

Convention Highlights

Monday, July 21, 2014
Joint Opening Session

Vice President Tackles Foreign, Veteran Policies

Vice President Joe Biden touched on several key issues in international affairs, as well as policies pertaining to veterans on the home front, especially their employment prospects.

He outlined a five-point strategy to help Iraq defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which wants to erase the Iraq and Syria border. To accomplish this, he said the U.S. should provide weapons and advice; support the Iraqi political process; establish a consensus among affected countries; bolster stability in the region; and enhance intelligence and law enforcement directed at foreign fighters. His underlying theme was that only Iraqis can make their country a federal, all-inclusive democratic state. “We can’t want peace more than the Iraqis,” he said. “We gave them a chance to seize their own destiny.”

In Afghanistan, Biden noted that 32,000 troops will remain there through the end of the year. If the new president of Afghanistan signs the bilateral security agreement, only 9,800 U.S. troops will stay after 2014. “But they will no longer be patrolling in villages and mountains,” he said. Rather, they would support counter-terrorism initiatives and provide training so Afghans can transition to a democratic form of government. “They have to chart their own future,” Biden stressed.

Closer to home, Biden said in relation to the VA crisis, “We will not rest until it gets fixed. There is only one sacred obligation – to care for veterans and their families.” He then moved on to the employment picture for recent veterans, which is considerably brighter. Harnessing the occupational talents of veterans is a primary goal of the Administration, he said. This includes extending professional licensing to all 50 states, enforcing veterans preference in government hiring and targeting specific business sectors, such as high-tech industries.

Declaring that 99% of Americans owe the 1% who served an eternal debt, Biden emphasized the role of military families. “They also serve who only stand and wait,” he said, quoting Milton’s *On His Blindness*. Spouses deserve special attention along with those wearing the uniform. Joining Forces, the White House effort to enlist corporate America in the battle for vet jobs, has seen the hiring of thousands of veterans, Biden said. As a result, veterans now have a lower unemployment rate than other Americans.

Missouri Politicians Address Important Topics

Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, underscored the recent problems at VA. “We must fulfill promises made to you,” she said. “We must listen to you, not bureaucrats.” She is gathering information from VA patients about their experiences. The outreach, now in its fourth year, has surveyed 9,000 veterans. On July 15, she introduced *S. 2606*, a bill that would allow firing VA employees who retaliate against whistleblowers. “They need to be gone and gone

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immediately,” she said. McCaskill also touted her plan to re-structure the agencies that conduct POW/MIA searches, recoveries and identifications. “I saw redundancy and turf wars,” she said. The new agency will have “one command in charge that will answer to you.”

Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.) took up the cause of health care for military retirees and their families. He introduced the *Caring for America’s Heroes Act, S. 2276*, on May 1, which would improve access to mental health care services under Tricare, the military’s health care system. Blunt called the crisis at VA “shameful ... a breach of faith ... and unacceptable.” Private care, he said, is a viable option: “Competition might not be a bad thing. It would offer more flexibility and more choices.” He added, “Veterans must be seen immediately at VA. We cannot accept anything less than that. We should think about what is best for veterans, not VA.” Blunt said that Missouri is home to 36,000 VFW members.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon (D) described the Show-Me Heroes employment program for Missouri’s veterans. Established in 2010, the program, which includes more than 4,000 employers, has helped some 6,700 vets find jobs. Nixon proudly announced that his state, which has 490,000 veterans, offers in-state tuition for all vets and will phase out taxes on military pensions within two years. He noted that funding for health care at the state’s seven veterans homes is “immune from the vicissitudes of budgetary entanglements.” Concluding, he said it is “essential” that VFW “pass the torch” to the next generation.

Recognizing Outstanding Service

Former U.S. ambassador Ryan C. Crocker received VFW’s *Eisenhower Award*. Crocker, who called himself a “diplomat among warriors,” was U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon. He referred to the terrorist group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria as “al Qaeda version 6.0,” saying today it poses an “enormous national threat.” Crocker stressed that Americans and the Iraq government need to face down that threat. “Wars don’t end just because we withdraw our forces,” he said.

U.S. Navy hospital corpsmen received VFW’s *Armed Forces Award*. Accepting it was Force Master Chief Sherman E. Boss, who said corpsmen represent nearly half of all sailors wounded and one third of all sailors killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Corpsmen stand watch all over the world today,” Boss said. Some 26,900 hospital corpsmen serve today.

Tom Clark, a teacher at Lake Central High School in St. John, Ind., received VFW’s *Americanism Award* for creating the *Gold Star Honor Project*. It requires students to research Indiana warriors killed during war. Since 1986 when he first began the project, more than 1,350 profiles have been compiled by his students. He sees the award as one earned by his students. Clark, who served in the Army in Germany during the mid-1970s, also did a one-year tour in Afghanistan as part of the Indiana National Guard, making him VFW eligible. “It was the right thing to do and that’s why I did it,” said Clark, a member of Post 717 in St. John. His daughter deployed twice to Iraq. Clark and his program were profiled in the September 2013 issue of *VFW* magazine.

Stars and Stripes received VFW’s *News Media Award*. Accepting it on behalf of the 153-year-old publication was publisher Max Lederer. He touched on the early days of the newspaper when Union soldiers from three Illinois regiments printed stories about their activities. “We only exist because of your stories,” he told attendees. *Stars and Stripes* has more than 400,000 readers worldwide. A \$2,500 honorarium accompanied the award.

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Various Awards and Speakers

Jason Kamiya, USAA's senior vice president for financial foundations, discussed the importance of personal financial management for veterans. He also highlighted United Way's *Military 211* hotline, which assists veterans with a variety of needs. Kamiya is a member of VFW Post 76 in San Antonio.

Andy Taylor, executive chairman of Enterprise Holdings, recognized his father, Jack Taylor, a WWII naval aviator. Jack, who was in the audience, founded the rental car company in 1957 and named it for the *USS Enterprise* on which he served. Taylor highlighted his company's efforts at recruiting veterans for employment. "We believe it is the right thing to do," he said.

Josh Halpern with Anheuser-Busch InBev (A-B) of St. Louis, said the 138-year-old company has had 5,500 veterans representing WWI to Afghanistan work for the brewery in its history. One such employee is Rocky Sickmann, a former Marine Corps Embassy Security Guard who was held hostage for 444 days in Tehran, Iran, after Iranians stormed the U.S. Embassy there in 1979. A-B has donated \$25 million to military charities, including \$100,000 to VFW.

The *Fred C. Hall Memorial Outstanding Post Special Project Award* went to Post 4819 in West, Texas, for its exceptional efforts to care for survivors of the deadly industrial accident there on April 17, 2013. Fifteen people, including 12 fighting the fire, died. Post Commander Michael Driscoll was on hand to accept the award.

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