

# ON ADDRESSING THE NATION IN A TIME OF WAR: TWO APPROACHES

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President Nixon's address to the nation on November 3 was a serious statement of United States policy on Vietnam. It deserves serious attention — and it will for many months to come. For on this issue President Nixon and, more importantly, the United States will finally be judged by the relation between the policy he enunciated and the unfolding of future events both in Southeast Asia and in the United States. Some interim judgments, however, are now possible and in order.

On President Nixon's own terms, how successful was his address to the nation? He asserted in his address that he wished to inform and persuade — to inform the nation about the war in Vietnam and to persuade the citizenry, particularly the "great silent majority," to support his policy. Did he inform the country? If one can describe the unveiling of a policy that remains secret as the transmission of information, then he did. But for many people such a disclosure is as satisfying as a strip-teaser who, to the rolling of drums and the flashing of lights, climaxes an extended dance with a triumphant display of her well-publicized body — fully covered. To be specific about the source of the discontent: President Nixon said that he had a timetable, but that it depended upon first, the "level of enemy activity" and second, on the strength of South Vietnamese forces. Both of these, it must be clear, are uncertain variables.

But more troubling is the President's statement that if the United States were to announce a fixed timetable for troop withdrawal, the enemy would simply wait "until our forces had withdrawn and then move in." But are we to believe that after all these years, the enemy, however defined, is not prepared to wait several more years, if that is what a flexible timetable means? Or that in several years the South Vietnamese forces will be able to accomplish without U.S. forces what together they have been unable to accomplish during most of this decade? This is not information, but the sowing of confusion.

Let us admit, however, that President Nixon's responsibilities are grave and that the task of fighting in Vietnam, negotiating in Paris and informing at home is a most difficult combination. Let us further admit Nixon is burdened with public doubt about the government's credibility, a burden he inherited from the previous Administration. It may be that, given the decision to continue to fight in Vietnam and support the present Saigon regime, few spokesmen could have done better. But, of

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course, the crux of that statement is in the phrase *given the decision*.

Given that decision, how well did President Nixon accomplish the second purpose of his address, i.e., how well did he persuade the citizenry of the United States to support his policy? The answer to that question is not immediately evident and it cannot be adequately answered by the polls. What is evident from the President's address is that he attempted to accomplish in an urbane and sophisticated manner what Vice President Agnew attempted to accomplish with a jagged hatchet. Both attempt to discredit the critics of our Vietnam policy and to gather the support of what the President called "the vast silent majority."

The President first made a bow to the integrity of some of the critics, saying "honest and patriotic Americans" can differ over policy. But he went on smoothly to suggest disaster "if a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority . . ." And the critics are thus described not only as being a minority, possibly correctly, but as being opposed to reason, which is a slander on many honest, thoughtful and informed citizens. The President went further, to assert that what the critics say now won't matter whether his policy succeeds or not. Surely this is a presumptuous reading of the future. Nations do honor, in retrospect, those citizens who opposed policies that have been judged in time to be dangerous and harmful. President Nixon, who accepted the terrible responsibilities of his office with the expressed intention of healing wounds and building bridges has, with this address, gambled on the chance that he could drive a wedge between a supposed silent majority of the citizens and the anti-war critics. But the Moratorium of October 15 does not allow that easy dismissal. The anti-war critics are as varied as the supporters of the war.

While considering the President's address it may not be inappropriate to recall the comments of one of the most thoughtful critics of the war. Speaking on Moratorium day, Yale President, Kingman Brewster, made these hard judgments:

"Let us not make the mistake of saying that defeat is easy to take," he said. "If our country is to survive this wound, let us be more honest in the pursuit of peace than we have been in the pursuit of this war.

"Let us admit that it is not easy to stop short of victory in a cause for which so many have fallen.

"Let us say simply that we cannot tolerate the abuse of their memory as a justification for continuation of the killing and the dying at the behest of a corrupt Saigon Government which rejects both democracy and peace.

"Let us admit that it is not easy to abandon the anonymous masses of South Vietnamese who have relied upon us.

"Let us say simply that their interest as well as ours can no longer be served by the perpetuation of terror and death.

"Let us admit that the retreat of our power in face of a persistent enemy might invite other aggressors to doubt — and doubting, to test — our will to help keep the peace, in Europe, in the Middle East, in Asia.

"Let us say simply and proudly that our ability to keep the peace also requires above all that America once again become a symbol of decency and hope, fully deserving the trust and respect of all mankind." J.F.

## SALT

"It has become more and more imperative to take real steps that would put an end to the escalation of the armaments race." The words are those of President Nicholai V. Podgorny speaking on the fifty-second anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, but the sentiment is international. Many people in all countries, including the United States, would like to see a halt to the arms race. A continuing arms race, many Americans believe, does less to enhance than to endanger the security of our country. It is further a drain on resources — money, men and intelligence — that could well be employed constructively.

For these reasons the strategic arms limitation talks (SALT), which are to begin in mid-November, are of great importance. The prospects at this date are not, however, encouraging. The policy of the United States has swung between having military parity with the USSR to maintaining superiority. But Podgorny, undoubtedly speaking for the decision makers, said that "We have never allowed and will not allow anybody to talk to the Soviet Union from a position of strength."

The real issues are drawn between and will be decided by the U.S. and the USSR. In the meantime, those nations with underdeveloped nuclear potential will watch the progress of SALT with the acuity provided by deep self-interest.