A Most Special Relationship

The Origins of Anglo-American Nuclear Strike Planning

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reat Britain’s relationship with the United States has long been described as “special,” though whether this characterization is fair or meaningful remains a subject of heated debate.¹ For John Charmley, the relationship “had its uses, but for many years . . . had been more useful to the Americans than it had to the British.”² Henry Kissinger echoed this judgment, acknowledging that “the relationship was not particularly special in my day” but that Britain was important to the United States because “it made itself so useful.”³ The idea of a special relationship seems a distinctively Churchillian conception, a mythic invocation of a common interest to which Harold Macmillan was happy to subscribe. Both of these British prime ministers, of course, had American mothers. Waning (during Edward Heath’s premiership) and waxing again (during Margaret Thatcher’s and Tony Blair’s times in office), the special relationship is something that continues to be expressed in the politics of gesture, sentiment, and self-ascribed historic missions.

Politicians employ rhetoric, whereas diplomats are more at home with practicalities. Oliver Franks, writing in 1990 about his service as British am-

1. Jeffrey D. McCausland and Douglas T. Stuart, eds., US-UK Relations at the Start of the 21st Century (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006). More generally, the transatlantic relationship nowadays “is interesting again; and not just to academics and politicians, but on the street as well. . . . [It] is no longer to be taken for granted. It is controversial, conflictive and, with all the talk of Mars and Venus, even sexy.” Erik Jones, “Introduction” to a special issue on the transatlantic relationship, International Affairs, Vol. 80, No. 4 (December 2004), p. 587.
bassador to Washington from 1948 to 1952, denied that the special relationship was a mere “affair of sentiment.”

I do not believe that its roots were subjective and symbolic. . . . The special relationship was not a mystique of the shared inheritance of the English-speaking peoples. It arose out of common aims and mutual need of each other; it was rooted in strong habits of working together on which there supervened the sentiments of mutual trust. Those sentiments were important because they facilitated agreement and the resolution of problems. But the special relationship consisted not of sentiment but of the exceptional and unique degree of collaboration between the two powers.4

As such, the relationship has continued to find expression in public performances of a tangible, if by no means untroubled, partnership. The sorties against Libya from British bases in 1986, the joint enforcement of a no-fly zone over portions of Iraq after 1991, and the two countries’ operations in Iraq since 2003 are the most recent and dramatic examples of this collaboration.

During the early Cold War, collaboration was more limited. In the nuclear field, Britain’s quest for a “special relationship” was constrained by the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 passed by the U.S. Congress (a bill more commonly known as the McMahon Act after its chief sponsor, Senator Brien McMahon). The legislation prohibited the supply of nuclear weapons information to foreign powers.5 Britain had (in Timothy Botti’s words) a “long wait” before it could gain favored status, first by partial amendment and then by the eventual scrapping of the McMahon Act’s provisions as they affected the United Kingdom, a step that eliminated most of the barriers to nuclear cooperation. In the meantime, joint military efforts proceeded with caution, sometimes covertly. This article recounts one of these little-known aspects of Cold War cooperation. The Strategic Air Command (SAC) and the Royal Air Force (RAF) set up arrangements for the joint delivery of nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union and its allies. For the British, this was an enormously significant development in their relations with the United States. “Strike Hard, Strike Sure” was inscribed on RAF Bomber Command’s badge. From 1957, “Strike Together” became the tacit third component of their mission.6

6. “Project Encircle,” the central part of the story presented in this paper, is shrouded in secrecy on the American side and is therefore told largely from UK sources. Relevant U.S. Air Force (USAF) documents are stored in the UK archives, but internal correspondence and the minutes of meetings on the other side of the Atlantic are not available. Some correspondence pertaining to Anglo-American joint strike planning has been withdrawn from the papers of the successive USAF Chiefs of Staff at the
Joint strike planning apart, Anglo-American nuclear collaboration was evident in a number of other closely related areas. The British government provided forward bases in the United Kingdom from which, under a succession of U.S. war plans, U.S. Air Force (USAF) bombers could undertake a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. Later, USAF air-defense fighters were deployed to protect the vulnerable bases in East Anglia, making a welcome addition to Britain’s own limited capability to intercept intruders. A second group of bases had to be acquired and prepared for the deployment of USAF strategic nuclear forces. The new bases required major capital investment, a burden that was borne until an increasingly cash-strapped Britain passed most of it on to the United States. Uncertainty about the conditions under which the bases could be used was a source of continuing friction in Anglo-U.S. relations. Prime Minister Clement Attlee’s dash to meet Harry Truman to avert the use of nuclear weapons in Korea strongly suggested that the United States did not require British or Canadian agreement before taking such action. The intense diplomacy that followed did not succeed in resolving the more pressing issue of whether British permission was required before launching an attack on the Soviet Union from SAC’s airbases in the UK.

The provision of nuclear (including, later, thermonuclear) weapons for delivery by RAF aircraft was the least publicly known of all these areas of collaboration. Offered originally as an unacceptable quid pro quo for the restriction of the British nuclear program, the weapons were eventually provided liberally, together with extensive training and technical assistance for the conversion of RAF aircraft to carry them. The operational conditions or “strings”—that they could be used only in the European theater and under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR)—were not onerous, and the arrangements freed up the UK’s own weapons development program to focus on building an independent deterrent. Exchanges of technical and scientific information also took place, initially on a limited basis and later on a much greater scale after the second amendment of the McMahon Act. The design assistance provided by the United States ranged from missiles (the aborted Blue Streak) to the warheads themselves and was

Library of Congress (LOC), but it seems likely from their short descriptions that they are simply the American copies of correspondence released in the UK. Relevant files at the U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, remain classified and require collateral action by both the USAF and the Department of Energy, something that is rarely forthcoming in response to Freedom of Information Act requests.

crucial in ensuring that Britain remained, as it does to this day, a nuclear power.

“Special Weapons” and the Special Relationship

The genesis of joint U.S.-UK nuclear strike planning has received scant attention from historians who have otherwise dug deep into the archives on both sides of the Atlantic. The only fleeting references to the issue have presented it as an aspect of the post-Suez rapprochement engineered by Harold Macmillan (after he became prime minister in early 1957). To be sure, rift and reconciliation colored the political relations of the two powers during and after Suez, but close relations at the military level continued uninterrupted throughout that period as the USAF and RAF moved progressively toward operational integration. The effects of Macmillan’s restorative diplomacy have been significantly exaggerated. Although it was politically convenient for the British government to portray the USAF’s deployment of Thor intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) to the UK as a demonstration of renewed Anglo-American amity, the stationing of the Thors in Britain had in fact been planned well before the Suez crisis.11

British planners harbored no illusions about the devastation that would be caused by a Soviet nuclear attack. Assessments made both before and after the advent of thermonuclear weapons were so horrifying that they could not be shared beyond a select circle in Whitehall. An initial report in 1953 forecast two million casualties, widespread panic and devastation, and the collapse of government and civil order following an attack using 132 fission weap-
The report was completed around the time of the first Soviet hydrogen bomb test, which led to the immediate commissioning of a further study. The follow-on study assumed an attack by ten 10-megaton bombs, both air and surface bursts. The report concluded that Britain would be turned into a smoldering, radioactive ruin facing—in the measured language of the report—“problems of a revolutionary character for the defense of this country and a threat of the utmost gravity to our survival as a nation.”

The only feasible way of averting these appalling consequences was Anglo-American partnership in a strategy of deterrence. Britain was not, and could not be, strong enough to deter a Soviet attack at a time when the Soviet Army was judged capable of overrunning Western Europe and speedily reaching the English Channel. From 1946, a series of U.S. war plans all assumed the need for bases in the UK to launch attacks against the Soviet Union. U.S. policy and Britain’s survival were equally predicated on the availability and security of the bases. In truth, the military need for them gradually waned as the operating range of SAC’s aircraft increased, assisted by in-flight refueling. With the advent of long-range nuclear missiles, forward bases for strategic air strikes were no longer needed. But in the early years of the Cold War, U.S. and British leaders believed that the best way of deterring a Soviet attack was by the certainty of USAF attacks launched from, or supported by, the English airbases. British alliance seeking was, however, based on more than a need to make a reality of nuclear deterrence. Then, as today, forging the closest possible partnership was seen also as a means of gaining confidant status and, thereby, a measure of restraining influence on the world’s preeminent military power.

Two factors in the early postwar years militated against a close and trusting partnership in the sense celebrated by “special relationship” rhetoric. The first was simply that too much was at stake, not just in terms of national survival but also in terms of national sovereignty. No matter how warm the mutual trust and personal links of presidents, prime ministers, and diplomats, neither state could fetter the discretion of the other to make war when vital interests were involved. Second, wherever the weight of the McMahon Act was felt, intense secrecy prohibited frank exchanges. Few U.S. officers and officials were themselves privy to information about the nuclear weapons stockpile or SAC’s delivery capabilities. Information about these matters was not freely shared internally, much less with a foreign power. U.S. officials also

looked askance at Britain’s vulnerability to Soviet espionage. The arrest of Klaus Fuchs, after he turned over invaluable nuclear weapons secrets to the USSR, prompted the slamming of doors across Washington. Initially, too, the presence of a Labour government in London raised doubts in Washington about British dependability. U.S. officials worried that some Labour ministers were unduly sympathetic to Soviet interests.

The essential features of nuclear issues thus militated against closeness. Nuclear bombs were, in the phrasing of the time, “special” weapons, and their status as such precluded for more than a decade the development of a “special” nuclear relationship. Nevertheless, from 1948 on, Britain’s service chiefs and their planning staffs, together with those serving in the British Joint Services Mission (BJSM), the Chiefs of Staff’s outpost in Washington, edged toward cooperation as a tactic to gain information about and influence over SAC’s nuclear war plans. British leaders had become acutely aware of the problems posed by the stationing of U.S. bombers in the British Isles, which thereby became not just a target but the bull’s-eye (in Winston Churchill’s words) for Soviet air attack. British embassy officials and the BJSM made Herculean efforts to discover the nature of U.S. war plans, but neither they nor their superiors—Attlee, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, his successor, Herbert Morrison, nor even Churchill himself—were able to learn anything of value.15 Throughout the 1950s, continuing uncertainty about U.S. intentions and the effect they would have on UK interests impelled the RAF to seek a closer liaison. These efforts eventually paid off in the form of a U.S. initiative to coordinate the two nuclear strike forces, an objective inseparable from Project E—the supply of U.S. nuclear bombs for RAF aircraft. U.S.-led “coordination” proved to be a highly ambiguous concept, and the pursuit of it could hardly avoid giving affront to the amour propre of the Air Staff. Yet such was the dependence on American technology and American trust that it proved but a small step from there to joint targeting, and thus to true operational integration.

**Vulnerability and Deterrence**

Once British leaders realized the impracticality of trying to prevent the devastation that Soviet thermonuclear weapons could inflict on the UK, national defense policy shifted toward nuclear deterrence.16 The main aim of the RAF

15. Young, “No Blank Cheque.”
became to threaten Soviet cities with annihilation. When Air Marshal Sir George Mills took over as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-C) of RAF Bomber Command in 1955, he was instructed to target the Soviet Air Force bases from which attacks on the UK would be launched. Mills argued against this:

On the deterrent point I am sure for the enemy's edification as well as our own we must be specific in saying that our aim in retaliation is to hurt him where it really hurts; if we don't keep this firmly in our mind we are going to be ridden off on all sorts of defensive ideas which will ruin or seriously diminish our deterrent value. Whoever would be afraid of launching a sudden attack if he thought the greater part of our retaliation would come back to his airfields? I do pray that we keep our minds absolutely crystal clear on this issue.17

Mills's campaign for a shift of targeting priority from airfields to “morale targets” (centers of population and administration)—in short, to Soviet cities—was partly successful. The Air Ministry gave way to what had long been known to be Mill's personal view, though not without much internal debate and some reluctance.18 The command directive issued to him embodied the requested shift away from targeting airfields, and he was instead directed to use the V-bomber force as “the principal British deterrent to global war by providing the means of meeting aggression with immediate nuclear retaliation.” The retaliatory blow was to be directed against “targets that will hurt the aggressor most,” notably through attacks on “centres of administration and population and upon [the aggressor's] communication system.”19 The command directive envisaged that Mills's forces—which consisted mainly of Canberra bombers and a few Valiants at that stage—would be used at the discretion of the Chiefs of Staff to support either British or allied forces and would remain under national control. Yet, although it was inconceivable that Britain could become embroiled in a nuclear conflict without the United States, that ally's intentions remained obscure. All that had been established through interservice discussions was that nuclear weapons would be used from the outset of a conflict and from bases in the UK.20 This was an

18. Air Commodore N C Hyde, Director of Ops (B & R) to ACAS (Ops), in NAUK, AIR 2/15917. As director of plans in 1948, Mills had been centrally involved in the Anglo-U.S. preparations for deployment of U.S. nuclear bombers at English airbases. “Notes on an Informal Meeting” (between USAF and RAF officers), 10 May 1948, in National Archives (NARA), College Park, MD, Records of US Army Plans and Operations Division, RG 319, Box 106.
insufficient basis for the combined operations that war or even the threat of war would demand.

Throughout this period, the RAF maintained close ties to the USAF in the hope of gaining both information and influence. In 1953 the first nuclear bomb was delivered to the RAF for training purposes. With the entry into service of the RAF’s Valiants, the first of a new generation of high-speed, high-altitude medium bombers, the British had new cards to play. In January 1953, Air Marshal Sir Harry Broadhurst, then Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations) but soon to succeed Mills as AOC-C Bomber Command, invited representatives of SAC and USAF headquarters to an informal meeting at the Air Ministry. Confessing that a coordinated strategic plan of attack would have to await the RAF’s acquisition of its own nuclear weapons, he nonetheless urged that certain aspects of strategic operations could be planned in advance “so as to preserve an economy of effort in war and, in particular, to avoid the confusion and mutual interference which would otherwise result.” The meeting ended with agreement on the formation of a combined RAF/USAF strategic operational planning group to recommend methods for coordinating strategic bombing, reconnaissance, and countermeasures.21 No immediate follow-up took place, but the agenda was set for future discussions that were of greater urgency as British nuclear forces expanded.

The task of opening a direct line of communication with the Americans about their nuclear strike plans fell to Air Chief Marshal Sir William Dickson, who had been appointed Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) in 1955. Dickson had prepared the ground before his appointment with a visit to SAC headquarters at Offutt AFB.22 After becoming CAS, he held further informal meetings with his USAF counterpart, General Nathan Twining.23 A major factor limiting Dickson’s discussions with the Americans at that time was the severely limited capability of Bomber Command. The RAF did eventually acquire a powerful strike force (albeit one that was not comparable to SAC’s), but in the early 1950s the situation was much less favorable. Full-service strength for the V-force was some way off, and a lengthy interval would be required before an arsenal of British nuclear bombs was available for them. In 1955 Britain possessed just ten nuclear bombs, and the total rose to only fourteen in 1956.24 By the time the later V-bombers, the Vulcans and Victors, came into service, only one in four actually had a weapon to carry. To fill the gap, Bomber Com-

22. File Notes, March 1954, in LOC, Twining Papers, Boxes 65, 67, and 74. Of the Chiefs of the Air Staff in this period, Dickson was, after Tedder, the most sympathetic to cooperation with the USAF.
23. Signal, Twining for Dickson, 5 August 1955, LOC, Twining Papers, Box 100.
mand relied on U.S. weapons provided under Project E to equip its forces for nuclear missions. This arrangement established a platform for discussions that soon moved on to broader issues of how the U.S. weapons would be deployed, under whose direction, and against which targets.

In February 1955, Dickson advised Churchill that “in a matter so vital to our survival we cannot be certain that in the event the Americans would use their resources exactly as we had planned or would wish; or that they would do so in the first few days which are now of such critical importance.” Target priorities were at issue here. The precise targets that SAC chose to strike had huge implications for the defense of the UK. A large number of targets would have to be hit, including roughly 150 airfields from which the Soviet bomber forces operated, as well as administrative and industrial targets, naval bases, and nuclear facilities. “We must try to hit them all at the outset,” Dickson urged, somewhat unrealistically. The vast number and range of Soviet counterforce targets required SAC to take the lead role. RAF Bomber Command, with its limited resources, had to be highly selective. Agreement on targeting, Dickson added, would avoid “wasteful overlapping and dangerous omissions” and would thereby benefit both countries. He stressed that it was “clearly to the American advantage to ensure there is no duplication between their plans and our own.”

The Coordination Talks

By the autumn of 1955 some new factors promised real advances in what until then had been an inconclusive discussion. First, as the V-bomber force began to expand, the UK gained serious military weight to bring to the partnership. Second, some tentative indications had emerged that the USAF would welcome an RAF commitment to attack twenty agreed targets as part of a joint operation. Third, the RAF had started to make progress on the modification of its aircraft to fly U.S. nuclear weapons under Project E, a development that itself would provide an opportunity to begin coordinating operations and logistic plans.

At this point the premiership in Britain changed hands. Churchill retired and was succeeded by Anthony Eden. Minister of Defence Selwyn Lloyd sought Eden’s approval to launch coordination talks with the USAF. Lloyd noted that serious talks about this matter would enable the British to discover more about SAC’s war plans. Meanwhile, the Air Staff had become even

26. Selwyn Lloyd to Eden, 12 April 1955; and P. de Zueleta to W. N. Hanna (MoD) 16 August, 1955.
more emphatic that the most effective deployment for Britain’s limited nuclear forces would be in joint operations with SAC. Vice Chief Tom Pike, upon returning from a visit to SAC headquarters, urged the start of joint staff meetings to follow up on the Dickson-Twinning discussions. In response, the USAF suggested holding a conference, under the code name “Encircle,” in London on 15–17 August 1956.27 Twinning wrote to the new CAS, Sir Dermot Boyle, expressing his hope that “a firm integration of effort will result from this meeting which will not only improve our offensive and defensive postures but will immeasurably strengthen the firm bond now existing between our two air forces.”28

The lead role in the talks on the British side was assigned to Deputy Chief of the Air Staff Geoffrey Tuttle, who hesitated before taking on the task. Initially, he was less enthusiastic than Dickson and Pike about Anglo-U.S. cooperation. When the British contingent held a preparatory meeting a week before Encircle, Tuttle warned that the RAF should be careful not to show its hand and should allow the Americans to take the lead in developing the concept of joint operations.29 This did not prove difficult. When the RAF officers reviewed the proposed agenda, they had nothing to say about some issues. Not only did the British officers find themselves simply responding to the U.S. overtures, they were bemused by some of the concepts they were asked to deal with. SAC had added an agenda item on “the economic worth of the program,” which apparently would entail a comparison of the operational value of the two countries’ strike forces and their ability to inflict damage. Tuttle suggested that this point might refer to “the cost of the programme in terms of £.s.d.,” whereas Air Vice Marshal Ronnie Lees, the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff for Operations, said it meant that U.S. commanders were hoping it would be “cheaper” to allow the RAF to drop American-made bombs than to do so themselves. The item was dropped from the final agenda for the Encircle meeting, avoiding what might have been an embarrassing discussion.30

Foreign Secretary Harold Macmillan supposed that something good might come of it. Even so, although he believed that progress on the V-force and on the planned British hydrogen bomb provided some leverage, he doubted that the Americans would be prepared to reveal their strategic air plan in full. See Macmillan to Eden, 22 August 1955, in NAUK, PREM 11/846.

27. Pike to General Coiner, USAF, 12 April 1956, in NAUK, AIR 2/18093.
28. Twinning to Boyle, 6 August 1956, in LOC, Twinning Papers, Box 83.
29. “Summary of Discussion and Tactics to Be Adopted at ‘Encircle’ as a Result of a Meeting Held in Air Ministry on 8 August 1956,” in NAUK, AIR 2/18093.
30. The concept of the economic effectiveness of a nuclear force was subjected to periodic analysis, although it is unlikely that officials at Air Staff level would have been familiar with such technical papers. A paper by Bomber Command’s Operations Research Branch, which examined the effects of a range of factors, including yield, accuracy, the number of weapons allocated to a target, and the disposition of aiming points within an urban area, made the entirely intuitive point that “economic use of
The main concern of the British side was to resist anything that impinged on the RAF’s jealously guarded independence. In particular, the British commanders vowed that “on no account” would they sacrifice control over the V-bomber force. Tuttle insisted that even the Canberras stationed in Germany remained a national force until allocated to SACEUR in an actual emergency. The RAF, he instructed, “must not be cornered into a position where ‘V’ aircraft were tied to SACEUR because they carried US atomic weapons. . . . [T]he ‘V’ force had a national commitment and was directly responsible only to the Chiefs of Staff.” He acknowledged that the USAF would attach strings to the use of U.S. weapons and that “we must accept them.” But Tuttle did not want a situation in which SACEUR would “just hand out the targets to the RAF.” With this mixture of suspicion, bafflement, obstinacy, and resignation, the RAF embarked on one of the most important negotiations in its history. What might have been the beginning of the end of the world certainly began with a whimper.

As it turned out, the Air Staff’s trepidation was misplaced. The tentative and conciliatory tone of the opening statement by Major General Richard Lindsay at the Encircle meeting the following week indicated that the U.S. delegates had only limited expectations of making progress with their would-be partners. The USAF representatives presented a paper that answered their British colleagues’ fears, paid elaborate homage to the RAF’s sensitivities on the national character of the V-force, and set out a detailed account of the principles governing the proposed collaboration. Those principles went a long way to reassure the British side.

As the assembled officers worked through the agenda in their heavily guarded meeting room at the Ministry of Defence building, the RAF staff registered their complete agreement with the U.S. proposals. The initial impetus for the meeting may have come from Pike, but the groundwork was exclusively American, including a series of well-prepared background papers from SAC headquarters in Omaha. In the absence of any strategic thinking about the matter in Whitehall, the RAF could do little more than react to the U.S.

the damage potential of the stockpile and good coverage or high assurances on individual targets are incompatible.” See “The Effect of Delivery Accuracy and Target Allocation on the Effectiveness of a Nuclear Stockpile,” Memorandum No. 199, OR Branch, RAF Bomber Command, August 1959, in NAUK, AIR 14/4287. Also relevant is a paper drafted by the scientific adviser to the Air Ministry, “Target Coverage by a Number of Nuclear Weapons,” Science 2 Memorandum No. 270, October 1957, in NAUK, AIR 77/78.

31. The Canberras likely remained under national control until actually loaded and armed with U.S. weapons, at which point SACEUR assumed control.

32. “Summary of Discussion and Tactics to Be Adopted at Encircle.” Tuttle’s position was almost certainly untenable.

33. Ibid.
ideas. The Americans’ preparatory work had so overwhelmed the British contingent that the minutes prepared by the RAF squadron leader who kept notes of the meeting consisted solely of verbatim passages from the SAC document, plus a line registering the RAF side’s agreement and a final point indicating the unreserved agreement of both parties.34

Back in the Air Ministry, a self-congratulatory tone prevailed in the weeks following the meeting. “The Americans are very anxious to keep us in the game with them,” reported BJSM Washington.35 The RAF commanders hailed the arrangements for coordination of strategic and tactical nuclear operations as “the most important development in recent years in planning for the UK strategic bomber force,” a development that provided “further evidence that the United States regards this country, both militarily and economically, as good investment.”36 Even Suez did not spoil the mood. The Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Dermot Boyle, canceled a trip to meet Twining in November because of the situation in the Middle East, but he personally oversaw the follow-up to Encircle.37 Boyle reminded his fellow chiefs that the Air Staff for years had been urging joint planning for British and American strategic air forces. Now, with the V-force coming on stream, coordination of the two nuclear strike plans could at last make headway, with an agreed concept of allied nuclear operations and an outline plan of action for conducting them.38

Boyle’s comments were appropriately upbeat for the suspicious Army and Navy chiefs, but in reality the supposed British-American concordance had already begun to unravel. The detailed terms of the agreement submitted by the Pentagon confirmed the worst fears of the skeptics among the Air Staff officers.39 RAF commanders had to face many thorny questions. What would “coordination” mean in practice? Was the British countervalue targeting doctrine really enshrined in the joint strike proposals, or was it effectively ruled out? Was the RAF expected to play no more than a subordinate role in U.S. decision-making? Who had authority to launch a nuclear attack? Progress had to be made on all these issues before an agreement could be concluded on the integration of U.S. and UK nuclear forces.

35. AVM Selway (BJSM) to AVM Earle, ACAS (Policy), 18 February, in NAUK, Air 20/11338.
36. Comments by the ACAS (Policy), AVM J. N. T. Stephenson, “Co-ordination of USAF and RAF Nuclear Strike Plans: Note by Chief of the Air Staff,” 31 December 1956, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
37. Boyle to Twining, 1 November 1956, in LOC, Twining Papers, Box 101.
38. “Co-ordination of USAF and RAF Nuclear Strike Plans”; and “Paper by Boyle with Appendices, to Be Discussed 8 January 1957 Meeting of the Chiefs of Staff,” in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
The Ambiguities of “Coordination”

When the UK Chiefs of Staff met in December, Boyle reported that some points in the U.S. proposal needed further discussion with the United States but should not delay approval of the broad arrangements. His colleagues were prepared to move ahead on that basis, but with an important proviso: namely, that there should be no implied commitment to any specific size for the V-force or to the production of a given number of weapons. This requirement was highly inconvenient. Playing up the need for the largest possible V-bomber force was part of the RAF’s game plan in going along with the USAF. Agreement with the Americans strengthened the Air Staff’s hand vis-à-vis the other services in the battle for resources and helped shore up support for the airborne deterrent within Whitehall. Any Treasury attack on the strength of the airborne nuclear force would from then on be presented as inconsistent with allied operational plans.40 RAF officers thus welcomed Encircle all the more for having put “powerful arguments at our disposal that . . . the American willingness to play ball with us is largely dependent on the efforts we have made and are making to build up a nuclear strike potential of our own.” Harold Macmillan, who had become prime minister in January 1957 and who was never one to emphasize strategy over economy, had been showing an unwelcome interest in the proposed size of the V-bomber force, with an eye to reducing and canceling production orders.41 When SAC commanders needed to know the size of the force they were planning to coordinate, Boyle could do no more than assure Twining that although the UK would “provide as big a force as is practicable in the light of all the circumstances,” the RAF could not be bound in advance to provide “any specific number of aircraft or weapons.”42

When Duncan Sandys took over at the Defence Ministry in January 1957, he threw his weight behind the RAF’s efforts. One of his first acts was to write to U.S. Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson confirming the broad terms of the agreement that emerged from the Encircle discussions. Sandys assured Wilson that the British government considered the proposals “a most significant development in the co-operation between our two countries.”43 Macmillan and Dwight Eisenhower reaffirmed this agreement in March when

41. “Co-ordination of USAF and RAF Nuclear Strike Plans.”
42. Boyle to Twining, 11 February 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
43. Sandys to Wilson, 30 January 1957, and Wilson to Sandys, 1 February 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
they met in Bermuda. In June, when Sandys saw Air Force Secretary James Douglas, he expressed “appreciation of the satisfactory way in which joint planning between Bomber Command and SAC was going ahead and stressed the vital importance of this to full efficiency of the United Kingdom defence effort.” At home, Sandys supported the Air Staff by stressing the adverse effects of the uncertainty about quantities of V-bombers and warning Macmillan that failure to be specific about the strength of that force would create difficulties for nuclear strike coordination plans “which have been agreed in principle at Bermuda.”

Boyle, for his part, was keen to see progress made on the big picture and was less concerned about the niceties of the proposed relationship. He urged the establishment of new links between SAC and Bomber Command to ensure that, in the event of war, the necessary political authority to launch a nuclear strike could be obtained in time. He suggested the formation of a standing liaison body that would “initiate and maintain a continuous contact between our two air forces on these important matters.” But Boyle and his colleagues soon found it necessary to address the issue that had made them most uncomfortable: whether Bomber Command’s forces were to coordinate with (as the RAF wished) or be coordinated by their American colleagues.

The essential truth of the emerging relationship lay, as ever, in the nuance. The crucial annex to the U.S. proposal implied that strike plans and the RAF’s role in them would be coordinated by the USAF Chief of Staff, possibly by delegation to the commander-in-chief of SAC. This wording was in sharp contrast to a letter from General Twining and to an earlier passage in the same annex that referred to coordination of strike plans with the Royal Air Force, a phrase that had been accepted—or so the British officers thought—at the Encircle meeting in August. “As I understand the proposal,” Boyle wrote to Twining, “it is that this should be a joint matter and that neither of us, nor the representatives of either of us, should have any over-riding authority. I am sure this is your intention.”

46. Extracts from Minutes of Prime Minister’s Meeting, GEN.570/2, 30 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 8/2400.
47. Twining to Boyle, December 1956 (precise date not indicated), in NAUK, AIR 20/11338, emphasis added.
48. Stephenson to CAS re Brieﬁng Paper 31 December 1956, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338; Loose, Air Cdr B. K. Burnett, Director of Ops (B & R), n.d., in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
49. Boyle to Twining, 11 February 1957.
was frosty, though Twining reassured the CAS that he did not claim to have *unilateral* overriding authority—as if some other kind existed.50

Evidently, the Americans approached the issue exclusively as one of coordinating a *U.S.-armed* strike and were primarily intent on establishing coordination in advance of the UK’s deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Victor force.51 In reality, the Victors were still some way from entering service and never ended up carrying U.S. weapons. Boyle told Twining that the Valiants already had a nuclear capability with British weapons and that no delay was needed before starting to coordinate the respective strike plans.52 “We can only assume,” mused Air Vice-Marshal Earle, “that Twining does not realize how far we have got with the development of the V Bomber force.”53 It certainly seemed so. Only after Air Marshal Tuttle gave the USAF officers an overview of Britain’s nuclear capability did a sense of urgency develop on the American side.54

On both sides, detailed planning began for the next joint meeting scheduled for Washington. In May 1957 the USAF deputy chief of staff, Major General Roscoe C. Wilson, wrote rather daringly to “Dear Dermot”—the intimacy was not repeated—about what SAC referred to as *The Pact of Co-operation with the British in Atomic Area*.55 Under the plan, the forces of SAC and Bomber Command would “remain under national control” but would “operate in global war according to a co-ordinated plan.” A joint planning group (JPG) would select targets; rank them in order of priority; allocate them between the forces, coordinate tactics, timing, routing, and countermeasures; and “determine[e] the allocation of US nuclear weapons to Bomber Command to meet any British deficiency as may exist for the time being.” The JPG would also address the troubling issue of authority to launch, seeking to devise a channel and system of control to “ensure that, in the event of war, the two forces will in fact be able to act in concert without delay.”56

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50. Twining to Boyle 21 February 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
51. Ibid.
52. Boyle to Twining, 26 February 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
53. Earle to Selway, 27 February 1957 in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
54. Tuttle (DCAS) to CAS, 18 March 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
55. Wilson to Boyle, 7 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
56. “Coordination of SAC and Bomber Command Global War Nuclear Strike Plans,” USAF/RAF Conference, Washington, DC, May 1957; “Suggested Terms of Reference for Joint Planning Group for the Co-ordination of SAC and Bomber Command Global War Strike Plans” (Draft), in NAUK, AIR 20/11338. Officials at BJSM Washington said it was “rather obvious that the existing bumbling linkage between State Department and Foreign Office will have to be replaced by a more lively arrangement if we are to hope for concerted action at the right time.” Selway to Earle, 18 February 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
Weapons and Targets

The vexatious issue of targeting, which had been dormant since the first Encircle meeting, now flared up again, causing the British to backtrack in the face of proposals that had “alarming” implications for British sovereignty. Procedures for target selection, accepted by the RAF side at the Encircle meeting, had now been rewritten to the disadvantage of the British side, but Boyle urged his colleagues not to contest the American proposals. Interservice problems also played a role. The terms of reference for the embryonic joint planning group took no account of the desire of the UK Chiefs of Staff to agree on broad target policy before beginning the coordination of Bomber Command’s and SAC’s plans. Nor had the Chiefs of Staff yet considered a joint planning staff paper on Allied Strategic Attack in Global War in 1957, which had a cover note attached that specifically raised the issue of higher direction and target selection.

The draft memorandum of understanding (MoU) prepared by SAC officers for the Washington meeting showed little awareness of the strength of Britain’s commitment to an independent nuclear deterrent. The phrasing of the U.S. draft rekindled hostility within the Air Ministry to the USAF’s apparent desire to dominate the proposed partnership. An internal meeting to plan a response to the SAC proposals posed a simple question—“Does the Memorandum of Understanding give us what we want?”—to which the reply was largely negative. All of the assembled RAF officers concurred that “this is not an ‘agreed’ US/UK document yet. It is up to the USAF and RAF to confirm it.” The one-sidedness of the proposed agreement was particularly irksome to the Air Ministry. The Assistant Chief of the Air Staff for Policy, Air Vice Marshal John Stephenson, who was the most trenchant of the internal critics, complained that the MoU “over-stresses our dependence on US weapons and makes no reference to use of our own.” The authors of the memorandum, he argued, entirely disregarded, “perhaps from ignorance; perhaps by intent,” the fact of Britain’s own nuclear capability. The U.S. proposal, he said, “smacks too much of incorporation into, and too little of coordination with.”

58. J. N. T. Stephenson, ACAS (P) to CAS, 15 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
60. Minute on the Memorandum, n.d., in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
Suspicions flourished on the British side. The intra-RAF deliberations coincided with the visit to London by Harold Stassen, an emissary for President Eisenhower who came to discuss the possibilities of a moratorium on nuclear testing. His visit was coldly received in Whitehall, where officials viewed his proposal as a ploy to block Britain’s development of a thermonuclear capability. The irrepressible Stephenson drew together this larger issue of nonproliferation policy with his opposition to the SAC document:

The memorandum...is not, for example, a Memorandum of Understanding on the co-ordination of UK/US nuclear offensives, which must surely be between equal partners. At the worst it might seem to be capable of extension, or even acceptable as it stands, as a substitute for our own plans for developing an independent deterrent. The dangers of extension in this direction are increased if the memorandum is read in conjunction with Mr Stassen’s recent disarmament proposals which embody among other measures proposals that production of new fissile material for the manufacture of nuclear weapons should cease by April 1959. At this time of course, UK stocks of nuclear weapons would be small and the implication that we might as well decide now to rely solely on American weapons would not be lost on those who are still not reconciled to our decision to be independent [anonymous annotation: CIGS, CNS, Chancellor]. I do not want to see dangers where none exist but I suggest that before any further action is taken on this paper it would be wise to decide among ourselves its precise status and what action we should take upon it, and at what level.

Mindful of these dissenting views, Boyle wrote a carefully non-committal letter to General Twining. He also warned Tuttle, who was to lead the British delegation at the next round of talks, not to disclose his hand too soon and to “leave the initiative with the Americans in the early stages of the meeting.” In particular, he told Tuttle, the British delegation should seek a clearer understanding of SAC’s intentions. Boyle stressed that “knowledge of the views and ideas of the Americans will be of great importance and we must hope that

61. Ibid. This negative view echoed that of the prime minister, who noted in his diary that “Mr Stassen (US representative at the disarmament sub-ctee) has filed an extraordinary set of proposals, without telling us or the French—or, it seems, the State Dept. Nor has he given copies to anyone except the Russians! Is this America’s reply to our becoming a nuclear power—to sell us down the river before we have a stockpile sufficient for our needs? Some of my colleagues suspect this.” Quoted from Macmillan Diaries, 2 June 1957, Bodleian Library, Oxford University (underscore in original).

62. J. N. T. Stephenson (ACAS (P)) to ACAS (Ops), 11 June 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338. The annotations referred to the skepticism of the Army and Navy Chiefs of Staff and that of the Treasury. Just as the SAC proposals on coordination had evoked a large measure of disagreement within the Air Ministry, target policy and targeting divided the British services, with Earl Mountbatten, Chief of the Naval Staff, persistently opposing RAF bombing doctrine. P. J. Hudson to PS to Tuttle, 9 September 1957, R. Butler to PS to Tuttle, 6 September 1957, Lees to Tuttle, 21 June 1957, Tuttle to Boyle 9 September 1957, in NAUK, AIR 2/13780.
when you and your team come back from the States you will be able to fill in some of the blanks on this.”63

The Washington meeting took place on 21 May 1957. Tuttle, in his opening remarks, described the talks as “one of the biggest steps in international military co-operation ever taken.” He reminded his listeners that he “was not a plenipotentiary” and that higher direction might be needed on any points of disagreement. He insisted that the V-bombers would remain under national control and would be used only against targets approved by his government.64 The meeting drew up terms of reference for the JPG, whose tasks would be to select and set priorities for targets, allocate them to SAC and Bomber Command, and coordinate tactics, timing, routing, and countermeasures. The document also stipulated that the JPG would establish what nuclear weapons should be allocated to the RAF to meet the temporary shortfall and to define the mechanisms of command and control that would enable the two forces “to act in concert without delay.”65

The outcome of the meeting was clearly to Britain’s advantage. Tuttle happily reported that “the American plan allows for considerably more bombs than bombers and that a one to one ratio of American bombs to British bombers would in their view be insufficient. This is, of course, extremely attractive in view of our limited stocks of fissile material.” The only thing SAC’s planners wanted to know was how many British weapons would be issued to Bomber Command for the first strike and how many American weapons would be required for subsequent strikes. Issues of control and storage of the American weapons could be addressed once the numbers were pinned down.66

But the issue was not, in fact, quite that straightforward. The USAF saw a direct link between the supply of U.S. nuclear weapons to the British and the development of target lists and other arrangements for their use. The RAF sought to break this link and to separate the coordination of plans from the supply of weapons. Boyle and his colleagues sensed that if the provision of nuclear bombs determined the plans for using them, it would confirm the subordinate role of the RAF. As formal agreement neared, Boyle’s first thought was to try dividing the memorandum into two parts—the strike plan and the supply of bombs—which could be negotiated separately. Tuttle disagreed, arguing that this “may give rise to suspicions by the Americans that we are trying

63. Boyle to Tuttle, 16 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
64. Tuttle’s handwritten draft of his opening remarks for the meeting at the Pentagon, 21 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 2/3780.
66. Tuttle to Boyle, 22 May 1957, in NAUK, AIR 2/13780.
to out-smart them.” Walking a fine line between candor and misrepresentation, Boyle suggested to Twining that the “presentational, constitutional and security aspects” of the matter could be handled more smoothly if the two key issues were separated in a revision of the agreement. Boyle added that although the V-bombers already had “a growing nuclear capability with United Kingdom weapons, on which planning coordination between our two air forces could now go ahead,” it would be some time before any V-bombers were modified to carry U.S. weapons. The “presentational” considerations to which Boyle referred were matters of bureaucratic politics. Neither then nor later did he consider himself obliged to report to his fellow chiefs on the section of the agreement that dealt with the supply of U.S. weapons to the RAF. Separating the issues enabled him to keep the matter out of the COS committee.

By mid-1957 the basic framework had been largely accepted. The U.S. negotiators agreed to provide a generous quantity of nuclear weapons to the RAF, precisely as Boyle had sought. The asymmetry in the relationship had to be acknowledged by the British, “bearing in mind the small contribution to be made by Bomber Command compared with that of the SAC.” Yet even after the basic framework was set, specific points remained contentious. At least four different versions of the agreement were in circulation, underscoring the lack of consensus about what kind of alliance should be established. The first version was the SAC proposal received from General Twining. The second incorporated minor changes and improvements that were the minimum acceptable to the RAF but that enjoyed little support within the Air Staff. The third was prepared to Boyle’s specifications by Air Vice Marshal Lees, the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff for Operations, despite his own “grave doubts.” The fourth was a masterly redraft by Frank Cooper, the civilian head of the S.6 section, who successfully reconciled the different views of Air Staff officers and provided the core of what was then sent back to Washington for approval.

In August 1957, General Thomas White, who had succeeded Twining as the USAF chief of staff, accepted the Cooper revisions to the agreement and passed them on to LeMay to use in follow-on negotiations between SAC and

67. Tuttle to Boyle, 11 July 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
68. Minute, PS to CAS for ACAS (P) and Others, 26 June 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
69. PS to CAS (R F Butler) to ACAS (Ops) (Lees), 13 May 1958, in NAUK, AIR 2/13780.
70. Draft Minute to Chairman COS Committee, n.d., in NAUK, AIR 20/11338. AVM Stephenson was reconciled to the UK’s acceptance of “a poor relation role,” advising his staff that “we are certainly the junior partner and will always be so.” Nevertheless, it was some consolation that “the Americans would never have made the approach last autumn if they had not been convinced that we had a real contribution to make.” Stephenson to Director of Plans, 14 June 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
Bomber Command. Soon thereafter, the commander in chief (AOC-in-C) of Bomber Command, Sir Harry Broadhurst, met with General Thomas Power, LeMay's successor. The generals devised a coordinated nuclear strike plan for the twelve months through 30 June 1959, using British and (from October 1958) U.S. nuclear weapons. Permanent Undersecretary of Defence Sir Richard Powell wanted the COS to endorse these arrangements “without demur.” The Royal Army and Navy chiefs saw the scheme only in outline, inasmuch as Tuttle and Boyle still had no intention of conveying details to the other services. This ploy, strongly supported by the civilian officials, helped avoid the issue of how large the V-force should be. The RAF did not want the Americans to learn about the ongoing battles over the number of V-bombers to order, for they would do little to inspire confidence in the robustness of the alliance.

**Target Policy and Target Selection**

The Ministry of Defence regarded the exchange of notes between Defence Minister Sandys and Defense Secretary Wilson as a “governing memorandum” requiring no further approval. Sandys on his own authority endorsed the COS paper as the basis for strike planning and did not mention it to his cabinet colleagues. On the question of targets, however, important differences of operational doctrine existed between the Americans and British. The RAF believed that this issue had been settled with the directive given to Air Chief Marshal Mills, the AOC-in-C of Bomber Command, in 1955 stipulating that British policy was to focus on “city-busting.” But this approach was shunned by the USAF, which aimed instead to cripple the Soviet Union’s ability to prosecute a war. For the USAF, cities were incidental, rather than primary, targets. The report of the joint planning staff helped Boyle square the doctrinal circle through its recommendation that UK policy be clarified before pursuing coordination with the United States. But Boyle was able to

74. R. F. Butler, PS to CAS, to PS to DCAS, P. J. Hudson (PS to CAS) Reply, 6 September 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
75. Note to COS Committee, 20 November 1957, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
76. “Allied Strategic Attack in Global War in 1957 and Its Consequences,” JP (57) 10 (extract), in NAUK, AIR 20/11338
suppress the similar concerns of the Air Staff by drawing a distinction between target \textit{policy} (to be decided by ministers on advice from the COS) and target \textit{selection} (a matter for the Air Ministry alone).\footnote{Sandys went still further when he chose not only to leave target selection to the professionals but also to hold back the target policy document from the Defence Committee. In so doing, he argued that not until more was known about the American plans from the joint talks should the policy document become the basis for operational discussions at command level between the RAF and USAF.\footnote{The chief of the Defence Staff was empowered at that stage to authorize the implementation of the target plans approved by the COS, thus supposedly linking target policy and target selection.} Thus, although the assumption had been that target policy would be settled at ministerial level and then translated by the RAF into specifics, the reality is that policy passed \textit{upward} in the form of a distillation of target selections (“targeting”) made by officers of the British and American air forces.}

U.S. war plans from 1948 on envisaged an immediate nuclear strike from forward bases in the UK to counter a westward push by Soviet ground forces.\footnote{U.S. war plans from 1948 on envisaged an immediate nuclear strike from forward bases in the UK to counter a westward push by Soviet ground forces. Under the new, coordinated targeting policy, RAF bombers would strike Soviet long-range bomber bases to neutralize or at least reduce the Soviet Union’s potential for launching a nuclear attack. This approach marked the reemergence of the doctrine that Mills had discarded, and it made sense only in terms of a preemptive nuclear strike, which was unlikely to go over well with the British public. By late 1958, however, the two sides had shifted to a more acceptable target allocation. Based on projections that Bomber Command would have roughly 100 aircraft in 1958–1959, the SAC/RAF agreement assigned a total of 106 targets to the UK, comprising 69 cities, 17 Soviet long-range aviation bases, and 20 air-defense sites. SAC, for its part, would give initial emphasis to defense suppression, taking out the hardened...
air-defense targets to allow subsequent waves of bombers to pass through. U.S. strategic doctrine attached great importance to direct attacks on the air-defense system in the first strike to open the way for follow-up strikes proceeding to deeper penetration targets.\textsuperscript{83} Joint operations eclipsed Mills’s 1955 directive because SAC and Bomber Command together had sufficient resources to strike all the relevant targets. Their combined strength permitted simultaneous attacks against the majority of airfields, administrative centers and transportation targets. The only proviso made by London was that airfield targets whose destruction was vital to Britain’s survival be included in the first strike by SAC aircraft.\textsuperscript{84}

**From Coordination to Integration**

The devastating weight of a combined attack cushioned many of the possible conflicts of priority between the two air forces. Every Bomber Command target was also on SAC’s list, and both countries’ commands wanted double or multiple strikes on their own selected targets to ensure success.\textsuperscript{85} Duplicated targeting by two strike forces raised questions of redundancy and the “fratricide” risk to Allied aircraft. During the summer of 1958, unnecessary target duplication was rationalized to produce a single integrated targeting plan. Follow-up meetings devised optimal routes and coordinated electronic countermeasures, and a fully coordinated plan was in place by 1 October 1958. The Chiefs of Staff were “well satisfied” with the results.\textsuperscript{86} Boyle reported that coordination between the two countries’ forces was now “entirely satisfactory with no real differences of view,” although, significantly, the RAF still lacked full knowledge of the overall USAF strike plan.\textsuperscript{87}

Boyle’s acknowledgment of this latter point meant that despite the elaborate claims made to the COS, the Air Staff still did not actually know what the Americans planned to do. This remained the case as late as the end of 1959. Neither command was prepared to release to the other all the details about its own strike plan. In that sense, “coordination” remained an aspiration rather than an achievement. In June 1959 the U.S. Joint Chiefs instructed

\textsuperscript{83} AVM R. B. Lees, ACAS (Ops.), “Strategic Target Policy for Bomber Command, 30 April 1958, in NAUK, AIR 8/2201.

\textsuperscript{84} Memorandum, n.d., in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.


\textsuperscript{86} COS Committee, “Co-ordination of Anglo/American Nuclear Strike Plans,” 5 June 1958, in NAUK, AIR 8/2201. A nuclear strike co-ordination committee was established at around this time.

\textsuperscript{87} COS Committee, 30 May 1958 Confidential Annex, in NAUK, AIR 20/11338.
LeMay to release to SACEUR information about SAC’s planned strikes against Eastern Europe and, “on a case by case basis, about attacks scheduled for targets in Soviet Russia.” A similar request was made from SACEUR to Bomber Command seeking to know the specific targets the V-force expected to hit and on what timescale. Bomber Command headquarters was extremely reluctant to release such information. Eventually, though, a formula was worked out providing for the release of a target schedule for the Kola Peninsula and Ukraine to regional commanders. With respect to the Soviet Union, SACEUR identified targets of special interest and inquired whether the RAF intended to attack them.88

The balance in the joint strike plan between counterforce and counter-value targets shifted dramatically over the next few years. By 1962 the target list for the RAF encompassed 48 cities, 6 air-defense targets and 3 long-range bomber bases. The following year, the joint plan was dramatically adjusted to assign to Britain 16 cities, 44 “offensive capability” targets such as airfields; 10 air-defense installations, and 28 IRBM launch sites.89 The emphasis had apparently shifted abruptly from urban centers to military targets in accord with the “population avoidance” doctrine of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s Ann Arbor speech.90 Up to that point, RAF planners had focused mainly on civilian targets, whereas U.S. planners had emphasized counterforce targeting and the infliction of damage on Soviet-bloc infrastructure. Both countries’ forces aimed to destroy the enemy’s capacity to fight—the Americans by wiping out the enemy’s physical fighting capability and the British by attacking enemy morale and will to fight. This disparity echoed the strategic targeting priorities of the USAF and RAF during World War II.91

By this point the independent British plan—insofar as it existed—resembled the British component of the joint plan in both the number and the types of targets. John Baylis has argued that this coincidence signified a new operational harmonization: “If the British were prepared to accept a coordinated plan which reflected the changes in American strategic priorities then this would tend to suggest that important modifications were being made at the time to their own strategic perspectives.”92 The implication is that

89. ACAS (Ops.) to CAS, 5 October 1962, in NAUK, AIR 8/2201.
U.S. strategic doctrine had been embraced by the junior ally, a synchronization of U.S. and British postures stemming from McNamara’s emphasis on greater efficiency and Prime Minister Macmillan’s desire to bolster interdependence.

Within the Air Ministry, some were concerned that joint targeting could be interpreted as a major shift toward a counterforce strategy. To defuse these concerns, Bomber Command officers assured the Air Staff that targets had been selected by mutual agreement to provide the best operational plan, and they denied that SAC was “arbitrarily imposing targets on the UK strike force.” Independent British targeting remained a paper commitment, and not just in the event of unilateral action:

[S]hould there be disagreement between ourselves and the Americans in the event, it would still be possible to direct the Medium Bomber Force to concentrate on centres of administration and population, as in the case of unilateral action, at the same time as the Americans attacked alternative target systems. . . . [T]he co-ordinated plan for all-out retaliation covers the targets previously allotted to Bomber Command. This plan is therefore fully compatible with the Strategic Target Policy which was formulated against the background of the use of massive retaliation [against Soviet cities].

In principle, then, the operational significance of coordination would depend entirely on the circumstances prevailing at the time. But in reality the prospect of a unilateral nuclear strike by the RAF required a considerable suspension of disbelief. The independent targeting plan was a sop to political amour propre and not something for which there was, in practice, any active training.

As early as 1959, General Power, the SAC commander-in-chief, claimed that the RAF V-force was “fully integrated” into joint planning with SAC. Sir Kenneth Cross, Harry Broadhurst’s successor as the head of Bomber Command, reported in November 1962 that the introduction of Quick Reaction Alert earlier that year “has led to an integration with SAC rather than mere coordination.” Richard Neustadt later echoed this judgment, noting that by the time of the Cuban missile crisis the RAF bomber force “had already been integrated, not in theory but in practice. The two strategic air forces were
thoroughly co-ordinated."97 Thereafter, despite the great disparities in size and striking power, links between the two commands became close and com-
radely, cemented by joint participation in bombing competitions and vividly described by former Vulcan captain Andrew Brookes as “a very intimate and closely-knit partnership.” One RAF officer recalled that “whenever we went to the SAC HQ at Offutt, we would be greeted by Curt LeMay or his suc-
cessor, Tommy Power, and treated just like Americans. We went all through their briefings, computers, top secret rooms and so forth—it was a very happy and very good working relationship.”98

Who benefited from this integration? Both parties did to some degree, but in different ways. Although the British forfeited something of their no-
tional nuclear independence—in practice rather than in theory—they gained shelter under the massive U.S. nuclear umbrella and some influence over the targeting of U.S. attacks. Yet even in the midst of the negotiations over the SAC–Bomber Command agreement, some Air Ministry officers were far from sanguine that U.S. support would be forthcoming in an emergency. “We must be prepared,” urged one, “to go it alone” in defense of purely British interests with “a large enough independent deterrent force to show our Allies that we are not entirely dependent upon them so that we can, if necessary, take a relatively independent line.”99

This larger political agenda had been laid out by Macmillan in 1958 when he stressed the need for Britain to “retain our special relationship with the United States and, through it, our influence in world affairs, and, especially, our right to have a voice in the final issue of peace or war [and] to enable us, by threatening to use our independent power, to secure United States co-
operation in a situation in which their interests were less immediately threat-
ened than our own.”100 Joint strike planning was a vital means of achieving these aims and ensuring that, in a nuclear war, “sufficient attention is given to certain Soviet targets which are of greater importance to us than to the United States.”101

If that was the UK interest in the joint SAC–Bomber Command arrange-
ment, what did the United States stand to gain? From a military standpoint,
the benefits were surely minimal. U.S. officials were skeptical about the role of British nuclear strike power in joint operations with SAC, describing the British force as “too small to contribute much to the overall US force.” This assessment was well-founded. SAC had 639 B-52s, 76 supersonic B-58s, and 880 B-47s, along with 547 Hound Dog missiles available for delivery on B-52s and 224 ground-launched ballistic missiles. Small wonder then, that U.S. planners were rarely more than lukewarm about the British nuclear deterrent. Macmillan’s contortions of “interdependence with independence” carried little conviction at Foggy Bottom or in the Pentagon. For the United States, British nuclear forces made only a minor contribution to the wider Western alliance, a contribution of political rather than military value. U.S. officials did have respect for British technology and were mindful, sometimes graciously, of the factors that induced a once-great power to preserve a modicum of independence. Britain received generous assistance from the United States in developing new weapon systems, but deployment of the weapons occurred within the context of a U.S.-led plan in which Britain was increasingly a minor partner.

A special relationship then? Not in the sense of the overblown rhetoric of sentimental identity, although at an operational level the professionalism and comradeship of the aircrews on both sides certainly helped consolidate a sense of common purpose. Many RAF officers whose experiences were shaped in joint planning and training with SAC were later elevated to high command posts, taking with them a sense of ease about relations with the Americans that many of their seniors had lacked. This spirit went some way to redress the years of suspicion and acrimony. Nonetheless, good operational relations were a consequence, not a cause, of Britain’s increased nuclear weapons capabilities. In 1950 the information-hungry British were mere plaintiffs, with little to bring to the table. Later, the build up of the V-force as a potential carrier of American nuclear weapons and as an ancillary strike force dictated that it be taken seriously. If British bombers, no matter how few in number, were delivering nuclear bombs (of whatever provenance) against Soviet targets, joint planning was crucial to settle routes, targets, and timing and to avoid fratricide. The gradual development of British nuclear forces drew the RAF and USAF together in what Oliver Franks would have recognized as “an exceptional and unique degree of collaboration between the two powers” to create the least recognized “special relationship” of the Cold War.

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