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NEWS

U.S. SENATOR FOR KANSAS

FROM:

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER

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U.S.- VIETNAM RELATIONS

**STRATEGIC, DIPLOMATIC, MORAL MISTAKE TO GRANT NORMALIZATION NOW;
PRESIDENT CLINTON MUST BE CONVINCED VIETNAM HAS DONE ALL
IT CAN TO RESOLVE POW/MIA ISSUE**

News reports indicate that President Clinton is on the verge of making a decision about normalizing relations with Vietnam. I understand an announcement may come as soon as tomorrow. Secretary of State Warren Christopher has recommended normalization. Many Vietnam veterans support normalization -- including a bipartisan group of veterans in the Senate, led by the senior Senator from Arizona, John McCain. Many oppose normalization as well. Just as the Vietnam War divided Americans in the 1960's and 1970's, the issue of how to finalize peace with Vietnam divides Americans today.

At the outset, let me observe that there are men and women of good will on both sides of this issue. No one should question the motives of advocates or opponents of normalization. We share similar goals: obtaining the fullest possible accounting for American Prisoners Of War and Missing In Action; continuing the healing process in the aftermath of our most divisive war; fostering respect for human rights and political liberty in Vietnam.

The debate over normalization is about our differences with the government of Vietnam, not with the Vietnamese people. The people of Vietnam have suffered decades of war and brutal dictatorship. We hope for a better future for the people of Vietnam -- a future of democracy and freedom, not repression and despair.

The debate over normalization is not a debate over the ends of American policy -- it is a debate over the means. The most fundamental question is whether normalizing relations with Vietnam will further the goals we share. In my view, now is not the time to normalize relations with Vietnam. The historical record shows that Vietnam cooperates on POW/MIA issues only when pressured by the United States; in the absence of sustained pressure, there is little progress on POW/MIA concerns, or on any other issue.

Vietnam Government Not Providing Full POW/MIA Information

The facts are clear. Vietnam is still a one party Marxist dictatorship. Preserving their rule is the number one priority of Vietnam's communist government. Many credible sources suggest Vietnam is not providing all the information it can on POW/MIA issues. In some cases, increased access has only confirmed how much more Vietnam could be doing. This is not simply my view, it is a view shared by two Asia experts -- Steve Solarz, former Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia and Pacific Affairs, and Richard Childress, National Security Council Vietnam expert from 1981 to 1989. Earlier this year, they wrote, "Vietnam could easily account for hundreds of Americans by a combination of unilateral repatriation of remains, opening its archives, and full cooperation on U.S. servicemen missing in Laos." They conclude that whatever the reasons or combination of reasons, Vietnam, in the current environment, has made a conscious decision to keep the POW/MIA issue alive by not resolving it."

This is a view shared by the National League of POW/MIA Families which has worked tirelessly to resolve the issue for many years. It is also a view shared by major veterans groups, including the American Legion, the largest veterans group. The media has reported that the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the second largest group is supportive of normalization. Let me quote from VFW's official position adopted at its 1994 convention: "at some point in time but only after significant results have been

(more)

achieved through Vietnam/U.S. cooperative efforts, we should...move towards normalizing diplomatic relations." A more recent VFW statement makes clear that normalization is not opposed by the VFW if it leads to a fuller accounting of POW/MIA cases.

If President Clinton intends to normalize diplomatic relations with Vietnam, he should do so only after he can clearly state that Vietnam has done everything it reasonably can to provide the fullest possible accounting. That's the central issue. The United States has diplomatic relations with many countries which violate human rights, and repress their own people. But the United States should not establish relations with a country which withholds information about the fate of American servicemen. As President-elect Clinton said on Veterans Day, 1992, "I have sent a clear message that there will be no normalization of relations with any nation that is at all suspected of withholding any information" [on POW/MIA cases]. Let me repeat: "suspected of withholding any information". I hope the standard proposed by President-elect Clinton is the same standard used by President Clinton.

Normalization: Strongest American Bargaining Chip

No doubt about it, the Vietnamese government wants normalization very badly. Normalization is the strongest bargaining chip America has. As such, it should only be granted when we are convinced Vietnam has done all it can do. Vietnam has taken many steps -- sites are being excavated, and some remains have been returned. But there are also signs that Vietnam may be willfully withholding information. Unless the President is absolutely convinced Vietnam has done all it can to resolve the POW/MIA issue -- and is willing to say so publicly and unequivocally -- it would be a strategic, diplomatic and moral mistake to grant Vietnam the stamp of approval from the United States government.

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* Remarks delivered on Senate floor, approximately 4:00 p.m.