

CANADA'S PRESS:

How one key issue was covered. By John R. Walker

■ **Truth may be the first casualty of war, but adequate information is often a casualty of peacetime, especially coverage of issues such as arms control and disarmament.**

■ For more than a century there have been professional war correspondents, but how many correspondents have there been, especially in Canada, who devote themselves to issues of peace and security?

This brief survey looks at one event which has had long-term effects on Canada's peace and security, and tries to assess how the press in Canada handled its job of informing Canadians about the consequences.

The event in question is NATO's December 1979 decision to deploy cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe, unless they could be bargained away in arms control negotiations between the US and the USSR during the following three years.

This so-called "two-track" policy was one of the most important and far-reaching decisions of the North Atlantic alliance in years.

Introduced into the NATO armoury was the long-range cruise missile, whose size and mobility created new verification problems for arms controllers. Also introduced was a new version of the Pershing missile, Mark II, which for the first time put Soviet military targets near Moscow under fire from US missiles in Europe.

The NATO decision exacerbated the discord within the alliance. The Netherlands, Belgium and

Denmark had to contend with their publics' reaction to nuclear escalation in Europe, and the Dutch and Belgians had to delay acceptance of the missiles on their soil until the domestic situation calmed down.

The decision to deploy new missiles while pursuing negotiations did not really help the Soviet-American arms control talks, especially those dealing with the so-called Euromissiles. The result of the protracted INF (intermediate-range nuclear forces) negotiations was a Soviet walk-out in 1983.

Finally this NATO decision, which may not have seemed immediately relevant in Canada, was used as the rationale for getting involved in US strategic weapons testing. On 10 February 1983, Canada signed an umbrella agreement with the United States for the testing, over Canadian territory, of the air-launched version of the cruise missile, a weapon which is deployed on US long-range B-52 bombers.

The results of the NATO two-track decision are still with us. How well were the Canadian people informed by their press of the decision and its implications?

The short answer: not very well. A longer answer is that, as a result of both the public and the official reaction to the decision, the Canadian press began to handle some issues of peace and security in Canada more effectively.

It was often said, long after the fact, that the need for cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe sprang from a major lecture at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, given by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt on 28 October 1977. He was alarmed about the new Soviet SS-20 missiles in Europe and the possibility of Europe being "decoupled" from the United States in the event of war.

This reporter looked in vain for any coverage of that speech in the major Canadian newspapers of that date. Nor was there any editorial comment later in 1977 on the implications of the Schmidt speech for NATO policy.

During 1978 the major nuclear debate was over the possible deployment of the neutron bomb and the public pressure on President Carter to reject it. There was no discussion in Canadian papers of the reason for the Soviet deployment of the new SS-20s. Did Soviet leaders have any idea what the reaction of Western Europe would be, or was this a routine decision taken under the weight of bureaucratic inertia?

It was not until 1979 that NATO appeared serious about new missile deployments, and these were portrayed as simply a "modernization" of NATO nuclear forces to meet the Soviet deployment of SS-20s.

NATO's 30th anniversary in April of 1979 produced a series in the *Montreal Star* in which General Alexander Haig, NATO Commander, called for "prompt modernization" of theatre nuclear

forces to meet the Soviet deployment of SS-20s.

After the June 1 NATO meeting at The Hague, several newspapers had short agency reports, noting that Cyrus Vance, US Secretary of State, said that a consensus had been reached "on moving ahead on decisions to modernize" their nuclear arsenal, and that there had been a call for new arms control negotiations.

Although it must be granted that Canada had been going through an election in the spring of 1979 and easing the Joe Clark government into place during the summer, it might be expected that during the fall, when the decisive NATO discussions were being held, there would be more press coverage of this upcoming event.

"Canada's national newspaper," the *Globe and Mail*, between September 1 and December 13, after the NATO annual meeting had made the decision official, had only one relevant news item. That was a one-paragraph story from Washington on October 5, at the bottom of a column of World News items on page 20. It said that "a high level Western group approved a US plan for deploying 572 nuclear missiles in Europe." The decision "taken last week in Brussels" would clear the way for public endorsement at the annual NATO meeting in December.

This was the month when the North Atlantic Assembly of NATO parliamentarians was meeting in Ottawa. There was a brief mention in the *Globe*, in a Canadian Press story on that session, of the controversy this plan was causing in Europe. Two