

Little Lost Canadians: Thinking About Missile Defence

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Winnipeg Free Press: A critique of fuzzy thinking on missile defence, and an attempt to correct factual errors about Canadian participation in NORAD and opting-out of ABM.

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LITTLE LOST CANADIANS

Thursday, 3 March 2005

Winnipeg Free Press

By John Clearwater

THERE has been a great deal of muddled thinking over the missile-defence issue and its relationship to the North American Aerospace Defence Command.

For the past two years, Canadians have been warned that failure to join Washington's quest for ballistic missile defence would have disastrous consequences for both our trade relations and the very survival of NORAD.

For the past week, commentators have blasted away at the leaked, then announced, decision of Prime Minister Paul Martin to decline official BMD participation. Their main theme is that, by declining to participate, Canada has doomed NORAD.

Is there any rationality in this argument, or are the people who make it just little lost Canadians in search of an intellectual home south of the border?

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The fact is that Canada formally rejected missile defence almost 40 years ago -- and even went so far as to put it in writing in the NORAD agreement. Back then, the U.S. was committed to the deployment of a limited "anti-China" ABM system, and Ottawa did not wish to be involved in any way.

When the NORAD Treaty was renewed on March 30, 1968, Ottawa added an interpretative clause, which stipulated that the agreement "will not involve in any way a Canadian commitment to participate in an active ballistic missile defence."

The Americans had no problem with this. Trade, diplomatic contact and military co-operation increased annually. The sky did not fall. And neither did NORAD.

The anti-ABM clause was not deleted until 1981. Although the clause was gone, Canada did not directly participate in the Reagan-era "Star Wars" missile-defence program. On Sept. 7, 1985, the Mulroney government declined a U.S. invitation to participate in the research stage of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

So, within our lifetimes, there are two examples of both Liberal and Conservative governments saying no to participation in missile-defence schemes, and neither caused an end to NORAD. What could have led anyone to think that a negative answer would doom the institution this time?

The same commentators claim that Canadians are responsible for the puzzlement and confusion in Washington, and among Americans generally, over our decision. Well, no offence, but the Americans do not have a great track-record when it comes to understanding any decision that does not accord with their way of thinking. That we might feel bad about this flaw is hardly an argument in BMD's favour. That commentators have actually made this argument is just another example of their impoverished reasoning.

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The clear and simple fact is that Paul Martin and the Liberals have already given the United States exactly what it sought to begin with -- full co-operation by NORAD in missile-defence work. Last August, Ottawa and Washington agreed that NORAD's aerospace warning function would be used "in support of the designated commands responsible for missile defence of North America." NORAD was already, by signature of Canadian ambassador Michael Kergin, an integral part of the missile-defence structure.

Since Canada already provides manpower for the NORAD early-warning and battle-command posts at our expense, and as these are free gifts to the operation of the missile-defence program, there is no reason to think that Canada is getting a free ride. In fact, Washington gets the extra staffing without paying the bill.

The lesson of history is that Canada does not have to participate in U.S. missile-defence plans, and that NORAD was never at risk. A desire to placate Washington is the only reason for further involving Canada in the current U.S. missile-defence scheme through back-door deals and quiet support.

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He is the author of "U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Canada".

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