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TEXT OF AN ADDRESS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF DEFENSE MELVIN R. LAIRD
BEFORE THE EIGHTH CONVENTION OF AFL-CIO
ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY, OCTOBER 7, 1969

It is an honor to be the first Secretary of Defense ever to address a national convention of the AFL-CIO.

As George Meany and others in this audience know, this is not my first contact with organized labor. For 17 years I have had close contacts with your national leaders, first as a member of Congress and now as Secretary of Defense.

The outstanding contributions made by labor in keeping our Nation secure and free have become even more apparent to me in my present office. I know firsthand how much the skill and productivity of American labor mean to our defense forces.

As an illustration of labor's support of defense, let me recall the action three years ago of the Building and Construction Trades Department. At that time the Navy was seeking to recruit apprentices and journeymen to bolster the Seabee units in Vietnam that were undertaking a backbreaking construction job. In response to the Navy's appeal, some 5,000 building tradesmen came out of your ranks into the Seabee's.

I could relate many other instances of this kind that have meant so much to the young Americans in the military forces in Vietnam -- such things as the help of maritime unions in unsnarling the tie-up in Saigon Harbor.

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The positions taken by organized labor in the areas of foreign and military affairs have been uniformly wise, farsighted, realistic, and free from illusion. The support of your executive council for the President's decision to begin on the Safeguard antiballistic missile system was of major importance in bringing about favorable Congressional action on this proposal. I know I voice President Nixon's sentiments when I thank you for this support.

The AFL-CIO has also supported the efforts of our Government to assure the right of self-determination to the people of Vietnam, and this forms a background for my remarks today. This policy now being carried out by the Nixon Administration offers the best hope of ending heavy American involvement within a reasonable time and of making it possible for the people of South Vietnam to chart their own political course in peace and freedom.

Make no mistake about it. To carry out his policy, the President needs the support of a united people. The young Americans in Vietnam need that support. Hanoi's strategy is clear: The leaders in Hanoi expect to achieve victory by waiting for us to abandon the conflict as a result of anti-war protest in this country. From their experience with the French and from their reading of events in the United States last year, they are encouraged to believe that they can get all they want if they merely wait long enough. The President will not bow to acts and utterances by those Americans who seek to pressure him into capitulation on Hanoi's terms. Those acts and utterances serve only to encourage the enemy to keep on stalling in Paris.

The Paris talks had made little headway by the time the Nixon Administration assumed office in January. They remain stalemated today. At Paris, the North Vietnamese can endlessly block our efforts to end the war through negotiation by rejecting all proposals. For this reason, the President decided at an early point in his Administration that we could not leave all our eggs in the negotiation basket. The President continues to give his full support to our Paris efforts because, clearly, negotiations could provide the speediest resolution to the war. But this course requires a sincere effort by both sides, not by the United States and South Vietnam alone.

In January, the U.S. Government had no alternative plan to influence the course of events should the continuing efforts at Paris fail. Today, there is an alternative course of action that at the same time complements our efforts at Paris. That program is Vietnamization.

Vietnamization is something new. Those who view it as a mere continuation of the program for modernizing South Vietnam's armed forces are quite mistaken. It is much more than that. The Vietnamization program represents a major change not only in emphasis but also in objectives. Troop modernization until early this year had had the negative goal of partially de-Americanizing the war. Vietnamization has the positive goal of "Vietnamizing" the war, of increasing Vietnamese responsibility for all aspects of the war and handling of their own affairs. There is an enormous difference between these two policies.

The previous modernization program was designed to prepare the South Vietnamese to handle only the threat of Viet Cong insurgency that would remain after all North Vietnamese regular forces had returned home. It made sense, therefore, only in the context of success at Paris. It was a companion piece to the Paris talks, not a complement and alternative. Vietnamization, on the other hand, is directed toward preparing the South Vietnamese to handle both Viet Cong insurgency and regular North Vietnamese armed forces regardless of the outcome in Paris.

In other words, we felt we could not stand pat with the past. Vietnamization has put some aces in the Free World's poker hand.

As I noted, Vietnamization embodies much more than merely enabling the South Vietnamese armed forces to assume greater military responsibility. It means, in South Vietnam, building a stronger economy, stronger internal security forces, a stronger government, and stronger military forces.

The American public must understand and support this if it is to be made to work in Vietnam. By making Vietnamization work, we create a powerful incentive for the enemy to negotiate meaningfully in Paris.

The enemy needs to know that time is not on his side, that the passage of time is leading to a stronger, not a weaker South Vietnam.

As the President has said time and again, we hold firmly to a single objective for Vietnam: permitting the people of South Vietnam freely to determine their own destiny. We want peace as speedily as possible, but we cannot acquiesce to a peace that denies self-determination to the South Vietnamese.

The President has also said: "I do not want an American boy to be in Vietnam for one day longer than is necessary for our national interest."

Vietnamization offers us the best prospect for bringing our men home quickly while achieving our objective in Vietnam.

The last thing I want to do is convey false hopes or promises to the American people. I do want to give as full a picture as I can of the situation we face in Vietnam and what we are trying to do about it. I cannot promise a miraculous end to the war. I cannot promise that our losses in combat will remain, as they were last week, at the lowest level in almost three years. But I can say to you that we are on the path that has the best chance of minimizing U.S. casualties while resolving the war in the shortest possible time without abandoning our basic objective.

In the Vietnamization program, high priority actions are under way. Let's look briefly at the four faces of Vietnamization for just a moment: stronger economy, stronger police for internal security, stronger government, and stronger military forces.

In the economic field, a significant factor is the opening up of waterways and roads for farmers to bring their produce to market and the growing confidence of farmers in using them. In addition, South Vietnamese have replaced Americans in the operation of the civilian port facilities at Saigon and at supply and warehousing facilities in various parts of the country. In the past three years, South Vietnam has trebled its funding of imports while the amount spent for this purpose by the Agency for International Development has dropped by a third. South Vietnam is moving toward restoration of self-sufficiency in rice production. Of course, progress in an economy distorted by war is bound to be uneven. Vietnam suffers from the chronic wartime malady of steep inflation but the Government of Vietnam is attempting to face up to this problem with American help.

In the field of local security, the police force has been expanded and its training strengthened. Partly for this reason, the Viet Cong infrastructure is being weakened and rooted out in many areas. That infrastructure includes the hard-line Communist civilians who control

and direct the acts of terrorism, assassination, and kidnappings at the local level -- as well as the military activities of the local guerrillas and main force units. One measure of success in local security is the extent of the denial to the enemy of the base of popular support he needs for supplies, concealment, intelligence, and recruits and, more important, the reduction in terrorist activities which intimidate the population.

In the political field, progress is measured by the extent of the people's trust in their government. It is at the grass -- or "rice" -- roots level where we find encouraging signs. Locally elected governments are spreading throughout the country. Self-government has been brought this year to more than 700 villages and hamlets in recently pacified areas, bringing the total with self-government to about 8 out of every 10. There has been a notable increase in the number of citizens willing to seek local office and hence to face the threat of Viet Cong terrorism which has taken such a toll of local officials in past years. However, much remains to be done. The Government of South Vietnam is continuing its efforts to strengthen popular support for their elected government officials at all levels, to improve administrative practices, and to provide better services to people in such field as education and public health.

The success of the whole Vietnamization program would be jeopardized without progress in the political field. The political system and policies of South Vietnam are not our responsibility, but we are anxious to see them succeed.

The military area is where progress in Vietnamization has been most visible. We have begun to replace American with Vietnamese troops. Already this year, in two installments, we are cutting the size of our forces by 60,000 in Vietnam, and, in a related development, by 6,000 in Thailand. Contingent on one or more of the three criteria expressed by the President -- progress at Paris, progress in Vietnamization, and reduction in the level of enemy activity -- additional numbers of Americans can and will be brought home.

The troop redeployments so far announced have not been made possible by any progress in Paris or by any convincing evidence that Hanoi wants to reduce the level of combat. They have been made possible principally by the improved capability of South Vietnamese military forces. The armed forces of South Vietnam have increased substantially. Since January of this year, 14 more battalions have been put in the field. They are better trained and better equipped. They are increasingly taking up

the burden of combat. For more than a year, their ground forces have not been defeated in any engagement of units of battalion size or larger.

These, then, are some of the encouraging signs. But there remains much to be done, particularly in strengthening the economic and political spheres. I don't want to suggest for a moment that everything is going our way, for there are still serious problems before us.

But we are not the only side with problems. One might gather from some statements of both our critics and our supporters that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong are eight feet tall, that they enjoy unreserved popular support, and that victory for them is inevitable. With Vietnamization well under way, I think it is time to pause and view the more balanced perspective of the problems faced by both sides.

Although the controlled press in North Vietnam does not parade criticism of their war effort, we see their problems in other ways. First of all, there are the staggering casualties they have endured numbering well over half a million men lost in combat since 1961. The impact of their casualties on the war effort is compounded by the growing difficulties encountered in recruiting replacements for the Viet Cong in South Vietnam add to this recent floods, epidemics, agricultural production difficulties, and a sagging economy. Finally, North Vietnam has lost its tough leader of many years, Ho Chi Minh, who served as unifying symbol of so-called liberation wars in Southeast Asia. We cannot know what effect such difficulties will have in the future course of the war, but we must keep them in mind in our assessments.

I have explained to you today what this Administration is seeking to do in Vietnam, and why we believe our dual approach of Vietnamization and negotiation is the best path to follow.

There are those who claim that the United States should establish a formal and fixed timetable for U.S. troop reductions in Vietnam. On May 14, President Nixon offered to withdraw our forces from South Vietnam by a fixed timetable if North Vietnam would do the same. The place to establish fixed timetable is in Paris or in some other mutual context, rather than by unilateral action in the United States. The President's offer has received no response from Hanoi, and from some statements I have read, seems to have been ignored by many in this country.

We believe there are other reasons why the unilateral setting of a fixed timetable would be unwise at this time.

First, the readiness of South Vietnamese forces to supplant American forces may not coincide with a predetermined timetable. We have achieved a momentum behind Vietnamization. It is of the greatest importance that this momentum be maintained. An arbitrary timetable could disrupt this momentum.

Second, any hope of progress in the Paris talks would evaporate. Knowing that American troops would be removed by a certain day, the Communist negotiators would be even more inclined to yield nothing and more encouraged to wait us out.

Third -- and this is particularly important -- we cannot at any stage of this process subject the American troops left in Vietnam to the danger of being overwhelmed by an enemy force. Any timetable set now could work out so as to leave a small band of Americans as a sacrifice to illusion, impatience, or frustration.

A timetable set now might prove to be too slow or too fast. We are not setting one because it would not be fair to our men in Vietnam or to our allies, and it certainly would retard progress toward ending the war.

I cannot tell you how or when the war in Vietnam will end. It has been my policy in office not to make optimistic forecasts; there have been too many of those in the Department of Defense. We are now embarked on a new course that we believe has the best prospect for ending American combat involvement. We shall persist in assisting the South Vietnamese to attain self-determination. We will not abandon South Vietnam. As President Nixon has said,

"Abandoning the South Vietnamese people would jeopardize more than lives in South Vietnam. It would bring peace now but it would enormously increase the danger of a bigger war later.

"If we simply abandoned our efforts in Vietnam, the cause of peace might not survive the damage that would be done to other nations' confidence in our reliability."

I am sure of one thing. The day that we all hope and pray for when there are no more American troops in combat will be speeded if the American people make it clear that they are united behind their President's policy.

As we press toward a resolution in Vietnam, we must not lose sight of the larger world stage. We must be vigilant in the face of a continuing threat from abroad to our security and a growing challenge here at home to the military foundation so vitally needed for a policy of peace.

The President has said we are entering an era of negotiations. We are trying to make negotiation work in Paris. We would like to see it work in arms limitation talks. We hope to make it work in all areas of contention as we approach the decade of the 70's.

You men of labor know a great deal about negotiation. Two things in particular you have learned and applied in your long history. The first is to persist and persevere, regardless of how difficult the course, because the goal is worthy. The second is to negotiate from strength.

On Vietnam, we are persevering in negotiating for peace and we are strengthening our hand through Vietnamization.

On the larger front, we have a strong military base that we must maintain so that we can always negotiate from strength while assuring our ability to defend our interests should negotiation fail.

We need your continuing help in keeping America aware of the need both for strength and perseverance in building a policy of peace. We know we will get it.

Thank you very much.
