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6. REMARKS

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DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND OFFICE OF SECURITY REVIEW

Interview with NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND

Viscount Portal of Hungerford Jun 21, 2017

by Alfred Goldberg

May 28 and 29, 1963

- Q. Why did the United Kingdom wait until April 1946 to request from the United States information on the manufacture of the atomic bomb?
- A. I can't remember. I didn't become Controller of Atomic Energy until January or February, 1946.
- Q. Was there pressure from the military services to proceed with manufacture of the atomic bomb?
- A. There was no pressure from the military. In fact we had to go to them and ask them what they wanted. The military may have been thinking about atomic weapons, but they didn't bring any pressure to bear on us. But as soon as we asked them, they said they wanted atomic weapons.
- Q. When was the decision taken to manufacture the bomb? Who participated? What were the factors that caused it to be made at that time?
- A. I don't remember when the decision was taken. We couldn't take it before we found out whether we could do the necessary things such as manufacturing plutonium.
- Q. Did the explosion of an atomic device by the Russians in 1949 result in criticism of the progress of the atomic program in the United Kingdom? Did it result in an acceleration of the pace of development?
- A. No, there was no criticism. I don't think that it caused any acceleration of our effort. By 1949 we were going pretty well as fast as we could. The Russians having the bomb didn't affect our program. I

should think that the Russians knew more about American methods of manufacturing the bombs than we did, thanks to information they got from Alan Nunn May and Fuchs and possibly others. Then, too, it occurs to me that they had good scientists for a long time. Furthermore, they probably used many times as many people on the job. They must have devoted far more resources than we to the job. After the war, and especially after the McMahon Act, we didn't get very much information from the United States. When I went around the American plants with General Groves in 1946, I was allowed to go into some places because I wasn't a scientist or engineer and therefore couldn't fully understand what was going on. We didn't even know how to can uranium at the time and we wanted to know badly, but I was allowed by General Groves only to look in at the place where it was being done. I was not allowed to go in. Of course, it did us little good, because I couldn't tell our chaps anything about canning uranium that could help them.

- Q. Did international events --Berlin Blockade, Korean War-- affect the pace of development?
- A. No, they had no effect.
- Q. What priorities were given to the development of the bomb?
- A. There were delays naturally, but we had a program that went on fairly smoothly. We got everything we wanted to do the job. I never heard of any other programs being given priority over us. I expect that our executives had to exert themselves to get some priorities from suppliers, but I was never brought in.

Q. Was there liaison with the military services on the development of vehicles to carry the bomb and the shaping of forces with atomic weapons in mind?

A. Yes. It was complete. Sir William Penney, I think, will bear out that we were in the closest touch with the military services, especially the RAF.

Q. Were there any differences within the Government on the development of the bomb?

A. I don't think so. I am far away from it now, but the impression I came away with was that the Labour Government were glad to have the atomic energy program and particularly the bomb programme going as long as they didn't have to talk about it very much. Their left wing weren't exactly keen on it and could have been embarrassing. When the Conservatives came in they were happy to have an atomic energy program and happy that it had been done by Labour.

Q. Was there any assistance from the United States in the development of the bomb?

A. Oh, yes, there must have been. I couldn't specify, but I think that Bill Penney was told a lot by friends. It may well have been sub rosa; I suppose it would have to have been. The desire was certainly there on the part of individual American scientists to help us. We were getting a lot of stuff under the counter, and it was all coming to one man on our side. The channel was almost entirely to Penney.

We had security problems which had been a cause of the cutting off of U. S. information. Labour was reluctant to admit the need for "positive" vetting and other security measures. You took a much stronger stand on security over there in the United States.

- Q. Did the lack of resources --money, scientists, engineers-- delay the development of the bomb significantly?
- A. Of course it must have done so, relatively to the U. S. and Russia. We didn't have the proportional resources of scientists and technicians and other resources to devote to the program that you had in the United States. We couldn't possibly have developed the bomb as quickly as you did; our strong point has always been in ideas not in the ability to develop them quickly.
- Q. Were major decisions on bomb carrying vehicles --aircraft, rockets-- delayed pending the development of the bomb?
- A. I couldn't tell you. I probably couldn't have told you at the time.
- Q. How long an interval was there between acquisition of an atomic device and its testing?
- A. I couldn't tell you at all. We were impatient at the time for the test. It turned out to require a much larger organization than we had thought.
- Q. How far back are the roots of the strategic nuclear deterrent force?
- A. I remember that before I left my position as Chief of the Air Staff in December 1945 quite a few of us were saying that the atomic bomb meant the abolition of war, that it would make it not worthwhile for anyone to wage a war. I was certainly talking to airmen in the RAF in those terms. We had Bomber Command, a large, powerful force, and this device. It was natural to put the two together. I personally underestimated the development of the long-range rocket. I never expected that it would reach the range that it has.

Q. Why were you selected to be Controller of Atomic Energy?

A. I remember very clearly and distinctly what Attlee said to me when he asked me to take the job. He said, "You will find that the scientists will always put a brake on the engineers, that they will want another six months in order to improve something or other. The engineers will always be impatient to go, perhaps too soon. It is up to you to knock the heads of the scientists and engineers together and to make the decisions. You are a practical man and it will be up to you to make decisions when they disagree."