

why African American men would fight for a country that treated them so unfairly. Yet the Tuskegee Airmen were eager to join up.

You know, I'm interested in the story about a young man who was so worried that the Army might change its mind about allowing him to fly, that he drove immediately to the train station. He left his car, as well as \$1,000 worth of photography equipment. He never saw his car, he never saw his camera, but he became a flyer.

These men in our presence felt a special sense of urgency. They were fighting two wars: One was in Europe, and the other took place in the hearts and minds of our citizens. That's why we're here. The white commander of the Tuskegee airfield was once asked, with all seriousness, "How do African Americans fly?" Kind of reflecting the ignorance of the times, they said, "How do African Americans fly?" He said, "Oh, they fly just like everybody else flies—stick and rudder." *[Laughter]*

Soon, Americans in their kitchens and living rooms were reading the headlines. You probably didn't realize it at the time, but you were making headlines at home, headlines that spoke about daring pilots winning a common battle.

And little by little, every victory at war was translated to a victory here in the United States. And we're in the presence of men who are earning those victories, important victories, leaders who pierced the unquestioned prejudices of a different society. You gave African Americans a sense of pride and possibility.

You saw that pride and awe—I'm sure you remember—in the faces of young children who came up to you right after the war and tugged on your uniforms and said, "Mister, can you really fly an airplane?" Some of you have been in Germany and Iraq, and you still see that sense of pride.

I appreciate your going. I appreciate the fact that one of our young soldiers today took pictures for a—of you for a scrapbook for his children. I appreciate the fact that one of our soldiers today said: "It is not often that you get a chance to meet the guys who have paved the path for you."

The Tuskegee Airmen helped win a war, and you helped change our Nation for the better. Yours is the story of the human spirit, and it ends like all great stories do—with wisdom and lessons and hope for tomorrow. And the medal that we confer today means that we're doing a small part to ensure that your story will be told and honored for generations to come.

And I would like to offer a gesture to help atone for all the unreturned salutes and unforgivable indignities. And so, on behalf of the Office I hold and a country that honors you, I salute you for the service to the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:23 p.m. at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

## Remarks During a Visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center *March 30, 2007*

Thank you. Please be seated. Thank you all for joining me. Every time I come to Walter Reed, my spirits are lifted. They're first lifted by the soldiers and marines who

are recovering from some very tough wounds. I had the honor of pinning the Purple Heart on quite a few people today, and I am always impressed by their resolve

and their commitment to the country. Every time I come to Walter Reed, I'm also impressed by the caregiver: the docs, the nurses, the people who spend many hours trying to heal those who have been wounded in service to our country.

The soldiers and marines stay here only for a few months, but the compassion they receive here stays with them for a lifetime. And so on behalf of a grateful nation, I do want to thank our docs and our nurses and caregivers for providing extraordinary health care to the people who wear the uniform. I know full well that the work you do is behind the scenes. In other words, you don't get a lot of glory for what you do, but you certainly do from the family members who first come here, and they see their loved one on a bed, wondering whether or not that person will ever walk again. And then, 6 months later, the body is returning, and the spirit is strong; the person is up and moving around. The family and the soldier is impressed by that care.

Americans must understand that the problems recently uncovered at Walter Reed were not the problems of medical care. The quality of care at this fantastic facility is great, and it needs to remain that way. Independent analysis have given extremely high marks for the quality of care here. In other words, this isn't my assessment, nor is it the assessment of people I have talked to, the families; although that's what they believe. It is also the assessment of a joint commission, which accredits thousands of American hospitals. And this commission has given Walter Reed the highest possible rating, a gold seal of approval.

Recently, the commission performed a surprise inspection. In other words, they didn't give a bunch of notice; they showed up and verified the high quality of care here. I want to congratulate you for what you're doing.

The problems at Walter Reed were caused by bureaucratic and administrative

failures. The system failed you, and it failed our troops. And we're going to fix it.

I met some of the soldiers who had been housed in Building 18. I was disturbed by their accounts of what went wrong. It is not right to have someone volunteer to wear our uniform and not get the best possible care. I apologize for what they went through, and we're going to fix the problem.

And that's exactly what this Government is going to do. We're not going to be satisfied until everybody gets the kind of care that their folks and families expect. And that's what I expect. And we've taken important steps to achieve the objective.

First, Defense Secretary Gates has insisted on accountability in the military command. He made changes in leadership. He made tough decisions, because he, like me, demands results. I welcome General Schoomaker, but I also welcome General Tucker. Tucker is not a doc. As General Schoomaker informed me, he is a "bureaucracy buster." His job is to make sure that the bureaucracy does not get in the way of making sure every soldier, marine, and their families get the best possible care. And I welcome you to the command, and thank you.

Secretary Gates, as I said, has approved a nonmedical deputy commander; that's Tucker. Building 18 has been closed. We're fixing that which needs to be fixed, including, interestingly enough, putting a new roof on it. The patients from Building 18 have been transferred into Abrams Hall, and I'm pleased to report that living conditions there are of high quality.

We have formed three working groups to help address problems that may exist and may arise. I want to share some of what the—the strategy behind the working groups is, and that is, first, Gates established—Secretary Gates established an independent review group, and that was

primarily to examine the conditions at Walter Reed and Bethesda. The group will recommend ways to ensure you have what you need to improve medical care.

I heard one recommendation. In other words, one of the care providers said: "Make sure we always have the best possible equipment; we want to be on the leading edge of technology, not the trailing edge." I agree completely. Those are the kinds of things that Secretary Gates's commission is going to be looking into.

Veterans Affairs Secretary Nicholson is leading a task force of Cabinet officers to identify potential gaps in the services our wounded troops receive as they return from the battlefield. In other words, we want all hands on deck here at the Federal level to make sure that health care is as good as it possibly can be. I'm not talking about the health care in the operating room; I'm talking about the bureaucracies that may prevent good health care from being delivered.

Finally, Bob Dole and Donna Shalala will chair a bipartisan Presidential commission on care for our wounded warriors. They will conduct a comprehensive view of the entire system for providing physical and emotional care to service men and women injured in this war. They will make sure that that person gets high-quality care from the time they suffer their wounds through their return to civilian life.

We want to make sure, for example, that any transfer from the Defense Department to the Veterans Affairs Department is smooth, and that there's not bureaucratic delay or obstacles in the way of making sure that we can report to our fellow citizens that people are getting the best possible health care.

I want to thank those who are working in these groups, and I'm looking forward to getting their recommendations, because I want to make sure our military families can be assured that their loved ones will get the very best.

This military system of ours—when you really think about it—just across the country, it's very complex, and it's large. Yet there's nothing complex about what we owe our troops; we owe them the best. That's what you believe here at Walter Reed. I have seen the care and dedication that you give on a daily basis. I just came from the therapy rooms, the physical therapy and the vocational therapy rooms. I see people patiently working with a wounded soldier on how to pick up cards and play cards with a new prosthesis. It's just hours of help, all because the people here recognize each human being matters; each person counts; and each person has endless possibilities, even though they may have received terrible wounds on the battlefield.

None of the problems that we have uncovered can overshadow the great work you do here. That's what you have to know. It's a special calling to serve those who serve our country. It requires a unique person to come here on a daily basis and to heal the hurts of those who served our country.

And so our Nation is grateful, and I'm proud to be your Commander in Chief.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:12 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Brig. Gen. Michael S. Tucker, USA, deputy commanding general, Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Notice of Intention To  
Enter Into a Free Trade Agreement With Panama  
*March 30, 2007*

*Dear Madam Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)*

Consistent with section 2105(a)(1)(A) of the Trade Act of 2002, (Public Law 107–210; the “Trade Act”), I am pleased to notify the Congress of my intention to enter into a free trade agreement with the Republic of Panama.

The United States-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement (the “Agreement”) will generate export opportunities for U.S. farmers, ranchers, and companies, help create jobs in the United States, and help American consumers save money while offering them more choices. The Agreement will also benefit the people of Panama by

providing economic opportunity and by strengthening democracy.

Consistent with the Trade Act, I am sending this notification at least 90 days in advance of signing the Agreement. My Administration looks forward to working with the Congress in developing appropriate legislation to approve and implement this Agreement.

Sincerely,

GEORGE W. BUSH

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Richard B. Cheney, President of the Senate. The notice is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

The President’s Radio Address  
*March 31, 2007*

Good morning. In recent days, the House and Senate each passed emergency war spending bills that undercut our troops in the field. Each of the Democrats’ bills would substitute the judgment of politicians in Washington for that of our generals on the ground. Each bill would impose restrictive conditions on our military commanders. Each bill would also set an arbitrary deadline for surrender and withdrawal in Iraq, and I believe that would have disastrous consequences for our safety here at home.

The Democrats loaded up their bills with billions of dollars in domestic spending completely unrelated to the war, including \$3.5 million for visitors to tour the Capitol, \$6.4 million for the House of Representatives salaries and expenses account, and \$74 million for secure peanut storage. I like peanuts as much as the next guy, but I

believe the security of our troops should come before the security of our peanut crop. For all these reasons, that is why I made it clear to the Democrats in Congress: I will veto the bill.

Democrats in the House and the Senate also recently passed their annual budget resolutions. Their budgets would raise your taxes and raise Government spending in Washington. And their budgets fail to address the most serious challenge to our Nation’s fiscal health: the unsustainable growth in entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare.

Overall, the Democrats would raise taxes by a total of nearly \$400 billion over the next 5 years. To put this in perspective, this would be the largest tax increase in our Nation’s history, even larger than the