

Remarks on Developments in the POW/MIA Situation October 23, 1992

The President. May I start by thanking General Vessey and Senator McCain. And also, demonstrating the bipartisan nature of this effort, I want to thank Senator Kerry for being here and Senator Smith, both extraordinarily active in trying to get to the bottom of this matter we want to discuss for a minute here.

Let me welcome also representatives from a group representing a group of brave Americans, the families of those still missing in Indo-China. I've visited with some of you all, but I want to welcome you to the Rose Garden. I've read your letters and listened to your stories. It is a powerful mixture of pride and fear: proud of your warrior's service, but fearful that you will never know his fate.

Early in our administration, we told Hanoi that we would pursue a policy that left behind the bitterness of war but not the men who fought it. Our approach was called the "Road Map." It was designed to gain the fullest possible accounting of MIA's. It's been a tough road to follow. You see, for all of us the POW/MIA issue is a question of honor, of oath-sworn commitment kept. It's a Nation's test of its own worth, measured in the life of one lone individual.

To help gain the fullest possible accounting, I asked General Vessey, a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to continue to serve as my personal representative to Hanoi. He has had, as we all know, many years of distinguished service. But of all his many missions, he might tell you that this is the toughest task he has ever faced.

He's worked countless hours; he's traveled endless miles, but he's been persistent and steadfast. And under his leadership, policy began to work. Hanoi has yielded the remains of 269 American servicemen.

We secured the right to go anywhere in Vietnam to investigate reports of live Americans. We began excavating battlegrounds of Indo-China, searching for the remains of our servicemen. In these searches we never found anyone alive, but we vowed to follow

every lead. And then last summer, we got our first glimpse of Vietnam's vast set of wartime archives. With proof of the archives' existence in hand, once again I asked General Vessey to undertake a mission to Hanoi, and called on a man I greatly admire, Senator John McCain, himself a former POW, to accompany the General.

The Vietnamese have tremendous respect for Senator McCain, a respect that transcends country and culture. And because of this, as General Vessey just told me, Senator McCain was absolutely critical to this mission. General Vessey and Senator McCain have just now reported to me and to others here on their mission, and I'm pleased to announce this morning that our policy has achieved a significant, a real breakthrough.

Hanoi has agreed to provide us with all, and I repeat, all, information they have collected on American POW's and MIA's. This includes photographs, artifacts, detailed records on Americans who fell into Vietnam's hands.

Hanoi's records will at last enable us to determine the fate of many of our men. And we still await the return of their remains, but already my representatives have begun to provide answers to families who have waited and prayed for decades. It pains me beyond words to say we may never know what happened to each and every American, but we will spare no effort to learn the truth.

Early in my term as President, we initiated worldwide investigations to determine the fate of our missing men, not only in Vietnam but in all the battles of the cold war. Along the way we've had significant help from Senator Kerry and Senator Smith who head this select POW/MIA committee. And I think we all stress this point: This is a bipartisan effort. It must transcend partisan politics in every way.

From Russia, we've had cooperation with President Yeltsin, pledging full cooperation. We've begun to learn the fate of Americans missing since Stalin's regime. And North

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Korea's returned the first American remains in over 40 years.

Today, finally, I am convinced that we can begin writing the last chapter of the Vietnam war. I want to stress that it is only a beginning, but it is a significant beginning. It was a bitter conflict, but Hanoi knows today that we seek only answers without the threat of retribution for the past.

As we cooperate in bringing that painful era to a close, Vietnam and the United States can begin to look towards the future. And to begin that process, we have extended a very modest disaster assistance to flood the ravaged areas of Vietnam—to those that have been hurt the most by the flood. I've also directed my administration to work with Hanoi in developing ways to help identify Vietnam's MIA's and increase humanitarian assistance to the disabled Vietnamese veterans of the war.

Now we will begin reviewing what further steps we can take with Hanoi. We appreciate

what's been done, and now we are redetermined to go forward to see what more we can do.

Today is a day of significance for all Americans. It is so because today again we honor those who chose to serve and who gave themselves in the supreme measure of devotion to their country. We're honoring them by at long last approaching a point where we can fully keep faith with their loved ones and bring them peace. So I am proud to be standing here with four who are making a significant contribution to America's search for the full truth.

Thank you all for coming. And General Vessey, my special thanks to you, sir, for once again serving your Nation with such distinction.

General Vessey. Thank you, sir.

The President. Thank you all very much.

Note: The President spoke at 8 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Remarks at a Laurel County Rally in London, Kentucky

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The President. Thank you, Senator. Thank you, Mitch McConnell. And I am so proud to be introduced by your Senator, who is doing a superb job for this State in Washington. If we had more like him they wouldn't be yelling, "Clean House!" or clean out the Senate. He is a star, and you're lucky to have him up there. Mitch, thank you.

But I'll tell you what you can do: You can improve things for this State and for the Nation, getting people that think as we do on these issues, and send David Williams to the Senate, elect him. He can do it.

As far as my former chairman and great friend Hal Rogers goes, I know he's surrounded in this wonderful part of Kentucky by friends. But every once in a while you strike up a strong personal friendship built on respect and, yes, love. And we Bushes feel very strongly, Barbara and I feel very strongly about Hal Rogers. You must reelect him to the United States Congress.

I want to thank Superintendent Joe McKnight and Roger Marcum, the principal, for permitting us to have this beautiful rally on this beautiful Kentucky day. Pay my respects to Melda Barton, our national committeewoman, Melda Barton Collins; and State rep Tom Johnson; and the chairman of our campaign, Tom Handy; and our celebrity guest, the family man from "Family Feud," Ray Combs.

I still remember my great visit here 4 years ago to the town named Bush, Kentucky. And I saw the fire department and the Bush Elementary School, and I met George Bush, the postmaster. This part of Kentucky—you have a wonderful way of making somebody feel at home. Someone mentioned to me the results of the South Laurel High School student referendum, and I understand it went pretty well. And let me just say to all of those from South