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The legacy of the Avro Arrow

WHAT is it about the death of the Avro Arrow that echoes so mournfully in our consciousness? In a country with vast marches of uncharted history, Canadians show no ignorance or indifference in recalling the short life of an airplane discarded a generation ago. "No single event in our history has been so mythologized," writes eminent historian J. L. Granatstein, and who could argue? Time has made the Avro Arrow an empty vessel, filled it with romance, nostalgia, loss and longing, and cast it adrift on a nation's restless soul.

The Arrow, a film which aired on the CBC last week, is the latest of a clutch of plays, books and documentaries. They surface like emotional splinters every few years, their tone forever sorrowful and angry. True to its promise, the film induced more hand-wringing and hair-pulling.

A misty-eyed Elwy Yost, who once helped recruit the Avro corps of engineers, railed at the stupidity of cancelling the most advanced aeronautical program of its day. A nostalgic June Callwood, who covered the story, called its sudden end "carnage" and "a kind of soul-theft." Two filmmakers on *The National* implored us not to eat our young and douse our dreams, suggesting that is our tradition.

Listening to these laments, you might think that killing the Arrow was a crime against humanity, a kind of technological infanticide. In a debate with words such as beauty and poetry used in the same breath as requiem and tragedy, the stillborn Arrow seems the greatest failure of our nationhood.

To the revisionists and nationalists who have freighted the Arrow with hopes and fears, the airplane was a metaphor. When it soared, it reflected daring, stature and self-confidence. When it crashed, it represented weakness and insecurity. And when those dazzling prototypes were cut up into little pieces, allegedly on the orders of a vengeful prime minister ("I want to get rid of that infernal plane!" John Diefenbaker rages in the film), it gave rise to a delicious conspiracy: that the planes (and plans) were destroyed to ensure none would end up in a museum where dispossessed romantics would hold monthly vigils, like neo-Nazis gathering at Hitler's bunker.

The economic and military case against developing the Arrow, while not beyond challenge, was generally sound. By 1959, the Arrow was over budget and behind schedule; its cost was several times that of comparable fighters and it would not have been in service until 1961 or 1962, when it was feared that it would have been obsolete. Warfare was changing from bombers to missiles. It didn't make sense in 1959 to continue funding the Arrow.

Certainly it was a spectacular plane, ahead of its time — sleek, fast and muscular. Its team of engineers was brilliant, its design innovative, its power unprecedented. The Conservatives were indecisive and unimaginative, especially in finding other applications for its technology. That they later bought other planes raises questions. And that the prototype and records were destroyed was unconscionable (though historian Denis Smith argues persuasively that there is no evidence that Mr. Diefenbaker ordered it).

Yet of all the arguments against the Arrow, we hear least of the moral one. In their sloppy sentimentality, defenders of the Arrow continue to see it as *less* than it was. They marvel at its formidable dimensions, the elegance of its lines and the grace of its form, as if it were a piece of sculpture. In their misguided enthusiasm, they detach the Arrow from its foremost purpose, which was to destroy.

The Avro Arrow, lest we forget, was a warplane. It flew higher and faster not to explore outer space, reach the moon or speed commercial air travel. Every ounce of its excellence was to attack those Russian bombers earlier, the better to blow them out of the sky over the Arctic.

Yes, this was the Cold War. But apologists for the Arrow forget that it would have carried a nuclear-tipped missile. They also forget that to succeed commercially the Arrow would have had to be exported, where it inevitably would have been a weapon in wars Canada opposed, such as Vietnam.

Had television shown its destructive power some years later, what kind of poetry would it have inspired then? What beauty and elegance would we admire today? What "carnage" would we regret?

Spare us the tears. We celebrated the wrong triumph and we mourn the wrong tragedy. In 1997, let us finally acknowledge that killing the Arrow was right if only because it saved us moral anguish, the dimension of which we never knew.

The mythmakers notwithstanding, there was life after the Arrow. Turning its imagination elsewhere, Canada completed the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Trans-Canada Highway. It dammed the rivers of the north, laid fibre-optic cable, built schools and colleges, embraced computer technology. If it no longer makes the world's best warplane, it makes the world's best commuter plane.

Our achievements were not just economic or scientific. In the 1960s, Canada established old-age pensions and universal health care, and encouraged the arts. Social security and artistic development, as much as bricks and mortar, makes us what we are.

What matters about the Avro Arrow today is not the airplane but the ideal. The yearning it inspires proves anew that great nations need great projects. As Canada built a railway and a seaway, we must now find a hundred new ways — far more daring and worthy than designing an airplane — to maintain our unity, secure our prosperity and preserve our identity. The truth is that we have never stopped dreaming, and if there is to be a Canada, we never will.