



The Peculiar Politics of Missile Defense

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Reviewed by Rebecca Friedman Lissner

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IN REVIEW

James Cameron, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

In March 2018, just over two weeks before national elections, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave a stunning speech in which he announced the development of numerous new and exotic nuclear weapon systems. Arguably, the most remarkable system mentioned was a nuclear-powered cruise missile with global reach. According to Putin, this new missile features “almost an unlimited range, unpredictable trajectory...and is invincible against all existing and prospective missile defense and counter-air defense systems.”¹ Nuclear analysts were quick to point out the weapon's illogic: Why invest in an unproven, high-risk system when much more basic countermeasures will do?²

James Cameron's book, *The Double Game: The Demise of America's First Missile Defense System and the Rise of Strategic Arms Limitation*, suggests an answer to this question through new insights into the domestic-political origins of nuclear strategy. Cameron focuses specifically on American nuclear policy during the 1960s and early 1970s—a period that spanned the John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon Administrations. With lucid prose and close attention to sourcing, Cameron shows how each president played a “double game” to reconcile their personal views regarding the utility of nuclear weapons with the shifting domestic-political exigencies of their times.

Of all three presidents, Kennedy's approach presented the starkest duality. Running against Vice President Nixon in 1960, Kennedy campaigned against the

¹ Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

² Jeffrey Lewis, “Putin's Nuclear-Powered Cruise Missile Is Bigger Than Trump's,” *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/01/putins-nuclear-powered-cruise-missile-is-bigger-than-trumps/>.

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Eisenhower Administration's lackadaisical approach to the Cold War, and especially the "missile gap" which reportedly had emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union. Once in office, Kennedy not only learned that the missile gap was a myth, but also, through the experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis, came to view American nuclear superiority as useless. Yet despite this personal evolution, Kennedy could not abandon his public commitment to "rational superiority" and planned to make it a central plank of his 1964 reelection bid, prior to his assassination.

For his part, Johnson was ambivalent on the question of nuclear superiority and, true to form, prioritized the Great Society above geopolitics. The ever-astute politician, Johnson "understood the basic fact that conservatives could endanger his domestic agenda if he stepped back from maintenance of the U.S. nuclear edge." These pressures put Johnson in an increasingly untenable position. He sought arms control agreements with the Soviet Union that would lock in American advantages, only to be rebuffed by the Kremlin as it proceeded to build up its nuclear forces. Moreover, domestic pressures compelled Johnson to proceed with an expensive and ineffective anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system despite serious misgivings within his administration.

Finally, it fell to Nixon to reckon with the loss of U.S. nuclear superiority alongside a Vietnam-era turn toward anti-militarism among the American public. Despite his personal hawkishness, Cameron writes that "Nixon conceded to the country's changed mood and publicly accepted the fundamental logic of arms control and mutually assured destruction." As a result, Nixon accepted a deal that would have been politically deadly to his predecessors: A Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) that codified Soviet superiority in Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) launchers, alongside an ABM Treaty that placed strict limits on national missile defense systems.

In tracing the peculiar path to SALT and the ABM Treaty—two of the most significant and enduring pillars of détente—the author demonstrates how divorced U.S. nuclear decision-making was from rational assessments of nuclear strategy. These policies were not the designs of the so-called Wizards of Armageddon as much as by the messy output of wrangling between Congress and the president, as well as competing constituencies within the Executive Branch itself. By focusing on these elements of policymaking, Cameron joins a long line of scholars who highlight the myriad ways in which U.S. nuclear policy departed from rational strategic dictates.³

The Double Game highlights this dynamic most starkly in its discussion of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. A central figure in both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, McNamara looms large in chapters one, two, and three—at times assuming more importance in Cameron's narrative than the presidents themselves. The consummate whiz kid, McNamara made it his mission to rationalize the Pentagon, particularly its unwieldy budgeting process. Yet, when it came to nuclear

³ For example, Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Military Technologies*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Cornell University Press, 1988); David Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," *International Security* Spring 1983, pp. 3-71.

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