, and she said: "Thank you for my daddy." "Thank you for my daddy." I think she was talking for all of us, everyone who fought so hard and came together to keep our promise to the veterans and to keep faith with our heroes. That's courage. That's character.

That's who all of you are. Not hyperbole. I want to thank you all—Democrat, Republican, Independents—for your work to get this bill to my desk and to get it signed.

As I said, I was going to sign that bill come hell or high water, no matter how long I had to keep the Congress in.

It's just another reminder of what we know to be true: We are the United States of America. There's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we decide to work together to get it done. We never fail when we do that. Never on any major issue.

So God bless you all. And let's continue to work together. And God save our veterans.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:42 a.m. at the George E. Wahlen Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center. In his remarks, he referred to Sgt. Erica Smith, Army veteran, cancer survivor, and beneficiary of the PACT Act; Angela D. Williams, Medical Center Director, VA Salt Lake City Health Care System; Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John F. Kerry, in his former capacity as the 2004 Democratic Presidential nominee; and Danielle Robinson, widow of Sgt. First Class Heath Robinson, and their daughter Brielle. He also referred to his grandchildren Naomi K. Biden Neal, R. Hunter, Natalie, Finnegan, Maisy, and Beau Biden, and Navy Joan Roberts.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022, first anniversary in Salt Lake City, UT.

Locations: Salt Lake City, UT.

Names: Biden Neal, Naomi K.; Biden, Ashley; Biden, Beau; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, R. Hunter, II; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Cox, Spencer J.; Criswell, Deanne Bennett; Gillibrand, Kirsten E.; Green, Joshua B.; Kerry, John F.; McDonough, Denis R.; Mendenhall, Erin; Roberts Navy Joan; Robinson, Brielle; Robinson, Danielle; Smith, Erica; Takano, Mark A.; Tester, R. Jon; Williams, Angela D.

Subjects: Economic stimulus legislation; Federal agencies, employment opportunities for military spouses; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); Hawaii, Governor; Hawaii, wildfires in Maui; Mental health programs and services; Military and veteran spouses, military caregivers, and survivors, efforts to advance economic security; Opioid epidemic, efforts to combat; Secretary of Veterans Affairs; Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022, first anniversary; Sexual assault and harassment; U.S. servicemembers, environmental exposures in war zones; Unemployment rate; Utah, Governor; Utah, President's visit; Veteran suicide rate; Veterans benefits; Veterans Health Administration; Veterans homelessness, efforts to combat; Veterans service organizations; Veterans, health and medical care; Veterans, service and dedication.

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