

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

Remarks by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Arlington, VA, Thursday, June 20, 2002.

Thank you, Joanne [Joanne Shirley, Chairman of the Board]. Thank you for everything that you and the members of the National League are doing to keep people focused on our unfinished business in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.

General Davis told me that he was at a dinner last night where the speaker spoke after dinner for an hour and a half, so by my count I have until midnight. [Laughter] I'll try to let you go sooner than that.

I'm very pleased to be here this evening. I'm very pleased to see members of our armed forces, our extraordinary armed forces who are doing such a marvelous job defending our country today, both active duty and reserve and retired, from all the services. I'm also encouraged by the presence here tonight of others whose steadfastness has given this cause so much encouragement, and particularly our former POWs. I refer to our good friend Congressman Sam Johnson from the great state of Texas and two other returned POWs who are with us this evening, Kevin McManus and David Gray. And why don't you stand up one more time so we can recognize you? [Applause]

Seeing the three of you at dinner here this evening I'm reminded of another brave American, Captain Bill Andrews, who endured captivity with honor. Despite a broken leg and brutal abuse from his captors he lived in hope. "As he later put it, I had faith in my country and I knew that I would never be forgotten."

I also see a lot of family members of our missing servicemen, the parents and siblings and children who have never wavered in their commitment to bring them home at last.

I've gotten to know many of you over the years. I think it's 19 years since my first League dinner, if I remember right, and we all draw great inspiration and strength from your tireless devotion.

I'd also like to salute the supporters and associate members of the National League who are here tonight for no other reason than because of their friendship and their support for a noble cause. [Applause] On behalf of our President and Secretary Rumsfeld I want to thank all of you for joining us.

And I'm very pleased to see that my good friend Dick Childress is here as well. That's no surprise, of course, to any of us who know him. After years of faithful service in the Army and at the National Security Council staff, Dick is retired. Or to put it more accurately, he's retired from the day-to-day responsibilities that he handled for so long. But as those of us who know him can attest, Dick will never retire from the work of finding and bringing home our missing heroes. [Applause]

Sixteen years ago when I was Assistant Secretary of State, Dick and I traveled to Vietnam together, along with Rich Armitage who was then at the Defense Department and is now our Deputy Secretary of State, and your own Ann Mills Griffiths who has kept the flame burning for so many years.

At that time we were the most senior executive branch delegation to visit Vietnam since the end

of the war, and we went with some skepticism, and in my case that is a gross understatement. In fact Ann practically had to break my arm to get me to come. By the time we concluded our talks with senior Vietnamese officials in Hanoi we felt that we had made some progress. More importantly, we were confident that we were moving the issue in the right direction.

By the same token it was also clear beyond a doubt that further progress would only come if we as a country maintained our sense of purpose, both in our future dealings with the Vietnamese government and in our own policies here in Washington. That's something that none of us in this room has ever forgotten, and I can assure you, speaking for Rich Armitage as well as myself, we're not about to forget it now that we're back in government. [Applause]

Over the many long and frustrating years that the League has kept the home fires burning, I've sometimes heard it said that if we fail to keep faith with those who did their duty in the past we could not expect Americans to do their duty in the future should that need ever arise.

It might have been easy to dismiss those words during periods of peace and prosperity, but that need has arisen. The truth of those words came home to us in an inescapable way on September 11th and in the weeks and months since.

When the terrorists struck on that awful morning nine months ago they thought they had taken our measure and found us wanting. They thought us weak, wedded to comfort, and softened by the life that we do enjoy in this great nation of ours, but they were wrong. Dead wrong.

Yes, they hurt us. They hurt us badly. Striking without provocation and by surprise against an unsuspecting people going about their daily business. And we have grieved for every one of our countrymen and women who died aboard the hijacked aircraft, who died in the World Trade Center in New York, and who died just a few blocks from here at the Pentagon.

But that blow, as dreadful as it was, did not intimidate the American people. On the contrary, it revived that great American spirit which has always been one of our distinguishing characteristics as a people. It reminded us not of our weaknesses but of our strengths.

With the inevitable comparisons to Pearl Harbor I was reminded of Winston Churchill's reaction to the Japanese sneak attack when he addressed the joint session of Congress after we had declared war. Recounting the outrage of that assault and the brazen acts of aggression against the British in East Asia, Churchill asked, "What kind of a people do they think we are?"

Secretary Rumsfeld answered that question in our own time by speaking of those who gave their lives at the Pentagon. "They died," the Secretary said, "because of how they lived. As free men and women, proud of their freedom, proud of their country, and proud of their country's cause, the cause of human freedom. They died because they were Americans."

One man's pride in his country summed it up for all who died on that terrible day. Secretary Rumsfeld recalled what was said of Navy Lieutenant Commander Vince Tolbert who died in the Pentagon on September 11th. "To his family, his friends and his peers," the Secretary said, "Tolbert was a hero every single day."

Vince Tolbert's father, himself a Navy veteran who flew combat missions in Vietnam said, "The Navy lost a good officer. I lost a good son."

That same pride burned within the passenger on board Flight 93 over Pennsylvania, led by a young father named Todd Beamer. They were heroes too. "Let's roll," he said. And they did. They rolled right over the hijackers' sick dream and brought that plane to an end in a Pennsylvania field.

Todd's father says he's asked himself many times since why his son was on that plane, but David Beamer gives his own reply. "We know why," he said. "Todd and those newfound friends of his, newfound freedom fighters is what they were, they were there to do the right thing."

Americans have always done that. Throughout our history Americans were there to do the right thing. That's the kind of people we are.

On Memorial Day just a few weeks ago President Bush was at a peaceful beach in Normandy where at another desperate moment in history another generation of young men had their own rendezvous with destiny. They fought for the values we all hold dear. They were a lot like Vince Tolbert and Todd Beamer -- men who were good sons, good fathers, good citizens. They never set out to be heroes, but when called upon they lived the part. When duty called, they answered. They didn't shy away from that duty, they embraced it.

In his Memorial Day speech, President Bush recalled the words of one of those GIs who reflected on the service of his youth, helping to defeat Nazism and to liberate Europe. "I feel like I've played my part," that veteran said, "in turning this from a century of darkness into a century of light."

The 20th Century is history now, both its darkness and its light. It falls to us to carry that same light forward into the 21st Century. But the beacon will be dim if we fail to honor the debt that we owe to those who have yet to return from the scenes of their struggle. We owe it to them and to posterity.

The unfinished business of the 20th Century must be our business in the 21st.

As President Bush put it when speaking of the fight for freedom, "We will not waiver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail." You have his word on that.

The brave men and women who are serving today in Afghanistan and in other theaters of the war on terrorism can do so with full confidence that if they do fall in battle this nation will spare no effort to bring them home. That's our solemn pledge. However long it takes, wherever it takes us, whatever the cost.

I stated again tonight for the benefit of those who served in years past and for the benefit of those who are serving this very night in defense of freedom and peace in lonely places in the world, we will not rest until that pledge has been kept in full.

Jerry Jennings will help make sure of that. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Prisoners of War and Missing Personnel, and as Director of the Defense POW and Missing Personnel Office, Jerry is the President's point man on the issue.

Why don't you stand up, Jerry, just so they know who to point at. [Applause]

Like the Marine that he is, Jerry hit the ground running when he assumed his new responsibilities. The story is told that when Jerry arrived in Cambodia the Prime Minister expressed surprise that he would be so diligent in the search for servicemen who have been missing for 30 years when thousands were still missing from the World Trade Center. Jerry's response was characteristic. "Mr. Prime Minister," he said, "those victims in New York City aren't missing. We know exactly where they are. But the GIs, the American soldiers that are missing in Cambodia, we don't know where they are and that's why I'm here."

And that's why he's focusing on other areas as well, including Korea and China and the former Soviet Union.

Jerry has the support of a President who this March sent Congress a candid determination on Vietnam's cooperation including language advising Congress that the Vietnamese should be doing more in certain areas. Specifically, and I quote from the President's statement, "Vietnam's unilateral provision of POW/MIA related documents and records should be improved. Focusing initially on archival data pertaining to Americans captured, missing or killed in areas of Laos and Cambodia under wartime Vietnamese control. Vietnam should also focus greater attention," the President said, "on locating and providing information on discrepancy cases with priority on those last known alive in captivity or in immediate proximity to capture, and to locating and repatriating the remains of those who died while in Vietnamese control that have not yet been returned."

Those words of our President define our mission. [Applause]

President Bush also took the opportunity in that document to reaffirm his personal commitment to the POW/MIA community and to the families and friends of the missing in particular. In his words, "achieving the fullest possible accounting of our prisoners of war and missing in action remains one of the most important priorities in our relations with Vietnam. The goal of this Administration is nothing less than to write the final chapter in this painful history."

I'm sure this audience will take it in the right spirit when I say that we would like nothing more than to put the National League of Families out of business. [Applause]

But when the POW/MIA flag is furled for the last time, we want it to be with the knowledge that the League's job is done at last, that we have kept the faith, never forgetting those who, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "gave the last full measure of devotion."

Back some 60 years after the day when Pearl Harbor was attacked and America was drawn into the war that was raging around the globe, England's great Prime Minister Winston Churchill observed in his memoirs that this meant the end of the war, even though it was four years away still. And he reflected on the fact that there were many silly people, as he called them, not only in enemy countries but here in England that might discount the force of the United States. "Some were saying the Americans were soft, others that they would never be united, they would fool around at a distance, they could never stand the bloodletting. Their democracy would paralyze the war effort. Soon we would see," these people said, "the weakness of this numerous but remote, wealthy and talkative people."

We haven't changed much in 60 years. [Laughter] Nor have our enemies.

But Churchill went on to say that he knew something of American history. He said, "I thought of a remark which had been made to me more than 30 years before by Foreign Minister Edward Grey" when the United States entered the First World War. "'The United States,' Gray said, 'is like a gigantic boiler. Once the fire is lighted under it there is no limit to the power it can generate.'"

This organization with its spirit of ordinary citizens organizing to achieve a common purpose and its extraordinary energy is an example of the energy that powers that gigantic boiler.

So this night I would encourage you in your task. Now is the time to double and redouble your efforts. You have friends in the right places, but we need your continued help. Working together we hope to write that final chapter.

So thank you all so much. God bless you. God bless our missing heroes. And God bless this great country. [Applause]

