

**REMARKS OF RICHARD T. CHILDRESS**  
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Ann, Board members, fellow veterans and government officials; I'm glad to be with you again. Last year, Ann assigned me the task of critiquing our government's performance on this issue. Although I found some positive elements, my focus was on what I perceived to be some deficiencies and worrisome trends. This speech followed up some flares the League had discharged quietly. I followed these up with my own "Red Star Clusters" last year. Although I had some officials thanking me for being direct on some issues that also caused them concern, I soon learned I had caused other officials a case of the vapors that sent them to their fainting couches.

Given what I considered a toned-down and mild critique compared to earlier remarks, especially in 2004, I was surprised at the overly sensitive reactions. It made me think of the 1980s, when I was at the White House. We were accused of conspiracy and covering up the existence of live POWs, had our homes targeted, were forced to obtain unlisted phone numbers, and faced a massive assault on our private lives. All this was accompanied by an unending stream of books, movies, demonstrations and irresponsible media coverage that, in comparison, made my remarks appear more like an invitation to chat at the next picnic.

Unfortunately, there was no substantive attempt to address these real concerns and, within months, the Secretary of Defense announced a wholesale reorganization of the POW/MIA accounting community. While making that announcement, Secretary Hagel publicly recognized and thanked the League for your decades of service and, specifically, commended Ann for substantive input.

Since I apparently offended people with last year's domestic critique, I have been assigned this year to address the responsiveness of foreign governments on whom we rely for our investigations and recoveries. This is the critical other half that determines success in reaching the fullest possible accounting. I welcomed this topic, as I sometimes find the motivation, reactions and predictability of foreign governments more transparent and logical from their perspective of national interest than our own.

But, what appeared at first to be a reasonably easy task, turned out to be more complex, given the geopolitical challenges that have arisen in the interim. Someone remarked that we are awake two-thirds of each day. During the other third, someone is up to something somewhere. Recent events in Asia and elsewhere are emblematic of this.

As our accounting efforts can be affected to varying degrees by the geopolitical environment, let's do a simple review of some of these events. They call for serious policy analysis by our government on ways and means to maximize opportunities and minimize disruptions on the POW/MIA issue.

Russia, on whom we depend to support a viable US-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIA Affairs, took over Ukraine's Crimea region, then sent their agents into Eastern Ukraine to destabilize it and cast doubt on the validity of Ukraine's planned presidential elections. The US and Europe responded with sanctions, the rhetoric escalated dramatically, and other front-line members of NATO expressed doubts about US responsiveness to potential Russian aggression toward them. The US attempted reassurance through a small deployment of ground troops and some Air Force assets and, most recently, a proposed \$1 Billion aid package to vulnerable countries near Russia.

Russia has sent mixed signals. While threatening to cut off access to the International Space Station due to US dependence on Russian launches and rocket engines, on which the US depends since the shutdown of our shuttle program, they have also begun a pullback of their forces from the Ukrainian border and indicated a willingness to begin dialogue with the new Ukrainian President.

Almost simultaneously, Russia began its own significant tilt toward Asia by signing a long-term agreement with China to sell their Siberian gas. This strategic move, worth some \$400 Billion, was significant as it offsets European and US efforts to wean Europe from Russian gas exports. Clearly, we are witnessing the worst fallout between Russia and the United States since the end of WWII.

The People's Republic of China has made further bold assertions of sovereignty in the South China Sea, or as many prefer, the East Sea, confronting Japan, the Philippines and Southeast Asian claimants, to include Vietnam. Most recently, the PRC deployed an 80 ship flotilla and an oil exploration rig near the Spratley Islands claimed by Vietnam. 30 Vietnamese Naval vessels demanded withdrawal, to no avail. The PRC rammed several Vietnamese boats and injured 6 sailors. Significantly, the PRC made this move before Secretary Hagel's scheduled arrival there for a reciprocal visit. This was a direct, public challenge to the United States, clearly signaling that their actions in the South China Sea were a Chinese affair, regardless of US expressions of concern. Further, the US has imposed sanctions against several PRC officials for cyber-attacks. Vietnam has reacted in a more public way to the challenges in the South China Sea than we have seen in the past. Vietnamese leaders gave a green light for demonstrations against Chinese actions that resulted in the burning of Chinese factories, increased their military surveillance, and they are considering joining the international lawsuit brought by the Philippines – an international legal action that concerns China.

The PRC continues its military build-up and their 2014 defense budget showed the largest increase in a decade, following more than 10% annual increases for two decades. In response to these challenges, Japan is reevaluating its defense posture to allow aid to threatened countries. Indonesia is also shedding its traditional ambivalence. Meanwhile, the Philippines is allowing US access to its previously used ports and airfields, and Vietnam is providing access to Cam Ran Bay for logistical and maintenance purposes.

In Korea, while significant human rights violations by North Korea continue to make the headlines, their nuclear plans are again under scrutiny as fears grow of another nuclear test. This, coupled with an aggressive, offensive and expanding ballistic missile capability, along with the Chinese threat, has caused a major rethinking in Japan of their traditional defensive posture. It has caused jitters in South Korea, along with exchanges of artillery fire, between North and South, and prompted the US to consider upgrading South Korean missile defense. There have been three deadly clashes between the two Koreas since March 2010.

In Thailand, home to one of JPAC's forward detachments, a military coup has taken place after years of political dysfunction. The US has expressed disapproval and halted some military aid and contact.

In Laos, a tragic plane crash occurred that took the lives of approximately 20 government officials, including the Interior Minister and significantly, the Defense Minister, LTG Douangchai Phichit, a long time cabinet minister influential on the POW/MIA issue through whom Ann has made successful appeals to improve US-Lao POW/MIA cooperation. While US officials and the League have sent appropriate and sincere condolence messages to the Lao government, the loss of Minister Phichit could be difficult to overcome. We won't know the full impact until the current vacuum of leadership is permanently filled, though in both instances, their deputies have been named in an acting capacity.

In Cambodia, the political situation remains unsettled, with a government crackdown on the opposition and street demonstrations earlier in the year that caused some deaths. This tension between the opposition and the government will likely remain with us, along with the endemic corruption.

In Burma, some reforms are underway, but human rights violations in relation to tribal and ethnic minorities remain a challenge, and some of these tensions have a limiting effect on US POW/MIA operations.

So, where does this complex porridge leave us on the POW/MIA issue? Is it all a negative picture for the future? If there are opportunities, will the US be nimble enough to seize them? If there are obstacles, can the US develop approaches that minimize the current damage and set a course for future cooperation? Will the US be so focused on our needed domestic reorganization that these important questions will be ignored, perhaps at a cost that will only be recognized in hindsight?

We can't have a response like I read recently in North Carolina. When a farmer was asked "Where does this road go?" He answers, "It has gone nowhere since I've been here... I get up early every morning and its still thar."

We experienced these geopolitical challenges in the 1980s. We had to open up one of the most closed political regimes in Asia, the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic. Laos feared our ally Thailand, the minorities who aided the US in the "secret war," and looked on us as the nation responsible for wartime death and destruction which left behind a continuing threat of unexploded ordnance.

Needless to say, the US-Vietnam relationship was at rock bottom, and not just from the war, which brought a complete break in diplomatic relations and a US trade embargo. This condition was reinforced by their occupation of Cambodia. We had to maneuver through this maze to make progress, while simultaneously reassuring Thailand, the front-line state, and other members of ASEAN that our humanitarian dialogue would not diminish our support to a Cambodian settlement or remove pressure on Hanoi in return for POW/MIA cooperation.

In the 1980s, we could do little in Korea, except request help from China, update our POW lists and turn them over to the Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom, with a request for North Korea's cooperation.

I use these examples to demonstrate the art of the possible even in objectively bleak circumstances, but it required full interagency attention, with a sincere designation from the highest levels that the POW/MIA issue was a national priority. But, aspirations are not strategy to achieve a goal. The questions to be answered are what is going to be done, and by whom, when, where and how?

So one must ask what is now possible that such a strategy would be designed to address and implement?

Korea, other than recoveries in the south, remains a major challenge. While some consideration was given a couple of years ago to test the new Kim's attitude on a humanitarian basis and to restart recovery operations in the North, that is clearly off the table now, given the new regime's stance. In my career and afterwards, I have gone through Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il and now Kim Jong Un. In some ways, the latest Kim has proven to be more unpredictable and aggressive than his predecessors. Further, he seems less susceptible to Chinese influence. It appears that they have adopted a new national anthem entitled, "We Three Kims of Orient Are", hardly a reassuring picture for the foreseeable future.

Now, let's turn to Chinese behavior and how their current course could affect US relations with countries that currently provide us access and cooperation on our accounting objectives. Years ago, after Ann's successful appeal to the Vietnamese to adopt an initiative allowing us access to Vietnamese archival information, we noted a change in attitudes in Hanoi.

Diligent and sensitive follow-up by our talented JPAC specialist Ron Ward, long working at JPAC's Detachment 3 in Hanoi, has resulted in the turnover of about 40 Vietnamese documents relating to the issue. Some represent information previously available; others provided some potentially useful information that can guide further investigative efforts as they contribute to both resolved and unresolved cases. Some, which we believed would be helpful, have proven not to contain the insights expected, but, as should be recognized in the investigation business, negative information can be as important as positive information.

All of these turnovers deserve detailed and complete evaluations to fully exploit their value, in conjunction with our current body of knowledge. It should be noted, however, that these turnovers are more substantive and valuable than the much-publicized turnover of documents in conjunction with the Senate Select Committee efforts years ago. This initiative also has greater future potential since it is ongoing, at a lower level, with greater developed rapport between the US and Vietnamese personnel.

In remarks to the League a couple of years ago, I said we could thank China for Hanoi's new level of cooperation. I wasn't being entirely facetious, as this was a period of heightened Vietnamese-Chinese tension. Today, those tensions are even higher. Like other nations, Vietnam takes actions and develops policies that their leadership perceives to be in their national interest. In this instance, in addition to increased dialogue on the Chinese challenges with Japan, the Philippines and their other ASEAN colleagues with South China Sea concerns, they also turn to the US. Our strategic cooperation with Vietnam has grown over the past few years, and much of it has not been visible. Secretary Hagel's visit to Southeast Asia this past month, where he publicly chastised China while meeting with his counterparts from Japan and Australia over Asian security was surely welcome in Hanoi.

While Vietnam does not want an open breach with the PRC, the Vietnamese Prime Minister recently announced that they had exhausted all dialogue channels with China on the South China Sea issues. They will clearly continue to seek balance, using Russia, ASEAN and the US as counterweights to China. Russia desires to rise, along with the PRC, while preventing their preeminence. Thus, they continue significant military aid to Vietnam.

Needless to say, in addition to our deepened policy dialogue and military-to-military cooperation, it is now timely to signal our desire for deeper cooperation on the POW/MIA issue and, more importantly, ensure resources are available to meet Hanoi's longstanding requests to accelerate the pace and scope of POW/MIA cooperation, as well as pursue new initiatives. The situation should also signal a perhaps more amenable environment to press for permanent stationing of DIA's Stony Beach personnel. But, the effectiveness of any initiatives will be related to our continued opposition to PRC provocations and adequate resources.

What does all of this mean to potential cooperation from the PRC? While they have repatriated POWs and remains from the Vietnam War that inadvertently ended up on Chinese territory, they continue to be closed-lipped on what information their personnel possessed or recorded in Vietnam and Laos during the War. Further, their deep involvement in the Korean War, to include administering POW camps housing American POWs, is a clear path to resolving many cases, yet little has been forthcoming. Given the current state of US-PRC relations, looking for great breakthroughs is too optimistic, but the issue needs to remain on the agenda with them, pointing out the positive public response that could be expected in the United States, potentially offsetting the regular negative media play on their actions in the South China Sea and internally on human rights.

With Russia, our equities on this issue revolve around the US-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIA Affairs and its support mechanism, previously much larger, but now failing to even be recognized as a DPMO Directorate. On several occasions, the US failed to support the Commission's work, especially the Presidential Emissary, General Doc Foglesong. In addition, bureaucratic power-plays for their support personnel adversely impacted morale and caused resignations of key personnel. Inordinate delays were experienced in approving the new USRJC Charter and renewing the tenure of General Foglesong. Now that these challenges are past, we have a serious rupture in US-Russian relations over Ukraine and other strategic issues. President Putin has not demonstrated the kind of commitment to this effort that his predecessors did, and the current challenges have probably dropped the issue further down their priority list. But, as is the case with China, as tensions ease, and we hope they will, raising the profile of our POW/MIA accounting interests to the Russian leadership may hold some promise, especially if emphasized as an interim public step in context of removing sanctions, when justified by Russian behavior.

Concerning the Vietnam POW/MIA issue, there is increasing evidence that Russia was more directly involved in the interrogations of American POWs which would at least suggest greater knowledge on our missing.

These large policy issues, or in-country events, should have minimal effect on Thai, Lao and Cambodian cooperation. After League interventions with Laos on heightened support and Stony Beach access, and with official support from our Ambassador and JPAC, some of the earlier challenges I mentioned in years past seem to have been ameliorated. Recent Embassy and JPAC reporting on Lao cooperation is more upbeat. A question remains on how the death of the Defense Minister will affect us, but only time can answer this. A League mission next year can give us additional insights to supplement official readings.

Cambodia remains in a cooperative mode, despite the political tensions and it is clearly in their interest to continue this stance. At one point, a couple of years ago, we felt that by 2015 we could have reached the point of declaring that we had reached the fullest possible accounting in one country. This would have been a significant milestone, but budget pressure and needless legal hassle generated by our side set us back. Despite the significance of this goal, it does not appear to be in the forefront of the US Governments strategy today, regardless of its potential for a welcome step forward.

In conjunction with the Secretary of Defense's directed restructuring effort, it should be timely, given recent events, to evaluate our external strategies with countries of concern. It appears that the POW/MIA bureaucracy has its hands full for a while to fully implement the Secretary's directives, and we all wish them success.

In the interim, another cadre of government specialists not directly involved could launch a truly interagency look at current opportunities and obstacles and develop strategies to be implemented during and after the reorganization. This was one of the major functions of the POW/MIA Interagency Group abolished in 1992 with the formation of DPMO. While a former DPMO Director announced a sub-policy committee on POW/MIA, chaired by himself, that would sit center-stage at the highest levels of the US Government, it had no similarity to the original POW/MIA Interagency Group and soon proved its hollowness. This enforced isolation from the larger policy community has been destructive. An interagency tasking request, coordinated at a high level from DoD to State, along with the regional bureaus at OSD, to evaluate regional concerns and possible POW/MIA initiatives, would serve to re-engage the policy community in a substantive way and influence potential integration and success of the new POW/MIA agency.

A lot of talent exists to undertake this effort. In addition to the higher level policy officials above, personnel at DPMO and JPAC have unique insights. Our detachments and resident country teams are also key from whom to seek ideas, especially long term civilians such as Ron Ward in Hanoi and Bill Gadoury in Vientiane. This continuity on a 24-hour basis over the years, along with our diplomatic presence, has an added value that cannot be duplicated through periodic visits by JPAC or DPMO personnel. We must remember that important differences lurk in small places. At this meeting, we are fortunate to hear from both of them, plus Stony Beach, on these critical "small places" that are mission essential.

Explicit in this tasking should be to re-energize public diplomacy efforts that have been conspicuously absent, despite constant League urging over the years, and I don't mean the pompous phrase showing "we care" moving across the landscape. We need a public diplomacy plan that reinforces that strategy through speeches, press releases and media briefings, and these need to be interagency-wide to signal the governments of concern. While the POW/MIA bureaucracy has had more surgeries than Joan Rivers, I have been encouraged by recent efforts at reorganization. Officials must be given a chance, without public carping, to finish their work.

The transparency demonstrated thus far by those responsible in seeking input has been striking and joins the earlier efforts by General McKeague in opening dialogue on an unprecedented scale before the reorganization efforts were announced. Those responsible for implementing the Secretary's guidance must recognize the enormous talent that exists, while reaching outside for ideas and dialogue that will prevent them from trying "new ideas" that are really "old ones" that have failed in the past.

There undoubtedly will be carping from a conspiracy element, since conspiracy and cover-up themes are like mental Doritos; they can't stop being eaten by some. We will always have a fever swamp of fringe-dwellers, and let's hope the new officials won't make the mistake of pandering to them or trying to co-opt them, as was tried unsuccessfully many times in the past. The media will continue to run distorted, inaccurate and accusatory articles since they seek controversy.

There are many big mouths with small minds, and the mission is too important to pander to them. They are now attacking the League for being too influential. They don't realize their very existence is because of the League. Without the League, the families of our missing from all wars would have had no voice, and the issue would not be a national priority. Most of those doing the carping represent few, if any, family members and their ego is so overwhelming that they do not understand the damage they have done and are doing to this noble effort.

Ironically, many of their stories this year that stoked some doubts in the public mind were sourced to many uninformed on the overall issue. The measure of their inability to hit the target is that none of them explored the real reasons behind the need for reorganization. The League and the major national veteran organizations, which are the serious players, recognize this and provided serious input to the government, much of which was adopted. Continuing this mature approach, while continuing to accept constructive suggestions, is a sign of maturity in government. And reflecting on my own efforts over the years, I am reminded of Winston Churchill's comment that "*I have benefitted greatly from criticism and at no time have I suffered a lack thereof*".

While economic interests on the geopolitical front may limit inherent tensions, I have outlined some interim opportunities. Let's declare we are all going to move on together domestically, not allowing the irrational paintbrush to smear everyone, since we have some very talented people working on this issue who deserve to provide input and feel free to try new approaches in an organizational atmosphere that rewards hard work and creative thinking.

Thank you.