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Vice President's Remarks on the 90th National Convention of the American Legion

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Phoenix, Arizona

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, friends and fellow citizens. It's good to see all of you this morning. I notice I always get a warm welcome when I come to Arizona in August. (Laughter.) But wherever you and I have met -- whether it was in Indianapolis last fall, or in other venues over the years -- I've always received a warm welcome from the American Legion. And I appreciate it, and I'm honored to be with you once again.

Let me thank your national commander, Marty Conatser, for the invitation to join all of you today. And I also want to thank Robert Spanogle, national adjutant; Jan Pulvermacher-Ryan, national president of the Auxiliary; Pam Gilley, national secretary of the Auxiliary. I also want to thank national and department officers and delegates, Legionnaires, Auxiliary members, Sons of the American Legion, and guests who have come to Phoenix from all over the world. Your commitment to the Legion has made this 90th National Convention a huge success. It's great to be part of it, and I bring respect and good wishes to all of you from the President of the United States, George W. Bush. (Applause.)



This hall is filled with distinguished Americans. You answered the nation's call -- and when you returned from duty, you kept up the habit of service by joining the American Legion. The Legion serves America by leading on important issues, from health care and education, to employment opportunities for veterans, to homeland security, to a better quality of life for our military families. You proudly wear an emblem that "stands for God and Country, and the highest rights of man." You speak up for liberty and democracy, because you know what those ideals mean -- and because you know the price that's been paid for our freedoms. Members of the American Legion stand firm for protecting our country's flag, and for defending the right of every American to pledge allegiance to one nation under God. (Applause.)

We also count on the American Legion to be an advocate for the nation's veterans. Our administration

has worked with you and have benefited greatly from your advice. President Bush and I came into office determined to raise the quality of veterans' health care, to get more money to the VA, and to trim the backlog in processing disability claims. Aided by your strong voice on Capitol Hill, we've been able to make a big difference for veterans and their families.

The President's budget for this year asks for nearly \$94 billion for the VA -- almost double what it was when we took office. And more than \$5 billion -- (applause) -- more than \$5 billion has been committed to new and expanded VA facilities across the country.

To expand educational opportunities for veterans and their families, President Bush was proud this year to sign a G.I. Bill for the 21st century. (Applause.) To provide better care for wounded warriors, we've implemented recommendations from Senator Bob Dole and Secretary Donna Shalala. And the President fixed an old problem for combat-injured and severely disabled veterans, when he signed concurrent receipt legislation -- making him the first President in more than a hundred years to do so. (Applause.)

For all the progress that's been made for veterans over these last seven and a half years, we're not easing up in the final months of our administration. We've got a fine leader at the VA, Dr. James Peake, who is the first physician and first general to serve as Secretary. We realize bureaucracies always need to be pushed -- and a retired three-star is a good one for doing the pushing.



President Bush said a long time ago that he intended to sprint to the finish line, and all of us who work for him are going to stay hard at it until our last day in office. I'll be putting on some miles myself next week, with an international trip that includes a stop in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia. That young democracy has been subjected to an unjustified assault, and the international community has joined in condemning Russia's invasion of a sovereign, democratic neighbor and its recognition of Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

America has sent in large amounts of humanitarian aid, along with a clear message to the people of Georgia: We support their democracy, and we'll work with our allies to ensure Georgia's territorial integrity as a free and independent nation. The Georgian people won their freedom after years of tyranny, and they can count on the friendship of the United States. (Applause.)

Come January, President Bush and I will turn our duties over to others. I realize the Annual Convention of the American Legion is not a political event, and I will not speak this morning about the presidential campaign. (Applause.) But in present company, there's one thing I have to say. I am proud and delighted that next week, your fellow Legionnaire, Senator John McCain of Arizona, will be nominated for President of the United States. (Applause.)

On my final visit to the American Legion as Vice President, I also want to thank each of you for the unstinting support you are giving to the men and women serving in our military today. I know it means

a lot to those serving far away, and to those you've welcomed home from their deployments. We blessed -- we are blessed with the finest military any nation has ever fielded, and may we never take them or their families for granted. (Applause.)

These are busy times for the nation's defenders, because we're at war with an enemy that hit us first, hit us hard, and has ambitions to cause ever greater destruction inside our country. In two weeks, we'll mark another anniversary of September 11th, 2001 -- and we'll recall the attacks that took 3,000 lives and did such great harm to our nation. We'll be reminded, once again, of the kind of adversaries that we face in this war. These extremists don't wear a uniform or recognize any standard of warfare. They hate our country; they are determined to kill as many Americans as they can; and they are fully prepared to kill themselves in the process. Simply stated, an extremist cabal has turned its guns on the United States and the civilized world. For the sake of our freedom and security, we must not relent until this enemy is destroyed. (Applause.)

In light of what happened in 2001, and considering what we've learned since about the enemy's operations and intentions, it's all the more remarkable that America has not had another 9/11. The fact that we've been safe this long is not an accident of history or just a stroke of luck. It is an achievement. We've undertaken a broad-based, unyielding effort to protect this country -- an effort set in motion and led by the President of the United States, and carried out by investigators, security professionals, intelligence operatives, and military personnel. No one can guarantee the enemy won't make another strike on our homeland -- indeed, that is their objective. But one thing is certain: We will not sit and wait to be hit again. (Applause.)

There was a time when terrorist attacks were treated mainly as an issue of law enforcement -- where you investigated the incident, arrest the bad guys, try them, and put them in jail. The first attack on the World Trade Center, back in 1993, resulted in indictments and prison terms for the major perpetrators. But that did not remove the danger to America. Terrorist attacks against American interests continued throughout the '90s, from the killing of servicemen in Riyadh and the Khobar Towers, to the destruction of our embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, to the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000.

Outside a few limited strikes, the terrorists never paid a real price for any of this. They believed they could strike us and get away with it. And they grew more confident that if they hit Americans hard enough, the United States would change our policies, abandon our commitments, and run away. They took to the examples of Beirut in 1983 and Somalia in 1993 -- when terrorists killed Americans and we thereafter withdrew our forces.

September 11th changed everything. We saw the kind of destruction that could be caused by 19 men armed with box cutters and boarding passes -- 19 men who were, in fact, part of an international network of terror. We had to contemplate, as well, their broader goals -- to acquire more deadly weapons; to gain new safe havens to wage further attacks; to spread an ideology of hatred and resentment across the broader Middle East and beyond.

After 9/11, it was clear that this mixture of ideology and violence, operating across borders and in secret, added up to more than just a law enforcement problem. It was, and is, a strategic threat to the United States, and must be dealt with systematically. (Applause.) So President Bush made a decision

to marshal all the elements of our national power to confront the extremists, to deny them safe haven, and above all to deny them the means to wage catastrophic attacks against the United States. He also made clear that in the post-9/11 era, regimes that harbor terrorists and defy the demands of the civilized world should be held to account -- before it's too late.

Having been attacked at home, we took decisive steps to make the country less vulnerable to attack, and to improve our ability to respond to a national emergency. We set up the Department of Homeland Security and a new counterterrorism center. We shifted the FBI's focus from investigating terrorist attacks to preventing them. The President signed the Patriot Act, which took down the legal and bureaucratic wall that kept law enforcement and intelligence authorities from sharing vital information.

We also stepped up intelligence operations -- to better figure out the movements of the enemy, the extent of their network, the location of the cells, the plans they're making, the methods they use, the targets they want to hit. Information of this kind is the hardest to obtain, but it's worth the effort in terms of the plots that are averted and the lives that have been saved. So our government has taken careful but urgent steps to monitor the communications of enemies at large, and to get information from the ones that we have apprehended.

We instituted the Terrorist Surveillance Program, to monitor international terrorist-related communications. If somebody inside the United States is talking to a terrorist overseas, we need to know about it so we can protect the American people. (Applause.)

To defend American lives, we went to work getting information from the terrorists themselves. One way we've done that is through interrogations. And here it's important for Americans to understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we are not doing. There's been a good deal of misinformation about the interrogation program run by the CIA. Many unfair and uninformed statements have been made about America's intentions and about the conduct of our intelligence officers. A lot of details are, understandably, classified. Yet the basic facts are these. A small number of high-value detainees have gone through a special program run by the CIA. The CIA program involves tough customers and tough interrogations -- but it is entirely legal and proper. The procedures are designed to be safe in full compliance with this nation's laws and treaty obligations. They've been carefully reviewed by the Department of Justice. The program is run by highly trained professionals who understand their obligations under the law. And, as the President has made clear, the program has uncovered a wealth of information that has foiled specific attacks -- information that has on numerous occasions made the difference between life and death. Intelligence personnel who have gathered that information have done a great service to our country. They are protecting Americans' lives, and they deserve the nation's gratitude. (Applause.)

No nation in the world takes human rights more seriously than the United States. The policies of our country comply with our law, which prohibits torture. We're proud of our country and what it stands for. We expect all who serve America to conduct themselves with honor. And we enforce the rules. Some years ago, abuses were committed at Abu Ghraib prison -- conduct that was not authorized and that did violate the law. When those abuses came to light, Americans were rightly outraged. Those who violated the law were arrested, prosecuted and punished, as justice demanded. The misdeeds of a few should never be used to slander the good and decent Americans who go to work every day to keep this country safe. (Applause.)

All of these measures -- homeland security, terror surveillance, and high-value interrogation -- have been absolutely essential to confronting the strategic threat to our country. And the same is true for our ongoing military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The war on terror is not a figure of speech. On two fields of battle, it is a shooting war. The only way to win is by going on the offensive -- and that's exactly what we're doing.

In both countries, we confronted tyrants -- (applause) -- in both countries we confronted tyrants and removed them from power. And we're keeping our promise to support these democracies, and to help them build up their own defense forces, and to prevent terrorists from regaining a foothold in that critical region of the world.

In Afghanistan, America leads a coalition that includes every member of the NATO Alliance. The Taliban is still waging attacks against the Karzai government and against our forces. But our coalition remains strong, and our troops are facing the enemy with skill and toughness. Seven years ago, we rescued the Afghan people and lifted their country out of the dark ages. Today they have an elected government, a rising economy, and schools that educate both boys and girls. Afghanistan is rebuilding itself, and it's become an ally in the war on terror. The Afghan people stand with us, and we are standing with them.

We are standing with the Iraqi people as well. And I'm pleased to report that the troop surge we began last year has been an enormous success. (Applause.) Violence in the country is down dramatically compared to the first part of 2007. Sectarian killings and civilian deaths have fallen dramatically. And the casualty rate among American forces last month was the lowest in the history of that conflict.

Thanks to our new strategy in Iraq, led by General Dave Petraeus, the Iraqi people now live in greater security than they have in years. We're gathering better intelligence, because now the Iraqis are less afraid to pass along tips about where enemy fighters are hiding, and where they keep their weapons. The surge has given Iraq's elected leaders the breathing room to pass new reforms, and they've stepped up to their responsibilities. At the same time, we're -- continued to train Iraq's security forces, and those forces are able to lead more and more operations on their own. And al Qaeda, the main enemy in Iraq, is substantially degraded, running out of sanctuaries, losing the fight.

We're going to keep our commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, as we have pledged to do. The military aspect of the war on terror has been a hard-fought, difficult, challenging enterprise. So difficult, in fact, that many politicians -- including some who voted to send the troops into battle -- have decided to quit. Last year, with the entire Iraqi operation in the balance, we had to fend off multiple threats from the Congress. There were threats to cut off all funding for the troops, threats to force an immediate withdrawal from Iraq, consequences be damned, and threats to mandate a pullout by strict, short, and completely arbitrary timelines. The troop surge faced intense opposition from members of Congress who said it was doomed to fail. The Democratic leader of the Senate -- an early supporter of the war -- abandoned that support and even declared the cause to be lost.

President Bush stood firm, along with a number of notably courageous members of Congress, some of them from Arizona. They knew a surge of operations was our big chance to get things right. They also

knew that success in Iraq mattered greatly to the future prospects for peace in the Middle East, as well as having enormous impact on our own security. For all these reasons, they knew that tyranny in Iraq was worth defeating -- and democracy in Iraq worth defending.

We could have quit a year and a half ago -- and today Iraq would be in chaos. Al Qaeda would probably control large segments of the country; it probably would be a major safe haven for terrorists; and its people would be suffering in ways we can scarcely imagine. America's credibility would be in tatters, and the terrorists would be newly emboldened. And everybody in Washington would be wondering just how we were going to fix the problem in Iraq sometime down the road. Fortunately, we've prevented that nightmare scenario -- and now it's clear that the opponents of the troop surge were dead wrong.

Success in Iraq has allowed us to continue the President's policy of return-on-success. We've reduced the length of combat tours from 15 months back down to 12. We've brought home all five of the combat brigades and the three Marine units who were sent into Iraq as part of the surge. Further troop movements will, as always, depend on what is happening on the ground.

We recognize there are still difficult challenges ahead in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East -- including the efforts by the radical regime in Iran to develop technologies that would give it the capability to produce nuclear weapons. No one should have any illusions about this. Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Its leaders have repeatedly called for the death of America and the extermination of Israel. A nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to our country's vital interests. The United States remains focused on mobilizing friends and allies to pressure the Iranian regime to accept a diplomatic solution, to comply with the U.N. Security Council resolutions, and to abandon its efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Diplomacy will always be our preferred course. But Iran must know that the United States is determined to defend its interests, and that all options remain on the table.

Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran, the people of our military understand what is at stake in the broader Middle East, and the consequences it holds for the war on terror. A few months ago, during a stay at Balad Air Base in Iraq, I participated in an awards ceremony, and was given the chance to address several thousand of our troops. The morale was high -- you could feel it as you stood there with them, and you could hear it as they cheered comrades receiving battle decorations. Most of all, I remember how strongly they applauded when I told them that we're going to get the job done right -- so that another generation of Americans doesn't have to come back and do it again. (Applause.)

At every stage, with all the changing fortunes of war, the members of our military have given their jobs all that is in them. They've seized the initiative; they have the guts and the determination to see the matter through. Last month in Iraq, more than 1,200 Americans coming to the end of their service obligation made the decision to re-enlist. On the Fourth of July, General Petraeus swore them in during a ceremony at Camp Victory. According to the sergeant major in Baghdad, it was the largest re-enlistment ceremony since the advent of the all-volunteer force. Our nation is grateful to each and every one of them. (Applause.)

As many of you know, I had the honor of serving this country as Secretary of Defense during the

administration of former President Bush. During those years, and in my current position, I've had no greater privilege than the chance to work with members of the American Armed Forces. I believe that if anyone lacks for inspiration in the war on terror, they need look no farther than the men and women who do the fighting. Whether it's on cold mountain peaks in Afghanistan or the hot dusty streets of Iraq, they have been magnificent. And a new generation of warriors is the next chapter of American ingenuity, bravery, and valor. (Applause.)

I recently attended a ceremony at the White House honoring one of our bravest -- an Army private from Pennsylvania named Ross McGinnis, who was killed in Iraq in late 2006. Private McGinnis was in the gun turret of a humvee patrolling Baghdad when an insurgent threw a grenade directly at the vehicle. The grenade fell through the gunner's hatch and landed inside. Private McGinnis shouted a warning, but the four men inside had no way of escaping. Instead of leaping off the vehicle to save himself, Private McGinnis dropped inside, covered the grenade with his body, and absorbed the blast. In a split second, he saved four lives and lost his own. And the four soldiers he saved were there in June, when President Bush presented to Mr. and Mrs. Tom McGinnis the Medal of Honor earned by their son -- who at age 19 proved himself to be one of the bravest men in our history.

As President Bush said at that ceremony, "The day will come when the mission has been completed, and the fighting is over, and freedom and security have prevailed. America will never forget those who came forward to bear the battle." (Applause.) With daily challenges confronting us, and American boots on the ground 6,000 miles away, we know there will be more fighting, and more sacrifices. But our men and women are serving in a cause that is noble, necessary, and in the finest tradition of America.

The United States was founded on the principles of liberty, justice, and equality. We have served those principles, and sacrificed for them, to the far corners of the earth. We have thrown back tyrants, stood watch on the frontiers of freedom, and defended the weak against the violent. We have brought hope and relief to peoples who thought they had lost everything -- until the Americans arrived to save them.

We've done all this, not for glory or empire, but for freedom -- because we know that the spread of freedom makes our world safer, and brings us closer to the peace we all desire. In the process we've received more than our share of criticism, and we can take it. The fact is this world is a much better place because of the power, the influence, and the values of the United States of America. (Applause.)

As citizens who have served in that cause, every member of the American Legion can stand tall. You've earned a special place of respect in this country. I count it a privilege to be in your company, and I lack the words to express how much I've appreciated your friendship over these many years. I'm proud of you, and I'm most grateful for your hospitality this morning.

Thank you. (Applause.)

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