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(St. Petersburg, Florida)

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
VETERAN'S ADMINISTRATION
CENTER HOSPITAL

BAY PINES, FLORIDA

1:07 P.M. EST

Bill, Mr. Haile, Dr. Burke and all of you wonderful people:

Let me reiterate what Bill Young said -- Happy Valentine. I hope you have many, many more.

I have spent a good many hours with Bill Young, talking about Bay Pines. When I was in the House of Representatives, Bill kept telling me about the great need, and I was also pushed a little bit by Skip Bafalis and Lou Frey and the rest of the Florida delegation.

So, when I became Vice President, the desire on the part of Bill and all of his colleagues was even greater and, as a result of their interest -- and to some extent, my effort -- we undertook a very comprehensive study, not only of this facility but seven other veteran's hospitals where the need was quite obvious.

The report that has been developed over the last month is going to be submitted to me officially within the next week or so. I have been briefed by not only Bill and the others, but with the knowledge that I have had in the past, when I was coming to St. Petersburg, I decided that rather than to rely on just some words on a piece of paper that I wanted to come out and see you and to see the facility and learn firsthand what the circumstances are.

On the way down, I was talking to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget -- you know he controls all the money (Laughter) -- and I said that if I found conditions the way I understood them to be, we had to get going on Bay Pines.

It is obvious that there is a tremendous need. You have an unbelievable high veteran's population in this part of Florida. You have, as I understand it, a very high age category among veterans.

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So, with the combination of the circumstances, plus the need to construct a new modern facility, I don't think you are going to be too disappointed with the kind of results that you are going to get.

Let me, if I might, pay tribute to the doctors and the directors and the personnel that try to do a first-class job for the veterans here. I understand you have about 600 beds, the new one would be some 900, and you would end up with not only this facility modernized, but a new facility up to the highest standards.

But, I know that not only the doctors that you have and the personnel that serve you, but the many veteran's organizations that come out and try to be helpful -- the wives, veterans themselves -- this is a great aid and assist, I know, to all of you who are unfortunately in the hospital.

But, we have a tremendous program that started two years ago, to upgrade the facilities and quality care in VA hospitals.

Last year, in January, when I submitted the budget for the VA, I added \$404 million to carry out the recommendations that we had to have more people, we had to have more equipment, and in addition, I recommended -- and we are trying to achieve it -- some 7,000 more personnel for the 180 some hospitals under VA jurisdiction.

But, even that program was not enough, and in the budget that I submitted in January of this year, we added another 1,700 more people to help achieve quality care for our veterans in every one of the 180 some VA hospitals.

What I am really saying is our country owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the veterans who have fought for freedom and liberty for 215 million Americans.

With the help of the VA, the American Legion and the AMVETS, and all of the other organizations, and with the help of the people in the Executive Branch of the Government, with the help of the people in the Congress, we are going to make certain that quality care is given to every veteran who fought for America in our military conflicts.

Good luck and God bless you.

END (AT 1:14 P.M. EST)