

Red Scare: Canada's Rush to Integrate North American Air Defence Systems

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Joe Clark perfectly depicts the popular perception of John Diefenbaker in his 2002 *Globe and Mail* editorial regarding Diefenbaker. “Dief the Chief” was a suspicious and arrogant populist driven by a strong sense of social justice and nationalism.¹ However, as with many conventional historical assumptions, there are notable exceptions to Diefenbaker’s record as an ardent nationalist. His reputation for nationalism (or anti-Americanism) stems from his tenuous relationship with United States President John Kennedy and the much publicized Bomarc and Cuban Missile Crises.² However, during the early part of Diefenbaker’s tenure in office he had a very close and friendly relationship with American President Dwight Eisenhower. This close relationship, and Diefenbaker’s willingness to trust the American administration, led to the first major political blunder of Diefenbaker’s tenure; his acceptance of the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD) in July 1957.

While this agreement had been seriously discussed by both Canadian and American officials since 1955, the previous Liberal government of Louis St. Laurent was hesitant to agree to an integrated Air Defence Command. Diefenbaker, upon becoming Prime Minister, immediately agreed to the NORAD proposal due to pressure from the military and the assumption that the Liberals were on the verge of approving the agreement. These factors caused Diefenbaker and his Defence Minister George Pearkes to overlook both the political and practical consequences of the agreement. Ultimately, this paper will argue John Diefenbaker’s willingness to create a North American Air

¹ “Dief Gave Us a Sense of Self”, *Globe and Mail*, 19 January 2002

² For a comprehensive coverage of Diefenbaker’s relationship with Kennedy see Knowlton Nash’s book *Kennedy and Diefenbaker: Fear and Loathing Across the Undefined Boarder*.

Defence Command was based upon false beliefs concerning the previous Liberal government's intentions towards NORAD; the consequences of which created political difficulties for his administration and left important questions pertaining to the command of Canada forces in NORAD unanswered. This will be demonstrated by analyzing the primary source evidence from the period of early negotiations starting in 1955 until the parliamentary debates of November 1957 surrounding NORAD. This includes looking at cabinet documents, parliamentary debates, memoirs of important actors, documents from the Department of External Affairs and prominent Canadian and American newspapers from the time period.

One of the major problems pertaining to a discussion of NORAD is what the founding principle of operational command means. This paper will first trace support for the larger concept of an integrated air defence network. During the 1957 period, it will focus on the particular interpretations of operational command as stated in the 8th Military Study Group Report, published by the Canada-US Military Study group (MSG) in 1956. The broad idea of an integrated air defence network and command structure was in the interest of both the United States and Canada. The United States was concerned about Soviet long-range TU-95 bombers attacking North America over the Canadian arctic. Canada, while sharing these basic concerns, also had unique concerns due to its geographic positioning. According to former Prime Minister and Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester B. Pearson, it was in Canada's interest to have a system where information could be quickly processed and acted upon. The rationale was that it was over Canadian soil where Soviet bombers and their nuclear payloads would be destroyed. The faster information regarding an attack could be processed and acted upon, the further

north the attacking bombers could be destroyed. This meant less fallout over the major population centres which are mostly close to the US border. However, while such an agreement was in the interests of both Canada and the USA, the Americans refused to allow an integrated air defence command structure to fall under the control of NATO forces as it decreased American control on the North American continent. Similarly, Pearson argues, it was in Canada's interest to negotiate bilateral agreements with the United States.³ Furthermore, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded the operational integration of Canadian and American air defence systems was desirable and should be negotiated with the Canadian military.⁴ The willingness of both the US Military and the Canadian Government vis-à-vis Prime Minister St. Laurent and his Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester B. Pearson led Canada and the US to enter into some form of air defence arrangements. According to historian Joseph Jockel, "Air defence was popular with Liberals, [it was] visible to the Americans, popular with the Canadians, easy on manpower and, for those who saw warmongers behind every gun, explicitly defensive."⁵

The initial planning for NORAD was undertaken by the respective militaries of each country and while the Liberals supported the principle, they were hesitant to agree to an integrated command structure. The tension between the Canadian militaries desire to integrate air defence systems and the Liberal's reluctance was first demonstrated in June of 1955. Air Marshall Slemon, head of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) was quoted by the Montreal Gazette as saying integration between the Canadian and

³ Lester B. Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of The Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson Volume 2 1948-1957* (Toronto, 1973), p.84

⁴ Joseph Jockel, *Canada in NORAD 1957-2007: A History* (Kingston, 2007), p.23

⁵ Jockel, p.24

American Air Defence forces was “inevitable.” The statement by Slemon prompted a swift response from Defence Minister Ralph Campney. He spoke in the House of Commons on 3 June 1955 stating the Liberal Government is opposed to any form of integrated air command between Canada and the US.⁶ Despite the government’s reluctance, the desire for some form of integration remained strong in both militaries.

On 19 December 1956, the Canada-US Military Study Group (MSG) delivered its Eight Report which specifically dealt with the issue of North American Air Defence which became the reference point for all future discussion regarding NORAD. The report officially endorsed the creation of a joint “operational air defence command” which was defined as directing, coordinating and controlling the operational activities of deployed units which may, or may not, be under the command of the authority exercising operational control. This meant during peacetime the command would be responsible for creating strategies and plans which, pending civilian approval, would be employed in the event of hostilities. However, if a deployed NORAD unit came under hostile attack, the commander of NORAD would be responsible to make the decision of whether to engage the enemy. Importantly, the report provided no recommendation regarding the actual political process of integration.⁷ This report and its recommendations were officially accepted by the Canadian Committee of the Chiefs of Staff on February 1st and received strong support from the Chair of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Lt-General Charles Foulkes. Despite the acceptance by the committee, Foulkes believed an official presentation to the Cabinet’s Defence Committee should be delayed until the proposal

⁶ “Canada Opposes Overall Command for Continent” *Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1955

⁷ “Permanent Joint Board on Defence Journal. Canadian Secretary’s Copy.” *Documents on Canadian External Relations 1956-57*, document 41

was approved by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁸ The reason was Foulkes believed political approval of the agreement would be more likely if the US had already given explicit approval.

The acceptance of the report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee and the subsequent report prepared for the Cabinet Defence Committee generated concern at External Affairs. The Department's representative on the committee was concerned about the report because it failed to "...reflect the political problems inherent in the control of Canadian forces in peace-time by an outsider. It can be argued that this aspect of the question will be dealt with by Ministers when they consider the submission. On the other hand officials cannot be blind to the political aspects of this question, and the original submission to Cabinet Defence Committee should reflect some political awareness."⁹ External Affairs was concerned about the possible implications of combining operational commands and expressed concerns regarding the willingness of the military to overlook the political ramifications of NORAD. Despite possible concerns regarding Canadian sovereignty, On 11 March 1957, Defence Minister Ralph Campney presented a report to the Cabinet Defence Committee which agreed to the principles of the MSG report adopted by the Chiefs of Staff Committee.¹⁰ The process of approval was halted on 24 March when the Liberal government decided the political consequences of adopting such a proposal before the general election of June 1957 could be costly. The United States government was told approval would have to wait until the cabinet meeting of 13 June

⁸ "Excerpts from the Chiefs of Staff Committee Meeting," 1 February 1957, *Documents on Canadian External Relations 1956-57*, document 44

⁹ "Memorandum from the Defence Liaison Division to Deputy Under Secretary of State for External Affairs," 13 February 1957, *Documents on Canadian External Relations 1956-57*, document 46

¹⁰ "Memorandum from the Minister of National Defence to Cabinet Defence Committee," 11 March 1957, *Documents on Canadian External Relations 1956-57*, document 49

1957, after the expected re-election of the Liberal government.¹¹ This interpretation is also backed up by Basil Robinson, the Department of External Affairs liaison in the PMO.¹²

Before the cabinet meeting of 13 June, the general election of 1957 brought John Diefenbaker and the Progressive Conservatives to power with a minority government. This change created a situation where the outgoing St. Laurent government refused to ratify NORAD. Instead, due to the important political considerations and practical consequences regarding Canadian sovereignty, the Liberals believed the incoming government should be responsible for discussing, and possibly implementing, NORAD.¹³ The Department of External Affairs was also reluctant to approve the implementation of NORAD. The day before the cabinet meeting, Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, Jules Léger, wrote to Pearson saying, “There is a precedent in the NATO structure for the operational control of Canadian units by non-Canadian commanders, but this, of course, does not apply to forces within the national boundaries. While this Department has had an opportunity on several occasions to comment on the recommendations of the Military Study Group...it was not consulted on the drafting of the memorandum to the Cabinet Defence Committee.”¹⁴ The continued pattern of External Relations hesitancy regarding NORAD indicates that, even if the Liberals had been reelected, the approval of cabinet was not guaranteed.

¹¹ John G. Diefenbaker, *Canada: Memoirs of the Right Honourable John G. Diefenbaker Volume 3*, (Toronto, 1977), p.21

¹² Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs*, (Toronto, 1989), pp. 15-18

¹³ Cabinet Conclusions: Air Defence, 13 June 1957

¹⁴ “Memorandum from the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs to Secretary of State for External Affairs,” 12 June 1957, *Documents on Canadian External Relations, 1956-1957*, document 50.

Cabinet's refusal to implement NORAD created an awkward situation for Lt-General Charles Foulkes. Having already achieved the approval of the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in March, Foulkes was embarrassed at the delay created by the Liberals and now faced an even greater delay due to the change of government. This created a situation where Foulkes wanted the agreement signed as soon as Diefenbaker was willing.¹⁵ The tension between the political and military establishments created the situation which unfurled over the course of July and August 1957.

Foulkes sought to take advantage of the new government to get the NORAD agreement approved. The agreement was presented to the new Defence Minister George Pearkes, a former colleague of Foulkes during World War II, on 22 July with instructions for him to seek the approval of the Prime Minister. By 24 July Diefenbaker had signed the agreement. There was no consultation with the Cabinet Defence Committee as it had not yet been constituted. Similarly, with Diefenbaker serving as his own Secretary of State for External Affairs, only Pearkes and Foulkes were consulted during the entire process.¹⁶ His quick approval of the agreement is attributed to his great trust in George Pearkes and his belief that Louis St. Laurent, Lester B. Pearson and Ralph Campney had all agreed to join NORAD but were simply prevented from signing the deal due to the election.¹⁷

The lack of an External Affairs minister also resulted in an absence of communication between External Affairs and the Prime Minister. The Department of External Affairs only found out about the agreement on 31 July from Livingston

¹⁵ Robinson, p. 18

¹⁶ Robinson, pp.18-19

¹⁷ Diefenbaker, p.21

Merchant, the American Ambassador to Canada. Furthermore, the department had provided Diefenbaker with briefing notes on 26 July concerning joint air defence agreements which highlighted the issue of control over Canadian forces. In the notes, External Affairs preferred inter-government agreements to be conducted between themselves and the American State Department. The agreement had already been signed by this point but the impending visit of Secretary of State Dulles and the lack of cabinet approval meant Diefenbaker's signature could still be withdrawn. Despite evidence of Diefenbaker reading the briefing, he still overlooked the implications of the NORAD agreement for he felt a structure such as NORAD did not require formal government approval.¹⁸

The informal attitude of Diefenbaker is reflected in his actions regarding cabinet approval. On 31 July he announced to his cabinet an agreement creating an integrated North American air defence command had been reached with the Americans. The only role for cabinet was to approve the appointment of Air Marshall Slemon as Deputy Commander of NORAD and to decide upon Slemon's salary.¹⁹ As was later pointed out in the House of Commons, this was the only time NORAD was discussed in cabinet, while the order-in-council approving the appointment of Slemon was the only approval ever given.²⁰

Two days after the appointment of Slemon, a joint press conference was hosted by Dulles and Pearkes to announce the official creation of NORAD. Pearkes emphasized the process was started by the previous Liberal administration and represented "another step

¹⁸ Robinson, p.19

¹⁹ Cabinet Conclusions: Air Defence, 31 July 1957

²⁰ House of Commons Debates, 5 November 1957, p.758

in the integration of air defence forces” which was “only natural.”²¹ Pearkes also emphasized the importance of the command structure having the ability to react in the event of a crisis situation. He stated, “[i]n the event of an attack every second is precious. There is no time for palavers. Both Forces must be able to work side by side.”²² The prevalent interpretation was that NORAD would create defence procedures and plans which would be put into effect in the case of an emergency. As well, in the event of a surprise attack on North America, the NORAD commander would be empowered to make operational decisions, such as whether to shoot down enemy bombers, without political consultation. The role of NORAD’s commander appeared to be agreed upon by both governments but once the political controversy surrounding the Tory government’s decision came to the forefront in late October, Pearkes dramatically changed his position.

The political controversy erupted in late October because of Diefenbaker’s lack of cabinet consultation and the issue of civilian control which Diefenbaker overlooked due to his (ultimately false) belief the Liberals were on the verge of signing the agreement. The first rumblings of an impending political controversy surrounding Canadian Forces role in NORAD and Diefenbaker’s actions surfaced on 11 August in the *Washington Post*. The editor of the *Montreal Gazette* wrote a guest column on Canada’s entrance into NORAD and the possible loss of Canadian sovereignty. The article reflects concerns over sections of the RCAF falling under the command of an American and the possibility an attack on the US would drag Canada into a war without prior consultation.²³ The column

²¹ “Canada, US Unify Air Defence; Slemon Appointed Deputy Commander” *Globe and Mail*, 2 August 1957

²² “US General Boss of RCAF if Wars Comes” *Toronto Star*, 2 August 1957

²³ “None Has Protested Loss of Sovereignty” *Washington Post* 11 August 1957

reflected the course dialogue surrounding NORAD would take over the latter months of 1957 and first reflects the issues brought forward. Issues which the now Leader of Opposition, Lester B. Pearson, would raise in the House.

The opposition attacks against the government began in earnest on 22 October. Pearson began to put pressure on the government to table the relevant documents and orders-in-council pertaining to the creation of NORAD. In the same session, George Pearkes confirmed Air Marshall Slemon and NORAD Commander General Partridge were in Colorado Springs and NORAD was in full operation.²⁴ This news provided the incentive for more opposition attacks. On 4 November 1957 Paul Martin Sr. and Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) member W. Henderson pressed Pearkes to explain the role of the RCAF within NORAD structure, seeing as the command was already established and operating. Furthermore, Martin pressured the government to table all other documents relating to NORAD, in addition to the order-in-council appointing Slemon as Deputy Commander.²⁵ The next day Liberal Jean Lesage continued the attack against Diefenbaker's government for failing to provide any documentation regarding the creation process of NORAD. As well, he highlighted the issue of Canadian forces being commanded by an American General. Particularly concerning was that NORAD Commander Partridge could deploy Canadian forces without first consulting Canadian civilian authorities. In response to these accusations, Pearkes claims the NORAD agreement was covered by the preexisting NATO agreement which was ratified by Parliament. Therefore NORAD has already been agreed to and didn't need any official

²⁴ House of Commons Debates, 22 October 1957, p.242

²⁵ House of Commons Debates, 4 November 1957, p.702

government or parliamentary approval.²⁶ Yet Pearkes neglected to mention that in fact the Americans were vehemently against NORAD being part of the NATO structure. While earlier reports such as the MSG's report made comparisons to NATO's command structure as an analogous structure, NORAD was in no way associated with NATO.

Pearkes continued his defence of his government in the House of Commons on 7 November 1957. He continued to state that NORAD was part of the NATO treaty. He also claimed Canadian forces would not be sent to war without the prior consultation of political authorities in Ottawa. He attempted to explain that in the initial press conference held on 2 August 1957 where he stated NORAD commander could deploy forces at the push of a button only after consultation with the relevant political authorities.²⁷ Yet this was in direct contradiction to what was actually said on 2 August 1957. Pearkes' statement flatly contradicted General Partridge in an interview he gave, an interview approved by the Department of External Affairs. In the interview Partridge stated he could deploy forces without approval from any civilian authority.²⁸ The continued insistence of Pearkes on claims which had no factual basis represents the clear state of confusion in the Diefenbaker government surrounding NORAD. These hasty and contradictory defences demonstrated serious political questions had not been addressed when the agreement was originally approved.

The political debate surrounding Diefenbaker's actions concluded on 13 November during the debates in the House of Commons. During the session, Pearson demanded access to all information pertaining to NORAD's command structure and its relationship with NATO. Diefenbaker responded by stating Pearson had all the relevant

²⁶ House of Commons Debates, 5 November 1957, p.758

²⁷ House of Commons Debates, 7 November 1957, p.850

²⁸ "General's Orders Not War Signal, Pearkes States" *Globe and Mail*, 8 November 1957

information due to the fact that the proposal was presented to cabinet. He also stated the Defence Minister, along with Pearson and St. Laurent, had given approval to the proposal but simply waited until after the election before announcing it. Pearson flatly denied that the proposal had ever been considered by the Liberal Cabinet.²⁹ The claims made by Diefenbaker are also reflected in his memoirs and seem to demonstrate an actual belief that the Liberals were on the verge of signing the agreement. While similar claims were made by Pearson and Diefenbaker throughout the rest of 1957 and into 1958, the substance of subsequent debates did not change significantly. After the debate of 13 November the major themes had become apparent and much of the remaining discussion was partisan bickering. On the diplomatic level, the process of actually determining the substance of the agreement continued. A final exchange of notes between the Canadian Embassy and the United States Government formalized the agreement on 12 May 1958. This process however had very little to do with the motivations or consequences of the initial decision by John Diefenbaker to agree to the implementation of NORAD but rather were diplomatic formalities.

Diefenbaker's decision to sign the NORAD agreement in July 1957 was based upon the false belief that the St. Laurent was, immediately after the election of 1957, going to approve the creation of NORAD. This belief caused him to overlook important factors which resulted in both political embarrassment and significant confusion for his young government. While there existed widespread support in the military establishments of both countries, certain sections of the government, most notably External Affairs, were hesitant to approve the creation of NORAD on the basis of the MSG's terms. However

²⁹ House of Commons Debates, 13 November 1957, pp.1061-1062

the level of consultation gave the appearance of an imminent approval by the Liberals. This was not the case, yet the inexperienced John Diefenbaker firmly believed he was approving an agreement which was already vetted by both the previous government and External Affairs. This false belief was exposed during the parliamentary debates of October and November 1957 where his government demonstrated their lack of understanding regarding NORAD. It became evidently clear certain key issues, namely control over RCAF units assigned to NORAD, were unresolved and there existed a large gulf in the powers of the NORAD to act without consulting political leaders in Canada.

This understanding of the birth of NORAD is similar to the majority historical opinion but does differ slightly. In his two books on the subject of NORAD, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, The United States and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958*³⁰ and *Canada in NORAD 1957-2007: A History*, Joseph Jockel argues the military establishments of Canada and the US both wanted air defence integration and as a result put tremendous pressure on their respective governments, especially Foulkes in Canada, to achieve this.³¹ While Foulkes did put significant pressure on the Diefenbaker government, Diefenbaker believed the Liberals were going to sign NORAD if re-elected. Foulkes pressure was simply one factor in Diefenbaker's decision. The works of Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* and Trevor Lloyd, *Canada in World Affairs: 1957-1959* both focus more specifically on the impact of Diefenbaker's decision and his motivations for the decision. They both come to similar conclusions that John Diefenbaker was affected by both the

³⁰ Joseph Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, The United States and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958*, (Vancouver, 1987), pp.98-104

³¹ Joseph Jockel, *Canada in NORAD 1957-2007: A History*, pp.22-34

military and the actions of the previous government when making his decision.³² Since Denis Smith's work is a biography he also argues Diefenbaker's relationship and trust in George Pearkes influenced his actions.³³ All works however agree with the argument that the hasty approval of NORAD created significant confusion for the Tories in the House of Commons. It also left a number of serious political considerations unresolved. While Diefenbaker's actions during the entire NORAD affair serve to rebut arguments of outright anti-Americanism, they do provide ample evidence for the historical interpretation as a paranoid and ultimately incompetent leader. The NORAD affair raises interesting questions regarding the effect a leader can have on policy and on the overall approach of government towards important questions of external affairs.

³² Trevor Lloyd, *Canada in World Affairs: 1957-1958*, (Toronto, 1968), pp.26-35

³³ Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker*,(Toronto, 1995), pp. 264-265

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Diefenbaker's memoirs provide an overview of the major events of his time in office, including the NORAD agreement. However his intention is to justify his actions while Prime Minister and so his recollections are often coloured by his own emotions. As well his claims regarding NORAD are, as demonstrated, frequently contradicted by other sources.

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Basil Robinson's memoirs serve as an excellent primary source for he records his own observations during his time in the Prime Minister's Office. They also provide a useful resource for locating other primary sources. They are limited in that while Robinson's personal experience is extremely useful, he often relies upon his own research to fill in the factual gaps thus making parts of his book simply an amateur history of the Diefenbaker administration.

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