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STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOB DOLE

THE PANAMA CANAL TREATY CABLE

Mr. President, I want to take just a few minutes to comment on a matter of grave concern to me and -- I hope -- to many of my colleagues. That is the question of just how far this Administration is prepared to go to protect itself from embarrassment over the proposed Panama Canal treaties.

On Monday of this week, I was handed a copy of a September 29 State Department Cable which gave me great cause for concern. The cable contained information -- previously unavailable to either the Senate or the general public -- which conflicted with testimony presented by key Administration witnesses on the Canal treaties last week. That was testimony on American rights under the proposed treaties to protect our defense interests.

The cable verified what many of us suspected all along: that American and Panamanian negotiators have far different interpretations of just what rights we would keep under the permanent neutrality treaty provisions.

Since this vital questions bears directly on the Senate's decision as to whether the treaties should be ratified, I felt it should be brought to the attention of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And since the Administration has been promoting an entirely different interpretation of these treaties before the American people, I felt they were entitled to know the full story, as well.

Yesterday, State Department sources contacted the Senate Ethics Committee staff to inquire as to whether my action in releasing the cable might have violated some Senate rule or ethic. I resent and reject that clear effort at intimidation.

A "CONFIDENTIAL" CABLE

My copy of the cable indicated it had been classified "confidential" and for "limited distribution." Why it was classified in this way, I can't begin to understand.

The cable contained no military secrets. Instead, it described a Panamanian negotiator as "disturbed" over descriptions of the treaties being promoted by American officials. It was obvious that its release would in no way endanger our national security. In fact, its release appeared more likely to enhance our national security by revealing just how much the treaties jeopardize our interests in the Panama Canal passageway.

So why was this cable -- which directly contradicted Administration testimony on treaty "protections" -- to be so carefully guarded from the Congress and the public?

I am forced to conclude that this cable was classified for narrow, short-term political advantage. Contradictory information about America's defense rights under the treaties was being concealed under a questionable "confidential" classification. If this was not intentional misuse of a "national security" cover, then it was at best an error in judgement that deserved correction.

Whatever became of the "open government" that our President promised during his campaign last year? If there is one thing that the people of this nation have learned from the mistakes of the past, it is that political cover-ups at the highest levels of government are themselves hazardous to our national security. Indeed, we should ask: just whose confidence was at stake in this "confidential" cable? Was it the Administration's, or was it the confidence of the American people in the integrity of Administration spokesmen?

Whether intended to advance a cause, or to prevent political embarrassment, government cover-ups have no place in the American system.

(more)

PUBLIC ACCESS TO FACTS

What else don't we know about the proposed Panama Canal treaties? What else is being "glossed over," because full disclosure might embarrass the Carter Administration? I believe the State Department should provide the Senate with copies of all documents, memorandums, and cables exchanged between our two countries during the negotiations. And I commend the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for its repeated efforts to obtain these materials.

In my opinion, the greatest danger that could arise from the Panama Canal issue would be in giving the public too little information about these treaties, not too much.

I challenge the Carter Administration to lay all its cards on the table, and let the American people judge for themselves whether or not the Panama Canal treaties are worthy of their support. Only then can the Senate proceed confidently in its ratification responsibilities next year.

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