THE NUCLEAR CERTIFICATE

Of all the thousands of decisions taken by British Cabinets since 1945, each one carefully recorded and preserved for eventual release at what is now the National Archives, those touching upon the nuclear weapon leave a special trace. Quite apart from the cost, the science and the logistics involved, a bundle of forces come into play in which instinct and emotion jostle with strategy and reality—the whole business overlain by uncertainty about the world, Britain's place in it, and the likelihood of an international clash so serious that actually using the dreadful thing might have to be contemplated. Several sets of ministers of both major parties have been involved in such decision-taking, and in each generation the mixture of motivations and justifications shifts and rearranges itself, though, as in a child's kaleidoscope, many of the particles remain the same. This study is about the *private* impulses and judgements that swirled around the Cabinet Room when big bomb decisions awaited, and the stories ministers told themselves about why this was the moment to get into the nuclear weapons business, or to ensure the country stayed in it decades later unless a disarmament-minded set of successors took their seats around the Cabinet Table in the meantime.

It was a remarkable Frenchman, Raymond Aron, who combined the gifts of a historical sociologist and a journalist with those of a cold-war strategic analyst who, in his post-1945 generation, caught best the specialness of the nuclear factor in high politics and history. In a famous essay on Max Weber, Aron stressed the importance of projecting back into past decisions and decision-makers the same degree of uncertainty *we* feel *today* about the future. 'The effort,' Aron wrote in 1959,

> to avoid the retrospective deterministic illusion regarding events or actions is . . . characteristic of the political historian—the historian who . . . wants to respect the proper dimension of action: namely, uncertainty with regard to the future. . .[1]

Three years earlier, Aron had himself set about untangling the motives behind the British government's determination to upgrade itself from an atomic to a thermonuclear power, with a degree of insight that suggested he had actually seen the Cabinet Secretary's minutes of the discussion which preceded the Churchill administration's decision to commission the building of a UK hydrogen bomb in the spring and summer of 1954 (a decision Whitehall managed to keep secret until the February 1955 Defence White Paper was published[2]).

In his *On War*, Aron depicted the British intention to go thermonuclear as seeking a 'certificate of grandeur', a modern equivalent of the fleets, armies and colonial territories that were required by a nineteenth-century nation wishing to 'enter the exclusive club of the world's masters.'[3] This, as we shall see later, was very much the flavour of the Chiefs of Staff's briefing for the Cabinet and of Churchill's selling of the upgrade from a fission to a fusion weapon in the Cabinet Room.

'Certificates' of several kinds were involved in the six decades of decision-taking encompassed by this book: insurance certificates (lest the United States withdraw its nuclear shield from western Europe); certificates of deterrence (would the Soviet Union risk attacking a stand-alone Britain, even without an American guarantee, if Russia stood to lose tens of its cities in a UK-launched retaliation?); political certificates of various kinds (wouldn't the UK be in a stronger position to restrain the USA in a period of rising international tension if it, too, were a nuclear power? Would the rest of western Europe be happy if, following a unilateral British disarmament, the French were left as the sole continental nuclear-tipped nation?). For the British bomb, ever since the Attlee government decided to go-it-alone and make an atomic weapon without US assistance, has been as much if not more of a political weapon than a military one. And the becoming and remaining a nuclear power is one of the most fascinating running themes of the post-war years. So far, every government has wished to either acquire, retain or renew its nuclear certificate.

Though the bulk of the documents reproduced herein date from 1945, the story does not. By the time Clement Attlee wrote his first memorandum on the bomb in August that year within a few weeks of becoming Prime Minister, another British premier had become the first and the last to authorise the use of an atomic weapon. Yet, till Attlee, no British Cabinet or Cabinet committee had been involved in nuclear decision-taking of any kind. For Winston Churchill, 'Tube Alloys' issues (as the bomb project was codenamed during World War II) were, first and last, a prime ministerial not a Cabinet matter. He declined all suggestions that he should consult even the Service Ministers leading the War Office, the Admiralty and the Air Ministry, let alone a formal group of colleagues, even after the secret Quebec Agreement of 1943. At Quebec, the allies' chief nuclear collaborators, Roosevelt and Churchill (the Canadians were also involved in the Manhattan Project, the cover-name for the bomb's development) agreed that the US President and the UK Prime Minister would need to concur jointly before the weapon, once produced, could be used.

Thanks to Churchill's fading memory a decade later during his twilight premiership, we can piece together the essentials of this example of truly prime ministerial British government. For reasons that are unclear, in January 1953 Churchill asked his scientific adviser, the Paymaster General, Lord Cherwell, to outline for him 'the principal events leading up to the dropping of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'

In his reply, Cherwell began with the constitutional question:

> On March 21, 1944, Sir John Anderson [Churchill's minister for the bomb] suggested that the Tube Alloys programme should be mentioned to the Service Ministers and to the other ministers concerned but you minuted 'I do not agree.' Sir John Anderson was perturbed by your decision and I am fairly certain that in the spring of 1945 he made another attempt to persuade you to bring the matter to Cabinet and that I supported him. No papers bearing on this can however be found. In the event, it seems, the question was never discussed at Cabinet or in the Defence Committee.[4]

Buckingham Palace, however, was informed about work on the bomb though this did not become known until 2005 when the wartime diaries of King George

VI's Private Secretary, Sir Alan ('Tommy') Lascelles, were published. In his entry for 8 February 1945, Lascelles recorded:

> Sir Edward Appleton, FRS, who runs the Government's Scientific Research department came to see me, to advise about 'hush-hush' places which the King wants to visit; a genial little man, who looks like a fox-hunter, and is an ardent Trollopian. I asked him about the progress of harnessing the atom [Lascelles plainly knew about the 'Tube Alloys' project already; but who told him and when and whether Lascelles informed the King we do not know]: apparently you can't do this without about ten acres of laboratories etc., and had the Germans got such a layout, we should certainly know about it. Our own outfit has been transported to the USA, since it was considered too vulnerable for this country during the Blitz [in fact, this decision was taken later]; there, with help readily given by American scientists, there has been rapid development.

Appleton was even more forthcoming about likely future plans to deploy the weapon:

> Appleton did not think that there would be time to use any sort of atom-filled bomb against the Germans, but there might be an opportunity of doing so in Japan. I asked what would be the result. 'Oh,' he answered, 'a couple of them would end the war overnight ~ there is no doubt about that.' I said that it might be a good thing if humanity were given proof of the effects of these fearful engines, as it might convince it that any further indulgence in war would inevitably end in its own annihilation. He said that the deterrent aspect was an important one, and had not been overlooked; but, apart from its military side, the atom had immense commercial possibilities, and was destined to replace the world's already dwindling resources of coal and oil. I wish I understood these things better.[5]

For all the strain on his brain induced by the Appleton briefing, Lascelles knew far more about the bomb in early 1945 than any member of the War Cabinet, Churchill and Anderson apart.

Two months later, as Cherwell's January 1953 minute reminded Churchill, the Manhattan Project was approaching a critical stage:

> In April 1945 Lord Wilson [Whitehall's representative on the Combined Policy Committee which dealt with atomic matters in Washington] telegraphed to Sir John Anderson that the Americans proposed to make a full-scale test in the desert in July and to drop a bomb on the Japanese in August and I told you about this.[6]

At the end of May 1945, after the war in Europe had ended, 'it was agreed that in order to fulfil the Quebec Agreement the concurrence of HMG [His Majesty's Government] should be recorded at a meeting of the Combined Policy Committee.' On 29 June 1945 Anderson reminded Churchill of the agreed procedure. 'In this minute,' Cherwell reminded Churchill, 'he requested authority to instruct our representatives to give the concurrence of HMG in the decision to use the bomb against the Japanese. You initialled the minute on July 1.' On 4 July 1945, Wilson 'formally gave the concurrence' at a meeting of the Combined Policy Committee in Washington.[7]

By the time Churchill took this awesome decision, Britain was over a fortnight into a general election campaign. The country was balloted four days later on 5 July though the result was not announced for another three weeks to give time for the Armed Forces' votes to be gathered and tallied around the world. To his own and his country's surprise Clement Attlee led the Labour Party to victory.[8]

How much did Attlee know about 'Tube Alloys' before becoming Prime Minister? At the time the wartime Coalition Government broke up in June 1945, Attlee, as he recalled in his memoirs, 'did not know then that the atom bomb project was about to come to fruition, for knowledge of it had been kept to a very narrow circle. It looked at that time to be likely that the Japanese would have to be dislodged piecemeal from the wide area which they occupied.'[9] Attlee's official biographer, Kenneth Harris, suggested that is was on 1 August 1945, six days after Attlee had become Prime Minister, that Roosevelt's successor, President Harry Truman, told him in a letter (they were both at the Potsdam Conference in Berlin) that the US Air Force was now ready to drop an atomic bomb on Japan.[10]

Attlee, as he made plain to his former Press Secretary, Francis Williams, 15 year later, had no difficulty with Truman's decision (though how much he knew about the details of the Quebec Agreement or Churchill's decision on 1 July to agree to the bomb's use, remains a matter of conjecture). 'Of course,' he told Williams,

> at the time we knew nothing, I certainly knew absolutely nothing, about the consequences of dropping the bomb except that it was larger than an ordinary bomb and had a much greater explosive force. If were are going back you must look at the situation as it then was. The Japanese were scattered over wide areas and we had no knowledge—I hadn't anyway—that they were likely to collapse. Knowing how they had fought in Burma, the odds were they would fight it out wherever they were with immense loss of life on both sides unless we could get a rescript from the Emperor ordering them to stop. The bomb was a way of getting such a rescript. And in fact we did get it.[11]

Two bombs were dropped on Japan. The first struck Hiroshima on 6 August; the second, Nagasaki on 9 August. As Appleton had predicted, two were enough to end the war in the Far East.

With all the other duties placed upon his shoulders during the first weeks of his premiership, the bomb and those 'consequences' of which he had until so recently known 'absolutely nothing' became a great preoccupation of Attlee's in August 1945. He swiftly commissioned an *ad hoc* ministerial Cabinet Committee on Atomic Energy (GEN 75 in the Cabinet Office's code). And it is with the first paper it took, prepared by Attlee's own hand, that this documentary study begins (apart from a couple of extracts giving the flavour of the Frisch-Peierls memorandum of 1940 and the Maud Report of 1941 which, between them, triggered the British quest for a bomb). For it was in the first weeks of Attlee's Government that the mechanics of Cabinet government became bound into the question of the bomb. The study finishes with the exchange of letters between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush in December 2006 (and the vote in Parliament in March 2007) which, unless an intervening government on either side of the Atlantic cancels the arrangement, should ensure that the UK

will have a nuclear weapon with a 'bloody Union Jack on top of it', to borrow Ernest Bevin's now famous words at a GEN 75 meeting in October 1946,[12] for at least a century from the date of the first atomic test in October 1952.

In between Attlee's August 1945 memorandum and the Blair-Bush correspondence, the documents herein trace the January 1947 decision to make a British atomic bomb; Churchill's amazement at finding, on returning to office in 1951, that Attlee's administration had concealed its £100m budget so successfully from Parliament, through to his own Cabinet's decision to authorise the manufacture of the vastly more powerful hydrogen bomb. The papers illuminate the decision of the Macmillan government in 1960 to purchase the US stand-off Skybolt missile as a way of extending the life of the RAF's 'V' force, and then to secure the submarine-launched Polaris system when the Americans abandoned Skybolt at the end of 1962.

Labour politics became integral to the story once more in the autumn and winter of 1964 when Harold Wilson persuaded his Cabinet, despite the appearance given by a manifesto pledge in the October election that it might be cancelled,[13] to proceed with Polaris. The debate about improving it, through what was to become known as the Chevaline project, designed to penetrate the anti-ballistic missile screen around Moscow, is followed through the Wilson government of 1966–70, and into the Heath administration of 1970–74 and the Labour governments of 1974–79.

A small amount of information is available from the highly secret ministerial group Jim Callaghan convened in 1978 to consider Polaris *replacement*, not merely improvement, once the submarines went out of service in the 1990s—a decision eventually taken by the first Thatcher administration in 1980–81 when it opted for the US Trident missile. Finally the manner in which the Blair government reached its intention of replacing the Trident D5 system, with most likely an updated version of the D5 and a new squadron of Royal Navy submarines to carry them into the 2050s, will be analysed.

Before turning to the documents themselves, a word of caution is needed. Acquiring the declassified papers and minutes of the Cabinets and Cabinet committees involved might, on first acquaintance, give the impression that this, after a suitable lapse of time, is the equivalent of reading the delayed product of a bug or two in the Cabinet Room. Revealing though the Cabinet official record can be, this is not so. For there is a certain austerity about the style of minute-writing practised by the Cabinet Office. For example, nowhere in the GEN 75 record is to be found Bevin's use of the words 'We've got to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it.' For this we needed a BBC *Timewatch* documentary broadcast on 29 September 1982 in which one of the scientific advisers present at the crucial GEN 75 meeting, Sir Michael Perrin, recalled the Foreign Secretary's actual words.[14] Similarly, to appreciate the disarray in Churchill's Cabinet at the first of its H-bomb meetings on 7 July 1954, we had to await the release of Harold Macmillan's diaries to researchers.[15]

That said, there is much to be gleaned from retrospective eavesdropping on this succession of nuclear moments in Downing Street. Each has to be understood in the context of its times and of the personal and political formations of the men and women taking the decision. What it really needs is a substantial study in its own right, a task which I hope a member of the up-and-coming

generation of contemporary British historians will undertake. When the young scholar concerned eventually sets to work—hopefully with more evidence to draw on, given that little nuclear-weapons related material is declassified until 30 years have elapsed—this documentary reader will, with luck, provide at the very least some of the fuel that propels his or her project from its launch-pad. In the meantime, it is written as a contribution by the British Academy, the Mile End Institute at Queen Mary, University of London, and the National Archives to the debate stimulated by the decision of the Blair government to replace the current Trident system which is likely to extend over the next few years. The purpose of the study is explanation, *not* advocacy (in any direction) of the wisdom or otherwise of the UK becoming and remaining a certificated nuclear weapons power.

NOTE. The documents have been photographed from copies in the National Archives, and are printed in facsimile to provide a sense of authenticity. In several instances, redundant or tangential pages have been omitted.