

126 Address to the Nation on Progress Toward Peace in  
Vietnam. *April 20, 1970*

*Good evening, my fellow Americans:*

I have requested this television and radio time tonight to give you a progress report on our plan to bring a just peace to Vietnam.

When I first outlined our program last June, I stated that the rate of American withdrawals from Vietnam would depend on three criteria: progress in the training of the South Vietnamese, progress in the Paris negotiations, and the level of enemy activity.

Tonight I am pleased to report that progress in training and equipping South Vietnamese forces has substantially exceeded our original expectations last June.

Very significant advances have also been made in pacification.

Although we recognize that problems remain, these are encouraging trends.

However, I must report with regret that no progress has taken place on the negotiating front. The enemy still demands that we unilaterally and uncondi-

tionally withdraw all American forces, that in the process we overthrow the elected Government of South Vietnam, and that the United States accept a political settlement that would have the practical consequence of the forcible imposition of a Communist government upon the people of South Vietnam.

That would mean humiliation and defeat for the United States. This we cannot and will not accept.

Let me now turn to the third criteria for troop withdrawals—the level of enemy activity. In several areas since December, that level has substantially increased.

In recent months Hanoi has sent thousands more of their soldiers to launch new offensives in neutral Laos in violation of the Geneva Accords of 1962 to which they were signatories.

South of Laos, almost 40,000 Communist troops are now conducting overt aggression against Cambodia, a small neutralist country that the Communists have used for years as a base for attack upon South Vietnam in violation of the Geneva Accords of 1954 to which they were also signatories.

This follows the consistent pattern of North Vietnamese aggression in Indochina. During the past 8 years they have sent tens of thousands of troops into all three countries of the peninsula and across every single common border.

Men and supplies continue to pour down the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and in the past 2 weeks, the Communists have stepped up their attacks upon allied forces in South Vietnam.

However, despite this new enemy activity, there has been an overall decline in enemy force levels in South Vietnam since December.

As the enemy force levels have declined

and as the South Vietnamese have assumed more of the burden of battle, American casualties have declined.

I am glad to be able to report tonight that in the first 3 months of 1970, the number of Americans killed in action dropped to the lowest first quarter level in 5 years.

In June, a year ago, when we began troop withdrawals, we did so on a "cut and try" basis—with no certainty that the program would be successful. In June we announced withdrawal of 25,000 American troops; in September another 35,000 and then in December 50,000 more. These withdrawals have now been completed and as of April 15, a total of 115,500 men have returned home from Vietnam.

We have now reached a point where we can confidently move from a period of "cut and try" to a longer-range program for the replacement of Americans by South Vietnamese troops.

I am, therefore, tonight announcing plans for the withdrawal of an additional 150,000 American troops to be completed during the spring of next year. This will bring a total reduction of 265,500 men in our Armed Forces in Vietnam below the level that existed when we took office 18 months ago.

The timing and pace of these new withdrawals within the overall schedule will be determined by our best judgment of the current military and diplomatic situation.

This far-reaching decision was made after consultation with our commander in the field, and it has the approval of the Government of South Vietnam.

Now, viewed against the enemy's escalation in Laos and Cambodia, and in view of the stepped-up attacks this month in South Vietnam, this decision clearly in

volves risks.

But I again remind the leaders of North Vietnam that while we are taking these risks for peace, they will be taking grave risks should they attempt to use the occasion to jeopardize the security of our remaining forces in Vietnam by increased military action in Vietnam, in Cambodia, or in Laos.

I repeat what I said November 3d and December 15th. 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.

My responsibility as Commander in Chief of our Armed Forces is for the safety of our men, and I shall meet that responsibility. The decision I have announced tonight to withdraw 150,000 more men over the next year is based entirely on the progress of our Vietnamization program.

There is a better, shorter path to peace—through negotiations. We shall withdraw more than 150,000 over the next year if we make progress at the negotiating front.

Had the other side responded positively at Paris to our offer of May 14 last year, most American and foreign troops would have left South Vietnam by now.

A political settlement is the heart of the matter. That is what the fighting in Indochina has been about over the past 30 years.

Now, we have noted with interest the recent statement by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Malik concerning a possible new Geneva conference on Indochina.

We do not yet know the full implications of this statement. It is in the spirit of the letters I wrote on April 7, to signatories of the 1962 Geneva Accords urging consultations and observance of the Ac-

ords. We have consistently said we were willing to explore any reasonable path to peace. We are in the process of exploring this one.

But whatever the fate of this particular move we are ready for a settlement fair to everyone.

Let me briefly review for you the principles that govern our view of a just political settlement.

First, our overriding objective is a political solution that reflects the will of the South Vietnamese people and allows them to determine their future without outside interference.

I again reaffirm this Government's acceptance of eventual, total withdrawal of American troops. In turn, we must see the permanent withdrawal of all North Vietnamese troops and be given reasonable assurances that they will not return.

Second, a fair political solution should reflect the existing relationship of political forces within South Vietnam. We recognize the complexity of shaping machinery that would fairly apportion political power in South Vietnam. We are flexible; we have offered nothing on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

And third, we will abide by the outcome of the political process agreed upon. President Thieu and I have repeatedly stated our willingness to accept the free decision of the South Vietnamese people. But we will not agree to the arrogant demand that the elected leaders of the Government of Vietnam be overthrown before real negotiations begin.

Let me briefly review the record of our efforts to end the war in Vietnam through negotiations.

We were told repeatedly in the past that our adversaries would negotiate seriously —if only we stopped the bombing of

North Vietnam;

- if only we began withdrawing our forces from South Vietnam;
- if only we dealt with the National Liberation Front as one of the parties to the negotiations;
- if only we would agree in principle to removal of all of our forces from Vietnam.

We have taken all these steps.

The United States, over a year and a half ago, stopped all bombing of North Vietnam. Long ago we agreed to negotiate with the National Liberation Front as one of the parties. We have already withdrawn 115,500 American troops. Tonight I have announced a decision to reduce American force levels by a quarter of a million men from what they were 15 months ago. We have offered repeatedly to withdraw all of our troops if the North Vietnamese would withdraw theirs. We have taken risks for peace that every fair and objective man can readily recognize.

And still there is no progress at the negotiating table.

It is Hanoi and Hanoi alone that stands today blocking the path to a just peace for all the peoples of Southeast Asia.

When our astronauts returned safely to earth last Friday, the whole world rejoiced with us. We could have had no more eloquent demonstration of a profound truth—that the greatest force working for peace in the world today is the fact that men and women everywhere, regardless of differences in race, religion, nationality, or political philosophy, value the life of a human being. We were as one as we thought of those brave men, their wives, their children, their parents.

The death of a single man in war, whether he is an American, a South Viet-

namese, a Vietcong, or a North Vietnamese, is a human tragedy. That is why we want to end this war and achieve a just peace. We call upon our adversaries to join us in working at the conference table toward that goal.

No Presidential statement on Vietnam would be complete without an expression of our concern for the fate of the American prisoners of war.

The callous exploitation of the anxieties and anguish of the parents, the wives, the children of these brave men, as negotiating pawns, is an unforgivable breach of the elementary rules of conduct between civilized peoples. We shall continue to make every possible effort to get Hanoi to provide information on the whereabouts of all prisoners, to allow them to communicate with their families, to permit inspection of prisoners-of-war camps, and to provide for the early release of at least the sick and the wounded.

My fellow Americans, 5 years ago American combat troops were first sent to Vietnam. The war since that time has been the longest and one of the most costly and difficult conflicts in our history.

The decision I have announced tonight means that we finally have in sight the just peace we are seeking. We can now say with confidence that pacification is succeeding. We can now say with confidence that the South Vietnamese can develop the capability for their own defense. And we can say with confidence that all American combat forces can and will be withdrawn.

I could not make these statements tonight had it not been for the dedication, the bravery, the sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of young men who have served in Vietnam. Nor could I have made it had it not been for the perseverance of mil-

lions of Americans at home.

When men write the history of this Nation, they will record that no people in the annals of time made greater sacrifices in a more selfless cause than the American people sacrificed for the right of 18 million people in a faraway land to avoid the imposition of Communist rule against their will and for the right of those people to determine their own future free of outside interference.

The enemy has failed to win the war in Vietnam because of three basic errors in their strategy.

They thought they could win a military victory. They have failed to do so.

They thought they could win politically in South Vietnam. They have failed to do so.

They thought they could win politically in the United States. This proved to be their most fatal miscalculation.

In this great free country of ours, we debate—we disagree, sometimes violently, but the mistake the totalitarians make over and over again is to conclude that debate in a free country is proof of weak-

ness. We are not a weak people. We are a strong people. America has never been defeated in the proud 190-year history of this country, and we shall not be defeated in Vietnam.

Tonight I want to thank the American people for the support you have given so generously to the cause of a just peace in Vietnam.

It is your steadiness and your stamina that the leaders of North Vietnam are watching tonight. It is these qualities, as much as any proposals, that will bring them to negotiate.

It is America's resolve, as well as America's reasonableness, that will achieve our goal of a just peace in Vietnam and strengthen the foundations of a just and lasting peace in the Pacific and throughout the world.

Thank you and good night.

**NOTE:** The President spoke at 6 p.m. in his office at the Western White House in San Clemente, Calif. The address was broadcast live on radio and television.

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