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Interview with

Jun 21, 2017

The Rt. Hon. Emanuel Shinwell

by Alfred Goldberg

November 26, 1962

- Q. Was there any opposition within the Labor Government between 1945 and 1951 to the developing of nuclear weapons and the delivery means for them?
- A. There was neither division nor discussion in the cabinet. The secret was very well kept. It was locked in the breast of the Prime Minister. Although Secretary of State for War and Minister of Defence I was not informed. So far as the country was concerned, the subject was not highlighted and there was therefore no controversy.
- Q. What were the basic motivations for the creation of a British nuclear deterrent force?
- A. Churchill, when he returned to office, was aware of the position and was anxious to prove that the United Kingdom was as competent to develop and use atomic weapons as was any other country. The reason he gave was fear of aggression. During the Korean war we asked our Prime Minister to visit President Truman and prevent Gen. McArthur from using the bomb in Manchuria. We were able to bargain because of our contribution to the forces in Korea. Attlee was, meanwhile, pushing the atomic energy peaceful program about which we had no illusions in terms of expenditure and resources. Those associated with Defence would not escape the knowledge that the Russians were building up their forces and this created tension. This no doubt persuaded Churchill to proceed with the nuclear deterrent.

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

A. Undoubtedly. There was secrecy about the expenditure involved. The Conservative Government has maintained that only 10 percent of defense cost has been devoted to atomic weapon development and production. In our time the controversy about the need to build up the Army was not acute because we had national service. When I was Secretary of State for War we had 400,000 men in the Army alone.

Q. Is there a valid reason for the continued maintenance of this force by the United Kingdom?

A. I accepted the concept to begin with because of the increasing strength of the Russian military potential. I am now sceptical about the value of the nuclear deterrent. I doubt whether the Russians are deterred from hostilities by either the American or the British deterrent. The Russians can get what they want without resort to war. What do they want that they don't have? To dominate the world? Impossible! Not even the forces of the Soviet Union could succeed. I am therefore skeptical of the value of the nuclear deterrent. I prefer the building up of conventional forces. A country like ours can't afford to abandon its defense organization. I don't mean the nuclear deterrent but conventional forces--mobile, flexible with effective striking power. We have made as efficient a contribution to the military strength of the West as any other country except the United States. The French have always let us down. We accepted Acheson's proposals for German rearmament because the French failed to make their contribution and the other NATO countries hardly counted at the time. But I

never expected that the Germans would be provided with nuclear weapons. I should like if possible to see four fully equipped British divisions associated with NATO. A limited war is possible in Europe and it could be confined to conventional forces. Tactical atomic weapons if available would be useful under certain circumstances. But a limited conflict with a pause is a doubtful concept. We need at least thirty divisions in NATO with thirty reserve divisions behind them. This might be a more effective deterrent than a nuclear threat.

Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the creation of the Ministry of Defense? Did it result in a diminution of the position of the individual services and their chiefs?

A. A Defence department was in operation under Churchill during World War II. It was suggested in Labor Party circles before the outbreak of war. Attlee had proposed it and after the war he created the first peacetime Ministry of Defence. A.V. Alexander was appointed. Then it was just a minister with a secretariat. It was intended to coordinate the service departments and harmonize operations. But Alexander was always at the mercy of the Chiefs of Staff. Relations were not always happy. The Government failed to reorganize defense because we were forced to curtail the services after the war. Cripps insisted on keeping costs down, but this was difficult. When I became Minister of Defence, for the first time we decided to promote a three-year plan. I presented a 3.7 billion budget covering three years. The Korean War forced us to revise the figure to 4.4 billion. When we left, the Churchill Government reduced the figure. The Ministry of Defence developed gradually, and became a department in my time. Staffs both military and civil were increased and we maintained a closer association with the services. But we never reached the point of integration, although there was more effective cooperation than previously. It operated officially dur-

ing the Korean War and gave useful support to NATO. My relations with the Chiefs of Staff and NATO were excellent.