

STATEMENT ON VIETNAM

by

Senator George McGovern
(Democrat of South Dakota)

to the
Platform Committee
Democratic National
Committee

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My distinguished colleague and friend Chairman Boggs, and members of the Platform Committee:

I come before this committee for two purposes. The first is to urge that we end the military involvement of the United States in Vietnam now. The second is to urge that we adopt a foreign policy which says firmly and without equivocation, no more Vietnams.

As to the first point, there is no consideration of national interest, no diplomatic commitment, and no other compelling reason to continue the American military intervention any longer. Indeed, our involvement in this struggle has been the most tragic diplomatic and moral catastrophe in our national history. To correct error, it is first necessary to admit it—to admit it frankly, without recrimination, but with a quiet determination to put an end to it.

I am well aware that arrangements must be made for extricating our troops with minimum danger to them, and to ease the transition from massive military intervention to the systematic phase-out of military operations.

But I come before this committee in the firm conviction that any President with the will to do it can end the major portion of the killing and the American military involvement in 60 days on terms acceptable to the majority of the people of both the United States and Vietnam. There is risk in such a course, but it is a risk far less than a continuance of the present slaughter that has already claimed 25,000 young American lives and countless multitudes of Vietnamese. The risks will be no less and the opportunities for settlement no greater a year hence, or five years hence, after more thousands of lives have been wiped out in this senseless war. The war has continued for many months, not because any responsible authority any longer believes we can win it, but simply because we seem to place a higher premium on saving our faces than saving the lives of our troops or ending the slaughter of the Vietnamese. We must stop the pursuit of illusory goals that were not attainable in 1954, 1961, or 1965, and that are not attainable now. We must stop saving face—and start saving lives.

How can anyone suppose that we can or should try to rescue a regime in South Vietnam that cannot command the respect or the support of its own people; and which, indeed, has earned the contempt of its own citizens?

Why do I call for an end to the war now?

The reasons are legion. Aside from the blood of our young men, we have squandered a hundred billion dollars and the mental and physical resources needed to reconstruct our own society. In a fruitless effort to "pacify" Vietnam, we have neglected our own desperate internal cities and rural areas until they reek with desperation, danger, and despair. We call for "law and order" at home while spreading death and disorder abroad and squandering the resources needed to lay a foundation of respect for law and order in our own land. We have alienated our friends around the globe and divided and confused our own citizens on an unprecedented scale. The damage to our monetary, fiscal and economic life is incalculable.

These factors represent a cost out of all proportion to any reasonable achievement we can expect for ourselves or for the people of Vietnam by continuing our military operations.

But the most compelling reason for ending the war is that it is a moral disaster for America and for Vietnam. This war has become a smoldering cancer that is eating away the ideals of dignity and compassion which have been our surest guides from the earliest days of the Republic.

Our original intervention was doubtless based on seemingly acceptable grounds. Each additional step into the quagmire has seemed necessary to redeem the earlier steps. It is difficult to place the responsibility for our escalating involvement on any one man, on any single administration, or on any one agency of government. Indeed, there seems never to have been a conscious, planned decision to invest so much of our blood and treasure in this venture. In a sense, we are all involved in varying degrees in this melancholy crusade. There is enough blame for each of us to carry a portion of the burden. This is not a time for partisan or personal recrimination. It is a time to look honestly at what we are doing to ourselves, to our most durable ideals and to our fellow mortals in Vietnam.

Ending the war and redeeming our own society are not divisible issues; they are fundamentally one issue, and they go to the heart of our historic ideals and our future hopes. Upon the resolution or the failure of this indivisible issue rests the answer to the question: "Which way, America?"

It is this moral and humanitarian challenge of the Vietnam issue that I ask you, our party, and our fellow citizens to consider.

How can we contend that we are in Vietnam to reduce terror and death, when our bombers have dropped more napalm and explosives on little Vietnam, North and South, than fell from the skies on all the nations of World War II? As a bomber pilot of World War II, I shudder over what we have been doing to this once-lovely land and its long-suffering people.

How can we justify the search and destroy tactics on the ground that have wrecked the villages, laid waste the rice crops, and herded several million villagers into appalling refugee centers devoid of dignity or decency?

How can we argue that we are defending freedom when our ally in Saigon presides over a cesspool of corruption, prostitution, and black marketeering?

What are we to say to the parents of American boys who have died trying to save an oppressive regime that has just sentenced to prison for five years at hard labor a presidential candidate whose only crime was to suggest a negotiated settlement of the war?

How can we justify the sacrifice of our sons to liberate Vietcong-held areas, only to have those areas taken over by selfish Vietnamese landlords charging extortionate rents and reasserting the same old injustice that first triggered the peasant guerrilla revolt?

We cannot answer these questions honestly without recognizing that there are no rational or moral grounds for continuing the war.

There are talks in Paris. But the killing goes on. Americans and Vietnamese are still dying while we deliberate here in comfort. Bombs are still falling, while we devise three-point, five-point, or even pointless plans to strengthen our public posture.

There is only one real answer, one Vietnam plank for the Democratic Party. In 1964, we sought the votes of the American people on a simple plank: "No wider war." That pledge was broken. Now, if we expect either moral justification or political success, we must demonstrate that we are prepared to redeem, not a new promise—but the fulfillment of the promise we made those four long years ago.

So let us go to Chicago, and to the American people in this great campaign, determined to end this fruitless killing, and to end it now. To that end, I suggest that it be the policy of the Democratic Party, and of its nominee for the Presidency of the United States:

First. We should immediately halt all bombing of North Vietnam.

The bombing does not protect our troops in the South. It is a barrier to serious negotiations. It is a waste of lives and resources. It must stop. To tell the American people that bombing a primitive jungle country in the North will save our sons in the South is a cruel fraud. We have been paying for it at a cost of \$6 or \$8 billion annually and the loss of several hundred of our best pilots. My own view is that it has killed more Americans than it has saved in that it has triggered a much larger retaliation from the other side. When we began the bombing 3½ years ago, there were 400 North Vietnamese regulars in the South; today, there are 60,000. The bombing has been a total failure and that is sufficient reason to stop it, even laying aside the issue of the Paris negotiations.

Second. We must immediately cease all search and destroy operations on the ground in South Vietnam. These operations ravage the land of our friends, causing uncounted civilian casualties. They kill thousands of our own young men. Perhaps most important of all, our action encourages the South Vietnamese to believe that they need neither to fight to defend themselves, nor engage in any efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement with their countrymen. Therefore, if more search and destroy missions are felt by the South Vietnamese to be necessary, let them be conducted by the South Vietnamese army.

Third. We must cease our open-ended support of the present government of South Vietnam. We have supported that government despite its massive corruption, its demonstrated incompetence, and its unyielding refusal to move toward reform and peace. There are non-communist elements in South Vietnam which are more honest, more ready to reach accommodation with the National Liberation Front, and more able to attract the support of the people of South Vietnam. We should shift our support to those elements—and not stand idly by when their leaders are thrown in jail. Once we have lessened our absurd over-identification with the Thieu-Ky regime, the result would in all likelihood be the formation of a new, more broadly-based Saigon government—able and willing to reach its own settlement with the National Liberation Front.

Fourth. We should cease our opposition to participation by the National Liberation Front in the government of South Vietnam. Rather, we should encourage and assist those elements in South Vietnam which seek such an accommodation with their fellow countrymen.

This should always have been a Vietnamese war. It must be a Vietnamese peace.

Fifth. We must clearly demonstrate that our involvement in Vietnam has reached its limit; and that if the war is to be pursued, it will not be at the further and endless cost of American lives, American dollars, and American progress. After 25,000 lives and 100 billion dollars, it is time for the Vietnamese to resolve this conflict or else assume its continuance on their own. Therefore, I propose that we adopt the recommendation of many distinguished American combat leaders, and forthwith reduce our forces in Vietnam to a level of 250,000 men. As Generals Gavin and Ridgway urged two years ago, more than that should never have been sent. As Colonel Corson of the Marines has told us this month, more than that must not be allowed to remain. If the South Vietnamese cannot defend themselves and make a reasonable settlement with the help of 250,000 Americans, they will not do so with half a million. 250,000 American troops are more than enough to protect our bases and, if the South Vietnamese are willing to defend themselves, to hold the major population centers. The 250,000 men that remain should then be withdrawn as time and events dictate: according to such factors as the willingness of the North Vietnamese to withdraw their forces, the progress of the South Vietnamese in reforming their own government and army, and the progress of peace talks with the NLF.

This program, in my judgment, would begin to move us at last toward extrication from our disastrous involvement in Vietnam. It would also, I believe, begin to move that unhappy country toward peace. It is the least we can promise for victory in November. It is the least we can do for our own conscience, and the welfare of our own posterity.

The second commitment I urge today is for a foreign policy that will promise not to repeat the tragedy of Vietnam. This pledge must have seven components.

First, and most obviously, it means that we must not again send half a million troops, give over 25,000 American lives, and spend 100 billion dollars, all to defend an incompetent and corrupt government against internal enemies, when that government cannot or will not fight to defend itself. If there is any lesson to be learned from the war in Vietnam, it is that we cannot resolve by American military might

a conflict whose outcome depends on the will and conviction of another people. In Vietnam at this very moment—after all the promises of land and other reform—the army still helps the landlords to collect illegal and oppressive rents from the peasants, on whose loyalty the outcome of the struggle has always depended. Meanwhile, the government is preparing the lists of those who will have places on its new Boeing 727 jet airliners, which are poised and ready for flight from South Vietnam. Presumably, those who flee will live, as many now do, in comfortable exile on the proceeds of those rents, and the American aid dollars which have disappeared into the swamp of Vietnamese government corruption. Such a government we must never support again.

Second, we must not again make an overwhelming investment of American lives, prestige, and honor in an area which is not strategically necessary to the defense of American interests. We now have alliances with 42 countries throughout the world. We are also told, by the Secretary of State, that these do not represent the total of our commitments; that we must be ready to fight in any land at any time, and perhaps in several at once. Yet, we are offered no standards by which to decide—no definition of where the national interest lies. We did not intervene when Communism threatened Indonesia by any strategic judgment a vastly more important nation than South Vietnam. We did not oppose the Chinese conquest of Tibet. We have not even raised a voice of moral support for the people of Czechoslovakia in their gallant resistance to Soviet domination. We need a new foreign policy—one which can make the great decisions of war or peace, action or inaction, on some more consistent and rational basis than the accident of fate or the whim of a single man.

Third, we must not again, in the service of a government that will not fight its own war, so neglect the needs of our own people that dark disorder and violence come to stalk our streets at home. Of our total federal budget last year, 83 billion dollars—over 56 per cent—went directly to military expenditures; 25 per cent of the budget went to Vietnam alone. If we add the cost of past wars and war-related spending, we have 107 billion dollars—72 per cent of the federal budget, one-eighth of the entire gross national product, one-eighth of every paycheck in the country. All our expenditures for health, education, welfare, housing and community development—not just for the poor,

but for all our people—these were 17.2 billion dollars, just 11 per cent of the federal budget, a little over 2 per cent of the gross national product. The Undersecretary of the Treasury has told us that we can fight another Vietnam, and meet the basic needs of the poor here at home, —but only if we are willing to drastically reduce our standards of living, and live instead at the subsistence level of the Soviet Union. Of course, this is a sacrifice we will make, if it is truly necessary to the security and survival of the United States. But we cannot try to police every nation in the world, when the neglect of our own society now confronts us with desperation and disorder in the streets of our cities.

Fourth, we must not again, in order to perpetuate the rule of a particular faction within a country, destroy its major cities, turn more than a quarter of its people into homeless refugees, defoliate its countryside and ruin its economy—and then say again, as an American officer said of the town of Ben Tre, “it became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it”. Of course, all war is brutal and destructive. But our power is unique; used in a small and undeveloped land, it can—as it may well have done in Vietnam—destroy the entire fabric of a society. For this we must have clear and convincing evidence that that is what the people of the nation want. We had that evidence in every country we liberated in World War II; we had it in Korea; but because of the failings of the South Vietnamese government, we have not had it in Vietnam, and that, in my judgment, is principally responsible for the deep moral questions the American people have raised about this war.

Fifth, we must not again engage in such a war without the assistance or participation of a single one of our historic allies. For over two decades, we have worked to strengthen our ties with the great independent nations of Western Europe, and Asian powers like Japan, India, and Pakistan. Our allies have stood by us in many crises in Europe; and many enlisted with us under the banner of the United Nations when we fought in Korea. In the long run, the active friendship of these great powers—and not the confusing internal politics of dozens of newer and smaller states—is what will most directly affect our own security. Yet, it is precisely these great nations that we have baffled and estranged from our purposes, in the single-minded pursuit of our own objectives in Vietnam; leaving us more alone and isolated than we have been in the history of this Nation.

Sixth, Congress must never again surrender its power under our constitutional system by permitting an ill-advised, undeclared war of this kind. Our involvement in South Vietnam came about through a series of moves by the Executive Branch—each one seemingly restrained and yet each one setting the stage for a deeper commitment. The complex of administration moves involving the State Department, the CIA, the Pentagon, AID, and various private interests—all of these have played a greater role than has Congress. Congress cannot be very proud of its function in the dreary history of this steadily widening war. That function has been very largely one of acquiescence in little-understood administration efforts. The surveillance, the debate, and the dissent since 1965, while courageous and admirable, came too late in the day to hold off the unwise course charted by our policy-makers.

Seventh, we must not again seek to hide the truth, even from our own people, behind the comfortable illusions of progress. For a decade and more, the facts about the war in Vietnam have been submerged by official predictions of victory just around the corner. For the last three years, we have been assured that this one more step up the ladder of escalation would end our task and the agony of Vietnam. But all the predictions, all the claims of imminent victory, have deceived only ourselves. This is a difficult and dangerous world. Its reality is grim and painful. But that pain is only a remote echo of the anguish toward which we can be taken by wishful thinking, false hopes, and sentimental dreams of a universal mission to police and subdue all the evil and disorder in the world. Surely it is now too late to pretend that the war in Vietnam was a success—or that the well-being of our country and our position in the world can be committed to its repetition in the future.

For after all, the one overriding lesson of Vietnam is that we must never again repeat this experience. It is said that to deny its repetition is to invite the Communists to seek new gains elsewhere in the world. They will seek those gains in any case, in many nations. But their success or failure will not depend primarily on our military might; it will depend above all on whether the people and governments of each nation have the will and capacity to defend themselves. That force of national and personal independence, after all, is what has preserved nations on every continent, and is eroding the Soviet empire today.

Governments and nations will ask our assistance, many will need it, and some—though not all—must receive it. And we can help them. But we cannot again try to do their job for them.

And here is the greatest danger. It is that if we do not now disassociate ourselves from the mistakes of Vietnam—if we do not make firmly and finally clear that the internal struggles of each nation are for the people and government of that nation to decide—then we are inviting the worst upheavals of all. For that is to say, to every government in the world: you need not reform yourselves. You need not meet the aspirations of your people. You need not mobilize your nation, nor end your corruption and inefficiency, nor cease to line your pockets with American aid. You need do none of these things, for we will fight your war for you. That is what it means, to say that we must be prepared for other Vietnams. It is also to ensure that we will have them.

The path to sanity and peace in Southeast Asia will not be easy. The ways to a larger war are enticing and simple; the ways to peace are difficult. But before we make that choice, let us recall the words of Virgil: “Easy is the descent to Hell; night and day the gates stand open; but to reclimb the slope and escape to the outer air, this, indeed, is a task.”

McGovern for President Committee
Edward McDermott, Chairman, Washington, D. C.