

Remarks of the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., president of the University of Notre Dame, speaking at a student-sponsored rally held May 4, 1970, to discuss U.S. actions in Cambodia.

There has probably been no moment in modern history when our country has been more divided regarding its priorities and policy than at present. The reason for our assembly today is the most recent of a long and lugubrious series of decisions regarding the involvement of our country in Vietnam. I am reasonably sure that I speak for most of you in judging that our original involvement there was a mistake. Now more than 40,000 ended American lives later, and after 250,000 wounded Americans, and about 120 billion dollars of expenditure on death and destruction, most of us are willing to concede that what we have won, if anything of real substance, is not worth the expenditure of so many lives and so much of our resources that might have been more humanly and more fruitfully expended elsewhere at home and abroad. It is easy to judge the past, through Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Curiously, it was our Army-General President Eisenhower who refused initially to get involved. Since then, we have under three subsequent Presidents edged into the quicksand and consistently sunk deeper.

I cheered when President Johnson declared an end to the bombing and opened up the Paris talks. I cheered again when President Nixon announced the withdrawal of our soldiers. I had hoped that the time schedule would be quicker, but at least this was a beginning and I took it that we were committed, as a nation, to end this fruitless war.

Then came last week's decision to take yet another step into the quicksand. I have carefully read and re-read the President's statement and recognize both his sincerity and his courage in deciding as he did.

I do not agree with him, although he knows more about all this than I do and he has the responsibility of decision. Let me tell you why I do not agree.

Whatever one says about the silent majority, I take it as a fact of life that most young people--those who bear the actual burden of being wounded and of dying--do not see America's brightest future identified with this military adventure. One great need of this nation today is for unity of purpose, clear priority of values, lofty vision regarding where we might go together. Vietnam runs counter to all of these present desires. It has divided the nation--those favoring the Vietnam war being mainly those who have had and will have no part in the suffering and the dying--an easy option. It has drained our young life, in death and mutilation; it has wasted resources desperately needed in our nation and around the world for much more serious problems; it has cast us as a nation in the character of a pariah, supported in our aims by almost no one of importance in the world's opinion. We have paid for mercenaries, but they merit no other title.

I cringe to seem to malign our dead--may God rest them and console their families. At least their full sacrifice of life has demonstrated to us that never again must we engage in such a senseless endeavor. If only this has resulted, we all may thank them for their enormous contribution to our education as a nation and to the saving of many thousands of future lives.

Regarding our war prisoners, we can only commit ourselves, at whatever cost, to their safe return. We owe them nothing less than our complete dedication to their return as long-suffering and long-forgotten heroes.

What do we do now? I suspect that most of you, like myself, have already indulged yourselves in revulsion and anger at the announcement that we are now widening, rather than narrowing, the war, even while recognizing that the North Vietnamese widened it first. I have tried to understand the recurrent military logic that the war must be widened to be narrowed, but, with all the good will in the world, I fail to follow a logic that has grown more barren, more illogical, more contradictory, and more self-defeating in promising victory through defeat. In fact, the very terms victory and defeat have become a triumph of unreason. Military logic reached its high point when we were told of Vietnamese villages and villagers: We had to destroy them to free them.

As one lone American citizen speaking only for himself, I would rather be honest in admitting that this whole endeavor has been a nightmare and a travesty of what we stand for as a nation (My lai, for example, was the nadir)--however innocently and naively it was conceived as it began. There comes a time in life when moral righteousness is more important than empty victory. Evil may be, and often is, completely victorious, but does one stand tall in such a victory?

All of us want to be loyal and patriotic--but we also want to be morally clean in the process. No one of us enjoys being ambiguously or doubtfully moral and right and just, however powerful we may be as a nation. Our real power and strength bear on spiritual values, justice, and honor. If our national conscience bothers us, we must stop, look, and ponder our future.

For all of you who are young, this pause comes with special poignancy. No one of you wants to be a coward, a traitor, or an ungenerous American.

But if I read your conscience aright, neither do any of you want to be a partner to what you honestly conceive to be evil, unjust, or just plain wrong or idiotic.

What do you do? I have no inflammatory rhetoric to offer you. I must tell you honestly that violence here at home is the worst possible reaction to the violence you abhor in Southeast Asia. I must tell you that if the world is to be better than it presently is, you must prepare yourselves, intellectually, morally, and spiritually, to help make it better. Striking classes as some universities are doing, in the sense of cutting off your education, is the worst thing you could do at this time, since your education and your growth in competence are what the world needs most, if the leadership of the future is going to be better than the leadership of the past and present. Good leaders were never born of self-indulgence, or self-pity either.

This may seem rather undramatic advice to a generation that seeks instant answers to horribly complicated situations. As one of your elders, may I suggest that together we state our uncompromising revulsion to the course of this war and all current wars. May we commit ourselves with all the energy, talent, and dedication at our command to the cause of peace, with the hope and conviction that, as a nation, we stand ready to undertake whatever sacrifice and whatever creative initiative that peace requires of us right now.

If you want to put this conviction into words, may I suggest the following statement that I would be proud to sign with you and transmit to our President:

DECLARATION

As Americans, proud of our national traditions and committed to the best ideals of our country, we declare that we see these traditions and ideals best realized by not continuing our military operations in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

1. We favor the withdrawal of our military forces at the earliest moment and the designation by the Congress of an ultimate date for complete withdrawal.

2. We favor the most serious efforts to repatriate our American prisoners of war at whatever cost. The nation should recognize its deep debt to them and their families for their continued suffering.

3. We favor the use of our persons and our financial resources to rebuild a new and hopeful society in Vietnam and all of Indo-China that has known nothing but wars for so many years.

4. We suggest that the people of this whole area must ultimately make their own effort to achieve the kind of society that they want; that whatever the good will of our past and future efforts, it is the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians themselves who will create the conditions for peace and a better society, something that no force of arms or military imperialism from North or South, East or West, has yet created.

5. Most fundamentally, may we state our deep convictions that our national priorities today are not military, but human. Our nation is unnecessarily and bitterly divided on issues at home and abroad. If the war abroad can be quickly and effectively defused, then we can be united at home in our dedication to justice, to equality of opportunity, and to renewing the quality of American life--a task that will require our best

personal efforts and even more of our financial resources than those squandered by us in recent years on a largely frustrating and fruitless venture.

6. Lastly, we realize that the above points would sound like empty rhetoric if we did not stand ready--as we do--to commit our persons, our talents, our honor, and our futures to help work for a better America and a better world in a peaceful and non-violent manner.

(Signed)

T. M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.