

The Fayetteville Observer

VP visit: Soldiers return to hero's welcome

Published on Thursday, April 09, 2009

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Vice President Joe Biden welcomed home soldiers from a 15-month deployment to Iraq, thanking them and their families Wednesday for the sacrifices they have made.

Biden's address on Fort Bragg's Main Post Parade Field came during a welcome home ceremony for the 18th Airborne Corps headquarters. The ceremony closely followed Barack Obama's first trip to Iraq as president.

Biden said the corps gave Iraqis "a fighting chance" to establish a peaceful government.

"I am absolutely confident the Iraqis are in a much better place to take care of their own nation," Biden said. "It's amazing to me as I go out into these battle spaces, how you just look at it like, 'This is my job, sir. Mr. Vice President, or senator, this is my job,' like you're showing up to the bakery that morning to make sure the muffins get put out."

Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, the commanding general of Fort Bragg and the 18th Airborne Corps, and about 40 members of the 18th Airborne Corps Headquarters returned home Sunday. That wrapped up the recent return of a group of 900 soldiers who served a 15-month tour in Iraq in charge of all coalition ground forces.

During those 15 months, Austin said, insurgent attacks fell from more than 400 a week to fewer than 100 a week — the lowest levels since the war began. The corps oversaw Iraq's recent provincial elections.

Biden, reading from a teleprompter, spoke for nearly half an hour as 1,200 soldiers from different units in the 18th Airborne stood on the Main Post Parade Field. Another 1,500 people — including dignitaries and public officials — listened from beneath nearby tents.

Biden said the sacrifices that families make while soldiers are away at war can't be overlooked. The vice president said he and his wife, Jill, who attended the ceremony, can empathize with families. The Bidens' son, Beau, is serving in Iraq as a captain with the Delaware Army National Guard. Biden quoted poet John Milton, who wrote, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

"There is no one we owe a greater debt to, as Gen. Austin pointed out, than your families." Biden said, eliciting a round of applause. "So many people — good, decent Americans — don't have any idea of the depths of the sacrifices your families make."

But even as the war in Iraq is wrapping up — Obama plans to end combat there by Aug. 31, 2010 — the strain on troops and their families isn't ending.

Biden said focus must shift to Afghanistan.

“That’s where al-Qaida is, that’s where bin Laden is, that’s where the jihadists are who attacked the United States of America,” Biden said. “There’s more work to be done, which means there are more people who are going to be separated from their families. We’re going to be asking more of those of you who wear the uniform.”

The nation cannot ask so much of its soldiers without committing to take care of them when they come home, Biden said.

He said if there were only \$10 in the federal budget, and \$6 of that was needed to care for soldiers and veterans, the rest would have to make do with the other \$4.

“We will spend all six before we spend it on anything else — on the elderly, on children, on the poor, on our roads, on our security — because this is the only genuinely sacred obligation this nation has,” he said.

Biden touted the administration’s proposed budget and the stimulus package, which include \$30 million in investment at Fort Bragg, \$7 billion in military construction projects and increased funding for veteran services.

The stop at Fort Bragg was Biden’s first as vice president.

Before his speech, he presented six soldiers the Bronze Star and another soldier received a meritorious service medal.

The corps honored Biden with a 19-gun salute and gave him one of the 105 mm Howitzer artillery shell casings as a souvenir.

North Carolina has been a regular stop on this administration’s itinerary. Biden visited the state last week to promote the \$787 billion federal stimulus package. President Obama set the deadline for the Iraq war and outlined his new war strategy in February while speaking to Marines at Camp Lejeune. And first lady Michelle Obama came to Fayetteville last month to meet with military wives.

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