

President pledges help to vets

by Foon Rhee, deputy national political editor March 16, 2009 02:28 PM BOSTON GLOBE

President Obama renewed his vow today to uphold the "sacred trust" with those serving in harm's way abroad.

"They are our best and brightest, and our bravest, enlisting in a time of war," he said at the Department of Veterans Affairs, whose mission, he said, is more vital now during the "long and difficult conflicts" in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama has promised to increase military pay, improve benefits to veterans, and offer more help to military families. Last week, first lady Michelle Obama visited Fort Bragg, the sprawling Army base in North Carolina, to bring that message.

The president noted that his own family -- particularly his grandfather, a World War II veteran -- benefited from aid to veterans without which, he said, he would not be in the White House.

His full remarks, as provided by the White House, are below:

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. To Jim Benson for helping to organize this; for Mahdee for your service to our country -- a Pledge of Allegiance that you've shown in your own commitment to protecting this country; and obviously, to Secretary Shinseki. It is an honor to join you and the hardworking public servants here at the Department of Veterans Affairs as we mark a milestone in the distinguished history of this department.

You know, 20 years ago, on the day the Veterans Administration was officially elevated to a Cabinet-level agency and renamed the Department of Veterans Affairs, a ceremony was held to swear in the administrator of the old entity as Secretary of the new one. And in his remarks that day, President George H.W. Bush declared that the mission of this agency is "so vital that there's only one place for the veterans of America: in the Cabinet Room, at the table with the President of the United States of America." I could not agree more.

I could not be more pleased that Eric Shinseki has taken a seat at that table. Throughout his long and distinguished career in the Army, Secretary Shinseki won the respect and admiration of our men and women in uniform because they've always been his highest priority -- and he has clearly brought that same sense of duty and commitment to the work of serving our veterans.

As he knows, it's no small task. This department has more than a quarter of a million employees across America, and its services range from providing education and training benefits, health care and home loans, to tending those quiet places that remind us of the great debt we owe -- and remind me of the heavy responsibility that I bear. It's a commitment that lasts from the day our veterans retire that uniform to the day that they are put to rest -- and that continues on for their families.

Without this commitment, I might not be here today. After all, my grandfather enlisted after Pearl Harbor and went on to march in Patton's Army. My grandmother worked on a bomber assembly line while he was gone. My mother was born at Fort Leavenworth while he was away. When my grandfather returned, he went to college on the GI Bill; bought his first home with a loan from the FHA; moved his family west, all the way to Hawaii, where he and my grandmother helped to raise me.

And I think about my grandfather whenever I have the privilege of meeting the young men and women who serve in our military today. They are our best and brightest, and they're our bravest -- enlisting in a time of war; enduring tour after tour of duty; serving with honor under the most difficult circumstances; and making sacrifices that many of us cannot begin to imagine. The same can be said of their families. As my wife, Michelle, has seen firsthand during visits to military bases across this country, we don't just deploy our troops in a time of war -- we deploy their families, too.

So while the mission of this department is always vital, it is even more so during long and difficult conflicts like those that we're engaged in today. Because when the guns finally fall silent and the cameras are turned off and our troops return home, they deserve the same commitment from their government as my grandparents received.

Last month, I announced my strategy for ending the war in Iraq. And I made it very clear that this strategy would not end with military plans and diplomatic agendas, but would endure through my commitment to upholding our sacred trust with every man and woman who has served this country. And the same holds true for our troops serving in Afghanistan.

The homecoming we face over the next year and a half will be the true test of this commitment: whether we will stand with our veterans as they face new challenges -- physical, psychological and economic -- here at home.

I intend to start that work by making good on my pledge to transform the Department of Veterans Affairs for the 21st century. That's an effort that, under

Secretary Shinseki's leadership, all of you have already begun -- conducting a thorough review of your operations all across this agency. And I intend to support this effort not just with words of encouragement, but with resources. That's why the budget I sent to Congress increases funding for this department by \$25 billion over the next five years.

With this budget, we don't just fully fund our VA health care program -- we expand it to serve an additional 500,000 veterans by 2013; to provide better health care in more places; and to dramatically improve services related to mental health and injuries like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. We also invest in the technology to cut red tape and ease the transition from active duty. And we provide new help for homeless veterans, because those heroes have a home -- it's the country they served, the United States of America. And until we reach a day when not a single veteran sleeps on our nation's streets, our work remains unfinished. (Applause.)

Finally, in this new century, it's time to heed the lesson of history, that our returning veterans can form the backbone of our middle class -- by implementing a GI Bill for the 21st century. I know you're working hard under a tough deadline, but I am confident that we will be ready for August 1st. And that's how we'll show our servicemen and women that when you come home to America, America will be here for you. That's how we will ensure that those who have "borne the battle" -- and their families -- will have every chance to live out their dreams.

I've had the privilege of meeting so many of these heroes. Some of the most inspiring are those that I've met in places like Walter Reed -- young men and women who've lost a limb or even their ability to take care of themselves, but who never lose the pride they feel for their country. And that is, after all, what led them to wear the uniform in the first place -- their unwavering belief in the idea of America; that no matter where you come from, what you look like, who your parents are, this is a place where anything is possible, where anyone can make it, where we take care of each other and look out for each other -- especially for those who've sacrificed so much for this country.

These are the ideals that generations of Americans have fought for and bled for and died for. These are the ideals at the core of your mission -- a mission that dates back before our founding -- one taken up by our first President years before he took office, back when he served as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. Then-General Washington fought tirelessly to support the veterans of America's Revolutionary War. Such support, he argued, should "never be considered as a pension or gratuity..." Rather, "...it was the price of their blood," and of our independence; "...it

is, therefore," he said, "more than a common debt, it is a debt of honor..." A debt of honor.

Washington understood that caring for our veterans was more than just a way of thanking them for their service. He recognized the obligation is deeper than that -- that when our fellow citizens commit themselves to shed blood for us, that binds our fates with theirs in a way that nothing else can. And in the end, caring for those who have given their fullest measure of devotion to us -- and for their families -- is a matter of honor -- as a nation and as a people.

That's a responsibility you hold, that's the work that you do -- repaying that debt of honor, a debt we can never fully discharge. And I know it's not always easy. I know there's much work ahead to transform this agency for the 21st century. But I have the fullest confidence that with Secretary Shinseki's leadership, and with the hard work of the men and women of this department, we will fulfill our sacred trust and serve our returning heroes as well as they've served us.

Thank you. God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody.