**25 February 1967**

**The Casualties of the War in Vietnam,**

**The Nation Institute, Los Angeles**

I would like to speak to you candidly and forthrightly this afternoon about our present involvement in Vietnam. I have chosen as a subject, "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam." We are all aware of the nightmarish physical casualties. We see them in our living rooms in all of their tragic dimensions on television screens, and we read about them on our subway and bus rides in daily newspaper accounts. We see the rice fields of a small Asian country being trampled at will and burned at whim. We see grief stricken mothers with crying babies clutched in their arms as they watch their little huts burst forth into flames. We see the fields and valleys of battle being painted with human blood. We see the broken bodies left prostrate in countless fields. We see young men being sent home half men, physically handicapped and mentally deranged. Most tragic of all is the casualty list among children. So many Vietnamese children have been mutilated and incinerated by napalm and by bombs. A war in which children are incinerated, in which American soldiers die in mounting numbers is a war that mutilates the conscience. These casualties are enough to cause all men to rise up with righteous indignation and oppose the very nature of this war.   
  
But the physical casualties of the war in Vietnam are not alone catastrophes. The casualties of principles and values are equally disastrous and injurious. Indeed, they are ultimately more harmful because they are self perpetuating. If the casualties of principle are not healed, the physical casualties will continue to mount.   
  
One of the first casualties of the war in Vietnam was the Charter of the United Nations. In taking armed action against the Vietcong and North Vietnam, the United States clearly violated the United Nations charter which provides, in Chapter I, Article II (4):

All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.

and in Chapter VII, (39):

The Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression, and shall make recommendations or shall decide what measures shall be taken....to maintain or restore international peace and security.

It is very obvious that our government blatantly violated its obligation under the charter of the United Nations to submit to the Security Council its charge of aggression against North Vietnam. Instead we unilaterally launched an all out war on Asian soil. In the process we have undermined the purpose of the United Nations and caused its effectiveness to atrophy. We have also placed our nation in the position of being morally and politically isolated. Even the long standing allies of our nation have adamantly refused to join our government in this ugly war. As Americans and lovers of Democracy we should carefully ponder the consequences of our nation's declining moral status in the world.   
  
The second casualty of the war in Vietnam is the principle of self-determination. By entering a war that is little more than a domestic civil war, America has ended up supporting a new form of colonialism covered up by certain niceties of complexity. Whether we realize it or not our participation in the war in Vietnam is an ominous expression of our lack of sympathy for the oppressed, our paranoid anti-Communism, our failure to feel the ache and anguish of the Have Nots. It reveals our willingness to continue participating in neo-colonialist adventures.   
  
A brief look at the back ground and history of this war reveals with brutal clarity the ugliness of our policy. The Vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence in 1945 after a combined French and Japanese occupation, and before the Communist revolution in China. They were led by the now well known Ho Chi Minh. Even though they quoted the American Declaration of Independence in their own document of freedom, we refused to recognize them. Instead, we decided to support France in its reconquest of her former colony. With that tragic decision we rejected a revolutionary government seeking self-determination, and a government that had been established not by China, for whom the Vietnamese have no great love, but by clearly indigenous forces that included some Communists.   
  
For nine years following 1945 we denied the people of Vietnam the right to independence. For nine years we financially supported the French in their abortive effort to re-colonize Vietnam. Before the end of the war we were meeting 80% of the French war costs. Even before the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, they began to despair of their reckless action, but we did not. We encouraged them with our huge financial and military supplies to continue the war even after they had lost the will.   
  
When a negotiated settlement of the war was reached in 1954, through the Geneva Accord, it was done against our will. After doing all that we could to sabotage the planning for the Geneva Accord, we finally refused to sign it.   
  
Soon after this we helped install Ngo Dhim Diem. We supported him in his betrayal of the Geneva Accord and his refusal to have the promised 1956 elections. We watched with approval as he engaged in ruthless and bloody persecution of all opposition forces. When Diem's infamous actions finally led to the formation of The National Liberation Front, the American public was duped into believing that the civil rebellion was being waged by puppets from Hanoi. As Douglas Pike wrote: "In horror, Americans helplessly watched Diem tear apart the fabric of Vietnamese society more effectively than the Communists had ever been able to do it. It was the most efficient act of his entire career."   
  
Since Diem's death we have actively supported military dictatorships all in the name of fighting for freedom. When it became evident that these regimes could not defeat the Vietcong, we began to steadily increase our forces, calling them 'military advisors' rather than fighting soldiers.   
  
Today we are fighting an all-out war, undeclared by Congress. We have well over 500,000 American servicemen fighting in that benighted and unhappy country. American planes based in other countries are bombing the territory of their neighbor.   
  
The greatest irony and tragedy of all is that our nation, which initiated so much of the revolutionary spirit of the modern world, is now cast in the mold of being an arch anti-revolutionary. We are engaged in a war that seeks to turn the clock of history back and perpetuate white colonialism.   
  
A third casualty of the war in Vietnam is the Great Society. This confused war has played havoc with our domestic destinies. Despite feeble protestations to the contrary, the promises of the Great Society have been shot down on the battlefield of Vietnam. The pursuit of this widened war has narrowed domestic welfare programs, making the poor, white and Negro, bear the heaviest burdens both at the front and at home.   
  
While the anti-poverty program is cautiously initiated and zealously supervised, billions are liberally expended for this ill-considered war. The recently revealed misestimate of the war budget amounts to ten billions of dollars for a single year. This error alone is more than five times the amount committed to anti-poverty programs. The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities. The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.   
  
If we reversed investments and gave the armed forces the anti-poverty budget, the generals could be forgiven if they walked off the battlefield in disgust. Poverty, urban problems and social progress generally are ignored when the guns of war become a national obsession.   
  
It is estimated that we spend $322,000 for each enemy we kill, while we spend in the so-called war on poverty in America only about $53 for each person classified as 'poor'. And much of that $53 goes for salaries of people who are not poor. We have escalated the war in Vietnam and de-escalated the skirmish against poverty. It challenges the imagination to contemplate what lives we could transform if we were to cease killing.   
  
At this moment in history it is irrefutable that our world prestige is pathetically frail. Our war policy excites pronounced contempt and aversion virtually everywhere. Even when some national governments, for reasons of economic and diplomatic interest, do not condemn us, their people in surprising measure have made clear they do not share the official policy.   
  
Another casualty of the war in Vietnam is the humility of our nation. Through rugged determination, scientific and technological progress and dazzling achievements, America has become the richest and most powerful nation in the world. But honesty impels me to admit that our power has often made us arrogant. We feel that our money can do anything. We arrogantly feel that we have everything to teach other nations and nothing to learn from the. We often arrogantly feel that we have some divine, messianic mission to police the whole world. We are arrogant in not allowing young nations to go through the same growing pains, turbulence and revolution that characterized our history. We are arrogant in our contention that we have some sacred mission to protect people from totalitarian rule, while we make little use of our power to end the evils of South Africa and Rhodesia, and while we are in fact supporting dictatorships with guns and money under the guise of fighting Communism.   
  
We are arrogant in professing to be concerned about the freedom of foreign nations while not setting our own house in order. Many of our Senators and Congressmen vote joyously to appropriate billions of dollars for war in Vietnam, and these same Senators and Congressmen vote loudly against a Fair Housing Bill to make it possible for a Negro veteran of Vietnam to purchase a decent home. We arm Negro soldiers to kill on foreign battlefields, but offer little protection for their relatives from beatings and killings in our own South. We are willing to make the Negro 100% of a citizen in warfare, but reduce him to 50% of a citizen on American soil. Of all the good things in life the Negro has approximately one half those of whites, of the bad he has twice that of whites. Thus, half of all Negroes live in substandard housing and Negroes have half the income of whites. When we turn to the negative experiences of life, the Negro has a double share. The infant mortality rate is double that of whites. There are twice as many Negroes in combat in Vietnam at the beginning of 1967 and twice as many Negro soldiers died in action (20.6%) in proportion to their numbers in the population as whites.   
  
All of this reveals that our nation has not yet used its vast resources of power to end the long night of poverty, racism and man's inhumanity to man. Enlarged power means enlarged peril if there is not concomitant growth of the soul. Constructive power is the right use of strength. Our arrogance can be our doom. It can bring the curtain down on our national drama. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. We are challenged in these turbulent days to use our power to speed up the day when "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain."   
  
A fifth casualty of the war in Vietnam is the principle of dissent. An ugly repressive sentiment to silence peace seekers depicts advocates of immediate negotiation and persons who call for a cessation of bombings in the north as quasi-traitors, fools and venal enemies of our soldiers and institutions. When those who stand for peace are so vilified it is time to consider where we are going and whether free speech has not become one of the major casualties of the war.   
  
Curtailment of free speech is rationalized on grounds that American tradition forbids criticism of our government when the nation is at war. More than a century ago when we were in a declared state of war with Mexico, a first term Congressman by the name of Abraham Lincoln stood in the halls of Congress and fearlessly and scathingly denounced that war. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois had not heard of this tradition or he was not inclined to respect it. Nor had Thoreau and Emerson and many other philosophers who shaped our democratic traditions.   
  
A sixth casualty of the war in Vietnam is the prospect of mankind's survival. This war has created the climate for greater armament and further expansion of destructive nuclear power. One of the most persistent ambiguities that we face is that everybody talks about peace as a goal. However, it does not take sharpest-eyed sophistication to discern that while everybody talks about peace, peace has become practically nobody's business among the power wielders. Many men cry Peace! Peace! but they refuse to do the things that make for peace.   
  
The large power blocs of the world talk passionately of pursuing peace while burgeoning defense budgets bulge, enlarging already awesome armies, and devising even more devastating weapons. Call the roll of those who sing the glad tidings of peace and one's ears will be surprised by the responding sounds. The heads of all of the nations issue clarion calls for peace yet these destiny determiners come accompanied by a band and brigand of national choristers, each bearing unsheathed swords rather than olive branches.   
  
So when I see in this day the leaders of nations talking peace while preparing for war, I take frightful pause. When I see our country today intervening in what is basically a civil war, destroying hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese children with napalm, leaving broken bodies in countless fields and sending home half men, mutilated, mentally and physically. When I see the recalcitrant unwillingness of our government to create the atmosphere for a negotiated settlement of this awful conflict by halting bombings in the north and agreeing to talk with the Vietcong, and all this in the name of pursuing the goal of peace, I tremble for our world. I do so not only from dire recall of the nightmares wreaked in the wars of yesterday, but also from dreadful realization of today's possible nuclear destructiveness, and tomorrow's even more damnable prospects.   
  
The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead a maimed of past wars?   
  
President John F. Kennedy said on one occasion, "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put and end to mankind." Wisdom born of experience should tell us that war is obsolete. There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminates even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so-called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war, God forbid, will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to ultimate death. So if modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war, he will transform his earthly habitat into an inferno such as even the mind of Dante could not imagine.   
  
Let me say finally that I oppose the war in Vietnam because I love America. I speak out against it not in anger but with anxiety and sorrow in my heart, and above all with a passionate desire to see our beloved country stand as the moral example of the world. I speak out against this war because I am disappointed with America. There can be no great disappointed with our failure to deal positively and forthrightly with the triple evils of racism, extreme materialism and militarism. We are presently moving down a dead-end road that can lead to national disaster.   
  
It is time for all people of conscience to call upon America to return to her true home of brotherhood and peaceful pursuits. We cannot remain silent as our nation engages in one of history's most cruel and senseless wars. During these days of human travail we must encourage creative dissenters. We need them because the thunder of their fearless voices will be the only sound stronger than the blasts of bombs and the clamor of war hysteria.   
  
Those of us who love peace must organize as effectively as the war hawks. As they spread the propaganda of war we must spread the propaganda of peace. We must combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement. We must demonstrate, teach and preach, until the very foundations of our nation are shaken. We must work unceasingly to lift this nation that we love to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humaneness.   
  
I have tried to be honest. To be honest is to confront the truth. To be honest is to realize that the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and moments of comfort, but where he stands in moments of challenge and moments of controversy. However unpleasant and inconvenient the truth may be, I believe we must expose and face it if we are to achieve a better quality of American life.   
  
Just the other day, the distinguished American historian, Henry Steele Commager, told a Senate Committee: "Justice Holmes used to say that the first lesson a judge had to learn was that he was not God...we do tend perhaps more that other nations, to transform our wars into crusades...our current involvement in Vietnam is cast, increasingly, into a moral mold...It is my feeling that we do not have the resources, material, intellectual or moral, to be at once an American power, a European power and an Asian power."   
  
I agree with Mr. Commager. And I would suggest that there is, however, another kind of power that America can and should be. It is a moral power, a power harnessed to the service of peace and human beings, not an inhumane power unleashed against defenseless people. All the world knows that America is a great military power. We need not be diligent in seeking to prove it. We must now show the world our moral power.   
  
We still have a choice today, non-violent co-existence or violent co-annihilation. History will record the choice we made. It is still not too late to make the proper choice. If we decide to become a moral power we will be able to transform the jangling discords of this world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. If we make the wise decision we will be able to transform our pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of peace. This will be a glorious day. In reaching it we can fulfill the noblest of American dreams.