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TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS BY VICE PRESIDENT GERALD R. FORD
TO THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
AUGUST 5, 1974

Thank you very, very much Mr. Commander, Lieutenant Governor Fritz Morris, my former colleague in the House, Lindy Boggs, my former colleague in the House, Brian Dorn, my very good friend the Deputy Administrator of the Veterans Administration, Dick Radabush, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It's a very great privilege and an extremely high honor to have the opportunity of speaking this morning before the Disabled American Veterans Organization, and I am grateful for your invitation. You are, in my judgment, a very special group because of your very special contribution in the service of our country.

From my almost a quarter of a century service in the House of Representatives, I have been much aware of the very key role that all of you have played, not only for the disabled veterans, but also in many, many areas of public service relating to patriotism, to youth programs, and a need for a very strong national defense program.

As Americans, and I applaud you for it, you still believe that a display of patriotism is healthy and right. I agree with you. (Applause) As Americans you have supported and are helping the Boy Scouts with a very generous program for scouting for the handicapped, and I thank you and I applaud you for that contribution. (Applause) As Americans you have been and are and I'm sure will be in the forefront helping us in the Congress who believe the same, that we have to have a strong Army, a strong Navy, a strong Air Force, and a strong Marine Corps. (Applause) You know as well as I do that strength brings peace and weakness brings war (Applause).

The views of your organization and the opinion of your national leaders carry a great deal of weight with the Congress of the United States. And you as an organization have a great impact on the present as well as preceding officials in the Veterans Administration.

You speak with an unusual authority on matters that affect the American veterans who, as a result of military service, have become disabled -- as well as for their widows and their dependent children.

Let me if I might express several key areas where your views and mine coincide. It is apparent that a vast majority of Americans believe that the history of Veterans Day since its inception as Armistice Day at the close

of World War I has a very rich and a very historic meaning. I applaud and support the DAV in its effort to get legislation to correct the mistake that Congress made several years ago. (Applause)

Amnesty, unconditional blanket amnesty to anyone who illegally evaded or fled military service is wrong. (Applause)

It's been well over a year since our last troupes left South Vietnam. We have a great obligation to those men who served in that conflict. It makes no difference whatsoever what our views were concerning that long, costly and very bloody conflict. This country has the same obligation to the former servicemen of this war as it's had for those who served in other wars. (Applause) We must and we will see that this obligation is honorably discharged to those who so served. (Applause)

I am sure that you are well aware that many of the following comments that I pass on to you are from the vantage point of a former member of the Congress for some twenty-five years who worked with Veterans Legislation and Appropriations. I speak from that vantage point with more experience than the present perspective of my present job which I've held for less than a year.

The DAV has a very remarkable and outstanding service program. It's large, it's efficient, and in my judgment it's effective. There is one point that stands out particularly in my mind. The DAV has exercised national leadership in opening its ranks to Vietnam veterans and bringing Vietnam veterans into its service program. I commend you for it. (Applause) I am told, for example, that of the 255 DAV National Service Officers presently on the rolls, over 170 have served during the Vietnam Conflict.

Let me give you the benefit of several special thoughts on our veterans program as I see it.

I think we have to in all honesty start from the viewpoint that the Veterans Administration is a tremendously large organization. It has some 207,000 employees. It runs 171 hospitals all over the country. It has many other facilities available to veterans. In all honesty, an organization as large as that can make mistakes, and it probably has. But let me say where those mistakes have been made, they are not from the heart. I think they are those mistakes that can be understood. But wherever the mistakes have been made, I am certain and positive a massive effort will be made to correct them as it should be. (Applause) And let me add if I might at this point, I have great faith and trust in a former colleague of mine, Dick Radabush, who I think as the probably new head of the VA will do a great job in that regard.

Let me cite a few statistics if I might.

This year the budget authority for the VA is over 14 billion dollars. The highest in our history. And it's 2/3 again as much as just four short years ago. A great deal of this increase has occurred because of a substantial increase in the veterans roles by the addition of Vietnam Veterans.

Here are a few other highlights that I think help us put into perspective the situation that we seek.

Compensation payments for service-connected disabilities and for deaths due to service to 2.6 million veterans and survivors of deceased veterans amounts to about \$3.9 billion annually.

Pension payments totaling \$2.9 billion to 2,300,000 disabled veterans and survivors of deceased veterans in financial need.

The budget includes \$2.6 billion in educational and training assistance to the two million Vietnam era veterans and 76,000 sons, daughters, wives and widows of deceased or seriously disabled veterans.

This is a lot of money. But this is a small payment considering the service that has been rendered by the veterans and their survivors, and we as Americans should be proud of our help and assistance, but we should never look at it as a monetary program but as a recognition for the great service that has been rendered. (Applause)

Our nation unfortunately is in the grip of an inflationary spiral which concerns all of us. But it is of special concern in my judgment to those war disabled veterans who depend primarily on their disability compensation checks. In their behalf, it is necessary that we exercise very special diligence to make certain that disability programs are reviewed constantly day by day, as we face this inflationary problem. Compensation must not be allowed to lag behind changes in the consumer price index. (Applause)

Another challenge facing all of us is our need and requirement to properly care for those who have war connected disabilities. All of you are probably more knowledgeable than I. Measuring disability is not an easy task. Arriving at the proper amount of compensation for disability once it's established is not simple. It is necessary that we continually study systems of disability measurement and compensation on a fair and justifiable basis. (Applause)

During the past decade, some ten years, we have experienced a very rapidly changing pattern in family incomes in America. The pattern of income change has escalated far more rapidly than the consumer price index. Consequently, it probably will be necessary that we reexamine our system of disability payments in light of these changing patterns of income to assure that the seriously

disabled receive compensation at a level commensurate with average family incomes in America. (Applause)

Certainly there is no more important part of the VA program than the medical services aspect which includes both hospital and other medical costs. Last year Congress passed and the President signed Public Law 9282, the Veterans Health Care Expansion Act of 1973. This comprehensive legislation was designed to bring about a number of needed improvements in the veterans medical program. Important among these is an expansion of out-patient care, ambulatory care facilities which have been an area of very special concern to this organization. I hope in the months ahead these relatively new programs on an expanded basis can be improved.

Let me sight another statistic or two if I might.

A record of \$3.2 billion dollars has been requested for VA hospital and medical care programs in the current fiscal year. This funding if approved by the Congress, and I am sure that it will, will allow the VA for example to provide a nearly 50 percent increase in in-patient treatment over 1969. It will nearly double visits over the figure of six years ago. It will bring VA hospital staffing to a new high and with a higher service in reference to employee to patient ratio. This budget request can also increase our out-patient clinics, escalate hospital construction and nearly double the training of doctors, dentists, nurses and other service personnel as compared to 1969.

However, in all areas of veterans assistance, we must strive equally as well so that the VA has a warm heart as well as effectiveness and economy. (Applause)

I must be candid with you and say without any reservation that as we've moved into this computer era not only in government but otherwise and recognizing that we've had advance techniques of computerization in the VA as well as elsewhere. But in the VA regrettably there has been unfortunate lapses in responding to the requests of individuals who deserve consideration. We must overcome these computer lapses. It is necessary that we constantly strive to improve the administration of benefits in order to not cause hardship for any individual or any person that are in need and eligible for VA consideration. Our programs as I see it must be structured in such a way that there is a minimum of red tape in making an application and a minimum lapse in the time for reaching a final determination.

Finally, if I might I'd call on you in your positions of civilian leadership to continue your service to your country by a never-ending stress on the importance of a strong national defense program. We are now engaged in the

Congress in another great debate; on whether \$87 billion is an adequate amount of money to keep us strong as a nation. We have made significant progress in achieving peace. We are at peace at the present time, but we need the adequate funding for the future if we as a nation are to continue our leadership and to continue the peace that each and everyone of us wants for our country and for the world at large. And so as the Congress moves ahead in the House as well as in the Senate, I urge that each and everyone of you have an impact on your Member of the House and your Members of the Senate.

I know there are those who feel that the way to achieve peace as we look at some of our adversaries is to reduce our defense budget unilaterally, cut back our men on active duty, slow down some of our new modern weapon system developments. They seem to operate on the theory that if we're just nice guys negotiating with others that we can achieve peace over the next decade or longer. I think the record is clear and convincing that we historically have become engaged in a military conflict whether it's World War I or World War II or Korea or Vietnam. We have fallen into the trap that if we were weak and nice we wouldn't have a conflict. History proves otherwise. If we have the strength, the enemy knows we have the strength and we are willing and have the will to use that strength, we can maintain the peace and we can avoid a war. (Applause)

It's been my observation over my service in the Congress that we're far better off when we consider the annual appropriations for the Defense Department. That if we error we ought to error on the side of strength rather than on the side of weakness. (Applause) And I happen to believe that in the current atmosphere the Congress will respond and I applaud the actions taken just a few days ago by the Defense Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations in the House of Representatives where they made some I think reasonable reductions, but basically supported the budget recommended by the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Chiefs of Staff.

But in the next week or so, the House of Representatives will be faced with efforts that will be made, and I don't challenge the motives, efforts will be made to put a five or ten percent reduction across the board, sort of a meat-axe approach. They will make an effort to cut back our troop commitments to our allies which organization is a shield against any Soviet aggression in Western Europe. Efforts will be made to rather substantially reduce our active duty military personnel. As I said a moment ago, I don't challenge their motives, I just challenge their judgment. We cannot afford to have those amendments prevail, because if they do, they will weaken our negotiating strength and will

weaken our efforts as a nation to stand tall and maintain the peace that all of us want so very badly. (Applause)

So I suggest as you leave New Orleans and go back to your respective homes, that you contact your Members of the House and Senate, Democrats as well as Republicans, and urge them to support the budget as submitted and the budget as approved by twelve very knowledgeable men from both sides of the aisle so that we can proceed with a well-equipped military, with a well-trained military, with an organization that is well lead, an organization Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines who stand on the perimeters of the free world including our own country, protecting us and protecting our nation.

Let me conclude with this final observation if I might. I've traveled roughly 120,000 some miles in the last eight months---visited forty states. And what I see throughout the country gives me hope. There are those in this country who are cynical and skeptical, are pessimistic about the future of America. As I look in the eyes of people in forty states and see their response, I strongly disagree with those who say that America has lost its spirit. I strongly disagree with those who say the American people have lost faith in their country. I believe that Americans today are proud to be Americans and proud of America. (Applause)

And let me if I might give you one illustration as to why we should be proud. There are many others, but let your mind go back if you will to last October. The Middle East was again engaged in a costly and bloody military conflict. It was the fourth war in twenty some years. It was in an area where hatred and jealousy had prevailed literally for centuries. And this war was only one and it followed three others. And probably if some leadership was not exercised, would be the fourth and would lead to a fifth and maybe others. But in this case, this conflict between Arabs and Israelis almost precipitated a head-to-head confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and all of us recognize and realize the potentials of such a head-to-head confrontation.

In this turmoil and war who did the Arabs on the one hand and the Israelis on the other ask to come in and help to settle this. They didn't go to the Soviet Union. They didn't go to Britain. They didn't go to France, or any other nation. They came to the United States of America because they trusted us. They had faith in our country. And when they ask for somebody to help, actually mediate this dispute, they didn't go to Mr. Breshnev of the Soviet Union. They didn't go to President Pompidou of France. They didn't go to the Head of State of Great Britain. They can to President Nixon. (Applause) And

when they wanted somebody on the spot going from Damascus to Televiv, from Televiv to Cairo, they didn't go to Mr. Gromyko of the Soviet Union or Mr. Jobert of France. They came and ask that our great Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, do the job. (Applause).

What I'm trying to say is we should be proud of the role that our country has played in this instance and we should be equally proud of the record our country has had over the last 20 years in trying to be a leader for peace. A nation that is respected and trusted on a world-wide basis, and I conclude with one final comment. We as Americans should be proud to be Americans and we should be proud of America. Thank you very, very much.

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