

1a

Draft -- November 25, 1967

The Search for Peace in Vietnam

I am going to talk about peace in Vietnam.

For the end of all wars is peace -- sometimes honorable peace, sometimes lasting peace, and sometimes the peace of despair and slavery.

And let me make it clear -- the peace I speak of is not the peace of surrender, -- open or disguised. It is not the peace that would come with abandonment of our commitments or the violation of our word.

The peace I speak of is a peace under which a man can go to bed at night and feel confident he will awake in the morning. A peace in which, when he awakens, he will not find his neighbor or his village elders slaughtered. A peace in which men can raise their families in dignity and hope. A peace in which men can, through orderly and fair constitutional procedures, select a government of their free choice -- and change it in the same orderly way. A peace in which the peoples of North as well as South Vietnam would devote their talents and resources to progress, working with the other governments of Southeast Asia.

* * * *

Let me recall some of the specific ways in which we have tried to help find that kind of peace.

I cannot disclose all we have done nor every channel that has been used. I am sure you would not want me to. For we still remain hopeful that one day one of these points of contact will produce a turning point in the struggle for a peaceful solution.

COPY LBJ LIBRARY

And I must, of course, preserve the confidential nature of the efforts of some other governments -- as we have given our word we would.

But there are things that can be said. There are things that I believe need saying. And I will say them.

* * * *

One major effort to achieve peace in Vietnam has now been all but forgotten by millions of people around the world and here at home. But is worth recalling.

As you know, North Vietnam's decision to take over South Vietnam was made in the late 1950's. By 1959 officers and non-commissioned officers, military specialists, political organizers, saboteurs, and agents were moving in increasing numbers from North Vietnam into the South. Weapons and other supplies were also sent South. The pace increased in 1960 and even more in 1961. Some moved by sea. Others went across the Demilitarized Zone. And others travelled down the jungle trails of neighboring Laos into South Vietnam.

In Laos itself the Communist Pathet Lao -- backed by armed men from North Vietnam and with supplies from Hanoi and other Communist capitals -- were trying to take over the country.

In 1961 President Kennedy directed Governor Harriman to negotiate a new agreement on Laos. It was clear the 1954 arrangement was not working.

A year of tough negotiating in Geneva followed. Yet, even as the talks went forward, the North Vietnamese tried to change drastically the military situation with a large offensive. They gave up the effort only when President Kennedy sent U. S. forces into Thailand and made it clear we were ready to act if necessary.

Only then did the Communist negotiators finally accept the new Geneva Accords of 1962.

It is worth recalling that a principal negotiator of that settlement -- indeed, the co-chairman of the conference -- was the Soviet Union. They assumed, with the British, responsibility for overseeing the agreement, with making it work. That responsibility was incorporated in Article 8 of the Agreement. It was backed by detailed private assurances of the Soviet negotiator to Mr. Harriman. It is a tragic fact that the Soviet Union has been unwilling or unable to fulfill that responsibility which it freely assumed.

For Hanoi did not observe the spirit or the letter of the agreement from the day it went into effect. They did not, as they had promised, pull their military forces out of Laos. And they continued illegally to use the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos to send their men and war material into South Vietnam. Their goal -- the conquest of South Vietnam and eventually of Laos -- never changed.

If Hanoi had lived up to its word, the problem in Vietnam would have found its solution.

If, today, the men in Hanoi wonder why we and others take their words with some skepticism, they need look no further for the reason than to the 1962 Agreement on Laos and their open violation of their solemn pledge.

It was directly because of that violation that the war in Vietnam expanded in 1963 and 1964. In the South, political confusion erupted in the spring of 1963, leading to the coup against the Diem government and to a long ~~year~~ period of instability. Seeing what they thought was a bright chance for quick success, the North rapidly expanded its forces in the South. By the end of 1964, regular units of the North Vietnamese Army were moving into attack positions in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong main force units were expanded. The Laos trails were developed into roads on which trucks could run.

Through this period we tried to explore whether Hanoi had any interest in moving toward a peaceful settlement. These explorations, conducted by a responsible third party, produced a clear reading that Hanoi was absolutely confident of victory. It was totally unprepared to consider peace except on its own terms -- terms that would have ensured Communist control in the South.

By early 1965 we recognized that stronger action -- the kind of action contemplated in the Senate Resolution of the previous August -- would be necessary. Pressure from the North was not just maintained, it was stepped up.

It was necessary to take new measures to try to slow and make more difficult the flow of armed men and supplies coming from the North. It was necessary, finally, and after five long years of restraint, to bring home to the men in Hanoi some of the punishment that they had long been inflicting on their fellow Vietnamese in the South. The bombing of North Vietnam began.

Soon after the bombing began, I made clear -- in a speech at Johns Hopkins -- that we were ready to negotiate at any time without conditions.

A short time after the bombing started -- in April and May of 1965 -- we began to hear from other governments that a halt in the attacks would get a favorable response from Hanoi. We decided to try.

And so, on May 12 -- on the occasion of Buddha's birthday -- we halted air strikes against targets in the North.

In a message to the North Vietnamese government we noted:

- that air strikes had stopped;
- the standdown would run into the next week;
- we were acting on "suggestions from various quarters, including public statements by Hanoi representatives" that there could be no progress toward peace while air attacks were going on;
- we would be watching, during the pause, for signs of "significant reductions" of armed action by the North against the South;
- we hoped Hanoi's response would permit "further and more extended suspension of this form of military action in the expectation of equally constructive actions by the other side in the future."

In short, the door to peace was open. We hoped Hanoi would come through and join in a real search for peace.

The note was given to the Soviet Union with the request it be delivered to the North Vietnamese. Moscow refused.

A copy was delivered to the North Vietnamese Embassy in one capital. It was returned the following day.

We arranged for delivery of another copy directly to the Foreign Ministry in Hanoi -- through a third government which had a representative there. This, too, was returned the following day.

And so -- after five days -- after our proposal had been turned back on three occasions -- bombing was resumed.

Not only was our offer turned down, but then -- as later -- the North Vietnamese used this interlude to strengthen its military position.

A second major chance for peace was lost. It was lost because of Hanoi's refusal to do two simple things -- to send a responsible representative to talk with us, and to show a restraint on the military front equal to ours.

For a time, most people here and abroad seemed to understand what had happened -- and to place the blame where it belonged. I remind you that throughout this time -- 1964 and 1965 -- when we were exploring every possible avenue to peace -- and even many that seemed utterly impossible -- we heard not one constructive word from Hanoi. North Vietnamese leaders came forward with no concrete proposals -- no reasonable suggestions.

But soon we began to hear a new theme from domestic critics and from a number of foreign governments.

The earlier pause was good -- but it didn't last long enough -- didn't give Hanoi enough time to think and respond.

We doubted this. We believed then -- as we do now -- that when lives and peace are at stake, men can and should act quickly and without conditions.

But we decided to set aside our skepticism. We decided to walk the extra mile. We decided to try again.

Christmas came, and, as part of the Christmas truce, we halted bombing on December 24. Then, responding to the insistent cries of hope, we decided to extend the bombing pause.

We informed a large number of governments of our decision. Messages went to dozens of capitals and were passed on. The United Nations Secretary General was informed.

In a message to one government close to Hanoi, we said:

"If . . . the other side will now reciprocate by making a serious contribution toward peace, it would obviously have a favorable effect on the possibility of further extending the suspension."

We then were able to deliver this same message directly to an official of the North Vietnamese government in another capital.

Finally, in still another capital, an American official spoke directly and at length with the top official in a North Vietnamese Embassy. The answer we got from Hanoi was that its position "remained unchanged." We were trying to "force" Hanoi to sit down at a table and talk. We had to stop the bombing "unconditionally and forever."

When we suggested another meeting, we were told the North Vietnamese had nothing further to say.

Nevertheless, our efforts continued in other places. But the results were the same. We were told we were trying to give Hanoi an "ultimatum." We could expect a settlement in Vietnam only when we accepted the four point stand of the North Vietnamese government -- and which we proved this acceptance "by actual deeds."

At the outset, many well-meaning people had told us that the bombing pause should last three weeks if it were to succeed in producing talks. It lasted for 37 days. And at the end of that period -- after dozens of efforts to encourage some favorable response -- and after we knew beyond any doubt that North Vietnam was using the respite to pour more men, more guns, more ammunition and supplies into the South -- we resumed bombing.

Another serious attempt to find peace -- or even a possible door to peace -- and another setback.

I have had moments of deep regret about this decision. Our enemy took clear advantage of us. And some brave South Vietnamese and some Americans are gone today because of Hanoi's actions.

Yet, looking back, I feel I could not have done otherwise. If there had been a chance for peace -- as many speaking with full governmental responsibility suggested to us -- we could not in conscience have neglected it. And, if it had succeeded, many lives would have been saved.

But you will understand if, today, I hear with grave doubts the same proposals -- the same arguments -- the same reasoning that I heard -- and took seriously -- less than two years ago.

For there is nothing to indicate that the man in Hanoi have altered their stand one bit.

Despite our deep disappointment with the failure of the long bombing pause to bring us closer to peace, the search for a solution went on.

In the fall of 1966 our Ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, was approached by the Polish representative on the International Control Commission. In several long sessions they discussed the possibilities of a peaceful settlement.

We set forth a number of proposals that we would be willing to accept. Above all, we were interested in direct contact with Hanoi so the details could be worked out in mutually agreeable form. Among the issues to be discussed would be acts of mutual de-escalation, including a cessation of the bombing of the North.

The Polish representative said that he had conveyed our views to Hanoi. If they were as we had outlined them, we should confirm them directly in conversations with a North Vietnamese representative in Warsaw. We agreed to do so.

In Warsaw our representative ran into one delay after another. The bombing of certain targets in the Hanoi area in early December was blamed for "creating a bad atmosphere." In fact, these strikes were not significantly

different from others that had occurred throughout the previous months -- while the talks in Saigon were proceeding without interruption.

Finally, air strikes on December 13 and 14 were used as the reason for breaking off this contact. Yet our representative had been in Warsaw and had been ready for direct contact with the North Vietnamese for a week before those air strikes and on the agenda was the question of bombing itself.

The fact is that from the very outset we had no direct word from Hanoi, no outline of Hanoi's views such as we had provided the Poles of our views.

It is perfectly clear that whatever the good will of the Polish intermediary, Hanoi, in fact, was not ready to negotiate. The air strikes were simply an excuse for Hanoi's failure to sit down and discuss this matter in a serious and reasonable way.

In many such cases, we have found that the optimism of intermediaries far exceeds the performance of the Hanoi regime.

With the failure of the Warsaw contact, we turned to other means of opening a useful dialogue with the North Vietnamese. Despite the argument advanced in the Polish capital about bombing, the fact is that direct contact was established with a representative of Hanoi soon thereafter.

In these talks we made a variety of proposals -- and they covered every possible road to peace we could suggest. In answer, Hanoi's representative simply jumped from one to another of these proposals. But he never accepted any. Nor did he make any useful counter-proposals beyond what we knew to be Hanoi's hard public request for surrender.

After these hundreds of contacts in almost every capital in the world -- direct and through official and private intermediaries -- I wondered whether, in fact, any North Vietnamese could speak for his government. Perhaps only Ho Chi Minh would be able to break through the confusion and the hardened positions we had been hearing.

I decided to address a message directly to the North Vietnamese leader. On February 2, this year, I sent that message.

It was as serious as I could make it. It contained no threats, no ultimatum. After citing the problems I saw in an "unconditional" halt to the bombing, I added:

"...I am prepared to move even further towards an ending of hostilities than your government has proposed in either public statements or through private diplomatic channels. I am prepared to order a cessation of bombing against your country and the stopping of further augmentation of U. S. forces in South Vietnam as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam by land and by sea has stopped. These acts of restraint on both sides would, I believe, make it possible for us to conduct serious and private discussions leading toward an early peace."

Then the letter was delivered, on February 8, we had stopped bombing the North. The next week President Ho sent a letter to Pope Paul in which Hanoi's hard line was repeated. Only the was bombing resumed. Ho's reply to me arrived a few days later and was couched in the same wording as that given the Pope.

He wrote: "The U. S. Government must stop definitively and unconditionally its bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, withdraw from South Vietnam all U. S. and satellite troops, recognize the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation, and let the Vietnamese people settle themselves their own affairs."

Let no well-meaning observer deceive you: that remains the position of Hanoi as of this hour -- as Hanoi transmits it to us privately as well as publicly.

* * * *

This is a description of some of the efforts we have made. It could be multiplied many times over with the story of other well-meant contacts -- other proposals -- and other rejections by Hanoi.

It is a gloomy and disheartening recital. But I think no fair-minded person can say that we have not tried -- tried hard -- tried often.

In my recent speech at San Antonio I spoke of the basic position of this Government regarding the way to peace. I said then:

time

"As we have told Hanoi time and again, the heart of the matter really is this: the United States is willing to stop all aerial and naval bombardment of North Vietnam when this will lead promptly to productive discussions. We, of course, assume that while discussions proceed, North Vietnam would not take advantage of the bombing cessation or limitation."

These words are clear. We stand by them.

I would go further ^{and} ~~and~~ say:

If Hanoi wishes to talk about a settlement, we stand ready to talk -- this week, tomorrow, even today;

If Hanoi is interested in deeds, we are prepared to undertake actions to lower the level of fighting -- so long as Hanoi acts in reciprocity;

And, if it is preferred that deeds and discussions go hand in hand, we are ready to take that course;

We will meet in public at a conference;

We will meet in private;

~~We will meet/any time. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~~~

But let me say this -- most solemnly and with utter candor: Peace is not a one-way street. It is not going to be found by the efforts of only one party. If there is to be peace, it will require that both sides be prepared to act -- and to live up to their promises.

The record of the past years makes it clear that we have tried hard to find a way to end the bloodshed.

Indeed, it is possible that all these efforts -- all the statements -- all the diplomatic approaches -- may have been misunderstood in Hanoi.

The men in Hanoi may have taken all these sincere efforts to end the war as signs of weakness -- as a desire to get out at any price -- as a way to cut our losses and run.

They may have decided that if they just hang on a little longer -- hold out a few more months -- inflict a few more casualties -- that our will is going to soften, our determination break.

If that is their conclusion, they are making a deadly error. And they are inflicting on their own people and on their innocent neighbors a terrible price for that error.

For we shall stand firm. The people of South Vietnam will stand firm. And the aggressors will never succeed.

I think the next move is up to Hanoi. We have tried -- and tried -- and tried. Our efforts have been turned back. If they desire real peace -- they know where to find us. We will be waiting. But, in the meanwhile, we shall not be standing still.
