

It Might Have Been

ABROAD AT HOME

By Anthony Lewis

Following is the text of President Ford's address to a joint session of Congress, as recorded in an optimist's imagination:

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, distinguished guests, my good friends in the Congress and fellow Americans:

The American people can be proud of what we have accomplished in the world. This country has an unmatched record of generosity and dedication to peace. But from time to time, naturally, our foreign policy has had setbacks. One of those, a very serious one, is happening now in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Under five Presidents, the United States has been involved in Indochina. Who can forget the enormous sacrifices that we made in blood, dedication and treasure? Millions of Americans served. Thousands died. Congresses appropriated over \$150-billion for the war.

Now it appears that those sacrifices were not enough to accomplish our goals. The governments we support in Saigon and Phnom Penh have suffered severe military setbacks. The question is what we can usefully do.

One thing we must not do is point the finger of blame at each other. Critics of our policy in Indochina disagree with what we tried to do. I think we were right, and I deeply regret that we have not been more successful. But after all we did, no one can fairly charge us with not trying.

As I was preparing this talk, one of my assistants said to me that it would be the last speech of the Vietnam era. That is not what I want it to be. My intention is to make the first speech of a new era.

Let us start afresh.

In that spirit, let me discuss the options that are still open to us in Indochina. On the one hand, I could ask Congress to let me send American men and planes back into battle. On the other, I could suggest that we just walk away and wash our hands of Indochina.

Another course has been suggested: supply more arms in the hope of creating a situation of strength from which our friends could negotiate. That sounds like the middle of the road, the American way. But President Kennedy and President Johnson and President Nixon tried to find that way in Vietnam, and the result was more and more war. I think it is time for an unequivocal effort to stop the fighting.

These are my plans:

1. We are calling for an immediate cease-fire in South Vietnam, to be followed by talks between the Vietnamese parties. The aim would be

quickly to carry out the political provisions of the 1973 Paris agreements, in particular, the establishment of a Council of National Reconciliation.

2. These talks should allow time for orderly departure of Americans and of those South Vietnamese who have been most closely associated with us—more time than continued fighting would. I have directed that the evacuation of non-essential personnel and dependents begin now.

3. In case the worst should happen, I am asking Congress for limited authority to use military force to protect the lives of Americans as they leave. I have also ordered diplomatic approaches to confirm statements by the Vietnamese communists that they will not obstruct a planned exit.

4. I shall ask Congress to approve a major new program of humanitarian aid for the victims of war in Vietnam and Cambodia. To be sure this is help without politics, the aid should be administered by international and voluntary agencies. To coordinate this great effort I am appointing a Democrat, a widely-respected person with experience negotiating on Vietnam. . . .

American hearts are open to the refugees and other victims of war. Our first obligation is to the people of Indochina. We began our involvement for their sake, and the world would rightly question our ideals if we now put their interest second to our own pride.

It will not be easy for America to accept setbacks after all the years in Indochina. But we have come to understand the need for accommodation with antagonists. If the United States can have détente with the Soviet Union, then perhaps in time we can hope for a process of healing in Indochina. That has begun in Laos, where a coalition government has ruled for a year.

I hope that Americans can find new ground for agreement in the program I have outlined, however much we may continue to differ about the past in Vietnam. I believe I have gone a long way. I hope those who have been critics of Vietnam will remember now that we still have profound obligations to those who share our vision of the good society—especially in Europe, Israel and Japan.

A new policy for Indochina need not mean defeat of our ideals. Nine years ago, in Phnom Penh, Charles de Gaulle of France said America should give up its military effort in Vietnam. To do so, he said, would not "thwart its ideals or jeopardize its interests. On the contrary . . . , what respect would not the United States recover throughout the world and what chances would not be retrieved for peace. . . ."

Let us all try to bring General de Gaulle's prophecy to life. May God guide us to do what is right.