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No. 116

(August 1965)

THE CANADA-UNITED STATES PERMANENT JOINT BOARD ON DEFENCE

After 1871, when the Treaty of Washington had settled most of the points of disagreement between Canada and the United States, relations between the two countries rapidly improved. Similar political philosophies, mutual trade, the interchange of population, the settlement of the Canadian West, and the habit of resolving outstanding problems by negotiation steadily reduced the causes of friction. This, in turn, ensured that old animosities and suspicions were soon largely forgotten.

Nevertheless, between 1871 and 1940 Canadian-American relations, though friendly, were somewhat aloof. Canada's position as a part of the British Empire and later as a member of the evolving Commonwealth, and Canadian consciousness of the disparity in population and wealth between the two countries, prevented any political alliance and confined co-operation almost entirely to the economic sphere. In the 1930s, the rise of aggressive totalitarian states in Europe and the Far East did, indeed, awaken a common sense of danger, but the anxiety of both nations to avoid international commitments hindered the coordination of plans for the defence of North America.

Far-sighted men on both sides of the border realized the dangers inherent in this situation and, in spite of difficulties, some tentative contacts were made during the late 1930s. However, it was not until the calamitous spring and summer of 1940, with Hitler's armies everywhere victorious in Europe and the British Isles facing the prospect of invasion, that Canada and the United States began seriously to concern themselves with problems of mutual defence. Late in May, Prime Minister King, feeling increasing concern for the security of Newfoundland and the defence of the Atlantic coast, suggested to President Roosevelt the need for further staff conversations. These conversations, which were held in Washington on July 11 and 12, were chiefly concerned with Canadian requests for military equipment from the United States and with the extent of United States military assistance that would be required to defend Canada from direct attack. In August, Canada posted military and naval attachés to Washington to join the single air attaché who had been serving there since the previous February. However, no provision had as yet been made for permanent and continuous high-level consultations between the two countries on military matters.

At this stage, the Canadian Prime Minister, through the United States Minister at Ottawa, Mr. J. Pierrepont Moffatt, suggested to President Roosevelt that the time had come when a personal interview between the heads of government might be useful. On August 16, when the President received this message, he at once telephoned Mr. King, inviting him to meet him the following day at Ogdensburg, New York. Mr. King, accompanied by Mr. Moffatt, motored to Ogdensburg the next afternoon, and that evening the President and the Prime Minister spent several hours aboard the Presidential train in long discussion.

This conversation between the two heads of government resulted in the press release of August 18 known as the "Ogdensburg Declaration":

The Prime Minister and the President have discussed the mutual problems of defence in relation to the safety of Canada and the United States. It has been agreed that a Permanent Joint Board on Defence shall be set up at once by the two countries.

This Permanent Joint Board on Defence shall commence immediate studies relating to sea, land and air problems including personnel and material. It will consider in the broad sense the defence of the north half of the Western Hemisphere.

The Permanent Joint Board on Defence will consist of four or five members from each country, most of them from the services. It will meet shortly.

Thus, with unique informality, a new era of Canadian-American relations began. The press release was the basis for the establishment of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence. The text was published in the Canada Treaty Series and passed as an Order-in-Council, while in the United States the Ogdensburg Declaration was viewed as an executive agreement that did not require the ratification of the Senate. Public reaction in both countries was immediate and favourable, though few persons, perhaps, realized that Canada and the United States had, in fact, advanced from a position of friendly co-operation to one of positive alliance.

The organization of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence has not altered substantially since its inception. From the outset, it was established in two national sections, each with its own chairman (a civilian), representatives from the armed services, and -- as secretaries -- representatives of the Department of External Affairs and the Department of State. The first Chairman of the United States Section was Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia of New York City; the first Chairman of the Canadian Section was Colonel Oliver Mowat Biggar, a prominent lawyer. Since 1951, representatives of the Department of External Affairs and of the Department of State have served as members of the Board in addition to the two secretaries provided by these departments. These appointments ensure that the Board is more than a body for joint staff consultations and that it is in close touch with the wider aspects of government policy.

For a few weeks in 1940, the United States Section of the Board outnumbered the Canadian Section by one service member, since both the United States War and Navy Departments provided air officers. On October 11, an additional Canadian service member, Lieutenant-Colonel Georges P. Vanier (now His Excellency General The Right Honourable Georges P. Vanier, Governor General of Canada) was named to the Board, thus equalizing the representation. However, when Colonel Vanier resigned late in 1942 to accept a diplomatic post, he was not replaced. Equality of representation was not achieved again until 1947, when, with the establishment of the Department of the Air Force, the United States representation of air officers was reduced to one. During the last several years, it has become customary for representatives of the Canadian Departments of Transport and Defence Production also to attend meetings of the Board, because of the close association of those departments with matters frequently under discussion.

The Canadian service members and the diplomatic members of the Board and the secretaries of each Section have always held other appointments as well. Thus, between meetings, they are in daily touch with the problems with which the Board is concerned and with the policies of their departments. Initially, United States service members were not as a rule within the War Department General Staff or the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations; now, however, they are the senior officers within their respective departments concerned with Canadian affairs. The Chairmen of each Section have never had departmental or service affiliations and are appointed by their respective heads of government.

The first meeting of the Board took place on August 26, 1940, in Ottawa, when seven recommendations were passed, more than a fifth of all the Board's recommendations for the entire war. This was possible because there was a backlog of urgent problems that had already received some joint staff consideration. During the remainder of the year the Board met every month. Normally meetings were held alternately in Canada and the United States. The first meeting in Ottawa was followed by one in Washington; other meetings were held at the sites of proposed defence projects; and, later in the war, the Board usually met alternately in Montreal and New York. No fixed schedule was adhered to; the Board met irregularly as often as required. During 1941, there were only eight meetings but in 1942, with the United States now a belligerent, the number of meetings increased to 11. By 1943, the turning-point of the war had been reached and measures for the defence of North America became less urgent. This was reflected in a decreasing number of meetings; seven in 1943, five in 1944, and five in 1945. Since then, meetings have been held on the average of four times a year.

The Permanent Joint Board on Defence was designed to be an advisory rather than an executive body, and its prime purpose was -- and still is -- to make recommendations to the respective governments on joint defence questions. Business is conducted without formality. The agenda include a review of progress reports submitted by the armed services of both countries, by the Canadian Department of Transport, and on behalf of the co-chairmen of the joint committee of the two governments on defence-production sharing. Defence problems are considered and discussed until general agreement is reached. No voting procedure is used and formal recommendations are passed unanimously. Problems for discussion may be initiated by the Board itself or by an agency of either government referring the

matter to the Board through a member for consideration. Once a recommendation is approved by both governments, this approval becomes the executive directive to the government agencies concerned.

The bulk of the Board's work during the war was concerned with the defence of the coastal regions of the northern half of North America; but the 33 recommendations passed in this period also dealt with such subjects as the exchange of information, the allocation and flow of material resources, the safety of navigation through the Sault Ste. Marie Canals, the co-ordination of aviation training, and the disposition of defence facilities. In addition to the recommendations, which were approved entirely in most cases, in part in a few, and overtaken by events in some cases, the Board, on October 4, 1940, submitted its first and only formal report. During the war the service members of the Board also prepared two Basic Defence Plans; the first dealt with a situation in which Britain had lost control of the North Atlantic, and envisaged the defence of North America being conducted under the "strategic direction" of the United States, while the second provided for the co-ordination of this defence by "mutual co-operation" in a situation in which the United States had become an active belligerent on the Allied side.

After the United States entered the war, some of the Board's functions were taken over by the military departments of each government, but it continued to be a particularly useful agency for the informal discussion of ideas before any formal approach was made, for negotiating defence matters in a setting where both military and diplomatic viewpoints were represented, for collecting and exchanging information, and for hastening executive action, smoothing out difficulties, eliminating delays, following up on decisions already taken and ensuring that important projects were not sidetracked in the press of departmental business. The valuable work done by the Board during the war convinced both governments that it could play a useful role in the post-war period. On February 12, 1947, Canada and the United States issued a joint statement to the effect that military co-operation between them would continue and that the Permanent Joint Board on Defence would be continued in existence.

Since the end of the war, the Board, established originally for the primary purpose of co-ordinating the plans of the two governments for the wartime defence of North America, has gradually come to assume a somewhat different role, partly because of the changing nature of the task and partly because of the emergence of other bilateral consultative bodies in the defence field. Among these are the Military Co-operation Committee, established in 1946, the Senior Policy Committee on the Canada-United States Defence Production and Development Sharing Programme, and the Canada-United States Ministerial Committee on Joint Defence, both formed in 1958. Thus the Board is no longer the only joint body concerned with defence problems.

The emergence of the Soviet threat to Western Europe in the late 1940s, and the consequent creation of NATO, brought Canada and the United States for the first time into formal alliance in peacetime. While actively supporting this multi-national defensive alliance, the two countries continued to provide for the defence of North America on a bilateral basis, paralleling the joint defence organization established collectively by the NATO countries

in Europe. In the early 1950s, the Board was directly involved in much of the planning for North American defence but, as the threat to North America became more direct, with the development first of bomber aircraft of intercontinental range and later of long-range missiles, such planning was increasingly carried out by the military staffs of the two governments. The Board was closely involved in the planning of the three radar lines (the Pinetree Line, the Mid-Canada Line, and the Distant Early Warning Line) successively constructed across the continent at increasingly northerly latitudes to give warning of attack across the Arctic. Its role was more indirect in the construction by the United States of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) with sites in Alaska, Greenland, and Britain, in the establishment of NORAD in 1957, and in the resolution, in 1963, of the troublesome problem of nuclear warheads for Canadian weapons systems.

In recent years, the Board has found its most useful role in the broad area of helping to mesh military requirements with political, economic and other considerations in order to facilitate the implementation of continental defence programmes in ways satisfactory to the two governments. Recent technological advances have made the problems of North American defence more complex, and the arrangements to provide for that defence have become correspondingly more complicated and extensive. Such defensive arrangements now impinge much more actively than in the first post-war decade upon the everyday life of North America, giving rise to a host of problems of a political, economic or social nature. The task of reconciling the requirements of continental defence with the various other objectives of North American society is a complex and delicate one, involving the careful consideration of many sensitive factors that often cannot be separated by the normal dividing-line between military and political matters. It is in this area that, in recent years, the Board has found its most useful role, a role not readily filled by any other of the several channels now available to the United States and Canadian Governments for dealing with matters of joint concern.

The mixed military and civil membership of the Board, the prestige and experience it has acquired through the years and the flexibility of its procedures give it unique qualifications for dealing with the sensitive and complex problems which, under modern conditions, arise in connection with North American defence. The Board can be expected to continue to make an important and valuable contribution to the maintenance of mutually beneficial relations between Canada and the United States.

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