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Canadian Arctic Sovereignty and Security: Historical Perspectives

Edited by P. Whitney Lackenbauer



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Cover: The Mobile Striking Force, an air-portable and airborne brigade group designed as a quick reaction force for northern operations, was an inexpensive solution to the question of how Canada could deal with an enemy lodgement in the Arctic. During training exercises, army personnel from southern Canada learned how to survive and operate in the north. In this image, taken during Exercise Bulldog II in 1954, Inuk Ranger TooToo from Churchill, Manitoba relays information to army personnel in a Penguin. DND photo PC-7066.

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Calgary Papers *in Military and Strategic Studies*

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“Advertising for Prestige”: Publicity in Canada-United States Arctic Defence Cooperation, 1946-48

David J. Bercuson

At the end of the Second World War, Canada and the United States began to cooperate more closely than ever on questions of continental defence.¹ Both nations held similar views about the political nature of the Soviet Union although there was some difference in the perceptions that United States and Canadian military leaders held about Soviet military capabilities and intentions at that time. It was also clear to Canadian leaders that the United States was determined to make its defensive stand as far forward as it could – in the Canadian Arctic – and that it was not in Canada’s own interests to attempt to deny American access to the Canadian north. That situation created a number of defence and foreign policy dilemmas for Canadian policymakers. One of the most difficult to resolve was how much to tell the world – and the Canadian people – about what was happening in the North, and why.

By the summer of 1946 Canadian-American negotiations, discussions, and planning about joint continental defence had begun although they were not far advanced. There were a small number of American troops stationed on Canadian soil in places such as the cold weather testing facilities at Churchill, Manitoba. In addition, American naval units were about to mount a small-scale exercise in the Arctic islands, and US Air Force B-29s were conducting regular long range training and weather survey flights from Iceland to Alaska over the Canadian Arctic. The joint Canadian-US Military Cooperation Committee was busy drawing up a grandiose plan for a continental air-defence system that was never instituted and the United States had sought permission to construct a chain of weather stations across the Canadian Arctic. The stations would be operated by the United States Weather Bureau, a civilian agency, but they were clearly military in intent.²

This was something new for Canada. Prior to 1940, there had been virtually no Canada-United States defence relationship. American troops or installations, civil or military, on Canadian soil, or joint Canadian-American defence planning, would have been unheard of. That had changed after the

fall of France with the issuance of the Ogdensburg Declaration and the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) in August 1940. But that change had taken place under the pressures of wartime and the extreme danger that Britain had been in 1940.³ Now, peace had come again and although Canadian leaders fully realized that the world had changed dramatically and that the United States was now the only nation that could help safeguard Canada, they feared that the Canadian people and the Canadian press would be slower to come around. Britain had always been Canada's great ally and, in 1945, Canada was as Anglophilic as ever. The safest course in mid-1946 seemed to be to conceal as much of the Canada-US cooperative effort as possible.

If anyone in Ottawa truly believed that that was feasible, a series of stories in the *Financial Post* in June and July 1946 must have smashed that illusion. With lurid headlines Ken Wilson of the *Post* declared that Canada was going to be “Another Belgium in U.S. Air Bases Proposal” but that Ottawa had managed to kill “U.S. Plans to man weather stations in the Canadian Arctic.”⁴ There was no “U.S. Air Bases Proposal,” but Wilson's story about the weather stations was fact; the Cabinet had turned down the American request on 29 June.⁵ How had Wilson found out? Obviously a matter highly sensitive to both governments had been leaked. That in itself pointed to the difficulty of keeping these things under tight wraps.

The Canadian government's effort to keep the details of the new Canada-United States defence partnership under cover was not helped by an incident that took place in late September 1946. In an off-the-record conversation with *Time* magazine correspondent Larry Laybourne during a visit to New York, Secretary of State Paul Martin said that the Canadian government faced important decisions in the field of joint defence and that he was “staggered by the expense of the installations which Canada would have to finance.”⁶ Martin was undoubtedly referring to the MCC's soon-to-be-shelved air defence plans. Laybourne then contacted American government officials to try to pry more information out of them but was told that any publicity regarding Canada-United States defence activities at that point would embarrass US Secretary of State James Byrnes, then attending the Paris Peace Conference. Laybourne chose to sit on the story but *Time's* representative in Ottawa tried to get details about Arctic defence installations from the United States embassy there. At the same time *Maclean's* reporter Blair Fraser and the *Financial Post's* Wilson were also poking around. Ottawa asked the State Department to help and Laybourne was contacted a second time and told to back off but not before the Canadians were reminded “where the responsibil-

ity for putting Time magazine on the trail lay." The Americans might not have been so compliant if they were not "alive to the danger of prejudicing Canadian Government decisions by unfortunate publicity."⁷

By the end of November 1946, both the United States State Department and the Canadian Department of External Affairs were trying to patch up a problematic defence relationship. Then, at the end of the month, came "The Watch on the Arctic" by Blair Fraser. This was a lengthy article in *Maclean's* which sketched out the extent of the joint defence projects underway, discussed Operation *Musk Ox* – a recent joint exercise in the north – and which offered a pretty complete analysis of the backstage negotiations between Ottawa and Washington to settle the terms of further continental defence planning. There were numerous quotes from unnamed sources who were obviously in the Canadian or US military.⁸ The American embassy in Ottawa thought the piece of "more than ordinary importance" because of Fraser's reputation and *Maclean's* circulation. In their view, the article reflected "conversations with officials who were very conversant with recent negotiations." The Americans did not find the article unfriendly, but thought it showed "a pre-occupation with what the Russians will think and with the need for a cautious and gradual approach to the problem." As they themselves admitted, that attitude seemed to be "prevalent among certain Canadian officials;"⁹ it was certainly the view of the Prime Minister.¹⁰

The growing press attention – and the increasing accuracy of the spate of newspaper and magazine stories – undoubtedly provided the motive for both governments to put the subject of "publicity with regard to joint defence projects" on the agenda for an important high level (and top secret) meeting on continental defence held in Ottawa on 16 and 17 December 1946.¹¹ The meeting brought Canadian and American diplomats (including the State Department's leading Soviet expert, George Kennan) and military men together to try to break the log jam of continental defence issues that had been building up since early summer. The discussions were wide ranging; in two days many misunderstandings were cleared up and the stage was set for a successful long-term defence partnership.¹²

There were two issues related to publicity that needed to be resolved at the get-together. The first was connected to Recommendation 35 of the PJBD which had been adopted by the Board and forwarded to the two governments in late September. This document (eventually approved as Recommendation 36) was, in essence, a joint Canada-United States defence treaty that established the principles upon which virtually all post-war continental defence arrangements were to be based. The original version approved by the PJBD

the previous spring had not gone far enough in protecting Canadian sovereignty and had been referred back to the Board by the Canadian Cabinet. The new version had been accepted by King’s government in mid-November but details about its promulgation and what to say about it in public were still unresolved.¹³ The second issue was the stickier question about how the two governments ought to handle general publicity about joint defence projects.

The first matter was resolved simply; both governments would issue a statement summarizing, but not quoting, the PJBD recommendation on the same day.¹⁴ Regarding the second problem, Ottawa recognized that “it would clearly be impossible to maintain complete secrecy about [northern defence plans] even if secrecy were desirable” and thus that some information about defence projects would have to be shared with the press and public. The course suggested was to first “state unequivocally but unsensationally that certain defence activities were regarded as necessary in order to insure the security of the continent against the possibility of future air attack over the Pole.” If that did not work and the public reaction proved too great, then “it might well be possible to place a minimum of emphasis on preparations for defence and to stress the civil benefits that can be anticipated from improving our knowledge of northern conditions.”¹⁵ Such a course had, in fact, first been suggested by US President Harry S. Truman when he had met with the prime minister in Washington in late October.¹⁶ Although the Americans saw the problem as a “purely Canadian one” both delegations at the Ottawa meeting agreed that “there might be advantages to carrying out certain of the earlier parts of the projected programme under civilian auspices.” The United States would help with the subterfuge where it could.¹⁷

That solved little, as both governments soon found out. On Sunday, 22 December, the American liberal daily *P.M.* published an inflammatory article by Leslie Roberts claiming that Canada feared being the “ham” in a US-Soviet “Sandwich.” The tone of the piece was set early: “official Canada today is more frightened of American militarism than of Soviet expansion. For more than a year Uncle Sam’s northern neighbor has been the victim of continuing pressures from the US Army to permit American occupation of the Canadian Arctic.”¹⁸ Undersecretary of State Lester B. Pearson sent a copy of the Roberts’ article to King along with a note that although he did not think the story would cause any harm, it was “irritating to see this kind of thing in print.”¹⁹ The State Department took note of the article but thought it “up to the Canadian government to comment if it so wishes.”²⁰

The Americans did not react to the Roberts piece, but the Soviets certainly did. The Soviet ambassador to the United States called on Hume

Wrong at the Canadian embassy in Washington to inquire about the article and was told that it was “a tissue of falsehoods and exaggerations which should not be taken seriously.” Wrong tried to re-assure the Russian that the American presence in the Canadian Arctic was nowhere near as extensive as Roberts had indicated. He told him that future articles of that ilk were to be expected but that if the Russians were concerned, he would be happy to give them as much information as he could on the truth behind the press stories.²¹ In attempting to reassure the Soviets that they had nothing to fear, Wrong was again echoing the attitudes of many Canadian policymakers. Canada’s Minister of National Defence, Brooke Claxton was so worried about what the Russians would think that he actually invited the Soviet military attaché in Ottawa to take part in a tour of foreign military attaches of the Churchill test facilities in the spring of 1947.²² The US consul general in Montreal thought the invitation amounted to an “appease-Russia” attitude.²³

On 12 February 1947, Canada and the United States issued formal statements declaring to the world that they had both endorsed Recommendation 36 of the PJBD. The actual text of the recommendation was not released. It was the explicit beginning of a continental defence relationship that exists to this day, but it did not solve the problem of how information about defence activities in the Canadian Arctic were to be publicized by either of the two governments or, indeed, if they were to be publicized at all. Claxton was particularly worried about information regarding American activities in the Canadian north getting out. When the cabinet finally approved the American request to begin construction of a chain of weather stations in the north, Claxton ordered the RCAF to ensure that United States Air Force transports bringing men, supplies and equipment to the construction sites stay away from “heavily populated and urban areas.”²⁴

Claxton may well have been more sensitive than most of his colleagues to a possible adverse public reaction to the news of American presence in the Canadian north. He had an overdeveloped sense of smell when it came to sniffing out political trouble. But on this issue, he was not wrong, as he and the government found to their consternation in early June 1947. That was when Claxton introduced a bill into the House of Commons to give Canadian courts complete jurisdiction over American troops for all matters which were offences under Canadian law. American service courts would retain their jurisdiction only for crimes committed under United States military law, which were not also covered by Canadian statute.²⁵

The bill was innocuous enough, but many opposition members saw a good opportunity to embarrass Claxton and the government. They de-

manded to know how many US troops there were in Canada, what they were doing, and why they were there at all. There were heated claims that Canada was surrendering its sovereignty to the United States: “Where will it end?” one opposition member demanded to know, “What will happen when the Chinese are here? What will happen if the Russians come here?”²⁶ Cooperative Commonwealth Federation MP Harry Archibald declared that the bill represented the last step to American absorption of Canada.²⁷

Given the government’s majority, the bill passed without difficulty, but the length and tone of the debate were disturbing to both Ottawa and Washington.²⁸ Newly appointed US Secretary of State General George C. Marshall told Truman there was “an element in [Canada] which declares that the arrangements constitute a violation of Canadian sovereignty and prejudice the chance of Canada maintaining peaceful relations with the Soviet Union.” He suggested that discussions about joint defence issues with King on Truman’s forthcoming visit to Canada (he was to visit Ottawa from 10-12 June 1947) be done only “informally and privately.”²⁹ Claxton told the US ambassador that he hoped if the press asked Truman about American troops in Canada, the president would say only that “the numbers are very small and the operations of a routine character but that it is not desirable to give out the information.”³⁰

As defence activity in the north increased following the spring break-up in 1947, the problem of press leaks and publicity grew apace. In Ottawa the debate centred on the question of whether the government should issue press releases only to correct “damaging and incorrect” press speculation or whether it should strike first with “initial governmental guidance in the form of suitable...press statements.”³¹ The problem was much more serious in Washington where the three armed forces seemed to compete with each other in the publicity arena in order to position themselves more favourably in the ongoing battle for a bigger piece of the defence spending pie. As one State Department official put it: “Press officers in War and Navy are evidently under considerable pressure to hand out stories about plans and operations in the far north. The pressure comes from some of their own people who want advertising for prestige and appropriations purposes and who are ignorant of the international implications...” The Canadian experts at State were both well aware of and sensitive to Ottawa’s desire to play down American activity in the Canadian north. The question was how to do it in a free society with a free press where it was both impossible and undesirable to try to muzzle the press entirely. State suggested that a standard policy be drawn up and that a directive implementing that policy be “issued at a high level” to keep the American military in line, “off the necks of the Canadians,” and acting in concert.³²

In mid-September 1947, the PJBD discussed the publicity problem at great length. It concluded that the lack of a policy to guide the release of information regarding Canada-United States operations in the north had “resulted in unnecessary confusion and misunderstandings... [and] needlessly irritated relationships between... [government] departments...and...has been a cause of some difficulty to the Canadian government.” The Board even found that military secrets were in danger of being compromised. It thus urged the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense to “establish a clearly-defined policy with respect to publicity...that appropriate directives be issued from a high level...and that measures should be taken to coordinate and expedite through prescribed channels proposed publicity concerning a given project.”³³ As a result, Secretary of State Marshall approached US Secretary of Defense James Forrestal with a proposal that both men work to implement the PJBD’s recommendation.³⁴ Forrestal replied that, with one minor exception, the views of the PJBD were “quite in line with my own ideas.”³⁵ With such powerful support, it was only a matter of time before the American military establishment was brought into line.

On 19 November Marshall, Forrestal and the Secretaries of the Army, Navy and Air Force issued a “Directive Concerning Publicity Relating to Joint Canadian-United States Defense Plans and Operations.” The document laid out the basic principles that would underlay the release of information from the United States regarding continental defence projects. It was based on the notion that such defence arrangements should be made known whenever and wherever possible, subject only to “limitations necessarily imposed by the requirements of military security.” Thus the United States pledged itself to release as much information as it could as early as possible on an unclassified basis, subject to cooperation and coordination with Canada. It pledged, among other things, that public announcements would always be approved in advance by both governments. It placed the burden of deciding what to release and how to do so on the American members of the PJBD and it reigned in overly zealous American military personnel who had been in the habit of communicating directly with the Canadian government and Embassy.³⁶ It was everything Ottawa could have asked for.

In Ottawa, the departments of External Affairs, National Defence and Transport were busy working on a policy of their own that would parallel the one being formulated in the United States. It was approved by Claxton, Secretary of State for External Affairs Louis St. Laurent, and Transport Minister Lionel Chevrier at the end of November 1947. The Canadian document paralleled the one that had been issued in Washington and declared:

“ADVERTISING FOR PRESTIGE”

“secrecy is counter to the traditions of the United States and of Canada and the desired objective is to reach the position where the press and public alike recognize that joint undertakings in the Canadian Arctic are normal and sensible developments.”³⁷ That, of course would not come for several years and certainly not until the threat of Soviet air-atomic attack was palpable to nearly everyone.

The final step in the process of trying to manage public information about northern defence activities came with the issuance of a joint understanding on 1 April 1948 which essentially repeated the separate but parallel documents that had already been promulgated in the two capitals. The two governments agreed on four basic principles:

- (1) defence arrangements ought to be publicized “in so far as the requirements of Government policy, military security and the international situation will permit”;
- (2) the question of how much information to release and when would be decided on a case-by-case basis;
- (3) the chief responsibility for the release of information would lie with the country on whose territory the defence project was based;
- (4) any public announcement should have the approval of both governments.³⁸

The joint policy was re-issued with minor modifications in late September 1950.³⁹

The problem of just what information to release and when and the related issue of how to handle publicity leaks and press reports that reflected unfavourably on Canadian-American defence arrangements did not disappear, of course. Press stories that had no basis in fact or which implied that Canada was compromising its sovereignty in the Arctic and elsewhere would continue to appear through the years.⁴⁰ That was to be expected. A joint policy on how much information to release, and under what circumstances, could never be expected to stop the press from writing about one of the biggest Canadian stories of post-war era, nor was it intended to do so. At least the competition among American military men for an edge on each other, at Canada’s expense, ended. At the same time, Canadian sensitivity about the American presence in the north did ease somewhat after 1950 when Canada actually found itself fighting alongside the United States in a

shooting war against a communist adversary and after the USSR gained an air-atomic offensive capability.

What this entire episode does show is that the United States took its lead from Canada from start to finish even when some US officials thought the Canadians were too sensitive and too eager to placate the Soviets. When this small part of the larger story of Canada-United States defence cooperation is examined, the long-standing myth still perpetuated by some Canadian historians of the period that the United States consistently bullied, bludgeoned, and blasted Canada to do its bidding, is once again called into question.⁴¹ In this, as in other aspects of that relationship, Canada benefitted from a neighbour which defined its self-interest in enlightened terms.

Notes

- 1 The Canadian-US defence relationship in the immediate post-war era, and some of the issues that flowed from it, have been tackled in a growing number of books. The pioneering work was James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada, Vol. III, Peacemaking and Deterrence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972). More recent works include Joseph T. Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, the United States and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987); Shelagh D. Grant, *Sovereignty or Security: Government Policy in the Canadian North, 1936-1950* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988); and David Jay Bercuson, *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton, 1898-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).
- 2 On MCC planning see Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs*, 6-25. On the weather stations, see Grant, *Sovereignty or Security*, 213-215. For a general overview of sovereignty issues arising out of continental defence, see David Jay Bercuson, "Continental Defence and Arctic Sovereignty, 1945-1950: Solving the Canadian Dilemma," in Keith Neilson and Ronald G. Haycock (eds.), *The Cold War and Defense* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 153-170.
- 3 The issue is succinctly explored in J.L. Granatstein, *How Britain's weakness forced Canada into the arms of the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 19ff.
- 4 Grant, *Sovereignty or Security*, 177.
- 5 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 2, 16, various volumes, Cabinet conclusions, 27 June 1946. They were later approved.
- 6 National Archives, Washington (NAW), RG 84, Ottawa Post Files, Ottawa Conference File 1946, 710 Joint Defence, Box 1514, Vol. 113. Parsons, Memorandum for File, 1 October, 1946.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 2 October, 1946.
- 8 Blair Fraser, "The Watch on the Arctic," *Maclean's*, 1 December, 1946.
- 9 NAW, RG 59, Records of the PJBD, File "Correspondence of the PJBD," Atherton to Secretary of State, 9 December, 1946.
- 10 Bercuson, "Continental Defence," 160.
- 11 Cabinet conclusions, 3 December 1946.
- 12 Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs*, 27-28.
- 13 Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada, vol.III*, 347.
- 14 LAC, Privy Council Office Records, Interim Box #12, D-19-2, Vol. 246, "Working papers for use in discussions with the United States," 6 December 1946.
- 15 *Ibid.*

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- 16 Grant, *Sovereignty or Security*, 180.
- 17 LAC, PCO Records, Interim Box #12, D-19-2, Vol. 246, minutes taken by E.W. Gill of the meeting of 16-17 December 1946. The volume contains both the Canadian and US minutes of the meeting (US minutes are headed “Memorandum of Canadian-United States Defense Conversations...”). The wording of both sets of minutes on this subject is virtually identical.
- 18 Leslie Roberts, “Canada Fears Being Ham in U.S.-Soviet Sandwich,” *P.M.*, 22 December, 1946.
- 19 LAC, RG 2, 18, Vol. 74, File D-19-2 1946 (September-December), “Memorandum for the Prime Minister,” 23 December 1946.
- 20 NAW, RG 59, Records of the PJBD, File “PJBD Correspondence,” Parsons to White, 23 December 1946.
- 21 LAC, RG 2, 18, Vol. 74, File D-19-2 1947 (January to June), Wrong to Pearson, 21 January 1947.
- 22 Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*, vol.III, 355-356.
- 23 NAW, RG 84, Ottawa Post Files, Ottawa Conference File 1947, Box 1517, Vol. 28, Winship to Atherton, 18 February 1947.
- 24 Bercuson, *True Patriot*, 170.
- 25 Cabinet conclusions, January 29, 1947; NAW, RG 84, Ottawa Post files, Ottawa Conference Files, Box 1517, Vol. 129, memorandum “Jurisdiction over Armed Forces of the United States in Canada.” 29 April 1947.
- 26 Canada, House of Commons *Debates*, 4 June 1947, 3797.
- 27 *Montreal Star*, 7 June, 1947.
- 28 *New York Times*, 8 June, 1947.
- 29 NAW, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Decimal File 1945-49, 842.20 Defense/6-947, “Memorandum for the President,” 9 June, 1947.
- 30 NAW, RG 84, Ottawa Post files, Ottawa Conference Files, Box 1517, Vol. 126, “Memorandum for the ambassador,” n.d.
- 31 Department of National Defence, Director General of History, File 112.3M2 (D214); draft agenda for a joint meeting of the Canadian section of the PJBD and the cabinet defence committee, 3 July 1947.
- 32 NAW, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Decimal File 1945-49, 842.20 Defense/7-1447, Wailes to Matthews, 14 July 1947.
- 33 NAW, RG 59, 842.20 Defense/10-1447, Foster to Marshall, 14 October 1947.
- 34 NAW, RG 59, 842.20 Defense/10-2347, Marshall to Forrestal, 23 October 1947.
- 35 NAW, RG 59, 842.20 Defense/11-647, Forrestal to Marshall, 6 November 1947.
- 36 LAC, PCO records, vol. 74, file D-19-2 (1948), PJBD, “Directive Concerning Publicity Relating to Joint Canadian-United States Defense Plans and Operations,” 19 November 1947.
- 37 *Ibid.*, “Memorandum on Policy with respect to Publicity on Defence Arrangements,” 29 November 1947.
- 38 *Ibid.*, “Memorandum on Publicity Relating to Joint Defence Projects,” 6 January 1948.
- 39 NAW, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Decimal File 1950-1954, F770007-1486 - 8, “Memorandum of Policy regarding the Release of Information on Canada-U.S. Defence Matters,” 29 September 1950.
- 40 One series that greatly embarrassed Ottawa dealt with US rights on its bases in Newfoundland. See Blair Fraser, “Where the Yanks Rule a Part of Canada,” *Maclean’s Magazine*, 15 November 1949.
- 41 The theme was first mooted in Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada*, vol.III, and repeated years later in Grant, *Sovereignty or Security*.

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ABSTRACT: Climate change is transforming the Arctic. Questions abound about what this will mean for the Canadian Forces, for Canada's sovereignty position, for northern peoples, and for stability and security in the circumpolar world. Fortunately, Canadians have encountered and debated similar issues in the past. This volume, featuring chapters by established and emerging scholars, offers essential historical analysis on Canadian Arctic security and sovereignty policies and practices since the Second World War. The "lessons learned" lay a solid foundation for future research and historiographical debate in this dynamic field, and should inform Canadian thinking on what is necessary to protect national interests in the twenty-first-century Arctic.

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