

Remarks at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania July 21, 2015

Thank you. Please, please, have a seat. Hello, VFW!

Thank you, Commander Stroud. John, as you complete your tenure, we want to thank you for your service to the Air Force, to the VFW, and to our Nation. And I look forward to working with your next commander, John Biedrzycki, a proud Army veteran, and as always, your outstanding executive director and Vietnam vet, Bob Wallace, who's doing a great job.

I'd ask you all to join me in saluting Ladies Auxiliary President Ann Panteleakos; your next president, Francisca Guilford; and everybody in the Ladies Auxiliary, because our military families serve right alongside those in uniform.

I want to acknowledge Mayor Bill Peduto, our host here in Pittsburgh; County Executive Rich Fitzgerald; and the people of Pittsburgh, who are hosting us in their beautiful city. And I'm pleased to be joined by our Secretary of Veterans Affairs, who you just heard from, Bob McDonald.

Like a true Army Airborne Ranger, Bob is tireless. Like the outstanding business leader that he is, he's bringing new reforms to the VA. At one press conference, Bob even gave out his personal cell phone number. Call him anytime, he said. I think he got some calls. On behalf of all of us, I want to thank you, Bob, for you outstanding service.

So it is a great honor to be back with the VFW. And I want to start with the simple message: Thank you. As so many of you remember, there was a time, back during the draft, when virtually every American had, at some point, a loved one or a friend in the military. Today, it's an All-Volunteer Force. So a lot of folks don't always have direct contact with our troops and with our veterans. One of the great privileges of my office is that I do. And that's why, as President, I consider it my obligation to help make sure that, even though less than 1 percent of Americans wear the uniform, that 100

percent of Americans honor your sacrifices and your service.

As we mark the 70th anniversary of the second end of the—or the end of the Second World War, I want to offer a special salute to all of our World War II veterans. As communities across our country continue to mark 50 years since the Vietnam War, we say once more, welcome to all our Vietnam vets. As I think you heard this morning, we have new—a new POW/MIA agency, new leadership. We're building stronger partnerships with veterans' groups like the VFW. Because bringing home Americans taken prisoner or who've gone missing is a sacred mission, and we are stepping up our efforts for all wars, to never leave a fallen comrade behind—ever.

VFW, when I took office, you were the very first veterans' convention I addressed, and I talked with you about how we needed a new vision of American leadership in the world. For too long, there had been a mindset where the first instinct when facing a challenge in the world was to send in our military. And we have the greatest military in human history. But we learned, painfully, where that kind of thinking can lead; that rushing into war without thinking through the consequences and going it alone without broad international support, getting drawn into unnecessary conflicts and spreading our military too thin actually too often would play into the hands of our enemies. That's what they wanted us to do.

And who paid the price? Our men and women in uniform. Our wounded warriors. Our fallen heroes who never come home. Their families, who carry that loss forever.

And so I said then that our brave troops and their families deserve better. We cannot expect our military to bear the entire burden of our national security alone. Everybody has to support our national security.

And so today, we're pursuing a new kind of leadership, a smarter, broader vision of American strength, one that relies not only on our

outstanding military, but on all elements of our national power. And that starts with the recognition that our strength in the world depends on our economic strength here at home. And as Americans, we can be proud of the progress we've achieved together. We've now seen more than five straight years of private sector job growth, nearly 13 million new jobs, which is the longest streak on record. The unemployment rate is near the lowest level in 7 years. American manufacturing, our auto industry are booming. Our exports—Made in America—have been at record levels. And wages for American workers are finally rising.

The stock market has more than doubled, which has restored 401(k)s for millions of Americans. More than 16 million Americans have gained quality, affordable health care who didn't have it before. We are producing more American energy here at home, which is reducing our dependence on foreign oil. And we've done all this while we've cut the deficit by two-thirds. So that's progress, that's strength, and that's American leadership. That serves as the foundation for our national security.

And real leadership also means using our power wisely, especially our military. That's why we refocused our fight in Afghanistan, pushed back the Taliban, trained up Afghan forces so they could take the lead for their own security. Today, we can say that our combat mission in Afghanistan is over. We brought America's longest war to a responsible end. And we salute every member of this 9/11 generation who has sacrificed to keep us safe.

Now, as Commander in Chief, my greatest responsibility is ensuring the security of the United States in what is still a dangerous world. And that means keeping our military strong. Yes, our Armed Forces are drawing down after two major wars, but some of the reckless budget cuts, under the name of sequestration, that's going on in Washington right now, that's not the way to keep our Armed Forces ready or to take care of our troops and their families. Or to keep America strong with the education and infrastructure

and research and development that we need to thrive. These mindless cuts have to end.

There are two ways forward right now. On the one hand, we can keep this sequester, trying to fund our military with gimmicks, short-change national security programs like counterterrorism, increase risk to our troops. Now, I've got to be honest, that's what the Republican budget does. But I've got a better idea, which is to end sequestration, increase the defense budget, invest in America's strengths. And I'm calling on Republican leaders in Congress to come to the table with Democrats, sit down, negotiate a budget that protects our national security and our economic security.

We shouldn't be playing partisan politics when it comes to national security. There's no good reason we can't get it done. And I've said I will veto any budget that locks in the sequester. It is not good for our country.

Now, every ally and every adversary needs to know around the world the United States has and will continue to have the strongest, most capable fighting force the world has ever known. No one can match our Army, the greatest land force on Earth. Nobody can match our Navy, the largest and most advanced battle fleet in the world, or our Coast Guard, safeguarding our shores and ports. Nobody can match our Air Force; its reach and precision are unequalled. Nobody can match our Marine Corps, the world's only global expeditionary force. Nobody can match our special operations forces, our remarkable, quiet professionals.

And I've shown I will not hesitate to use force to protect our Nation, including from the threat of terrorism. Thanks to the skill of our military and counterintelligence professionals, we've struck major blows against those who threaten us. Usama bin Laden is gone. Anwar Awlaki, a leader of the Al Qaida affiliate in Yemen, gone. Many of Al Qaida's deputies and their replacements, gone. Ahmed Abdi Godane, the leader of the Al Qaida affiliate in Somalia, gone. Abu Anas al-Libi, accused of bombing our Embassies in Africa, captured. Ahmed Abu Khattalah, accused in the attack in Benghazi, captured. The list goes on. If you

target Americans, you will have no safe haven. We will defend our Nation.

When threats emerge, real leadership means the United States rallies the world to action. We're stronger when we stand with allies and partners. No other nation in the world can match the alliances that we have. It's another source of our strength; it's a force multiplier. And I want to take the opportunity to commend Prime Minister David Cameron and our great British allies and their friends, their recent decision to increase their defense spending to 2 percent. That's what every NATO ally should do. They've got to meet their commitments to our collective security so that we stand together.

When we stand together, things happen. Right now we've got a coalition of some 40 nations in Afghanistan. The war may be over that we—that our ground troops fight, but that country is still dangerous. So we'll persevere in our new mission, which is training and assisting Afghan forces, remaining relentless in our counterterrorism operations against Al Qaida.

Likewise, we stand together—a coalition of some 60 nations, including Arab partners—in the fight against ISIL. I firmly believe that the United States should not be engaged in another major ground war in the Middle East. That's not good for our national security, and it's not good for our military. But what we can do and what we are doing is to pound ISIL from the air—more than 50,000 [5,000]^o air strikes so far—while training and supporting local forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria as they fight to push ISIL back.

Recent losses on the battlefield show that ISIL can be defeated. We're a long way from being finished. I've said this is a long campaign; it will take time. But have no doubt, we will degrade and ultimately destroy this barbaric terrorist organization. We've got the coalition, and we've got right on our side, and it will happen.

At the same time, we have to remain vigilant in protecting our homeland. Our law enforcement and homeland security professionals are

tireless. They've arrested individuals across our country for attempting to join ISIL or for plotting terrorism. They've thwarted attacks; they've saved American lives.

We don't yet know all the details behind the attack in Chattanooga, but we do know that Al Qaida and ISIL have encouraged attacks on American soil, including against our servicemembers. And this threat of lone wolves and small cells is hard to detect and prevent. So our entire Government—along with State and local partners—we are going to keep doing everything in our power to protect the American people, including our men and women in uniform.

And we honor our five servicemembers killed so senselessly in Chattanooga. We are grateful to the courageous police who stopped the rampage and saved lives. And we draw strength from yet another American community that has come together with an unmistakable message to those who would try to do us harm: We will not give in to fear. You cannot divide Americans. You can never change our way of life or the values of freedom and diversity that make us Americans.

Now, as we defend our Nation, real leadership also means something else: having the courage to lead in a new direction, the wisdom to move beyond policies that haven't worked in the past, having the confidence to engage in smart, principled diplomacy that can lead to a better future.

That's what we're doing in Cuba, where the new chapter between our peoples will mean more opportunities for the Cuban people. Today, with our American Embassy open in Havana for the first time in 50 years, we reaffirm that we will speak out for freedom and universal values around the world.

But we're not scared to engage. We also see the strength of American diplomacy in our comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran, because we must prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. And we're now engaged in an important debate, which is a good thing. We are a democracy. Unfortunately, you may have no-

^o White House correction.

ticed, there's already a lot of shaky information out there. So, even as I make the case of why this is a critical deal to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, we're going to make sure the people know the facts. And here are some basic facts.

With this deal, we cut off every single one of Iran's pathways to a nuclear program. Iran is prohibited from pursuing a nuclear weapon permanently. Without a deal, those paths remain open and Iran could move closer to a nuclear bomb. With this deal, we gain unprecedented access to Iran's nuclear facilities and monitor them 24/7. Without a deal, we don't get that. With this deal, if Iran cheats, sanctions snap back on. Without a deal, the sanctions unravel. With this deal, we have a chance to resolve the challenge of Iran trying to get a nuclear weapon, peacefully. Without it, we risk yet another conflict in the Middle East.

Now, if Iran tries to get a bomb despite this agreement—10 years from now or 20 years from now—the American President will be in a stronger position to take whatever additional steps are necessary, including any option of military action, to prevent that from happening. And those are the facts. That's the choice. And for the sake of our national security and the sake of future generations, we need to make the right choice on this critical issue.

And I also want to make a broader point. In the debate over this deal, we're hearing the echoes of some of the same policies and mindset that failed us in the past. And some of the same politicians and pundits that are so quick to reject the possibility of a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program are the same folks who were so quick to go to war in Iraq and said it would take a few months. And we know the consequences of that choice, of what it cost us in blood and treasure.

So I believe there's a smarter, more responsible way to protect our national security, and that is what we are doing. Instead of dismissing the rest of the world and going it alone, we've done the hard and patient work of uniting the international community to meet a common threat. Instead of chest-beating that rejects even the idea of talking to our adversaries—

which sometimes sounds good in sound bites, but accomplishes nothing—we're seeing that strong and principled diplomacy can give hope of actually resolving a problem peacefully.

Instead of rushing into another conflict, I believe that sending our sons and daughters into harm's way must always be a last resort and that before we put their lives on the line, we should exhaust every alternative. That's what we owe our troops. That is strength, and that is American leadership.

Of course, even with this deal, we'll continue to have serious differences with the Iranian Government: its support of terrorism, proxies that destabilize the Middle East. So we can't let them off the hook. Our sanctions for Iran's support for terrorism and its ballistic missile program and its human rights violations, those sanctions will remain in place. And we will stand with allies and partners, including Israel, to oppose Iran's dangerous behavior.

And we are not going to relent until we bring home our Americans who are unjustly detained in Iran. Journalist Jason Rezaian should be released. Pastor Saeed Abedini should be released. Amir Hekmati, a former sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, should be released. Iran needs to help us find Robert Levinson. These Americans need to be back home with their families.

There's one more aspect of American leadership I want to discuss because, even more than sending Americans to war, real strength is measured by how we take care of our veterans when you come home. VFW, working together, we've made real progress. We've won historic increases in veterans funding. We've made VA benefits available to more than 2 million veterans who didn't have them before, including more Vietnam vets exposed to agent orange. That was a commitment I made when I ran for office, we're keeping that commitment.

We're devoting unprecedented resources for mental health care. We've helped more than 1.4 million veterans and their families pursue their education under the post-9/11 GI bill. We've reduced the number of homeless veterans by about a third. We're helping more

veterans and military spouses find good civilian jobs. And the veterans' unemployment rate continues to go down; it's now lower than the national average. And that's all good news.

When problems arise, we work to fix them. Here in Pittsburgh, an outbreak of Legionnaire's disease at the VA a few years ago killed six veterans and infected others. That was a tragedy, and whenever there are any missteps, there is no excuse. So our hearts go out to the families of those who have lost loved ones. And know that there is new leadership now at the Pittsburgh VA. The safety measures now in place are some of the strongest in the Nation, and patient safety is a top priority at VA hospitals, because we have to prevent anything like that from ever happening again.

Last year, of course, the full magnitude of broader problems also came to light: long wait times, veterans denied care, some people inexcusably cooking the books. It was unacceptable. And I made it clear I wanted those problems fixed. I brought in Bob McDonald, and I went down to the Phoenix VA to see and hear for myself. I know Bob gave you an update earlier. The VA reached out to vets across the country to get them off those wait lists and in for care. Bob is bringing energetic new leadership. He is working to hold people accountable and make sure the whistleblowers are protected instead of punished.

With the new resources of the Choice Act, the VA has hired thousands of new physicians, nurses, staff. They're opening more clinics. So to all the veterans who spoke up, I want you to know we heard you; we changed the rule. Now, if it takes you more than 40 miles to drive to a VA facility, we'll help you go to a doctor outside of the VA.

Today, the VA is handling millions more appointments, inside and outside the VA, and delivering more care. On average, veterans are waiting just a few days for an appointment. And that's all good news. Veterans continue to tell us that once they get through the door, the care is often very good.

A lot of folks across the VA, many of them veterans themselves, work hard every single day to do right by our veterans, and we thank

them. But we've got to acknowledge, our work is not done; we still have a big challenge. Even with all these new resources, the VA is still struggling to keep up with the surge of veterans who are seeking care.

The fact is, our veterans are getting older. With the end of the most recent wars, more veterans are now coming home. Our veterans are seeking more care. Our veterans are getting the new lifesaving treatment for hepatitis C. You put it all together, and in some places, wait times are higher than they were last year.

So I want you to know, I'm still not satisfied, Bob is still not satisfied. We are focused on this at the highest levels. We are not going to let up. And we're going to keep pushing forward on the five priorities of our veterans agenda.

Number one, we're going to keep fighting for the resources you need. And to help deal with this surge, we've sent an urgent request to Congress: Give the VA more flexibility so it can move funds to where they're needed most right now.

I'm calling on Congress to approve this request quickly, this month. Our vets need it, and our hospitals need it. And let me just add, we've protected VA funding from sequestration in the past, and I've proposed another increase in veterans funding for next year. And I would point out that the Republican budget falls short, and it's another reminder that the best way to protect VA funding going forward—and, VFW, we need you to keep raising your voice on this—is to get rid of sequestration for good. That's how we're going to make sure that our veterans have the resources they need.

Number two, we're going to keep fighting to make sure you actually get the health care you've been promised. We'll keep improving care for our growing number of proud women veterans. We've got to make good on the promise of the Clay Hunt Act: improving care for veterans with posttraumatic stress, increasing outreach and peer support, and recruiting more psychiatrists and mental health counselors. We've got to make sure veterans who are already struggling don't fall through the cracks.

And we've also got to end the stigma and shame around mental health once and for all. And every American can help by learning the five signs that someone may be hurting so we can all reach out. Our troops and veterans were there for us. We need to be there for them a hundred percent. We've all got a role to play.

Number three, we're going to keep cutting the disability claims backlog. I can report that since its peak 2 years ago, we've now cut the backlog by 80 percent—by 80 percent. And we're going to keep bringing it down. Instead of all that paper, the VA is now handling almost all your disability claims electronically.

And by the way, the accuracy of claims is up as well. But I know that it still has taken too long to get a final answer on your appeals. So one of our next missions has to be fundamental reform of the claims appeals process so that it works for you, our veterans, and you can actually get answers faster—final answers faster. We've recruited some of the best talent from Silicon Valley and the private sector. We're going to put them on the case.

Number four, we'll keep fighting to uphold the dignity of every veteran, and that includes ending veterans' homelessness. As part of their Joining Forces initiative, Michelle and Jill Biden are helping to lead the charge. And they've teamed up with hundreds of elected officials: Governors, mayors, local leaders.

New Orleans and Houston have become the first cities to effectively end veterans' homelessness. They deserve their congratulations for that. We're seeing major progress in cities like Salt Lake City and Louisville. So this has become a national movement. And we stand by our pledge: We are going to keep at it until every veteran who has fought for America has a place to call home in America.

And finally, we're going to keep fighting to give our troops and veterans every chance to enjoy the American Dream you helped defend. Now, there's already a law to protect our troops and military families against unscrupulous predatory lenders. But I have to tell you, some of the worst abusers, like payday lenders, are exploiting loopholes to trap our troops in a vicious cycle of crushing debt. So today we're

taking a new step. The Defense Department is closing these loopholes so we can protect our men and women in uniform from predatory lenders. It is the right thing to do.

And since today also marks 5 years since I signed historic Wall Street reform into law, let me say I will not accept any efforts to roll back this law or its strong protections for our economy and the American people, including our military families.

And we're going to keep helping our newest veterans transition to civilian life. All 50 States have now taken steps to recognize the skills of our veterans when issuing civilian credentials and licenses. So we've got to make sure these laws are working so our veterans actually get those credentials. We'll keep helping our veterans and their families choose the school that's right for them under the post-9/11 GI bill, and that now includes the surviving spouses of our fallen heroes.

In 43 States, veterans now pay in-State tuition. We're working to make sure that happens in all 50 States. I don't know what the other seven States think they're doing. We've got to go ahead and make that happen.

We'll keep partnering with communities that step up and welcome our veterans home with jobs and opportunities that are worthy of their skills. And as long as I'm President, I'm going to keep telling every business in America: If you want somebody to get the job done, hire a vet. Hire a veteran, because they know what sacrifice means and duty means and responsibility means.

Let's do more nation-building here at home. That's part of our strength, part of our American leadership.

VFW, as I look around this auditorium, I see that the love of country and the devotion to duty spans the generations. And that spirit endures in those who wear the uniform today. We saw that, once again, last week in Chattanooga.

Back in Massachusetts, Tom Sullivan cheered for his Boston teams. In battle, said a comrade, Sully "was just everything that a marine should be." In two tours in Iraq, he earned a Combat Action Ribbon; for his wounds, two Purple

Hearts. When he was warned that a gunman was there in Chattanooga, he ran in, so that others could live. Today we echo the words of his community: Gunnery Sergeant Thomas J. Sullivan “was our hero and he will never be forgotten.” “Thank you . . . for protecting us.”

Growing up in Georgia, Skip Wells was a true servant leader: devoted to God and to his friends, quick to lend a hand or put you on his prayer list. During his hometown’s Fourth of July parade, he was so proud to be a marine that he went in his dress uniform. Just 21 years old, a year out of boot camp, easy going, always smiling, even during the hardest drills. A friend said, “Skip is the kind of kid you want on your team.” As Americans, we are forever grateful that Lance Corporal Squire K. Wells was on our team.

As an Eagle Scout in Arkansas, David Wyatt would race up a mountain to be the first on top. He was determined to do his part for our country, found his calling in the Marines. He led with courage in Afghanistan and Iraq and with compassion, as a mentor to comrades with posttraumatic stress. It’s said he was a “gentleman and a gentle man.” And no one knew that better than his wife Lorri and their two young children. Today, we see, as they did, why a friend would say that Staff Sergeant David A. Wyatt was “the kind of man this country needs more of.”

Back home, Carson Holmquist was an embodiment of the spirit of Grantsburg, Wisconsin, population, 1,300. Loved country music, loved to fish, to hunt, to play football. And he loved the Marines, showing up at his old high school in his dress blues. He, too, served in Afghanistan; was devoted to his family, his wife Jasmine and their 2-year-old son. Said his old coach, Carson “always did the best he could.” Today, our Nation is stronger because America saw the best of Sergeant Carson A. Holmquist.

And in his hometown in Ohio, Randall Smith is remembered as the high school baseball star with the fierce pitch. He was a fun and outgoing guy—the guy, they said, you just

wanted to be around. His buddies in the Navy knew it—he had just reenlisted—and his family knew it too: his wife Angie, who called—who he liked to call “the most beautiful woman in the world,” and their young daughters, who he called his “little princesses.” Today, we join the people of Paulding, Ohio—including VFW Post 587, with five flags flying—in honor of Navy Petty Officer 2d Class Randall S. Smith.

VFW, our Nation endures because citizens like you put on the uniform and serve to keep us free. We endure because your families serve and stay strong on the home front. We endure because the freedoms and values you protected are now defended by a new generation, Americans just like our five patriots who gave their lives in Chattanooga. As a grateful nation, we must stand up for them and honor them, now and forever.

God bless these American heroes. God bless all our troops and all of our veterans. God bless the United States of America.

Thank you, VFW. We’re proud of what you do.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:30 a.m. at the David Lawrence Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Rich Fitzgerald, county executive, Allegheny County, PA; Michael S. Linnington, Director, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency; Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden; Barbara Forsha, interim director, VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System; Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez, suspected gunman in the shootings at the military facilities in Chattanooga, TN, on July 16; Heith Wyatt and Rebecca Wyatt, children of S. Sgt. David A. Wyatt, USMC, who was killed in the July 16 shooting at the Naval Operational Support Center in Chattanooga; and Wyatt A. Holmquist, son of Sgt. Carson A. Holmquist, USMC, who was also killed in the July 16 shooting. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.