

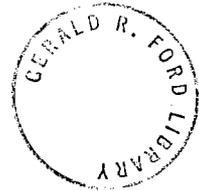
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AUGUST 19, 1974

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY
(Chicago, Illinois)

THE WHITE HOUSE
ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT
TO THE 75TH CONVENTION
OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

CONRAD HILTON HOTEL



11:38 A.M. CDT

Commander Ray Soden, Governor Walker, my former members or former colleagues of the United States Congress, my fellow members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars:

Let me express my deepest gratitude for your extremely warm welcome and may I say to Mayor Daley, and to all the wonderful people of Chicago who have done an unbelievable job in welcoming Betty and myself to Chicago, we are most grateful.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Mayor Daley and the people of Chicago knew that Betty was born in Chicago. Needless to say, I deeply appreciate your medal and the citation on my first trip out of Washington as your President. I hope that in the months ahead I can justify your faith in making the citation and the award available to me.

It is good to be back in Chicago among people from all parts of our great Nation to take part in this 75th Annual convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

As a proud member of Old Kent Post VFW 830, let me talk today about some of the work facing veterans -- and all Americans -- the issues of world peace and national unity.

Speaking of national unity, let me quickly point out that I am also a proud member of the American Legion and the AMVETS.

In a more somber note, this morning we all heard the tragic news of the killing of our American Ambassador to Cyprus. He, too, gave his life in foreign wars. Let us offer our prayers and our condolences to his loved ones for his supreme sacrifice on behalf of all Americans.

As President and as a veteran, I want good relations with all veterans. We all proudly wore the same Nation's uniform and patriotically saluted the same flag. During my Administration, the door of my office will be open to veterans just as it was all my 25 years as a Member of the Congress.

MORE

Today, I am happy to announce my intention to send the Senate the nomination of my personal friend and former Congressional colleague Dick Roudebush of Indiana -- it seems to me you know what I am going to say (Laughter) but I will finish the sentence -- to be Administrator of the Veterans Administration.

As past National Commander of the VFW, Roudy has served well as Deputy Administrator of the VA. He is a man who gets things done, and I am confident will do a first-class job.

It seems to me that we should recognize the veteran is a human being, not just a "C" number to be processed by a computer system. We all know that the Government knew our name when we were called into service. This Administration is going to see to it that we still know your name and your problems.

A veteran is a person, not just a digit in a computer system, which more often than not goofs up.

I propose the VA take the best of our technology and the very best of our human capabilities and combine them. As President, I want no arrogance or indifference to any individual, veteran or not. Our Government's machinery exists to serve people, not to frustrate or humiliate them.

I don't like read tape. As a matter of fact, I don't like any kind of tapes.

Our great veterans hospitals, which will not lose their identity, must be the very best that medical skill and dedication can create. VA hospitals have made many great medical breakthroughs in the past. One of America's great challenges today is the older veteran. The VA medical and nursing care system for older people must become a showcase for the entire Nation.

We can work together to achieve that end and humanize the VA. But to achieve such progress, I intend to improve the management of the VA. We must get the most for our tax dollars.

While supporting the new Administrator in maximum efforts to make the best use of funds available, I want Roudy to take a constructive new look at the VA's structure and the services that it renders to our veterans.

MORE

I think it is about time that we should stop thinking of veterans in terms of different wars. Some may march at a different pace than others. But we all march to the same drummer in the service of our Nation. I salute the men of many campaigns -- of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

As Minority Leader of the House and recently as Vice President, I stated my strong conviction that unconditional blanket amnesty for anyone who illegally evaded or fled military service is wrong. It is wrong.

Yet, in my first words as President of all the people, I acknowledged a Power higher than the people who commands not only righteousness, but love, not only justice, but mercy.

Unlike my last two predecessors, I did not enter this office facing the terrible decisions of a foreign war, but like President Truman and President Lincoln before him, I found on my desk where the buck stops, the urgent problem of how to bind up the Nation's wounds. And I intend to do that.

As a lawyer, I believe our American system of justice is fundamentally sound. As President, I will work within it. As a former Naval reservist, I believe our system of military justice is fundamentally sound. As Commander-in-Chief, I will work within it.

As a former Congressman who championed it, I believe the concept of an all-volunteer armed force is fundamentally sound, and will work much better than peacetime conscription.

Accordingly, in my first week at the White House, I requested the Attorney General of the United States and the Secretary of Defense to report to me personally before September 1 on the status of some 50,000 of our countrymen convicted, charged or under investigation or still sought for violations of Selective Service or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, offenses loosely described as desertion and draft-dodging.

These two Cabinet officers are to consult with other Government officials concerned and communicate me their unvarnished views and those of the full spectrum of American opinion on this controversial question, consolidating the known facts and legal precedents.

I will then decide how best to deal with the different kinds of cases, and there are differences. Decisions of my Administration will make any future penalties fit the seriousness of the individual's mistake.

MORE

Only a fraction of such cases I find in a quick review relate directly to Vietnam, from which the last American combatant was withdrawn over a year ago by President Nixon.

But all, in a sense, are casualties, still abroad or absent without leave from the real America.

I want them to come home if they want to work their way back.

One of the last of my official duties as Vice President, perhaps the hardest of all, was to present posthumously 14 Congressional Medals of Honor to the parents, widows and children of fallen Vietnam heroes.

As I studied their records of supreme sacrifice, I kept thinking how young they were. The few citizens of our country who, in my judgment, committed the supreme folly of shirking their duty at the expense of others, were also very young.

MORE

All of us who served in one war or another know very well that all wars are the glory and the agony of the young. In my judgment, these young Americans should have a second chance to contribute their fair share to the rebuilding of peace among ourselves and with all nations.

So, I am throwing the weight of my Presidency into the scales of justice on the side of leniency. I foresee their earned re-entry -- earned re-entry into a new atmosphere of hope, hard work and mutual trust.

I will act promptly, fairly and very firmly in the same spirit that guided Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman, as I reject amnesty, so I reject revenge. As men and women whose patriotism has been tested and proved, and yours has, I want your help and understanding.

I ask all Americans, whoever asked for goodness and mercy in their lives, whoever sought forgiveness for their trespasses, to join in rehabilitating all the casualties of the tragic conflict of the past.

Naturally, I am glad to see the VFW at this convention install a veteran of the Korean War, John Stang, as your new National Commander-in-Chief. And I compliment you and congratulate you as well as John.

We have struggled for years in America to overcome discrimination against younger Americans, against older Americans, against Americans of various creeds, religions, races, and yes, against women. I will not tolerate any discrimination against veterans, especially those who served honorably in the war in Vietnam.

I am deeply concerned about employment opportunities for the Vietnam-era veterans. We have had some success in placing veterans in the age span of 20 to 34, but the facts and figures show us that there are some tough problems in this category.

As of last month, the rate of unemployment for veterans between 20 and 24 was nearly 10 percent, much too high. The rate of unemployment for these young veterans who are members of minority groups was 19 percent, and far, far too many disabled veterans are still without jobs.

I can assure you, without hesitation or reservation, that this Administration puts a very high priority on aiding the men who bore the brunt of battle, if we can send men thousands and thousands of miles from home to fight in the rice paddies, certainly we can send them back to school and better jobs at home.

MORE

I am consequently considering the veterans education bill in this light. But your Government, of necessity, has to be constrained by other considerations as well. We are all soldiers in a war against brutal inflation.

The veterans education bill more than likely will come before me very shortly for action. It comes when I am working hard along with others from the Congress, labor, management, and otherwise, on a nonpartisan battle against excessive Government spending.

America today is fighting for its economic life. The facts are that uncontrolled inflation could destroy the fabric and the foundation of America, and I will not hesitate to veto any legislation, to try and control inflationary excesses. I am open to conciliation and compromise on the total amount authorized so that we can protect trainees and all other Americans against the rising cost of living.

I commend not only the past service of veterans but also the continuing involvement of many of you in the National Guard and reserve forces. With current manpower reductions in the active duty Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, the Commander-in-Chief must, of necessity, place continuing reliance on the readiness of our National Guard and reserves. And I intend to put muscle into this program.

Peace, it depends upon the strength and readiness of our defenses. And I will support every sensible measure to enhance the morale and the combat readiness of our armed forces.

The United States, our allies and our friends around the world must maintain strength and resolve. Potential adversaries obviously watch the state of our readiness and the strength of our will. I will offer them no temptations.

America is not the policeman of the world, but we continue to be the backbone of a free world collective security set-up.

MORE

Just as America will maintain its nuclear deterrent strength, we will never fall behind in negotiations to control -- and hopefully reduce -- this threat to mankind. A great nation is not only strong, but wise; not only principled, but purposeful. A fundamental purpose of our Nation must be to achieve peace through strength and meaningful negotiations.

Our good will must never be construed as a lack of will. And I know that I can count on you and the families of each and every one of you. Peace and security require preparedness and dedication.

You have experienced war firsthand. I want to make certain and positive that Washington never sends another tragic telegram. The list of mourners is already far too long. So is the list of those who wait and wonder, the families of those missing in action. I will never forget them.

Together we are going forward to tackle future problems, including the scourge of inflation which is today our Nation's public enemy number one. Our task is not easy. But I have faith in America. Through our system of democracy and free enterprise, the United States has achieved remarkable, unbelievable progress. We have shared our plenty with all mankind.

This is the same Nation that transcended inflations and recessions, slumps and booms, to move forward to even higher levels of prosperity and productivity. This is the same Nation that emerged from the smoke of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, to change its own destiny and the history of the world -- and for the better.

During the first few months that I was Vice President, I traveled some 118,000 miles and visited 40 of our great States. What I saw and what I heard gave me renewed inspiration. It made me proud, proud of my country. It sustains me now.

Our great Republic is nearly 200 years old, but in many, many ways we are just getting started. Most Americans have faith in the American system. Let us now work for America in which all Americans can take an even greater pride. I am proud of America; you are proud of America, we should be proud to be Americans.

Thank you very much.

END

(AT 12:05 P.M. CDT)