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Vice President Speaks at VFW 103rd National Convention

Remarks by the Vice President to the Veterans of Foreign Wars 103rd National Convention

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Thank you, Jim, and I appreciate your introduction, and your strong leadership for the VFW. And I especially appreciate your warm welcome.

I've been looking forward to this opportunity to visit the historic city of Nashville, and to being with the members of the VFW and Ladies Auxiliary. I see many good friends here in the audience this morning. I know I have attended your convention in the past. It's a special privilege to stand before you today, for the first time, as Vice President of the United States. (Applause.) And it is my great honor to serve with a commander in chief every soldier and every veteran can be proud of - President George W. Bush. (Applause.)

I'm grateful to Jim Goldsmith and Diana Stout for their hard work on behalf of the nation's veterans and military personnel. I also want to thank Bob Wallace, your fine executive director who runs the Washington office. And permit me to be among the first to wish great success to Ray Sisk of California, who will exceed Jim -- succeed Jim this Friday as the VFW Commander-in-Chief, and Betty Morris of Maryland, the incoming national president of the Ladies Auxiliary. I know Ray and Betty will both do a superb job. (Applause.)

As members of the VFW, you are united by common experiences and shared commitments. In the military, you devoted yourselves to a cause above self-interest, served with a firm sense of duty and developed personal standards that make you an example for your families and your fellow citizens. The daughter of an Army Air Corpsman described growing up with her father, and the values she learned from him without even knowing it. As she recalls, "Honesty, integrity, hard work, personal responsibility, and perseverance were all around me and I absorbed them almost imperceptibly." Our veterans have had a similar effect on the entire nation.

Those values are embodied in this organization. In the VFW our nation sees a continuing ethic of service, shown in the time, talent, and money you have given to citizens in need. Last year alone, VFW members gave more than 16 million hours to worthy causes. Your Operation Uplink has allowed service members and hospitalized veterans to make free calls home. I know they and their families are deeply grateful to all of you.

The VFW also 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. The VFW stands firm for protecting our country's flag and for defending the right of every American to pledge allegiance to one nation under God. (Applause.)

Our administration is proud to have strong ties with the leadership and the membership of the VFW. We believe that in dealing with the federal government, every veteran deserves a response that is fair, respectful and prompt.

We are working every day to improve the level of service to our veterans. On taking office we found a large claims backlog, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The backlog is falling steadily, as is the average time for processing each claim. But there's a lot more work to be done and America's veterans can now be certain that someone is doing it. The President has put a solid, results-oriented veteran in charge of the Department, Secretary Tony Principi. Under our administration you won't receive excuses, you will receive action.

To further improve health care services to veterans, President Bush has established a veterans health task force, of which Bob Wallace is an influential member. And although we are holding most discretionary spending to 2 percent increases, the President has asked Congress for an 8 percent increase for veterans' health care, and a seven percent increase for veterans' programs overall. (Applause.) The money is necessary to meet pressing needs, some of which have gone neglected in recent years.

We will continue working with VFW leaders and members on homeland security, drawing upon your experiences in military and civilian life. And we share common cause on the matter of servicemen whose fate is still undetermined. For all the uncertainties that remain, the basic issue is clear: thousands of brave Americans, last seen doing their duty, remain unaccounted for. The nation remembers these men, and this government will persist in the effort to account for every last one of them. (Applause.)

As we meet all of these commitments, our administration is moving forward on an agenda to build a safe and prosperous future for the American people. We have laid the foundation for greater prosperity and opportunity with the most significant education reforms in 35 years, with free trade legislation to open up markets to American producers, with tough new laws to ensure corporate integrity and honest accounting, with spending discipline in Washington and

with the largest federal tax reduction in twenty years.

There is a full agenda for the fall, and beyond. Yet the President and I never for a moment forget our number one responsibility: to protect the American people against further attack, and to win the war that began last September 11th.

The danger to America requires action on many fronts all at once. We are reorganizing the federal government to protect the nation against further attack. The new Department of Homeland Security will gather under one roof the capability to identify threats, to check them against our vulnerabilities, and to move swiftly to protect the nation.

At the same time, we realize that wars are never won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy. We will take every step necessary to make sure our country is secure, and we will prevail.

Much has happened since the attacks of 9/11. But as Secretary Rumsfeld has put it, we are still closer to the beginning of this war than we are to its end. The United States has entered a struggle of years -- a new kind of war against a new kind of enemy. The terrorists who struck America are ruthless, they are resourceful, and they hide in many countries. They came into our country to murder thousands of innocent men, women, and children. There is no doubt they wish to strike again, and that they are working to acquire the deadliest of all weapons.

Against such enemies, America and the civilized world have only one option: wherever terrorists operate, we must find them where they dwell, stop them in their planning, and one by one bring them to justice.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime and al Qaeda terrorists have met the fate they chose for themselves. And they saw, up-close and personal, the new methods and capabilities of America's armed services. (Applause.) May I say, as a former Secretary of Defense, that I have never been more proud of the America's military. (Applause.)

The combination of advantages already seen in this conflict -- precision power from the air, real-time intelligence, special forces, the long reach of Naval task forces, and close coordination with local forces represents a dramatic advance in our ability to engage and defeat the enemy. These advantages will only become more vital in future campaigns. President Bush has often spoken of how America can keep the peace by redefining war on our terms. That means that our armed services must have every tool to answer any threat that forms against us. It means that any enemy conspiring to harm America or our friends must face a swift, a certain and a devastating response. (Applause.)

As always in America's armed forces, the single most important asset we have is the man or woman who steps forward and puts on the uniform of this great nation. Much has been asked of our military this past year, and more will be asked in the months and the years ahead. Those who serve are entitled to expect many things from us in return. They deserve the very best weapons, the best equipment, the best support, and the best training we can possibly provide them. And under President Bush they will have them all. (Applause.)

The President has asked Congress for a one-year increase of more than \$48 billion for national defense, the largest since Ronald Reagan lived in the White House. And for the good of the nation's military families, he has also asked Congress to provide every person in uniform a raise in pay. We think they've earned it. (Applause.)

In this war we've assembled a broad coalition of civilized nations that recognize the danger and are working with us on all fronts. The President has made very clear that there is no neutral ground in the fight against terror. Those who harbor terrorists share guilt for the acts they commit. Under the Bush Doctrine, a regime that harbors or supports terrorists will be regarded as hostile to the United States.

The Taliban has already learned that lesson, but Afghanistan was only the beginning of a lengthy campaign. Were we to stop now, any sense of security we might have would be false and temporary. There is a terrorist underworld out there, spread among more than 60 countries. The job we have will require every tool at our means of diplomacy, of finance, of intelligence, of law enforcement, and of military power. But we will, over time, find and defeat the enemies of the United States. In the case of Osama bin Laden -- as President Bush said recently -- "If he's alive, we'll get him. If he's not alive -- we already got him." (Applause.)

But the challenges to our country involve more than just tracking down a single person or one small group. Nine-eleven and its aftermath awakened this nation to danger, to the true ambitions of the global terror network, and to the reality that weapons of mass destruction are being sought by determined enemies who would not hesitate to use them against us.

It is a certainty that the al Qaeda network is pursuing such weapons, and has succeeded in acquiring at least a crude capability to use them. We found evidence of their efforts in the ruins of al Qaeda hideouts in Afghanistan. And we've seen in recent days additional confirmation in videos recently shown on CNN -- pictures of al Qaeda members training to commit acts of terror, and testing chemical weapons on dogs. Those terrorists who remain at large are determined to use these capabilities against the United States and our friends and allies around the world.

As we face this prospect, old doctrines of security do not apply. In the days of the Cold War, we were able to manage the threat with strategies of deterrence and containment. But it's a lot tougher to deter enemies who have no country to defend. And containment is not possible when dictators obtain weapons of mass destruction, and are prepared to share them with terrorists who intend to inflict catastrophic casualties on the United States.

The case of Saddam Hussein, a sworn enemy of our country, requires a candid appraisal of the facts. After his defeat in the Gulf War in 1991, Saddam agreed under to U.N. Security Council Resolution 687 to cease all development of weapons of mass destruction. He agreed to end his nuclear weapons program. He agreed to destroy his chemical and his biological weapons. He further agreed to admit U.N. inspection teams into his country to ensure that he was in fact complying with these terms.

In the past decade, Saddam has systematically broken each of these agreements. The Iraqi regime has in fact been very busy enhancing its capabilities in the field of chemical and biological agents. And they continue to pursue the nuclear program they began so many years ago. These are not weapons for the purpose of defending Iraq; these are offensive weapons for the purpose of inflicting death on a massive scale, developed so that Saddam can hold the threat over the head of anyone he chooses, in his own region or beyond.

On the nuclear question, many of you will recall that Saddam's nuclear ambitions suffered a severe setback in 1981 when the Israelis bombed the Osirak reactor. They suffered another major blow in Desert Storm and its aftermath.

But we now know that Saddam has resumed his efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Among other sources, we've gotten this from the firsthand testimony of defectors -- including Saddam's own son-in-law, who was subsequently murdered at Saddam's direction. Many of us are convinced that Saddam will acquire nuclear weapons fairly soon.

Just how soon, we cannot really gauge. Intelligence is an uncertain business, even in the best of circumstances. This is especially the case when you are dealing with a totalitarian regime that has made a science out of deceiving the international community. Let me give you just one example of what I mean. Prior to the Gulf War, America's top intelligence analysts would come to my office in the Defense Department and tell me that Saddam Hussein was at least five or perhaps even 10 years away from having a nuclear weapon. After the war we learned that he had been much closer than that, perhaps within a year of acquiring such a weapon.

Saddam also devised an elaborate program to conceal his active efforts to build chemical and biological weapons. And one must keep in mind the history of U.N. inspection teams in Iraq. Even as they were conducting the most intrusive system of arms control in history, the inspectors missed a great deal. Before being barred from the country, the inspectors found and destroyed thousands of chemical weapons, and hundreds of tons of mustard gas and other nerve agents.

Yet Saddam Hussein had sought to frustrate and deceive them at every turn, and was often successful in doing so. I'll cite one instance. During the spring of 1995, the inspectors were actually on the verge of declaring that Saddam's programs to develop chemical weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles had been fully accounted for and shut down. Then Saddam's son-in-law suddenly defected and began sharing information. Within days the inspectors were led to an Iraqi chicken farm. Hidden there were boxes of documents and lots of evidence regarding Iraq's most secret weapons programs. That should serve as a reminder to all that we often learned more as the result of defections than we learned from the inspection regime itself.

To the dismay of the inspectors, they in time discovered that Saddam had kept them largely in the dark about the extent of his program to mass produce VX, one of the deadliest chemicals known to man. And far from having shut down Iraq's prohibited missile programs, the inspectors found that Saddam had continued to test such missiles, almost literally under the noses of the U.N. inspectors.

Against that background, a person would be right to question any suggestion that we should just get inspectors back into Iraq, and then our worries will be over. Saddam has perfected the game of cheat and retreat, and is very skilled in the art of denial and deception. A return of inspectors would provide no assurance whatsoever of his compliance with U.N. resolutions. On the contrary, there is a great danger that it would provide false comfort that Saddam was somehow "back in his box."

Meanwhile, he would continue to plot. Nothing in the last dozen years has stopped him -- not his agreements; not the discoveries of the inspectors; not the revelations by defectors; not criticism or ostracism by the international community; and not four days of bombings by the U.S. in 1998. What he wants is time and more time to husband his resources, to invest in his ongoing chemical and biological weapons programs, and to gain possession of nuclear arms.

Should all his ambitions be realized, the implications would be enormous for the Middle East, for the United States, and for the peace of the world. The whole range of weapons of mass destruction then would rest in the hands of a dictator who has already shown his willingness to use such weapons, and has done so, both in his war with Iran and against his own people. Armed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror, and seated atop ten percent of the world's oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world's energy supplies, directly threaten America's friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.

Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. And there is no doubt that his aggressive regional ambitions will lead him into future confrontations with his neighbors -- confrontations that will involve both the

weapons he has today, and the ones he will continue to develop with his oil wealth.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no basis in Saddam Hussein's conduct or history to discount any of the concerns that I am raising this morning. We are, after all, dealing with the same dictator who shoots at American and British pilots in the no-fly zone, on a regular basis, the same dictator who dispatched a team of assassins to murder former President Bush as he traveled abroad, the same dictator who invaded Iran and Kuwait, and has fired ballistic missiles at Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, the same dictator who has been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism for the better part of two decades.

In the face of such a threat, we must proceed with care, deliberation, and consultation with our allies. I know our president very well. I've worked beside him as he directed our response to the events of 9/11. I know that he will proceed cautiously and deliberately to consider all possible options to deal with the threat that an Iraq ruled by Saddam Hussein represents. And I am confident that he will, as he has said he would, consult widely with the Congress and with our friends and allies before deciding upon a course of action. He welcomes the debate that has now been joined here at home, and he has made it clear to his national security team that he wants us to participate fully in the hearings that will be held in Congress next month on this vitally important issue.

We will profit as well from a review of our own history. There are a lot of World War II veterans in the hall today. For the United States, that war began on December 7, 1941, with the attack on Pearl Harbor and the near-total destruction of our Pacific Fleet. Only then did we recognize the magnitude of the danger to our country. Only then did the Axis powers fully declare their intentions against us. By that point, many countries had fallen. Many millions had died. And our nation was plunged into a two-front war resulting in more than a million American casualties. To this day, historians continue to analyze that war, speculating on how we might have prevented Pearl Harbor, and asking what actions might have averted the tragedies that rate among the worst in human history.

America in the year 2002 must ask careful questions, not merely about our past, but also about our future. The elected leaders of this country have a responsibility to consider all of the available options. And we are doing so. What we must not do in the face of a mortal threat is give in to wishful thinking or willful blindness. We will not simply look away, hope for the best, and leave the matter for some future administration to resolve. As President Bush has said, time is not on our side. Deliverable weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a terror network, or a murderous dictator, or the two working together, constitutes as grave a threat as can be imagined. The risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action.

Now and in the future, the United States will work closely with the global coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction. We will develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect America and our allies from sudden attack. And the entire world must know that we will take whatever action is necessary to defend our freedom and our security.

As former Secretary of State Kissinger recently stated: "The imminence of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the huge dangers it involves, the rejection of a viable inspection system, and the demonstrated hostility of Saddam Hussein combine to produce an imperative for preemptive action." If the United States could have preempted 9/11, we would have, no question. Should we be able to prevent another, much more devastating attack, we will, no question. This nation will not live at the mercy of terrorists or terror regimes. (Applause.)

I am familiar with the arguments against taking action in the case of Saddam Hussein. Some concede that Saddam is evil, power-hungry, and a menace -- but that, until he crosses the threshold of actually possessing nuclear weapons, we should rule out any preemptive action. That logic seems to me to be deeply flawed. The argument comes down to this: yes, Saddam is as dangerous as we say he is, we just need to let him get stronger before we do anything about it.

Yet if we did wait until that moment, Saddam would simply be emboldened, and it would become even harder for us to gather friends and allies to oppose him. As one of those who worked to assemble the Gulf War coalition, I can tell you that our job then would have been infinitely more difficult in the face of a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein. And many of those who now argue that we should act only if he gets a nuclear weapon, would then turn around and say that we cannot act because he has a nuclear weapon. At bottom, that argument counsels a course of inaction that itself could have devastating consequences for many countries, including our own.

Another argument holds that opposing Saddam Hussein would cause even greater troubles in that part of the world, and interfere with the larger war against terror. I believe the opposite is true. Regime change in Iraq would bring about a number of benefits to the region. When the gravest of threats are eliminated, the freedom-loving peoples of the region will have a chance to promote the values that can bring lasting peace. As for the reaction of the Arab "street," the Middle East expert Professor Fouad Ajami predicts that after liberation, the streets in Basra and Baghdad are "sure to erupt in joy in the same way the throngs in Kabul greeted the Americans." Extremists in the region would have to rethink their strategy of Jihad. Moderates throughout the region would take heart. And our ability to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process would be enhanced, just as it was following the liberation of Kuwait in 1991.

The reality is that these times bring not only dangers but also opportunities. In the Middle East, where so many have known only poverty and oppression, terror and tyranny, we look to the day when people can live in freedom and dignity and the young can grow up free of the conditions that breed despair, hatred, and violence.

In other times the world saw how the United States defeated fierce enemies, then helped rebuild their countries, forming strong bonds between our peoples and our governments. Today in Afghanistan, the world is seeing that America acts not to conquer but to liberate, and remains in friendship to help the people build a future of stability, self-determination, and peace.

We would act in that same spirit after a regime change in Iraq. With our help, a liberated Iraq can be a great nation once again. Iraq is rich in natural resources and human talent, and has unlimited potential for a peaceful, prosperous future. Our goal would be an Iraq that has territorial integrity, a government that is democratic and pluralistic, a nation where the human rights of every ethnic and religious group are recognized and protected. In that troubled land all who seek justice, and dignity, and the chance to live their own lives, can know they have a friend and ally in the United States of America.

Great decisions and challenges lie ahead of us. Yet we can and we will build a safer and better world beyond the war on terror. Over the past year, millions here and abroad have been inspired once again by the bravery and the selflessness of the American armed forces. For my part, I have been reminded on a daily basis, as I was during my years at the Pentagon, of what a privilege it is to work with the people of our military. In whatever branch, at whatever rank, these are men and women who live by a code, who give America the best years of their lives, and who show the world the finest qualities of our country.

As veterans, each of you has a place in the long, unbroken line of Americans who came to the defense of freedom. Having served in foreign wars, you bore that duty in some of our nation's most difficult hours. And I know that when you come together, your thoughts inevitably turn to those who never lived to be called veterans. In a book about his Army years, Andy Rooney tells the story of his childhood friend Obie Slingerland -- a decent, good-hearted, promising boy who was captain of the high school football team. Obie later went on to be the quarterback at Amherst before entering the Navy and becoming a pilot. Still a young man in his early 20s, he was killed while flying a combat mission off the carrier Saratoga. Andy Rooney writes: "I have awakened in the middle of the night a thousand times and thought about the life I had that Obie never got to have."

Many of you have known that experience. The entire nation joins you in honoring the memory of your friends, and all who have died for our freedom. And the American people will always respect each one of you for your standing ready to make that same sacrifice. On the nation's behalf, and for myself and President Bush, I thank you for the service you gave to your fellow citizens, for the loyalty you have shown to each other and for the great honor you have brought to your uniform, to our flag, and to our country.

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