

The Avro Arrow

As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, Canada became increasingly concerned with the threat of a Soviet attack. The Canadian government backed the A. V. Roe Company to build one of the world's fastest supersonic jets: the Avro Arrow. The Avro Arrow was a twin-engine, all-weather interceptor jet. Test flights showed it could fly faster and higher than any other plane.

Despite positive feedback from the test flights, on February 20, 1959, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker cancelled the Avro Arrow project, fired all 14 000 workers on the project, and also ordered the destruction of all test planes, parts, and design papers. Diefenbaker stated several reasons for his decision:

- The costs had increased from \$2 million per plane to an estimated \$12.5 million per plane.
- The value of a fighter jet had declined as the Soviet Union had launched its first intercontinental ballistic missile. This meant the threat of attack could come from space and not from pilot-flown bombers.
- The Canadian government had decided to purchase the American-made F-101 Voodoo fighter jets.

The loss of jobs, the renewed reliance on American military technology, and the blow to Canada's aerospace industry did not sit well with Canadians. Many talented Canadian aerospace engineers went to work in the United States.

From **DENNIS McDERMOTT** of the United Auto Workers Union, which represented the employees of the A. V. Roe Company:

We will now lose the cream of our skilled aircraft technicians to the United States. You just don't open and shut an industry like a workhouse. History will prove this to be one of the most colossal blunders made by any prime minister in the history of Canada.

From Prime Minister **JOHN DIEFENBAKER**, January 25, 1963, House of Commons:

Some people talk about courage. Well, we took a stand in reference to the Arrow. No one wanted to take that stand . . . As I look back on it, I think it was one of the decisions that was right. Here was an instrument beautiful in appearance, powerful, a tribute to Canadian production . . . This instrument that was otherwise beautiful, magnificent in its concept, would have contributed little, in the changing order of things, to our national defence.

From **BOB JOHNSON**, employee of the A. V. Roe Company:

We salvaged nothing. We scrapped everything . . . Even the drawings had to be burnt . . . They should have saved those drawings. Even the information itself could have been used by the British aviation industry and the States, because, let's face it, the Arrow was the most advanced aircraft of its day. Yet all that knowledge, all that development, years and years of study, was wiped out.

The Avro Arrow continues to provoke debate among Canadians today. To some it symbolizes clear thinking by the Canadian government. To others it symbolizes the collapse of Canadian willingness to pursue the best.

EXPLORATIONS

1. Why do you think the Avro Arrow has been called Canada's "national dream"?
2. Take a historical perspective as an advisor to Prime Minister Diefenbaker. What advice would you have

given regarding the Avro Arrow project? Should the project have been cancelled or continued? You may want to do extra research into the Avro Arrow to gather evidence to support your advice.