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DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND OFFICE OF SECURITY REVIEW
Interview with Sir Roger Makins
NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND

by Alfred Goldberg

Jun 21, 2017

August 8, 1963

Q. Do you think that it was inevitable that Britain should develop atomic energy and the atomic bomb after World War II?

A. Yes. The original program had been a joint enterprise conducted as a matter of policy in the United States during the war. It was always hoped by us that the collaboration would continue after the war. If it had continued, the British nuclear energy program would have taken a different form. I don't know just what form. There was a residue of atomic research activity that went on here in Britain all during the war. It was felt at the time that we had been the first in the field with the concept of nuclear weapons and our scientists were well aware of the implications of atomic energy for power. They were working on thermal reactor problems at Montreal. So that there would be atomic energy development in the country was assumed. Subsequent events concerned with collaboration with the United States affected the form of the program.

Q. What were the prime motives for the decision to develop the bomb?

A. It was implicit in the thinking of the time that the objective was twofold. The primary one was the development of weapons and the secondary one was the civil application of atomic energy. The speed and nature of progress was conditioned by the resources available.

Q. Was there any significant assistance from the United States on the production side of the atomic energy project?

- A. There was no assistance at all from the United States between 1945 and the resumption of collaboration in the military field in 1958. The only collaboration that existed during that period was in the field of raw materials and in certain basic fields. And these were only resumed after negotiations that led to a modus vivendi. The January 1948 agreement permitted only a very slender amount of collaboration. It was of no military assistance to our program.
- Q. During the 1949 Anglo-American negotiations on atomic energy, did Britain make specific requests concerning full cooperation between the two countries on atomic development?
- A. We were trying to get full collaboration throughout the period. At every important step in the development of our program, particularly factory construction, the British Government tried to establish collaborative arrangements with the Americans before taking decisions to embark on further construction of expensive facilities. This happened at least twice. We would have preferred to conduct our production program in collaboration with the United States. The United States was never willing to bring the 1949 talk to a conclusion. Suggestions were made and discussed but no action was taken. The reason most frequently given for failure of negotiations was security. The Fuchs case occurred about this time. I always thought the security argument was not the real reason. The real reason was the same that lay behind the McMahon Act--that this was an American secret that could be kept an American secret. Our scientists never believed that it was possible to keep the secret.

Q. What do you think were the chief American reasons for refusing to continue the wartime collaboration on atomic energy?

A. It was said at the time on the American side that a close Anglo-American collaboration would prejudice the chances of agreement on an international control system. But it was really not important what the motives were. We accepted these things at face value. The most important thing to us was the American unwillingness to collaborate. I thought that it was Administration as well as Congressional policy to end collaboration. The man who said no in 1946 was Byrnes, who was the Secretary of State. I have always thought that the basic reason was to protect the American Secret.

I think that the Fuchs case provided the reason for discontinuing negotiations in 1950, but whether the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy would have approved the proposals, even had there been no Fuchs case, was pretty doubtful. In that case, the security factor did occur conveniently for the United States.

Q. Did the explosion of a bomb by the Russians in 1949 accelerate the program in Britain? Did it have any effect on the negotiations with the United States?

A. I think that the country was going ahead about as fast as it could in any event. I don't know that the Russian explosion affected the speed of the program. The Russian explosion helped the Anglo-American negotiations in 1949 because it tended to create a more favorable climate for negotiating. The United States no longer had a monopoly, and this was clearly a threat in face of which renewal of collaboration made sense.