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**Asa McKercher. "A Helpful Fixer in a Hard Place: Canadian Mediation in the U.S. Confrontation with Cuba."** *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17:3 (Summer 2015): 4-35. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS\\_a\\_00551](https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00551).

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Review by **Lana Wylie**, McMaster University

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**A**sa McKercher's article offers a comprehensive and welcomed addition to the literature on Canadian-U.S.-Cuban relations. As I have come to expect from McKercher's pieces, this is a strong and thoroughly researched exploration making extensive use of archival material and weaving together ideas that would be appreciated by a number of academic disciplines and avid Cuba watchers.

His article examines the idea that Canada has played the role of mediator in the U.S.-Cuban conflict. Although the author broadly examines over 50 years of policy, his main focus is on the Diefenbaker era. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker has often been credited with establishing an independent policy toward Cuba that eschewed U.S. pressure to isolate the island nation. McKercher challenges the contention that this prime minister as well other Canadian leaders adopted the helpful fixer role in the Cuba-U.S. relationship. He maintains that Canada's behaviour was "alliance-driven." (5) In fact he argues that Canada "spurned the role of helpful fixer" (34). To make this case, the author combs through archival sources and the secondary literature, highlighting the various factors at play, most interestingly, the inconsistencies among the key figures in Canadian foreign policy. His research reveals that Canada's Ambassador to Cuba, Allan Anderson, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, Howard Green, and the Prime Minister at times put forth very different interpretations of events and of Canada's role in U.S.-Cuban affairs. His analysis reveals that Green and Diefenbaker were often on different pages over Cuba. Although McKercher is clearly writing as an historian, these insights would be much appreciated by political scientists, especially those who study the domestic sources of foreign policy and the role of individuals in International Relations.

While this is a solid piece of scholarly research, McKercher overstates in places. For instance, he argues that "scholars who claim that Washington and Ottawa diverged in their positions on Cuba are mistaken. Canada and the United States were ultimately allies" (31). First, McKercher himself recognizes that the two states diverged at times over Cuba. In this article, he cites numerous instances of divergence such as Diefenbaker's refusal to join the U.S. embargo of Cuba (5) or Ottawa's belief in the legitimacy of the revolution, not to mention the divergence in both countries' response to and interpretation of the Cuban Missile Crisis.(30) Second, to state others are mistaken, by implying that the scholarship emphasizing these divergences also

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believes that Canada was willing to put their alliance with the U.S. at risk over Cuba, overstates the conclusions within the literature. However, McKercher is certainly bringing our attention to a problem within the literature, which sometimes exaggerates the degree of divergence between Canada and the United States over Cuba. Thus, I think his assertion that scholarship “overestimates Canadian support or affinity with Cuba” is more accurate (6).

I would also challenge his assertion that Canadian officials have seldom acted to bring the two sides together (32). What this article and other research demonstrate, is that numerous times Canada has offered to act as a mediator in this relationship. In this article the author quotes Joe Clark (former Canadian Prime Minister), Howard Green, Michael Wilson (Canada’s Ambassador to the United States), Marcel Cadieux, (Canada’s Under Secretary of State) and John Diefenbaker proposing or suggesting that Canada adopt a mediating role. And while there is disagreement over the extent of the role Ottawa played in bringing the two sides together in 2014, Canada certainly had a role. It is also clear that Canada, more so than any other state throughout this half-century dispute, has taken on this role. As such, the statement that Canada “spurned the role of helpful fixer” (34) also overstates. At times, yes, Canada did spurn this role, but while this is true or at least partially true (spurned is likely too strong a word even in 1960 when Canada rejected the proposal by Mexico to join Mexico and Brazil in an effort to mediate between Washington and Havana), at other times, Canada clearly wanted to take on the helpful fixer role.

Last, while the article presents solid research, it would be further strengthened in places by more evidence. For instance, the statement that Diefenbaker’s combative approach to Washington in 1962 had “more to do with his own psychological and political problems” (33) requires further support.

These critiques aside, McKercher’s article offers us other interesting insights into the study of Cuba’s relations with the West. It is worth mentioning that McKercher highlights a point not often raised in the literature (the work of Raúl Rodríguez aside)<sup>1</sup>. This is the depth of Cuba’s reading of Canada’s situation vis-à-vis the United States. As McKercher’s examples highlight, Cuba demonstrated a remarkable level of insight into the difficult and sensitive balancing act Canada had to perform with regard to its support of Cuba. He also shows how Cuban officials adjusted their expectations and reactions to accommodate Canada in this regard.

In short, McKercher’s thorough research and analysis presented in this article offer an important addition to the literature and will appeal to scholars and their students in numerous disciplines.

**Lana Wylie**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, McMaster University. Dr. Wylie has extensive research experience in Canadian and American foreign policy, Latin American and Caribbean politics with a concentration on Cuba, and international relations. She has published three books (two edited volumes and one monograph) related to Canadian foreign policy and/or Cuba. Her forthcoming edited

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<sup>1</sup> Raúl Rodríguez Rodríguez, “Canada and the Cuban revolution: Defining the rules of engagement 1959–1962” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 16:1 (March 2010): 63-80; Raúl Rodríguez Rodríguez, “Canada and Cuba: Historical Overview of the Political and Diplomatic Relations” in Luis René Fernández Tabío, Cynthia Wright, and Lana Wylie, eds., *Other Diplomacies, Other Ties: Cuba and Canada in the Shadow of the US* (University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

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volume (with Luis René Fernández Tabío, and Cynthia Wright) is *Other Diplomacies, Other Ties: Cuba and Canada in the Shadow of the US* (forthcoming with University of Toronto Press).

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