

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta November 08, 2011

Remarks Delivered by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta to the National Guard Bureau Joint Senior Leaders Conference

Thank you very much for the kind introduction, General McKinley, and thank you for your leadership and service to the country. We have been convening a lot of groups as we talk through budget issues. And General McKinley has been right there and made a tremendous contribution.

It's just good to have his guidance, his counsel and his leadership as part of that effort, so I thank you very much for this opportunity this morning to have a chance to address the National Guard community for the first time as Secretary of Defense. This is truly an extraordinary gathering of National Guard leaders. You've come from all 50 states, three territories, District of Columbia, because you're committed to maintaining the strength of the nation's oldest and most enduring institution of common defense.

So I'd really like to begin by thanking you for your dedication that you've shown your country and communities that you represent. I'm reminded of the story of the professor who was going throughout the state of California giving exactly the same lecture on a very intricate area of physics law that he had won the Nobel Prize in. So he was giving the same speech everywhere he went. So one day he was headed towards Fresno, California, and his chauffeur leaned back and said: You know, Professor, I've heard that lecture so many times, I think I could give it by memory myself.

Now the professor said: Well, you know, they don't know me that well in Fresno. Why don't you put on my suit and I'll put on your chauffeur's uniform and you give the lecture?

They did that. The chauffeur got up before a standing-room audience, spoke for an hour gave the lecture, word for word, and got a standing ovation at the end of the lecture. The professor, dressed as the chauffeur, sat in the audience and couldn't believe what had happened. Then someone raised their hand and said "professor that's an outstanding address on a very complex area but I have some questions. So he went into about a three-paragraph question that included some mathematical formulas and equations and said to him now what do you think about that? There was this long pause. Then the chauffeur said you know that's the stupidest question I've ever gotten and to show you how stupid it is I'm going to have my chauffeur answer it out here in the audience.

There is a hell of a lot of chauffeurs in this audience when it comes to the issues of public service and the National Guard and I can't tell you how thankful I am to all of you and your willingness to serve and to help protect this country.

As we approach this milestone, the Guard's 375th anniversary next month. I think we can say with certainly this force today is stronger, it's better trained, it's better equipped, and as a result it is more vital to the nation's security, more vital that it ever has been in the past.

This anniversary is an occasion to celebrate the accomplishments of our citizen warriors. But it's also a moment to stand back and chart the course of the National Guard for the future so that it can continue to be the most cost-effective operational force that leverages the skills of our most talented and our most committed citizens for the missions, the vital missions that we must serve both at home and abroad.

I come here with a very deep respect for the contributions of the citizen warriors of the National Guard, and with deep respect for what their brothers and sisters have done who also serve in the Reserve component. I say that not only as Secretary of Defense, not only as someone who had the opportunity to serve in uniform, but also as the proud father of one of our sons who was an officer in the Navy Reserve.

Like so many, my son was inspired, in the aftermath of September 11th, to do his part to defend this nation, to give back something to this country, a country that has given so much to him and to his family and to his community.

As many of you know, I'm the son of Italian immigrants. I used to ask my father: Why did you come all of that distance in the early 1930s, no money, no language ability, no skills? Why would you travel all that distance to this country? My father said: The reason we did it was because your mother and I believed we could give our children a better life in this country.

That's the American dream. That's what we want for our children, and hopefully our children will want for their children. And it's what motivates people who want to serve and give the children of this country a better and more secure life.

That was true for my son. He was a practicing attorney, found the opportunity to serve as a reservist. In the course of his deployment, when he was activated, he went to Afghanistan; worked there at Bagram Air Force Base in the intelligence community, working with people from every service to try to develop better intelligence for our warriors, and in doing that, gave me the experience of knowing firsthand sacrifices that people throughout this country make and the sacrifices that their families make in order for them to serve.

I also witnessed immense pride, immense gratification that they take from lending their skills to the common defense of this country, the immense gratification that comes from making a positive difference in the service to this country.

At the end, the measure of all of us the measure of all of us is whether or not we made a difference. That's the test of life. For those who serve, who put their lives on the line, no question in my mind, they meet the test, making a difference to their fellow citizens.

This is a story that is shared by 830,000 Guardsmen and reservists who've been activated since 9/11. By taking time out of their lives to answer the call of duty, these men and women uphold the fundamental values that underlie

the strength of this nation. This nation was founded on the principle of service to country. That's what our forefathers envisioned. This country, blessed by God, would be committed to the common defense of the nation.

The Guard plays a very special role. It's a vital link between our communities and the military, particularly as the size and the footprint for our active-duty force has shrunk over the last twenty years. With a presence in more than 3,000 communities, men and women of the Guard show their neighbors a sense of commitment, a sense of dedication that is the very best that our country has to offer.

I was raised in the time of the draft and served during that period. One thing about that is that it provided people from across this country to come together and work together. It is essential that we have that tie-in to America so that every community understands what service is all about. And in a volunteer force, the National Guard provides that important ingredient of reaching back into every community across this country and making them a part of the national defense of this country.

It has long been my belief that democracy depends on the willingness of people to serve, people that dedicate themselves to that greater cause, who are willing to fight, put their lives on the line to defend this country, defend our values, defend our way of life.

That is exactly what the men and women of the National Guard have proven time and time and time again that they are always ready, always there to defend America.

All told, more than 370,000 guardsmen have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, many of them multiple times, deployed time and time and time again.

It's a simple reality, and important fact that we could not have sustained this war effort without the sacrifice, without the contributions of our guardsmen, more than 670 of whom have paid the ultimate price for service to the country.

These men and women have written a new chapter in this institution's storied legacy. They have firmly established the Guard as a vital operational arm of our military, a force far different from the strategic reserve that many envisioned during the Cold War.

The National Guard has proved its combat readiness, its combat effectiveness.

During this past year, it has played a crucial role in the operations over Libya. Air National Guard units supplied fully half of the air refueling capacity for the United States and NATO aircraft in the initial weeks of the air campaign. I just returned from the defense ministers meeting in Brussels. Everybody obviously was very pleased with what had occurred in the NATO mission 50 percent of that mission was supported by the U.S., through our ISR, but more importantly through the air refueling that took place. We provided the air

refueling for that effort, and you did that. Having responded to the call at a moment's notice, Air National Guard tanker assets from 10 states were in place and ready to operate the same day that the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution that authorized the mission.

In addition to these kinds of international demands, the National Guard has been more active than ever in providing relief and support to citizens here at home. When Hurricane Irene hit the Eastern Seaboard this year, I had the opportunity as secretary to see this happen firsthand: Nearly 8,000 Guard members from 18 states were deployed with equipment pre-positioned to ensure that it was available for their use.

The storm marked the first time we designated dual-status commanders in response to an emergency. As Secretary of Defense, I can't tell you how proud I was to be able to participate in this new approach that provides greater cooperation between federal and state authorities.

We're also taking steps to bolster the Guard and the designated force for responding to the horrific possibility of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incidents. To meet this threat, we've established ten Homeland Response Forces support missions.

After more than 10 years of war, requiring great sacrifice of our men and women in uniform, 6,200 who have died in battle, over 40,000 who have been wounded, many of them with the most horrific wounds you can imagine, a terrible price has been paid. That price is paying off.

In Iraq, combat forces will be coming home by the end of the year. And we have achieved a mission, making that country one that could govern and secure itself, and make sure that al-Qaida and any terrorist group will not be able to find safe haven there.

In Afghanistan, we have weakened the Taliban. We've established greater security. For the first time in five years, the level of violence is down in Afghanistan.

We're building the Afghan army and police, and we've begun a transition so that Afghanistan can govern and secure itself.

This is not over by any means. It will demand continuing commitment and continuing work. General Allen is working night and day to make sure we keep this on the right track. But we are headed in a better direction.

Libya: a successful NATO mission; got rid of Gadhafi; gave Libya back to the Libyans. Hopefully, they can establish institutions of government that can represent the people.

On terrorism, the war on terrorism that began on 9/11, we have made significant progress and gains in going after terrorists. We have decimated their leadership. I had the honor to be part of was the operation that went after bin Laden. Not only did we get bin Laden, not only have we gotten Awlaki, but we've gotten most of their leadership, and only a handful remain. They're

still there; they're still a threat. They're a threat in Yemen, they're a threat in Somalia, and they're a threat in North Africa. But the fact is, because of the operations by intelligence and military components working together, we have helped make this country safer.

All of this will hopefully give our troops a little breathing room from the constant deployments that we have seen time and time and time again over these last 10 years.

While this will provide the Guard and their families the much-needed respite, a little more balanced mobilization schedule, we need to be all the more thoughtful and careful in how we manage the Guard component, the Reserve component going forward.

As we approach this new reality, I do not want to see the loss of the operational experience that we've amassed over the past 10 years.

Even in the face of budget pressures and changing war-fighting demands, we cannot forget the lessons that we have learned about the National Guard's central role and relevance to the military in the 21st century. A decade of war has honed the Guard into an effective, lethal fighting force, and it would be a tremendous mistake in my view, tremendous mistake to put that capability back on the shelf. And I can tell you on my watch; it's not going to happen.

But to keep this force operational, we're going to have to continue to invest in it. That will become much tougher to do if Congress allows further rounds of defense cuts to proceed, particularly with this sequester mechanism that's been built into the Budget Control Act.

You know, as a former member of Congress, I know that sometimes Congress can do nutty things. But developing this crazy formula, which basically I mean, I was asked in Congress when I was testifying, isn't this the equivalent of shooting yourself in the foot, and I said no, it's more like shooting yourself in the head, because what they're basically saying is if they don't do the job that they're supposed to do, if they don't provide the leadership that they're supposed to do, they're going to allow these cuts to take place across the board, and the cuts in defense will virtually double double over the next 10 years. It would decimate our defense. It would cripple us in terms of our ability to protect this country.

But I've said to members of Congress, look, my friends, I have men and women that are willing to put their lives on the line to sacrifice for this country; you sure as hell can sacrifice to provide a little leadership to get the solution we need in order to solve this problem.

As I go through, obviously, these budget decisions that we have to face and as you know, we've already been handed a number of \$450 billion to reduce the defense budget over 10 years, and in a five-year period, we're probably looking at about \$260 billion that will be part of the budget we'll have to submit. But I have a fundamental guide as we go through it. And frankly, I am walking lockstep with the service chiefs, I'm walking lockstep with General

McKinley, I'm walking lockstep with our Undersecretaries, to make sure that we do this together. We have to.

There are four guideposts.

Number one, we are going to maintain the best military in the world. We have the strongest military force in the history of mankind. We are not going to give that up. We're going to maintain the best military in the world.

Secondly, I am not going to hollow out the force. Every time we've come out of a major conflict, whether it was World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the fall of the Soviet Union, what has happened is we suddenly did dramatic cuts across the board. They hollowed out the force. That cannot happen. We've got to learn the lessons that taking some kind of just across-the-board cut approach to defense spending is not the way to do this.

It weakens everything in defense when we do it that way. So that means we have to look at every area in the budget. That's not going to be easy to do either, but it needs to be done. We need obviously to look at efficiencies where's the overhead, where's the duplication. The Pentagon is a big damn bureaucracy. I feel like going from the CIA to the Pentagon is like going from the corner hardware store to Home Depot. So there are efficiencies that we can get there, and we will push on that.

We've got to look at the whole area of procurement reform. How can we achieve savings in that area? And some of these contracting out approaches that have been done with regards to weapons systems take 12, 15, 20 years. It's too damn long. There's got to be a better way to do it and a way that saves money.

In addition, I've got to look at the area of compensation, which is tough to do, but it's an area that's grown 80 percent. So I've got to look at those areas for savings. Health care alone, in my budget, is almost \$52 billion, \$53 billion. So I've got to look at ways to try to get savings there as well.

But in doing that, I also and this is the most important point I've got to maintain faith with those that have served. We have promised benefits to those that have served. We're going to stick to it. So it means we've got to grandfather whatever savings we do in order to protect those benefits, and we will do that. We will do that. So those are some of the guidelines that we're going to have to follow as we go through this difficult period.

The Guard has proven itself it really has to be the force of first choice, not a force of last resort, across many of our vital missions. And we can't return to viewing and utilizing the National Guard merely as a strategic reserve to be deployed only in the event of emergency. That means we have to continue to invest in training and equipment. We've got to work harder to incorporate the men and women of the Guard into ongoing military operations by judiciously utilizing their skills and their capabilities as part of our strategic total force. You've got to be part of that.

I can't predict with any certainty the future of the conflict that we will face. Uncertainty is a part of this business. But I do know where or how our forces can be best deployed. And I do know that if this country has to go to war, we won't do it without the men and women of the Guard.

This is true not only because of the Guard's ability to augment and reduce the pressure on the active force, but it's because of their unique skills and capabilities. They bring tremendous skills, tremendous capabilities from every one of their communities to the work they do in defense of this country. And these high-demand skills in areas as diverse as cyber, building partnership capacity are going to be critical to fulfilling the military missions of the future.

Still, the Department must think critically about the relationship between the active and reserve components to ensure that we have the right mix of capabilities and personnel between the two in order to succeed in the complex set of missions that we're likely to face, from conventional conflict to irregular warfare to post-conflict stabilization procedures and operations.

This is an ongoing conversation between our military leaders from the active component, the reserve and the National Guard, and it must be. As part of the review this department is undertaking to inform and look at our budget decisions, we are pushing to identify capabilities and missions that should be moved from the active component to the reserve, and just as importantly, those capabilities that we've learned were not sufficiently resident in the active force that should be migrated from the reserve.

The goal of all of these efforts will be to ensure that the men and women of our total force are utilized in a way that keeps faith with the expectations that they will be assigned appropriate tasks and used judiciously.

What I want, and what I expect is balance in skill sets and personnel assignments and training. But we need to give our people balance in their lives as well. This is so important, because even though we have a great deal of advanced weapons and technology in the Guard, we all know the greatest asset we have is our people.

We've got to continue to attract and retain uniquely talented and capable individuals in order to sustain the strength and vitality of this institution. That means making sure that our Guard members and their families are cared for during every stage of mobilization.

Through the department's Yellow Ribbon reintegration program, we're striving to ensure that Guardsmen, their families and their employers are properly prepared for their deployments, and that they have access to services, referrals, and proactive outreach for the mobilization cycle.

The department also recognizes that maintaining the resilient and strong force that we have requires doing everything we can to address the unemployment. The Guard and Reserve earlier this year stood at 13 percent. The youngest are the most vulnerable in this respect the unemployment rate of 23 percent among junior enlisted Guardsmen and reservists.

That's unacceptable. Through efforts like the Yellow Ribbon Program, the employer support program of the Guard and Reserve, the department is working hard. We've got to make a commitment here to connect employers with talented service members.

I was just in New York yesterday talking to the business community up there and telling them how important it was for them to help provide jobs to those that are returning. We've got to we've got to work at this. We're supported by more than 4,700 volunteers who are working out there to communicate with our men and women in uniform about employment resources and potential jobs that may be available to them. We've got to continue to push on that effort.

Safeguarding the jobs of those that are deployed is an equally important responsibility unique to the Guard and Reserve. And our employer support programs work hard to make sure that those who are called to duty have the peace of mind that their job will be there when they go back home.

One concern that I know we share is the practice of off-ramping, when units have their scheduled deployments cancelled. I know how disruptive that can be to soldiers and airmen who have made major commitments when they're mobilized: leaving their jobs, leaving their schooling, terminating leases, moving their families ahead of their deployments. I want you to know that I am committed, along with the leadership of the National Guard, to avoid this practice where possible and to provide suitable alternative missions and other mitigation for units and individuals so that their lives will not be disrupted.

When I go through a book of deployments every week and I look at the those Guard units that were initially called up and for one reason or another are not going to be deployed, my question is, where else can we use them, where else can we deploy them to make sure that their lives are not disrupted?

These men and women have made a major commitment to our country. We owe it to them not to increase their hardships and try to ensure their quality of life. That's the sacred obligation, sacred obligation the American people owe to all of our guardsmen and indeed all of our service members, who often take on the full burden of war and done so continuously since 9/11.

As Secretary of Defense, I consider it my highest responsibility to protect those who have defended this country. I want you to convey to all of your guardsmen back home that I will fight for them here in Washington, just as they have fought for all of us wherever they've been called to deploy.

Later this week the country marks Veterans Day. It's an important opportunity to remember and to thank those who have served so honorably in the past, those who serve with such valor today, but also it's a time to ensure that we will honor their sacrifices by maintaining our commitment to this institution.

For over 375 years, generations of Guardsmen have pulled their weight at home and abroad, have given their strength, their commitment to the public good. They've exemplified the spirit of our nation, a spirit George Washington

made famous when he said that "when we assume the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen."

It's their proud legacy that is now in our hands. Today we must commit ourselves anew to the pressing forward that must be done, the hard work that must be sustained in order to maintain a strong National Guard, a strong military for the future. It won't just happen on its own. It demands not only that we fight on the battlefield, but we are going to have to fight here at home as well to make sure that the right policies are put in place.

I often tell the story of the rabbi and the priest who decided they would get to know each other a little better. So one evening they went to a boxing match, thinking that if they went to events like that that they would understand each other's religion a little better.

So one evening they went to this boxing match, and just before the bell rang, one of the boxers made the sign of the cross.

The rabbi nudged the priest and said, what does that mean? The priest said, it doesn't mean a damn thing if he can't fight.

My friends, we bless ourselves with the hope that everything is going to be fine in our democracy. Very frankly, it doesn't mean a damn thing unless we're willing to fight for it. Your presence here -- your presence here, the service that you provide this country makes clear that you are willing to fight, fight for that American dream my parents cared so much about that is so much a part of what this country is about, fight for strong national defense, for a strong National Guard, but most importantly, fight to protect a government of, by and for all people.

Thanks very much for having me.

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