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Biden recognizes the sacrifice of service members in a speech ahead of Memorial Day.

By Glenn Thrush

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President Biden delivered an emotional speech on Friday honoring the sacrifice of combat veterans ahead of the planned withdrawal later this year from Afghanistan — and recalled his many trips to a battle-scarred country he called “God-forsaken.”

The president, addressing service members in a hangar at Joint Base Langley-Eustis in Virginia, set out to honor the troops ahead of the Memorial Day weekend. He singled out the contributions of soldiers who served repeated tours overseas, and their families, whom he described as the “backbone” of the military.

But he frequently wandered off script, settling on the subject most prone to pull him from a teleprompter: his late son Beau Biden, who was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in Iraq.

“I shouldn’t be talking so much about my son, but I’m not going to apologize,” said Mr. Biden.

The president’s speech came a day after the Pentagon confirmed that United States troops and their NATO allies intend to be out of Afghanistan by early to mid-July, well ahead of Mr. Biden’s Sept. 11 withdrawal deadline to end America’s longest war.

“I’ve been in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan over 20, I think 25 times, and I’ve seen — I wish everyone could see — what you do when you’re there,” he said. “So my message to all of you is quite simple. Thank you. Thank you.”

Mr. Biden then offered a bittersweet recollection of his own experiences in Afghanistan, saying he had “the pleasure, as they say” of visiting the whole country, from forward operating bases in the north, to poppy fields in the south.

“It’s all one God-forsaken landscape, but you all just showed up and did your job,” he told the service members and their families.

Mr. Biden leavened his otherwise somber delivery on Friday with a couple of lighter moments.

The president likes fast cars — and fast planes — and he grouched about not being able to hitch a ride on an F-22 Raptor, a stealth fighter plane housed at Langley-Eustis.

“God, I’d love to go for a ride in one of those,” he told the audience. “I’m your commander in chief, why the hell can’t I command you let me go up?”