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Prepared Remarks of Fred Thompson's speech to VFW National Convention

(Note: Senator Thompson departs frequently from prepared texts)

It's an honor to be in your presence and I want to thank you for all that you've done and for what you're doing today.

Honor and duty, putting your country first, are hallmarks for you. Ultimately it's all about freedom. It's the universal principle on which this country was founded.

Because of the sacrifice of so many, we are a great nation that serves as a beacon of hope and freedom for all those who do not have it. For a long time now, the United States has been a powerful force for stability, democracy and prosperity in the world. Our brave men and women have given more blood for the freedom of other people than all the other nations in the world combined, and I'm getting a little tired of people feeling the necessity to apologize for the United States of America.

You and the men and women of our Armed Forces are reminders that our strength does not come from the high tech tools of combat, the smart bombs, satellites and stealth bombers. Our strength comes from those willing to take up these weapons when necessary. For that, our nation is profoundly indebted.

You and they are the tools by which we have carried out our nation's first obligation:securing the freedom and security of this country. We are all caught up in the issues of the day, and there are plenty of them, but without freedom and security there are no solutions to any other problem this country may have.

I come to you today as one who is concerned that, on our present course, our country is going to become less secure and more divided. I fear that even at this late date, we as a nation have not come to terms with the nature and extent of the threat our country faces. Or how much time, resources and commitment we are going to have to make. Many people apparently think that if we just pull out of Iraq, radical Islam will leave us alone.

You and I know better. We know that Iraq is currently the major front in a global war and that if we appear to be weak and divided, or if we fail, it will embolden our enemy and further endanger our country. We must have a frank and continuous conversation about this with the American people because, above all, we must have the support and unity of the American people if we are to succeed.

We face an enemy who looks upon the current situation as a continuation of a struggle that has been going on for hundreds of years. Their intent is to bring western civilization, and primarily the United States to its knees.

They are barbaric to an extent that is hard to comprehend by the ordinary person. They believe that their effort is on course; that the Soviet Union was a tougher enemy than we are and they defeated them in Afghanistan. They believe that Saddam was right when he called the United States a "weak horse." Osama bin Laden has called us a "paper tiger."

These are not comments about our military strength, these are comments about their perception of American will. The world waits to see if they were right.

Success in Iraq will not solve our problem, but defeat will make it much worse. We are clearly making progress there in the important Anbar province and elsewhere.

Yet even before General Petraeus, who is universally respected, has an opportunity to give his report, Congress furiously debates the terms of our surrender instead of how we might achieve success. They remind me of the scene from Iwo Jima where a group of men were struggling to plant the flag. However, this time it's not the American flag, it's the white flag.

The specter of ethnic cleansing, the nuclearization of the entire Middle East, the disruption of oil supplies and the loss of confidence and respect of our allies in the Middle East and around the world is insufficient to deter them. No one wants peace more than the father or mother of children and grandchildren. But if world history teaches us anything, it is that the appearance of weakness and lack of determination invites more conflict and death, not less.

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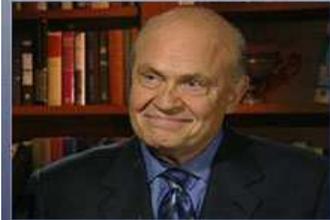


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We cut our military, our procurement and our research and development. Now our military is stretched too thin. We are wearing out our equipment. Our intelligence capabilities are inadequate.

To reverse this situation we must reassess our national priorities and face the truth about what it will take to defend this country.

Demographics and increasing medical costs are going to cause the growth of our entitlement programs to squeeze out discretionary spending, including our defense budget. America is going to have to come together for an honest bipartisan discussion about this. Because anyone who honestly looks at the situation knows that the current trend cannot be sustained. So remember when we're talking about fiscal policy we're also talking about the military and national defense.

We must continue to rebuild our capabilities to match the determination and patriotism of the young men and women who serve this country. If you go to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, where they treat amputees and burn victims, you will meet more than one young soldier whose primary concern is whether or not they are going to be able to rejoin their comrades.

If you go to Walter Reed you may see a young Marine who I talked to recently. When I walked into the rehab center, he was laughing and joking with his therapist. He was a double amputee and was trying out his new legs. After I talked to him for a while, I asked him what he planned to do. He said he had his eye on this non profit organization that was doing a lot of good. He wanted to join them. Then he said, "I just want to give something back."

What kind of nation we must be to produce such people. Our main goal should be to never give our service men or women or their families any reason to believe such sacrifice was made in vain.

It's obvious that not enough recognition and appreciation is shown to the people fighting our battles. A few months ago I started doing a segment on ABC Radio that highlighted some of our current heroes and their stories. Stories about men like Army Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith and Marine Corporal Jason Dunham, both of who were recipients of the Medal of Honor for acts of valor in Iraq.

All of you know, I am sure, the protocol for saluting a Medal of Honor recipient. Whether you are a President or a Four Star General, it is you who salutes a Medal of Honor recipient first. This should indicate just how high an honor the medal is. Fewer than 300 have been awarded since 1950 and only a handful in the last couple of decades. Yet when Sergeant Smith was awarded the Medal of Honor, the New York *Times* which devotes countless column inches of negativity about our efforts in Iraq on its front page, ran Sergeant Smith's story on page 13.

Our obligation to our Veterans does not end when they leave the battlefield. Sometimes it's just beginning. Our fighting men and women are brave and courageous but they are not indestructible. They have needs – emotional, medical and financial and having served their country with honor we must make sure those needs are met. Caring for our Veterans is not only the right thing to do, it is a wise thing to do. We need for the young people of this country and their parents to know that we take care of our Armed Forces both yesterday and today. This will help ensure that they will continue to be eager to serve their country. Caring and commitment go a long way toward recruiting and retention.

I was thinking of our obligation to our Veterans when I was invited by Sean Hannity to join him in San Diego for one of his "Freedom" concerts. Now if you've in the Navy or the Marine Corps, you know that San Diego is a "Company" town. It was an honor to be there with so many members of our Armed Forces and their families but there were a lot of civilians in the audience too. So I took the opportunity to recite a poem by Charles Province that speaks to us all:

It is the Soldier, not the minister
Who has given us freedom of religion.
It is the Soldier, not the reporter
Who has given us freedom of the press.
It is the Soldier, not the poet
Who has given us freedom of speech.
It is the Soldier, not the campus organizer
Who has given us freedom to protest.
It is the Soldier, not the lawyer
Who has given us the right to a fair trial.
It is the Soldier, not the politician
Who has given us the right to vote.
It is the Soldier who salutes the flag,
Who serves beneath the flag,
And whose coffin is draped by the flag,
Who allows the protester to burn the flag.

A lot of tough issues seem to be confronting our nation all at once these days. But this is not the

first time our nation has been confronted with major problems. We've always reacted the same way. We came together as a people. We remembered that there is much more that unites us than divides us, confronted our problems head on and gotten to the other side of the mountain wiser and stronger.

Today, we must remember that our defense of freedom is right. The character of our troops is strong. That if we stand together, united as a people – as we have in past times – the cause of freedom will prevail.

We can also be certain that in the years ahead, new strategic challenges will arise. In meeting these threats the world will once again look to America for leadership. I know that just as each of you answered the call, the United States will stand ready.

Thank you for your service, your sacrifice and your great honor that each of you brought to your uniform, our flag and our country.

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