1968

Speeches, Viet Nam

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/mansfield_speeches/1429

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/mansfield_speeches
My remarks, today, deal with Viet Nam. Before proceeding to them, however, I wish to refer to the USS Pueblo incident. When added to the Vietnamese conflict, it is illustrative of the hydra-headed character of military involvement on the mainland of Asia. War spreads readily on that continent; the difficulty lies in curbing it. I would emphasize, therefore, that while the urgency in Viet Nam is to bring one bloody conflict to a close, the imperative in Korea is to prevent the opening of another.

In the latter connection, it will help to bear in mind the essentials of the Pueblo affair. A U. S. vessel—that it was an electronic listener of some sort is not disputed—was
in a position off the North Korean coast. What vital national need prompted the dispatch of this particular mission or why the vessel went undefended are not known.

All reports available to me indicate that the Pueblo was in international waters at the time it was taken. As of the moment, the Pueblo is now at anchor in Wonsan harbor and the 82 surviving crewmen who were aboard--one other has died--are interned in North Korea. That ineluctable fact is in no way altered by a sense of outrage or indignation.

The crew aboard the Pueblo was carrying out a dangerous assignment. The "why" and the "how" of the mission are moot at this point. What matters now is the obligation to those men. In our reactions to the Pueblo affair, lives must not become the pawns of either pride or petulance. Every effort to bring about their release must be made.

We will also do well to bear in mind that the one war in which we are engaged on the Asian mainland has become a source of immense grief. Any move which leads into a second
Vietnamese-type conflict in Korea will compound the grief but hardly serve the interests of this nation.

In sum, what most matters at this point, it seems to me, is: (1) return of the 80-odd American crewmen alive—I repeat, alive—and; (2) prevention of a second war in Korea on the pattern of Viet Nam which could the more readily become World War III.

The firm restraint which President Johnson has exercised from the outset of the Pueblo affair has set a wise course for this nation. The question has been raised at the United Nations Security Council by Ambassador Arthur Goldberg. It has been pursued at the Panmunjom truce site in discussions between our representatives and those of North Korea. Other channels are also being tapped which might lead to the release of the crewmen. In short, the President's policy at this time is to seek a solution by diplomacy. It is the course of prudence and reason in what is, at best, a delicate and dangerous situation. It deserves every support of the nation.
There is no certainty that the present efforts will bear fruit. Other possibilities, however, may also be available. I would point out, for example, that, if necessary, the matter should be pressed further at the United Nations which has had a definite responsibility in Korea for almost two decades. If it comes to that, it may be feasible to seek impartial arbitration or mediation or a presentation of the entire matter to the World Court. May I say that precedent for the latter procedure is to be found in a similar dispute two decades ago over the loss of two British destroyers off the Albanian Coast.

Whatever the specific recourse, in my judgment, the efforts to find a peaceful solution in the Pueblo affair are attuned to this nation's interest. What matters in my judgment is saving lives, not saving face. What matters is the substance not the shadow of this nation's interests.

That is true in Korea; and it is no less true in Viet Nam. The nation's interests in Viet Nam, in my judgment, lie in bringing the war to an honorable conclusion at the
earliest possible moment. The pursuit of a negotiated solution was right for this nation before the recent coordinated offensives in the South Vietnamese cities. It is right today, while that offensive continues in certain areas and when a second offensive may be on the verge of opening, if not in Khe Sanh, somewhere else in the remote highlands of central Vietnam.

Insofar as I can see, negotiations are and have always been the only rational alternative in this situation to an indefinite U. S. involvement on the Southeast Asian mainland. Two years ago I joined four Senate colleagues, including Senator Muskie, in a report at the conclusion of a visit to Southeast Asia. Our principal observation, then, was that the American position in Vietnam had the character of "pressing against a military situation which is, in effect, open-ended." We added this comment: "How open is dependent on the extent to which North Vietnam and its supporters are willing and able to meet increased force by increased force." It is more apparent now than it was at the time that the war is open-ended. How open
may be uncertain—in my judgment it is still wide open—but in any event, to date, the NLF and the North Vietnamese have been both able and willing to meet increased force with increased force.

At the beginning of 1966, the United States already had 180,000 men in Viet Nam. American forces directly involved in the war have since tripled to something approaching 600,000—with over 500,000 on the ground in Viet Nam and the others serving the war from elsewhere in the region. Total American casualties have gone well past 100,000. Last year’s toll of those killed in action showed a seven-fold increase in two years, from 1,964 in 1965 to 9,353 in 1967.

This increase in the American military effort has been met by increases in the North Vietnamese-NLF effort; their casualties, too, have increased greatly. The war, in short, has risen over the past three years to ever higher intensities of destructiveness. The basic juxtaposition in Viet Nam, however
has not been altered as anticipated. In the spring of 1965, the all-consuming objective of the American effort was to prevent the collapse of a government with which we had allied ourselves. Almost three years later, countless thousands of lives later, and tens of billions of dollars later, that is still the objective.

One can put whatever interpretation one chooses on the recent events in Viet Nam. To me, however, they suggest that the survival of the Saigon political structure, in its present form, may now be more uncertain. The pacification program appears to have gone the route of at least a dozen prior schemes for "winning the people" by providing them with security and a stake in the structure. The cities of South Viet Nam which have heretofore been spared most of the ravages of the war, almost by tacit understanding, have now been drawn into the vortex of its terrible devastation. If there is an alternative to chaos in what has heretofore been the core of the government's
strength, it will lie in yet another costly task of reconstruction and rehabilitation which can hardly be borne by the South Vietnamese government.

What is now clear is that no part of South Viet Nam is secure for anyone. The hamlets, villages, and the cities of Viet Nam are seen to be honeycombed with a NLF infrastructure which has undoubtedly existed for many years, which is still intact and which may well be stronger than ever.

It is possible to point to one-sided casualty figures and to echo one-sided words of reassurance. If we are interested in saving lives rather than saving face, however, I think we will find the realism to confront the implications of the present situation. The Saigon political structure is no stronger today than it was three years ago in the sense of being able on its own to govern, to defend or to rally the people of South Viet Nam. Indeed, its very survival now appears more dependent upon American military power than at any time in the
past. In short, once again there is not the beginnings of a
beginning of a stable political situation in South Viet Nam.

That such is the case, in no way reflects on the
courage or the competence of the military forces which have
carried the burden of combat in Viet Nam for many months. In
statistical terms, these forces have been immensely effective.
They have won major engagement after engagement. The figures
say that over 87,000 enemy troops were killed last year, that
another 27,000 have crossed over to the government side and that
countless thousands were captured or were otherwise put out of
action. Naval and air power have pounded so much of North Viet
Nam into rubble that there are left unscathed scarcely any
military or industrial targets.

Nevertheless, for the kind of war which is being
fought in South Viet Nam, the forces in opposition continue to
obtain adequate and, apparently, ever more sophisticated mili-
tary supplies over the infiltration routes from the North. The
NLF remains omnipresent, from the demilitarized zone at the 17th parallel to the Mekong Delta and its regular forces and guerillas are steeled to accept great privation and to make enormous sacrifices. The Viet Cong remain entrenched and virtually untouched in their traditional strongholds—the swamps, paddy-fields and hamlets of the Mekong Delta—from whence they are now seen to be able to dispatch forces to Saigon and other cities. North Viet Nam has committed to the war in the South considerably less than a quarter of the well-trained forces of General Giap. And beyond North Viet Nam lies the untapped manpower of China and the supply sources of both China and the Soviet Union.

These are some of the realities which the computers of "progress" in this war do not measure. These are some of the realities which urge us to recall the original purposes for which the nation was committed to South Viet Nam. They were, above all, limited purposes. We went into Viet Nam not to take over a war but on the assumption that we were summoned to aid the people of South Viet Nam.
From the outset, it was not an American responsibility and it is not now an American responsibility to win a victory for any particular Vietnamese group, or to defeat any particular Vietnamese group. It was not then and it is not now an American function to insure that any political structure shall be enshrined over the smoldering ruins of a devastated Viet Nam. Even if we could, we should not seek to synthesize a government or system for South Viet Nam. That is not the responsibility of the American military command, the American economists and the American political scientists who are gathered in Saigon. That is a responsibility which can only be exercised by the Vietnamese people themselves. The sooner that the limits of our commitment are recognized by all directly concerned, therefore, the better for all concerned.

We need to face the probability, bluntly, that the build-up of the American involvement, in its very immensity, may well have already extended the role of this nation beyond those limits. In so doing, it may not be aiding--
as it was intended—to resolve the situation in accord with the wishes of the people of South Viet Nam. It is apparent, for example, that the more that U. S. forces have taken the major combat role, the slacker have been the efforts of the allied indigenous forces. It is apparent, too, that a massive U. S. technological presence in South Viet Nam has exerted a revolutionary impact on the whole of the fabric of traditional Vietnamese society.

In a physical sense, the crushing weight of modern warfare has fallen not only on the Viet Cong—the NLF—and the North Vietnamese but on all Vietnamese. The terrible cost in lives and property throughout Viet Nam is borne by Vietnamese of all political colors.

Our immense effort, in short, has gone a long way in altering the character of what was once an inner struggle among Vietnamese. In the end, however, the future of Viet Nam must depend on the Vietnamese themselves. It is their country;
they live in it. They will be living in it long after we are
gone from it.

Our commitment is to support, not to submerge.

To strip the Vietnamese struggle of its Vietnamese character,
to convert it into a war to be won or lost by this nation,
detracts from its relevance both to the people of Viet Nam and
to the people of the United States. To do so is to consolidate
an American involvement on the Southeast Asian mainland of inde-
finitive duration and obscure purpose whose terminus is not
visible—not in Viet Nam, not in Laos, or in Cambodia. Indeed,
it may well be an involvement which is without exit except in
World War III.

This nation is deeply committed in South Viet Nam
but let us not make the mistake of interpreting that commitment
as compelling us—in the name of victory or whatever—to see to
it that every last member of the NLF is either dulled, dead, or
fleeing to the North, and that North Viet Nam has been bombed
back into the Stone Age. That course leads not to an ending but
to an endless succession of violent beginnings. An interminable involvement of American forces may meet the desires of some in Viet Nam or of some other nation, but that course does not accord with the substance of the interests of the United States.

President Johnson has repeatedly stated that this nation's objective is "...only that the people of South Viet Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way." He has stated that he is willing to move at any time in negotiations which might bring about that result.

It should be made clear to all concerned--Americans and Vietnamese--that that is the extent of this nation's commitment. The commitment is to all of the people of South Viet Nam. We have no obligation to continue to pour out the blood and resources of this nation until South Viet Nam is made safe for one faction or another.

Indeed, in my judgment, there is little prospect of meeting our actual commitment to the people of Viet Nam in the visible future unless there is a prompt restoration of
peace. On that basis, every avenue--in the United Nations or elsewhere--should continue to be explored in an effort to reach an honorable conclusion. In so doing, this nation needs no sanction or approval from any group, leader, or whomever in Viet Nam or anywhere else.

In the hope of bringing about a peaceful settlement without adding to the burdens of the American forces in the south, I have joined Senator Cooper and others in urging that the bombing of North Viet Nam be restricted to the infiltration routes at the 17th parallel. I am frank to say, however that while it may well result in negotiations, I am not at all sure that a cessation of the bombing is the critical factor in bringing this war to an honorable conclusion. More important, in my judgment, is the framework in which the war in Viet Nam is seen and within which its conclusion is negotiated. It is doubtful that there is a basis for fruitful negotiations if the conflict is defined as a simple case of aggression on the part of the North against the South. The reality is far more
complex, far more subtle. That is true insofar as the relationship between North and South Viet Nam is concerned. It is true insofar as the relationship of the various groups and elements within South Viet Nam is concerned. The government in Saigon, as it is presently constituted continues to be run by a faction of military officers—indeed, most of whom are northerners—and they are by no means the whole political coin. There are other groups of southern Vietnamese who must be taken more into consideration if there is to be an end to the bloodshed in the foreseeable future. These groups include not only those within the National Liberation Front but elements which are now without significant voice in either camp.

A negotiated solution, if there is to be one, may well involve preliminary discussions among the political, religious, and sectarian groups, as well as the ruling military group, which are to be found under the Saigon structure. If there can be some common agreement among them to seek a settlement of the war, it is at least conceivable that there could then be
discussions with the National Liberation Front. Needless to say, such discussions can hardly take place if the Saigon government regards even words of compromise as treasonable.

If the door could be opened to peace-talks among the South Vietnamese themselves, one would hope that it would make easier the opening of doors to negotiations between this nation and North Viet Nam and among all the nations directly or indirectly concerned in the conflict. A basis might then be laid for applying the Geneva accords of 1954 and 1962 in determining the future relationship of the two parts of Viet Nam and for guaranteeing the neutralization of Viet Nam and all of Indo-China. May I add it does not much matter whether such discussions are held under United Nations auspices or in Geneva, or in some other appropriate forum. What is necessary is that they encompass all who are closely involved, including China, if there is to be a durable peace in Viet Nam and Indo-China.
I do not know whether there are any greater prospects for progress towards peace in this approach than in the countless others which have been suggested. I believe, however, that unless there is the beginning of a negotiated peace, the fires of war in Viet Nam will blaze ever more fiercely. They will spread further and further, leaving ever wider arcs of a piteous wreckage. And if the fires burn out of control to World War III, what nation will claim the victory? Indeed, what nation will be left to claim it?