

CAROLINE KENNEDY: Thank you. Good morning. Good morning everyone and welcome to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and the second day of the Vietnam and the Presidency Conference, the first conference sponsored by all the presidential libraries and the National Archives. For scholars and students, presidential libraries hold the memory of our nation. They are unique repositories of our country's history.

And for the general public, their interactive museums offer visitors the opportunity to hear, see and experience the events that shaped our nation and understand the lessons of leadership. We are especially honored here at the Kennedy Library to host this conference. And, on behalf of the library and foundation and the members of my family, I want to thank all of you for coming.

President Kennedy wrote that history was a means by which a nation establishes its sense of identity and purpose. In his book, *Profiles in Courage*, the 50th anniversary of which we celebrate this year, he also proved that the lessons of history can be used not only to illuminate the past but to set the standards by which we measure our leaders.

He encouraged members of his cabinet to read *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman's history of the misjudgments that led to the First World War, in order that American leaders would never be in the same position as German after the war. When the foreign minister was asked after the war was over

and 20 million lives had been lost, “How did it all happen?” he answered, “Ah, if only we knew.”

This conference and the continuing popular dialogue about the war in Vietnam help to play a critical role in making sure that Americans will know and understand the causes and consequences of this conflict. The span of that history is long. Outside in the foyer, there are documents from presidential library archives chronicling US involvement in Vietnam beginning with notes from the 1943 discussion in Tehran between President Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin on the fate of Indochina and culminating with the decision to normalize relations between the United States and Vietnam symbolized by the first official visit to Hanoi in November 2000 by President Bill Clinton.

Yet the lessons of Vietnam have never been more relevant. Those of us who grew up in families and in a society torn apart by Vietnam and who are parents today, struggle to help our own children make sense of another controversial foreign war that is coming into our homes and changing our world.

That is why we are so especially grateful to the policymakers, officials, reporters, war veterans and historians who are willing to share their wisdom and experience with us today. I know how much my father relied on the advice and counsel of Ted Sorensen. And we are so fortunate to have him

here, along with so many other extraordinary participants and observers of our country's longest conflict.

I know I speak on behalf of everyone in the audience in expressing my appreciation for all the speakers for your willingness to participate in this historic proceeding. I also want to thank the Archivist of the United States, Allen Weinstein and the National Archives and Records Administration under whose auspices this conference has been sponsored. And all the presidential libraries and library foundations for their support.

We're especially grateful to President Jimmy Carter who, although he could not be here today, offered an exclusive interview on how the war in Vietnam affected his presidency. And to President Gerald Ford who personally invited members of his administration to insure that this conference would have the greatest possible participation of policymakers from the Kennedy through Reagan presidencies.

Finally, I want to thank Deborah Leff, the director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum and all those at the Kennedy Library and foundation who worked to organize this event.

Monitoring today's sessions is someone who began following war and commenting on it to the President as a seven and a half-year old boy. I have a copy of a letter he wrote-- A little flag here. "Look at this." [Laughter]

On November 25, 1966, the original of which is on display at the Johnson Library in Texas--

“Dear Mr. President, I hope that the men in Vait Nam are doing well! How are you felling? [Laughter] I hope you are felling good! I’ am 7 and 1/2 years old! And I like you! I have not ben in the White House befor. but I will some time. I live in new york stat in Elmira! I want to visit you! Signed, one of you’r young Democreets, Brian Williams. [Applause]

Even though every sentence ends with an exclamation point, I guess he never got the invitation because today Brian Williams is a registered Independent. In the introductory essay to the book *Dear Mr. President* in which this letter is reprinted, Brian Williams explains that as a child he was not allowed to eat dinner until after the evening news. So the story of the Vietnam War unfolded nightly in his family’s den as it did in so many other American homes.

And can tie events in his family’s history to milestones in the war. It was during these hungry years that young Brian hatched his dream to be a TV news anchorman. A childhood fantasy that came true in December 2004 when he was named anchor of the NBC nightly news. Since that time he has become the nation’s most watched news anchor. And distinguished himself most recently with his coverage from New Orleans of the devastation cause

by hurricane Katrina, which has been widely compared to the work of Edward R. Murrow.

Brian Williams understands the presidency, having served as NBC's chief White House correspondence during Clinton's first term in office. And he is continuing to cover US foreign policy and the war on terror. He spent days in the desert south of Najaf with the army's 3rd infantry division and was one of the first correspondents to reach Baghdad after the invasion began. As anchor, he has continued to produce riveting reports on how American soldiers wounded on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan are overcoming their injuries at Walter Reed hospital.

We are honored to have him here with us today to guide our discussions and hope that his participation will encourage more Americans to take a greater interest in America's past and in the events of our own time. Thank you.

[Applause]

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Well, Caroline, I don't know how to quite thank you for that. No document ever disappears with this library crowd. I forgot that they could find that. So I was seven. If you look closely at the letter, which I'm sure Caroline has having distributed to all members of the audience today as part of your packet, I spelled it Democret, C-R-E-T. So technically, I was making no reference to any known party. And, as she correctly

pointed out, since I have come of age to vote, I have been a registered Independent as, in my view, every good journalist should ever since.

I'm thrilled to be here in this city where my father was born, in this museum dedicated to a man I worshipped in life and in death. And I want to thank the organizers, the volunteers, all the participants, obviously, all the members of the audience. We have a thousand people watching over at the satellite center at UMASS and hundreds of thousands will see this, thanks to the good folks at C-SPAN. And tip of the hat, of course, to the presidential libraries who are doing this as a collective, as a consortium. And we appreciate that.

I'm proud to say I visited most of the presidential libraries in this country. All of this is happening under the aegis of the Archivist of the United States. And we should pause to remember that over the door at the National Archives already well know, it says, "Past is Prologue." And we should really make that our motto and our operating thesis, in my view, here today.

America has a wound. We have many wounds, of course. We ask the American Native community in this nation. We have wounds like Antietam and Selma and Dallas and Ground Zero. These days I would add to the list a place I always considered the most interesting city in the country, New Orleans, Louisiana. But there is no wound as raw and as wide and shared by so many American families in our day and generation as the Vietnam War.

And today, we are going to talk about it. And we are going to deconstruct it. And we are going to debate it and we are going to ask and answer questions about it. That is where you come in. You all have cards and we will bring your questions up here and we will try to mix it up as best we can. So that is an important role of what you are going to see unfold. We will here from men and women who know war, who have written about it, who have witnessed it, who have talked about it and who have fought. By my count there are seven veterans on today's panels.

Back to "Past is prologue," for just a moment. Vietnam affected nine presidents. It led to the outright defeat, that is to say departure from office of one of them. And arguably a promise to end the Vietnam War guaranteed the reelection of another. Some would argue and have that we are fighting in many ways the same war today. Something tells me that argument will come up today.

Vietnam is constant in the life of each of the post-Vietnam era American presidents. I recently talked to one of them. And this is how we will start the morning with a former president, who happens to be a veteran of the US Navy. Ladies and gentlemen, my conversation recently with former President Jimmy Carter.

[VIDEO CLIP]

[Applause]

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mr. President, first of all, on behalf of the Library, thank you for doing this, and I think we should start fairly generally. That is, the effect on your life, on your presidency, as a veteran, as a father, the effect of the Vietnam War.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, first of all, I had a son, my oldest son Jack, who was in Vietnam. He was at Georgia Tech as a student, felt that the draft, or the absence of it wasn't fair, so he left college and went to Vietnam.

And, obviously, I inherited the White House from Gerald Ford, under whom the withdrawal from Vietnam took place. So it was a very important issue in my own life personally.

Within the next year or so we began talks with the Vietnamese representatives at the United Nations and in Washington to see if we could normalize relations. And that didn't pan out while I was president, but I've been very grateful that it did occur not too long after that.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: How serious, Mr. President, did those talks on normalization ever get?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, they obviously reached my point as President of the United States. I had my memoranda from the Secretary of State, from the National Security Advisor, pro and con, recommending the degree of publicity we could give to the secret talks, on how many members

of Congress we should involve. The demands of the Vietnam people was that we pay reparations to them in some way. And they finally, in 1978, I believe it was, dropped that demand.

It was complicated, to some degree, by the fact that in the same year, 1978, was when I was involved in intense and personal negotiations to normalize diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

So compared to China, and compared to this Camp David talk between Israel and Egypt, I would have to say that the Vietnam normalization was not the top priority on my list.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: And looking back in the long view of history, it would have been awfully early, compared to the date of withdrawal from Vietnam, to have normalized relationships, I guess, during your administration.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, it would have been quite early. But we did begin talks, I know. I looked up some of the records recently, in 1978. So it was a matter of discussion then. But as I say, it wasn't a top priority.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: You have called the pardon the most difficult decision you had to make during your campaign for president. It was clearly your first official act as President. Go back, if you will, and remember for us the thinking that went into the pardon.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Yes, well, in inaugural ceremonies, on the stage with President Gerald Ford, one of my closest and best personal friends now, I departed from my original text to thank him for having healed our nation, a man whom I had just defeated in the 1976 campaign. And when I left the inaugural stage and platform and went inside the Capitol Building, before I even went to the White House, I signed a directive that gave a pardon to all those who had defected from the military in order to avoid service in Vietnam. I didn't pardon deserters from the military, but those who did defect and went to Canada, I gave a blanket pardon to them.

It was very difficult political issue. And I know that within that same brief period of time, I spoke to the American Legion, I believe it was, and my action in giving the pardon was not the most popular thing in that big forum. But it was the right thing to do, and I was just following up, basically, on the heroic action that President Gerald Ford had taken in trying to heal our nation, and to give us a chance to move beyond the Vietnam War and obsession with Vietnam into another era of life.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Of course, before the ink was dry, and you referenced this, the critics said it went too far, that it dropped ongoing prosecutions. The critics on the other side said you didn't allow for deserters. Was it the first lesson in your presidency of not being able to please anyone and no good deed going unpunished?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, it had to be the first lesson in my presidency because it was the first thing I ever did in my presidency, other than give my inaugural address. It was done within 30 minutes after I was inaugurated President. And so it was a good indication to me, not all that surprising because I had been governor beforehand and I had been in politics a good bit.

But there's no way to please everybody, certainly on something that was as obsessive in our country as was the Vietnam War. And beginning, as you know, ten years earlier in 1968 with the Democratic Convention with massive demonstrations, this altercation had been a deep and penetrating division in our country.

But I think that that was a major step that was necessary at the time, and I don't have any regrets since then in starting to heal our country and getting us to move beyond the Vietnam War to better things.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mr. President, I was in an airport recently and saw a group of volunteer greeters waiting for some combat veterans to return home from Iraq, and I thought to myself, "If only that had happened for our veterans in the Vietnam conflict." Some people often say, as you know, "You can go ahead and hate the war if you want to, but don't hate the soldiers fighting it, because their actions are noble on the battlefield, reflecting the decision of the chain of command."

I'm curious as to your feelings about how soldiers, how returning veterans, were treated in this country after the Vietnam War.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, as I said earlier, Brian, my older son was one of those who did return. I think he came home to Plains twice while he was in the military. And he was adverse to wearing his uniform while he was home on leave, because there was a lot of scorn and derogation and condemnation of him for being naive, as to leave the sinecure of college education at Georgia Tech and going to Vietnam. He was condemned by his own peer group.

And it was only when I became President and I appointed Max Cleland, a Vietnam veteran, who, as you know, is a triple amputee, to head up the Veterans Department of the government, that that healing process made major strides forward. And I think eventually, of course, with the Vietnam heroic monument, one of the most popular places in Washington, that that healing process was complete.

I see a lot of similarity with the Gulf War, as far as the concentration of sacrifice from just a very few people. This is unique in the history of our country that only those who are now going to Iraq for the third time, and have families, are the only ones who are called upon to make any sort of sacrifice as part of a war effort.

And so there's a lot of difference. But one of the things that has been different in Vietnam and now is that I believe all of us do revere the unique sacrifice, almost unique, that the veterans who are coming back from Iraq are all making for our country. Because a lot of them in the National Guard and the Army Reserve have to go back to Iraq over and over. So we revere them now. This was not the case in Vietnam.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Mr. President, some of the people watching and listening to this, no doubt, are active in the MIA Movement, which was, of course, active during your presidency. Talk about your efforts where POWs and MIAs are concerned, and looking back, are you satisfied that you did enough?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I'm satisfied that I did everything I could. As you know, there were a number of Americans who erroneously believed that their loved ones who were missing in action were still alive, and were moving around somehow in Northern Vietnam, either under restraint or voluntarily. And this was an exacerbating factor during the time that I was President. All the information that I had showed that these reports were non-subjective, that there weren't any appreciable number of those missing in action who were still alive in Vietnam.

But they put tremendous restraint on American public opinion, on the members of Congress, and indirectly, on me, in not being willing to acknowledge that the MIAs were actually permanently missing in action.

We did everything we possibly could to get the Vietnamese to let us explore for those who were lost and to try to account for every single person. I think eventually almost every person who was missing in action in Vietnam were accounted for.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Was the Carter Era Pentagon, sir, should it be considered a post-war Pentagon? Was it a military machine that was recovering from a conflict just fought?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, the military that I inherited was minimal. And there was a major adverse reaction when I became President to any sort of emphasis on military capability. Vietnam turned our nation against a strong military.

I came from a military background. That was my chosen profession. And I elevated military budgets and commitments to improved weaponry, to a top level of priority in my administration. I brought in a revered scientist, Harold Brown, who had been a president of Cal Tech, and a top administrator who had been in charge of Coca-Cola Company to run the Defense Department.

So almost all of the weaponry that has been devised since then originated in its embryonic stages during my administration under Harold Brown's leadership. So we made a major commitment to strengthen our military and to emphasize not just on the number of ships and the number of tanks, but on the technical capabilities of new weaponry.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: Your mission in the desert to rescue the hostages in Iran, to what extent were the ghosts of the Vietnam War flying along on that mission?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I really can't say that there was very much spillover from Vietnam to my efforts to rescue the hostages. It was a well-planned operation. We had explored the so-called Desert One Area with a small airplane landing there and taking soil samples. We had what we thought was an adequate number of helicopters to get all of the hostages was. We knew where every hostage was out. We knew the identity of all their guards. We knew what kind of automobiles they drove to work every day. We monitored when they went and when they didn't. We knew the degree of lethargy or laxity within the compound, and so the whole plan was very good. Unfortunately, we underestimated the number of helicopters that would be lost in the rescue operation and had to withdraw in failure.

But I can't really say, Brian, that the effect of Vietnam carried over into that operation.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I do recall reading, at the time and perhaps in more recent years, whether they were historians or just plain journalists, attributing the underpinnings of the failure in part to the post-Vietnam Era military, where special forces weren't up to snuff, weren't what they should have been. So you're saying that would be a misreading of the circumstance.

PRESIDENT CARTER: It would be a total misreading. The special forces and all aspects of the military performed superbly. The only thing is that we set up a number of helicopters-- We had to have six helicopters to get all of our hostages out. And to get a portion of them out and leave the rest behind would undoubtedly have doomed them to be executed. So, the premise from the very beginning was that unless we have six helicopters, we will not go through with the operation.

We thought we would have enough helicopters. We had eight. One turned back in an unexplained way, still. One was put down in a sandstorm, and another developed a last minute hydraulic problem with its system and had to turn back.

So that was why this mission failed, as I explained to the people the next morning, that same morning. But it was not because of an inability or an incompetence, or lack of courage or commitment on the part of anyone.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: I'm going to quote from one of your news conferences, January 17, 1979, Vietnam came up vis-a-vis Iran. You answered a question in part, "Certainly we have no desire nor ability to intrude massive forces into Iran or any other country to determine the outcome of domestic political issues. This is something that we have no intention of ever doing in another country. We tried this once in Vietnam. It

didn't work well, as you know." Mr. President, give us some context for the period and your meaning then.

PRESIDENT CARTER: I think that's a very prescient and accurate statement that I made. As you know, historically the United States has adopted a policy of going to war, of invading a country, bombing a country, attacking a country, only if our security was directly threatened.

The premise in Vietnam, which you'd have to argue about this one way or the other, was that we were threatened because of statements, explanations made by President Johnson and others, even Dwight Eisenhower and Kennedy. That there was a threat that Communism would prevail in the entire Asian field, since both the Russian Soviet Union and China were helping the Vietnamese. And we saw this as a means of prevailing throughout Asia, and that's why went to war in Vietnam, which didn't turn out to be well.

At that time, the premise was for me and all my predecessors, Democratic and Republican, was that we would resort to war only if our security was directly threatened. Now we have a different policy that President Bush has promulgated, that is preemptive war. We now have a brand new, unprecedented policy of reserving the right to go to war against another country even though our security is not directly threatened. That's a new and radical departure from all the Republic and Democratic presidents in recent history.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: On the topic of the current war in Iraq, Mr. President, how far are you willing to go in any comparisons or analogies to the conflict in Vietnam?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I would do this comparison cautiously, because I think the Vietnam War turned out so badly for the United States, with ostentatious and clear defeat, our withdrawing troops from the tops of buildings and helicopters at the last minute, our opponents in Vietnam completely prevailing politically and militarily. And I would hope and expect and pray that this would not happen to us in Iraq.

There's some elements of the Vietnam War that might very well be similar or pertinent. That is, unanticipated link or involvement, the unanticipated number of casualties, unanticipated cost of the war, and doubtful premises on which we went to war. So there are some similarities, but I think in the long-term we will not have to withdraw from Iraq in any sort of ostentatious or clear failure, as we did in Vietnam.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: And Mr. President, since this event is happening under the auspices of the JFK Presidential Library and Museum, perhaps I can get you to talk about how you view the Kennedy role in the Vietnam War. Do you see it as a Kennedy conflict that then Lyndon Johnson inherited and as we now know, famously struggled with and escalated?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, there are undoubtedly scholars and political figures who are participating directly at the Kennedy Center that know a lot more about that early stage of our history than do I.

My understanding as a young non-politician-- I was just a peanut farmer then-- was that the commitment to go to Vietnam was made basically by President Kennedy. I think he intended for it to be a limited participation. It was after the French withdrew and we thought we would fill their role in protecting Asia against Communism.

And then I think that President Johnson, when he inherited the presidency, got deeper and deeper involved and it became a matter of national pride and his personal ego and his commitment to prevail, or to nail a coonskin to the barn door, or something of that kind.

And the forces of insurgency were against us. And I think that we underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese, and we also overestimated the capabilities and the commitment of those who were on our side among the Vietnamese.

So, I would say it was greatly escalated and expanding under Lyndon Johnson, initiated by President Kennedy.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: How do you view the Domino Theory today, looking back, of course, now that we're looking at the Cold War in the

rearview mirror? It fueled so much of the military industrial society buildup in this country.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, the Domino Theory, I think, was a real threat. And it was probably exaggerated in retrospect, as a cause for our going into Vietnam. But when I was President during the Cold War, every nation in the world, even the most tiny nations like Burkina Faso and Liberia and Mali, obviously Ethiopia and larger countries, were looked upon as a testing ground in the competition between democracy as we see it and Communism espoused by the Soviet Union. So we were in competition in every region in the world.

And there was always a premise that if the Soviets did prevail in a particular region in the world, if we should withdraw or be less than totally committed, than the Communism might prevail on a global basis.

So I think that the Domino threat was real, although it was misjudged and maybe exaggerated, for instance, in the case of Vietnam.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: As an event that affected the presidencies of several men, looking at Vietnam in terms of what it did to the American presidency, do you regard it as among the darker moments in modern American history?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Yes, I do. I think it was the first time in history that the United States had committed an entire nation to achieve a political

and military combined mission, in which we failed. And this was a sobering blow to our self-esteem, and maybe a pretty severe blow to our world-wide esteem as judged by outsiders.

And I think it sent a cautionary signal throughout the American society, including the members of Congress, and maybe the presidents, and the public, that we should be more cautious in military adventurism, particularly when we endangered our own stature. And one of the lessons that we learned then was that if we should go to war, that we would have a maximum commitment of the international community, as really close allies and committed friends and supporters as possible. And I think this is what George Bush, Sr. did in the first Gulf War. He made sure that we didn't go there until we had a broad range of support.

These lessons that were learned, I think, have been forgotten or ignored in the present Iraq War. But I think the lessons are still there, and they might very well be proven to be efficacious or applicable, because of developing circumstances that have occurred in Iraq in the last three years, that it was a mistake for us to go in, in effect unilaterally in a war that was no threat to our own national security and pretty much based on false premises.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: And Mr. President, finally, if there's a way to step back and view how the Carter White House was different, how it was affected by the fact that there had been a Vietnam War, I know it's almost impossible to look at how it would have been in the vacuum of the absence

of a war, but how did it taint or affect your decision making in foreign policy on an ongoing basis?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, I don't know how differently I would have looked on international affairs and the use of military force and so-called "adventurism" if Vietnam had not occurred. But I think I was part of a political reaction to Vietnam in that I felt that our nation should husband and enhance tremendously our military capability, that our first emphasis should be on diplomacy in resolving disputes, not just involving ourselves but others, like in the Middle East, that we should reach out as much as possible to other major powers to become our allies. That's why I normalized relations with the People's Republic of China after 35 years of different policy. It was why I tried to resolve the problems in this hemisphere that were festering like a cancer based around the Panama Canal issue. It's why I tried to evolve a new and acceptable and mutually beneficial treaty.

So I think a lot of the things that I did as President were at least indirectly affected by the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

BRIAN WILLIAMS: President Carter, on behalf of the Kennedy Library and all those watching and listening, thank you so much for taking the time to take our questions on this topic.

PRESIDENT CARTER: It's been a pleasure, Brian. Thank you and my best wishes to all those at the Kennedy Center.