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Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: March 9, 1959

SUBJECT: SAC Overflights

APPROVED HFS 3/12/59

PARTICIPANTS: The Acting Secretary
Mr. Arnold Heeney, Canadian Ambassador
Mr. Saul Rae, Canadian Minister
Mr. Livingston Merchant, Assistant Secretary EUR

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The Ambassador of Canada combined substance with his courtesy call this morning on the Acting Secretary and handed Mr. Herter a TOP SECRET note giving the Canadian Government's approval to extensive SAC overflights over Canadian territory scheduled in accordance with a test exercise covering the next four months.

Ambassador Heeney had two points to make. The first was that the Canadian Government had considered our request for approval in this matter seriously and at the highest level in light of the timing in relation to the Berlin crisis. He said that the information given him on a most restricted basis concerning the development of our contingency planning with respect to Berlin had been the decisive element in the Prime Minister's approval. The anxiety of the Canadian Government remains, however, lest future actions on our part as the crisis unfolds mistakenly lead the Soviet Government to calculate that we are planning to take preemptive action.

Secondly, the Ambassador said that he was instructed to say that unhappily actions taken by the United States in the economic field having a damaging effect on Canada could not escape an interrelation with Canadian cooperation in Defense matters, at least in certain Canadian quarters. In this connection he specifically referred to our impending announcement of mandatory oil import quotas. He asked in effect that this fact be kept by us in mind.

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TOP SECRET

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Handed to Secy
The Acting
by Amb. Healey
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The Canadian Ambassador presents his compliments to the Acting Secretary of State and has the honour to refer to Mr. Murphy's letter of February 6 which sought the approval in principle of the Canadian Government for the overflight of Canada by Strategic Air Command aircraft carrying atomic weapons in the course of a test programme between March and June of this year.

It has normally been possible for the Canadian Government to deal with requests of this nature within a few days. In this instance, however, the Canadian Government felt it essential to give its fullest consideration to the possible effect which an extensive SAC test exercise over the next four months could have in a period of increasing tension over the Berlin situation.

The Canadian Government was concerned over the possibility that a SAC exercise of this magnitude might set in motion a chain reaction of moves and counter-moves which could lead to a fatal increase in international tension. This concern was heightened by uncertainty as to whether the test exercise had been planned as part of a general effort to convince the Soviet Government that the United States Government was firm in its resolve to maintain the security and freedom of Berlin by the use of force if necessary.

The Canadian Government felt that there was danger as well that whatever the purpose of the test exercise might be, the Soviet Government might interpret the exercise as provocative and the first step of a general mobilization of Western strength to bring pressure on the Soviet Union.

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Finally, the Canadian Government was concerned that even if it were possible to prevent gross miscalculation by the Soviet Union of the purpose of the test exercise, it might be represented by some elements of the press as a show of strength. The Canadian Government is convinced that such an interpretation could only increase the difficulties of negotiation of the Berlin problem and would not be in the best interests of the Western alliance.

In spite of these concerns, which have in part been removed as a result of consultation with the United States authorities, the Canadian Government, after the most careful reflection, has come to the view that it would not be justified in withholding its support from a measure which would increase the deterrent capability of the Strategic Air Command. The Canadian Government continues to believe, however, that every precaution should be taken in the months immediately ahead to reduce the possibilities of miscalculation by the Soviet Union of Western intentions. In his press conference on March 4 the President of the United States expressed his reluctance to authorize measures which might be regarded in a period of tension as part of a general mobilization. That reluctance is fully shared by the Canadian Government.

The Canadian Government understands that the test exercise under consideration is an extension of the exercise conducted last year for the purpose of testing, within the concept of "airborne alert", the capability of the Strategic Air Command to keep fully manned and fully armed aircraft in the air on a continual basis while carrying out operational procedures. It recognizes that for the desired purpose of the exercise to be met successfully, a detailed programme of flights over an extended period has to be planned. The United States authorities are aware, however, that when the Canadian Government gives approval to a general programme for the overflight of Canada by SAC aircraft, clearance for individual flights will

be sought on a service to service basis. On the Canadian side the RCAF will be responsible for obtaining ministerial clearance. While no obstacle can be foreseen at the moment to the provision of the required Canadian clearances, it will be recognized that circumstances might arise in the four months period which would necessitate further consideration by the Canadian Government of the desirability of particular overflights and which could justify the suspension of the exercise. It is understood that technical discussions on the exact procedures for daily clearance of the desired overflights are continuing between the RCAF and the USAF.

The Canadian Government would wish as well to be assured that no publicity will be given to these overflights in order to prevent the danger of a misunderstanding arising in the minds of the press or the public as to the purpose of the flights. References to last year's test exercise in furtherance of the concept of "airborne alert" have appeared in the press. Other press stories have urged that a more comprehensive "airborne alert" should be instituted in order to convince the Soviet Union of the determination of the United States to guarantee the security and freedom of Berlin. The Canadian Government believes it essential that every effort be made to ensure that information about this exercise should not be allowed to reach the press.

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THE CANADIAN EMBASSY,
Washington, D.C.

March 6, 1959.

A. J. T.