

Remarks to the American Legion National Convention in Chicago, Illinois

August 25, 1992

Thank you very, very much. And may I salute our Governor who is with me; our Secretary, Ed Derwinski; Governor Edgar here. And thank you, Dom, for that introduction. He put a lot of emphasis on that "paid up" member. [Laughter] You've had a great leader here, and I know you're going to have another great one. But I just salute Dom for all he's stood for. And let me also mention Sparky Gierke who is serving with the same devotion he served those here at the Legion, serving in the administration.

A lot happens in a week. A week ago, I could have laid claim to being the second most charismatic member of the Bush family. But after my grandson got up there, George P., at our convention in Houston, I guess I'm now the second most charismatic George Bush. Things are not going well here. [Laughter] So anyway, I mention this only because I know how Legionnaires feel about family. And I hope you'll excuse me if I say I was very proud of both Barbara and that grandson.

You know, I very much appreciate even the invitation to speak here this morning. If you'll allow me just to divert a minute because of something that is happening in the country. I was in south Florida last evening. And while I was stunned by the incredible physical destruction that I witnessed on this hurricane, you can't help but be impressed by the way Americans pull together in times of crisis. We are at our best when times are tough.

South Florida has been declared a Federal disaster area, and you should know that there are, what, 27 Federal Agencies, including our military services, pulling together to assist all Floridians in their time of need. I know I speak for all veterans on this one and all Americans when I say that our prayers are with the people of south Florida and also the Louisiana coast being threatened, the people also of south Louisiana who stand in Andrew's path at this very moment. No matter where the victims live, we as a nation will do absolutely

everything we can to help these good people recover.

I want to start this morning by saying that the bond we share links us, whether we served in the South Pacific or South Vietnam or whether we stood watch along that 38th parallel or braved the sands of Desert Storm. Just as you answered your country's call, so too America should serve those who served their country.

The specialized health care centers we've created, the new outpatient clinics, the billion dollars more we've invested in veterans health care every year, each is a sign of the debt we owe America's veterans, of the investment we make in the men and women who wear this country's uniform. Just yesterday I announced an innovative new job training program that will help all Americans including servicemen leaving the military, defense workers retooling for the new challenges of this civilian economy, or older veterans seeking better jobs and a new beginning. Frankly, the debt we owe is one we can never pay in full, but we need to do our utmost, just as America's vets gave their all when they were called. You have my commitment, as a proud member of the American Legion, post 77 member for life, that we will protect these programs that preserve your well-being. We owe it to the veterans.

I was a little negligent in my introductory remarks because sitting over my right shoulder here, albeit a Democrat—this is a non-partisan meeting, so I—you're showing the flag here—is Sonny Montgomery, one of the great friends the veterans have ever had, I'll tell you, Congressman Montgomery of Mississippi.

Now, I know that today I'll not have your attention all to myself. Two hours from now, you're going to hear maybe a different message. But I respect the American Legion's tradition of nonpartisanship. It's been that way, and I'm determined it will remain that way today. I wouldn't give a partisan speech to this group. You've already sacri-

ficed enough for your country. [Laughter] So bear with me because I want to make a few serious comments. I want to talk to you this morning about the world we knew, about the new world we're now forging.

Fifty years ago this summer, America's at war. At the age of 18, I went off to fight. Like many of you, I was scared, but I was willing. And I was young, but I was ready. Like so many of you, I had barely lived when I began to watch men die.

My own experience was in my mind during Operation Just Cause, when we freed Panama and jailed Noriega, and then again two Augusts ago, when I had to make a tough call, a call that only the Commander in Chief makes: the difficult decision to send young men and women into harm's way. As President, with that experience behind me and mindful of the trust, everyone who would serve, my sense of duty was magnified a thousand times.

And when I faced that decision, the American Legion never wavered. You were there with solid support, no vacillation. You supported our men and women 100 percent. And I will always be grateful to you. Your leaders went there. Your leaders went and showed the Legion flag and gave those young men and women the strong support, bringing with them messages from home from the families. It was a wonderful way that the American Legion supported those who were actually in the field. Whether they were regular Army or the magnificent National Guardsmen that were called to serve, whoever it was, the Legion backed them up. I want to thank you for that support over the years. If you had not been there in the past to help fight for a strong defense, our soldiers would not have been prepared; they would not have been equipped to fight to keep us free.

And when the calm came after Desert Storm, when our troops came home to a hero's welcome, the outpouring of love and honor was a grateful Nation's way of saying thanks. But it was something more. It was a reaching out, a warm embrace, a welcome home to all who wear the uniform, including the unsung heroes of another war, those who till that moment had not been recognized, a long-overdue recognition of gratitude to the veterans of the Vietnam war.

And the country rallied behind them and at long last gave them their proper honor.

Now, some of you may remember this. Four years ago, I met with you as Vice President: September 7th, a day that will live in infamy. [Laughter] Okay, I wanted to say it before you did. What does it take to live something down with this crowd? [Laughter] Since then, we've seen a world of change. What if I'd said then, that day, that by the end of my first term a wall would fall in Berlin; that we would have agreed to cut nuclear weapons by a full 75 percent, including the elimination of all those MIRV'd ICBM's, the most destabilizing strategic weapons? Because we did, our children sleep safer. What if I'd said that the Soviet regime that once claimed that history was on its side would be found only in the history books, and that the "dominoes" would fall in democracy's direction? What if I told you 4 years ago that the cold war would be over, that the West would win without a shot being fired? You'd say it was a miracle. But a miracle we did more than pray for: a miracle that Americans worked for, fought for, died for. Because the truth of the matter is, communism didn't just fall, you helped push it.

There are many heroes of the cold war, men and women whose courage and sacrifice turned the tide toward freedom: the brave people of Eastern Europe, who kept faith when freedom was a distant dream; the people in this country who gathered in taverns and restaurants in Cleveland and Pittsburgh and Detroit and, yes, right here in Chicago, to keep the hope of the captive nations alive, even when the fashionable few mocked their devotion as futile. The honor roll must also include men of moral courage like Pope John Paul II; like President Ronald Reagan, who called the Soviet Union an "evil empire"—which it was—and called for the Berlin Wall to be torn down, and it was.

Most of all, the tribute must include the American people, who paid the price in more ways than we can measure to win freedom's great victory. And especially you, you who slogged through the mud, sailed the seas, flew headlong into fire: This was truly your finest hour. And there is one

hero America must never forget, and that is the hero who has not yet come home. And I pledge to every American family awaiting word of its loved ones: We will demand the fullest possible accounting for every POW and MIA. And we will not have normal relations with Hanoi until we are satisfied on that count.

I am very proud of our accomplishments, thankful that I've been able to give the order so many Presidents longed to give, for many of our nuclear forces to stand down, stand down from alert. And yet, in spite of freedom's great gains, I know that our world today is more uncertain, more unpredictable than the world we've left behind. The Soviet bear may be extinct, but there are still plenty of wolves in the woods, renegade rulers, outlaw regimes, madmen we simply cannot allow to get a finger on the nuclear trigger. You have my word: This President will never allow a lone wolf to endanger the security of the United States of America.

Foreign policy is not a footnote, a loose end that we wrap up and then safely forget. It requires steady, experienced leadership. Think back not too long ago to the time of gas lines and grain embargoes. In Teheran, Americans were held hostage. In Moscow, America was seen as weak and uncertain. This is a lesson we ignore at our own peril. Now those days are gone, but our strength in the future, like any great nation, rests on our eternal vigilance. We need to speak up for the military muscle that gives meaning to America's moral leadership. We need to say even now that the cold war is over: America is safe as long as America stays strong. You see, the world is still a dangerous place, and if America does not lead, who will?

Take Iraq as a test case for the most difficult security challenges we are likely to face in the future. We tried peaceful means to bring Iraq into the family of nations. Given the dangerous neighbors, given the vital interests at stake, it was right to try. Had we not made those efforts, had we not exhausted every peaceful means, we would never have been able to build the unprecedented United Nations coalition that stopped a tyrant in his tracks and rolled him back to Baghdad.

Now, let's also get straight what was at stake: A madman with missiles and chemical weapons stood on the brink of a chokehold on much of the world's energy supplies, threatening to overrun our allies. We destroyed that threat, liberated Kuwait, and locked up a tyrant in the prison of his own country. We know now Saddam Hussein was developing the weapons to destroy Israel. Tens of millions of deaths of Arabs or Israelis would not matter to this killer. The Middle East could well have become a nuclear apocalypse. That is what was at stake.

Now, some who were faint-hearted and stood in the way of crushing Saddam's aggression now have the gall to say, "You stopped the war too soon." Some also say that General Norman Schwarzkopf wanted to march into Baghdad and "get" Saddam. False! I'll never forget—this is a true story and history has it recorded on film—sitting in the Oval Office on February 27, 1991, our troops having performed so magnificently in the field. And with me in the room was General Scowcroft and the Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell. They recommended to me, as President who has the responsibility for this, that we stop the slaughter; our mission was accomplished. I asked, are you sure that our field commanders feel this way? They both said yes. But to double-check, Colin Powell got up from the couch in our office—you all have seen pictures of it—walked over to the desk that you see pictures of, reached into the front right-hand corner of the desk, and there was a secure telephone; picked up that secure phone and got General Schwarzkopf on the line in my presence. And General Powell looked up at me after he had talked to Schwarzkopf, and he said, "Mission accomplished. Stop the killing."

And it was right. We are not in the slaughter business. We were in the business of crushing aggression. And we did it. And I don't like this historical revision. We did the right thing; we did the compassionate thing in the end as well. If we'd continued, hundreds of thousands of American troops would be on the ground in Iraq today attempting to pull warring factions together or bogged down in some guerrilla warfare.

Whether in Korea or in Lebanon, history shows us the danger of losing sight of our objectives. Liberators can easily become occupiers. A Commander in Chief has to know not only when his objectives have been reached but when to consolidate his gains.

And one other thing let me say right here. I feel on me the obligation to every family of every single man or woman serving in the Armed Forces. And I am not going to commit our ground forces to a war until I know what the mission is, how that mission will be achieved, and how those forces will come out, their honor intact, victory in hand. We've seen too many combat situations where we asked those kids to fight with one hand behind their back. Not as long as I am Commander in Chief.

Instead of playing the world's policeman, we worked with the United Nations to destroy Iraq's remaining weapons of mass destruction, to keep Iraq under control. Through an embargo, through tight control over oil exports and U.N. inspections, we are putting the lid on Saddam. And believe me, he is going to live up to each and every one of those U.N. resolutions. I am determined to see that, and I will.

As you know, today a whole new world of hope is dawning in the Middle East. This very week, as Arab and Israeli sit down together in Washington, DC, we are winning the peace. And that was made possible by the sacrifice of those involved in Desert Storm.

There will be other regional conflicts. There will be other Saddam Husseins. Look around the world. Look at the threats we face: terrorism, the terrible drug cartels, regional conflicts as the breakup of empire gives vent to ancient hatreds, the spread of nuclear and chemical weapons. From Qadhafi in Libya to Kim Il-sŏng in North Korea, the threats on our horizon could look a lot like the threat we turned back in Iraq.

Take the threat of chemical weapons. I really get emotional about chemical weapons when I see these young people here today and think of the horror that they can wreak. During Desert Storm, the danger from chemical weapons did not materialize. In the next conflict, it might. Our task is

clear: There must never be a next time. For me, banning chemical weapons has been a priority since the day 8 years ago when I went to Geneva on instructions from President Reagan to present our draft convention. In the next few days, we expect the completed convention to be presented in Geneva. And it is my hope, it is my aim that before this year is out, the nations of the world will unite to ban chemical weapons, to banish this scourge from the face of the Earth.

Now, our work in the world did not end with our victory in the cold war. Our task is to guard against the crises that haven't yet even caught fire, the wars that are waiting to happen, the threats that will come upon us with little or no warning. I make this promise: As long as I am President, our services will remain the best trained, the best equipped, the best led fighting forces in the entire world. That is the way we guarantee the peace.

I hope that I've earned your trust to meet those challenges and to stand up for America's interests and these ideals that all veterans share. I hope I've earned your trust to bring together foreign policy and security policy and economic policy so that it can make a difference in your hometown, your neighborhood, your life. Because the military challenges we're bound to face are only a part of the future.

The end of the cold war means new opportunities, new opportunities for global prosperity, for new markets for American goods. From Moscow to Managua, free market reform is now sweeping away the dead hand of state socialism. Capitalism is recognized the world over as the engine of prosperity and social progress. And nations are reorganizing themselves to unleash the limitless potential of the individual.

Now, governments can go two ways: They can help foster free enterprise, or they can put obstacles in its path. There is no question what course we must take. The U.S. will remain a forceful advocate for free and fair trade. In the 21st century, America must be not only a military superpower but an economic superpower, an export superpower. I won't wade into all the statistics that point in this direction, but I will tell

you this: Every additional billion dollars of exports stamped “Made in America” means 20,000 new American jobs. Last year alone, America was the world’s number one exporter. We sold a record \$422 billion worth of goods. That’s a lot of paychecks for the American people.

But the promise of new prosperity must not blind us to new challenges. It’s an economic fact of life that many of our key security partners are now our toughest economic competitors. Nations that lack the confidence to compete will be tempted to seek refuge behind the walls of protectionism. We didn’t end the cold war to make the world safe for trade wars. We must fight the protectionist impulse here at home, and we must work with our partners for trade that is free, fair, and open. We’re making progress by forging a new North American free trade agreement to open new markets from Manitoba to Mexico. And we’re pushing hard to complete a strengthened global trade agreement.

My strategy would go further. The U.S. must build a new network of trade agreements with Eastern Europe’s new democracies, with the new nations of the old Soviet Union, with our neighbors to our south, to the south in Latin America, with the dynamic economies of the Pacific as well. If we are to sustain our status as an export superpower, we must not allow ourselves to be tied down to one trade bloc. Our domestic market, the largest market in the world, gives us leverage. I intend to use it for good by strengthening America’s global reach as a complement to our security presence. America must maintain a strong presence in markets across the Atlantic and the Pacific.

The key is an agenda that fully integrates our domestic, economic, and foreign policies. In our world today, these three topics have become one issue. You’re going to ask, you ought to ask, all right, what are we going to do to get ready for the game? Well, fair question. Here’s my answer: We

must build on the fundamentals of lower tax rates, limits on Government spending, less redtape and regulation, and more trade and more competition to generate the growth that means more opportunity and more jobs. And I think that in the nineties, Government can add to this growth program by building opportunity and hope for individuals, empowering families and communities.

I’d like to close with the words of a President from the other party, John F. Kennedy. On a sentry box in Gibraltar, he found scrawled these words. I’d like to read them to you:

God and the Soldier all men adore
In time of trouble and no more
For when war is over, and all things righted
God is neglected—and the soldier slighted.

Just as we must never forget our God, we must never forget you who put your lives on the line for freedom. Sure, that means supporting the programs, the policies, the principles that keep us strong. But it also means building an America of which you can be proud, an America worthy of the blood we shed and the friends that we lost. It means building an America which is safer, stronger, and more secure, an America in which every coast guardsman, every soldier, every sailor, every airman, every marine, every guardsman can say, “This is the dream that I fought for.”

Thank you very much for your warm welcome, for your love of our country. And may God bless the United States of America, the greatest, freest country on the face of the Earth. Thank you all.

Note: The President spoke at 10:15 a.m. at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Dominic D. DiFrancesco, national commander of the American Legion, and Herman F. (Sparky) Gierke, judge on the U.S. Court of Military Appeals and former national commander of the Legion.