



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/LPMJ3817>

**‘Asa McKercher and Michael D. Stevenson, Building a Special Relationship: Canada-US Relations in the Eisenhower Era, 1953-61’**

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**To cite this book review:** Kim Nossal, ‘Asa McKercher and Michael D. Stevenson, Building a Special Relationship: Canada-US Relations in the Eisenhower Era, 1953-61’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 5 (September 2025): 164-165, <https://doi.org/10.52230/ISWI5529>

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Asa McKercher and Michael D. Stevenson, *Building a Special Relationship: Canada-US Relations in the Eisenhower Era, 1953-61* (UBC Press, 2024), 334pp. Paperback. C\$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-7748-7055-9.

This book made especially bittersweet reading in the winter of 2024–2025, when the president of the United States (US) set about destroying the relationship with Canada. Soon after his election in November 2024, Donald J. Trump began to openly and publicly slag Justin Trudeau, the Canadian prime minister; he questioned the ‘viability’ of Canada as a country; he declared that the boundary between the two countries consists of an ‘artificially-drawn line’ that should be erased; on numerous occasions he called for the elimination of Canada as a sovereign state via annexation; he accused Canada of treating the US ‘horribly’; and he imposed sweeping tariffs designed, in Trudeau’s view, to tank the Canadian economy in order to make it easier to annex Canada. Importantly, Trump and members of his administration persistently lied about Canada’s alleged complicity in the fentanyl crisis that has plagued so many American families. Despite all evidence that the amount of fentanyl coming into the US from Canada is minuscule, Trump, his vice-president, JD Vance, and other senior members of the administration pushed a conspiracy theory that claimed that the Canadian government was not working to keep fentanyl from crossing the border into the US; that Canada was controlled by Mexican cartels; and that Canadian law enforcement was purposely avoiding acting against fentanyl labs operating in Canada. It was a Nazi-style ‘Big Lie’, consistently repeated, designed to convince ordinary Americans that Canada is no friend of the US, and should be punished. Well might Mark Carney, who took over as prime minister from Trudeau after winning the Liberal leadership, admit ruefully at the end of March 2025 that ‘The old relationship we had with the United States, based on deepening integration of our economies and tight security and military cooperation, is over.’

What a difference seventy years makes. The portrait of the Canada-US relationship in the 1950s drawn by Asa McKercher and Michael D. Stevenson, two talented historians of Canadian diplomacy, looks nothing like the animus-filled relationship of the mid-2020s. Rather, their history of the relationship stresses the crucial importance of friendship as the two governments sought, as the title suggests, to build a special relationship as the US was finding its place as the dominant power after the Second World War. Both governments were eager to ensure that local cross-border concerns and broader global geopolitical issues were managed despite the huge difference in power between the two countries.

McKercher and Stevenson note that this period in Canada-US relations has not been well covered by historians. Much of the literature has concentrated on ‘the shaping of peace’ in the 1940s and early 1950s and then has jumped to the tense relationship between Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker and President John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s. This book fills the gap admirably, providing a comprehensive examination of all the key issues in an increasingly complex relationship during this period. It should be added that their considerable archival research is complemented by their very keen eye for compelling stories and memorable quotations.

McKercher and Stevenson do not mention Kal Holsti, who argued in the early 1970s that the Canadian-American relationship was special because the two sides had, over the course of the twentieth century, developed a mutually-agreed culture of diplomacy for the management of conflicts that would inevitably arise between several hundred million people in two sovereign states sharing a continent and an 8900-km border. In Holsti's view, what made the relationship special was that Canadians and Americans had agreed that conflicts were 'problems to be solved' rather than 'confrontations to be won at all costs.'

Thus, this book on the special relationship is not a platitudinous paean to interstate happy times. On the contrary: it recounts numerous conflicts between the two governments during this era over a range of issues, large and small. It makes clear that officials were often annoyed — and sometimes angered — by what the other side did or said. But what comes through clearly is that officials, both bureaucratic and elected, on both sides were committed to resolving conflict civilly and with an eye to the long game.

Indeed, it is a story that is evident in other eras in the Canada-US relationship: Greg Donaghy's *Tolerant Allies*, about the relationship in the 1960s, or Allan Gotlieb's *I'll Be With You in a Minute, Mr Ambassador*, his mini-memoir of his time as Canada's envoy to Washington in the 1980s, have similar resonances in how quarrels in those eras were dealt with by the two governments.

*Building the Special Relationship* was released five months before the 2024 election, and thus it is not at all surprising that McKercher and Stevenson would conclude that 'the cooperative bilateral ties' that the Eisenhower administration and the governments of Louis St. Laurent and John G. Diefenbaker worked so hard 'to cement' would 'endure to this day' (p. 6). To be sure, the relationship they built did endure — for many decades — but like all relationships built on trust, it had a basic fragility. In the event, it did not take the Trump administration very long to fundamentally undo so much of the work that officials on both sides of the line during the Eisenhower era — and all subsequent eras — did to build and maintain that relationship. At least we will have this excellent history as a reminder of what international relations in North America used to be like.

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