

Cancelling Arrow terrible blow

by Robert Benzie

(With permission - The Calgary Sun)

As John Diefenbaker burned in hell, you can be sure the crotchety Prairie oaf was characteristically incensed about his rather dubious place in history.

These days, the deceased Tory prime minister is on the minds of many, as Canadians remember his mean-spirited cancellation in 1959 of the Avro CF-105 Arrow jet fighter.

We're thinking about Diefenbaker because of the excellent CBC mini-series, *The Arrow*, which recently revived the heated passions that surrounded the CF-105.

As most people know, the Avro Arrow was designed and built in Malton, Ont. to be the best all-weather interceptor in the world.

Faster and more beautiful than any fighter before or since, the Arrow was a victim of petty partisan politics and once its Liberal backers were out of power, Diefenbaker's Tories killed it — and the nation's aerospace industry.

Thousands of engineers were thrown out of work and out of Canada.

Forced abroad, they helped NASA put a man on the moon and aided Britain and France in developing the supersonic Concorde, among other aviation milestones.

In a sad kind of a way, Canada has never really recovered from the Arrow's tragic end.

Developed in the high-flying '50s, the plane soared before this country developed its present inferiority complex.

There was a time, though it now seems difficult to believe, when Canada was about surmounting any and all challenges; about taking on the world and winning; about working together for the greater collective good.

If that spirit emanated first from Malton's sprawling A.V. Roe Canada aircraft factory in the heady days after the Second World War it certainly reached its zenith at Expo '67 in Montreal, when Canada was the centre of it all.

Since 1967, the nation's downward spiral has entwined the FLQ crisis, two Quebec referendums, increasing regional selfishness in the West, the weakening of a strong central government, a divisive Constitution, military scandals, the demise federally of two great political parties (and the rise of two parochial protest parties in their place), an enfeebled labor movement and staggering gulf between the haves and have-nots, until we have come to where we are today.

Despite the cheerleading of Prime Minister Jean Chretien, the country lacks the can-do drive it had in the 1950s and 1960s.

A G7 national in name only, Canada seems to have begrudgingly accepted that greatness doesn't have to be achieved here; that it's OK to be second or third-best; that ours should be little more than a branch-plant economy.

It's terrible betrayal in a 20th century that Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier pledged would belong to us.

We have long feared our political leaders lack vision — say what you want about Quebec secessionists, at least they seek what they believe to be a better society — but that malaise, that sense of helplessness, has seeped from Parliament Hill throughout the land.

Maybe the death of the Avro Arrow didn't start all of this.

It could just be a self-destructive flaw in the Canadian character.

But surely Diefenbaker's decision to cease production of the airplane — and his vindictive order that every last Arrow be cut up and sold for scrap metal and all blueprints burned — was a harbinger of the mediocrity to come.

Successive Canadian governments have curtailed expensive defence programs since 1959, such as the EH-101 helicopter that helped defeat the Tories a little more than three years ago.

Yet nothing looms so ominously as the Arrow.

And that is because it still evokes a bittersweet nostalgia of immense possibility for many Canadians.

For those of us too young to remember this country before it became second-rate, watching CBC's *The Arrow* sparked thoughts of what might have been... if only.

It also conjured up images of teetotaling, non-smoking, God-fearing John Diefenbaker crackling among the flames of Hades. Because some sins can never be forgiven.

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