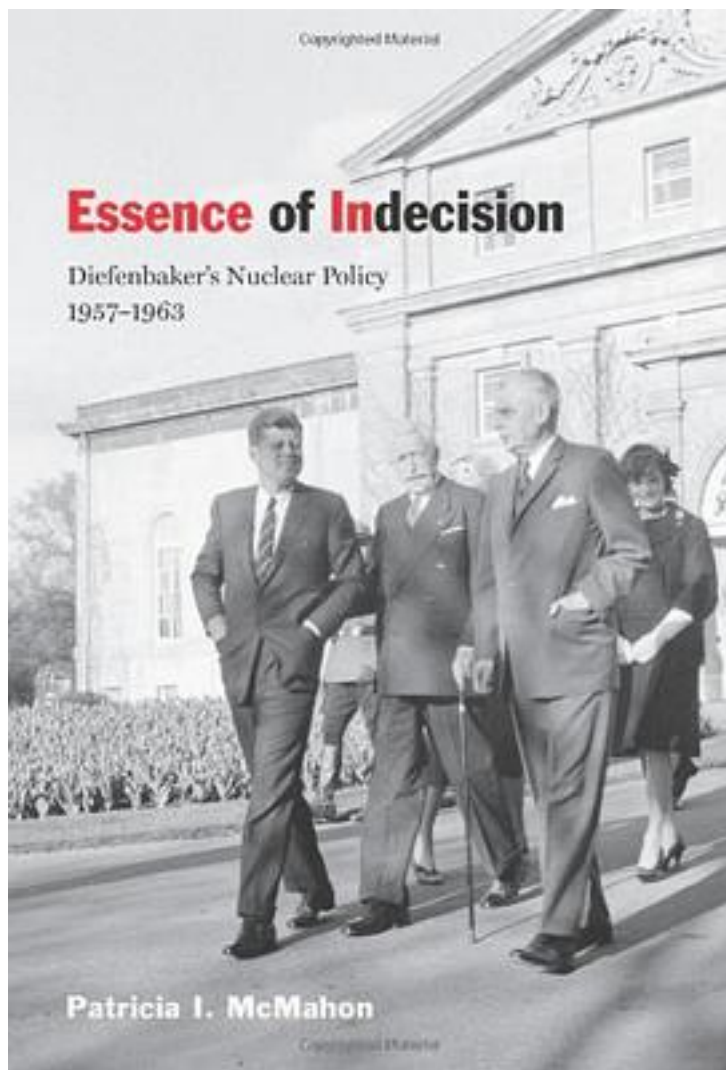


Essence of Indecision



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The nuclear issue was a minor political matter when John Diefenbaker became prime minister in 1957. By 1963, it served as a catalyst for his defeat, with many attributing his demise to the indecision with which he handled it. Patricia McMahon tells a more nuanced story in "Essence of Indecision". Tracing Diefenbaker's deliberations over nuclear policy, McMahon shows that Diefenbaker was politically cautious, not indecisive - he wanted to acquire nuclear weapons and understood from public opinion polls that most Canadians supported this position. However, Diefenbaker worried that the growing anti-nuclear movement might sway public opinion sufficiently to undermine his political support. He also feared that Liberal leader Lester Pearson could use the issue for political advantage. As long as Pearson opposed Canada's membership in the nuclear club, he could portray Diefenbaker's government as an irresponsible proponent of nuclear proliferation. Despite these reservations, Diefenbaker was involved in nuclear negotiations with the Americans throughout his tenure as prime minister, and an agreement was within reach on a number of occasions. When, in January 1963, Pearson reversed his position, Diefenbaker felt trapped - in making a clear public statement in favour of nuclear weapons it would appear as though he was merely following his opponent's lead. When Canada acquired nuclear weapons in 1963, it was under the leadership of Pearson, not Diefenbaker. The first book to deal exclusively with Diefenbaker's nuclear policy and the influence of the anti-nuclear movement, "Essence of Indecision" is key to understanding Diefenbaker's formulation of nuclear policy, and the environment, both international and domestic, in which that policy was created.

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