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Interview with Marshal of the R.A.F.

Jun 21, 2017

Sir William Dickson

by Alfred Goldberg

November 12, 1962

- Q. To what extent did the experience of World War II, especially strategic bombardment, shape the strategic thinking of the British military services after World War II?
- A. The development of long range strategic bombing power in the war and the existence of our Bomber Command provided the basis of our post-war strategy. Broadly the pillars of this strategy were the defence of this country, protection of our interests overseas and the support of the Commonwealth. We therefore retained Bomber Command in being. It provided offensive power for defence in the West and our many bases overseas, and our large Transport Command gave it the ability and flexibility to give strategic support to our garrisons abroad and support to the Commonwealth when needed. We were gradually reducing our overseas garrisons and that made it all the more important to work on a strategic policy of reinforcement. Stalin's message to Roosevelt before the end of the war had indicated very early the new threat we had to face. So we worked to keep Bomber Command in being and to modernize it. We aimed to produce our own atomic weapons and we developed the three V-bombers. Strategic thinking always ends up in hardware. So one may say that our postwar strategy

was a continuation of World War II strategy adapted to meet the new threat. It was our interests worldwide which were threatened. You had engaged in almost wholesale disarmament and we were left to contain the Communist perimeter around the world and to hold strategic bombing as a counter threat to any further communist advances in Europe.

Q. What was the influence of the atomic bomb on British strategic thinking after World War II ?

A. We were determined to have our own atomic weapons.

We began to turn Bomber Command into a small but nevertheless powerful force with a dual atomic and conventional bomb capability, the latter for use in small wars. We kept it a very close secret how many atomic weapons we had, so that our atomic potential could act as a deterrent from the start of the announcement that we had the bomb. The bomb affected our planning of aircraft, equipment, storage, dispersal, etc. Churchill kept on working on the U.S. President to give us information that would help us increase our nuclear striking power. Bomber Command's acquisition of the nuclear weapon added to the deterrent value of Bomber Command overseas as well as in Europe. As I have said we thought in terms of the deterrent concept immediately after the war, and our development of our own atomic weapons was a logical development of this concept.

Q. In the years since World War II have the British military services generally had a single strategic concept to guide their planning and programming? What have been the chief differences among them in strategic thinking?

A. The Chiefs of Staff wrote many strategic appreciations -- concepts you call them in Washington-- after the war. The same basic principles which I have already mentioned governed all of them. They were of course adjusted each year in particulars to meet changes in our commitments, and the resources allocated to Defence. Each year re-appraisal follows much the same pattern. The Treasury fire the first gun by advising the Ministry of Defence that it will be necessary for Defence to suffer a cut of so many millions. The Ministry of Defence with the C.O.S., the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office in consultation then examine how much money can be saved without serious harm to our interests and commitments. Exchanges go on until the Defence Committee finally decides on the defence budget for the following year. Our strategy has remained broadly the same. We have adapted it to meet reductions in money and manpower and alterations in our commitments. The White Paper ^{of 1957} has been called a radical change in policy. I do not agree. It highlighted the effect new weapons were having and there were changes in emphasis here and there. The

1957 paper drew attention to the new importance of missiles in addition to the other elements of our strategic posture. White Papers on Defence are necessary for the information of Parliament, but we have to remember that they are presented by Ministers who naturally wish to make them appear as original and farsighted as possible. But actually defence policy can only evolve slowly and can only be judged over a period of years. One of the main adaptations of British strategy postwar was brought about by our membership in NATO, SEATO, and CENTO. The development of Soviet and Chinese power put an end to an independent strategic policy for any nation of the west - even for the United States. Ours of course followed suit. We had to shape up our defence forces to meet our commitments to these alliances as well as to defend purely British interests overseas. The postwar strategy remained much the same except that its implementation was now shared with our Allies.

Q. What were the basic motivations for the creation of a British nuclear deterrent force? Is there a valid reason for the continued maintenance of this force by the United Kingdom?

A. I think I have already answered the first part of your question. Air power provided the offensive potential and from that followed the policy of the deterrent. There was a continuity of postwar strategic thinking that considered airpower one of the vital elements. Our first postwar Government laid the basis of this policy. They took many of the vital decisions. The decision to develop British atomic weapons and the decisions which gave effect to our strategy. Also the setting up of USAF bases in this country after the Berlin crisis. It was a bold political decision by Atlee's Government to permit the Americans to base an atomic force in England. The Churchill administration of 1951 carried on this policy with characteristic drive.

It is only in the recent past that criticism has been voiced against the U.K. nuclear deterrent. I am not speaking of the CND people - I mean criticism in Parliament. It stems from political motives and evaluation of the cost. Bomber Command's target plan and operational plans are very closely co-ordinated with those of the USAF. People like LeMay

and Power have recorded that although the British deterrent force is small it is efficient and that because of its geographical location it adds a tactical value to the combined US/UK plans disproportionate to its size. So long as the need for the West to have a nuclear deterrent continues, it is essential for it to be credible. For this reason alone, therefore, the British contribution is important. On political grounds, if we gave up our atomic weapons our influence in the world would be greatly reduced, which I think would be a loss for the West. It is also important for Europe that the United Kingdom should have a capability of inflicting devastation on Russia in retaliation. It could deter local action by the Russians. There is, therefore, a valid and strong reason for keeping deterrent power. We may soon come to the point where the U.K. Bomber Force is in some way more closely tied to NATO, but I admit I find difficulty in solving the problem of control. If there are obviously too many who have to be consulted before the pulling of the trigger, the deterrent power is diminished.

- Q. In balancing military requirements against budgetary considerations, has there been a tendency to tip the scales in favor of financial considerations?
- A. In all of my seven years on the Chiefs of Staff Committee we always prayed and hoped that the Government in power would let us have a five or eight year plan. Everyone pays lip-service to the need for a long-term plan but, of course, our Constitution, like yours, makes it difficult. Parliament has to vote each year on the services at the defence debates. Constitutionally there is no guarantee that there will be a Navy, an Army or an Air Force next year. The Government has difficulty in cutting back on education, health, public works, etc., so defence is always vulnerable to cuts. There is always a battle between Defence and the Treasury. We are always under pressure to cut down. Usually the Ministers come around to our way of thinking. There are certain commitments from which there is no proper escape. The Chiefs of Staff are in a difficult position over money. They do not deal directly with finance, and individually they are bound to press the needs of their own service. But this is tempered by their corporate responsibility to give strategic advice to the Government. The Chief of the Defence Staff was established because the Prime Minister is compelled in peacetime, because of his many other pre-occupations, to delegate power to the

Minister of Defence to probe into the many facets of defence and to formulate a defence policy for the consideration of the Defence Committee within the money figure likely to be available for Defence. The Minister needs a very senior officer to advise him in executing this responsibility and it is only the Chief of the Defence Staff with the backing of the Minister who can help to obtain coordinated advice from the C.O.S. on these matters. There are, of course, other advantages in having a Chief of ^{Defence} Staff.

- Q. What was the attitude of the British 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 Ministry of Defence, apart from its financial contribution to NATO, is not a spending department. The services are among the big spending departments. It ceased to be merely a coordinating agency when Mr. MacMillan gave new and revolutionary terms of reference to Mr. Duncan Sandys, the Defence Minister, in January 1957. The Prime Minister, as I have said, cannot devote the necessary time to the detailed problems of defence which are intricate and highly political; he has to decentralize his authority. In 1957 he delegated to the Minister of Defence the responsibility of formulating a policy for defence. This was a revolutionary and fundamental change, for up to that
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point the Minister has not had this power. So MacMillan really delegated authority. The Minister has authority to inquire into every detail of defence including the shape and size of the three services. The services watch the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Staff very carefully. But in Whitehall we think and move laterally as well as vertically in getting things done.

The Defence Staff is drawn from all three of the services. The Chief of the Defence Staff advises the Minister of Defence what he thinks is the best line for defence policy. The Chief, of course, gets the views of all the services through his relatively small staff, but he primarily depends on the C.O.S. Committee of which he is Chairman and on its organization. At a C.O.S. meeting when there is a subject on the agenda affecting for example the Foreign Office, a Foreign Office representative is present. Most defence issues are thrashed out on a lateral basis at all levels up to the ministerial one. These lateral contacts are important and I think valuable in British administration. We mutually inform ourselves laterally between departments so that when the issue comes before Ministers they are already aware of the basic factors which govern the decision to be taken. The Ministry of Defence exercises a strong influence on the military considerations of the C.O.S. A White Paper on the Defence organization created by appointment as Chief of Defence

Staff. I was in favor of this reorganization which was necessary to meet modern conditions. It was necessary to strengthen the advice available to the Ministers and at the same time it preserved the C.O.S. organization. Any Government would weaken itself if it denied itself access to the professional heads of the three services. The Chief of the Defence Staff himself derives his influence and authority by virtue of of this Chairmanship of the C.O.S. Committee. He would be a danger and of little value to the Minister if he only relied on his own experience and his small staff.

Q. How much of a role has the nuclear arms problem played in frustrating development of NATO military capacity?

A. I do not think very seriously. NATO countries other than the U.S., the U.K. and France have tacitly accepted the position wherein nuclear power lay only in the hands of the Americans and ourselves. There has, of course, been some feeling against the position wherein the military executive of NATO was composed of only the three nuclear powers - i.e. the Standing Group, but the machine works and they have been content to develop conventional forces backed by U.S. tactical weapons under U.S. control. The existence of U.S. nuclear power and its great deterrent effect has, I think, given many of the NATO countries a feeling of security which has led them to fall back on the size and quality of their contributions to NATO. But they cannot hold back beyond a certain point and the persuasion and leadership exerted by Supreme Commanders helps to maintain the joint

effort. Economic factors have of course contributed to the short-fall in plans. At Lisbon in 1952 astronomical

figures were agreed to. When countries began to realize the cost they knew the figures were impracticable. That started a general unwillingness to meet NATO goals. But the gradual building-up of NATO's strength has given confidence, and its value to its members prevents them from defaulting beyond a certain point.

- Q. Is development of an integrated nuclear deterrent by a European union feasible and desirable?
- A. For obvious reasons it is undesirable for any more nations to acquire independent nuclear offensive power. As I have said I think it important that the European NATO countries should possess a nuclear deterrent to deter Soviet aggression in Europe. Such a deterrent does actually exist now here in the U.K., and France is developing another. But the problem of how to integrate this into the European Union is a difficult one. Control is the main difficulty. If the U.K. joins the Six there is a possibility that the British and French nuclear force could in some way be put at the service of NATO in Europe and some arrangement for the delegation of control arrived at. It is highly political and the timing is important. I think U.K. membership of the Six is perhaps the key factor. Meanwhile it is our policy to maintain our nuclear power and to await events.

If Europe is to have nuclear capability based on British and French forces it is essential that it should be closely tied in with American power as is the British force today.

Q. Do you consider it desirable for the United States and NATO to build up large conventional war forces?

A. I do not think that larger forces are necessarily required. I think NATO's conventional forces should be efficient, properly equipped, trained for both nuclear and conventional war and demonstrably capable of resisting strongly all local actions, infiltrations, and incursions. We must change to a "forward strategy". What we must do is to move to hold the perimeter. We have to hold in some strength right up to the forward line. We must present a front against which the Soviets have to mount an attack of such strength as to be conspicuously an act of war and aggression. Defence in depth is no longer of the same importance. I don't know how the arithmetic goes. It is impracticable for us to go back to conscription. But I think there is adequate manpower^w already available in Europe and we cannot ignore our responsibilities overseas.

Q. Do you think that the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe would inevitably lead to all-out use of nuclear weapons?

A. Yes. There is a very strong ^{probability} ~~possibility~~ that it would. It might be different in parts of the world other than Europe - in the Far East for example. I

can see situations where the Americans and ourselves, in some isolated locality might drop a bomb of low yield as a deterrent to imminent aggression by a small power. I am definitely in favor of equipping NATO forces with tactical atomic weapons. Their presence is a deterrent to all types of aggression. They give confidence to the NATO countries exposed, like Turkey for instance. The safety of Turkey depends on Russia realizing that Turkey might let off some atomic weapons if attacked and thus start something bigger. Similarly, the U.K. atomic force in Cyprus serves as a deterrent to aggression against Iran and other parts of the Middle East. We cannot match the USSR or China in conventional forces and manpower, and without tactical nuclear weapons we could be over-run by conventional forces at any point. The deterrent is a combination of tactical and strategic power. One is the complement of the other.