

An underappreciated Canadian

was the conscience of the 18-power disarmament conference, in quietly urging his colleagues to get things done. That he could not do more to assert the Canadian will was due in small measure at least to Canada's lack of expertise on matters military-strategic and technological. It was only on the eve of Burns's retirement in 1969 that this shortcoming in Canadian disarmament diplomacy was about to be rectified. As a soldier he was what his sternest critic said of him, "splendid" in leading Canadian troops in the smashing of the Gothic Line in Italy; as a peacekeeper he exhibited what the DEA expected of him: "toughness, impartiality and consummate tact" — the foundations of his reputation as an international civil servant.

Burns kept the peace between Arab and Israeli as best he could, in what he described as an always "most ticklish situation." Yet it could be that Burns will not be remembered best for his deeds. The military and the diplomatic circumstances in which he found himself, the duties with which he was charged as a Canadian or international public servant, were always beyond his control. He cannot be faulted for the failure of disarmament to materialize, much less for the inability of the UN to keep the peace in the Middle East. And, as General Crerar told Burns shortly after his dismissal from command in 1944, "the odds were stacked against you from the beginning." What Gibbon wrote of the Byzantine general Belisarius might also now be said of Burns: "His imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times; his virtues were his own."

Burns's overriding virtue was his integrity which, when coupled with his military experiences, his tenacity, his humanism and his intellect, impelled his writing. His always controversial thoughts on strategy and war, dating back to the 1920s, may prove to be his most lasting contribution to posterity. "General Mud" (as he referred to himself after Flanders and Italy) had been troubled by his battlefield experiences in Europe's wars of carnage. Total war in a technological era, a perverse manifestation of which was, for Burns, the strategic bombing of civilian targets by airmen, violated his sense of military professionalism. This he derived from the emphasis on the defence in British military tradition and from his training at the Royal Military College in Kingston, an engineering school once steeped in the militia ethic.

Defence by destruction no defence

Burns's sensibilities here were only heightened in the atomic era, with the development of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. The threat of assured destruction was for him potential "megamurder"; the subscription by professional soldiers to the precepts of nuclear deterrence meant "an abdication of their true function as protectors of the civil population" and a delivery of that population to "mass slaughter." As a military man Burns could only be dubious about the promised stability of a superpower "system" of mutual nuclear deterrence; and he was always equally skeptical of the strategic benefits of arms control as a promised regulator to that system. This he saw as a feint devised by the "Pentagon's academic hired men" to legiti-

mize its armaments. Burns wrote of the dangers of nuclear war; and he wrote as early as 1949 of the need for disarmament, as the only way to obviate these dangers. Yet Burns, profoundly disillusioned with the changing role of the professional soldier in the nuclear era, could never advocate unilateral disarmament either by Canada or its allies. Nor is it clear that he was truly convinced of the practicability of negotiated disarmament itself.

As a soldier with battlefield experience during the two world wars, and as the chief disarmament negotiator for a NATO country, Burns could not escape from a deep-seated concern for European security. *Megamurder*, and his memoranda to Ottawa in the 1960s, datelined Geneva, clearly reflected this concern as much as they did his fear of nuclear war. Yet he had rejected on both moral and strategic grounds the legitimacy of America's extended nuclear guarantee, through the deployment of tactical nuclear systems, as the basis for NATO Europe's security. Burns argued, partly in opposition to Canada's commitment to a nuclear role in the alliance, that the use of these weapons in any "limited" war in Europe would inevitably lead to an escalation of the conflict to the strategic threshold. Committed to the idea of Europe as a nuclear free zone, he was also occasionally attracted to the prospect of a demilitarized Europe under internationally-supervised police forces. Yet as a military man he was in the main justifiably skeptical about such a prospect, and rested his case against nuclear weapons in Europe on NATO's need to rely upon a strengthened conventional shield.

Conundrums still unsolved

Here, as was often the case, Burns was in the vanguard of Canadian strategic thinking. Doubts about the doctrine of limited nuclear war became a hallmark of serious Canadian thinking in alliance councils during the 1970s, but hitherto authorities in Ottawa and in alliance headquarters failed to take to mind Burns's advice about their need to "raise the nuclear threshold." It is suggestive that had they done so, NATO's nuclear dilemmas of the early 1980s might have been circumvented. Yet, as he recognized more clearly than most, innovations in the technology of precision-guided munitions had, by the early 1980s, rendered anachronistic Burns's hope of two decades ago that a rational defence policy for NATO Europe could be found.

When General Burns left government service in 1969 to take up a chair in strategic studies at Carleton University, an item on Canada's defence policy agenda was the Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) of North America through a "modernized" continental aerospace defence system. Paradoxically, Burns's final words as adviser to the government on disarmament were against BMD and Canadian participation therein, as he feared that a superpower competition in the field of strategic defence might well undermine the stability of mutual nuclear deterrence. Yet he recognized the moral and political imperatives underlying the idea of defences against the nuclear threat, and the likelihood that fearful adversaries would at some point pursue this will-o'-the-wisp. □