

**James Cameron.** *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 248 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-045992-5.

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On the plains near Nekoma, North Dakota, stands an arresting and haunting remnant of America's quest for Cold War nuclear safety. The truncated pyramid and concrete monoliths of the Stanley R. Mickelsen Safeguard Complex loom over the landscape like a brutalist Chichen Itza. A result of the provisions built into the Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty agreed between Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev in 1972, the complex came online in 1975, only to be decommissioned a year later. The Mickelsen facility is a very real reminder of the rise and fall of ballistic missile defense (BMD) and its role as symbol, problem, and political bargaining chip.[1]

James Cameron's analysis of how successive US administrations walked the tortuous path from prioritizing nuclear superiority to the eventual acceptance of parity with the Soviet Union and acquiescence to the terrifying concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD) is both lucid and fascinating. The nuclear age's scholarship has been invigorated in recent years by studies—not always by historians—that offer significant new insights into the politics, strategy, and culture of the post-Trinity era.[2] *The Double Game* easily deserves its place as an important work, of benefit to scholars with a variety of interests.

At the heart of Cameron's analysis lies the rise and fall of the first major efforts to create a BMD system, efforts that would eventually result in the Mickelsen Safeguard Complex's short, contested existence. According to public pronouncements and private hopes, such a system would provide a shield against Soviet—or sometimes Chinese—nuclear missiles and bombers. Although never even close to being implemented in full, the nascent BMD system was given up by Richard Nixon during the 1972 SALT talks, bar the provision for a limited range of systems held by both sides.

However, *The Double Game* is much more than an analysis of the international diplomacy of arms control in the nuclear age. To persuasively make his case that the United States eventually accepted nuclear parity with the Soviets, Cameron delves into the conflicted minds of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Nixon to explore the inner conflicts and debate that took place about America's nuclear posture. The “double game” refers to these conflicts, the tension between the public presentation of nuclear superiority and later nuclear parity, and the private debates about the necessity for such grotesque policies.

The book reveals much about the uncertainty, doubt, and indecision that plagued successive ad-

ministrations as they grappled with the tools of Armageddon and the ways in which they affected domestic politics and foreign relations. One thing that becomes clear from Cameron's rigorous analysis is the way in which successive presidents became entrapped by the nuclear age's rhetoric and the tension between public pronouncements and private doubts. Moreover, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon all struggled to adapt to the changing nature of what could loosely be called the "public mood" during their respective years in the White House.

This tension between the public and the private is therefore core to Cameron's argument. He makes the case from the outset that "policymakers struggled to balance the demands of presenting a front of strategic coherence with the incoherent reality behind the scenes" (p. 7). For example, Cameron analyzes how Kennedy profited from the "missile gap" during the 1960 presidential election but then struggled to rationalize how the US nuclear "edge" failed to inspire confidence during periods of tension, such as the Second Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Cameron also finds time to clearly demonstrate how domestic political considerations influenced Cold War nuclear strategy. This follows the scholarly trend of showing how and why such things mattered, taking on board the axiom that the domestic and the foreign are always inextricably interlinked.<sup>[3]</sup> A prime example of this is Johnson's turn toward ABM in 1967 as a means of looking tough when faced with a looming election and the domestic political divisions created by Vietnam and opposition to his Great Society programs. This reinforces the argument that Johnson only turned toward the nuclear—whether it was ABM or the 1968 Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons—as a result of domestic pressures and electoral needs.

What also becomes apparent is the impact of technological failure or inadequacy on BMD planning and presentation. The knowledge that early

systems, such as the Dwight Eisenhower-era Nike-Hercules and Nike-Zeus, were overly complex, were hugely expensive, and could potentially be a threat to American lives cast a pall over BMD planning. Yet this did not stop Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara from accelerating the development of Nike-Zeus. As Cameron notes, such a decision typified the tensions inherent in nuclear planning. McNamara spent the money because of fears that the Soviets were working on something similar. The effectiveness of such a system mattered not. What mattered was the public credibility inherent in pursuing such a system and maintaining the appearance of superiority.

One area that could have been strengthened comes toward the book's opening. The 1960 presidential election—where Kennedy made considerable electoral capital out of the mythical "missile gap"—is a pivotal early moment. Yet there is relatively little focus on how the "missile gap" phenomenon actually played out. It would have helped to bolster the subsequent analysis with more attention paid to how the Kennedy campaign—and Kennedy himself in particular—mentally dealt with the fact that there was no missile gap, despite the campaign's rhetoric. This would have tied neatly into the fascinating analysis of Kennedy's attitude toward nuclear weapons once in power. Moreover, a slightly fuller appreciation of the Eisenhower era and Sputnik's shock would have helped to place the developments of the 1960s in a broader and fuller context.

It would also have been helpful to know how and if theoretical understandings of the ways in which different figures interpreted and understood nuclear decision making and the dissonance of the public and private attitudes could have been brought to bear on the analysis. Such scholars as Jacques E. C. Hymans have obviously done critical work in this area (*The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* [2006]), so one is left wondering if such approaches could have been used to add

even further rigor to an already impressive analysis.

Finally, given the close alignment of missile defense and civil defense, it may have been of interest to see a little more about how and where these themes interlinked, beyond the brief mention given. Civil defense planning and implementation was plagued by many of the same issues that hampered BMD, mainly the stark difference between the public rhetoric and theatrics of civil defense, and the incoherent reality behind the scenes. Indeed, the Kennedy administration was warned by advisers—such as Marcus Raskin and Carl Kaysen—that the public appearance of order and knowledge was at odds with what was going on within government.[4]

Any criticisms leveled at *The Double Game* are, however, minor. Cameron has written a work of great significance, founded in broad and deep research, and penetrating analysis of the period and issues. *The Double Game* will undoubtedly garner acclaim among several audiences across a range of disciplines. Historians working in a number of areas will find great value in Cameron's assessment of the relationship between nuclear strategy, diplomacy, and concern for domestic audiences. Moreover, his attention to the internal turmoil of leaders and policymakers adds additional depth and nuance to his argument.

#### Notes

[1]. The full impact of the complex can be appreciated through the stark collection of construction photographs available through the US Library of Congress online archives at <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?q=Photograph%3A+nd0046&fi=number&va=exact&st=grid&op=PHRASE>.

q=Photograph%3A+nd0046&fi=number&va=exact&st=grid&op=PHRASE.

[2]. See, for example, Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, *Unclear Physics: Why Iraq and Libya Failed to Build Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Matthew

Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[3]. See, for example, the essays contained in Francis Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), or Marc Trachtenberg's now classic study *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[4]. Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 29.

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