

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at a State Luncheon With President Vo Van Thuong of Vietnam in Hanoi, Vietnam

September 11, 2023

Moderator. Today, on the occasion of the state visit to Vietnam by President Joe Biden, President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, His Excellency Vo Van Thuong, solemnly hosts the banquet—[inaudible]—President Joe Biden and the high-level delegation of the United States of America.

We are very honored to invite Your Excellency, President Vo Van Thuong, to deliver his welcome remarks.

President Thuong. Honorable President Joseph Biden, distinguished American and Vietnamese guests, on behalf of the state and people of Vietnam, once again, I would like to warmly welcome you, President Joseph Biden of the United States of America, to Vietnam on your first state visit.

Your visit is truly significant. It builds on the very special character of Vietnam-U.S. relations. You are the first U.S. President to visit Vietnam at the invitation of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyễn Phú Trọng.

During this visit, you have also joined General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng to announce the upgrade of relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership for peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. This is truly a new page in the relationship between our two countries, an enduring, stable, long-term framework that opens up a vast space for further development of the bond between us for decades to follow.

Mr. President, distinguished guests, a mere 5 months after national independence, President Hồ Chí Minh penned a letter addressing President Truman, expressing the desire to establish a bond of full cooperation with the United States. As history would have it, this desire had to confront countless turmoil and challenges, all of such we have overcome. And today we can speak with joy that never before has the relationship between our two countries reached such flourishing height as today.

From former enemies to comprehensive strategic partners, this is truly a model in the history of international relations as to how reconciliation and relationship-building should proceed after a war. This is a result of the efforts to walk past such challenges and vicissitudes of history by so many generations of our country's leaders and people.

Over the past 50 years, we have witnessed events of such significance in the relationship and the unprecedented quantum leaps in our relationship. There have been momentous achievements in various areas of cooperation between Vietnam and the U.S., from economic, trade, investment ties and in education and training cooperation, to various mechanisms for dialogue and joint efforts across different domains and sectors.

Across the comprehensive areas of cooperation between us, I would like to specifically call to attention the truly pride-worthy and striking achievements in our cooperation in addressing war legacy issues.

Allow me to cite the dioxin remediation projects in Da Nang and Bien Hoa airports; support given by the U.S. in various ways to Vietnamese persons with disabilities, including Agent Orange victims of the second and third generation; and the removal of UXOs left behind after the war.

And most recently, for the first time, our two countries have started working together to conduct forensic identification of yet unidentified remains of Vietnamese war martyrs. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to generations of U.S. administrations and people—and to you, Mr. President, and the First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden—for your active support for Vietnam in the humanitarian field.

On our part, since 1973, Vietnam has actively conducted unilateral searches for American MIAs. In 1988, both sides commenced the first joint mission. After half a century, the full cooperation between Vietnam and U.S. in this area is still growing stronger and stronger. Many American MIAs lost in high mountains or deep oceans, even the—on grounds hardly ever tread, have since been found—their remains returned to their home.

Mr. President, distinguished guests, to quote Secretary General Nguyễn Phú Trọng, "Set aside the past, overcome differences, build on similarities, look to the future."

You have also pledged your support for a strong, independent, resilient, and prosperous Vietnam. I have a strong belief that building on the length of Vietnam-U.S. relations with mutual trust and respect, and given the new driver we have established during your visit, the strategic—comprehensive strategic partnership for peace, cooperation, and sustainable development between Vietnam and the U.S. will continue to grow in strength and substance and bring concrete benefits to our two peoples, make positive contributions to peace, friendship, cooperation and sustainable development in the region and the world.

Let me take this opportunity to express my respectful gratitude to the different agencies, organizations, and individuals from both countries who, from one generation to the next, have tirelessly cultivated and nurtured the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S.

Of these very exemplary persons, I would like to especially honor the late Senator John McCain, former Senator Patrick Leahy, and Special Presidential Envoy John Kerry—truly close friends of Vietnam through the years.

Let us, in the generations to come, work together to build on these efforts to preserve, reinforce, and grow this special relationship, take it higher and further in the warm atmosphere of friendship and cooperation between Vietnam and the United States of America.

Let us raise our glasses to the happiness of the American people and the prosperity of the United States of America, to the flourishing comprehensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States of America, to the good health of President Joe Biden, and to the good health of all present here today.

[At this point, President Thuong offered a toast.]

Moderator. Now we have the great honor to invite Your Excellency, Mr. Joe Biden, President of the United States of America, to respond.

President Biden. Mr. President, the great Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du once wrote, "In glory they made up for their past hardships, and their love got fresher and warmer each day."

Mr. President, friends, it's an honor to be here today on this historic occasion, a day when we feel all the glory and warmth of the boundless possibilities that lie ahead, a day that may have seemed impossible not that long ago.

As a matter of fact, I was just in the other room with my very close and old friend, Tom Vallely, who is the guy who put together the Fulbright University. And he was helping me when I was a much younger man trying to get the nomination for President.

And we were sitting in a small twin-engine plane. And I looked at him, and I said, "Tom, why are you doing this for me?" He said, "Because I want to fundamentally change the

relationship with Vietnam." And he had been here as a soldier. "I want to fundamentally change that relationship." And he's worked his whole career to do that.

And you know, for—we—as we sit side by side, Mr. President, we're reminded of the hard work we all did to get here to overcome the hardships of the past and seize the promises of the future, one of greater opportunity, dignity, security, and prosperity for all our people.

And as we trace this 50-year arc of progress between our nations, there's one common denominator: you, our people, our activities, our activists, our entrepreneurs, our scholars, our veterans, our innovators, and our leaders who never forget—like Senator, later Secretary Kerry, who was a brave soldier who fought here, but wanted, every day since then, to make it better. Everyone in both our countries who's working to make sure that people, no matter who they are, can seize potential of this moment.

I want to thank three close friends again in normalizing these relations: John Kerry, Tommy Vallely, and a close friend of the three of us—a guy who is not here today; a guy who, when he returned from Vietnam, came to work for me as a Military Aide in the United States Senate and then I convinced him he should run for United States Senate. He ran in the other party. We argued like hell from that point on, but we still loved one another. And John McCain, who I miss—we all three of us miss dearly today.

We know where there was darkness, you all found light. Where there was hardship, you found healing to bring us forward, to bring us together, to bring us to this day. It's testament to how far our countries have come, but most importantly, how far we will go in the years ahead.

And that's what comprehensive strategic partners is about—and thank you for inviting us to have that status—going forward together, tackling challenges together, facing the future together.

So please join me, if you will, in—I'd like to make a toast. I quoted a Vietnamese poet to begin with, and I'm going to quote—my colleagues in the Senate always kidded me. I was always quoting Irish poets. I quote them not because I'm Irish—because they're the best poets in the world. That's why I quote them.

But all kidding aside. There is a great quote from a man whose wife I got to know after he passed away, Seamus Heaney. And he wrote a poem called "The Cure at Troy." And this is my toast to all of you.

He said, "History teaches us, don't hope on this side of the grave. But then, once in a lifetime, that longed-for tidal wave of justice rises up, and hope and history rhyme."

Here's to us making hope and history rhyme for all our people. God bless you all.

[President Biden offered a toast.]

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 1:30 p.m. in the Yellow Room at the Presidential Palace. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas J. Vallely, senior adviser for mainland Southeast Asia, Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University; Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John F. Kerry; and Marie Heaney, wife of Irish poet Seamus Heaney. President Thuong and the moderator spoke in Vietnamese, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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