

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2025*

**Remarks at the Department of Defense Commander in Chief Farewell Ceremony at Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall, Virginia**

*January 16, 2025*

Thank you.

Every time I'm here, it's made me so damn proud to be an American. *[Laughter]* And it must all of you as well. One percent of you are defending 99 percent of us. We owe you. We owe you big.

Just over 240 years ago, George Washington gave his farewell address to the Continental Army. Still astonished by their victory and by their unity, Washington asked, and I quote, "Who that was not a witness could imagine that men who came from different parts of the continent would instantly become one patriotic band of brothers?"

That's what you are: one patriotic band of brothers.

Vice President Harris, Jill, Doug, Secretary Austin, Secretary [Chairman; White House correction] Brown—two of the best decisions I ever made in my career, I might add—Service Secretaries—*[applause]*—Members of the Congress, and, most importantly, this patriotic band of servicemembers before me: Serving as your Commander in Chief has been the greatest honor of my life.

And while I'm deeply grateful for your thanks and affection, I'm here to thank you—thank you for your service to our Nation and for allowing me to bear witness to your courage, your commitment, your character.

As I listened to the choir sing, I thought about it. You all represent what America is: character, honesty, integrity, commitment. Like Washington, you've left me astonished. And I mean it.

Over the years, I've frequently seen you in action in war zones in Bosnia, Baghdad, Fallujah, Kabul, I wasn't going to bore the hell out of you, but—*[laughter]*—Helmand, Kandahar, and other places.

I remember one trip to Afghanistan as Vice President. I was at a forward operating base, Wardak Province, which is in eastern Afghanistan. I was asked by a commanding officer to pin a Bronze Star on a soldier for his heroism. The soldier's teammate was hit while driving in a Humvee. And this soldier did everything possible to rescue his colleague from the burning flames.

But when I went to pin the medal on him, the soldier looked at me and said: "I don't want it. I don't want it. He died. I don't want it." And, in that moment, all I could think about was the encourage and—incredible courage and humility and moral compass that this soldier had, that all of you have.

You're the—this is not hyperbole. You are simply the greatest fighting force in the history of the world—in the history of the world. That's a fact. That's not hyperbole, that's a fact.

And there's never been a time in history when we've asked our military to do so many different things, so many places all at the same time. And I want to be clear: You have done all—all—these missions with strength and maybe even, importantly, with integrity.

When I asked you to end our Nation's longest war, you rose to the occasion, evacuating Americans, allies, and our Afghan partners; accomplishing the largest airlift in military history; and ending a war with the same courage that defined American service in Afghanistan for over 20 years.

I believe history will reflect that it was the right thing to do, but I know—I know it was hard. After decades of losing your brothers and sisters, including the withdrawal, the pain was still real.

And it was for me as well. Every day I still carry—every single day——

*[At this point, the President held up a piece of paper.]*

——it's my schedule. On the back of the schedule, every single day at the top since I've been here, it says, "U.S."—"Daily U.S. troops in Afghanistan"—"U.S. troops that have died in Afghanistan: 2,465." Not "over 2,000"—"2,465." "Troops wounded: 20,769."

And every day, we'll honor their sacrifice for continuing a mission for which they gave their lives: fighting terrorism, defending our homeland, and protecting the American people.

Six months after that war ended, when Russia began its largest war in Europe since World War II, I asked you to help defend Ukraine. You didn't hesitate. You kept Ukraine in the fight; trained Ukrainian soldiers and pilots, troops; bolstered NATO's eastern flank; and above all, you showed the world, America stands up for freedom, stands with our friends. America stands strong with our allies. We never bend down. We bend down to no one, certainly not Putin.

And now, nearly 3 years later, Putin has failed to take Kyiv, failed to make large territorial gains, and failed to break NATO.

As a matter of a fact, when I spoke to him on the phone, I talked—he talked about—he wanted us to be the Finland of Europe. And I pointed out to him at the time, for real, that you'll not only get the Finland of Europe, you're going to get the Finlandization—not of Europe—you're going to see Europe joining NATO—Finland joining NATO, Sweden joining NATO.

On America's watch, dictators do not get to do whatever the hell they want.

Then, following Hamas's terrorism on October the 7th, I asked you to——

*[The President turned around and addressed those positioned behind him.]*

Excuse my back, by the way. *[Laughter]* My mother would be very upset. *[Laughter]*

I asked you to deploy to the Middle East. Again, you stepped up, pulling long nights and long deployments to weaken Hamas, to defend Israel against unprecedented attacks on [from; White House correction] Iran.

Imagine had we not. If we don't lead the world, who will lead the world? Who?

And twice, you stood up to the attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea. Last year, I spoke with the women and men aboard the destroyer that took down the first Houthi attacks. It was the USS *Carney*. And I want you—to tell you all what I told them: We owe you. We owe you.

And back in May—yesterday I announced—proud to announce the cease-fire, the hostage deal between Israel and Hamas. The road to that deal was not easy. It was 8 months ago I laid down the elements of that deal, in May—embraced by countries around the world, because they know we say what we mean; endorsed overwhelmingly by the U.N. Security Council.

It's taken 8 months of nonstop, relentless effort by my administration to get it done, but because of you—all of you standing behind me—because of you, because of so many diplomats and defense professionals, we kept the pressure on Hamas, and we got it done. We got it done.

And finally, when I asked you to strengthen America's position in the Indo-Pacific, in the middle of all the other conflicts and crises, you said, "No problem." You kept China in check.

Remember when we take office—took office, China was over—going to overcome the United States economically and politically by 2030. Everybody wrote that, except here in this building.

The skies open. The seas free. And our allies close.

You established our first trilateral defense partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom; our first trilateral partnership that some—we said couldn't get done—with Japan and the Philippines; and our first trilateral partnership between Japan and South Korea. Remember that? Camp David. They said we couldn't do it.

It wasn't me. It was America. We did it. That's what America does—people know America is acting out of character. Our Nation is so much and so many others as—did—our Nation has asked so much of so many others as well.

Doctors and nurses helping servicemembers to learn to walk again, eat again, speak again. The National Guard members who dropped everything to help their fellow Americans during the fires and hurricanes. The marines guarding Embassies around the world. The scientists making sure we have an edge over adversaries. Interpreters who make our missions possible.

And perhaps most importantly, your families. They sacrifice so much. And I might add, the doctors and nurses.

Excuse a point of personal privilege, as they used to say in the Senate—came home one—I commuted every day—every single day, over two million one hundred thousand miles on Amtrak because I lost my family when I first got here.

My oldest son—one day, I went home—he was the attorney general—he said, "Dad, what are you doing Friday?" I said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "I want you to pin my bars on." I said, "What?" I said, "You're married with two children." He said, "I know, Dad, but someone has got to go."

He spent a year in Iraq, won the Bronze Star, conspicuous service medal. But like many others, he was exposed to those burn pits, which are within about a half a mile of where he was—where he bunked. He had stage-4 glioblastoma, like so many other of our folks.

And I watched the nurses and the doctors who took care of him for so long.

And by the way, I want to take a moment to speak to all military spouses, kids, and parents here today. Most Americans never see the sacrifices that you make every single day. They'll never see all those holidays and birthdays with an empty seat at the dinner table because mom or dad was deployed. They'll never see all the moves you had to make to new States, to new schools, to new jobs. But I see it, and Jill saw it.

She made it her life's work. She's done everything big and small, from helping military spouses find childcare and build their own careers, by hanging photos of deployed moms and dads outside classrooms of those National Guard folks, because then, on every holiday, every time there's—something is going on, their moms or dads weren't there, but then—but no one ever mentioned it. She started getting into every classroom in America to put a picture of a deployed mom or dad outside the classroom.

Even this morning she held an event for—with Joining Forces, an historic White House initiative to support military and veterans' families, because, as the poet John Milton wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait." "They also serve who only stand and wait."

So, for the last time as Commander in Chief, I want to say thank you, thank you, thank you to all the families. We owe you.

I've long said, as a nation, we have many obligations. But I said we only have one truly sacred obligation, and that's to prepare those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they come home and when they don't.

Over the last 4 years, Kamala and I have worked to make good that obligation. We passed more than 40 bipartisan laws to support you, including something I felt so strongly about: the passage of the PACT Act. I drafted that law, and we passed it. Now it's already helped over 1 million servicemembers and their survivors, their children have access to everything from college to health care.

These people were exposed to toxins—in my generation, to Agent Orange; my son's generation, to burn pits. But we had to prove that what you had—what's your disease, all the brain damage, all the brain cancers—were a direct consequence of those toxins or Agent Orange.

But we changed that. And I want to publicly thank the 9/11 Commission. All those folks, all those firefighters who were so badly, badly damaged because of the fumes and the toxins associated with the—9/11.

And those of you who are the Vietnam generation—finally, all you had to prove is that stuff dropped on you, and it didn't cause—they didn't have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt it caused your disease. Just state the fact, and you're covered.

We've invested over a trillion dollars in our defense industrial base. In real dollars, that's more than America did in any 4-year period during the cold war.

We also invested record resources to fight the scourge of military suicide. No more calling and saying: "My husband needs help. He needs help." You get an answer.

We fought—[inaudible]—we brought veterans homelessness to record lows, made historic changes in the military justice system, which has reduced the rates of sexual assault for the first time in nearly a decade.

We ended the ban on transgender service. We took landmark steps to create more economic opportunities for military spouses. We expanded opportunities for women in combat roles. And I'm proud to have appointed the first woman as a service chief in the history of this country. Clap for that, folks, because she deserves it. [Applause]

I don't know about the rest of you guys, but the women in my family are a hell of a lot smarter than the men in my family. [Laughter]

Look, if there's one thing I hope to take away from today, it's this—this is not hyperbole: You're truly the finest fighting force in the history of the world. That's not hyperbole. That's true.

Everything I and others have asked of you, you've done—you've done—with honor, commitment, grit, and guts.

Let me close with a final request. I say it not as your President or Commander in Chief; I say it as a man who spent 50 years of his life serving his country in a different way: Remember your oath.

My son, Major Beau Biden, used to call it "home base." That's a set of principles, of values that give you light in darkness, that guide you.

It's true that the military has the best weapons, the best training in the world. We have the most cutting-edge ships, planes, and subs. We have the smartest and most well-trained force on Earth.

That's all critical, but that alone is not what makes us strong. This is not what brought Washington's "band of brothers" together all those years ago. It's our values. I mean this sincerely. It's our values—American values. Our commitment to honor, to integrity, to unity, to protecting and defending not a person or a party or a place, but an idea, literally, unlike—as a student of history, I can say unlike—any other in human history.

And that idea is: The United States of America is unique in the world. Virtually every other nation in the world is based on geography, ethnicity, ethnicity, or religion, or some defining feature. But we're the only nation in the world—only nation in history built on an idea—an idea—an idea that we're all created equal.

We know the words by heart. We're endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. That's the idea that generations of servicemembers have fought for, an idea you have sworn an oath to defend.

As a nation, we've never fully lived up to that idea, but we've never, ever, ever walked away from it. And our country is counting on you to ensure that that will always be true.

As I said when I began, 1 percent of you defend 99 percent of the people across this Nation. That's why you all deserve a special place in our hearts and in God's heart.

May God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:01 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Q. "C.Q." Brown, Jr., USAF; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; and Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard Adm. Linda L. Fagan, USCG. He also referred to his grandchildren Natalie P. Biden and R. Hunter Biden II. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 17.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Commander in Chief farewell ceremony at Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall, VA.

*Locations:* Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall, VA.

*Names:* Austin, Lloyd J., III; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, R. Hunter, II; Brown, Charles Q. "C.Q.," Jr.; Emhoff, Douglas C.; Fagan, Linda L.; Harris, Kamala D.; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich.

*Subjects:* Afghanistan, withdrawal of U.S. military forces; AUKUS trilateral security partnership; China, economic growth and development; Finland, North Atlantic Treaty Organization accession; Gaza, conflict with Israel; Gaza, hostages held by Hamas; Hamas political-paramilitary organization; Indo-Pacific, economic and security cooperation; Iran, missile and drone attacks on Israel; Israel, attacks by Hamas of October 7, 2023; Israel, Iranian missile and drone attacks; Israel, military operations in Gaza; Japan, relations with Philippines; Japan, relations with South Korea; Japan, relations with U.S.; Joint Chiefs of Staff; Military families; Military spouses, employment and job training support; National Guard; North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Philippines, relations with Japan; Philippines, relations with U.S.; Red Sea attacks on commercial shipping; Russia, conflict in Ukraine; Russia, President; Secretary of Defense; Sexual assault and harassment; South Korea, relations with Japan; South Korea, relations with U.S.; Suicide prevention efforts; Sweden, North Atlantic Treaty Organization accession; U.S. Coast Guard; U.S. servicemembers, environmental exposures in war zones; U.S. servicemembers, health and medical care; U.S. servicemembers, service and dedication; Ukraine, Russian invasion and airstrikes; Ukraine, U.S. assistance; Veterans, mental health services, improvement efforts;

Vice President; Virginia, Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall; Virginia, President's visit; Yemen, Houthi rebel group.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD202500079.