

THE PRESIDENT' S READING COPY

VIETNAM SPEECH -- TELEVISION

MAY 8, 1972

Good evening.

Five weeks ago, on Easter weekend, the Communist armies of North Vietnam launched a massive invasion of ~~the~~ Republic of South Vietnam -- an invasion that was made possible by tanks, artillery, and other advanced offensive weapons supplied to Hanoi by the Soviet Union and other Communist nations.

1. The South Vietnamese have fought bravely to repel this brutal assault.
2. Casualties on both sides have been high.
 - (1) Most tragically, there have been over twenty thousand civilian casualties, including women and children, in the cities which the North Vietnamese have shelled in wanton disregard for human life.

As I announced in my report to the Nation twelve days ago, the role of the United States in resisting this invasion has been limited to air and naval strikes on military targets in North and South Vietnam.

As I also pointed out, in that report, we have responded to North Vietnam's massive military offensive by undertaking wide ranging new peace efforts, aimed at ending the war through negotiation.

- I. On April 20, I sent Dr. Kissinger to Moscow for four days of meetings with General Secretary Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders.
 - (1) I instructed him to emphasize our desire for a rapid solution to the war and our willingness to look at all possible approaches.
 - (2) At that time, the Soviet leaders showed an interest in bringing the war to an end on a basis just to both sides.
 - I. They urged resumption of negotiations in Paris and indicated they would use their constructive influence.

2. ~~Based on these assurances~~; I authorized Dr. Kissinger to meet privately with the top North Vietnamese negotiator, Le Duc Tho, on Tuesday, May 2, in Paris.

(I) Ambassador Porter, as you know, resumed the public peace negotiations in Paris on ~~Thursday~~, April 27, and on ~~Thursday~~, May 4.

3. At those meetings, public and private, all we heard from the enemy was bombastic rhetoric and a replaying of their demands for surrender.

(I) For example, at the May 2 secret meeting, I authorized Dr. Kissinger to talk about every conceivable avenue toward peace.

1. The North Vietnamese flatly refused to consider any of these approaches.

2. They refused to offer any new approach of their own.

3. Instead, they simply read verbatim their previous public demands.


Here is what over three years of public and private negotiations with Hanoi has come down to:

I. The United States, with the full concurrence of our South Vietnamese allies, has offered the maximum of what any President could offer.

(1) We have offered a de-escalation of the fighting.

(2) We have offered a ceasefire with a deadline for withdrawal of all American forces.

(3) We have offered new elections which would be internationally supervised with the Communists participating both in the supervisory body and in the elections themselves.

I. President Thieu has offered to resign one month before the elections.

(4) We have offered an exchange of prisoners of war in a ratio of ten North Vietnamese prisoners for every one American prisoner they return.

2. North Vietnam has met each of these offers with insolence and insult.

(1) They have flatly and arrogantly refused to negotiate an end to the war and bring peace.

(2) Their answer to every peace offer we have made has been to escalate the war.

(3) In the two weeks alone since I offered to resume negotiations, Hanoi has launched three new offensives.

1. In those two weeks, the risk that a Communist government may be imposed on the 17 million people of South Vietnam has increased.

2. And the Communist offensive has now reached the point that it gravely threatens the lives of 60,000 American troops who are still in Vietnam.

There are only two issues left for us in this war.

1. First, in the face of a massive invasion, do we stand by, jeopardize the lives of sixty thousand Americans, and leave the South Vietnamese to a long night of terror?
 - (1) This will not happen.
 - (2) We shall do whatever is required to safeguard American lives and American honor.
2. Second, in the face of complete intransigence at the conference table, do we join with our enemy to install a Communist government in South Vietnam?
 - (1) This, too, will not happen.
 - (2) We will not cross the line from generosity to treachery.

We now have a clear, hard choice among three courses of action:

1. Immediate withdrawal of all American forces;
2. Continued attempts at negotiation; or
3. Decisive military action to end the war.

I know that many Americans favor the first course of action.

1. They believe that the way to end the war is for the United States to get out, and to remove the threat to our remaining troops by simply withdrawing them.
2. From a political standpoint, this would be an easy choice for me to accept.
 - (1) I did not send over one-half million Americans to Vietnam.
 - (2) I have brought 500,000 home from Vietnam since I took office.

3. But abandoning our commitment in Vietnam here and now would mean turning 17 million South Vietnamese over to Communist terror and tyranny.

(1) It would risk the lives of 60,000 Americans who are still in Vietnam.

(2) It would mean leaving hundreds of American prisoners in Communist hands with no bargaining leverage to get them released.

4. An American defeat in Vietnam would encourage this kind of aggression all over the world -- aggression in which smaller nations, armed by their major allies, could be tempted to attack neighboring nations at will.

(1) World peace would be in grave jeopardy.

The second course of action is to keep on trying to negotiate a settlement.

I. This is the course we have preferred from the beginning.

(I) We shall continue to pursue it.

(2) But we have made every reasonable offer and tried every possible path for ending this war at the conference table.

I. The problem is that it takes two to negotiate, and ~~that~~ now, as throughout the past four years, the North Vietnamese arrogantly refuse to negotiate anything but an imposition by the United States of a Communist regime on 17 million people in South Vietnam who do not want a Communist government.

It is plain that what appears to be a choice among three courses of action for the United States is really no choice at all.

I. The killing in this tragic war must stop.

(I) By simply getting out we would only worsen the bloodshed.

- (2) By relying solely on negotiations we would give an intransigent enemy the time he needs to press his aggression on the battlefield.
- (3) There is only one way to stop the killing, ~~and~~ that is to keep the weapons of war out of the hands of the international outlaws of North Vietnam.

Throughout the war in Vietnam, the United States has exercised a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war.

~~It was right for us to exercise that restraint.~~

- (1) That was our responsibility as a great nation -- a nation which is interested, as America has always been, in peace and not in conquest.
2. However, when the enemy abandons all restraint, throws its whole army into battle on the territory of its neighbor, and refuses to negotiate, we face a new situation.

In these circumstances, with 60 thousand Americans threatened, any President who failed to act decisively would have betrayed the trust of his country and the cause of peace.

I have therefore concluded that Hanoi must be denied the weapons and supplies it needs to continue its aggression.

I. In full coordination with the Republic of Vietnam, I have ordered the following measures which are being implemented as I am speaking to you:

- (1) All entrances to North Vietnamese ports will be mined to prevent access to these ports and North Vietnamese naval operations from these ports.
- (2) United States forces have been directed to take appropriate measures within the internal and claimed territorial waters of North Vietnam to interdict the delivery of supplies.
- (3) Rail and all other communications will be cut off to the maximum extent possible.
- (4) Air and naval strikes against military targets in North Vietnam will continue.

These actions are not directed against any other nation.

I. Countries with ships presently in North Vietnamese ports have been notified that their ships will have three daylight periods to leave in safety.

(1) After that time, the mines will become active and any ships attempting to leave or enter these ports will do so at their own risk.

I HAVE ordered

These actions/will cease when the following conditions are met:

I. First, all American prisoners of war must be returned.

(1) Some of our POWs have been living in the most filthy and degrading conditions for over eight years -- in violation of all rules of international law and human decency.

(2) The actions I have ordered tonight would be fully justified if their only purpose were to win the freedom of these brave men.

2. Second, there must be an internationally supervised ceasefire throughout Indochina.

3. Once prisoners of war are released, and once the internationally supervised ceasefire has begun, we will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina.

(1) At that time we will proceed with a complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within four months.

These are terms which would not require surrender and humiliation on the part of anybody.

1. They would permit the United States to withdraw with honor.
2. They would end the killing and bring our POWs home.
3. They would allow negotiations on a political settlement between the Vietnamese themselves.
4. They would permit all the nations which have suffered in this long war to turn at last to the urgent works of healing and peace.

They deserve immediate acceptance by North Vietnam.

It is appropriate to conclude my remarks tonight with some comments directed individually to each of the major parties involved in the continuing tragedy of the Vietnam War.

1. First, to the leaders in Hanoi:

- (1) Your people have already suffered too much in your pursuit of conquest.
- (2) Do not compound their agony with continued arrogance.
- (3) Choose instead the path of a peace that redeems your sacrifices, guarantees true independence, and ushers in an era of reconciliation.

2. To the people of South Vietnam:

- (1) You shall continue to have our firm support in your resistance against aggression.
- (2) It is your spirit that will determine the outcome of the battle.
- (3) It is your will that will shape the future of your country.

3. To other nations, especially those which are allied with North Vietnam:
 - (1) The actions I have announced tonight are not directed against you.
 - (2) Their sole purpose is to protect the lives of 60,000 Americans who would be gravely endangered in the event that the Communist offensive continues to roll forward, and to prevent the imposition of a Communist government by brutal aggression upon a nation of 17 million people.

4. I particularly direct my comments tonight to the Soviet Union.
 - (1) We respect the Soviet Union as a great power.
 - (2) We recognize the right of the Soviet Union to defend its interests when they are threatened.
 - (3) The Soviet Union, in turn, must recognize our right to defend our interests.

- (4) No Soviet soldiers are threatened in Vietnam.
- (5) Sixty thousand Americans are threatened.
- (6) We expect you to help your allies.
- (7) You cannot expect us to do other than continue to help our allies.
- (8) But let us, and let all great powers, help our allies only for the purpose of their defense -- not for the purpose of launching invasions against their neighbors.
 1. Otherwise the cause of peace, the cause in which we both have so great a stake, will be seriously jeopardized.
- (9) Our two nations have made significant progress in our negotiations in recent months.
 1. We are near major agreements on nuclear arms limitations, on trade, on a host of other issues.
 2. Let us not slide back toward the dark shadows of a previous age.

3. We do not ask you to sacrifice your principles or your friends.

(1) But neither should you permit Hanoi's intransigence to blot out the prospects we together have so patiently prepared.

4. We are on the threshold of a new relationship that can serve not only the interests of our two countries but the cause of world peace.

(1) We are prepared to continue to build this relationship.

1. The responsibility is yours if we fail to do so.

6. Finally, to the American people:

(1) I ask you for the same strong support you have always given your President in difficult moments.

1. It is you most of all that the world will be watching.

- (2) I know how much you want to end this war.
- (3) I know how much you want to bring our men home.
- (4) I think you know, from all that I have said and done these past three and a half years, how much I, too, want to end the war and bring our men home.
- (5) You want peace. I want peace.
 1. But you also want honor and not defeat.
 2. You want a genuine peace, not a peace that is merely a prelude to another war.
- (6) At this moment we must stand together in purpose and resolve.
 1. As so often in the past, we Americans did not choose to resort to war.
 - (1) It has been forced upon us by an enemy that has shown utter contempt toward every overture we have made for peace.

That is why tonight I ask for your support of this decision,
a decision which has only one purpose -- not to expand the
war, not to escalate the war, but to end this war and to
win the kind of peace that will last.

1. With God's help and with your support we shall
accomplish that great goal.

Thank you, and good night.

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