

THE WHITE HOUSE

**Office of the Press Secretary
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PRESS BRIEFING BY AMBASSADOR DOUGLAS "PETE" PETERSON

**Hilton Hanoi Opera Hotel
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2:10 P.M. (L)

MR. CROWLEY: Good afternoon. We thought that before we depart Hanoi for Ho Chi Minh City that we would provide you an opportunity in person to talk about Vietnam with our extraordinary Ambassador, Pete Peterson. You did have the opportunity earlier in the week, when he was gracious enough to do a phone interview with you from Brunei. But for those of you that were out at Tien Chau Village to see the extraordinary efforts being made on the recovery of the remains, you can also appreciate this day has a special meaning for Ambassador Peterson, himself, a former Air Force pilot and prisoner of war.

But I think before you leave Vietnam you ought to have the opportunity, jump in a taxi and drive around either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City -- from perhaps a hotel room, what's happening on the streets with the interaction among the bicycles, the mopeds and the cars looks like a ballet. When you're actually on the streets themselves, you know it's a free for all. But one of Ambassador Peterson's initiatives is to try to put a helmet on every single Vietnamese motorist, in a safe Vietnam initiative. I think once you're on the streets here you can appreciate how important that is.

To kind of put the first portion of the President's visit in perspective a little bit on today's activities, but just overall, the promise that exists in the Vietnam-United States relationship, we're happy to have Ambassador Pete Peterson.

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: Good afternoon. I hope, indeed, all of you will have an opportunity to get out and see the city in more personal terms. This room will become quite small to you, I'm sure, after you sit in it long enough.

The fact that you're here is historic in itself, because you're accompanying the first President to ever step foot in Hanoi and the first President to visit the unified Vietnam, as well. And, of course, what that signals to all of us is that the relationship between the United States and Vietnam has matured, matured to the point now where we are able to cross vast uncharted areas across virtually every subject and sector of interest that exists between our two countries. And I'm very happy to say that we have been very successful in many of those sectors of which are rather exploratory.

You've seen of course the JTF today, out at the excavation site, but we're also working with the Vietnamese in military-to-military activities in a very genuine and trustful way in the demining, which is another event later today at which you will be able to participate in. And also we're doing search and rescue and other kinds of cooperative efforts with the Vietnamese military that have proven to be very well accepted and welcomed by the Vietnamese.

The other areas of course was noted, one being in what I call injury prevention area, working in the safety areas, and then health in general, infectious disease, HIV/AIDS and education, science and

technology across the board.

And then, of course, then the President comes, five years after we've normalized diplomatic relations. And we've now concluded our bilateral trade agreement, which essentially normalizes our economic relationship. His visit can set us straight into the future. And as we have the used the term, and you have, too, that we're beginning a new chapter.

His objectives, clearly, are to help us analyze where we've been, where we've been successful and then to look at the opportunities for the future and chart the future course.

I couldn't be more pleased. You have been out on the road with the President and in the events of which he has been participating, and you've seen the enthusiasm -- spontaneous enthusiasm, I might add -- of the Vietnamese people wherever he goes. That is true, too, for the First Lady. The welcome that has been made by the Vietnamese people and the government has been extraordinary in my view, and it's going to make a big difference, I think, in how we work in the future. Because in my view, what this trip will ultimately provide for us is an improved understanding and greater trust between our two countries as we work on areas of mutual interest.

The President's trip thus far has to be rated as a huge success. His bilateral meetings were all cordial, informative and quite candid, I might add. And the President I think has come away with a much greater understanding of the leadership and the principles and the views that have been held by the Vietnamese government and leadership for what they see as their past, of course, but where they see where they want to go in the future. It matches perfectly with our objectives and the events that have taken place thus far have led us, I think, to a conclusion that this is a successful trip no matter what happens, following today.

As you know, tonight we'll depart for Ho Chi Minh City. This will give you a great opportunity to make a comparative. The two cities are vastly different, with Hanoi being what we call a city that possesses a unique character, its quaintness and those things aren't necessarily found in Ho Chi Minh City, which is a real metropolitan area, much more hustle-bustle than even Hanoi, if that would frighten you a little bit, perhaps. And you'll find the people in Ho Chi Minh City much more, if you will, business-oriented. Whereas, I guess the comparative will be maybe Boston and Washington, D.C. -- you have a capital city versus a city of great business strength and there are differences between the cities.

But remember that this is a unified country, and the leadership of course has on their mind to make this one country, a very successful country in the future. And as I noted with my phone call with you in Brunei, the attributes for success and the potentials for success clearly are there, and it's only for the leadership and for those of us who are interested in providing assistance to take them to where I think they can, in fact, declare themselves a country of magnitude and a country that wants to work with the rest of the international community constructively and peacefully.

So let me take whatever questions you have.

Q The Vietnamese leader said in the toast last night that the United States should do more to help Vietnam recover from the war. Do you expect that sort of pressure to increase as ties normalize? Do you expect those calls to rise?

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: I don't think they'll rise any further than they already have. It's not a surprising request, and it's also not a new request. Since the day I arrived, I'm certain before my arrival those pleas have been made to the United States for assistance. And we have heeded that call. We have helped the Vietnamese in all kinds of ways in the process of disaster activity and recovery and then now mitigation.

In all kinds of areas that I mentioned earlier, too, is the grievance that we have in demining and dealing with the problems of unexploded ordnance. And now, just next weekend, I will depart with a lot of my

colleagues and the Vietnamese to Singapore to talk about how we engaged in a very serious scientific effort to seek the answers for the real impact of the herbicides that were used here during the war.

I feel very comfortable in the activities that we are engaged in with the Vietnamese and many of those activities are directly applicable to the consequences of the war, which is the terms that they would use. Some are tangential, but all, collectively, are helping Vietnam to reach its potential.

Q Mr. Ambassador, you said something last night that caught my attention -- actually, several things, but one of them was when you said the United States had a unique role to aid Vietnam, and that only the United States -- the United States alone could really help Vietnam come out of its current backward status and join the rest of the modern world.

I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on that and why you feel that's so, and that only the United States could do that? And tell us whether you think the Vietnamese see it the same way, because talking to the people on the street you get a little bit of the sentiment that people are very proud of their independence and they don't think they need help from anyone, and they're a little bit suspicious of offers of assistance.

And maybe also if you could help us to kind of deconstruct a little bit the sentiments in the toast last night, because as an outside onlooker that doesn't really know a lot about how to interpret the nuances of what the leaders here say, this looks like a fairly flat, almost it's a negative, dour kind of toast. There's a lot of these expressions of, the United States needs to do more, we have this troubled history; and it doesn't seem to be balanced at all by any kind of expressions of gratitude or enthusiasm, that relations appear to be warming. And the tone of it seems to be so different from the fairly gracious sentiments that were expressed by the President, himself. Did that surprise you or are we missing something in interpreting these remarks in that way?

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: I'll try to take the questions backward, if I can remember them all, here. But the toast is pretty much of a standard issue, I think, relative to our formal engagement with the Vietnamese. I can assure you that the Vietnamese have expressed orally to the President in his bilats that they're very, very keen to continue to build this relationship and to strengthen it in every facet of the interests that we have mutually, and that they're prepared to take the steps that are necessary to improve in those areas.

I can't remember the speech with great detail. You're probably referring to the one paragraph that specifically noted that we needed to address the consequences of the war in more detail, much to the question that was asked earlier. And my response is much as I just said, that they would like for us to, obviously, take over all of their concerns about that. The problem with that is that the science doesn't necessarily support a conclusion. And if one was to have concluded already that the herbicide problem is this, this, this, then why would we enter into a joint scientific effort?

The very fact that the Vietnamese have agreed to a scientific effort jointly to make discoveries would also suggest that maybe their conclusions are without all of the necessary scientific data to support those conclusions. And that's our position.

We're prepared to do everything we can to move forward with the scientific effort, and through that scientific effort, look for avenues and opportunities to assist the Vietnamese as to the level of the data supporting the action. And that's, I think, the way we see it.

In the area of why do I think America can do more than any other country, it's because America has greater capacity to do the kinds of things that need to be done here -- that is, in the areas of technical training and technical transfer and engagement in systems development. And to build institutions, which is one of the most critical lacking factors in Vietnam now. They just do not have the institutions in existence now to support even the full implementation of the bilateral trade agreement that we've just signed. And that's why the President has announced that we're going to add even greater funding into

that technical assistance in the areas that we would refer to perhaps as institution building and rule of law to help the Vietnamese over that. And I don't know that any other country has the capacity and many times the expertise to do those kinds of things.

And then, finally, I just think that because we are who we are -- we might be in denial in America about who we are, but the rest of the world knows who we are and they see America as the most successful and powerful nation in the world and they want to emulate America in the way that they live and work. I think that part of us being involved is that inspiration that we bring that helps them through their development. So those are the factors that I use in measuring why I think America is probably the only country that can help the Vietnamese to the degree of full success.

Next question, way in the back.

Q Ambassador, here it is, 25 years after the war and the President of the United States is here dealing with the communist government of Vietnam, trying to establish cordial relations. With all due respect, sir, to you and to others who have served in the war, might not the families of those who perished in that war ask what did their loved ones die for?

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: Well, each of those families would have to answer that for themselves, of course. I would never try to preempt their feelings, because I know -- I know -- how they feel. My family, too, suffered greatly. In fact, I personally suffered every imaginable hurt and problem that one could, short of death.

But I am convinced that those who lost their lives, those who suffered here would be among the first to stand up and say, we don't want this to happen again. And that by constructive effort and engagement on our part, the United States can make sure that we do not have a circumstance arise that could give the opportunity for misunderstanding, and then therefore an opportunity for the renewal of a conflict either here or in the region.

So my view on it is that you have an opportunity here to prevent. And I know that those people who served here, I think every single one, even though they have painful memories, would engage with me and others to prevent any similar conflict in the future. And that's why I'm here.

Q It's such a sensitive topic about these MIA excavations and continuing search for our soldiers. Do you foresee a day when the administration, whichever administration it is, finally says, enough, rest in peace, let's withdraw, we'll stop?

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: No, I don't see any administration doing that. I don't see any politician doing that. I certainly don't see any ambassador doing that. And I don't see any military general doing that. The decision of fullest possible accounting -- and that is difficult to define, because there's no written word on that -- it has to be defined by the American people, and most assuredly by America's veterans and the families of those who were lost here.

Fullest possible accounting is a great descriptive, but it's incredibly difficult to define. And it has to be defined ultimately, in my view, by those who served here and by those whose lives were most deeply touched by our engagement here.

Anything else?

Q Not too long ago at least one Vietnamese official, military official, complained about the lack of cooperation from the United States' side in finding -- in searching for the missing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Now with the release of these new documents or the transfer of these new documents by the United States, do you see that as a response to that complaint, or were these documents in the pipeline already?

AMBASSADOR PETERSON: No, it was clearly not a response. In fact, I'm aware of that statement and I just feel that that person was uninformed.

I suspect that there are people in this room who, until they came to Hanoi on this trip, were quite uninformed on the activities of our Joint Task Force-Full Accounting. And it's a matter of understanding the commitments on both sides before one can adequately or accurately report on them. I think the individual who made the statement was simply not well informed on the actions that we had taken in the past and want to take in the future.

As you know, when that statement was made, we had already had paid and asked the Vietnamese to send, I believe it was five -- four or five archivists back to the United States, where they spent several weeks going through every archive that our military has, and within the National Archives as well, as you know, there are millions of documents that have been released. And we have assisted in forensic training, we have assisted in material ways. We have linked up our veterans with their veterans. We have done an enormous amount of work with them to help them seek the fate of the 300,000 that they have lost.

So, no, this was not a response; this was just an additive to the work, and the good work, that we've already done, and a signal of our long-term commitment to assist the Vietnamese in reaching their fullest possible accounting as we go along in search of ours.

MR. CROWLEY: Just to add one point before closing on the issue of fullest possible accounting, that is not a policy that is specific to Vietnam alone. As with the fall of the Soviet Union, we are getting access to and now learning more about the fate of prisoners of war during the Second World War. We are trying to build a relationship with China that might lead to excavations or further information. We just had a successful excavation in North Korea, for example, and last week I think welcomed 15 remains from the Korean War back to the United States.

This has been basically a pledge that the American people provide to those men and women in uniform and that effort will continue, just as long as we think there is information that may lead to the fullest possible accounting from any war that the United States has participated in. This is an effort that is obviously focused on Vietnam right now, but continues in other conflicts, as well.

Very good. Thanks.

END 2:35 P.M. (L)