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Barack Obama

Address at the Military Retirement Ceremony for Gen. Martin Dempsey

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Forty-five years ago -- in June of 1970 -- a telegram arrived in upstate New York at the home of 18-year-old Marty Dempsey. "Congratulations," it read, "You are appointed to the West Point Class of 1974..." Marty was honored. But he had just finished high school, and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to head off to the Academy. His mother, I'm told, thought different. She urged him to "give it a try for the summer" -- which sounds like Beast Barracks meets sleep-away camp. Sound advice, with a little Irish charm, runs in the Dempsey family.

Over the decades that followed, he patrolled the Iron Curtain, commanded divisions on desert battlefields, and led America's soldiers -- and more than a few times, he burst into song. And over these last four years, Marty's wisdom, his vision, and his character have helped lead the greatest fighting force the world has ever known.

Secretary Carter, Deputy Secretary Work, members of Congress and the Joint Chiefs, service secretaries, men and women of the Defense Department, our armed forces and our military families -- it is a deep honor to join you as we pay tribute to a singular leader for our military and our nation, and one of the finest men that I know -- General Martin Dempsey.

A little over four years ago, I tapped Marty to serve as Chief of Staff of the Army. We let him enjoy it -- for one day. Then, I asked him to be Chairman. So let me just say, Marty, and more importantly, Deanie, this time I promise, no surprises tomorrow.



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I chose Marty for these leadership roles because of his moral fiber and his deep commitment to American strength and values. I chose him because of his vision for our military as a more versatile and responsive force. I chose him because he had the steady hand we needed in this moment of transition -- as we tackle emerging threats and support so many of our troops as they transition to civilian life. And I've seen Marty manage each of these challenges with integrity and foresight and care. But perhaps most of all, I chose Marty because he's a leader you can trust.

Marty, you've always given it to me straight. I can't tell you how much I've appreciated your candor and your counsel. And I've seen you build that trust not just with me, but across our military, with our troops and their families, with Congress and our allies abroad, and with the American people.

Today, thanks in no small measure to Marty's leadership, America has reassured allies from Europe to the Asia Pacific. We ended our combat mission in Afghanistan and brought America's longest war to a responsible end. We've forged new partnerships from South Asia to the Sahel to meet terrorist threats. We've built a coalition that is combating ISIL in Iraq and Syria. We have bolstered our cyber defenses. We helped halt the spread of Ebola in West Africa.

None of this would have been possible without Marty's guidance and leadership. And what makes it more remarkable is that he's guided our forces through a time of reckless budget cuts. With less than a week before Congress needs to pass a budget to keep the government open, let me just say now is not the time for games that lock in sequester. It's not good for our military readiness. It's not good for our troops. It's not good for our family. And it's not good for our country. As Commander in Chief, I believe we should invest in America and in our national security, and not shortchange it.

Yet, even in these tough fiscal times, Marty has made sure we maintain our military superiority. And no one can match our services because no one can match our service members -- our sons and daughters who he's cared for like his own. In them, he sees the West Point classmates of his youth. He sees those he commanded. He sees their families -- and, in them, he sees his own.

There's Deanie, of course, Marty's high school sweetheart, lifelong better half, whose grace and resilience and good cheer embodies the military spouses she fights so fiercely for. Chris, Megan, and Caitlin -- who followed in their father's footsteps to wear our nation's cloth.

Marty's mother, Sarah, who we thank for making him give the military a try "for the summer." And there are his nine grandchildren, who we can be confident will mark this nation in so many positive ways in the future. On behalf of the American people, I want to thank the entire Dempsey family for their service to our nation.



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Marty will be the first to tell you that he couldn't have done his job without his outstanding Vice Chair. And I, too, have depended on the advice and experience of Admiral Sandy Winnefeld. Thank you, Sandy, for your outstanding service.

In General Joe Dunford and General Paul Selva -- two of the most respected officers in our military -- we have tested leaders ready to carry on Marty and Sandy's work. I could not be prouder of them and the service they've already rendered this great nation. And I could not be more confident in the advice and counsel that they'll provide me. Thank you to them. Thank you, Ellyn. Thank you so much for everything that you've done.

Now, we're going to have a lot of work to do long after not just Marty is gone, but I'm gone from the stage. There are always new threats, there are always new challenges in this ever-changing world. We have to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, the remnants of al Qaeda, terror networks around the world. We have to adapt our defenses for the 21st century. We have to give our troops the support they need to meet their missions. We have to make sure that our forces and our families receive the pay and the benefits and the quality of life that they have earned. That is how we maintain a military that is second to none. And I am confident that we are up to the task.

I'm told that on Marty's desk there's a box -- it's a cigar box with 132 cards, each one with the name, picture and story of every one of the 132 soldiers who gave their lives under his command in Iraq. And on top of the box are three words: "Make It Matter." Make it matter. And every morning, Marty places three of those cards in his pocket, so that every moment as Chairman -- every meeting, every trip, every decision, every troop review -- every moment of every day some of those fallen heroes are with him.

Those cards were with him a few years back when, for the first time as Chairman, Marty spoke to a group of military children who had lost a parent. And that day, as he walked through the crowd -- some 600 Gold Star kids, young, so full of hope -- he began to think about their lives and how each of them would have to make their way without a father or a mother. And Marty had planned to speak -- but he couldn't. So he did one of the things that he does best. He began to sing.

And in that moment, the highest-ranking military leader in our nation forged a bond with those children -- boys and girls who, at such a tender age, had given up so much -- in a way that perhaps nobody else could. And year after year, they've invited him back, because they know Marty Dempsey will always give them everything he has -- his voice, but even more, his full heart and soul.

This is the man we honor today. A friend to so many troops and families across our military. A patriot with a profound love for our country and those who sacrifice for it. A trusted leader who in a time of great change "made it matter" all the time.



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I am extraordinarily grateful to have had him by my side through the bulk of my presidency, and I am extraordinarily proud to call him my friend.

Marty, for your lifetime of extraordinary service, you have the deepest thanks of a grateful nation. God bless you. And God bless our men and women in uniform.