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The Situation in Vietnam

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONTANA)

VIET NAM: NARROWING THE ISSUES

Mr. President:

The fighting in Viet Nam is unabated. Military engagements intensify. Casualties on all sides increase. The streams of refugees rise. The extent of the devastation wrought is not known but it is obviously immense. Indeed, the costs of the heightened conflict in Viet Nam already dwarf the billion dollar development program for the Mekong Project in Southeast Asia which was suggested by President Johnson in a speech in April at Johns Hopkins University.

The President did not want it that way. At Johns Hopkins, he stated emphatically his preference for peace. He has since emphasized it at every opportunity. He offered then, and he has offered again and again, to enter into "unconditional discussions," in an effort to bring the war to an end. These appeals for negotiation, unfortunately, have either been ignored, dismissed with derision, or otherwise rejected. The efforts of various intermediary nations to initiate negotiations--efforts which have been endorsed by the United States--have met a similar fate. These attempts, in short, have all drawn a blank.

It might be concluded, therefore, that Hanoi and the Viet Cong have no interest whatsoever in negotiating peace. As if to reinforce this conclusion, Ho Chi Minh has talked in terms of a 20-year war. It would appear, then, that Hanoi is determined to continue the military struggle until the United States is driven into the sea. But the President has made clear that we will not permit that to happen and it will not happen.
There the matter stands. Hanoi and the Southern Liberation
Front insist that they will not desist from the struggle and we will not
yield. Is there, then, no alternative but a trial by arms in the three-,
five-, or ten-year conflict which is projected by some of our own offi-
cials or the 20-year war which was mentioned by Ho Chi Minh?

Hanoi has indeed talked of a 20-year war. But from that same
city there has also come talk of the conditions on which the war might
end. Hanoi stated these conditions for peace in a radio broadcast on
April 12, 1965, in response to the President's Johns Hopkins speech.
The conditions were underscored subsequently by Peking and by Moscow.
From these announcements, it would appear that negotiations to end the
conflict are feasible, insofar as Hanoi is concerned, on the basis of
these four conditions:

1. That the rights of the Vietnamese people--peace,
independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity--on the basis
of the Geneva Agreements are recognized;

2. That the division of Viet Nam into two zones will
continue, pending peaceful reunification and that there will be no
foreign military alliances, bases, or troop personnel in connection
with either zone;

3. That the internal affairs of South Viet Nam will
be determined by the South Vietnamese people themselves alone in
accordance with the National Liberation Front program and without
any foreign interference;

4. That the peaceful reunification of Viet Nam will
be settled eventually by the Vietnamese people themselves in both
zones and without foreign interference.
I cite these conditions which have been set forth by Hanoi because it is important that we do not assume that we are engaged in Viet Nam against a group or a government which has no objective except warfare for the sake of warfare. On the contrary, it would appear that the leaders in Hanoi and the Southern Liberation Front and their allies in Peking and their supporters in Moscow have a very clear idea of why they fight and, in the four points to which I have referred, of the conditions on which they will cease fighting.

In a similar fashion, while some United States officials have suggested, as noted, that we are engaged in a three-, five-, or ten-year war, the President has also spoken of peace and the great desirability of restoring it as quickly as possible in Viet Nam. There are conditions on which we, too, would be prepared to see this conflict terminated, although there may still be confusion both at home and abroad as to what these conditions may be.

To be sure, there have been pronouncements from various sources and in general terms, about ending aggression from the North. There has been talk of aiding the South Vietnamese government as long as our aid is sought. There have been individual views of why we fight expressed in the press, in Congress and in the Departments of the government. But with all due respect there could be set forth, cohesively, even now, the basic conditions which United States policy regards as essential to peace in Viet Nam. Such conditions do exist. They can be distilled from President's Johnson's many statements on Viet Nam and other official pronouncements. And it may be useful at this time to set them forth, once again, in cohesive form. A clarification on this point may not only be helpful to public understanding; it may also be a spur to the initiation of negotiations.
In any event, the Communists have not alone set forth the conditions for peace in Viet Nam. We have also done so even though they may not be fully understood. Given the degree of American involvement and sacrifice, we, too, have the right and responsibility to define again and again as concisely and as clearly as possible, the basic conditions for peace in that nation, as we see them.

Indeed, it may be--and certainly, it is to be hoped--that the clear juxtaposition of the two sets of conditions for peace may lead to the "unconditional discussions" which are properly and urgently sought as a means of bringing this bitter and brutal struggle to an end.

When the official statements of the policy of the United States of the past few months are examined, it would appear to me that these conditions for peace in Viet Nam have already been identified by the President and his principle spokesmen during the past few months:

1. There must be a verified choice by the people of South Viet Nam of their own government—a choice free of terrorism, violence, and coercion from any quarter. In this connection, the President clearly stated at Johns Hopkins that "We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Viet Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way."

2. There can be a future for South Viet Nam either in independence or as a part of a unified Viet Nam on the basis of a peaceful, free and verified expression of the wish of the people in each segment of that region and in general accord with the Geneva Agreements. In a press conference on July 28, the President gave emphasis to this point when he said: "We insist and we will always insist that the people of South Viet Nam shall have the right of choice, the right to shape their own destiny in free elections in the South, or throughout all Viet Nam under international supervision."
3. There shall be a withdrawal of all foreign forces and bases throughout Viet Nam, north and south, provided peace can be re-established and provided the arrangements for peace include adequate international guarantees of non-interference, not only for Viet Nam, but for Laos and for Cambodia as well. This point was underscored by Secretary McNamara on June 16 when he said, "the United States has no designs whatsoever on the territory or the resources of Southeast Asia or any country in it. Our national interests do not require that we introduce military bases for our forces in Southeast Asia. They don't require that the states of Southeast Asia become members of Western military alliances. The ultimate goal of our country, therefore, in Southeast Asia is to help maintain free and independent nations there in which the people can develop politically, economically, and socially, according to patterns of their own choosing, and with the objective of becoming responsible members of the world family of nations."

Further, we are parties to the Geneva Accord of 1962 which is designed to achieve essentially these ends in Laos and we have expressed our willingness to join in a resumption of a Geneva Conference for the purpose of considering international guarantees of the independence, integrity and borders of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

To these three basic conditions of peace, I would add two corollaries which all of us must realize are obviously essential if peace in Viet Nam is to be reached via the operations of negotiation rather than through the exhaustion of war.*

1. There needs to be provision for a secure amnesty for those involved in the struggle on all sides in Viet Nam as an essential block to an extension of the barbarism and atrocities of the struggle into the subsequent peace and, indeed, as an essential of that peace.
2. There needs to be a willingness to accept, on all sides, a cease-fire and stand-fast throughout all Viet Nam which might well coincide with the initiation of negotiations.

President Johnson has made it clear, time and again, that we seek no larger war. He has made it clear, time and again, that we do not have any territorial or military or other claim whatsoever in Viet Nam. He has said, time and again, that our only purpose is to help the South Vietnamese people to secure their own future, free from coercion. He has said, time and again, that we are prepared for unconditional discussions with anyone, anywhere, to bring about peace. From that policy, as it has been enunciated and as it is quoted, it would seem to me entirely valid to distill American conditions for peace along the lines which have been enumerated.

To be sure, others may brush aside these conditions, even as we tend to do the same with respect to the conditions which they have set forth. Hanoi may reach, via an automatic reflex, the conclusion that these conditions, since they originate in the United States, can only mean domination of South Viet Nam by ourselves and those whom we support. And, in all frankness, we are prone to a converse conclusion, via the same reflex, with respect to the conditions which are suggested from Hanoi. The reflex of mistrust and disbelief is understandable. But unless the military conflict is to expand and to continue into the indefinite future, whether it be 3, 5, 10 or 20 years of war, the degree of accuracy of these automatic reflexes must be tested in negotiations.

The high purpose of negotiations, if they can be initiated, should be to see to it that the conditions of peace wherever they may originate come to mean in fact and in detail the domination of the Vietnamese people themselves over their future. Beyond other considerations,
this conflict involves primarily their country, their lives, their children. It is the Vietnamese people, north and south, who suffer most from its devastating and tragic consequences. And, in the end, it is they who should have the right to determine the shape of the nation in which they live. That is where negotiations can lead. That is where the President wants them to lead. That is where they must lead, if there is ever to be a valid peace in Viet Nam.