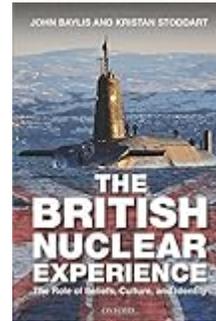


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John Baylis, Kristan Stoddart. *The British Nuclear Experience: The Roles of Beliefs, Culture and Identity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 312 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-870202-3.



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Anyone wishing to understand the United Kingdom's seven-decades-old relationship with nuclear weapons—a must if one is to fully appreciate, understand, and engage with the heated nuclear debates of today—should start with this excellent new book by leading British scholars John Baylis and Kristan Stoddart. *The British Nuclear Experience* provides a fascinating and highly accessible narrative of the somewhat peculiar story of both the day-to-day dynamics and the broader evolution of nuclear thinking and policy in the United Kingdom. The authors unearth and explain many fundamental dynamics about British nuclear policy that are rarely included in other analyses and tend to feature little in the public discourse or debate about the future of nuclear weaponry. There is no obvious political or normative agenda being advanced in this work (it is neither a cheerleader for Trident replacement nor a treatise for unilateral disarmament), but rather the authors seek to provide a holistic and inclusive assessment of how and why certain decisions were made, who the key players behind these decisions were, and above all, how we got to where we are today. If there is any key take-away message, it is that we must look beyond simple security-driven explanations for UK nuclear policy (although these are certainly not discarded in the book), and

focus on the importance of ideas, identity, beliefs, and the intervening role played by domestic politics and British political culture. By drawing upon an extensive and diverse range of primary evidence and sources in order to tell their story, which gives the work great depth, authority, and credibility, the book is able to provide a fascinating insight into what is so often (sometimes arguably for good reasons) an impenetrable subject, full of secrets and intrigue.

The book manages to pack a considerable amount of detail, fact, and anecdote into a relatively small space, and without compromising readability, assessment, or chronological flow. The narrative begins with analysis of the early days of atomic research, starting with the time when Britain led the world in the science of nuclear weapons, through the Manhattan Project, and into the race to build the bomb. It then explains how Britain, and especially the 1952 UK Global Strategy Paper, set the stage for general thinking about nuclear deterrence, how atomic weapons became central to both US and NATO strategy by forming a key part of nuclear orthodoxy that remains this day. The book considers the questions and complications for British non-strategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons and their role within NATO, especially in Europe, and as a component of broader UK

strategy. Baylis and Stoddart also look closely at the decision, politics, and technological developments that surrounded the move from the V-bomber force to Polaris in the 1960s, and then at the even more complicated story of how the United Kingdom came to procure the Trident D5 missile system two decades later. Finally, the book demonstrates how the procurement of Trident D5 missiles drives and shapes the way that the debate has materialized in recent years, first under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and more recently under David Cameron. While the text is primarily sequential, it uses key periods in UK nuclear history as vehicles through which to highlight and explain the broader set of dynamics at play. The interaction of these dynamics is a central part of the story and can explain much about how the United Kingdom got to where it is, and why the current debate has shaped up in the manner that it has.

The main academic thrust of the book is to highlight that in order to understand the particular, often punctuated, evolution of UK nuclear weapons policy, we must look beyond external threats as the key explanation of events. Indeed, the book makes the case for the application of a "thin constructivist" international relations (IR) lens in order to look outside the narrow set of strategic (realist) drivers that so often dominate analysis, not just of UK nuclear weapons but also of global nuclear order more broadly. While there is little dispute that the presence of the Soviet Union, and the threat of nuclear attack on the United Kingdom, was a major factor in British thinking throughout the Cold War, the book also shows that these were not the only dynamics driving the policy forward and saving the UK nuclear weapons program from being cancelled. Indeed, a nuclear weapons policy based purely on strategic analysis may have played out very differently, both during the Cold War, and now especially, in the two-and-a-half decades and a half since it has ended. In fact, as the book shows, had the political situation been different in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United Kingdom might well have purchased the less expensive and less capable Trident C4 missile (which was viewed as being sufficient for deterrence at the time), rather than the more advanced and more expensive D5 system it operates today. As it is, the UK is currently debating the replacement of a system that was beyond what officials believed was necessary for "minimum nuclear deterrence" even at the height of the Cold War. This also highlights the importance of contingent events elsewhere in shaping the nuclear debate in the United Kingdom (a key theme of the book), as well as explaining the current attachment to a highly capable nuclear system.

The authors suggest that we must therefore consider the particular impact that British culture, beliefs, and identity had on the nuclear story: perhaps most importantly how notions of "great power status" and the UK as having a "fundamental role in the world" have been juxtaposed against domestic financial and political realities and constraints, as well as a belief that if nuclear weapons could keep Britain safe and deter war, then they were morally justifiable. The perceived need to have a "Union Jack flying on top of it" has remained an integral part of the story throughout British nuclear history—even if policymakers and supporters have not always publicly acknowledged this motivation. This is not to mention the signal importance that both "keeping up with Uncle Sam" and retaining the special relationship has had on policy. Indeed, the United States plays a key role throughout the story, both directly through its provision of nuclear technology (after the McMahon Act of 1946 was amended), and indirectly through the importance of the transatlantic cultural link and NATO. Despite recent overtures by US president Barack Obama, it is believed that the United States continues to favor a nuclear-armed Britain, and the UK sees this link as a fundamental diplomatic component of the Atlantic alliance, and a source of British influence around the world. The book does an excellent job of explaining the ebb and flow of these dynamics and how they have provided the intellectual context through which both the British nuclear program, as well as the often capricious political debate, has been seen, understood, and constituted.

There are a number of fascinating sub-themes that also perforate the analysis throughout the book. The first is the uncanny way that British nuclear debates and political dynamics have repeated themselves (often in a surprisingly similar manner) over time. There is perhaps no better example of this than the recurring deliberations about what the United Kingdom requires for nuclear deterrence. For example, the political debates of the 1950s and the "Duff-Mason report" in 1978 bear striking resemblance to the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review (TAR) mandated by the Liberal Democrat Party as part of its coalition deal with the Conservatives: discussions about the possibility of "other nuclear options" such as nuclear delivery by cruise missiles (either by submarine or aircraft) are certainly not new. Indeed, many of the "alternatives" discussed in the 2013 TAR—aspects that remain part of the debate today—were addressed in much better detail in 1978 (albeit not publicly). The possibility of some type of nuclear cooperation with France, an idea seriously entertained by Edward Heath in the 1970s as part

of an *entente cordial*, has never really gone away either and would be revisited again throughout the decades, notably in the late 2000s.

So, too, would the discussions about the “Moscow Criterion” and what UK nuclear weapons must be able to achieve in order to deter; this was a fundamental driver of the decision to procure Polaris in the 1960s (making the newly produced V-bombers obsolete almost immediately) and the “Chevaline” program to increase warhead penetrability undertaken in the 1970s, and a key reason why the 2006 Government White Paper argued for renewing Trident with a like-for-like replacement system and not something “less capable.” This remains a centerpiece of the debate today (although far less explicit), despite the move towards what has become popularly termed a second nuclear age, which has seen a greater diversity of national and nuclear security threats than ever before. In some ways this dynamic can also be evinced by Margaret Thatcher’s deep concerns about Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (or Star Wars, as it became popularly known), and how this might impact the viability of the UK nuclear deterrent, and exacerbate conventional (NATO) inferiorities in Europe. As Michael Hesletine mused at the time, “What if the Soviet Union succeeded in developing such a system in turn, which might neutralize the British and French independent deterrents?” (p. 183). The same dynamics are slowly entering the debate again today, with the possibility that Russia, or another potential UK adversary might develop a ballistic missile defense system sometime in the future that could undermine the Trident-based nuclear force and therefore its ostensive deterrent value.

The same is largely true for domestic party politics and internal party dynamics, particularly for the Labour Party (the Tories have remained strong supporters of a UK nuclear capability for most of this period, and more recently of renewing the Trident system). Indeed, the book chronicles how various Labour leaders have sought to manage the nuclear issue amongst the party membership and within the Parliamentary party, and particularly how they have sought to neuter or at least circumvent antinuclear sentiment (notably under Clement Atlee, and then later, Harold Wilson, James Callaghan, and Blair). It also shows how leaders (when in opposition) have utilized the disarmament message as a key policy option: a highly visible factor in the 1980s under Neil Kinnock and something we appear to have returned to again with the election of antinuclear weapons advocate Jeremy Corbyn today. While the Main Gate decision to begin construction on replacement nuclear weapons will likely be

taken in 2016, how a future Labour government would act should it win power in the 2020 general election remains to be seen, especially if this victory relies heavily on the support of the Scottish National Party (SNP). Ultimately, and despite considerable differences in context, the same themes therefore appear to underpin the discussion; the same options, politics, and debates seem to crop up, and the same conclusion(s) tends to be reached. At least, that is, so far.

A penchant for secrecy has been another constant theme of what the authors describe as the “British nuclear experience.” Until recently, UK nuclear policy was decided and implemented by just a handful of very influential people and kept well away from the media and the general public. In fact, as the authors show, for a large part of the story, British nuclear decision-making has been made by a very small number of people and groups, often operating, in the early stages at least, in complete secrecy—even from large parts of the government. This was “due to a deep-seated conviction by the political and defence establishment that nuclear matters are of such overwhelming importance to the security of the state that extraordinary measures are necessary to protect national secrets” (p. 130). Both the Wilson and Callaghan governments kept the hugely expensive Chevaline program secret—primarily because Chevaline was as much about politics as any particular requirements, and decisions on nuclear weapons were regularly not even discussed by the full Cabinet—let alone subject to scrutiny from Parliament or the general public. Instead, a small number of key figures, political, official, and scientific have been fundamental to the story: Clement Atlee, Ernest Bevin, and Henry Tizard in the early years; Harold Macmillan in the early 1960s; Margaret Thatcher and Michael Quinlan through the 1980s and 90s; and perhaps Tony Blair and David Cameron more recently—to name but a few. In this way, the book makes the case for the intrinsic importance of a powerful nuclear advocacy coalition within government: while views within this coalition have often differed, this was kept quiet from the general public and therefore from wider scrutiny.

Given all of these dynamics, the authors suggest that while any move toward UK nuclear disarmament is certainly possible, this would require a fundamental change in the kind of beliefs, culture, and identity issues which have embedded nuclear weapons at the center of British thinking, and not necessarily therefore a fundamental shift in the strategic environment and types of threats facing the United Kingdom. As the book makes clear, a strong belief about Britain and what it stood/stands for as

much as any threat has underpinned the seven-decades-long British relationship with nuclear weapons. Ultimately, as the authors point out, "until a substantial degree of trust between nations has been achieved, British governments continue to believe that nuclear weapons have a critical role to play in national security" (p. 202). However, it could be argued that the reverse is happening, with the ever-important references to an uncertain global future being given fresh impetus following Russian military action in Ukraine and Syria, and heightened instability across the Middle East.

The overwhelming feeling is therefore that business as usual remains the British nuclear status quo, and that barring some significant political or strategic transformation, Britain will remain a member of the exclusive nuclear weapons club well into the second half of this century. That said, it could be that Britain's nuclear weapons future could be decided on the basis of a number of domestic pressures. While the government has committed to spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, there are many competing demands on that budget and govern-

ment spending more generally. Furthermore, this comes at a time when the government secured only a tiny parliamentary majority in the 2015 general election, and is now facing an opposition that is going to review its policy on Trident replacement, led by someone personally opposed to nuclear weapons. There is also the sizable SNP parliamentary representation, for whom opposition to Trident replacement has become a totemic policy, and which continues to raise the possibility that developments in Scottish domestic politics could yet prove important in determining the UK's nuclear future. Despite this, David Cameron has recently repeated his pledge to replace Trident on a like-for-like basis and maintain Continuous at Sea Deterrence with four submarines, which is likely to ensure that many of the fascinating and defining themes of Britain's nuclear debate that Baylis and Stoddart identify in this book will remain prominent well into the future.

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