

Speech by Richard Nixon (7 April 1971)

Caption: On 7 April 1971, in an address to the nation, US President, Richard Nixon, reveals to his compatriots the reasons for speeding up the withdrawal of US troops engaged in conflict in Vietnam.

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GOOD EVENING my fellow Americans. Over the past several weeks you have heard a number of reports on TV, radio, and in your newspapers on the situation in Southeast Asia.

I think the time has come for me as President and as Commander-in-Chief of our Armed Forces to put these reports in perspective, to lay all the pertinent facts before you and to let you judge for yourselves as to the success or failure of our policy.

I am glad to be able to begin my report tonight by announcing that I have decided to increase the rate of American troop withdrawals for the period from May 1 to December 1. Before going into details, I would like to review briefly what I found when I came into office, the progress we have made to date in reducing American forces, and the reason why I am able to announce a stepped-up withdrawal without jeopardizing our remaining forces in Vietnam and without endangering our ultimate goal of ending American involvement in a way which will increase the chances for a lasting peace in the Pacific and in the world.

When I left Washington in January of 1961, after serving 8 years as Vice President under President Eisenhower, there were no American combat forces in Vietnam. No Americans had died in combat in Vietnam.

When I returned to Washington as President 8 years later, there were 540,000 American troops in Vietnam. Thirty-one thousand had died there. Three hundred Americans were being lost every week and there was no comprehensive plan to end the United States involvement in the war.

I implemented a plan to train and equip the South Vietnamese, to withdraw American forces, and to end American involvement in the war just as soon as the South Vietnamese had developed the capacity to defend their country against Communist aggression. On this chart on my right, you can see how our plan has succeeded. In June of 1969, I announced a withdrawal of 25,000 men; in September, 40,000; December, 50,000; April of 1970, 150,000. By the first of next month, May 1, we will have brought home more than 265,000 Americans – almost half of the troops in Vietnam when I took office.

Now another indication of the progress we have made is in reducing American casualties. Casualties were five times as great in the first 3 months of 1969 as they were in the first 3 months this year, 1971. South Vietnamese casualties have also dropped significantly in the past 2 years. One American dying in combat is one too many. But our goal is no American fighting man dying anyplace in the world. Every decision I have made in the past and every decision I make in the future will have the purpose of achieving that goal.

Let me review now two decisions I have made which have contributed to the achievements of our goals in Vietnam that you have seen on this chart.

The first was the destruction of enemy bases in Cambodia. You will recall that at the time of that decision, many expressed fears that we had widened the war, that our casualties would increase, that our troop withdrawal program would be delayed. Now I don't question the sincerity of those who expressed these fears. But we can see now they were wrong. American troops were out of Cambodia in 60 days, just as I pledged they would be. American casualties did not rise; they were cut in half. American troop withdrawals were not halted or delayed; they continued at an accelerated pace.

Now let me turn to the Laotian operation. As you know, this was undertaken by South Vietnamese ground forces with American air support against North Vietnamese troops which had been using Laotian territory for 6 years to attack American forces and allied forces in South Vietnam. Since the completion of that operation, there has been a great deal of understandable speculation – just as there was after Cambodia – whether or not it was a success or a failure, a victory or a defeat. But, as in Cambodia, what is important is not the instant analysis of the moment, but what happens in the future.

Did the Laotian operation contribute to the goals we sought? I have just completed my assessment of that

operation and here are my conclusions:

First, the South Vietnamese demonstrated that without American advisers they could fight effectively against the very best troops North Vietnam could put in the field.

Second, the South Vietnamese suffered heavy casualties, but by every conservative estimate the casualties suffered by the enemy were far heavier.

Third, and most important, the disruption of enemy supply lines, the consumption of ammunition and arms in the battle has been even more damaging to the capability of the North Vietnamese to sustain major offensives in South Vietnam than were the operations in Cambodia 10 months ago.

Consequently, tonight I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded. Because of the increased strength of the South Vietnamese, because of the success of the Cambodian operation, because of the achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, I am announcing an increase in the rate of American withdrawals. Between May 1 and December 1 of this year, 100,000 more American troops will be brought home from South Vietnam. This will bring the total number of American troops withdrawn from South Vietnam to 365,000. Now that is over two-thirds of the number who were there when I came into office, as you can see from this chart on my left. The Government of South Vietnam fully supports the decision I have just announced.

Now, let's look at the future:

As you can see from the progress we have made to date and by this announcement tonight, the American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end. The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight. Our goal is a total American withdrawal from Vietnam. We can and we will reach that goal through our program of Vietnamization if necessary.

But we would infinitely prefer to reach it even sooner – through negotiations. I am sure most of you will recall that on October 7 of last year in a national TV broadcast, I proposed an immediate ceasefire throughout Indochina, the immediate release of all prisoners of war in the Indochina area, an all-Indochina peace conference, the complete withdrawal of all outside forces, and a political settlement. Tonight I again call on Hanoi to engage in serious negotiations to speed the end of this war. I especially call on Hanoi to agree to the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of war throughout Indochina. It is time for Hanoi to end the barbaric use of our prisoners as negotiating pawns and to join us in a humane act that will free their men as well as ours.

Let me turn now to a proposal which at first glance has a great deal of popular appeal. If our goal is a total withdrawal of all our forces, why don't I announce a date now for ending our involvement? Well, the difficulty in making such an announcement to the American people is that I would also be making that announcement to the enemy. And it would serve the enemy's purpose and not our own.

If the United States should announce that we will quit regardless of what the enemy does, we would have thrown away our principal bargaining counter to win the release of American prisoners of war, we would remove the enemy's strongest incentive to end the war sooner by negotiation, and we will have given enemy commanders the exact information they need to marshal their attacks against our remaining forces at their most vulnerable time.

The issue very simply is this: Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that – by our own actions – consciously turns the country over to the Communists? Or shall we leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive as a free people? My plan will end American involvement in a way that would provide that chance. And the other plan would end it precipitately and give victory to the Communists.

In a deeper sense, we have the choice of ending our involvement in this war on a note of despair or on a note of hope. I believe, as Thomas Jefferson did, that Americans will always choose hope over despair. We have

it in our power to leave Vietnam in a way that offers a brave people a realistic hope of freedom. We have it in our power to prove to our friends in the world that America's sense of responsibility remains the world's greatest single hope of peace.

And above all, we have it in our power to close a difficult chapter in American history, not meanly but nobly – so that each one of us can come out of this searching experience with a measure of pride in our Nation, confidence in our own character, and hope for the future of the spirit of America.

I know there are those who honestly believe that I should move to end this war without regard to what happens to South Vietnam. This way would abandon our friends. But even more important, we would abandon ourselves. We would plunge from the anguish of war into a nightmare of recrimination. We would lose respect for this Nation, respect for one another, respect for ourselves.

I understand the deep concerns which have been raised in the country, fanned by reports of brutalities in Vietnam. Let me put this into perspective.

I have visited Vietnam many times, and, speaking now from that experience and as Commander-in-Chief of our Armed Forces, I feel it is my duty to speak up for the two and a half million fine young Americans who have served in Vietnam. The atrocity charges in individual cases should not and cannot be allowed to reflect on their courage and their self-sacrifice. War is a terrible and cruel experience for a nation, and it is particularly terrible and cruel for those who bear the burden of fighting.

But never in history have men fought for less selfish motives – not for conquest, not for glory, but only for the right of a people far away to choose the kind of government they want.

While we hear and read much of isolated acts of cruelty, we do not hear enough of the tens of thousands of individual American soldiers – I have seen them there – building schools, roads, hospitals, clinics, who, through countless acts of generosity and kindness, have tried to help the people of South Vietnam. We can and we should be very proud of these men. They deserve not our scorn, but they deserve our admiration and our deepest appreciation.

The way to express that appreciation is to end America's participation in this conflict not in failure or in defeat, but in achievement of the great goals for which they fought: a South Vietnam free to determine its own future and an America no longer divided by war but united in peace.

That is why it is so important how we end this war. By our decision we will demonstrate the kind of people we are and the kind of country we will become.

That is why I have chartered the course I have laid out tonight: to end this war – but end it in a way that will strengthen trust for America around the world, not undermine it, in a way that will redeem the sacrifices that have been made, not insult them, in a way that will heal this Nation, not tear it apart.

I can assure you tonight with confidence that American involvement in this war is coming to an end.

But can you believe this? I understand why this question is raised by many very honest and sincere people. Because many times in the past in this long and difficult war, actions have been announced from Washington which were supposed to lead to a reduction of American involvement in Vietnam. And over and over these actions resulted in more Americans going to Vietnam and more casualties in Vietnam.

Tonight I do not ask you to take what I say on faith. Look at the record. Look again at this chart on my left. Every action taken by this Administration, every decision made, has accomplished what I said it would accomplish. They have reduced American involvement. They have drastically reduced our casualties.

In my campaign for the Presidency, I pledged to end American involvement in this war. I am keeping that pledge. And I expect to be held accountable by the American people if I fail.

I am often asked what I would like to accomplish more than anything else while serving as President of the United States. And I always give the same answer: to bring peace – peace abroad, peace at home for America. The reason I am so deeply committed to peace goes far beyond political considerations or my concern about my place in history, or the other reasons that political scientists usually say are the motivations of Presidents.

Every time I talk to a brave wife of an American POW, every time I write a letter to the mother of a boy who has been killed in Vietnam, I become more deeply committed to end this war, and to end it in a way that we can build lasting peace.

I think the hardest thing that a President has to do is to present posthumously the Nation's highest honor, the Medal of Honor, to mothers or fathers or widows of men who have lost their lives, but in the process have saved the lives of others.

We had an award ceremony in the East Room of the White House just a few weeks ago. And at that ceremony I remember one of the recipients, Mrs. Karl Taylor, from Pennsylvania. Her husband was a Marine sergeant, Sergeant Karl Taylor. He charged an enemy machinegun singlehanded and knocked it out. He lost his life. But in the process the lives of several wounded Marines in the range of that machinegun were saved.

After I presented her the Medal, I shook hands with their two children, Karl, Jr. – he was 8 years old – and Kevin, who was 4. As I was about to move to the next recipient, Kevin suddenly stood at attention and saluted. I found it rather difficult to get my thoughts together for the next presentation.

My fellow Americans, I want to end this war in a way that is worthy of the sacrifice of Karl Taylor, and I think he would want me to end it in a way that would increase the chances that Kevin and Karl, and all those children like them here and around the world, could grow up in a world where none of them would have to die in war; that would increase the chance for America to have what it has not had in this century – a full generation of peace.

We have come a long way in the last 2 years toward that goal. With your continued support, I believe we will achieve that goal. And generations in the future will look back at this difficult, trying time in America's history and they will be proud that we demonstrated that we had the courage and the character of a great people.

Thank you.