

486 Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace  
in Vietnam. *December 15, 1969*

*Good evening, my fellow Americans:*

I have asked for this television time tonight to give you a progress report on our plan to bring a just peace in Vietnam, which I described in my television address on November 3.

As you will recall, I said then that we were proceeding in our pursuit for peace on two fronts: a peace settlement through negotiation, or if that fails, ending the war

through Vietnamization, a plan we have developed with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal, first, of all U.S. combat troops, and eventually of other forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable.

I must report to you tonight with regret that there has been no progress whatever on the negotiating front since Novem-

ber 3. The enemy still insists on a unilateral, precipitate withdrawal of American forces and on a political settlement which would mean the imposition of a Communist government on the people of South Vietnam against their will, and defeat and humiliation for the United States.

This we cannot and will not accept.

Typical of their attitude is their absolute refusal to talk about the fate of the American prisoners they hold and their refusal even to supply their names so as to ease the anguish of their loved ones in the United States. This cruel, indefensible action is a shocking demonstration of the inflexible attitude they have taken on all issues at the negotiating table in Paris.

But despite their attitude, we shall continue to participate in the Paris talks and to seek a negotiated peace—one which is fair, fair to North Vietnam, fair to the United States, but most important, fair to the people of South Vietnam. Because as I have indicated, anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own fate.

As you know, Ambassador Lodge has had to leave his assignment in Paris because of personal reasons. I have designated Philip Habib, one of our most experienced Foreign Service officers who has been participating in the negotiations for over 18 months, as the acting head of our delegation with the personal rank of Ambassador. He has been given full authority to discuss any proposal that will contribute to a just peace.

Let me turn now to the progress of our plan for Vietnamization and our troop withdrawal program.

When I announced this program in

June, I said that the rate of withdrawal would depend on three criteria: progress in the Paris negotiations, progress in the training of South Vietnamese forces, and the level of enemy activity.

Now, while there has been no progress on the negotiating front, I have a much more favorable report to give to you tonight with regard to the training of South Vietnamese forces.

First, let me share with you how I reached this conclusion. In making decisions, I believe a President should listen not only to those who tell him what he wants to hear, but to those who tell him what he needs to hear. It is most important to get independent judgments from individuals who are expert on the factors to be considered, but who are not directly involved in the operations themselves. This is particularly essential when the lives of American men are involved.

Several months ago I read a book by Sir Robert Thompson,<sup>1</sup> a British expert who was one of the major architects of the victory over the Communist guerrillas who attempted to take over Malaya in the 1950's. In his book, which was published just as this administration took office, he was very pessimistic about the conduct of the war in Vietnam. He particularly noted the failure to prepare the South Vietnamese to take over the responsibilities for their own defense.

On October 7, I met with Mr. Thompson and asked him to go to Vietnam and to give me a firsthand, candid, and completely independent report on the situation there. After 5 weeks of intensive in-

---

<sup>1</sup> "No Exit from Vietnam" was published in 1969 by David McKay Company, Inc. (224 pp.).

investigation he gave me his report on December 3.

His full report, which makes several very constructive recommendations, must remain confidential since it bears on the security of our men. But let me read to you from his summary of his findings.

"I was very impressed by the improvement in the military and political situation in Vietnam as compared with all previous visits and especially in the security situation, both in Saigon and the rural areas.

"A winning position in the sense of obtaining a just peace (whether negotiated or not) and of maintaining an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam has been achieved but we are not yet through. We are in a psychological period where the greatest need is confidence. A steady application of the 'do it yourself' concept with continuing U.S. support in the background will increase the confidence already shown by many South Vietnam leaders."

Mr. Thompson's report, which I would describe as cautiously optimistic, is in line with my own attitude and with reports I have received from other observers and from our civilian and military leaders in Vietnam.

Now, there is one disturbing new development, however, with regard to enemy activity. Enemy infiltration has increased substantially. It has not yet reached the point where our military leaders believe the enemy has developed the capability to mount a major offensive, but we are watching the situation closely to see whether it could develop to that extent.

Now for the decision. Taking all these developments into consideration, I am announcing tonight a reduction in our

troop ceiling of 50,000 more U.S. troops by April 15 next year. This means that the ceiling which existed when I took office on January 20 has now been reduced by 115,500 men. This reduction has been made with the approval of the Government of South Vietnam, and in consultation with the other nations which have combat forces in Vietnam.

Now there are some who believe that to continue our withdrawals at a time when enemy infiltration is increasing is a risk we should not take. However, I have consistently said we must take risks for peace.

And in that connection, let me remind the leaders in Hanoi that if their infiltration and the level of enemy activity increases while we are reducing our forces they also will be running a risk. I repeat the statement I made in my speech on November 3:

"Hanoi could make no greater mistake than to assume that an increase in violence will be to its 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 reduction in our forces is another orderly step in our plan for peace in Vietnam.

It marks further progress toward turning over the defense of South Vietnam to the South Vietnamese.

And it is another clear sign of our readiness to bring an end to the war and to achieve a just peace.

Before concluding this report, I wish to express my appreciation to the great number of people from all over this Nation who have indicated their support for our program for a just peace since my

speech on November 3.

This support was particularly underlined by the action of the House of Representatives and the Congress in which a majority of both Democrats and Republicans voted overwhelmingly 334 to 55 for a resolution supporting the plan for peace which I announced on November 3.

The leaders in Hanoi have declared on a number of occasions that division in the United States would eventually bring them the victory they cannot win over our fighting men in Vietnam. This demonstration of support by the American people for our plan to bring a just peace has dashed those hopes.

Hanoi should abandon its dreams of military victory.

It is time for them to join us in serious negotiations.

There is nothing to be gained by delay.

If Hanoi is willing to talk seriously they will find us flexible and forthcoming.

I am glad that I was able to report tonight some progress in reaching our goal of a just peace in Vietnam. After 5 years of increasing the number of Americans

in Vietnam, we are bringing American men home.

Our casualties continue to be at the lowest rate in 3 years.

But I want you to know that despite this progress, I shall not be satisfied until we achieve the goal we all want: an end to the war on a just and lasting basis.

This is the fifth Christmas when Americans will be fighting in a war far away from home.

I know that there is nothing the American people want more, and there is nothing I want more, than to see the day come when the Christmas message of "peace on earth, good will to men" will be not just an eloquent ideal but a reality for Americans and for all others who cherish peace and freedom throughout the world.

Your continued support of our plan for peace will greatly strengthen our hopes that we can achieve that great goal.

Thank you and goodnight.

NOTE: The President spoke at 6:02 p.m. in his office at the White House. His remarks were broadcast on radio and television.

On the same day the White House released an advance text of the address.