

THE PRICE OF ALLIANCE: AMERICAN BASES IN BRITAIN

John Saville

In 1984 there were 135 American military bases in Britain, most of them operational, some still being planned or built. This total was made up of 25 major operational bases or military headquarters, 35 minor or reserve bases, and 75 facilities used by the US Armed Forces. There were also about 30 housing sites for American personnel and their families. The term 'facility' covers a variety of different functions, and includes intelligence centres, stores, fuel supply points, aircraft weapon ranges and at least fourteen contingency military hospitals. Within this military complex there are five confirmed US nuclear weapon stores in the United Kingdom: at Lakenheath in East Anglia; Upper Heyford in Northamptonshire; Holy Loch and Machrihanish in south-west Scotland; and St. Mawgan in Cornwall. Other bases, notably Woodbridge and Alconbury, are thought to have storage facilities for peacetime nuclear weapons.

All this information and much more, is provided in the only comprehensive published survey of American military power in Britain. This is the volume by Duncan Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier. American Military Power in Britain*, published by Michael Joseph in 1984. It is an astonishing story that Campbell unfolds, and the greater part of it—and certainly its significance for the future of the British people—has remained largely unknown or ignored by both politicians and public. The use of British bases by American planes in April 1986 provided the beginnings of a wider awareness of the extent to which the United Kingdom has become a forward operational base for the American Armed Forces within the global strategy laid down by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington; but it would be an exaggeration to believe that there is a general awareness, or unease of living in an arsenal of weapons controlled by an outside power.

There are many reasons for the ignorance of the British public, and their apathy towards the facts as they are occasionally revealed. A minor but not unimportant fact is that the physical presence of the American bases is not immediately obvious when driving around the British countryside. Within a month of the first American bases being located in Britain—in August 1948—it was proposed that they should be designated RAF stations; and today most American Airforce sites are described as RAF and

they have in nominal control an RAF 'commander'. This RAF officer is usually two or three ranks below the level of the senior American officer and has no operational rights. He is, in fact, a local liaison officer and no doubt they all know their proper place. Road signs to RAF stations can therefore be misleading.¹

A second, and more important reason, why the American military presence has not yet made a serious impact upon British public life is that the decisions for the siting of American bases, and all subsequent decisions, have been taken almost wholly in secret; and in secret not only from the public, but from Parliament, and in quite a number of quite central matters, from a majority of Cabinets. Secrecy on many political decisions began with the Attlee governments of 1945–51, and has continued to the present day. The few politicians at Westminster who have been concerned to uncover some of the facts about American military power in Britain have always had great difficulty in extracting information, or have been refused it. A Labour MP—Bob Cryer—asked in June 1980 how many US bases there were in Britain. A written answer on 18 June gave twelve bases plus an unspecified number of other facilities. Cryer asked again, and the second answer on 7 July increased the total of bases and facilities to 51; and a third question produced a response on 8 August of three additional named facilities. All these were written answers and it is worth noting that the three named facilities identified on 8 August—the third time of asking—included Brawdy, the largest underwater monitoring station in the American Ocean Surveillance Information System which runs out hundreds of miles of cable into the Atlantic Ocean, and Machrihanish, a nuclear base which is the centre of the US Navy Special Forces Unit in Europe. The third named facility was Felixstowe, one of the two ports regularly used by the US Air Force to ferry explosives in and out of Britain.² In the same year, 1980, a private survey by Duncan Campbell listed 103 military bases and facilities. It was published in the *New Statesman* 31 October 1980, and when the Ministry of Defence finally produced its own list in April 1983 the total had risen to 75. Of this number, according to Campbell 73 had existed at the time Cryer was informed that the number was 54.³

Governments' prevarications and straightforward lying do not exhaust the reasons for the low profile in public consciousness which the American bases have so far enjoyed. Apart from those living in or near the flight path of the concentrations of American planes, the British public sees or reads very little about the American presence in Britain. In the 1950s there were a series of incidents between the American forces and surrounding natives which reached the national press; but the last quarter of a century has witnessed remarkably few news stories. There has been a careful control by American commanders of their own troops, and there is an increasing isolation of the members of the military forces within their own bases, which provide in abundance all the consumer provision the

average American citizen has come to expect. But the most important factor in what is a remarkable phenomenon, whereby the vast American military presence is almost invisible, is the immunity which American members of the armed forces enjoy in almost all matters from the English courts for any misdemeanours or crimes which they commit.

A large measure of legal immunity for members of visiting armed forces has always been customary, although it has seldom been discussed since the presence of foreign troops on British soil has not been common. The constitutional questions were discussed at the Imperial Conference of 1930, and in 1932 the British Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act provided a pattern that it was expected other Governments would follow. The purpose of the Act, as explained by the Secretary of State for War, was to put the Dominion forces, in the matter of discipline, on the same constitutional footing as any other visiting foreign force:

With regard to a foreign force, the recognised principle of international law is that when one country invites or permits the force of another to come within its territory, then that force brings with it the principle of extra-territoriality and no court of the country visited can interfere in any way with its discipline.⁴

Leaving aside the special problems of the Second World War, the post-war situation was defined by the Visiting Forces Act of 1952, which applied to (a) a specified list of Dominions and (b) 'any country designated for the purposes of that provision by Order in Council under the next following sub-section. . .'. The purpose of the Act was in fact, to legislate for the new American military presence in the UK: a permanent presence which created an entirely novel situation in British history. Countries within the NATO group were signatories to a Status of Forces Agreement, but this British Act of 1952 has a special provision in S.11⁴ which made any debate about whether an offence committed by a foreign serviceman came within the jurisdiction of the English courts 'largely an academic question'.⁵ By Section 11(4) it was enacted that if an offence was committed a certificate might be issued by, or on behalf, of the appropriate country stating that the offence arose out of or in the course of duty, and that the certificate shall be deemed 'sufficient evidence of that fact until the contrary is proved'. What this means in daily life in Britain today may be illustrated by two cases quoted by Duncan Campbell. In 1965 a naval rating stationed at Holy Loch was driving a car which ran into a mother and her baby. The child was killed and the mother injured. At the insistence of the US Navy the issue was not tried in the Scottish courts, but by a naval court-martial which fined the driver thirty-five dollars. In August 1979 a US marine based at St. Mawgan in Cornwall killed a seventeen year old youth while driving a car, and the US Navy, actually interrupted an inquest and forbade any further proceedings. Six months later the US

Navy held their own court-martial and fined the marine one **dollar**.⁶

There have been dozens of incidents involving the American armed forces and members of the British public. Especially this is true of road accidents. Who knows about them? and who apparently cares? except the victims and the victim's families and friends.



The central question for Britain as an independent state, and for the British people, is the operational use of the American bases. Will it ever be possible for the Americans to send their bombers from British bases without the full agreement of the British Government in power at the time? And are there likely ever to be situations of such gravity that the Americans consider there is no time to 'consult' their host country but that immediate action is required? But the question above all other questions—the condition of conditions—relates to the use of atomic weapons. Is there a positive veto on the use of atomic weapons within the general issue of American bases for offensive purposes?

The answer to these questions lies in the history of the ways in which American bases came to be permanently established in Britain, and within that history there is the more complicated story of the attitude towards atomic weapons, and their use, by the Americans in general, whether from British bases or elsewhere in the world. There are then two strands to this story which come together when atomic weapons are stored on American bases in Britain and capable of immediate use; and in what follows, the history of each of the two independent parts is first considered separately.

The first political agreement between the US and the UK on atomic weapons was arrived at before the construction of a viable bomb was completed. At the Quebec meeting in August **1943** between Roosevelt and Churchill it was agreed that atomic weapons should not be used 'without each other's consent'. This was a general statement, not in any way connected with wartime military bases in Britain—there were no atomic bombs anywhere—and it was this agreement that was invoked for British assent to the use of atomic bombs in Japan in August **1945**. This clause on atomic bombs was part of a wider general agreement which laid down a special relationship between the US and the UK over the whole range of atomic energy. There were however, writes Margaret **Gowing** 'some real obscurities' in the atomic agreement that were to create major problems in the coming years, but there was no ambiguity about the required *consent* of both countries before atom bombs could be used.'

It had been the report by Sir John Maud in **1941** concerning the feasibility of an atom bomb which had persuaded the Americans of the practical possibilities of nuclear weapons. Only the US with its industrial

and scientific strength had the resources required. Some British scientists moved to the USA, but for political reasons a group of British and French scientists also went to Canada. By the end of the war British scientists had acquired a great deal of scientific and technical expertise in the general field of atomic energy, and they knew most of what was needed to know about the making of atomic bombs; although even at this time they had never had access to the Hanford plant where plutonium was produced and their knowledge of the metallurgy of plutonium was limited. But they did know a great deal about the second kind of fissile material—uranium 235. It was generally assumed by most of the top-level British scientists that the UK would move into the atomic energy field once the war was over, both for the production of atomic bombs and for peaceful energy generation. There were, it was appreciated, many problems still to be solved, and although there was intensive discussion about the establishment of a central scientific institute, no final decision had been taken when the war ended.

Political decisions about the atomic bomb had been severely restricted by Churchill during the whole of the war years. Some seven ministers beside himself, in the wartime coalition were involved in the decision-making, and all were Conservatives. Neither Attlee, deputy Prime Minister, nor Bevin, both leading members of the wartime government, were included. When Sir Stafford Cripps, as Minister of Aircraft Production, tried to take some interest in the question he 'had been warned off.' The two best informed members of the Churchill group were Sir John Anderson, former Governor-General of Bengal and Lord President of the Council in the Coalition government, and Lord Cherwell, formerly Professor Lindeman. Outside the small group of ministers and advisers were a few civil servants who were fully informed, and even the Chiefs of Staff knew only the outlines of the matter. Sir Henry Tizard, who was to become the Labour government's adviser on defence research, was denied any access to atomic information in the closing years of the war. This was on Churchill's specific instructions.⁹

Churchill was passionately convinced that the basis for a lasting Anglo-American understanding had been established during the war years; and that it would provide the foundations for stability in the world when peace returned. He valued his relationship with Roosevelt enormously, and regarded the Quebec Agreement as one of the high peaks in the mutual understanding between the two countries. While there were serious frictions in the years after Quebec over atomic energy questions, divisions at least from the British side were temporarily overcome by the Hyde Park aide-memoire signed by Roosevelt and Churchill in September 1944. This reiterated the general theme of Quebec, that full collaboration and co-operation would continue in the future in the field of atomic energy, both on the military and commercial levels. It was also accepted that the agreement would continue beyond the defeat of Japan unless it was

terminated by joint decision. According to Margaret Gowing 'no other American knew of its existence' and it became null and void on Roosevelt's death in the spring of 1945.

Attlee took office, following the Labour victory at the general election, on 28 July 1945. His policy on atomic energy, and more particularly on the atom bomb, was as secretive as that of Churchill. The years of the Labour administrations were remarkable for the absence of serious discussion outside the government, in the House of Commons or beyond Westminster. The contrast with the American press is striking. Within the Attlee Cabinet the atomic energy or the atom bomb was on the agenda on only eight occasions, five of these being in the first six months of the Attlee government. And on only three occasions was the item on the agenda for discussion as against information. Atomic matters were handled not by the Cabinet in full session but by a small committee Gen.75, established in August 1945, and it was made up of seven ministers: Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Stafford Cripps, Greenwood and Dalton, with John Wilmot, Minister of Supply, being added later.¹⁰ Altogether Gen.75 held sixteen meetings, and it was then replaced at the beginning of February 1947 by a Ministerial Atomic Energy Committee with a rather large membership. This last committee did very little and its importance diminished over time. The crucial decisions about the atom bomb were taken elsewhere, by a small group of Ministers who made up Gen.163: Attlee, Bevin, Lord Addison, A.V. Alexander and John Wilmot. Gowing summed up the situation in a striking passage:

Apart from Mr. Attlee's two, partly 'atomic' visits to Washington, the Cabinet as a body was completely excluded from all the major decisions in these years. It took no part in the decisions to establish a research establishment, to build piles to produce plutonium, or later, to build gaseous diffusion plants to separate uranium-235; no part in the decisions to make and then test an atomic bomb, and about the planned place of atomic bombs in British strategy; in the decisions about priorities; in the decisions concerning atomic relations with other countries, including the important atomic negotiations with America after 1945.¹¹

There was another feature of the Attlee years that needs remarking on. The chairman of the Advisory Committee established to make recommendations on policy was Sir John Anderson, a Conservative and notoriously anti-Labour in his political and social attitudes. His appointment was made at the suggestion of the Secretary of the Cabinet, and it was understood that Anderson would report directly to the Prime Minister.

The first major event in the weeks after the bombs had been dropped on Japan in August 1945 was a garbled leak from Truman's cabinet. Col. Stimson, the Secretary of State for War, had suggested that basic scientific data about the atom bomb might be shared with the Russians. The sensational way it was leaked caused an uproar in Congress where

anti-Soviet attitudes had always been present and were in the process of growing fast. Truman tried to calm fears at a press conference by making a distinction between scientific and technical information. This was a question central to the Quebec Agreement, and Attlee became much concerned with the issue of exchange of information which had been a matter of the highest importance to the British side. Truman was, of course, talking about the Russians, but very few Americans knew of the information exchange clauses of the Quebec Agreement, and had they been made public, the outcry would have been hysterical.¹² On September 25th Attlee wrote a long letter to Truman (reprinted in full in *Gowing*, pp. 78-81). The text, which apparently had been drafted and re-drafted in the previous month, reflected Attlee's own concern with what he appreciated was a new world situation with the successful invention of the atom bomb. It was a sensible, balanced statement which made the point that the monopoly the US currently enjoyed was likely only to be temporary and that 'if we are to rid ourselves of this menace [we have] to make very far-reaching changes in the relationship between States'. Attlee ended his letter suggesting that he and Truman should meet to discuss 'this momentous problem'.

Attlee sent a copy of the draft to Churchill who in his reply went to the heart of the political problem as understood by a man who had taken a major part in the military intervention against Soviet Russia after the 1917 Revolution, and who had been consistently anti-Soviet ever since. Did Attlee want the Americans to provide full information to the Russians? If so, Churchill continued, he did not believe the Americans would agree and certainly he himself would be against any such action. He went on:

I am sure they [the Americans] will not use their advantage for wrong purposes of national aggrandisement and domination. In this short interval they and we must try to reach some form of security based upon a solemn covenant backed by force viz the force of an atom bomb.¹³

Churchill further emphasised what had become one of the main illusions of his thinking and one which continued until his death: his relationship with the US through Roosevelt during the war years would continue in conditions of peace. This is how he phrased it to Attlee:

This almost amounts to a military understanding between us and the mightiest power in the world. I should greatly regret if we seemed not to value this and pressed them to melt our dual agreement down into a general international understanding consisting, I fear of empty phrases and undertakings which will not be carried out (see what happened to submarines).

This 'special relationship' between Britain and the US was always qualified

during the war from the American side and was becoming increasingly selective in the later years of the war. It will be seen later in this article that the Attlee letter was sent in the same month that the American Air Force chiefs were considering for the first time the theory and practice of the strategy of the 'first strike'.

Attlee's letter to Truman remained unanswered for three weeks, but a meeting in Washington was finally arranged for 9 November. In the intervening period, opinion among Attlee and Bevin and their advisers had fluctuated considerably over the question of information access for Russia. In part the matter turned upon the estimates that were being made, or guessed at, concerning the speed with which the Russians would be able to develop the atom bomb; and estimates varied widely. In September Halifax had reported from Washington that General Groves, a key figure in the American atomic energy programme, was convinced that it would take the Russians many years to develop adequate technical capacity. Before he went to Washington Attlee had been converted to the American view that information should be withheld from the Russians, and although there was some disagreement in the Cabinet—one of the rare occasions when the Cabinet actually had a discussion of atomic energy matters—the tough line of Attlee and Bevin met no sustained **opposition**.¹⁴

Attlee prepared for Washington against a background of conflicting advice on a wide range of issues. The Chiefs of Staff argued that if an international agreement was not possible—and that in straight language meant an agreement with Russia, which was certainly not thought practicable—then the possession of atomic weapons by Britain was vital to British security. A second requirement was the closest possible co-operation with the US, and the exchange of scientific and technical information.

Attlee first went to Canada and arrived in Washington on 9 November 1945. With him was Mackenzie King, the Canadian Prime Minister. 'For talks of such importance the preparations seemed very inadequate' **Gowing** commented. Attlee had gone 'purposely' without a specific agenda, and the only adviser he was accompanied by, who knew all the details of the atomic projects was Sir John Anderson. There was a similar ignorance among the politicians on the American side. Neither Truman nor Byrnes, the Secretary of State, had previous experience of atomic energy matters. The two main points in the discussions were the distribution and availability of the raw materials for atomic energy—in which the Americans were at a considerable disadvantage, and knew it—and the exchange of scientific information—which the UK needed. A general satisfactory understanding seems to have been reached, but the question was what form should the agreement take. A formal document would require the consent of the US Senate, and to avoid that embarrassment—there was no problem, of course, with the British House of Commons—it was decided to sign a

less formal statement which would have the status of a working brief. A 'very flimsy piece of paper'¹⁵ was hurriedly signed on the last day of the Conference. Its last sentence reads:

We desire that there should be full and effective co-operation in the field of atomic energy between the US, the UK and Canada. . .

and that was all; except for a request to the Combined Policy Committee¹⁶ to recommend new arrangements for continued co-operation in peacetime. This was given to Anderson and Groves who jointly addressed a memorandum to the chairman of the Combined Policy Committee offering a series of points which would replace the Quebec Agreement and all other undertakings. Most important for the future was the proposed substitution of 'consultation' for 'consent' in the matter of the agreement to use atomic weapons.

Attlee's visit to Washington undoubtedly promised a general improvement in Anglo-American co-operation. In fact Gowing noted, the hopes that had been raised lasted for only a very short while. As expected, the United Nations failed to produce a scheme for international control of atomic energy; and within nine months the passing of the MacMahon Act made most forms of collaboration on atomic matters by the USA illegal. The Truman agreement with Attlee that there should be full and effective co-operation 'had not proved worth the paper it was written on'. So Gowing summed up in what, it must be recalled, was the official history of Atomic Energy in Britain since 1945.¹⁷

The year which followed the Washington meeting was a period of rapidly declining collaboration between the US and the UK, and the failure to develop co-operation matched other areas of international relationships between the two powers. For the Americans in 1946 the British were of decreasing importance. In February 1946 the UK had informed the Combined Policy Committee that they were planning to build a large-scale pile to produce plutonium, but their requests for information on American technical experience were refused. Whatever the particular reasons the American Chiefs of Staff and the Pentagon were firmly against any location of atomic energy plants in Britain: on the grounds, they argued, of strategic security. The lack of collaboration during 1946—except for a partial agreement on material supplies—led the British to conclude that the Americans were primarily interested in keeping their existing atomic monopoly as long as possible. What began to alter the situation that existed between the two Powers was the steady hardening of the political lines that were being drawn between the Anglo-Americans and their (more or less) European allies, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its buffer states in eastern Europe on the other. It was a process that developed throughout 1946 and began to change

policy in dramatic ways in **1947**. Attlee and Bevin, from the first days of the Labour government, were firmly anti-Soviet. The British Foreign Office was unswerving in its anti-communist and anti-Soviet attitudes, and especially was this true of its upper echelons; and Bevin's ideas meshed easily with theirs. Both Attlee and Bevin thought the Americans were 'soft' on Russia and needed educating, and it was this opinion that led them to welcome (in private) Churchill's Fulton speech in March **1946**. American attitudes, however, were already changing. Forrestal, who was first secretary of the Navy and then of the Army, had long been paranoid about the Russians and communism. He read Kennan's eight thousand word despatch from Moscow in February **1946** and decided that here was the new realist capable of providing 'the whole truth' about Russia.¹⁸ Kennan returned from Moscow in late **1946** and went to the National War College. In May **1947** he became head of the Policy Planning Staff which Secretary of State Marshall established in **1947**. Earlier that year, Kennan had privately submitted to Forrestal a paper entitled 'Psychological Background of Soviet Foreign Policy' which was later published in Foreign Affairs as 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' by Mr. X. The 'X' article became famous as indicating a new understanding of the Soviet Union and heralding a much tougher and more hardened opposition to Soviet policy. But Kennan's original despatch from Moscow in February **1946** was already part of the change. As Kennan wrote in his Memoirs about the despatch:

Six months earlier this message would probably have been received in the Department of State with raised eyebrows and lips pursed in disapproval. Six months later it would probably have sounded redundant, a sort of preaching to the converted.¹⁹

The matter of timing, and the connections between different parts of American and British policies are important; and often overlooked, not only by later historians but by contemporaries at the time. A large part of the problem was the secrecy with which policies were initiated and conducted and the compartmentalised character of the decisions that were taken. As already noted **1946** was a year of declining co-operation between the US and the UK, but not in all areas of policies, and the myth, that the Americans were unsophisticated in their dealings with the Soviet Union and needed the political experience of the British to guide them, had little, if any substance, although the illusions it encouraged were common to Attlee and Bevin and most of their Foreign Office advisers. The Fulton speech of March **1946** is a useful illustration. Churchill discussed the speech at length with leading politicians in the US, including Byrnes, the Secretary of State and Admiral Leahy the President's top military adviser, and he must have at least given Truman

the outlines of what he was going to say since Halifax, the British Ambassador reported that Churchill had discussed with Truman 'the details of the journey' to Fulton.²⁰ But Truman was certainly given a summary of the speech by Byrnes who had read it in full at the British embassy: an incident which Byrnes described in his memoirs.

The next morning, when I gave President Truman a résumé of the contents of the speech, he decided not to read the advance copy that was to be sent to him. Anticipating that the Soviets would charge the British and Americans with 'ganging up' on them, he could truthfully say he had not read the speech prior to its delivery.²¹

It is the argument of H.B. Ryan, who has examined the background to the Churchill speech, that while Halifax in Washington was fully briefed about the content of the speech, he did not inform London even in a general way about its significance. Ryan assumes this was the case since presumably he found nothing in the archives; but there are more ways of communicating sensitive matters than through the diplomatic bag. It is correct that the Cabinet minutes state that no minister saw an advance copy of the speech and Attlee in the House of Commons denied previous knowledge of what was to be said,²² but who can always believe Cabinet minutes, or Prime Ministers so experienced in the arts of dissembling as Attlee was during the whole of his administrations?

A more striking illustration, and one that was to lead directly to the later build-up of the American military presence in Britain, were the discussions within the Pentagon about future strategy once the war with Japan was ended. It is now known that the Pentagon were already considering the policy of the 'first strike', as early as October 1945, and that Britain was one of three bases close to the Soviet Union that the Americans might have to 'seize and hold'.²³ The Spaatz papers, deposited in the National Archives, reveal that in June–July 1946, shortly after the formation of the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) Spaatz himself visited England to obtain an agreement whereby British bases could be used by the Americans in an emergency for atom bomb missions. The negotiations were conducted with Air Chief Marshall Lord Tedder, and five RAF bases were allocated to be made ready for B-29 bombers.²⁴ The next month, August 1946, Col. E.E. Fitzpatrick arrived to supervise the construction of assembly buildings and loading facilities at the five chosen bases: Lakenheath, Mildenhall, Scampton, Marham and Bassingbourn. The bases were ready by 1947.²⁵ Whether the politicians were informed is not clear but it must be expected that at least Attlee and Bevin were told about what was going on. What can certainly be said, is that if Attlee and Bevin were informed they would have approved.

1947 was the year of decision for the US–UK relationship. The Truman doctrine of the spring of 1947 meant the taking over of 'responsibility' of

Greece and Turkey from the British; the creation in May 1947 of a Policy Planning Staff by George Marshall, the American Secretary of State, heralded the beginnings of a more forward policy; the 'prologue to the Marshall Plan' speech which Dean Acheson made in Cleveland, Mississippi, on 8 May; and then there was Marshall's own speech at Harvard on June 5.²⁶ The widely accepted view that it was Bevin's imagination that translated Marshall's general ideas into European reality is an illusion that is still constantly repeated in current writing.²⁷ The Marshall speech was a conscious political statement, and the genesis of the Marshall Plan has been fully documented. Before Acheson's 'preliminary canter'—his words—at Cleveland he had already briefed three British journalists of its significance. These were Leonard Miall of the BBC, Malcolm Muggeridge of the *Daily Telegraph*, and Rene McColl of the *Daily Express*.²⁸ This was early May 1947. Later in the same month Will Clayton returned from Europe and produced a memorandum which according to Acheson had a powerful effect on Marshall.²⁹ Clayton's thesis was the rapid disintegration of Europe. It was a highly sensational document which undoubtedly exaggerated the economic problems of Europe, however much is accepted of the revisionist Milward thesis.³⁰ Acheson gave a short account of the meeting on 28 May at which Clayton expounded his views to Marshall and his colleagues. Acheson's summary read:

Will Clayton was one of the most powerful and persuasive advocates to whom I have listened. What he said at the meeting added to his paper principally corroborative detail to illustrate the headlong disintegration of the highly complex industrial society of Europe, through the breakdown of inter-relations between the industrial cities and the food-producing countryside. Millions of people would soon die, creating a chaos of bloodshed and disorder in doing so. To organise the great effort needed to prevent this disaster would take time, but it had to begin here and now. Surely the plan should be a European plan and come—or at any rate appear to come—from Europe. *But the United States must run the show. And it must start running it now.*³¹

But the United States must run the show. The emphasis was made by Acheson in this account from his autobiography. The crucial question is to what extent did the Marshall Plan's acceptance offer political leverage to the United States over and within Western Europe? Milward's answer on the economic side is that Marshall Aid did not save Western Europe from collapse because Western Europe was not collapsing, but it did allow some governments to continue the policies both domestically and abroad which had brought about the 1947 balance of payments crisis.³² In the case of Britain the absence of outside dollar funds would have meant major shifts in the import programme and cuts in the food rations to levels lower than those of the war years. A Treasury paper argued that the calorific intake, given the necessity for sharp reductions in dollar imports, would

be about **10** per cent lower than the average of the pre-war period.³³ Britain did well out of Marshall aid in that about **25** per cent of all Marshall Aid financed imports went to the United Kingdom. The funds for the European Recovery Programme—the official title for Marshall aid—started to become available on 3 April **1948** and continued until **30 June 1950**. There is no doubt of the economic benefits of Marshall Aid to Britain and to Western Europe in general and although there were considerable political differences over other parts of the Recovery Programme—and notably the American objective of an integrated Western Europe—the economic advantages to Britain must be considered as an essential part of the total political situation within which Attlee and Bevin were adapting the United Kingdom towards a military domination by the United States.



Early in **1947** Roger Makins, Minister Plenipotentiary in Washington, was due to return to London. The year **1946**, as already noted above, had been one of increasing frustration from the British side at the lack of American co-operation on atomic energy matters, and Makins tried to begin a new dialogue. He first saw the members of the Atomic Energy Commission who made it plain that the main problem for the Americans was the agreement on raw materials; and they further made it clear that the whole question would soon have to be revealed to the new Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.³⁴ Acheson was ill but Makins finally got to see him, and Acheson made no comment on Makins' main demand—which related to the need to circumvent the McMahan Act on information—but asked about the British attitude towards the Quebec agreement. What would be the British reaction to a demand for its abrogation? and with this message Makins returned to London.

On **5 May 1947** the US Atomic Energy Commission together with the Joint Committee were informed that the British knew how to make the bomb, that currently half the uranium of the Belgian Congo was going to Britain, and that raw materials from Canada and the USA were not sufficient for the US atomic energy programme. On the **12 May** Acheson appeared before the Joint Committee with Senator Hickenlooper in the chair. For the first time the elected representatives of Congress learned of the Quebec Agreement and in particular of its clauses on atomic weapons.

Hickenlooper and Vandenberg were shocked and outraged. Only a week had passed since they had learned of the ore arrangement; now they discovered that Britain held a veto over the most powerful weapon in the American arsenal.³⁵

Hickenlooper wrote to George Marshall that 'the present agreement, in view of all the circumstances, is intolerable'.

During the summer months of 1947 George Kennan had been making a survey of American atomic policy. His report, completed by late August 1947, concluded that an international agreement within the United Nations was not practicable and that the US should break free from the constraints of trying to work through the UN: 'grim reality was forcing a return to close relations with Britain and Canada' is how the official historians of American atomic policy phrased it.³⁶ There was therefore, a need for talks and the first moves came in November 1947 when John Cockcroft, who was visiting the United States, was encouraged to consider ways in which the current deadlock could be broken; and serious discussions begin. The Joint Committee on Atomic Energy gave its agreement to the opening of talks with Britain and Canada, and formal discussions within the Combined Policy Committee began on 10 December 1947. Lovett, the Acting US Secretary of State was leading the American team and there was every indication that a new and fair understanding on atomic matters was what the Americans were really interested in. The British negotiators were apparently completely taken in. Makins was impressed with the change of attitude within less than a year of his departure from Washington and while officials back in London showed more scepticism, those in Washington evidently believed in the new openhandedness which the Americans were displaying.

The record of American duplicity is set out in great detail in their own official history. Before the Congressional Joint Committee had agreed that talks should proceed there had been a smaller meeting between Hickenlooper and Vandenberg, representing the Committee, three members of the Commission, and Lovett, Kennan, Forrestal and Bush from the Administration. Lovett had emphasised the strength of the British with regard to raw materials. The Official History continues:

Nonetheless the Americans would strive to abrogate the wartime agreements, to acquire British ore stocks, to get a much greater share of Congo production, to restrict the storage of raw material in Britain to a minimum, and to obtain British and Canadian support for ore negotiations with South Africa. In return the United States would give some information.³⁷

And this, in all essentials, is what the Americans achieved. The official historian of the British atomic energy story is too polite to use vulgarisms, but she leaves her readers in no doubt that the British were fooled and that the agreement which resulted gave nothing, or almost nothing, to the British. She summed up the agreement which was 'joyfully concluded' (her words) in January 1948 as comparable with the same kind of negotiations that had been characteristic of Anglo-American relations in the atomic field for the previous five years: 'promises forgotten, former discussions

misinterpreted, facts stood on their heads, sheer administrative muddle with departments pulling in different directions'.³⁸

The conclusions of these talks, in early January 1948, were again not embodied in a formal document—in order once more to circumvent going through Congress, and it was not made known to the UN, since both sides were happy to agree that the agreement did not come within Article 102 of the UN Charter. The agreement was known as the *modus vivendi*, a title that had interesting implications not missed by at least some of the participants. The *Concise Oxford* definition of *modus vivendi* is precisely what was in some minds: 'arrangements between disputants pending settlement of debate, arrangements between people(s) who agree to differ'. The phrase was the suggestion of Edmund A. Gullion, a young State department official who was concerned with atomic matters. 'His British and Canadian colleagues demurred, for the term was most often used to describe the relations between adversaries driven by circumstances to get along together. To himself Gullion thought *modus vivendi* accurate'.³⁹ This is how the American official historians summed up the matter: a further comment on the belief in Whitehall that the Americans were not really up to the British in their diplomatic experience and sophistication.

The main clauses of the *modus vivendi* were all seriously detrimental to the British, although the euphoria within which the talks were conducted from the British side temporarily obscured the aims and objectives of the Americans, and concealed the deep ambiguities within the general agreement. What the British surrendered was the 'consent' of the Quebec Agreement and its substitution by 'consultation'; and the Americans received all they wanted in the supply of uranium. Under this new agreement the Americans were to get all the Congo production of uranium during 1948 and 1949. If the Americans required more during these two years, then two-thirds of the unallocated stocks in Britain would be made available. What the British got, or thought they got, was the exchange of information, especially in matters relating to the production of plutonium for atom bombs, and there was in fact some useful exchange of information on both sides in the months immediately following the signing of the agreement. But already by April 1948 the Americans were becoming more and more reluctant to divulge what they regarded as sensitive material, and the discovery that the British were moving towards the production of an atom bomb was sufficient for the American military to react strongly and negatively towards further disclosures. By the end of 1948 requests from Britain for the continued extension of collaboration that had been promised under the *modus vivendi* 'were in the familiar state of suspended animation in Washington, where they lay unanswered'.⁴⁰

The *modus vivendi*, it should be noted, was between the United States and Britain. Commonwealth countries were excluded from all serious

information, and no European country was included; not even France to whom, as Gowing noted, 'Britain had some moral obligation'.⁴¹

It is important to make clear what happened as a result of this agreement, and whose fault it was. The major responsibility in the first instance belongs to Roger Makins. He had been at the Washington Embassy between 1945 and 1947 and he led the British delegation at the *modus vivendi* talks. Makins was supposed to be familiar with the American political scene, but he evidently quite failed to appreciate that none of those he negotiated with—Kennan, Lilienthal, Carrol Wilson⁴² carried much political clout in the complex relationships between the Truman administration, the military establishment and Congress. Gowing writes (p. 254): 'The British also gave the US negotiators credit for understanding what they were doing, and again it was to transpire that they did not.' Part of these general misjudgements must have stemmed from those attitudes of superiority the British affected towards the Americans which have already been commented on; but the ignorance in these *modus vivendi* discussions was also a failure of the Foreign Office intelligence services. There was always a strong current of Anglophobia among sections of American politicians and administrators, and there were a number of recurring conflicts in these post-war years that affected all or mostly all negotiations between the two countries. One was the hostility of the American military, and of influential politicians such as Forrestal, to the idea of a large-scale atomic energy complex in the UK; and a total opposition, on strategic grounds, to the manufacture of atomic bombs in Britain. Another and more important in general terms, was the relatively minor place which America gave to the British connection. It was not unimportant to them, for Britain had world-wide connections which the USA needed; and the strategic position of the British islands was well appreciated by the military. But Britain was a second class power in economic and military terms; the Empire was in process of disintegration; and within a decade of the war ending it was clear that Britain was steadily losing ground to the other second class powers in the world: Germany, France and Japan. The illusion that Britain was still a first class power lingered on in British minds in the years after the war; but it was one of the many miscalculations that leading politicians and most of the senior officials of the Foreign Office continued to make, with so many disastrous results. Already in the closing days of 1948 the British Ambassador to Washington—the former Archibald Clerk-Kerr, wrote to London: 'the whole question of our relations with the Americans on atomic energy questions seems to me to be becoming increasingly bound up with the larger issue of the extent to which the Americans are prepared to treat us on more or less equal terms as a first-class power'.⁴³

The growing domination of America in the affairs of Britain began to be increasingly important—but not to Parliament or the British public, who knew nothing or almost nothing of these developments—with the physical establishment of the American military on British soil. The arrangements already in hand between the American Air Force and the RAF, whereby five RAF bases were being modified to accommodate American-carrying atomic planes have been noted above; but it was the Berlin blockade that led to the permanent establishment of US planes in Britain. The sequence of events was neatly summarised in the diaries of James V. Forrestal, the American Secretary of Defense. Forrestal was an able man whose anti-communism made him a high security risk for any country which aspired to a rational foreign policy. He was asked to resign by Truman in March 1949, had a severe breakdown and committed suicide within less than two months of his resignation. His diaries were published in 1951.

The Russian blockade of Berlin began in late June 1948, and Forrestal summed up a high level discussion in Washington which included a decision that Douglas, Ambassador to Britain, should be asked to explore the possibilities of basing two B-29 bomber groups in Britain.⁴⁴ On the 2 July Forrestal summarised a meeting of the Cabinet. George Marshall reported that Bevin had agreed to the stationing of two B-29 bombers in Britain, and that Douglas had been instructed to ask Bevin—who had surprised the Americans by his prompt agreement—if he, Bevin, had 'fully explored and considered the effect of the arrival of these two groups in Britain upon British public opinion'.⁴⁵ Forrestal's own view of the decision to establish in Britain the B-29s, the only plane capable of carrying atom bombs, was neatly summarised by him in an entry for 15 July 1948. It was a statement that deserves to be better known, and encapsulates an American view of Britain that was never absent from some of those in the highest levels of American government and administration. Forrestal provided a 'Summary of considerations to send B-29s to England':

1. It would be an action which would underline to the American people how seriously the government of the United States views the current sequence of events.
2. It would give the Air Force experience in this kind of operation; it would accustom the British to the necessary habits and routines that go into the accommodation of an alien, even though an allied, power.
3. We have the opportunity now of sending these planes, and once sent they would become somewhat of an accepted fixture, whereas a deterioration of the situation in Europe might lead to a condition of mind under which the British would be compelled to reverse their present attitude.⁴⁶

The British decision to accept American bombers was taken on 28 June 1948 by a small group of ministers—Attlee, Bevin, Alexander, Morrison

and the Chiefs of Staff: one more example of the very restricted and secretive way Attlee operated within his own Government. The usual soothing lies were given to the House of Commons who were informed on 28 July that these were 'informal and longstanding arrangements between the USAF and the RAF for visits of goodwill and training purposes'.⁴⁷ The first two groups of American planes arrived in July 1948, and at the end of July the American Ambassador made a further request that the third group—at the time stationed in Germany—should be brought to Britain. The B-29s belonged to the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) and were of the type to deliver atom bombs, although in 1948 the planes that came to Britain had not yet been modified for this purpose. By the following summer some B-29s had been modified, and by mid-1950 all were capable of nuclear deployment.⁴⁸

The 1948 arrangements had supposedly been temporary during the period of the Berlin crisis, but not in the minds of the American Chiefs of Staff; and in 1949 the US asked to be allowed to take over some airfields in Oxfordshire for what was clearly a more permanent base for the Americans. Bevin, who became steadily more fervent in his support of the American connection, nevertheless was aware that there were important constitutional/political issues involved. He wanted assurance on two matters: the right for Britain to terminate the arrangement whereby an alien military presence was permanently stationed in Britain, and second, the issue of control over the operational aspect of American military installations. These matters were *not* raised in 1948 or 1949. In 1950 there was a letter sent to the American Ambassador stating the right of the British to terminate the agreement but saying nothing about the operational use of the B-29 bombers. This is Gowing's story, for the relevant documents are still withheld from public scrutiny. Gowing then continues with an extraordinary account which if it were not written by the official historian, whose scrupulousness is never in doubt, would be unbelievable in terms of the naivety and plain stupidity of the Foreign Office and particularly of the leading Labour ministers. Gowing's account may be summarised. It was appreciated that the letter to the American Ambassador dealt with only the affirmation of the right of the British government to terminate the agreement. It was decided therefore, on the advice of a Foreign Office lawyer, that it 'might be desirable' (the words are Gowing's) to enquire of the American Ambassador on operational matters, whether they were atomic or non-atomic. However, there were worries in the Foreign Office that a letter asking such questions 'might cause suspicion and offence', so the matter was referred to their political masters. And the ministerial decision came to the conclusion that matters should be left as they were, without further clarification. The operational question, it was argued, would only arise if and when British policy diverged sharply from that of the Americans; and if it did, then the whole

matter of the use of the bases by Americans would **arise**.⁴⁹ In this way, the Americans were spared the 'suspicion and offence' that the Foreign Office had worried about. Between this episode in 1950 and the 1980s there were two occasions when the question of American bases was again raised. In September 1951 Herbert Morrison, now Foreign Secretary, was visiting Washington and he told the State Department officials he was meeting that when Britain agreed to provide bases, the American Ambassador had agreed there would be consultation about the use of atomic weapons. What the reply was is not stated in **Gowing**. The second occasion was in 1958 when the Foreign Office informed the US—again presumably the State Department—that Bevin had been given full oral assurances about the use of American bases. This was supposedly in 1948 although the Foreign Office then went on to admit that there was no contemporary evidence they could offer for their statement. What the Americans made of this is not recorded by **Gowing**. We know that in general the Americans took no notice at all of these sort of unsubstantiated statements, and indeed why should they?

To go back to the establishment of American bases in Britain in 1948 and 1949. Once they were inside Britain the Americans began to expand their facilities with considerable speed. All the airfields agreed in the Spaatz-Tedder discussions of 1946 had become B-29 bases by mid-1950, with the single exception of Bassingbourn, near Cambridge. Burtonwood, near Warrington in Lancashire, was becoming a major supplies depot designed to service the growing numbers of American planes. In the same year 1950, before the Korean War began, four new airfields were given to the USAF for full development. These were **Greenham Common**, **Upper Heyford**, **Fairford** and **Brize Norton**.⁵⁰ And then, in the middle of the year, the war began in Korea. In order to meet the possibilities of a world conflict, which was how the American Joint Chiefs of Staff evaluated the situation, there was an urgent need to reinforce American military power in western Europe. One measure suggested was to store the non-nuclear components of atomic weapons in Britain and then, if the situation worsened, only the nuclear cones would have to be sent; with a considerable saving in planes and time. The **Military Liaison Committee** discussed these and other recommendations with the Atomic Energy Commission on 10 July 1950, and the next day Truman agreed. These details are set out in the American official history of atomic energy⁵¹ but there is no suggestion that there was any consultation with the British; and if there were any records to this effect, they would almost certainly have been quoted. **Gowing** quoted the gist of this story in a footnote on p. 313, but again did not suggest that any request was made to the British. We must assume that the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington regarded their action as a necessary part of their **defensive/offensive** strategy, and that the British bases were included in that strategy.

The Korean War exercised a profound impact on both sides of the Atlantic. The real complexities of the situation in Korea were simplified in stark black and white terms, and there was probably no event in the global conflict between the USA and the Soviet Union that had greater propaganda power and influence in the extension and deepening of the Cold War.⁵² The military situation for the Americans deteriorated sharply from November 1950 with the intervention of the Chinese. The crisis situation brought Truman to a press conference on 30 November in which he stated that the US would 'take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation, just as we always have'; and when asked if that included the atom bomb Truman replied that it included 'every weapon we have'. Asked further if there had been active consideration of its use, he said, 'There has always been active consideration of its use.' The report of Truman's press conference was received in London in a highly critical way, particularly as it was coupled with an incorrect rumour that General MacArthur might be given discretion in the use of the atom bomb. Attlee announced that he had cabled Truman of his urgent need to meet the President and he arrived in Washington early in December.

Acheson gives a lively and sharp account of the meetings which spread over five days. He clearly thought Attlee a tricky customer and superior to Truman in political and intellectual debate. In these memoirs Acheson speaks of Attlee leading Truman on to the flypaper. The critical occasion was on the last day of the talks. Truman and Attlee went for private talks in Truman's study; and Acheson described the scene when they returned:

They had, said the President cheerfully, been discussing the atomic weapon and agreed that neither of us would use these weapons without prior consultation with the other. No one spoke, 41

Acheson then set about rectifying the situation. The Truman statement was, of course, a return to the Quebec Agreement of 1943 which the Americans had wiped out with the *modus vivendi* agreement of 1948; and the Americans knew that it was politically impossible to restore it. Acheson pointed out, in his words, 'over and over again' that the President had always publicly stated that his own power under the law was not limited by anyone in the matter of the decision to use atomic weapons; and that if he tried to change the position, Congress would never accept it. Acheson won of course; and all agreed, 'albeit Mr Attlee a little sadly', Acheson wrote. An innocuous paragraph was drafted which read: 'The President stated that it was his hope that world conditions would never call for the use of the atomic bomb. The President told the Prime Minister that it was also his desire to keep the Prime Minister at all times informed of developments which might bring about a change in the situation.' It was a **statement** that committed Truman, or any of his successors, to

precisely nothing. Much later, Acheson recalled this day in an interview for the BBC, not long before he died. He explained what Attlee was trying to do on the last day of the Conference and how he nearly succeeded in a re-affirmation of the Quebec Agreement. Acheson's words should be carefully noted. He was speaking in 1971 but they apply to all time:

What he [Attlee] was trying to get the President to do, and later almost succeeded in getting the President to do, was to agree that we would not use an atomic weapon without the agreement of Britain. . . We were perfectly willing to talk about consultation, but to require the agreement of the British before this would be used was a silly thing to do because it might have to be used at once. If you got notice that incoming missiles were coming, you didn't have time to go sending cables around asking for agreement. This is what he later on did achieve in a private talk with the President. And we had to unachieve ~~that~~.⁵⁴

We had to unachieve that: a famous phrase much quoted. The British in 1950 put the best interpretation upon what had happened, but there was no agreed record of the discussions, and the Americans held firmly to the wording of the communique which from their side gave nothing away. Attlee on his return to London totally misled his colleagues in the Cabinet. He reported to them on the 12 December, and the Cabinet Minutes read:

The Prime *Minister*: The President had entirely satisfied him about the use of the bomb. He had assured the Prime Minister that he regarded the atomic bomb as in a sense a joint possession of the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, and that he would not authorise its use without prior consultation with the other two governments save in an extreme emergency—such as an atomic attack on the United States which called for immediate ~~retaliation~~.⁵⁵

Two days later Attlee reported to the House of Commons in the same spirit. 'I was able,' he said 'to raise the vital question of the use of the atomic weapon, and received assurances which I consider perfectly satisfactory'. At this point Churchill interjected: 'We do not know what those assurances were', to which there was no reply⁵⁶ and Churchill did not pursue the question.

Attlee's public stance was in sharp contrast with the realities of Anglo-American relations; and the British Chiefs of Staff were among the groups who were concerned. In their case it was the absence of any strategic plan for the use of the atom bomb and the place of British bases in that plan. The bases had not, so it appears, been part of the discussions in Washington, and it took nearly a year for talks to begin again. In September 1951 Morrison complained to Dean Acheson at the delay in the elaboration of the strategic air war plan, and this led to talks beginning in Washington between Oliver Franks, the British Ambassador, the State Department and Omar Bradley, the US Chief of Staff. In October 1951 Franks put a formula to the Americans which concluded with the statement that the

question of the use of American air bases and facilities in the United Kingdom:

naturally remains a matter for joint decision in the light of the circumstances of the time⁵⁷

on 6 December the gist of this formula was given to the House of Commons by Churchill who had by now succeeded Attlee as Prime Minister.⁵⁸

For reasons of interpretation which are difficult to understand Gowing considers this new formula initiated by Franks as 'very important indeed'; but she was writing before the revelations of the 1980s which are discussed below. There is one further episode in the early 1950s which requires to be briefly chronicled, and then the whole question lay dormant for the next thirty years. But when Churchill made his first visit to America as the new Conservative Prime Minister in January 1952 atomic energy matters were part of the agenda. He was accompanied by Cherwell. Churchill, whose intellectual powers were failing, was dominated by his wartime experiences of collaboration with the United States, and 'obsessed' (the word is used by Gowing) with the Quebec Agreement. The communique underlined for the first time that there was no question of the British bases being used without British consent, but the ambiguities in the statement were never brought out for private or public discussion; and there the matter rested.⁵⁹

And it rested, as already noted, for some thirty years. But in the early 1980s the proposed introduction of missiles into the air defences of western Europe once again raised the question of whose finger was on the trigger, and there was much discussion of 'dual control'. The British Prime Minister tried to rush the Americans into agreement by way of press conferences as well as to allay disquiet among her own native constituents. In a press conference in late February 1983 Mrs Thatcher explained:

The arrangements we have made for the new missiles are the same as those of long ago between Mr Churchill and Mr Truman. They are arrangements for joint decision—not merely joint consultation—but joint decision. I am satisfied that those arrangements would be effective. A joint decision on the use of the bases or the missiles would of course be dual control.⁶⁰

Mrs Thatcher repeated this understanding in the House of Commons on 12 May 1983. The existing agreement she said, meant that:

no nuclear weapons would be fired or launched from British territory without the agreement of the Prime Minister. That is categorical.⁶¹

But this is not how the Americans interpret matters. A BBC 2 programme *Brass Tacks* discussed the question and it was reported in the Listener by

David Henshaw on 2 June 1983. It makes illuminating reading. Henshaw, in the course of his well-researched article, gives a straightforward and accurate account of the previous negotiations leading up to the Churchill-Truman talks of 1952: the one which included in the communique the words 'joint decision'; and he then proceeded to ask leading American politicians what their interpretation had been at the time, and what their perceptions were now. Caspar Weinberger, the present Defense Secretary, thought the words of the communique 'perfectly clear' and there was no need for further exegesis. Lucius Battle, who had been senior aide to Dean Acheson at the time of the 1952 agreement, was however by no means sure what 'a matter for joint decision' actually meant. 'I haven't the slightest idea' he said. 'Each side perhaps believes, sees, views the agreement as exactly what he was trying to get. . . it's part of diplomacy in a way.' 'And did the Americans think they'd given a veto to the British?' 'No, absolutely not.' Even of nuclear weapons based on British soil? 'No.'

Henshaw summed up towards the end of his article:

No American politician I spoke to thinks it [the 1952 Agreement] gives Britain a veto over the use of the bases: according to Paul Warnke, who was Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Johnson, it's doubtful if most people in the Pentagon even know that the agreement exists. Robert McNamara, who had seven years in charge of Defense in the Sixties, said: 'I don't conceive of it as a veto, no. I think "consultation" means a discussion. . . with the party having the final authority—in this case the US—making the final decision.' James Schlesinger, Richard Nixon's Defense Secretary, is a little more flexible: but in the end, do we have a veto? 'I think it comes close to a veto—but the intention is that there be intimate consultation.' Not the same thing as a veto? 'It is, if there is time available.' The trouble with crises, of course, is that, inevitably, time is rarely available.⁶⁷

Henshaw concluded his article by emphasising that there is no power which can take away the American President's constitutional rights over weapons used, or to be used in America's national interest. And that is where the matter remains. Mrs Thatcher said in the House of Commons that it was 'inconceivable' that she would refuse America's request to use British bases for the Libyan raids. Whatever attitude or policy a British government may have, in any situation deemed critical by the Americans they will make and take decisions without reference to any British government.



The misunderstanding and misconceptions about the place of American bases in British decision-making were vividly, and brutally, illustrated by the events of April 1986 when American planes bombed Libya. It was a highly instructive episode for the British: it was also a major event in

the history of the world in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It exhibited, first and foremost, the total disregard of international law by the United States in the role that country has accepted as the *gendarme* to world capitalism; a role most clearly illustrated in the policies currently being pursued against Nicaragua: the 1980s version of Vietnam. On a more political level the bombing of Libya exposed the subservience of the Thatcher government to the Americans as well as the muffled incompetence of the Labour Opposition in Parliament. What emerged from the debates and questions in the House of Commons was first, that the Government prevaricated, as all Governments have done on these issues since 1948, and second, that those against the American action in Libya—and they included Tories—were misinformed in their political assessment of the supposed control which Britain was alleged to have over the operational use of American bases.

The bombing raid on Libya took place around 2 a.m. on the morning of 15 April, and the first questions in the Commons were put to the Prime Minister in the afternoon of the same day. In answer to questions, Thatcher made one reply that encapsulated her own attitude towards the Americans, and revealed the level of subservience in her political attitudes:

The Foreign Secretary and I have acted very closely together throughout. I remind the Hon. Gentleman that the United States has more than 330,000 members of her forces in Europe to defend our liberty. Because they are here, they are subject to terrorist attack [a reference to a recent bomb explosion in a Berlin night club]. It is inconceivable that they should be refused the right to use the American aircraft and American pilots in the inherent right of self-defence, to defend their own people.

(*Hansard*, Vol. 95, Cols. 727–8, 15 April 1968.)

It was David Steel, the Liberal leader, who picked up the Thatcher phrase 'it is inconceivable' and went on to ask, 'Is not that writing a blank cheque for President Reagan'. From Thatcher's side, the use of the word 'inconceivable' was a serious mistake. She believed it, and without doubt will continue to believe it, but what is needed in politics is deception, not truth, and thereafter Thatcher always talked about joint consultation and agreement between allies.

The next day, 16 April, saw a major debate on the Libyan affair. It was opened by Thatcher who emphasised that President Reagan 'sought our support under the arrangements which have continued under successive governments for over 30 years, he also sought our agreement to the use of United States aircraft based in this country. Hon. members will know that our agreement was necessary' (*ibid.*, Col. 878). Kinnock replied with a poor speech which did not raise the issue of the bases as a matter of principle, but the debate as a whole was both serious and highly revealing. David Steel points out that the Attlee–Truman accord was never published

'and it should be revised, published and approved' (Col. 889). Edward Heath, in a major intervention, explained to the House that during the Yom Kippur war of 1973 the Americans had asked the British for the use of bases, including those in Cyprus. 'The reply, which my Government sent to the United States was no.' Heath drew the conclusion from this episode that there existed a right of veto and that the American government had accepted this right of veto on the part of the British. James Callaghan, who followed Heath, insisted that the Prime Minister had no moral obligation to accede to the American request. David Owen, the SDP leader, argued that 'joint-decision making'—the formula that all speakers used in respect of the American bases, should also involve all aspects of what is being decided, including choice of target and the like. Denis Healey wound up for the Opposition. He made a serious speech, registered some important points about the American action, was both witty and scathing about the Prime Minister's 'impenetrable complacency with which [she] armours her invincible ignorance', but failed to develop as one of the major issues the question of the American bases, and their control. He did ask whether British consent involved a British veto, but the question got lost in the remainder of his speech.

The Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, concluded the debate. He reiterated the familiar parts of the Government's case: that they had asked many questions of the Americans before the action was agreed, and he emphasised several times that there had been full agreement by the United Kingdom. He specifically denied the thesis of the blank cheque. This is how he summed up the position:

. . . There was no blank cheque. There was a single, carefully drawn up agreement, and its limitations have been fully and honestly respected. I would have expected no less. Moreover, as my right Hon. Friend told the House, it is clearly understood with President Reagan that if there were any question of using United States aircraft based in this country in any further action, that too, would be the subject of a further approach to the United Kingdom under the joint consultation agreements. Once again, our consent would be necessary. We have no wish—

At this point the Foreign Secretary was interrupted by a back-bencher who asked that as the Foreign Secretary had given the House a detailed exposition of the agreement between the Prime Minister and President Reagan, would it not be sensible to publish the agreement in total. The Foreign Secretary then replied:

It is not a question of a publishable agreement. I am describing the series of exchanges between my right Hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the President of the United States, to which my right Hon. Friend referred in her statement yesterday.

So within almost the same breath the Foreign Secretary referred to 'a single carefully drawn up agreement' and then explained 'It is not a question of a publishable agreement. I am describing the series of exchanges. . .'

There was *no* written agreement of course, just as there was no written agreement in **1951** and **1952**. The crucial references, the reader may be reminded, was first the statement that Churchill made in the House of Commons on **6 December 1951** which summarised the discussions which had been on between London and Washington. The brief statement read:

The use of these bases in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision by His Majesty's Government and the United States Government in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time.

Churchill had only just assumed office following the defeat of the Labour Party at the general election. He visited Truman early in **1952**, and the communique that was issued following their meeting stated that there was no question but that the British would be consulted before they were used by the Americans; and Professor Margaret Gowing noted this was the first time the assurance of American consultation had been given. This is the second of the crucial references which together make up the 'joint consultation agreement' between America and Britain. But *nothing* has been written down. There is *no* formal agreement signed on behalf of both countries, because Congress would never have agreed to any limitation upon the President's power to declare war or military action. And that is true of conventional weapons as it is with nuclear weapons. The only way the British could get the fig-leaf of an agreement out of the Americans was by accepting verbal statements in place of a formal written statement; and British politicians go on believing or deceiving their public, that there is a veto over American actions.

When David Henshaw investigated the problem in **1983** for the BBC he could not find one single American politician or diplomat or official who considered that Britain had a veto on the operational use of the bases. His summary of the position as he found it has been quoted above. Earlier in the same article Henshaw quoted part of an interview he had with Lucius Battle, the senior aide of Dean Acheson at the time of the talks in the autumn of **1951**. Henshaw asked Battle what 'a matter for joint decision actually means', and Battle replied:

'I haven't the slightest idea. . . Each side perhaps believes, sees, views the agreement as exactly what he was trying to get. . . its part of diplomacy in a way.' And did the Americans think they'd given a veto to the British? 'No, absolutely not.' Even of nuclear weapons based on British soil? 'No.'

We can leave the issue there. There is no control over the American's operational use of their bases in Britain. In global terms the Yom Kippur war was not a major confrontation, and it was not difficult for the Americans to accept consultation with the British or their refusal. In the case of Libya, it was a political decision to involve the British, to ensure that the Americans had one faithful, subservient ally in her criminal acts. The bombing of Libya could just as well have been carried out from the American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean—and more easily—and the argument that F III's were needed to ensure accuracy was made nonsense of by the inaccuracy of the bombing, and the killing of many civilians at considerable distances from the military targets.

When a major crisis does occur, or a situation which the Americans consider a major crisis, then the responses will be different. No doubt the British will be consulted but only, as Richard Nixon's Defense Secretary said to David Henshaw, 'if there is time available'; and if the Americans decide to use atomic weapons they will not, under any circumstances, accept any veto on the power of the American President to take the final decision.

NOTES

1. Duncan Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier* (1984), p. 30. The suggestion that US bases remain designated as RAF stations was apparently made by Sir William Dickson, Lord Tedder's Deputy Chief of Staff.
2. The written answers to Cryer's questions are in *Hansard*, 5th Ser. Vol. 986 (1979-80), Cols. 587-8 (18 June 1980); *ibid.*, Vol. 988, Cols. 54-5 (7 July); *ibid.*, Vol. 990, Col. 481 (8 August 1980). The details of Brawdy and the other facilities noted in the text are from Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, pp. 138 ff., 171, 172, 276.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-5.
4. *Hansard*, 5th Ser. Vol. 86, Cols. 481-2 (30 December 1932). For a general discussion, R.Y. Jennings, 'The Commonwealth and International Law', *The British Year Book of International Law* (Oxford, 1953), p. 320 ff.
5. The phrase 'largely an academic question' is taken from G.P. Barton, 'Foreign Armed Forces: Qualified Jurisdictional Immunity', *British Year Book of International Law*, pp. 341-370 at p. 368.
6. Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, p. 302. The Holy Loch incident is referred to in the *Scottish Daily Express*, 30 November 1969; and the Cornwall case in *Cornwall Courier*, 9 August 1979 and *Cornish Guardian*, 10 January 1980.
7. M. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence. Britain and Atomic Energy. Vol. 1. Policy Making* (1974), pp. 6-7 and *passim*. I have used Professor Gowing's remarkable book intensively and I hope not unfairly. It is a work of great scholarship. Since her book is an official history, detailed references to much of her evidence are not yet available.
8. The words are those of Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p. 5.
9. Gowing, p. 5 does not specify why Tizard was thus treated. One factor must have been the strong antipathies between Tizard and Lindemann, later Lord

Cherwell who was very close to Churchill: R.W. Clark, *Tizard (1965) passim*.

10. 'Gen.' was the term for an *ad hoc* committee and was always given a number.
11. Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence*, p. 20.
12. K. Harris, *Attlee (1982)*, p. 279. 'Hysterical' is the description used by Harris.
13. Gowing, p. 66.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70. Gowing mentions no names in her discussion of Cabinet dissensions. Halifax in Washington and Clerk-Kerr in Moscow were both in favour of giving the Russians information: Gowing, p. 69.
15. Gowing's phrase, p. 76, the nature of which she does not explain.
16. The Combined Policy Committee was established as a result of the Quebec Agreement of 1943. From the end of 1946 to September 1948 Donald Maclean was the British secretary to the Committee.
17. Gowing, p. 87.
18. Lloyd C. Gardner, *Architects of Illusion. Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy 1941-1949* (1970), p. 276.
19. *Memoirs*, p. 295 quote A. Bullock, *Ernest Bevin. Foreign Secretary 1945-1951* (1983), p. 238.
20. H.B. Ryan, 'A New Look at Churchill's "Iron Curtain" Speech', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (1979), pp. 895-920, 903.
21. J.F. Byrnes, *All in Our Lifetime* (New York, 1958), p. 349.
22. H.B. Ryan, 'A New Look. . .', p. 909, note 50 and p. 911.
23. David Henshaw, 'The President's Duty will always be to act in America's interest', *Listener* (2 June 1983), p. 3.
24. J.T. Greenwood, 'The Emergence of the postwar Strategic Air Force, 1945-1953', *US Air Force Academy, 8th Military History Symposium* (1978).
25. Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, p. 28.
26. Dean Acheson, *Present At the Creation* (1970), Ch. 26.
27. British historians but not Americans, have commonly suggested that without Bevin's imagination and understanding the Marshall initiative would have come to nothing. This myth is treated at length in the official biography of Bevin by Bullock (see especially p. 400 ff) and K.O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945-51* (Oxford, 1984) repeats the story in the same terms: 'It was perhaps his most important personal contribution to the conduct of British foreign policy', p. 270. No one who reads the American documentation carefully could come to these sorts of conclusions.
28. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 227-30.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 230. See also A.S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51* (1984), p. 3, note 4.
30. Milward's thesis briefly summarised, is that there was no impending economic collapse in Western Europe during 1947, and even less was there an 'impending political, moral and spiritual collapse' (p. 465). The payments crisis, which is not underestimated, was in fact due to 'the remarkable speed and success of Western Europe's economic recovery' (*ibid.*).
31. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 231-2.
32. Milward, *The Reconstruction. . .*, pp. 465-6.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
34. R.G. Hewlett and F. Duncan, *Atomic Shield, 1947-1952. A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Vol. 2 (Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 273.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
38. Gowing, p. 261.
39. Hewlett and Duncan, *Atomic Shield*, p. 283.

40. Gowing, p. 273.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
42. David Lilienthal was chairman of the US Atomic Energy Commission from November 1946 until mid-February 1950, and Carroll Wilson was the first general manager.
43. Quoted in Gowing, p. 265.
44. *The Forrestal Diaries* (ed. W. Millis, New York, 1951), p. 454.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 456. On the matter of the American's surprise at the casualness of the English in their acceptance, see A. Pierre, *Nuclear Politics* (1971), p. 79.
46. *Forrestal Diaries*, p. 457.
47. *Hansard*, 5th Ser. Vol. 454 (1947-8) Col. 123 (28 July 1948).
48. Gowing, p. 311, note.
49. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-2.
50. Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, pp. 31-2.
51. Hewlett and Duncan, *Atomic Shield*, pp. 521-2.
52. For a general account of the Korean War, J. Halliday, 'Anti-Communism and the Korean War, 1950-1953', *Socialist Register*, 1984, pp. 130-163. For the manipulation of the media by the American military and civil authorities, P. Knightly, *The First Casualty* (revised ed. 1982), Ch. 13 and from one of the key witnesses to the deceptions, A. Winnington, *Breakfast with Mao. Memoirs of a Foreign Correspondent* (1986), esp. Chs. 9-13.
53. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 484.
54. *Listener*, 8 April 1971, p. 442.
55. Quoted in Harris, *Attlee*, pp. 465-6. See Morgan, *Labour in Power*, pp. 427-30 for a misleading account: 'Attlee returned. . . in a mood of some triumph.'
56. Quoted in Harris, *Attlee*, p. 466. *Hansard* reference is Vol. 482, Col. 1357 (14 December 1950).
57. Gowing, p. 312.
58. The short statement by Churchill read as follows: 'The use of these bases in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision by His Majesty's Government and the United States Government in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time.' *Hansard*, 5th Ser. Vol. 494, Col. 280 (Written Answers) 6 December 1951.
59. Gowing, p. 413.
60. Quoted in Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier*, p. 311.
61. *Hansard*, 12 May 1983.
62. *Listener*, 2 June 1983. This is an extremely important article, with the title 'The President's duty will always be to act in America's interest', pp. 2-4; and should be better known.