

These are difficult times. But remember, we've been through worse. And think about everybody here—your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents—they struggled in ways we can't even imagine to deliver that American Dream to you. We've always been a nation full of vision, a bold and optimistic America that does big things. We don't have a cramped vision. We don't try to exclude. We try to embrace and bring people in to this idea of America.

It's a vision where we live within our means, but we invest in our future; where everybody makes sacrifices, but nobody has to bear the burden alone, and everybody shares in our success; where we live up to the idea that no mat-

ter what you look like, no matter where you come from, no matter what your surname—whether your ancestors landed at Ellis Island or came over on a slave ship or crossed the Rio Grande—we are all connected, and we all rise and fall together.

That's the America I believe in. That's the America that you believe in. That's the America we can once more have, as long as all of us are working together.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:24 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Sergeant Dakota L. Meyer *September 15, 2011*

Thank you, everybody. Please be seated. Thank you, Chaplain Kibben. Good afternoon, everyone. And on behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House.

It's been said that "where there is a brave man, in the thickest of the fight, there is the post of honor." Today we pay tribute to an American who placed himself in the thick of the fight, again and again and again. In so doing, he has earned our Nation's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor. And we are extraordinarily proud of Sergeant Dakota Meyer.

Today is only the third time during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that a recipient of the Medal of Honor has been able to accept it in person. And we are honored to be joined by one of the two other recipients, Sergeant First Class Leroy Petry, who is here.

I would point out something else. Of all the Medal of Honor recipients in recent decades, Dakota is also one of the youngest. He's 23 years old. And he performed the extraordinary actions for which he is being recognized today when he was just 21 years old.

Despite all this, I have to say Dakota is one of the most down-to-earth guys that you will ever meet. In fact, when my staff first tried to arrange the phone call so I could tell him that I'd approved this medal, Dakota was at work,

at his new civilian job, on a construction site. He felt he couldn't take the call right then because, he said, "If I don't work, I don't get paid." [Laughter] So we arranged to make sure he got the call during his lunch break. [Laughter] I told him the news, and then he went right back to work. [Laughter] That's the kind of guy he is. He also asked to have a beer with me, which we were able to execute yesterday.

Dakota is the kind of guy who gets the job done. And I do appreciate, Dakota, you taking my call. [Laughter] The Medal of Honor reflects the gratitude of the entire Nation. So we're joined here by Members of Congress, including somebody from your home State, the Republican leader of the Senate, Mitch McConnell. We are joined here by leaders from across my administration, including Secretary of Veterans Affairs Ric Shinseki and Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, and leaders from across our Armed Forces, including the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Amos.

We're honored to welcome Dakota's father Mike, who's here; his extraordinary grandparents; and more than 120 of Dakota's family and friends, many from his home State of Kentucky. I want to welcome Dakota's comrades from the Marine Embedded Training Team

2–8, and we are humbled by the presence of the members of the Medal of Honor Society.

Dakota, I realize the past 2 years have not been easy for you, retelling the story of that day and standing here today. You're a very modest young man. But as you've said, you do it for a simple reason—retelling the story—because it helps you to honor those who didn't come home and to remind your fellow Americans that our men and women in uniform are over there fighting every single day.

So that's how we'll do this today. It's fitting that we do so this week, having just marked the 10th anniversary of the attacks that took our Nation to war, because in Sergeant Dakota Meyer, we see the best of a generation that has served with distinction through a decade of war.

Let me tell the story. I want you to imagine it's September 8, 2009, just before dawn. A patrol of Afghan forces and their American trainers is on foot, making their way up a narrow valley, heading into a village to meet with elders. And suddenly, all over the village, the lights go out. And that's when it happens. About a mile away, Dakota, who was then a corporal, and Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez could hear the ambush over the radio. It was as if the whole valley was exploding. Taliban fighters were unleashing a firestorm from the hills, from the stone houses, even from the local school.

And soon, the patrol was pinned down, taking ferocious fire from three sides. Men were being wounded and killed, and four Americans—Dakota's friends—were surrounded. Four times, Dakota and Juan asked permission to go in; four times they were denied. It was, they were told, too dangerous. But one of the teachers in his high school once said, "When you tell Dakota he can't do something, he's going to do it." [*Laughter*] And as Dakota said of his trapped teammates, "Those were my brothers, and I couldn't just sit back and watch."

The story of what Dakota did next will be told for generations. He told Juan they were going in. Juan jumped into a Humvee and took the wheel; Dakota climbed into the turret and manned the gun. They were defying orders,

but they were doing what they thought was right. So they drove straight into a killing zone, Dakota's upper body and head exposed to a blizzard of fire from AK-47s and machine guns, from mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

Coming upon wounded Afghan soldiers, Dakota jumped out and loaded each of the wounded into the Humvee, each time exposing himself to all that enemy fire. They turned around and drove those wounded back to safety. Those who were there called it the most intense combat they'd ever seen. Dakota and Juan would have been forgiven for not going back in. But as Dakota says, you don't leave anyone behind.

For a second time, they went back, back into the inferno; Juan at the wheel, swerving to avoid the explosions all around them; Dakota up in the turret, when one gun jammed, grabbing another, going through gun after gun. Again they came across wounded Afghans. Again, Dakota jumped out, loaded them up, and brought them back to safety.

For a third time, they went back, insurgents running right up to the Humvee, Dakota fighting them off. Up ahead, a group of Americans, some wounded, were desperately trying to escape the bullets raining down. Juan wedged the Humvee right into the line of fire, using the vehicle as a shield. With Dakota on the guns, they helped those Americans back to safety as well.

For a fourth time, they went back. Dakota was now wounded in the arm. Their vehicle was riddled with bullets and shrapnel. Dakota later confessed: "I didn't think I was going to die. I knew I was." But still they pushed on, finding the wounded, delivering them to safety.

And then, for a fifth time, they went back, into the fury of that village, under fire that seemed to come from every window, every doorway, every alley. And when they finally got to those trapped Americans, Dakota jumped out. And he ran toward them, drawing all those enemy guns on himself, bullets kicking up the dirt all around him. He kept going until he

came upon those four Americans, laying where they fell, together as one team.

Dakota and the others who had joined him knelt down, picked up their comrades and—through all those bullets, all the smoke, all the chaos—carried them out, one by one. Because, as Dakota says, “That’s what you do for a brother.”

Dakota says he’ll accept this medal in their name. So today we remember the husband who loved the outdoors, Lieutenant Michael Johnson; the husband and father they called “Gunny J,” Gunnery Sergeant Edwin Johnson; the determined marine who fought to get on that team, Staff Sergeant Aaron Kenefick; the medic who gave his life tending to his teammates, Hospitalman Third Class James Layton; and a soldier wounded in that battle who never recovered, Sergeant First Class Kenneth Westbrook.

Dakota, I know that you’ve grappled with the grief of that day, that you’ve said your efforts were somehow a “failure” because your teammates didn’t come home. But as your Commander in Chief, and on behalf of everyone here today and all Americans, I want you to know, it’s quite the opposite. You did your duty, above and beyond, and you kept the faith with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps that you love.

Because of your honor, 36 men are alive today. Because of your courage, four fallen American heroes came home, and—in the words of James Layton’s mom—they could lay their sons to rest with dignity. Because of your commitment—in the thick of the fight, hour after hour—a former marine who read about your story said that you showed how “in the most desperate, final hours . . . our brothers and God will not forsake us.” And because of your humble example, our kids—especially back in Columbia, Kentucky, in small towns all across America—they’ll know that no matter who you are or where you come from, you can do great things as a citizen and as a member of the American family.

Therein lies the greatest lesson of that day in the valley and the truth that our men and

women in uniform live out every day. “I was part of something bigger,” Dakota has said, part of a team “that worked together, lifting each other up and working toward a common goal. Every member of our team was as important as the other.” So in keeping with Dakota’s wishes for this day, I want to conclude by asking now-Gunnery Sergeant Rodriguez-Chavez and all those who served with Dakota—the Marines, Army, Navy—to stand and accept thanks of a grateful nation.

Every member of our team is as important as the other. That’s a lesson that we all have to remember—as citizens and as a nation—as we meet the tests of our time, here at home and around the world.

To our Marines, to all our men and women in uniform, to our fellow Americans, let us always be faithful. And as we prepare for the reading of the citation, let me say, God bless you, Dakota. God bless our Marines and all who serve. And God bless the United States of America. *Semper Fi.*

[At this point, Lt. Cmdr. Matthew R. Maasdam, USN, Navy Aide to the President, read the citation, the President presented the medal, and Rear Admiral Margaret G. Kibben, USN, Chaplain of the U.S. Marine Corps, said a prayer.]

Thank you all for joining us here today. We are grateful for Dakota. We are grateful for all our men and women in uniform. And I hope that all of you have not only been inspired by this ceremony, but also will enjoy the hospitality of the White House. I hear the food is pretty good. *[Laughter]*

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:50 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Dwight and Jean Meyer, grandparents of Sgt. Meyer; and Carlat Freitas, mother of PO3 James Layton, USN, who was killed in Afghanistan on September 8, 2009.