

8/14/95  
Gulf War Illness

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**Remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton  
to the President's Advisory Committee on  
Gulf War Veteran's Illnesses  
Washington, DC**

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. I am delighted to be here at this first meeting, and on behalf of the President, I want to thank the Chair and members of the President's Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses for your willingness to perform this public service. I also want to welcome all the veterans, their friends and families, who are here to talk about their personal experiences and to hear from the Administration officials who have been working diligently on the issues raised in the President's Executive Order creating this Committee.

I want to start by emphasizing again how proud we all are of our victory in the Gulf War. Because of the enormous skill and bravery of American troops, an end was put to Saddam Hussein's brutal and illegal occupation of Kuwait. Because of the strength of U.S. leadership, the international community came together to stop and reverse unprovoked aggression against an innocent nation.

This Presidential Advisory Committee is an important example of the President's commitment to leave no stone unturned in the Administration's efforts to understand Gulf War veterans' illnesses and to make sure that the government is responsive to veterans' needs.

In his announcement, the President assured Gulf War veterans that we are grateful for their bravery, and we are as proud of them today as all of us were when they returned victorious in 1991. And most important, the President made it clear that just as we relied on our troops when they were sent to war, we must assure them that they can rely on us now.

The President and I have heard from many Gulf War veterans and their family members about their illnesses. We have received letters from all over the country, and have had the privilege of meeting with many veterans and family members in person. Some of these men and women, such as Steve Robertson and Nancy Kaplan, will be speaking to you this afternoon.

Veterans have told me about their frustrating efforts to find out why they are ill and how their illnesses can be treated. They have shared moving stories of the devastating effects on families

when fathers and mothers become disabled and unable to work. They have described what it was like to serve their country in a desert land where oil well fires turned the day to night, and where sandstorms made it difficult to breathe. Some described scud missile attacks, or told of frequent use of insecticides to protect them from insect-born diseases.

Many Gulf War veterans have been outspoken in seeking and providing information about their illnesses. This Advisory Committee will determine whether the experiences these veterans describe in the Persian Gulf, and in receiving medical care, have been adequately addressed or whether there are additional actions that need to be taken.

When Secretary Jesse Brown and I met with veterans at the local VA Hospital here in Washington, and when then Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch and I met with active duty soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital, the stories we heard touched us deeply, and provided important information as well. I know you will be working closely with veterans, who will be an invaluable resource in your deliberations, and I am pleased you will begin by hearing directly from Gulf War veterans today.

I have also met with the physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals from the VA and DOD who have worked with Gulf War veterans who are ill. They too express great frustration about the difficulties they have faced in helping some of the veterans and their family members whose illnesses remain undiagnosed. I know you will also work closely with these dedicated men and women, and learn from their experiences.

When the men and women of the U.S. military, Reserves, and National Guard were called to war in 1990, our Nation knew that we could rely on them, and they served our nation honorably.

When we look back to the euphoric parades for returning U.S. troops in 1991, we can still remember a great feeling of relief. We had won the war, and most Americans had returned home safely.

But throughout 1991 and 1992, there was increasing concern about some of our Gulf War veterans. There were veterans who described symptoms that did not respond to treatment, and did not go away as expected. When my husband became President and learned that the numbers of veterans with chronic symptoms seemed to be increasing, he took an active interest in helping our veterans.

Because of the leadership and dedication of the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Health and Human Services, this Administration has already made unprecedented efforts to help Gulf War veterans. For example, never before has an Administration moved so quickly to conduct research aimed at helping returning soldiers who are ill. This year alone, the three Departments will

spend approximately \$15 million to study possible environmental hazards, to determine whether illnesses have been transmitted to spouses and children, and to develop improved treatment programs.

With the leadership of the VA, this Administration strongly supported laws to ensure that compensation is available to those who are disabled, even if the direct causes of the illnesses stemming from their military service are unknown. The VA is also providing priority medical care to Gulf War veterans, and both VA and the Defense Department have established special treatment centers to help veterans whose illnesses are particularly difficult to diagnose.

The Defense Department has also recently initiated a new program that will declassify documents and other information about the Gulf War, and make them available on Internet.

All these efforts will serve our veterans well, and most were accomplished with bipartisan support from the 103rd Congress, under the leadership of then Chairmen of the Veterans Affairs Committees, Sen. Jay Rockefeller and Rep. Sonny Montgomery, and their Committee members.

As President Clinton stated when he first announced this Advisory Committee, he is determined to do whatever it takes to respond to the concerns of Gulf War veterans.

This Administration has already convened several other panels of outside experts to examine various issues pertaining to Gulf War veterans' illnesses, but it came to realize that the issues are so complex they require a more comprehensive, sustained effort.

And so the President established this Advisory Committee, to be independent and appropriately staffed, with the relevant experience and expertise that the members represent. This Advisory Committee is unique because, as the President outlined in his Executive Order, you will review all aspects of the Federal governments' programs and policies that affect Gulf War illnesses, telling us what we are doing right and what we should be doing better.

The Executive Order specifies that you will provide "advice and recommendations" based on your review of the following: research; medical treatment; risk factors from service in the Gulf War, including possible environmental factors, and drugs and vaccines; reports of the possible detection of chemical and biological weapons; coordinating efforts that have been established by Federal agencies; external reviews by other expert panels; and outreach to veterans.

As you can see from that list, your mandate is broad. In your efforts to review all these programs and policies, the Secretaries

are pledged to assist you, and you will find their doors open to you. And the President has made it absolutely clear, in his Executive Order and in his announcement of this Advisory Committee, that when you consider your task, no issue is off limits and every reasonable inquiry should be pursued.

There are many opinions about how many Gulf War veterans are ill, what has caused those illnesses, and how they can best be treated. In talking to veterans and to those who are trying to serve them, it is clear that those opinions are as strongly held as they are diverse.

And so, your task is a difficult one. There are many unanswered questions, and we are counting on you to make sure that this Administration is doing all it can to catalog relevant questions and, in so far as possible, answer them.

For that reason, you were selected on the basis of your wide range of expertise in medical issues, scientific research, policy, and military matters. The veterans on the panel will contribute their invaluable perspectives from their military experiences, and it is particularly important that two of you served in the Gulf War. You all were selected because you do not have pre-conceived notions about the scope of the problem of Gulf War illnesses, or the causes and treatment.

None of us knows what the research now being conducted or called for in the future will tell us. So far, the research that the government has conducted indicates that thousands of veterans who were healthy when they left for the Gulf War are now ill. Many veterans believe that these symptoms cluster together into a "Gulf War Syndrome" that is unique. Based on the research to date, however, experts have concluded that there is not enough evidence to call this a syndrome. This is an issue that will continue to be studied as more research is completed.

There are disagreements about the likely causes and the best treatments for these symptoms. These issues also will continue to be studied as more research is completed.

The President has appointed this Advisory Committee because we do not yet have the answers to these important questions. These are complicated scientific questions that deserve careful scientific scrutiny.

In his Executive Order, the President has entrusted you to make sure that the Federal government is supporting appropriate research, and that, whenever possible, the results are being used to inform treatment, compensation, and priorities for future research. You are also entrusted to examine the wide array of Federal programs and policies to make sure that they not only make

sense, but also that they are being administered effectively and humanely.

I want to leave you with the image of an open door. Perhaps your most important tool as you serve on this Committee is your ability to be open-minded, to take advantage of our open-door policy to seek out the information you need to evaluate all existing programs and policies, and to make recommendations to ensure that this Administration will continue to be responsive and responsible to our veterans. We owe them that much, and more, and all of us are grateful for your willingness to take on this important public service. Thank you very much Madame Chairman.

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