

Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908-1973)

Address on Vietnam Before the National Legislative Conference, San Antonio, Texas

given on September 29, 1967

Speaker Barnes, Governor Hughes, Governor Smith, Congressman Kazen, Representative Graham, most distinguished legislators, ladies and gentlemen:

I deeply appreciate this opportunity to appear before an organization whose members contribute every day such important work to the public affairs of our State and of our country.

5 This evening I came here to speak to you about Vietnam.

I do not have to tell you that our people are profoundly concerned about that struggle.

There are passionate convictions about the wisest course for our Nation to follow. There are many sincere and patriotic Americans who harbor doubts about sustaining the commitment that three Presidents and a half a million of our young men have made.

10 Doubt and debate are enlarged because the problems of Vietnam are quite complex. They are a mixture of political turmoil--of poverty--of religious and factional strife--of ancient servitude and modern longing for freedom. Vietnam is all of these things.

Vietnam is also the scene of a powerful aggression that is spurred by an appetite for conquest.

It is the arena where Communist expansionism is most aggressively at work in the world today--where it is crossing
15 international frontiers in violation of international agreements; where it is killing and kidnapping; where it is ruthlessly attempting to bend free people to its will.

Into this mixture of subversion and war, of terror and hope, America has entered--with its material power and with its moral commitment. Why?

Why should three Presidents and the elected representatives of our people have chosen to defend this Asian nation
20 more than 10,000 miles from American shores?

We cherish freedom--yes. We cherish self-determination for all people--yes. We abhor the political murder of any state by another, and the bodily murder of any people by gangsters of whatever ideology. And for 27 years--since the days of lend-lease--we have sought to strengthen free people against domination by aggressive foreign powers.

But the key to all that we have done is really our own security. At times of crisis--before asking Americans to fight and
25 die to resist aggression in a foreign land--every American President has finally had to answer this question:

Is the aggression a threat--not only to the immediate victim--but to the United States of America and to the peace and security of the entire world of which we in America are a very vital part?

That is the question which Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had to answer in facing the issue in Vietnam.

30 That is the question that the Senate of the United States answered by a vote of 82 to 1 when it ratified and approved the SEATO treaty in 1955, and to which the Members of the United States Congress responded in a resolution that it passed in 1964 by a vote of 504 to 2, "... the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

35 Those who tell us now that we should abandon our commitment--that securing South Vietnam from armed domination is not worth the price we are paying--must also answer this question. And the test they must meet is this: What would be the consequences of letting armed aggression against South Vietnam succeed? What would follow in the time ahead? What kind of world are they prepared to live in 5 months or 5 years from tonight?

For those who have borne the responsibility for decision during these past m years, the stakes to us have seemed clear--

40 -and have seemed high.

President Dwight Eisenhower said in 1959:

"Strategically, South Vietnam's capture by the Communists would bring their power several hundred miles into a hitherto free region. The remaining countries in Southeast Asia would be menaced by a great flanking movement. The freedom of 12 million people would be lost immediately, and that of 150 million in adjacent lands would be seriously
45 endangered. The loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us and for freedom "

And President John F. Kennedy said in 1962:

"... withdrawal in the case of Vietnam and the case of Thailand might mean a cob lapse of the entire area."

A year later, he reaffirmed that:

50 "We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there," said President Kennedy.

This is not simply an American viewpoint, I would have you legislative leaders know. I am going to call the roll now of those who live in that part of the world--in the great arc of Asian and Pacific nations--and who bear the responsibility for leading their people, and the responsibility for the fate of their people.

55 The President of the Philippines had this to say:

"Vietnam is the focus of attention nowIt may happen to Thailand or the Philippines, or anywhere, wherever there is misery, disease, ignorance....For you to renounce your position of leadership in Asia is to allow the Red Chinese to gobble up all of Asia."

The Foreign Minister of Thailand said:

60 "(The American) decision will go down in history as the move that prevented the world from having to face another major conflagration."

The Prime Minister of Australia said:

"We are there because while Communist aggression persists the whole of Southeast Asia is threatened."

President Park of Korea said:

65 "For the first time in our history, we decided to dispatch our combat troops overseas... because in our belief any aggression against the Republic of Vietnam represented a direct and grave menace against the security and peace of free Asia, and therefore directly jeopardized the very security and freedom of our own people."

The Prime Minister of Malaysia warned his people that if the United States pulled out of South Vietnam, it would go to the Communists, and after that, it would be only a matter of time until they moved against neighboring states.

70 The Prime Minister of New Zealand said: "We can thank God that America at least regards aggression in Asia with the same concern as it regards aggression in Europe-and is prepared to back up its concern with action."

The Prime Minister of Singapore said:

"I feel the fate of Asia--South and Southeast Asia--will be decided in the next few years by what happens in Vietnam."

I cannot tell you tonight as your President-with certainty--that a Communist conquest of South Vietnam would be
75 followed by a Communist conquest of Southeast Asia. But I do know there are North Vietnamese troops in Laos. I do know that there are North Vietnamese trained guerrillas tonight in northeast Thailand. I do know that there are Communist-supported guerrilla forces operating in Burma. And a Communist coup was barely averted in Indonesia, the fifth largest nation in the world.

80 So your American President cannot tell you--with certainty--that a Southeast Asia dominated by Communist power would bring a third world war much closer to terrible reality. One could hope that this would not be so.

But all that we have learned in this tragic century strongly suggests to me that it would be so. As President of the United States, I am not prepared to gamble on the chance that it is not so. I am not prepared to risk the security--

indeed, the survival--of this American Nation on mere hope and wishful thinking. I am convinced that by seeing this struggle through now, we are greatly reducing the chances of a much larger war--perhaps a nuclear war. I would rather
85 stand in Vietnam, in our time, and by meeting this danger now, and facing up to it, thereby reduce the danger for our children and for our grandchildren.

I want to turn now to the struggle in Vietnam itself.

There are questions about this difficult war that must trouble every really thoughtful person. I am going to put some of these questions. And I am going to give you the very best answers that I can give you.

90 First, are the Vietnamese--with our help, and that of their other allies--really making any progress? Is there a forward movement? The reports I see make it clear that there is. Certainly there is a positive movement toward constitutional government. Thus far the Vietnamese have met the political schedule that they laid down in January 1966.

The people wanted an elected, responsive government. They wanted it strongly enough to brave a vicious campaign of Communist terror and assassination to vote for it. It has been said that they killed more civilians in 4 weeks trying to
95 keep them from voting before the election than our American bombers have killed in the big cities of North Vietnam in bombing military targets.

On November 1, subject to the action, of course, of the Constituent Assembly, an elected government will be inaugurated and an elected Senate and Legislature will be installed. Their responsibility is clear: To answer the desires of the South Vietnamese people for self-determination and for peace, for an attack on corruption, for economic
100 development, and for social justice.

There is progress in the war itself, steady progress considering the war that we are fighting; rather dramatic progress considering the situation that actually prevailed when we sent our troops there in 1965; when we intervened to prevent the dismemberment of the country by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese.

The campaigns of the last year drove the enemy from many of their major interior bases. The military victory almost
105 within Hanoi's grasp in 1965 has now been denied them. The grip of the Vietcong on the people is being broken.

Since our commitment of major forces in July 1965 the proportion of the population living under Communist control has been reduced to well under 20 percent. Tonight the secure proportion of the population has grown from about 45 percent to 65 percent--and in the contested areas, the tide continues to run with us.

But the struggle remains hard. The South Vietnamese have suffered severely, as have we--particularly in the First
110 Corps area in the north, where the enemy has mounted his heaviest attacks, and where his lines of communication to North Vietnam are shortest. Our casualties in the war have reached about 13,500 killed in action, and about 85,000 wounded. Of those 85,000 wounded, we thank God that 79,000 of the 85,000 have been returned, or will return to duty shortly. Thanks to our great American medical science and the helicopter.

I know there are other questions on your minds, and on the minds of many sincere, troubled Americans: "Why not
115 negotiate now?" so many ask me. The answer is that we and our South Vietnamese allies are wholly prepared to negotiate tonight.

I am ready to talk with Ho Chi Minh, and other chiefs of state concerned, tomorrow.

I am ready to have Secretary Rusk meet with their foreign minister tomorrow.

I am ready to send a trusted representative of America to any spot on this earth to talk in public or private with a
120 spokesman of Hanoi.

We have twice sought to have the issue of Vietnam dealt with by the United Nations--and twice Hanoi has refused.

Our desire to negotiate peace--through the United Nations or out--has been made very, very clear to Hanoi--directly and many times through third parties.

As we have told Hanoi time and time and time again, the heart of the matter is really this: The United States is willing
125 to stop all aerial and naval bombardment of North Vietnam when this will lead promptly to productive discussions. We, of course, assume that while discussions proceed, North Vietnam would not take advantage of the bombing

cessation or limitation.

But Hanoi has not accepted any of these proposals.

So it is by Hanoi's choice--and not ours, and not the rest of the world's--that the war continues.

- 130 Why, in the face of military and political progress in the South, and the burden of our bombing in the North, do they insist and persist with the war?

From many sources the answer is the same. They still hope that the people of the United States will not see this struggle through to the very end. As one Western diplomat reported to me only this week--he had just been in Hanoi--
"They believe their staying power is greater than ours and that they can't lose." A visitor from a Communist capital
135 had this to say: "They expect the war to be long, and that the Americans in the end will be defeated by a breakdown in morale, fatigue, and psychological factors." The Premier of North Vietnam said as far back as 1962: "Americans do not like long, inconclusive war Thus we are sure to win in the end."

Are the North Vietnamese right about us?

- I think not. No. I think they are wrong. I think it is the common failing of totalitarian regimes that they cannot really
140 understand the nature of our democracy:

--They mistake dissent for disloyalty.

--They mistake restlessness for a rejection of policy.

--They mistake a few committees for a country.

--They misjudge individual speeches for public policy.

- 145 They are no better suited to judge the strength and perseverance of America than the Nazi and the Stalinist propagandists were able to judge it. It is a tragedy that they must discover these qualities in the American people, and discover them through a bloody war.

And, soon or late, they will discover them. In the meantime, it shall be our policy to continue to seek negotiations--confident that reason will some day prevail; that Hanoi will realize that it just can never win; that it will turn away
150 from fighting and start building for its own people.

Since World War II, this Nation has met and has mastered many challenges--challenges in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin, in Korea, in Cuba.

We met them because brave men were willing to risk their lives for their nation's security. And braver men have never lived than those who carry our colors in Vietnam at this very hour.

- 155 The price of these efforts, of course, has been heavy. But the price of not having made them at all, not having seen them through, in my judgment would have been vastly greater.

Our goal has been the same--in Europe, in Asia, in our own hemisphere. It has been--and it is now--peace.

And peace cannot be secured by wishes; peace cannot be preserved by noble words and pure intentions. "Enduring peace," Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "cannot be bought at the cost of other people's freedom."

- 160 The late President Kennedy put it precisely in November 1961, when he said: "We are neither warmongers nor appeasers, neither hard nor soft. We are Americans determined to defend the frontiers of freedom by an honorable peace if peace is possible but by arms if arms are used against us."

The true peace-keepers in the world tonight are not those who urge us to retire from the field in Vietnam--who tell us to try to find the quickest, cheapest exit from that tormented land, no matter what the consequences to us may be.

- 165 The true peace-keepers are those men who stand out there on the DMZ at this very hour, taking the worst that the enemy can give. The true peace-keepers are the soldiers who are breaking the terrorist's grip around the villages of Vietnam--the civilians who are bringing medical care and food and education to people who have already suffered a generation of war.

And so I report to you that we are going to continue to press forward. Two things we must do. Two things we shall do.

170 First, we must not mislead the enemy. Let him not think that debate and dissent will produce wavering and withdrawal. For I can assure you they won't. Let him not think that protests will produce surrender. Because they won't. Let him not think that he will wait us out. For he won't.

Second, we will provide all that our brave men require to do the job that must be done. And that job is going to be done.

175 These gallant men have our prayers-have our thanks--have our heart-felt praise-and our deepest gratitude.

Let the world know that the keepers of peace will endure through every trial--and that with the full backing of their countrymen, they are going to prevail.

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