



The New Protective State

Government, Intelligence and Terrorism

Edited by Peter Hennessy



continuum

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Introduction

The intelligence profession, like most other forms of organized human activity, is very often shaped by powerful weather-makers. For the bulk of the years since 1945 it was the potential military threat posed by the Soviet Union, its allies and the ideology which appeared to drive the Eastern Bloc's approaches to international affairs. For a brief and, from today's perspective, rather strange decade after the hardliners' coup failed in Moscow in August 1991, there was no single dominant weather-maker to condition life and thought within the British and Western intelligence communities. Since September 2001, there has been.

As in the early years of the Cold War, people and systems have taken a while to absorb the nature, magnitude and likely duration of the new threat from international terrorism on a scale not previously experienced by any of the countries which are its potential targets. As Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller points out in her chapter, in the autumn of 2006 all the British agencies, departments and authorities involved in countering international terrorism were still climbing a steep learning-curve. This book, largely created by serving or former intelligence practitioners or customers of the intelligence product, traces the analytical and, in part, philosophical developments in British thinking five years on from the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

It chiefly consists of papers or lectures presented to the Mile End Group which is run by and for research students in the Department of History at Queen Mary, University of London, during the course of 2006. The MEG is part of the Mile End Institute for the Study of Government, Intelligence and Society. This study, in partnership with Continuum, is the Institute's first publication. Some of the contributions had, in an earlier form, been presented to other bodies. For example, Chapter 5 was originally presented by Sir David Omand at Gresham College to the Gresham Society as the Peter Nailor Memorial Lecture in 2005. And Chapter 6 was first read by Sir Michael Quinlan as the 2005 Annual Lecture to the Centre for Intelligence Studies in the Department of International Relations at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

The book is intended to be a contribution both to contemporary history and what Fernand Braudel liked to call 'slower pulse'¹ varieties of the discipline. For just as today's research students, pursuing the still-young trade of British intelligence history, now cut their intellectual teeth on the once tightly protected archives whose files reflect the adjustment to a long and sometimes dangerous Cold War in the late 1940s, scholars of the mid-twentieth century may well be fascinated to see how the new UK protective state was created in the early years of the new millennium. This book, its authors hope, will endure as an aid to their attempts to reconstruct the analyses, approaches and systems of those who strove to build it.

As this book went to press in the first days of March 2007, there was much speculation in the press and in Whitehall about possible reconfigurations of the machinery of government for dealing with counter-terrorism. But the Cabinet had yet to discuss a final resolution of the possibilities.² The chief purpose

1 Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. xxxvii.

2 Peter Riddell, 'Home Office is at the heart of a turf war over anti-terrorism', *The Times*, 1 March 2007.

of this book, whatever the future might hold, is to portray the thinking of a range of key insiders (the editor apart) in 2006 about the first five years on the road from 9/11.

Mile End Institute, Queen Mary, University of London
March 2007

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1

From Secret State to Protective State

Peter Hennessy

. . . the destabilizing and hence conflict-engendering consequences of developing technology . . . [means] . . . aggression will continue to trump defence, but the means of aggression will become increasingly cheap, widely available and so to speak portable; this diffusion will almost inevitably in the end lead to these means coming into the possession of someone inclined, through fanaticism or folly, to deploy them.

(Ernest Gellner, 1991)¹

In 1991, the great social anthropologist Ernest Gellner published an essay entitled 'War and Violence'. Characteristically, it was as perceptive about the recently ended Cold War as it was prescient about the anxieties and threats generated by international terrorism and potentially rogue states a decade later. Gellner was especially well placed to write on such themes, for he was as well primed on the Soviet Union and

1 Ernest Gellner, *Anthropology and Politics: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 171. His essay was originally published as 'An Anthropological View of War and Violence' in Robert A. Hinde (ed.), *The Institution of War* (London: Comminan, 1991), pp. 62–80.

Eastern Europe as on the politics and anthropology of the Middle East and Muslim societies generally.²

This is what he wrote about Cold War past and its nuclear dimension:

The powerful and destructive weapons were so complex that they could only be acquired in any large quantity by a very small number of superpowers. These tend to be endowed with at least relatively pacific populations: the new weapons could only be produced by industrial machines, whose members are not literally warriors in any old sense, but instead are highly trained technical personnel, whose work and education incline them to lead inherently pacific lives.³

Gellner was no Pollyanna, but he did not see the political leaderships of the original nuclear-tipped powers as 'madmen in all authority . . . distilling their frenzy' (in Keynes' marvellous phrase)⁴ into a succession of high-risk actions. 'The authorities in the superpowers in question', Gellner judged,

were also at least relatively rational and moderate: they were not, by temperament or ethos, committed either to a cult of wild risk-taking as inherently admirable and noble, nor were they, whatever their formal pronounce-

2 Gellner's books included *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981); *Nations and Nationalism* (Blackwell, 1983); *Culture, Identity and Politics* (CUP, 1987); *Plough, Sword and Book* (London: CollinsHarvill, 1988); *Relativism and the Social Sciences* (CUP, 1985); *Language and Solitude* (CUP, 1998); *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).

3 Gellner, *Anthropology and Politics*, p. 170.

4 J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), p. 383.

ments, fanatical enough to fight for their belief system irrespective of risk.⁵

In the early 1990s, Gellner was well aware that '[a]ll these assumptions may in due course cease to hold'; that hugely destructive weapons might no longer be so difficult to manufacture to the point where 'they may become increasingly available by purchase, or even by local production, even to societies whose members are not pervaded by a relatively pacific, productive ethos'. Gellner recognized, too,

that, while a large armoury may be needed if there is to be any prospect of victory and survival, a much smaller one will do for a determined blackmailer. He knows that his success will depend on the credibility of his threat. He will realize that his threat will only carry conviction if *he really does mean it*, whatever the cost to *him* if his bluff is called. He may be willing to pay that price, even though he knows that, if his bluff is indeed called, he will himself perish together with his enemies.⁶

Gellner concluded that as 'the proliferation of high-tech weapons proceeds, the probability of some of them being acquired by groups endowed with such a state of mind eventually becomes very great. The present [i.e. early-1990s] increase in international terrorism offers a small but frightening foretaste, as yet on only a moderate scale, of such a situation.'⁷

Ernest Gellner died in November 1995. He did not live to see the jihadist terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001 or those in London in July 2005. Nor did

5 Gellner, *Anthropology and Politics*, p. 170.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

he develop his contrast between Cold War politico-social anthropology and that of the different age of anxiety through which we are now living, though it could to some extent be foreseen, as Gellner himself sensed, in the last years of his life.

That contrast – both in terms of similarities and differences – is the theme of this chapter. The idea of such an exercise was stimulated by an event, a process and an observation. The event took place in Whitehall during the first days after the atrocity of 11 September 2001 when the Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Richard Wilson, sent for the old Cold War files on what to do if the Prime Minister was wiped out by a bolt-from-the-blue attack. In the autumn of 1961, following a review stimulated by Lord Mountbatten, Chief of the Defence Staff, a policy was adopted of nominating two ‘alternative’ decision-takers from among the senior ministerial ranks for the purposes of authorizing nuclear retaliation. When the relevant file was declassified in August 2006, it showed a macabre, Shakespearean side to Macmillan. Asked by the Cabinet Office to nominate his two nuclear deputies, he scribbled this on the bottom of the minute:

I agree the following –

First Gravedigger

Mr Butler

Second Gravedigger

Mr Lloyd

HM

6/10/61

(‘Quite obviously,’ John Ramsden said on reading this extraordinary document, ‘Macmillan was casting himself as Hamlet. What other Prime Minister would have done that?’)⁸

8 National Archives, Public Record Office, CAB 21, London and Oxford: 6081, Bishop to Macmillan, 5 October 1961; Macmillan to Bishop, 6 October 1961. For the original ‘gravediggers’ see *The Works of William*

This 'gravediggers' one-and-two practice had lapsed in the decade between the failure of the hardliners' coup in Moscow in August 1991 and the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. On the advice of Sir Richard Wilson, it was restored by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in 2001. Now, as in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the choice of alternatives is made on an *ad hominem* basis rather than ministerial job or place in the Government's order or precedence.⁹

The process part of the stimulus for this chapter (of which details of the 1960–1 review of nuclear retaliation procedures formed a part), was the surge of Cold War-related documentary releases under the 'Waldegrave Initiative'.¹⁰ This started during the second Major Government and grew apace in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It enabled scholars for the first time to piece together the hidden structures and the concealed details of Britain's Cold War secrets, as some of the most sensitive files retained beyond the normal 30 years reached the Public Record Office at Kew.¹¹ My research students and I, therefore, were embarked on a process of scholarly catch-up on these highly revealing papers just as early-twenty-first-century Whitehall was beginning to build the new protective state in response to the threat posed by al-Qaeda, its adherents and its imitators.

The observation, which joined the event and the process as the trigger for this volume, was a remark of Richard Wilson's, when Cabinet Secretary, during a briefing he gave to my students (which, in retirement, he has made public).¹² The

Shakespeare (Shakespeare Head Press/Blackwell, 1938), 'Hamlet', Act V, Scene 1, lines 1–231. See also Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 154–65; conversation with Professor John Ramsden, 17 August 2006.

9 Private information.

10 Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and Its Holders Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2001).

11 Hennessy, *The Secret State*.

12 Lord Wilson of Dinton, 'Tomorrow's Government', Royal Society of Arts Lecture, 1 March 2006.

British, Lord Wilson said, have the habit of going into their big changes ‘as if under anaesthetic’. (He had in mind the UK’s accession to the European Economic Community in the early 1970s and the devolution legislation plus Human Rights Act in the late 1990s.) Only much later, he explained, do people realize the significance of these huge constitutional changes and tend to ask ‘Is that what we really meant?’

To my mind, the construction of the wider protective state since 2001 falls into this ‘anaesthetic’ category. Parliament, public and the press have yet to appreciate fully either its scope and magnitude in-the-round or its long-term significance to our systems of government and the kind of country we are. My purpose in this chapter, therefore, is to compare and contrast the UK’s Cold War secret state of 1948–91 with the new protective state of 2001 and after, then turning to the wider and enduring importance of what has been built and what is still under construction.

Threats and responses

The State is the coldest of cold monsters.

(General Charles de Gaulle)¹³

The state’s apparatus comes no colder than those of its moving parts where intelligence, threat assessments, counter-measures and contingency planning meet and intersect. This was as true during the great 40-year East–West confrontation as it has been post-2001 when the UK and its allies have had to contend with terrorism of a magnitude and kind which distinguishes it from anything heretofore experienced even by those countries, like Britain, with a long history of coping with it.

13 Attributed to Charles de Gaulle.

The state that was pieced together very rapidly after the Berlin blockade was begun by the Soviets in June 1948 and that developed over the decades that followed until the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989 could, without exaggeration, have been described as cold, monstrous *and* secretive. The post-2001 protective state may deserve the first two adjectives but the third, in relative terms, does not apply. The degree of openness about the bulk of it (the sources and methods of intelligence-gathering and certain protective measures and plans understandably excepted) has been both noticeable and, by previous UK standards, remarkable.

At no stage during the Cold War, for example, was a White Paper published which came near to matching *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy* of July 2006.¹⁴ Its only Cold War rival in terms of candour about the vulnerability of the UK was the famous Sandys Defence White Paper of 1957.¹⁵

Compare the 1957 paragraph which historians, rightly, have agreed contributed powerfully to the creation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament the following year,¹⁶ with the threat assessment contained in the 2006 counter-terrorism White Paper.

First the 1987 document:

It must be frankly recognized that there is at present no means of providing adequate protection for the people of this country against the consequences of an attack with nuclear weapons. Though in the event of war, the fighter aircraft of

14 *Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy*, Cm 6888 (London: Stationery Office, July 2006).

15 *Defence: Outline of Future Policy*, Cmd 124 (London: HMSO, 1957).

16 Christopher Driver, *The Disarmers: A Study in Protest* (London: Hodder, 1964), pp. 42–53; see also the MI5 brief on the history of CND prepared for Harold Macmillan in 1963 in NA, PRO, PREM 11/4285, 'The Development of the Nuclear Disarmament Movement', April 1963.

the RAF would unquestionably take a heavy toll of enemy bombers, a proportion would inevitably get through. Even if it were only a dozen, they could with megaton [i.e. hydrogen] bombs inflict widespread devastation.¹⁷

Now the 2006 assessment:

The Government assesses that the current threat in the UK from Islamist terrorism is serious and sustained. British citizens also face the threat of terrorist attacks when abroad. Overall, we judge that the scale of the threat is potentially still increasing and is not likely to diminish significantly for some years.

The UK has achieved some significant successes in dealing with potential attacks by Islamist terrorists, since before 2001. A number of credible plans to cause loss of life have been disrupted . . . However, as the tragic attacks of 7 July 2005 have shown, it is not possible to eliminate completely the threat of terrorist attacks in this country.¹⁸

Such rare candour apart, the once-secret world of Whitehall had really come in from the cold by the first decade of the twenty-first century. In terms of detail and openness, the depiction in the 2006 White Paper of the state apparatus for counter-attacking the leading threat of the day would have inspired disbelief in the Whitehall generation that drafted the 1957 Defence White Paper. Fifty years ago, for example, the peace-time *existence* of the Secret Intelligence Service was not avowed; the initials 'JIC', had they leaked, would have led to a serious inquiry by the Joint Intelligence Committee and its staffs (which were in the process of a reorganization in 1957, which was itself top-secret); and the slightest whisper of what the Government

17 *Defence: Outline of Future Policy.*

18 *Countering International Terrorism*, p. 8.

Communications Headquarters did would very likely have led to a prosecution under Section 2 of the draconian Official Secrets Act, 1911 (now repealed). The 2006 White Paper, by contrast, gives a near-comprehensive account of the functioning of all the state's intelligence and security bodies including the cross-cutting Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre housed within the main building of the Security Service, MI5.

Openness about process and instruments is important, but first-order contrasts need to be assessed if other comparisons are to be set in proper context. Magnitude of threats is at the top of the list. For if one contemplates the worst that al-Qaeda and its imitators – or even an emerging rogue state with a chemical, biological, radiological or even nuclear capability – can do, it simply does not compare in impact or consequences to a thermonuclear attack on the United Kingdom of the kind the Soviet Union could have mounted in a few hours from the mid to late 1950s. Equally, the likelihood of such a Soviet attack was very small unless war came through catastrophic miscalculation or inadvertence.¹⁹ Jihadist attacks, by contrast, were deemed inevitable *before* July 2005 and continue to be assessed as highly likely today and for a substantial period ahead. And as a senior Whitehall contingency planner put it in 2002: 'We did assume rationality with the Sovs. Now in Al Quaeda you have a bunch of people who just want to kill you . . . and it doesn't matter what the target is and who gets in the way.'²⁰

Given the continuity of the UK's non-partisan crown servants, many of the framers and constructors of the new protective state (including David Omand, Kevin Tebbit and Richard Mottram) were fully aware of the Whitehall esti-

19 See NA, PRO, CAB 158/47, JIC (62) 70, 'Escalation', 14 November 1962.

20 Quoted in Hennessy, *The Secret State*, p. 211.

mates of what hydrogen weapons on Britain would do to the kingdom in a few hours. They were equally aware of the physical and human wreckage likely to be left in the weeks, months and years that followed nuclear attack – what Edwin Muir, in his remarkable post-World War III ('The seven days war that put the world to sleep') poem, *The Horses*, described as

That old bad world that swallowed its children quick
At one great gulp.²¹

Muir, writing in the mid-1950s, expressed with his special Orcadian eloquence what his – and my – generation felt about living under the shade of the bomb. Eric Hobsbawm spoke for all of us when, recalling the 1950s in 2002, he said, '[i]t was a bad time . . . because we lived under the black shadow of the mushroom clouds . . . we were all living in a kind of nervous hysteria'.²²

Looking back, 1954 was for 'that bad old world' what 2001 was for today's. It was the year in which not only Whitehall's scientists, intelligence analysts and planners realized just what a single H-bomb could do; the whole world took it on board, too, as Edwin Muir plainly did. The moment can be dated precisely – 31 March 1954 at a Presidential news conference in Washington. Eisenhower's special adviser on atomic weapons, Lewis Strauss, was there to reassure the American public about the Japanese fishermen contaminated by the most recent US H-bomb test in the Pacific. But, in reply to a simple question from a journalist, about the size and power of a

21 Edwin Muir, 'The Horses' in *One Foot in Eden* (London: Faber, 1956), pp. 73–4. I am very grateful to my friend Andy Dalton for bringing this poem to my attention.

22 Quoted in Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2006), p. 133.

thermonuclear weapon, he delivered a reply that was heard around the world:

Strauss: ‘. . . in effect it can be made as large as you wish, as large as the military requirement demands, that is to say an H-bomb can be made as – large enough to take out a city.’

Journalist: ‘How big a city? Any city? New York?’

Strauss: ‘The metropolitan area, yes.’²³

Within a few months the Churchill Cabinet had approved the manufacture of a British H-bomb.²⁴ And within a year of Strauss’s statement, every member of the Cabinet was given a personal copy of the Strath Report on the effects of a thermonuclear attack on the UK.²⁵ The Strath group estimated that ten 10-megaton Soviet H-bombs dropped on the British Isles would kill 12 million people and seriously injure a further 4 million (nearly a third of the entire population) even before the fall-out spread its poison across the country. As to the impact on survivors, Strath told ministers:

However successful the educative process might be, it would still be impossible to forecast how the nation would react to nuclear assault. The effect of this on dense populations would remain beyond the imagination until it happened. Whether this country could withstand an all-out attack and still be in any state to carry on hostilities must be very doubtful.²⁶

23 Lorna Arnold, *Britain and the H-Bomb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 20.

24 NA, PRO, CAB 128/27, CC(54)53, ‘Conclusions’, 26 July 1954.

25 See Hennessy, *The Secret State*, pp. 121–46.

26 NA, PRO, CAB 134/940, HDC (55)3, ‘The Defence Implications of Fall-Out from a Hydrogen Bomb: Report by a Group of Officials’, 8 March 1955.