

My Fellow Americans:

By ANTHONY LEWIS

Good evening.

As you have seen in your newspapers and on your television screens in the last few days, a new challenge confronts the American commitment to freedom in Vietnam. Communist forces, with the help of disloyal South Vietnamese elements, have seized control of Saigon.

Tonight I want to tell you how I plan to meet that challenge and bring lasting peace to Southeast Asia.

First let me remind you that when I took office, in 1969, there were more than 500,000 American soldiers in Vietnam, suffering up to 300 casualties a week. By 1972 I had reduced the troop ceiling to 50,000.

The struggle against the Communist enemy has been carried on by the South Vietnamese themselves. Their gallant army, under the courageous leadership of President Thieu, has stood up well during all these years, even when taking casualties as high as 1,000 a week.

The United States has played its part in the continuing defense of freedom by giving air and naval support. When the North Vietnamese seized Quangtri, Hue, Kontum and other cities in their great offensive of 1972, we successfully prevented them from capitalizing on their armed conquest by destroying those cities.

This year again the Communist invaders have struck at the northern and central regions of South Vietnam. The gains they were able to make were countered by what our intelligence appraisals show was extremely heavy damage from the air in all the areas they control.

But then, last weekend, there came a carefully planned and surreptitious attack on Saigon. North Vietnamese units infiltrated into the outskirts of the city were joined by subversive groups working inside the army of South Vietnam and by some disloyal politicians.

I have here in my hand a report from Ambassador Bunker. It leaves no doubt that this was a clear case of aggression. The conspirators showed their true colors by arousing the public even against the American advisers who had been helping to defend them. The result was nothing less than the naked and brutal takeover of a free city.

However, I am happy to tell you that American units guarding our embassy and headquarters in Saigon resourcefully evaded the disloyal elements in the South Vietnamese Army and made their way to our base at Camranh Bay. Ambassador Bunker and his staff are there, and President Thieu has moved his Government to Camranh.

There have been voices in America

ABROAD AT HOME

this week urging that we give up our commitment to freedom in South Vietnam—the commitment of Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. You have heard those voices. Tonight I am giving my answer. It is no: We are not going to forget our promises to the people of South Vietnam.

Here are my reasons.

President Thieu heads the freely elected Government of South Vietnam. If we abandon that Government, if we let it succumb to naked aggression, then we would be telling our friends everywhere that they can no longer count on the United States as a friend.

This is a test of wills. What is at stake here is not just Vietnam but American leadership for peace in the whole world. The choice is to exercise that leadership or to abdicate it and thus invite the destruction of free governments everywhere.

As I have said before, our leadership role in the world requires that we make one thing clear: when we are hit, we will hit back. I have consulted my senior advisers in Washington and Camranh on how best to do that now. Tonight I am announcing my decision.

We shall strike at the aggressors in South Vietnam with our most effective weapon—the bombers operating from our carriers and bases in Thailand. Many targets were considered, but I have chosen to shorten the conflict by hitting directly at the enemy command.

Accordingly, as I began speaking to you, 120 B-52's took off to bomb Saigon. They are under strict instructions to hit only roads, rail yards, docks, industries and other military targets. Civilian casualties will therefore be held to a minimum.

We shall continue to offer generous terms for peace. We seek no territory. We ask only that the illegal elements that have seized power in South Vietnam turn in their arms and restore General Thieu to the presidency. If they do, we shall immediately suspend the bombing.

Let me close with this thought. I have visited 36 countries as President, searching for peace, and everywhere I have found respect for the office of the President.

Any man who holds this office would be failing his duty to history if he betrayed the millions of people who have relied on us in Vietnam. That would mean a lessened respect for the next President of the United States, whoever he is. It would mean a renunciation of our morality. It would be especially tragic this year—1976, the 200th anniversary of our freedom. I shall never take that path.

Thank you and good night.
