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Britain's Bomb: What's Next? (Book Review)

Brian Stiltner

Sacred Heart University, stiltnerb@sacredheart.edu

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Review of: *Britain's Bomb: What Next?* Edited by Brian Wicker and Hugh Beach. London:

SCM Press, 2006. xii + 212 pp. £ -- (pb). ISBN 0-334-04096-596-5.

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Reviewed by: Brian Stiltner, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut

By the time this review is published, Tony Blair will no longer be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He pushed for a decision to be taken by the next general election: he wanted the UK to commit to replacing the current Trident system (a stock of 58 missiles and under 200 warheads, some of these housed on four nuclear submarines) with a new generation of nuclear weapons and submarines. The British Trident submarines are scheduled for retirement between 2019 and 2024, and the warheads have a limited lifespan as well. Although options existed for extending the current system up to 2051, the House of Commons voted in March 2007 by a strong margin to spend at least £20 billion to replace Trident. However, 88 Labour MPs defected from the vote, which was characterised as a strong blow to Blair's leadership.

The looming decision on Trident prompted the writing of this book. The editors aim to contribute to the public conversation on this matter. Whatever the merits of the book, it is to be hoped that it played a role in promoting and will still play a role in informing the public conversation, and it is well suited to do so. (Is there still a conversation to be had? Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said at the time that the decision was 'not irreversible.') A project of the Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament, the volume is edited by Brian Wicker and Hugh Beach, who are chair and vice-chair, respectively, of the organisation.

They bring together contributors of both religious and secular mindset, most all of them active in research and advocacy on nuclear policy. Some, including co-editor Beach, had careers in the British military; some have held in public posts concerning defence policy. The authors represent a range of policy positions: from nuclear-pacifism (Tony Kempster's title proclaims, 'The Bomb is Not a Holy Weapon of Peace!') to realism (Oliver Kamm leads with, 'If Our Enemies Have Nuclear Weapons, So Must We.') Most of the contributors take up positions between these poles, and most are moderately to severely critical of the Blair plan.

Each of the thirteen essays is readable, concise, and possesses its own merits. The editors add two valuable features. The first is an excellent introduction that summarizes the shape and status of the conversation created by thirteen essays. This introduction identifies nine 'points of consensus' among the contributors and fourteen 'bones of contention,' the latter divided into ethical, political, legal, technical/strategic, and theological issues. Among the consensus points are that the rationale for Britain's deterrent is up for question after the end of the Cold War, that its deterrent is of no use against terrorist groups, and that updating the arsenal could well undermine the cause of non-proliferation. The bones of contention include well-worn ethical issues in the nuclear deterrence debate. Of particular interest is how the collection as a whole interweaves the ethical issues with political and strategic debates over whether Britain really still 'needs' a nuclear deterrent and what benefits and risks would accrue to a decision to let the nuclear programme expire.

The second beneficial feature of the book is a 'Technical Annex' by Hugh Beach. This twenty-page appendix explains the basic facts that are publicly known about Britain's nuclear

programme. Also discussed here is the dependence of the Trident system on the United States. It is not clear that a Trident missile could be launched and effectively targeted without U.S. approval and support, although Beach concludes is possible. However, ‘the whole system would start to become unworkable and probably unsafe within a matter of a year or so’ (191).

There are three potential audiences for this book. The first, naturally, comprises church members and others involved in theological conversations about the ethics of war and peace, especially in the UK. The description on the back cover aims the book at ‘every Christian concerned about the action of the current government in relation to the future defence of the country.’ This audience will find much of value within, though little of it explicitly theological. Only Bishop Richard Harries addresses some theological foundations for his just-war based acceptance of nuclear deterrence. A few of the contributors who strongly favour disarmament appear to be motivated by faith and religious teaching, but the connections are not explicitly drawn. This indirect role for religion might be expected in a debate on an applied ethical issue; and it might be bemoaned or celebrated or simply noticed—that is a matter for another discussion. The second audience is all citizens of the UK who are interested in the same ‘actions of the current government.’ Of course, shouldn’t everyone be concerned? While no civic population shows universal interest in any policy issue, it is possible that the high dismay in the UK over the Iraq War will translate into heightened interest in the decision about renewing Trident. At the moment, the decision to renew Trident has majority public support, but advocates for the options of ending or reducing the programme can find considerable and well-framed arguments in this book.

The third audience is readers outside the United Kingdom, likely in church and academic contexts. For that audience, of which this reviewer is a member, the book is not only informative about the momentous British decision, it is illuminating about Britain's perception of its role in the world. The contributors represent two main ways of thinking: Britain should retain its role as a major military power by replacing Trident, or it should take a leading role in non-proliferation and *de*-proliferation by forsaking what is already a costly and unnecessary deterrent. As an American reader, I was struck by the dependence of the British deterrent on American technical support and left dubious that the UK is able to act as a truly independent nuclear power. I was also persuaded that Britain stands at a crossroads at which it could exert unique global leadership by moving in a direction other than replacing Trident.

Will this book be relevant beyond the March 2007 vote and Blair's stepping down? Yes, because it lays out balanced and edifying debate. The book should retain value as the British populace and leadership analyze how and why the decision was taken and whether they want to stick by it. It also sheds critical light on the tropes that other nuclear powers and nuclear-jealous powers state in support of their policies. If even the modest 'points of consensus' identified by editors were more broadly acknowledged in the political debates about nuclear weapons, the international community might see some progress toward non-proliferation.