

So much for the Canadian position in relation to the conflict in Vietnam.

It is now almost exactly two years since the major parties to the Vietnam conflict began publicly to define their positions in regard to a settlement of the Vietnam conflict. In the case of the United States, I would date that process as having been initiated by President Johnson in his address at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, when he first announced the willingness of the United States to enter into unconditional discussions with the other side. Almost by coincidence, the first public definition of the position of the Government of North Vietnam was given by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong on the following day -- that is, April 8, 1965 -- in a report to the North Vietnamese National Assembly. The position then set forth took the form of the now familiar four points to which, to my knowledge, the Government of North Vietnam remains firmly committed.

In a sense, therefore, it may be said that a process of public negotiation has been in progress between these two governments over the past 24 months. We have regarded this process as useful and encouraging. At the same time, we have always recognized that there were limits to this process and that, sooner or later, efforts would have to be made by third parties to bring the two sides into some form of direct contact.

As the Committee is aware, that was the essential purpose of the two missions which Mr. Chester Ronning undertook on behalf of the Canadian Government in March and June of 1966. Put in its simplest terms, what we asked Mr. Ronning to explore in the course of those two visits was whether there was any minimal basis on which it might be possible to arrange for bilateral contact between representatives of the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam without commitments of any kind on either side. This seemed to us at the time, and still seems to us, to be a valid approach. The issues at stake in Vietnam are such that no third party could probably presume to negotiate them on behalf of one side or the other. Nor, I think, would such a course be acceptable to the parties to the present conflict. And if that is so, the conclusion which necessarily follows is that the efforts of third parties are best directed towards enabling the parties themselves to enter into such a negotiation at the earliest possible time and before the mounting lack of confidence on both sides makes the possibilities of peaceful accommodation in Vietnam recede beyond reach.

In the discussions which Mr. Ronning had with the Prime Minister and other senior personalities of North Vietnam, it became apparent to us that, as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned, the bombing of North Vietnam represented the key to any efforts which might be made to bring the two sides into direct informal contact. This conclusion, which we reached in the light of Mr. Ronning's first visit to North Vietnam in March of last year, has since been borne out in the official public statements of the Government of North Vietnam. I think the Committee might find it helpful, therefore, if I were to try to say something more about the North Vietnamese position on this subject as I understand it.