

The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia

*Remarks as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Double Tree Hotel, Crystal City, VA, Thursday, June 21, 2001.*

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Thank you very much. I think it's fun to be back at the Pentagon for the third time. I thought it might be a little easy, but then [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld said, "We're going to keep bringing you back until you get it right." And then I realized I was in for some demanding times.

But it is a real pleasure to be back with the League with whom I've spent so many evenings like this one. I want to thank the League in the person of my good and most persuasive friend [Executive Director, National League of Families] Ann Mills Griffith for inviting me to join you this evening. This is one occasion when Ann didn't have to twist my arm. It is a pleasure to be here.

As many of you know, I've had a longstanding association with the League dating back nearly 20 years when I first went to work in the State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

I remember those early days when George Brooks was your chairman, and I'm sure he's with us in spirit this evening. I'm sure George Shine is also. His granddaughter, Colleen, helped keep the League and family quest alive, and is here in person.

My admiration for this organization and its vital mission - its mission to keep missing Americans in the forefront of U.S. foreign policy - has deepened through the years, and I'm delighted to be here as you gather for your 32nd Annual Meeting.

Indeed, I've thought this organization epitomizes something that is so characteristic about Americans through the decades. It's something that was noticed by the great French writer and observer Alexis de Toqueville almost 200 years ago when he commented on the Americans' ability to form associations for the public good-voluntary associations for the public good. Certainly this is exactly such an association.

I'm also pleased to see [former Deputy Secretary of Defense] Rudy de Leon here tonight, my predecessor. Like the members of the League, Secretary Don Rumsfeld and I know Rudy as a patriot and a friend of the highest order. We had a tough transition with very little help around, and Rudy was kind enough and dedicated enough and quite bipartisan enough to stick with us and help us through a couple of tough months, and Rudy, we thank you. [Applause.]

As I look at Rudy here tonight and I think about the budget debates we've been going through this week, I'm glad that there's obviously at least one person here who feels my pain. [Laughter.]

In addition to the families, I want to recognize particularly Congressmen Sam Johnson and Martin Frost, both from the great state of Texas; my colleagues at this table and in the audience from DoD [Department of Defense]; distinguished guests from the NSC [National Security Council] and my old haunts at the State Department, other distinguished guests, veterans, and most of all our returned POWs. I salute all of you.

The League's dedication and devotion have made a difference in the lives of countless Americans - not only for those who served our nation in the past, but also for those who serve us now. They have fought for the policy and the resources to enable our government to support the tireless work of our men and women working on behalf of our missing. This partnership is unprecedented in the world, and it has raised the issue of the missing as a priority, even in the lands of our former adversaries.

Some 15 years ago when I was at the State Department as Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, Ann Griffiths and [former director of Asian affairs at the National Security Council] Dick Childress and

[former Assistant Secretary of Defense and current Deputy Secretary of State] Rich Armitage and I traveled together to Vietnam. That was January 1986, and at the time we were the most senior executive branch delegation to visit the country since the end of the war. That time Ann did have to use her persuasive powers because I was initially, to put it mildly, a somewhat reluctant participant.

Communist rhetoric infused a process that was characterized by fits and starts and deceptions, in addition to the fact that almost a quarter of a million Vietnamese troops were then occupying Cambodia. But Ann and Dick Childress, who can be persuasive in his own way, said to me, "You've got to go. There is hope. The State Department has to show the flag." So I had no choice, and I went.

We traveled to Hanoi where we met with the senior levels of the Vietnamese government, and by the time our talks had concluded my initial skepticism had been replaced by a sense of hope because I felt we had made progress and we could make more progress in the future.

I became convinced then that further progress in the face of that rhetoric and posturing from Hanoi would come only through unwavering steadiness of purpose in future negotiations and in future policies.

It's been gratifying to be able to observe the progress made since that trip 15 years ago by those who have been faithful to the cause, by those who assisted painstakingly through recovery sites in the field, by those who have applied the marvels of science to identify those missing who have returned.

I'm aware that fitful maneuvering and domestic pressures sometimes made hopes seem remote or even unrealistic, but, certainly, as we look over the course of time great progress has been made.

The extent of that progress was brought home to me very poignantly on a sad occasion some two months ago. Quite a few of you here this evening gathered with us at Fort Meyer to remember the lives and service of men from both the United States and Vietnam who had been killed in a helicopter accident during a joint recovery mission.

The Americans who died in that crash were members of Joint Task Force Full Accounting, and the Central Identification Laboratory. One of those killed, Detachment 2 Commander Lieutenant Colonel Rennie Martin, captured the essence of why someone would take up the cause of removing uncertainty from the hearts of fellow Americans. He told his father, "All of a sudden, you are here, and you have a mission to let a family know: we found him."

Rennie was about to hand the reins over to Lieutenant Colonel "Marty" Martin, who was also killed on the mission. Before he left for Vietnam Marty told his father, "Dad, I can't wait to get over there." He couldn't wait to do his part to bring certainty and solace to the families of those who are missing still.

That same sense of noble purpose guided the others who were killed on that joint mission: Major Charles Lewis, Sergeant First Class Tommie Murphy, Master Sergeant Steven Moser, Chief Petty Officer Pedro Gonzalez, Technical Sergeant Robert Flynn, and nine of their Vietnamese colleagues.

Their good deeds and their lives of honor will not only endure but they will strengthen the cause for which they sacrificed.

Those servicemen who died in the line of duty were dedicated to a noble cause, seeking answers about their fellow servicemen for themselves and their families. Their colleagues maintain that dedication with pride. It is a sacred trust we owe to those who serve. If they fall on the field of battle, we, their country, will do everything in our power to find them.

That is a solemn compact our government has with each and every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine and Coast Guardsman who serves. Our men and women in uniform will have faith in us only if we keep faith with those who went before.

Our continuing efforts will succeed only with joint cooperation which improved greatly under [former Secretary of Defense] Bill Cohen and Rudy de Leon, and which we intend to continue.

We saw evidence this week of the improvement and cooperation with the announcement that two fallen warriors will finally go home to families who have been keeping their own vigil for close to 36 years. Air Force Colonel Harley Pyles of Enon, Ohio, and Marine Colonel Winfield Sisson of Berkeley, California, were killed when their aircraft crashed into the side of a mountain in 1965. For their families, the long wait is finally over.

As the families here know, their recovery and return is the result of years of painstaking effort -- effort in negotiations, effort in analysis, effort in numerous visits to incident sites, efforts in the process of forensic analysis. Rudy de Leon made it a priority to secure adequate resources critical to continuing this effort, and Ann Griffith has made me, without much twisting of arms, to pledge to you this evening that both Secretary Rumsfeld and I will continue the work that Rudy pursued with such determined dedication. [Applause.]

We are committed to meeting the needs of the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii and the other teams that work on our investigate research and recovery operations such as the Joint Task Force at Camp Smith, Hawaii, and the Armed Forces DNA Lab in Maryland.

We will continue to support strongly the work of the Defense Intelligence Agency's Stony Beach Team. We will ensure that the critical skills of the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory will be fully used. We are firmly committed to strengthening our defense POW/MIA office to help develop policy and ensure its implementation. They will have a renewed focus and we will look to them for the analysis we will need for negotiations. [Applause.]

Most importantly and I think I know I'm speaking also for my good friend the new Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Jim Kelly in saying we are committed to strengthening the diplomatic efforts needed to gain unilateral actions on the part of Vietnam-actions at the core of resolving the many discrepancies we must address. In particular, to account for Americans last known alive in captivity or in proximity to capture.

With what we've long known of Vietnam's wartime and post-war behavior, we are confident that in addition to our successful joint operations, Vietnam can help us further on remains and archival records.

We are determined to continue to search for resolution to free you and all the families from the prison of uncertainty whenever and wherever possible. Our commitment includes seeking answers for the families whose loved ones are still unaccounted for from the Second World War and the Korean War to the Cold War. It is an obligation we owe to those who serve and to their families, and we will honor it by giving the task our best efforts so one day the men and women of organizations like the League can themselves return home, their mission complete.

Let us recognize the significant progress that has been made over the last two decades, but also recognize the many gaps that must be filled. It is a challenge that this administration intends to meet.

As President Bush said on Memorial Day when he was surrounded by Arlington's testament, row on row, to ultimate bravery and sacrifice, and I quote the President, "Those missing deserve and will have our best efforts to achieve the fullest possible accounting, and alive or dead, to return them home to America."

Three weeks ago I had the opportunity and the honor and the privilege to speak to our future Army leaders at the West Point commencement. I spoke to them, among other things, about courage, and especially moral courage, and I told them about a West Point soldier from the class of 1959, a soldier who's name is still listed among America's missing, a name known to many of you - Captain Rocky Versace. His heroism and his courage are legendary.

In October of 1963, just weeks shy of completing his second tour in Vietnam, he was captured by the Viet Cong and held in a prison in South Vietnam. Even under excruciating torture he defied his captors and sang "God Bless America".

I told the cadets that Rocky Versace exemplified honor and courage and that 40 years after his death, his life, his determination, his patriotism, and his courage call out for recognition. If Congress agrees, we will answer that call and recommend to President Bush that Captain Rocky Versace, Class of 1959, be awarded the Medal of Honor. [Applause.]

Rocky did not return to us, but other heroes who did return are with us tonight, those whom Ann introduced earlier. I thank you for supporting the League's continuing quest and for your great service to our country.

These men serve as living reminders of the depth of sacrifice that can be asked of those who wear our nation's uniform. They remind us of the debt we owe to all the brave Americans who are yet missing and yet unaccounted for, and the debt we owe to the families who represent them and long for them.

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, members of the League have led their own valiant effort to ensure that these men will not be forgotten. They have traveled to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia to meet with foreign officials. They have walked thousands of miles through the halls of the Pentagon, the State Department and the Congress, telling the stories of husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, and loved ones - reminding all Americans of our sacred duty.

To paraphrase the words of an English poet, wherever American heroes have fallen, there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever America. But, whenever possible, we want to bring them home to rest in the country they loved and served so well. So we must not, we will not, cease our efforts until we can return to America's welcoming arms and yearning hearts those heroes who have been missing far too long.

I look forward to working with all of you and with the League on this noble task in the days to come.

Thank you very much, and thanks for inviting me to speak. [Applause.]