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Interview with                   NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND  
General The Lord Ismay           Jun 21, 2017  
by Alfred Goldberg  
November 28, 1962

- Q. What was the effect of World War II experience --especially the strategic bombardment experience-- and the atomic bomb on British strategic thinking after the war?
- A. Quite honestly, mine is only a personal view. At the end of the war I said to Attlee: Look, PM, I am off, I have had it! -- He asked me to stay on. I was more engaged in that year thinking of that new White Paper on Defence and in cleaning up after the war than in projecting myself into the future. I found it impossible to even visualize a new war, therefore never thought of any future strategic study. But my own view is this: if we were given our chance again, I would still say we were right to go on with strategic bombing, in spite of the claims that it did not do the job. I don't believe that Overlord would have been the outstanding success it was without the aerial bombardment. Not only from the standpoint that it had broken German morale, but it had broken up the railway system. Even with what we know now I would still do the same thing. I think we might have lost the war, if the British --and for that matter the Americans-- had taken a bloody nose in Overlord. They might not have been ready to have another try; so a bloody nose in that attempt to go into Europe might have been fatal. **None** dared think of a failure, it had to be a success.
- I do not believe that the invasion was carried out as necessary to the continued existence of the U. S. Army. It was the other way round. I consider Marshall the biggest man of all the Combined

Chiefs of Staff, a man of absolute integrity and individuality, but he had this idea that you could equate war to business --if you paid enough you could buy victory. He thought that if we were really serious we could send a force across the Channel in 1942. Well, we could not. We did not have the men and equipment, and France was swarming with first-class German soldiers. We could not have taken on what they had got there, and we had not affected their capacity to reinforce from the East. Marshall could not see that; I suspect that he thought we were going to run out; and therefore deliberately overplayed his hand. If he had not taken this line, perhaps we would have waited until 1945. We had a revulsion toward it; the people who were at the head of our affairs had seen the Somme (60,000 dead and wounded in a single day -- July 1, 1916) and Gallipoli, that awful landing, "the sea was red with blood for fifty yards". Even Winston dreaded the idea of that landing, but eventually he came around to it. At the Cairo Conference he said to me "I am hardening on it -- I am hardening on it". He meant that he was going full steam ahead with it, but he dreaded it. We who had had nearly all our friends mown down in the First World War, had an instinctive horror of sending our sons and grandsons to the same kind of slaughter. We imagined quite wrongly that we might get into static warfare again.

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?

A. No, I don't think so. I think their only concept is that we have to supply four Divisions for NATO, a good portion of the NATO, fleet, keep Bomber Command, and use the rest as a sort of reserve to keep the outposts going. The whole situation changed after I left the service, after the removal of the Indian Army.

Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the creation of the Ministry of Defence?

A. The lesson of the great wars is that you must coordinate the services. Under political pressure Baldwin had a Minister for Coordination of Defence. That was cheating. It contributed nothing. The services went exactly as they wanted. There was no real coordination at all. "Why didn't he have Winston do it?" Thank God he didn't. Winston would not have put up with such farcical powers and there would have been a riot. So he put this good lawyer and good Christian Sir Thomas Inskip who was sacked after Munich. When Winston became Prime Minister he assumed the powers of Ministry of Defence, and he operated not through a Ministry, but through a handling machine. He had me and a select staff. We didn't know the answers to all the questions he asked, but we knew where to get them. At the end of the war we asked ourselves, "What are we going to do?" We cannot continue to have just a handling machine. We must try a Ministry of Defence with authority". I had a big hand in writing that White Paper in 1946.

I visualized the Minister for Defence being a member in the Cabinet and the service ministers becoming practically under secretaries. I visualized the Minister of Defence as giving orders and being in charge of finances --dividing up the money.

I never heard of any hostility to the Ministry of Defence either at the beginning or after. I felt that the services were pleased to have a father to come to.

I remember, after I left the Government, Walter Monckton was put in as Defence Minister and I found the three service ministers in his ante room waiting to discuss a man power question with him -- they looked rather like schoolboys waiting to see the headmaster. I don't think that they resented it at all. There was however a lot of resentment about their having a Chairman of the CoS. There has always been an argument whether there should be a Chairman of the CoS Committee. In the war there was a great agitation that there should be. That was chiefly done as an attack on Winston --they wanted to build up soldier, sailor, or airman as a panjan-drum. The argument continued after the war. I wrote to Selwyn Lloyd when I was with NATO in Paris, "Why not try it as an experimental measure, there is nothing to stop you from dropping the experiment if it does not work --only don't give it out as though you had found something wonderful, -- say that this has been debated a long time, -- it would be rather a good thing to try it."

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- Q. How do you feel about separating the Chiefs of Staff from their services? Do you favor the Defence Staff approach?
- A. I am still opposed to separation of the Chiefs of Staff from the services. They must wear two hats and their headquarters should be in their own services. That is the proper arrangement. A member of the CoS must have the machinery of his service available to him, he must have the whole backing of his whole department. You cannot make a plan with the CoS alone. You have got to have the whole knowledge of your department. Take the discussion between Lloyd George and Robertson in World War I: "Why don't you land a force at Alexandretta and cut the Turks off?" Wally said: "How are you going to feed them?" It is a very nice idea, it looks pretty on the map, but that isn't all. Harbor facilities? Water? Local supplies? Climate? Equipment? --Are they going to have the people to answer all these questions.
- Q. What were the basic motivations for the creation of a British nuclear deterrent force?
- A. Political. Very largely for political prestige, but it is of course supported by military opinion. I would certainly guess that these are General de Gaulle's motives.
- Q. Was the development of this force accomplished at the expense of the British contribution to NATO?
- A. I would not even be ready to guess whether our nuclear deterrent force was built up at the expense of our contribution to NATO.
- Q. Is there a valid reason for the continued maintenance of the deterrent force by the United Kingdom?
- A. I should have to talk this over with your chaps. What arrangement we could make for substitution for it. I cannot imagine using it
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unless you are using yours. I cannot imagine using it at all. But I can imagine its possession preventing our being blackmailed over an issue in which the U. S. A. were wholly disinterested.

Q. Is the development of an integrated nuclear deterrent force by a European Union feasible and desirable?

A. No, I would not think so. It is too complicated altogether.

Who is going to give the order to pull the trigger? Obviously it is quite impossible that fifteen nations, including Iceland, should run a war. I had a ~~scheme~~ locked up in my safe for the fifteen NATO ambassadors to push off to Washington on the declaration of war and there represent their countries, or be disbanded altogether and let their own ambassadors represent them in Washington. If there was a war, there was no good in fifteen ambassadors lolling around Paris.

Q. What was the British role in conceiving NATO?

A. I am not sure, but I think that it started off with Western Union.

Ernie Bevin had a good deal to do with that. Of course, he was not powerful enough to do anything by himself, but then he and Marshall (or Dean Acheson) conceived the idea of building up the Western Union into something much bigger. Ernie Bevin was very keen on this. We weren't so keen on it as a nation, but it was always Bevin's dream that we should have a Western Union army or rather a NATO army under single command. When that was decided in Brussels in 1950 and that Eisenhower should take command, Bevin said to Jack Slessor: "I nearly died three times this year; thank God I have lived to see this day."

Russia was steadily going out seizing more and more territory and a halt had to be called. NATO was the most provident thing done by a group of nations for a long time. It was all bluff at first. Its value lay in the fact that the Russians knew if they attacked anybody it meant war. "If you touch anyone of us, you take on all of us". Behind us was the nuclear power of the United States. From that day onward not a single square inch of territory have the Russians gained.

The unfortunate thing about NATO is that it is so local -- rather like the Maginot line. I hadn't been there a year before I protested about the weakness of our flanks -- on the South, in the Middle East, Egypt.

Q. Why was NATO so much more acceptable to the United Kingdom than was a European Defence Community?

A. European Union would have been a supra-national thing, a federation.

All of the member countries subscribe to NATO until their own nationality is impinged. They are jealous of their own sovereign rights and to try and give NATO any supra-national powers is premature. I don't think any single country has become less nationalistic. I know from experience. At a meeting to get funds for the NATO infrastructure -- 150 millions were wanted -- I sat in the chair and went around the table: "How much are you going to give?" In the end it added up to 70 millions, so I had to tell them: "You cannot have the airfields." A capital start for NATO!



Then they asked me to put up suggestions. I did so, and the reaction of every single partner was identical: "Mr. Chairman, I think this is a splendid allocation, but you have put my country too high! NATO wanted a nanny and I brought them up to a certain age. They could stand on their own feet and had reached a point where they needed a governess. I never tried to direct the Council -- I tried to influence them. But now you want a NATO view and you can only get that from a man who is trained in diplomacy -- a politician who can formulate policy. Spaak took this line, and gave them a lead; but he could not get them to adopt a NATO policy. They were far too insistent on their sovereign rights. I had quite an easy time, I didn't attempt to be anything more than a "rapporteur". I used to tell them: the greatest enemy is Communism and next greatest Nationalism, one very close behind the other.

- Q. Other than the Soviet menace, what factors have affected Atlantic and European movements toward integrated defence and economic organizations and arrangements?
- A. Purely the Soviet menace. I think that there was a certain fellowship between all except Germany, in that we all had suffered from the Nazis, but that was all. I do not know whether that would bring people together. France had little feeling for anybody and had never been anything but lukewarm about NATO. All they were concerned with was what were they going to get out of it.

Q. To what extent have European Union -- in its various aspects -- and NATO been working at cross purposes? What is likely to be the effect of European Union on NATO?

A. I don't think they have worked at cross purposes. Sometimes I used to think it a pity that NATO did not have the lot - for instance OEEC -- as a part of the show. But of course, the membership was different. The United States and Canada were not in OEEC. I came to the conclusion that although it would be more tidy to put the other European organizations in NATO, it was better to let them work separately. Now OEEC is almost overlapping. We try to kid ourselves that NATO is more than a military alliance. There has never been any money forthcoming to make it more than that. We have been trying to get international schools and ended up with a handful of NATO scholarships and they are just a drop in the ocean.

Q. How great a role has the existence of the U. S. nuclear deterrent played in frustrating development of NATO military capability?

A. Not a great one. You are dealing with people who have never maintained armies, except for France. Britain never maintained a big one. Denmark and Norway never kept soldiers and were never really serious about an army. Turkish soldiers fight brigands in the hills; Greece is the same, and the Italians we all know about. France had Algeria on its neck and never took NATO seriously anyhow. I don't think anyone has held back because of feeling safe. I think they have held back because they want to spend their money on other things. Sheer funk keeps them together.

The first war was fought in such a brutish unimaginative way Sea power and air power used the way they should be used prevented this happening in the second war. This was thanks to Winston. The war could not have been won without him and when they crab him it drives me absolutely mad. In his memoirs Lord Chandos writes about Winston: "...I could have asked no more of life than to have worked close to him, to have enjoyed his friendship always and his confidence ~~sometimes~~..." I feel just like that.

Q. What are the basic reasons for the failure of NATO to develop a conventional force adequate to deter soviet aggression?

A. I don't think they would ever develop sufficient strength to hold Russia for long because they do not have sufficient resources, either manpower, or money. We only aim at thirty divisions and you cannot hold that front forever with that number. What we want to establish is that it is a real all-out attack: to make Russia think before she forces that crunch.

In spite of the annual review the NATO partners did not put up the forces to which they were committed. I don't think you can really expect many of them to produce very much. I always felt that the most that we could hope for was to maintain a force which was sufficiently strong to hold whatever the Soviet could attack them with without bringing up reinforcements from the rear.

Since the war I have wished that the bomb had never been dropped. When I heard that the experiment had been a success I was quite sick.

I always hoped it would be a failure. Then I thought no more about it; not till it was dropped did it really come to mind again. I have always felt that while it was there, there would never be a war, I still feel that there will never be a big war.

Q. Do you favor the equipment of NATO forces with tactical nuclear weapons?

A. I am entirely uninformed, but I should be all for it. Anything that can strengthen our forces is all to the good. We don't want to be attacked. This is for prevention. I don't want to use these weapons against the Russians, but I want to have them to stop them from using them against me.