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Interview with Sir Ian Jacob

Jun 21, 2017

by Alfred Goldberg

March 26, 1963

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. I think it fair to say that in the period of the Labor Government the differences among the services were not nearly as great as they have become since. There were a lot of concrete things to do--Germany and the Middle East, for instance--and I would say that the machine worked remarkably well and there was a fair measure of agreement. There is a fundamental difference underlying everything we have done since the war. We had the same responsibilities after the war as before, but all of the areas in which we were concerned had been stirred up. Before the war we could handle these areas with small forces. All of the responsibilities were still on our hands together with additional problems at a time when we were trying to reduce our forces as rapidly as possible to a reasonable peacetime limit. This curious situation is still with us.

The general tendency when contemplating national strategy is to continue to stand by things you have regarded as principles when they are no longer applicable. In 1946, when I went to Egypt with Lord Stansgate's Mission to try to negotiate a new treaty with Egypt, I was of the opinion that we should get out of Egypt as fast as possible. We said we needed the Suez Canal, but the situation has

completely changed. The only danger to the Middle East was from the Russians, but we can't protect the Persian oilfields from Egypt. We were mesmerized by the thinking of the past 50 years. The basis of all strategy is to establish your commitments and how you are going to meet them. This sort of thing--the Egyptian business--bedevils all strategic thinking in this country. We try to produce a strategy and forces to deal with them and then we realize that we can't. Compare the situation now with 1946. We have withdrawn from many areas we considered of vital importance then. This thinking will not do. It is very largely at the bottom of our difficulties with strategic thinking. We are trying to do too much with too little. This gets worse as time goes on. We require forces of a certain size and we are not much above the minimum now. It gets more expensive all the time. Nine tenths of the expenditures are taken up by constant factors, leaving one tenth as a marginal budget, for which the contest among the services becomes more and more difficult and fierce. I think that the whole efforts of the services were directed towards meeting the many commitments from the war and even the prewar period. There was very little room for strategic thinking.

It was only because the Attlee Government said, "We are going to go", that we got out of India. It was the only way to do it, and it was the right thing to do. This country now has certain things it feels it has to do--contribute to the NATO forces, look after its Commonwealth and other global interests, and play some part in the

nuclear deterrent. It can't satisfy all of the requirements with the same lot of forces. Again strategic thinking is trying to get some kind of compromise to satisfy all three of these requirements without breaking the bank. It won't work. No government will willingly abandon something.

Q. To what extent did the World War II experience continue to influence strategic thinking after the war?

A. I arrived back in the Ministry of Defence about May 1952 just as the Chiefs of Staff were writing a new paper on global strategy for the new Government. Apart from that there was no question about what you require in coping with a war. There was a lot of argument about what would happen if you had an atomic war. People were taking a new view of the course a war might take. We have come to the conclusion that it was no good to create a great apparatus for a long war. On that basis the services were not much influenced by the experience of World War II. For the first four years after the war, the Russians didn't have the bomb. During the first five years after the war nobody made a real attempt to cope with future war. Once the Russians got the bomb this changed things. As for all the rest--the lesser wars and what you do about Malaya and the Persian Gulf and so on--there<sup>s</sup> are still regarded as being conducted under the old rules. It is continuity. The difference is between the large war and all the rest. We don't make the same kind of preparations for the big war. Aside from deterrence, all the rest is coping with the immediate situation. In NATO the problems are chiefly political.

- Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the creation of the Ministry of Defence in 1946? Has the trend towards a more powerful and unified Ministry of Defence been desirable?
- A. The military services were all for it. Before the war there had been the Committee of Imperial Defence and a Minister for Coordination of Defence, but he was ineffective. Then for five years during the war we had the Prime Minister as Minister of Defence and all the strategic operational functions were taken over by the Chiefs of Staffs working for the Prime Minister. Therefore they were accustomed to the idea and didn't see anything peculiar in it. The Chiefs of Staff would go on as before. The service departments would be administrative bodies. Originally, we visualized the Ministry of Defence as a small secretariat operating as the CID Secretariat had done before the war. We thought of the Minister of Defence as the master in the strategic field. We didn't foresee all of the international developments that occurred-- NATO, CENTO, SEATO, etc. These had to be handled somewhere, and the Ministry of Defence started growing. There was a great deal of activity all around the world and the Chiefs of Staff were much more actively engaged in these current activities than ever before in peacetime. The apparatus has grown quite big. Then there came the establishment of a chairman of the C.O.S. When Sandys became Minister of Defence he was given inflated powers and there began to grow up a spirit of antagonism among the services, for they did not believe that he should have these powers. Sandys was trying to exercise these powers. Meanwhile the conception of the Defence Committee as being in the central position

was atrophied and everything went into the Ministry of Defence. Now the Ministry of Defence has been trying to do the job. Far more gets shoved into the C.O.S. than should be. But we can't go backward now and we must go forward. It seemed that the only thing to do was to put the Ministry of Defence in a position to exercise its powers.

Q. Was there any substantial disagreement with Government policy in development of nuclear weapons between 1945 and 1952?

A. Not that I know of. One of the difficulties in the postwar situation is the intensive secrecy that surrounds modern weapons and all that goes with them. One can't inquire about these things anymore.

Q. Did the explosion of an atomic device by the Russians in 1949 affect the British program for atomic energy? Did it cause an acceleration?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Was the development of the British nuclear deterrent force accomplished at the expense of the British contribution to NATO?

A. I think increasingly so, subject to one thing only. Once you had determined to do away with conscription, the size of the force you could raise was limited. The main competition to NATO was commitments elsewhere in the world. Now the main crunch is not so much manpower as money.

Q. How much of a role did the existence of the U.S. nuclear deterrent play in frustrating development of NATO's conventional military capability? What other factors were important?

A. I suppose it would be fair to say that if there had been no atomic bomb, then in the earlier days of NATO funk alone would have induced the European nations to contribute more manpower. The other intangible factor was whether the Russians would ever invade western Europe. Why

should they? They don't want another war. They want to get their aims without war. The existence of the American nuclear deterrent was something that weighed in the scale with the Russians. With NATO the important thing was that the Americans were in it.

Q. Is it desirable and feasible to create a European nuclear deterrent force or a single NATO deterrent force?

A. I think on only one ground. We all know that we cannot predict the political situation ten years hence. You might have then an Administration in the United States that adopted an isolationist attitude. On that ground, there is a residual argument in favor of NATO having its own forces. For the United Kingdom force there are two arguments. We might have a confrontation with the Russians in some place like Iraq or Kuwait. I think that is a nonsensical argument. The assumption is that you are prepared to go this far in an operation that is not really of vital importance. Are you going to threaten Russia with the Americans standing by and doing nothing? The other argument is simply not knowing what the position will be <sup>e</sup>ten or twenty years hence. I rather hold with the people who say that we don't want an independent nuclear deterrent, but we must maintain a nuclear capability. It might be better to have the TSR. 2 airplane to deal out nuclear bombs, and it could be used for other purposes as well. Polaris is useless except for one thing. I am against abandoning all nuclear weapons and capabilities.

Q. To what extent have financial considerations affected the strategic thinking of the planners?

A. There is no doubt that to some extent they do, even unconsciously. It

is no good putting forward something that is out of the question financially. You write your strategic paper, it is reviewed up the line, and then you set to work pruning it.

- Q. In weighting the factors that influence strategic thinking and policy-making, what weight would you give to technology in the post-World War period?
- A. It is becoming dominant now, unless it gets completely squeezed out by money. It is absolutely dominant now and I hope that it will get a better organization and be kept under control. The only qualification is that if you are considering a world-wide semi-peacetime situation you have to have simple forces. You can't do Kuwait with V-bombers and missiles. This is going to present us and almost everybody else with an insoluble problem. These advanced weapons become so expensive that there isn't room for them compared with the other essentials for the troops. We are struggling against it and so are the French. Even the U.S. will have to face this problem.