

STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOB DOLE

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF FAMILIES BREAKFAST

FRIDAY, JULY 13

WASHINGTON, D.C.

I usually begin an appearance such as this by saying what a pleasure it is for me to be here. Of course, there can be no pleasure so long as 2300 Americans remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. There is instead anxiety and frustration and grief—grief prolonged by uncertainty over the fate of your loved ones. So let me instead say what an honor it is for me to join with you this morning, and renew our mutual commitment to finding out the fate of beloved husbands, fathers, sons and best friends.

For you and I, the Vietnam War refuses to go away. While many in government would prefer to block out the war as merely a bad dream, it is a nightmare that goes on day after day for people like you. For you, peace has never been declared. To you, America has failed thus far to discharge her obligation to seek and know the truth.

That's what I would like to discuss this morning, and hopefully to correct in the days ahead.

For the last six years, our government has proclaimed that no more Americans live in the jungles of wartorn Asia. But that is not enough; not nearly enough. You have a right to know what happened to your men, and an even greater right to explore every possibility that they may yet survive.

Bits and pieces of evidence suggest that some may be alive even now. Vietnamese refugees have testified that they have seen imprisoned Americans as late as last year. The final report of the House Select Committee concluded that North Vietnam has failed to turn over information in its possession pertaining to large numbers of missing Americans.

So let me repeat: As long as the slightest hope remains that our government might save a single life or comfort a single distraught family, than our leaders have a moral responsibility to keep up the search, and keep up the pressure on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

My concern is not new. Three years ago, the Senate passed my resolution to establish a Presidential Task Force on the POW/MIA issue; tragically, the proposal never got out of committee.

This year, along with Representative Guyer of Ohio, I have introduced a joint resolution to establish a special investigating commission to secure a full accounting of all our MIA's and POW's. I am delighted to report that the resolution passed the House on Tuesday of this week—I only hope we can secure a similar result in the Senate—and the White House.

PAST FRUSTRATIONS - PRESENT HOPE

Past efforts to obtain a reasonable and accurate accounting from the Socialist governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have been fruitless. Despite assurances that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is conducting an extensive search for Americans listed as missing, and for information that might indicate their fate, the North Vietnamese have provided little information about our MIA's and POW's, at sporadic intervals, arbitrarily determined by no one but themselves.

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Now that the military and Congressional inquiry teams have expired, there is a crucial need for some vehicle to determine the whereabouts of these men. The withholding of this information is a violation of your rights and basic human decency. I believe the commission I have proposed could address these gross violations and promote greater cooperation from the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian governments.

I believe the public as a whole understands that the Vietnamese are primarily interested in U.S. recognition, trade and aid so they can proceed with plans to redevelop their devastated economy. They hope for an exchange of American bodies for American dollars. We must make clear that there will be no aid forthcoming until we see better results in the long overdue accounting for these missing Americans. Once again, this commission I am proposing could help to achieve this, in the process removing a barrier to developing relations with Vietnam.

AN OBLIGATION TO FAMILIES AND HISTORY

One school of thought feels it is best to call an end to the Vietnam War in all aspects. Let's forget it ever happened, they say, and the pain and suffering will vanish. Nothing could be more irresponsible--or more unjust to the brave men who carried America's hopes and ideals on their shoulders. I think the public is still concerned about these men. I think they feel it is our responsibility to account for them. I think they agree with me--in order to really close the final chapter on the Vietnam War, the need for a full accounting is essential.

Millions of people share in our concern. I have received pleas from many human rights organizations urging our continued attention to this matter. Many more come from families of U.S. servicemen still listed as "missing in action" in S.E. Asia. Your families, ladies and gentlemen. You don't want to let go; you want to know and rightfully and understandably so. The desire to know the fate of loved ones lost in armed conflicts is a basic human need which any humane nation must and can satisfy. This commission could do just that, finally resolving the doubts that you have while assisting the DOD reclassification efforts.

REALLY CLOSING THE FINAL CHAPTER

We know that there can never be a full accounting for all of these individuals. But what the American people do expect--and what we in Congress must insist upon--is a reasonable demonstration of cooperation on this issue. We have waited too long, and labored too hard for an honorable accounting and we are not going to be satisfied with anything less than full Vietnamese compliance. Time is running out for these men. Conscience will not permit our leaders to forget--we must not let them.

At a time when this Administration addresses itself so eloquently to the matter of universal compassion for human rights, it seems only fitting that the same criteria of judgment be applied to Vietnam's treatment of the MIA/POW issue. We owe at least this much to you and to the memory of the servicemen themselves. Until we achieve this, we will never close the final chapter on the Vietnam War, nor will we heal the wounds it created. I have written this week to President Carter, hoping to enlist his support for something more lasting than a one day remembrance or a Presidential proclamation. I hope together we can finally solve the tragic mystery of our POW's and MIA's.

SALT II AND A WORLD AT PEACE

Now, if you'll permit me to take a few moments to address another major concern before our nation. I speak, of course, of the SALT II treaty, on which hearings began earlier this week.

You have sacrificed in the name of peace. It is a tarnished peace, so long as you live in darkness or doubt as to the whereabouts of your men. But you know, firsthand, of the suffering that war imposes on the innocent, the young, the women, the parents. I know too: for I have seen the horrors of war firsthand. I have seen men die at my feet. I bear with me the scars of combat, and I will carry them to my grave. No one desires a world at peace more profoundly than I--or you.

So who can oppose the concept of arms limitation? Who, in this age of pushbutton Armageddon, can seriously doubt the need to control the madness of the arms race, in which stockpiles of weapons grow ever higher, awaiting the ominous day when the skies rain death and the soil itself is permeated with radioactive fallout.

It is a horrible vision, and yet a real one. So I want to see SALT II work. I want to see it put a halt to the relentless buildup of weaponry that threatens our world and terrifies our people.

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But SALT II is imperfect, and I want to see it perfected. I want to see a peace of equals, not inequals, a peace of strength not a peace of weakness. I want a peace that gives new meaning to life, instead of inviting even greater aggression and international holocaust.

I'm asking some tough questions about the treaty. And you should too--not because you want it defeated, but because you want it made better. We cannot accept any arms limitation that might permanently weaken America's position as a great power.

During the last 15 years, the Soviet Union has outspent the United States in strategic forces by a three to one margin. Our Navy is down to less than 400 ships, and our weaponry in Europe is, in some cases, 20 years out of date. We have followed a policy of arms restraint, as if we could set a good example, and expect other nations to follow.

Unfortunately, the modern world doesn't work that way. Thus we have to perfect SALT II, to insure that both sides restrain their development and deployment of doomsday weapons. We have to ask tough questions about the Soviet's Backfire Bomber, and about our right to share our technology with our allies. We have to make certain that America's defenses will not be weakened by an treaty, and that our children and grandchildren will not be sucked into the same kind of terrible sacrifice that was demanded of this generation.

So I ask you, who have suffered so much, to speak out one more time. Speak out for a world at peace, but a peace between equals. Speak out for an America strong enough to be gentle, and self-confident enough to be sure. Speak out for leadership that is both morally and politically true, that never confuses peace with appeasement, but never mistakes saber rattling for strength.

I pledge to continue my efforts to secure a full accounting of your men. I ask in return that you make certain that they are enshrined in the policy of our government.

In the words of the late Pope Paul VI, "Peace is something that is built up day after day, in the pursuit of an order intended by God."

Might we never pass a day without contributing to that peace, or pursuing that order. And my prayer for each of you as you leave this capital city, is that God might grant to you the peace of acceptance and understanding. As he is our witness, our government cannot rest a day until it provides you with the tools to engineer that peace.

Thank you.

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