

Remarks

USDP Flournoy

National League of Families

Candlelight Dinner

July 23, 2009

Thank you, Jo Anne.

It's a tremendous honor to be invited to speak here. I do a lot of public speaking, but not every topic I'm asked to address is one that's this close to my heart.

As Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, making sure that POW/MIA issues get the support they deserve is part of my job. But as the spouse of a veteran with 27 years of service, I also have a deep personal commitment to POW/MIA issues and issues involving military families.

Though I've been a Navy wife, unlike so many of you here tonight, I've never faced the agony of not knowing the fate of a loved one. And I can't even imagine the pain so many of you here today have gone through. The men and women who wear this country's uniform face countless dangers, and we owe it to them to make sure none of them will be forgotten. We all owe a great debt to those who serve this country in uniform, and I feel very privileged, in my current position, to be able to help make sure that we get the fullest possible accounting of the fate of our missing service-members.

I can promise you that this issue also has the full and unequivocal support of this Administration. Secretary Gates asked me to pass along his best wishes on your 40th anniversary, and I can promise you that at DOD, ensuring that we have the personnel, funding, and other resources to seek the fullest possible accounting will remain a high priority.

But I want to make it clear that commitment to this issue goes all the way to the top, both in the legislative branch and the executive branch.

As President Obama said in his letter to the League, even as we today “engage in battles against those who seek to do us harm, we do not forget those who came before and did not return.” This is a bipartisan issue. Our missing service-members aren’t Democrats or Republicans: they’re Americans.

And though I wish—I know we all wish—that this group’s mission would by now have become irrelevant, we all know it hasn’t. As President Obama said, our troops continue to engage in battles with those who seek to do us harm. We have more than 200,000 men and women deployed in harm’s way right now, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. As we sit here tonight, many thousands of young men and women are risking their lives for this country. Some of them will give their lives. And some of them will fall into enemy hands.

Just recently, another American soldier, PFC Bowe Bergdahl, fell into enemy hands. Not in Southeast Asia, of course, but in another theater far away from home—Afghanistan. I know many of you understand very well the unique agony his family is going through—the pain of not knowing. And I know you will join me in prayers for PFC Bergdahl’s safe return to his family.

But even as we face the challenge of new conflicts and new losses, we remain committed to seeking a full accounting of losses from older conflicts. Southeast Asia is, and will remain, a very important part of the world to the U.S., and we will continue ensure that the POW/MIA accounting mission is an important part of our bilateral relations with each Southeast Asian country. At DOD, that's reflected in the fact that day to day coordination between DPMO and our Asia-Pacific Security Affairs office is so strong.

In fact, I see this issue as evidence that good can come out of even the gravest of losses. As you all know, engagement with Southeast Asian governments over this mission has been a critical building block for restoring normal diplomatic relations between the US, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Our patient engagement on this most human of issues has helped build trust and goodwill. The accounting issue is an effective path to engagement for the U.S. government, and we will use build on that entree whenever and wherever we can.

And as our bilateral relationships mature, I can promise you that this issue will not be brushed aside. As Ambassador Charlie Ray said this morning, this issue laid the groundwork for developing our bilateral relations with individual Southeast Asian countries—and it's only appropriate that this should result in further progress towards a full accounting. The League's activities helped get us where we are today, and we must honor and build on that legacy.

But as Charlie also said, we must adapt to changing times and circumstances. We appreciate that time is not on our side in Southeast Asia: with each passing year, it grows more and more difficult to obtain solid information about service-members lost decades ago.

40 years have gone by since the moon landing, and 40 years have gone by since the National League of Families was founded. It's hard to believe. When I look at photos from the Vietnam War, and see the young faces of our troops, I find it almost impossible to accept, emotionally, that many of those young men are now well into their 50s, 60s, even their 70s.

The passage of time makes our work more difficult in Southeast Asia, and also more urgent. It's now more important than ever that we focus on drawing down the backlogs in Laos and Vietnam, and that we continue to encourage Vietnam to take greater unilateral steps towards a full accounting. In particular, we are encouraging Vietnam to provide more archival documents relating to their forces in Cambodia and Laos, since, as you know, these were the sites of many American losses.

Speaking of the passage of time, it's also hard to believe that Ambassador Charlie Ray will soon be leaving us. He's done a superb job, and we will miss him. But he has other important tasks ahead of him. I can't say yet who will be replacing Charlie as our new Deputy Assistant Secretary for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs, but you can be assured that whoever it is, he or she will have ready access and an open door from me and the rest of the OSD Policy shop.

Let me close by saying, once more, what a privilege it is to be here at this very moving dinner.

Let me reiterate what Pete Verga and Charlie Ray said this morning: even at DOD, few of us can truly know what you have endured over these many years. But even so, I hope you know that you are not alone. More than 600 of our top specialists work tirelessly around the world, 24/7, to bring your loved ones home. A few of those 600 people are in this room tonight.

And they are backed up by the thousands of people who wear this country's uniform, as well as by all of us at the Pentagon, and by our President. Every man and woman in uniform today bears testimony to the sacrifices of your loved ones, and carries their legacy forward in dozens of far-off lands. Your loved ones are not forgotten—and you are not forgotten.

Thank you inviting me here. Thank you for the work you do. And most of all, thank you for the precious gifts you've given.