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Federal referendum of June 6, 1993

For or against the army?

The two subjects to be decided on June 6, 1993, both concern national defence, which is also the subject of this issue's Forum. The Swiss people and the cantons will decide the fate of two popular initiatives aimed at putting a stop to military projects: the purchase of new fighter aircraft and the construction of a new depot.

The popular initiative "For a Switzerland without New Fighter Aircraft" was handed in at the Federal Chancellery on June 1, 1992, with 181,707 valid signatures. Its originator, the Group for Switzerland without an

Pierre-André Tschanz

Army, had succeeded in collecting as many as half a million signatures in the record time of just over one month – but only part of them had to be in fact validated. The initiative requires the addition of a new Article 20 to the transitional provisions of the federal constitution, formulated as follows: "The federal government shall not purchase new fighter aircraft before the year 2000; 'new fighter aircraft' shall refer to any fighter aircraft whose purchase may be demanded by the Federal Assembly between June 1, 1992, and December 31, 1999".

The F/A-18 Hornets targeted

The initiative is aimed at the purchase of 34 American F/A 18 Hornet fighters for a total of Sfr. 3.5 billion.

These aircraft are intended to replace the French Mirage IIIs which Switzerland bought in the 1960s as fighter-interceptors. An enormous budget excess

caused a political scandal at the time and led to the resignation of the Minister of Defence.

In the opinion of defence experts, the government and a majority in parliament, the Mirage IIIs are no longer appropriate for a modern air defence system. As early as 1988 the government had decided to replace them with F/A 18 Hornets, but the purchasing process was delayed by the necessity of reviewing the defence implications of the immense changes which took place in eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990. The government redefined Switzerland's security policy at this time but ended up by confirming the choice of the F/A 18, arguing that a modern air defence system, well-equipped and based on efficient training, was the alpha and omega of effective national defence.

A disputed choice

Objections surfaced immediately. Some would have preferred the F-16, also American but less expensive, and others would have chosen the French Mirage

Even without an immediate threat Switzerland must have credible defence, say the opponents of the two military initiatives.

(Photo: Michael von Graffenried)

2000-5 (for reasons of European solidarity). Then of course there were the antimilitarists and pacifists, who were determined that the end of the Cold War should result in lower military expenditure. Encouraged by the relative success of its popular initiative for the abolition of the army – more than one in three Swiss voters said Yes to that proposal in November 1989 – the Group for Switzerland without an Army then launched the popular initiative on which the people and the cantons will be called upon to vote on June 6.

According to the pacifists and antimilitarists, Switzerland can very well do without new fighter aircraft now that the danger of war has disappeared. At a time of economic recession marked by budget deficits the planned expenditure is out of all proportion. The army should join everyone else in tightening its belt. But the government, a majority in parliament and the centre-right parties emphasize the fact that the military share of the federal budget has been in constant decline for over a decade. The real aim of the popular initiative "For a Switzerland without New Fighter Aircraft" is once again the abolition of the army, they say. Even in the absence of a defined military threat at present, Switzerland should maintain a credible defence system.

Against Neuchlen-Anschwilten

A local action group, supported by antimilitarists, has launched a popular initiative called "40 Military Depots are Enough" aimed at preventing construction of a new depot at Neuchlen-Anschwilten in Canton St. Gall. The army too should be subject to legislation on environmental protection, goes the argument. Both the government and parliament recommend rejection of this initiative, which was signed by 121,000 people. It is pointed out that the Neuchlen-Anschwilten depot is urgently needed. It is not so much a new depot as the replacement of the old St. Gall barracks which is no longer in use. In addition, it is entirely compatible with the environment, says a government spokesman, and nature protection in the immediate area of the depot is guaranteed as much as is humanly possible. ■

