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Interview with

Jun 21, 2017

The Rt. Hon. J. Selwyn Lloyd

by Alfred Goldberg

May 30, 1963

- Q. What were the basic motivations for the creation and maintenance of a British nuclear deterrent force?
- A. The Labour Government made the decision to develop the atom bomb; the Conservative government made the decision about the thermonuclear bomb. I think that the reasons for those decisions were the following. We had had a part in the original enterprise. We had provided our share of the brains for it. Some of those eminent scientists were still available to us. The McMahon Act seemed unfair. Most important of all, we still had very large responsibilities overseas. We believed that we had a role to play in World affairs and our influence was likely to be greater if we had our own nuclear deterrent.
- Q. Is it your impression that the fundamental groundwork for this force had been laid before the Conservatives came back into power in 1951? When was the decision made to go ahead with nuclear deterrent force?
- A. I have no records with me and I can therefore only speak from memory. I do not know the extent to which the groundwork had been done before we returned to power nor do I remember when the decision was made. In fact I was Minister of State at the time, concerned primarily with United Nations affairs, and abroad a great deal. A decision of this sort would not be recorded in minutes given wide distribution. Therefore I cannot help you.

Q. Did any international events accelerate the building of this force -- both the bombers and the thermonuclear bomb?

A. We must have been influenced by the Korean War and the military confrontation between East and West which took place then. You mention Suez. The incident of 1956 had nothing to do with it. On the other hand I would say that the development of the V-bomber force affected the decision to relinquish the base in the Suez Canal Zone made in 1954. We had 100,000 troops tied up in Egypt and it was thought that the large base there was no longer necessary because we were entering into a new phase in strategic planning marked by planes with far longer ranges, carrying bombs far more destructive. I think it was really a case of the nuclear deterrent programme affecting our international decisions rather than vice versa.

Q. Why did it take Britain longer than Russia to develop the atomic bomb and nuclear deterrent force?

A. I do not know to what extent that is true with regard to the bomb itself. So far as aircraft were concerned, one reason for our slowness was that the British aircraft industry was trying to do too much; there were too many units in the industry and too many different types of planes being attempted. In addition, for quite a long time the system of procurement was faulty. Duncan Sandys, my predecessor at the Ministry of Supply, started to improve the situation and I carried on after him. Originally if the military requirement had been stated and the specification drawn up, only one or two prototypes were ordered. If there was an accident to the prototype a great deal of time was lost. Sandys started a system of ordering a development batch of about 20 aircraft. It seemed expensive; in fact it was

cheaper in the long run. It was not a question of us hanging back either at the Ministry of Supply or the Ministry of Defence. We were just as disappointed as anyone that production was not quicker. Nor was it a question of shortage of money. The money was provided in the annual estimates but the amounts allotted were rarely, if ever, spent. The shortages in production were the cause. Nor do I think that there was a feeling that we need not hurry because there was a US nuclear force to protect us.

One has to think of Britain as it was in the first few years after the War. We had been badly battered. There were many shortages. Our resources were fully absorbed in reconstruction and exports. The Socialist government spent a great deal of its time and energy nationalizing certain industries. Then came the Korean War. When the Conservatives got in, our gold and dollar reserves were disappearing at a rate which would have finished us in six months. So we had a great many other things on our mind.

You ask whether things would have gone quicker if the Conservatives had won the 1945 Election. I believe that they would. Nationalization created a great many problems and diverted a great deal of energy. I think Attlee was probably as decisive as anybody on this business but there were other priorities. When it came to Korea, the Labour Government were responsible for the over ordering of aircraft. Further large orders were placed before the reliability of particular aircraft has been proved. I think it can also be said against the Conservatives that we too were slow in improving the organisation of the aircraft industry. It was not only about 1959 that that was finally done.

Q. Did Britain have less influence during the years that it did not have a nuclear deterrent force than it has had since?

A. No, I do not think that that was the case. Germany was prostrate. France was enfeebled. Italy and Japan were in grave difficulties. We had substantial military forces and a great deal of real estate, bases and military installation all over the world. We were working very closely with the U. S.

The slow rate of development of our nuclear deterrent force was not a decisive factor in our influence.

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

A. I do not think so. I have always been rather heretical about the British contribution to NATO. I thought as Minister of Defence, Foreign Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer that it was beyond our capability, for balance of payment reasons, to carry out the obligation entered into in 1954 to Western European Union. In fact the obligation was not to be binding if we were in balance of payments difficulties. In 1957 I therefore negotiated, on balance of payments grounds, a reduction in size of our NATO forces to 55,000 in two steps. We were only just able to get by in these years because the American forces stationed in this country were bringing in substantial foreign exchange. Unless some way is found of solving the balance of payments side of it, I do not consider we can afford to maintain our troops in Western Germany. The development of the nuclear deterrent force had little or nothing to do with this.

- Q. Has the pursuit of nuclear power by Britain and France played an important part in frustrating the development of a powerful NATO conventional war capacity?
- A. No, I do not believe this to be the case. The French contribution was affected primarily by Indo-China and Algeria. Our contribution was affected chiefly as I have just said, by the balance of payments. Some of the military experts might argue differently and say it was the end of conscription and our commitments elsewhere that made our NATO contribution difficult for us. I do not agree that that was the real reason. As Foreign Secretary I never pressed my colleagues to increase our contribution to NATO because I was convinced that we could not afford the cost across the exchanges. The United States were to some extent in the same boat but proportionately the burden was heavier for us and we had more slender reserves to meet it.
- Q. What priorities were given to the creation of the nuclear deterrent force?
- A. So far as I remember there was what was called superpriority for certain types of aircraft.
- Q. Did the creation of the nuclear deterrent force produce the consequences that its creators desired?
- A. I believe that during the 1950's it did lead to a closer relationship between the US and ourselves, than otherwise would have been the case. It is not widely realized how important the British contribution and the American aircraft based on Britain were, for geographical reasons. The first wave would have come from here and our own aircraft were a large element in that.

I think that our influence in other countries was increased. It gave us a rather special position and added weight to our councils.

For example, in the Baghdad Pact, the fact that we, a full member, had a nuclear capability that could be used from Cyprus, was a factor that increased our standing.

Q. What are the basic justifications for the continued maintenance of a British nuclear force?

A. Self defence, and the need to play a part in important decisions.

I doubt whether it is practicable to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. If other countries are going to have them, i. e. Communist China, France, and several others which I could name but will not, I do not consider that Britain should be without them.