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Remarks By John McCain To The Members Of The Veterans Of Foreign Wars (VFW)

April 7, 2008

ARLINGTON, VA -- U.S. Senator John McCain will deliver the following remarks as prepared for delivery to the members of the National VFW Headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, at 9:45 a.m. CST:

Thank you. It is an honor to be here today. I'm always grateful to be in the company of Americans who have had the burden of serving our country in distant lands, and the honor of having proved your patriotism in difficult circumstances. Your example is a constant reminder to Americans that we have obligations to our country that are greater than our personal ambitions, and that our self-respect will owe more to how faithfully we keep those obligations than any other success we achieve in life. Among those obligations is to debate honestly issues that involve America's future security because so many Americans have sacrificed everything to keep us secure. All that is asked of the rest of us is that we do not dishonor their sacrifice by treating the cause they served so bravely as an opportunity to argue without wisdom; to divide us without care for the consequences; to advance our individual or partisan interests at the expense of America's security .



At the beginning of last year, we were engaged in a great debate about what to do in Iraq. Four years of a badly-conceived military strategy had brought us almost to the point of no return. Sectarian violence in Iraq was spiraling out of control, life had become a struggle for survival, and a full-scale civil war seemed almost unavoidable. Al Qaeda in Iraq was on the offensive. Entire Iraqi provinces were under the control of extremists and were deemed all but lost. Faced with the prospect of defeat, we had two fundamental choices. We could retreat from Iraq and accept the horrible consequences of our defeat. Or we could change strategies and try to turn things around. It was, I believe, a critical moment in our nation's history, and a time of testing for our nation's political leadership.

In the year that has passed, our nation showed its strength, and its deep sense of global responsibility. Instead of abandoning Iraq to civil war, genocide, and terror, and the Middle East to the destabilizing effects of these consequences, we changed strategies. We sent to Iraq additional troops, many of them on their third or fourth tour, and a great, seasoned general to lead them, with a battle plan that, at long last, actually addressed the challenges we faced in Iraq.

Within six months, the men and women who have made such enormous sacrifices for the rest of us dramatically turned around the situation in Iraq. From June 2007 through my most recent trip last month, sectarian and ethnic violence in Iraq has been reduced by 90 percent. Civilian deaths and deaths of coalition forces fell by 70 percent. The dramatic reduction in violence has opened the way for a return to something approaching normal political and economic life for the average Iraqi. Political reconciliation is occurring across Iraq at the local and provincial grassroots level. Sunni and Shi'a chased from their homes by terrorist and sectarian violence are returning. The "Sons of Iraq" and Awakening movements, where former Sunni insurgents have now joined in the fight against Al Qaeda, continue to grow.

Iraq's political order is also evolving in hopeful ways. Four out of the six laws cited as benchmarks by the U.S. have been passed by the Iraqi legislature. A law on amnesty and a law rolling back some of the harsher restrictions against former employees of the Iraqi government have made it possible for Iraqis to find genuine reconciliation. They should also encourage both Sunni and Shi'a to feel they have a stake in Iraq's future. The legislature has devolved greater power to local and provincial authorities, where much of the real work of rebuilding Iraqi society is taking place. Much more needs to be done, and Iraq's politicians need to know that we expect them to show the necessary leadership to rebuild their country. For only they can.

The job of bringing security to Iraq is not finished. Iraqi forces recently battled in Basra against radical Shi'a militias, supported by Iran, a fight that showed both the progress made by the Iraqi security forces -- a year ago, they could not have carried out such operations on their own -- and the continuing need for coalition support. The situation in southern Iraq remains unsettled. There continues to be a significant flow of money and weaponry from Iran into Diyala Province, Baghdad, Basra and elsewhere in support of the Iranian-backed Special Groups, the Jaysh al Mahdi, and the Badr Organization. Sunni terrorists and insurgents continue to maintain bases in Mosul and elsewhere in Ninewah Province.

But there is no doubt about the basic reality in Iraq: we are no longer staring into the abyss of defeat, and we can now

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look ahead to the genuine prospect of success. Success in Iraq is the establishment of a generally peaceful, stable, prosperous, democratic state that poses no threat to its neighbors and contributes to the defeat of terrorists. It is the advance of religious tolerance over violent radicalism. It is a level of security that allows the Iraqi authorities to govern, the average person to live a normal life, and international entities to operate. It is a situation in which the rule of law, after decades of tyranny, takes hold. It is an Iraq where Iraqi forces have the responsibility for enforcing security in their country, and where American troops can return home, with the honor of having secured their country's interests at great personal cost, and helping another people achieve peace and self-determination.

Today these goals are within reach. "Never despair," Winston Churchill once said. And we did not despair. We were tested, and we rose to the challenge. Some political leaders close their eyes to the progress that the surge has made possible, and want only to argue about the past. We can have that debate. I profoundly disagree with those who say we would all be better off if we had left Saddam Hussein in power. Americans should be proud that they led the way in removing a vicious dictator and opening the door to freedom, stability, and prosperity in Iraq and across the Middle East.

But the question for the next President is not about the past, but about the future and how to secure it. Our most vital security interests are at stake in Iraq. The stability of the entire Middle East, that volatile and critically important region, is at stake. The United States' credibility as a moral and political leader is at stake. How to safeguard those interests is what we should be debating.

There are those who today argue for a hasty withdrawal from Iraq. Some would withdraw regardless of the consequences. Others say that we can withdraw now and then return if trouble starts again. What they are really proposing, if they mean what they say, is a policy of withdraw and re-invade. For if we withdraw hastily and irresponsibly, we will guarantee the trouble will come immediately. Our allies, Arab countries, the UN, and the Iraqis themselves will not step up to their responsibilities if we recklessly retreat. I can hardly imagine a more imprudent and dangerous course.

Over the past year, the counterinsurgency strategy of General Petraeus has been based on the premise that establishing greater security in Iraq is indispensable to advancing political reconciliation and economic reconstruction; to making diplomatic progress in the region; and to preparing the Iraqi military to assume its responsibilities to defend the sovereignty of Iraq and the authority of its elected government. Should the United States withdraw from Iraq before that level of security is established those goals will be infinitely harder if not impossible to attain. Al Qaeda in Iraq will proclaim victory and increase its efforts to provoke sectarian tensions in Iraq into a full scale civil war that could descend into genocide and destabilize the Middle East. Iraq would be a failed state that could become a haven for terrorists to train and plan their operations. Iran's influence in Iraq -- especially southern Iraq -- and throughout the region would increase substantially and encourage other countries to seek accommodation with Tehran at the expense of our interests. These likely consequences of America's failure in Iraq would, almost certainly, require us to return to Iraq or draw us into a wider and far costlier war.

The American people deserve the truth from their leaders. They deserve a candid assessment of the progress we have managed to make in the last year in preventing the worst from happening in Iraq, of the very serious difficulties that remain, and of the grave consequences of a hasty, reckless, and irresponsible withdrawal. If we are honest about the opportunities and the risks, I believe they will have the patience to allow us the time necessary to obtain our objectives. That honesty is my responsibility, and it is also the responsibility of Senators Obama and Clinton, as well as Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress. Doing the right thing in the heat of a political campaign is not always the easiest thing. But when 4000 Americans have given their lives so that America does not suffer the worst consequences of our failure in Iraq, it is a necessary thing. In such a grave matter, we must put the nation's interests before our own ambitions.

The fact is, we now have a great opportunity, not only to bring stability and freedom to Iraq, but to make Iraq a pillar of our future strategy for the entire region of the greater Middle East. If we seize the opportunity before us, we stand to gain a strong, stable, democratic ally against terrorism and a strong ally against an aggressive and radical Iran.

Over the next 18 months, Iraq will conduct two landmark elections -- for provincial governments and for the national government. On my most recent trip to Iraq, I met dozens of shopkeepers, workers, city council officials and others, who want Iraqis from all backgrounds to elect local leaders charged with making decisions that reflect the needs and desires of the local populations -- not the preferences of Baghdad elites. If we sustain the current progress, those elections can be held in relative freedom and security for the first time since the fall of Saddam. We should welcome a larger United Nations role in supporting the elections under the capable leadership of its Special Envoy, Steffan de Mistura, who is already playing a key role in mediating disputes in areas like Kirkuk.

Throughout this period, we must continue to help the Iraqis protect themselves against the terrorists and the insurgents. We must press ahead against the radical Shi'ite militias and the Iranian-backed Special Groups, and support the Iraqi government's efforts to defeat them. We must continue to support the Sunni volunteers of the Iraqi Awakening as they stand up to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, especially in the ongoing battle for Mosul. And we must continue to build the capacities of the Iraqi Security Forces so that they can play an increasingly strong and neutral role in suppressing sectarian violence.

All this will require that we keep a sufficient level of American forces in Iraq until security conditions are such that our commanders on the ground recommend otherwise. It also means we must increase levels of reconstruction assistance, so that Iraq's political and economic development can proceed in the security that our forces and Iraqi Security Forces provide. Above all, it means we must once again reject, as we did in early 2007, the calls for a reckless and irresponsible withdrawal of our forces just at the moment when they are succeeding.

Economic progress is essential if the security gains in Iraq are to be sustained. The once silent and deserted markets have come back to life in many areas, but high unemployment rates continue to fuel criminal and insurgent violence. To move young men away from the attractions of well-funded extremists, we need a vibrant, growing Iraqi economy. The Iraqi government can jump-start this process by using a portion of its budget surplus to employ Iraqis in infrastructure projects and in restoring basic services. The international community should augment Iraqi efforts by broadly enhancing the proven success of microfinance programs to spur entrepreneurship at local levels throughout the country and Iraq's Arab neighbors should invest in regional stability by using the fruits of their oil exports to directly invest in Iraq. As these efforts begin to take hold in Iraq, it will be -- as in all countries -- the private sector that creates the vast majority of jobs and propels the growth that will end reliance on outside aid.

I do not want to keep our troops in Iraq a minute longer than necessary to secure our interests there. Our goal is an Iraq that can stand on its own as a democratic ally and a responsible force for peace in its neighborhood. Our goal is an Iraq that no longer needs American troops. And I believe we can achieve that goal, perhaps sooner than many imagine. But I do not believe that anyone should make promises as a candidate for President that they cannot keep if elected. To promise a withdrawal of our forces from Iraq, regardless of the calamitous consequences to the Iraqi people, our most vital interests, and the future of the Middle East, is the height of irresponsibility. It is a failure of leadership.

I know the pain war causes. I understand the frustration caused by our mistakes in this war. And I regret sincerely the additional sacrifices imposed on the brave Americans who defend us. But I also know the toll a lost war takes on an army and on our country's security. By giving General Petraeus and the men and women he has the honor to command the time and support necessary to succeed in Iraq we have before us a hard road. But it is the right road. It is necessary and just. Those who disregard the unmistakable progress we have made in the last year and the terrible consequences that would ensue were we to abandon our responsibilities in Iraq have chosen another road. It may appear to be the easier course of action, but it is a much more reckless one, and it does them no credit even if it gives them an advantage in the next election.

We all respect the sacrifices made by our soldiers. We all mourn the losses they have suffered in this war. But let us honor them by doing all we can to ensure their sacrifices were not made in vain. Let us show an appropriate humility by recognizing that so little is asked of us compared to the burdens we imposed on them, and let us show just a small, but significant measure of their courage, resolve and patriotism by putting our country's interests before every personal or political consideration.

War is a terrible thing. You know that better than most; you who have borne the heartache and deprivations of war so that our country might be secure in its freedom. I hold my position on Iraq not because I am indifferent to the suffering caused by this war but because I detest war, and believe sincerely that should we fail in Iraq we will face an even sterner test in the very near future, an even harder war, with even greater sacrifice and heartbreaking loss than we have suffered over the last five years.

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 you, 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 -- those who supported the decision that placed them in harm's way and those who opposed it -- humbled by and grateful for their example. We know how little has been asked of others compared to their service, and the terrible sacrifice made by those who have not returned to the country they loved so well. 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.

The sacrifices made by veterans deserve to be memorialized in something more lasting than marble or bronze or in the fleeting effect of a politician's speeches. Your valor and devotion to duty have earned your country's abiding concern for your welfare. And when our government forgets to honor our debts to you, it is a stain upon America's honor. The Walter Reed scandal recalled, I hope, not just government but the public who elected it, to our responsibilities to the men and women who risked life and limb to meet their responsibilities to us. Such a disgrace is unworthy of the greatest nation on earth. As the greatest leaders in our history, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, instructed us, care for Americans who fought to defend us should rank among the highest of national priorities.

Those who have borne the burden of war for our sake must be treated fairly and expeditiously as they seek compensation for disability or illness. We owe them compassion, knowledge 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. They 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 everything 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. The disgrace of Walter Reed must not be forgotten. Neither should we accept a situation in which veterans are denied access to care due to great travel distances, backlogs of appointments, and years of pending disability evaluation and claims. I believe that we should give veterans the option to use a simple plastic card to receive timely and accessible care at a convenient location through a provider of their choosing. I will not stand for requiring veterans to make an appointment to stand in line to make an appointment to stand in line for substandard care of the injuries you have suffered to keep our country safe. Whatever our commitments to veterans cost, we will keep them, as you have kept every commitment to us. The honor of a great nation is at stake.

As we meet, in Iraq and Afghanistan, American soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen are fighting bravely and tenaciously in battles that are as dangerous, difficult and consequential as the great battles of our armed forces' storied past. Many of them have had their tours extended longer than they were initially told. Others who had already served two or three tours returned to combat sooner than they had been led to expect. It is 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 would have greeted the news without feeling greatly disappointed, and without offering a few well deserved complaints in the direction of those of us who have imposed on them this additional hardship. Then they shouldered a rifle 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 so well by such selfless patriots. God bless and protect them.

