

OPINION PAGES

Revisiting the great debate

Should Canada be part of a U.S.-led missile defence system? It's a question with which Canadian prime ministers have been wrestling since the 1950s.

American President George W. Bush dearly wants to retain Donald Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary, despite recent press furor. His choice will affect not just American and Iraqi security, but Canada's security as well.

Rumsfeld is contemplating the possible use of nuclear-tipped interceptors in a national missile defence system, reviving an idea that U.S. and Canadian authorities rejected three decades ago as technically problematic and politically unacceptable. He encouraged William Schneider Jr., chairperson of the Defense Science Board, to explore the idea as part of a study of alternative approaches to intercepting enemy missiles. As the United States' partner in NORAD and NATO, the Canadian government will need to decide if it supports the previously-rejected concept of using nuclear-armed interceptors.

In the late 1950s, the John Diefenbaker government agreed to deploy, in partnership with the United States, nuclear-armed interceptors — CF-101s in Canada and CF-104s in Europe — as well as an anti-missile system that relied on nuclear-tipped Bomarc missiles. But the notion of nuclear explosions going off high overhead to intercept Soviet bombers and block incoming missiles proved unsettling for many people and Diefenbaker eventually decided not to arm Canada with nuclear warheads. (During the Cuban missile crisis, they were filled with sand ballast and Diefenbaker's vacillation on the issue eventually led to the fall of his government.)

Incoming prime minister Lester Pearson and his cabinet (including Prime Minister Paul Martin's father, Paul Martin Sr.) quickly agreed to acquire nuclear-capable weapon systems — and Canada was a nuclear-armed power between 1959-1971. It took many years for our politicians, including prime ministers Diefenbaker, Pearson and Trudeau, to conclude that American plans to help Canada deploy "defensive" nuclear weapons were problematic and unacceptable.

For years, when confronted with disturbing information about nuclear fallout, most Canadians unquestioningly accepted the United States' argument that the fallout from exploding nuclear-tipped interceptors would be less harmful in comparison to full-scale nuclear war. Even this month, Ted Postol, a prominent physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told the Winnipeg Free Press that debris from intercepting nuclear warheads could spread over heavily-populated Canadian cities, inciting a brief CTV news story and little Canadian interest.

The ongoing tendency to assume that nuclear-armed interceptors are acceptable — indeed, preferable — is aptly illustrated by the Diefenbaker government's approach to the issue of fallout from nuclear explosions over Canada.

In 1961, the cabinet received "the best information available" to consider what they called the "dead-man fuse" question. Since the fear was that Soviet bombers would carry nuclear weapons preset for certain altitudes, at which they would detonate regardless of whether the bomber's crew was dead or alive, the U.S. Air Force recommended Canada deploy the nuclear-tipped Bomarc B missile. The Diefenbaker cabinet was

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told that the Bomarc missiles could destroy the enemy's aircraft without causing the nuclear weapons they carried to explode, even if the warheads had been activated beforehand. As for the resulting fallout from the Bomarc exploding on impact with the enemy's aircraft, these small nuclear explosions would not cause a great deal of fallout because they would occur high in the air.

On the other hand, there was a "strong probability" that the use of conventional warheads in the Bomarc A model would result in the explosion of activated nuclear weapons carried by enemy aircraft.

Later, defence minister Douglas Harkness also assured the minister of external affairs, Howard Green, in a personal letter that the Bomarc missiles would destroy Soviet bombers and the bombs they were carrying with only a "minor" release of radioactive fallout.

Although cabinet ministers seemed reassured by phrases such as "would

not cause great fallout" and "strong probability," many Canadians were not similarly confident. The minister of national defence continued to receive well-reasoned letters from citizens, asking, for example, whether the atomic blast from "our missile may not trigger the enemy's H-bomb ... liberate deadly radiation ... still causing undue damage through blast, heat, and radiation?" The minister vigorously maintained in his own personally-written draft of a "standard reply" that such concerns were unwarranted and "completely incorrect." In his view, "the Bomarc equipped with a nuclear warhead on contact with an aircraft or even exploded in close proximity to that aircraft would in all probability not only destroy the aircraft but also neutralize or 'cook' the bomb, thus preventing it being triggered."

In this cabinet minister's opinion, "the size of the nuclear warhead designed for the Bomarc is relatively small, as compared to the bomb or bombs carried in the aircraft and this, coupled with the fact that the explosion would occur several thousands of feet in the air, would have little affect [sic] at ground level."

Indeed, the defence minister's conviction that the explosions from the Bomarc missiles would not threaten

Canadian lives was sufficiently firm that he expressed no concerns to the prime minister about possibly moving the line of defence northward. As he wrote in secret correspondence to Diefenbaker, the only foreseeable problem with moving the likely area of air battle was the possibility of negative newspaper articles written by so-called defence "experts." In his own words, "I believe we would be at a disadvantage, although military opinion does not accept this, in moving the likely area of air battle from roughly along the 49th parallel to roughly a line through Calgary, Saskatoon and 100 miles north of Winnipeg. I would think it almost inevitable that some of the newspaper defence 'experts' would finally get on to this idea and you are well aware of what the effect on people in Western Canada would be of articles along this line."

Rather than acknowledge concerns about the dangerous effects of nuclear fallout from Soviet bombers and Bomarc alike, the defence minister's qualms revolved around the predictably negative reaction of newspapers and Western Canadians.

Canadian cabinet ministers reluctantly recognized by May 1960 that Canada was "bound by agreement with the United States" to construct two bases for nuclear-armed Bomarc missiles, although the threat of the manned bomber had rapidly decreased and it was considered that the bomber threat would probably be considered to be negligible by 1965.

The cabinet's continuing quandary about whether to acquiesce to the U.S. request was exacerbated by news that tests of the Bomarc B missiles in the U.S. were not promising and the cost of buying more interceptors would be prohibitive. Nevertheless, the general consensus within cabinet was that the Canadian commitment "could not be cancelled in present circumstances without precipitating a crisis in Canada's relations with the U.S."

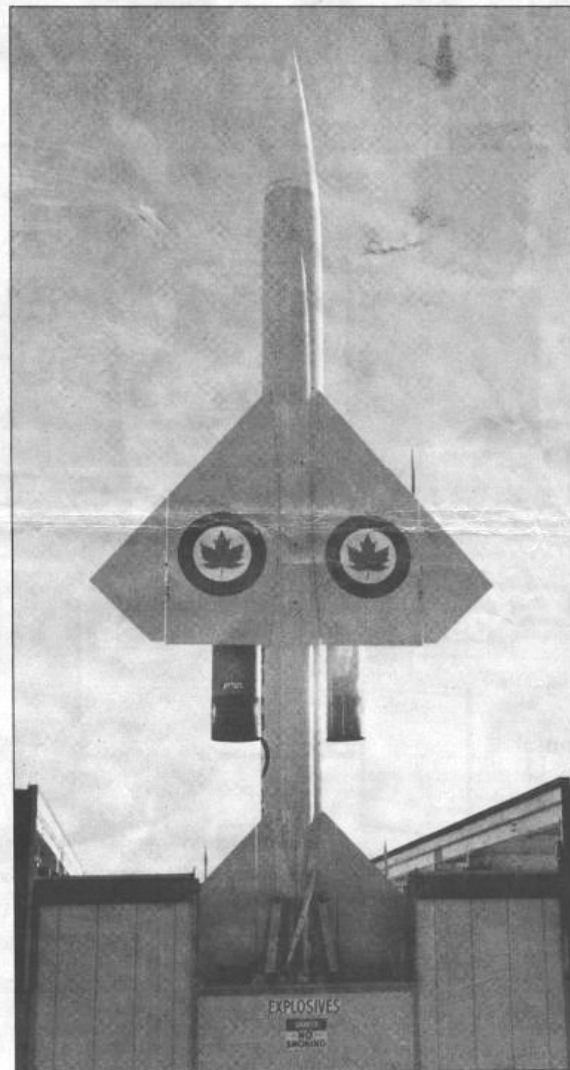
Whether prime minister John Diefenbaker himself understood from the outset that the Bomarc B would carry a nuclear, and not a conventional missile, remains unclear. In later years, Diefenbaker denied having committed the government to acquiring nuclear weapons for the Bomarc missiles (as well as for the CF-101s, the CF-104s, the Honest John, and the Lacrosse missiles).

For example, during the 1963 general election, he claimed not to have understood the distinction between the two Bomarc models — and to have consented only to the acquisition of the Bomarc A missile because it carried a conventional warhead. But the record shows that on February 20, 1959, the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that: "The full potential of these defensive weapons is achieved only when they are armed with nuclear warheads ... We are confident that we shall be able to reach formal agreement with the United States ..."

These words seem quite clearly to mean that Diefenbaker initially accepted that the Canadian Forces would have nuclear weapons.

Even if President Bush replaces Rumsfeld with another defence secretary soon, Prime Minister Paul Martin and his cabinet can expect mounting pressure to support — or not support — the U.S. ballistic missile defence project. But Martin may well want to recall that prime minister Diefenbaker's fears of being trapped in an American-led nuclear war — fought over Canadian skies — led him, eventually, to renege upon his original promises and fight for his political life from an anti-nuclear and arguably more anti-American standpoint.

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Free Press file photo

STAR WARS, THE FIRST GENERATION: A Bomarc B anti-aircraft missile sits atop its launcher in North Bay in September 1963. The ground-to-air missiles were deployed in squadrons under the Canadian Forces Air Defence Command and the U.S. Air Force Aerospace Defence Command.