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NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY THE
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS, THE HONOURABLE MITCHELL SHARP,
TO THE EMPIRE CLUB, ROYAL YORK HOTEL,
TORONTO, THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 1973

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be your guest today. Your President's timely invitation has given me the opportunity to speak to you on the subject which is most on my mind. With my tropical suits not yet back from the cleaners, I expect that you too would wish me to say something about Viet-Nam and my recent visit.

However, I do not think that it is really possible to appreciate the difficulties of Canada's role in the new Commission and the dilemmas about continued participation without some background on the long years of Canadian involvement in Indo-China. This involvement reaches back almost 19 years -- to the International Conference convened in Geneva in 1954 by Great Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, France and China. You may recall that this Conference followed the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. This was the culmination of eight years of hostilities against the French Colonial Power by Vietnamese Nationalists -- under the Communist leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the military leadership of General Giap. The task of that Geneva Conference of 1954 was to establish a peace settlement which might prepare the way for free elections and the eventual reunification of North and South Viet-Nam -- objectives which, I think you will agree, have a familiar ring.

The Conference set up an international supervisory group known as the International Commission for Supervision and Control. Poland, India and Canada were invited to be its members. This body was despatched to Indo-China with the responsibility to report -- and in this way it was hoped to deter violations of the cease-fire. It was also intended that the Commission would play a role in the supervision of free elections.

In its first year of operation, the old ICC established a good record with some notable achievements. Much of this useful work was facilitating the movement of refugees from North to South and the regroupment of opposing military forces.

By the end of 1954, there were 14 teams located at sites in both North and South Viet-Nam. At that time there were some 200 Canadians in the ICC -- about two-thirds of the number now serving with the new Commission. The task of the old ICC, at least at the beginning, was made easier by the fact that the cease-fire line was a more meaningful division. The Viet Minh, or Communist troops, in the South largely withdrew to the North. The leopard spots, which bedevil the present situation, were not a factor. But of more importance was the fact that at this stage, the principal parties wanted the agreement to work.

However, the early successes of the ICC were not repeated. Commitments to the agreement gradually eroded and the International Commission slid into irrelevance. This was not because Canada had failed its responsibilities as a member of the Commission but largely because the adversaries in Viet-Nam repeatedly and violently broke the terms of the International Agreement. From watching over a peace it found itself watching over a war.

You are familiar with the tragic escalation of this war -- the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and innocent persons killed and maimed, the damage wrought on people in every sense -- socially, morally, economically and psychologically.

As the Commission could do nothing to halt hostilities you may ask, "Why did we stay on with Canadians exposed to the hazards of war in both Hanoi and Saigon?" Some Canadians did lose their lives in Indo-China. What possible

Canadian or Vietnamese or humanitarian interest could we serve? Many have asked that question. It is asked of me frequently both in and out of the House of Commons.

I can assure you that successive Canadian Governments had serious misgivings about staying on. We did so because we knew that ultimately the war must come to an end -- that it was unlikely one side or the other would obtain a clear victory, and that in these circumstances any peace supervisory machinery, however, rusty, might be needed and needed quickly. If in this small way we could help to facilitate a settlement of the war, we were prepared to swallow our frustrations and keep on a skeleton staff which could spring to life, perhaps in a revised form, when a cease-fire was reached. But once over that road has been enough.

There were other reasons too. Although sometimes wrongly impugned as an American stooge, Canada and Canadian honesty in its work in Viet-Nam was generally respected by all sides. Some of the parties to the war indicated that they wanted us to stay on. They also wanted an international presence, symbolic of the old settlement to remain intact.

This brings us almost up to date. Let us look more closely at what has happened over the past three months:

- the intensive bombing of North Viet-Nam ceased;
- negotiations for a cease-fire resumed in Paris;
- a cease-fire agreement was signed by the four parties -- the Republic of Viet-Nam or South Viet-Nam, the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam or North Viet-Nam, the United States and the Viet Cong;
- Canada was formally invited to participate in the new peace supervisory commission along with Hungary, Poland and Indonesia;
- within hours of the signature of the agreement a Canadian delegation composed of members of my Department and the Department of National Defence, led by a senior Canadian Ambassador, Michel Gauvin, left for Saigon;
- an International Conference of 13 participants, including the Secretary General of the United Nations was convened in Paris at the end of last month to consider and endorse the cease-fire agreement;
- I attended as the leader of the Canadian delegation and unexpectedly found myself a co-chairman of the Conference sessions;
- most recently talks between the Republic of Viet-Nam and the other South Vietnamese Party have opened in Paris.

I have spoken briefly of the frustrations of the old commission and if you have a sinking feeling that history -- insofar as the utility of the commission is concerned -- may be repeating itself, I may tell you that I share this anxiety.

Because of this concern and because of our experience on the old commission, as soon as the possibility arose that Canada might be invited to participate in a new commission -- we made it clear that we would only accept such an invitation if our conditions based on this experience were substantially met.

The first and fundamental condition was that the provisions for the operation of the new commission appear workable and offer some prospects of being effective. More specifically we stipulated:

- That the belligerent parties, the United States, South Viet-Nam, North Viet-Nam and the Viet Cong should be bound by the same agreements which set out the role and procedures of the new commission. This was one of the short-comings of the previous agreement -- neither Washington nor Saigon were parties to the 1954 agreement. The signatures of all of the belligerents were obtained in Paris.
- We sought a "continuing political authority" to which the commission or any of its members could report and consult and which would assume responsibility for the peace settlement as a whole. This took the form of an arrangement whereby the four Parties to the Paris Agreement, the belligerents themselves, are responsible for conveying to the participants in the Paris International Conference reports from the International Commission and the views of its individual members. This is not a fully satisfactory arrangement by any means. We would have preferred to have the United Nations provide the political authority.
- We also made clear that Canada could not participate unless invited to take part by all of the parties concerned. This was obtained. All of the parties asked us to take part.

On the basis of our past experience in Viet-Nam we put forward a number of suggestions which we considered would help to produce a more workable framework for the commission's activities. Certainly we were unhappy with some of the short-comings of the Agreement -- but this should not be allowed to obscure our fullest appreciation for those who laboured so hard to secure the basic Agreement itself.

With the signing of the cease-fire agreement in Paris we had to decide immediately whether or not to take part in the new international commission. As we did not wish to obstruct in any way the path toward a peace settlement and as it was too soon to determine whether arrangements for the Commission's operations would be workable, we agreed to take part for an initial period of 60 days.

In this time, which expires shortly, we have to complete our own evaluation of the effectiveness of the Commission both in terms of its specific tasks and as a welcome stabilizing presence.

The decision is important and it was my view that a personal, on-the-spot visit to the Commission and direct conversations with political leaders in Saigon and Hanoi would greatly assist me in making informed and responsible recommendations to Cabinet. It was also my view that this visit would assist members of the Opposition Parties to make their own judgements about an important area of Canadian foreign policy. The visit also afforded us an opportunity to form impressions about the Canadian role in Laos where we have been asked to expand our participation in a reactivated Commission.

As you know my invitation was not accepted by the Conservative Party but I was very glad to have with me parliamentarians from the other parties in the House and from the Senate.

With this group, a number of official advisers and 34 journalists, we set off from Ottawa a week ago Tuesday on a journey of 22,000 miles.

Our first major stop was Tokyo. I was anxious to discuss Viet-Nam with my Japanese colleague, Mr. Ohira, particularly as I felt the Japanese absence from the Paris Conference deprived those meetings of important and influential counsel. On arrival at Tokyo I was agreeably surprised to learn that the Prime Minister of Japan, Mr. Tanaka, also wished to see me. Both the Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister urged Canada to remain on the Commission despite the frustrations which they acknowledged. Their message was essentially "don't disturb the arrangements by withdrawal -- peace is too fragile". This was to be the prelude of advice which was consistently given to me by almost every political leader with whom I spoke during our visit.

From Tokyo we flew to Saigon arriving a week ago today. My first call was on the Foreign Minister, Tran Van Lam. Later that day I attended a reception given by Ambassador Gauvin. You probably saw press reports describing that reception as a "diplomatic coup". It was, I believe, the first time that all of the parties to the Agreement, including the principal representatives of the Viet Cong, the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and the four ICCS representatives had all come together under one roof in Saigon.

The following day after a thorough briefing by the Canadian delegation, we visited the compound of the old ICC where the civilian component of the new Commission is working. We were able to see for ourselves the deplorable physical conditions under which Canadians have worked in Saigon for almost two decades. Later that day I had discussions with President Nguyen Van Thieu and visited the military component of the Commission at Tan-Son-Nhut.

Our pace was already gathering a brisk momentum which was not to slacken until our departure from Hanoi three days later.

Saturday morning we flew to the regional headquarters of Can-Tho. Can-Tho is in the key Mekong Delta area, long and bitterly fought over as the rice bowl of Indo-China. This was a fascinating and illuminating experience. We received an excellent briefing from Canada's External Affairs and Military representatives and had discussions with members of the Joint Military Commission, as well as with Polish, Indonesian and Hungarian members of the Commission.

Land in the Mekong area is still hotly contested. The delta is quilted with leopard spots. We learned that since the cease-fire came into effect in January, some 7,000 incidents had been reported throughout South Viet-Nam. Some of these involved large-scale operations, possibly up to divisional strength. But from all of these incidents came only 31 requests for investigation -- and from these requests only two reports have emerged. The Commission's frustrations are very real indeed.

To illustrate some of the difficulties faced by the Canadian members, I would like to give you an example of a minor incident. A report was received that a vehicle had been blown up while travelling along a road in the area. After considerable difficulties within the Commission, agreement was finally reached to investigate. Canadians, who examined the site, concluded that the vehicle had been destroyed by a mine and, as the road is well travelled, also concluded that the mine must have been placed after the cease-fire took effect. The others agreed that it was a mine, but two members insisted that the mine must have been placed before the cease-fire.

After Can-Tho we flew to Saigon and were soon on our way to Vientiane, the capital of Laos. In Vientiane, after briefings with Canadian officials, I had a long conversation with the Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma. While recognizing a direct relationship between the war in Viet-Nam and the use of Laotian territory for military purposes, he was particularly anxious to ensure some measure of international involvement in the future of Laos through the reactivation of the old ICC. A cease-fire has been achieved. However, the two sides in Laos have not been able to find common ground for a military agreement on the modalities of disengagement and supervision. Until this takes place, it will not be possible for us to determine our response to the request for Canadian participation in a reactivated Laos Commission.

I also had discussions in Vientiane with representatives of the Pathet Lao. I raised with them the case of Lloyd Opper, the Canadian missionary who was seized in Laos last October. I was quite frankly shocked to hear General Phoun Sipraseuth tell me that Mr. Opper's release would be delayed until certain domestic political arrangements in Laos had been agreed. I replied in very plain language, making it clear to him that there could be no possible relationship between the continued imprisonment of a non-combatant Canadian citizen and political developments in that country. He promised to report my position to his superiors. I also raised this question with the political leaders in Hanoi. They too promised to look into it.

Sunday morning we had an early start for Hanoi. Shortly after our arrival in that city, I was able to have conversations with Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh. After these discussions my hosts offered a tour of the city.

As you would expect all of my talks with political leaders in Hanoi and Saigon centred upon the question of continued Canadian participation in the Commission.

As I have already indicated, the views of all the leaders with whom I spoke were to the effect that Canada should continue to serve on the Commission. Most of these leaders emphasized that the consequences of an early Canadian withdrawal would be far-reaching. I have also received similar views from the governments of the United States, Britain, Indonesia and China. I made no commitment to any of them at that time and I make no commitment now as to what our response will be, since the question is still before the Government.

While the advice to us had a common theme, I think it is relevant to point out that each Party had its own distinctive reasons for wishing us to stay on.

For reasons which are very understandable governments of countries not directly involved in Viet-Nam tend to suggest that any international presence is better than no international presence. For Canadians our 19 years in Viet-Nam have long since disabused us of any such illusions.

I found the attitudes of the leaders in South Viet-Nam very direct. They have no illusion that the ICCS would be able to discharge effectively the responsibilities set out in the Paris Agreement. I explained very frankly to the Vietnamese both in the South and in the North that the composition of the Commission made it extremely unlikely that the Commission would ever reach a finding unfavourable to North Viet-Nam or to its allies in the South. At the same time I said that Canada would not hesitate to support a finding detrimental to the position of the Republic of Viet-Nam.

The South Vietnamese leaders acknowledged this. However, they said that the important thing was to bring all points of view into the open. They also attached importance to the Commission's presence in connection with the political settlement.

In the North the political leaders replied to all of our questions by referring us to the terms of the Agreement. They regarded this as sacrosanct and like their counterparts in the South declared they intend to abide by the Agreement.

I asked Prime Minister Pham Van Dong which he regarded as having the higher priority, his country's desire for peace or the reunification of Viet-Nam as a whole. He replied that the question of priorities did not arise as strict observance of the Agreement would lead to peaceful unification.

It was clear from these conversations that both the North and the South are expecting quite different and in some ways contradictory results.

In my conversations with Foreign Minister Lam and President Thieu, I raised the question of civilian prisoners in South Viet-Nam. I urged them to consider the weight of public opinion in Canada and abroad on this matter. Both told me that they had already released five thousand civilian prisoners on the occasion of the recent lunar new year celebrations, and that they had provided a list of over five thousand additional civilian prisoners to the other South Vietnamese Party for release in accordance with the Paris Agreement and Protocols. Both went on to contrast their record on this issue with that of the other side. They told me that of the 60,000 South Vietnamese civilians missing and presumed captured by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, only two hundred or so had been included in the list required under the Paris Agreement and Protocols.

This short but intensive visit to four countries was arranged at very short notice. It was not a simple matter for governments particularly those in Indo-China with many urgent preoccupations, to make arrangements necessary to receive a Foreign Minister, his delegation and a large group of journalists. Yet everywhere we were met with great kindness and hospitality.

The arrangements were also an exacting test for Canadian Air Transport Command. For example, we have had no previous experience of the air field in Hanoi. Its runway is short and not intended to accommodate Boeing 707s. The pilots and crew overcame this problem and many others with extraordinary calm and skill.

If I appear to be passing out a lot of bouquets it is not to be diplomatic -- but because they are more than justified. Much credit must go to the Canadians on the ground in Indo-China. I was enormously impressed and proud of the efficiency and dedication of our people in Indo-China -- both civilians and military. Many of them are working 16 hours a day, seven days a week in appalling conditions. Their challenges and frustrations would be daunting on a weekly basis. Theirs are daily. The problems are not only those of a political and military character. Just as often they are administrative. It was soon abundantly clear to me that had it not been for these Canadians, it is doubtful that the ICCS would have been in any position to be even potentially effective.

I would not like to leave you with the impression that nothing has been achieved and that this enormous effort has all been in vain. However unsatisfactory we find the present situation, it is an obvious improvement over the situation that

existed before January 28. Prisoners of War on both sides are being released. Very soon the last American forces in Viet-Nam will have departed. The ICCS had its role to play in these developments and if it did nothing else but help to provide the framework within which these accomplishments were made possible that is ample justification.

You will have noted that the Canadian approach is cautious, but is also responsible -- responsible to Canadians who would not wish us to make reckless and unrealistic commitments and responsible to society at large which earnestly wishes an end to the bloodshed.

In conclusion I would emphasize that it has never been part of our mission in Viet-Nam to make peace. That can be done only by Vietnamese themselves. Others have tried without conspicuous success. We have no such ambitions. We had felt that our readiness to respond to the unanimous request that we participate in the ICCS at the beginning could help to give a start to the cease-fire -- imperfect as it might be. That it has done. What now must be decided is how much further we should go. It has been my object during the past few weeks to ensure that the Canadian public, the Parliament and the Government have the fullest possible information on which to base their judgement.