

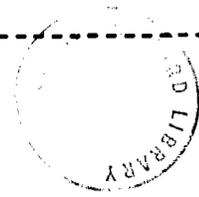
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THE WHITE HOUSE



ADDITIONAL REMARKS BY PRESIDENT FORD  
IN HIS ADDRESS TO THE 75th ANNUAL VFW CONVENTION  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS - MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 1974

As Minority Leader of the House and recently as Vice President, I stated my strong conviction that unconditional blanket amnesty for anyone who illegally evaded or fled military service is wrong. It is wrong.

Yet in my first words as President of all the people, I acknowledged a Power higher than the people, who commands not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy.

Unlike my last two predecessors, I did not enter this office facing the terrible decisions of a foreign war. But, like President Truman and President Lincoln before him, I found on my desk, where the buck stops, the urgent problem of how to bind up the Nation's wounds. And I aim to do that.

As a lawyer, I believe our American system of justice is fundamentally sound. As President, I will work within it.

As a former Naval Reservist I believe our system of military justice is fundamentally sound. As Commander-in-Chief, I will work within it.

As a former Congressman who championed it, I believe the concept of an all-volunteer armed force is fundamentally sound and will work much better than peacetime conscription.

Accordingly in my first week at the White House Office, I directed the Attorney General of the United States and the Secretary of Defense to report personally to me, before September 1, on the status of some 50,000 of our countrymen convicted, charged, under investigation or still sought for violations of the Selective Services Act or the Uniform Code of Military Justice -- offenses loosely described as desertion and draft-dodging.

These two Cabinet members are to consult with other government officials concerned and communicate to me their unvarnished views and those of the full spectrum of American opinion on this controversial question, consolidating the known facts and legal precedents.

I will then decide how best to deal with the different kinds of cases. There are differences. Decisions of my Administration will make any future penalties fit the seriousness of the individual's mistake.

Only a fraction of such cases relate directly to Vietnam, from which the last American combatant was withdrawn over a year ago by President Nixon.

But all, in a sense, are casualties; still abroad or absent without leave from the real America.

(MORE)

I want them to come home, if they want to work their way back.

One of my last official duties as Vice President, perhaps the hardest, was to present posthumously 14 Congressional Medals of Honor to the parents, widows and children of fallen Vietnam heroes.

As I studied their records of supreme sacrifice, I kept thinking how young they were.

The few citizens of our country who, in my judgment, committed the supreme folly of shirking their duty at the expense of others, were also very young. All wars are the glory and the agony of the young.

In my judgment, these young Americans should have a second chance to contribute their fair share to the rebuilding of peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

So I am throwing the weight of my Presidency into the scales of justice on the side of leniency. I foresee their earned re-entry into a new atmosphere of hope, hard work, and mutual trust.

I will act promptly, fairly and firmly, in the same spirit that guided Abraham Lincoln and Harry Truman. I reject amnesty and I reject revenge.

As men and women whose patriotism has been tested and proved, I want your help. I ask all Americans who ever asked for goodness and mercy in their lives, who ever sought forgiveness for trespasses, to join in rehabilitating all the casualties of all the tragic conflicts that are past.

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