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DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND OFFICE OF SECURITY REVIEW

Interview with NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND

Earl Alexander of Hillsborough Jun 21, 2017

by Alfred Goldberg

June 21, 1963

- Q. Was there any serious opposition to the development of nuclear weapons under the Labor Government between 1946 and 1951?
- A. You must remember that we were under the shadow of the McMahon Act. I don't remember any opposition and I shouldn't think there was any. I think it was in 1947-48 that we made the decision.
- Q. How much time and cost might the United Kingdom have saved had the United States shared fully its knowledge of production of the atomic bomb after the war? Was there any help from the United States.
- A. A good deal, and the United States might well have shown a generous spirit considering our contribution to the bomb. The information on atomic energy we did get from the United States was of a limited character. I don't remember any details of the information that we did get. There was, of course, good feeling among the scientists of the two countries, and this may have helped. Relations were hurt by the Fuchs case. There was nothing worse than the Fuchs case except that 1946 spy cases in Canada revealed in the Report of the Canadian Royal Commission which penetrated deep into the U.S.A. as well as the one in Canada.
- Q. Was there any serious consideration of the development of a strategic deterrent bomber force under the Labor Government? Would a Labor Government have followed the same course in this regard as did the Conservatives during the 1950's.
- A. After the war it was of fundamental importance, in view of the international situation, that the position of the bomber force be studied. We had to consider all defence possibilities in our planning, including a force of that kind.

Q. To what extent did the strategic bombardment experience of World War II shape British strategic thinking after the war?

A. As a nation we have always believed that we must take a full part in collective security. We showed that in the flyover of forbidden territory to Berlin in 1948. The Labour Government's defence budgets showed its bona fides, its genuine concern for defence. Estimates provided general purpose forces for the effective collaboration of all three services. New equipment was difficult to get because we had so much wartime equipment to use up.

Q. In the years after World War II did the British military services have an agreed single strategic concept to guide their planning and programming?

A. In the light of discussion we always got full agreement on the budget. From the moment we had a permanent Ministry of Defence we were effective in our pressures on the Government. Our defence budgets prove that we succeeded in convincing the Treasury and others that we really needed what we were asking for. I had a very strong ally in Ernest Bevin.

Q. Do you feel that the Labor Government gave adequate emphasis to research and development between 1945 and 1951?

A. In the Ministry of Defence we allotted a regular and substantial sum for defence research and we set up a Defence Research Committee. I had the advice and help of Sir Henry Tizard in all this. We were spending sums on research and development that were very large for those days. You must remember that there were also expenditures for research by civil departments that had important defence implications.

- Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the creation of the Ministry of Defence?
- A. I think that their attitude was reasonable. I can't complain that I had any real difficulties. The Chiefs of Staff still retained their direct access to the Prime Minister just as they had had access through the Committee for Imperial Defence before the war.
- Q. To what extent do you think financial considerations affected military policy and strategic planning after the war?
- A. The course of events after the war was disappointing to the Cabinet. We were not in a sound financial position and our economic troubles were great. Even so we carried a heavy defence burden and most of the other countries in Europe didn't. We couldn't ignore financial considerations.
- Q. Do you think that the creation of the nuclear deterrent force was at the expense of the British contribution to NATO?
- A. No, certainly not in my time. We always fulfilled our commitments to NATO. We were backed by National Service which we put through. It was the first peacetime conscription in our history. Churchill told me that the Conservatives wouldn't have had the nerve to do it. It seems to me that since our time, the Government have had difficulty in maintaining forces in Germany.
- Q. Did the military services state requirements for nuclear weapons when you were Minister of Defence?
- A. We were at too early a stage to do that. We didn't have a bomb yet. We had so far to go in the field that although there was a good deal of talk about the bomb before 1948 we didn't go beyond talk. I am quite sure that we had talks about the bomb. There was no need for

the services to make recommendations or to put pressure on. Attlee and I had talks about the bomb in a general way. It wasn't until 1948 that we decided to go ahead because the industrial capacity couldn't be spared until then. But the basic reason why the decision wasn't made earlier was economic rather than political. Please remember the problems of rebuilding war damaged houses (over 3 million), factories, plants, and retooling and reequipment for peace instead of war. Generally speaking, there was no difficulty about establishing Government policy and maintaining it. I never had any doubts about the desirability of our developing the bomb. I remembered when we had had to stand alone after Dunkirk, and I believed that we had to be prepared to stand alone again if necessary. Most of us in positions of responsibility were agreed on this. Remember that the U.S.A. were rapidly demobilizing until the Brussels Treaty, and we opened discussions for a wider basis of defence of Western freedom with U.S.A. and Canada.