
Reviewed by Zaynab Quadri (Mershon Center, Ohio State University)

Published on H-War (August, 2023)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Jocelyn Wills’s *Tug of War*, a sweeping history of the Canadian space technology company MacDonald, Dettwiler and Associates (MDA), is an ambitious study of remarkable breadth as well as depth. Tracing the company’s modest origins in the late 1960s through its entrenchment in the post-9/11 world of surveillance capitalism and military contracting, Wills argues that MDA provides “a window into a corporate world girded by potent forces at the nexus of state, capital, and geopolitical power games” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (p. 9). The study effectively uses a wide array of sources—interviews with MDA founders and employees, archival material from the Canadian government, news media coverage, and other publicly available US and Canadian business and government records—to narrativize “the ways in which the forces of surveillance capitalism integrated Canada into regional, industrial, academic, and military alliances, particularly but not exclusively with the United States” (p. 6).

In both substance and methodology, *Tug of War* exists at an exciting and productive intersection of multiple fields. Wills effectively writes across scales, balancing a granular examination of individuals and personalities with institutional context of Canada’s burgeoning security industry and its relationship with the Canadian government, and a transnational view of how Canadian actors responded to and entangled themselves with the US government and market. This allows the book to speak to business history (how companies have risen and faltered and recovered amid rapid geopolitical and technological changes) and to the history of capitalism (in terms of how the case of MDA exemplifies broader trends in political economy around labor, capital, and state-corporate relations).

Wills notes that MDA “matters to our understanding of policymaking and business-government relations during the Cold War and into the twenty-first century” (p. 8). The story of MDA also, for Wills, demonstrates that “historians have much to contribute to the field of surveillance
studies,” especially because the “satellite-based space industry,” in contrast to the computer industry, remains understudied in the literature (p. 14). However, Wills’s analysis has important implications for Americanists of many stripes—most specifically, scholars of US military history, US diplomatic history, the transnational history of the US in the world, and the broader regional history of North America. The US security state has always existed and developed in a global context, and Wills persuasively situates Canada as a notable player in the negotiation and projection of American foreign policy goals. As Wills puts it, “With few exceptions, [most scholarship tends] to focus on the United States, the United Kingdom, and other ‘great powers’ while remaining remarkably silent on the history of the secondary powers that have helped to serve the interests of capital and the hegemonic ambitions of the United States” (p. 13).

This “continental” view reveals not only the relevance of space and satellite industries in relation to relatively more well-worn examinations of arms, bombs, and nuclear weapons but also the expansiveness and political-economic penetration of US security politics beyond its borders. Chapter 4, which includes discussion of MDA’s fiscal difficulties in the late 1970s, is an instructive example of the latter point. Wills writes that “Canada’s defensive posture, future plans, place within the neoliberal order, and changing relationship to the continental integration project appeared to threaten MDA’s very survival” (pp. 165-66). Wills frames these debates within domestic Canadian history, but Americanists should find debates over capital flight and “post-industrialism” and fights over sovereignty in a globalizing, US-dominated economy familiar, in a domestic US labor history context as well as a transnational context of US-led economic liberalization in the decolonizing world. The Canadian case is thus distinct for how it negotiated these issues as a US ally that nevertheless struggled (and struggles) to avoid a dependent, parasitic relationship with its southern neighbor.

Wills understandably stays close to MDA over 366 pages of prose, but the narrative nevertheless offers many tantalizing glimmers of other transnational stories, other theoretical questions that can and should prompt further inquiry. “Sweat equity”—the reliance of particularly tech start-ups on free intern and student labor to cut costs in a neo/liberalizing market—is a thread woven through MDA’s history, decades before this model would become strongly associated with “Big Tech” giants in the 2000s and 2010s. Relationships with other countries besides the United States, too, were integral to MDA’s continued fiscal solubility and accumulation of business and technological experience. Notable examples include: working with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to export a computer-based supervisory reporting system to Reza Shah’s Iran in 1970, to “develop nuclear power stations throughout the county, and then use Iranian oil revenues to finance the development of South Africa’s fuel-enrichment technology in exchange for enriched uranium”; navigating and capitalizing “on South Africa’s pariah status” in 1976, arguing that “MDA should do business with anyone willing and able to advance the company’s ambitions” and signing a 1.3 million dollar contract to “develop additional ground station features, all of which the firm could sell to others”; and cultivating partnerships with the Israeli Air Force in 1980 and Israel Aerospace Industries in 2008 (pp. 82, 127-28). These stories are lightly touched on within the context of MDA’s financial and technological operations, but they are rich with potential to be expanded on as nodes in the broader history and geography of the US-dominated, but nevertheless global, political economy of militarism.

Tantalizing, too, are Wills’s and MDA’s contributions to the literature on neoliberalism. Public discourse and much academic inquiry on the subject tend to emphasize the threats to state power
posed by corporations and nongovernmental organizations since the 1970s. Yet, as MDA's restructuring in the early 1980s shows in chapter 5, the relationship between the state and corporations is more complex. Not only does the state keep corporations alive by granting them contracts as some of their most important clients, but the state also can and does further intervene to rescue them when they are cash-strapped—and it does so within a regional and global political-economic context. In 1982, as Wills demonstrates, MDA was facing an internal financial crisis and was in the crosshairs of another company that wanted to buy it out, but the Canadian government was one of the key sources of additional financing courted by MDA's leadership. With the Reagan administration implementing its economic agenda of tax cuts, deregulation, and free trade agreements, alongside its Cold War military buildup to reverse the policy of detente, the Canadian government was incentivized to rescue MDA: “Seeking to exploit the US government procurement system and acquisition market so that Canadian firms could penetrate the massive US defence market and to help protect Canadian sovereignty as well, influential members of Canada’s own military-industrial establishment thus pushed the federal government to save MDA” (p. 188). The evocative interaction of corporate, national, and international actors and processes in this specific, historicized example provides useful data for both historians and theorists of capitalism and neoliberalism.

Given how many moving pieces Wills is able to integrate and balance, the text’s occasionally cumbersome level of detail on MDA’s minutiae, along with the corresponding underdevelopment of the theory introduced in the book’s introduction and conclusion, is a fairly minor quibble. *Tug of War* is a fascinating, timely, and valuable work of impeccably researched history, which succeeds in the vital task of materializing a transnational story about “the security state.” Too often, this formation is evoked as an imprecise synecdoche for a heterogeneous assemblage of governmental and corporate organs. The strength of Wills’s work is in its willingness to get into the weeds, in order to expand our notions of who and what constitutes the infrastructure of American war making across borders in the post-1945 era.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59519

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.