

# H-Diplo

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**Alexander W.G. Herd. "A 'Common Appreciation;' Eisenhower, Canada, and Continental Air Defense, 1953-1954." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13:1 (Summer 2011): 4-26. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00140. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00140](http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00140) .**

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Review by **Christopher J. Bright**, Independent Scholar

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Alexander W.G. Herd's "A 'Common Appreciation;' Eisenhower, Canada, and Continental Air Defense, 1953-1954," is a strong and well-reasoned article. It discusses consultations between the United States and Canada between October 1953 and September 1954 about the defense of North America from a surprise Soviet bomber attack. Drawing upon archives in both nations and displaying a good grasp of the secondary literature, the author succeeds in illuminating a key period in U.S.-Canada bilateral defense relations.

U.S. policy makers and military leaders, as Herd notes, believed the explosion of a Soviet thermonuclear device in August 1953 was an enormously significant event. The sudden Soviet acquisition of thermonuclear capability sparked greater attention to the establishment of a radar network to warn of approaching bombers, the design and deployment of more sophisticated anti-aircraft armament, and the reinvigoration of national civil defense preparations, among other results. Prominent journalistic accounts highlighted these activities at the time, and they were the subject of Congressional studies and many National Security Council (NSC) meetings. Indeed, NSC159/4, approved by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in September 1953, was the federal government's classified guidance on the topic: it described the existing and predicted threat to the United States and prescribed steps to be taken in response. After the guidance was adopted, the president and his aides were briefed frequently on the progress towards meeting the document's mandates.

Herd is particularly adept at describing the evolution of the Canadian government's understanding of U.S. officialdom's perception of continental defense. After the Soviet H-bomb test, the Canadian Ambassador to the United States wondered in a secret cable if the detonation would spark "another searching reexamination" of the

possibility of achieving a “more hermetic” North American air defense system, suggesting that earlier exertions focused on unnecessary or unattainable ends (7). Similarly, some Canadian ministerial staffers initially thought published lamentations about the danger of a Soviet air raid could be best explained as the product of a U.S. government effort to heighten public fears in the U.S. in order to weaken objections to defense spending increases (8 ). By the end of the twelve months considered in Herd’s article, however, U.S. officials found that their Canadian counterparts were in “very nearly complete agreement” with the Eisenhower Administration’s genuine concern about the prospect of a Soviet attack and the defense measures considered necessary (21).

When Canadian leaders realized the depth and extent of U.S. interest in improving continental defenses, they maneuvered to ensure that their nation became a respected partner in the effort. Eisenhower’s administration was quite receptive. As Herd notes, in the first of the four bilateral consultations he analyzes, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff conveyed the details of the U.S. air defense plans to the Canadian participants. The Canadians were also briefed on the priorities outlined in NSC 159/4 and on the frank results of Robert Bowie’s evaluation of Soviet intentions which had been compiled for the N.S.C. (16-17). This material was among the most sensitive national security information held by the U.S. government at the time, and it was apparently readily communicated to Canada. According to Herd, the U.S. also dispatched additional senior officials to subsequent meetings (20). These actions clearly telegraph the U.S. government’s attitude about the importance of winning Canadian concurrence with plans to protect North America. In light of this, it is easy to disagree with Herd’s assessment of the U.S. announcement at the conclusion of the second consultative meeting that subsequent gatherings would be held only if requested by the Canadians. Rather than indicating the strength of the emerging partnership, however, Herd believes this demonstrated that U.S. officials “did not view these meetings with the same high regard as their neighbors” (21).

Other scholarly accounts have analyzed later U.S. activities to familiarize Canadian forces with sensitive details about the design and deployment of nuclear anti-aircraft arms for continental defense. Herd has consulted Sean Maloney’s treatment of the topic, for example, which includes discussion of an official Canadian delegation invited by the United States to observe a demonstration shot of the first weapon type fielded. Obtaining Canadian concurrence with the advent and operational requirements of these arms was important to the U.S. Hosting the Canadian observers was a significant step to this end and was consonant with the tenor of the earlier consultations.

Indeed, it seems that varying national conceptions about the propriety of the possession of nuclear arms (defensive or not) eventually dampened U.S. and Canadian military cooperation, including continental defense matters. Herd makes the case that

in the twelve months under consideration Canada exercised its sovereignty by influencing U.S. plans to protect the continent. But, in this period the United States and Canada came to share a common fear of a Soviet bomber attack. This eased the way for a coordinated response. This is an important point. By the mid-1960s, at which time both nations had access to nuclear air defense weapons, however, perceptions of the threat and the role that air defense nuclear arms should play in protecting the continent began to differ. Similarly, Canadian opposition to ballistic missile defense, first in the Reagan era and then more recently, was probably rooted in a deep national skepticism about the threat of intercontinental missiles, coupled with a desire not to entangle Canada with what were seen as expensive, unnecessary, technologically infeasible, and provocative armaments. When Canadian leaders believed their national interests coincided with the United States, they were eager to cooperate on defensive measures and found willing partners in the United States. When Canadian officials no longer perceived the same threats as their southern neighbors, it was also easy to assert their independence from U.S. policies.

**Christopher J. Bright** is an independent scholar. Trained as a diplomatic historian at The George Washington University, his book *Continental Defense in the Eisenhower Era: Nuclear Antiaircraft Arms and the Cold War* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), in the Palgrave Studies in the History of Science and Technology series, will be reissued in paperback in 2012. He can be contacted via [www.ChristopherJohnBright.com](http://www.ChristopherJohnBright.com).

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