

The Eternal Diplomat and the Reluctant Warrior:

Canadian and American Vietnam Policies, 1964-1968”

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External Affairs Minister Paul Martin, speaking before the House in 1966, defended Canada's Vietnam policy as an autonomous construction that converged with but was not predicated on its neighbour. In the same speech he highlighted the dangerous threat posed by wars of national liberation. The consequences of a communist victory in Vietnam he warned, would gravely impact newly independent countries around the world and destabilize global security. Canada had a direct stake in the maintenance of an independent South Vietnam and for that reason he argued "in principle we appreciate and support the objectives and policy of the United States."<sup>i</sup>

The cold war had entered a new era of détente, but the threat of communism continued to propel foreign policy in Canada and America. However, each government did not uniformly interpret the threat of communism. America, leader of the free world, had genuinely staked the preservation of global security and its international reputation on a South Vietnamese victory. Canada based its national security on a restrained and rational American foreign policy, to preclude the more imminent threat of nuclear escalation. Paul Martin determinedly expressed that "[o]ur policy in this situation represents our own honest assessment of the position and is not a reflection in any way of pressure imposed on us by the United States..." However, it was Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson who articulated a more honest assessment of Canada's position when he publicly announced in 1965 that, "[w]e must protect and advance our national interests, but we should never forget that the greatest of these is peace and security. The achievement of this aim--- it is chastising to realize---does not depend on our policies so much as it does on those of our neighbour."<sup>ii</sup>

Canada role in the Vietnam War between 1964 and 1968 was inherently contradictory. It attempted to balance obligations in numerous arenas, but eventually the country was unable to reconcile incongruent responsibilities. Consequently,

Canada's role in Vietnam, following a flurry of questionable diplomatic activity in 1964 continuing into 1966, was rendered moribund. Canada's attempts to augment the large-scale American effort with diplomacy ultimately failed to contribute in a meaningful way to the latter's Vietnam policy. However, as the US became increasingly ensnared in the Vietnam quagmire, the inadequacies of Canadian contributions were vividly exposed. Diplomacy aimed at negotiations proved to be a hollow ambition as the spectre of war escalated during this critical period. Canada's limited utility in 1964 and 1965 necessitated its compliance with American policy; a trade-off deemed acceptable at the time. However, when the dissolute nature of Canada's diplomatic function became public knowledge and war escalated to unprecedented levels, Canadian core values took precedence over the potential dangers posed by a North Vietnamese victory. Having exhausted its diplomatic utility in Washington by 1965, and upon failing to contribute militarily, Canada's Vietnam record was marked by failure in Washington and failure at home. This failure is not highly visible or easily detectable because the popular Canadian collective memory tends to focus on Canada's military non-involvement in Vietnam and Pearson's infamous Temple speech. However, these points only camouflage the more pertinent observation, that Canada's failure to reconcile external threats with core values incapacitated its ability to fulfil allied commitments while concurrently damaging its domestic reputation.

In support of the argument outlined above the paper will proceed in the following manner. It will begin with a thorough overview of the historiography on Canada's role in Vietnam and its bilateral relations with the United States. This is a narrow yet hotly contested topic which has garnered considerable attention. The polarized nature of this debate makes it important to demonstrate where the position

forwarded in this paper is situated in the literature. Following the historiography, a brief outline of the historical context and a discussion of the national security approach will be provided to anchor the analysis. The body of the paper proceeds in chronological fashion divided into three broad temporal periods. The first extends from early 1964 until the Tonkin Gulf Crisis. In this stage America's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam is elaborated and within this context the Canadian contribution is examined. The role of Canadian diplomat Blair Seaborn as a third party intermediary between Hanoi and Washington and his delegation on the International Control Commission is examined. In both functions, Canada's questionable tactics employed in support of American interests will be analysed. The second temporal delineation begins with America's retaliatory air strikes against the north on February 7, 1965, which marked a critical date in the escalation of the war. Canada's dubious diplomatic role on the ICC will be examined, with specific emphasis on the issuance of the Minority report and the funnelling of vital politico-military intelligence to Washington. This section will also incorporate Prime Minister Pearson's Philadelphia Temple speech in which he conveyed a veiled critique of America's Vietnam policy. Canada's transition from diplomatic champion to public dissenter will be analysed in relation to the national security approach. Finally, the third section looks at Paul Martin's attempt to revive Canada's diplomatic role via Canadian diplomat Chester Ronning. However, the Canadian contribution by 1966 had been exhausted and this diplomatic initiative was unwelcome in Washington. The contradictory nature of Canada's role in Vietnam fully manifested itself in the third phase which witnessed the unhinging of Ottawa's delicate balancing act. Unable to simultaneously satisfy external and domestic responsibilities, Canada opted for a

middle ground policy that ultimately paralysed the administration's ability to influence Washington or to convincingly defend its diplomatic conduct.

The American intervention in Vietnam marked a new phase in a much longer conflict. France, the former colonial power of Indo China, relinquished control of the country in 1954. The same year an International Commission for Supervision and Control was established to monitor the implementation of and adherence to the Geneva Agreements. Canada reluctantly accepted membership on this tripartite commission.<sup>iii</sup> However, the commission was a political compromise from its inception. The troika body was composed of delegates from Poland, Canada and India, mirroring the Communist, Western and neutral spheres in the Cold War. Poland demonstrated unwavering support for the North Vietnamese. It is therefore unsurprising that Canada was naturally sympathetic to the South Vietnamese cause. The American presence in Southeast Asia also began in the 1950's via two avenues. The first was a U.S. engineered multilateral Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) complimented by the extension of bilateral aid to the 'free' states in the region.<sup>iv</sup> Ironically, as the world was entering a new era of détente and a Sino-Soviet split was emerging, America pursued its policy of containment with increased vigour. The strategy of containment was premised on the logic that should communism prevail in one location, it would germinate the region. Canada did not fundamentally disagree with the domino theory, or with the dangers of communism. However, it was the nascent nuclear capability of Communist China that presented a more imminent danger to Canadian security.<sup>v</sup>

Against this backdrop, America became increasingly committed to Vietnam under the auspices of defending South Vietnam's right to exist free of communist subversion. President Johnson continually argued that America did not have imperial

designs, but rather shouldered the perilous burden of leading and protecting the free world.<sup>vi</sup> A succession of coups and religious movements in South Vietnam created a precarious political environment, which obstructed American efforts. On the other side of the seventeenth parallel, Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN), increased its control over the north and covertly supported the effective Viet Cong insurgency. America responded with a policy of graduated military pressure and became incrementally entrenched in the country. Canada never contributed troops to the American effort but instead extended limited diplomatic and political support. From 1964 to 1968, the war reached disproportionate heights, as negotiations proved elusive, and resolve grew stronger. Various bombing hiatuses punctuated America's involvement. Instead of encouraging negotiations these pauses counterproductively increased military activity in their wake. America was operating from complex and somewhat irrational premises, where perception had surpassed reality. As a result, Washington found itself engulfed in the Vietnam quagmire.

Although Canada did not directly participate in the Vietnam War, its diplomatic involvement spawned a rich historiography on the subject. The traditionalist historical narrative depicts Canada as an honorable dissenter that pursued an independent foreign policy premised on a higher morality than that of its powerful southern neighbour. Lawrence Martin in his study of the relationships between *The Presidents and the Prime Ministers*, examines the tenuous Johnson-Pearson years from a traditionalist perspective. He concludes that following Pearson's courageous Temple Speech, there was a discernable bilateral rift premised on divergent Vietnam policies for the remainder of the leaders' tenures.<sup>vii</sup> As scholars probed deeper into Canada's conduct throughout the war a much different version of its' involvement in Vietnam emerged. The revisionist school, inaugurated by scholar

Charles Taylor, provided a damning account of Canada's conciliatory role towards the United States' Vietnam policy. Subsequent scholars, such as James Eayrs and Victor Levant, contributed to this 'complicity thesis'. As its name implies, revisionist scholars allege that Canada was an accomplice to America's dangerously flawed Vietnam policy. The major weakness in the complicity thesis is its reactionary nature premised on morality. Scholarly work that adheres to this school, challenges Canada's moral conduct on a number of grounds, including its partisan position on the tripartite ICC established to monitor the ceasefire and for producing weapons for the United States' effort in Vietnam under the Defense Production Sharing Act. However, assessing Canada's role in terms of moral prudence is overly simplistic and idealistic. This approach fails to situate the country's foreign policy in the cold war context. Situated next to the western hegemonic power, which was Canada's closest economic and military ally, forced Canada to assess its position in terms of self-interest rather than in exclusively moral terms.

Douglas A. Ross provides a valuable contribution to the historiographical debate, most notably by removing the moral dimension from the analysis, and approaching the matter with more objectivity. Ross, while not entirely discarding the notion of complicity pursues a line of reasoning that challenged the prevailing revisionist thesis when he published *In the Interests of Peace* in 1984. Ross argues that Canada successfully exercised an autonomous and traditional policy line in Vietnam which augmented and, most importantly, tempered America's more aggressive approach to the war. Pearson's objective was to constrain Lyndon Johnson who he believed was an amateur foreign policy practitioner operating under intense pressure from the hawks in the American administration.<sup>viii</sup> Under these conditions Canada was forced to compromise a degree of national honour, and therefore

morality, for the more salient objective of brokering a negotiated settlement of the war to dispel the possibility of nuclear escalation.<sup>ix</sup> While Ross still discerns a degree of Canadian subservience in deference to American policy, author Ramesh Thakur in his case study of the ICC, argues that Canada and America converged strategically in their determination to forestall Communist expansion. Furthermore, he argues that the idea of Canadian complicity is premised on the notion that Canada could actually have impacted American policy, which is a fallacious assumption. Moreover, the complicity thesis ignores Canada's honourable record on the Commission prior to the escalation of hostilities.<sup>x</sup>

A renewed and revised analysis of Canada's foreign policy during this period has recently emerged. This school again challenges the traditionalist and revisionist theories, putting forth a synthesis that is rooted in a more holistic historical context. Greg Donaghy's book *Tolerant Allies: Canada and the United States, 1963-1968* offers an alternative perspective to the Johnson-Pearson era. He focuses on the continental economic integration during this period. His central thesis is that America was an accommodating and patient neighbour contrary to the prevailing conclusion that this era marked a rift in bilateral relations. While Donaghy recognizes that Canada and America had different calculations of the risks presented to the West by Far East Asia, he does not conclude that foreign policy differences irreparably damaged relations in this period.<sup>xi</sup>

The debate has evolved over the course of thirty years, producing a synthesis that draws on the strengths of previous work. However, there are still many voids in the literature, specifically as regards Canada's impact on American foreign policy during Vietnam. Moreover, an in-depth analysis concerning the degree of Canadian complicity, the motivation propelling compliance, and the implications of compliance

warrant further objective attention. Finally, there is a perspective which has not been adequately developed in the literature, and that is Canada's failure to fulfil its allied commitment to the United States. This is a difficult position to adopt because of the moral gravity associated with the Vietnam War. However, it is hoped that the following study can approach the subject with an objectivity that recognizes but nevertheless excludes the moral dimension of the war. It is only in this manner, that Canada's conduct towards the United States can be accurately assessed in the period from 1964 to 1968. However, it should be noted that the moral dimension, as it affected domestic public opinion, will be incorporated into the analysis but morality as a foreign policy approach will not inform the basic premises of the argument.

### **National Security Approach applied to Canada and America**

This study on Canada's role during the Vietnam War and its impact on American policy will be framed in the national security paradigm. Diplomatic historian Marvin Leffler provides the following definition: "[n]ational security policy encompasses the decisions and actions deemed imperative to protect domestic core values from external threats."<sup>xii</sup> The advantage to employing the national security paradigm is the flexibility it awards the researcher by incorporating domestic and external factors into a mutually reinforcing synthesis. The external threats can be examined in a systemic fashion that integrates the international structure and dispersion of power within it, but it is also shaped by perceptions that are inherently rooted in domestic factors. Core values, as Leffler explains, generally incorporate material interests with intangibles such as ideology. Defense therefore, obviously includes the protection of territorial integrity but also the safeguarding of more fundamental interests such as political institutions, form of government and national cultural values.<sup>xiii</sup> This approach elucidates how foreign policy is often propelled,

molded and, of critical importance, limited by domestic factors. I will apply the national security paradigm to Canadian and American conduct, both in bilateral relations and in their respective Vietnam policies. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that Canada's initial Vietnam policy was premised on the maintenance of congenial Canadian-American relations. When this strategy damaged Canadian core values, the threat of strained bilateral relations was secondary to preserving Canada's domestic integrity. However, this almost imperceptible strategic shift was adopted too late and Ottawa was unable to fulfill either obligation.

The United States calculation that a communist take-over in South Vietnam would constitute a real threat to America's core values needs to be examined within a longer temporal context. The Second World War and the realization that the Soviet Union had acquired nuclear capability much sooner than the Washington had anticipated fundamentally altered the international structure. The threat to global security assumed a much different form premised on bi-polarity and Mutually Assured Destruction. The pivotal doctrinal tenet of American foreign policy, as embodied in President Truman's adoption of NSC-68 in 1950, was 'containment'. The Soviet threat was described both in material and ideological terms. As the policy paper enunciated: "The objectives of a free society are determined by its fundamental values and by the necessity for maintaining the material environment in which they flourish. Logically...the Kremlin's challenge to the United States is directed not only to our values but to our physical capacity to protect their environment."<sup>xiv</sup> The means to achieve this objective were military and economic preponderance to root out communist subversion wherever it appeared. By making national security synonymous with the circumvention of communism globally, America committed

itself to a strategy of 'perimeter defence'. Implicitly, America confronted every form of communist subversion with the same degree of immediacy and gravity.<sup>xv</sup>

America's commitments to South Vietnam had antecedents in President Eisenhower's administration that predicted Indo-China would provide the venue for the next Sino-Soviet confrontation. As early as 1956 and 1958 the National Security Council suggested that, "the national security of the United States would be endangered by Communist domination of mainland Southeast Asia," and furthermore, "the loss to Communist control of any single free country would encourage tendencies toward accommodation by the rest."<sup>xvi</sup> The domino theory, integral to the notion of containment, had a historical legacy in America's Southeast Asian policy. This rationale reasserted itself forcefully in the early 1960's under President Kennedy's administration. In a memorandum prepared by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, both advisers fervently forwarded the notion that South Vietnam was the lynchpin in Southeast Asia, and should Communism prevail, the rest of the region would move inexorably towards the Communist bloc. They argued that the loss of Vietnam would irreparably damage America's credibility and undermine its global commitments.<sup>xvii</sup> Kennedy appeared to have heeded these warnings and fulfilled America's commitment to protect Southeast Asia under the SEATO treaty of 1954. In one of the President's final speeches, Kennedy reaffirmed his determination to confront communism, reasoning that while Communism remained strong, "[t]he balance of power is still on the side of freedom. [Americans] are still the keystone in the arch of freedom."<sup>xviii</sup>

Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed the presidency following John F. Kennedy's assassination. Johnson notes in his memoirs that America's Vietnam policy would remain "steady on course" and five days after his assumption

of leadership he pledged to Congress that “[w]e will keep our commitments from South Vietnam to West Berlin.”<sup>xix</sup> Despite counterfactual allegations that President Johnson embroiled America deeper into Vietnam than Kennedy would have, there remains a marked consistency from the Eisenhower administration through the Kennedy years and culminating in Johnson’s decision to escalate American involvement. In a memorandum from George McBundy the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs to the President in mid-March 1964, he remarks on the importance of Vietnam to American security. In answering the question “Why is South Vietnam important to us?” McBundy posits, “First, it is a key element in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia in turn is an area whose size and importance are plain to see.... Second, we have a commitment there in honor and in national interest. Ten years ago President Eisenhower rightly decided to support the new government of South Vietnam and we have continued that support ever since in good times and in bad.”<sup>xx</sup> America’s Vietnam policy pivoted on two basic premises. First, as was aforementioned, the succession of South Vietnam to Communist rule would threaten free society in the entire region. Secondly, American prestige, due to its historical presence and commitments in Vietnam was inextricably linked to the maintenance of a non-communist regime in the south.

Canadian security and the external threats deemed dangerous to its core values did not differ drastically from the United States. Canadian officials never publicly deviated from supporting the American position that North Vietnam was the belligerent in the escalating conflict. Nor did Canada question the dangers posed by wars of national liberation succumbing to communist victories. However, Canada framed its external threats from a drastically different position in the global structure. As a self-proclaimed middle power Canada attempted to forge an independent foreign

policy character.<sup>xxi</sup> Charting a third tier in the international structure ventured beyond the realm of realist foreign policy making. The country's middle power status became associated with Canadian core values emphasizing its role as an international mediator tempering the excesses of American policy. The logical manifestation of this was peacekeeping. This emphasis on peace and moderation became lynchpins of Canada's core value.<sup>xxii</sup>

Canadian security was inexorably linked to American security, making Canada's southern neighbour its' most dangerous ally. Although such a statement, in its literal sense, is an oxymoron, it accurately describes Canada's perception of national security. It has been posited by scholars such as David Stairs who writes on Canada's role in the Korean war, that the country's primary security concern was constraining the United States. Following in this vein, Douglas Ross devotes a chapter of his exhaustive research on Canadian diplomacy during the Vietnam War to its foreign policy objective of "Constraining Lyndon Johnson". These arguments are supported by Pearson's memoirs. The revered Prime Minister wrote in a letter to President Johnson, following his infamous speech at Temple University that there existed in Canada a "deep anxiety about developments [in Vietnam] which could lead to wider hostilities." He went on to point out, as he had done many times before that "[w]e are very much aware in Canada that we are inevitably involved in every big decision made in Washington, so we are concerned about the decisions themselves."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Prime Minister Pearson's most pressing fear was that Vietnam would escalate into a nuclear conflict should China feel compelled to intervene. American retaliation, even if prompted by what Canada deemed to be North Vietnamese aggression, had the potential to culminate in another World War. Canadian

authorities attempted to convey this position via its traditional practice of quiet diplomacy. *The Principles of Partnership* informally called the Merchant-Heeney Report, a joint national study, advised, “wherever possible, divergent views between the two governments should be expressed and if possible resolved in private, though diplomatic channels.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Vietnam posed a significant challenge to this institutionalised practice. Unlike America, Canada did not advocate a policy of perimeter defence but rather focused on strategic priorities. While supporting containment as a legitimate policy, Canadian foreign policy architects were wary about confrontation.<sup>xxv</sup> “Ottawa still favoured accommodation of Chinese interests and consistently argued against any provocative or destabilizing challenges to vital Chinese interests by US national security planners.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Therefore, American foreign policy rather than a communist victory in Vietnam was the most urgent threat to Canadian National Security.

### **Operation 34 A to the Gulf Of Tonkin: American Escalation and Canadian Diplomacy**

American prospects in Vietnam were never assured. It was forecasted that the level of American commitment in 1963 would not secure a victory. At best with a presence of 16,300 armed forces in South Vietnam,<sup>xxvii</sup> America could hope for neutralization, but most probably it could expect a Communist victory in the south. The strategic hamlet program was over extended and lacked leadership, the armed forces were undermanned and under funded, and the Viet Cong were gaining strength and their infiltration into the south was accelerating.<sup>xxviii</sup> In response to this dire situation, Operation 34-A was formulated during the November 1963 Honolulu Conference. This strategic plan approved CIA sponsored South Vietnamese covert action against the North.<sup>xxix</sup> Despite the limited expansion of US and the Republic of

South Vietnam's (GVN) activities authorized by Operation 34-A, General Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs argued that America was sabotaging its position by limiting action to South Vietnam. Resultantly, the Viet Cong were directing the timing and the theatre of confrontation, which relegated the United States and South Vietnam to a purely reactionary military role.<sup>xxx</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reaffirmed their position for an increased military presence in South Vietnam the following month. This memorandum explicitly recommended the selection of targets in North Vietnam for air bombings supported by the introduction of jet aircraft and an expansion of the war into the demilitarised zone (DMZ).<sup>xxx</sup> National Security Action Memorandum 288, developed by Robert McNamara, formalized the escalation and was approved March 17, 1964.<sup>xxxii</sup>

NSAM-288 vastly expanded America's military mandate emphasizing the need to increase the pressure exerted on North Vietnam through selectively targeted bombing. The memorandum called for two distinct programs; the first to be initiated within 72 hours enabling the armed forces to employ "Border Control" and "Retaliatory Actions". The second program called for "Graduated Overt Military Pressure" with a thirty-day initiation capability.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Intensification of military action was a dangerous strategy as it could induce Peking's intervention. However, Walt Rostow, Chairman of the Policy Planning Council, argued that this event was unlikely considering the historical record of animosity between Vietnam and China. Rostow supported his position by pointing to Ho Chi Minh's reluctance to relinquish control over the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRVN) armed forces, secret police, and political institutions to Peking.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Widening the war, without compromising America's public commitment to preserve a free society in South Vietnam preoccupied Johnson and his security

advisers. While plans to escalate the American war effort were taking shape in the confidential Washington circle a concerted effort was being waged to garner international support from its allies. As Secretary of State for Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman astutely warned, “I think that premature action will so alarm our friends and allies and a significant segment of domestic opinion that the pressure for neutralization will become formidable.”<sup>xxxv</sup> In an attempt to acquire material and political support in anticipation of escalation Washington issued a statement on March 23 requesting that the international community “put out more flags”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Canada immediately recognized the contradictory obligations it faced concerning its ICC diplomatic posture and its allied commitments to the United States. In an attempt to reconcile potentially incompatible responsibilities, Canada opted to increase its diplomatic contribution.

### **Canada’s Contribution to Escalation: Blair Seaborn and the ICC**

When Washington sought to establish a third-party channel of communication with Hanoi, Canada expediently offered the services of seasoned diplomat, and expert on Far Eastern Affairs, Blair Seaborn. Dean Rusk found that Pearson and Martin were extremely receptive to the US position and more than willing to cooperate. The countries informally established the Canadian channel in April. Pearson, seizing the opportunity, conveyed his willingness to contribute diplomatically to the American presence in Vietnam.<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, prior to Seaborn’s first mission, the State Department expressed reservations about Canada’s commitment should the contents of Seaborn’s message convey a threat. Secretary of State McBundy warned Ambassador Lodge that “...in light of present Canadian attitudes we tend to see real difficulty in approaching the Canadians at this time with any message as specific as you suggest, i.e., that Hanoi be told by the Canadians “that they will be

punished”...the more specific message might lead us into a very difficult dialogue with the Canadians as to just what our plans really were.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> America’s concern was reinforced during a meeting between Johnson and Pearson in New York. The Prime Minister expressed his concern over escalation and suggested that activity be restricted to South Vietnam. He was referring specifically to Senator Barry M. Goldwater who, during his campaign for the Republican nomination, had advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons and conventional bombing. Johnson assured the Canadian leader that he had no designs on nuclear escalation and that should America be forced to resort to conventional bombings, targets would be discriminate and limited in scope. By the end of this short conversation the Prime Minister’s position had drastically shifted. Instead of supporting American action limited exclusively to South Vietnam, Pearson acquiesced to Johnson’s position of strategically limited conventional bombing.<sup>xxxix</sup> Two important points can be inferred. Firstly, Pearson’s personal and political reservations expressed via ‘quiet’ diplomatic channels did not carry much weight in Washington. Secondly, U.S. policy makers were aware of Canada’s limitations and, from an early stage, questioned its neighbour’s loyalty.

Canada’s pledge of diplomatic support was not enough to convince Washington of its allegiance. The Americans withheld the full contents of Seaborn’s message from the Canadians. The first outline given to Seaborn contained a two-fold objective to gather intelligence as well as to convey the American position. He was instructed to assess Ho Chi Minh’s resolve, weaknesses in Hanoi’s government and potential fractures in civil-military relations as well as differences regarding the Sino-Soviet split. Moreover, Seaborn was asked to investigate Chinese communist support in North Vietnam. The second part of Seaborn’s mandate was to reaffirm America’s limited objectives in South Vietnam which were only designed to protect the South

from guerrilla insurgency. The US did not seek military bases in the country nor to topple the Communist regime in the North. However, he should “frankly” convey “that the US public and official patience with North Vietnamese aggression is growing extremely thin.”<sup>xl</sup> He was also authorized to hint at potential economic benefits that could be accrued from compliance with American requests. The carrot and the stick, while present in this first message, were not forcefully stated. An appendage to this initial outline was transmitted to the American embassy in Saigon in which the benefits and consequences were explicitly outlined.

The second draft was withheld until the Americans undertook overt military action in the North and were ready to deliver an ultimatum.<sup>xli</sup> More than just warning Hanoi that American patience was exhaustible, this second draft unequivocally stated that “...the United States will initiate action by air and naval means against North Viet-Nam until Hanoi does agree to stop the war.”<sup>xlii</sup> Considering, the two conditions upon which this second message was predicated, it can be inferred that the incidents in the Tonkin Gulf furnished the American’s with a conducive context in which to convey its more hard line ultimatum. There are two basic conclusions to be drawn from America’s reluctance to disclose vital information to the Canadian emissary and its government. First, while the Pentagon had been formulating its plan for Overt Graduated Military Pressure in the preceding months it needed to suspend action until escalation could be viewed as proportional and responsive to pre-emptive aggression from the North. Considering Canada’s trepidation concerning the escalation of hostilities, it was likely deemed that the American position would be damaged should Canada be privy to this premeditated policy. Secondly, graduated diplomatic pressure was symptomatic of the Administration’s general Vietnam policy of applying incremental force in hierarchical fashion. It was feared that the external threat posed

to Canada by a strategy of premeditated aggression would be incongruent with its image as a peaceful mediator. Although probably not expressed in these terms the Americans calculated that Canada's core values would be seriously injured should they be privy to the real function of Seaborn's mission. To preserve the channel, as well as to ensure the faithfulness with which Seaborn's relayed his messages, the Americans initially kept Canada ignorant until the situation permitted a reasonable escalation of hostilities.

It is important to recount how this favourable context emerged, in which the American's deemed it appropriate to disclose the entirety of Seaborn's message to the Canadians. The catalyst for escalation occurred in the Tonkin Gulf on August 2, 1964 between Seaborn's first and second trip. While conducting covert operations under the auspices of Operation Plan 34-A, US naval ships were patrolling North Vietnamese coastlines to monitor radio and radar signals broadcasted from the shore. This practice, part of a wider global electronic reconnaissance network, was codename DESOTO.<sup>xliii</sup> The US *Maddox* was stationed in international waters twenty nautical miles from the North Vietnamese coast when it came under attack.<sup>xliv</sup> The *Maddox* was instructed to continue its patrols within eleven miles of the shore and avoid proximity to South Vietnamese vessels conducting 34-A operations.<sup>xlv</sup> The *USS Joy Turner* joined the *Maddox* and a second attack was alleged to have occurred on August 4. The documents reveal that there was ambiguity surrounding the timing and nature of this second assault.<sup>xlvi</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk remembers that doubt existed in Washington as to whether a second assault had actually taken place, but defends the administration's actions.<sup>xlvii</sup> In contrast, Under-Secretary of State George Ball's record unabashedly reveals his personal scepticism concerning the verity of the second attack.<sup>xlviii</sup> However, as historian Berman astutely points out,

“...circumstantial evidence was all Johnson needed for ordering reprisals against the North.”<sup>xlix</sup>

The Tonkin Gulf incident provided the ideal context for the President to approach Congress. As he noted later, “I was determined, from the time I became President, to seek the fullest support of Congress for any major action that I took.<sup>1</sup> On August 7, the Joint Resolution of Congress gave the President far-reaching executive powers, awarding him the prerogative “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”<sup>li</sup> The resolution additionally imbued Johnson with the authority, “to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force....” Johnson was now equipped with the constitutional muscle to wage the kind of war against North Vietnam of which Hanoi had been forewarned. Seaborn’s second meeting with Pham Van Dong, occurred shortly after this pivotal point in the war and his revised message reflected America’s strengthened resolve.

The message Seaborn delivered to Hanoi on August 10 bore a distinctly threatening tone. In addition to reiterating the basic American position, Seaborn warned DRVN authorities that America was approaching its threshold and now had the weight of a united Congress and citizenry behind it. If the threat had not been understood before, it was clearly expressed in this revised statement. “If the DRV persists in its present course, it can expect...to suffer the consequences...the DRV knows what it must do if the peace is to be restored.”<sup>lii</sup> Seaborn’s second trip transpired amidst an atmosphere of increased tension and heightened aggression. Hanoi and Washington both declared their increased determination to succeed on their respective terms. Negotiations were implausible. Consequently, the Canadian emissary’s purpose had been reduced from a potential communicative conduit to an

American delivery channel. Paul Martin, took serious offence to the allegation that Seaborn was essentially an American pawn, whose good offices as a Canadian diplomat had been subverted into an American political subordinate. Martin later unconvincingly argued that, “Seaborn was not an agent for the United States, and there were no threats in the message carried.”<sup>liii</sup>

Although the intentions were commendable, Seaborn’s contribution to the American effort failed to encourage negotiations. His reports repeatedly communicated DRVN’s determination to reject American terms. Seaborn’s visits also reaffirmed his own belief that the “DRV are not now interested in any negotiations.”<sup>liv</sup> and the unnerving observation that Pham Van Dong was “genuinely convinced that things are bound to go his way in Indochina.”<sup>lv</sup> In hindsight, Seaborn’s missions may have raised the spectre of confrontation by entrenching each party’s resolve. Consequently, historians such as Charles Taylor and Victor Levant have criticized the decision to send a Canadian national on an American mission. In the following year Seaborn continued his diplomatic missions to Hanoi, but as an independent Canadian representative. Washington felt that, after delivering the American position in two official visits, Seaborn had fulfilled his mandate. With no prospect of negotiations on American terms, the Canadian channel’s utility had been negated.

Canadian American relations during this period were punctuated by a flurry of diplomatic activity. Canada sincerely attempted to fulfil its allied obligations in a manner that would compliment its nascent foreign policy character as a middle-power and a peacekeeper. Contributing diplomatic support through the services of Blair Seaborn was an attempt to reconcile divergent national security concerns. However, this was not a means via which Canada could affect American policy. As

Ambassador Lodge vehemently stated, “[i]t is not rpt not at all necessary that the Canadians either agree or disagree. What is important is that the Canadian transmit the message and be willing to do that and report back accurately what is said.”<sup>lvi</sup> Moreover, when America responded to the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Prime Minister Pearson asserted that Canada had not been consulted but merely informed of the events by the Secretary of State.<sup>lvii</sup> Despite, Canada’s inability to influence American policy, Canada remained publicly and privately loyal to its powerful neighbour. However, the ethical nature of Canada’s commitment, and the means via which it supported the U.S. were beginning to affront its core values as peace-keeper and mediator.

In public pronouncements concerning the war, both Martin and Pearson commended America’s restrained and proportional response to the events in early August.<sup>lviii</sup> Political and diplomatic defence of Canada’s NATO ally buttressed this public front of support. In addition to Seaborn’s secret meetings with Hanoi, the ICC guarded the America position after the Gulf of Tonkin. The auxiliary role played by the ICC in defence of US actions is not a stunning example of Canada’s allied contributions but it highlights the bureaucratic means via which it attempted to fulfil neighbourly obligations. The People’s Army of Vietnam’s (PAVN) chief liaison officer formally submitted DRVN’s version of the events to the ICC. According to North Vietnam, American warships had been providing cover for daily amphibious South Vietnamese raids into DRVN territory. Moreover, the warships had entered North Vietnam’s territorial water in a ‘provocative’ manner.<sup>lix</sup> On July 30, the PAVN accused South Vietnam of attacking two islands in the Gulf with support from U.S. forces. Essentially the first attack on the *Maddox* was a reprisal for US pre-emptive strikes that had occurred in DRVN’s territorial water. On August 3, according to the

PAVN, the *Maddox* was joined by the *USS Joy Turner*, and continued to demonstrate provocative behaviour in DRVN territorial waters. The liaison officer, while addressing the ICC, insinuated that the second attack had never taken place.<sup>lx</sup>

Seaborn utilized a number of bureaucratic ploys to support the American position. After hearing the official PAVN's report, Seaborn expressed his inability to respond without due consideration and consultation with the Canadian government. After communicating with external affairs two courses of actions were deemed appropriate.<sup>lxi</sup> The Canadian delegate was instructed to question the ICC's jurisdiction under the Geneva Charter. The ambiguity pivoted on the Final Declaration, which the Canadians' argued was an informal agreement between the signatories, and which the Polish delegates maintained was an official supplement to the Protocol. If the former interpretation was deemed correct then the Tonkin Gulf incidents did not fall within the ICC's mandate. External Affairs in Ottawa did not want to set a disadvantageous precedent for their American 'friends' as it was termed in one telegram by submitting the incident to an ICC enquiry. Moreover, it is likely that Canada did not want to find itself in an uncomfortable situation, where it had to choose between diplomatic integrity and allied responsibilities. While the Legal Committee eventually ruled against the Canadian position, the significance rests with Canada's motivation to assist the Americans. Perhaps more importantly, it rests with Canada's realization that its position on the ICC would soon reach an impasse where it would be forced to publicly balance the dichotomous preservation of core values and fulfilment of neighbourly duties. Secondly, Ottawa instructed Seaborn to focus on the recent history of inactivity on the ICC. An insufficient number of Interim reports had been submitted to the co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference over the preceding months. Ottawa hoped to capitalize on the ICC's relative stagnation to

argue that a report focusing solely on the Tonkin Gulf incidents would be devoid of context. As a result, the co-chairmen could not render an impartial assessment of the situation because the events had not been properly linked to North Vietnamese subversion. This linkage and contextual logic would resurface in the Minority Report issued the following year.<sup>lxii</sup>

### **Canadian Complicity Paves the Road to Escalation: The Minority Report and Information Sharing**

The Tonkin Gulf Crisis marked an important development in the Vietnam War. President Johnson ably wielded this advantageous political climate to garner popular and congressional support for his increasingly aggressive Vietnam policy. The opportunity to escalate the American war effort presented itself again in February 1965. The Viet Cong launched surprise attacks on the US army barracks at Pleiku and two South Vietnamese airfields on February 6. That evening Johnson met with his security advisers and authorized reprisal air attacks against four North Vietnamese targets.<sup>lxiii</sup> The tides of the American effort had irreversibly shifted north. Following this decision, which was later codenamed Rolling Thunder, escalation was inevitable. All concerned parties immediately recognized the gravity of this American initiative. The DRVN described the attacks as “a new extremely serious US war act.”<sup>lxiv</sup> Johnson later described the decision to bomb North Vietnam as “a turning point.”<sup>lxv</sup> As Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara surmised, “wars generate their own momentum and follow the law of unanticipated consequences... Operation Rolling Thunder not only started the air war but unexpectedly triggered the introduction of U.S. ground combat as well.”<sup>lxvi</sup> The American response on February 7, 1965 inaugurated a new stage in the conflict. Once the Policy of Sustained Reprisal had been authorized it was recommended that the administration should “develop the

necessary public and diplomatic statements to accompany the initiation and continuation of this program.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The Canadian delegation to the ICC had an obligation to support the US position. Canada's refusal to contribute troops seriously compromised the appearance of loyalty to a traditional ally. Again, Canada employed increased diplomatic activity to compensate for the lack of military support but also to contribute in a manner that was congruent with its core values. The Canadian delegation was ideally situated to defend American actions. When the Commission issued its February 13 report concerning the events six days earlier Canada abstained. The majority report, ratified by the Indian and Polish delegations, deemed US air raids on February 8 to be in contravention of the Geneva accords thus labelling it an aggressor.<sup>lxviii</sup> The U.S. position was premised on the retaliatory and defensive nature of its response. Johnson's inner circle was well aware that a sustained air war would damage America's international reputation and undermine the advantages accrued from appearing moderate and proportional. In early 1965 the US administration enjoyed public support from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Canada was among the allies identified as demonstrating a modicum of support.<sup>lxix</sup> However, its actions on the ICC in support of the US would belie this assertion.

Appended to the majority report was a Canadian issued minority statement. The Canadian delegation recognized the severity of the situation in both North and South Vietnam but considered the majority report to be issued out of context. According to the minority statement, Poland and India did not acknowledge the ongoing environment of Viet Cong guerrilla insurgency which provided the backdrop to February 7. This was the same logic Blair Seaborn had used earlier with respect to

the Tonkin Gulf crisis. The Canadian minority statement unequivocally labelled North Vietnam the aggressor and primary instigator of hostilities. The evidence supporting the Canadian position was premised on conclusions drawn from the Commission's Special Report of 1962.<sup>lxx</sup> There was an outpouring of hostile reactions to Canada's report, which had staunchly defended the integrity and appropriateness of American actions. The Indian delegation accused Canada of distorting the conclusions of the 1962 report. A supplementary Polish response to the Canadian position also rejected the minority report because it justified America's overt military actions against the North using inconclusive evidence which had not been sanctioned by the Commission. Moreover, Poland abstained from the 1962 report, and therefore could not condone a Canadian statement premised on it. Canada's controversial position seriously compromised its diplomatic integrity on the Commission. The DRVN's media immediately capitalized on the situation.

The North Vietnamese media responded with scathing criticism to the publication of Canada's minority statement. The Canadian delegation was indicted for its partisan, politically motivated tactics. As one North Vietnamese news report levied, "the separate statement of the Canadian delegation has shielded the US imperialists...everyone knows [the Canadian delegation] follows the USA."<sup>lxxi</sup> The Canadian minority statement became public shortly after the Department of State released its White Paper on February 27 entitled *Aggression From the North: The Record of North Viet-Nam's Campaign to Conquer South Viet-Nam*.<sup>lxxii</sup> The North Vietnamese viewed the convergence between the White Paper and the Minority Statement as, "too obvious and shows the connection between these two evil acts."<sup>lxxiii</sup> The Canadian Administration immediately realized the seriousness of these allegations. It felt compelled to respond to Hanoi's accusations in a timely fashion

that conveyed both its indignation and sense of insult.<sup>lxxiv</sup> However, ulterior Canadian motives are highly probable.

Following the issuance of the minority statement Washington contacted Ottawa requesting sufficient copies to disseminate to the American media. The Canadians' conciliatory position was a valuable public relations tool in the United States as it represented international support condoning America's Vietnam policy. America privately questioned the tenacity of Canadian support during this period.<sup>lxxv</sup> However, it appreciated this supportive diplomatic initiative and hinted that it would benefit bilateral relations.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Hanoi's authorities duly noted cooperation between Ottawa and Washington. The ICC became the vehicle via which Canada orchestrated its policy of diplomatic support for the US initiative at the expense of impartiality. The minority statement is the most vivid illustration of this practice, however it was a manifestation of an almost institutionalised Canadian tradition of sharing information with the United States.

Information sharing with Washington was common protocol for Ottawa. From the commission's inception in 1954 Canadian Ambassador to the US told American officials that, "we would wish to keep the United States informed privately of the course of events." Pearson, External Affairs minister at the time, immediately recognized the potential volatility of this arrangement, especially if it became public knowledge.<sup>lxxvii</sup> However, it appeared that Hanoi's authorities were convinced of Canadian espionage. On February 12, PAVN contacted the Commission with an urgent request to withdrawal all fixed teams working for the ICC from North Vietnam. The supposed justification for this request was concern for the security of the members. Faced with North Vietnamese obstinacy, the commission was forced to

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capitulate and all five fixed teams were withdrawn to Hanoi on February 22.<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Canada argued that PAVN's justifications for withdrawal was insufficient considering only two of the five fixed teams were positioned in the vicinity of air raids. It can be inferred that the security of ICC members was not the objective of North Vietnamese authorities.<sup>lxxix</sup> Rather, the war had entered a new phase, in which the PAVN wished to remove the commissions 'eyes and ears' from its territory. In retrospect, the PAVN's fears were not unfounded. The documentary record of the ICC is littered with information concerning the Viet Cong's strongholds, manpower, and primary routes of infiltration. One handbook itemized the origin and specificities of North Vietnamese weaponry from tanks, artillery tractors and field guns to protective and detecting equipment as well as infantry weapons.<sup>lxxx</sup> If this information was being directly funnelled to Washington, as the evidence suggests, then ICC fixed teams operating within its territory would have undermined North Vietnam's position.

### **Canadian Complicity Confronted: Pearson's Temple Speech**

Canada's allied contribution to America's war was becoming increasingly public with negative coverage on the minority report and Canadian conduct on the ICC. New reports revealed that Canada was passing on vital politico-military intelligence to the United States, allegations which Martin and Pearson did not directly challenge. Rather they skirted addressing the issue directly and argued, "members of the Canadian delegation in Viet Nam are not engaged in clandestine or spying activities."<sup>lxxxii</sup> While defending Canada's position, the American war effort was gaining momentum. Throughout February and March American air strikes increased and ground troops were introduced. As Pearson revealed in his memoirs, he felt increasing pressure from growing public dissatisfaction with America's

actions.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Pearson, in retrospect, chose a controversial setting to deliver a “piece of friendly advice from a good neighbour.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup> The Prime Minister, in his acceptance speech for the Temple University World Peace Award on April 2, took the opportunity to address Johnson’s hard line position on North Vietnam. He proposed a short and calculated intermittence to the bombing. Johnson’s was predictably outraged by Pearson’s speech despite the Prime Minister’s defence of American motives.

Pearson’s timing and venue for expressing concern about the efficacy of American strategy are illustrative. Until this point, Canada had neglected its core values in pursuit of congenial relations with the United States. While support never manifested itself militarily, it nevertheless compromised Canada’s diplomatic integrity. The war had escalated beyond the threshold in which Canada could reconcile its external threats with its core values in a manner that would maintain public support. However, there is a degree of irony in how Canada formulated its policy towards the United States and its involvement in Vietnam. Diplomatic contributions did not substantially impact American policy. While Washington welcomed such initiatives they were never deemed critical to the American effort. Had Canada remained ambivalent from the beginning then Pearson may not have felt compelled to balance Canada’s record of complicity with a public pronouncement of uncertainty about American policy. The damage inflicted on bilateral relations undermined its earlier record of diplomatic support. Dean Rusk later remarked that America never “expected Canada to fight with us in Vietnam. But we expected understanding and support. To put it mildly, we did not have major political support from Canada. That made it more difficult.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Prime Minister Pearson deviated from Canada's traditional policy of quiet diplomacy. His memoirs reveal concern about the rate of escalation in Vietnam and Johnson's ability to restrain the momentum of war. However, Pearson miscalculated his influence over Johnson. The Canadian leader was not the lone dissenter attempting to curb Johnson's aggressive strategy. Many voices within the administration and intelligence communities expressed scepticism about the prospects of the government's Vietnam policy. The President was inundated with policy advice from both hawks and doves. A general theme in the literature on President Johnson focuses on his flawed character as the primary reason for America's over commitment in Vietnam. He is depicted as an intimidating figure that wrested advice conducive to his primary objective of military victory.<sup>lxxxv</sup> This portrayal fallaciously overlooks the sheer volume of voices advising the President and his concerted effort to mediate the more hawkish elements in the administration.

History has vindicated one dissenting voice in particular. Under Secretary of State George Ball submitted about twenty papers, challenging US foreign policy in Vietnam in general and the assumptions this policy was operating under in particular.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Ball's memoirs are replete with accounts of his dissent.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> According to the director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), Ball's opposition was not an anomaly in the administration. Vice President Hubert Humphrey and counsellor to the President Clark Clifford<sup>lxxxviii</sup> were among the considerable number of voices in Washington expressing grave reservations about the direction of America's policy.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Although Ball, supported by more like-minded colleagues then previously thought, did not succeed in changing the administration's aggressive policy, his memoirs extort an understanding portrayal of President Johnson. Ball defends Johnson, arguing that he was reluctant to further embroil

America in the growing crisis, but was compelled to action by his advisers and by the momentum of the war.<sup>xc</sup> Dissent was based on intelligence amassed not only from the Central Intelligence Agency, but also from a lesser-known organ of the US intelligence community called the INR. This bureau penned pessimistic and, as history later confirmed, highly accurate reports on the prospects of US policy. The report warned American policy makers that Hanoi could not be bombed into submission.<sup>xci</sup> Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, John McCone, estimated the exact opposite and consistently advocated increased bombardment and reinforced ground troops as the best means to achieve success.<sup>xcii</sup> Conflicting intelligence reports contributed to divisions amongst the JCS during the fateful February of 1965 when America launched its air campaign. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, commented on the unanimous policy line he received from the JCS and was only later informed, “the Army did not agree that bombing North Vietnam would produce the desired results, and the navy wasn’t too sure about it. It was the Air Force and the Marine Corps that were the tough proponents of air power.<sup>xciii</sup> This complex issue warrants a much deeper analysis, but it is sufficient to note that Johnson was privy to varied opinions which carried much more weight in the policy planning process. Pearson’s attempts to ‘slow’ down the war displayed a miscalculation of Canada’s influence in Washington.

### **Canadian Diplomacy Expires: Chester Ronning’s Mission in 1966**

Pearson’s Temple Speech did not lead to an irreparable rift in bilateral relations across the board. However, it marked the end of Canada’s diplomatic influence in Washington with respects to Vietnam, which had been minimal at best. Despite the severing of Canada’s diplomatic weight in Washington, Paul Martin continued in vain to resuscitate Canada’s diplomatic role in the Vietnam War. He

agreed with the contents of Johnson's John Hopkins speech delivered April 7 only five days after Pearson's controversial speech. Again Johnson expressed America's altruistic and limited objectives in Vietnam. He lamented the regrettable but unavoidable policy of air strikes and his reluctance, yet moral obligation, to militarily support South Vietnam.<sup>xciv</sup> Moreover, Martin denounced Hanoi's four points which had been issued in response to Johnson's speech. These four points, later increased to five, called for an immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of American military personnel, equipment and bases, and the peaceful reunification of the country free of foreign interference.<sup>xcv</sup> These points were inflexible and precluded meaningful negotiations. Nevertheless, Martin sought an independent Canadian initiative to investigate the remote possibility that terms could be established upon which North Vietnam would enter into negotiations.

Chester Ronning was selected for this mission. Born in China, Ronning openly advocated international recognition of Communist China coupled with public criticism of American foreign policy. Washington immediately raised concern about Ronning's natural predilections and questioned the Canadian motive. American Ambassador to Canada Walt Butterworth speculated that Martin harboured ulterior motives to bring about recognition of Communist China.<sup>xcvi</sup> From the outset, Washington was dubious about the Ronning missions; questioning the diplomat's political leanings, the objectives of the initiative and the overall prospect of success. Dean Rusk cabled a telegraph to the American embassy in Saigon, plainly voicing his pessimistic view. He assured the American ambassador that "there is no occult understanding between Washington and Ottawa on this matter...Quite frankly, I attach no importance to his trip and expect nothing out of it."<sup>xcvii</sup> Even Pearson articulated his misgivings to Butterworth, reassured him that Martin engineered the

Ronning missions. Pearson admitted that his External Affairs Minister had underestimated the potential dangers associated with this independent Canadian initiative.<sup>xcviii</sup>

The Ronning mission was doomed from its inception. America would never agree to Hanoi's four points and any sign of North Vietnamese willingness to negotiate would necessarily entail an implicit acceptance of their unacceptable preconditions. Nevertheless, Ronning met with Pham Van Dong on March 7 and amidst the typical professions of resolve and slander towards the 'American imperialists', the Canadian diplomat elicited a 'breakthrough'. According to Ronning, Pham Van Dong expressed a willingness to enter into negotiations pending a cessation of US aggression in the North. For the first time, Hanoi's leadership did not explicitly link the Four Points with negotiations, which led Ronning to believe he may have found the diplomatic opening needed for a negotiated settlement.<sup>xcix</sup> When Ronning submitted his memorandum to Washington the response was indicative of their initial scepticism, even antipathy, towards the Canadian channel. Washington had made a direct diplomatic channel to Hanoi available in Rangoon. If Hanoi wished to communicate a shift in their position America felt that they would have done so via this conduit. Considering Hanoi did not show interest in utilizing the US link coupled with the DRVN's persistent emphasis on its "Four Points" the US concluded that Ronning's 'breakthrough' was not in fact a new proposition.<sup>c</sup> Ronning himself described his mission as "having travelled ten thousand miles to present a feather."<sup>ci</sup> Moreover, he stressed the authorities' unwavering adherence to Hanoi's 'Four Point's' throughout the meeting which necessarily diluted the importance of Ronning's 'discovery'. Predictable, Ronning's mission was a failure. It only marginally delayed a new American strategy to target Petroleum, Oil and Lubricant

site in the north. More fundamentally, it annoyed the Americans who felt forced to accept a Canadian proposition that was unwelcome in the first place. As one American official tellingly relayed to the President, “[Ronning’s] report to Prime Minister will be helpful in destroying illusions still held by some in Ottawa.”<sup>cii</sup>

Canada’s role in Vietnam is more complex than an initial assessment might denote. This helps to explain why the historiography on the subject is extremely polarized especially with regards to Canadian complicity. In many ways, the documentary evidence speaks for itself. There was a high degree of complicity with American policy in Vietnam especially in Canada’s role as commissioner on the ICC. It perpetually defended American interests which was manifested most dramatically in Canada’s 1965 minority statement. Even more controversially, Canada funnelled vital information to Washington accrued from its participation on the commission. Meanwhile, America became increasingly entrenched in Vietnam partly because the administration successfully construed the external threat of a communist victory as imminently dangerous to American core values. Canada could not justify its Vietnam policy in the same way, because it was operating under an entirely different set of conditions. Canada’s middle power status was predicated on an independent foreign policy approach which emphasized peacekeeping and mediation. While the threat of communism was generally accepted, Canada could not intimately link communism to its national security in the same manner as America. Canada’s national security was more realistically hinged on American moderation. In this way, the Vietnam War became an imminent external threat by default.

Canada sought close bilateral relations in attempts to forestall the dangers of an aggressive American policy, which could potentially trigger a wider war or induce China’s nuclear involvement. One manner in which Canada reconciled the

contradictory nature of Canada's core values and its allied responsibilities was to increase its diplomatic contribution. Washington accepted the Canadian intermediary Blair Seaborn. However, when his mission to create dialogue between Hanoi and Washington was replaced by a mandate to deliver an American ultimatum, Canada's intentions came under close public scrutiny. As questionable activities on the ICC came to the public's attention, Ottawa was hard pressed to defend itself. Perhaps in part because of past diplomatic failures in Vietnam or maybe to breath fresh life into Canada's core values, Pearson delivered his infamous Temple Speech. This decision marked the failure of Ottawa's overall Vietnam policy. Canada tried to function within the limits of peacekeeping and mediation and consequently did not contribute significantly to the American effort. Strict adherence to its core values was incongruent with allied responsibilities. However, when the public became aware of Canadian complicity, Ottawa's policy makers were forced to defend their prior conduct and pursue more autonomy in Vietnam. Meeting neither obligation in full, Canada opted for a middle ground policy that ironically led to its overall failure. Canadian politician John Holmes surmised it well: "There are bound to be situations in which a country, either in its national interest or out of moral conviction, must refuse to go along. The world, however, will proceed on its course regardless. Jumping off a ship can be a grand gesture, but one is apt either to drown or end up permanently on an atoll."<sup>ciii</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>iv</sup> Thakur, Ramesh. *Peacekeeping in Vietnam: Canada, India, Poland and the International Commission* Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1984. pp. 78-79.
- <sup>v</sup> Ross, Douglas A. *In the Interests of Peace* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984. pp., 260.
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- <sup>viii</sup> Ross, pp. 263.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ibid, 256.
- <sup>x</sup> Thakur, 206-7.
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- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid
- <sup>xx</sup> John McCone’s Memoranda of the Meeting, February 7, 1965’ *FRUS* Johnson Administration Vol. II Doc. 81.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Levant, 14.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid
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- <sup>xxv</sup> Ross, 12-13.
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- <sup>xxxii</sup> ‘Summary Notes of the 547th Meeting of the National Security Council Washington, February 8, 1965, 10:30 a.m.’ *FRUS* Johnson Administration Vol. II, Doc. 87. Also refer to ‘Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson En route from Saigon to Washington, February 7, 1965’ *FRUS* Johnson Administration Vol. II, Doc. 84.
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- <sup>xl</sup> ‘Memo To: G – Mr. U Alexis Johnson from S/VN – Joseph A. Mendenhall, dated June 1, 1964 (TS) Subject: Instructions for Canadian Interlocutor with Hanoi” in *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers*. Ed. George C. Herring. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983. pp. 22.
- <sup>xli</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. It is interesting to note the language’s ambiguity which reads “This further outline is premised on the assumptions that ... (b) we plan to use “carrots” as well as a “stick” on Hanoi.” This is subject to varying interpretations, but I took it to mean that emphasis would be placed on the threat of force denoting an ultimatum.
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- <sup>xliv</sup> ‘Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State Saigon, April 17, 1965, 4:21 p.m. 3424. Reference: DOD 152339Z April 15’ *FRUS* Johnson Administration Vol. II Doc, 260.
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- <sup>xlvi</sup> ‘Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State Saigon, April 27, 1965.’ *FRUS* Johnson Administration Vol. II. Doc, 276.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Rusk, Dean. *As I Saw It*. New York and London: W.W.Norton and Company, 1990. pp.444.
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- <sup>xlix</sup> Berman, Larry. *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the Vietnam War*. New York and London: W.W.Norton and Company, 1982.
- <sup>l</sup> Johnson, 115.
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