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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
UPON RECEIVING THE
SPECIAL GOLDEN HELMET AWARD
FROM THE AMVETS

THE ROSE GARDEN

12:30 P.M. EDT

Mr. Commander, George Shake, Paul Welch, distinguished guests, previous Commanders and others:

As you were speaking of the Hewitt-Madigan Post, it brought back many fine memories of my many opportunities to get together with my former comrades in that post, and my long association with that particular organization in the AMVETS, and I thank you and I hope you will transmit it to them, my appreciation for that opportunity over the years.

I am also, Mr. Commander, deeply grateful for this honor this morning. As a life member of the AMVETS, it is a very special privilege and pleasure to receive the Golden Helmet Award, the finest tribute you can pay to a President of the United States. I thought I was very fortunate back in 1971, as Commander, to have gotten the Silver Helmet Award, and then to have this, it really overwhelms me, and I can't express adequately my appreciation.

I have always held the AMVETS in the highest regard because I know from personal experience that organization has never faltered -- or wavered, I might add -- in your support for a strong, sturdy, America.

There have been times during our recent history -- and I cite the period of the Vietnam War as an example -- when many of our fellow citizens -- I think conscientiously -- grew weary of our leadership role and wanted to sharply reduce America's presence and strength throughout the world.

Fortunately, those voices never really prevailed. The Congress regrettably listened too much and our defense budgets were cut too much, but over the years we managed to maintain a military force capable of meeting any threat to our security, and we continue to be a forceful leader in international diplomacy today.

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Today the pendulum is swinging back the other way, I am glad to report. As I travel about the country, and perhaps as you travel about the country, I find growing public support for our Armed Forces and a growing public awareness that in order to keep the peace we must be willing to invest in a first-class fighting force. That growing support is due in no small measure to the unflagging devotion of organizations such as the AMVETS, through lean years as well as good years, and I am proud to salute you and all of those associated with you.

But, I rapidly say we must not be lulled into complacency so that we make wrong decisions today when the penalties will be great tomorrow. There still remains an insistent cry that we slash billions and billions of dollars from our defense budget in order to pay for a galaxy of new social programs, that we withdraw our forces from many places in the world and that we bargain differently with our adversaries.

Let me be very blunt. Those who preach to us that we must slash billions of dollars from our military forces fail to understand that our Armed Forces are the bulwark of freedom throughout the world.

America will be free only as long as America is strong. Those who preach to us about withdrawing our military forces from around the globe fail to understand that America's presence and America's continuing commitment to our allies is the single greatest force in the world today.

Only so long as other nations can rely upon our firmness and steadiness will world peace remain intact. And finally, those who preach to us that we must be tougher with our adversaries while simultaneously cutting our defense budget totally fail to understand international diplomacy.

If the day ever comes when America goes back to the bargaining table with one hand tied behind her back, she will return not on her feet but on her knees.

If I may, I would like to borrow a line from Adlai Stevenson in another campaign 24 years ago. He said, "Let's talk sense to the American people. Let's tell them the truth. There are no gains without pains."

The truth is in today's world we are at peace only because we are strong, and we are willing to pay the price of a mighty military force. We are at peace only because we are firmly committed to our friends and to our allies, and we are at peace today only because we are firm and determined in dealing with our adversaries.

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So long as I am President, and so long as the AMVETS and many other Americans prevail -- and I think we will -- we will never succumb to the voices of those who would reduce our capability to deter aggression and to maintain the peace.

Mr. Commander, I thank you from the bottom of my heart again for your award. I look forward to working with you and to your associates and to your successors in the days ahead.

Thank you very, very much.

END (AT 12:35 P.M. EDT)