OP-ED/GUEST COLUMN

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

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 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 told that the Bomarc missiles could destroy the B-52 bombers that were carrying with them 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” Bomac missile may not trigger the U.S. H-Bomb...liberate deadly radiation...still causing undue damage through the resulting fallout from the Bomarcs exploding on the ground. The minister vigorously maintained in his own personally-written draft of a “statement” that there was insufficient reason to believe that the bomber was armed with a nuclear weapon.

As for the resulting fallout from the Bomarcs exploding on impact with the enemy aircraft, these small nuclear explosions would not cause a great deal of fallout because they would occur in close proximity to that aircraft, would not only destroy the aircraft but also neutralize or “cook” the bomb thus preventing its being triggered. In this Cabinet minister’s opinion, “The very significant factor is the size of the nuclear warheads...designed for the Bomarcs 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 thousand feet in the air, would have little effect [sic] at ground level.”

Indeed, the then-defence minister’s conviction that the explosions from the Bomarc missiles would not threaten Canada was sufficiently strong that he expressed no concerns to the prime minister about possibly moving the line of defence northward. As he wrote in secret correspondence with the U.S., “We have considered 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 have little difficulty in the near future in sustaining the general public, although military opinion does not accept this, in moving the likely area of air battle from roughly the 49th parallel to roughly a line through Calgary...about 200 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 the effect on people of radioactive fallout. The minister vigorously maintained in his own personally-written draft of a “statement” that there was insufficient reason to believe that the bomber was armed with a nuclear weapon. The minister vigorously maintained in his own personally-written draft of a “statement” that there was insufficient reason to believe that the bomber was armed with a nuclear weapon.

By 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 will 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 renounce his original promises and fight for his political life from an anti-nuclear standpoint.

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