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a. NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) Slim, William	b. RANK	c. TITLE
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a. NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial) Carpenter, Ryan	b. TELEPHONE NO. (Include Area Code) 703-697-3306
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a. NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial)	b. OFFICE/AGENCY	c. TELEPHONE NO. (Include Area Code)

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Interview with NO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION FOUND

Field Marshal The Viscount Slim Jun 21, 2017

by Alfred Goldberg

January 15, 30, and February 6, 1963

- Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the Ministry of Defence?
- A. After the war, quite rightly I think, the new Labor Government separated the Offices of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence. I think that this is quite correct for peacetime, and that you must have a Ministry of Defence. We can't run defence as a troika system. My relations with the Ministers of Defence were always good. I have no complaint at all on that score; there was no undue friction. I didn't always agree with them, of course. During last of the time that I was C.I.G.S. I was Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff. There was no Dickie Mountbatten then (fourth member as Chairman). It had been proposed, of course. The British Chiefs of Staff were in a somewhat different position from the American service chiefs who were fighting so much among themselves after the war. We fought our quarrels in private and did our best to keep them in decent obscurity. Another very noticeable thing about the British system was the closeness with which we worked with the civil departments, especially the Foreign Office. We followed the good practice of having a senior representative of civil departments present at our meetings in matters that affected them. We tried to encourage our American colleagues to do the

same on their part. It was often very difficult for us to find out what was the American view. There were too many American viewpoints on some matters and this left your Allies wondering what you were doing and where you were. Most of our troubles arose from things like the diversity of American views. At the end of the war we had to get a new relationship between the British and the Americans. We wanted a very close relationship and I think that the United States did also. The Atomic Energy Act made things more difficult between us. We made a great effort (especially Sir Oliver Franks) to get the Americans to work together. The U. S. Navy apparently did its own independent planning for war. The military services were not as close to the State Department as they should have been. It made cooperation much more difficult. The service chiefs in this country were in intimate contact with the Prime Minister, and that is necessary. Both Attlee and Churchill handled the Chiefs of Staff remarkably well, very much better than ever before. The Chiefs of Staff used to attend Cabinet meetings when serious questions involving military matters arose. They attended Cabinet meetings with great frequency. We were allowed to speak freely, and we were terribly grateful for that. The question arose of having a Chairman for the C.O.S., the super duper type that we have now. I was opposed to it. Montgomery, my predecessor I think, was in favor of it. The Chiefs of Staff should be the best advisers on military questions that the government can get. If they differ on important points and don't agree, there is not much point in bringing in another military man. What you need is someone else

-- the Minister of Defence. It worked very well with us. We used to thrash it out and eventually come to an agreement. The first time I ever saw the nuclear deterrent business set out logically was in a C.O.S. paper -- about 1950, I think. We started on it in 1950 and it probably came out in 1951.

- Q. How do you feel about separating the members of the Chiefs of Staff from their services? Do you favor the defence staff approach?
- A. Our chief of staff has a double function. He is the professional head of his service and secondly a member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee in which he operates as a chief of staff representing his service but has a joint responsibility --like the member of a cabinet-- for all C.O.S. recommendations and action. This was the old conception. The trouble was that you had to discover and get hold of a rather strange chap who could be leader of the Army and also cooperate with equals and get on with politicians. The fatal thing is for a chief of staff to intrigue. That is absolutely fatal. The military man is never any good at it, anyhow. It splits him from his colleagues. The chief of staff also has to be able to stand up to pressure from his subordinates. I don't believe in separating the chiefs of staff from their services. If you do, they become sort of committeemen. The chief of staff needs a first rate deputy to run the day to day service side for him. The things that shake the services up are often the little things. The Army Council could be quite calm about war with Russia. The real explosions come about buttons on waistcoats. Like all staffs, defence staffs tend to get too big. This is a difficulty everywhere -- with both civilian and military staffs.

Q. What was the effect of World War II experience --especially strategic bombardment-- on British strategic thinking after the war?

A. I was never in Europe during the war except for one month. Except for that, I did not get west of Suez for seven years. After the war all of the services fell into the hands of people who had been successful commanders in Europe. They had received everything that opened and shut when they asked for it during the war. They had had a great superiority all around over the enemy. The result was that they had acquired the habit of thinking that you could not do things until you had everything that you required. They were somewhat like the White Knight in Alice in Wonderland. I was appalled at this attitude and I fought against it. In Burma we had fought with two bootlaces and a bamboo. The greatest evil of the last war was that it taught us to rely too much on equipment and transport. In the later stages in Africa and Europe we got too much. People relied on moving under an air umbrella. The aggressor is always ready and we are not. It is hard well trained units that you have to rely on at the start. For Korea we sent two battalions to begin with and they did very well, largely because they had been trained to move on their feet.

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., On the whole I think they did. The C.O.S. wrote that joint paper on the deterrent and that was agreed among the three of us. We took a week and sat until we had done it. That was the first time that the C.O.S. of any nation, as far as I know, got down to seeing

how the thing would work. It had a great effect on the British Government. I remember Winston Churchill coming back to the Chiefs of Staff and saying, "This is a state paper of the greatest importance but that does not mean that I concur in all of it." Under both the Labor and Conservative Governments the C.O.S. had a united front. The C. O. S. were strong after the war. On one-year conscription we took a strong stand. Monty had accepted one-year conscription, but I couldn't accept it. We couldn't train and use a man in the East in one year. The Labor Government was very good on this issue.

Q. What were the basic motivations for the creation and maintenance of a British nuclear deterrent?

A. The same reasons that General de Gaulle has. It's partly because you don't want to be completely dependent on somebody else. It is quite conceivable that British and U. S. interests in some parts of the world may not coincide. If you can maintain a nuclear deterrent force it is still desirable. Everyone is inclined to run off on the nuclear war and say that it will all be over in ten minutes. But there will be a good many stages before that happens. Conventional forces might isolate and end the conflict while it is still small and before it reached a nuclear stage.

Q. Was the development of this force accomplished at the expense of Britain's contribution to NATO?

A. No, I don't think so. Of course there were cutbacks in conventional forces, but there had to be. You Americans can have many channels going at the same time, but we cannot.

Q. Do you favor the continued maintenance of an independent nuclear deterrent for the United Kingdom?

A. As I said before, I do, but every new invention makes it more difficult for Britain. It is a matter of what we can afford.

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

A. Eisenhower developed effective command and control during the war. An Anglo-American system can be developed that will work very well. The only people that can run an equal show are the Americans and the British. It is like a company in which you have 50-50 shares. In a larger group you can work it so long as one country is really predominant. In the Common Market France is predominant and the others don't like it, but the organization goes on.

Q. What was the British role in conceiving NATO?

A. A very big role. We were the leading people in the organization that preceded NATO. I think that Britain played a very great role, especially in getting the Americans in. The Americans would not have come in unless we had. We had a great deal to do with getting an American commander. The Americans were not all that popular with the Allies. You don't realize that you make more enemies by giving people things. Certainly the British C.O.S. were very hot on having an American commander. If we had an American commander we would get the stuff we needed and the Americans would be in. In my time we believed in NATO very much. When we got the deterrent going there did grow up a sort of feeling everywhere that if we had the great deterrent what was the use of having all of those soldiers sitting around on the ground.

- Q. Has the nuclear arms problem played an important part in frustrating the development of a powerful NATO conventional war capacity?
- A. Not so much a NATO capacity. I think it may have affected British capacity. Given that wrong attitude, "what is the use of conventional forces sitting on the ground." They shouldn't sit on the ground --they should move.
- Q. Do you favor the buildup of larger conventional war forces by the United States and NATO? Could the West hope to match Russian conventional power?
- A. I think it is a great mistake to let the conventional forces down. They are the fire brigade to stop the fire. We British have commitments all over the world and we have internal security requirements in many parts of the world. The conventional forces are needed for this; there is nothing like well-disciplined infantry to do the job. If I had to economize I would do so on the nuclear forces in Britain, rather than on the "fire brigade" conventional forces we need. We should even be able to match the Russians in well armed conventional forces if we included the United States. Without the U.S. of course the West could not.
- Q. Do you think that use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe would lead to all-out use of nuclear weapons?
- A. I think that it is possible to outface the Russians in Europe in the same way that you outfaced them in Cuba. But it is Brinkmanship. I have a feeling that the Russians are really frightened of war. They are not prepared to plunge into war the way the French and Germans are. The German is a carnivorous sheep who follows the leader and devours his neighbors. The Russian threatens but he does not really want to fight. He would not have fought the

Germans if he could have avoided it. I don't think that tactical nuclear weapons would make much difference to that in Europe. The only thing that could happen in Europe would be a Russian advance or invasion. If we use tactical nuclear weapons a great war would be inevitable anyhow. If Russia invades, then all the chips will be on the table and everything goes. If the Chinese had been told that if they invaded India, there would be a nuclear attack on Peking, they would not have done it. We have a situation today where the stronger power does not have an incentive to attack. The only hope of an atomic aggressor is to get off so early that he can avoid retaliation.

In 1950 I began to think that the Russians would invade Europe in 1953. With the support of the Government, I brought in the Z reservist scheme. About 1951, it seemed to me, the Russians knew that the Americans had the bomb all right, but they did not believe that you could deliver it. They thought their fighters could hold you off. They later changed their minds and realized you could deliver it.

- Q. To what extent have financial considerations come to affect the strategic thinking of the planners?
- A. The chief way is in the strength of one's forces and to a certain extent in their training. Therefore, obviously, one's strategic conceptions are affected. Apart from that, financial considerations do not have so great an effect. The whole thing is to make your resources meet your commitments. Any military business must plan ahead. We are wrong if we are not planning for something three years ahead. We must foresee the changes in Africa, for instance.
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- Q. Among the factors that influence strategic thinking and policy, what weight would you give to technology in the postwar period?
- A. A great deal. I would say the important advances in technology for the Army has been the increase in air transport and its greater use.