An Unwinnable War

Date: February 8, 1968
Author: Robert F. Kennedy
Genre: speech; address

Summary Overview

On February 8, 1968 Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York announced his opposition to the Vietnam War during a speech in Chicago. His speech occurred as American soldiers and soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) were fighting to dislodge communist forces that had seized military bases and cities in the RVN during the Tet Offensive. He provided a critical assessment of the American military intervention in Vietnam, arguing that the war was having a devastating effect on both the Vietnamese and Americans. He argued that the Tet Offensive proved once and for all that the war was unwinnable. The only sensible course was to withdraw all American forces from Vietnam. An influential member of the Democratic Party, Kennedy's denunciation put him in direct opposition to the war policies of Democratic president Lyndon Johnson and provided him with a platform with which to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968.

Defining the Moment

In many respects, Kennedy's "Unwinnable War" speech represented a dramatic shift in his views. As a close advisor to his brother, John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy had supported American aid to South Vietnam in the early 1960s. His support for the war continued during the first years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, even as Johnson sent hundreds of thousands of American combat troops to fight in the south against anti-government communist forces.

Kennedy's relationship with Johnson was complex. Although Johnson appreciated Kennedy's earlier support for escalation, he was also paranoid about his potential influence. Johnson thought that Kennedy's views on Vietnam were far more hawkish than his own. He feared that if he did not aggressively fight the war, Kennedy would use it as an opportunity to criticize him, undercut his support, and improve his own popularity among democrats.

Over time, Kennedy became more critical of American involvement in the war, but he largely kept his criticisms to himself as he did not want to appear disloyal or create divisions within the Democratic Party. Kennedy's "Unwinnable War" speech was the first time he publicly called for an end to the war. His comments were largely a reaction to the Tet Offensive. For months, the Johnson administration had told the American people that the United States was winning the war and that it would be over soon. On January 30, 1968, the Vietnamese New Year, the National Liberation Front (NLF) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) conducted a series of coordinated attacks against important and symbolic military and civilian targets throughout South Vietnam. As scenes of insurgents attacking the US embassy flashed across millions of American TV screens, any hope that the war would soon be over was permanently broken. Kennedy's speech was meant to address this new and troubling reality. His criticisms of the war were likely shared by many Americans listening who had similarly concluded that the events of the past days had proven once and for all that the Vietnam War was in fact an unwinnable war.

Biography

Born in Brookline, Massachusetts on November 20, 1925, Robert F. Kennedy was not only the brother of President John F. Kennedy, but also an influential political actor in his own right. After military service in

World War II, Kennedy earned a law degree from the University of Virginia and served as council for several congressional committees during the 1950s. When his older brother was elected president in 1960, Kennedy was appointed attorney general of the United States. He was one of his brother's closest advisors and, as attorney general, played an instrumental role in determining the Kennedy administration's response to the civil rights movement. In 1964, Kennedy was elected to the US Senate. He had long had reservations about Johnson's policy in Vietnam, but after the Tet Offensive began in late January 1968, he publicly expressed his opposition to the war. On March 31, 1968, he announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. After winning several state Democratic primaries, he was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Our enemy, savagely striking at will across all of South Vietnam, has finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances, even from ourselves. But a short time ago we were serene in our reports and predictions of progress.

The Vietcong 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 the commanding general of our own great forces.

No one can predict the exact shape or outcome of the battles now in progress, in Saigon or at Khesanh. Let us pray that we will succeed at the lowest possible cost to our young men.

But whatever their outcome, the events of the last two weeks have taught us something. For the sake of those young Americans who are fighting today, if for no other reason, the time has come to take a new look at the war in Vietnam, not by cursing the past but by using it to illuminate the future.

And the first and necessary step is to face the facts. It is to seek out the austere and painful reality of Vietnam, freed from wishful thinking, false hopes and sentimental dreams. It is to rid ourselves of the "good company," of those illusions which have lured us into the deepening swamp of Vietnam.

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.

It is said the Vietcong will not be able to hold the cities. This is probably true. But they have demonstrated despite all our reports of progress, of government strength and enemy weakness, that half a million American soldiers with 700,000 Vietnamese allies, with total command of the air, total command of the sea, backed by huge resources and the most modern weapons, are unable to secure even a single city from the attacks of an enemy whose total strength is about 250,000. . . .

For years we have been told that the measure of our success and progress in Vietnam was increasing security and control for the population. Now we have seen that none of the population is secure and no area is under sure control.

Four years ago when we only had about 30,000 troops in Vietnam, the Vietcong were unable to mount the assaults on cities they have now conducted against our enormous forces. At one time a suggestion that we protect enclaves was derided. Now there are no protected enclaves.

This has not happened because our men are not brave or effective, because they are. It is because we have misconceived the nature of the war: It is because we have sought to resolve by military might a conflict whose issue depends upon the will and conviction of the South Vietnamese people. It is like sending a lion to halt an epidemic of jungle rot.

This misconception rests on a second illusion—the illusion that we can win a war which the South Vietnamese cannot win for themselves.

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 for.

People will 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 boast, that single fact reveals the truth. We have an ally in name only. We support a government without supporters. Without the efforts of American arms that government would not last a day.

The third illusion is that the unswerving pursuit of military victory, whatever its cost, is in the interest of either ourselves or the people of Vietnam.

For the people of Vietnam, the last three years have meant little but horror. Their tiny land has been devastated by a weight of bombs and shells greater than Nazi Germany knew in the Second World War.

We have dropped 12 tons of bombs for every square mile in North and South Vietnam. Whole provinces have been substantially destroyed. More than two million South Vietnamese are now homeless refugees.

Imagine the impact in our own country if an equivalent number—over 25 million Americans—were wandering homeless or interned in refugee camps, and millions more refugees were being created as New York and Chicago, Washington and Boston, were being destroyed by a war raging in their streets.

Whatever the outcome of these battles, it is the people we seek to defend who are the greatest losers.

Nor does it serve the interests of America to fight this war as if moral standards could be subordinated to immediate necessities. Last week, a Vietcong suspect was turned over to the chief of the Vietnamese Security Services, who executed him on the spot—a flat violation of the Geneva Convention on the Rules of War.

The photograph of the execution was on front pages all around the world—leading our best and oldest friends to ask, more in sorrow than in anger, what has happened to America?

The fourth illusion is that the American national interest is identical with—or should be subordinated to—the selfish interest of an incompetent military regime.

We are told, of course, that the battle for South Vietnam is in reality a struggle for 250 million Asians—the beginning of a Great Society for all of Asia. But this is pretension.

We can and should offer reasonable assistance to Asia; but we cannot build a Great Society there if we cannot build one in our own country. We cannot speak extravagantly of a struggle for 250 million Asians, when a struggle for 15 million in one Asian country so strains our forces, that another Asian country, a fourth-rate power which we have already once defeated in battle, dares to seize an American ship and hold and humiliate her crew.

The fifth illusion is that this war can be settled in our own way and in our own time on our own terms. Such a settlement is the privilege of the triumphant: of those who crush their enemies in battle or wear away their will to fight.

We have not done this, nor is there any prospect we will achieve such a victory.

Unable to defeat our enemy or break his will—at least without a huge, long and ever more costly effort—we must actively seek a peaceful settlement. We can no longer harden our terms every time Hanoi indicates it may be prepared to negotiate; and we must be willing to foresee a settlement which will give the Vietcong a chance to participate in the political life of the country.

These are some of the illusions which may be discarded if the events of last week are to prove not simply a tragedy, but a lesson: a lesson which carries with it some basic truths.

First, that a total military victory is not within sight or around the corner; that, in fact, it is probably beyond our grasp; and that the effort to win such a victory will only result in the further slaughter of thousands of innocent and helpless people—a slaughter which will forever rest on our national conscience.

Second, that the pursuit of such a victory is not necessary to our national interest, and is even damaging that interest.

Third, that the progress we have claimed toward increasing our control over the country and the security of the population is largely illusory.

Fourth, that the central battle in this war cannot be measured by body counts or bomb damage, but by the extent to which the people of South Vietnam act on a sense of common purpose and hope with those that govern them.

Fifth, that the current regime in Saigon is unwilling or incapable of being an effective ally in the war against the Communists.

Sixth, that a political compromise is not just the best path to peace, but the only path, and we must show as much willingness to risk some of our prestige for peace as to risk the lives of young men in war.

Seventh, that the escalation policy in Vietnam, far from strengthening and consolidating international resistance to aggression, is injuring our country through the world, reducing the faith of other peoples in our wisdom and purpose and weakening the world's resolve to stand together for freedom and peace.

Eighth, that the best way to save our most precious stake in Vietnam—the lives of our soldiers—is to stop the enlargement of the war, and that the best way to end casualties is to end the war.

Ninth, that our nation must be told the truth about this war, in all its terrible reality, both because it is right—and because only in this way can any Administration rally the public confidence and unity for the shadowed days which lie ahead.

No war has ever demanded more bravery from our people and our Government—not just bravery under fire or the bravery to make sacrifices—but the bravery to discard the comfort of illusion—to do away with false hopes and alluring promises.

Reality is grim and painful. But it is only a remote echo of the anguish toward which a policy founded on illusion is surely taking us.

This is a great nation and a strong people. Any who seek to comfort rather than speak plainly, reassure rather than instruct, promise satisfaction rather than reveal frustration—they deny that greatness and drain that strength. For today as it was in the beginning, it is the truth that makes us free.

Document Analysis

As American and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces continued to battle communist forces throughout South Vietnam, Kennedy declared his opposition to the Vietnam War in a speech in Chicago on February 8, 1968. Kennedy justified his opposition, arguing that the war did not serve the interests of either the Vietnamese or the American people and was unwinnable. He also noted that the Johnson administration had purposely misled the American people about the true nature and status of the war.

Clearly, the Tet Offensive loomed large in his thinking. He maintained that the attacks had "shattered the mask of official illusion" that American forces were winning the war and that it would soon be over. He noted that while the NLF's immediate goal of overthrowing the South Vietnamese government would fail, thousands of American soldiers would ultimately be killed in the process. The Tet Offensive also proved that the Johnson administration's claim that communist forces were near defeat was nothing more than an illusion. The simple fact that the NLF was able to conduct coordinated attacks throughout the South was proof 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 the commanding general of our own great forces."

In Kennedy's estimation, the only way forward was to accept the reality of the war. First and foremost, the offensive proved once and for all that despite having more than half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, supported by 700,000 allied ARVN soldiers with the most modern weaponry and total control of the air and sea, communist forces could not be prevented from attacking nearly every city and important military installation in South Vietnam simultaneously. In the past, Johnson's administration had justified the need for more American forces in Vietnam with the argument that they were needed to control enemy forces and maintain security. Kennedy claimed that the recent offensive proved that no quantity of soldiers and resources would be enough to secure these goals.

Kennedy maintained that victory depended "upon the will and conviction of the South Vietnamese people." Yet they were largely led by corrupt military officials, whose dedication to popular rule was tenuous at best and whose primary concern was making money. Many Vietnamese had little confidence in their officials and, therefore, little interest in defending the country they represented. Additionally, American bombing

campaigns had done little to gain support from Vietnamese civilians especially as thousands were killed or injured. The South had more than 2 million refugees as a result of the bombing.

Equally important, the war not only placed American soldiers in the difficult position of fighting, and even dying, for a corrupt regime, it also diverted American resources from more pressing domestic needs. Kennedy noted that "we cannot build a Great Society there if we cannot build one in our own country." Even at the international level, Kennedy maintained that continued escalation of the war damaged American standing abroad, "reducing the faith of other peoples in our wisdom and purpose and weakening the world's resolve to stand together for freedom and peace."

Kennedy concluded that the only sensible reaction to the realities of the Vietnam War was to seek a peaceful settlement with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, or North Vietnam) and the NLF. He believed that a peace settlement was the only way to avoid continued suffering and the only way for the Johnson administration to regain the trust and confidence of the American people.

Essential Themes

Robert F. Kennedy served as an influential advisor during his brother's presidency. During this time he expressed support for American intervention in Vietnam, a position which he maintained during the first years of Johnson's presidency. By late 1967, Kennedy had become increasingly skeptical about American involvement in Vietnam, but he hesitated to express these views publicly for fear of appearing disloyal to the president. However, the Tet Offensive permanently destroyed Kennedy's confidence that the war could be won in a timely matter. In his mind, the fact that the Vietnamese communist forces could conduct such a significant military attack meant that the war was unwinnable. Thus, Kennedy's "Unwinnable War" speech represented a significant shift in how he viewed American military intervention. It also led a significant break in his relationship with Johnson's administration.

Kennedy's speech established his reputation as an antiwar politician. Overnight, he became the most prominent antiwar politician. In the months before the Tet Offensive antiwar Democrats had tried unsuccessfully to convince Kennedy to run against Johnson in the 1968 Democratic nomination race. When he turned them down, they turned to Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota. Quite unexpectedly, McCarthy came close to defeating Johnson in the New Hampshire primary on March 12, 1968. This close election motivated Kennedy to announce his entry into the race. Influenced at least in part by the entry of such a formidable candidate, Johnson announced on March 31 that he would not be seeking the Democratic nomination. After winning the California primary in early June, Kennedy established himself as a major contender for the nomination. However, his journey to the presidency was cut short when he was assassinated on June 5, 1968.

—Gerald F. Goodwin, PhD

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