

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Source: Press Office, McCain presidential campaign

Monday, August 18, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery to the 109th Annual Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States National Convention in Orlando, Florida, today at 9:00 a.m. EDT:

Thank you all very much. National Commander George Lisicki, thank you for the kind introduction. Ladies Auxiliary President Virginia Carmen, Incoming National Commander Glen Gardner, Incoming Ladies Auxiliary President Dixie Hild, Adjutant General Gunner Kent, Executive Director Bob Wallace: I thank you all for the warm welcome. I am honored to be in the company of all my fellow members of the VFW, and especially anyone here who might hail from Post 7401 in Chandler, Arizona.

I'm proud to count many of you in this room as personal friends, including my good friend retired Marine Corps Sergeant Major Paul Chevalier of New Hampshire. And there's another gentleman here I know you'll want to welcome. He's as fine a friend as a man could have in a tough spot, Lieutenant Colonel Orson Swindle of the United States Marine Corps.

All of us take pride in being members of this great organization. After its founding in 1914, the VFW served many of the more than four million American veterans of the First World War. Today just one of those veterans survives, a man of 107 named Frank Buckles. Frank lives in West Virginia. And I have a feeling that word will reach him if we all join in a round of applause for the last doughboy.

In all the years since, the men and women of the VFW have stayed faithful to their mission of serving those who have served their country. In Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, America's veterans have faced different enemies, but they have always found the same friend and ally in the VFW. All of us returned from war with a few experiences we'd gladly forget, but the friendships and camaraderie we brought home are forever. For keeping us all together, and helping those most in need, we're all in the debt of the VFW.

The men and women of the VFW know the value of freedom, because you have been its protectors. You were there when your country needed you. You shouldered heavy burdens and accepted great risks. I'm sure many of you will also recall from your experiences in war, as I do from mine, that when you're somewhere on the other side of the world in the service of America you pay attention to the news from back home. It affects morale. And even during this election season, with sharp differences on the wisdom and success of the surge in Iraq, Americans need to speak as one in praise of the men and women who fight our battles. They are the best among us, as you were before them, and I know you will join me in applauding the courage and skill that will see America through to victory.

Though victory in Iraq is finally in sight, a great deal still depends on the decisions and good judgment of the next president. The hard-won gains of our troops hang in the balance. The lasting advantage of a peaceful and democratic ally in the heart of the Middle East could still be squandered by hasty withdrawal and arbitrary timelines. And this is one of many problems in the shifting positions of my opponent, Senator Obama.

With less than three months to go before the election, a lot of people are still trying to square Senator Obama's varying positions on the surge in Iraq. First, he opposed the surge and confidently predicted that it would fail. Then he tried to prevent funding for the troops who carried out the surge. Not content to merely predict failure in Iraq, my opponent tried to legislate failure. This was back when supporting America's efforts in Iraq entailed serious political risk. It was a clarifying moment. It was a moment when political self-interest and the national interest parted ways. For my part, with so much in the balance, it was an easy call. As I said at the time, I would rather lose an election than lose a war.

Thanks to the courage and sacrifice of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines and to brave Iraqi fighters the surge has succeeded. And yet Senator Obama still cannot quite bring himself to admit his own failure in judgment. Nor has he been willing to heed the guidance of General Petraeus, or to listen to our troops on the ground when they say -- as they have said to me on my trips to Iraq: "Let us win, just let us win." Instead, Senator Obama commits the greater error of insisting that even in hindsight, he would oppose the surge. Even in retrospect, he would choose the path of retreat and failure for America over the path of success and victory. In short, both candidates in this election pledge to end this war and bring our troops home. The great difference is that I intend to win it first.

Behind all of these claims and positions by Senator Obama lies the ambition to be president. What's less apparent is the judgment to be commander in chief. And in matters of national security, good judgment will be at a premium in the term of the next president -- as we were all reminded ten days ago by events in the nation of Georgia.

It's been a while since most Americans -- including most of our leaders and diplomats -- have viewed Russia as a threat to the peace. But the Russian government's assault on a small democratic neighbor shows why this needs revising. As I have long warned, Russia under the rule of Vladimir Putin is becoming more aggressive toward the now democratic nations that broke free of the old Soviet empire.

Russia also holds vast energy wealth. And this heavy influence in the oil and gas market has become a political weapon that Russia is clearly prepared to use. Georgia stands at a strategic crossroads in the Caucasus. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which brings oil from the Caspian to points west, traverses Georgia. And if that pipeline were destroyed or controlled by Russia, global energy supplies would be even more vulnerable to Russian influence with serious consequences on the world energy market.

For some time now, I have been making the case for a dramatic acceleration of domestic energy production. With high prices and

growing demand for oil and gas, Americans cannot remain dependent upon others for the most vital of commodities. Now we are reminded that energy policy is also a matter of the highest priority not only for our economy, but for our nation's security. Disruptions of supply abroad can suddenly raise energy prices, inflicting great harm on our economy and on America workers. And in the term of the next president, skillful handling of such a crisis could be the difference between temporary hardship and far-reaching disaster.

When Russia first invaded Georgia, some people may have wondered why events in this part of the world should be any concern of ours. After all, Georgia may seem a small, remote and obscure place. But many of you served in places that once seemed remote and obscure. And the veterans of foreign wars know better than anyone how inattention to small crises can invite much larger ones. There are many reasons why the Russian invasion of Georgia is of grave concern to America and to our allies. Above all, Georgia is a struggling democracy where Soviet tyranny is still fresh in memory. There are reports now of Georgian villages being razed, civilians being rounded up, and innocent civilians shot. We have seen such things before, as in the Balkans and in earlier periods of European history, and now we must ensure that events in Georgia do not unfold into a tragedy of greater scale. When young democracies are threatened or attacked, and innocent civilians are targeted, they should be able to count on the free world for support and solidarity.

If I am elected president, they will have that support. And in cooperation with our friends and allies in Europe, we will make it clear to Russia's rulers that acts of violence and intimidation come at a heavy cost. There will be no place among G-8 nations, or in the WTO, for a modern Russia that acts at times like the old Soviet Union. The Cold War is over, the Soviet empire is gone, and neither one is missed. Least of all is that empire missed by the once captive nations of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia. These brave young democracies have joined the free world, and they are not going back.

Through decades of struggle, free nations prevailed over tyranny in large measure because of the sacrifices of the men and women of the United States armed forces. And it will fall to the next commander in chief to make good on the obligation our government accepts every time any man or woman enters the military, and again when they receive their DD 214. Those we depend on as troops should know, when they become veterans, that they can depend on us. Honoring this obligation will require leadership. And I pledge to you that as president I will lead -- from the front -- to reform our VA system and make sure that veterans receive the respect and care they have earned.

The Walter Reed scandal was a disgrace unworthy of this nation -- and I intend to make sure that nothing like it is ever repeated. There are other problems as well that have not received as much media attention. And my administration will do the hard and necessary work of fixing them, even when the press and the public are not watching.

Reform begins with appointing a Secretary of Veterans Affairs who is a leader of the highest caliber, and who listens to veterans and veterans' service organizations. My VA secretary must be a forceful

advocate for veterans and forthright advisor to me, so we can make the right choices about budgeting, health care, and other veterans' benefit issues. He or she will also need to be a high-energy leader, too, because we'll have a lot of work to do in improving service to veterans.

Veterans must be treated fairly and expeditiously as they seek compensation for disability or illness. We owe them compassion and hands-on care in their transition to civilian life. We owe them training, rehabilitation, and education. We owe their families, parents and caregivers our concern and support. Veterans should never be deprived of quality medical care and mental health care coverage for illness or injury incurred as a result of their service to our country.

As president, I will do all that is in my power to ensure that those who serve today, and those who have served in the past, have access to the highest quality health, mental health and rehabilitative care in the world. And I will not accept a situation in which veterans are denied access to care on account of travel distances, backlogs of appointments, and years of pending disability evaluation and claims. We should no longer tolerate requiring veterans to make an appointment to stand in one line for a ticket to stand in another.

I'm not here to tell you that there is a cost that is too high to be paid in the care of our nation's veterans. I will make sure that Congress funds the VA health care budget in a sufficient, timely, and predictable manner. But I will say that every increase in funding must be matched by increases in accountability, both at the VA and in Congress. And this requires an end to certain practices and abuses that serve neither our veterans, our country, nor the reputation of Congress itself.

Exactly because funding VA programs command bipartisan support, some in the Congress like to attach unrelated appropriations and earmarks to VA bills. The result is to mix vital national priorities with wasteful and often worthless political pork. Earmarks show up in bills of every kind, and not just VA bills. That's how we end up budgeting hundreds of millions of dollars for bridges to nowhere, or lesser sums for Woodstock museums and the like. When that earmark for a million bucks to fund a Woodstock museum didn't come through, I don't imagine that many veterans had to change their vacation plans. And the principle here is simple: Public money should serve the public good. If it's me sitting in the Oval Office, at the Resolute desk, those wasteful spending bills are going the way of all earmarks, straight back to the Congress with a veto.

When we make it clear to Congress that no earmark bill will be signed into law, that will save many billions of dollars that can be applied to essential priorities, and above all to the care of our veterans. But reform doesn't end there. We must also modernize our disability system to make sure that eligible service members receive benefits quickly, based on clear, predictable, and fair standards. And we must address the problems of capacity and access within our VA health care system. While this will involve a wide range of initiatives, I believe there is a simple and direct reform we should make right away.

My administration will create a Veterans' Care Access Card to be used by veterans with illness or injury incurred during their military service, and by those with lower incomes. This card will provide those without timely access to VA facilities the option of using high-quality health-care providers near their homes. For many veterans, the closest VA facility isn't close enough. And many of their local providers are already familiar with the most common needs of veterans. Often, all that prevents them from receiving local care is a system for sharing medical records among VA, DOD, and civilian hospitals and doctors. My reform will improve care, reduce risks, and broaden access all at the same time.

This card is not intended to either replace the VA or privatize veterans' health care, as some have wrongly charged. I believe the VA should always be there to provide top-quality care for our veterans. And I believe that the VA should continue to provide broad-spectrum health care to eligible veterans, in addition to specialized care in areas such as spinal injuries, prosthetics, and blindness -- services in which the VA sets the standard in medical care.

Even so, there are veterans eligible for care who are not currently able to receive it, on account of distance, wait times, or the absence of certain specialties. And for this group, the new card I propose will offer better alternatives, to provide the benefits they have earned.

Reform must also recognize that greater care is needed for certain types of injuries. In the Senate, I co-authored the Wounded Warrior Act, which was the first major legislative initiative to address post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. As president, I will build on this legislation to improve screening and treatment for these severe injuries suffered by many in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The VA must also broaden its care for the women who are entering the armed forces in greater numbers than ever. The growing ranks of women in uniform have left the VA lagging behind in the services it provides. And here the Veterans Care Access Card will prove especially valuable, affording women medical options while the VA improves capacity and expands services.

These are among the elements of my reform agenda for the VA system. And today, as other occasions, I have stated in the plainest, most straightforward terms that the Veterans Health Care Access Card will expand existing benefits. I don't expect this will deter the Obama campaign from misrepresenting my proposals, but lest there be any doubt you have my pledge: My reforms would not force anyone to go to a non-VA facility. They will not signal privatization of the VA. And they will not replace any scheduled expansion of the VA network -- including those facilities designed to serve veterans living in rural and remote areas.

I suppose from my opponent's vantage point, veterans concerns are just one more issue to be spun or worked to advantage. This would explain why he has also taken liberties with my position on the GI Bill. In its initial version, that bill failed to address the number one education request that I've heard from career service members and their families -- the freedom to transfer their benefits to a spouse or a child. The

bill also did nothing to retain the young officer and enlisted leaders who form the backbone of our all-volunteer force.

As a political proposition, it would have much easier for me to have just signed on to what I considered flawed legislation. But the people of Arizona, and of all America, expect more from their representatives than that, and instead I sought a better bill. I'm proud to say that the result is a law that better serves our military, better serves military families, and better serves the interests of our country.

No one who has worn the uniform of his or her country can ever take these matters lightly. We all learned an ethic in the service of looking after one another, of leaving no one behind, and this commitment did not end when we left the service. As a matter of duty and of honor, whatever our commitments to veterans cost, if I am president those commitments will be kept.

The next president will have many responsibilities to the American people, and I take them all seriously. But I have one responsibility that outweighs all the others and that is to use whatever talents I possess, and every resource God has granted me to protect the security of this great and good nation from all enemies foreign and domestic.

It is every veteran's hope that should their children be called upon to answer a call to arms, the battle will be necessary and the field well chosen. But that is not their responsibility. It belongs to the government that called them. As it once was for us, their honor will be in their answer not their summons. Whatever we think about how and why we went to war in Iraq, we are all humbled by and grateful for their example. They now deserve the distinction of the best Americans, and we owe them a debt we can never fully repay. We can only offer the small tribute of our humility and our commitment to do all that we can do, in less trying and costly circumstances, to help keep this nation worthy of their sacrifice.

Many of them have served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many had their tours extended. Many returned to combat sooner than they had been led to expect. It was a sad and hard thing to ask so much more of Americans who have already given more than their fair share to the defense of our country. Few of them and their families will have received the news about additional and longer deployments without aiming a few appropriate complaints in the general direction of people like me, who helped make the decision to send them there. And then they shouldered a rifle or climbed in a cockpit and risked everything -- everything -- to accomplish their mission, to protect another people's freedom and our own country from harm.

It is a privilege beyond measure to live in a country served by them. I have had the good fortune to know personally a great many brave and selfless patriots who sacrificed and shed blood to defend America. But I have known none braver or better than those who do so today. They are our inspiration, as I suspect all of you were once theirs. And I pray to a loving God that He bless and protect them. Thank you.