

MAY 28, 2021

Remarks by President Biden Addressing Service Members and their Families

Joint Base Langley-Eustis
Hampton, Virginia

2:06 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: I'll let you guys get comfortable. (Laughs.)

Colonel Ross — Clint, it's wonderful to see you again. Thank you. When our path last crossed, as Jill said, you were serving in the White House. And I never thought we'd be standing here today doing what we're doing today.

And, Chief Master Sergeant Peterson, thank you, and to all members of your team who helped put this visit together today. It — it means a lot to Jill and me.

When I was Vice President and — as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, we tried to visit almost every major military base in the country, and as Vice President, around the world. And you are — simply stated, you are the backbone of the country. You're the backbone of the country.

And although our son Beau was the Attorney General of the state of Delaware and had spent nine months in Kosovo trying to — as assistant U.S. attorney — trying to set up their criminal justice system. And I might say, I've — I can do this with the military; I'm going to brag about him a little bit — he's the only foreigner to have a war memorial erected to him in Kosovo, just below Fort [Camp] Bondsteel and a highway — the first highway they built — named after him: the Joseph R. “Beau” Biden Memorial Highway. And he was a — he was proud as hell — as hell of his work.

But then he decided that — I kept on — he had contracted a — exposure to a virus in — when he was in Kosovo and in Turkey as a civilian. And he came back with a problem.

But he kept going to Walter Reed. I couldn't understand why he was — they finally found — it's called ankylosing spondylitis. They finally found a cure. It prevented him from having what they call "bamboo spine." But he kept going back. I couldn't understand why. I thought I knew why, but, Gov, he went back because he was trying to get an exemption to be able to join the United States Army. He was a sitting attorney general, and as all my colleagues — the Governor and Bobby Scott and Congresswoman — they all know is that when you do that — he joined the National Guard. And his unit deployed, and he wanted to deploy to Iraq with them.

So he literally had to give up his seat. Temporarily, he could not have any business done — as you National Guard folks know, you can't do any business with a state if in fact — you're now federal property.

And so, he gave up the seat and had the courage to appoint a fellow who had been a Republican attorney general as attorney general while he — while he went. The proudest thing he ever did — proudest thing he ever did.

And he — he spent a year in Iraq. And it was — it was one of the great honors of his life to do it. Won the Bronze Star, the Conspicuous Service Medal, and other awards — like many of you have — but he never, ever talked about it.

I remember we had an event at the White House — I shouldn't be talking so much about my son, but I'm not going to apologize for it.

We had an event for Iraqi veterans at the White House and the President, without telling me and Jill, invited Beau to be there with another 75 soldiers and sailors and airmen. But he wouldn't wear any of his decorations. And General Odierno called him — he served under him — and said, "Put them on now." Swear to God. Walking out of the VP Residence, he wouldn't put them on until then. That's the first time I ever saw the Bronze Star on him.

But I'm just telling you that is — he's like a lot of you. You do your duty. You don't expect anything for it except be a little — have — get a little respect. It deserves so much more. You deserve so much more.

And, you know, I'm honored to be joined today by Governor Northam and by two great representatives of the Commonwealth: Congresswoman Luria and Congressman Scott. And I want to thank — thank you for all that you do to represent these service veterans, because they're devoted to you; for the family members, the caregivers, survivors who call Virginia home.

I'm especially honored to share the stage with Brittney, and Jerdan, and Nathan, and Margrit Katherine. I love those barrettes in your hair, man. I tell you what — and look at her; she looks like she's 19 years old, sitting there with her — like a little lady with her legs crossed.
(Laughter.)

Brittney, you're doing triple duty: as a veteran, a military spouse, and a teacher. And, kids, thank you for being there for your mom.

I can remember all those times — and all of you remember, the spouses — when your husband or wife are deployed. Every morning, you wake up, you say that little extra prayer while you're drinking your coffee. You just spend a little more time wondering.

And, you know, you only — you make up 1 percent of the population. You're defending 99 percent of the rest of us. And we owe you. But you do your job so gracefully. You hardly ever say anything about what you're doing.

But it matters. It matters to your families — for that time we're sitting across from an empty chair at the kitchen table and the dining room table; for those birthdays or Christmases or holidays when they're gone.

You know, there's a famous English poet who said, "They also serve who only stand and wait."
"Also serve who only stand and wait."

I know Major Beene — having been deployed to Afghanistan during the pandemic has only made everything much harder during the pandemic. I want to thank you so much — your entire family's service to our country. You're all incredible. You so underestimate how important you are.

And there's nothing that Jill and I enjoy more than spending time with our troops here and abroad — if you're stationed here United States or deployed around the world.

I've been in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan over 20 — I think it's 25 times. And I've seen — I wish everyone could see what you do when you're there. I wish they could see every day how you saddle up, how you jump in that cockpit. Just see — no, you're just — just doing your job.

Not to mention all of the troops I've had the chance to visit in the Middle East and Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. We've traveled all over. Jill has traveled all over with me and her own

visits to servicemembers in Iraq. I think she's the only Second Lady ever to go into the middle of a warzone, because she wanted to be there and see you.

I always want you to know — always — that the issues you and your family are facing, we need to know how we can support you better. I mean it sincerely from the bottom of my heart: support you better.

There's reason for that. I said, we Bidens are proud to have family in the military. And our son Beau's service was — was among the achievements, as I said, he was most proud of.

My heart swelled to see him in uniform.

When I went into Iraq — I was there for five times — when he was in Baghdad. (Laughs.) And I remember, the first time I saw him, his name was "Hunter." I said, "What in the hell happened?" He said, "Dad, I didn't want anybody to do me any special favors because my Vice President is my dad." He got permission to put a different nametag on.

I also remember what it was like to listen to him talk about the needs that people had when he got back home. About all the folks he served with who came back with post-traumatic stress, and he was back being attorney general, having to deal with that.

But here's the point: You do so much and you ask for so little. You know, our experience is a fraction of what so many of you and your families have gone through — a family like Brittney and her kids. You're the absolute best America has to offer: our heart, our honor, your solid steel spine.

So my message to all of you is quite simply: Thank you. Thank you. Not "thank you for your service" — just thank you for who you are, because it's contagious. Thank you for choosing a selfless service to your country.

I know we have mostly soldiers and airmen in attendance today, but there can be a lot of friendly rivalries on a base. Each branch has its own proud, cherished traditions and culture. I know how proud Langley is of their premier 5th-generation F-22 Raptor Wing. Oh, God, I'd love to go up in one of those.

I asked, "I'm your Commander-in-Chief. Why the hell can't I command you let me go up in one?" But, you know, they won't let me do that.

And Fort Eustis hosts one of Army's busiest airfields, which is led by the Air Force, primarily used by the Navy. (Laughs.) It's all about as joint as it can possibly get.

Every day, the more than 20,000 members of the Air Force and Army, along with civilian personnel, come to work with a shared mission. No matter which branch of our armed forces you proudly represent, you're part of the greatest fighting force in the history of the world. That's not hyperbole. The greatest fighting force in the history of the world.

You're integral to the most powerful nation in the world. There's been no Army, Navy, or Air Force ever like you — or Marines.

Here at Joint Base Langley-Eustis, you enable the success of our mission around the world. You provide intelligence support and airpower. You ensure our soldiers and airmen are ready, trained to deploy the COCOMs around the world — including, this year, adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols and quarantines before to ship out in order to minimize the spread of the virus.

I know that many of you deployed yourselves, probably more than once. Over the past 20 years, our volunteer force and our military families have made incredible sacrifices for this country.

Early in my term as Vice President, when I traveled overseas, I'd sometimes meet service men and women who were deployed their fourth, fifth, sixth times. I remember going into Baghdad, just remember — and those of you who had to fly in, you do those circular deals so we wouldn't get shot at, we wouldn't get hit.

I walked up in the cockpit of a silver bullet that they had me in. And I asked — I said, "How many..." — there were five people in the cockpit at the time — the loadmaster as well. I said, "How many is this your first tour?" Nobody raised their hand. "How many the second tour?" Nobody raised their hand. "Third tour?" Two raised their hand. "Fourth tour?" Two raised their hand. "Fifth tour?" One raised their hand. No other war have you gone in, served, and got back up and go back again and again and again. Once. Once.

Wiping the blood off the seat of an up-armored HMMWV is enough to get you focused. Then to saddle up next time and go back and back again? You're incredible. You're incredible.

The country — they owe you, and they're — this time, they're more appreciative. In my generation, you didn't come home and get off an airplane in a uniform in an airport coming

back from Vietnam. People will treat you with respect, but they have no idea the sacrifices you make in theater.

As we bring — as we get close to bringing down the longest war drawdown in American history — our troop presence in Afghanistan — I want to recognize the significance to — of what all of you, the United States Armed Forces, have accomplished in the past 20 years.

Went to Afghanistan with a clear purpose: to get the people who attacked us on 9/11 and to prevent al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base from which to attack America in the future. To achieve that purpose — you achieved that purpose. Year after year, deployment after deployment, American troops pursued the terrorist threat through some of the most unforgiving terrain on the planet.

I have now had the pleasure, as they say, of being to every part of Afghanistan, from the FOBs up in the Kunar Valley; down south, looking at all those poppy fields; and all in between. It's one godforsaken landscape.

But you all just showed up and did your job, and it helped make sure there hasn't been another attack on the homeland from Afghanistan for the last 20 years. And you never gave up until we delivered justice to Osama bin Laden.

I got criticized after 9/11 for saying, "We'll follow the son of a bi- — gun to the gates of hell until we get him." It's exactly what you did. That's exactly what you did. And you got him.

And now, as we draw down, we're also going to focus on the urgent work of rebuilding over-the-horizon capabilities that'll allow us to take out al Qaeda if they return to Afghanistan — but to focus on the threat that has metastasized.

The greatest threat and likelihood of attack from al Qaeda or ISIS is not going to be from Afghanistan; it's going to be from five other regions of the world that have significantly more presence of both al Qaeda and organizational structures, including ISIS.

We're going to update our security stance and turn our forces to the threats that will dominate our future to ensure the security of the American people for decades to come.

But we'll never, ever, ever forget the terrible cost that we paid as a nation. Many of you likely have lost friends and colleagues in Afghanistan and Iraq. I know this is personal to you, especially as you head into Memorial Day weekend. We as a nation will always remember and

pay tribute to those we lost.

After I announced my decision to end the war in Afghanistan, the first thing I did was visit — visit Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery — just walked through those headstones, seeing all those stones.

Our son did not die in Iraq, but he came back — went as an incredibly healthy young man and came back with a severe brain tumor because his hooch was just downwind from those burn pits — I don't know if that's the reason. But he came home — it was just a matter of how long he lived.

I still carry with me — every single solitary day I have my staff, for the last — since the war began — I have my schedule. In the back of my schedule, it says, “U.S. daily troop update. U.S. troops died in Iraq and Afghanistan: 6,927” — not “over 6,000.” Total fallen angels across the board: over 7,000.

Every one of these lives lost is a tragedy, an empty seat at the dinner table, a missing voice at the holidays. Every one of them left behind a whole community — not just one, a whole community. We can never repay that debt. But I promise you this — and to all the Gold Star families across the country: We will never, ever, ever, ever forget.

Each year, Memorial Day offers us a chance to reflect on the enormity of the sacrifices that generation after generation of Americans has made and the responsibilities that we bear — the citizens bear in return.

I've said many times — it used to get me in trouble 25 years ago, 30 years ago in the Senate — I said, “America has many obligations. We only have one sacred obligation. We have obligations to our children, to the elderly, and so many more things, but only one sacred obligation — is to prepare you, when we send you into harm's way, with everything you need; to care for your families when you're gone; when you come home, care for you and your families, and the needs that may be a consequence of the war.”

We owe it. We owe it to you. We particularly owe it to their memories to affirm the very best of what America stands for — to uphold honor and democratic values that are the foundation and the strength of this nation.

You know, I sometimes get criticized for saying what I deeply believe, having done this for the bulk of my life. We're in a — we're in a battle between democracies and autocracies. The more

complicated the world becomes, the more difficult it is for democracies to come together and reach consensus. I've spent more time with President Xi of China than any world leader has — for 24 hours of private meetings with him with just an interpreter; 17,000 miles traveling with him in China and here. He firmly believes that China, before the year '30, '35, is going to own America because autocracies can make quick decisions.

But America is unique. From all nations in the world, we're the only nation organized based on an idea. Every other nation you can define by their ethnicity, their geography, their religion, except America. America is born out of an idea: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [and women] are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, [including] Life, Liberty," et cetera.

None of you get your rights from your government; you get your rights merely because you're a child of God. The government is there to protect those God-given rights. No other government has been based on that notion. No one can defeat us except us.

It's an idea that generations of patriots have fought and died for to defend it. I know that's a conviction that each and every day you all share. That's why you joined up, why you run around danger when duty calls.

It's my greatest honor — it should not surprise anybody; it should be anybody's greatest honor in all of life — to be able to serve as your Commander-in-Chief. No greater honor.

So, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for spending this time with me today. And thank you for your commitment to our country, because without you, as I said — I'll be — end where I began: You are the spine of America — the spine.

And I can't tell you how much it matters. I think you underestimate just the consequence of who you are and what you do.

So, thank you. May God bless you. And may God protect our troops. Thanks. (Applause.)

2:29 P.M. EDT