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"A Lucky Generation", American Legion Convention

Max S. Baucus

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"A Lucky Generation"

Senator Max Baucus
American Legion Convention
Great Falls, Montana

July 7, 1995

Good morning. Thank you all very much. It is a real honor to speak here at your Convention.

A LUCKY GENERATION

I spent a lot of time last May going to graduations. Some of them were right around here. Geysler, Hobson and Stanford in Judith Basin. Dodson and Harlem up on the Hi-Line.

Then some further away -- Opheim all the way over by Glasgow and Browning up on the Blackfeet Reservation. The first graduation was right around the time of the V-E Day anniversary. And the next to last, Opheim, fell on Memorial Day.

And the whole experience -- speaking and listening to a lot of our young people -- brought home something important to me. That is, we are lucky we are to be alive today. We are a lucky generation.

It is true that Montanans today have a lot of problems and frustrations.

We're creating a lot of jobs, but our incomes are growing very slowly.

Senior citizens face rising health care costs and financial pressure on rural hospitals -- and with the cuts in Medicare and VA hospitals coming under the new budget, the pressure will rise.

And the competition in beef and grain from our neighbors a few miles up I-15 makes our agricultural producers work harder than ever to stay in the black.

We even have garbage salesmen from places like Minneapolis and New York who think our prairie towns are the perfect places to ship big city trash.

These are tough problems. We need to address them. We need good economic policies and a sound farm program. And I can guarantee you, no New York City garbage salesman will get one inch past the Dakota line if I have anything to say about it.

But sometimes we also should step back. Step back and remind ourselves that as tough as they are, these are the problems of a country at peace.

MONTANA IN THE WARS

When I was born, right around the beginning of the war, Montana's young people had a very different set of problems from those young kids last month. They were not deciding whether to work at home on the farm, move to town or go on to college.

It was just a few months after Pearl Harbor. Quiet prairie towns turned into military camps. Malmstrom opened up here in Great Falls, and St. Marie in Glasgow. Montana young people -- many of you here tonight -- signed up by the thousands as soldiers, sailors, Army nurses and Marines. And man for man, in the next four years we lost more people than all but one other state.

The Cold War decades were no easier. Some of you went off to Korea and Vietnam. All of us lived with the chance that, any day, the entire country could be wiped out -- that missiles would "rain down," as Khrushchev put it, from Russia onto every American city from Los Angeles to Boston and from Great Falls to the Mexican border.

THE MILITARY BUDGET

Today's world, because of your courage and your sacrifice, is very different.

You have given to those children a world at peace. A world in which -- for the first time in more than sixty years, since Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 -- America faces no powerful foreign enemy.

It is up to us to keep it that way. And although we may not have Hitler or Stalin any more, we still have some nasty customers. We have North Korea looking for a nuclear bomb. We have Iraq itching to get back at us. And we have big armies, nuclear weapons and unstable governments in China and Russia.

So we still have to be prepared for anything. And that can be hard to remember in peacetime, when the military is always a target for budget-cutters.

It is true that some cuts in the past few years were justified. We don't need a huge standing army in Western Europe. But there is a limit. I think defense, like agriculture, has taken its share already. Going lower would be a big risk. And although we've had a lot of attempts to keep cutting this year, I voted against them all and I don't think they'll succeed.

Our armed services, and the military budget which makes them the world's best, are not a cash cow. They are an investment in the safety and security of our country.

We made big mistakes by scaling down the armed services so fast after World War I and World War II. When we took ourselves out of world politics in the 1920s and 1930s, we helped bring on World War II. Our virtually complete demobilization in 1946 meant untrained troops and thousands of unnecessary casualties just four years later in Korea.

Now as then, we simply do not know what the future will be. And we have to be ready to defend our country.

MALMSTROM AIR FORCE BASE

You don't have to look far for an example. Imagine someone in 1940 who said that in a couple of years, pilots would be flying round-the-clock missions out of Great Falls to support the Soviet Army. In those days, they probably would have locked up anyone who made such a prediction as a subversive or a lunatic.

But it happened just the same. Flights to Russia go over the North Pole. So we have no continental airbase closer to Russia than Malmstrom; and we also have very few that are so geographically secure from foreign attacks.

That is why, during World War II, President Roosevelt and General Marshall chose Great Falls as our central Lend-Lease base for the Soviet Union. Our pilots provided the Soviet army with trucks, aircraft parts, boots, uniforms and other supplies crucial to the defense of Leningrad, the Battle of Kursk, and ultimately the march to Berlin.

Right here in Great Falls was one of the key sites in World War II.

THE BASE CLOSING COMMISSION

That, of course, brings me to the Base Realignment and Closure Committee. As you've probably heard, they made their final recommendation to the President late in June. They propose to expand our missile mission, while moving our tankers down to Florida and shutting the runway.

Taken as a whole, that's about as good as we could expect. But I think they're making an awful mistake to say we don't need to fly out of Malmstrom any more. Even with the world at peace, even with the deficit and all our other problems, we just can't tell the future. And Malmstrom's flying capacity is a national security resource we should not give up easily. There is still a possibility that the President would ask for changes, in which case we may have a chance to keep the runway.

And while I'm on the subject, we and the community here should give a hand to Warren Wenz, Tim Ryan and the Committee of 80. They did a great job making our case over the past year and organizing the BRAC hearing last April. And the Committee deserves a lot of credit for the BRAC's wise decision to keep and expand Malmstrom's missile

mission. We all worked together. And although we didn't get as much as we wanted, we did pretty well.

If the President approves the Commission's recommendations, the BRAC bill will come up before the Senate in the next few months. Under the Commission rules, it is impossible to amend. So I will want to hear your advice, today or in the next few weeks, before I reach my own decision.

FLAG AMENDMENT

Then, not too far in the future, the Senate will vote on an amendment to protect the flag.

And you know where I stand. I respect the First Amendment. But I cannot imagine that when Madison and the founders drafted it, they had any idea that someday the Supreme Court would decide that burning a flag was a form of speech. It is ridiculous. It is not common sense. And I don't think it will last.

Last week, the House of Representatives passed a Constitutional Amendment to reverse that decision. And I'm a cosponsor of the amendment in the Senate.

We are still a few votes shy. But we are working hard, and we've got a lot of good people in the American Legion and VFW on our side. So I am optimistic.

CONCLUSION

And I am also optimistic about an even bigger subject.

When I went to those graduations, I made a point of reminding the kids of their heritage. Telling them about the Montanans who served their country and left them a world at peace and a future with almost unlimited prospects.

In the Judith Basin schools, I told the story of one of our Medal of Honor winners in the Second World War. A man named Bill Galt, who some of you may have served with. He grew up on a ranch between Stanford and Geyser, graduated Geyser High in 1938, and was killed clearing a German trench at the Battle of Monte Cassino.

Or at Browning, about some of the Blackfeet Marines like Orville Goss and Sidney Brown who were wounded at Iwo Jima.

And at Opheim, about another Medal of Honor winner -- Henry Schauer, who grew up on a farm near Scobey.

TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE

And the experience left me feeling better than ever about our state and our future.

You often hear bad things about young people today. You will people say that our kids are apathetic. That they don't care about their heritage. They don't know about Iwo Jima and they can't find Vietnam or Korea on a map.

But don't you believe it. We have a great generation of kids coming out into the world.

When I talked about Bill Galt down in Geysers, they were listening. Almost fascinated. They wanted to know more. It was really a moving thing to see.

And I'll leave you not with any inspiring rhetoric or political talk, but with a little request. Every once in a while, I hope you get out to our schools and talk about your experiences. Talk about the things you have seen and the people you served with.

Because that will do more than anything to preserve our heritage -- our values -- our appreciation of our very real blessings alive.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today.

God bless you, and God bless America.