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Transcript of Sen. Jeff Merkley Speech & Exchange of Remarks with Lisa Grande, President, USIP

Link to video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA2oCZCYOlc&ab_channel=UnitedStatesInstituteofPeace

[SEN. JEFF MERKLEY:]

Thank you very much, President Grande, for the invitation to come here to the US Institute of Peace and to address issues of the relationship between the United States and Vietnam, a bit about the relationship between the United States, Laos and Cambodia. Certainly, a special welcome to all of you who have journeyed from Southeast Asia to come and join this two-day conference. Thank you for being invested in a future with a positive strong partnership between the United States and the countries of Southeast Asia. I do want to follow up on the President's recognition of the passing of Senior Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh, former vice minister of defense. He was a key architect in building the relationship between the United States and Vietnam, particularly over the remediation of dioxin.

I have with me a copy of a speech that Senator Leahy gave in March of 2021, in which he paid tribute. I just thought I would read a couple of paragraphs to remind us of this key relationship and the contributions that he made. These are the words of Senator Leahy. "Mr. President" -- he's addressing the president of the Senate -- "Mr. President, I want to pay tribute to one of Vietnam's highest ranking military officers, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh. General Vịnh, who has served as Vietnam's Deputy Minister of National Defense since 2009, has played an indispensable role in the reconciliation between Vietnam and the United States. After more than four decades of military service, he is finally nearing retirement from the Ministry of National Defense."

The speech goes on for several pages, but I just thought I'd cite one other paragraph. "General Vịnh has been my principal Vietnamese counterpart in working to address the legacy of dioxin contamination at the former US military bases and the needs of Vietnamese with severe physical and cognitive disabilities resulting from exposure to dioxin. I consider him a friend and I'm grateful for the hospitality he has shown me, my wife Marcelle, and other senators who have visited Vietnam."

Each significant positive effort takes champions on both sides of the relationship. And certainly Lieutenant General Vinh was a champion, and he will be missed.

In April, I had the privilege of leading a congressional delegation to Vietnam with the express purpose of sustaining the war legacy programs that former Senator Patrick Leahy had worked for years to establish. His key staff member in this effort, Tim Rieser, is here. If Tim could stand for a minute. I would just like to recognize him for all the decades of his experiences. He did this work in the context of being the clerk for the Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, but I think he would have managed to accomplish this work no matter what official position he held. Since Senator Leahy's retirement, he has continued to really facilitate the connections between our nations.

These programs mean a lot to me personally. I've thought about why they resonate so much. The story really begins when I'm just a little tyke, and my father, a mechanic, would come home and after dinner, we would watch the evening news. On the news, in the early/mid-60s, and then forward, would be clips from the war in Vietnam. I have this memory of asking my mother about war. How long could a war last, this conflict? And asking her if it could last more than a week. More than a month, more than a year? Each time her affirming that, yes, it could last longer than that. It was hard for me as just a little guy to get my hands around a conflict that could endure with so much carnage for such a length of time.

Then I started to realize that this was a war in which young men were conscripted, drafted by the United States and sent to serve. I lived in a blue-collar community. In that community when people's draft number was called, there wasn't a lot of discussion about being a conscientious objector or a lot of discussion about college deferment. I am the first in my family go to college. Very few people I knew had gone to college. The context was, this might be something, that I might be sent to that war. Well, that focuses the mind.

But as it turned out, in June of 1973, the official authority for conscripting Americans ended. That was almost exactly a year before I graduated high school. I wasn't drafted and I didn't face the choices that I might have faced about deferment or conscientious objection. But off I went to college with a strong interest in international affairs and immediately launched in some courses on international affairs and I learned a whole lot about the war. I just came to believe that the entire enterprise was a terrible, tragic mistake. Many deaths in Vietnam, where every family was touched. So many deaths in American families, so many injuries. American soldiers were bringing home all for a severely flawed theory of international security.

When I learned about Senator Leahy's programs to heal the wounds of war, I thought, this is the right thing to do. I want to help sustain these programs as Senator Leahy retires. That's how I ended up leading a congressional delegation to Vietnam this last April. One of the Leahy war legacy programs is to clean up the remaining hotspots of dioxin contamination from Agent Orange -- called such because the barrels had an orange stripe that went around them. Agent Orange is a defoliant. It's cancer causing. It caused genetic defects. It's highly toxic, and we

sprayed incredible amounts across the landscape of Vietnam to make it easier to see the deployment of Vietnamese soldiers.

The US stacked thousands of these barrels at the Air Force bases, and many of those barrels leaked, resulting in deep contamination at Da Nang and Biên Hòa. The US decontamination program that Lieutenant General Vĩnh helped to partner in, tackled Da Nang Air Force Base first. That had already been fully cleaned up by the time our delegation went in in April. We built a giant oven, then excavated and baked in incredible amounts of dirt to basically neutralize that dioxin.

Biên Hòa Air Force Base was next. While most of that work is still ahead of us, some ten-year agenda ahead of us, a piece has been completely decontaminated and re-landscaped as the Peace Park. At one end of the park is a bench. The “Leahy bench.” Inscribed into that bench is a quote from Senator Leahy saying, “We cannot change history. But together, we can build a better future.”

I think that's just a powerful, beautiful sentiment. That's what the war legacy programs are all about. We cannot change what came before, but we can shape what lies ahead of us. Former enemies working together to build a better future.

Those war legacy programs operated really in two ways. One level is addressing the physical wounds of war. A second is building relationships through which we can partner on other projects. Let me address the components of that first level. The first is, as I mentioned, the cleaning up the dioxin hotspots. Dioxin, again, generates birth defects, causes cancer. The birth defects can be passed down through generations, and America must remain engaged and clean up Biên Hòa Air Base. Completion of that project is estimated to take about half a billion dollars and 10 years. We have to stay the course.

Now, when I went to college and my first year, and my first international relations course, we saw a film about the United States involvement in Vietnam. Those of us in the course, felt it so powerfully, so personally, that this was our generations tragedy. Then, four years later, I taught that course. I was a teaching assistant for that course. I took my students to that same movie, and they saw it differently. They saw it as a previous generation's mistake and that kind of difference of four years span. It's important that those of us who feel it personally -- we're getting older, I'm 66, as General Vĩnh was -- that we maintain this connection to our responsibilities on these war legacy programs. We make sure that others who are younger than us understand the connection and the responsibility as well.

We have now invested about \$140 million in programs to assist individuals who are suffering disabilities triggered by dioxin. Those funds support programs for medical and rehabilitation services, prosthetic and orthotic devices, physical, occupational speech, therapy, training and support for caregivers, access to public transportation, and promotion of disability rights and inclusion. These investments need to continue.

Third, we're working to locate and clear unexploded ordnance. Since 1993, the US government has assisted in the removal of hundreds of thousands of unexploded mines. I've seen different numbers ranging from 400,000 to 750,000. What a huge number of mines and often cluster munition bomblets. But that number of hundreds of thousands, it's a drop in the bucket when you consider that an estimated 800,000 tons of unexploded ordnance remains scattered across Vietnam. And those cluster munitions, they can lay hidden for decades until a plow hits them or a child picks one up. It explodes and kills those or maim those who are nearby. This is really why I fiercely oppose the use of cluster munitions in the Ukrainian war this year.

Since the 1970s, over 100,000 people have been hurt or killed by the delayed explosion of these munitions. We have to continue to work on the cleanup to fund the work of the cleanup however difficult, however tedious it might be. Fourth, we have to continue to provide care and assistive technologies to those who have been injured by the explosions. There is a fifth component to these war legacy programs. Vietnam has for a substantial amount of time, helped identify the remains of American soldiers and return the remains back to the United States. For that we are deeply, deeply, grateful.

The United States now has a program in which it is assisting Vietnam and using the best DNA technology in the world to help locate and return the remains of Vietnamese martyrs. This program helps recover these wandering souls, as they are referred to, who have been lost for half a century after dying in battle and return them to their families.

While the war in Vietnam was incredibly public, we cannot forget that the United States also fought a secret war in Cambodia and Laos. In Cambodia, it's estimated the United States dropped 26 million cluster bomblets. Since 1979, about 65,000 Cambodians have been hurt or killed by these bombs. Today there are 25,000 Cambodians living with limb loss as a result of unexploded ordnance that exploded. It's the highest ratio per capita in the world.

Laos is estimated to be the most heavily bombed country in the world, bombed by the United States. It's estimated the US dropped 270 million cluster bombs in Laos, 10 times the amount dropped in Cambodia, and about a third of them failed to explode. They're still hidden across the countryside. The United States needs to do all it can to work with Laos and Cambodia in partnership to address the finding and removal of these munitions, just as we have in Vietnam.

Earlier this week, I met with the ambassador from Laos and we discussed ensuring that the United States and Laos continue to work together to find and remove these cluster munitions. I mentioned that on the first level, these war legacy programs were about addressing the physical wounds of war, but on another level, they are about building a relationship. A relationship of cooperation, of planning a partnership, of execution of those plans between our two nations, and that that partnership can be the foundation for working on many other issues, from building a stronger economic partnership, a thriving Vietnamese manufacturing economy, working on issues of the environment or issues of security.

Now, this cooperation was not inevitable. The feelings in the course of war run deep. We could have chosen on one side or the other or both sides to remain bitter enemies, but that is not the choice that we have made. We have chosen together to build a better future and we have to keep investing in that choice, that choice of partnership for the future.

The relationship between our two governments is growing. In addition to the war legacy programs, Vietnam has participated in a number of our exchange programs in which we sponsor individuals to come to the United States. In my previous capacity as head of the World Affairs Council of Oregon, we hosted the International Visitors Leadership Program, and in that program, we hosted any number of delegations from Vietnam. There are now more than 7,000 Vietnamese alumni of US government sponsored exchange programs. We had most recently a delegation from Vietnam in my home state of Oregon, in March. I invite all of you to come visit the most beautiful and wonderful state in the United States of America. This past December, I worked to accelerate the confirmation of a new Director of the Peace Corps, Carol Spahn. We got it done just in time for her to travel to Vietnam in December at Christmas time to swear in the first ever group of Peace Corps volunteers. I think that makes Vietnam the 143rd country to partner in the Peace Corps. To allow Peace Corps members to be in Vietnam, that is a significant symbol of growing trust in the relationship between our nations. I was really pleased to be able to meet those Peace Corps members while I was there.

Prominent diplomatic visits are accelerating. Secretary of State Blinken visited Vietnam in April. I heard about his upcoming visit and mentioned it in some conversation with the press and I was informed that it had not been officially announced yet. Word had pretty well spread, so it wasn't too bad of a faux pas, but you never know when you're going to make a mistake when you're wearing a microphone. I was so pleased that Secretary Blinken was going and it helped pave the way for President Biden to visit this past Sunday, where he and General Secretary Trọng upgraded the US-Vietnam partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership. That is a tremendous goal point to accomplish. Thank you to leadership of Vietnam and the United States for accomplishing that new relationship.

In the near future, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính will be visiting the United States. We will be welcoming him shortly. These visits, they underscore great strides that we have made together since the normalization of relations in 1995, and the potential for working together on issues related to economy, security, and the environment.

Let me just highlight a few of the areas where it can continue to build our relationship. First, we can, together, work to build a prosperous, secure future across the Indo-Pacific, strengthening the rules-based international order, providing security for all nations and promoting shared prosperity, working together through ASEAN, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, other multinational institutions and platforms to strengthen commerce, strengthen supply chains.

We can work together. We can slow climate chaos. We can work together to accelerate our mutual transition to renewable energy. This is something that has to happen incredibly fast. We see the impacts in the United States. We see the impacts in Vietnam. These last nine years

have been the hottest on record in the world. This last July 4th was the hottest day in the history of human occupation on our human presence on this planet. As Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos move up the manufacturing value chain, more multinational corporations want to move production to countries with 100% renewable, clean energy. Building that clean energy infrastructure will be indispensable to realizing that vision. I don't need to tell anyone here that Southeast Asia, in particular, the Mekong Delta, is incredibly susceptible to the impacts of climate change from the warmer temperatures, rising sea levels, salt infiltration, challenging the fertility of soils, floods, more powerful storms, and so forth.

Speaking of the Mekong Delta, we can work together on some of the challenges like sustainable fisheries, countering chemical contamination, cleaning up plastic pollution, restoring habitats. I am proud to lead, in partnership with Senator Sullivan of Alaska, a bipartisan resolution in the US Senate recognizing the importance of the Mekong Delta to Southeast Asia, and the role of the Mekong-United States Partnership for promoting prosperity.

We know that our two nations will not always see eye to eye on every issue. We have different histories. We have different forms of government. We can use the foundation that has come from the war legacy programs for cooperation on these other programs. We can use that to have this sort of relationship where we can discuss those differences and work to resolve them. Together, our countries can build a new future that is prosperous for all, that respects human rights, that addresses climate chaos, that protects natural resources.

I was very, very struck while sitting on the Leahy bench at the Peace Park, about a symbol of our country's going forward together. If you sit on that bench and you stare across the park, you will see at the other end that there are two fighter planes, but those fighter planes are not facing each other in confrontation. Instead, they are mounted parallel to each other, side by side with each other, representing our partnership going forward together. Same direction. One plane, Vietnamese. One plane, an American fighter. Side by side, flying into the future, together. That was a beautiful representation to me because suddenly those fighters in the Peace Park are not about war. They're about partnership.

Earlier this year, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính said, "Between negotiation and confrontation, we choose negotiation. Between dialogue and conflict, we choose dialogue. Between peace and war, we choose peace." Negotiation, dialogue, peace. Failing to make those choices in the past brought war and suffering, but choosing them now is a path to a far better future. Thank you.

[LISE GRANDE]

Mr. Senator, thank you for your leadership and thank you for your comments this morning. With your permission, we'd like to pick up on just a few of the aspects of your discussion. The first, you touched on the fact that you have sponsored with someone from the other side of the aisle, with a Republican senator, important legislation that looks at the Mekong Delta. How have you seen both Democratic leaders and Republican leaders react to the elevation of our relationship with Vietnam into a comprehensive strategic partnership?

[MERKLEY]

The reaction has been extremely positive. There is a sense that we share mutually beneficial opportunities. As I think about, for example, right now, what I saw in Vietnam was a rapidly expanding first-world economy. As I went from meeting to meeting, a number of people pointed out that the goal of the country is to be developed on a par with other Southeast Asian economies, like South Korea or Taiwan. The year 2040, that's not very far away. To do that requires an incredibly fast investment by the world to produce parts for the international supply chain. Vietnam has a strong interest in the economic partnership with the United States of America. We have a strong interest. Many of our companies that have been operating primarily in China are looking to move. Part of it is driven by the Chinese treatment of the Uyghur community, and a lot of the production that is done with slave labor wanting to move to an alternative. This has happened incredibly fast. I was just stunned by the level of development that I saw modern infrastructure, modern light rail being built, so on and so forth, at a pace that I was a little jealous of. Could we bring some of that to Oregon? I think the reaction has been that that's very positive, that we have some mutual security interests, too, in terms of the dynamics of Southeast Asia. There's a lot of opportunity here.

[GRANDE]

Senator, you've talked about the beginning of this new phase of our relationship, our friendship, through the elevation of our formal state-to-state relations into this comprehensive strategic partnership. If this is the beginning, it suggests that there will be ups and there will be downs as we go forward. What do you think some of the highlights are going to be? We're very interested in your reflections on what you think some of the obstacles are, some of the things that we together as Vietnam and the United States are going to have to face and find solutions for.

[MERKLEY]

I've mentioned a number of the ups. I think the war legacy programs not only were the right moral thing to do, but they have been so helpful to so many people. They have provided a foundation for dialogue that has led to connections and, for example, the connection between Senator Leahy and his team member Tim Rieser, and Vietnamese leaders. Those friendships, and they were friendships built over time, are very meaningful and working on other issues. I really feel like in addition to the substance of the programs, it's the relationships that bode well for the future.

In terms of the challenges, every issue is complex. Anything easy has already been done. So therefore, everything you're seeking to do is challenging by definition. Whether it's in the economic sphere, or in the security sphere, nothing is simple. We'll have to iron those out. Perhaps the most significant issue we'll have to wrestle with is that our two nations carry often a different approach to the issue of citizens' speech and commentary. This issue of freedom of speech, and the ability of citizens to weigh in on issues and challenges, and not face retribution for that, is something our two nations will definitely have a lot of conversations about and wrestle with.

[GRANDE]

Senator, you described in a very compelling way why this issue has meant so much to you personally. We think of the extraordinary role that fellow senators, Senator Leahy, Senator McCain, Senator Kerry have played in shaping, committing to propelling this extraordinary 50-year reconciliation process. Where do you want to see that process go next?

[MERKLEY]

Those individuals, Senator Kerry, Senator McCain, and certainly Senator Leahy, they did invest enormous effort to make this connection. Both Senator McCain and Senator John Kerry, having been in the Vietnam War, carrying that connection, of course, Senator McCain having been in prison. Emotionally, it's so powerful to see those who were directly involved with the war behind them build friendships and connections and call for us to be on a different path. Those of us who are coming after, we did not serve in the Vietnam War. I feel the connection by having kind of barely missed the war and having studied it carefully, and had strong feelings about it. But that connection will be less over time for those who are more separated as my students were, who were only four years behind me in college.

We have to carry this connection forward, and it will change shape. But let's make sure that we keep the foundation in place, we keep investing and completing the vision of the war legacy programs. Let's have more senators visit Vietnam and visit Cambodia and Laos. Laos, by the way, is going to be hosting ASEAN for this coming year. It's a very good moment, a reason for people to say "let's make that trip." The senator who went with me [to Vietnam], Senator Chris Van Hollen, is the chair of the subcommittee on Southeast Asia of the Foreign Relations Committee, which I also serve on. So he's going to be a powerful partner in this. Senator Coons, who chairs the Appropriations or the spending committee that Senator Leahy led and Tim Riese served as the clerk for, is keenly interested in supporting programs. Let's keep building the conversation, make sure we complete that vision, but then there'll be so many newer conversations about security, about the economy, about the environment. I look forward to bringing in senators who are concerned about or interested in that whole set.

[GRANDE]

And then Senator, if you allow a final question, the reconciliation process between Vietnam and the United States is, in fact, the longest reconciliation process in the entire modern period. It's lasted 50 years and has gone from milestone to milestone and now from strength to strength. When we look at other conflicts around the world, what would be the advice that you would give leaders in countries that are at war about how to end them and how to reconcile?

[MERKLEY]

That's a pretty powerful question, a broad question. Let me start by just recognizing that time period. I mentioned that 1973, June of '73 is when the US ended the induction process of folks whose draft number had come up. Well, here we are: June of 2023 is exactly 50 years. So it is half a century process of work, of investment in relationships and programs.

The relationship that was most talked about as I was growing up was reconciliation with Germany from World War II, and how the Marshall Plan had been a key part of investing in a prosperous Germany and building a foundation for other relationships. We have that example; we have the Vietnamese example. Here's what we know. When countries have a conflict, leaders often lead a conversation in which they devalue the humanity of the opponent. That was certainly true in our conflict in World War II and our conflict in Vietnam. Because it's easier to be at war in which you are looking down the scope of a rifle or pushing a button to drop a bomb if you've dehumanized the opponent.

We know that dehumanization is false. We know that the same kind of set of human values exist and reverberate in every culture. We have to resist that type of leadership that calls out for dehumanizing others. We have to recognize for any given conflict that if big conflicts of the past could be ended, and bridges created that were probably almost impossible to imagine when in the conflict or shortly after the conflict, then we know that it can be done in the existing situations.

This entire United States Institute of Peace facilitates dialogue, facilitates cooperation, in an effort to help build pathways to end conflicts or heal wounds or build relationships. Let me just end by saying that work is absolutely critical. My first experience on Capitol Hill was as an intern for Senator Hatfield. Senator Hatfield had been one of the first members of the Navy into Hiroshima after the dropping of the atom bomb. He became a lifelong advocate for diminishing the threat of nuclear weapons. He and Senator Ted Kennedy, a Republican and a Democrat, worked together in the nuclear freeze movement. They then planted together a tree that is extinct in North America for millions of years. It happens to be the Oregon State fossil. This tree was found still growing in China. It's referred now to as a dawn redwood.

You will find that tree growing in the path if you walk from my office across the open grounds to the Senate chamber. I pass it multiple times every day and I have put a plaque on it talking about the Peace Tree. The connection here is that if you have individuals who are dedicated to building relationships, to building a vision of peace, who are partnering across the aisle, we can build a much better future. Now that Peace Tree is now the tallest tree on the Capitol grounds. It was not when I was elected 15 years ago. I wrote up in a pamphlet that when the Peace Tree became the tallest tree on the grounds, perhaps we'd see a new era of peace in the world. Well, I'm not sure that that vision has been accomplished, but let's rededicate ourselves in the context of our relationship with former enemies that are now partners. Let's rededicate ourselves to building on the work. The work that this US Institute of Peace is involved in. Relationships and partnerships to build toward a more prosperous future, resolve our differences through dialogue, to choose dialogue, as the prime minister said, to choose partnership and cooperation rather than war.