1992 Chicago National Convention

SPECIAL ISSUE

The American Legion

DISPATCH

Wednesday, Aug. 26

STUMPING IN CHICAGO

Bush, Clinton bring messages to Legionnaires

Critics who say the United States didn't go far enough in Desert Storm by pushing deep into Iraq are wrong, says the nation's Chief Executive.

"I don't like the historical revisionists' view. We're not in the slaughter business. We did the right thing. We did the compassionate thing ," said President George Bush, speaking before more than 3,000 Legionnaires Tuesday morning.

Recounting the success of the U.S.-led forces in Operation Desert Storm, Bush told Legionnaires that Iraqi strongman

"This president will never allow a lone wolf to endanger the United States of America."

President George Bush

Saddam Hussein was contained by the invasion and economic sanctions.

He said the United States and its allies tried to bring about a peaceful solution to the Persian Gulf conflict before the war erupted. He described Hussein as a "madman with an arsenal of chemical weapons w stood on the chokehold" of the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

Mincing no words, Bush said Hussein will "live up to every one of the United Nations resolutions" that were adopted when the ceasefire was made.

The president, who is a paid-up-for-life member of Post 77, Houston, Texas, also said some positive results have surfaced since Desert Storm.

"A new world of hope is dawning in the Mideast," he said. "Israel and Arab nations are sitting down together and talking out their problems."

He praised The American Legion for its support for troops deployed to the gulf and those who were activated for stateside service.

"Your leaders went there and showed the Legion flag," he

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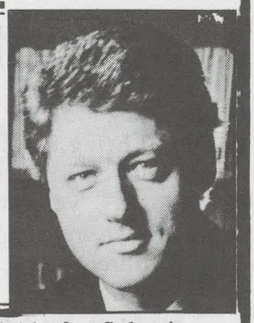
Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton Tuesday made no apologies to the nation's largest veterans organization for not serving during the Vietnam War, saying he opposed the war--but not the men who fought it.

Addressing delegates to The American Legion National Convention , the Democratic presidential nominee strived to diffuse criticism of his actions of joining, then withdrawing from the Arkansas ROTC program after receiving his draft notice in 1969.

"I was never against the heroic men who fought that war."

Gov. Bill Clinton



Clinton later made himself available for Selective Service, but drew a high number, 311, and was not drafted.

"I was never against the heroic men who fought that war. I feel I owe you a statement to set the record straight. If my number came up I would have served," Clinton told a packed convention ballroom at the Chicago Sheraton Hotel & Towers.

Concerning veterans health care, Clinton vowed that if he wins in November he will not merge VA with any other health care system, but stopped short of defining VA's status in any national health care program.

He also promised to simplify the maze of VA eligibility guidelines and open up the system to veterans being denied care, drawing his biggest applause line.

"I will honor your service by appointing not a secretary *of* veterans affairs, but a secretary *for* veterans affairs," Clinton said.

Clinton also promised he will consult closely with veterans groups before selecting a VA secretary, should he

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Teams advance to World Series

FARGO, N.D. -- The lineup of eight regional champions has been penciled in for the 1992 American Legion World Series, according to series officials in Fargo, N.D.

The series begins today at Jack Williams Stadium and continues through Sunday, Aug. 30.

The host city is buzzing about the local team sponsored by Gilbert C. Grafton Post making it to this year's tournament. Regional play concluded Sunday, Aug. 23.

Some 4,311 teams were certified to compete in the 1992 series. The regional winners are listed below, and include Post sponsors, where applicable:

Region 1: Connecticut, East Hartford Post 77

Region 2: New Jersey, Brooklawn Post 72

Region 3: Puerto Rico, Guaynabo Post 134

Region 4: Gonzales, La.

Region 5: Illinois, Arlington Heights Post 208

Region 6: North Dakota, Gilbert C. Grafton Post 2

Region 7: Oregon, Medford Post 15

Region 8: Newbury, Calif.

The Dispatch will carry full coverage of the championship game from Fargo in its Sept. 10 issue.

Arlington Heights, Ill. (41-15) faces Newbury, Calif. (36-2) in today's series opener.

Arlington Heights is making its first series appearance since 1976. That year, Arlington Heights represented Des Plaines, Ill. and finished second to Santa Monica, Calif.

Other pairings today include East Hartford, Conn. (49-8) vs. Medford, Ore. (43-15) in the second game. The third game, pitting Guaynabo, Puerto Rico (30-7) against Brooklawn, N.J. (43-9) is scheduled for a 5 p.m. start.

In the fourth game, Gonzales, La. (48-9) faces series host Fargo, N.D. (64-10).

Thursday's action gets underway at 10 a.m., followed by another doubleheader scheduled for 5 p.m. Friday's first doubleheader begins at 1 p.m., at 2 p.m. Saturday, and back to 1 p.m. for the series finale.

Nearly 60 percent of all major league players played American Legion baseball, and Legion baseball alumni count 31 members of the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in their ranks.

This year represents the 67th anniversary of American Legion baseball, and the 66th American Legion World Series. There have been 638 series games played since 1926.

Medicare funds mean more bucks for VA medical coffers

Using Medicare funds to treat veterans will bring more money into the VA health-care system, a leading congressional veterans advocate told Legionnaires today.

"Thirty percent of veterans in VA in VA hospitals are covered under Medicare, but currently they can't use it. We could pick up a lot of money and put that money in a local (VA) hospital," said Rep. G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery, addressing Legionnaires at Tuesday's opening convention session.

Montgomery said he supports a pilot program using Medicare funds to help veterans pay for care they no longer receive due to excessive eligibility restrictions. Current law prohibits veterans using Medicare funds to reimburse VA for care.

Montgomery, a Life Member of Legion Post 21, Meridian, Miss., is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

"The VA has never faced a more critical time in its history," Montgomery told Legionnaires.

He admitted funding for VA programs is inadequate to meeting veterans' health-care needs, and that quality of care is suffering as a result.

In another development, Montgomery announced his committee will begin hearings Sept. 16 investigating unexplained illnesses suffered by growing numbers of Persian Gulf War veterans.

Veterans exposed to toxic fumes and smoke from Kuwaiti oil fires during the war have reported flu-like symptoms, bleeding gums, fatigue, hair loss and other health problems.

"Based on concerns brought to our attention by The American Legion, individual veterans and their families, we see significant reason to look into this matter, and we want to ensure that the concerned agencies coordinate their efforts," Montgomery said.

The committee's health-care panel, also chaired by Montgomery, has scheduled its first hearing for 9 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 16 in Rm. 334 of the Cannon House Office Bldg. in Washington, D.C.

He said the panel will take testimony from American Legion officials, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Centers for Disease Control.

Win makes color guard unit enjoy 'Pure Heaven'

National Commander Dominic D. DiFrancesco congratulated the Pure Heaven Color Guard, Unit 37, Ames, Iowa for winning championship honors last weekend.

"They did a fantastic job after coming so close to winning last year," DiFrancesco said. "My congratulations go out to all who took part in this great Legion convention tradition."

The Pure Heaven Color Guard won national champion in the category,

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• Bush

said,Bush also touched on other issues of concern to the Legion, especially the sweeping changes that have occurred in Eastern Europe and throughout the former Soviet bloc.

"Who would have thought four years ago (Bush's appearance before Legionnaires at the National Convention in Louisville) when we last met that the dominoes would fall in democracy's direction?"

"Communism didn't just fall -- you helped push it," he said. The president also said the West must help new democracies rebuild their economies, too.

And he also had some words of caution about the fall of the Soviet Union.

"The Soviet bear may be extinct, but there still are wolves in the woods," he said. "This president will never allow a lone wolf to endanger the United States of America."

A World War II Navy pilot, Bush promised he would not allow the nation's defenses to become obsolete, even as the government continues with its reduction in manpower and spending programs for weapons systems.

The president also spoke briefly about the controversial POW-MIA issue. "Our greatest hero is the one who has not come home (from the Vietnam War). We will not have normal relations with Hanoi until we're satisfied" the fates of American MIAs have been resolved.

The American Legion has demanded the U.S. government open up all of its files pertaining to missing servicemen from World War II, Korea and Vietnam wars. A special POW-MIA update was conducted Monday by the Legion (*see Tuesday edition of The Dispatch*).

Bush also took time out to tout his economic agenda for the United States. He said the nation must remain "global" in its dealings and that it should avoid isolating itself economically from the rest of the world.

"The promise of prosperity must not blind us to other challenges," he said. "We must fight the protectionism impulse here at home."

Bush also jokingly reminded Legionnaires of the gaffe he committee in Louisville in 1988 when he inadvertently referred to Sept. 7 as Pearl Harbor Day.

"It was a day that will live in infamy," he said, drawing laughter from Legionnaires. "Boy, what it does it take to live down something with this crowd."

After his remarks, Bush was presented with The American Legion Distinguished Service Award medal by Past National Robert S. Turner, and he was also inducted into the ANAVICUS, by PNCs John Geiger and Dan Foley.

"Communism didn't just fall -- you helped push it."

• CLINTON

be elected. And he criticized delays in processing benefit and disability claims.

"It shouldn't take longer to get your VA benefits than it took to liberate Kuwait."

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"The lessons The American Legion taught me are lessons I've practiced all my life," the candidate said, city Legion programs helping veterans, disabled veterans, children, and the homeless.

"I will honor your service by appointing not a secretary *of* veterans affairs, but a secretary *for* veterans affairs."

Stressing a non-partisan foreign policy, Clinton repeated his support of the president's stand against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, and administration policies in the Yugoslavian civil war.

"The American people do not believe either political party has a monopoly on love of country," said Clinton. "Patriotism is not partisan."

Clinton proposes putting troops cut in the military downsizing to work in other areas to cushion anticipated defense cuts in coming years.

"The Pentagon stands as America's best youth training program, and our most potent research center. It's time to put those assets to work at home in the battle to make America strong once again," he said.

He also backs incentives allowing troops to earn military retirement pay by working civilian sector jobs in education and law enforcement.

The five-term Arkansas governor also attempted to fend off claims his lack of military experience might hamper his ability to function as commander-in-chief. He said Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan had little or no prior direct military experience prior to being elected president.

Returning to the Vietnam War era, Clinton said he supports efforts to account for Americans missing in action in Vietnam and previous wars.

"I do not know if there are still American POWs being held. But I do know this: when I'm your president, the files will be thrown open, the roadblocks will be torn down and the truth will come out."

The candidate also addressed the military downsizing and its effect upon not only the nation's military preparedness but the estimated one million defense industry workers whose jobs will be eliminated.

He said that while he "will never allow a hollow Army," he differs with Bush over the nation's strategic priorities.

Cmdr. details 'journey of success'

When National Commander Dominic DiFrancesco was elected last year he promised the 3.1 million members of The American Legion that he would lead them down a path where "success is a journey -- not a destination."

Yesterday, DiFrancesco took delegates down the path the organization has traveled the last year. "Your service to America's veterans, their families and the children of the country is unequaled," DiFrancesco said, delivering his report of activities to Legion delegates at the 1992 National Convention. "Your responsibility is real and your ability is unquestioned."

DiFrancesco, a Korean War veteran who served in the Navy, talked about the various issues Legionnaires faced, ranging from the organization's vigorous opposition to certain VA health care proposals, to its support for a new GI Bill of education for Desert Storm veterans.

Not long after DiFrancesco was elected, he led the Legion's fight against the Rural Health Care Initiative.

"By virtue of your leadership and the strength of our membership, The American Legion was successful in leading the fight to prevent an ill-begotten scheme to admit non-veterans while veterans continued to be turned away," DiFrancesco said, drawing a swell of applause from Legionnaires. "We're equally adamant in our current campaign to see that all eligible veterans are permitted to take advantage of Medicare benefits to pay for VA health care."

DiFrancesco also urged Legionnaires to continue with their efforts to ensure that veterans' medical programs receive realistic funding, and that all veterans who need care are admitted through reform of current eligibility rules.

"The VA must prepare for the growing numbers of aging veterans," the commander said. "It must adjust to meet the medical needs of a growing number of women veterans."

He also set his sights on the nation's defenses; specifically, the current downsizing of the military and cuts in defense spending. He said the cuts are being made at a time when the nation's economy is sluggish and the jobless rate remains high.

"Lawmakers quiver like Jell-O when you try to pin them down on what they're doing to ease the transition from a life in uniform to an uncertain future as civilians competing for jobs in the American economy," he said.

He also took time out to tout the Legion's quest for a new GI Bill for veterans who servedc during the Persian Gulf War. The Legion first proposed such a measure before last year's national convention, the only veterans' group to do so. Earlier this year, a measure was introduced in the Senate for increased educational benefits for those who served during the conflict.

"This new legislation is essential if a grateful nation is to help these veterans become productive, taxpaying citizens, rather than homeless street people, as too many of today's veterans have become."

DiFrancesco also mentioned other highlights of his year at the helm, including the Legion's never-ending campaign for a constitutional amendment to protect the U.S. Flag;and resolving the fates of America's servicemen who were reported missing in action.

He also touched on such highlights as his participation in ceremonies at the Pearl Harbor Memorial in Hawaii last Dec. 7, and a historic trip he took to New Guinea to place American Legion plaques honoring U.S. heroes from World War II. He introduced one of the men honored by such a plaque, former Army officer Meredith "Hug" Huggins, and his grandson, Shawn Gilley (*see convention preview edition*).

"I set several goals a year ago when I assumed the office of National Commander. Thanks to you, your leadership and your vision, we have accomplished much. Still, I remind you -- success is a journey -- not a destination."

VA chief fumes over smoking in VA hospitals; promises aging veterans to get better care

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs says he isn't blowing smoke when it comes to the health veterans in VA hospitals.

"VA is determined to have a smoke-free environment in all of its hospitals," Derwinski told national convention delegates Tuesday afternoon.

"The facts of life is that it's just good medicine to ensure that our patients and employees kick the smoking habit," said Derwinski, adding that the accreditation of VA hospitals is threatened if facilities refuse to enforce smoke-free policies.

Derwinski, a member of Legion Post 1160, Department of Illinois, said VA also is looking at the long-term health-care needs of veterans, especially those who served during World War II.

The average age of veterans who served in that era is 70, Derwinski said.

"Our geriatric programs must expand and we're asking our (affiliated) medical schools to provide us with more geriatric specialists," Derwinski said.

Derwinski, who steered clear of any mention of the controversial Rural Health Care Initiative -- which he supported and the Legion opposed -- also touted VA's role in establishing a registry for Persian Gulf veterans. The registry allows gulf veterans and those still on active duty to be tested for any potential health problems they might have contacted when they were stationed in the Persian Gulf.

Derwinski said tests are available at all VA hospitals and that more specialized screening is available at VA sites in West Los Angeles, Houston (Texas), and Washington, D.C.

The secretary also announced that a special agreement between VA and the National Academy of Sciences is looking into the possible health effects of exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange, which many troops were exposed to while serving in Vietnam.

"To a large degree, I believe we will have solved the Agent Orange issue," Derwinski said.