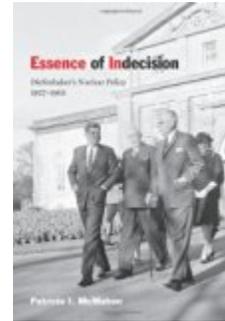


Patricia I. McMahon. *Essence of Indecision: Diefenbaker's Nuclear Policy, 1957-1963*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. xviii + 246 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-3498-8.

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Nuclear Weapons If Necessary, But ...

“Just because one is paranoid does not necessarily mean that one is unreasonable” (p. 178).

John Diefenbaker is a much maligned former prime minister of Canada. Frequently, the verdict of historians is that he utterly failed to realize the potential of his time in office, frittering away the massive popular mandate granted to him by Canadians in the landslide election victory of 1958. Nowhere, according to this interpretation, was his dithering indecision more manifest than on the issue of nuclear weapons for Canada. Patricia I. McMahon tackles this topic head-on in her book *Essence of Indecision*. It is an engaging, credible, and evidence-based reexamination of a crucial period in Canadian history when big issues were at stake, and the Canadian and American governments were at loggerheads, both behind the scenes and in full public view. “This book,” she explains, “examines the development of Canada’s nuclear policy” during the period 1957 to 1963 when Diefenbaker was prime minister of Canada (p. xi).

Those years, slightly more than one-half of the tumultuous tenth decade of confederation, saw a host of topics that engaged and divided Canadians, especially their politicians. Among these were the place of Quebec—in or outside of—Canada; the changing role of women within and outside their homes and families; the evolution of government’s role in providing both a managed economy and a social welfare state; the impact of accelerating technological change on traditional ways of life; and the prospects for continuing Canadian sovereignty in the

shadow of a superpower neighbor, the United States of America. McMahon’s book zeroes in on the latter two of these, as she explains in the introduction. “The political turmoil that surrounded the debate about Canadian nuclear policy in the late 1950s and early 1960s” is her focus, along with “the interplay between the development of Diefenbaker’s nuclear policy and the anti-nuclear movement” (p. ix). Here is the key to her reexamination of a much-studied topic and era. Along with the usual mix of politicians, senior bureaucrats, elite diplomats, and military brass, McMahon undertakes an examination of the impact of three Canadian antinuclear pressure groups: the Canadian Committee for the Control of Radiation Hazards (CCCRH), the Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND), and the Voice of Women (VOW). It is her contention that, at a critical point in the story, advocacy activities by these three groups influenced Diefenbaker to alter his course, thus indirectly contributing to the policy crisis that ultimately brought down his government.

In six chronological chapters, accompanied by an introduction and conclusion, McMahon both describes and analyzes the political process by which Diefenbaker’s Conservative government tried to develop a policy concerning the possible acquisition and deployment of nuclear weapons by the armed forces, in partnership with the United States, and with European allies through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). She covers the decision to create the North American Air Defence (NORAD) agreement, with Canada as a necessarily ju-

nior partner to the United States, as well as the debate about allowing American armed forces to stockpile nuclear weapons at their military bases on Canadian soil. Two other elements of the debate were: should Canadian forces serving in Europe under NATO auspices acquire tactical nuclear weapons, and should the Bomarc antiballistic missile that the Diefenbaker government had agreed to acquire be armed with the nuclear warheads they were designed to utilize?

Though Canadian scientists had participated in the wartime Manhattan project to develop an atomic bomb, Canada had renounced the possession of nuclear weapons in 1945. However, the Cold War that pitted Soviet Russia against most of her former allies in Western Europe and North America, along with the rapid development of thermonuclear bombs, jet aircraft, and ballistic missiles, necessitated a drastic reexamination of appropriate defense measures. At the same time, an international peace and disarmament movement raised the hopes of many that negotiations to reduce armaments on both sides offered a better chance for Canadian and human survival than a renewed arms race. With a sure hand, McMahon weaves these threads together into an absorbing narrative, while providing contextual details of such international events as the U2 spy plane incident, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Berlin blockade, and the Cuban missile confrontation. At the same time, she covers key domestic events, including federal elections, the cancellation of the Avro Arrow, a sharp economic recession, and the devaluation of the Canadian dollar.

For many years after the fall of the Conservative government in 1963, the prevailing explanation for its demise centered on the leadership and personality flaws of its leader, Diefenbaker, who, it is claimed, dithered and delayed and declined to make a decision on the nuclear weapons issue. The earliest, and still among the most eloquent, exponents of this viewpoint was the popular journalist, Peter C. Newman, whose best seller, *Renegade in Power: The Diefenbaker Years* (1963) appeared only a few months after the fateful election. Mainstream academic scholars, who have largely confirmed Newman's history-on-the-run account, with substantial works based on solid historical sources, include J. L. Granatstein (*Canada, 1957-1967: The Years of Uncertainty and Innovation* [1986]); Michael Bliss (*Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* [1994]); John English (*The Worldly Years: The Life of Lester Pearson, volume 2, 1949-1972* [1993]); and Denis Smith (*Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* [1995]). Still the most thoughtful brief for

the defense has come from the pen of Canadian philosopher George Grant, whose thin but controversial *Lament for a Nation* appeared in 1965, and has remained in print ever since, through the Carleton Library series (the fortieth anniversary edition was published in 2005).[1] In Grant's big-picture view, Diefenbaker's defeat had little to do with his small-town prairie populist style or inability to make decisions, and everything to do with the defeat of Canadian national independence at the hands of the powerful American military-industrial complex, aided and abetted by the English-Canadian news media, the turncoat Liberal leader Lester Pearson, and half of the chief's own cabinet. Diefenbaker's defeat was thus neither a blundering miscalculation nor a sign of his unfitness for office, but rather a quixotic crusade that ultimately turned tragic, both for him and for Canada.

In recent years, a third school of thought has appeared among mainly younger scholars to augment and sometimes challenge the Newman and Grant interpretations. Rejecting the open-and-shut, guilty-as-charged Diefenbaker denunciation as an overly simplistic caricature, and seeing Grant's broad-brush-stroke ideological musings as perhaps too clever by half, this group of scholars has sought to examine Diefenbaker within the context of his times, and to base their findings not just on solid evidence, including new archival sources unavailable to earlier researchers, but also in the light of insights gleaned from other fields of scholarship. Among these authors are James G. Ferguson (*Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009: Deja Vu All Over Again* [2010]); Joseph Jockel (*Canada in NORAD, 1957-2007: A History* [2007]); Andrew Richter (*Avoiding Armageddon: Canadian Military Strategy and Nuclear Weapons, 1950-1963* [2002]); and Cara Spittal ("Narrative Nation-Building: A Conversation with Gad Horowitz about Diefenbaker and Toryism," in Peter Kulchyski and Shannon Bell's forthcoming edited collection *Subversive Itinerary: The Thought of Gad Horowitz*). McMahon is definitely in this third school. "Diefenbaker's indecision was more apparent than real," she writes, and then goes on to summarize his thought process, in clear and temperate prose as follows: "Diefenbaker took a two-pronged approach to nuclear policy. On the one hand, he promoted the possibility of nuclear disarmament; on the other, he actively supported the acquisition of nuclear weapons from the United States. Although this approach appears to be contradictory, it was not. Nor was it the result of uncertainty. Diefenbaker believed that Canadians would be more willing to accept nuclear weapons (and the leader who made the decision to acquire them) if they knew that

their prime minister had done so only as a last resort” (p. x). In the end, his attempt at a delicate political balancing act failed, and he and his government went down to defeat, but there was method not madness in the overall strategy, as McMahon clearly shows.

Threaded through the book are several key themes that bear comment. One of the most important of these is the impact on national politics of three antinuclear protest groups, the aforementioned CCCRH, CUCND, and VOW. It was well known that Diefenbaker put great stock in the mailed letters that he received from what he termed “ordinary Canadians.” These three interest groups made letter writing to top public officials, particularly the prime minister, one of their main forms of advocacy. When combined with public demonstrations and the news of radical protest rallies abroad, particularly in the United Kingdom, Diefenbaker began to factor their views, and potential influence at election time, into his policy calculations. The zenith of their impact according to McMahon came in 1961, when CUCND organized a seventy-three-hour protest on Parliament Hill involving between five hundred and eight hundred demonstrators, followed by the delivery of a massive petition by CCCRH to the government, containing an estimated 140 thousand to 180 thousand signatures. The petition caught the public imagination and prompted an article in *Maclean’s* magazine. “It certainly got Diefenbaker’s attention,” McMahon observes (p. 128). He determined to suspend negotiations with the Americans over the terms of a possible agreement to acquire nuclear weapons until after the 1962 election, much to the annoyance of the American government, not to mention the pronuclear members of his own cabinet.

Much has been written elsewhere about the prickly, even abrasive, relationship between Diefenbaker and the U.S. president, John F. Kennedy (JFK), and in particular the contrast afforded by the affably respectful relations between the chief and JFK’s predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower.[2] McMahon’s conclusions here are in line with the conventional wisdom. She notes that the two leaders “had little in common,” that Diefenbaker was “leery of the new president,” and that “the prime minister’s resentment toward the president grew throughout the spring of 1962” (pp. 95, 135). Among other reasons, she hints at jealousy, since it became increasingly apparent that “Canadians adored Kennedy” (p. 135). Diefenbaker felt that Kennedy was arrogant and pushy; Kennedy thought Diefenbaker was dithering and not to be trusted, particularly when the latter refused to return a briefing memo prepared for the president’s perusal that inadvertently

fell into Canadian hands after one of their personal meetings. McMahon concludes that “Diefenbaker’s encounters with the new American president had a profound impact on the formulations of Canada’s nuclear policy” (p. xv).

Another politician who figures prominently in McMahon’s account is Lester Pearson, the former Liberal minister for External Affairs, and for most of the years covered by this book, the opposition leader seeking to replace Diefenbaker as prime minister. Diefenbaker, she makes clear, did not fear Pearson in Parliament or on the hustings, where the ex-diplomat was no match for the chief’s debating and oratorical skills. But, she notes, he was “plagued by fears that Liberal leader Lester Pearson would rally the anti-nuclear forces and take their support to victory in the next federal election” (p. xiv). It was not so much radioactive nuclear fallout that made Diefenbaker queasy, then, but rather the potential political fallout from any misstep on this sensitive public issue. His approach to the formulation of nuclear policy, she states, was “overwhelmingly a matter of political calculation, not national security” (p. 175). Indicative of the author’s evenhanded approach, however, she quickly adds that “the same could be said of Pearson’s approach” (p. 175).

McMahon also devotes considerable attention to Diefenbaker’s interactions with his cabinet, particularly the two defense ministers, George Pearkes (1957-60) and Douglas Harkness (1960-63), and the two secretaries of state for External Affairs, Sidney Smith (1957-59) and Howard Green (1959-63). Harkness and Green become, in McMahon’s sure hands, the contrary voices speaking in Diefenbaker’s ears, the former urged with growing insistence that the government strike a deal with the United States to acquire nuclear weapons, while the latter lobbied with equal tenacity for delay so that Canada’s voice in international disarmament talks would have credibility. McMahon goes further, though, showing how the disagreement pitted the department of National Defence against the department of External Affairs, particularly once Norman Robertson became Smith’s undersecretary in late 1958. After Green’s appointment, Robertson “provided his minister with key arguments to muster support for disarmament and opposition to Canada’s acquisition of nuclear armaments.” Thus, although Diefenbaker entered office with serious misgivings about the “Pearsonalities” within the civil service, McMahon capably demonstrates that any explanation which attributes his indecision about nuclear weapons solely to this factor is superficial, at best.[3]

Although McMahon's research into the activities of antinuclear activists adds to our understanding of why Diefenbaker hesitated to move forward with negotiations to acquire nuclear weapons, and notwithstanding her disclaimer that "the stock portrait" of Diefenbaker as "an indecisive populist who naively discounted the growing use of public opinion polling data in favour of letters from ordinary Canadians is incomplete," her final judgment about Diefenbaker is conventional (pp. ix-x). He was, she concludes, "defeated by his own shortcomings ... the architect of his own demise." Most of his difficulties in formulating a nuclear weapons policy were "problems of his own making." Had he focused on "actually governing" rather than "maintaining his political position," particularly during the four years in which he enjoyed an overwhelming parliamentary majority, there was ample time to formulate a policy, negotiate an agreement with the Americans, and begin implementation before seeking reelection in 1962 (p. 175). That Diefenbaker did not, in McMahon's view, is attributable to many factors, including cabinet rivalries, intra-bureaucratic squabbling, the protests of antinuclear advocacy groups, and miscalculations by the Kennedy administration in Washington. But ultimately, she lays the lion's share of the blame at the prime minister's feet. "His political insecurities, both real and imagined, made it impossible for him to conclude a final agreement with American officials on nuclear weapons" (p. xii).

Early in the book, McMahon lays the groundwork for this explanation, noting that Diefenbaker had sustained five electoral defeats at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels before finally getting elected to the House of Commons in 1940. Moreover, he had twice run unsuccessfully for the Conservative Party leadership, before finally winning in 1956. Victory at the polls, he had learned, was anything but automatic. Furthermore, his formative years in Parliament were spent watching the wily Liberal leader and prime minister, W. L. Mackenzie King. A policy of "not necessarily conscription, but conscription if necessary" had seemed to serve King well in bringing his Liberal government through the divisive soldier recruitment crisis of World War Two. McMahon suggests that in delaying a decision on nuclear weapons Diefenbaker was emulating his old Liberal adversary. She might have strengthened this explanation had she cited another role model, and one Diefenbaker genuinely admired, Sir John A. Macdonald. Not for nothing was the historic first leader of his party known as "Old Tomorrow." McMahon's fundamental point here is well taken, however. Both Macdonald and King knew when to "hold

'em," and when to "fold 'em." Whether it was Macdonald in the 1860s joining the confederation movement he had long opposed, or King accepting J. L. Ralston's two-year-old offer to resign from the cabinet in the 1940s, successful Canadian prime ministers have shown that they can distinguish between a time for delay and a time for decision. On the nuclear weapons issue, Diefenbaker was unable to seize the moment. Perhaps had he used Pearson's flip-flop on the issue in January 1963 as cover, he could still have rallied the cabinet, caucus, and public to his side had he moved decisively. That he did not even try McMahon attributes to bad tactical timing. Diefenbaker did not wish to be seen as reacting to Pearson's initiative. He had "backed himself into a corner" (p. 163). We might also include hubris as an explanatory factor. Diefenbaker, the self-styled populist, was not about to let Pearson, or Kennedy, or Harkness, or the Toronto-centered news media tell him how to set policy. He dug in his heels. Pride, it seems clear, preceded the fall.

Another explanation for Diefenbaker's miscalculations as to the political value of delay is that he failed to appreciate how time had sped up, certainly since the days of Macdonald, but also since King's era. Changes in transportation and telecommunications by the 1960s meant that ordinary Canadians could now hear and see events from across the country, and indeed around the world, right in their living rooms. Moreover, given the unprecedented range and speed of long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles, military planners and their civilian bosses felt an even greater need for certainty and precision in matters of national defense. Times indeed had changed, and a policy of nuclear weapons if necessary, but not necessarily nuclear weapons was less and less viable from both a political and a national security perspective by the 1960s.

To conclude, the author has done her work well. In a commendable economy of words, she systematically reexamines the politics of the Diefenbaker government's nuclear weapons policy, questioning old assumptions and integrating the activities of three prominent antinuclear protest groups into the analysis. If in the end McMahon's conclusions tend to reinforce the existing consensus about Diefenbaker's flawed leadership, the reader is nonetheless reassured that the result was not predetermined, that those findings reflect both careful scholarship and evidence-based logical thought. While the author acknowledges that some sensitive documents on nuclear policy from the departments of National Defence and External Affairs were firmly closed to her, she makes a convincing case that "rich resources in collec-

tions of the personal papers of those involved” in the political process of shaping nuclear policy were more than adequate for her task (p. xvii).

McMahon’s writing style is a blend of expository and narrative techniques. The author’s introduction provides an overview of the books’ contents, methodology, and themes. The six chronologically organized chapters develop the analysis, almost year by year. In the conclusion, the author briefly summarizes the outcome of the nuclear debate under the new Liberal government of Pearson, then pulls together the analytical findings to address the interpretive issues raised in the introduction. This, it appears, is classic expository technique: say what you are going to say, then say it, and finally, say what you said. However, viewed through another lens, the book unfolds in classic, almost Shakespearean, narrative style. The introduction serves as a prologue, while the six chapters are the equivalent of the great bard’s traditional five acts, vehicles for the developing plot. A dramatic “crisis” is provided by the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the subsequent showdown for the support of the Canadian people between television-age President Kennedy and whistle-blowing Diefenbaker. The “climax” of the tale comes when Diefenbaker’s government falls, through the loss of a nonconfidence vote in the House of Commons. The epilogue to this drama is provided by the final chapter labeled “conclusion.” McMahon did not set out to write a historical play, but her expository narrative allows those readers so inclined to imagine it with little difficulty. Moreover, her depiction of Diefenbaker is the stuff of tragic figures: an ordinary man who achieves extraordinary greatness, then is brought down by the flaws in his own character.

Again, McMahon’s book might appear to be classic old-school political history, combining all the things that new historians oppose: male-dominated elite politics and tired military and diplomatic subject matter, based largely on archival print documents. Yet there is much here for new political historians to ponder and appreciate. It is an intriguing case study of the way the Canadian political system functions. How does policy

happen? In this example of nuclear weapons policy all of the following elements played their part: public opinion, political parties, interest groups, the news media, elections, the prime minister’s office, the cabinet, the parliamentary caucus, the House of Commons, and the senior bureaucracy. Scholars interested in the potential influence of advocacy groups will find McMahon’s study very useful, as will those looking at the politics of policymaking within the government bureaucracy itself. Conflict, the essence of politics, along with power and influence, are omnipresent in the story that unfolds in this book.

Finally, those who might wish to uncover ways and means to influence those who have power today would do well to read this book, too. On the surface, one might conclude that the antinuclear activists failed, since in the end, Canada did acquire nuclear weapons, the opposite of what they wished. Still, these groups were able through planned advocacy strategies, such as letter writing, demonstrations, and a massive petition, to significantly delay that decision. This is not a meaningless achievement by any means, in a parliamentary democracy that inclines heavily toward top-down decision making.

Notes

[1]. Needless to say, Diefenbaker’s own memoirs mounted a spirited defense of his actions throughout his government’s years in office. See John G. Diefenbaker, *One Canada: Memoirs*, 3 vols. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975-77).

[2]. See, for example, Knowlton Nash, *Kennedy & Diefenbaker: The Feud That Helped Topple a Government* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990).

[3]. For a solid treatment of Diefenbaker’s uneasy relationship with External Affairs, see John Hilliker, “The Politicians and the ‘Personality’: The Diefenbaker Government and the Conduct of Canadian External Relations,” *Canadian Foreign Policy: Historical Readings*, ed. in J. L. Granatstein (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1993), 152-167.

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