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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT THE
SEVENTH ANNUAL CONVENTION
OF THE LEAGUE OF FAMILIES
OF MIAs AND POWs

THE STATLER HILTON

8:51 P.M. EDT

Carol Bates, Congressman Sonny Montgomery,
distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a very high honor and a very great privilege to meet once again with this courageous assembly of Americans whose loved ones remain unaccounted for in Southeast Asia. You have borne a very heavy burden with incredible courage. Every citizen in this country admires your bravery, your dignity and your persistence.

Through long, long months and years of trial, you have been sustained by the love of your missing men and by your love of the country those men defended. I am proud of you, and I am proud of your men. But, my admiration is not enough. The gratitude of this nation is not enough. You and your loved ones must be assured of a continuing commitment from your Government to obtain a full accounting of those missing in action or still listed as prisoners of war.

Let me re-emphasize this from me, as well as from your Government: this is a firm, unequivocal commitment; it is a longstanding commitment; it is still an active commitment, and for me, as I said a moment ago, it is a very personal commitment, and that is why I am here tonight.

When I came home from the Pacific roughly 30 years ago, I joined -- as many of us did -- several veteran organizations. Then, a short time later, I had the good fortune to become a Member of the House of Representatives. During my service as a Member of the House of Representatives, I can recall vividly working on MIA problems on an individual, a case-by-case basis, during both the Korean and the Vietnamese conflicts.

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As a Congressman, as many of you know, I met with members of the National League of Families here in Washington and back home in my community of Grand Rapids, Michigan. I did not forget you then and I have not forgotten you now.

One of my very last meetings as Vice President was a meeting with your Board of Directors. A year ago, as President, I attended this convention and shortly thereafter met with your Board of Directors in the Cabinet Room in the West Wing of the White House. Let me assure you we are employing every effective means to account for your loved ones. Let me assure you without any hesitation or reservation that I will continue that effort.

We must be honest with ourselves. This is a frustrating, painstaking, difficult process. It is a tragic fact and it makes me, as well as you and millions and millions like you, very, very sad that every missing man or information concerning that individual may never be available, regardless of any superhuman efforts by the most and the best in our Government.

Furthermore, as all of you know, we are dealing with a Government that has demonstrated very little concern for your feelings. The Vietnamese claim to have established agencies to search for the missing, but thus far they have withheld this information, totally without justification.

We have offered to carry out the searches ourselves or to enlist a neutral Government or the Red Cross in this humanitarian search. Thus far, none of these offers have been accepted, but we will persist. We will keep trying as long as we have any hope whatsoever, and I promise you that.

We are willing to talk with the Vietnamese. At my direction, we have exchanged messages with them, indicating our willingness to discuss outstanding issues in our two countries. We have made clear that our primary concern is to obtain an accounting for our servicemen who are missing in action.

Without a satisfactory solution of the MIA issue, no further progress in our relations is possible. I know that many of you are deeply concerned about declassification of information relating to MIAs. Several months ago I discussed in depth this problem with the members of my staff and directed that progress be made in that regard, and I have been informed that progress has been made.

Let me re-emphasize there will be continuing progress in this regard. Everyone in this room has demonstrated a strength, has demonstrated a resolve which makes you equal to the burdens that you are carrying. Your courage has been an inspiration to me and to millions of your fellow citizens. Your loved ones have not been forgotten. You have not been abandoned. I promise you I will not rest until the fullest possible accounting of your loved ones has been made.

Thank you.

END

(AT 9:00 P.M. EDT)