

Remarks on the Nomination of James B. Peake To Be Secretary of
Veterans Affairs
October 30, 2007

The President. Thank you all. Please be seated. Welcome. Caring for our military veterans is a solemn responsibility of the Federal Government. It is our enduring pledge to every man and woman who puts on our Nation's uniform. And it is the daily work of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am pleased to announce my nomination of an Army doctor and combat veteran who will be a strong new leader for this Department, Lieutenant General James Peake.

Public service is a family commitment, and I'm especially grateful to Dr. Peake's wife Janice—a fellow Texan—who is with us today. I appreciate you supporting Jim once again as he does the Nation's work. I'm also proud to welcome Kimberly and Thomas. Thank you all for coming. We just met in the Oval Office, and there's no question in my mind, they're certainly proud of their dad.

Dr. Peake grew up in a home where service to country was a way of life. His father started out as an enlisted man in the Army and became an officer who spent most of his 30-year career in the Medical Service Corps. Doctor Peake's mom was an Army nurse. His brother was a naval aviator. And as a young man of 18, he set upon his own lifetime of service when he arrived at the United States Military Academy.

After graduating from West Point in 1966, Second Lieutenant James Peake was sent to Vietnam with the 101st Airborne. There he served as a platoon leader. He led men in combat and earned several medals for his courage, including the Silver Star. One of those who knows him best described his leadership this way: "End of a chow line officer—everyone else first."

In Vietnam, he also earned two Purple Hearts. While in the hospital recovering

from his second wound, he learned that he had been accepted to medical school. After completing his medical studies at Cornell University, he devoted his career as an Army doctor to improving care for our wounded service men and women. Long before the global war on terror began, Dr. Peake was changing the way we deliver medical care to our troops. As a result of his reforms, many who once might have died on the battlefield, now they come home to be productive, and they're having fulfilling lives.

As a medical officer and combat vet who was wounded in action, Dr. Peake understands the view from both sides of the hospital bed: the doctor's and the patient's. He brought that understanding to many jobs. These include command surgeon in the Army hospitals, commanding general of the largest medical training facility in the world, and Army Surgeon General, where he commanded more than 50,000 medical personnel, oversaw 16 hospitals across the world, and managed an operating budget of nearly \$5 billion.

Since leaving the Army, he is—served as executive vice president and chief operating officer of Project HOPE. There he helped one Navy hospital ship respond to the victims of the Asian tsunami and another that was sent to care for those hit by Hurricane Katrina. Most recently, he has served as chief medical director and chief operating officer with QTC Management, which provides military veterans with timely medical examinations as well as electronic medical record services.

When confirmed by the Senate, Dr. Peake will bring his unique set of skills and experiences to the Department of Veterans Affairs. He will be the first physician and the first general to serve as Secretary. He will apply his decades of expertise in

combat medicine and health care management to improve the veterans' health system. He will insist on the highest level of care for every American veteran.

One of Dr. Peake's first tasks as Secretary will be to continue to implement the recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission on Wounded Warriors. And Senator, thank you for joining us. Some of their recommendations are the responsibility of the executive branch, and Dr. Peake will be a leader in carrying them out. Others require the approval of the United States Congress, and that's why this month, I sent a bill to Capitol Hill that will make those recommendations the law of the land.

As Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Doctor Peake will be a powerful advocate for the prompt enactment and implementation of this vital legislation. And he will work tirelessly to eliminate backlogs and ensure that our veterans receive the benefits they need to lead lives of dignity and purpose.

In all these ways, Dr. Peake will build on the fine records of Secretary Jim Nicholson and Secretary Tony Principi. Jim is a West Point man who knows the meaning of duty, honor, and country. He's a Vietnam vet and a former Ambassador and a good friend. I thank him for his service, and I thank his wife Suzanne as well, and wish them all the very best.

Principi is with us. It's good to see you, friend, thanks for coming. He's a graduate of one of our military academies, although it's not West Point, it was the Naval Academy. Like the other two men here today, he is a combat veteran of Vietnam. And like the other two, he has served our veterans with dignity and integrity. And I appreciate your service.

Jim and Tony can be proud of their record at the Department of Veterans Affairs. Under their leadership, Federal spending for veterans increased by more than two-thirds. We extended treatment to a million additional veterans, including hundreds of thousands returning from Iraq and

Afghanistan. We expanded grants to help homeless veterans across the country. These men have worked well with the VSOs, and I thank the leaders for joining us here today. Dr. Peake is going to work well with you too.

And speaking of working well, it's time for the Congress to do its job for the veterans. Congress needs to send me a clean VA appropriations bill that I can sign into law by Veterans Day.

I want to thank Acting Secretary Gordon Mansfield for leading the Department these last few weeks. He's done a fine job. He's earned the respect of all those who've worked under him. He's earned the gratitude of our Nation's vets.

I appreciate Dr. Peake's willingness to step forward at this important time for the Department. He's a man who's been tested in battle. He has proved himself as a soldier, as a physician, as a leader, and as a good family man. He will be a superb Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and the United States Senate should promptly confirm him.

Doctor, I appreciate you stepping up again. On behalf of the United States of America, congratulations.

[At this point, Secretary-designate Peake made brief remarks.]

The President. Yes, sir. Good job. Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:09 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Sen. Robert J. Dole, Cochair, President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors; and former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony J. Principi. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary-designate Peake.

Remarks at the Grocery Manufacturers Association/Food Products Association Fall Conference

October 31, 2007

Thanks for coming. Thank you all. Please be seated. Billy, thank you. I asked Billy where he works. He said, "Well, I run Sunny Delight Beverage Company." I said, "Well, Billy, I quit drinking." [Laughter] He said, "That's not that kind of—alcohol."

I thank you all for having me. Billy, thank you for your kind words. He's from Cincinnati. I was in Cincinnati the other day, stopped off and got some ribs, and he tried to ask me to compare Texas ribs with Cincinnati ribs. That's a little unfair. But they're awfully good, Billy.

I appreciate you having me for this fall conference. I'm thrilled to be a sitting President coming to visit with you. I didn't realize the last one was Eisenhower. I don't know if he came on Halloween, but I did. It's always an interesting day here in the Nation's Capital. This morning I was with the Vice President. I was asking him what costume he was planning. He said, "Well, I'm already wearing it." [Laughter] Then he mumbled something about the dark side of the force. [Laughter] He's doing well.

I want to talk today about health care. There's an interesting debate raging here in Washington, and it's an appropriate—Halloween is an appropriate day to talk about it, because there's a bill moving through the Congress that's disguised as a bill to help children, but I think it's really a trick on the American people. I'm going to spend some time explaining why I have made some decisions I have made regarding this piece of legislation.

The bill that I'm going to discuss would cause moms and dads to give up private insurance and—private insurance for their children and move them on to the Government rolls. It would move us closer to a health care system dominated by the Federal Government. It would fund massive new spending by raising taxes on the Amer-

ican working people. I believe the legislation I'm going to talk to you today—about which I'm going to talk to you today is a path to Government-run health care, which I believe is the wrong path for the United States.

And I vetoed a bill. As Billy noted, the spotlight can be quite bright when the President either shows up or does something. And I vetoed a piece of legislation. And I appreciate your giving me a chance to come by and explain to you and the American people why I did so.

But before I do, I do want to thank you all very much for giving me a chance to come by. It's a—the White House is a nice place to live, but sometimes it's good to get outside the White House, to be with people who are actually making a living—[laughter]—that are creating jobs; that are taking risk; that are really, I hope, living the American Dream.

Laura sends her best. She's doing great. I'm truly a lucky man to have married this great woman, and I think the country is lucky to have her as the First Lady.

I want to thank Mary Fallin from Oklahoma—Congresswoman from Oklahoma—for joining us. Mary, thank you for being here. I particularly want to say something about Cal Dooley. I worked with him when he was a Member of the United States Congress. I found him to be a good, honest guy. When he said he was going to do something, he would do it. And I don't know if this helps him or hurts him, but you made a pretty smart move to hire him. And I'm proud to be with you, Cal. Thanks for being here.

One of the reasons I've come by is to remind you how important you are to our economy. In other words, I'm the kind of person who believes that it's important for those of us in government to encourage