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Vice President's Remarks at the 46th Annual American Legion Conference

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you very much, distinguished guests, and veterans, and thank you for asking me to join you today. It's good to be with all of you, and I appreciate the warm welcome.

And I want to thank your national commander, Tom Bock, for the kind words, and for his years of service, both in uniform and as leader now of the American Legion. I also want to note that Tom, like some others in the room, is not only a soldier, but the father of a soldier -- Army Helicopter Pilot Adam Bock, who is with us this morning. (Applause.) And I know that everyone in this hall today is proud of the new generation that is fighting for America and defending our freedom.



I want to welcome all of you to the Nation's Capital. I know you've been here now for your 46th annual Washington Conference. For 87 years, the American Legion has embodied the noblest ideals of the nation we all love. In our own time, with nearly 15,000 Legion posts and close to 3 million members, the American Legion and the Auxiliary provide a daily example of good citizenship, generosity, and decency. You speak out for honorable principles, and you live by them. And you proudly wear an emblem that "stands for God and Country, and the highest rights of man." As Vice President, and as a citizen of the nation you defended, I have unlimited respect for the American Legion, and for your superb record of patriotic service.

The American Legion serves the nation by leading on a range of important issues, such as health care and education; employment opportunities and homeland security; military readiness and the quality of life for our service families. Members of the Legion stand firm for protecting our nation's flag, and for defending the right of every American to pledge allegiance to one nation under God. (Applause.)

American Legion members speak with conviction, and with credibility, on behalf of our veterans and our military families. You remind fellow citizens of a commitment that our nation made many generations ago: To serve the needs and the interests of our military veterans -- and to do so in a spirit of compassion, civility, sensitivity, respect, and, above all, gratitude. That's a commitment our

administration takes very seriously. (Applause.)

The President and I came to office determined to enhance the quality of veterans' health care, to significantly increase the resources going to the VA, to modernize VA facilities, to improve service to veterans' families, and to trim the backlog in processing disability claims. We're meeting these objectives, but we'll never be complacent about the progress being made. Bureaucracies need to be pushed, and we're constantly looking for ways to make the system work better for our veterans and their families. And, rest assured, we get a steady stream of good advice from Tom Bock and the leadership of the American Legion -- and we welcome it. (Applause.)

I also want to thank the American Legion for your tremendous daily support for the men and women serving in our military today. I know it means a great deal to them to know how deeply you believe in them, and in the cause they serve, during a time of enormous consequence. Americans in uniform are currently serving in over 100 countries, and the military remains an active, visible sign of America's commitments around the world -- defending our interests, standing by our friends, keeping patient vigil against possible dangers, and, above all, directly engaging the enemies of the United States.



For many in this generation of soldiers, service to the country has involved accepting some extremely perilous missions. The war on terror is a new kind of war against the most ruthless of enemies -- and the fight we are waging is every bit as urgent as it is dangerous. Those who attacked America have proven their eagerness to kill innocent men, women, and children by the thousands. They are looking to obtain chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons by any means they can find, and would not hesitate to use such weapons at the first opportunity.

Although we have been in the struggle against terrorism for over four years now, the terrorists were actually at war with this country even before 2001. But for a long time, they were the ones on the offensive. In Beirut in 1983, terrorists killed 241 Americans. Following that attack, the United States forces were withdrawn from Beirut. Time and time again, for the remainder of the 20th century, the terrorists hit America but America did not hit back hard enough. In 1993 we had the killing of American soldiers in Mogadishu, and the first bombing at the World Trade Center in New York. We had the murders at the Saudi National Guard Training Center in Riyadh in 1995; the killings at the Khobar Towers in 1996; the destruction of two American embassies in East Africa in 1998; and, of course, the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. The terrorists came to believe that they could strike America without paying any price -- indeed, they became convinced that if they killed enough Americans, they could change American policy.

And so they continued to wage those attacks -- making the world less safe and, of course, eventually striking the United States here at home on 9/11 and killing 3,000 of our fellow citizens. Now they're making a stand in Iraq -- testing our resolve, and trying to shake our commitment to democracy in that country. And while the terrorists are seemingly random and cold-blooded in their attacks, we have to

realize they are also pursuing a strategy with a clear set of objectives.

By methods of murder, they hope to overturn Iraq's democratic government and return that country to the rule of tyrant, and then use Iraq as a staging area for ever greater attacks against America and other civilized nations. Their aim is to remake the Middle East in their own image of tyranny and oppression -- by toppling governments, driving us out of the region, and by exporting terror.

Our own strategy in the conflict is clear: We're hunting down high-value targets like al Zarqawi and his lieutenants. Our soldiers and Marines are conducting smart, focused, aggressive, counterterrorism operations in the areas where the terrorists are known to be concentrated. And our coalition continues to train more Iraqi forces to assume increasing responsibility for their nation's security. As more and more Iraqi security forces complete their training, they're taking on greater responsibility in these efforts. Iraqi troops are increasingly taking the lead in joint operations, conducting independent operations, and expanding the reach and the effectiveness of our own forces.

And as Iraqi security forces grow in size and capability, we're becoming better able to keep urban centers out of the hands of terrorists. One of the challenges we faced was that after clearing out terrorists, there have not always been enough trained Iraqi forces to maintain control. So when coalition forces moved on, terrorists would try to move back in. More and more, however, we're able to leave Iraqi troops in charge because they are increasingly well equipped, properly trained, familiar with the territory, and often can tell who the terrorists are, therefore are able to maintain control. Meanwhile, coalition forces are able to go forward and deal with the threat in other parts of the country, as well as to strengthen security at the borders.

At present, Iraqi personnel are collecting good intelligence, working with civic and religious leaders, and gaining greater confidence among the Iraqi people. This is an ongoing process, obviously, and standing up a capable, effective military requires a patient and a sustained effort. Yet the progress is steady. It is moving in the direction we want, and the people in charge of the effort are doing a superb job. The goal we share with Iraq's government is a full transition to security and to self-reliance, a nation with a constitutionally elected government and capable security forces, an Iraq that is at peace with neighbors and an ally for us in the war on terror.

Going forward, as the Iraqi security forces grow in strength and the political process continues to advance, we'll be able to reduce troop levels without losing our capacity to defeat the terrorists. And in the months ahead, any decisions about troop levels will be driven by the conditions on the ground and the judgment of our commanders -- not by artificial time lines set by politicians in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

The terrorists understand what is at stake in Iraq. That's why they commit acts of horror, calculated to shock and to intimidate the civilized world -- beheading men, murdering mothers and children, and killing innocent Iraqis in police stations, mosques, buses, restaurants, stores and on street corners.

Last week terrorists attacked the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest sites for Shiite Muslims, in a clear attempt to ignite a civil war. We can expect further acts of violence and destruction by the enemies of freedom. Yet the Iraqi people have expressed their own desire for liberty by voting in

free elections three different times over the last year, and we remain optimistic that Iraq's political factions will work together in forming a stable, viable representative government. We expect, as well, that as freedom takes hold, the ideologies of hatred and resentment will lose their appeal, and the advance of democracy in Iraq will inspire reformers across the broader Middle East.

And as this region experiences new hope and progress, we will see the power of freedom to change our world, and a terrible threat will be removed from the lives of our children and grandchildren.

I know that most of you have heard the political debates that have been going on here in Washington. Some have suggested this war is not winnable, and a few seem almost eager to conclude that the struggle is already lost. They are wrong. The only way to lose this fight is to quit -- and quitting is not an option. (Applause.)

Some of the comments heard in Washington have sent mixed signals to our troops in the field. Our military has at times been unfairly criticized, as when one prominent senator said on national television that American soldiers were, "terrorizing" Iraqi women and children in their homes. Just before Christmas, I went to Iraq and had a chance to meet with some of our men and women serving there. I told them that we're proud of them, and of the progress they're making every day. I assured them that the American people do not support a policy of resignation and defeatism in a time of war. (Applause.)

Here in Washington, if any believe America should suddenly withdraw from Iraq and stop fighting al Qaeda in the very place they have gathered, let them say so clearly. If any believe that America should break our word and abandon our Iraqi allies to death and prison, let them make it known. If any believe that America should be safer -- or would be safer with men like bin Laden and Zarqawi in charge of Iraq, let them try to make that case.

The reality is that bin Laden and Zarqawi regard Iraq as the central front in the war on terror. We must do the same. And this nation has made a decision: We will stand by our friends, and engage our enemies with the goal of victory. As the President said in the State of the Union, "We are in this fight to win, and we are winning."

An effort like this naturally involves a home front, with a great deal of urgent and difficult work needed to persevere. Four years ago, Congress passed the Patriot Act, to give law enforcement all the tools they need to track down terrorists inside the United States. Lately the Patriot Act has become a victim of partisan politics. It first passed the Senate 98 to 1 four years ago. Now it's been filibustered in the Senate, and the Democratic leader boasted recently about his efforts to "kill" the Patriot Act. The security of the United States should be kept above partisan politics. And Congress needs to renew the Patriot Act. (Applause.)

Another imperative in the war on terror is that we learn the intentions of our enemy. We've heard it said many times that our government failed to connect the dots prior to the 9/11 attack. We now know that two of the hijackers were in the United States and placed telephone calls to al Qaeda operatives overseas prior to 9/11. We did not know about their plans until it was too late. So to prevent another attack -- and based on authority given him by the Constitution as Commander-in-Chief and by statute -- the President authorized a terrorist surveillance program. On occasion you hear this called a

domestic surveillance program or domestic spying. That is inaccurate. It is not domestic surveillance. We are talking about communications, one end of which is outside the United States and one end of which we have reason to believe is related to al Qaeda. And it's hard to think of any category of information that could be more important to the safety and security of the United States than such communications.

Previous presidents have used the same constitutional authority -- and federal courts have approved the use of that authority. Appropriate members of Congress have been kept informed. I personally have presided over more than a dozen briefings of members of Congress about that program since its inception over four years ago. And because all of us are committed to protecting the civil liberties of the American people, the terrorist surveillance program is limited, and elaborate steps have been taken to protect our civil liberties. This program has also helped prevent terrorist attacks and saved many lives. It remains absolutely essential to the security of the United States.

The terrorist surveillance program was highly classified, and information about it was improperly given to the news media. But debate is now underway. At the very least, this debate has clarified where various people stand on the issue. As always, the President has made his position absolutely clear to citizens all across the land: If there are people inside our country talking with al Qaeda, we want to know about it -- because we will not sit back and wait to be hit again. (Applause.)

When President Bush spoke to Congress after that terrible day in 2001, he expressed the hope that life in this nation could go back to normal. He rightly said that it would be good for Americans to return to our lives and to our daily routines. He also said that the events of 9/11 would be on his mind every single day. Well, I see the President almost every day, starting with our morning briefings on intelligence in the Oval Office. He knows what his job is. He knows what's at stake. And he has not for a single moment relented in the work of protecting the American people. (Applause.)

As we get farther away from September 11th, some in this city are yielding to the temptation to downplay the ongoing threat to our country, and to back away from the business at hand. This is a dangerous mind set. We're all grateful that this nation has gone for more than four years without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we will not be attacked again. But getting through four years of wartime without another 9/11 took a lot more than just luck. We've been protected by sensible policy decisions, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of people in the armed forces, law enforcement, intelligence, and homeland security. The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured, yet still lethal, still determined to hit us again. We have faced, and are facing today, enemies who hate us, who hate our country, and who hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, have no regard for the laws of warfare, and feel unconstrained by any standard of morality. We've never had a fight quite like this before -- and there is hard work ahead. Either we are serious about fighting this war or we are not. And the enemies of America need to know that we are serious, and this nation will not let down its guard.

As long as we are in this conflict, our nation will depend very heavily on the skill and the character of our military. Right now in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is still tough fighting, in conditions ranging from urban to desert to high mountains. We've lost some of our finest, and that loss is irreplaceable. Many have come home with terrible wounds, and some of them face a very hard road ahead. They can be assured of the best care that we can possibly give them.

All the men and women who serve in this cause can know with absolute certainty that they have contributed to the future safety of this nation, and to the peace of our world. They can be proud of all that they have done for America, just as we will always respect their spirit of sacrifice and their courage under fire. (Applause.)

In this conflict, there have been a great many stories of heroism, and a great many battle decorations earned by America's fighting men and women. The highest award of all, the Medal of Honor, has also been presented in this war, given to a member of the United States Army.

In April of 2003, during the campaign to liberate Iraq, a task force led by Sergeant Paul Ray Smith came under surprise attack in Baghdad by a company-sized force of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard. Under constant enemy fire, with his unit pinned down and a number of men wounded, Sergeant Smith climbed onto a damaged armored vehicle and manned a 50-caliber machine gun -- all the while in a completely exposed position. Sergeant Smith remained in that spot, subjecting himself to greater danger than the Army or the country could ever ask, firing incessantly at the enemy until he took a fatal round to the head. After the firefight, the Army concluded that this one soldier had personally killed as many as 50 of the Republican Guard, and saved the lives of more than 100 other Americans. On the second anniversary of the incident, President Bush presented Sergeant Smith's Medal of Honor to his wife and children. One of Paul Ray Smith's men said he "was hard in training because he knew we had to be hard in battle." For as long as citizens step forward to wear the Army uniform of the United States, our nation will remember this man and his courage.

In this new generation we are seeing once again that the American in uniform places the mission first, never accepts defeat, never quits, and never leaves a fallen comrade. The spirit of the American fighting man and woman is to be honorable and just, and, even amid the cruelties of battle, to be decent and humane. And these are the reasons why, in every corner of the Earth, people should know that the United States is a country that seeks not to conquer but to liberate, and to spread the freedom that leads to peace.

Americans showed that character in the great struggles of the 20th Century, and Americans are showing that character in meeting the serious challenges of this new century. Our people in uniform today are following noble traditions and upholding a brave legacy -- and they find inspiration from those who came before.

One of our units serving in Iraq put it best, in a letter they sent to the American Legion. They said, "Our greatest thanks and appreciation will always go out to the soldiers of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Veterans of past wars will forever be in our hearts as America's heroes. Their sacrifices give us courage and their devotion reminds of what we are fighting for."

I know that for each one of you -- whether you served at home or abroad, in time of war or in time of peace -- your association with the U.S. military remains a source of pride. And in this period of such great challenge for the country, we are reminded again that freedom comes at a price, and that a great nation must honor the men and women who have paid that price.

As a citizen, I am grateful to the men and women who defend us all. I am grateful, as well, to all of you for defending our country yesterday, and for standing behind our military today.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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Return to this article at:

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