

INTRODUCTION

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We have in this volume a fascinating set of documents to illustrate the saga of Cabinets and the bomb. For me, the richest jewel is almost at the outset, in the form of Clement Atlee's paper—surely his own work, from the laconic directness of its expression—written for a small number of his colleagues on 28 August 1945. Within weeks of the two bombs on Japan, he has grasped the significance of what has happened with a clarity that some flashier minds still had not equalled decades later: '... even the modern conception of war to which in my lifetime we have become accustomed is now completely out of date' and '... this invention has made it essential to end wars... the whole conception of war [must be] banished from people's minds and from the calculations of government.'

I would like to pick out from this treasure chest eight themes—not in any particular chronological or other order—which readers might like to explore.

The first theme is the *rationale* for Britain's going into the nuclear-weapon business. This has diverse strands discernible. There is prestige, though not in a shallow showy sense: if we have this capability, other countries will continue to take us seriously as we engage in our responsibilities around the globe. There is the seat at the top table, so that we can make ourselves heard in top-level disarmament and arms-control dealings. There is influence with the United States, though interestingly the paths of that are rarely spelled out in any clear analytical way, save perhaps for references to responsibility-sharing in NATO. There is the contribution to Western deterrence capability, and by the 1960s this runs alongside the second-centre-of-decision argument and the concept of independence—though there is some wrestling with what independence needs to mean (it is piquant to compare Harold Wilson in and out of office on this). But, despite the renowned early remark by Ernest Bevin about a Union Jack on the bomb, there is scarcely any trace, at any stage, of what might be called straight Gaullisme—the notion that 'we are a great historic nation that should not put its ultimate trust in anyone else.'

My second theme is that of *challenge* to the policy. This is not confined to periods of Labour government—there are serious doubts about its continuance expressed within the Cabinet in 1962 and 1972, for example, on economic and value-for-money grounds. But of course opposition is most evident under Labour. It is striking to see Wilson in 1974 not only having to explain to Cabinet, almost apologetically, his having authorised a nuclear test but even then having, under pressure, to submit afterwards a paper filling out the explanation.

I find myself wondering just why challenges to nuclear-weapon status were more frequently recurrent, and went deeper, in Britain than in any of the other four Treaty-recognised possessors. I suspect that the answer may lie not in any distinctive positive feature of the British scene, but merely in the absence or relative weakness in Britain of any of the special perceived national imperatives which diversely motivated the other four (the United States, the Soviet Union, France and China).

My third theme is *cost*. This needs little elaboration—it was a continual worry for every Cabinet. Again, though, the comparison with France is notable. While we do not know (or at least I do not) all the detail of France’s internal deliberations, it is surely remarkable that France bore with much less agonising—or much less evident agonising—a resource burden almost always several times higher than Britain’s. (The opportunity cost of that was seen, of course, in the differences of conventional force contribution to the Atlantic Alliance and in the 1991 Gulf War.)

My fourth theme is *the attitude of the United States*. This varies significantly over time. For a decade from 1946 the McMahon Act holds sway, and there is little or no collaboration, though some discreet dialogue. That changes in 1958 after our weapon tests in the Pacific have demonstrated our technical competence, but reservations persist in some parts of the United States government. The Skybolt episode quite aside, Robert McNamara makes a speech notoriously disobliging to Britain and France at Ann Arbor in 1962, and parts of the State Department, focused on an arms-control agenda, did not like the Polaris deal at Nassau. The papers show Nixon and Kissinger sympathetic to British capability, but uneasy about support in Congress for further aid to it. I myself recall an informal discussion in London in 1979 when Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, asked by Francis Pym what he thought about British continuance in the business, said ‘I regard it as modestly advantageous—with the emphasis on the adverb.’ But the George W. Bush letter of 7 December 2006 shows no reservations. And it is interesting, throughout the saga, that there never seems to be any trace of a United States’ attempt to use their support of our nuclear capability as a lever to secure co-operation in other fields, as over military involvement in the Vietnam War.

My fifth theme concerns *France*. Alongside a gut reluctance to contemplate France as the only West European nuclear power, the idea of Anglo-French co-operation flits in and out of the papers. Harold Macmillan is interested in 1962, and Edward Heath (more markedly) in the early 1970s. But quite aside from French reservations, the close co-operation with the United States, which was always far the greater prize for us, entailed constraints, as the paper of 22 September 1976 brings out—constraints theoretically on both sides of the partnership, though one may legitimately wonder whether the United States observed them as meticulously as we in prudence felt bound to.

My sixth theme is the *ethics* of the whole business. Explicit references to moral concerns are notable mostly for their absence, though there is recorded on 8 July 1954 a significant Cabinet exchange about worries of this kind over the shift to the H-bomb. And there is virtually no discussion about operational aspects (with ethical implications) like targeting; it is apparently taken for granted at least until 1980—when the public document explaining the choice of Trident, not in this volume, contained a low-key but significant choice of words of different import—that the measurement currency of deterrent threat is the destruction of cities.

My seventh theme is *institutional pressure*. There is less of this than critics sometimes supposed. The Royal Air Force was always very keen on the strategic nuclear role, and continued to cherish its remaining capability for over a decade even after the central responsibility had passed to the Royal Navy in 1969. The

Navy itself was occasionally ambivalent—not all sailors found the role itself operationally attractive, and there was recurrent unease about whether the displacement effect of its cost within the defence budget might hurt other things which most of the Navy prized more highly. I myself recall first having been drawn into the ‘airborne versus seaborne’ debate in 1961, well before Nassau, and the Admiralty’s desire to win the debate seemed at that time by no means unqualified. The scientists at Aldermaston and elsewhere were naturally key players as advisers on what was feasible, but contrary to some public suspicion they rarely if ever attempted to drive policy—it is not the case, for example, that they pushed specially for the Chevaline project.

My eighth and final theme is *secrecy*. Though once policy was settled plenty of material was usually—and, once more, contrary to anti-nuclear legend—made available, papers in advance of decision were almost always very closely held, no doubt primarily so as not to give information prematurely to the Soviet Union (the scars of espionage scandals took time to heal). But there can be no doubt that under Labour governments there was an additional strand of motivation in the desire not to expose too much surface to major figures within the Cabinet who were deeply opposed to the whole nuclear business. That was clearly so, for vivid example, during the years when Chevaline was being developed, though there was a further and more externally legitimate reason for that: Chevaline was a technically demanding project that seemed in earlier stages by no means certain to succeed, and it would have been very damaging to the credibility of our deterrent stance to disclose its existence and purpose and then have to admit that we had not managed to make it work. When Francis Pym told Parliament about it in 1980, development had reached a point where we were confident of bringing it to fruition.

A last reflection. It is agreeable, is it not, to read, even under Top Secret classifications, thorough and balanced papers for the Cabinet or its committees, with ensuing discussion coolly and carefully recorded. *Autres temps, autres moeurs*, perhaps.

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