

THE 1966 BRITISH DEFENSE REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The Labour Party, it will be recalled, won the British election of October 1964 by the narrow margin of five seats after being out of power for thirteen years. Its 1964 pre-election defense promises included determinations:

- o To reduce defense expenses.
- o To do away with the pretense of maintaining an independent British nuclear deterrent.
- o To create an Atlantic nuclear force under NATO.
- o To maintain a British presence East of Suez.
- o To keep the British Army of the Rhine up to size.

After only a few months in power, the Labour Government issued the 1965 defense white paper. As might be expected under the circumstances, it was an interim report promising a full treatment of defense policy after a prolonged review.¹ The 1965 white paper and the defense

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¹ See Statement on the Defence Estimates 1965, Cmnd. 2592, February 1965.

debate which followed it showed that regardless of pre-election promises the Labour Government was not eager to do away with nuclear weapons. It decided to complete the four Polaris submarines which had been started under the Conservatives and to keep some of the V-bombers as a "guarantee" to cover the non-nuclear powers in the Far East. It made few changes in the British defense posture.

After sixteen months of study and reflection the long-awaited defense review was completed and issued on February 22, in red covers, as the 1966 defense white paper.² Its appearance provoked far less reaction than anticipated. The defense debate in Parliament over the white paper was notable for its slow pace, for its lack of a clear policy clash between parties, and for the absence of senior participants on the Conservative side.³ Immediately thereafter Parliament adjourned to prepare for the March 31st general election in which Labour won a plurality of 97 seats.

Major subjects treated in the defense review included:

- o Financial constraints on the defense budget.
- o British commitments to NATO.
- o British commitments in the Middle and Far East.
- o Decisions about equipment of British air and sea forces.

²Statement on the Defence Estimates 1966, Part I, The Defence Review, Cmnd. 2901, and Part II, Defence Estimates, 1966-1967, Cmnd. 2902.

³For coverage of the defense debate see House of Commons Debates, Vol. 725 (22 February), cols. 239-265, and (7 and 8 March) cols. 1748-1863, and 1927-2048. Hereafter cited as Hansard.

BASIC FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Perhaps the most important single constraint on defense policy formulation in 1966 was the determination of the Labour Government to halt what they called the "runaway growth" of British defense expenditures by limiting the defense budget by 1969-70 to that of 1964-65, or to about 2000 million pounds at constant prices. Actions taken by August 5, 1965, were described as bringing the Government more than halfway toward the target by reducing defense expenditures to 2180 million pounds.⁴ Projected at that rate the expenditure for 1966-67 was estimated to fall slightly below 2000 million pounds.

These savings were accomplished by:

- o Reducing British commitments in the Middle East.
- o Purchasing American aircraft in place of more costly British planes.
- o Canceling a projected aircraft carrier and reducing the purchase of weapons.
- o Getting American orders for British ships and weapons.

These decisions were not accomplished without discord in the Labour Party. Christopher Mayhew, the Minister of Defence for the Navy, resigned, along with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir David Luce, in protest to the cancellation of the carrier and over the determination of the Government to maintain a British presence in the Far East along with other commitments on a defense budget of 2000 million pounds. In explaining his resignation to the House of Commons, Mayhew said:

⁴ Cmnd. 2901, Part I, para. 3.

This, then was the beginning of the trouble-- a rigid laying down in advance of two incompatible objectives, a world role and the 2000 million. The inevitable consequence followed, cuts in resources out of proportion to cuts in commitments....

In the case of the Navy, they are much wider than merely the cancellation of the CVA-01 but they are not specified. The cuts apply to all three Services and amount to one-sixth of the total budget. Some of these reductions were to cut out waste. On the other hand, the cuts were overwhelmingly in the realm of equipment and weapons and not in the realm of administration, pay and pensions⁵ which amount to one-half of the total budget.

This statement contrasts with the claims of the defense white paper that the savings achieved were "without any loss in military efficiency," a promise which recalls the assurance of Louis Johnson in the United States that he would cut the fat out of the defense program without cutting the bone and muscle. A critic usually friendly to the Labour Party observed: "The overall cost is to be cut but somehow we will emerge stronger. It is all very unconvincing."⁶

Enoch Powell, the Conservative spokesman for defense matters, challenged the Government on its claim that defense spending had steadily risen in the past several years. He attempted to show that British expenditure on defense from 1957-1965 remained fairly stable in relation to the Gross National Product. He gave the figures as:

⁵Hansard, 22 February, cols. 256-257.

⁶"Still East of Suez," in New Statesman, February 25, 1966.

| | | |
|----------|------|---------------------|
| 1957-58: | 7.3% | of GNP ⁷ |
| 1958-59: | 7.1% | " " |
| 1959-60: | 6.8% | " " |
| 1960-61: | 6.9% | " " |
| 1961-62: | 6.9% | " " |
| 1962-63: | 6.9% | " " |
| 1963-64: | 6.6% | " " |
| 1964-65: | 6.5% | " " |

He predicted that in order to achieve the additional savings of 180 million pounds, cuts in the manpower of the forces would have to be made. It would not be enough to withdraw British troops from Aden, Libya, and other places; real savings could only come through a reduction in the size of the standing Army.

Labour Party spokesmen admitted that reaching the objective of reducing the defense budget to 2000 million pounds would depend on the procurement of American orders for British ships, weapons, and goods, but gave assurances that these would be forthcoming. To those who doubted the possibility of selling the required amount of goods to the United States, the Labour spokesman said that the questioners would have to admit their lack of faith in the word of the United States or in the competitive ability of British industry to sell against American firms when there was no tariff or other barrier.⁸

NATO AND THE DEFENSE OF EUROPE

The defense white paper sets the primary purpose of British armed forces as defending the freedom of the

⁷Hansard, 7 March, col. 1749.

⁸Hansard, 7 March, col. 1861.

British people. It sees the security of the United Kingdom largely dependent on preventing war in Europe. The likelihood of such a war is regarded as being low because a belief exists that war at any level may escalate into nuclear war. According to the white paper there is "no sign that the credibility of the nuclear response has fallen below the level required to deter aggression in Europe."⁹ The much-discussed Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) is dismissed in two sentences showing that it-- along with the MLF--can be considered as dead.

The white paper admits that the decision to use nuclear weapons in Europe requires "further study." On the assumption that escalation to higher levels of violence will rapidly follow the introduction of nuclear weapons into a limited conflict in Europe, the white paper concludes that it would be wrong to assume that a general war in Europe might last "several months" after the American nuclear forces have been engaged. This makes it possible to reduce outlays on supplies.

As foreshadowed by speeches of Denis Healey, the Minister of Defence, the white paper sees the possibility that small unpremeditated conflicts may occur in Europe which will require "conventional forces to deal with them." This does not mean that the British favor an increase in such forces in Europe; they believe that the forces already deployed are "adequate" if properly maintained, armed, and equipped. Where additional forces are needed, such as in air support for conventional operations, the possibility is seen of providing this by

⁹ Cmnd. 2901, Part II, para. 10.

reducing the number of long-range nuclear strike aircraft now being maintained.¹⁰

An intention is announced to maintain British ground forces in West Germany "at about their existing level" provided that an arrangement can be worked out to share this expense with West Germany. In the condition of "no threat of war in Europe," the maintenance of the British Army of the Rhine was described by one well-informed British observer as being as much for the purpose of "watching the West Germans" as "watching the Russians." Some reduction in the British naval forces assigned to NATO is planned after consultation with Britain's allies.

The European section of the white paper is noteworthy for the absence of any discussion of nuclear free zones or of disengagement, and the ANF proposal, which played such an important role in the defense debate of 1965 is merely referred to as "a basis for discussion."¹¹ All V-bombers are now referred to as being "assigned" to NATO. Nothing is said about using them as a nuclear "guarantee" to India. No hopes are expressed that disarmament will permit Britain to make important reductions in her military establishment prior to 1970.

THE MIDDLE AND FAR EAST

The defense white paper stresses Britain's peace-keeping function outside Europe, particularly in the Middle and Far East. Here Britain's survival is not threatened, but she has many "interests" which justify

¹⁰Ibid., para. 14.

¹¹Ibid., para. 11.

her military presence. A visible British presence is regarded as a deterrent to local conflict in this area and even small British forces are thought capable of "preventing large-scale catastrophes" in certain circumstances. The white paper declares that no country with a sense of international responsibility would surrender a position of the kind that Britain has in these areas "unless it was satisfied that others could, and would, assume a similar role."

However, in the light of Britain's strained economy and over-stretched forces, it was decided that Britain's continued presence outside Europe should be subject to certain general limitations.¹² These included:

- o Not participating in war without the assistance of allies.
- o Not providing assistance to countries unless they offer the facilities required.
- o Not maintaining defense facilities in an independent country against its wishes.

While some economies were to be made in Cyprus and Malta, the major change announced for the Middle East was a decision to withdraw from Aden in 1968. As a compensation for this withdrawal a slight increase was to be made in the British facilities in the Persian Gulf.

Possibly reflecting pressure exerted by the United States, the white paper announced an intention to stay in Singapore under "acceptable conditions," as long as the Governments of Malaysia and Singapore want them to. If the British are forced out of Singapore at some future

¹²Ibid., para. 19.

time, they hope to establish base facilities in Australia. Hopes are expressed that an end to the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia may enable Britain to withdraw some of 40,000 troops now stationed in Malaysia.

The Conservatives could not very conveniently attack the restrictions imposed on future British interventions in the Middle and Far East because of the views expressed by Enoch Powell, their spokesman for defense matters. He had earlier urged withdrawal from the Far East and leaving defense of these areas to indigenous forces. The most damaging attack on the Government's policy came from Christopher Mayhew.¹³ He pointed out that these restrictions would prevent Britain from engaging in all but the most minor military operations without the consent and support of the United States. He argued that the case of Vietnam showed that it was impossible to predict that a small military operation would remain small. Mayhew favored reducing British commitments in the Far East and doubted the ability of any "white" nation to carry out a useful peace-keeping role East of Suez in the 1970's.

With the diminished forces contemplated for the 1970's in the Far East, Mayhew said that Britain would be acting "not as a power in its own right, but as an extension of United States power--not as allies, but as auxiliaries of the United States." He pointedly asked how Britain could be sure of American assistance. The United States, he observed, has come to the aid of the Australians with substantial military forces--but in

¹³Hansard, 22 February 1966, cols. 261-262.

return the Australians have sent a battalion to Vietnam. Britain does not intend to send forces there.

EQUIPMENT OF FORCES

In the area of equipment of forces, two controversial decisions were announced: one was to purchase 50 F-111-A's from the United States as a replacement for the Canberras until the Anglo-French variable geometry aircraft can take over in the middle 70's; the other was to cancel the projected aircraft carrier CVA-01. These two decisions were related since the F-111's were put forward as a substitute for the carrier.¹⁴

Curiously enough, Enoch Powell joined with Christopher Mayhew in arguing against the cancellation of the carrier. Mayhew made the point that carriers would be required for four reasons--if Britain was to keep its announced world role. These were:

- o They would enable Britain to exercise air power in any part of the oceans.
- o They would provide insurance against loss of land bases.
- o They were valuable on account of their "deterrent power."
- o They provided the necessary flexibility in the use of air power.¹⁵

¹⁴Ten F-111's were to be ordered immediately followed by an order for 40 more in April 1967. Ibid., Part III, paras. 3, 10.

¹⁵Hansard, 22 February 1966, col. 258.

The white paper planned for the continuation of the existing fleet of four British carriers into the 1970's for as long as they were useful. It suggested that the one function for which carriers were thought to be essential, the landing or withdrawing of troops against a sophisticated opposition, could best be carried out by land-based air power and would not be undertaken without the cooperation of allies. Small carrier forces had limited usefulness. Even if the projected carrier were built, the force Britain could maintain in the Far East would be limited to one carrier with another available on fifteen days notice. The costs of providing for the additional carrier were described as being too great for the return.¹⁶

Defence Minister Healey repeatedly reminded his listeners in Parliament that the Conservative opposition had not laid down a single new carrier in the thirteen years when they were in power. Now they criticized the Labour Government for not laying down a new carrier which would have only marginal value in the Far East in the middle 1970's. He claimed that the costs of carrier-based aircraft were two-and-a-half times as much as comparable land-based aircraft.¹⁷ Healey admitted that if a country could afford 16 carriers (like the United States) and was engaged in a massive land campaign in Asia in which airfields were subject to mortar attack, then a carrier fleet might be worthwhile. But no such involvement was foreseen for Britain in the 1970's.

¹⁶ Ibid., Part III, paras. 4 and 5.

¹⁷ Hansard, 7 March 1966, col. 1791.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The Labour Party's impressive victory in the March election suggests that the defense policy announced in the 1966 white paper will govern the British defense posture for some time to come. Having spent sixteen months in a detailed review, one cannot expect to see the Labour Party repeat this soon. Therefore one should not look forward to important changes unless world conditions are altered radically. The character as well as the form of British defense thinking has been set for the next five years. In its present state of disharmony, the Conservative Opposition cannot offer a viable alternative to the Labour defense policy.

The following implications seem to emerge from the 1966 defense white paper and debate:

- o Britain has decided for the time being to maintain a presence in both Europe and the Far East.
- o Labour leaders have accepted a role for Britain in relation to the United States which has been described as "similar to that of Canada."
- o British defense capabilities will henceforth be strictly "budget-limited" and no important military operation will be undertaken without the United States.
- o Nothing indicates that Britain will give up its nuclear weapons capability in the foreseeable future but will keep it as a political counterweight to France's Force de Frappe.
- o British participation in a nuclear "guarantee" for India looks more remote than it did in 1965.

- o Unless conditions change Britain will refrain from raising awkward questions of NATO strategy, nuclear free zones, and disengagement.