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TEXT OF PRESIDENT NIXON'S ADDRESS ON VIETNAM  
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY TO THE NATION  
WHITE HOUSE, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1969

Tonight I want to talk to you on a subject that deeply concerns every American and other people throughout the world -- the war in Vietnam.

I believe that one of the reasons for the deep vision in this Nation about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy.

Tonight I would like to answer some of the questions that I know are on the minds of many of you listening to me.

How and why did America get involved in Vietnam in the first place?

How has this Administration changed the policy of the previous Administration?

What has really happened in the negotiations in Paris and on the battlefield in Vietnam?

What choices do we have if we are to end the war?

What are the prospects for peace?

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AMERICAN EMBASSY - TOKYO

Let me begin by describing the situation I found when I was inaugurated on January 20.

- The war had been going on for four years.
- 31, 000 Americans had been killed in action.
- The training program for the South Vietnamese armed forces was behind schedule.
- 540, 000 Americans were in Vietnam with no plans to reduce the number.
- No progress had been made at the negotiations in Paris and the United States had not put forth a comprehensive peace proposal.
- The war was causing deep division at home and criticism from many of our friends as well as our enemies abroad.

In view of these circumstances there were some who urged I end the war at once by ordering the immediate withdrawal of all American forces.

From a political standpoint this would have been a popular and easy course to follow. After all, we became involved in the war while my predecessor was in office. I could blame the defeat which would be the result of my action on him and come out as the peacemaker. Some put it quite bluntly: This was the only way to avoid allowing Johnson's war to become Nixon's war.

But I had a greater obligation than to think only of the years of my Administration and the next election. I had to think of the effect of my decision on the next generation and the future of peace and freedom in America and the world.

Let us all understand that the question before us is not whether some Americans are for peace and some against it. The great question at issue is not whether Johnson's war becomes Nixon's war.

The question is: How can we win America's peace?

Let us turn now to the fundamental issue. Why and how did the United States become involved in Vietnam in the first place?

Fifteen years ago North Vietnam, with the logistical support of Communist China and the Soviet Union, launched a campaign to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam by instigating and supporting a revolution.

In response to the request of the Government of South Vietnam, President Eisenhower sent economic aid and military equipment to assist the people of South Vietnam in their efforts to prevent a Communist takeover. Seven years ago, President Kennedy sent 16,000 military personnel to Vietnam as combat advisors. Four years ago, President Johnson sent American combat forces to South Vietnam.

Many believe that President Johnson's decision to send American combat forces to South Vietnam was wrong. Many others -- I among them -- have been strongly critical of the way the war has been conducted.

But the question today is -- Now that we are in the war, what is the best way to end it?

In January I could only conclude that the precipitate withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam would be a disaster not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and for the cause of peace.

For the South Vietnamese, our precipitate withdrawal would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover of the North 15 years ago.

-- They then murdered more than 50,000 people and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps.

-- We saw a prelude of what would happen in South Vietnam when the Communists entered the city of Hue last year. During their brief rule there, there was a bloody reign of terror in which some 3,000 civilians were clubbed, shot to death and buried in mass graves.

-- With the sudden collapse of our support, these atrocities of Hue would become the nightmare of the entire nation -- and particularly for the million and a half Catholic refugees who fled to South Vietnam when the Communists took over the North in 1954.

For the United States, this first defeat in our Nation's history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the world.

Three American Presidents have recognized the great stakes involved in Vietnam and understood what had to be done.

-- In 1963, President Kennedy said with his characteristic eloquence and clarity, "We want to see a stable government there carrying on the struggle to maintain its national independence. We believe strongly in that. We're not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia, so we're going to stay there."

-- President Eisenhower and President Johnson expressed the same conclusion during their terms of office.

For the future of peace, precipitate withdrawal would thus be a disaster of immense magnitude.

-- A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends.

-- Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam would without question promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest.

-- This would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain peace -- in the middle east, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere.

Ultimately, this would cost more lives.

It would not bring peace but more war.

For these reasons, I rejected the recommendation that I should end the war by immediately withdrawing all our forces. I chose instead to change American policy on both the negotiating front and the battlefield.

In order to end a war fought on many fronts, I initiated a pursuit for peace on many fronts.

In a television speech on May 14, in a speech before the United Nations, and on a number of other occasions I set forth our peace proposals in great detail.

-- We have offered the complete withdrawal of all outside forces within one year.

-- We have proposed a cease-fire under international supervision.

-- We have offered free elections under international supervision with the Communists participating in the organization and conduct of the elections as an organized political force. The Saigon Government has pledged to accept the result of the elections.

We have not put forth our proposals on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. We have indicated that we are willing to discuss the proposals that have been put forth by the other side and that anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future. At the Paris peace conference, Ambassador Lodge has demonstrated our flexibility and good faith in 40 public meetings.

Hanoi has refused even to discuss our proposals. They demand our unconditional acceptance of their terms; that we withdraw all American forces immediately and unconditionally and that we overthrow the Government of South Vietnam as we leave.

We have not limited our peace initiatives to public forums and public statements. I recognized that a long and bitter war like this usually cannot be settled in a public forum. That is why in addition to the public statements and negotiations I have explored every possible private avenue that might lead to a settlement.

Therefore, tonight I am taking the unprecedented step of disclosing some of our other initiatives for peace -- initiatives we undertook privately and secretly because we thought that we thereby might open a door which publicly would be closed.

I did not wait for my inauguration to begin my quest for peace.

-- Soon after my election through an individual who is directly in contact on a personal basis with the leaders of North Vietnam I made two private offers for a rapid, comprehensive settlement. Hanoi's replies called in effect for our surrender before negotiations.

-- Since the Soviet Union furnishes most of the military equipment for North Vietnam, Secretary of State Rogers, my assistant for national security affairs, Dr. Kissinger, Ambassador Lodge, and I, personally, have met on a number of occasions with representatives of the Soviet Government to enlist their assistance in getting meaningful negotiations started. In addition we have had extended discussions directed toward that same end with representatives of other governments which have diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. None of these initiatives have to date produced results.

-- In mid-July, I became convinced that it was necessary to make a major move to break the deadlock in the Paris talks. I spoke directly with an individual who had known Ho Chi Minh on a personal basis for 25 years. Through him I sent a letter to Ho Chi Minh.

I did this outside of the usual diplomatic channels with the hope that with the necessity of making statements for propoganda removed, there might be constructive progress toward bringing the war to an end. Let me read from that letter:

"Dear Mr. President:

"I realize that it is difficult to communicate meaningfully across the gulf of four years of war. But precisely because of this gulf, I wanted to take this opportunity to reaffirm in all solemnity my desire to work for a just peace. I deeply believe that the war in Vietnam has gone on too long and delay in bringing it to an end can benefit no one -- least of all the people of Vietnam.

"....."

"The time has come to move forward at the conference table toward an early resolution of this tragic war. You will find us forthcoming and open-minded in a common effort to bring the blessings of peace to the brave people of Vietnam. Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war."

I received Ho Chi Minh's reply on August 30, three days before his death. It simply reiterated the public position North Vietnam had taken in the Paris talks and flatly rejected my initiative.

The full text of both letters is being released to the press.

-- In addition, Ambassador Lodge has met with Vietnam's chief negotiator in Paris in 11 private meetings.

-- We have taken other significant initiatives which must remain secret to keep open some channels of communication which may still prove to be productive.

The effect of all the public, private and secret negotiations which have been undertaken since the bombing halt a year ago and since this Administration came into office on January 20, can be summed up in one sentence --

No progress whatever has been made except agreement on the shape of the bargaining table.

It has become clear that the obstacle in negotiating an end to the war is not the President of the United States. And it is not the South Vietnamese Government.

The obstacle is the other side's absolute refusal to show the least willingness to join us in seeking a just peace. It will not do so while it is convinced that all it has to do is to wait for our next concession, and the next until it gets everything it wants.

There can be now no longer any doubt that progress in negotiation depends above all on Hanoi's deciding to negotiate seriously.

I realize that this report on our efforts on the diplomatic front is discouraging but the American people are entitled to know the truth -- the bad news as well as the good news where the lives of our young men are involved.

Let me now turn, however, to a more encouraging report on another front.

At the time we launched our search for peace, I recognized that we might not succeed in bringing an end to the war through negotiation. I, therefore, put into effect another plan to bring peace -- a plan which will bring the war to an end regardless of what happens on the negotiating front.

It is in line with a major shift in U. S. foreign policy which I described in my press conference at Guam on July 25. Let me briefly explain what has been described as the Nixon Doctrine -- a policy which not only will help end the war in Vietnam but which is an essential element of our program to prevent future Vietnams.

We Americans are a do-it-yourself people -- an impatient people. Instead of teaching someone else to do a job, we like to do it ourselves. This trait has been carried over into our foreign policy.

In Korea and again in Vietnam, the United States furnished most of the arms, and most of the men to help the people of those countries defend their freedom against Communist aggression.

Before any American troops were committed to Vietnam, a leader of another Asian country expressed this opinion to me when I was traveling in Asia as a private citizen. "When you are trying to assist another nation defend its freedom, U. S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight the war for them."

In Guam, I laid down these three principles as guidelines for future American policy toward Asia:

1. The United States will keep all of our treaty commitments.
2. We shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.
3. In cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.

After I announced this policy, I found that the leaders of the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea and other nations which might be threatened by Communist aggression welcomed this new direction in American foreign policy.

The defense of freedom is everybody's business -- not just America's business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened. In the previous Administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam; in this Administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace. The policy of the previous Administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war but even more significantly it did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves when we left.

The Vietnamization plan was launched following Secretary Laird's visit to Vietnam in March. Under the plan, I ordered a substantial increase in the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces.

In July, on my visit to Vietnam, I changed General Abram's orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policy. Under the new orders the primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam.

Our air operations have been reduced by over 20 percent.

We have now begun to see the results of this long overdue change in American policy in Vietnam.

-- After five years of Americans going into Vietnam, we are finally bringing American men home. By December 15, over 60,000 men will have been withdrawn from South Vietnam -- including 20 percent of all of our combat troops.

-- The South Vietnamese have continued to gain in strength. As a result they have been able to take over combat responsibilities from our American forces.

Two other significant developments have occurred since this Administration took office in January.

-- Enemy infiltration over the last three months is less than 20 percent of what it was over the similar period last year.

-- Most important -- United States casualties have declined during the last two months to the lowest point in three years.

Let me turn now to our program for the future.

We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U. S. ground combat forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable. This withdrawal will be made from strength and not from weakness. As South Vietnamese forces become stronger, the rate of American withdrawal can become greater.

I have not and do not intend to announce the timetable for our program. There are obvious reasons for this decision. As I have indicated on several occasions, the rate of withdrawal will depend on developments on three fronts:

-- One is the progress which may be made at the Paris talks. An announcement of a fixed timetable for our withdrawal would completely remove any incentive for the enemy to negotiate an agreement.

-- They would simply wait until our forces had withdrawn and then move in.

The other two factors on which we will base our withdrawal decisions are the level of enemy activity and the progress of the training program of the South Vietnamese forces. Progress on both these fronts has been greater than we anticipated when we started the withdrawal program in June. As a result, our timetable for withdrawal is more optimistic now than when we made our first estimates in June. This clearly demonstrates why it is not wise to be frozen in on a fixed timetable.

We must retain the flexibility to base each withdrawal decision on the situation as it is at that time rather than on estimates that are no longer valid.

Along with this optimistic estimate, I must -- in all candor -- leave one note of caution.

If the level of enemy activity significantly increases we might have to adjust our timetable accordingly.

However, I want the record to be completely clear on one point.

At the time of the bombing halt last November, there was some confusion as to whether there was an understanding on the part of the enemy that if we stopped the bombing they would stop shelling cities of South Vietnam. I want to be sure there is no misunderstanding on the part of the enemy with regard to our withdrawal program.

We have noted the reduced level of infiltration and the reduction of our casualties and are basing our withdrawal decisions partially on those factors.

If the level of infiltration or our casualties increase while we are trying to scale down the fighting, it will be the result of a conscious decision by the enemy.

Hanoi could make no greater mistake than to assume that an increase in violence will be to its own advantage. If I conclude that increased enemy action jeopardizes our remaining forces in Vietnam, I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with that situation.

This is not a threat. This is a statement of policy which as Commander-in-Chief of our Armed Forces I am making in meeting my responsibility for the protection of American fighting men wherever they may be.

I am sure that you can recognize from what I have said that we have only two choices open to us if we want to end the war.

-- I can order an immediate, precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the effects of that action.

-- Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization if necessary -- a plan in which we will withdraw all of our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom.

I have chosen the second course.

It is not the easy way.

It is the right way.

It is a plan which will end the war and serve the cause of peace -- not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and in the world.

In speaking of the consequences of a precipitate withdrawal, I mentioned that our allies would lose confidence in America.

Far more dangerous, we would lose confidence in ourselves. The immediate reaction would be a sense of relief as our men came home. But as we saw the consequences of what we had done, inevitable remorse and divisive recrimination would scar our spirit as a people.

We have faced other crises in our history and have become stronger by rejecting the easy way out and taking the right way in meeting our challenges. Our greatness as a nation has been our capacity to do what had to be done when we knew our course was right.

I recognize that some of my fellow citizens disagree with the plan for peace I have chosen. Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved.

In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: "Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home."

One of the strengths of our free society is that any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view. But as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that view and who attempt to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.

For almost 200 years, the policy of this Nation has been made under our Constitution by those leaders in the Congress and in the White House who were elected by all the people. If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority this Nation has no future as a free society.

I would like to address a word to the young people of this Nation who are concerned about the war.

I respect your idealism.

I share your concern for peace.

I want peace as much as you do.

There are powerful personal reasons I want to end this war. This week I will have to sign 83 letters to mothers, fathers, wives and loved ones of men who had given their lives for America in Vietnam. It is very

little satisfaction to me that this was only one-third as many as I signed during my first week in office. There is nothing I want more than to see the day come when I no longer must write any of these letters.

-- I want to end the war to save the lives of those brave young men in Vietnam.

-- I want to end it in a way which will increase the chance that their younger brothers and their sons will not have to fight in another Vietnam someplace in the world.

-- I want to end the war so that the energy and dedication of our young people, now too often directed into bitter hatred against those they think are responsible for the war, can be turned to the great challenges of peace, a better life for all Americans and for people throughout the world.

I have chosen a plan for peace. I believe it will succeed.

If it does succeed, what the critics say now will not matter. If it does not succeed, anything I say then will not matter.

I know it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days. But I feel it is appropriate to do so on this occasion.

Two hundred years ago this Nation was weak and poor. But even then, America was the hope of millions in the world. Today we have become the strongest and richest Nation in the world. The wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom in the last third of this century will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of Free World leadership.

Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful Nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people on this Earth to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism.

And so tonight -- to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans -- I ask for your support.

I pledged in my campaign for the Presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.

The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate in Paris.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

Fifty years ago, in this very room and at this very desk, President Woodrow Wilson wrote words which caught the imagination of a war-weary world during World War I. He said: "This is the war to end wars." His dream for peace after that war was shattered on the hard realities of great power politics, and Wilson died a broken man.

Tonight I do not tell you that the war in Vietnam is the war to end wars.

I do say that I have initiated a plan which will end this war in a way that will bring us closer to that great goal of a just and lasting peace to which Woodrow Wilson and every President in our history has been dedicated.

As President I hold the responsibility for choosing the best path to that goal and then for leading our Nation along it.

I pledge to you tonight that I will meet this responsibility with all of the strength and wisdom I can command in accordance with your hopes, mindful of your concerns, sustained by your prayers.

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