

Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention in Milwaukee,
Wisconsin
August 20, 2001

Thank you all. Thank you very much. At ease. *[Laughter]*

Thank you for that warm welcome. Before I begin my address, I know you'll want to join me in paying tribute to a fine friend and a good man who left us last week. We mourn the loss of Floyd Spence, who served our country well as a Congressman from South Carolina. He was chairman of the Committees on National Security and on the Armed Services, a senior member of the Committee on Veterans Affairs. He was a strong advocate for national defense. Our prayers are with his wife, Deborah, and his four sons.

My, time flies. I was here a year ago, minus one day. *[Laughter]* Since then, I have had a change of address—*[laughter]*—and I received a great honor. Another honor comes to me today: to speak as Commander in Chief to the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States of America.

Today I bring the respect of our Nation and a special greeting from one of your own members, from VFW Post 4344 of Houston, Texas, the former President George H.W. Bush.

I want to thank your commander in chief. John has been in the Oval Office. He is a true advocate for the veterans. He has done a fine job. And like me, he married well. And I want to congratulate John's successor, Jim Goldsmith. And I look forward to working with Jim, just like I have with John. I also want to thank Bob Wallace. I want to thank Bob Wallace, the VFW's man in Washington, DC, for working closely with my administration and representing your interests very well. I want to thank Pat Jankowski of the Ladies Auxiliary, who are gathered here as well in Milwaukee, and I want to thank her for her leadership. And I want to congratulate

Diana Stout, who will become the incoming president of the Ladies Auxiliary.

As well, I want to thank the Governor of Wisconsin, Scott McCallum, for his hospitality, and I want to thank all the good people of Wisconsin, particularly Milwaukee for being such a welcoming city to this great convention.

And I want to pay tribute to a good friend of mine and a good friend of yours, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Tony Principi. Last year he was giving me advice about veterans affairs. This year he sits around the Cabinet, making sure I understand what we are doing in veterans affairs. And I appreciate so very much Tony's return to public service. He is doing a fine job.

I want to thank you all for having me come to this convention. I have been looking forward to this visit. I appreciate every chance I get to travel our country. It is important for a President never to become isolated in the seat of power. As great and influential as that city is, sometimes the President just has to get out of Crawford, Texas. *[Laughter]*

This is a fine organization. General Douglas MacArthur called the VFW the greatest organization in the world. He and his dad were both members, and they would be proud of all you have done for your country, and they would be proud of the more than 1.9 million members of the VFW.

Each one of you is a living example of a special kind of patriotism, the love of country, expressed not just in word but in lifetimes of service. You defended America in hours of need. You help your fellow veterans in times of their need. And you have done so much to build the character of our young people, to teach them to live by good values, to honor their parents, to

trust in God. You helped them to appreciate freedom, to love America, and to respect our flag. You understand as well that showing a basic respect for our Nation's flag is not merely the option of every citizen; it should be a matter of constitutional law.

In Europe last month, one of my last stops was Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo. I went there to thank our service men and women for their sacrifice for our Nation. I took the occasion to make good on a promise by signing a bill to allocate over \$2 billion in additional appropriations for military pay, benefits, health, and housing. To restore the strength and morale of America's Armed Forces, we must first take care of the people who wear our uniform. I believe we're making every branch of service a place where men and women are proud to serve and, as importantly, proud to stay.

My administration understands America's obligations not only go to those who wear the uniform today but to those who wore the uniform in the past, to our veterans. And at times, those obligations have not been met. Veterans in need of care have been kept waiting, and thousands of veterans' claims have been delayed or, in some cases, lost in the bureaucracy.

Many veterans have observed that the Government seemed to work a lot more efficiently when it wanted something from them. When the draft board got your file, it worked efficiently. *[Laughter]* But now, when you need health care, forms get lost and answers come late. That is no way to treat America's veterans, and that is going to change.

Secretary Principi is conducting a top-to-bottom review of the claims processing. Currently, there are about 600,000 pending applications, of which 53,000 have been pending over a year. Many of those belong to veterans over 70 years of age. That's not right. I have given Secretary Principi the clearest of clear mandates: He must bring those claims to a speedy and fair

resolution. We must move as quickly as possible on the backlog, and we will. We will improve cooperation between the VA and the Department of Defense in providing care to those who served.

In May, I signed an Executive order creating a Presidential task force to recommend major reforms in the delivery of health care to veterans and military retirees. Two distinguished Americans will lead that task force: Dr. Gail Wilensky, an expert on health policy and a faithful friend to the veterans, and former Congressman Gerry Solomon. One might be tempted to call him an ex-marine, but we all know there is no such thing as an ex-marine.

We are making great progress on implementing the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act to ensure that our veterans receive high-quality care. In the budget I submitted to Congress, I requested an increase of \$1 billion, additional money for veterans services. Secretary Principi recently announced new health care facilities for veterans: 6 new centers for Parkinson's disease research and care and 41 new outpatient clinics in 28 States.

Veterans are a priority for this administration. I put a good man in charge, and that priority is reflected in my budget. Our budget also meets the most fundamental responsibility a President bears, to provide security for the United States of America. Not only does the budget take care of our people, we give today's military what it needs to operate: equipment, spare parts, advanced training. In all, I've asked Congress to provide our military an increase of \$39 billion over the original 2001 appropriations. This is the largest increase in military spending since Ronald Reagan was the Commander in Chief. We are not only going to spend more on national defense; we're also going to spend it more wisely.

Secretary Rumsfeld is charged with developing a strategy to bolster today's military, and he is charged with developing a strategy to develop a military that is ready to defend America tomorrow as well. A

modern military requires major investment in research and development so that our military is always the finest in the world. And something I offered last year as a promise is today a commitment: to research, develop, and deploy a defense against ballistic missiles.

These are the priorities I submitted to Congress in February and priorities reflected to the budget amendment in June. I trust they will be reflected in the appropriations bills Congress sends me this fall for my signature.

As we enter the appropriations process, I have great hopes but no illusions. Washington has its own way of doing things, especially around the time of year when final appropriations are made. The spending bills are passed one after another, 13 in all. Everybody in Washington knows there is a budget, but new spending gets thrown in along the way. Finally, when it is time to pass the last bill, they realize they are just about to go over the budget. And often, and sadly, the final bill has been the defense appropriations bill, and therefore, defense appropriations has gone without adequate funding. That's the old way of doing business. That's old style of thinking.

I have a better idea. Let's abandon the old ways of gamesmanship, standoffs, and Government shutdowns. Let us keep our priorities straight and start with the things that matter most to our country's security and our country's future. This year, let us have responsible spending from day one and put the national security and education of our children first in line when it comes to the appropriations process.

I hope you all watch very carefully. It's important that people pay attention to what goes on in Washington. It will be an interesting signal about the priorities of the leaders of the United States Congress when they let those appropriation bills out to come to my desk.

I'm confident I can work with Congress on appropriations because we have worked

closely together on other issues. We saw bipartisan votes on the budget itself. And they passed and I signed and the mailman is delivering the first major income tax relief in a generation.

And we also worked together in honoring veterans. Members of the VFW have long advocated a fitting memorial to those who served in the Second World War. The World War II Memorial has been in the works for an awfully long time. The final obstacles have been removed. I've signed it into law, and soon the veterans of World War II will have their place of honor in the heart of our Nation's Capital.

In the heart of Washington, DC, that monument will stand for all time as a reminder of service and sacrifice. Not far away are monuments to those who fought in other wars across the world. For all of you, service in time of war was a defining experience in your life. Your brave and selfless conduct has defined the best of our country.

America does not seek to produce more generations of war veterans; we are a peaceful nation. But we'll always need the commitment and courage and honor that we find in our veterans. Those who have worn the uniform have made a contribution not just to the defense of our Nation but to the character of our Nation. You've given your best to America, and in so many ways you are the best that is in America.

For all that, you have the deep respect of those who wear the uniform today, the Commander in Chief as well. And you have the gratitude of a Nation that is in debt.

Thank you for letting me come. May God bless our veterans.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:20 a.m. at the Midwest Express Center. In his remarks, he referred to David, Zack, Benjamin, and Caldwell Spence, sons of the late Representative Floyd Spence; John F. Gwizdak, commander in chief, James N. Goldsmith, senior vice commander in chief, and Bob Wallace,

Washington office executive director, Veterans of Foreign Wars; Patricia Jankowski, president, and Diana Stout, senior vice president, Ladies Auxiliary to the Veterans of Foreign Wars; and Gov. Scott McCallum of Wisconsin. The President also referred to Public Law No. 106–117, the Veterans Millennium

Health Care and Benefits Act; and Public Law No. 107–11, to expedite the construction of the World War II Memorial. The Executive order of May 28 on the President’s Task Force To Improve Health Care Delivery for Our Nation’s Veterans was published in the *Federal Register* at 66 FR 29447.

Exchange With Reporters in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin August 20, 2001

The President. Everybody enjoying themselves in Waco?

Q. Love it.

The President. That’s the spirit.

Situation in the Middle East/Visit to Harley-Davidson

Q. Sir, there were some comments on the Sunday chat shows yesterday that you’re disconnected in the Middle East peace process. Do you have any response to that?

The President. Every time I talk to you all, you ask me about the Middle East. Nothing has changed. We’re very much engaged, trying to break the cycle of violence. I spoke to Ariel Sharon the other day. The Secretary of State is in constant dialog with the parties in the Middle East. In order to get to a peace process or discussions of peace, we must end the violence, and

it requires two parties. It requires the desires of both parties to do that.

Thank you. Anything else?

It’s great to be here in one of the world-class manufacturing companies, a company that not only is good at making a product, a company that is fabulous at marketing a product. The Harley-Davidson is a great example of the American entrepreneurial spirit. I look forward to having lunch with the workers and thank them for putting out such a quality product.

NOTE: The exchange began at 12:10 p.m. outside the Harley-Davidson Pilgrim Road Powertrain Operations factory. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks to Harley-Davidson Employees in Menomonee Falls August 20, 2001

I really appreciate your hospitality. First of all, I’m really impressed by the quality of the workers who are here. It’s obviously reflected in the quality of the product. Harley-Davidson is uniquely American. People love them. And some people are bold enough to drive them, and some of us aren’t. [Laughter] I’m hitting the speed limit this year, 55. [Laughter]

But I really appreciate your hospitality and letting us come by and say hello. I can’t tell you how great it is to be the President of the greatest country on the face of the Earth. I thank all the—there are more people than I can think that impress me. One of the things that impressed me, besides people’s friendliness, is the number of people that said, “I pray for