

Remarks at Fort Bliss, Texas

August 31, 2012

The President. Hello, Team Bliss! Hooah! Thank you so much, everybody. Hooah!

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. To General Lloyd Austin, thanks for the introduction and your leadership, leading our troops in Iraq and taking care of our soldiers now that they are at home.

And right at the top, let me say that our hearts are obviously with all the folks who are down in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast, who are dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Isaac. Our prayers are with those who've lost loved ones. And I've directed the Federal Government to keep doing everything that it can to help our partners at the State and local level. As a country, we stand united with our fellow Americans in their hour of need.

I want to thank General Pittard and all your great commanders for welcoming me here today. I want to give a shout-out to the Sergeant Major of the Army, Ray Chandler, and Commander—Command Sergeant Major Ronnie Kelley. These guys remind us that our non-commissioned officers are the backbone of our military, leading the finest enlisted force in the world.

It is great to be back at Fort Bliss, home to the Army Air and Missile Defense Command, "Swift and Sure." We've got Guard and Reserve here. Of course, it's home to the legendary 1st Armored Division, "Old Ironsides." We've got a lot of brigades here, including the "Iron Eagles," "Iron Brigades," "Bulldogs," and "Ready First."

And I also want to salute Lucille Pittard and Alice Kelley and all the extraordinary spouses and military families who are here. Give them a big round of applause.

I know that all of you are grateful for the incredible support you receive from your civilian neighbors. So I want to acknowledge two champions of Fort Bliss: We've got Congressman Silvestre Reyes, and we've got Mayor John Cook. And we've also got all the great folks in El Paso and New Mexico. Give them a big round of applause.

Now, I've come back to Bliss for a simple reason. Two years ago, I was here to mark a historic moment in the life of our Nation and our military: the end of major combat operations in Iraq. It was a chance for me to say on behalf of the American people to you and all who served there: Welcome home, and congratulations on a job well done.

In every major phase of that war, you were there, the "Iron Soldiers." Because of your speed and strength, American troops toppled a dictator in less than a month. Because of your commitment, you stayed on extended tours and went back, tour after tour, year after year. Because of your determination to succeed, you turned back an insurgency. You stood firm against sectarian strife. You helped pull Iraq back from the abyss, and you trained Iraqis to take the lead. That was the progress you made possible with your service and your courage.

And so, 2 years ago, I was able to come here to Bliss and mark the end of our combat mission. And that night I told the American people that all our troops would be out of Iraq by the end of the following year. At the time, I know some folks didn't believe me. They were skeptical. Some thought the end of combat was just word games and semantics, but I meant what I said.

So you kept training up those Iraqi forces. We removed nearly 150,000 troops, and this past December, under General Austin's leadership, the last American troops came home, including the 4th Brigade Combat Team from Bliss.

You left Iraq with honor, your mission complete, your heads held high. After nearly 9 years, our war in Iraq was over. And today, Iraq has a chance to forge its own destiny, and there are no American troops fighting and dying in Iraq.

On this anniversary, we honor the memory of all who gave their lives there: nearly 4,500 American patriots, including 198 fallen heroes from Fort Bliss and the 1st Armored Division. And we salute all who served there.

When I was here 2 years ago, I told you something else though: that we had more work to do, including taking the fight to Al Qaida. And there, too, I meant what I said. With allies and partners, we've taken out more top Al Qaida terrorists than at any time since 9/11. And thanks to the courage of our forces, Al Qaida is on the road to defeat and bin Laden will never again threaten the United States of America.

Two years ago, I also told you that we'd keep up the fight in Afghanistan. And I know that some of you recently got back. On behalf of a grateful nation, welcome home.

Some of your buddies are in Afghanistan right now, and our thoughts and prayers are with all the troops from Bliss deployed around the world, including Afghanistan: the "War Eagles" and the "Highlanders."

And I know that some of you will be deploying later this year. And I've got to tell you the truth: This is still a very tough fight. You know this. You carry in your hearts the memory of comrades who made that ultimate sacrifice, including six heroes from Bliss who gave their lives on that awful day last month.

I just had the opportunity to meet with some of our Gold Star families, and our message to them is this: Your loved ones live on in the soul of our Nation, and we will honor them always.

Because of their sacrifice, because of your service, we pushed the Taliban back. We're training Afghan forces. The transition to Afghan lead is underway, and as promised, more than 30,000 of our troops will have come home by next month.

Just as in Iraq, we are going to end this war responsibly. Next year, Afghans will take the lead for their own security. In 2014, the transition will be complete. And even as this war ends, we will stay vigilant so Afghanistan is never again a source for attacks against America. Never again.

So we're not just ending these wars, we're doing it in a way that keeps America safe and makes America stronger. And that includes our military.

Think about it. Just 4 years ago, there were some 180,000 American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. By next month we will have cut that

number by nearly two-thirds. So most of our troops have come home. And as more Afghans step up, more of our troops will come home.

And what does that mean for you? Well, after 10 years of continuous operations, it means fewer deployments. It means more time for training. It means more time to improve readiness, more time to prepare for the future. And it means more time on the homefront with your families: your spouses and your kids.

So make no mistake, ending the wars responsibly makes us safer, and it makes our military even stronger. And ending these wars is letting us do something else: restore American leadership.

If you hear anyone trying to say that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, don't you believe it. Because here's the truth: Our alliances have never been stronger. We're leading on behalf of freedom, including standing with the people of Libya that are finally free from Muammar Qaddafi.

Around the world, there's a new attitude toward America, new confidence in our leadership. When people are asked, which country do you admire most, one nation always comes out on top: the United States of America.

And that's the progress that we've made thanks to your incredible service. We're winding down a decade of war. We're destroying terrorist networks that attacked us. And we've restored American leadership. And today, every American can be proud that the United States is safer, the United States is stronger, and the United States is more respected in the world.

Now, when I was here last, I made you a pledge. I said that, as President, I will insist that America serves you and your families as well as you've served us. And there again, I meant what I said. Because part of ending wars responsibly is caring for those who fought in it. And that's why I wanted to come back to Bliss on this anniversary to reaffirm our solemn obligations to you and your families.

You see, we may be turning a page on a decade of war, but America's responsibilities to you have only just begun.

[At this point, a baby cried.]

The President. Hey! [Laughter] I hear you.

So here's my pledge to you. In a world of serious threats, I will never hesitate to use force to defend the United States of America or our interests. At the same time, I will only send you into harm's way when it is absolutely necessary. And when we do, we will give you the equipment and the clear mission and the smart strategy and the support back home that you need to get the job done. We owe you that.

With the end of the wars, our military will be leaner, but we'll keep making historic investments to keep you the absolute best military in the world, bar none. The United States will always maintain our military superiority. In you, we've got the best trained, best led, best equipped military in human history. And as Commander in Chief, I'm going to keep it that way.

And by the way, you've been hearing some folks out there trying to talk about the budget and trying to scare you. Last year, Congress pledged to find a plan to reduce the deficit, and they said if they couldn't agree, there would be big cuts across the board, including defense. But understand, nobody wants these cuts, and that's why Congress threatened them, to force themselves to make hard decisions.

Well, here's the thing. There's no reason those cuts should happen, because folks in Congress ought to come together and agree on a responsible plan that reduces the deficit and keeps our military strong.

That's what needs to happen. That's what you and your families deserve. And that's how we're going to keep America safe and strong and grow our economy all at the same time. That's a pledge that we need to make to you.

And just as we give you the best equipment and technology on the battlefield, we need to give you the best support and care when you come home.

Audience member. I say hooah!

The President. Hooah!

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. We just had a roundtable with some soldiers and their families, talking about how coming home can be its own struggle, especially for our wounded warriors. So we've poured tremendous resources into this effort, unprecedented support for our troops with traumatic brain injury, for our troops and veterans with PTSD: more counselors, more clinicians, more care, more treatment.

And I know you've been a leader on this here at Bliss, making it clear that everyone has a responsibility to help a comrade who's hurting. So today we're taking another step. I've signed a new Executive order to give our troops, our veterans, and our families better access to mental health care.

We're going to increase the number of folks manning those crisis hotlines so help is there when you need it most. We're going to add even more counselors and mental health providers. We're launching a new awareness campaign, starting tomorrow, and I'm directing a new Task Force to find out what works best so we're doing everything we can to help those in need and save lives. And I know that you join me in saying to everyone who's ever worn the uniform: If you're hurting, it's not a sign of weakness to seek help, it's a sign of strength.

We are here to help you stay strong, "Army Strong." That's a commitment I'm making to you.

And we're going to keep taking care of our remarkable military families too. This is something I care deeply about, but even if I didn't, I'd have no choice because Michelle would tell me what to do. [Laughter] And along with Michelle and Dr. Jill Biden, they have been doing everything they can to get civilians involved in this process, not just our Government. So today more people all across America are joining forces to give our military families the respect and the support that they deserve, and that's especially important right now.

Now, this may be a political season, and folks may be arguing about all sorts of things. But one thing that we Americans are united on is our support for you. Only 1 percent of Americans may wear the uniform—

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. —but 100 percent of Americans need to be supporting you and your families 100 percent.

And so this brings me to the final pledge I made here at Bliss 2 years ago. When you take off the uniform, we are going to help you fully participate in our economy. Every single one of you has defended the American Dream for the rest of us, and every single one of you deserves the chance to live the American Dream yourselves. And that includes jobs worthy of your incredible talents.

And by the way, it's not just good for you, it's good for the country, because after a decade of war, the nation we need to be rebuilding is the United States of America. And all of you have the skills that America needs.

So, with a million more of you rejoining civilian life in the years ahead, we're upping our game at every stage of your careers. We've overhauled the Transition Assistance Program, creating a kind of reverse boot camp as you leave service, to help you find a job, and pursue that degree, or start that business. And hopefully, this will be one boot camp you actually like. [Laughter]

We'll keep helping you and your families pursue your education under the post-9/11 GI bill. And by the way, we're cracking down on those schools that have been trying to take your money and then rip you off by not giving you the education that you paid for. That needs to stop. We're going to bring an end to that.

We're going to keep hiring our newest veterans in the Federal Government and in communities as police officers and firefighters and first-responders. Because we passed tax credits, more businesses can hire our veterans and wounded warriors.

We're making it easier for you to transfer your outstanding military skills to the licenses and credentials that you need to get that civilian job. If you've been a medic in theater, you shouldn't have to start at Nursing 101 if you decide you want to go into the medical profession here in the United States. If you've been a mechanic on a multimillion-dollar piece of equipment, you shouldn't have to come back

and start all over again in getting credentialed to work on a car here in the United States.

And maybe you've heard, last year, I challenged the private sector to hire or train 100,000 veterans or military spouses. Well, last week, Michelle was able to announce that patriotic companies across America have actually exceeded that goal ahead of schedule with 125,000 jobs.

But we've still got more work to do. So today I'm again calling on Congress to act. They've got some work they need to do: pass the veterans jobs corps so we can put more vets to work protecting and rebuilding America; extend tax credits to businesses that hire our veterans. And I say to every company in America: If you want somebody who knows how to get the job done, if you want somebody who is going to make you proud, just like they made America proud, then hire a vet. [Applause] Hire a vet. Because after fighting for America, you shouldn't have to fight for a job in America.

So, Team Bliss, these are America's commitments to you and all who serve, because we need to be there for you just like you were there for us, not just this year or next, but for all the years to come.

That's the lesson of a soldier I had the honor to meet the last time I was in Afghanistan, visiting some of our wounded warriors in the hospital at Bagram. Sergeant Chase Haag is 22 years old. This past spring, he was with his team when their vehicle got hit by an IED the day that I flew in. So when I arrived at his hospital room, he and his buddies were all in pretty bad shape. And he was certainly in bad shape: His leg was broken; his back was fractured. He was laying there on his bed. He was under a lot of medication, face was swollen, his eyes were shut.

And at first, my attitude was I didn't want to disturb him because I thought he was sleeping. And the doctor said, no, I think he can understand what you're saying even if he can't acknowledge it, and I think he'd appreciate knowing that you're by his side. So I leaned in, and I told Chase how proud I was of him and how proud the country was of him and how we'd be praying for his recovery.

And I was turning to leave, and then something happened. There was a rustling under his blanket. And Chase never opened his eyes, couldn't make a sound, but suddenly, you saw the blanket lift, and his arm came out. And he shook my hand: a firm Army handshake. And I don't think there was a dry eye in that room.

And then, a few months later, I was visiting our wounded warriors at Walter Reed, and I walk around the corner, and who's there, but Chase. He had endured multiple surgeries. He was persevering through physical therapy. But this time, he was on his feet. He was walking again. And he had his dad next to him. And today, he's back where every soldier wants to be: back with his unit.

And it made me think, that's just one moment in the life of one American soldier. But it captured the spirit, the resilience, the tenacity, the discipline, the resolve, the patriotism of all of you.

For a decade, you have served under the dark cloud of war. You've endured great loss, and good men and women have given their last full measure of devotion. But we Americans are strong, and we are resilient, and we have resolve. And now we can see a light: the light of a new day on the horizon. And that's because of you.

The war in Iraq is over. The transition is underway in Afghanistan. Our troops will keep coming home. And we are keeping our military ready for whatever the future may hold. But know this, Bliss, we are moving forward stronger and more confident in knowing that when faced with great trials, we Americans do what we always do. We don't just endure, we emerge stronger than before.

And as we go forward as one Nation, if the American people ever need inspiration, they just have to look at Bliss. They need only to look at you. For in you, we see the best that our country has to offer: the virtues that have made America great for more than two centuries, and the values that will keep us great for centuries to come.

It's the belief that all men are created equal; that we are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's the sense of duty that says our country and our freedoms are worth fighting for. It's the selflessness that says I don't care who gets the credit, but I'll do my part, and we'll get the job done. The trust in one another, knowing that when the chips are down, the person next to you has got your back and you've got theirs. The strength you draw from every part of our American family, every color, every creed, every background, every faith coming together, succeeding together, as one American team.

That's who you are. That's who we are. We are Americans. We pledge allegiance to the same proud flag. And we all love this country and all it represents to the world: the hope, the opportunity. And we stand united in support of our troops and your families. And when we stand together and when we work together, when we take care of each other, we remind ourselves, there's nothing we can't do, America's greatest days are yet to come, and that we remain the greatest force for freedom that the world has ever known.

So God bless you. God bless all our men and women in uniform. And God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:06 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, USA; Maj. Gen. Dana J.H. Pittard, USA, commander, 1st Armored Division, and his wife Lucille; Sergeant Major of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III, USA; CSM Ronnie F. Kelley, USA, division command sergeant major, 1st Armored Division, and his wife Alice; Mayor John Cook of El Paso, TX; and Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden. He also referred to Executive Order 13625, which is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.