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# The promise was

## Two views on Ford's Palm Springs speech

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For a few brief hours in San Diego the other day, President Ford acted like a man who had taken charge of U.S. foreign policy.

What he did was to release in advance the text of a remarkable speech he would deliver later in the day, after a scheduled news conference. The words of that speech were cool-headed and realistic, tough without being truculent, a stunning departure from the cheap political rhetoric of the recent past.

He had kept his peace until that speech text was put into the hands of reporters, maintaining an uncommon silence in the face of the debacle unfolding in South Vietnam. The word was passed that the speech was written "in Palm Springs, not Washington," as if to

make the point that Gerald Ford, not Henry Kissinger, was the real author of the sentiments expressed.

Indeed, the speech was free of emotional cant about the sturdiness of the American character. It warned potential enemies against miscalculating America's will and purpose in the world, and reassured anxious allies of U.S. support. And, perhaps most importantly, it turned away from the risky course of recriminations.

Ford indicated in that text that he understood the incendiary nature of Vietnam in American politics, and that he was no longer engaged, in his words, in "attempts to assess blame."

He seemed acutely aware that no enterprise has so deeply scarred the consciousness of the American people as the conflict in Southeast

## too good to be true

Asia. It was, from the beginning, a war without honor, and its original aim was obscured by the swift tide of events and then by a rhetoric rooted in the past.

It shouldn't be forgotten that most Americans supported the war for many years and the eventual disillusionment was all the deeper and more intense because of that support. Eventually the so-called "Peace with Honor" was accepted by most Americans as the best one could expect from a bad bargain.

There was a tendency to forget Vietnam as a ghastly mistake, a cruel self-deception. But a lot of dry tinder was left on the emotional landscape, needing only a sustained spark to ignite it.

In his San Diego text, Ford appeared ready to douse the tinder with a sensible acceptance of reality. But then the President held his

news conference, and he managed to fall off his lofty height and land smack in the swamp again. He ignored his own advice, engaging in the transparent exercise of saying he would not fix blame, the American people would do that, and when they did, they would put it squarely on Congress.

He spoke of his being frustrated by the inhibitions Congress had placed on presidential power. At times he sounded as though he might want to employ U.S. power again to stem the tide in Vietnam.

The speech, which he delivered intact, came through, after the news conference, as the hollow echo of a man speaking someone else's words. The chance he had to divorce himself from the futile past was blown skyhigh. And one could almost hear the tinder crackling offstage.