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Interview with Marshal of the R.A.F.

Sir Dermot Boyle

by Alfred Goldberg

October 17, 1962

Q. To what extent did the experience of World War II influence the strategic thinking of the British military services after the war?

A. The war left us in no doubt that the future of the world depended on the U. S. and ourselves remaining in the closest possible touch and sympathy. This was not because we considered ourselves so important in the scheme of things, but because we considered ourselves a stepping stone to Europe and the Commonwealth. Throughout the war we had worked closely with the Americans and we knew that it must continue.

Q. What was the attitude of the individual services towards the strategic bombardment experience of World War II?

A. The arrival of the nuclear bomb makes an analysis of strategic bombing of no significance except for historical purposes. It doesn't seem important or relevant now. In my experience, the deterrent concept has dominated strategic thinking since the war. It was, of course, completely accepted by our air staffs and by the three chiefs of staff at the time it was adopted as policy. There were differences of opinion among the services over proportions. The Army and Navy felt that if too much was spent on the deterrent force they would not have the necessary resources for conventional weapons. Consequently, along with the Treasury, they questioned the amounts required for the deterrent force.

But the R.A.F. has been spending an average of only about ten percent of the defence budget for the deterrent force. To this should be added about three and one-half percent for defence of the deterrent force. The rest of the defence budget goes for conventional forces. What do we need these conventional forces for: --To deal with brush fire operations throughout the commonwealth and colonies and in places like Cyprus, Malaya, Aden, Kuwait. I quite agree that we need such forces for these purposes.

The Army and Navy agreed that the deterrence concept was O.K. as long as the West was dominant. But queried what happened when the East acquired the same threat as the West as happened six or seven years ago, and we began to get a balance of deterrent forces. The true deterrent remains the same, but it becomes impartial. The deterrent is just as valid when both sides have equal power to do damage to each other. We must of course maintain the power to retaliate after an attack, for the deterrent remains valid only if it remains effective after having absorbed an attack. As a result there never will be a nuclear war. Rather than try to establish a civil defence organization, I would have a clear understanding with the enemy regarding the consequences for him of an attack on us. It is a healthy state of affairs when both sides know that the penalty for an attack is simply unacceptable. We have to keep on talking. War is no longer available to the politicians as a means for the advancement of policy. All of the evidence shows that this is fully hoisted in by governing circles.

There has been enough provocation during crises of recent years --Berlin and Cuba, for instance-- to have started war ten times over on the old basis --the prewar sor of thing. But both sides or one side or the other have had to withdraw or draw back because tensions had to be eased in order to avoid going over the brink. Khrushev is as fully aware of this as we are and his actions show it.

Q. How did the atomic bomb influence British strategic thinking after World War II?

A. The first two bombs were cloaked in a bit of secrecy and it took time for it to dawn on the public what an appalling weapon the bomb was. The military and the scientists understood because they had access to information. Now everyone know the appalling effects of the weapon. This is extremely important -- that the maximum number of people in the world should understand the effects of the weapon. The bomb is actually running counter to the old historical principle that the defense eventually catches up with the offense in military technology. No defensive weapon against the bomb has been found. Its power is so devastating that it is the counter to its own use. We must keep the deterrent umbrella and try to get together beneath it. The Army and Navy, in the years after the war, did not seek to find a role for themselves in the use of nuclear weapons.

Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the creation of the Ministry of Defence? Has the Ministry tended to exercise a strong influence on the military considerations of the Chiefs of Staff?

A. The natural reaction was against it because it downgraded the three services. We have been determined to make it work, for once a

thing is decided on we accept it. Looked at objectively, however, it is just another clumsy cog in the wheel. I may be a bit heretical in this, but you get so many people who can say No and so few who can say Yes. It stops you from doing the right thing quickly enough. You wait months or years for a decision and when it comes it is too late.

Within the Air Force we avoid narrow mindedness by moving our people around. We don't let them stay in one command too long.

I was not in favor of Thor, for instance, because of strategic reasons --it was a first strike weapon. But it provided a magnificent introduction to ballistic missiles for the R.A.F.

The Ministry of Defence has not exercised a strong influence on the Chiefs of Staff and it has not bulldozed them. The Ministry of Defence is trying to build up a staff that will be concerned with internal operations of the military services. It is going for unified commands also. In my day we were against them, but they are an almost essential sequel to the formation of the Ministry. The authority of the Chiefs of Staff is declining. In general, more people are getting into the act and this has slowed down everything. Everything is questioned and the military services have had to increase their staffs simply to answer questions. There was a general reluctance on my part to agree to the formation of another amorphous mass that would just slow things down. The American experience was used as an argument in favour of a Defence Ministry.

Q. Have the British military services in the years since World War II generally been able to agree on a single strategic concept to guide their planning and programming?

A. Yes, they have agreed on deterrence and that dictates almost all of the rest. In agreeing in principle, the Army and Navy did not realize fully what they were doing. We would not I believe get agreement on deterrence now if we were starting from scratch. The Army and Navy have been wriggling about it for some time. In my opinion the deterrence policy is the only one that makes sense in the present state of the world. I feel that I am much more impartial about this now than I was earlier. The Army and Navy say we must have more conventional forces, but large scale conventional warfare would lead to the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Governments would fear the use of tactical nuclear weapons since once we use any nuclear weapons, there will be no stopping. Conventional forces for limited war are all right, but not for major continental war. We must maintain adequate forces to maintain our NATO commitments and to meet our other "brush fire" requirements.

Q. What were the basic British reasons for developing and maintaining a nuclear deterrent force?

A. In general terms, unless we were in on that, we would no be "in" on the modern military scene at all. We had the idea of the atomic bomb in the first instance and handed it over to you. We realized that a new weapon had come into the world. So we developed it and were I believe absolutely right to do so.

Q. To what extent have the services been influenced by financial considerations in their strategic planning and thinking, as distinguished from their programming, since World War II?

A. I wouldn't have thought very much. The idea of the deterrent force and a certain amount of conventional weapons is the only program you can consider in the light of the financial support one is likely to get in peacetime. It is increasingly obvious that it is out of the question for us to fight a major war without allies. Everything is affected by money considerations. The fact that money is limited has had a purging effect on us -- made us more objective in our thinking. To have any other strategic program than our present one would simply involve doubling or trebling our conventional forces. This is out of the question and in my view would gain us nothing.

Q. What effect did Suez have on the policy announced in the White Paper of April 4, 1957 on Defence?

A. I think none at all. One may argue that after Suez we realized we could not fight an independent war but if this was so the restriction was based much more on political than military grounds. We would have had no difficulty militarily in bringing the Suez operations to a successful conclusion --the political problem was the difficulty. The Chief thought that influenced the White Paper was that Duncan Sandys understandably wanted to save money and he thought that this could best be done by supporting a deterrent policy and substituting missiles for aircraft. This justified the maintenance of smaller conventional forces. Mr. Sandys would not listen to argument in favour of aircraft and the scientists were with him. They thought that the missile was the modern way of

doing what the airplane had done in the past. But the missile is really an adjunct to the airplane. The airplane is flexible while the missile is not. Once you launch the missile, it is gone. They used the quick reaction time argument for the Blue Streak and then they had to go to hardening, and finally had to abandon the whole project because it became enormously expensive and indeed remained a just class project and therefore of no deterrent value.

Q. Has the nuclear arms problem played a role in frustrating development of a powerful NATO military capability?

A. I think so, but if you had not had nuclear weapons you would have had a war. The Russians would have walked to the beach.

Q. Has it been desirable for the United Kingdom to maintain an independent nuclear force?

A. Yes. I don't reckon England has gotten so low in the world scale yet that she does not have a significant role to play. To throw away the independent nuclear deterrent would be lunacy. It would not be in our nor in your interest for the United States to carry the whole burden. We should have a share in the decisions and the responsibility. The United Kingdom deterrent force can be much less than that of the United States and still be credible. An argument against an independent deterrent force is that we are in this with you and under what circumstances could we go to war with Russia without involving you? Still another argument against is that Russia would never dare to attack because the United States stands behind us. I don't agree with this because I can conceive a situation where we might get attacked without the United States being involved. I do not think that the United States would come

to our assistance if we had gone off on our own. If we were wiped out under such circumstances you would say: too bad for the poor old British. The argument in favor is the prestige value. Why do you talk to us? France knows more about Europe than we do. You are talking to France more now that it is getting atomic weapons. The same thing was true with us in the R.A.F. You did not pay much attention to us in the years right after the war, but you paid much more attention to us when we began to get the V-bomber force operational. This is a human trait.

Q. Is it desirable and feasible for the European Community to develop an integrated nuclear deterrent force? Is it desirable, from the military viewpoint, for the United Kingdom to help create this force and be a part of it?

A. I think it is undesirable because it is not feasible. Can you imagine the deliberations that would precede the decision to retaliate. The Russians would see to it that the deliberations were never completed. For Europe and the United States to have to agree before the weapons could be used would be weakness. Powers that have nuclear forces will be reluctant to see our lives complicated by other powers acquiring such forces, but there is nothing we can do to stop it that I can see. It would take a different kind of world. This nuclear situation is the best that we can hope for many years to come. Peace through fear of retaliation.

Q. Can the United Kingdom pay the price of maintaining an independent nuclear deterrent force?

A. For the Skybolt era we can. By 1966 the proportion of the defence budget devoted to the nuclear deterrent will I believe be down to

nearer 5% than 10% of the Defence vote. It remains credible, too. This is not an arms race. If, to keep it valid, you have to engage in tremendously difficult technological research and development, it could become expensive. I cannot see a situation in which an airborne deterrent would not be valid. I doubt if the cost would go much above 6% even if we had to keep a part of our force in the air. Under normal circumstances we would not have to maintain a maximum airborne alert with the American deterrent behind us. We would have to be able to keep the force airborne for long periods if necessary. I doubt if the Russians would swap Moscow for England and that is what it would boil down to. We don't need a big deterrent force I believe if it has to be kept airborne the whole year round which is unrealistic. As for other types of deterrent forces --the capital investment for Polaris is higher, but the daily running cost is higher for the airborne force. France and Germany can use these same arguments to justify their creation of deterrent forces except that they don't have them yet. To throw it away now and simply make a contribution of forces to NATO would be lunacy for us. It would downgrade us. It would then be all U. S. We need the independent deterrent for prestige but for more positive reasons as well.

Q. Is it desirable to build up and maintain larger conventional war forces than the U. S. and NATO have maintained heretofore? Should more emphasis be placed on tactical air even at the expense of the nuclear strategic deterrent?

A. I am against such a buildup because it gives a hint to the enemy that we are prepared to fight a largescale war with conventional weapons. We should not do this. If it happens, the first conventional weapon we would need would be for air defence of this country.