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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

November 13, 1984

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
AT DEDICATION OF VIETNAM MEMORIAL STATUE

November 11, 1984

Vietnam Memorial  
Washington, D.C.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Senator Warner, thank you very much. And may I thank you also for the crucial personal support that you gave to the building of this Memorial.

I extend the thanks of the nation also to all who have contributed so much to this fine cause.

Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests, my remarks today will be brief because so much has been said over the years and said so well about the loyalty and the valor of those who served us in Vietnam. It's occurred to me that only one very important thing has been left unsaid, and I will try to speak of it today.

It's almost ten years now since U.S. military involvement in Vietnam came to a close. Two years ago, our government dedicated the Memorial bearing the names of those who died or are still missing. Every day, the families and friends of those brave men and women come to the wall and search out a name and touch it.

The Memorial reflects as a mirror reflects, so that when you find the name you're searching for, you find it in your own reflection. And as you touch it, from certain angles, you're touching, too, the reflection of the Washington Monument or the chair in which great Abe Lincoln sits.

Those who fought in Vietnam are part of us, part of our history. They reflected the best in us. No number of wreaths, no amount of music and memorializing will ever do them justice. But it is good for us that we honor them and their sacrifice. And it's good that we do it in the reflected glow of the enduring symbols of our Republic.

The fighting men depicted in the statue we dedicate today, the three young American servicemen, are individual only in times of -- or in terms of their battle dress. All are as one, with eyes fixed upon the Memorial bearing the names of their brothers in arms. On their youthful faces, faces too young to have experienced war, we see expressions of loneliness and profound love and a fierce determination never to forget.

The men of Vietnam answered the call of their country. Some of them died in the arms of many of you here today, asking you to look after a newly born child or care for a loved one. They died uncomplaining. The tears staining their mud-caked faces were not for self-pity, but for the sorrow they knew the news of their death would cause their families and friends.

As you knelt alongside his litter and held him one last time, you heard his silent message -- he asked you not to forget.

Today, we pay homage not only to those who gave their lives, but to their comrades present today and all across the country. You didn't forget. You kept the faith. You walked from the litter, wiped away your tears, and returned to the battle. You fought on, sustained by one another and deaf to the voices of those

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who didn't comprehend. You performed with a steadfastness and valor that veterans of other wars salute, and you are forever in the ranks of that special number of Americans in every generation that the nation records as true patriots.

Also among the servicemen and women honored here today is a unique group of Americans whose fate is still unknown to our nation and to their families. Nearly 2500 of the names on this Memorial are still missing in Southeast Asia, and some may still be serving.

Q They are.

THE PRESIDENT: Their names are distinguished by a cross rather than the diamond. Thus, this Memorial is a symbol of both past and current sacrifice.

The war in Vietnam threatened to tear our society apart. And the political and philosophical disagreements that animated each side continue to some extent.

It's been said that these memorials reflect a hunger for healing. Well, I do not know if perfect healing ever occurs. But I know that sometimes when a bone is broken, if it's knit together well, it will in the end be stronger than if it had not been broken.

I believe that in the decade since Vietnam the healing has begun. And I hope that before my days as Commander in Chief are over the process will be completed.

There were great moral and philosophical disagreements about the rightness of the war. And we cannot forget them because there is no wisdom to be gained in forgetting. But we can forgive each other and ourselves for those things that we now recognize may have been wrong. And I think it's time we did.

There's been much rethinking by those who did not serve and those who did. There's been much rethinking by those who held strong views on the war and by those who did not know which view was right. There's been rethinking on all sides, and this is good. And it's time we moved on in unity and with resolve -- with the resolve to always stand for freedom as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.

And we must in unity work to account for those still missing and aid those returned who still suffer from the pain and memory of Vietnam. (Applause.) We must as a society take guidance from the fighting men memorialized by this statue. The three servicemen are watchful, ready and challenged, but they are also standing forever together.

And let me say to the Vietnam veterans gathered here today: When you returned home, you brought solace to the loved ones of those who fell, but little solace was given to you. Some of your countrymen were unable to distinguish between our native distaste for war and the stainless patriotism of those who suffered its scars.

But there's been a rethinking there, too. And now we can say to you and say as a nation, thank you for your courage. Thank you for being patient with your countrymen. (Applause.) Thank you.

Thank you for continuing to stand with us together. The men and women of Vietnam fought for freedom in a place where liberty was in danger. They put their lives in danger to help a people in a land far away from their own. Many sacrificed their lives in the name of duty, honor and country. All were patriots who lit the world with their fidelity and courage.

They were both our children and our heroes. We will never ever forget them. We will never forget their devotion and their sacrifice. They stand before us, marching into time and into shared memory forever. May God bless their souls.

Now, I shall sign the document by which this memorial has been gratefully received by our government. (Applause.)

(The document is signed.) (Applause.)

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you very, very much.

THE PRESIDENT -- and now it belongs to all of us, just as those men who have come back belong to all of us. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

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END

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pow/MIA  
speeches

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POW/MIA ADDRESS AT  
DEDICATION OF COLUMBUS, OHIO VETERANS PARK  
DECEMBER 9, 1984  
RICHARD CHILDRESS  
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Mayor Rinehart, Congressman Wiley, Congressman Kasich, families of our missing men, fellow veterans and concerned citizens; I am honored to be able to participate in the events today in Columbus.

I, and my fellow veterans gathered with us served in a noble cause. People can debate the way the Vietnam War was conducted, whether we should have ever been present, but these debates are unrelated to the basic fact -- American youth were asked to go for their country and they answered that call. This was noble and good. Popular myths of Vietnam veterans being maladjusted or somehow not part of us is simply not supportable on a personal or statistical level. The vast majority work daily to support their families, contribute further to this great country with their skills and enrich our lives.

I wish to turn now to a very special group of veterans -- those still missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. They number 2,483. Although we know the majority gave their lives in defense of our nation, there still lingers the haunting possibility some may still be held captive. In order to answer this question, President Reagan directed your government to pursue the POW/MIA issue as a matter of highest national priority. In 1981, President Reagan assumed office after a two-year standstill -- with no resolution of any cases from Vietnam. We developed a strategy that has been implemented and is ongoing. Among other things, it included the opening of negotiations with both the Lao and Vietnamese Governments, raising of intelligence priorities, an international diplomatic offensive and a bipartisan approach at home. At the suggestion of the National League of Families, we adopted a public awareness program to inform the American people of this national tragedy so they in turn could signal the Vietnamese and Lao Governments that the American people back the President's priority and want this issue resolved.

I have traveled to both Laos and Vietnam and I can assure you that they have noticed your interest.

The response to our efforts from the other side has been disappointingly slow. But, we have seen the repatriation of the remains of 25 of our missing men, thus relieving the terrible uncertainty that their families have endured for so long with such bravery.

In February of this year, I participated in the highest level delegation to go to Hanoi on this issue since the end of the war. The Vietnamese promised to accelerate their efforts. This pledge was again reaffirmed in October to me by their Foreign Minister after the return of six of our missing men in July. We are awaiting the fulfillment of their pledge to us and will continue to press them.

On July 20, the President announced the agreement of the Government of Laos and the United States to conduct the first crash site excavation since the end of the war. We are now awaiting the monsoon rains to end and the ground to dry before actual work. We are hoping to begin soon after the first of the year. This crash site could resolve as many as 13 cases. We hope to effect the excavation of all accessible sites in this country.

Most critical to us and to you is the live prisoner issue. We have not yet been able to confirm they are holding prisoners, but we operate under the assumption they are. I can assure you that the full intelligence apparatus of this government is working to answer this question. Should it be confirmed, the President has pledged decisive action to return them home. We have resolved many of the sightings, but many are unresolved and as long as we have such a situation, we will not rule out the possibility of prisoners being held.

Many of you wish to help and you can. Your presence here helps, the flying of the POW/MIA flag will help, your support to the families of our missing, who have the most to gain or lose, will help. I urge you to work closely with the National League of Families. They have many good ideas of how you can aid our official efforts. Their Ohio representative, Liz Flich, is also well known to us in Washington and particularly effective.

Unfortunately, both in the past and now, some well-meaning concerned citizens or veterans have hurt our efforts. Private, irresponsible cross-border forays as depicted in recent films and tried in 1982 are destructive to our efforts. The foray in 1982 with no intelligence or operational capability delayed agreement with the Lao Government to excavate a crash site for almost a year. Unfortunately, there are those raising money on this issue to support their own activities by inferring that the United States Government is doing nothing. Such assertions are false and anyone who has followed the issue for many years knows it. In summary, the private sector has a critical role to play and we encourage it, but not as soldiers, diplomats or intelligence agents. We have plenty and they are active. Blind activism does not work.

If we work in unity backing the official efforts and coordinating closely with the families, we maximize our chances for success. Finally, I would like to read a letter to you that I was asked to bring and which I will leave with Mayor Rinehart.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

December 3, 1984

Nancy and I would like to express our deep appreciation for the supportive efforts of the City of Columbus to resolve the POW/MIA issue.

Public awareness activities signal the Vietnamese and Laotian governments of the genuine interest of the American people in resolving this issue. Your support to our official efforts in partnership with the National League of Families is especially significant.

The POW/MIA flag that you will fly in Columbus has also flown in Washington over the White House. It is a symbol of our determination to return our men and end the haunting uncertainty of their families.

*Ronald Reagan*

(Noonan/BE)  
December 11, 1984  
1:00 p.m.

PRESIDENTIAL REMARKS: CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTING  
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1984

Thank you, all of you, so much.

In just a moment I'm going to push the button that lights the National Christmas Tree. This is an old White House tradition, this showing up to do this by a President or Vice President, and I am happy to continue it.

I was in the White House a few moments ago and I was looking out at the tree and at all of you surrounding the tree, and I thought of how God gives us moments that lift us, and that bring us together.

Christmas is a deeply holy day for many of us, the day that marks the birth on Earth of the Son of God, who came to redeem our sins and to teach us that most-needed of lessons: how to live. For others of us, Christmas is a national holiday that marks the birth of a good preacher whose message of peace is pertinent to all times and all peoples. Either way His message remains the guiding star of our endeavors.

I guess we all have our own favorite Christmas memories -- for this is the time of year when most of us try to be better than our everyday selves, when, for a week or so, we let loose the tautest coils of kindness in our hearts . . .

For the past few years in this great house I have thought each Christmas season of our first real Christmas as a Nation. It was the dark and freezing Christmas Eve of 1776, when General Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware. They --

and Providence -- gave our Nation its first Christmas gift: a victory that brought us closer to liberty, the condition in which God meant man to flourish.

It always seems to me that Christmas is a time of magic -- and the magic is there no matter what our external circumstances are. We are a prosperous Nation, and this year many of us will go out and buy rather splendid gifts for the people we love -- books and artwork and clothing and jewelry. But in leaner times, and for some of us these are lean times, the magic maintains. The other day the father of a White House staffer talked about his childhood Christmases in the Great Depression. He'd been asked what folks did in those days for gifts. The man said that he had no money, but in Brooklyn in those days nobody had any money so it wasn't so bad. In fact, he could well remember his first Christmas gift to his father. He was 5 or 6 years old at the time, and he had just seen his first movie, a slapstick comedy. Early Christmas morning, as his unemployed father slept, the boy decided to give his father something that he had seen in the movie, something that had inspired great laughter and gaiety in the theatre. So he gave his father a hotfoot. Dad woke up and there was a little shouting but when the son explained his motives there was a lot of laughter, too. I know many children are watching right now so I just want to say, as they do on t.v. specials: Don't try this trick at home!

Each December is a paradox: We celebrate a Prince born in utter poverty, and the fact of His birth makes our hearts turn warmest at the coldest time of the year. Many of us do good at

this time of year, and most all of us mean to, but sometimes good intentions get lost in the demands of shopping and such. But this is only the 13th day of December, and we still have a dozen days to do a kindness -- to answer the letter of a child who writes to Santa at the Post Office, or to buy an extra gift for a Toys for Tots campaign, or whatever. So if you have forgotten to do it: Do it, do it tonight or tomorrow, and make someone very glad.

There's still time. In fact, one of the great messages of this season is that it's not too late, it's never too late, to touch a life and thereby change the world forever.

And it is good for all of us over the next few weeks to remember all of those who serve our country abroad -- the one million men and women in uniform, the members of our Foreign Service, the people who work in our information agencies throughout the world, and the men and women in the Peace Corps . . . All of these people, our brothers and sisters, protect our country and represent us abroad. And even though they can't be at the table this Christmas they can't be far from our hearts.

And I want to add that there is no one we hold in our hearts more closely than the Missing In Action in Southeast Asia, some of whom may be serving our country still. They too are absent at the table; and the gathering will not be complete, will never be complete, until they return or are accounted for.

Now, it's cold and, in the immortal words of the astronaut Alan Shepard, I'm gonna stop talking and "light this candle!"

I light it in a Nation at peace, a Nation united. The ties that bind still bind, the circle is unbroken; and the magic maintains.

And so now I light the Nation's Christmas tree. May its thousand lights illuminate our best resolves, and cast a great glow on our affection for each other, and our thanks for each other, and our love.

Thank you. Merry Christmas! May you fill it with joy.