

Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009: Déjà Vu All Over Again. By James G. Fergusson. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. 352 p. ISBN 978-0-7748-17516 \$34.95)

John Clearwater

Volume 35, Number 1-2, 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1013992ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1013992ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Clearwater, J. (2012). Review of [*Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009: Déjà Vu All Over Again.* By James G. Fergusson. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. 352 p. ISBN 978-0-7748-17516 \$34.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 35(1-2), 170–173. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1013992ar>

Arwen Mohun, might have helped to explain how accidents were conceptualized within a risk framework from the very beginning of the period studied here, smack in the middle of turn-of-the-twentieth-century industrial modernity, long before the era that Beck has called the “risk society.”

Finally, there is no real word from accident victims in this history. No doubt it would have been difficult to get at their stories. Yet some attention to union archives, workers’ compensation records and autobiographies might have given us a sense of how the victims (and agents) of twentieth-century accidents understood their own ‘bad luck.’

MAGDA FAHRNI

Université du Québec à Montréal

***Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009: Déjà Vu All Over Again.* By James G. Fergusson.** (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. 352 p. ISBN 978-0-7748-17516 \$34.95).

It has been nearly 30 years since Ronald Reagan made his Strategic Defense Initiative speech in March 1983. I recall watching the live broadcast in amazement. The Pentagon, also amazed, was totally blindsided by the announcement and reacted instinctively against it: the money would come from their budget for real weapons.

Of course Reagan was not the first proponent of ballistic missile defence (BMD), and he is certainly not the last. The history and politics of BMD in the United States is an epic, with great and small battles raging over the decades, and littering the world with political and military fallout. But James Fergusson’s book is not really about the USA. Rather, he has examined the Canadian content of BMD, a small, but inside Canada, significant set of stories.

I was truly happy that a book on the topic had finally come to light. It covers the history and politics with some skill. It helps place Canadian political and military actions, often divergent, in context. For this I am grateful.

I would have been even more grateful if the document footnotes could have been used to retrace the records. Unless the collected files have been made available to the public, as I do with my nuclear weapons files, it would be nearly impossible to follow the author’s research. It would also have been better as an academic study rather than an extreme pro-BMD partisan attack.

While I was interested in the overall topic, and especially in how Canada manoeuvred the difficult waters of this US political minefield, I was constantly put off by the numerous factual errors on history and nuclear weapons. Lyndon Johnson was pro-ABM: McNamara was against it (p.27). The original cruise missile testing agreement did not allow Canada “cost-free” access to US testing ranges. The original agreement only allowed the US cost-free access to Canadian ranges (p.79). Many other errors mar the book.

The fight over BMD is based on an understanding of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. For some reason the author relies only on secondary sources (p.111). The treaty negotiator, Gerard Smith, told me personally that the ABM Treaty was written to ban things such as SDI—or defence by other technical means. The author really goes out on a limb, albeit a popular one with the pro-BMD crowd, by saying that there is nothing explicit in the ABM Treaty prohibiting national missile defence (fn 37, p.167). This is so far from the truth it is way out there in the wild blue yonder. Smith himself told me the very concept violates the intention of the ABM Treaty.

When the author wants to discredit or belittle without having to make a real argument based on facts, he uses “peace movement” (p.77), or phrases such as “Standard left-wing disarmament movement destabilizing arms race critique” (p.87). The ad hominem argument falls flat as it fails to address the issue in each case, preferring to simply dismiss the opponent. This happens repeatedly, and becomes more than tiresome. He also takes a shot at “academics and the peace movement” (p.75) for pointing out the logical outcome of weapons upgrades and countervailing strategy: fighting a nuclear war. This was not only admitted by the proponents, but also bragged about. The most bizarre attack lumps Professor Ted Postol (MIT) in with opponents, and totally misses the point (p.163). Postol is pro-BMD: but he is a staunch opponent of bad science and of faked BMD tests.

But there are things on which we do agree. Fergusson makes a perfect bulls-eye when he says opposition to ABM in Canada “could eliminate [...] research and industrial benefits [...] with direct economic implication” (p.84). He gets it: it really is about the money, or at least the perceived economic benefit; not about the capability of any BMD system.

It is also about the relationship. I agree that Canadian failure to provide real support to BMD “would be devastating” to current political and military leaders (p.180). This is the real concern of the Canadian leadership, as I demonstrated in my book, *Just Dummies: Cruise Missile Testing in Canada*. There is no technological aspect of the entire programme which needs Canada. This is all political theatre. The Canadian

establishment fears that non-participation will hurt the theatre. The problem to be examined, which is not done by the author, is whether this really matters to the security or the nation.

In order to understand the real argument being made by Fergusson, you have to understand that for him, it seems that “close cooperative relations with the US military [is] sine quo non” for the Canadian military and political establishment (p.142 & p.187). This is key, as all of the arguments about participation and saying ‘no’ to the USA are bound up in the idea that Canada would somehow not exist without the USA. And it may be, sad as this is, that for the Canadian Forces (CF) participation with the USA means everything, and without them the CF are nothing. Logically, the Department of National Defence and the CF will do almost anything at all in order to be junior birdmen to the US eagle. The be all and end all, as far as can be discerned from the book, is that the Canadian military gets to continue to play with big brother and continue to cloud shovel with the USA. Since BMD is political theatre in the USA, this is just a sideshow in Canada, and the CF wants to be onboard for continued access to the big toys.

According to Fergusson, Canada going along with Washington on BMD is “existential” (p.144). Politically the author is asserting mind-boggling logic: Canadian support for international law and things such as a land-mine treaty hurt Canada because the USA is so frequently opposed (p.194). He seems to be saying Canada can safely turn out the lights at the Department of Foreign Affairs and the National Defence Headquarters, because all the right decisions will be made in Washington and simply repeated in Ottawa.

Fergusson’s book is a good start, but does not ask the hard questions which need to be addressed by Canada before the next round of BMD fetishism kicks off in the US:

- Based on history, what influence would Canada have on such a programme, and would this influence matter at all if the Canadian government adopts exactly the same goals as the USA? Is there a seat at the table?
- Would Canada be more secure than it is today if it participated, and how would this be so?
- Where is the money? Experience from other countries shows there is little financial benefit to nations hosting BMD programmes. The US keeps the best money and technology and jobs at home: scraps go abroad.

The missile Maginot Line, the world’s most expensive military welfare project, is largely helpless against determined missile threats. This book

is a good overview of the topic, but not a fair account of the events it describes. As for BMD, Canada does not get a say, but the generals might get to play.

JOHN CLEARWATER
Ottawa

***Essence of Indecision. Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963.* Par Patricia I. McMahon.** (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. 246 p. ISBN 978-0-7735-34988 \$95.00).

C'est avec un vif plaisir que nous accueillons la publication de l'étude de l'historienne Patricia I. McMahon intitulée *Essence of Indecision, Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963*, un ouvrage qui pallie un réel vide historiographique concernant ce volet de l'histoire politique canadienne. Avec rigueur et avec une remarquable concision, l'auteure nous livre les conclusions d'une recherche de longue haleine portant sur le débat entourant la politique nucléaire canadienne et, plus précisément, sur les interactions entre le développement de la politique du Premier ministre John George Diefenbaker (1898-1979) et le mouvement anti-nucléaire canadien.

Comme l'illustre d'emblée le libellé du titre, où la couleur du lettrage commue « *Indecision* » en « *Decision* », l'auteure cherche à prendre le contre-pied de cette vision, selon elle communément admise, d'un homme politique naïf et populiste qui se serait laissé aisément influencer par une abondante correspondance publique anti-nucléaire. Plus précisément encore, elle cherche à valider l'hypothèse voulant que ce qui fut interprété à tort comme de l'indécision relevait en fait d'une stratégie à deux niveaux. D'une part, Diefenbaker aurait fait la promotion du désarmement en misant sur le fait que les Canadiens seraient plus à même d'accepter l'armement nucléaire s'ils avaient l'impression que leur premier ministre n'en a fait l'acquisition qu'en dernier recours. Simultanément, Diefenbaker aurait poursuivi les négociations avec les États-Unis, desquels il ambitionnait d'acquiescer ledit armement.

Cette étude n'a donc nullement la prétention d'être une histoire de la politique nucléaire canadienne, mais plutôt une analyse des considérations politiques qui influencèrent les positions de Diefenbaker à cet égard. Conséquemment, les sources utilisées sont celles qui peuvent documenter les décisions politiques et ce qui a pu les influencer. Malgré des restrictions d'accès aux archives gouvernementales, l'auteure a réussi à constituer un corpus documentaire lui permettant d'étayer ses hypothèses en croisant