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ERA OF NEGOTIATIONS? - PART V

Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie in the Senate

April 23, 1970

SENATOR MUSKIE: Mr. President, in a series of brief statements during the last month I have raised questions about the Administration's Vietnam policies--its overreliance on Vietnamization and neglect of diplomacy. I had hoped that these questions would be answered in the President's address to the nation on April 20. Unfortunately, I do not find this to be the case. I find that many of the same inconsistencies remain between the Administration's word and deed.

I listened to President Nixon, hoping that he might reveal the plan for peace that we have been promised since his campaign in 1968. I hoped that he might indicate a program that would bring our involvement to a speedy close. Instead, I heard a determination that the war must continue and that, at best, a year from today almost 300,000 Americans will still be fighting and dying in Vietnam.

The fact that our American forces in Vietnam have been reduced and that further reductions are contemplated is desirable, but it cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that, under present planning, more than half of the peak number of American troops will remain in Vietnam after two and one-half years of

the Nixon Administration. Moreover, although President Nixon contrasts American casualties for the first quarter of 1970 favorably with first quarters of prior years, the fact is that the level of American casualties has remained high even as our troop strength has declined. Indeed, in recent weeks, the rate of casualties has increased. Continuation of the present rate would mean that by a year from now -- when the current installment of withdrawals is scheduled to be completed -- an additional six to seven thousand American boys will have been killed.

President Nixon's hopes for peace appear to be based on the illusion that Vietnamization can in time bring about a military victory. Although the President speaks of a political settlement as being "the heart of the matter" he makes no move to bring about effective and productive negotiations in Paris. We continue to be represented there by a career foreign service officer whom the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong consider as a subordinate with whom they cannot and will not negotiate. In addition, the promise that almost 300,000 American troops will continue a year from now to shore up the Thieu Regime certainly removes any incentive for Saigon to negotiate a realistic political settlement. The President concedes that there has been no progress in Paris. But there can be no progress in Paris while we continue to down-grade diplomacy.

President Nixon offers only the prospect of further and futile military efforts to resolve an essentially political conflict. He tells us only that, over some indefinite period, all American combat forces are to be withdrawn. Are we to understand that non-combat forces will remain?

We are not told whether or how many combat forces are to be withdrawn during the next month or six months or during the balance of 1970. Are we to understand that the President has given in to military insistence on a delay in any further troop withdrawals?

We are told that what was previously described as a firm withdrawal plan was in fact a strategy of "cut-and-try." Is the new program, with the timing and pace of withdrawals to be determined by developments elsewhere, any different?

What we do know is that we are asked to support, and to support indefinitely, a war in which somewhat fewer American troops continue to fight on an ever-widening battlefield. We know too that the criteria for terminating American participation have now also been widened to include developments not only in South Vietnam but throughout Indochina.

(More)

Much has been made of the increased emphasis in the speech on the desirability of a political settlement of the war, but paying lip service to diplomacy is not enough. This Administration must take a variety of steps to reinvigorate the process of negotiation and to bring an end to the killing in Vietnam.

In this respect the speech was a disappointment.

The President failed to name a high-level replacement for Ambassador Lodge. It has now been 153 days since we had a high-level negotiator in Paris and North Vietnam's political representative at the talks has returned home. To let this post remain vacant for 5 out of the 15 months that the President has been in office is a poor way to give substance to the "era of negotiation" proclaimed by the President at the time of his inauguration.

The only new diplomatic initiative referred to in the speech was the French proposal to reconvene the Geneva conference, and the NLF statement in Paris the day after the President's speech apparently killed that proposal. It has now been many, many months since this Administration or the Government in Saigon restated our negotiating position or attempted a major new diplomatic initiative.

The President's speech stated that we favored a "fair political solution" that "reflected the existing relationship of political forces within South Vietnam." But our negotiating position and that of the Thieu/Ky regime do not contain specific proposals to achieve this end. The most forthcoming proposal we have made to date is for a "winner take all" election to be run while the Thieu regime remains in full power. The fairness of the election would supposedly be

guaranteed by a small "supervisory mixed electoral commission", presumably sitting in Saigon, on which the NLF would be represented. As I shall spell out in a future statement, it is not hard to see why this proposal has not been the basis for a political settlement between the Vietnamese factions which have been at war with each other for so many years.

Finally, Mr. President, I would take issue with the extraordinary rhetoric which President Nixon put forward as the basis for his troop withdrawal announcement.

How is it possible under any stretch of the imagination to say, as the President told the nation, that "the decision I have announced tonight means that we finally have in sight the just peace we are seeking". Negotiations are at a complete impasse. Today's meeting - the 64th - was a propaganda exchange. The war has widened in both Laos and Cambodia. Even if the President's highly optimistic statement that "pacification is succeeding" is accepted at face value, and few would do so, the best that can be said is that we are slowly disengaging from the war. But Vietnamization means only the continuation of Asians killing Asians, and it is hollow rhetoric to talk about a "just peace" now being in sight.

The time has come, and indeed is long since past, when we should move boldly to create the conditions that will permit the political settlement which is the only hope for peace in Southeast Asia. This will require the announcement of an irreversible decision, not for piecemeal and protracted troop reductions, but

for total American withdrawal. It will require that we send to Paris a high-ranking negotiator with direct and acknowledged access to the President. It will require that we make clear to the Saigon Government that they can no longer rely on American military power to postpone forever their need to recognize the realities of political power in South Vietnam.

There is today less stability in Indo-china than there was fifteen months ago, when this Administration took office. In those fifteen months, eleven thousand Americans have been killed --- more than one-quarter of all American deaths in Vietnam. Our national interest demands a plan for peace --- not a call to arms.