

NORAD's Evolving Role in North American Homeland Defense

Written by Sara K. McGuire

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SARA K. MCGUIRE, FEB 13 2015

The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) has long been a function of the North American security environment. Initially established during the Cold War, NORAD was intended to fulfill a homeland defense role by looking outwardly to identify and interdict threats approaching Canada and the United States. In the post-9/11 period, NORAD's focus has evolved and the institution has shifted from looking outwardly to include participation in homeland security operations taking place within the United States and Canada. NORAD's participation in North American homeland security operations has resulted in the redefinition of the institution's role in defense and security operations. In recent years, NORAD has provided airborne security at major sporting events, government conventions, and other large public gatherings. This homeland security support role has been buttressed by the institution's appropriation of popular cultural icons, such as Santa Claus and Superman. These examples are symbolic of a broader shift away from strategic defense, towards a public relations' role. In the post-9/11 period, NORAD's primary function has been to affirm U.S. dominance over North American skies, and to convey to the public audience that the potential for future terrorist attacks remains a threat to domestic security.

The evolving role of NORAD in guaranteeing North American security demonstrates the difference between homeland defense and homeland security. Homeland defense is concerned with the *military* defense of a given state. In the United States, homeland defense has typically favored the "away game", whereby the American military tackles threats to the state *away* from the continental homeland. In the era of the "War on Terror", this has meant that U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq where they sought to prevent potential terrorists from ever arriving on American soil. Homeland security, on the other hand, involves the protection of citizens and infrastructure at home, and is concerned primarily with, "...the intersection of evolving threats and hazards with traditional governmental and civic responsibilities for civil defense, emergency response, law enforcement, customs, border control and immigration (Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report, 2010).

NORAD's post-9/11 mission clearly fits within this understanding of homeland security objectives. There is a general understanding within the North American defense community that, "...it is better for all concerned if hijackers are barred from boarding airliners in the first place" (Lawson and Sawler 2012: 11). Ignoring for the moment the bilateral aspect of NORAD, as the U.S. government seems to have done in recent years, NORAD's role as a frontline defender against the communist threat has been replaced by its symbolic purpose in the American psyche. This culturally symbolic function is demonstrated by the institution's provision of air support at important events within the United States and Canada.

Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the Department of Defense initiated Operation Noble Eagle, which coordinated military operations related to homeland security and support to federal, state, and local agencies. In keeping with the operation's directives, NORAD assumed responsibility for detecting and evaluating threats originating inside Canada and the United States (Kapp, 2005: 1). Operation Noble Eagle precipitated a fundamental shift in NORAD's strategic objectives, transforming it from an institution focused primarily on the military defense of North America to one in which domestic air security took precedence. Prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, it was assumed that any aircraft entering North American airspace was friendly. Chief of the Canadian Defence Staff, General Tom Lawson (Lawson and Sawler 2012: 8), explains the necessity of including NORAD in homeland

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security operations, noting that, “threats were now seen to potentially originate within North American borders, and subsequently, NORAD was required to look inwards as well”. The initiation of Operation Noble Eagle required NORAD to focus on aviation security issues originating within Canada and the United States in addition to monitoring air traffic entering North American airspace. In this sense, NORAD’s mission has expanded to include the monitoring and interception of flights of interest, regardless of their origin (Gladman 2007: 6).

Operation Noble Eagle requires that NORAD conduct Air Sovereignty Alert (ASA) operations in order to protect US airspace from domestic threats. ASA operations involve individual aircraft patrolling the airspace above North America, and monitoring areas – such as the National Capital Region – which have been deemed to be of strategic importance. When a threat to homeland security is detected, aerial surveillance ends, and the operation becomes a homeland defense air mission under Operation Noble Eagle. As a function of its aerospace warning mission, and through agreements with other commands, NORAD monitors the airspace over North America and detects, validates, and alerts the command of potential or realized threats posed by aircraft, missiles, or space vehicles. While Noble Eagle allows NORAD commanders to authorize pilots to shoot down hostile aircraft, this authority has not been utilized in the post-9/11 period (Air Force 2012: 109). Instead, NORAD’s ASA operations are generally limited to providing air cover support for special events and escorting suspicious aircraft out of strategic airspace. Given the absence of another airborne terrorist attack, NORAD’s ASA operations are generally aimed at demonstrating the United States’ control of its skies and borders.

NORAD’s new emphasis on homeland security has meant that its core missions in the new security environment have largely entailed air surveillance of (predominantly American) “special events”. NORAD pilots have participated in surveillance operations monitoring important political events, such as the Democrat and Republican National Conventions, the inauguration of President Obama, various State of the Union Addresses, government summits, space shuttle launches, and sporting events. NORAD planes provided surveillance support for the 2002 Group of Eight (G8) Summit held in Calgary, Alberta and the 2010 Group of Twenty (G20) Summit held in Toronto, Ontario. They have also provided “security from above” for the Super Bowl each year since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

NORAD’s new role in supporting North American homeland security initiatives is perhaps best demonstrated by its participation in providing security for the 2002 and 2010 Winter Olympics. The Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah was declared a National Special Security Event. This designation resulted in the largest coordinated security effort in U.S. history. NORAD served as the representation of the state’s control over its skies by providing air surveillance and support for the Games. In 2010, the institution reprised this role by participating in Operation Podium, initiated by Canada Command, to secure the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, British Columbia. As a supporting command, NORAD was directed to monitor airspace security both inside and outside of the Olympic Airspace Control Area. Alan Stephenson notes that, “...due to the congested airspace of the Vancouver area, NORAD was integrated into the interagency Air Security Operations Centre to ensure close coordination and control of all aircraft inside the Olympic airspace” (Stephenson 2011: 7). This mandate signals a clear shift away from NORAD’s traditional defense function. In an interview with members of the media, NORAD’s Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Marcel Duval of the Canadian Forces, asserted the institution’s support role in maintaining security at the Olympics. When asked about contingency plans in the event of a terrorist attack, Lieutenant General Duval surprisingly stated that, “The U.S. Military will be at the ready in case of a worst-case scenario” (CBC News). This flippant comment suggests that NORAD has fully embraced its new role as a support agency whose primary objective is to offer support for homeland security operations.

In keeping with the increasingly symbolic function of NORAD, the institution has sought to solidify its command position in popular culture. NORAD has had a close association with Santa Claus since 1955, when the organization first started tracking the “big man’s” Christmas flight plan. Every year, volunteers at Peterson Air Force Base field calls from children anxious to know when their presents will be arriving. While this “mission” seems like a silly holiday distraction, it is one that NORAD has taken more seriously in the years following the 9/11 attacks. Publicity for the Santa-Tracker has been increased and has resulted in more and more calls each year to the service. In 2013, volunteers answered more than 114,000 calls from children around the world, and NORAD’s “Santa-Tracker” website had over 22.3 million unique visitors (CBS News). In recent years, the air command has become

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increasingly concerned with maintaining its exclusive relationship with Santa. Following a tradition in which the Santa-Tracker was linked to a Google Maps page that could be updated to show Santa's location, NORAD took the drastic move of trademarking the Santa-Tracker and signing an agreement with web search engine, Bing, in 2012. NORAD also licensed its Santa-Tracker logo to a private company to sell official tee shirts and other gear. Officially, this move was not intended to make money, but rather to keep profiteers from cashing in. This begs the question, why is NORAD so desperate to maintain its exclusive rights to Santa Claus? One answer might be that it is an effective way to demonstrate the United States' primacy in homeland security. The state's security apparatus is so effective it is even able to control and protect Santa. Another explanation is that it is an effective way to introduce the War on Terror and the new security environment to children. Why is it necessary that NORAD is the only command tracking Santa? The implication is that the United States has the sole ability to perform this function.

NORAD's appropriation of popular culture does not end with its ownership of Santa's Christmas Eve trip. In the latest Superman movie, "Man of Steel", NORAD successfully recruits Superman for its own purposes. Superman, masquerading as a civilian contractor, locates a UFO under the ice at a NORAD Arctic outpost. When the world is threatened by a would-be alien overlord, General Zod, Superman is recruited by General Stanwick on behalf of NORAD. Addressing concerns that Superman might not have America's best interests at heart, General Stanwick asked him if he is trustworthy. Superman replies, "I'm from Kansas. I'm as American as can be (Superman: Man of Steel). Once again, NORAD's ability to control Superman is intended to demonstrate U.S. dominance over American airspace.

NORAD's role in US defense and security objectives has changed since its inception in order to keep pace with the state's security environment. In the post-9/11 period, NORAD has shifted from a homeland defense role, to one of homeland security. As such, the bilateral institution's primary role in US defense is as an aide to civilian authorities in providing security for North American "special events" such as the Olympics, and the Super Bowl. In this period, however, NORAD has evolved to serve a symbolic, popular culture function. It can be argued that, by co-opting Santa and Superman, NORAD demonstrates to the public that American military supremacy cannot be matched, and even extends to superheroes and Santa Claus.

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