

Aug. 17 / Administration of George Bush, 1992

Remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana

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Thank you all so much. I'm proud to be back with you. This time I'll remember Pearl Harbor Day, too. [Laughter] May I salute Bob Wallace and thank him for that warm introduction; and salute Diane Wallace; say a special hello to a man who's doing a great job for this State and for our country in the Senate, Senator Dan Coats, and his lovely wife, Marcia, over here who flew out with us. I also want to salute our incoming chief, and I say "ours" because I am a member, a courageous leader in his own right, Jack Carney. Just had the pleasure of meeting with Jack and Joanne and the president of your ladies auxiliary who I also just met, Mary Sears, and Mary's husband, Sam. You've got a good first team.

There's two other true heroes I want to mention. If they haven't spoken, you're in for a treat. But General Jack Galvin is one of the greatest soldiers this country ever had. He just finished up as head of our NATO forces and did a superb job. And of course, next to him, or right down one from him, you all know Senator McCain, who gave many years of his life fighting for his country, spending several years in a prison camp, an outstanding Member of the United States Senate.

Bob Wallace invited me here. He said your members wanted to hear from a leader with charisma and popularity, whose words are revered from coast to coast. Unfortunately, Barbara wanted me to speak. But I'm delighted she's here with me.

Well, as you may know, I'm on my way to Houston to the Republican National Convention. When I saw the size of this crowd, I thought about giving a dress rehearsal of that Houston speech, complete with a few partisan political observations. But then I got to thinking about you guys. You don't need to hear a political speech. You've already sacrificed enough for your country. [Laughter] So instead, I'd like to talk a little bit about where our Nation has been and where we're headed together.

As we gather here today, the cold war

is over. For more than 40 years, our GI Joes and Janes hit the ground and sucked the dust in faraway places like North Africa and Normandy, Pork Chop Hill and Ia Drang Valley. Back then, we called you heroes. Today, we call you winners. If anyone tells you that imperial communism fell on its own, tell them that you helped punch it in the gut and sent it tumbling back down the back stairs of history. Each of you who served, each of you, won the battle for humanity's heart and soul.

What a group we've put forth, these sons and daughters of Paterson and Peoria, you who wrote, some of you, "Kilroy was here" on the walls of the German stalags and left signs in the Iraqi desert that said, "I saw Elvis"—[laughter]—and you who sang "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" on the roads outside London and listened to the Beatles with Chris Noel and Adrian Cronauer in Saigon.

Goering, Hermann Goering, thought the American fighting forces were a pushover. We showed him. Kim Il-Song in Korea thought he could take us. Wrong again. And Saddam Hussein miscalculated. He thought we'd grown soft over the years. He didn't think we'd commit our Armed Forces. He misread the will of the American people, and he didn't believe we would do what it would take to win. But our men and women showed him. To put it real simple: We kicked a little Baghdad bully.

Now I have a special word for those who served in Vietnam, and I know we have many here who did. That war was controversial. Many refused to serve. The Government didn't go all out to win. You were fighting with one hand tied behind your back, and still, you fought with courage and with valor.

But your Nation, when that war ended, never appropriately said thanks. Then 20 years later, America was called to fight again, and this time we did what was needed to win. We fought quickly; we fought with purpose. And when the Desert

Storm troops came home, a wondrous thing happened. America saluted, unanimously saluted, not just those heroes but our forgotten heroes, the men and women who served in Vietnam. The tribute was genuine. It was heartfelt, and it came from every corner of this Nation. And so, let me say this: It was long overdue. God bless those of you who served in that troubled war.

As we all know, in every encounter, from World War II to Desert Storm, for every one of us on the front lines, there were other Americans supporting us at home, fathers and mothers and sisters, brothers, neighbors, who said the prayers, sent the cookies, and watched the mailbox. Over the years, together we footed a bill of over \$4 trillion to pay for all the tanks and ships and missiles. And so, let's not forget the unsung hero of the cold war, the American taxpayer.

Why did we do it? Why did we make the sacrifice? If you ask me, we shed our blood and spent our treasure because we believed enough in our American ideals to defend them. Today, those ideals, your ideals, are triumphant around the entire globe. In Germany, a wall has fallen. In Moscow, citizens troop to the polls. Think about this: In just the past 4 years, more people have taken the first breath of freedom than in any time in all of human history. You made history, and you should be proud of that. This is something major and important.

But there is a method to our unselfishness. Calvin Coolidge defined patriotism as "standing up for yourself by standing up for your country." We fought so our children don't have to fight.

Remember that awful movie of several years ago—some of you may well remember it; Barbara and I do—"The Day After"? It brought the horror of the aftermath of a nuclear explosion home to a small Kansas suburb. People gathered in churches and lecture halls to watch it in fear together. Some called it a documentary of the future. Today, it doesn't even belong in the science fiction bin of movie rental stores. Because of your sacrifice, the nuclear nightmare has receded, and our kids and our grandkids now sleep in the sweet sunshine of peace, no longer afraid of nuclear war. You helped

do that.

So this is the progress in which we take pride. It's the progress that you've brought to the world and to our children. And yet, the question today is: What do we do next? We can start by remembering something John Kennedy once said: "A nation reveals itself not only by the men and women it produces, but by the men and women it remembers."

I understand right in here what makes military service so special. Military service is the great leveler. My own Navy squadron included farm boys and city hustlers, athletes, bookworms, preacher's kids, Army brats. Together we experienced the tingling excitement of that sport of kings when I first went into the service, picking up cigarette butts. [Laughter] Now, later we felt the knots in our stomach from our first carrier landing and the heaviness in our hearts from spending our first Hanukkah or Christmas without our loved ones and the horrible, sickening feeling of watching our buddies go down in battle, never to return.

These memories are etched in my mind, as they are etched in yours. No matter that the cold war is over, no matter how places like Guadalcanal and Hamburger Hill recede in our memory, our Nation can never and must never forget. As long as I am President, I make this solemn promise: We will always stand by those who stood up for America.

That means keeping in mind a lesson that every soldier and sailor knows in his heart: Weakness tempts aggression. With the cold war over, I have put forth a responsible plan to cut defense spending, cut it to the level recommended by General Galvin's former colleagues, our true military experts. But in this political year, some will want to go further, a lot further. One plan offers to cut 4 times more than what our experts say is responsible.

Let me say this. In the sands of Kuwait, our sons and daughters showed that courage is hereditary, but courage will be of no use if fighter planes can only be found in museums and our ships are all in mothballs. When it comes to defending our country, my loyalty lies not with the Gallup polls but with our young people who must gallop in

the way of danger. We simply must never go back to the hollow army of the late seventies. I stand with the marines, the soldiers, the sailors, the airmen, the guardsmen. We can never ask these men and women to stand in harm's way and then tie one arm behind their back. As long as I am Commander in Chief, I will stand for our Armed Forces, and I will keep the United States of America strong, so I can tell the American people our national security is second to none.

We owe you more than a strong America abroad. We owe you a strong America at home, an America that lives up to the dream that you defended, where you can get work, and protect your family's well-being. Just as you can't build a home without a hammer, you can't build a dream without a job. Some say the way to create jobs is with more taxes; I disagree. I have a plan to cut Government spending and use incentives to get this economy moving again. So far, being very candid, that plan is blocked by the Congress. But this fall, with your help, I intend to change all of that.

I have a special concern for those who are caught in the transition of our economy, for example, veterans who once worked the turrets of a tank and are now getting used to the keyboards of a high-tech economy. So I have advanced a national strategy to retrain our workers, especially those in the defense-related industries. I have asked our leader, Bob Wallace, to come to Washington and help lead that job training effort in the veterans community. I'm asking the Senate to confirm Bob as Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training. And he will do a first-class job.

Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training, that's just a fancy title that really means "Potomac pitbull for veterans' rights." [Laughter] If anyone tries to forget the vet, Bob and I are going to be there to clamp down on their arm.

Now, jobs is one priority; health care, another. Our health care system is broken today, and we all know it. Costs are rising too fast. Too many people can't get coverage. Some say it's time to throw up our

arms and let the Government take it over. Well, I have a different plan, a way to get at the real causes of skyrocketing costs, like faulty insurance programs, piles of paperwork, and way too many frivolous lawsuits. We're suing each other too much instead of caring for each other enough in this country.

But let me make a commitment to you this morning. I am proud of what we have accomplished together to strengthen our veterans health care system, proud of the specialized health care centers that we've created and the new outpatient clinics. I am proud of our new registry to track Persian Gulf veterans and, most especially, of the billion dollars more every year we've invested in your health care. Every inch of the way we have had sound advice from Bob Wallace and Larry Rivers and so many others with the VFW. But let me be very clear on a key point here. While we must change our health care system, we will not change our commitment to the integrity of veterans health care.

A couple weeks ago, I announced a new White House advisory panel, which will include a representative of the VFW. I want to make sure that when it comes to making health care changes, the veteran's voice comes through loud and clear. If Congress sends me legislation to dismantle the VA system, I will whip out that veto pen and knock down that Scud missile headed right for the well-being of every family represented here. If anyone again suggests taxing your benefits, I'll say what I've said many times before, "Keep your hands off the veterans."

Now, there's one more promise I'll make to you. It concerns those who are not with us today, the ones that John McCain knows so much about from his own life experience. I'm talking about the POW's and the MIA's.

As Bob mentioned, I did have my own experience with combat, nothing quite like John's or like many of yours. But after my plane was shot down on September 2, 1944, at 0732—I can't remember Pearl Harbor Day, but I can sure remember September 2d. [Laughter] But look, I remember floating around in the Pacific. Off in the distance I could see this Japanese-held island of Chichi Jima in the Bonin Islands. I re-

member worrying about whether anyone in my squadron would find me. Then I remember thinking: What if the other side does?

By the grace of God, along came a submarine, U.S., and by the grace of God, my family never had to face the agony of a late-night phone call or a knock on that door. But to those who do wait for the calls or knocks to bring news of loved ones, let me simply say, we will never forget you.

The search for answers about POW–MIA’s is a question of justice, of oaths sworn and commitments kept. For 241 families, the uncertainty has already ended. I salute General Vessey, and I salute those in the Senate and those in the White House who have worked to this end. But there are still more answers to find. Without further progress, my administration will not move forward with Hanoi. We will not rest until we have received the fullest possible accounting of every POW–MIA.

In preparing for this visit today, I ran across a quote from Daniel Bennis, a disabled veteran from Hamel, Minnesota. Dan Bennis was asked why he went to war in the first place. He said, “I fought for the right to see my country in the splendor of all seasons.” I fought for the right to see my country in the splendor of all seasons.

Well, Dan, America is a country of all seasons. But to me, America is a nation where one season dominates, the season of spring. Today, as we listen to all the talk of pessimism and lost potential, we may think that the cold winds of winter are blowing. But I sense a different wind, the American wind, the warm breeze of renewal and rebirth.

In our workplaces, our economy is being reborn as our companies retool for the new competition. In our schools, our students are being reborn as, for the first time in a century, we change the very way we learn. In our homes, our families are being reborn

as we turn back to our moral foundations.

Some ridicule me. Some ridicule us when we talk about family values. But it’s the family that teaches us right from wrong, teaches us discipline, respect for the law. As every vet knows, it’s family that wiped the tears away when we cry. Strengthening the family is not something we ought to do; it is something we have to do.

Now, some take a look at all we must do as a nation and say, “Look, our challenges are too big, too daunting.” I would remind them that America is still the only place where miracles not only happen, they happen every day.

This is the Nation that toppled the wall. This is the Nation that won the war. This is the Nation that produced you. None have been braver or sturdier. Through your courage, your valor, your sacrifice, you changed the course of human history. We have changed the world, and now we will change America because America is the land of the eternal spring.

Thank you very much. May God bless the VFW, and most of all, may God bless the greatest, freest country on the face of the Earth, the United States of America. Thank you very, very much.

Note: The President spoke at 11:02 a.m. at the Indiana Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Robert E. Wallace, commander in chief, VFW, and his wife, Diane; John M. Carney, senior vice commander in chief, VFW, and his wife, Joanne; Mary Sears, national president of the ladies auxiliary of the VFW, and her husband, Sam; Chris Noel, entertainer and recipient of the VFW commander in chief’s Gold Medal of Merit; Adrian Cronauer, Armed Forces Network disc jockey during the Vietnam war; Larry W. Rivers, executive director, Washington, DC office, VFW; and Gen. John W. Vessey, U.S.A., ret., Special Presidential emissary to Hanoi for POW–MIA Affairs.