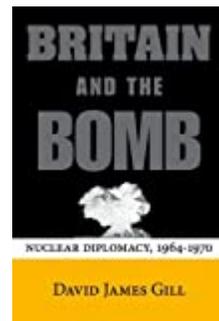




**David James Gill.** *Britain and the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy, 1964-1970.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. xii + 304 pages. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8658-4.



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Originating, in part, from the Nuclear History Program in the 1980s and 1990s there is now a substantial scholarly literature on British nuclear history.[1] Much of this work focuses on the strategic and military aspects of British nuclear policy, particularly issues relating to the testing of nuclear weapons, nuclear targeting, and the Anglo-American special nuclear relationship. In his study of *Britain and the Bomb*, David James Gill focuses on Harold Wilson's governments between 1964 and 1970 and argues that traditional approaches have tended to neglect the intricate blend of political, economic and strategic considerations which influenced Britain's nuclear diplomacy during what Gill argues was a historical watershed in British nuclear history (pp. 3, 50). He also argues that a reevaluation of the Wilson years is needed to take account of what he describes as his remarkable achievement in the field of nuclear diplomacy (p. 212).

Gill provides a convincing case that British nuclear policy during the Wilson years was a diplomatic and economic tool as much as a strategic and military tool (p. 33). In particular, using a range of British and American archives, as well as key secondary sources, he highlights the interwoven issues of nuclear sharing, nuclear consultation, nonproliferation, and independent deterrence, which characterized the evolution of Wilson's approach

to nuclear diplomacy. As he rightly argues, the interwoven nature of these different areas is often neglected in the historiography of this period. On taking office in 1964 Wilson was faced with a range of nuclear dilemmas. Should he continue with the Polaris program inherited from his predecessors, even though he had hinted at giving it up in the election campaign? How could he keep the Labour Party united on nuclear issues? Should he accept the principle of nuclear sharing and join the Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF) proposed by the United States and supported by West Germany? How could Soviet opposition to a nonproliferation agreement be overcome?

Wilson's idea of an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) is often seen in the literature as simply a device to kill off the MLF which the British government objected to. As Gill argues, however, the ANF was much more than this. It was a serious diplomatic initiative by the new Labour Government with intentions beyond merely scuppering the MLF (p. 76). It helped buy time and move attention away from the MLF proposal, without alienating the United States and West Germany. It therefore helped to prevent a possible U.S./West German nuclear alliance which excluded Britain. It also helped to disguise his decision to pursue the Polaris program which he had crit-

icized in opposition, thereby enabling him to ease lingering tensions within the Labour Party (p. 77).

While publicly supporting the MLF and ANF, Wilson worked hard to shift the debate away from nuclear sharing toward nuclear consultation within the NATO alliance. He strongly supported U.S. defense secretary Robert McNamara's moves in this direction which led to the establishment of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) within NATO. With this, one of the main barriers to Soviet participation in a nonproliferation agreement was removed and Wilson strongly supported efforts by the superpowers to negotiate the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which opened for signature on July 1, 1968. Britain was not a party to these negotiations, highlighting her declining status in international relations, but the treaty reflected a consistent policy objective in Wilson's nuclear diplomacy.

Gill also rightly emphasizes the way that continuing economic difficulties during the Wilson governments in the 1960s had a significant effect on the evolution of nuclear diplomacy. The ANF was particularly important in this respect. Gill argues that: "US support for the pound, growing tensions with the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] concerning the costs of military cooperation in Western Europe, and fears of a revival of the MLF meant that formal support for the ANF remained prudent" (p. 106). At a time of severe economic difficulties, leading to devaluation, the ANF was a convenient tool for the Labour government to secure economic support from the United States, even though there was very little support in private within the government for the principle of nuclear sharing. Despite this stress on the way economic pressures shaped British nuclear policy, Gill notes that Wilson "clung on to the bomb" (p. 212). Severe as the economic constraints were, they did not lead to Britain abandoning the Polaris force, as many in his party had hoped would happen.

This leads Gill to argue that Wilson's nuclear diplomacy was characterized by pragmatism and a preference for ambiguity as well as duplicity and prevarication (pp. 213, 139). Nevertheless, he argues that his nuclear diplomacy overall was "a remarkable achievement" (p. 213). This success has to be set alongside the failures associated with devaluation, the forced withdrawal from East of Suez, and exclusion from the European Economic Community. The tendency in the literature on the Wilson governments is to focus on these failures, whereas Gill argues that more attention needs to be given to the successes of his nuclear diplomacy. Gill's conclusion is

that Wilson "set a new modern course for British nuclear diplomacy" during this period (p. 219). There is some truth in this judgment. All the prime ministers who followed Wilson supported the key policies relating to the NPT and the NPG which he had championed. Whether, as Gill argues, Wilson "changed Britain's relationship with the bomb" is more debatable (p. 219). In many ways the ANF proposal put forward by Wilson was not too dissimilar to the Thorneycroft Proposals put forward by the previous Conservative government in 1963-64. Also, as Gill concedes, Wilson had very little influence in the superpower negotiations that led to the NPT and the NPG was largely the result of an American, rather than a British, initiative. Despite the rhetoric of the period prior to the 1964 election and his years in office, he also significantly continued to support the independence of the British nuclear force. Neither the NT nor the NPG has made any serious difference to the fundamental determination of successive governments to remain a nuclear weapon state. In this respect there is considerable continuity with the prime ministers who went before and those who came after him. It is not clear therefore that the Wilson government was such a watershed in British nuclear history as Gill argues (p. 50). Britain's contemporary relationship with the bomb remains much the same as when one of Wilson's predecessors, Clement Attlee, made the momentous decision in 1947 to develop nuclear weapons.

This said, David Gill has written a first-class study of the nuclear diplomacy of the Wilson era which provides significant new insights into the evolution of British policy between 1964 and 1970, particularly in terms of the interrelationship between different strands of policy. The book highlights the complexity and nuanced nature of the nuclear policies pursued and the broader context of economic and political issues, as well as the role of diplomacy and strategy. The book provides a valuable addition to the literature on the subject.

#### Note

[1]. The Nuclear History Program initially involved four nations: Britain, the United States, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany. It later expanded to take in a number of other countries, including the Soviet Union/Russia. It received funding from the Ford Foundation, the Volkswagen-Stiftung, the John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the German Marshall Fund. A more informal British Nuclear History Group continues to meet, leading to continuing publications on a variety of aspects of British nuclear history.

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