

THE PRESIDENT'S NEWS CONFERENCE

Excerpt — Statement and Questions on Viet-Nam

East Room, The White House • July 28, 1965, 12:34 P.M.

One day before the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division landed at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced he was ordering the Air Mobile Division and other forces to Vietnam, raising U.S. troop strength from 75,000 to 125,000. This excerpt includes the President's opening statement and the Vietnam-related questions from that news conference. Portions on unrelated topics (the nomination of Abe Fortas to the Supreme Court, the appointment of John Chancellor to head the Voice of America, and the appointment of John Gardner to HEW) have been omitted for length.

WHY WE ARE IN VIET-NAM

Not long ago I received a letter from a woman in the Midwest. She wrote: "Dear Mr. President: In my humble way I am writing to you about the crisis in Viet-Nam. I have a son who is now in Viet-Nam. My husband served in World War II. Our country was at war, but now, this time, it is just something that I don't understand. Why?"

Well, I have tried to answer that question dozens of times and more in practically every State in this Union. I have discussed it fully in Baltimore in April, in Washington in May, in San Francisco in June. Let me again, now, discuss it here in the East Room of the White House.

Why must young Americans, born into a land exultant with hope and with golden promise, toil and suffer and sometimes die in such a remote and distant place?

The answer, like the war itself, is not an easy one, but it echoes clearly from the painful lessons of half a century. Three times in my lifetime, in two World Wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom. We have learned at a terrible and a brutal cost that retreat does not bring safety and weakness does not bring peace.

It is this lesson that has brought us to Viet-Nam. This is a different kind of war. There are no marching armies or solemn declarations. Some citizens of South Viet-Nam at times, with understandable grievances, have joined in the attack on their own government.

But we must not let this mask the central fact that this is really war. It is guided by North Viet-Nam and it is spurred by Communist China. Its goal is to conquer the South, to defeat American power, and to extend the Asiatic dominion of communism. There are great stakes in the balance.

Moreover, we are in Viet-Nam to fulfill one of the most solemn pledges of the American Nation. Three Presidents—President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present President—over 11 years have committed themselves and have promised to help defend this small and valiant nation.

This, then, my fellow Americans, is why we are in Viet-Nam.

THE NATION'S GOALS IN VIET-NAM

First, we intend to convince the Communists that we cannot be defeated by force of arms or by superior power. They are not easily convinced. In recent months they have greatly increased their fighting forces and

their attacks and the number of incidents.

I have asked the Commanding General, General Westmoreland, what more he needs to meet this mounting aggression. He has told me. We will meet his needs.

I have today ordered to Viet-Nam the Air Mobile Division and certain other forces which will raise our fighting strength from 75,000 to 125,000 men almost immediately. Additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested.

This will make it necessary to increase our active fighting forces by raising the monthly draft call from 17,000 over a period of time to 35,000 per month, and for us to step up our campaign for voluntary enlistments.

After this past week of deliberations, I have concluded that it is not essential to order Reserve units into service now. If that necessity should later be indicated, I will give the matter most careful consideration and I will give the country—you—an adequate notice before taking such action, but only after full preparations.

These steps, like our actions in the past, are carefully measured to do what must be done to bring an end to aggression and a peaceful settlement. We do not want an expanding struggle with consequences that no one can perceive, nor will we bluster or bully or flaunt our power, but we will not surrender and we will not retreat.

OUR READINESS TO NEGOTIATE

Second, once the Communists know, as we know, that a violent solution is impossible, then a peaceful solution is inevitable. We are ready now, as we have always been, to move from the battlefield to the conference table. I have stated publicly and many times, again and again, America's willingness to begin unconditional discussions with any government, at any place, at any time. Fifteen efforts have been made to start these discussions with the help of 40 nations throughout the world, but there has been no answer.

LETTER TO U THANT

I have directed Ambassador Goldberg to go to New York today and to present immediately to Secretary General U Thant a letter from me requesting that all the resources, energy, and immense prestige of the United Nations be employed to find ways to halt aggression and to bring peace in Viet-Nam.

THE PRESIDENT'S PERSONAL FEELINGS ABOUT WAR

Let me also add now a personal note. I do not find it easy to send the flower of our youth, our finest young men, into battle. I have spoken to you today of the divisions and the forces and the battalions and the units, but I know them all, every one. I have seen them in a thousand streets, of a hundred towns, in every State in this Union—working and laughing and building, and filled with hope and life. I think I know, too, how their mothers weep and how their families sorrow.

This is the most agonizing and the most painful duty of your President.

So, too, this shall not happen. We will stand in Viet-Nam.

QUESTIONS ON VIET-NAM

Possibility of Escalation in Viet-Nam

Q. Mr. President, in the light of the decisions on Viet-Nam which you have just announced, is the United States prepared with additional plans should North Viet-Nam escalate its military effort, and how do you anticipate that the Chinese Communists will react to what you have announced today?

THE PRESIDENT. I do not want to speculate on the reactions of other people. This Nation is prepared, and will always be prepared, to protect its national interest.

Duration of Fighting

Q. Mr. President, you have never talked about a timetable in connection with Viet-Nam... Donald Johnson, National Commander of the American Legion... could imagine the war over there going on for 5, 6, or 7 years. Have you thought of that possibility, sir?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes, I think the American people ought to understand that there is no quick solution to the problem that we face there. I would not want to prophesy or predict whether it would be a matter of months or years or decades... I do think our cause is just. I do think our purposes and objectives are beyond any question.

Role of Saigon Government

Q. Mr. President, does the fact that you are sending additional forces to Viet-Nam imply any change in the existing policy of relying mainly on the South Vietnamese to carry out offensive operations and using American forces to guard American installations and to act as an emergency backup?

THE PRESIDENT. It does not imply any change in policy whatever. It does not imply any change of objective.

Consultation with the Congress

Q. Mr. President, what are the borders of your power to conduct a war? At what point might you have to ask Congress for a declaration?

THE PRESIDENT. I don't know. That would depend on the circumstances... Up to now, we have had ample authority, excellent cooperation, a united Congress behind us, and—as near as I could tell from my meetings last night with the leaders, and from my meetings today with the distinguished chairmen of the committees and the members of both parties—we all met as Americans, united and determined to stand as one.

Possibility of Negotiation with the Viet Cong

Q. Mr. President, would you be willing to permit direct negotiations with the Viet Cong forces that are in South Viet-Nam?

THE PRESIDENT. We have stated time and time again that we would negotiate with any government, any place, any time. The Viet Cong would have no difficulty in being represented and having their views presented if Hanoi for a moment decides she wants to cease aggression.

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