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**Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie on War in Vietnam at the
National Presbyterian Center, Washington, D.C.**

Edmund S. Muskie

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MUSKIE News

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REMARKS BY SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CENTER, WASHINGTON, D. C.
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1972

I have been asked to talk with you today about the environment. . . the earth God made. Instead, I want to ask you to reflect with me on the earth man has remade. For if what we mean by the environment is what we have done to our land and our lives, then half a world away, we have come dreadfully close to fulfilling the nightmare of Tacitus: "They have made a desert and called it peace."

Four years ago, this nightmare was first invoked to describe the war in Vietnam. Since then, every year has been hailed as a year of hope for peace. And every year, we have seen our hope turn to the dust of new-made graves. America's leaders have been carried along on a tide of illusion, convinced at first that we were right, committed still to making right a war we know is wrong. We fight for a make-believe victory in a real place and real people die each day.

The President gave us his latest solution last week, and he is at a crossroads. The choice for the President is whether he will use his dramatic announcement to build political support for endless battle -- or whether he will seek to end the fighting now. Those of us who are out of power must welcome Administration proposals to move American

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troops out of Indochina. But we must also question the wisdom of a course which attaches so many conditions to our leaving that it can only leave us where we are now -- watching our sons fight and die, not for a cause, but for a mistake -- looking to a future where more human beings will suffer at our hands in a senseless and immoral conflict.

Surely when we look into our own consciences, we must know that saving lives is more important than saving face. And just as surely, we must judge the President's policy and our own by a single standard: Can they bring American's soldiers and prisoners home from Vietnam? For what we need is not a reason to prolong the agony of war, but a way to peace.

Most of us had hoped that this was what we would hear from the President last week. We had hoped for news of future negotiations that would succeed instead of past negotiations that have failed. We had hoped to see the President remove the war as an election issue by stopping the war before the election.

But again, as so often before, we find our hopes disappointed. We have now had the time to look closely at each of the eight points and listen carefully to all of the official explanations. We waited for a response from Hanoi. All we have heard is harsh criticism of the president's plan, and their official newspaper rejected it on Saturday.

Why are we at an impasse? What has our government really offered to the other side?

Most Americans thought they heard the President agree to set a date certain for our withdrawal. But it is not the genuine date certain so many of us have urged upon him. He did not offer to exchange our presence in Vietnam for the freedom of our prisoners. Instead, he laid

down additional conditions. . . a general settlement of all outstanding issues or a ceasefire in all of Indochina.

As part of the general settlement, the President suggested the kind of elections already rejected by the other side -- because they would be controlled by our side. The administration promises that such elections will be "free". . . the same promise that was made in every American proposal of the 1960s. . . the same promise that was broken in 1971, when we saw so clearly what we had purchased with our treasure and our blood: A democratic regime so undemocratic that its Presidential election was unfree, unfair, and uncontested. This time, General Thieu has volunteered to step down thirty days before the voting, but his hand-picked agents would continue to control the police; the province, district, and village chiefs; the whole machinery and force of government. What opponent would then risk his liberty or even his life in open opposition? How could anyone call such elections free?

The President has also offered the kind of ceasefire already rejected by the other side -- because it would strengthen our side. The Administration claims that the principle of a ceasefire has been accepted by their negotiators as well as ours. But the administration's words cannot conceal a plain reality. Hanoi apparently proposes a ceasefire as part of a settlement on their terms -- which our government rejects. The President proposes a ceasefire on our terms -- which Hanoi rejects. Our kind of ceasefire would force the North Vietnamese to withdraw their forces in some unspecified fashion from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. We are asking them to stop fighting and concede Saigon's control over most of the countryside, abandoning their supporters to the police power of an enemy regime.

The President called for just such a ceasefire in his proposals of October, 1970. His proposals were turned down then. How could anyone expect a similar ceasefire offer to be anything but a stumbling block now? How could anyone expect Hanoi to settle for something which must seem to them nothing more than a date certain for their own surrender?

In short, in the face of a frustrating deadlock, the President has basically renumbered and reissued the proposals that have failed for six years. We are trying to win at the conference table what we have not won and cannot win on the battlefield. And yet we persist.

When will we ever learn?

We have no right to take for our own the awful majesty of God over life and death, destroying land and people in order to save them.

We have no right to kill, wound, or displace over a hundred thousand civilians a month by continuing to rain over four million pounds of bombs a day on Indochina.

We have no right to send young Americans to Vietnam as bargaining chips for the freedom of prisoners of war who would be free if those young Americans were not sent at all.

And we have paid so high a price for being wrong. We have seen 55,000 of our sons come home from Asia in coffins. . . twenty thousand of them in the last three years. We have seen hundreds of our soldiers captured or missing in action. . . four hundred of them in the last three years. We have seen countless Vietnamese killed and innocent children scarred and shot. . . and no number of years can erase the terrible memory.

There are those who say that if we sustain the pressure and stand the pain, we can fight on to victory. We have heard their voices before.

We can only reply in the words of an ancient king: "One more such victory and we shall be undone."

So our task is to leave Indochina, to leave it to the Vietnamese to work out their own peace, not to determine their destiny according to a plan written in Washington.

There is only one way out of this war. We must take that way now, before further erosion in our troop strength and our bargaining position frustrates any chance to exchange American military disengagement for American prisoners in the North. This disengagement, I believe, would also set the stage for the Vietnamese to reach a political settlement among themselves. The President must stop throwing away that opportunity. He must commit this country to take two vital steps — not only because they are realistic — but because they are right.

First, we must set a date when we will withdraw every soldier, sailor, and airman, and stop all bombing and other American military activity, dependent only on an agreement for the return of our prisoners and the safety of our troops as they leave.

Second, we must urge the government in Saigon to move toward a political accommodation with all the elements of their society. Without such an accommodation, the war cannot be ended. And it is clear that the American people will not support an indefinite war either by our presence or by proxy.

We must turn toward peace. And we must face this fact: If we have learned anything in seven years, it is that we cannot bomb Hanoi into submission. We cannot bomb them into freeing our prisoners, anymore than we were able to bomb them to the conference table in the 1960s.

We have learned that this disastrous course will not contain the spread of Communist power, will not strengthen our leadership among nations, and will only turn the people of Asia and indeed of all the world against us, as a country that is violating its deepest principles of morality and respect for human life and human rights.

We should never have gone to Vietnam. We should never have stayed there. A thirty-year-old Laotian mother in a refugee camp recently asked the only question still worth answering: "And, as for the other men and women, do they know all the unimaginable things happening in this war?"

We are the other men and women. We know the truth. How can we go on as we have. . . unleashing terror and destruction to prop up a corrupt dictatorship? Is this what America was made for? Is this what we want America to stand for in our time?

It took too much time for most of us to see the full depth of the tragedy in Vietnam. At first, there were only the quiet stirrings of doubt, then the public outcry of a few brave people, then the great debate over the bombing of the North. In the process, many of us learned that we had been wrong. And I say what I must now, not in righteousness, but in the conviction that we cannot and should not shrink from the truth.

This war has lasted far longer than anyone ever dreamed it could. It has drained us of our treasure and our spirit and our unity far beyond what we can possibly afford. It has brought tragedy and suffering to homes across the nation where young men will never return. It has brought doubt and division to our schools, our churches, and our communities. It has subverted our respect for government and our ties with one another.

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It is not an easy thing for a great country to admit a mistake. But it is perhaps the definition of greatness in a country that it can.

So what now must we say of Vietnam?

For the sons who have already died in battle, whose brothers should not have to follow them to war and to an early grave —

For the innocent people of a thousand Asian villages, people who may not know the name of their nation, let alone the cause of their dying —

For the American prisoners of war, who deserve something better than a life sentence or a slow death in foreign jails —

For all those who suffer in Indochina as we meet here --

For their sake and for our own —

We must be willing now — all of us -- to say, "Enough."

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