



OP-ED/GUEST COLUMN

Lessons of prior Cabinet decision-making on U.S. missiles: Diefenbaker went through similar situation as Martin



Photographs by Jake Wright, The Hill Times and Canadian Encyclopedia

CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS: PM MARTIN MAY WELL WANT TO RECALL THAT PM DIEFENBAKER'S FEARS OF BEING TRAPPED IN AN AMERICAN-LED NUCLEAR WAR, FOUGHT OVER CANADIAN SKIES, LED HIM, ULTIMATELY, TO RENEGE UPON HIS ORIGINAL PROMISES AND FIGHT FOR HIS POLITICAL LIFE.

By ERIKA SIMPSON
Defence Minister Bill Graham says that the federal Cabinet, not the House of Commons, will decide whether Canada will join the U.S. ballistic missile defence project. Recently-revealed Cabinet minutes from the early 1960s teach valuable lessons because Cabinet ministers faced a similar decision about whether to deploy anti-missile nuclear weapon systems. Behind-the-scenes, their internal debates were characterized by confusion and ignorance about the technology being

recommended; a strong inclination not to abandon the United States; accompanied by fear that Canada could be entrapped in an American-led nuclear war over Canadian territory.

These tendencies are illustrated by the Cabinet'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 pre-set 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 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, then 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 then-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 John 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.

By May, 1960, Cabinet ministers reluctantly recognized 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 Feb. 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.

Clearly Defence Minister Graham thinks Prime Minister Paul Martin should be able to tell the House of Commons of his Cabinet's decision to support — or not support — the U.S. ballistic missile defence project. But Prime Minister 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, ultimately, to renege upon his original promises and fight for his political life from an anti-nuclear standpoint.

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