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## DEFENSE OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND OFFICE OF SECURITY REVIEW

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Interview with Jun 21, 2017

The Rt. Hon. Harold Watkinson

by Alfred Goldberg

March 28, and April 11, 1963

- Q. Do you know whether the Labor Government of 1945-51 had done any serious thinking or planning for the employment of nuclear weapons?
- A. Lord Attlee did not consult his Cabinet colleagues about the decision to go ahead. As P. M., the Prime Minister probably got his advice through the civilian and military scientists. He probably took no political advice on this at all. I think that the Russian atomic explosion in 1949 did accelerate the development of nuclear weapons in this country. It did strengthen the hand of the right wing of the Labour Party.
- Q. Did the British military services have an agreed single strategic concept to guide their planning and programming?
- A. Yes. I can only speak of the period of the Conservative Government, from 1951 onward. There has never been any disagreement about the broad strategic plan. First we have always attached great importance to our Navy, on which our commonwealth communications depend. Now both sea and air communications. We always felt that the maintenance of strong ~~bases~~<sup>bases</sup> at Singapore and Aden, and until recently Cyprus and Malta, were just as important as our contribution to the NATO central front. We and the Americans are the only NATO countries with enormous worldwide commitments. We should add East Africa to the bases I have already mentioned. All of our thinking has been dominated by our need to hold on to our worldwide communications and commitments. Our Commonwealth associations are of great importance to us.

In the politics of defence, the nuclear deterrent has figured unduly merely because of a difference in view between the two political parties. The Leftwing of the Labour Party has been opposed to nuclear weapons for a long time, at least since the time of the Sandys doctrine of deterrence. We never devoted more than ten percent of the defence budget to the nuclear deterrent. Our main effort has always been sea-power and airpower.

Q. What was the attitude of the military services towards the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Staff?

A. I would think that during Mr. Sandys period there was feeling by the services, against central control because he was a very tough and a very good Minister who was determined to get his way, as every good minister should. I can sum it up by saying there has never been a real revolt. My own knowledge is from 1955 onwards, and there never were any internecine struggles. In my day the thing was considered settled. I would have taken the steps toward further centralization that Mr. Thorneycroft has taken but for the feeling that I shared with Lord Mountbatten and the Chiefs of Staff that the change would be inopportune until regular remitting had succeeded. I agreed with Lord Mountbatten that we had to do the things he wanted, but that we would have to wait until the effects of the major changeovers in the services --especially recruiting-- had been well absorbed. We had, in fact, in 1959/62 secured the things that matter. The Minister of Defence has had absolute and complete operational control since the time of the Kuwait operation. All that matters in operational control is now under the Minister. Now will come the slow integration of management, logistics and the other elements of the military organization.

Q. When did the opposition to the nuclear deterrent assume serious political proportions?

A. I think this occurred when Gaitskell got into trouble with his annual party conference and the Ban the Bomb movement got started. Within the Labour Party, certain people like George Brown wanted to defend the nuclear deterrent while Harold Wilson wanted to move to the left and ban it. Once the Labour Party got torn by this issue, it clearly became a hot political potato.

Q. Did the Army and Navy have serious reservations about the RAF nuclear deterrent force?

A. Certainly as to cost. They would not have been doing their job if they hadn't argued the thing out. Lord Mountbatten and I felt we had enough power because the Minister of Defence has the ultimate decision in all defence matters. The Minister of Defence has effective control of the Chiefs of Staff and he can and does preside over them when he wishes. The Permanent Secretary decides how much money goes to each of the services. The Chief Scientific Advisor has ultimate control over all weapons projects. The Minister of Defence never had trouble in getting his way. The Prime Minister is unlikely not to side with his Minister of Defence.

Q. What were the chief motivations behind the 1957 White Paper?

A. It has been much misquoted. My personal view is that with nuclear weapons you start in the ice age and then go through a period --as France does now-- when you believe that the nuclear weapon is so dominant that you don't need large conventional forces. It is equally fair to say that in this country the Government and Mr. Sandys found it a useful doctrine for a period when recruitment was difficult.

Although Sandys was accused unfairly of going to great lengths on the policy of nuclear deterrence, this was largely a party political agreement. We knew that as long as we had our overseas bases we had to have conventional forces. They were more valuable to us outside of Europe than in central Europe.

Now we have come to more balanced views. We must have the nuclear force as the ultimate weapon, but it is not the end-all. We must have the right balance in our forces. It is really how the White Paper was interpreted that caused the trouble. I have always believed that the British nuclear deterrent was a contribution to Western strength because the quality of independence lies in the capacity to make nuclear weapons and the capacity to say I will or will not use or contemplate nuclear weapons in support of any particular strategic plan. A nuclear force puts you in the nuclear club and gives you the right to say that you will or will not make a contribution.

- Q. Was the development of the British nuclear deterrent force accomplished at the expense of Britain's contribution to NATO forces?
- A. I don't think so. The British contribution to NATO is limited and always has been by foreign exchange and manpower. Countries can always find the money for defence when they absolutely have to, but they can't always have the trained men to meet their worldwide commitments. That takes time and effort and is a matter of the right manpower.
- Q. Is it possible for the United Kingdom to be an independent nuclear power if it is dependent on the United States for vital equipment?
- A. Yes, because the quality of independence is primarily the capacity to make a modern sophisticated nuclear weapon. All that the United Kingdom ever proposed to buy from the United States was the means of delivery

of the weapons, and the means of delivery once obtained remains in the possession of the buying power. It pays us to buy them rather than to develop them ourselves because of the rate of obsolescence. We have saved a great deal by giving up trying to produce our own delivery vehicles --a Skybolt type of vehicle, for instance.

- Q. Is it desirable and feasible to create an independent European or NATO deterrent?
- A. Yes. You will remember that in his lecture last night Herr Strauss asked three questions about the proposed multilateral nuclear force. The third asked if it rested upon the belief that the Americans would hesitate to incinerate themselves for the sake of Europe. I would go further and say that the Allies don't have any fear that an American Administration would hold back if Europe were attacked. The important thing that matters is not what the Allies feel, it is what Khrushchev and his successors feel that would matter. If there were a public clamor in the United States against the use of the bomb --something like our nuclear disarmament and ban the bomb people-- Khrushchev and his successors might miscalculate and be willing to risk a limited war in Europe. Therefore, it is necessary and desirable to have a European deterrent without the Americans but tied in to NATO and the United States. It is much more a political and psychological move than a military one. It is not a matter of simply adding a few more atom bombs.
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Q. Did possession of the independent deterrent force during the past decade actually have the effects desired by its creators?

A. Yes again. Britain, as you know, got into the business through its Tube Alloys organization during the war. Much of our work on and contribution to the development of the atomic bomb was lost to us through the action of Congress in passing the McMahon Act. That greatly affected relations between the two countries for a number of years after the war. Attlee couldn't do much about it, but had Churchill been in office there would have been a great row. Our possession of nuclear energy has made us an equal partner in disarmament talks, it has enabled us to talk to the United States as an equal, and it has helped insure us against nuclear blackmail. The Russians knew that we had a deterrent force and that we would have to be considered in any actions they planned.

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

A. We have always tried to spend about seven percent of our gross national product on defence. Therefore, finance has always been a major factor in our defence planning. The military planners have always been aware of money ceilings and have therefore been affected. I would not, in my day, know of any decision that was taken only on financial grounds. There are many factors involved in strategic planning. Financial considerations limit the details of plans but not the major strategy.

Q. In assessing the factors that influence strategic thinking and policy-making, what weight would you give to technology?

A. Whether the scientists are the masters of the military or vice versa is very difficult to decide. If you could lock up the scientists for five

years you could have a logical defence program. Technology has really dominated strategy in recent years. As soon as you have made a plan you are presented with a whole new series of weapons and have to start over again. We have gone from aircraft to missiles to space. Our Ministry of Defence is really a troika with the Permanent Secretary, the Chief of Defence Staff, and the Chief Scientific Advisor, in charge of vital areas. Technology has been recognized as a dominant element in strategy. The C.D.S. is the final advisor of the government in all utility matters it operates.