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Shooting down the Arrow myth

Both its high ratings and the keen responses in a host of letters to editors tell me the CBC-TV movie on the cancelling of the Avro Arrow in 1959 has had a powerful impact across the country.

It has made John Diefenbaker even more, and evermore, a villain in our popular history. It's unfair, but now almost impossible to change. The myth is now so secure, so sure to agitate several more generations with the broken dream of a Canadian superplane (with a Canadian engine, too!) that was ahead of all other jet fighters. Then a callous prime minister with a government and military too much under American influence brought it to an abrupt, mean-minded end.

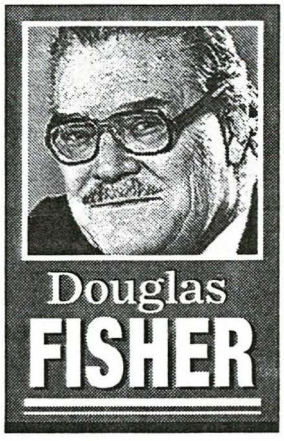
I believe the real story of the Arrow's abandonment and the conduct of the politicians involved in it is

DREAM GROUNDED ...
Landing gear problem caused this Avro Arrow to skid off the runway in photo from 1958. Fisher believes the decision to terminate the Arrow program was correct.

— SUN file photo

of a reasonable, though harrowing, decision. The ill consequences were worsened by a distrust in political Ottawa that crude tactics by Avro executives had earned.

At the time, as an active opposition MP, I had a very tiny but in-close chance to follow the politics of the decision. I had sat in an Arrow cockpit and spent hours at the Malton plant talking with engineers. I spoke about the plane's prospects in the House and its committees and I saw Crawford Gordon perform. He was the CEO of Avro (played by Dan Aykroyd in the film). One morning I was a witness in the prime minister's office to the contempt Dief and Gordon had for each other.



To me the film overdid both the Conservatives' antagonism to the Arrow project and the major margins in technological leadership which were jettisoned with the Arrow. Despite persuasiveness as a drama, the film's story is often inaccurate and misleading, at least in relation to the real life scenario. In fairness to all the politicians who went along with the cancellation — and I was one — I wish the screenwriters and producers had considered the following factors.

Firstly, there was a long, sturdy and often belligerent defence of the Arrow project by many Tory MPs, particularly those from Ontario. Their efforts dovetailed with those of Ontario Tory MPPs led by Premier Leslie Frost. Frost was determined the Arrow should go on and he warned his friend, the Chief, that cancellation would shred his national popularity and mandate. He was appalled at the grievous loss in jobs and of superb skills.

I emphasize the pro-Arrow Tories because it underlines the real merits there had to be in a decision contrary to their views. I also know there was less than absolute and complete enthusiasm for pushing on with the Arrow among MPs in the parliamentary caucuses of the Liberals and the CCF. Everyone knew about the skyrocketing costs and the distortions these would cause in budgeting for land and sea forces and about the impossibility of getting the U.S. or Britain to buy Arrows (even though Hawker-Sidley, Avro's British parent company, was very big in the U.K.).

Secondly, Crawford Gordon, no piker at bullying, had been threatening the government for a year of losses in jobs and production in much more than the plane and engine plant (12,000 jobs). He was also the top man for Nova Scotia's biggest employer with coal mines, steel and railway equipment plants (20,000 employees) owned by Hawker-Sidley.

Gordon's instant decision on learning of the PM's announcement was to fire all Arrow production workers. Such pettiness ignored provisions by the government of a well-subsidized transition for the closing.

Thirdly, a fair person who reviews the subject of the Arrow, as touched on in the biographies and the memoirs of leading politicians of the time, will realize both the diverse arguments for and against the cancellation and the deep consideration which the politicians gave to them. See books on John Diefenbaker (like *Rogue Tory* by Denis Smith), or the excellent biography of George Nowlan, the Nova Scotian minister, or the autobiography of Donald Fleming (then finance minister), or the biography of Alvin Hamilton, a Western Canada minister. And there's a fair account on the Arrow in a biography by Reginald Roy of George Pearkes, VC, then defence minister. I knew Pearkes as an honest, thoughtful man, far from the Great War Colonel Blimp of Duncan MacPherson's cartoons.

On the Liberal side, the memoirs of Lester Pearson and several books by Jack Pickersgill, plus the autobiography of Paul Martin, Sr., and a biography of C.D. Howe indicate to me that despite the partisan advantage which the Arrow cancellation brought them, these Liberals had grave doubts about the Arrow, and if the St. Laurent government had won a majority in 1957 it would have phased down the Arrow project.

Why? Because of escalating costs, bleak sales prospects, conundrums over a weapons system for the plane, and changing plans in Washington for North American air defence rising out of an increasingly competent Soviet rocketry.

Planes are so fascinating. A sleek fighter is far more memorable than most other products of man and of public funding. So the Arrow is mourned — deeply! It makes such a contrast to many other contracts which politicians have cancelled or mothballed during my watch. Most were as costly or more so than the mighty Arrow.

Consider the Pickering airport fiasco (and wish Ottawa had been as brave about the white elephant we have at Mirabel).

Remember the abandonment of the Spadina Expressway and the traumas this created in Metro Toronto.

Recall the elongated, expensive promise of the home-built armored personnel carrier that never came — Canada Car's Bobcat.

Think of that huge mausoleum in memoriam to Allan Mac-Eachen's genius: the heavy water plant in Nova Scotia.

Why, compared to the Arrow, is there so little regret over the continuing inadequacies of Pearson airport terminals? Surely these are tied to the bold cancellation by Jean Chretien of the contract for Pearson III.

And we still are unsure what millions we will pay for his cancellation of the contract to buy multi-purpose helicopters made by the Mulroney government.

Our present PM, even though he cannot kill the GST, is more than a dollar match of John Diefenbaker as a killer of projects and jobs. But so far, the developing myths about his deeds have nothing as exciting as the Arrow. And Airbus, so far, is not really his myth but that of another unpopular Tory prime minister.