

Remarks at the Wounded Warrior Project Soldier Ride Opening Ceremony April 14, 2016

The President. Good morning, everybody!

Audience members. Good morning!

The President. Oh, welcome to the White House! Thank you, William, for your outstanding service, and your beautiful family. I heard, I think, your youngest one saying: “Daddy! It’s Daddy!” [Laughter] So she’s proud too.

Vice President Joe Biden. See her waving at you?

The President. Hey, you. [Laughter]

I want to thank outstanding advocates on behalf of our men and women in uniform and our veterans. First of all, our Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Secretary McDonald. Please give him a big round of applause. And somebody who’s got veterans’ backs every single day, Vice President Biden. Please give him a big round of applause. [Applause] They like you.

Now, let me just first of all say, this seems to be an exceptionally good-looking group here. I do want to check, though, to see how the distribution is. First of all, I understand we do have some Army here. Navy! [Applause] Air Force! [Applause] Marines! [Applause] Coast Guard! [Applause] All right, Coast Guard. [Laughter] And we’ve got some of your biggest fans, which is our extraordinary military families. Yes.

We hold a lot of events here at the White House, but few are as inspiring as this one. Over the past 7 years, this has become one of our favorite traditions. This year, we’ve got 40 Active Duty riders and 25 veterans. Many of you are recovering from major injuries. You’ve learned how to adapt to a new life. Some of you are still working through wounds that are harder to see, like posttraumatic stress. And like countless riders across the country, part of this great movement is to help each other, for all of us to see each other get across that finish line. And that’s how America is supposed to work. That’s how our military works. And it doesn’t stop when you take off the uniform.

We’re joined by Marine Captain Jessica Bilkovich. Where’s Jessica? There she is, back there. Jessica was injured in training, but went on to serve in Afghanistan. And over time, her

injuries compounded. In addition to intense back pain, she was also struggling with post-traumatic stress and depression. It took her 6 months to make the phone call for help, but thanks to the love and support of her husband, she finally reached out. And as part of her treatment, she discovered cycling. On her first ride, Jessica says, “I felt so free, like a weight was coming off.” The Soldier Ride gives her the chance to do what she loves. And, Jessica, you are an inspiration; we could not be prouder of the example that you’re setting for so many people.

We have Army Staff Sergeant Casey McEuin. Where’s Casey? Casey is back there. Decorated veteran, Casey served for 15 years with the 4th Infantry Division, including in Afghanistan.

Audience member. Hooah!

The President. Injured in an attack on his outpost, he had to medically retire, something he had never imagined. And he felt lost, struggling to find work and living out of his Jeep. And then, some veterans’ service organizations helped him get back on his feet. And today, he’s still fighting for his brothers and sisters in arms, working at Hired Heroes USA, which helps connect our returning heroes with job opportunities. Casey is a proud rider today. We are proud of you, Casey. Thank you.

And that’s what’s so remarkable about this ride, dreamt up by a bartender. [Laughter] Yes, some of my best ideas have come in a bar. [Laughter]

Audience member. Hooah!

The President. You too, huh? [Laughter] But this is one of those ideas that the next day, actually, it was still good. [Laughter] It’s a reminder—that was not in the script. [Laughter]

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. Yes. [Laughter]

The President. It’s a reminder of the power of one person to launch a movement that changes people’s lives. It’s a reminder of the sacrifices that our men and women in uniform have made to keep our Nation free. And it’s a reminder that, for those who are called to

serve, their mission doesn't end on the battlefield: It's one you carry with you for the rest of your lives.

Our veterans will tell you themselves, they may have put away their uniforms, but they're not finished serving their country. That includes our wounded warriors who here today, who often tell me that as soon as they can, they want to serve their country again. Service is in their DNA. Giving back is what you all do.

But as we all know, many of our returning heroes still have a hard time connecting opportunities to community and finding ways to serve. And today I want to thank our incredible veterans' service organizations who step up for veterans every day, making that connection. Organizations like The Mission Continues. Organizations like Team Red, White, and Blue. Organizations like Team Rubicon.

So I know you guys are ready to ride. I just want to close with a quick story. We're joined today by Air Force Technical Sergeant Jason Miller. Where's Jason?

T. Sgt. Jason Miller. Right here, sir.

The President. There's Jason right there. Jason served four combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Came home with his body intact, but inside he was struggling with wounds nobody could see. And Jason doesn't mind me telling you all that he got depressed enough that he considered taking his life. Four years ago, he wrote me a letter about what he was going through. And he told me about how hard it was to get the services and the support that he needed. As luck would have it, right around that time I happened to meet with Team Rubicon, which deploys veterans for emergency response to disasters. And in addition to making sure that the VA was following up with Jason, I also asked Team Rubicon to get in touch with him. It helps when you're Commander in Chief. [*Laughter*] You've got—folks take your phone call. [*Laughter*]

Team Rubicon reached out. Jason ended up joining Team Rubicon, deployed to Moore, Oklahoma, which was devastated by a tornado.

And feeling an immediate bond with his teammates, he threw himself into the work of helping people pick up their lives. In the process, he found a path to a new life of his own. And when Jason talks about what this new opportunity to serve means, he quotes Ghandi. He says, "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

And Jason's spirit, the spirit of all of you, is the story of our Armed Forces. It's about dedicating your life to a cause that is bigger than yourself. It's about support and love for each other and for our country that flows through everybody who serves under our proud flag. And it's about the country that pledges to be with you every step of the way, not just when we need you, but also when you need us.

That's why every day I have left—that I have left in this office, I'm going to keep doing everything that I can to make sure that we serve you as well as you've served us. And that means making sure you get the care and benefits that you've earned and that you deserve. It means making sure you and your families have the opportunities to continue to contribute to our Nation's success, to achieve your own dreams. You represent what's best about our Nation, and I hope all of American—all of the American people along the route will come out and show their support for these heroes, not just today, but every single day.

So God bless you. God bless all our military families, all who serve. God bless America.

With that, we are going to let William strap up, and then I am going to blow the horn, which I always really enjoy. [*Laughter*] All right, come on.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:31 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Capt. William B. Reynolds III, USA (Ret.), board member, Team Red, White, & Blue, who introduced the President; and Chris Carney, founder, Wounded Warrior Project Soldier Ride.