The propaganda model and the British nuclear weapons debate

Milan Rai

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what [Dwight] Macdonald calls the ‘responsibility of people,’ given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.


This essay applies the Chomsky–Herman propaganda model of the mass media to the debate around nuclear weapons, especially in Britain. According to the propaganda model, the ‘free press’ serves the societal purpose of ‘protecting privilege from the threat of public understanding and participation’.1 Chomsky and Edward Herman describe the propaganda system as ‘brainwashing under freedom’:

A totalitarian state can be satisfied with lesser degrees of allegiance to required truths. It is sufficient that people obey; what they think is a secondary concern. But in a democratic political order, there is always the danger that independent thought might be translated into political action, so it is important to eliminate the threat at its root.2
Debate cannot be stilled, and indeed, in a properly functioning system of propaganda, it should not be, because it has a system-reinforcing character if constrained within proper bounds. What is essential is to set the bounds firmly. Controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites, and it should furthermore be encouraged within these bounds, thus helping to establish these doctrines as the very condition of thinkable thought while reinforcing the belief that freedom reigns.3

Since 1945, there have been several periods of intense public controversy over British nuclear weapons. This mainstream debate has had a ‘system-reinforcing character’ as it has kept to ‘proper bounds’. As Chomsky observes, in any state religion, there are at least two basic principles. First, the Holy State is good. Officials and ministers make mistakes, sometimes through lack of knowledge, sometimes through lack of intelligence. Overall, though, the establishment is well-intentioned, despite the occasional bad apple. The second principle is that the Holy State is always acting defensively in nature.

How does this play out for the British nuclear weapons debate? According to these principles, Britain’s nuclear weapons are there to defend Britain and other countries from attack. Chomsky suggests: ‘A useful rule of thumb is this: If you want to learn something about the propaganda system, have a close look at the critics and their tacit assumptions. These typically constitute the doctrines of the state religion.’4 If we look at the recent nuclear weapons debate in Britain, we find these kinds of remarks at the limits of ‘responsible opinion’.

An editorial in the Independent back in 2005 said that the collapse of the Soviet Union ‘has made the deterrence argument obsolete’. It went on: ‘During the Cold War, nuclear weapons acted as a deterrent to aggression by other states.’5 There was a similar critique from perhaps the most anti-militarist of the Guardian’s columnists. In 2013, Simon Jenkins said: ‘It [the British nuclear deterrent] made no sense.’ Keeping British nuclear weapons was ‘irrational’, ‘mad’, ‘hare-brained’, ‘hypocritical’, ‘an irrelevance’, ‘absurd’, and ‘nonsense’. Jenkins wrote that Britain’s nuclear weapons bore ‘no reference to any plausible threat to Britain that could possibly merit their use’.6

What are some of the assumptions made by these establishment critics? First, British nuclear weapons are solely about defending the territory of Britain. Second, they’re a defence against nuclear-armed enemies. Third, they are for retaliation after an attack on Britain (a threat
which is supposed to make such an attack less likely). Fourth, Britain has not used its nuclear weapons.

These four assumptions are what the public thinks of as ‘deterrence’. They have no basis in reality. In fact, Britain has used its nuclear weapons repeatedly.

Nuclear coercion

Daniel Ellsberg, the US military analyst who leaked the Pentagon’s secret internal history of the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers, wrote in 1981:

Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, US nuclear weapons have been used, for quite different purposes: in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone’s head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled.7

Britain has used its nuclear weapons in the same way, repeatedly. Iraq has been threatened with British nuclear weapons on at least three occasions. In 1961, Britain created a phoney crisis in the Persian Gulf and mobilised its military forces to intimidate Iraq and the region. One element was the deployment of nuclear-capable Scimitar aircraft to the Gulf.8 In Malta, British strategic nuclear bombers were placed on alert.9 A right-wing British historian with intelligence connections, Anthony Verrier, later described the incident as an ‘act of deterrence, in which the nuclear weapons system played a central, concealed role … directed against Nasser and, by extension, Russian ambitions in Arabia’.10 Gamal Abdel Nasser was the nationalist president of Egypt. ‘Russian ambitions in Arabia’ is code for the forces of independent Arab nationalism generally, including in Iraq. Almost 30 years later, the US and British governments were determined to punish Iraq for invading Kuwait on 2 August 1990: eight days later, the British tabloid the Daily Star reported: ‘Whitehall sources made it clear that the multinational forces would be ready to hit back with every means at their disposal … [including] using tactical nuclear weapons against [Iraqi] troops and tanks on the battlefield.’

On 30 September 1990, a senior British army officer with 7th Armoured Brigade warned on the front page of the Observer that if there were Iraqi chemical attacks, British forces would ‘retaliate with battlefield nuclear forces’. On 26 October 1990, the Daily Mail reported: ‘One senior minister said, “If we were prepared to use tactical nuclear
weapons against the Russians, I can’t see why we shouldn’t be prepared to use them against Iraq’.” On 13 November 1990, the senior Guardian journalist Hugo Young reported in the paper that he had heard a minister say that the war against Iraq might have to be ended with ‘tactical nukes’. On 6 December 1990, the British Prime Minister, John Major, told television presenter David Frost that the use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf was ‘not likely, remotely’. However, Major did not rule out the use of British nuclear weapons: it was a live policy option.

There were more nuclear threats in the run-up to the 2003 attack on Iraq. Then British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons Defence Select Committee on 20 March 2002 that states like Iraq ‘can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons’.11 On 24 March 2002, Hoon told ITV’s Jonathan Dimbleby Show that the government ‘reserved the right’ to use nuclear weapons if Britain or British troops were threatened by chemical or biological weapons. Hoon was asked about these nuclear threats in a House of Commons debate on 29 April 2002. The Defence Secretary said: ‘ultimately, and in conditions of extreme self-defence, nuclear weapons would have to be used’. Hoon was pressed to explain but refused to clarify what this meant.

Other countries have also been subjected to British nuclear threats. In its early years, the British strategic nuclear force was airborne, carried by Valiant, Vulcan and Victor aircraft. These ‘V-bombers’ made hundreds of flights in the 1950s and 1960s across the British Empire. These global sorties were clearly not about ‘defending’ the homeland from being attacked by Russia.

In 1962, V-bombers attended independence ceremonies in Uganda and Jamaica.12 When three Victors were sent back to Jamaica in 1966, they had ‘more than decorative purposes’ according to Andrew Brookes, historian of the V-bomber force and himself a former Vulcan pilot.13 Brookes records that the Vulcans at RAF Waddington were committed in 1963 to ‘dealing with conventional trouble in the Middle East’, while their sister Victors in Cottesmore and Honington ‘looked after the Far East’.14 While these V-bombers might have been only carrying conventional weaponry in such conflicts, their deployment as strategic nuclear bombers outside Europe would have sent powerful and threatening nuclear signals to Britain’s enemies.

Victors from Bomber Command were deployed to Singapore in December 1963, during Britain’s ‘confrontation’ with Indonesia. According to Brookes, the nuclear bombers were kept in Singapore longer than usual, ‘positioned to be seen as ready to eliminate Indonesia
Air Force capabilities if they launched air attacks.’ Brookes does not say what kind of bombs might have been used to carry out this ‘elimination’.

Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee wrote later of the nuclear-capable Victors: ‘Their potential was well known to Indonesia and their presence did not go unnoticed.’ He added: ‘The knowledge of RAF strength and competence created a wholesome respect among Indonesia’s leaders, and the deterrent effect of RAF air defence fighters, light bombers and V-bombers on detachment from Bomber Command was absolute’. When the first Victors arrived at RAF Tengah in Singapore at the end of 1963, a storage unit had already been built at the base for 48 Red Beard nuclear bombs. The squadron then engaged in low-altitude nuclear bombing exercises.

Here is the true meaning of deterrence. It is spelled out in the nuclear threats against Iraq, a non-nuclear weapon state in 1961, 1991 and 2003; in the V-bomber deployments throughout the British Empire in the 1950s and 1960s; in the commitment of Vulcans and Victors to ‘deal with’ the Middle East and the Far East (where there were no nuclear weapon states in 1963); and in the intimidation of Indonesia in the mid 1960s.

Respecting Britain’s vital interests

Deterrence means cultivating a ‘wholesome respect’ for British violence in the lesser races who might interfere with British domination. Deterrence means preventing non-nuclear weapon states from using weapons or launching attacks that might defeat British expeditionary forces sent out into the global south. Deterrence means, if necessary, keeping the option open to use nuclear weapons to crush non-nuclear weapon states too tough to defeat by conventional means.

In other words:

• British nuclear weapons have not just been about ‘defending Britain’; they have been ‘used’ right around the world.
• British nuclear weapons have been aimed at non-nuclear weapon states as well as nuclear-armed enemies.
• British nuclear weapons have been about nuclear intimidation and coercion as well as threatening nuclear retaliation.
• Britain has used its nuclear weapons – to threaten other countries during direct confrontations – and more widely.
This has been part of British nuclear policy since the beginning. The 1956 Defence White Paper, a public document, said: ‘we have to be prepared for the outbreak of localised conflicts on a scale short of global war. In such limited wars the possible use of nuclear weapons cannot be excluded.’ ‘Localised conflicts’ or ‘limited wars’ were wars in the global south, against opponents (either states or nationalist movements) who lacked nuclear weapons.

Nearly 40 years later, in November 1993, the then British Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind expressed the same view, with more cautious wording, again in a public speech:

The ability to undertake a massive strike with strategic systems is not enough to ensure deterrence. An aggressor might, in certain circumstances, gamble on a lack of will ultimately to resort to such dire action. It is therefore important for the credibility of our deterrent that the United Kingdom also possesses the capability to undertake a more limited nuclear strike in order to induce a political decision to halt aggression by delivering an unmistakable message of our willingness to defend our vital interests to the utmost.18

The 2010–15 Coalition government said: ‘The purpose of our nuclear weapons is to deter an attack on the UK, our vital interests or our allies’19 – three distinct entities or concepts. Looking through the documentary record, it is clear that ‘vital interests’ relate to British financial and economic interests, critical raw materials and trade routes – outside Europe.20 All of this is a matter of public record, and yet these important facts did not enter the fierce debates about British nuclear weapons possession in the 1980s, or more recently about the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system.

**Propaganda and deterrence**

Earlier, in relation to the 1991 nuclear threats against Iraq, I referred to a lot of material that appeared in British newspapers. How can the mainstream media really be a kind of propaganda system if such disturbing facts were reported, sometimes prominently, in mainstream newspapers? Herman and Chomsky comment:

*That the media provide some information about an issue … proves absolutely nothing about the adequacy or accuracy of media*
coverage. The media do in fact suppress a great deal of information, but even more important is the way they present a particular fact – its placement, tone, and frequency of repetition – and the framework of analysis in which it is placed.\textsuperscript{21}

Chomsky explains that:

The enormous amount of material that is produced in the media and books makes it possible for a really assiduous and committed researcher to gain a fair picture of the real world by cutting through the mass of misrepresentation and fraud to the nuggets hidden within.\textsuperscript{22}

That a careful reader, looking for a fact can sometimes find it, with diligence and a sceptical eye, tells us nothing about whether that fact received the attention and context it deserved, whether it was intelligible to most readers, or whether it was effectively distorted or suppressed.\textsuperscript{23}

The debate over the morality of nuclear retaliation, a debate which raged fiercely during the upsurge of the 1980s, has been a damaging distraction from the real issues and the inconvenient truths of British nuclear history and policy. Much of the challenge from the peace movement has reinforced state propaganda by focusing on hypothetical retaliation in the future rather than actual nuclear intimidation and coercion in the past and the present. The heart of the matter is that British national security policy has not been driven by a concern for national security, but by a commitment to dominate, to control ‘vital interests’. In parallel, the engagement of the mainstream media with these issues has been driven not by a concern for truth but by a commitment to serve power and privilege.

Notes

4 Noam Chomsky, \textit{The Chomsky Reader} (Serpent’s Tail, 1988), 126.
5 ‘Hypocrisy and the nuclear deterrent,’ \textit{The Independent}, 2 May 2005.
6 Simon Jenkins, ‘This £100bn. armageddon weapon won’t make us one jot safer,’ \textit{The Guardian}, 25 September 2013.


Herman and Chomsky, ‘Propaganda mill,’ 15.