

National League of Families of POW/MIA in Southeast Asia

Remarks as Delivered By Deputy Secretary of Defense Rudy de Leon, Marriott Hotel, Washington, DC, Thursday, June 22, 2000

Thank you very much for that introduction. I appreciate the chance to be here to speak before you, because in many respects, I've been coming to League events going back to 1979 and 1980 when I was a staff assistant on the Hill. So, thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me to be here to speak today.

This morning, I'm joined by my military assistant from the Air Force, Colonel Rowdy Yates, an Air Force fighter pilot [applause] who was one of the first pilots of the F-117 fighter. He flew combat missions over the southern Iraqi no-fly zone. As we were working on the speech we made the remark to each other how important it was that there were people like you, like Ann Mills Griffiths [Executive Director, National League of Families], JoAnne [Shirley, Chairman of the Board, National League of Families], and everyone up in the front table. Because he said, if something ever happened to me, I'm glad that my wife can go to people like the leadership of the National League of Families.

It's an important issue for me because my aunt's husband died in a Korean POW camp. In those days, there was no organization for her to go to. You have made a fundamental change in the way that our country thinks about the men, and now the women, that are sent on military missions. You have changed the landscape of Washington for the future. I think every member of our armed forces today is grateful for the impact that the National League of Families has had.

I also want to thank you for the National League's plaque from last year. It is one of the few awards that I have displayed in my office because it's an important personal award for me. In many respects these are not just simply cases or issues, these are families that I've had the chance to work with over these many years.

So in addition to the very capable leadership at the front table here, I would just say that your people have really enriched my life. I think of Inge Hardy from Massachusetts whose son was a pilot, was shot down, and later his remains were recovered. I think of George Atkinson of the United States Air Force, a fine public servant. Johnny Webb, I hope Johnny is here. He drives himself, so I once visited him in the hospital where he was resting. He had just come back from North Korea, had come to Washington and ended up back in Hawaii. Johnny Webb is someone who has a commitment to his work. There is Dick Childress who has been a pillar of assistance to your cause. [Applause.]

So I truly thank all of you who are involved with the League. Your work is indispensable, not simply for the dynamic and the political power that you've created and the impact that you've had, but also for the spirit of partnership that you've shown in your dealing with the Department of Defense on behalf of the men and now women who serve in our armed forces.

Indeed, your efforts to keep our prisoners missing from the Vietnam War in the forefront of U.S. foreign policy play a very important part in guiding our recent policy. Specifically, you helped shape a historic event this spring, when Secretary [William] Cohen became the first American Secretary of Defense to visit Vietnam since the end of the war. So I thought I'd like to begin by sharing with you a few highlights and thoughts from his trip.

Concerning Vietnam, Secretary Cohen had visited Vietnam once before as a Senator in 1994. He said that he saw significant differences in the country in six years. He saw great changes in Vietnam and the potential that they would be entering the mainstream of nations.

Secretary Cohen would be the first to say that a deeper relationship with the United States is going to be dependent on measured steps. In our military-to-military relationship, we are looking at cooperation in demining, training in the environment, and military forensics. And I would add that the League was out in front in endorsing such humanitarian efforts in 1987.

Secretary Cohen would also say that any future cooperation between our countries will continue to hinge on one overriding humanitarian issue: the accounting for our missing prisoners of war. [Applause.] You have long advocated and stressed the need for renewed unilateral efforts by Vietnam to return remains and to provide records that would account for our missing. [Applause.]

The Secretary took this message to the highest military and civilian leadership in the country, and to the members of the American business community in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. He told his Vietnamese hosts that "accounting for Americans still missing in action will continue to be our highest priority." In turn, the Vietnamese leadership voiced its commitment to a continued high level of cooperation.

While in Vietnam, Secretary Cohen also saw firsthand the difficulty and dedication involved in field investigations and recovery efforts when he visited a muddy rice paddy on the outskirts of Hanoi. One of the recovery sites was where a top notch, highly motivated team of our specialists -- people that have the dedication that Johnny Webb has -- was hard at work.

On March 19, 1967 two Navy officers were flying a mission over Hanoi when their aircraft was shot down. One of those Navy aviators was Commander William Stark, who came home; the other is still missing in action. It's not yet known today if he ejected or perished with his aircraft.

Today, that team of specialists and the Secretary of Defense were joined by some 200 Vietnamese citizens seeking to discover the truth by excavating that muddy rice paddy outside Hanoi. Those joint efforts, which this League has done so much to promote, to support, and to inspire, have helped to build links with the people of Vietnam and the dialogue with the government.

The Secretary noted in his comments during the visit that "in our recovery efforts, our nations have found the seeds of future cooperation. By helping the families of the missing, we have helped to establish greater working ties and will step cautiously forward in those areas where we have mutual interest." The most important thing, I would say again, stressed by our Secretary, is the fullest possible accounting for our missing servicemen -- your family members and missing loved ones.

With the help of this organization our investigation, research and recovery efforts have also set a precedent and template for how we conduct these operations in other places around the world. From the level of staffing and the kind of scientific support needed to how we can best negotiate with our former adversaries.

Today, we are seeing the results of this strategy in North Korea. Since 1991 hundreds of remains have been returned from North Korea, either unilaterally or through joint recovery efforts. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War, we will begin our most significant recovery efforts to date. American teams will arrive in North Korea on the 25th of June for the first of five joint recovery operations, which they will complete by Veterans Day, November 11th. [Applause.]

I believe that with these efforts, augmented by the important work of the U.S.-Russian Commission on POW/MIAs, we can be more hopeful now than at any other time the last half century that we will finally be able to account for many of the over 8,000 still missing from the Korean conflict.

I might add that on his recent visit, President Putin and Marshal Sergeyev, the Russian Defense Minister, were working with some very useful suggestions that Secretary Cohen received from Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire. Secretary Cohen spoke with the representative to Minister Sergeyev of the issues that Senator Smith raised, and Minister Sergeyev pledged, to Secretary Cohen to follow with a response to

these issues, clearly making the U.S.-Russian commission a very meaningful exchange as part of the investigative effort. So that is something that Secretary Cohen worked as recently as last week.

Even today, from the dangerous divide of the Korean Peninsula to our peacekeeping operations in Kosovo -- and this is an issue Rowdy Yates and I were discussing this morning -- our country, the United States, has a solemn compact with each and every soldier, sailor, airman, Marine, and Coast Guardsman in the service; a commitment that we will do all in our power to find them and bring them home if they are captured, missing in action, or fall on the field of battle.

So in a sense, the accounting for those who are still missing from past wars is more than a question of justice and the payment of a debt come due. It is also a matter of readiness of today's military forces. Our men and women in uniform will only have faith in us if we keep faith with those who went before. [Applause.]

So today I want to assure you that both Secretary Cohen and I consider it a priority to account as soon as possible for our missing Vietnam veterans, as well as those who have preceded them in the Cold War, the Korean War, and the Second World War. We will continue our diplomatic efforts to discover the whole truth about those last seen alive and in captivity. [Applause.]

We are also committed to maintaining both the high quality of all of the civilians and service members now engaged in our accounting efforts as well as the resources they need to be most effective. We have assembled a very talented team to work on our investigative, research and recovery operations, from the Joint Task Force at Camp Smith, Hawaii to the Stony Beach interviewers from DIA, an important part of the team that I'm pleased to announce today will continue working at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, in a permanent space that Air Force Secretary Whit Peters has directed the Air Force to provide. [Applause.]

There is also the scientists at the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii and the Armed Forces DNA Laboratory here in Maryland, who do pioneering work with the latest state of the art technology for mitochondrial DNA testing.

I can assure all of you that I know how important these personnel are. Between the most advanced technological tools and the entire team of specialists there is a synergism. These are people that have their act together. They are a great resource for our country and they are essential to honoring that compact and contract that we have with you and your missing loved ones. I am committed to protecting the resources that are so essential to our mission. [Applause.]

Therefore, I will send a team to CILHI to personally review their mission requirements, get their concerns about their manning levels resolved, and ensure that their organizational structure and resources fit the mission. [Applause.] The beauty of working these issues for 20 years is that now I'm the Deputy Secretary of Defense and all budgets pass through my office. [Laughter and applause.]

I've also received assurances from the Commander of the Air Force Materiel Command, General Les Lyles, who was with you here last year in his capacity as Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, that the Life Sciences Equipment Laboratory in San Antonio will be provided the resources they need to meet their critical supporting role. [Applause.]

I'd like to acknowledge my colleague and friend from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Bob Jones [Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Prisoners of War and Missing Persons Affairs], for his hard work and for his dedication in working with his team, including Walt Slocombe [Under Secretary of Defense for Policy] and Jim Bodner [Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy]. This team is personified by Bob and Walt's personal commitment. [Applause.]

To the National League of Families and the members here, as a small organization that deals with large government agencies, you've probably felt at times a little like David trying to get the attention of

Goliath. Few individuals in Washington, though, are more likely to be heard than our friend, Ann Mills Griffiths, and your Chairman of the Board, JoAnne Shirley. So I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their tireless efforts. And I want to thank you all for changing the landscape.

And I wanted to take a moment to fill you all in on the details of the story of my uncle, the Korean War POW. After 20 years of searching, two weeks ago I read the file on him from the Army Archives. He was a staff sergeant. He had come from Colorado and then moved to California, married my aunt and had two young children. He had joined straight out of high school. World War II was just coming to an end. He went and served as part of the occupation force in Japan. He rose to the rank of staff sergeant and quickly found himself in the middle of the Korean conflict. Reading that file today and looking at how we work with our families 50 years later, there are so many dramatic changes.

Here was a man who was reported missing with a simple telegram that was sent to his spouse. She had moved back from Japan to California and was living with her mother and stepfather and her children when a simple telegram came saying her husband was missing. Then the years passed, the war ended, the armistice was signed, and still no word.

Finally, out of perseverance, some prisoners started to be released from the North Korean camps. And so as they made their way home to Tennessee and Massachusetts and South Carolina they would stop to see my aunt in California. They reported that they'd seen her husband, and then finally they told her, "Yes, I was there when it happened, when he died." The records simply say the cause of death was malnutrition and dysentery. In the file, I read the letter that his mother wrote to the Army saying, "I'll do anything, I'll do anything possible "to have my son returned to me."

As I read this file, as I went through all of the material, I could understand the stories that my mother had been telling me about my aunt, about how there was nowhere for her to go, about why she was so bitter - - a wife with two children living with her mother, my grandmother, untouched by any support system, such as the League offers today.

And so here we are today. The people in this room have changed that. Every other family since then, whether it's Colonel Yates or all the other pilots and aviators in our armed forces and all the other members of the military, we have changed the landscape so that people like my aunt will never be alone again. No matter what happens. No matter how difficult it is to trace what happened.

I think in a town that comes to be personified by sound bytes, you have had, and are having, a lasting impact. A loved one, a husband, a brother or an uncle, a son or nephew can come back. On the day the remains of Lieutenant Hardy came back from Vietnam, I was talking with his mother. She'd told the story before, and took me through the routine again. She said how proud Lieutenant Hardy would have been of his mother. Because for someone who had no experience, by working with the League, she learned to walk the halls of Congress, to walk the halls of the White House and the Department of State and the Pentagon, and for all of those years she kept Lieutenant Hardy alive. His memory lives at this moment.

So as I conclude, I know and you know, and I keep saying that behind each black slab on that wall of the Vietnam Memorial, stands the families that yearn for answers. We must never forget -- the nation, the Department of Defense, everyone who wears the uniform today. And we will not waiver in our efforts to bring them home. Thank you very much for the chance to be here today. [Applause.]