

231 Remarks Following Initial Meeting With President Thieu at Midway Island. June 8, 1969

Mr. President:

I want to take this opportunity officially to welcome you to this meeting at Midway and to tell you how much I have appreciated the opportunity to talk with you again.

We met on two occasions in your country. This is the first time we have had the chance to talk in our present capacities as heads of our Governments and Chiefs of State.

Our meeting this morning has taken approximately 2 hours. We will continue our private discussion through the noon hour, before meeting the larger group, including the Secretary of State, and their opposite numbers, for approximately an hour and a half, later in the afternoon.

The communiqué at the end of the day, which will be issued at approximately 4, will cover the wide range of subjects that the President and I have discussed. Among those this morning were these: the progress of the talks in Paris; the situation in Vietnam in a number of areas; the pacification program, where I received a very encouraging report from the President; the plans for what seems to me a very important land reform program, which will be implemented in South Vietnam by President Thieu and his Government; and the progress insofar as the conduct of the war is concerned.

In addition to these subjects, all of which will be covered in the communiqué which will be given to you later this afternoon, the President and I had a substantial discussion with regard to the present situation insofar as the training of South

Vietnamese Armed Forces are concerned. And as a result of that discussion, we reached a decision which I should like to report to you now, and President Thieu will also express his views with regard to this decision.

President Thieu informed me that the progress of the training program and the equipping program for South Vietnamese forces had been so successful that he could now recommend that the United States begin to replace U.S. combat forces with Vietnamese forces. This same assessment was made by General Abrams when he reported to me last night and this morning.

As a consequence of the recommendation by the President and the assessment of our own commander in the field, I have decided to order the immediate redeployment from Vietnam of a division equivalent of approximately 25,000 men.

This troop replacement will begin within the next 30 days and it will be completed by the end of August. During the month of August and at regular intervals thereafter, we shall review the situation, having in mind the three criteria that I have previously mentioned with regard to troop replacement:

First, the progress insofar as the training and equipping of South Vietnamese forces; second, progress in the Paris peace talks; and third, the level of enemy activity.

I will announce plans for further replacements as decisions are made. As replacement of U.S. forces begins, I want to emphasize two fundamental principles:

No actions will be taken which threaten the safety of our troops and the troops of our allies; and second, no action will be taken which endangers the attainment of our objective, the right of self-determination for the people of South Vietnam.

It is significant to note that it was just 27 years ago that the Battle of Midway, which history records as one of the major turning points in World War II, came to a conclusion. I believe that the decision made at Midway today, and which we are announcing at this time, marks a significant step forward in achieving our goal of protecting the right of self-determination for the people of South Vietnam, and in bringing lasting peace to the Pacific.

President Thieu, I know that the members of the press would like to hear your views on our discussions as well.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:40 p.m. at the residence of Capt. Albert S. Yesenky, Commanding Officer of the U.S. Naval Station on Midway Island.

Following the President's remarks, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam spoke as follows:

Thank you, Mr. President.

Once again I would like to thank you most sincerely for your very kind words and your cordial welcome. It is a great pleasure for me to meet with President Nixon on this island in the middle of the Pacific.

It's our honest hope that the Pacific will become a vast community of free nations living in peace, prosperity, and brotherhood.

Ladies and gentlemen, as everyone knows, this ocean was named after peace because the first navigators were fortunate enough to sail over peaceful waves. But other navigators subsequently found out that this name can be at times only a pious hope. They knew they had to rely on their strength, determination, and

perseverance when they run into stormy weather.

But after the tempest and typhoon, the sun always rises over the immense stretch of the blue waters.

We are, therefore, always confident of the bright and beautiful tomorrow.

So, Mr. President, once again I look forward very much to my exchange of views with you on our common efforts to establish a long-lasting peace and freedom in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia.

Now, I come to a more substantial matter, that is, what President Nixon just said to you.

As you know, ladies and gentlemen, as I have announced many times in the past 12 months, it has been the constant purpose of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam to shoulder an increasing share in the struggle to defend freedom in Vietnam and to alleviate the burden nobly assumed by the United States in participating with us in this struggle. We have made continued efforts in that direction.

And in the past months the strengthening of the Vietnamese Armed Forces through general mobilization, and the rapid progress on the pacification and the rural development, have made it possible for me to inform President Nixon that the Armed Forces of Vietnam are now able to start the process of the replacement of the American forces.

And the equivalent of one U.S. combat division will be replaced by Vietnamese troops. That first replacement will start in July and will be completed the end of August. Further replacements of American troops will be considered at regular intervals in the light of the three criteria that President Nixon has decided. That means the progress in training and equipment of Vietnamese Armed Forces; secondly, the level of Communist hostility; and thirdly, the progress which can be made in Paris talks.

Ladies and gentlemen, on this occasion I would like, once again, in the name of the Vietnamese people, to express our deep gratitude for the sacrifice generously accepted by the American people in joining us in the defense of freedom in Vietnam.

Thank you.