A Further Outlook

How Johnson Judo Put MLF Issue in Its Place

When the NATO foreign ministers meet in Brussels Monday, the specter of the multilateral nuclear force will hover in the background. Two years ago, it was much more substantial and was talked of as a solution to the West's collective security problems. This excerpt from the new book "Lyndon B. Johnson and the World," by the diplomatic correspondent of the Wall Street Journal, tells what happened to the idea.

By Philip Geyelin

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IT IS IN THE NATURE of big government that a good measure of mystique, a rich variety of motives and evangelical zeal are almost essential to propel anything controversial or revolutionary through the bureaucratic bogs and on up to the bureaucratic peaks. For the same reason, a project once embedded in high policy is almost as difficult to dislodge. And nothing illustrates the point better than the famous case of the multilateral nuclear force (MLF), a United States proposal for a NATO flotilla of surface ships armed with Polaris missiles whose atomic warheads would be under United States control.

By April, 1964, when President Johnson first gave formal attention to it, MLF had acquired a life of its own, an almost automatic acceptance as something the United States had been pushing, off and on, for almost four years and would continue to push, largely for lack of an alternative way to knit closer collaboration among the allies with regard to nuclear defense. Or so Johnson had every right to assume.

His review was routine, but bureaucrats with a cause don't need much encouragement, and Johnson's once-over-lightly look at MLF in April was to embroil him in a knock-down, drag-out confrontation with his own principal advisers in December when a visit by British Prime Minister Harold Wilson finally forced him to put his mind to the problems of the Atlantic Alliance.

When he did, he concluded after five days of stormy intramural debate that he did not wish to be committed in any way to the creation of MLF or any variation thereof. It took some doing. Enough had been said and done publicly by him and his subordinates in the interim to tie the United States more tightly than ever to the concept of a NATO nuclear fleet.

A Bilateral Declaration

RIGHT AFTER the April review, at a meeting of Associated Press editors in New York on April 20, Johnson had declared, "We support the establishment of a multilateral nuclear force composed of those nations which wish to participate." On June 12, after Johnson had met with West German Chancellor Erhard, a White House communique reported the two men had "agreed that the proposed multilateral

force would make a significant addition to [the] military and political strength [of NATO] and that efforts should be continued to ready an agreement for signature by the end of the year."

As late as Oct. 20, 1964, the MLF proposal was still sailing serenely on, still propelled by unequivocal pronouncements from high policy-makers. On that date, Dean Rusk, no MLF zealot, made a brief speech on a significant occasion: an MLF "pilot ship," mixed-manned by crews of eight NATO nations, was visiting Washington. Said Rusk: "This mixed-manned ship . . . is not only tangible evidence of our earnest intent to proceed toward MLF . . . [it] is living proof that NATO ships can be effectively manned by different nationalities."

This was a main point of criticism—that mixed-manning simply wouldn't work. But there was Rusk stoutly insisting that it would, and that the United States intended to see that it did.

Yet less than two months later, Johnson was saying he could not see how he was committed. The MLF was all but dead. The next move had been put squarely up to Europe.

An Object Lesson

HOW THIS BIT of artful dodging was done—and why—is worth recounting in some detail, not just for its impact on Alliance policy but for what it tells of Lyndon Johnson and of the workings of policy-making machinery when, after the election, he finally began to fasten his grip on the controls.

It was a memorable object lesson in Johnson decision-making, a major development in the President's move toward mastery of the "processes," a significant turn in the United States approach to Alliance policy. But it becomes more meaningful if one first examines what the President was making a decision about.

It all began, you might say, with the stationing of Soviet atomic missiles in western Russia, zeroed in on Western Europe. This immediate Russian threat looked more menacing than ever to a Europe which had to rely on the will and intent of Washington for about 98 per cent of its nuclear defense capacity.

Accordingly, there was growing pressure from West Germany and from the top level at SHAPE for stationing American medium-range missiles on the Continent. They were to be operated under the "two-key system" in which Europeans man and operate the weapons while the warheads remain in United States custody.

But prevailing United States opinion during the Eisenhower and Kennedy years had been cool to the idea of equipping the Germans with such weapons. On the other hand, most United States policy-makers had believed through the years that something probably ought to be done to give the West Germans a greater role in their own nuclear defenses. One argument was that United States failure to respond in some fashion would put intolerable pressure not only on the Germans but perhaps other Western Europeans to arm themselves with atomic weapons, thus raising the odds on the chance of nuclear war.

A Token Force

THUS, BACK in the waning days of of the Eisenhower Administration in 1960, the idea of at least a token NATO nuclear force had been conceived. The plan was that the United States would contribute a few submarines with Polaris missiles, Britain might commit some part of its present or projected nuclear force and the way would be open for French participation as well. As the idea evolved under the Kennedy Administration, mixed-manning became the crucial element and a planning group of eight nations, including the United States, Britain, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey and Greece, got down to a considerable degree of detailed agreement on a 25-ship force, each ship to be armed with eight missiles.

With this plan, Europe would actually be participating in the operation and ownership of a nuclear force. Even though the warheads would still be United States-controlled, this would presumably put the United States under even greater obligation to honor its NATO commitments to forestall a Soviet nuclear attack. In the process, West Germany would receive a "vaccination" of sorts; a modicum of influence in Western nuclear defenses, the theory went, would immunize the Germans against rampant revival of militarism.

American policy-makers also had a "British" argument for MLF; if the British could be persuaded to surrender all or part of their nuclear force to a NATO arrangement, Germany's nonnuclear status would be less "second class," and if the French would do the same (presumably post-de Gaulle), the result would be ultimately to envelop the independent British and French forces. By this line of logic, MLF became not just a piece of armament but an exercise in disarmament.

Object of Ridicule

AS A PRACTICAL matter, the MLF was deficient on every count, including the test of military efficiency. In its early stage, its nuclear "sharing" would be illusory, for it would be a

long time before Europe was sufficiently cohesive to operate a collective nuclear force and a long time before the United States would be ready to surrender any significant part of its monopoly of control over warheads.

There was no assurance that the French would ever come in; the British blew hot and cold. The whole idea became known in some European circles as the "multilateral farce."

But the fact remained that it also partially served all the purposes for which it was designed; besides, it was something to discuss at a time when there was agitation for some solution and no alternative. So the idea lived on, and it should have surprised nobody that after Johnson so much as hinted an interest in April, that the dedicated advocates of MLF should have sprung into action.

A special MLF task force was established in the State Department, headed by Gerard C. Smith, an early MLF adherent. Meantime, NATO Ambassador Thomas Finletter and others were giving it a hard sell in Europe and ruffling the tempers of opponents, who were stirred to register complaints.

Trouble was building up on other fronts. When MLF was just a bright idea, the French were content to scorn it. Now it began to appear that MLF or something like it might actually materialize and de Gaulle felt disposed to turn actively against it and threaten dire reprisals against NATO unless the MLF was dropped.

The commotion this stirred up was beginning to unhinge Ludwig Erhard's caretaker coalition government in Bonn. Erhard's Christian Democratic Party was sorely split on the issue and there were signs it would just as soon defer a choice on MLF—with all its implications of a choice between the wrath of Washington and the wrath of de Gaulle—until after elections.

Britain's new Labor government had found it convenient, while campaigning for election, to talk as if it wanted to unload all the United Kingdom's atom weaponry. To do this, it had been assumed the British would be obliged to cooperate with the United States in establishing some sort of NATO nuclear force. But after his election, Wilson had to take into account Tory sentiment for retaining British nuclear capability and a widespread British reluctance to let the Germans anywhere near atomic weapons. So Wilson had cooked up an alternative named the ANF, for Allied (or sometimes Atlantic) Nuclear Force, an open-ended grab bag into which almost anything could have been put, including British V bombers, United States Polaris subs and even an MLF component, though the British were not enthusiastic about this last point.

The resolution of the intramural squabbling over MLF still left the President with "a lingering disquiet."

Finally, the Russians were beginning to hurl dark threats, arguing that giving the Germans even a tiny finger on a NATO nuclear trigger would gravely endanger the peace, intensify the tensions of cold war and wreck chances for a nonproliferation treaty.

These, briefly, were some of the forces at work, and while most of Johnson's senior policy advisers thought they by and large amounted to conclusive arguments against MLF, all the points were to figure in the five days of intensive debate that preceded Harold Wilson's trip to Washington Dec. 8.

Some strong hints of how and under what circumstances Lyndon Johnson would move in the future can be seen in a capsule account, assembled from conversations with a number of officials involved, of his first deep plunge into the NATO nuclear issue. And the strongest hint may lie in the first question he asked at a meeting assembled at White House request after what the

State Department had expected would be a reasonably routine briefing session the previous day.

Plainly, Johnson hadn't been satisfied. His first questions went to the heart of the matter: What happens, he wanted to know, if nothing is done to rearrange NATO's nuclear set-up, if the Germans are given no larger share in influence and responsibility over nuclear decisions?

On that score, he apparently got a bewildering variety of projections. The lineup, by all accounts, had Ball, McNamara, Acheson, and Bruce by and large on the side of MLF, or a variation. This group more or less agreed that doing nothing would lead the Germans to seek United States medium-range missiles under the "two-key" system as a starter. German insistence on a separate German deterrent would follow within a decade or less, they argued. Bundy was skeptical that this could come about that soon.

But on this score, if on little else, Johnson was on the side of the "theologians." He maintained a constant position throughout the exchanges over the next four days that doing absolutely nothing was too dangerous; that the Germans would be bound to react—perhaps violently; that they would want their own nuclear weapons in much less than a decade. He would do so, the President is said to have declared, were he in the Germans' shoes.

No Woodrow Wilson

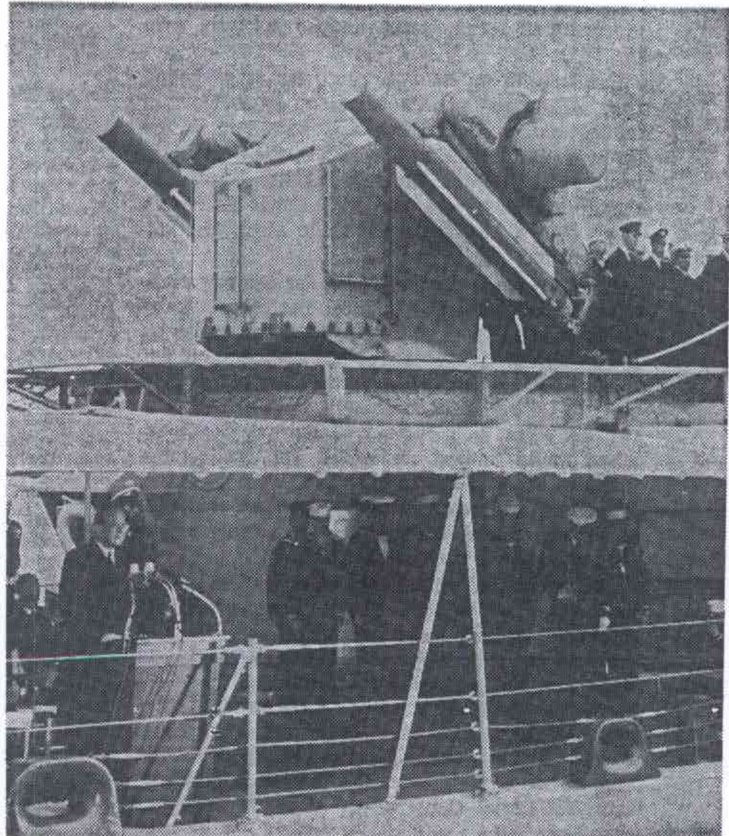
BUT THE DISCUSSION had not proceeded much further before Johnson asked the question that turned the tide against a firm line with Wilson on MLF or any close variant. The question was how to sell a skeptical Senate on a controversial proposition when even the potential European partners have, at best, two minds about it.

"I don't want to be a Woodrow Wilson, right on a principle, and fighting for a principle, and unable to achieve it," the President reportedly declared. At this point, the outer limits of the ultimate decision had been set: he would slam no doors on the Germans, but neither was he buying the optimistic estimates of his advisers about the prospects in Congress, because on this subject, at least, he was moving in familiar territory.

He and Humphrey had been taking soundings on Capitol Hill, and the more the President talked to his old colleagues, the more he became convinced that the prospects were bleak and the more he was able to assert his command over the discussions.

His advisers insisted that because there had been no recent go-ahead from the President, no real effort had been made to win over Congress, but Johnson was not impressed. "I can't move if I don't have the troops," he complained.

With that question resolved, at least in his own mind, the President hacked away at the problem that remained: how to handle Wilson, and the Germans, without involving the United States in a commitment to MLF or



Associated Press

Secretary of State Rusk (left) welcoming the crew of the USS Claude V. Ricketts at the Washington Navy Yard Oct. 20, 1964. Sailors of seven European nations and the United States manned the ship.

some variation of it. According to debate, Johnson seemed almost to be trying to convince himself that it really didn't matter because nobody in Europe felt strongly about MLF anyway.

He had conceded early in the discussion the danger of a German "inferiority complex" and the importance of giving the Federal Republic at least the "symbols" of equality. But he grabbed at every evidence offered that perhaps this need not be done right away, that there was really no United States commitment to do so, that the British would resist it or that the United States could not readily strong-arm the shaky Wilson government.

At the outset, the responses from most of the men around him were quick and confident: the Germans were pictured as eager, the British as at least susceptible to reason and the Italians ready to follow along. The President, in short, was assured that he could carry the day if he applied a little leverage. Since it was becoming increasingly apparent that Johnson did not want to apply leverage because he did not want to add MLF or anything similar to his legislative workload for 1965, this merely set up for the President the question of what would happen if his advisers were right and Wilson caved in. Wouldn't he then be faced with selling Congress a proposition that Congress didn't want?

Checked to Kennedy

SO IT WENT, around and around, until, at one point, it occurred to Johnson to ask what his predecessor had felt about this. The answer came from McGeorge Bundy, whose influence as guardian of options and protector of the President was perhaps never more effectively displayed than in the episode of the MLF.

Bundy had nothing particular against the MLF personally. He simply didn't those familiar with the course of the want President Johnson married to it in the sort of shotgun ceremony that he thought the State Department partisans were trying to stage. He did not think the West Germans wanted it nearly as badly as the State Department contended and he doubted Harold Wilson was really keen about any new arrangements.

Beyond that, he saw it as his obligation to warn the President of possible pitfalls and he believed the MLF advocates were giving Johnson a rosier picture of the prospects for MLF adoption in Europe than the facts merited. So he was ready, when Johnson inquired, with a memorandum which Bundy himself had prepared for Kennedy in mid-1963.

He was also ready to state what the late President's reaction to it had been. According to one official, the gist of the Bundy memorandum was that nobody in Europe was ready to move on MLF, and the gist of Kennedy's response was, "If the Europeans don't want it, then the hell with it." "If the Europeans don't want it" now became a Johnson refrain—in fact, Johnson's life raft.

The President also had, by Sunday evening, a fresh Bundy appraisal raising anew some doubts about the military utility of MLF, questioning the slim House of Commons majority and raising other questions about the feasibility of "doing MLF."

Presidential License

BY THIS POINT, Lyndon Johnson had appearently made up his mind that MLF or whatever was not sufficiently in demand by anybody to justify a battle in Congress even though Ball, McNamara and Bruce were still doggedly arguing that the United States had no alternative but to be in favor of something of the sort. At one awkward moment, the argument was pressed that to back away would be to surrender the initiative to de Gaulle.

But Johnson was just as dogged in his insistence that he could not see how he was committed, and since that was obviously the way he wanted to see it, nobody felt emboldened to read the fairly recent record back to him. There was even some disposition to concede that maybe underlings had overdone the MLF crusade.

Such is the way with presidential commitments. Johnson clung tenaciously to a vague, tangential, 10-year-old Eisenhower letter to Diem to reinforce his case for escalation of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, but he was quite prepared to ignore his personal commitments to MLF when it did not fit his current purpose.

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when the ultimate solution began to take shape. But it was Rusk, reportedly, who first staked out the most promising area of compromise by suggesting that the whole question be tossed back to Europe; no deadlines would be imposed for the British and the Germans and any other interested parties to work something out, and the United States would commit itself to no specific formulation, but it would be understood that the United States expected the British government to meet any reasonable, minimum German demands, including, if the Germans were adamant, some mixed-manned elements in a

NATO nuclear force.

Johnson saw pitfalls even in this highly conditional compromise. So this, too, was ruled out by the President, and while Harold Wilson waited in the Cabinet room Tuesday morning, Lyndon Johnson made his ultimate decision: He would take a hard line generally with Wilson from the outset, but then would sit back and permit Wilson to present his own MLF plan formally.

The United States would offer comments, the question would be batted back and forth, Britain would be encouraged to try it out on Bonn and the United States would give careful consideration to anything the two European principals might work out. Meanwhile, MLF would lie in limbo, available for use in whatever new formula might emerge but no longer the centerpiece of U.S. nuclear policy for NATO.

Everybody Happy

ON DEC. 8, 1964, the White House made public a communique on the talks between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson and that's roughly the way it was. The British were to talk to the Germans; the United States would talk to both; if anything came of those conversations, other interested parties would be brought into the act.

Wilson pronounced the encounter "completely successful." He had been obliged to yield nothing visible and nothing invisible that was in any way final. Hailing a "total identity of view," he noted pointedly, in passing, that there had been "no theology"—an obvious reference to those irrepressible MLF crusaders.

President Johnson, however, was left with a lingering disquiet, a sense that however well the Wilson encounter may have turned out, something was wrong in a system which had allowed him to lose, if even for a short time, his control of that branch of the governmental system which was his by right to command. By way of foreclosing further free-wheeling—on the NATO question, at least—he moved quickly to nail down the new line. His principal national security advisers were assembled to agree on a memorandum setting forth in no uncertain terms Johnson's outer limits for future presentation of United States policy, at whatever level of government, on the crucial defense issues in the Atlantic Alliance.

Soon thereafter, the MLF apparatus within the State Department was, if not completely broken up, at least scattered and driven underground. The special advisory job of Gerard Smith was abolished. Silence was the word on MLF, and there was joy and relief among those who either actively opposed it or, more often the case, considered it simply an unwelcome irritant.

But it wasn't that simple when the whole subject came up again in a December, 1965, meeting between Lyndon Johnson and Ludwig Erhard. By that time, the original formula was indeed dead, but early in 1965 it had become obvious that if Europeans did not like MLF, they liked still less the impression they had received that the United States had quietly withdrawn from the whole problem.

Indeed, the European response was nearly ludicrous; a Europe that had been griping loudly about American dominance and interference was suddenly confronted with a United States that looked and sounded genuinely uninterested in doing much of anything to solve Alliance problems until her European allies took some collective initiative on their part.

As word of Europe's anxiety filtered back to Washington, even some of those officials who had welcomed the change of course in Alliance policy began to fear that Lyndon Johnson, in his haste to get his own hands firmly on the controls, had swung the helm too hard. On January 16, 1965, when the question of the MLF, and future Alliance policy, was raised at a ranch-house news conference, Johnson was armed with an answer carefully drafted by the State Department.

It professed the "greatest of interest" in the outcome of discussions between the British and the Germans as a follow-up to the Wilson visit to Washington, and while the President's prepared response did not endorse MLF as such, it did say that the United States deems it "highly important to develop arrangements within the Alliance that will provide an opportunity for the nonnuclear members to participate in their own nuclear defense while avoiding the spread of national nuclear systems. I strongly hope in these talks there will be progress that will allow us to move on to fruitful multilateral discussions."

That comment, by itself, was sufficiently opaque, but when a reporter asked specifically whether "we are still strongly in favor of a mixed-manned nuclear fleet," the President answered: "Yes, I said that just now."

By any literal reading, this would seem to have recommitted Johnson to MLF and reversed the result of the Wilson talks. But a more accurate

reading of where the matter then rested could be found in a cable dispatched simultaneously by Rusk, with White House approval, to all United States ambassadors in Europe.

The envoys were told, in effect, that the National Security Council memorandum was by no means intended to halt all United States pressure on Europe to reach a meeting of minds on the reorganization of NATO's nuclear defenses. The United States, it went on, still sees advantages in some sort of NATO nuclear force but wants the widest possible consensus, and at least an opening for the French, if not actual French participation. This directive put the "activists" back in business again but with a more precise sales pitch and under a tighter rein.

Where It Belonged

THE END RESULT of it all, then, was to strike a balance that was to prevail throughout 1965 and on into 1966. The MLF was precisely where Johnson wanted it to be and where it should have been all along—in the middle of the table, as one proposal among many, to be accepted or rejected without prejudice to the United States position or injury to United States prestige. This didn't make the Europeans feel comfortable, and neither did it free President Johnson from criticism for lack of leadership.

But the effect, if curious, was also healthy. In the fall of 1965, the West Germans finally faced up to the nuclear issue; a parade of officials made pilgrimages to Washington, testing the mood and talking up the need for a solution to the NATO nuclear question which would give West Germany some form of active participation in an Alliance nuclear force.

The climax finally came quietly in a closely held exchange of views between Chancellor Erhard and President Johnson at the White House in December. Erhard made a strong case for the ANF-MLF approach. President Johnson reiterated United States readiness to pursue the matter, but with one proviso: by this time, Johnson had come to conclude that no new nuclear-strike force should be created, as the original MLF proposal envisaged.

Any new weapons system would create complications for the United States effort to push for a nonproliferation agreement with the Soviet Union. But the United States remained committed to a variation, at least, of the ANF formula and open-minded about some application of the mixed-manning feature to existing national forces if the West Germans were adamant.

Early in 1966, a special committee of NATO nations, largely composed of those that had expressed original interest in the MLF, began work on recommendations to be presented to the McNamara "directorate." By this time, the MLF, as originally constituted, could legally and logically be pronounced dead—but not in vain. Its demise as a pet United States project had admirably served the Johnson judo principle.

It had elicited a West German initiative as an antidote to the precise designs of de Gaulle, however they might unfold. Lyndon Johnson could no longer be the wrecker of the Alliance. Just conceivably, he might become the architect of a grand redesigning of outdated relationships. At the very least, he had reset the stage to his advantage. All of his options were safely back in hand.

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