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Arctic Defense Is Joint Undertaking

By Marquis Childs

OTTAWA, Canada.—The Canadian government has recently completed its pledge to supply 12 squadrons equipped with jet all-weather fighter planes to the North Atlantic Treaty military force in western Europe. With the delivery of the last of the 300 jets, Canada becomes the only NATO power, with the possible exception of the United States, where schedules are still to be filled, to live up to its pledged contribution.

This is a matter of considerable pride in the solid, stable government that has just been reelected to power by a large majority. It indicates, too, the weight that top policy-makers give to the NATO concept of building a bastion in the heart of the European workshop that is next door to the Communist peril.

The deep conviction of the importance of NATO played a part in the behind scenes controversy that has taken place over how and where a continental defense system should be established to protect the great industrial complex of the United States and Canada.

That controversy began last spring when the National Security Council in Washington determined that Canada should be asked to cooperate in the immediate construction of a radar warning system built on the very edge of the Arctic waste. This was in line with the recommendation of Project Lincoln, the Air Force research program into protection from an atomic Pearl Harbor being carried out at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



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IT ALSO was in response to the urging of those concerned with civil defense. They argued that such a line would give a five-to-six-hour warning of a bombing attack and with that warning American cities could be effectively evacuated. The Lincoln Line, as it has become known, was designed to link up with the radar system being built around Alaska and with a warning system on the big Air Force base at Thule on the Island of Greenland. One advantage was that the radar stations could be supplied by ships along the Arctic coast. The estimated cost is reported to have been from 600 million to a billion dollars.

But Canadian as well as some American military and scientific experts began to find flaws in the idea of an Arctic line. They pointed out that planes passing over it could be detected and their numbers estimated with fair accuracy, but the direction in which they were going could not be determined. Thus, a raid might be aimed at Chicago or Seattle, while on the first warning all of the big cities on the Eastern Seaboard would be evacuated. After this happened two or three times, disrupting normal life to an extraordinary degree, the system would be abandoned. In a continuing cold war with a growing fear of atomic disaster, the Russians would quickly exploit such a situation, sending planes into the Arctic wild for the sole purpose of causing havoc.

The Canadian opposition put a damper on eager, one might also say frantic, determination of the Americans to get on with building the Lincoln Line. It is now virtually certain that regardless of the appraisal of the tests in the Arctic as to the effectiveness of such a line, it will not be built. Opinion here is all on the side of pushing up from the farthest north railway so that the warning time is constantly increased with a series of lines to check and recheck on direction and numbers. This was likewise the final view of Gen. Omar Bradley just before he retired as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

IN THE midst of the argument over the Lincoln Line, Canada came up with a new idea for an intermediary line based on a more advanced technology. This was the brainchild of a group of brilliant scientists at McGill University in Montreal, among them those who contributed the pioneering development of radar and the proximity fuse at the beginning of World War II.

The McGill fence, as it is now known, could be far less costly and could be built much more quickly. But even more important, the skilled manpower required to operate it would be a fraction of that required for the Lincoln Line. What is more, the radar network now being completed to protect a part of Canada and the United States would serve as a backstop.

All these factors are likely to prove decisive when the joint Canadian-United States defense board meets at the end of this month. Canadian cabinet members are fearful that if billions are spent for continental defense at the same time the United States is curtailing its aid to western Europe, the NATO powers will fear a retreat within fortress America and NATO will be weakened or destroyed. This is still another argument—the clincher from the Canadian viewpoint—for the compromise plan put forward by Canada's military and scientific planners.