

they went to victory for our country with lightning speed. When they came home, for reasons that we still don't fully understand, thousands of them became ill. They served their country with courage and skill and strength, and they must now know that they can rely upon us. And we must not, and will not, let them down.

Three years ago I asked the Secretaries of Defense, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs to form the Persian Gulf Veterans Coordinating Board to strengthen our efforts to care for our veterans and find the causes of their illnesses. I signed landmark legislation that pays disability benefits to Gulf war veterans with undiagnosed illnesses. DOD and VA established toll-free lines and medical evaluation programs.

I am especially grateful to the First Lady who took this matter to heart and first brought it to my attention quite a long while ago now. I thank her for reaching out to the veterans and for making sure that their voices would be heard.

To date, we have provided Gulf war veterans with more than 80,000 free medical exams. We've approved more than 26,000 disability claims. HHS, DOD, and the Veterans Department have sponsored more than 70 research projects to identify the possible causes of the illnesses.

But early on, it became clear that answers were not emerging fast enough. Hillary and I shared the frustration and concerns of many veterans and their families. We realized the issues were so complex they demanded a more comprehensive effort. That is why, in May of 1995, I asked some of our Nation's best doctors and scientists, as well as Gulf war veterans themselves, to form a Presidential advisory committee that could provide an open and thorough and independent review of the Government's response to veterans' health concerns and the causes of their ailments.

Since that time, we have made some real progress. The Department of Defense, with the CIA, launched a review of more than 5 million pages of Gulf war documents, declassifying some 23,000 pages of materials and putting them on the Internet. Through this effort, we discovered important information concerning the possible exposure of our troops to chemical agents in the wake of our destruction of an arms depot in southern Iraq.

The committee made clear and the Defense Department agrees that this new information

demands a new approach, focusing on what happened not only during but after the war and what it could mean for our troops. Based on the committee's guidance, the Department of Defense has restructured and intensified its efforts, increasing tenfold its investigating team, tracking down and talking to veterans who may have been exposed to chemical agents, and devoting millions of dollars to research on the possible effects of low-level chemical exposure.

I'm determined that this investigation will be comprehensive and credible. We haven't ended the suffering. We don't have all the answers, and I won't be satisfied until we have done everything humanly possible to find them. That's why I welcome this committee's report and its suggestions on how to make our commitment even stronger. I also take seriously the concern regarding DOD's investigation of possible chemical exposure. I'm determined to act swiftly on these findings not only to help the veterans who are sick but to apply the lessons of this experience to the future.

I've asked the Secretaries of Defense, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs to report to me in 60 days with concrete, specific action plans for implementing these recommendations. And I am directing Secretary-designate Cohen, when confirmed by the Senate, to make this a top priority of the Defense Department. I'm also announcing two other immediate initiatives.

First, I've asked this committee to stay in business for 9 more months to provide independent, expert oversight of DOD's efforts to investigate chemical exposure, and also to monitor the Governmentwide response to the broader recommendations. The committee's persistent public effort has helped to bring much new information to light, and I have instructed them to fulfill their oversight role with the same intensity, resolve, and vigor they have brought to their work so far. Dr. Lashof has agreed to continue, and I trust the other committee members will as well.

Second, I'm accepting Secretary Brown's proposal to reconsider the regulation that Gulf war veterans with undiagnosed illnesses must prove their disabilities emerged within 2 years of their return in order to be eligible for benefits. Experience has shown that many disabled veterans have their claims denied because they fall outside the 2-year timeframe. I've asked Secretary