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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: On Veterans (Fargo, North Dakota)

Fargo, ND | July 03, 2008

For a fact sheet, click here.

Tomorrow, we'll mark the 4th of July with barbecues and parades; fireworks and time off with loved ones. We'll also have the opportunity to give thanks for our troops and veterans. Their sacrifice has made possible the freedom that we enjoy. And keeping faith with those who serve must always be a core American value and a cornerstone of American patriotism. Because America's commitment to its servicemen and women begins at enlistment, and it must never end.

Without that commitment, I might not be here today. My grandfather - Stanley Dunham - enlisted after Pearl Harbor and went on to march in Patton's Army. My grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line while he was gone, and my mother was born at Fort Leavenworth. When he returned, it was to a country that gave him the chance to go to college on the GI Bill; to buy his first home with a loan from the FHA; to move his family west, all the way to Hawaii, where he and my grandmother helped raise me. Today, my grandfather is buried in the Punchbowl, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, where 776 victims of Pearl Harbor are laid to rest.

I knew him when he was older. But whenever I meet young men and women along the campaign trail who are serving in the military today, I think about what my grandfather was like when he enlisted - a fresh-faced man of twenty-three, with a hearty laugh and an easy smile.

These sons and daughters of America are the best and the bravest among us. When our troops go into battle, they serve no faction or party; they represent no race or region. They are simply Americans. They serve and fight and bleed together out of loyalty not just to a place on a map or a certain kind of people, but to a set of ideals that we have been striving for since the first shots rang out at Lexington and Concord - the idea that America could be governed not by men, but by laws; that we could be equal in the eyes of those laws; that we could be free to say what we want and write what we want and worship as we please; that we could have the right to pursue our individual dreams, but the obligation to help our fellow citizens pursue theirs.

Allegiance to these ideals has always been at the core of American patriotism - it's what unites a country of so many different opinions and beliefs. At the same time, we must never forget that honoring these ideals must mean honoring the men and women who defend them in the uniform of the United States. This requires more than saluting our veterans as they march by in a 4th of July parade. It requires only sending them to war when we must, and giving them the equipment they need to complete their mission safely. It requires giving them the care and benefits they have earned. And it requires standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our veterans and their families after the guns fall silent and the cameras are turned off.

We know that over the last eight years, we've often fallen short of meeting this test. We learned about the deplorable conditions that were discovered at places like Fort Bragg and Walter Reed. We've walked by a veteran whose home is now a cardboard box on a street corner in the richest nation on Earth. We've heard about what it's like to navigate the broken bureaucracy of the VA - the impossibly long lines, or the repeated calls for help that get you nothing more than an answering machine.

It doesn't have to be this way. Not in this country. There are many aspects of the war in Iraq that have gone inalterably wrong, but caring for our veterans is one thing we can still get right.

When I arrived in the Senate, I sought out a seat on the Veterans Affairs Committee so I could fight to



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serve our veterans as well as they have served us. We fought to make sure that the claims of disabled veterans in Illinois and other states were being heard fairly. We passed laws to get homeless veterans off the streets and to prevent at-risk veterans from getting there in the first place. I led a bipartisan effort to improve outpatient facilities at places like Walter Reed, and to slash red tape, and reform the disability process - because recovering troops should go to the front of the line, and they shouldn't have to fight to get there. And we passed laws to give family members health care while they care for injured troops, and a year of job protection so they never have to face a choice between caring for a loved one and keeping a job.

But there is so much more work that we need to do in this country. We have much further to go to keep our sacred trust with the men and women who serve.

That's why I've pledged to build a 21st century VA as President. It means no more red tape - it's time to give every service-member electronic copies of medical and service records upon discharge. It means no more shortfalls - we'll fully fund VA health care, and add more Vet Centers, particularly in rural areas. It means no more delays - we'll pass on-time budgets. It means no more means-testing - it's time to allow every veteran into the VA system. And it means we'll have a simple principle for veterans sleeping on our streets: zero tolerance. As President, I'll build on the work I started in the Senate and expand housing vouchers, and launch a new supportive services housing program to prevent at-risk veterans and their families from sliding into homelessness.

I'll also build on the work I did in the Senate to confront one of the signature injuries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. We have to understand that for far too many troops and their families, the war doesn't end when they come home. But only half of troops returning with PTSD receive the treatment they need. Think of how many we turn away - of how many we let fall through the cracks; of how many suffer in silence. We have to do better than this.

In the Senate, I've helped lead a bipartisan effort to stop the unfair practice of kicking out troops who suffer from PTSD. And when I'm President, we'll enhance mental health screening and treatment at all levels. We also need more mental health professionals, more training to recognize signs and to reject the stigma of seeking care. And we need to dramatically improve screening and treatment for the other signature injury of the war, Traumatic Brain Injury. That's why I passed measures in the Senate to increase screening for these injuries, and that's why I'll establish clearer standards of care as President.

We have called on our troops and their families for so much during these last years, but we haven't always issued that call responsibly. We need to restore twelve month Army deployments, but we also need to restore adequate training and time at home between those deployments. My wife, Michelle, recently met with Army spouses in North Carolina who told her about the toll it takes to have your loved one leave for tour after tour of duty. And they told her something we all need to remember: "We don't just deploy our troops overseas, we deploy families." That's why we also need to provide more counseling and resources to help families cope with multiple tours. That's what we owe our military families who have sacrificed so much for us.

And when our loved ones do come home, it is time for the United States of America to offer this generation of returning heroes the same thanks we offered that earlier, Greatest Generation - by giving every veteran the same opportunity that my grandfather had under the GI Bill. That's why I was proud to be a strong supporter of the 21st Century GI Bill that was introduced by my friend Senator Jim Webb. This bill will provide every returning veteran with a real chance to afford a college education, and it won't harm retention.

The brave Americans who fight today believe deeply in this country. And no matter how many you meet, or how many stories of heroism you hear, every encounter reminds that they are truly special. That through their service, they are living out the ideals that stir so many of us as Americans - pride, duty, and sacrifice.

Some of the most inspiring are those you meet at places like Walter Reed Army Medical Center. They are young men and women who may have lost a limb or even their ability to take care of themselves, but they will never lose the pride they feel for their country. It's this classically American optimism that makes you realize the quality of person we have serving in the United States Armed Forces.

This, after all, is what led them to wear the uniform in the first place - their unwavering belief in the idea of America. The idea that no matter where you come from, or what you look like, or who your parents are, this is a place where anything is possible; where anyone can make it; where we look out for each other, and take care of each other; where we rise and fall as one nation - as one people. It's an idea that's worth fighting for - an idea for which so many Americans have given that last full measure of devotion.

I can still remember the day that we laid my grandfather to rest. In a cemetery lined with the graves of Americans who have sacrificed for our country, we heard the solemn notes of Taps and the crack of guns fired in salute; we watched as a folded flag was handed to my grandmother. It was a nation's final act of service and gratitude to Stanley Dunham - an America that stood by my grandfather when he took off the uniform, and never left his side.

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Abraham Lincoln once said, "I like to see a man proud of the place in which he lives. But I also like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him."

There is no doubt that we are a nation that is deeply proud of where we live. But it is now our task to live in a way that Stanley Dunham lived; to live the way that those heroes at Walter Reed have lived. It is now our task to live so that America will be proud of us. That is the true test of patriotism - the test that all of us must meet in the days and years to come. So as we mark this Independence Day, let us rededicate ourselves to meeting that challenge, and to serving those who have worn the uniform of the United States as well as they have served us.

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