

Cheney Salutes War Veterans, Pledges Better Service

By Linda D. Kozaryn
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Aug. 27, 2002 -- Vice President Dick Cheney saluted America's war veterans Monday as an example for the nation and said, "Every veteran deserves a response that is fair, respectful and prompt" when dealing with the federal government.

"Under our administration, you won't receive excuses," he pledged. "You will receive action." Cheney spoke at the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention in Nashville, Tenn. He paid tribute to the veterans' past and present service and commended the work of today's armed forces.

"In the military," he told the assembled vets, "you devoted yourselves to a cause above self-interest, served with a firm sense of duty and developed personal standards that make you an example for your families and your fellow citizens." He relayed the comments of a woman whose father served with the Army Air Corps. Cheney said she recalled growing up surrounded by "honesty, integrity, hard work, personal responsibility and perseverance," and that she absorbed these standards "almost imperceptibly."

"Our veterans have had a similar effect on the entire nation," Cheney said. Today's service members, he noted, are exhibiting the same sense of duty and the same high standards in the war against terrorism. "May I say, as a former secretary of defense, that I have never been more proud of America's military.

"Over the past year," Cheney said, "millions here and abroad have been inspired once again by the bravery and the selflessness of the American armed forces. For my part, I have been reminded on a daily basis, as I was during my years at the Pentagon, of what a privilege it is to work with the people of our military."

The Bush administration aims to improve the government's service to veterans, according to the vice president. "On taking office, we found a large claims backlog numbering in the hundreds of thousands," he said. "The backlog is falling steadily, as is the average time for processing each claim."

There's more work to be done, Cheney said, and Tony Principi, Department of Veterans Affairs secretary, is a the "results-oriented veteran" in charge of getting it done.

President Bush has set up a task force to further improve health care services for veterans. The president has asked Congress for an 8 percent increase for veterans health care and a 7 percent increase for veterans' programs overall. "The money is necessary to meet pressing needs, some of which have gone neglected in recent years," Cheney said.

The administration plans to continue drawing upon the nation's war veterans' military and civilian experience to help with homeland security, he added.

Cheney also repeated the government's pledge to fully account for all service members whose fate is still undetermined. "For all the uncertainties that remain, the basic issue is clear: thousands of brave Americans, last seen doing their duty, remain unaccounted for. The nation remembers these men, and this government will persist in the effort to account for every last one of them."

Each of America's war veterans "has a place in the long, unbroken line of Americans who came to the defense of freedom," he said, and the American people will always respect each one for standing ready to make the ultimate sacrifice.

VFW members, he noted, continue to give their time, talent and money to citizens in need. Last year alone, they gave more than 16 million hours to worthy causes.

"The VFW stands firm for protecting our country's flag and for defending the right of every American to pledge allegiance to one nation under God," Cheney said, drawing applause from the assembled wartime veterans.

"On the nation's behalf, and for myself and President Bush," he concluded, "I thank you for the service you gave to your fellow citizens, for the loyalty you have shown to each other and for the great honor you have brought to your uniform, to our flag and to our country."