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Copy of Remarks of keynote speaker at National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia 43rd Annual Meeting

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Remarks of Richard T. Childress
Senior league Policy Advisor & Director for Asian Affairs
National Security Council, 1981-1989
43rd Annual Meeting
National League of POW/MIA Families
June 14, 2012

Ann, board members, family members, fellow veterans and government officials, my warmest regards to all on the occasion of the League's 43rd Annual Meeting. The League has spanned nine presidential administrations, through an attendant variety of policy and operational approaches. Some have brought your support, some your opposition, along with heartfelt attempts to modify policy from your unique perspective. Your record of service is remarkable and would be of immense pride to those brave members of your family who have yet to return to us.

This year, we are facing some unknowns. While this is true each year, the unknowns are of a significant magnitude that could develop in a very positive direction or develop into major challenges that could affect the issue in a negative manner. One positive is that the conspiracy and cover-up "wingnuts" subsided again this year, with only a couple of folks who seem to be off their MEDS. But, before attacking the unknowns, let's begin with some knowns and some hopeful, recent developments.

First, knowing no better authority to quote than myself, in my remarks to you two years ago at the 2010 41st Annual Meeting, I noted that Vietnam is still withholding archives that we need and have been repeatedly requested through official and League channels. Further, based on my experience with them, I said that without a concentrated push by each element of the government, their response would be inadequate. Our government did not make that push. In my remarks to you last year, I again noted the change in the strategic relationship between the US and Vietnam and the opportunity it presented. That circumstance prompted the League to take up the archival challenge in a more direct way, resulting in Ann and me going again to Vietnam in March 2011.

Our appeal to them was two-fold: First, we noted and applauded the regional relationships between our countries and reviewed in detail the developments, beginning in the 1980s. Second, we made a renewed humanitarian appeal for them to respond to your needs and, further, noted how a positive response could impact public opinion and the bilateral relationship. We coordinated our approach fully with US officials and provided a straw-man archival concept approach to the US government and to the Vietnamese that could also, over time, include the Lao and Cambodians.

If you recall, we expressed our deep disappointment with the cynicism about this initiative that came from some in our government. Frankly, they responded with uninformed, insensitive and negative comments about budgets, our naiveté, and that this has all been tried before. Our concept paper was ignored and, given their approach, the first official follow-up dialogue in April was a complete and predictable flop.

Though our government was still not convinced, a new round of technical talks in September of 2011 was better planned and removed some of the confusion from the April talks. As a result, agreement was reached to conduct working level exchanges on archives between US and Vietnamese counterparts. Due to quiet, effective exchanges by Casualty Resolution Specialist Ron Ward of JPAC Detachment Two in Hanoi, backed up by DPMO's Research and Analysis Directorate and JPAC's J2, or Intelligence Directorate, successes were achieved this year. I believe all, including Ron's supportive Detachment Two Commander LTC Pat Keane, would acknowledge Ron's key role, using his established rapport with counterparts, his understanding of the Vietnamese environment, and his belief, along with the League's, that progress was possible in the current environment. You will hear more from Ron later in the meeting, so listen closely.

The other frustrating component was our inability to respond to the Vietnamese call to increase the pace and scope of operations in Vietnam, a proposal made to our League delegation in Hanoi in March 2009. Although the proposal was made in front of a wide variety of government officials, the previous JPAC Commander did not even raise it on the next trip. Their rationale? It wasn't considered official until it came directly to JPAC, ignoring Vietnam's decades-long practice of raising new initiatives to the League.

DPMO finally raised it on a subsequent trip to Hanoi, but we were then in the midst of budget hurdles. Despite these budget issues, other measures could have been adopted and were advocated by the League, such as increased investigations, less expensive than excavations, as a demonstration of US responsiveness.

While we cannot assert the US government was reacting quickly, we can say today that the US is finally responding. The budget picture has cleared up, at least for now, full scale programs of investigations and excavations are deploying in Vietnam, and JPAC developed a new concept of Vietnamese Recovery Teams. These have a lighter, more cost-effective component of US personnel, and it appears to be working in the initial stages. JPAC will give us more on this later in the meeting.

So, that summarizes good news on three fronts: archives, field operations and a better funding picture. I would like to add to this list of good news that coordination between the League and JPAC has improved this year, and more substantive consultations have occurred. Add to this, the full support of our State Department, especially our Ambassadors on the ground, who give a powerful interagency component so critical to success. The heartfelt letters from our Ambassadors that are printed in your program give testament to their support of these efforts.

We've had some hiccups with Laos lately. While the Lao leadership finally approved our DIA Stony Beach specialist to expand activities on his humanitarian tasks, he still lacks the freedom to pursue investigations, even with prior approval of the Lao Government and in the company of Lao officials. The leeway he has been given recently will, hopefully, demonstrate his usefulness to both sides and rid their bureaucracy of their last vestige of unjustified suspicion.

A serious challenge has also arisen on the effectiveness of field operations with an attempt by the Lao Government to levy exorbitant aircraft charges for JPAC's field operations. The JPAC commander has rightly resisted and refused to sign a long term contract. To make matters worse, the Lao are refusing road access to some sites where air travel is not required, citing "safety concerns."

This is happening at the same time as the country is advertising itself as an investment and tourism destination, hosting regional events and approving travel up-country by Non-Governmental Organizations, or NGOs as they are called, providing humanitarian assistance. Our Ambassador, State Department officials here in DC, the JPAC Commander and the League are working assiduously together to remedy these problems. We are hopeful our early counterparts in the Lao Government, many now in senior positions, along with a new (actually returning) chair of their POW/MIA Committee, will intervene based upon our cohesive appeals. Since Ann and I were pioneers in this relationship, we are encouraged that their Vice Foreign Minister, also a pioneer in the US-Lao relationship, is arriving in Washington soon and do hope he is bringing good news.

We have several unknowns in the future, and some could be significant. Budget issues still loom ahead of us, especially the destructive rescissions scheduled for defense spending. While my political antenna tells me Congress will intervene and that won't happen, if it does, pressure rises significantly. Let's face it, the economy is fragile. I heard it was so bad in Chicago, the Mafia had to lay off two judges. We would have to rely on fulfillment of the significant pledges by the President and Secretary of Defense in their Memorial Day remarks. The welcome commitment was the strongest and clearest yet from this administration and they may be tested in a constrained budget environment. Secretary Panetta followed up during his recent trip to Vietnam, a good sign that it was not just Memorial Day rhetoric. Public reporting, though historically inaccurate on the history of the issue, did indicate Vietnam's agreement to open more restricted areas for recoveries, another good sign. We will hear more at this meeting.

One multi-million requirement has receded for the foreseeable future. We were on the cusp of resuming excavations in North Korea at a significant cost. While JPAC personnel were in China awaiting clearance to proceed to North Korea, the regime in Pyongyang was singing "We Three Kims of Orient Are", and then fired off a ballistic missile that was apparently key-wound. But, they will continue to try, and it will put off excavations for the foreseeable future. This humanitarian bridge that worked in Vietnam may not be applicable to the North Koreans after all, but likely will be of use with Burma.

While we don't yet have a final analysis of the archival material Vietnam has provided, it is a welcome step that reduces suspicion greatly, whether or not they provide solid leads. Negative information is as important as positive information in order to achieve the fullest possible accounting. The other unknown is whether this turnover is the first tranche of more to come. Let's hope so and continue to encourage Vietnam to move down this positive path.

Significantly, we have a change in DPMO leadership in the person of Que Winfield. This name should be familiar. While on active duty, Que was the first JPAC Commander, from 2003 – 2006. The League has signaled full support to Que's success. I join you. DPMO has been an acquired taste, much of it bitter, for those who have dealt with them. They tended to ignore Mark Twain's advice "Get your facts first, then you can distort them any way you want to." Some of their communications were an aggravated assault on the English language. As the phrase has it, the theme was that the last thing they wanted to do is hurt you, but you're still on the list. Some of their talented employees felt they were required to sit on all sides of the fence at once.

Since DPMO was established in 1992, I've spoken about its dysfunctional nature; but with Que's experience in operations and the confidence he enjoys from this administration, we have hope for reform. In the recent past, DPMO leadership essentially declared war on many of their sister agencies and subordinates. First, was an attempt to assert operational control and reduce the attendant budget from JPAC. Thankfully, they lost that unworkable foray.

Their next attack was on the US-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs and its support structure, the Joint Commission support Directorate, or JCSD. This "helpful" initiative has resulted in the retirement, dismissal and attempted punitive action against some of the most talented personnel in the organization, threatened the tenure of the Commission Chairman and undermined US credibility with the Russians.

I was the point man for two Presidential envoys while at the NSC, General Jack Vessey on POW/MIAs and Senator Paul Laxalt to the Philippines to help solve the crisis with President Marcos. Aside from the advice and travel by their side, I was charged with ensuring their full support from the rest of our government. Unfortunately, this President's emissary, Doc Foglesong, a retired four-star general with decades of service, including as Commander of our European Command, a devoted and talented advocate, was consistently undercut, and personnel who were supporting him were punished.

In all of these incidents, DPMO resorted to group-think and everything started going badly. They closed ranks and mutually reinforced each other in the leadership, while shunning any contrary advice coming from inside or outside. Those in DPMO responsible for this travesty should themselves be in the dock. It is unclear whether General Foglesong will be replaced, but in any event, Que will have a challenge in converting DPMO into a supportive organization of the President's Commission, rather than a historically known obstacle.

Most recently, the former DPMO leadership, in a move reminiscent of the last year of Jerry Jennings' tenure, essentially attempted to take over this year's annual meeting. In reaction to the GSA scandal, new guidelines were established for government-supported conferences. Fair enough, but this became an excuse to try to dictate speakers, change the meeting schedule and eliminate the Saturday morning Q & A Session under a binding 3-year Memorandum of Understanding. The League tried to work out a reasonable accommodation, while preserving the mutually beneficial process of conducting the government's annual briefings and the League annual meeting simultaneously – something intended by Congressional legislation authorizing COIN Assist transportation.

This attempted assault on what has long been a model of private and public cooperation on an annual basis was finally ended when the grown-ups in the DoD policy chain realized the League was saving the government tens of thousands of dollars in costs for meeting space, room rates and service luncheon rates under their contract and not a hot-tub was to be found. We should thank Pete Verga for his intervention, at least in this instance, and Que might wish to join us – I can't imagine the reception he might have received inheriting, much less walking into, such a debacle. There are a few remaining issues to solve before next year's meeting, but if logic and grown-up behavior prevails, they will be solved amicably.

DPMO has also gone to extraordinary lengths over the past two years to limit information to the League. Given their effectiveness, I think we should recommend the FBI study their techniques since we apparently have more leaks lately than a day care center. DPMO was not even protecting classified information, but DPMO employees had to seek League advice and coordinate by private phone calls – an abomination! Que could start with this and restore what used to be a productive two-way partnership.

Another large unknown will begin to reveal itself next month. The Under Secretary of Defense, in a May 10th memo, called for a high level meeting of all components in the POW/MIA community to discuss roles, missions, priorities, geographic responsibilities and funding. This is an imposing agenda. Hopefully, they recognize that some of the need for this action is due to DPMO mismanagement and interagency antagonisms they have generated. It is also prompted by congressional interest generated by one of the dumbest studies on this issue ever published.

In summary, this study by a temporary JPAC employee and a very small number of fellow plotters demonstrated complete ignorance of this issue. They attacked the very core of objective investigation and research that for years has provided leads and located sites for excavation. While totally and publicly disavowed by the JPAC Commander, it still was leaked to Congress by a self-serving cabal. We must hope Congress recognizes the stupidity of the document, as well as its self-serving nature.

The interagency community also has to resist the temptation to form decisions based on Congressional action that artificially sets a mandate to reach 200 identifications per year. Solely focusing on that perceived mandate, rather than a capacity, could result in moving resources to and graves of unknown US personnel interred in the Punchbowl Cemetery or isolated WWII sites, rather than those where we have not had recent access, such as Burma or India. Such an approach could come at the expense of hard-won diplomatic agreements with governments where post-war access was denied, such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. As important as WWII remains recovery may be, much of the work was done after victory, where the US had access to most of the battlefields. Budget decisions need to ensure the current and welcome increases in the pace and scope of operations in Southeast Asia are maintained and the funds for others wars is an additive.

It will be critically important that they reinforce those elements in DPMO, JPAC and elsewhere who are in direct support of field operations through research, investigations, excavations and, the final step, identifications. Any other path will cause me to characterize my caution above as the canary in the coal mine, and he will perish, along with the encouraging progress now underway.

Finally, let's hope this is a gathering to develop options, not make decisions, without a full vetting by the shareholders closest to the frontlines, such as JPAC. And, hopefully, they will seek wise counsel from Ann on any changes likely to impact the SEA mission – League support of the Executive Branch is critical to the success of major POW/MIA initiatives, as is support from Congress, veterans, the families and the general public.

General Grant, in his recollections of the fallen at Shiloh, stated that “the distant rear of our Army engaged in battle is not the best place from which to judge correctly what is going on in front.” This is a lesson certainly known to any military professional and is applicable now. I'm convinced that if Que Winfield begins with an attitude toward JPAC of “How can I support you?” his goodwill will be reciprocated.

I'm equally convinced that if a cooperative, solid JPAC and DPMO relationship is established, many of the challenges that have arisen in the past and helped generate the Undersecretary's omnibus review will recede as non-issues. I am also sure that a new spirit of consultation by DPMO with the League will pay real dividends, as it continues to produce with JPAC, DIA, AFDIL, LSEL, the Services and our Ambassadors.

We should listen to our presenters with a sense of hope and optimism that a new start is underway to focus on the objective - getting answers for you. Despite the challenges, I have become more optimistic this year. The momentum can be sustained if the policy community backs up the positive trends developing and holds the line against reorganization schemes developed in isolation from those doing the actual work or in reaction to criticism from those who don't. This issue is surely less complex than our current national security challenges. Policy time can be saved by ensuring any proposals pass the smell test, reinforce what is working and remove or bang heads of the minority of bureaucrats who stand in the way.

Thank you.....