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**Address at the 88th Annual American Legion National Convention**

*As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, Salt Lake City, Utah, Tuesday, August 29, 2006*

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Thank you so very much. I appreciate that a great deal, that warm welcome. Earlier, a few minutes ago, I had a chance say hello to Senator Bennett and Senator Hatch, both of whom have provided such fine representation for this state and strong support for the Department of Defense and for the men and women in uniform. Members of the congressional delegation, I believe, are here -- Rob Bishop and Christopher Smith. We thank you for being here. The mayor, Mr. Corroon -- thank you. Distinguished guests.

Michael Peterson, if I could sing, I'd sing just like that. (Laughter.) That is very nice. (Applause.)

And to the spirit of youth, young folks, I had a chance before I came here to watch their presentations on television. We appreciate your thoughtfulness and your service.

To the Spirit of Service Awardees, congratulations. It is impressive to note what you're doing while you serve our country in uniform.

My special thanks to you, Tom [American Legion Commander Tom Bock], for your service to the military, to our veterans and to our country. It was a pleasure to meet your wonderful family over there; your son who's flown Chinooks, I guess, in Iraq, is following your proud tradition of military service.

Certainly, our country is grateful to all of you who have children, relatives, serving in our nation's military. They're in our thoughts and prayers, and please tell them that we appreciate all they do for our country.

I also want to thank each of you, members of the American Legion, for the love and the support that you provide for our troops every day. It is important, and it is deeply appreciated.

No one is more proud of these young people than their Commander-in-Chief, and I know that President Bush is looking forward to being with you later this week. It's a privilege to work with a president who is determined to protect our flag. (Applause.) We are fortunate to have a leader of strong resolve at a time of war.

Through all the challenges, he remains the same man who stood atop the rubble in Manhattan with a bullhorn vowing to fight back. The leader who told a grieving nation that we will never forget what was lost. And the President who has worked every day to fulfill his vow to protect the American people and to bring the enemy to justice or to bring justice to the enemy.

Our nation is so fortunate to have the American Legion standing up for all of those who are serving our country at this time of testing.

About a year ago, I participated in the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington. My father had served in the Pacific on a carrier during that war. When I looked out in the audience I could see a great many American Legion caps, not surprising, and it was a reminder of the millions who sacrificed for our country, so many of

whom did not come home.

And it was also a reminder of all that the American Legionnaires do for our servicemen and servicewomen. Indeed, through nearly nine decades of service, the American Legion continues to find ways to undertake new initiatives that embody the motto: "For God and Country."

The Department of Defense is proud to be your partner in the Heroes to Hometowns program, which is helping severely wounded veterans with job searches, with their homes, and with other activities to aid in their transition to civilian life.

Your partnership with the America Supports You program helps communities, organizations, and individuals across this nation express their appreciation to our troops and to their families. You can find it at: [americasupportsyou.mil](http://americasupportsyou.mil), and see all of the things that the compassionate and generous American people are doing; schools, corporations, villages, helping the families and helping the troops.

And on a personal note, I want to commend the American Legion for its sponsorship of the Boy Scouts. I know there are places where Scouting is kind of put down. Well, I was a proud Cub Scout; a Boy Scout; an Explorer Scout; an Eagle Scout; and a Distinguished Eagle Scout; and the Scouts represent, in my view, some of the very best qualities of our country, and they certainly merit our support. (Applause.)

The American Legion -- actually the members of the American Legion -- have achieved a great deal since its founding in the months following World War I, when those small number of folks got together in a hotel room in Europe looking for a way to help some of their fellow veterans who would be coming home soon.

That year -- 1919 -- turned out to be one of the pivotal junctures in modern history with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the creation of the League of Nations, a treaty and an organization intended to make future wars unnecessary and obsolete. Indeed, 1919 was the beginning of a period where, over time, a very different set of views would come to dominate public discourse and thinking in the West.

Over the next decades, a sentiment took root that contended that if only the growing threats that had begun to emerge in Europe and Asia could be accommodated, then the carnage and the destruction of then-recent memory of World War I could be avoided.

It was a time when a certain amount of cynicism and moral confusion set in among Western democracies. When those who warned about a coming crisis, the rise of fascism and nazism, they were ridiculed or ignored. Indeed, in the decades before World War II, a great many argued that the fascist threat was exaggerated or that it was someone else's problem. Some nations tried to negotiate a separate peace, even as the enemy made its deadly ambitions crystal clear. It was, as Winston Churchill observed, a bit like feeding a crocodile, hoping it would eat you last.

There was a strange innocence about the world. Someone recently recalled one U.S. senator's reaction in September of 1939 upon hearing that Hitler had invaded Poland to start World War II. He exclaimed:

"Lord, if only I had talked to Hitler, all of this might have been avoided!"

I recount that history because once again we face similar challenges in efforts to confront the rising threat of a new type of fascism. Today -- another enemy, a different kind of enemy -- has made clear its intentions with attacks in places like New York and Washington, D.C., Bali, London, Madrid, Moscow and so many other places. But some seem not to have learned history's lessons.

We need to consider the following questions, I would submit:

- With the growing lethality and the increasing availability of weapons, can we truly afford to believe that somehow, some way, vicious extremists can be appeased?
- Can folks really continue to think that free countries can negotiate a separate peace with terrorists?
- Can we afford the luxury of pretending that the threats today are simply law enforcement problems, like robbing a bank or stealing a car; rather than threats of a fundamentally different nature requiring fundamentally different approaches?
- And can we really afford to return to the destructive view that America, not the enemy, but America, is the source of the world's troubles?

These are central questions of our time, and we must face them honestly.

We hear every day of new plans, new efforts to murder Americans and other free people. Indeed, the plot that was discovered in London that would have killed hundreds -- possibly thousands -- of innocent men, women and children on aircraft flying from London to the United States should remind us that this enemy is serious, lethal, and relentless.

But this is still not well recognized or fully understood. It seems that in some quarters there's more of a focus on dividing our country than acting with unity against the gathering threats.

It's a strange time:

- When a database search of America's leading newspapers turns up literally 10 times as many mentions of one of the soldiers who has been punished for misconduct -- 10 times more -- than the mentions of Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith, the first recipient of the Medal of Honor in the Global War on Terror;
- Or when a senior editor at *Newsweek* disparagingly refers to the brave volunteers in our armed forces -- the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marines, the Coast Guard -- as a "mercenary army;"
- When the former head of *CNN* accuses the American military of deliberately targeting journalists; and the once *CNN* Baghdad bureau chief finally admits that as bureau chief in Baghdad, he concealed reports of Saddam Hussein's crimes when he was in charge there so that *CNN* could keep on reporting selective news;
- And it's a time when Amnesty International refers to the military facility at Guantanamo Bay -- which holds terrorists who have vowed to kill Americans and which is arguably the best run and most scrutinized detention facility in the history of warfare -- as "the gulag of our times." It's inexcusable. (Applause.)

Those who know the truth need to speak out against these kinds of myths and distortions that are being told about our troops and about our country. America is not what's wrong with the world. (Applause.)

The struggle we are in -- the consequences are too severe -- the struggle too important to have the luxury of returning to that old mentality of "Blame America First."

One of the most important things the American Legion has done is not only to serve and assist and advocate, as you have done so superbly for so much of the past century, but also to educate and to speak the truth about our country and about the men and women in the military.

Not so long ago, an exhibit -- *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian during the 1990s -- seemed to try to rewrite the history of World War II by portraying the United States as somewhat of an aggressor. Fortunately, the American Legion was there to lead the effort to set the record straight. (Applause.)

Your watchdog role is particularly important today in a war that is to a great extent fought in the media on a global stage, a role to not allow the distortions and myths be repeated without challenge so that at the least the second or third draft of history will be more accurate than the first quick allegations we see.

You know from experience personally that in every war there have been mistakes, setbacks, and casualties. War is, as Clemenceau said, "a series of catastrophes that result in victory."

And in every army, there are occasional bad actors, the ones who dominate the headlines today, who don't live up to the standards of the oath and of our country. But you also know that they are a very, very small percentage of the literally hundreds of thousands of honorable men and women in all theaters in this struggle who are serving our country with humanity, with decency, with professionalism, and with courage in the face of continuous provocation. (Applause.)

And that is important in any long struggle or long war, where any kind of moral or intellectual confusion about who and what is right or wrong, can weaken the ability of free societies to persevere.

Our enemies know this well. They frequently invoke the names of Beirut or Somalia -- places they see as examples of American retreat and American weakness. And as we've seen -- even this month -- in Lebanon, they design attacks and manipulate the media to try to demoralize public opinion. They doctor photographs of casualties. They use civilians as human shields. And then they try to provoke an outcry when civilians are killed in their midst, which of course was their intent.

The good news is that most Americans, though understandably influenced by what they see and read, have good inner gyroscopes. They have good center of gravity. So, I'm confident that over time they will evaluate and reflect on what is happening in this struggle and come to wise conclusions about it.

Iraq, a country that was brutalized by a cruel and dangerous dictatorship, is now traveling the slow, difficult, bumpy, uncertain path to a secure new future under a representative government that will be at peace with its neighbors, rather than a threat to their own people, to their neighbors, or to the world.

As the nature of the threat and the conflict in Iraq has changed over these past several years, so have the tactics and the deployments. But while military tactics have changed and adapted to the realities on the ground -- as they must -- the strategy has not changed, which is to empower the Iraqi people to be able to defend, and govern, and rebuild their own country.

The extremists themselves call Iraq the "epicenter" in the War on Terror. And our troops know how important their mission is.

A soldier who recently volunteered for a second tour in Iraq captured the feeling of many of his peers. In an e-mail to some friends, he wrote the following, and I quote:

"I ask that you never take advantage of the liberties guaranteed by the shedding of free blood, never take for granted the freedoms granted by our Constitution. For those liberties would be merely ink on paper were it not for the sacrifice of generations of Americans who heard the call of duty and responded heart, mind and soul with 'Yes, I will.'"

Some day that young man very likely will be a member of the American Legion attending a convention like this. I certainly hope so. And I hope he does that and that we all have a chance to meet. And one day a future speaker may reflect back on the time of historic choice, remembering the questions raised as to our country's courage, and dedication, and willingness to persevere in this fight until we prevail.

The question is not whether we can win; it's whether we have the will to persevere to win. I'm convinced that Americans do have that determination and that we have learned the lessons of history, of the folly of trying to turn a blind eye to danger. These are lessons you know well, lessons that your heroism has helped to teach to generations of Americans.

May God bless each of you. May God bless the men and women in uniform, and their families. And may God continue to bless our wonderful country.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)