WASHINGTON, June 5th, 1964

MALCOLM FRASER'S IMPRESSIONS OF UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The last two weeks have been a most interesting time to be in Washington. This Capital of the United States has, in many ways, been pre-occupied with what has been happening in Laos and South Vietnam. In Australia, we are much more inclined to be pre-occupied with what happens in Indonesia and in the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia, but in the United States, because of their commitment to South Vietnam the main pre-occupation is clearly with South-East Asia proper. There are many reasons for this. Three United States' Presidents have laid the prestige of this great country on the line so far as South Vietnam is concerned. There seems to be a complete conviction on every side that the United States will do what is necessary to win in South Vietnam. This is an impression I have gained from speaking with people in the Capital, in the House of Representatives, in the American Senate and speaking to people in the State Department and in the Defence Department. However, if I try to find out what means are going to be used to achieve victory in South Vietnam for the forces opposing communism then it is much more difficult to get an answer. The United States Congress has just voted an additional 125,000,000 dollars special aid to South Vietnam because of the seriousness of the situation in this country. This can be taken as a token of the United States determination but, again, it doesn't solve the question as to how victory for the anti-communist forces will be achieved.

Let me try and put this particular war, because it is a war, into perspective. World conditions between the Nato powers, that is the free European powers - Canada and the United States, and the communist countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain have been stabilised in recent months. The reason for this is clear. The communist countries and principally Russia know full well that the United States, Great Britain and their Allies are prepared to lay everything on the line if there is a communist attack on West Berlin or on Western Europe. This has been made plain in more than one Berlin crisis since the end of the last war. Crises which were instigated by the Russians but which were answered firmly and vehemently by the West.

Now, let me come to another kind of threat. The Russians tried nuclear blackmail over Cuba and they were met by the full force of the American response. President Kennedy made it quite plain that if the Russians persisted in establishing nuclear missiles in Cuba the United States would respond with all the force at its command. As a result, the Russians withdrew their missiles. Again the Russians - the communists - learnt that over this kind of threat the West would be prepared to lay everything on the line and thus the threat receded.

And now we come to a third kind of threat, a threat which is cheap to initiate by the communist countries but to which any reply by the West is difficult and expensive. This was the threat of subversion, of sending in guerillas, of training them, of arming them, to terrorise the countryside and undermine the Government of the country. This is what is happening in South Vietnam. There is no doubt that the guerillas, the terrorists, have been directed and supplied and inspired from North Vietnam, from Communist Vietnam backed by Communist China.

It is difficult to fight this kind of war. The terrorists, the Communists, in Vietnam look like other Vietnamese. They are people of the same race even if they come from the northern part of the country.
They cause some trouble in a town or a village, they ambush a patrol, then they go to their hideouts in the jungle. They throw away their weapons and they look like any other Vietnamese. It is difficult, if not impossible, to respond to this kind of attack by conventional military means. You haven't got a conventional target to hit. A small number of people, lightly armed and capable of moving quickly from one part of a country to another can cause a great deal of havoc, they can cause terror amongst the countryside and they can make it extremely difficult to keep law and order.

It is generally thought that you need about twenty regular troops to respond to one guerrilla or one well trained terrorists of this kind. Thus, if you have a thousand guerrillas you need twenty thousand regular troops.

It is easy to see why this kind of war is inexpensive for the sponsors, for the people of North Vietnam or in Communist China and extremely expensive for South Vietnam and for the West. Somehow or other, and I don't pretend to suggest how this can be done, this kind of subversion has got to be made expensive for the people who sponsor it. Until the West faces up to this particular problem I believe it will be faced by continuing subversion in one country or another throughout the world.

South-East Asia is a testing ground about this matter at the present time. If the communist terrorists are successful in South Vietnam this would gravely affect SEATO and the countries that belong to it. The other countries would come to believe that the Chinese, the Chinese communists were going to win. Cambodia, Burma, Thailand and Pakistan, already with the closest relations to Peking might become more closely allied to Peking than they now are.

But this wouldn't be the end of the story. If this kind of subversion is allowed to be successful in South Vietnam it will not only spread to other countries in South-East Asia but it will spread to Africa and to South America - fertile grounds for this kind of attack. There comes times when free countries find their backs up against a brick wall, they cannot retreat further without giving away vital interests. It is my belief that once such vital interest is found in South Vietnam in South-East Asia the repercussions of defeat will resound around the world, the prestige of the free countries would be threatened gravely. Many people would come to say that the United States, the greatest and the strongest free country in the world, had laid her prestige on the line and lost. Thus, if other countries allied to her in some way are threatened in the same manner they too can be won over to communism. The West, and the United States in particular, cannot allow this to happen. The world-wide implications of what is happening in South Vietnam are well recognised in this Capital of the United States of America.

The means and the manner whereby the threat can be answered and resolved are not clear. I would, however, believe there is a general understanding that the methods that have been used for the last year or two are not sufficient because the position has been deteriorating in South Vietnam, and unless new tactics are used the position cannot be held indefinitely.

There is no need to underline the seriousness of ultimate failure. It wouldn't only affect our close friend and ally Malaysia - a Commonwealth country - the affect would come upon us in one form or another.

This coming week I will be visiting Ottawa. Canada has always shown a very close interest in South-East Asia and is one of the fourteen members of the Laos controlled commission established several years ago. It would be interesting to see how the Canadian authorities look upon these problems.
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