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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE DEDICATION CEREMONIES
OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS BUILDING

2:37 P.M. EST

Thank you very, very much, Lyle, distinguished members of the House and Senate, my former colleagues, my very good friends and also a former colleague, the Administrator of the Veterans Administration, better known as Roudy, Mr. Schulze, Reverend Elson, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I am extremely proud to be here with you today and to particularly participate in the dedication ceremonies of the National Service Headquarters of the DAV. The most impressive building in an excellent site, and I commend and congratulate the DAV for seeing this brick and mortar come to life with the activities that are going on here today and the activities that will be continuing for a good many years to come.

In August of 1974 I had the privilege, as Vice President, of addressing the 53rd Annual Convention in New Orleans. At that time your National Commander very graciously offered me an invitation. He said I would be welcome at any gathering of the Disabled American Veterans at any place. I can think of no time or place or occasion more appropriate for me to accept that invitation than here today. And I thank you, Mr. Commander, for inviting me to participate.

The completion of this very, very impressive new National Service Headquarters is the proud climax of your fine history of accomplishment, a history that stretches back some 56 years, and I know how much it has meant to many of you to participate. And I can tell from the crowd here and the looks on the faces of those here that this is a historic moment in the life and the history of the DAV.

As a veteran myself of World War II, I have long admired and greatly respected the outstanding role that the DAV has played in our national life. The DAV, with over half a million dedicated members, has compiled a very enviable record of conscientious and perhaps even more importantly compassionate response to the very special needs of disabled veterans and their families.

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Your efforts have greatly increased the educational, medical and employment opportunities available to disabled veterans. You have personally assisted -- and I mean really assisted -- hundreds of thousands of individual veterans and their families in receiving the benefits that they have earned.

Working with the Veterans Administration, you and the members of your auxiliary have promoted the rehabilitation and welfare of literally hundreds and hundreds of thousands of hospitalized veterans and your unique partnership which is not as well known as it should be with the Boy Scouts of America make it possible for thousands of handicapped boys throughout our country to enjoy the benefits of scouting.

Throughout all of these programs I think this organization has uniquely displayed a strong, healthy and vibrant patriotism. You are rightfully proud, as I am, of the great country we all were called upon to defend, as we did. However, yours was the ultimate involvement. You gave your muscle, your blood, your courage, and your years. It was a priceless gift to America that America must never forget, and as President and as Commander-in-Chief and as a citizen, I salute each and every one of you.

One of your very notable accomplishments, again not too well known, has been to serve and to involve in your work disabled veterans of the Vietnam conflict. It is my understanding that more than 80 percent of your 280 National Service Officers stationed throughout the United States today are from the Vietnam conflict. I think this clearly shows your success in meeting the new challenges confronting veterans and veterans organizations.

We have exactly the same obligation to servicemen of that long and divisive war as to any other. They served their country well in war time and it is only right that we serve them just as well in peace time.

By maintaining, by improving our Veterans Administration we can insure that veterans will get the help that they so richly deserve. That is why even within the tight constraints of the Federal budget for fiscal year 1977 I have recommended a record amount of over \$4 billion for VA medical care.

Again despite the fiscal constraints, I have requested funds for more than 9,000 new VA medical personnel in the budget for fiscal years 1976 and 1977. These funds, this personnel, they are needed to implement the recommendations of the quality of care survey, and I am confident that the Congress carry out the request.

I think it is legitimate. I think it is needed and the net result will be better and better care for those who are unfortunately confined to our VA hospitals and those budgets provide -- it is interesting to note -- some \$600 million for VA medical construction projects.

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Actually we are providing more funding, more people and better facilities to give eligible veterans the highest quality and the fastest possible care that this country can make available.

In addition to what I have mentioned before, the new VA budget will provide \$8 million in compensation and pension benefits to almost 5 million veterans families in fiscal year 1977. And every American citizen, I think, agrees with me. You deserve nothing less and we will do all that we can to make certain that you receive nothing less.

I believe the Veterans Administration has done a fine, fine job overall under the very difficult circumstances, under the leadership of my very good friend, Dick Roudebush, the VA has made tremendous strides in serving our veteran population and we are going to make certain and positive that this progress continues with the help of organizations such as your own.

From your new headquarters here you will be in a very good position to continue serving the interests of disabled veterans. This new building is a monument to the sacrifices made by those veterans and to the services you have rendered to them. But it is more than that. It is a living, vital, dynamic headquarters where you can and will continue those services.

It is interesting to me that here is a building that has been designed with sensitivity to the needs of disabled veterans. Like your organization, it is 100 percent accessible to them, whatever their infirmity. We must continue to eliminate the cruel barriers that prevent disabled veterans and too many other disabled Americans from leading the rich life that everyone has the right to enjoy in our very great country.

As you know better than I, many of these barriers are physical. Your efforts and your Government's efforts to train and to rehabilitate the disabled are tragically undermined if the disabled individual cannot enter and cannot use public buildings or places of business.

I am well aware of the sad facts that many things the rest of us take for granted -- like a narrow doorway or a flight of stairs -- can be like signs saying "Disabled -- Keep Out." We must work to remove those signs, and we are, and we will.

We are moving steadily toward making Federally owned and leased buildings physically accessible to every American.

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A recent meeting held at the White House on the subject of architectural barriers explored this particular problem with architects, builders, engineers and contractors. By removing physical barriers, we can also help to remove social barriers which all too frequently confront the disabled.

And as we dedicate this building, let us dedicate ourselves to protecting the freedom for which veterans gave an important part of their lives. Let us also dedicate ourselves to understanding and to responding to the special needs of the disabled veterans. A free society owes an enduring debt to those who fought to keep it free. Let us match the sacrifice with our determination that all veterans shall indeed live a life that is secure, satisfying and truly independent.

Thank you very much.

END

(AT 2_50 P.M. EST)