

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks on the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 in Nashua, New Hampshire
May 21, 2024

The President. Well, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Let me push this in. I pushed in the stand.

Hey, guys. How you doing? Good to see you. Hope Mommy and Daddy are promising you a real gift for doing this. *[Laughter]*

Folks, I want to say—Sergeant, I want to thank you for your service and for the introduction of me. I appreciate it very much. And congratulations on your promotion. And I know your whole family is so proud.

You know, when my son Beau was promoted to major in Iraq, I happened to be there shortly afterwards. And I said, "Now you're a field-grade officer." He said, "I have no illusions, Dad, who runs the Army: those folks with stripes on their shoulders." And you do. I want to thank you.

Look, I want to thank Senator Maggie Hassan, Senator Jeanne Shaheen, and Annie—Congresswoman Annie Kuster for their work on behalf of veterans.

And former Governor John Lynch is here with his Dr. Susan—his wife, Dr. Susan, who—their friendship for years has meant a great deal to me and to my family.

And, Secretary McDonough, thank you for your leadership, because it really matters.

To all the veterans and families that are here today, I want to say thank you. We could never fully thank you for all the sacrifices you've made. Only 1 percent of the American population has risked everything to defend our other 99 percent of us. One percent, that's it. And we owe you. We owe you big.

I've long said, and initially got in trouble for saying it, that—about 30 years ago—that America has a lot of obligations, but only one truly sacred obligation—sacred obligation. And that's to prepare those we send into harm's way and to care for them and their families when they come home, and if they don't come home, care for their families.

Nearly 2 years ago, we took a giant step toward fulfilling that obligation when I fought for and signed the PACT Act. It was one of the most significant laws ever. It surprised me anybody voted against it, but a bunch did. We set up to help millions of veterans who were exposed to toxic substances during their services.

And today I'm proud to announce the VA just granted its one millionth—one millionth—ACT Act claim. One million. A major milestone, providing \$5.7 billion [billion; White House correction] in benefits to 890,000 veterans and their families so far in hand, including 3,000 here in New Hampshire.

It matters, because too many servicemembers have not only braved the battlefields, but they also—while breathing in toxic fumes and burn—from burn pits and other means. You know, pits as big as a football field—100 yards long, 10 feet deep—that incinerate all the wastes of war, everything from tires to chemicals and jet fuel and so much more—so much more. Smoke thick with poison spreading through the air, into the lungs of many thousands of troops who lived and worked near them—in one of those burn pits.

I know. I saw them in Iraq and Afghanistan. In my many times in and out, you could smell it in the air.

And when our troops came home, many of the fittest, best trained warriors we've ever seen—we saw, like in 9/11 fighters—firefighters, they were incredibly helpful in my—making my case. Because what happened? Look at all those firefighters that died of cancer as a consequence of being exposed to those toxic fumes. Headaches, numbness, dizziness, trouble breathing, cancer, brain cancer.

Folks, you've suffered long enough. You shouldn't have to prove that your illness came from their service. But thanks to the PACT Act, you don't have to prove it now.

My son Beau was one of those veterans. So this is personal to me and my family and to his family and his children so—and so many of yours. So I took office; I determined that, come hell or high water, we were going to protect the heroes who protect our Nation.

We learned a terrible lesson after Vietnam as those harmful effects of Agent Orange took years to manifest and left too many veterans without the care they deserved, because they had to prove that every illness they had was a consequence of Agent Orange, which was often too hard to do.

That's why I cosponsored the Agent Orange Act as a Senator way back in 1991: to support veterans exposed to toxic substances in Vietnam. That's why I pushed to pass the PACT Act so today's veterans don't suffer the same painful, frustrating delays and denials. That's why we continue to work around the clock to get veterans benefits they deserve and get them now.

Many of you and your family members and advocates fought for years to make this happen. Folks literally slept on the Capitol steps the week we were fighting this out the—in the Senate to get it done. They literally slept on the steps.

After 41 Republican Senators—the vast majority of that caucus—voted against the bill, against expanding health care for disabled veterans, New Hampshire's congressional leaders worked hard to help push it through. And they all, the Senators and Congresswoman, stepped up.

Since then, we've launched the biggest outreach campaign in VA history to make sure veterans in every State, Territory, and area know what the law does.

First, it expands eligibility for VA health care. Today, toxic-exposed veterans who served during any conflict, not just the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, can enroll. Over 145,000 veterans are now getting care as a result of that one change. The law also provides regular toxic-exposure screenings to catch problems early when they can be dealt with.

It expands access to disability benefits, including monthly payments for folks who have fallen sick. And we've made those benefits effective immediately—no wait, immediately.

The law is—look, the bottom line is, people not being sure we'd get it done without a lot of complication.

The law invests in new facilities, new research, more health care workers at VA hospitals. And I'm committed to making the long-needed upgrades in the facilities—the VA's facilities right here in New Hampshire.

For families who have lost a loved one, the PACT Act means monthly stipends of about \$3,000 a month for a surviving spouse with two children. And by the way, the surviving spouse gets those benefits for the rest of their lives. It means tuition benefits for children to go to college, to get job training.

I'll never make up for the lost—you lost a piece of your soul: a husband, wife, son, daughter. But we owe it to folks, all of the—everyone—everyone we can to help put their lives back together, because it's tough stuff. In America, we leave no veteran behind. That's the motto.

On my way here today, I met with veterans named Lisa Clark over at the VFW. She served in the Air Force, where she met her husband, a combat engineer who served in Vietnam. They were together 42 years. He was exposed to Agent Orange during his time in Vietnam. And last year, he passed away from cancer.

Thanks to the PACT Act, the burden was not on Lisa to prove the Agent Orange caused his cancer. And thanks to that, the PACT Act, Lisa now receives \$1,600 a month in survivor benefits. It doesn't take away the pain of losing her husband, but it allowed her to keep living in the same home they shared for 20 years.

Service is a tradition in Lisa's family and so many of your families that are in this room today. Her dad Anthony joined the Navy when he was 18 years old, served in World War II. He's now 96 years old, and I think he's here in the room today. Where are you, Dad? *[Applause]* Thank you.

Like my deceased father-in-law, as we say in the Catholic church, "No purgatory for this guy." Five daughters. *[Laughter]* Straight to Heaven.

And by the way, I say to every young man thinking of getting married: Marry into a family of five or more daughters. I did. My wife is the oldest of five sisters. You know why? One of them will always love you. *[Laughter]* Not the same one. One of them is always—be on your side. That's the biggest advantage of marrying into five daughters. *[Laughter]*

Lisa's brother-in-law and nephew also served in Iraq and Afghanistan. They were exposed to toxic burn kits [pits; White House correction]. Because they're both fighting lung—now, because of that, they're fighting lung and heart disease. But the PACT Act is finally getting them the VA benefits they deserve.

Lisa has called it a "game changer," and says vets—volunteers—and she volunteers at the VA in Manchester to, quote, as she says, "to give something back." She's already given a lot. Lisa, you spent years giving back. It's time we have your back and have it now.

And by the way, that's literally what the PACT Act does.

I'm asking everyone to help spread the word. As a—go to [VA.gov/PACT](https://www.va.gov/PACT)—P-A-C-T—and apply for VA health care, get screened for toxic exposure, and file a claim. Or go to your VA or veterans organization for help. They have staff from the VA here today to help sign you up if you need that help.

Folks, in the last year, the VA delivered more benefits and processed more overall claims than ever in the entire history of the VA. And since I took office, we have passed over 30 bipartisan laws supporting veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors. We've increased resources to end veteran homelessness; hired and trained hundreds of additional mental health providers, specifically to help veterans end the silent scourge of veteran suicide; and—while recruiting veterans to help other veterans to understand what's going on and what they're going through.

Asking for help is a sign of strength. And reaching out to your fellow vets to save lives—it's not a weakness.

We're also working to protect veterans from scammers who target their benefits. No one should be defrauded in a nation they defended.

You know, and through my wife Jill's work in Joining Forces, we've taken the most comprehensive actions in history to expand economic opportunity for military spouses and veteran spouses, caregivers, and survivors. That means jobs, trainings, childcare, eldercare, and more.

Today's veterans unemployment rate is near a record low of 3.2 percent as a consequence of all this. We have a lot more to do, but our plan is working.

Let me close with this. After I signed the PACT into—PACT Act into law, I handed the pen that I signed it with—which is a tradition to the most—person most responsible for the legislation—to a widow and her daughter of the late Sergeant First Class Heath Robertson [Robinson; White House correction]. They fought for years to see it passed. And the—finally, the family that suffered the greatest loss turned its pain into purpose to help others.

That's courage. That's character. That's America. We came together to keep our promises.

Veterans, you are the solid steel spine of our Nation, and that's not hyperbole. Your families are the courageous heart. Generations of patriots have stood on the frontlines of freedom, each one of them—each one—a link in a chain of honor stretching back to our founding days.

Just as you have done your duty to America in the past, you're doing it—they're—we're now, finally, beginning to do our duty to you.

The United States of America—that's who we are, and there's nothing—nothing—beyond our capacity when we act together. We've got to remember who we are. We're the United States of America. Nothing is beyond our capacity.

May God bless our veterans, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:33 p.m. at the Westwood Park YMCA. In his remarks, he referred to MSG Nicole Lyon, USA, of Hudson, NH; Anthony Catuogno, father, and Paula Catuogno, Susan DeSantis, Judith Goodwin, and Joy Greene, sisters, of Merrimack, NH, resident Lisa M. Clark; and Columbus, OH, resident Danielle Robinson and her daughter Brielle. He also referred to his grandchildren Natalie P. and R. Hunter Biden II, children of the President's deceased son Joseph R. "Beau" Biden III; and his sisters-in-law Bonny and Kelly Jacobs, Jan Hartman, and Kim Snow.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 in Nashua, NH.

Locations: Nashua, NH.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Catuogno, Anthony; Catuogno, Paula; Clark, Lisa M.; DeSantis, Susan; Goodwin, Judith; Greene, Joy; Hartman, Jan; Hassan, Margaret Wood; Jacobs, Bonny; Jacobs, Kelly; Kuster, Ann McLane; Lynch, John; Lynch, Susan; Lyon, Nicole; McDonough, Denis R.; Robinson, Brielle; Robinson, Danielle; Shaheen, C. Jeanne; Snow, Kim.

Subjects: Military families; Military spouses, employment and job training support; New Hampshire, President's visit; Secretary of Veterans Affairs; September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks; Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022; U.S. servicemembers, environmental exposures in war zones; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Unemployment rate; Veterans benefits; Veterans Health Administration; Veterans, health and medical care; Veterans, mental health services, improvement efforts; Veterans, service and dedication.

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