David Malone on Andrew Cohen:
“Cohen is highly critical of the government’s foreign policy statement of 1995, ‘Canada in the World.’ Although I was its principal author, I agree with most of his points ... The statement was hopeful but not particularly honest.”

Modris Eksteins on Lesley Krueger’s new novel:
“How things have changed. History as explanation is a notion that belongs to a bygone age of empire. In the academy today history is at most suggestion, usually of what is not, rather than what is.”

Tom Axworthy on David Frum:
“The character, capacity and commands of the 43rd President of the United States are now critically important to the future of all of us. Frum has written a brief for the defence, but it is a shrewd, insightful and even engaging work that illuminates a president who continues to be underestimated.”

Anthony Westell on Michael Adams:
“The percentage of Americans agreeing that ‘a widely advertised product is probably good’ rose from 32 percent in 1992 to 44 in 2000. Less materialistic, more skeptical Canadians stayed firmly at 17 percent.”

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Drawings throughout the issue by Ward Scott.

Ward Scott is a New Brunswick illustrator who has published in The Prairie Journal, Books in Canada and the Mystery Review.
I enjoyed While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World very much, and had not expected to. Most volumes on Canadian foreign policy are both ahistorical and deadly dull.¹ (The worst of all tend to be diplomatic memoirs, with Charles Ritchie’s a happy but rare exception.) While not particularly scholarly in tone or methodology (considering that he is now ensconced at Carleton University), Andrew Cohen has clearly done a lot of homework, speaking to many knowledgeable insiders, former insiders and decided outsiders of the political, civil service, academic and think-tank worlds. Most importantly among many other virtues, the book is fluently written, and the text benefits from a strong point of view and commendable narrative drive. Cohen further offers stimulating judgements and sound policy recommendations.

In brief, it is a very good read and a clear stimulus to some reflections of my own on Canada’s conduct of foreign policy since World War II. I have known many of the individuals discussed or quoted by Cohen at one time or another in the past. My father, once an international correspondent, was among the cohort of new foreign service recruits brought in to staff the rapidly expanding Canadian diplomatic missions abroad during World War II. He worked for the three leaders of the Canadian diplomatic “golden age” that Cohen documents, Lester B. Pearson, Norman Robertson and Hume Wrong. I have personal memories of the first two. I joined the Department of External Affairs in 1975, and have been a foreign service officer ever since, currently on leave working in the research and international non-governmental organization sectors in New York. Much of this volume’s terrain is thus familiar. I qualified initially at the narrative hook Cohen provided to the early years of Canadian foreign policy formulation, that is, the careers of Pearson, Robertson andWrong, since these men were, in all but matters of class and education, a study in contrasts. I have always disliked nostalgia about the purported golden age of Canadian diplomacy because it is often divorced from its time and from the unique circumstances of Canada’s emergence from colonial status and short-lived prominence as a belligerent untouched by the Second World War on its own soil. However, Cohen does a good job on the pre-history of today’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. And Pearson, Robertson and Wrong prove good company. All three served in Canada’s highest diplomatic positions in the 1940s and 1950s, with Pearson moving on to the political plane, first as Secretary of State for External Affairs and then as Prime Minister (in which position he failed to muster an echo of his earlier, remarkable achievements in the construction of the post-war multilateral architecture and approaches, which are still recognizable at the United Nations).

The book’s title reveals Cohen’s central thesis: Canada’s place in world affairs, once great, has been lost. He sees the rot as having set in under the Trudeau government, as early as 1968, and as

David M. Malone, a former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, is President of the International Peace Academy in New York.
having intensified ever since. He dislikes the emphasis on Canadian economic interests that has characterized foreign policy since the mid-1970s, and hankers for a return of priority to the projection of Canadian values internationally. He is highly critical of the decline of Canada’s foreign policy instruments as the centrepiece of his emphasis on international economic relations in Daffie and the Prime Minister’s Office in recent years, he fails to note that other countries were engaged on a similar track. Indeed, the emergence of the G7 forum in the mid-1970s, an outgrowth of the wrenching economic shocks of the early 1970s, responded to widespread worries in major capitals about international economic management. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of Germany and French president Valéry Girard d’Estaing, having earlier worked closely together as their countries’ respective finance ministers, convened leaders of the world’s major democratic economies (without Canada) in 1975 at Rambouillet to pick up where they had left off in their earlier portfolios. Given a public crise de nerfs by the Italian government over Rome’s exclusion from the forum, Italy was invited at the last moment, and that gave U.S. president Gerald Ford an opening to include Canada at the next such meeting in 1976 in Puerto Rico.

International economic policy coordination (cooperation, depending on national preferences) was the big issue of that period, and Canada’s role. As Cohen points out, Trudeau and his talented foreign policy advisor Ivan Head crafted a niche for Canada as an advocate for the developing world within the G7. Canada came to have the lead (with France) on north-south relations in the early years of this summityt, until Ronald Thatchertism put a paid to negotiations over a “new international economic order” in 1981. The failure of Trudeau’s “third option”—intended to diversify Canada’s economic and political relationships—to elicit any interest in a Europe bent introspectively on unification, made the protection of Canada’s trade access to the U.S. even more of a priority, explaining in part the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and North American Free Trade Agreement, pulled off by Brian Mulroney in the absence of his conduct of Canada’s international relations. Controversial at the time, and still disliked by many, these trade pacts are seen today as critical foundations for Canadian prosperity, perhaps faute de mieux. Their negotiation recalls the salience of a highly skilled school of Canadian public servant, our international trade negotiators, of whom Simon Reisman was the most famous example.

Cohen only deals with the FTA of 1989 in one brief paragraph, although he does recognize it as a “watershed [that] confirmed the trend towards bilateralism and continentalism that had been building for half a century.” Equally downplayed (although mentioned in passing) is the extent to which the G7, which other countries, including the U.S., sought to cash in on a post–Cold War peace dividend by running down their military, aid and diplomatic programs and capacities during the 1990s. Thus, developments in Canada correspond much more to prevailing international trends than Cohen allows and this sometimes skews his analysis.

Cohen is, however, right to focus on the emergence of the 1990s as central, with the re-emergence of the U.S.-Canada relationship, of which Simon Reisman’s stewardship was a major instrument. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S., and the emerging political leadership of the country, advanced its foreign policy agenda with a renewed vision of the U.S.-Canada relationship and the importance of the two countries to one another. This meant that there was a significant degree of leadership and coordination, in both the political and the bureaucratic spheres, on important issues of mutual concern.

From this perspective, Cohen’s critique of Canadian foreign policy since the 1990s is largely accurate. He is correct in pointing out that the decline of Canada’s military capacity for participation has not been addressed in a meaningful way. The aging of Canada’s military equipment, while depressing, is hardly unique: the vaunted flagship of the French navy, the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, seems to break down even more often than do our own vessels and the helicopters they sometimes carry. But the erosion of the military’s human capital will be harder to reverse, however committed and talented individual officers and enlisted personnel may continue to be. And expertise on security policy in Ottawa will need to be developed again and rewarded in years ahead. Security policy (and our defence and foreign policy instruments) will need to be reoriented from the U.S. and Canada’s continental interests to the actual threats of the early 21st century. The aging of Canada’s military equipment, while depressing, is hardly unique: the vaunted flagship of the French navy, the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, seems to break down even more often than do our own vessels and the helicopters they sometimes carry. But the erosion of the military’s human capital will be harder to reverse, however committed and talented individual officers and enlisted personnel may continue to be. And expertise on security policy in Ottawa will need to be developed again and rewarded in years ahead. Security policy (and our defence and foreign policy instruments) will need to be reoriented from the U.S. and Canada’s continental interests to the actual threats of the early 21st century.

Cohen does discuss at length the degraded state of Canada’s diplomatic instrument as he sees it. Up to a point, I can only agree. (The public service as a whole has experienced several grim decades, but the decline of DFAIT must rank as sharper and more visible than that of other ministries.) His analysis of the causes of rising dissatisfaction (culminating last year in unprecedented picketing of the Pearson building in Ottawa—which houses DFAIT) is accurate. A combination of poor pay, pallid career prospects and a dearth of overseas assignment opportunities, plus the growing contempt of the rest of the public service, particularly its “centre” (essentially...
Cohen sees the rot as having set in under the Trudeau government, as early as 1968, and as having intensified ever since.

Cohen argues that Pearson, Robertson and Wrong are an extinct breed. As he rightly notes, this is not a bad thing in all respects: being men of their time, they did little for women, Jews, gays and other non-white establishment males during their public careers. Indeed, they ostracized some of these groups. (DFAIT today is increasingly diverse, which pleases me. Some recent encounters was a meeting with a remarkably ethnically mixed group of young officers.) It would also be impossible for any single officer in DFAIT today to play the role these three did 50 years ago, because the size of the department and the substantive scope of Canadian international relations preclude any public servant from the degree of personal dominance achieved in earlier decades by men such as them. I, for one, miss them in the early years used to work directly for the prime minister, who doubled as secretary of state for external affairs.) Even very strong recent deputy ministers (the new designation of the old under-secreteries) such as Allan Gotlieb and Gordon Smith could never hope to stamp their personalities and views on DFAIT as Robertson did in the 1940s.

In fact, Canada’s foreign service continues to attract stellar performers often endowed with strong personalities. Let me name four who are currently making a real difference: Paul Heinbecker, Canada’s Ambassador to the United Nations, currently much in the news for quarter-backing a courageous Canadian initiative on Iraq; his predecessor, Robert Fowler, who achieved significant influence in the UN Security Council during Canada’s activist term 1999–2000 and then served as the Prime Minister’s chief aide for Kanansakis, and still serves as Canada’s ambassador to Italy; Jeremy Kinsman, currently Canadian ambassador to the European Union in Brussels and formerly head of the Canadian mission to the EU in London; and Marie Bernard-Meunier, our ambassador in Germany. Each of these individuals has generated or shaped significant new policies in Ottawa (Heinbecker on security; Fowler on security, Africa and much else; Kinsman on domestic Canadian communications and cultural policy; Bernard-Meunier in the emerging field of global issues, on which Canada did so well in spite of the 1990s budget cutting). From their acres abroad, they now work hard to galvanize policy initiatives out of Ottawa that will reflect credit on the country, sometimes clashing with each other (strong egos seemingly a luxury to some). At working level, while frustrations abound, so do unparalleled career opportunities. During my formative years, I worked for policy entrepreneurs such as Sylvia Ostry and Derek Burney (now with CAE Inc.), first-class international operators such as former UN Ambassador Yves Fortier, UN Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette and the International Criminal Court’s newly elected presiding judge, Philippe Kirsch. Cohen recognizes continuity in quality of staff, but nostalgically regrets the outsized roles of earlier times. Not much can be done to bring those back!

Cohen seems attracted to the idea of the foreign service as a closed shop, an old school, with successful negotiation of the fabled foreign service exam serving as its ordination. Outside appointments are to be discouraged, the answer to staffing shortfalls being the hiring of more career foreign service officers.5 Perhaps, but times are changing. For one thing, top young internationally competitive professionals today, by and large do not come out of a single career, preferring two- to three-year stints offering new challenges and the prospects of more rapid promotion. (This is certainly the case of those with whom I work in New York.) “Have laptop, will travel” might well be their motto. This ethos, combined with the demands of two-career families, may not be compatible any longer with the sometimes rigid (albeit increasingly flexible) career patterns of earlier days.

The foreign service has been cursed by its self-conception as a superior band of internationalists amidst the heathen of the broader public service. It sometimes exhibits an attitude both of victimhood (unloved, underpaid, etc.) and of self-regard and entitlement (they’re “met the entrance requirement and paid their dues” in Cohen’s words). It is a most unattractive combination. Foreign service officers have tended to struggle unreflectively to keep the great unwashed out of those positions. But why? Are we really so special? The much-vaulted but unreliable foreign service exam historically has served to admit not only deserving candidates but also professional and personal misfits, while keeping out some stellar candidates.

The Global Issues Bureau was one of DFAIT’s most dynamic units in the late 1990s. When Bernard-Meunier was asked by Gordon Smith to set it up, few foreign service officers were available. Nor was there need for those duties, and fewer still wanted to take a risk on an untried field of foreign policy endeavours. By default, Bernard-Meunier had to hire competent staff where she could find them: elsewhere in government, in the academic world and among NGOs. A few foreign service officers provided a safety net of diplomatic experience to guide the enthusiasm, street smarts and sheer talent of this happy band. Did they take note of what outsiders could achieve within DFAIT? Not noticeably. Last time I asked, many were still fighting a rear-guard action against “lateral entry” by non-service officers, seemingly imperious to the implications of their own protectionism. We need not fear competition. We should welcome it and the rich array of relevant talent and experience that lies beyond Fort Pearson.

One irony, nevertheless, remains: foreign service types are generally held in Ottawa to be aloof, self-important, dim on domestic priorities and policies, and generally bad at the “Ottawa game.” In an era of budget cutting, management challenges and obsession with process as opposed to policy (which could not be afforded), the Ottawa community in the 1990s seemed to become even more alienated than usual from the broader Canadian scene, succumbing throughout the public service to the isolation it attributes to DFAIT.

DFAIT’s myopic and episodic relationship with leading Canadian universities and academic stands at odds with the strong university backgrounds and enduring links of the ministers-at-titans at the Department of External Affairs. DFAIT’s remove from academic stimulation, relieved only by the presence of the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs at Carleton (now run by the admirable Fen Osler Hampson), is a puzzle. Efforts to engage meaningfully with the academic world have been launched by several recent ministers, including Lloyd Axworthy and Bill Graham, both serious scholars themselves. But they rarely gel. Washington, with its lively think-tanks and first-rate universities, is a very different story. Perhaps the next prime minister will champion a venture jointly funded by government, the private sector and leading Canadian philanthropic organizations, to engage research and reflection on foreign policy writing.

From Cohen, we learn that only 40 percent of foreign service officers at any given time serve Canada’s embassy in Switzerland might extend to C$240,000 as opposed to the perhaps C$75,000 a Canadian diplomat would earn in a similar slot, the expense of deploying and housing that Canadian employee and his or her family abroad can greatly exceed the cost of even an expensive local hire. Thus, increasingly, individuals who had joined government in order to serve their country abroad find themselves confined to Ottawa and urged to play the Ottawa game. Cohen seems bothered by the notion of large numbers of local hires working within the Canadian foreign service. This does not trouble me: they are mostly topflight and highly dedicated. Rather, what perplexes me is the proportion of our Canadian personnel assigned to Ottawa. The grotesque concentration of DFAIT staff in Ottawa will be reversed only once it is recognized as a distortion of how a modern foreign service can and should run.

Where DFAIT is best used is in providing the centre, including the prime minister, with broad options for the orientation of Canada’s international relations and the means to implement these abroad. Does the UK Prime Minister, for instance, who has at his disposal probably the best foreign service today, require of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that it “play the London game”? The idea is ludicrous. He looks to British diplomats to promote UK interests aggressively abroad while supporting policy development at Number Ten as it relates to foreign spheres. Thus, DFAIT resources would appear to be seriously misallocated, feeding the morale problems Cohen describes so well.6

Cohen is highly critical of the government’s foreign policy statement of 1995, Canada in the World. Although I was its principal author, I agree with most of his points (except on the importance of economic and trade diplomacy for...
Canada in the World was pitched at a high level of generality ... Complaints abounded about the absence of specific priorities and ideas on what might be curtailed or eliminated. A Canadian government reluctance to do less of anything internationally led to bland assurances that more would be done with less. In this sense, the statement was hopeful but not particularly honest.

Successive Canadian governments have found it difficult (in some cases, unwise) to make public choices relating to priorities among and within regions of the world. Such temporizing can prove overblown claims for the outcome—an abdication of hard choices and responsibility rather than a spur to meaningful action? My opposite number in Britain at the time, David Manning, on hearing about our elaborate foreign policy review process, commented dryly: "We don't review foreign policy, we do it." 

Canada’s problem has been, as Cohen so cogently argues, that it has engaged in wishful thinking (and acting) on foreign policy for some years now. While wishing to save money, for reasons of which I—as a very worried taxpayer in the early 1990s—approved mightily, the government lullled itself into believing that Canada could continue to matter internationally while its foreign policy instruments eroded and while the country’s weight relative to others declined, particularly emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil. Our approach was to “be there,” hosting summits, turning up in massive Team Canada trade promotion exercises that puzzled our hosts and rapidly outlived their potential, and relying on our many club memberships.

My sense is that things may be about to change. Within the higher reaches of the public service an effort is under way to rethink foreign policy and the integration of its various instruments (diplomatic, aid, military and financial) should be high on the list of his or her policy challenges. If so, much will be owed to Andrew Cohen for this passionate, informative, entertaining and mostly convincing volume. I myself am greatly in his debt.

Notes
1 History matters tremendously in international relations. In Canada, as in the U.S., the study of history has been short-changed for many years at the high school level. Canadian history has been taught, but largely devoid of broader context, as though Canada was shaping the world rather than (mostly) the other way around. Our curriculum need to be rethought.
2 “Ronald Thatchersmism” was the expression coined by Canadian economist Sylvie Dey to describe the ideological shock that the alliance of UK prime minister Margaret Thatchers and U.S. president Ronald Reagan administered to the international system following the latter’s election.
3 Funding of the World Bank and other Department of Finance international priorities is often drawn from CIDA’s envelope, further restricting the latter’s freedom to manoeuvre.
5 One of the high points of my career was working at the UN for non-career Ambassador Yves Fortier, a superb negotiator and master of the big picture. When appointees from the outside, whether politicians or not, are endowed with the requisite skills, they perform at least as well as the professionals. It is the hacks, appointed solely for reasons of political convenience, who rightly raise hackles.
6 Cohen points to Norway’s success in diplomacy, contrasting it to Canada’s less entrepreneurial approach. He is right about Norway’s success, but it is owed first of all to awesomeness to make choices and accept a “niche diplomacy” role (mainly in international mediation) and second to large sums of “walking around money” available to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reputedly up to US$250 million a year. DFAT does not dispose of 10 percent of this sum for discretionary diplomatic initiatives.
7 Manning, today Blair’s principal foreign policy advisor, was recently appointed UK ambassador to the United States.