

The Reality of Vietnam

Robert Kennedy



OVERVIEW

As United States attorney general in the early 1960s, Robert Kennedy had supported the Vietnam War. By 1968, however, he had emerged as a leader for those wanting a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On February 8, 1968, shortly after the Vietcong's Tet offensive, Kennedy—now a senator from New York—delivered a speech that was harshly critical of the government's Vietnam policy. The speech propelled Kennedy into the race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. Excerpts from the speech follow.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why does Kennedy believe that United States involvement in Vietnam should end?
 - According to Kennedy, why is the United States fighting this war?
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But a short time ago we were serene in our reports and predictions of progress. In April, our commanding general told us that "the South Vietnamese are fighting now better than ever before . . . their record in combat . . . reveals an exceptional performance." In August, another general told us that "the really big battles of the Vietnam war are over . . . the enemy has been so badly pummeled he'll never give us trouble again." In December, we were told that we were winning "battle after battle," that "the secure proportion of the population has grown from about 45 percent to 65 percent and in the contested areas the tide continues to run with us."

That is what we were told, and what we were told at the highest possible level.

Those dreams are gone. The Viet Cong will probably withdraw from the cities, as they were forced to withdraw from the American Embassy. Thousands of them will be dead. But they will, nevertheless, have demonstrated that no part or person of South Vietnam is secure from their attacks: neither district capitals nor American bases, neither the peasant in his rice paddy nor our ambassadors nor the commanding general of our own great forces. . . .

. . . We will find no guide to the future in Vietnam unless we are bold enough to strip away the illusions and to confront the grim anguish, the reality of that battlefield which was once a nation called South Vietnam. . . . It is time for the truth.

We must, first of all, rid ourselves of the illusion that the events of the past two weeks represent some sort of victory. That is not so. . . .

Two Presidents and countless officials have told us for seven years that although we can help the South Vietnamese, it is their war and they must win it; as Secretary of Defense McNamara told us last month, "We cannot provide the South Vietnamese with the will to survive as an independent nation . . . or with the ability and self-discipline a people must have to govern themselves. These qualities and attributes are essential contributions to the struggle only the South Vietnamese can supply." Yet this wise and certain counsel has gradually become an empty slogan, as mounting frustration has led us to transform the war into an American military effort.

The South Vietnamese Senate, with only one dissenting vote, refuses to draft eighteen- and nineteen-year-old South Vietnamese, with a member of the Assembly asking, "Why should Vietnamese boys be sent to die for Americans," while nineteen-year-old American boys fight to maintain the Senate and Assembly in Saigon. . . .

You cannot expect people to risk their lives and endure hardship unless they have a stake in their own society.

They must have a clear sense of identification with their own government, a belief they are participating in a cause worth fighting and dying for. Political and economic reform are not simply idealistic slogans or noble goals to be postponed until the end of the fighting. They are the principal weapons of battle. People will not fight—they will simply not fight—to line the pockets of generals or swell the bank accounts of the wealthy. They are far more likely to close their eyes and shut their doors in the face of their government—even as they did last week.

More than any election, more than any proud boasts, that simple fact reveals the truth. We have an ally in name only. We support a government without supporters. Without the effort of American arms that government would not last a day. . . .

And we are told that the war in Vietnam will settle the whole course of the future of Asia. But that is a prayerful wish based on unsound hope, meant only to justify the enormous sacrifices we have already made. The truth is that communism triumphed in China twenty years ago and was extended to Tibet. It lost in Malaya and the Philippines, met disaster in Indonesia, and was fought to a standstill in Korea. It has struggled against governments in Burma for twenty years without success, and it may struggle in Thailand for many more.

The outcome in each country depends and will depend on the intrinsic strength of the government, the particular circumstances of the country, and the particular character of the insurgent movement. The truth is that the war in Vietnam does not promise the end of all threats to Asia and ultimately to the United States; rather, if we proceed on our present course and follow our present policy, it promises only years and decades of further draining conflict on the mainland of Asia—conflict which, as our finest military leaders have always warned, could lead us only to national tragedy. . . .

The history of conflict among nations does not record another such lengthy and consistent chronicle of error as we have shown in Vietnam. It is time to discard so proven a fallacy and face the reality that a military victory is not in sight and that it probably will never come. . . .