

# 129 Address to the Nation on Vietnam.

*April 26, 1972*

*Good evening:*

During the past 3 weeks you have been reading and hearing about the massive invasion of South Vietnam by the Communist armies of North Vietnam.

Tonight, I want to give you a first-hand report on the military situation in Vietnam, the decisions I have made with regard to the role of the United States in the conflict, and the efforts we are making to bring peace at the negotiating table.

Let me begin briefly by reviewing what the situation was when I took office and what we have done since then to end American involvement in the war and to bring peace to the long-suffering people of Southeast Asia.

On January 30, 1969, the American

troop ceiling in Vietnam was 549,000. Our casualties were running as high as 300 a week. Thirty thousand young Americans were being drafted every month.

Today, 39 months later, through our program of Vietnamization—helping the South Vietnamese develop the capability of defending themselves—the number of Americans in Vietnam by Monday, May 1, will have been reduced to 69,000. Our casualties—even during the present, all-out enemy offensive—have been reduced by 95 percent. And draft calls now average fewer than 5,000 men a month, and we expect to bring them to zero next year.

As I reported in my television address to the Nation on January 25, we have offered the most generous peace terms in

both public and private negotiating sessions. Our most recent proposal provided for an immediate cease-fire; the exchange of all prisoners of war; the withdrawal of all of our forces within 6 months; and new elections in Vietnam, which would be internationally supervised, with all political elements including the Communists participating in and helping to run the elections. One month before such elections, President Thieu and Vice President Huong would resign.

Now, Hanoi's answer to this offer was a refusal even to discuss our proposals and, at the same time, a huge escalation of their military activities on the battlefield. Last October, the same month when we made this peace offer to Hanoi, our intelligence reports began to indicate that the enemy was building up for a major attack. And yet we deliberately refrained from responding militarily. Instead we patiently continued with the Paris talks, because we wanted to give the enemy every chance to reach a negotiated settlement at the bargaining table rather than to seek a military victory on the battlefield—a victory they cannot be allowed to win.

Finally, 3 weeks ago, on Easter weekend, they mounted their massive invasion of South Vietnam. Three North Vietnamese divisions swept across the demilitarized zone into South Vietnam—in violation of the treaties they had signed in 1954 and in violation of the understanding they had reached with President Johnson in 1968, when he stopped the bombing of North Vietnam in return for arrangements which included their pledge not to violate the DMZ. Shortly after the invasion across the DMZ, another three North Vietnamese divisions invaded

South Vietnam further south. As the offensive progressed, the enemy indiscriminately shelled civilian population centers in clear violation of the 1968 bombing halt understanding.

So the facts are clear. More than 150,000 North Vietnamese are now fighting in South Vietnam. There are no South Vietnamese troops anywhere in North Vietnam. Twelve of North Vietnam's 13 regular combat divisions have now left their own soil in order to carry aggressive war onto the territory of their neighbors. Whatever pretext there was of a civil war in South Vietnam has now been stripped away.

What we are witnessing here—what is being brutally inflicted upon the people of South Vietnam—is a clear case of naked and unprovoked aggression across an international border. There is only one word for it—invasion.

This attack has been resisted on the ground entirely by South Vietnamese forces, and in one area by South Korean forces. There are no United States ground troops involved. None will be involved. To support this defensive effort by the South Vietnamese, I have ordered attacks on enemy military targets in both North and South Vietnam by the air and naval forces of the United States.

I have here on my desk a report. I received it this morning from General Abrams. He gives the following evaluation of the situation:

- The South Vietnamese are fighting courageously and well in their self-defense. They are inflicting very heavy casualties on the invading force, which has not gained the easy victory some predicted for it 3 weeks ago.
- Our air strikes have been essential in

protecting our own remaining forces and in assisting the South Vietnamese in their efforts to protect their homes and their country from a Communist takeover.

- General Abrams predicts in this report that there will be several more weeks of very hard fighting. Some battles will be lost, he says; others will be won by the South Vietnamese. But his conclusion is that if we continue to provide air and sea support, the enemy will fail in its desperate gamble to impose a Communist regime in South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese will then have demonstrated their ability to defend themselves on the ground against future enemy attacks.

Based on this realistic assessment from General Abrams, and after consultation with President Thieu, Ambassador Bunker, Ambassador Porter, and my senior advisers in Washington, I have three decisions to announce tonight.

First, I have decided that Vietnamization has proved itself sufficiently that we can continue our program of withdrawing American forces without detriment to our overall goal of ensuring South Vietnam's survival as an independent country. Consequently, I am announcing tonight that over the next 2 months 20,000 more Americans will be brought home from Vietnam. This decision has the full approval of President Thieu and of General Abrams. It will bring our troop ceiling down to 49,000 by July 1—a reduction of half a million men since this Administration came into office.

Second, I have directed Ambassador Porter to return to the negotiating table

in Paris tomorrow,<sup>2</sup> but with one very specific purpose in mind. We are not resuming the Paris talks simply in order to hear more empty propaganda and bombast from the North Vietnamese and Vietcong delegates, but to get on with the constructive business of making peace. We are resuming the Paris talks with the firm expectation that productive talks leading to rapid progress will follow through all available channels. As far as we are concerned, the first order of business will be to get the enemy to halt his invasion of South Vietnam and to return the American prisoners of war.

Finally, I have ordered that our air and naval attacks on military installations in North Vietnam be continued until the North Vietnamese stop their offensive in South Vietnam.

I have flatly rejected the proposal that we stop the bombing of North Vietnam as a condition for returning to the negotiating table. They sold that package to the United States once before, in 1968, and we are not going to buy it again in 1972.

Now, let's look at the record. By July 1 we will have withdrawn over 90 percent of our forces that were in Vietnam in 1969. Before the enemy's invasion began, we had cut our air sorties in half. We have offered exceedingly generous terms for peace. The only thing we have refused to do is to accede to the enemy's demand to overthrow the lawfully constituted

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<sup>2</sup> On April 23, 1972, Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler announced an agreement by the United States and the Republic of Vietnam to resume the plenary sessions of the Paris peace talks. The announcement is printed in the Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents (vol. 8, p. 790).

Government of South Vietnam and to impose a Communist dictatorship in its place.

As you will recall, I have warned on a number of occasions over the past 3 years that if the enemy responded to our efforts to bring peace by stepping up the war, I would act to meet that attack, for these three very good reasons: first, to protect our remaining American forces; second, to permit continuation of our withdrawal program; and third, to prevent the imposition of a Communist regime on the people of South Vietnam against their will, with the inevitable bloodbath that would follow for hundreds of thousands who have dared to oppose Communist aggression.

The air and naval strikes of recent weeks have been carried out to achieve these objectives. They have been directed only against military targets which support the invasion of South Vietnam and they will not stop until the invasion stops.

The Communists have failed in their efforts to win over the people of South Vietnam politically. And General Abrams believes that they will fail in their efforts to conquer South Vietnam militarily. Their one remaining hope is to win in the Congress of the United States and among the people of the United States the victory they cannot win among the people of South Vietnam or on the battlefield in South Vietnam.

The great question then is how we, the American people, will respond to this final challenge.

Let us look at what the stakes are—not just for South Vietnam, but for the United States and for the cause of peace in the world. If one country, armed with the most modern weapons by major powers, can invade another nation and

succeed in conquering it, other countries will be encouraged to do exactly the same thing—in the Mideast, in Europe, and in other international danger spots. If the Communists win militarily in Vietnam, the risk of war in other parts of the world would be enormously increased. But if, on the other hand, Communist aggression fails in Vietnam, it will be discouraged elsewhere, and the chance for peace will be increased.

We are not trying to conquer North Vietnam or any other country in this world. We want no territory. We seek no bases. We have offered the most generous peace terms—peace with honor for both sides—with South Vietnam and North Vietnam each respecting the other's independence.

But we will not be defeated, and we will never surrender our friends to Communist aggression.

We have come a long way in this conflict. The South Vietnamese have made great progress; they are now bearing the brunt of the battle. We can now see the day when no more Americans will be involved there at all.

But as we come to the end of this long and difficult struggle, we must be steadfast. And we must not falter. For all that we have risked and all that we have gained over the years now hangs in the balance during the coming weeks and months. If we now let down our friends, we shall surely be letting down ourselves and our future as well. If we now persist, future generations will thank America for her courage and her vision in this time of testing.

That is why I say to you tonight, let us bring our men home from Vietnam; let us end the war in Vietnam. But let us end it in such a way that the younger brothers

and the sons of the brave men who have fought in Vietnam will not have to fight again in some other Vietnam at some time in the future.

Any man who sits here in this office feels a profound sense of obligation to future generations. No man who sits here has the right to take any action which would abdicate America's great tradition of world leadership or weaken respect for the Office of President of the United States.

Earlier this year I traveled to Peking on an historic journey for peace. Next month I shall travel to Moscow on what I hope will also be a journey for peace. In the 18 countries I have visited as President I have found great respect for the Office of President of the United States. I have reason to expect, based on Dr. Kissinger's report, that I shall find that same respect for the office I hold when I visit Moscow.

I do not know who will be in this office in the years ahead. But I do know that future Presidents will travel to nations abroad as I have on journeys for peace. If the United States betrays the millions of people who have relied on us in Vietnam,

the President of the United States, whoever he is, will not deserve nor receive the respect which is essential if the United States is to continue to play the great role we are destined to play of helping to build a new structure of peace in the world. It would amount to a renunciation of our morality, an abdication of our leadership among nations, and an invitation for the mighty to prey upon the weak all around the world. It would be to deny peace the chance peace deserves to have. This we shall never do.

My fellow Americans, let us therefore unite as a nation in a firm and wise policy of real peace—not the peace of surrender, but peace with honor—not just peace in our time, but peace for generations to come.

Thank you and good night.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. His address was broadcast live on radio and television.

The President spoke from a prepared text. An advance text of his address was released on the same day.

The White House also released the transcript of a news briefing on the President's address by Henry A. Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.