

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the government itself was partly responsible for arousing public controversy to such an extent during what might otherwise have been a typically sluggish summer season. It was, after all, the government that chose to delay taking a decision about Canadian participation and, indeed, to establish a parliamentary committee to examine the issue. By doing so, it unquestionably prolonged the decision-making process and allowed time not only for public opposition to build, but also provided such opposition with an official forum at which to express its concerns.

It is fair to assume that the parliamentary committee hearings were a genuine attempt to take the pulse of the nation on two contentious issues. Certainly the virtue of public consultations was an important part of the new government's lexicon, one it frequently invoked to distinguish itself from the previous administration.

Although the parliamentary committee approach gave the controversy more scope, it is by no means clear that a quick decision, especially one in favour of participation, would have avoided substantial political "fallout." The fact is that the question of Canadian involvement in SDI research raised a series of longstanding Canadian concerns which touched on everything from defence policy and a commitment to arms control, to our image of ourselves in the world community, to, above all, our relationship with the United States. Canada alone of the NATO countries shares the North American continent with the United States. This very proximity inevitably coloured Canadian ruminations on the subject as much as the spur of keeping up with American high technology informed the decisions of those other countries which had been invited to participate.

In very general terms, as much as Canadians like and admire their southern neighbours, there is a significant element of the population that is always concerned to draw distinctions between the two countries and that is vigilant in defence of Canadian independence. No government can afford entirely to ignore this element, in part because it cuts across party lines, in part for its influence and, finally, because of its sheer size. The context of the Mulroney government's decision cannot thus be discounted. In the first place, the government was perceived as more favourably disposed to the United States—particularly to current trends there—than its predecessor. More specifically, the SDI decision was taken in the wake of the *Polar Sea** incident and as a prologue to a concerted effort by the government to enhance Canada's trading relationships with the United States. Given these kinds of signals, it was almost certainly essential in the

government's view for it not to be perceived as wholly within the American orbit.

There were other considerations to which the Prime Minister alluded. In his public statement of September 7 he drew attention to one of his first pronouncements on the SDI issue in March when he referred to his concern about "getting involved in a situation where the parameters are beyond our control and where the government of Canada does not call the shots."²⁸ Mr. Mulroney noted as well, in an interview on September 5 with CBC radio host Peter Gzowski that the decision had to be weighed in terms of Canada's international reputation and its commitment to arms control.

The decision still left many unanswered questions. Some of these, perhaps most, would remain unanswered in the foreseeable future precisely because, as the Joint Committee had written in its interim report, the particular decision taken left Canada's options open. SDI itself, however, was certain to remain a highly relevant policy issue for Canada. The concerns expressed by the opposition, for example, over possible links between SDI and the North Warning System are likely to prove a precursor of things to come. The NORAD review to take place prior to its expiry in May of 1986 will be another focal point for the ongoing debate. The Senate Defence Committee's recommendation for a Canadian military space program, which had been taken up with great enthusiasm by the *Globe and Mail* (editorials of June 17, August 26, September 9) during the SDI debate, is likely to be considered again during the NORAD review.

A Canadian military space program would involve surveillance of Canadian air space by space-based systems to warn of penetration by hostile aircraft or cruise missiles. It would preserve Canadian sovereignty and yet it would also complement any U.S. ballistic missile defence system that might be deployed. Moreover, if the United States did proceed with a Ballistic Missile Defence system, as the *Globe and Mail* pointed out, "it will insist on space-based radar or sensors to monitor continental air space, whether Ottawa likes it or not."²⁹

The response of Canadians to the Strategic Defence Initiative during 1985 indicates that it will not be easy to find a consensus on these policy alternatives.

*The United States had sent a Coast Guard ice-breaker, *Polar Sea*, through the Northwest Passage in early August without acknowledging Canada's claim of sovereignty over the passage, thus touching off a major furor.