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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama at the VFW National Convention

Orlando, FL | August 19, 2008

Thank you, Commander Lisicki, for your leadership. Let me also acknowledge the leadership of Virginia Carman, the president of the VFW ladies auxiliary, as well as my friend Jim Webb who will be speaking here later today. Finally, let me thank all of the members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States of America for inviting me back to this convention. It is a privilege to be among so many who have given so much for our country.

I stand before you today at a defining moment in our history. We are in the midst of two wars. The terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 are still at large. Russia has invaded the sovereign nation of Georgia. Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. The next Commander-in-Chief is going to have to exercise the best possible judgment in getting us through these difficult times.

Yesterday, Senator McCain came before you. He is a man who has served this nation honorably, and he correctly stated that one of the chief criteria for the American people in this election is going to be who can exercise the best judgment as Commander in Chief. But instead of just offering policy answers, he turned to a typical laundry list of political attacks. He said that I have changed my position on Iraq when I have not. He said that I am for a path of "retreat and failure." And he declared, "Behind all of these claims and positions by Senator Obama lies the ambition to be president" - suggesting, as he has so many times, that I put personal ambition before my country.

That is John McCain's prerogative. He can run that kind of campaign, and frankly - that's how political campaigns have been run in recent years. But I believe the American people are better than that. I believe that this defining moment demands something more of us.

If we think that we can secure our country by just talking tough without acting tough and smart, then we will misunderstand this moment and miss its opportunities. If we think that we can use the same partisan playbook where we just challenge our opponent's patriotism to win an election, then the American people will lose. The times are too serious for this kind of politics. The calamity left behind by the last eight years is too great. So let me begin by offering my judgment about what we've done, where we are, and where we need to go.

Six years ago, I stood up at a time when it was politically difficult to oppose going to war in Iraq, and argued that our first priority had to be finishing the fight against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Senator McCain was already turning his sights to Iraq just days after 9/11, and he became a leading supporter of an invasion and occupation of a country that had absolutely nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks, and that - as despicable as Saddam Hussein was - posed no imminent threat to the American people. Two of the biggest beneficiaries of that decision were al Qaeda's leadership, which no longer faced the pressure of America's focused attention; and Iran, which has advanced its nuclear program, continued its support for terror, and increased its influence in Iraq and the region.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, I warned that war would fan the flames of extremism in the Middle East, create new centers of terrorism, and tie us down in a costly and open-ended occupation. Senator McCain predicted that we'd be greeted as liberators, and that the Iraqis would bear the cost of rebuilding through their bountiful oil revenues. For the good of our country, I wish he had been right, and I had been wrong. But that's not what history shows.

Senator McCain now argues that despite these costly strategic errors, his judgment has been vindicated due to the results of the surge. Let me once again praise General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker -



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they are outstanding Americans. In Iraq, gains have been made in reducing the level of violence thanks to the outstanding efforts of our military, the increasing capability of Iraq's Security Forces, the ceasefire of Shiite militias, and the decision taken by Sunni tribes to take the fight to al Qaeda. Those are the facts, and all Americans welcome them.

But understand what the essential argument was about. Before the surge, I argued that the long-term solution in Iraq is political - the Iraqi government must reconcile its differences and take responsibility for its future. That holds true today. We have lost over a thousand American lives and spent hundreds of billions of dollars since the surge began, but Iraq's leaders still haven't made hard compromises or substantial investments in rebuilding their country. Our military is badly overstretched - a fact that has surely been noted in capitals around the world. And while we pay a heavy price in Iraq - and Americans pay record prices at the pump - Iraq's government is sitting on a \$79 billion dollar budget surplus from windfall oil profits.

Let's be clear: our troops have completed every mission they've been given. They have created the space for political reconciliation. Now it must be filled by an Iraqi government that reconciles its differences and spends its oil profits to meet the needs of its people. Iraqi inaction threatens the progress we've made and creates an opening for Iran and the "special groups" it supports. It's time to press the Iraqis to take responsibility for their future. The best way to do that is a responsible redeployment of our combat brigades, carried out in close consultation with commanders on the ground. We can safely redeploy at a pace that removes our combat brigades in 16 months. That would be well into 2010 - seven years after the war began. After this redeployment, we'll keep a residual force to target remnants of al Qaeda; to protect our service members and diplomats; and to train Iraq's Security Forces if the Iraqis make political progress.

Iraq's democratically-elected Prime Minister has embraced this timeframe. Now it's time to succeed in Iraq by turning Iraq over to its sovereign government. We should not keep sending our troops to fight after four years of duty while our military is overstretched. We should not keep spending \$10 billion a month in Iraq while Americans struggle in a sluggish economy. Ending the war will allow us to invest in America, to strengthen our military, and to finish the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and the border region of Pakistan.

This is the central front in the war on terrorism. This is where the Taliban is gaining strength and launching new attacks, including one that just took the life of ten French soldiers. This is where Osama bin Laden and the same terrorists who killed nearly 3,000 Americans on our own soil are hiding and plotting seven years after 9/11. This is a war that we have to win. And as Commander-in-Chief, I will have no greater priority than taking out these terrorists who threaten America, and finishing the job against the Taliban.

For years, I have called for more resources and more troops to finish the fight in Afghanistan. With his overwhelming focus on Iraq, Senator McCain argued that we could just "muddle through" in Afghanistan, and only came around to supporting my call for more troops last month. Now, we need a policy of "more for more" - more from America and our NATO allies, and more from the Afghan government. That's why I've called for at least two additional U.S. combat brigades and an additional \$1 billion in non-military assistance for Afghanistan, with a demand for more action from the Afghan government to take on corruption and counter-narcotics, and to improve the lives of the Afghan people.

We must also recognize that we cannot succeed in Afghanistan or secure America as long as there is a terrorist safe-haven in northwest Pakistan. A year ago, I said that we must take action against bin Laden and his lieutenants if we have them in our sights and Pakistan cannot or will not act. Senator McCain criticized me and claimed that I was for "bombing our ally." So for all of his talk about following Osama bin Laden to the Gates of Hell, Senator McCain refused to join my call to take out bin Laden across the Afghan border. Instead, he spent years backing a dictator in Pakistan who failed to serve the interests of his own people.

I argued for years that we need to move from a "Musharraf policy" to a "Pakistan policy." We must move beyond an alliance built on mere convenience or a relationship with one man. Now, with President Musharraf's resignation, we have the opportunity to do just that. That's why I've cosponsored a bill to triple non-military aid to the Pakistani people, while ensuring that the military assistance we do provide is used to take the fight to the Taliban and al Qaeda in the tribal regions of Pakistan.

Today, our attention is also on the Republic of Georgia, and Senator McCain and I both strongly support the people of Georgia and the Americans delivering humanitarian aid. There is no possible justification for Russia's actions. Russian troops have yet to begin the withdrawal required by the cease-fire signed by their president, and we are hearing reports of Russian atrocities: burning wheat fields, brutal killing, and the destruction of Georgia's infrastructure and military assets.

This crisis underscores the need for engaged U.S. leadership in the world. We failed to head off this conflict and lost leverage in our ability to contain it because our leaders have been distracted, our resources overstretched, and our alliances frayed. American leadership means getting engaged earlier to shape events so that we're not merely responding to them. That's why I'm committed to renewing our leadership and rebuilding our alliances as President of the United States.

and much more!

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For months, I have called for active engagement to resolve the disputes over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I made it crystal clear before, at the beginning of, and during this conflict that Georgia's territorial integrity must be respected, and that Georgia should be integrated into transatlantic institutions. I have condemned Russian aggression, and today I reiterate my demand that Russia abide by the cease-fire. Russia must know that its actions will have consequences. They will imperil the Civil Nuclear Agreement, and Russia's standing in the international community - including the NATO-Russia Council, and Russia's desire to participate in organizations like the WTO and the OECD. Finally, we must help Georgia rebuild what has been destroyed. That is why I'm proud to join my friend, Senator Joe Biden, in calling for an additional \$1 billion in reconstruction assistance for the people of Georgia.

These are the judgments I've made and the policies that we have to debate, because we do have differences in this election. But one of the things that we have to change in this country is the idea that people can't disagree without challenging each other's character and patriotism. I have never suggested that Senator McCain picks his positions on national security based on politics or personal ambition. I have not suggested it because I believe that he genuinely wants to serve America's national interest. Now, it's time for him to acknowledge that I want to do the same.

Let me be clear: I will let no one question my love of this country. I love America, so do you, and so does John McCain. When I look out at this audience, I see people of different political views. You are Democrats and Republicans and Independents. But you all served together, and fought together, and bled together under the same proud flag. You did not serve a Red America or a Blue America - you served the United States of America.

So let's have a serious debate, and let's debate our disagreements on the merits of policy - not personal attacks. And no matter how heated it gets or what kind of campaign he chooses to run, I will honor Senator McCain's service, just like I honor the service of every veteran in this room, and every American who has worn the uniform of the United States.

One of those Americans was my grandfather, Stanley Dunham.

My father left when I was 2, so my grandfather was the man who helped raise me. He grew up in El Dorado, Kansas - a town too small to warrant boldface on a road map. He worked on oil rigs and drifted from town to town during the Depression. Then he met my grandmother and enlisted after Pearl Harbor. He would go on to march across Europe in Patton's Army, while my great uncle fought with the 89th Infantry Division to liberate Buchenwald, my grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line, and my mother was born at Fort Leavenworth. After my grandfather left the Army, he went to college on the GI Bill, bought his home with help from the Federal Housing Authority, and he and my grandmother moved west in a restless pursuit of their dreams.

They were among the men and women of our Greatest Generation. They came from ordinary places, and went on to do extraordinary things. They survived a Depression and faced down fascism. And when the guns fell silent, America stood by them, because they had a government that didn't just ask them to win a war - it helped them to live their dreams in peace, and to become the backbone of the largest middle class that the world has ever known. In the five years after World War II, the GI Bill helped 15 million veterans get an education. Two million went to college. Millions more learned a trade in factories or on farms. Four million veterans received help in buying a home, leading to the biggest home construction boom in our history.

And these veterans didn't just receive a hand from Washington - they did their part to lift up America, just as they'd done their duty in defending it. They became teachers and doctors, cops and firefighters who were the foundation of our communities. They became the innovators and small business owners who helped drive the American economy. They became the scientists and engineers who helped us win the space race against the Soviets. They won a Cold War, and left a legacy to their children and grandchildren who reached new horizons of opportunity.

I am a part of that legacy. Without it, I would not be standing on this stage today. And as President, I will do everything that I can to keep the promise, to advance the American Dream for all our veterans, and to enlist them in the cause of building a stronger America.

Our young men and women in uniform have proven that they are the equal of the Greatest Generation on the battlefield. Now, we must ensure that our brave troops serving abroad today become the backbone of our middle class at home tomorrow. Those who fight to defend America abroad must have the chance to live their dreams at home - through education and their ability to make a good living; through affordable health care; and through a retirement that is dignified and secure. That is the promise that we must keep with all who serve.

It starts with those who choose to remain in uniform, as well as their families. My wife Michelle has met with military families in North Carolina, Kentucky and Virginia over the last several months. Everytime, she passes on their stories - stories of lives filled with patriotism and purpose, but also stories of spouses struggling to pay the bills, kids dealing with an absent parent, and the unique burden of multiple deployments. The message that Michelle has heard is what you all know and have lived: when a loved one is deployed, the whole family goes to war.

The VFW has done an extraordinary job of standing by our military families - helping out with everything

from a phone card for a soldier who is overseas, to an extra hand around the house. As President, I will stand with you. We need a Military Families Advisory Board to identify new ways to ease the burden. We need more official support for the volunteer networks that help military spouses get by. And we need to make sure that military pay does not lag behind the private sector, so that those who serve can raise their families and live the life they've earned.

For those who return to civilian life, I will support their American Dream in this 21st century just as we supported generations of veterans in the 20th. That starts with education. Everyone who serves this country should have the same opportunity that my grandfather had under the GI Bill. That's why, unlike my opponent, I was a strong and early supporter of Jim Webb's GI Bill for the 21st Century - a bill that Senator McCain called too generous. At a time when the skyrocketing cost of tuition is pricing thousands of Americans out of a college education, this bill provides every veteran with a real chance to afford a world-class college education. And that's what I'll continue to stand up for as President.

We must also stand up for affordable health care for every single veteran. That's why I've pledged to build a 21st century VA. We need to cut through the red tape - every service member should get electronic copies of medical and service records upon discharge. We need to close shortfalls - it's time to fully fund VA health care, and to add more Vet Centers. We need to get rid of means-testing - every veteran should be allowed into the VA system. My opponent takes a different view. He wants to ration care so the VA only serves combat injuries, while everyone else gets an insurance card. While the VA needs some real reform to better serve those who have worn the uniform, privatization is just not the answer. We cannot risk our veterans' health care by turning the VA into just another health insurer. We need to make sure the VA is strong enough to treat every veteran who depends on it. That's what I'll do as President.

And we must expand and enhance our ability to identify and treat PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury at all levels: from enlistment, to deployment, to civilian life. No one should suffer in silence, or slip through the cracks in the system. That's why I've passed measures to increase screening for these unseen wounds, and helped lead a bipartisan effort to stop the unfair practice of kicking out troops who suffer from them. This is something I've fought for in the Senate, and it's something that I'll make a priority as President.

Economic security for our veterans also depends on revamping an overburdened benefits system. I congratulate the VFW for what you've done to help veterans navigate a broken VBA bureaucracy. Now it's time for the government to do a better job. We need more workers, and a 21st century electronic system that is fully linked up to military records and the VA's health network. It's time to ensure that those who've served get the benefits that they've earned.

Just as we give veterans the support they deserve, we must also engage them and all Americans in a new cause: renewing America. I am running for President because I believe that there is no challenge too great for the American people to meet if they are called upon to come together. In America, each of us is free to seek our dreams, but we must also serve a common purpose, a higher purpose. No one embodies that commitment like a veteran.

Just think of the skills that our troops have developed through their service. They have not simply waged war in Afghanistan and Iraq - they have rebuilt infrastructure, supported new agriculture, trained police forces, and developed health care systems. For those leaving military service, it's time to apply those skills to our great national challenges here at home.

That means expanding programs like Troops-to-Teachers that put veterans at the front of the classroom. That means tapping the talent of engineers who've served as we make a substantial investment to rebuild our infrastructure and create millions of new jobs. That means dramatically expanding national service programs to give Americans of all ages, skills and stations the chance to give back to their communities and their country. I'll also enlist veterans in forging a new American energy economy. That's why I've proposed a Green Veterans initiative to give our veterans the training they need to succeed in the Green Jobs of the future - so that they put themselves on a pathway to a successful career, while ensuring that our national security is never held hostage to hostile nations.

This is how we can help our veterans live their dreams while helping our country meet the challenges of the 21st century. And this is what we have learned from so many generations of veterans, including those of you here today - that your contribution to the American story does not end when the uniform comes off. We need those who serve in our military to live their dreams - and to continue serving the cause of America - when the guns fall silent. That's what the VFW stands for, and if I have the honor of being your President, that's what my Administration will work for every single day. Because I believe that we have a sacred trust with those who serve in our military. That trust is simple: America will be there for you just as you have been there for America. It's a trust that begins at enlistment, and it never ends.

I thought of that trust last week when I visited the Pearl Harbor Memorial. I saw where the bombs fell on the USS Arizona, and where a war began that would reshape the world order while reshaping the lives of all who served in it - from our great generals and admirals, to the enlisted men like my grandfather. Then I visited his grave at the Punchbowl, the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific.

I 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 and my grandfather was laid

to rest. 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.

This is what we owe our troops and our veterans. Because in every note of Taps and in every folded flag, we hear and see an 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. Now it falls to us to advance that idea just as so many generations have before.

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