

American Legion leader urges strength, not apologies, in overtures to Muslim world

WASHINGTON (June 5, 2009) -- The head of The American Legion is stressing the need for strength as well as conciliation in President Obama's current campaign to improve relations with Muslim countries.

"Although The American Legion does not believe that the United States has *anything* to apologize for, we appreciate the spirit of President Obama's call for what he termed a 'new beginning' in our relationship with the followers of Islam," said David K. Rehbein, national commander of the nation's largest veterans service organization.

"We must demand reciprocity of both spirit and deed," he said. "When the president pronounces, as he did in his conciliatory address in Egypt, that the events of September 11, 2001, in his words, 'led us to act contrary to our traditions and our ideals', he must, in our opinion, demand equally public admission from the Muslim world that elements within its community have been responsible for egregious acts of terrorism including mass killings, torture and public beheadings – acts that must be contrary to *their* traditions and ideals.

"When the President announces that, to quote him, 'we are taking concrete actions to change course,' with reference to the exercise of certain interrogation techniques and the very controversial order to close detainee housing at Guantanamo Bay, then it is incumbent upon him to demand that the Muslim community take concrete and demonstrable action to suppress and eliminate those within their own ranks who are responsible for uncounted, unprovoked acts of terrorism.

"The extension of the hand of friendship and its return are hopeful signs, but the United States of America is not willing to accept total blame for the conditions that have led to the present state of affairs," he said.

On a related topic, Rehbein said the recent killing of a young soldier at a recruiting center in Arkansas by an ideologically radicalized murderer further demonstrates the risks inherit in housing Guantanamo Bay terror suspects on American soil. "Even if these detainees were to be housed in the most secure premises possible," said Rehbein, "they might still be free to communicate their radical beliefs to fellow prisoners, thus converting already known criminals to their murderous points of view – much as the Arkansas killer was persuaded to commit his act of terror.

"Even greater danger would be imposed upon our citizens if radicalized detainees were ever set free in this country," Rehbein said. "President Obama claims that it is within his power to hold the suspected terrorists indefinitely, but that argument has yet to be settled definitively in the courts. This past Tuesday, for instance, U.S. District Court Judge John Bates ruled that, by law, some detainees – potentially dangerous ones in our opinion – should not be held under current circumstances. If they are moved to domestic soil, their release could pose an immediate danger to our citizens. This is unacceptable. Beyond that, the threats of escape and the availability of outside assistance to detainees is far greater here than they are on an isolated Caribbean island.

"The overwhelming majority of both lawmakers and ordinary citizens are strongly opposed to housing terrorist suspects within our borders," Rehbein concluded. "It is our hope that the President, even as he reiterates his intention to close the Guantanamo Bay facility, will keep this mandate, and the emotional comfort and physical welfare of *our* citizens, in mind."