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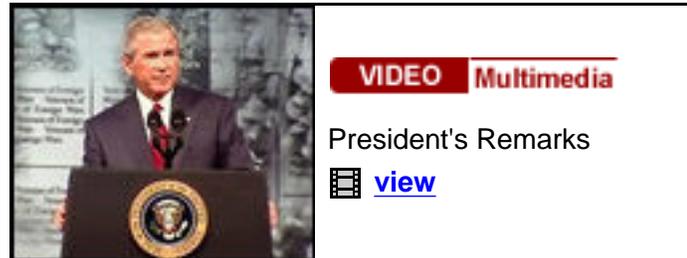
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Office of the Press Secretary
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President Honors Veterans of Foreign Wars at National Convention

Salt Palace Convention Center
Salt Lake City, Utah

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. (Applause.) Thank you all very much. Thanks for the warm welcome. It's a pleasure to be back here in Salt Lake City, Utah. And I'm proud to again stand with the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Thanks for having me. (Applause.)

I really enjoy coming to these conventions. Members here come from all walks of life and you do vital work across our country. I know firsthand the spirit of the VFW. I was raised by one of your members -- (applause) -- a proud veteran of Post 4344 in Houston, Texas, former President George Bush. (Applause.) Where is that mighty Texas delegation? (Applause.) Behaves yourselves. (Laughter.)

I'm honored to serve as the Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces. The men and women who wear the uniform today are protecting our nation and our way of life. And they are upholding a tradition of honor and bravery and integrity set by America's veterans. All of you defended this country with unselfish courage. You've earned the respect of our citizens. And so, on behalf of a grateful nation, thank you for your service for the cause of freedom and peace. (Applause.)



I appreciate John Furgess. I appreciated working with him for the past year. He's a good, honorable man, and he's represented the VFW with distinction and class. It takes judgment to be the President of an organization. And so when I first saw John this morning, I realized he was a man of good judgment. He said, "You've got to understand, Mr. President, most of the people are really excited to see Laura." (Laughter and applause.) I'm proud she's traveling with me. I'm proud to call her wife. And a lot of folks in this United States of America are proud to call her First Lady. (Applause.)

And I'm pleased the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is with us today, Ranger vet, a man who is doing a fine job on behalf of the veterans across the United States, Secretary Jim Nicholson. (Applause.)

When I landed out there at the airport, I was greeted at the base of the stairs by the Governor of this great state, Governor Jon Huntsman. And I appreciate you being here, Governor. And I want to thank your wife, Mary Kaye, for joining, as well. There she is. Hi, Mary Kaye. I know the Lieutenant Governor, Gary Herbert is with us, and Jeanette. Appreciate you being here, Lieutenant Governor.

I got on Air Force One down there in Waco, and they told me that we had a special guest on our plane. I said, well, who is it? They said, well, it's Orrin Hatch. I said, fantastic, glad to give the fellow a ride. (Laughter.) And the reason why I'm glad to give him a ride, he's a strong ally, and I appreciate a strong ally in Orrin Hatch. He does a great job for Utah, and he does a great job for the United States of America. (Applause.)

I appreciate Congressman Chris Cannon joining us today. Thank you for being here, Congressman -- and Congressman Jim Matheson -- I'm proud you both are here. Thanks for taking time to be here today. (Applause.)

They must have changed the immigration laws here in Utah, because they allowed the Idaho Governor to come across the border. (Laughter.) I'm proud to be here with my friend, Dirk Kempthorne. Thank you for coming, Dirk. (Applause.) I want to thank the Senior Vice Commander, Jim Miller, for his hospitality. I'm looking forward to working with him. I want to thank JoAnne Ott, the outgoing National VFW Ladies Auxiliary president. And I want to thank Sandy Germany, who will be the incoming president. (Applause.)



Most of all, thank you all. As veterans of foreign wars, you stepped forward when America needed you. You took an oath to defend the nation, and you kept that oath, overseas and under fire. You triumphed over brutal enemies, liberated continents, and answered the prayers of millions across the Earth. All of us who have grown up in freedom must never forget your service and your sacrifice.

We also remember the troops who left America's shores, but did not live to make the journey home. We think of the families who lost a loved one, and who carry a burden of grief that remains for a lifetime. We remember the men and women in uniform whose fate is still undetermined, our prisoners of war and those missing in action. America must never forget them. We will not stop searching until we have accounted for every soldier, sailor airmen and Marine missing in the line of duty. (Applause.)

VFW's mission is to honor the dead by helping the living, and VFW members are making good on that promise every day. Together with your superb Ladies Auxiliary, VFW members have -- (applause) -- VFW members have adopted military units, mentored youth groups, assisted in blood drives, and provided countless services to fellow veterans and their families. When you hear the name VFW, you

know a certain type of work is being done -- honorable, decent, and faithful to the nation's highest ideals.

In war and in peace, America's veterans set an example of citizenship, and we honor your devotion to duty and to our country. All of America's veterans have placed the nation's security before their own lives. Your sacrifice creates a debt that America can never really fully -- fully repay.

Yet there are certain things the government can do. My administration remains firmly committed to serving America's veterans. Since I took office my administration, in working with the United States Congress, has increased spending for veterans by \$24 billion, an increase of 53 percent. In my first four years as President -- (applause) -- in my first four years as President, we increased spending for veterans more than twice as much as the previous administration did in eight years. (Applause.)

Health care is a top priority for our veterans and it's a top priority for my administration. The past four years, we've increased the VA medical care budget by 51 percent, and we're using those resources to make real improvements for our veterans. Over the past four years, we've increased total outpatient visits from 44 million to 55 million. We've increased the number of prescriptions filled from 98 million to 116 million. Since January 2002, we've reduced the backlog of disability claims by 20 percent. Claims are now being processed 68 days faster. By the end of this year, we plan to cut another 15 days on the average turnaround time. (Applause.)

We place a special focus on treating men and women returning from combat, and veterans with service disabilities and lower incomes and special needs. In the last two years, we've committed more than \$1.5 billion to modernizing and expanding VA facilities, so more veterans can get care closer to their homes. My administration is helping the veterans who fought and sacrificed for America to get the quality care they deserve.

We're also getting results for veterans beyond the health care system. For more than a century, federal law prohibited disabled veterans from receiving both their retired pay and their VA disability compensation. Combat-injured and severely disabled veterans deserve better, and I was honored to be the first President in more than 100 years to sign concurrent receipt legislation. (Applause.)

We've also expanded grants to help homeless veterans in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. No veteran who served in the blazing heat or bitter cold of foreign lands should have to live without shelter in the very country whose freedom they fought for. (Applause.) You defended our flag in uniform; you continue to defend the flag today.

I share the VFW's strong support for a constitutional amendment to protect the American flag. (Applause.) In June, the House of Representatives voted to ban flag desecration, and I urge the United States Senate to pass this important amendment this year. (Applause.)

At this hour, a new generation of Americans is defending our flag and our freedom in the first war of the 21st century. The war came to our shores on the morning of September the 11th, 2001. Since then the terrorists have continued to strike -- in Bali, in Riyadh, in Istanbul, and Madrid, and Baghdad, and London, and Sharm el-Sheikh and elsewhere. The enemy, the terrorists, are ruthless and brutal.

They're fighting on behalf of a hateful ideology that despises everything America stands for.

Our enemies have no regard for human life. They're trying to hijack a great religion to justify a dark vision that rejects freedom and tolerance and dissent. They have a strategy, and part of that strategy is they're trying to shake our will. They kill the innocent. They kill women and children, knowing that the images of their brutality will horrify civilized peoples. Their goal is to drive nations into retreat so they can topple governments across the Middle East, establish Taliban-like regimes, and turn that region into a launching pad for more attacks against our people. In all their objectives, our enemies are trying to intimidate America and the free world. And in all their objectives, they will fail. (Applause.)

Like the great struggles of the 20th century, the war on terror demands every element of our national power. Yet this is a different kind of war. Our enemies are not organized into battalions, or commanded by governments. They hide in shadowy networks and retreat after they strike. After September the 11th, 2001, I made a pledge, America will not be -- will not wait to be attacked again. We will go on the offense and we will defend our freedom. (Applause.)

We have a comprehensive strategy to win this war on terror. It includes three parts -- protecting this homeland, taking the fight to the enemy, and advancing freedom. The first part of our strategy is to protect America. We're reforming our intelligence services to stay ahead of our enemies and to rout out terror cells before they strike. We're using our diplomatic and financial tools to cut off the terrorists' financing and to drain them of their support. We've more than tripled funding for homeland security since September the 11th, 2001. We've provided more than \$14 billion to train and equip state and local first responders. Many of our police officers and firefighters and first responders are veterans, and America is grateful for their dedication to keeping this country safe. (Applause.)

One of the most important tools we have to protect America is called the USA Patriot Act. This good law permits our intelligence and law enforcement communities to share information. It gives our law enforcement officers many of the same tools to fight terror that they already use to fight drugs and street crime. The Patriot Act is fully consistent with the United States Constitution, and as a result of that act, we're getting results. Our law enforcement intelligence officers have used the Patriot Act to help break up terror cells and support networks in California and New York and Ohio and Illinois and Virginia and Florida and other states.

Key provisions of the Patriot Act are scheduled to expire at the end of this year. Yet the terrorist threat to our country will not expire at the end of this year. When the House and Senate return from their recess, they need to send me a bill to renew the Patriot Act. (Applause.)

All these steps to protect the homeland have made it safer, but we're not yet safe. Terrorists in foreign lands still hope to attack our country. They still hope to kill our citizens. The lesson of September the 11th, 2001, is that we must confront threats before they fully materialize. (Applause.)

Vast oceans and friendly neighbors are not enough to protect us. A policy of retreat and isolation will not bring us safety. The only way to defend our citizens where we live is to go after the terrorists where they live. (Applause.)

So the second part of our strategy is to take the fight to the terrorists abroad before they can attack us here at home. This is the most difficult and dangerous mission in the war on terror. And like generations before them, our soldiers and sailors and airmen and Marines have stepped forward to accept the mission. They've damaged the al Qaeda network across the world and we're going to keep the terrorists on the run. From Afghanistan to Iraq, to the Horn of Africa, our men and women in uniform are bringing our enemies to justice and bringing justice to our enemies.

Our goal is clear: to secure a more peaceful world for our children and grandchildren. We will accept nothing less than total victory over the terrorists and their hateful ideology. (Applause.)

Iraq is a central front in the war on terror. It is a vital part of our mission. Terrorists like bin Laden and his ally, Zarqawi, are trying to turn Iraq into what Afghanistan was under the Taliban, a place where women are beaten, religious and ethnic minorities are executed, and terrorists have sanctuary to plot attacks against free people. Terrorists are trying to block the rise of democracy in Iraq, because they know a free Iraq will deal a decisive blow to their strategy to achieve absolute power. The Iraqi people lived for three decades under an absolute dictatorship, and they will not allow a new set of would-be tyrants to take control of their future.

The response -- (applause) -- the people of Iraq have made a clear choice for all to see. In spite of threats and assassinations, more than eight million citizens defied the car bombers and killers and voted in free elections. (Applause.) In spite of violence, the Iraqi people are building a nation that secures freedom for its citizens and contributes to peace and stability in that region.

Now Iraq's leaders are once again defying the terrorists and pessimists by completing work on a democratic constitution. The establishment of a democratic constitution will be a landmark event in the history of Iraq and the history of the Middle East. All of Iraq's main ethnic and religious groups are working together on this vital project. All made the courageous choice to join the political process, and together they will produce a constitution that reflects the values and traditions of the Iraqi people.

Producing a constitution is a difficult process that involves debate and compromise. We know this from our own history. Our Constitutional Convention was home to political rivalries and regional disagreements. The Constitution our founders produced has been amended many times over. So Americans understand the challenges facing the framers of Iraq's new constitution. We admire their thoughtful deliberations; we salute their determination to lay the foundation for lasting democracy amid the ruins of a brutal dictatorship.

As Iraqis continue to take control of their own future, we will help them take responsibility for their own security. The enemies of a free Iraq are determined. They are adapting their tactics so they can take more innocent life. American and Iraqi forces are adapting our tactics, too. We're on the hunt, side-by-side with Iraqi troops. We're working to defeat the terrorists together. As we hunt down our common enemies, we will continue to train more Iraqi security forces so they can take on more responsibilities in fighting the terrorists. After all, it's their own country.

Our military strategy is straightforward: As Iraqis stand up, Americans will stand down. And when Iraqi forces can defend their freedom by taking on more and more of the fight to the enemy, our troops

will come home with the honor they have earned. (Applause.)

In the long run, victory in the war on terror requires changing the conditions that give rise to violence and extremism. So the third part of our strategy in the war on terror is to spread the hope of freedom across the broader Middle East. Free societies are peaceful societies. By standing with those who stand for their liberty, we will lay the foundation of peace for our children and our grandchildren.

As we work to spread freedom in the Middle East we have cause for optimism. The rise of liberty in Iraq is part of a wider movement in the region. The tide of freedom ebbs and flows, but it is moving in a clear direction, and freedom's tide is rising in the broader Middle East.

In Afghanistan, men and women have formed a free government after suffering one of the most brutal tyrannies on Earth. America is proud to call Afghanistan an ally in the war on terror. In Lebanon, people took to the streets to demand their sovereignty. They have now gone to the polls and voted in free elections. As freedom takes root in these countries it is inspiring democratic reformers in places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Across the region, a new generation desires to be free, and they will have it. And the world will be more peaceful because of it. (Applause.)

In the heart of the Middle East a hopeful story is unfolding. After decades of shattered promises and stolen lives, peace is within reach in the Holy Land. The Palestinian people have expressed their desire for sovereignty and peace in free and fair elections. President Abbas has rejected violence and taken steps toward democratic reform. This past week, Prime Minister Sharon and the Israeli people took a courageous and painful step by beginning to remove settlements in Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. The Israeli disengagement is an historic step that reflects the bold leadership of Prime Minister Sharon.

Both Israelis and Palestinians have elected governments committed to peace and progress, and the way forward is clear. We're working for a return to the road map. We're helping the Palestinians to prepare for self-government and to defeat terrorists who attack Israel, and terrorists who oppose the establishment of a peaceful Palestinian state. We're providing \$50 million in direct assistance to the Palestinians for new housing and infrastructure projects in Gaza. We remain fully committed to defending the security and well-being of our friend and ally, Israel, and we demand an end to terrorism and violence in every form, because we know that progress toward peace depends on an end to terror.

We'll continue working for the day when the map of the Middle East shows two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security. (Applause.)

As more nations replace tyranny with liberty and replace hatred with hope, America will be more secure. Our nation has accepted a mission, and we're moving forward with resolve. Spreading freedom is the work of generations, and no one knows it better than you. Freedom has contended with hateful ideologies before. We defeated fascism; we defeated communism; and we will defeat the hateful ideology of the terrorists who attacked America. (Applause.)

Each of these struggles for freedom required great sacrifice. From the beaches of Normandy to the snows of Korea, courageous Americans gave their lives so others could live in freedom. Since the

morning of September the 11th, we have known that the war on terror would require great sacrifice, as well. We have lost 1,864 members of our Armed Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and 223 in Operation Enduring Freedom. Each of these men and women left grieving families and loved ones back home. Each of these heroes left a legacy that will allow generations of their fellow Americans to enjoy the blessings of liberty. And each of these Americans have brought the hope of freedom to millions who have not known it. We owe them something. We will finish the task that they gave their lives for. We will honor their sacrifice by staying on the offensive against the terrorists, and building strong allies in Afghanistan and Iraq that will help us win and fight -- fight and win the war on terror. (Applause.)

As veterans of foreign wars, you know that the rise of liberty is critical to our national security. You understand the power of freedom because you've witnessed it with your own eyes. In a single lifetime, many of you have seen liberty spread from Germany and Japan to Eastern Europe, to Latin America, to Southeast Asia and Africa and beyond. You've seen that democracies do not fight each other, and that liberation leads to peace. With your courage and commitment to freedom, you have lifted lives of millions around the globe, and you made this country and our world more secure.

The generation of men and women who defend our freedom today is taking its rightful place among the heroes of our nation's history. Once again, America has found patriots who are selfless and tireless and unrelenting in the face of danger. Once again, the American people have been steadfast and determined not to lose our nerve. And once again, we have confidence in our cause, because we know that freedom is the future of every nation, and that the side of freedom is the side of victory.

I want to thank you for the example you have set for all who wear our nation's uniform. I want to thank you for your bravery and your decency. May God bless this nation's veterans, and may God continue to bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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