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After Vietnam: A Time for Reassessment

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AFTER VIET NAM: A TIME FOR REASSESSMENT

The class of 1975 is the first to graduate after the U. S. disengagement from Indochina. This commencement also marks the beginning of the fourth decade since World War II. Some here, today, among the graduates were active participants in the recent war. Among the parents, many played a part in World War II. It is something of a confession of my age to note that I was involved in World War I. I hasten to add, however, that it was at the very end of that conflict. Furthermore, I was an under-aged seaman in the Navy at the time.

My remarks will be directed to what we have in common as different generations of Americans. Whatever we may not have, we have the United States in common and at a most difficult moment in the nation's history. Clearly, we are not passing through the best of times. Clearly, this is not freedom's finest hour.

Do not look to me, however, to condemn an older generation for the present state of affairs. Nor will I blame the nation's plight on the young. Young people did not make the situation in which, together, we find ourselves; they have not yet had that opportunity. As for older generations, it is merely to be noted [redacted] that they have had time only to add to or to correct a few of the accumulated mistakes which they inherited when they were younger.

So, I will not lead this commencement in a search for scapegoats. Let me try, instead, to set forth where I think we are, how we have arrived at this point, and where we may

hope to go from here, notably in our relations with the rest of the world.

These questions cannot be considered except in the context of the experience in Indochina. Viet Nam is a book that is now closed and, may I add, it is my fervent hope that it stay closed. It has been, this long and tragic war, a roadblock to the nation's future. It has been a funnel into which has disappeared a massive chunk of the nation's ideals, energies and expectations.

Although the book is closed on Viet Nam, it is essential that we not forget its costs. They were many and great. Some readily apparent and some obscure. For these remarks, today, it is sufficient to note only that fifty-five thousand Americans died in the war and I hope the last group, in the Mayaguez affair. These young men were cut out of life at an age not much different from that of this graduating class. The wounded in Indochina were three hundred thousand. One

hundred fifty billion dollars or more in public funds were spent to pursue the war. Before the final reckoning (all the bills will not be paid until well into the next century), the cost undoubtedly will have doubled and doubled again.

In this nation, a large segment of our strength and resources was diverted to support the misbegotten venture. As a result, much of what needed doing at home by government was not done or not done very well. In the name of security against vague threats from Southeast Asia, the inner security of the nation was neglected for almost a decade.

The war left the nation's economy in worse straits than at any time since the Great Depression. We are paying its price in the present inflation-depression. There are sputterings now and then but there are as yet no real signs of recovery. On the contrary, over eight million people remain unemployed, with the impact of this figure felt especially among young Americans and in the great metropolitan centers.

energy. Yet few, if any, answers are being found to the questions. So far there is little to show in the way of results.

Our present economic problems are duplicated abroad in many of the countries with whom, since the end of World War II, we have had the closest connections, in particular, Western Europe and Japan. They have been military allies and we are associated with them in a variety of mutually advantageous economic arrangements. The plight of some of these countries, Italy and the United Kingdom, for example, is grave.

Problems of the kind I have mentioned have long cried out for concentrated public attention. They plead for an injection of young energy and approaches, fresh intellectual resources and a new dedication in all aspects of the leadership of this nation. That it has not been forthcoming, in my judgment, is due in no small part to the diversions abroad and, notably, to Southeast Asia in the past decade.

Whatever may have led us into the conflict in that region, it is now clear that the involvement hit us where it hurt most--in the nation's inner unity. The war opened with a Presidential call for support of the Commander-in-Chief; it was met by a patriotic affirmation of national unity. Before the war was over, however, we went through deeper divisions than any since the Civil War. We know now what we did not know at the outset. The involvement did not serve the interests of this nation or the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian people. That is the bitter reality of this frustrating experience.

We pursued a well-intentioned but impossible dream. In its pursuit, the lands and peoples of Indochina were torn and battered almost beyond recognition. While young Americans died in the tens of thousands, Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians--men, women and children--died in the millions. Three simple rice cultures--Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos--were over-

whelmed by the technology of modern warfare. Millions fled the villages, the hill-towns and the paddy fields to escape the bombs and crossfire. They huddled as refugees in the cities, there to live in one way or another--including the widespread trafficking in drugs--off the troops. The swollen urban populations were fed, in major part, by imported food paid for by U. S. aid programs. Ironically, rice had to be sent from this nation to what is one of the richest rice surplus areas of the world. While we were exporting food to Indochina, shortages at home pushed prices, sky-high, to Americans.

Why? To what end?

Now that recollections of the war are fast receding into history, it is important to ask ourselves these questions. We must ask ourselves what impelled us into this ill-fated enterprise? I raise the matter, not to open old wounds. Nor do I raise it to put the finger of blame on particular indivi-

duals. There is blame enough to spare for all concerned--for a succession of Presidents, a succession of Congresses, a continuum of military and civilian bureaucrats. In the end, there is blame enough for all of us.

I raise the questions because they must be raised. Answers must be sought to them if the events of the past few weeks in Indochina are to be not merely a depressing end to a long and bleak chapter in this nation's history but also a new and hopeful beginning.

We have, in short, an obligation to clarify what we were about in Viet Nam for so many years. That is a way of keeping faith with the Americans whom we sent to Indochina and who have not come back. That is an obligation which is owed to living generations and to the future citizens of this nation. Unless the questions are resolved in all honesty, we will have learned nothing and this nation's historic purpose will have emerged under the permanent cloud of the war. On the other

hand, if an understanding of the tragic experience assures that this is, indeed, the last Viet Nam, then the sacrifices which have been exacted will be not without meaning.

It is pointless, may I reiterate, to put the finger of responsibility on one President or another, on one party or the other, on the Defense Department the State Department or some other. We are all involved. There is no evading a national responsibility.

Viet Nam did not spring suddenly out of partisan politics. Nor did it begin just a few years ago, in 1969, 1966, 1964 or even 1961. In my judgment, the present involvement is a culmination of a foreign policy which was born before most of the members of this graduating class.

Parents here, today, will remember a great war and its aftermath over a quarter of a century ago. They will remember a military power assembled by a united people, deployed all over the globe and welcomed by the oppressed everywhere in the world. It was an immense power which overwhelmed a tyranny in Europe and another in Asia.

After an atomic-sealed victory over Japan, this nation moved into the post-World War II era, intact, powerful and dynamic. In contrast, vast areas of the world lay in ruins around us, hungry, exhausted and bankrupt. The international leadership of the United States was sought in these circumstances by friend and enemy even as it came to be opposed by the Soviet Union. As we saw it, then, this nation's economic dynamism was the only hope for what began to be called the "free world." As we saw it, too, this nation's military supremacy, including an atomic monopoly, was the principal bulwark against the aggressive spread of what was soon termed "monolithic Communism." The term was applied to our erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union, and all nations and political movements which fell within what was believed to be the permanent orbit of Moscow.

There began an era of foreign policy based on those premises. Tens of billions of dollars of materials, services

and credits poured out of the United States into other countries, often to help them to recover and maintain free systems, more often, to keep them from "going communist." Aid went to Western Europe, to Asia, to Latin America and eventually, to Africa.

In the name of the United Nations, a war was fought and financed by this country to hold back communism in Korea. We led the United Nations into a boycott of the revolutionary Chinese People's Republic which was held at the time to be in Moscow's orbit. Tens of thousands of man-hours of the expensive time of U. S. government diplomats, agents and employees were invested in the effort to exclude the Peking government from the world community, if not to bring it down altogether. Multiple alliances were built which wove us into a common NATO defense of Western Europe and linked us in some sort of defense arrangements with forty nations or more around the globe. Hundreds of thousands of Americans in uniform went abroad, into military garrisons and bases in Europe and Japan and

elsewhere. Tens of billions of dollars worth of construction, equipment and weapons and nuclear warheads went with them.

These policies were devised largely in the name of national security and world peace. They were called, accurately, bipartisan and were described less accurately as a mutual security program. The fact is that the policies, as late as the Indochina involvement, were largely a one-sided effort of the United States. They rested on the readiness of this nation to carry the preponderant burdens of cost and, in the last analysis, notably as in the case of Korea, the Dominican Republic and Indochina, the weight of direct U. S. military operations.

For years, there was little reason to question these policies. Congress was predisposed by the experience of World War II to accept the leadership of the President. We were in a period of so-called cold war with Soviet and Chinese communism. By the same token, allied nations had no choice but to accept

the leadership of the United States which alone had the capacity to sustain this postwar system.

To be sure, there were flaws in the structure even though they were not readily visible in the exhuberance of the times. In the first place, the security system relied so heavily on military power to maintain peace and, particularly, on U. S. military power that an undue burden of responsibility was consigned to the Armed Services even as an excessive drain was attached to the national economy. A zeal for a new-found internationalism, moreover, led us to label virtually everything that we did abroad with that word and led us beyond essential national needs and humanitarian considerations, into an incautious involvement in almost every area of the world either in the name of "fighting Communism" or "promoting progress" or "insuring the nation's security." This worldwide projection of U. S. influence involved heavy expenditures of the people's money for all kinds of aid-programs and the creation of elaborate U. S. official establishments abroad.

Moreover, it prompted us to take on, as allies, a number of governments who were dependents in all but name and with highly dubious roots of acceptance among their own people. The great vitality of the postwar economy of this nation also created an erroneous belief in its inexhaustibility. Even as late as the onset of the Viet Namese War, we proceeded as though the nation could have not only guns and butter but would also be able to pay for fat and trimmings.

We pursued these policies, flaws and all, with little change for many years. We pursued them, however, in a world which was changing greatly. The nation's atomic monopoly came to an end. The myth of "monolithic Communism" disappeared in numerous political shifts among the Eastern Europeans and in the vast upheaval in the Chinese-Soviet relationship. Newly independent states appeared in the underdeveloped areas, as classic colonialism was reduced to an historic relic. Europe recovered and went far beyond recovery to new heights of

well-being. New economic dynamisms emerged, notably in Germany and Japan, even as our own economy showed signs of overwork.

It was in these changed circumstances that we became involved in Indochina. We became involved for what had long been accepted as highly worthwhile ends. We became involved in the name of resisting "aggressive Communism," in the name of "national security," in the name of "safeguarding international peace," and in the name of "honoring commitments" to what were weak and dependent governments.

We went into Viet Nam, in short, on the wheels of the same policy and for many of the same reasons that we had gone into Korea a decade and a half earlier, only this time without even the modicum of international sanction which had, in the Korean situation, been supplied by the United Nations. We did so almost as an habituated response, with far less understanding of the actual situation in Indochina and unmindful of the changes which had taken place in this nation, in Asia and in the world.

I think it is now widely understood that Viet Nam was a mistake, a tragic mistake.

To have persisted in it in the closing days of the sudden collapse of the synthetic military government which existed in Saigon at the time would have been to do violence to the welfare of the nation and to add to the surfeit of violence which had already been visited on the Indochinese peninsula. In my judgment, the determination of Congress to face up to and to act on that reality by refusing to supply a further billion dollars in military aid was a singular service to this nation and to the people of Indochina. We had armed, trained, financed and fought for dubious governments in Viet Nam and Cambodia. We had done our share--far more than our share--to inject them with the elements of survival. What last ditch effort would have been likely to do anything more?

In writing an end to the involvement in Indochina, I believe Congress also underscored the beginning of a new era in the nation's international relations. Mistakes have been

made during the past thirty years in the conduct of these relations and, certainly, Indochina was the last and greatest. Do not think for a moment, however, that the experience of these three decades was all a mistake. Much that was done had to be done, in the enduring interests of this nation and the world. Much that is being done now needs still to be done.

A vast web of trade and cultural relationships, for example, has been woven with the rest of the world. It has served for many years to enhance the lives of hundreds of millions of people. By the same token, a sudden sundering of this web could bring upheavals and conflicts of a most disastrous kind. We have also begun to perceive in these twenty-five years, I believe, the dimensions of the problem of maintaining permanent peace. That perception may make us more aware of our essential national limitations as well as our vast national potential. In the process, we may gain greater awareness of the significance of human interdependency and mutual concern if the world is ever to know stability. Peace cannot be maintained by United States power alone.

It would compound the tragedy if, in the bitter aftermath of Indochina, we were to turn our backs on this advance. It would be a step backward if we were to veer from what became an excessive, one might say, an obsessive international involvement to an extreme of disinvolvement.

That danger has been intensified, it seems to me, not only in the post-Indochina atmosphere of disillusionment but because we are in the midst of a serious economic situation at home.

I hope it will be recognized, therefore, that it is possible to withdraw from Indochina without seceding from the world. If we make that distinction--and I am confident that the people of this nation and their representatives in Congress will make it--than it should be possible to withdraw militarily not only from Indochina but from the entire Southeast Asian mainland, including Thailand, without severing normal international contact with that region and certainly without abandoning our vital interests in what transpires on the periphery of the Asian mainland.

Similarly, we should be able, in time, to reduce sharply and re-order the United Stated deployment of over half a million armed forces and dependents in Western Europe three decades after World War II without forsaking the essential mutual pledges of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. I have supported and urged such reductions for a decade. The events in Indochina in no way alter my view that one or two divisions of U. S. forces stationed in Europe commits the United States no less irrevocably than five. Timing of reductions is another matter but I can only say that the sooner they begin, the more gradual and less dislocative will they be.

We must, too, in the Congress exercise a firm and discriminating control over the enormous expenditures which are made in the name of national defense and, at the same time, still provide adequately for the security of the nation. We should find it feasible to curb the carelessness, costliness and cosiness which has filtered into the Armed Forces system, notably in contracting with defense industries, without

demeaning and discouraging the millions of dedicated men and women who wear the uniform. We should be capable of shutting down obsolescent and over-extended aid programs without losing a human compassion for the other people with whom we share the earth.

If these adjustments are to be made effectively, it seems to me that they must be accompanied by new and vigorous efforts of American diplomacy. These efforts should be aimed at securing agreements among nations which would make international stability more dependent on mutual undertakings and less on the unilateral commitment of the military power of this or any other nation. Such agreements in the Far Pacific, for example, would have to involve not only the United States and Japan, but also the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, the Philippines and other nations. Communist or not, there is a sufficient pool of common interests in preserving peace and developing trade among these Asian and Pacific nations to make the search for new understandings more than a quixotic venture.

May I say that I find it most helpful in this respect that President Nixon initiated official contact with the Chinese People's Republic and that the bi-lateral ties of Japan and the Philippines with the United States are being gradually absorbed in the enlarging regional and international contacts of these nations. I am hopeful that they will soon be joined by the Republic of South Korea which remains an area of concern. I am hopeful, too, that steps will be initiated by the Chinese on Taiwan and the Chinese on the Mainland, looking to the re-unification of what is one China. The security of the Western Pacific must come to rest far more heavily in the future on mutual restraint, normal relations and interdependence among the nations of that region and less on the military power of the United States.

In regard to Europe, an updated approach to the relationship would presuppose, it seems to me, a substantial shift away from dependency on NATO and the Warsaw Pact and a greater effort to reach agreements which will continue to expand and

to consolidate constructive ties between East and West Europe. In the talks between the two segments which are now taking place, it might be helpful if the Soviet Union and this nation were to stand to the side and let the lead pass to smaller European states on both sides.

The efforts of the Soviet Union and the United States might well be concentrated, instead, on disarmament, reductions of their forces in Europe, and the control of nuclear weapons which have been pursued for so many years. In this connection, some risks for peace are clearly indicated if we are to reduce the ever-present and catastrophic risk of the collapse of human civilization that is inherent in international nuclear anarchy. To be sure, the nuclear test ban treaty, the SALT agreement, and other peripheral undertakings represent significant advances but they provide far from sufficient protection against the threat of nuclear destruction which from second to second hangs over all of us.

As for the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, it is, in my judgment, unrealistic for those who already possess nuclear weapons to ask other great states capable of producing them to refrain from doing so indefinitely unless--and I stress the word unless--such possessing states are themselves prepared to show the way in reducing and ending the nuclear threat. It is not enough for them merely to put ceilings on their already excessive nuclear arsenals. The need is to move in new ways on this question. In the current talks, it seems to me that the nuclear powers might well consider adding to the Treaty on non-proliferation a fixed time span, perhaps ten years, within which they would pledge mutual reductions of stockpiles and progress towards banning--in the manner of poison gas--or in the control of usage of nuclear weapons by means of generally acceptable international mechanisms. Whether the United Nations can be reconstituted to play a significant role in this process, I do not know, but some international authority, it seems to me, must be involved. In any event, unless some tangible

progress of this kind is made, it is not likely that states capable of producing nuclear weapons are going to remain for long outside the inner circle of nuclear powers in international relations.

If I may sum up, then, the need for the era ahead, as I see it, will be to get away from the excesses of an indiscriminate and, in many respects, increasingly disillusioning and isolated internationalism which has characterized our policies for the past two or three decades. We must try to recast our relations with others to the end that they are multilateral and mutual in substance as well as in name.

Insofar as the United States is concerned, this transition and development of policy must derive from Presidential leadership but it must not derive from Executive fiat. If it is to find firm roots in our nation, any formulation of U. S. policy must depend on a concerted effort in which the President is joined by the Senate and the Congress, with each respectful of the Constitutional sensibilities of the other.

It will depend on the many private universities and other sources of enlightenment in the nation. It will depend on a government which can be trusted by an informed people because it is credible in what it says and does and because it is alert and responsive to their needs and to the needs of the nation.

You who graduate, today, and your counterparts throughout the nation, loom large in what may be anticipated during the decades ahead. With the vote, you are in a position to make your weight felt in the conduct of the government. You have such wisdom and training as education can provide. Those are highly important assets for your coming role in joining in shaping the nation's future. Beyond it, however, there is the part which the younger generation will have played in ending the tragedy of the involvement in Indochina. I, for one, of an older generation will applaud and thank you if you help to see to it that tragedies of that kind are not repeated. To move beyond Viet Nam into a future of world understanding and

peace will devolve heavily on you. To open a new era of constructive cooperation with the rest of the human race, to act with compassion and with high purpose for the welfare of the people of this nation and the world, that is your opportunity, you who are the "new hands" of tomorrow. It is your life which lies ahead. It is your nation. It is your world. May you make the most of them all.