**Remarks of Senator Patrick Leahy**

U.S. Institute of Peace

Overcoming War Legacies: The Road to Reconciliation and Future Cooperation between the United States and Vietnam

March 26, 2019

Thank you Nancy. Thank you to the U.S. Institute of Peace for hosting this very unique event. And thanks to you all for being here, especially those who came all the way from Vietnam.

I – along with two disabled American veterans of the war in Vietnam – had the opportunity to meet briefly with Senior Lieutenant General Vinh earlier this morning. As Nancy and General Vinh said, he and I have worked together for many years on Agent Orange.

Back when we started I don't think either of us could have imagined that we would be here today. I suspect Ambassador Ngoc, and probably everyone else in this room, feels the same way.

Many of us know people who served in the war, on both sides. Some lost their lives, and the names of the Americans are etched in the black granite Wall just a few hundred meters from this building. Others were grievously wounded.

Words cannot adequately describe the magnitude of the catastrophe of that war for the people of both countries. Forty-four years later, we still struggle in this country with the remnants of the divisions in our society caused by the war, as do the people of Vietnam.

My involvement with post-war Vietnam began in 1989, when former President George H. W. Bush and I talked about the need for reconciliation with Vietnam – something that many Americans, including veterans of the war like Bobby Muller, John Kerry, and John McCain, were calling for.

In fact, President George H.W. Bush agreed to use what was later named the Leahy War Victims Fund, because of organizations like the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation – led by Bobby Muller – that provided prosthetics and wheelchairs to Vietnamese who were severely disabled from landmines and other unexploded bombs. And I praised President Bush for doing so.

That assistance, which continues today, has enabled thousands of Vietnamese to regain their mobility, and their dignity.

Of course, as we saw in the video, others had been working on the MIA issue even earlier. That heroic work helped bring closure to hundreds of American families. It was made

possible thanks to the invaluable help of the Government of Vietnam, at a time when the United States had an economic embargo against Vietnam as it was struggling to recover from the war's devastation.

For many years the United States has also been helping to locate and destroy the millions of landmines and other unexploded bombs that continue to maim and kill innocent Vietnamese. Fortunately, thanks to that work, the number of casualties is far fewer today than it used to be. But more remains to be done.

Over the years, I had many conversations with officials of the Government of Vietnam, before and after diplomatic relations were reestablished in 1995. No matter what the subject of those conversations was, the Vietnamese always brought up Agent Orange, and its effects on their people.

At the same time, American veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam and were suffering from cancers and other illnesses, were also lobbying for help from their government. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognized those claims, but it wasn't until another 15 years had passed that we finally began to address this issue in Vietnam.

As Senior Lieutenant General Vinh described, we started at Da Nang. The U.S. Agency for International Development deserves great credit for undertaking and completing such a complex, difficult, and ultimately successful project.

The Vietnamese Ministry of Defense – and especially General Vinh – worked closely with USAID. In doing so the Ministry of Defense and USAID not only overcame many obstacles to complete the project; they also helped to advance relations between our two countries to a higher level.

Like the MIA and UXO issues before it, Agent Orange evolved from a subject of anger and resentment, to one of cooperation and appreciation.

For four decades, the Da Nang Airport was a health hazard to tens of thousands of people living in its vicinity. A little over a year ago, Air Force One landed there for the APEC Summit meeting.

Soon after, the USS Carl Vinson docked at Da Nang, and sailors from that aircraft carrier visited an orphanage for children who may have inherited their disabilities from parents or grandparents who were exposed to Agent Orange.

None of that would have happened were it not for the perseverance of USAID and the U.S. Embassy, and their Vietnamese counterparts. Ambassador Ngoc, previously as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and today, has been a strong supporter of this.

Throughout this period, USAID has also expanded its health and disability programs to seven Vietnamese provinces. They provide medical, rehabilitation, infrastructure, and social

assistance to severely disabled Vietnamese in areas that were heavily sprayed with Agent Orange or contaminated with dioxin.

In less than one month, I will lead a delegation of ten Senators – Democrats and Republicans – to Vietnam. It will be my fourth trip there. This time we will travel to the Bien Hoa Air Base near Ho Chi Minh City, which was the largest U.S. military base in Vietnam during the war.

Senior Lieutenant General Vinh and I, U.S. Ambassador Daniel Kritenbrink, USAID Mission Director Michael Greene, and other Vietnamese officials, will inaugurate the dioxin remediation project at Bien Hoa, the largest remaining hotspot of contamination in Vietnam. This will be a far larger project than Da Nang, and one of the largest environmental remediation projects in the world.

At the same time, I and my Senate colleagues will witness the signing of a Memorandum of Intent between the United States and Vietnam, spelling out a new 5-year commitment to support health and disabilities programs for persons with disabilities in provinces that were heavily sprayed with Agent Orange.

These achievements were possible because of those first efforts by the Government of Vietnam to help locate American MIAs, and by the U.S. Government to assist persons with disabilities in Vietnam.

But we should also recognize the indispensable role of U.S. veterans of that war and nongovernmental organizations. They, on their own initiative, years before the U.S. Government was ready or willing, traveled to Vietnam and began the process of building bridges between our two countries.

The benefits of this humanitarian cooperation have been far-reaching:

> It has reunited the remains of U.S. soldiers with their loved ones.
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> It has enabled many people in Vietnam who lost their mobility to become mobile again.
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> It has helped Vietnamese families and communities to care for the disabled.
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> We are getting rid of the dioxin.
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> And we have begun to help the Government of Vietnam identify the remains of Vietnamese MIAs.

Just as important, this cooperation has been the foundation of a growing partnership. While our two governments have strong disagreements on some important issues, we share many interests: from increasing academic, professional, and cultural exchanges, to expanding trade relations, to combating climate change.

Our partnership with the Ministry of Defense, and the active support and engagement of the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of State in these humanitarian efforts, have opened up new opportunities for cooperation on regional security issues.

## Conclusion

We cannot escape the fact that the war was a disaster for generations of Vietnamese and Americans. Each of us who lived through that period has our own memories, our own emotions, our own opinions.

For me, there can be no excusing the folly of that war, nor diminishing of the immense destruction and suffering that it caused.

But we can all be proud of the way our two countries have worked to overcome that tragic legacy. There are many in this room who have contributed to this effort. We have come a long way, and we have further to go.

Thank you.

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