

NORAD: Origins and operations of Canada's ambivalent symbol

By Roger Swanson

Since its creation in the late 1950s, the North American Air Defence Command has matured into an ambivalent symbol. With its combined command and its single air-defence plan, NORAD is symbolic of the degree of consensus that can exist between two sovereign nations faced with an external threat. However, NORAD is also symbolic of what many Canadians would like to avoid — an organizational tie with the United States that is bilateral rather than multilateral (i.e., in which the full impact of U.S. power is not "multilateralized" or diffused by the presence of other nations).

NORAD has contributed to the effective security of Canada and the United States since its inception. However, NORAD itself is — and always has been — insecure. This insecurity stems from its parentage. If NORAD's mother can be regarded as the increasing severity of an immediate Soviet threat to North America, its father is the technological-military advances that made this threat more and more imminent as the decade of the Fifties progressed. NORAD's history is, therefore, one of perpetual battle against shifting threat-perceptions and technological obsolescence. The immediacy of the Soviet threat to North America has been subject to two very different sets of perceptions — Canadian and U.S. The technological-military advances that make this Soviet threat credible subject NORAD to constant obsolescence, forcing Canada and the United States to allocate money to defence rather than to other pressing priorities.

NORAD was established on an interim basis in August 1957, formally effected in May 1958 for a ten-year period, and renewed in March 1968 for an additional five years. Since NORAD comes up for renewal in 1973, the present is an appropriate time to review its background and those considerations that might concern Canada and the United States in negotiations over its renewal.

NORAD's antecedents can be divided into three periods: (1) initial co-operation

from the late 1930s up to and including Second World War co-operation; (2) preliminary postwar air-defence contacts from 1946 to 1949; and (3) permeative Canadian-U.S. air-defence co-operation from 1950 up to and including the establishment of NORAD.

The first period witnessed the shattering of a number of historical precedents. In August 1936, in a speech at Chautauqua, New York, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave the first public pledge of U.S. defence assistance to Canada. This was the genesis of Canadian-U.S. defence co-operation, for, until late in the nineteenth century, Canada had regarded the United States as a military threat (and with some justification, given the U.S. invasions of Canada and subsequent U.S. filibustering). Canadian fear of U.S. aggression had largely dissipated with the advent of the twentieth century. In fact, Canada had had a War Mission in Washington during the First World War. However, Canadian-U.S. defence co-operation did not really occur until the late Thirties. This was because Canada's defence orientation continued to be British, and because a disintegrating international system — that was to culminate in the Second World War — had not yet disturbed the complacency of the North American environment.

In August 1938, at Kingston, Ontario, President Roosevelt publicly presented an even stronger pledge of defence assistance than in his 1936 statement. Two days later,

Dr. Swanson is assistant professor in the Centre of Canadian Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University. Co-author of Canadian Foreign Policy: Options and Perspectives, he has published widely in the area of Canada-U.S. relations. Dr. Swanson was appointed to the U.S. State Department's European Advisory Council in 1971. The views expressed in this two-part series on NORAD are those of the author.

