



For Immediate Release
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President Bush Attends Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, Discusses Global War on Terror

Orange County Convention Center
Orlando, Florida

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Thank you for the warm welcome. And I am proud to address the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (Applause.) I spoke to you when I was a presidential candidate. And this is the fifth time that I have spoken to your national convention as your President. And every time I've been honored to meet with members of the VFW, I come away from these meetings with my -- inspired by your love of country, by your devotion for duty, and for the example you set for those who wear the uniform today.

I also appreciate the fact that you're here in spite of the weather. (Laughter.) Tropical Storm Fay set a challenge for this convention, but your members were wise enough to hang around. I do want to thank the citizens -- the officials of the state of Florida for working hard to make sure that people were ready to address the storm. We watched this very carefully, and I must say that the people of this state worked hard to make sure that this convention and other lives were saved. We appreciate the work of the local officials. And of course, we'll continue to monitor the storm as it moves through, through the area.

I do want to thank my friend, George Lisicki, for his leadership as your National Commander. He's done a fine job on behalf of the VFW. I know firsthand; I've had him to the Oval Office. He's not afraid to speak his mind. I listen. and I know you're proud of the job he has done. (Applause.) And I want to thank his wife, Gloria, for putting up with him. (Laughter and applause.)

I do want to thank Bob Wallace, the Executive Director of the VFW. He has worked very hard to represent you, and he's done so in fine fashion.

I'm proud to be here with Glen Gardner, Incoming National Commander-in-Chief of the VFW, and his wife, Jean. I've known Glen for a long time; I admire him. I told him I'm fixing to retire, so I'm not going to be around to work with him. But no doubt in my mind he'll do a fine job on behalf of the VFW.

I want to thank Virginia Carman, National President of the Ladies Auxiliary. (Applause.) Dixie Hild is the Incoming National President of the Ladies Auxiliary. (Applause.) I want to thank the rest of the leadership for letting me come by to visit with you.

I met an interesting person here today, a woman named Keela Carr. When I go to a city I like to herald people who are volunteering on behalf of the country. Keela has walked from California to Washington, D.C., to thank the veterans for their service to the United States of America. And I'm proud to have met Keela Carr. And I want to thank you for doing what you're doing, Keela. (Applause.)

And I want to thank the members of the Armed Forces that are here today. There is no greater honor than being the Commander-in-Chief of the United States military, and I'm proud to be in your presence. (Applause.)

America owes the men and women of the VFW a debt that can really never be repaid. You fought for our freedoms, and then when you came home, you volunteered to continue to serve this nation. Together with your Ladies and Men's Auxiliaries, members of this organization donate 13 million hours of community service every year. You mentor youth groups. You sponsor blood drives. You send packages to the military units deployed

overseas. You provide vital services to your fellow veterans at home. In the VFW, we see the best of the American spirit -- and American -- America honors your service in and out of uniform. (Applause.)

When the history of the last eight years is finally written, it will show how closely and effectively my administration and the VFW have worked together on behalf of Americans' veterans. My budget includes nearly \$94 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs -- which means we have nearly doubled the funding for veterans since I took office. (Applause.)

We've worked together to modernize and expand VA facilities -- and got \$5.5 billion of taxpayers monies in the budget to do so. The VFW and my administration have worked hard to expand grants to help homeless veterans in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, because we strongly believe no veteran who served in distant lands should have to live without shelter in the land they fought to defend. (Applause.)

We believe that combat-injured and severely disabled veterans deserve to receive both their military retired pay and their VA disability compensation. I was the first President in more than 100 years to sign concurrent receipt legislation. (Applause.)

We have worked effectively and diligently to provide for those returning home from the front lines today: My administration implemented recommendations from Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala to help our wounded warriors build lives of hope and promise and dignity. We're investing hundreds of millions of dollars to develop new treatments for conditions like traumatic brain injuries and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Earlier this year, I was pleased to sign a piece of legislation that the VFW has long championed -- a GI Bill for the 21st century. (Applause.)

We also owe something to your brothers-in-arms who never returned home. We will always cherish the memories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice. We will never stop searching until we can account for every missing soldier, sailor, airman, Coast Guardsmen, and Marine. (Applause.)

Over the past seven and a half years, I have seen the VFW's devotion to our men and women in uniform. I have been impressed, I have been inspired by your support of the military. You understand that our men and women in uniform deserve our full support because they are defending America in our nation's first war in the 21st century. That war reached our shores on September the 11th, 2001, a day that you have not forgotten, and neither have I. On that day, 19 men armed with box cutters brought killing and carnage to our homeland. We're at war against determined enemies, and we must not rest until that war is won. (Applause.)

This war cannot be won, however, if we treat terrorism primarily as a matter of law enforcement. Law enforcement is an essential part of our strategy -- but our strategy cannot be limited to law enforcement alone. After the first World Trade Center attack in 1993, our law enforcement community succeeded in tracking down several of the killers, prosecuting them and putting them into jail. But eight years later, al Qaeda terrorists came back to finish the job. The lesson is this: In order to do our duty, our solemn duty, which is to protect the homeland from further harm, we must keep the pressure on the enemy, we must keep the extremists on the run. In order to do so, we must use all assets of national power, including the United States military. (Applause.)

So when this war, with your strong support, we are taking the fight to the enemy. Over the past seven years, America and our allies have captured or killed hundreds of al Qaeda leaders and operatives in more than two dozen countries. We'll continue to battle the terrorists overseas so we do not have to face them here at home.

We're on several fronts in this war on terror. A major front is Afghanistan, where we removed a dangerous regime that harbored the terrorists who plotted the September the 11th attacks. Because we acted, the Afghan people have been liberated. A nation that was once a training ground for terrorists has become an ally in the war on terror. We built a strong coalition of nations including every member of the NATO Alliance to help the Afghan people defend their young democracy. And we will ensure that that country never becomes a safe haven again for terrorists who seek to launch attacks on America or our allies. (Applause.)

Another front in the same war against the extremists is Iraq. We removed a brutal dictator who murdered his own people, who paid the families of suiciders, who invaded his neighbors, who was an enemy of the United States, who repeatedly defied the United Nations. Because we acted, the dictator is gone and 25 million Iraqis are free.

Removing Saddam Hussein was right then -- and it is right today. (Applause.)

In 2006, as you well know, the situation in Iraq was deteriorating. Some back in Washington said the war was lost. They were willing to give up on the mission. They were willing to leave a struggling democracy to its own fate. But failure in Iraq could have spread chaos across the region, emboldened Iran, emboldened the terrorists, and given them a new base from which to launch operations against America and allies. I believe this would have been a disaster for America -- and so do the men and women of the VFW. (Applause.)

Early last year, after consultations with our commanders -- and the Commander-in-Chief must always listen to the commanders and not the latest opinion poll -- (applause) -- I ordered a surge of forces into Iraq. I remember briefing the leaders of the VFW on my decision. Since the surge began, violence in Iraq has dropped; civilian deaths and sectarian killings are down. Slowly but steadily, political and economic progress is taking place. Iraq is a rising democracy. Iraq is an ally against these extremists. And our troops have become home -- begun to come home under our policy of return on success. We all look forward to the day when even more of our troops come home. And the VFW understands that the only way to bring them home is with victory. (Applause.)

To ensure that we have the capabilities to prevail in Iraq and Afghanistan, or wherever the terrorists make their stand, we've transformed the United States military. Our branches of the military are working together better than ever. We've more than doubled funding for our Special Operations Command so our forces can hunt the terrorists no matter where they hide. We've increased the number of unmanned aerial vehicles in our arsenal. We're moving American forces from Cold War garrisons in Europe and Asia so they can deploy rapidly anywhere in the world. We're going to increase the size of our ground forces. We'll make our troops more lethal and more agile so they can remain on the offense against the enemy. America's future leaders must remember that the war on terror will be won on the offense -- and that's where our military must stay. (Applause.)

We're keeping the pressure on the enemy. As we've done so, we've defended this homeland. Nearly seven years have passed without another attack on our soil. This is not for the lack of trying by the terrorists. Our intelligence and law enforcement professionals have worked with our allies to stop major al Qaeda attacks, including a plot to blow up transatlantic flights from London, and a plan to strike the tallest skyscraper in Los Angeles. We owe these fine professionals our thanks. And we owe them something more -- the tools necessary to be able to do their job.

Since 9/11, we've given American defenders what they need. We formed a new Department of Homeland Security. We overhauled the nation's intelligence community. We shifted the FBI's focus from investigating terrorist attacks to preventing terrorist attacks. We passed the Patriot Act, which tore down the wall that once prevented law enforcement and intelligence officers from sharing vital information. We created a new National Counter-Terrorism Center. We established a program at the CIA to interrogate key terrorist leaders captured in the war on terror. We worked with Congress to pass legislation that allows our intelligence professionals to quickly and effectively monitor terrorist communications. (Applause.)

We have used all these tools to stop new attacks. And I'm pleased to report to the American people that these tools will be available for future administrations to protect the American people for years to come. (Applause.)

And in this war, we're countering the terrorists' dark and hateful ideology by offering a more hopeful vision -- and that's one based on freedom. On September the 11th, we saw how the terrorists exploit hopelessness and despair to recruit young men for their evil plots against America. We learned that our nation's security depends on combating the conditions that give rise to terror by aiding the rise of free societies. We're engaged in the great ideological struggle of our time -- between the forces of freedom and the forces of tyranny. So we -- America and our allies will support young democracies. We're standing with brave democratic reformers.

Over the past seven years, we've seen liberty on the march, seen citizens in Afghanistan and Iraq establish representative governments after decades of tyranny. We've seen the people of Lebanon take to the streets and demand their independence. We've seen citizens of the former Soviet republic -- republics stand up for their right for free and fair elections.

One of the most inspiring chapters of history was written by the Georgian people during the Rose Revolution of 2003. In the years that followed, the Georgian people have held free elections. They've established a democratic form of government. Georgia has also sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to help others realize the blessings of liberty. Georgia has stood for freedom around the world -- now the world must stand for freedom in Georgia.

(Applause.)

For nearly two weeks, the world has watched Georgia's young democracy come under siege. Russian forces invaded the country in a disproportionate response to a long-simmering conflict in Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The world has come together to condemn this assault. Yesterday Secretary Rice met with members of the NATO Alliance to discuss the ongoing situation. Our countries agreed that Russia must honor its commitment to withdraw its troops from Georgia and to return to the status quo before the hostilities began on August the 6th.

The Alliance is considering seriously the implications of Russia's actions for the NATO-Russia relationship. The Alliance determined that business as usual cannot continue with Russia. And the Alliance agreed to help Georgia by sending NATO teams to assess the country's needs, and by forming a new NATO-Georgia Commission.

The United States of America will continue to support Georgia's democracy. Our military will continue to provide needed humanitarian aid to the Georgian people. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia. And the United States will work with our allies to ensure Georgia's independence and territorial integrity. (Applause.)

The people in this room understand the benefits of liberty because you fought to defend it and bring it to others. As young men, many of you battled the forces of Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan on the battlefields of World War II. In those days, it would have been hard for you to imagine that the enemies you were fighting would become some of America's closest allies. Six decades later, Germany and Japan are strong democracies. They are two of our closest allies.

In your own lifetimes, you have seen firsthand the power of liberty to transform societies and yield the peace we all want. (Applause.) I believe that people in this hall believe that the power of freedom is unstoppable. I believe it because I believe in an Almighty that has given every man, woman and child on the face of the Earth freedom. (Applause.) And I know freedom yields the peace we want. If America maintains our confidence in our ideals, is willing to take the lead, freedom will once again prevail. And we'll be able to look at a generation of Americans coming up and say, we did our duty; we defended America and laid the foundation of peace for generations to come. (Applause.)

We can also be confident in every generation freedom has found brave defenders in the men and women of our Armed Forces. You know, through the years I've received a lot of heartfelt letters from our military families. One of them was from a woman in Texas named Sue Stoner. Sue's husband is a decorated Air Force veteran of Vietnam and the Gulf War. Last year during a trip to Fort Hood, the couple witnessed their six-year-old granddaughter Mikayla do something that every American should do, as well. The little girl bounded over to a wounded stranger in Army fatigues, and said, "I just wanted to say thank you for serving our country." As Mikayla's proud grandmother tells it, the soldier leaned forward on his walker, and said, "Sweetheart, I did it for you." (Applause.)

Every one of you put on the uniform for the same reason. You risked your life, you sacrificed so Americans like Mikayla could grow up in freedom. We will always honor your service. We will never forget your sacrifice. (Applause.)

This is the last time I will address a veterans convention as the Commander-in-Chief. Over the past seven, eight years -- seven and a half years, I've been honored to get to know many of your members. I've relied on your counsel. I have benefitted from your wisdom. I have been extremely grateful for your prayers.

I know you share with me a deep love for America and an awesome pride in those who defend her. When I meet with our troops, they always inspire me with their sense of duty and honor. They are America's finest citizens. (Applause.) I am confident that our troops will always be able to count on the fellowship and the support and the love of the men and women of the VFW. May God bless you, and may God bless America. (Applause.)

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