

## **Competence, Comprehension, and Caring**

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“Past is Prologue” was the original assignment I was given by Ann to address. In searching my archives, I found patterns with which we are all familiar, such as between Administrations – Post War. There were the familiar write-offs, then priority, bureaucratic reorganizations that failed, but maintained over time to attain further failure. But I noted a theme throughout that caused me to change the subject to “Competence, Comprehension, and Caring,” all overarching factors in the history of the POW/MIA issue that are inextricably linked.

Within this issue, as William Faulkner observed, “The past is never dead, it’s not even past”, and government officials who hear or read this should know the difference between a critic and an enemy. Critics will tell you perceived failings, but enemies will never tell you what they believe you are doing wrong.

First, competence. Yes, there are instances of incompetence, but they are much rarer than some believe. We should praise our competent specialists – scientists at AFDIL; highly trained Stony Beach Team members; casualty officers from each of the Services; and within DPAA, a wealth of diverse talent, including anthropologists and archaeologists, archivists and historians, research and analysis personnel, casualty resolution specialists at the detachment level, explosive ordnance and medical personnel, life support equipment analysts, negotiators pursuing public-private partnerships, computer technicians, soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen at excavation sites, logisticians, procurement personnel, and more. This multi-disciplined collection of specialists demonstrates the current complexity of the mission, and they all have one thing in common: they have been trained in their respective specialties.

Those in leadership positions possess an acceptable level of competence compiled from previous assignments, military or civilian. None, however, have been educated on the overall POW-MIA issue – their knowledge has come from on-the-job training. At the same time, we should also recognize there are some military leaders who have been genuine heroes in this effort, learned this mission in record time, and pursued it with diligence and passion. Further, many of the civilian leaders have honed their long-term experience because of valuable knowledge.

What distinguishes these personnel and their requirement to succeed is to recognize that to be most effective in their new role, they need education or experience that provides an overall foundation in the issue. This is the only solid basis on which to make policy decisions and transmit an informed view to the team of specialists under them.

This shortfall needs attention. We drop our specialists into this complex pool with no training in the overall issue history and current dynamics, but expect a smooth running operation with a common orientation and understanding. Something as elementary as reading the reports of past League Annual Meetings would provide good context.

Which introduces comprehension. To comprehend the complexities of this issue requires detailed knowledge of the history of the issue – previous negotiations, agreements reached, and motivations of host countries; views of the families, vets groups, and other concerned citizens; and what worked in the past, what didn’t, but might now. The result is that too frequently, those working the issue for years possess much greater issue-related comprehension than the ever-changing leadership.

During the period of my responsibilities on the National Security Council Staff, the policy makers came with a comprehensive view of what needed to be done, the key players, the past write-offs and, for the most part, they were Vietnam Veterans – with senior policy-level backing.

Unfortunately, over the years, as the number of personnel grew, changes in national policy occurred, as did Congressional and public pressure. Decisions were made that minimized the bureaucratic need for comprehension that was replaced with internal bickering between operations and policy, and a succession of temporary leadership personnel reacting without a coherent understanding of the mission.

They began to focus on statistics, business models along with innumerable charts, measurements and goals that further reduced personal understanding of the overall issue.

As a result, defensiveness grew and legitimate critics were shunned, instead of consulted. Further, this approach was contrary to what the most successful businessman in this country, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, espoused. He said the emphasis should not be on models, but the customer, the customer, the customer. And who is the POW/MIA customer? The families of our missing. Lack of comprehension leads one down Yogi Berra's famous road where he said "When you run into a fork in the road, take it."

One outcome was an unfortunate number of resignations and early retirement of seasoned, long-term employees who actually comprehended the issue – and some were even forced out. As the new statistical models became established with fewer to challenge the flawed assumptions, comprehension of the overall issue, to include differences in the wars, receded further until it has become the boiling frog problem--his life is in danger, but he's unaware of what's happening.

Over the years, many seasoned employees felt they could not find common sense without a search warrant.

Ironically, besides the veteran POW/MIA personnel at DoD, much of the overall comprehension of the issue was maintained by State Department personnel. They were not only attuned to the cultural and political environment of the countries concerned, they knew that the history preceding them was critical to developing and implementing policy. This led them to stay in touch with their predecessors, including embassy staffers, Ambassadors, and desk officers who rose through the ranks over the years and had been exposed to the issue early in their careers. Over time, they passed on their knowledge and stayed in contact with the League.

Unfortunately, military officers connected to the issue go from assignment to assignment, and their replacements lack the historic base of the issue. DoD civilians, like State officials, retain comprehension, but all are subject to both negative and positive broader policy approaches.

Consider comprehension from veteran casualty resolution specialists at the detachment level. They have visibility on all aspects of accounting, from cultural sensitivity to maintaining close relations with foreign counterparts. They participate in policy level negotiations and technical meetings, investigations, forensic reviews, excavations and are a frequent contact point in archival pursuits – yet these valuable resources are seldom consulted on broader DPAA policy matters. Too often, they are reduced to making last minute pleas before talks are conducted or a policy is adopted; yet, historically some of the best ideas have come from them.

Complicating comprehension further has been the budget battles. The basic dysfunction of continuing resolutions, budget cuts, sequestration, personnel cutbacks and hiring freezes have been significant obstacles. My sympathy was high for our management personnel to overcome these challenges, in many cases with inadequate policy backing at the top.

These are major obstacles to success, whether comprehension of the issue exists or not. Unfortunately, in the face of these challenges, when resources are restored, the cancelled operations are simply reinstated, not doubled to compensate, which reduces progress considerably, but are publicly praised as an example of priority.

A review of the history of this issue relegates the origins of comprehension degradation to the early 1990's. Most critical was the abolishment of the POW/MIA Interagency Group that regularly kept the issue on policy-makers' radar screens, and the 1992 formation of DPMO. The latter removed responsibility from DoD policy to a field operating agency, thus providing the excuses with flawed statistics that allowed President Clinton to declare Vietnam was cooperating in full faith and for policy-makers to say, "It's not my job, call DPMO."

Over time, the movement of DIA's analytical branch under DPMO destroyed an independent analytic element separate from political pressures, and unseemly battles between DPMO policy personnel and operational elements ensued. This battle raged for years and even included DPMO attempting to take over all operational matters.

At least one JTF-FA commander ignored DPMO and existing national policy, stating he would roll through Vietnam, solve the issue in a few years, and advocated lifting the trade embargo – contrary to the President's public statements at the same time that he was awaiting greater POW/MIA accounting cooperation.

The battle for bureaucratic power submerged any real look at the issue from a comprehensive standpoint, as much energy was diverted to power plays. This, of course, caught the attention of policy-makers who couldn't understand why their best laid plans were going awry.

Thus, more million dollar studies from think tanks, GAO investigations, hearings, and the Senate Select Committee. Then the legislation expanding the mission to all wars and a directive to develop the capability and capacity to identify at least 200 remains per year, from all wars back to WWII. And, finally, another reorganization that formed DPAA.

This latest reorganization has structural strengths, but the lack of overall mission comprehension and the reemergence of bureaucratic conflict between operations and policy could doom it like previous efforts. The history of this issue is replete with unintended consequences which reminds me of John Jacob Astor's comment on the Titanic: "I sent for ice, but this is ridiculous." A strong leader with comprehensive knowledge of the issue is sorely needed and, even then, I don't envy the challenges he or she will face.

The appointment of the DPAA Director who suddenly left last year was a severe blow to those who hoped for continuity and an increase in comprehension over a lengthy promised tour. He had followed, at my count, at least 12 previous directors with an average of less than two years' service in the position and only two with prior POW/MIA experience. To top this off, the first candidate selected – who later withdrew – to succeed LTG Linnington after his departure had no known experience in the issue.

This mission cannot afford another on-the-job training director who will be assaulted by those with a stake in the current approach. He or she should be someone with comprehension and experience on the issue and be well-teamed with some of the new DPAA leaders who have shown a willingness to reach out, learn and aren't hyper-sensitive to critiques.

I join the League, the Special Forces Association, Special Operations Association, VVA and many others in strongly recommending a candidate who can hit the ground running with demonstrated, admirable comprehension of the issue.

The recent reorganization was supposed to end the policy versus operational tension but, unfortunately, with the absence of the DPAA Director for a year, old tensions are again rising, and a comprehensive policy approach is being eroded by an operational focus on numbers and disdain for valid policy proposals.

After the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act was passed asserting a random goal of 200 IDs a year, the initial policy guidance was hopeful and stated *"There will be no decrease in the level of effort for any region on any war. We will increase, not shift, effort and capacity. We will increase efforts in Vietnam and be prepared to operate in North Korea. Every war from WWII onward must have an*

*appropriate level of effort. We will not do dumb things just to chase the numerical goal. Further, the priority for new identifications will come from battlefield recoveries and remote unknown gravesites, rather than exhuming unknowns from National and other cemeteries.”*

Thus, the potential existed to meet Vietnamese requests to increase the pace and scope, as well as increase resources to rationally meet Congressional intent. DPMO and JPAC had different interpretations of the law. DPMO accurately maintained the law required establishing the capacity and capability to identify 200 remains, while JPAC maintained that it required 200 actual identifications, regardless of the source.

In 2010, JPAC Detachments in Southeast Asia were told not to expect an increase in pace and scope due to WWII funding requirements. Of all things, JPAC cited as their authority conversations with Congressional staffers.

The 200 IDs figure was arbitrary, unrealistic and counterproductive to pursuing answers based on realities of the differences in the wars, versus strictly data- driven forensic and science-based operations. Seemingly, no one in decision-making policy positions had either the comprehension or interest in challenging this distortion.

A quote in a recent article from the *Economist* is applicable to this situation. *“Too often policy-makers try to tame complicated systems using simple targets and inadvertently create nasty, unintended consequences – more detailed targets are no solution, they can be gamed too and risk tidying smaller problems out of sight while more catastrophic ones await.”*

The 200 ID marker is a short term measurement that provides no insight as to whether it will lead to ultimate success. Likely, it will lead to tactical success, then strategic failure. Reviewing the history to prepare my remarks made me feel I was reading the longest suicide note in history.

It was clearly time – then and now – for policy level officials to make rational decisions and bring some comprehension to a well-intentioned Congress. How to implement their law was and is an Executive Branch decision. The initial opportunity was lost, and the body-count, or in this case the ID-count, started.

In 2013, some hope for rationality surfaced when a proposal was floated to surge Vietnam War accounting efforts for two years and for all the right reasons, but it was not to be. A spending freeze cut back operations, and there was no policy decision to reprogram funds.

Similarly, the November 2013 policy guidance for FY 2015-19 stipulated that the majority of recoveries and identifications were to come from field operations, not disinterment, and attention to sites on the Master Excavation List longer than five years was imperative. The stated goal was to complete recovery operations at identified sites in Cambodia no later than FY2016, Vietnam by FY2019 and Laos by FY2021.

In addition, a robust and dedicated investigative effort increase in each country was to be maintained, along with increasing the scope and depth of research and analysis to create viable field leads.

Again, even a casual observer can see these noble sentiments have not been met and, instead, have actually regressed in several instances. By October 2015, DPAA Strategic Instructions provided for additional focus on disinterment, an updated policy on “unknowns” interred, and noted that disinterment would now be a mission priority.

The POW/MIA issue is not a Tinker-Toy for planners to pull apart and reassemble at will, without a severe loss of confidence in original judgments based on comprehension, and leads to doubts about the seriousness of those in charge. The unintended effects of ambitious plans of reorganization can become more important than the intended objectives.

In the 1980's to early 1990's, the Vietnamese used every imaginable excuse to halt, then renew, cooperation. We felt then it was one damned thing after another. They have now been ready for years, and the new situation changes the source of excuses to our own government – the same damned thing over and over.

History, indeed rhetoric still in DPAA documents, demonstrates that industrial development, aging witnesses, acidic soil, immediate family members still alive, discrepancy and last known alive cases, no access to the battlefields post-war, and a new relationship between the US and Vietnam make the call for a priority of effort in Southeast Asia.

In 2009, Vietnam called for an increase in the pace and scope of operations and cited many of these same reasons. They developed a 13-page, detailed proposal on such increases and provided it to us and, in 2011, resumed archival turnovers based on a League request during a trip to Hanoi.

Despite Vietnam's positive movement, a body-count mentality to reach an annual 200 ID goal continues to be the priority. How does DPAA defend this? They complain about dry holes which their policy continues to create. They assert "bang for the buck" and cite dollars spent per identification.

It is as if no one knew that exhuming remains from a cemetery or excavating a crash site in industrialized Europe is cheaper than research, investigations, surveys, and excavations in remote jungles of Southeast Asia, resulting in more complex identifications.

Such thinking also ignores the fact that increasing the number of operations each year in Vietnam resolves the issue more rapidly and saves years of recovery expenses with greater results. At one time, JPAC even advocated cutting the SE Asia budget portion from 65% of the total to only 25%. At least DPMO rightfully rejected this body-count mentality at that time, but it would return.

Even with evidence to the contrary, DPAA maintains Vietnam War accounting is the overwhelming priority, but has cautioned the League not to advertise it. There is nothing to advertise; the priorities are skewed.

Thus far, DPAA has not made a compelling case to the public or Congress why the priority should be on Vietnam War accounting in a real, not rhetorical, sense. Neanderthal and other ancient remains have been found in Europe, with DNA still available for testing. WWII remains are overwhelmingly not in danger, and immediate recovery is not required to preserve them. Those in imminent danger deserve priority, but the same category for WWII is miniscule, as compared to remains from the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, in the background, a lack of comprehension is evident about the value of collection efforts by Stony Beach and research and analysis.

A senior leader was unaware of numerous cases that Stony Beach and other language-capable specialists have helped resolve and questioned what cases senior research and analysis personnel have solved. There appears an unbelievable lack of comprehension that it was their collective work that provided leads and brought evidence-based evaluations of Vietnamese knowledgeability. Very importantly, evaluation of their collective efforts gave substance to negotiations that led to solving many cases, both unilaterally and jointly.

To add insult to injury, new justifications have arisen, as if policy is taking the moral high ground, by asserting that all MIAs are equal regardless of the war. Further, and contrary to non-existent assertions, some are stating that exhumation and identification of "unknowns" is accounting as well. Yet, despite their limited charter, the League has fully supported efforts on all wars. Their stated policy has consistently supported increased efforts on all wars, so long as they were additive, not at the expense of Vietnam War accounting.

The fact is that no one in the League or the veteran groups has ever stated that MIAs are not equal and that exhumations are not an accounting. This trumped up rhetoric is to mask a flawed policy with moral arguments that are not based on facts.

This mythology has recently been transmitted to policy level officials. They operate as if evidence falls into place when you begin with a conclusion and a hammer. DPAA went from trying to answer questions to answers that couldn't be questioned.

Historians have noted that frequently, when we have made our fellow men our interest, we go on to make them objects of pity then, and in our wisdom, turn to coercing them. Are we on this path?

There has been increasing media coverage of WWII identifications which are moving to us all, but the media, Congress and the general public do not know the cost of failing to prioritize recoveries that are in danger.

The publicity is motivating those pursuing a body-count to do more of the same. If there was a national poll that asked if the priority should be on recovering remains in danger of destruction before all others, does anyone doubt the results? Remembrance without understanding is betrayal.

Let's turn to caring. When I entered this issue as a staff member at the White House I had no idea the complexities and hard work this part of my duties would entail, but I learned fast. I had very limited contact with any family members prior to this time. We had a neighbor in Colorado Springs in the mid-1970s whose husband was missing in Laos and, during this same period, Elli had been to a couple of Officers Wives Club meetings with presentations that we believe were by League officials.

We cared, weren't sure how we could help, and had a naïve faith our government would do the right thing for the families. Some contact with JCRC when I was stationed in Thailand, and limited exposure for the Army staff all in the 1970's, began to sow doubts in my mind about governmental priority.

Fast forward to 1981 when I arrived at the White House and, shortly thereafter, was tasked with responsibility for POW/MIA Affairs. I spent over a year to gain overall comprehension of the issue. My background as a Vietnam veteran and Asian Specialist helped, but was inadequate.

Research in prior Presidential archives and draining the brains of veterans at DIA and JCRC advanced my knowledge, but the real eye-opener was my multiple visits to the League office and brainstorming with Ann who was a member of the then-existing POW/MIA Interagency Group.

This exposure later expanded to meeting many families over the years at League annual meetings and Board meetings. Hearing their individual stories and collective concerns put caring on overdrive. My colleagues in these earlier years had many of the same interactions and most were Vietnam veterans, both military and civilian.

Many of these contacts were with fathers and mothers of the missing men and, sadly, many have passed without answers, but they have been succeeded by sisters, brothers, sons and daughters and other relatives, including grandchildren. This was an educational experience that will remain with me forever.

Fortunately, with the welcome addition over time of personnel, and as host nation cooperation has increased, we now have hundreds of competent specialists working on your behalf. Unfortunately, given the nature of their duties and the bureaucratic models channeling contact with the families, they have been robbed of this experience and the opportunity to be more effective.

This has led to an unintended insensitivity on how policy decisions influence the families' judgments as to whether they really care. Abstract intentions and goals result in treating families as abstractions.

In the push for normalization, the Clinton Administration reported the return of unidentified remains before identification to inflate numbers and change perceptions of Vietnamese cooperation, a practice that was finally reversed. Would a family member conclude such a policy had greater priority than caring?

Does anyone believe that stamping unclassified documents pre-decisional or “For Official Use Only” to prevent critiques by the League, or gag orders to not to communicate with or speak to Ann, demonstrate caring to the families? Does a DPMO order to a JPAC commander not to meet with the League Board demonstrate caring?

Does it show caring to hold policy discussions behind closed doors that would change decades old policy defining the fullest possible accounting – from the return of a live prisoner, his remains, or convincing evidence as to why neither is possible, to only the return of a live prisoner or his remains as the definition?

Such a policy would eliminate a family’s knowledge of what happened and any assurance that our government did all it could to achieve the fullest possible accounting. Over time, such a proposal would lead inevitably to a unilateral write-off of hundreds of cases, not the intention of federal law.

Discussions have even been held on the possibility of removing names from the list of unaccounted-for without remains and, further, even eliminating priority on the Last Known Alive cases of missing Americans. Do these nonsensical discussions to save resources to meet an arbitrary goal of 200 IDs a year demonstrate caring to the families?

Does it lead to a perception of caring for lab-led Tiger Teams in 2012 to demand no discussions outside of the Team, exclude directors, include many as Team Members who had no issue-related comprehension, and the organizers had reached conclusions before deliberations began?

What about the JPAC study that defined the “customer” as the Service Casualty Officers, not the families? Great confidence builder. Does a DoD Directive as recent as 2017 that defines an outreach program including Veteran Service Organizations and not the League inspire confidence that our government cares?

Do self-protective internal directives that ask all requests for information first go through management – even for routine data – raise suspicion and affect perceptions of caring? At times, getting information is like frisking a seal.

I could cite many more instances, but you have the flavor. Does this mean, the government doesn’t care? In most instances, no, it does not mean that. Rather, it demonstrates the lack of issue comprehension that leads to dumb decisions and builds the perception among families that those in government do not actually care.

It also renews unpleasant memories of periods when the issue was being written off. These unthinking blunders erode trust, increase suspicion and inhibit development of rational policy.

Despite this, there are countless DPAA employees who genuinely care, interact with family members and roll their eyes with you concerning some of the thinking that comes from isolated cubicles.

Frankly, those who are pursuing destructive paths also care, at least for the most part, but they lack real comprehension, and their limited exposure to the families’ rational approach, despite the families’ desire to trust their government, causes them to see the families as a danger or threat to their policy proposals. They haven’t had the opportunity to see how close consultation with the League leads to effective policy, which then becomes staunchly aligned in dealing with Congress, veterans, other concerned citizens and foreign governments.

An uninformed listener could hear or read this speech and be so depressed that they feel there is no hope. I don’t feel that way, nor do I believe that most of the families who have been through so much feel this way. But, surely we are on the cusp of great opportunity or a historical tragedy that history will record.

The new DPAA Director can take actions, some immediate, some over time, that will reorient the effort and lead to a history in which all can take pride.

This change at the top can empower the new and seasoned cadre of DPAA leaders who have demonstrated competence, a desire to build comprehension, and caring and we should hope for the new Director to be fully backed at senior policy levels in the new Administration.

Toward these ends, I have some recommendations that I believe should be given careful consideration, and I have shared them with Ann who agrees with them. These can be accomplished in-house, without million dollar studies from outside experts with no comprehension of the issue.

- Provide newly assigned personnel in middle and upper management – civilian and military – the same advantages others in government have. Establish an informal training period that involves a mandatory reading list of the issue’s history and what was effective and not effective in the past. Supplement it with visits to the League office, veteran leaders, and sessions with long-time veterans in this issue, both current and former US Government employees. These new employees deserve no less and it sure beats being thrust into the issue with competence, but no comprehension.
- Immediately remove the gag rule. Instead, urge close consultation with the League and other responsible organizations – encourage an attitude of asking these groups, possessing real comprehension, *“What do you think?”* before a policy decision. Or, simply say, *“I have a problem, and can you help?”*  
This is true transparency, not what is now the practice.
- Identify those in the organization, at any level, with real comprehension and seek their views on policy formulation; then reinforce, recognize and reward them.
- Clear up any ambiguity on the mission – it is the return of a live prisoner, his remains or convincing evidence as to why neither is not possible, sharing the full record of effort with the next-of-kin.
- Evaluate and develop the budget in the context of the challenges enumerated earlier that relate to the Vietnam War effort. First, build the Vietnam War budget for a surge of investigations and excavations to meaningfully meet Vietnam’s constant requests to increase the pace and scope of operations.

Look at the all-war approach that gives priority to last known alive cases and remains in danger – whether Vietnam War, Cold War or WWII – those in acidic soil, threatened by development, or other compelling reasons. Then, look at what is left to apply to remaining WWII cases and a contingency for additional funding if North Korea opens up again, a dim prospect in the near term.

- Sensitize senior policy personnel, as well as Congress, to the need for budget and policy reorientation. The current body-count mentality is counterproductive and a shift is logical, consistent and publicly defensible. If Congress is still insistent on the unintended consequence of the random number of 200 IDs per year, ask them to make up any budgetary shortfall, as this is the path the Executive Branch is going to follow for all the right reasons.
- Review and implement the proposal that the League and I furnished to begin a bilateral comprehensive review of the joint and unilateral mission areas in Vietnam which was received positively by the last Director, but never raised in meetings. Sadly, a similar, personal request to the White House National Security Advisor for President Obama to do so was ignored. Further, even the President’s speech in Hanoi to the Vietnamese people did not mention the issue.

- Given the differences between Vietnam and Laos, consider a similar approach to Laos with complementary, but somewhat different provisions. After years of requests, the Lao government's recent agreement for base-camping near excavation sites is a hopeful sign to build upon.
- Vigorously reinforce the new, positive signs of life in the USRJC, a vital supplement to the issue that was almost destroyed in the past. Their presence in this meeting is a significant step in the right direction.
- Reinforce and expand the public-private partnership initiative under Tom Holland that is demonstrating effectiveness on WWII cases, with cautions to the partners that DoD-conducted excavations will not take precedence over cases where remains are in jeopardy.
- Finally, use the proven competence of DPAA employees to focus on remains recovery of those in danger of being lost forever.

While this initial plate is full, it is doable. In implementation, remember there are hordes of government lawyers to tell you something can't be done, and those who tell you it can be done are hiding under their desks.

Look under the desks and to the families for advice. If our government begins down this path, be both supportive and patient as implementation begins.

To summarize, there are two potential political outcomes in front of us that history will record. The first is that the new administration reviewed the overall policy of the POW/MIA issue and, recognizing the differences in the wars and the need for immediate actions to accelerate the effort in Southeast Asia, put forth a major effort to achieve the fullest possible accounting for missing Vietnam War personnel.

This will renew trust with the families and recognize them once again as reliable partners who only ask for best efforts. In the past, the results were evident as families received answers who earlier were doomed to have none.

On the other hand, a lack of action will result in a different historical record.

It will note that despite years of warnings of aging witnesses, acidic soil, infrastructure development and a government in Vietnam appealing for years to increase the pace and scope of operations, the US Government pursued a policy that did not recognize these facts.

Instead, it pursued a policy that divided resources and efforts across all wars to meet a randomly established number of identifications, mostly from exhumations of US servicemen interred in American cemeteries abroad and on US soil or isolated WWII battle sites.

As they clinked glasses in celebration in a location resembling the ballroom on the Titanic, the Vietnam War families once again found themselves praying in the lifeboats and the concept of leaving no man behind was given an irreversible tarnish.

We can hope for the first outcome, and your determination and courage through all of the years will be needed in the future. I and many others in and out of government are with you.

As George Will, one of your noted dinner speakers in the 1980's, wrote in a 1983 Washington Post column about the missing in Vietnam having not been abandoned, "Ann Griffiths and the other Winter Soldiers of the League of Families have demonstrated the stirring beauty of fidelity painfully maintained in the blank face of facts that promise no proximate relief" and referred to the families gathered for the annual meeting as the gallant last battalion in the Vietnam War's last battle.

My friends, you are the last gallant battalion of the Vietnam War and, like battalions in the war, formed from all over our nation, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status.....and the League does not need GPS to know where it stands. Hold the line, and stay the course. Thank you.....