These are the things they didn't want you to know.

The inner thoughts of prime ministers from Lloyd George to Margaret Thatcher. The missives from the Palace that the royals wanted kept away from prying eyes. The things the Cabinet were only prepared to discuss behind closed doors, on the strict understanding that no one would find out about it until long after they were safely picking up their pensions. The secrets so worrying to the powers-that-be that they decreed they should be kept locked away for decades.

And in many cases, it's very hard to see why.

Would it really have hurt the nation to know that Mrs Thatcher was incandescent at public funds being spent on a new ironing board for Number 10? That Winston Churchill graciously offered to hold his Cabinet meetings elsewhere so Clement Attlee and his wife could take their time moving out of Downing Street? Or that the Queen disliked the film *Beau Brummel* so much that she threatened to stop going to the cinema altogether?

Other documents make hair-raising reading. The admission in a top-secret briefing on Britain's preparedness for nuclear war in 1960 that 'the provision of facilities on the scale considered necessary for the continued survival of those who outlived the attack

was not undertaken because of the cost'. The plans made 50 years before 9/11 to counter the 'most serious threat' of undetectable atomic bombs being smuggled into the UK on board ships and planes, which consisted in full of 'putting on a bold front' and hoping the Russians fell for it. Or even the heartfelt worries of one of Harold Wilson's ministers – expressed in a hand-written note 'because I did not want the office to know about it' – that Prince Charles might have been brainwashed into supporting terrorists.

These are the inside stories of those crises and everyday dramas – and the reactions of the very ordinary men and women who had to deal with them: their frustration and fury, incredulity and occasional outright horror. They range over eight decades and administrations of every political persuasion, but a peculiarly British sensibility runs through them all: a determination to avoid awkward questions, to defuse pomp and, wherever possible, indulge in a little light piss-taking. They reveal first-hand, and in many cases for the first time, what one senior Number 10 official termed the 'mixture of sweet reasonableness and low cunning' that kept the country functioning throughout the twentieth century.

A brief history of confidentiality

All the source material for this book comes from the declassified official papers which take up over 100 miles of shelving at the National Archives. It wasn't until 1916 that anyone thought it might be a good idea to keep formal records of what was said in Cabinet, which is why the earliest item you will find here is 'an appreciation' of how the First World War was progressing (in short: not terribly well). For a long time there was no question of letting anyone outside of Whitehall ever see them: as a Cabinet Precedent Book makes clear a few decades later, 'official information is the property of the Crown. Any person, whether a servant

of the Crown or not, who publishes or otherwise discloses official information, without official authority, is liable to prosecution under the Official Secrets Act of 1911 and 1920.' Even decades after declassification, there is still quite a thrill to opening up a file that has 'SECRET' or even 'TOP SECRET' stamped in large red letters across its cover. Although I have to say the one that also had the reference number '007' on it turned out to be considerably less exciting than it ought to have been.

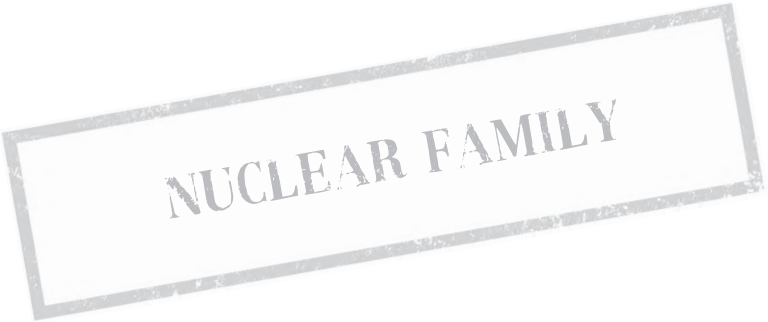
It was not until 1958 that the law decreed that government paperwork should be automatically opened up to the public after 50 years had passed. This came as an unpleasant surprise to former PM Anthony Eden, who had left Downing Street a year before that, when he came to write his memoirs. 'I found it very disturbing,' he complained after the Cabinet Office informed him he would not be allowed to look at all his own correspondence until he had reached the grand old age of 110. 'So far as I can recall, I knew nothing about the Public Records Act of 1958, and if I did I would certainly have put forward some arguments at the time.'

The deadline, which was designed to ensure that anyone who featured in the paperwork as it was released would be beyond the reach of recriminations due to retirement or death, came down to the more familiar '30-year rule' the following decade. 'If criticisms are to be made of me, and of my conduct of affairs, I would rather be alive to answer them,' announced Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1966. He died exactly 29 years later.

There was a vain attempt to put the genie back in the bottle in 1985, when maverick politician Enoch Powell, by that point a backbencher for the Ulster Unionists, tabled a parliamentary motion attempting to extend the secret period beyond three decades in order to avoid embarrassing any ministers who might be 'still active in public life'. By an astonishing coincidence, the thirtieth anniversary of his own first government job was fast approaching.

In 2000, Tony Blair's government introduced the Freedom of Information Act, which opened up all but the highest-security government departments to anyone who knew exactly what to ask for and had the stamina to hold out against obfuscating civil servants until they got what they were looking for. So proud was Blair of this particular bit of legislation that he described it as 'imbecility' and himself as a 'naive, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop' for ever considering it. The 30-year rule itself, however, remained unchanged for another seven years, until his successor Gordon Brown – a man who was regularly accused of keeping secret from Blair what he was up to when serving as his Chancellor – commissioned a review of the way the nation deals with its secrets from his unlikely pal Paul Dacre, editor of the *Daily Mail*. This concluded that the limit should be dropped to 15 years as 'a small but significant contribution to a more mature democracy in which there is a greater trust between the electors and the elected'. The report was released in 2009, just before the MPs' expenses scandal broke. A year later the government said it would drop the deadline – but only to 20 years, and it won't be fully phased in until 2023.

This book, by its very nature, is something of a lucky dip. I've rummaged in the archives and blown the dust off the things that surprised, enlightened and amused me. I hope they do the same for you. If you enjoy it, tell your friends. If you don't, it is absolutely imperative in the interests of national security that you tell no one.



‘As if God himself had appeared among us’ – 1945

The message from the British Ambassador to the USA which arrived by cipher telegram in Whitehall was simple and clear. ‘Experiment took place this morning and is reported to have been successful.’

The account he attached from an eyewitness was more effusive. ‘It was a wonderful, even fantastic, experience which I shall not attempt to describe now, as I am rather tired and should get things in wrong proportion,’ wrote Sir James Chadwick. ‘The implosion “gadget”, containing 6 kg of 49, was fired this morning . . . The test appears to have been completely successful. There is no doubt that the nuclear reaction took place . . . The ball of fire was intensely bright, equivalent to several suns by general estimate, so that it seems reasonably certain that the explosion was equivalent to more than 1000 tons of TNT and possibly several thousand. This I call completely successful.’

It was 16 July 1945. Chadwick, who headed the British mission to what was code-named the Manhattan Project, had watched something that no one had ever seen before; that very few people in the world even suspected might be possible: the explosion of a nuclear bomb.

It took place at a remote army airfield in New Mexico, almost literally the middle of nowhere, five hours' drive from the Los Alamos laboratory where the scientists had been beavering away for the previous two and a half years. But the blast was so enormous that it could be seen, heard and felt up to 100 miles away: a cover story had to be contrived about the 'severe explosion of an ammunition dump with considerable pyro-technic effect'. Even that excuse was on a strictly need-to-know basis: as ambassador Lord Halifax informed his superiors in London, 'This statement will only be published in the New Mexico papers and will not be carried by any news agencies or published in other states, though some leakage is, of course, possible.'

By 23 July Chadwick had recovered his composure sufficiently to deliver a fuller report to Sir John Anderson in the War Cabinet Offices, the man whose eponymous bomb shelters he had just rendered obsolete. Chadwick may have been a physicist by training – he won the Nobel Prize in 1935 for proving the existence of neutrons, one of the discoveries that paved the way for the creation of the atomic bomb – but he wrote like a poet as he described his viewpoint 20 miles from the explosion site.

> The first grey light of dawn was appearing as we lay or sat on the ground. Except for the faint twitterings of a few early birds there was complete silence. Then a great blinding light lit up the sky and earth as if God himself had appeared among us.
>
> After a second or so I peeped round the dark glass with which I was shielding my eyes, but the light was still so intense that I was almost blinded. Then I saw . . . the ball of flame, the blue and purple luminosities, etc. After about 100 seconds there came the result of the explosion, sudden and sharp as if the skies had cracked. Then the hills themselves took alarm and uttered rumbling protest for what seemed several minutes. Meanwhile a column of gas had risen and it continued to rise in a fairly

> definite cylinder with a mushroom top. It rose with surprising speed. There was an inversion at about 17,000 feet, and here the cloud spread out to some extent, but the central portion pushed through this layer and continued to rise. After some minutes, the column had reached a height which I estimated, by rough measurement, to be about 40,000 feet.
>
> My anxieties over the uncertainties of the test had made me somewhat nervous, and the awe-inspiring nature of the outcome quite overwhelmed me. Although everything happened almost exactly as I had imagined it, the reality was shattering. Even now, a week later, I am filled with awe when I look back on this moment. It was a vision from the Book of Revelation.

His colleague James L. Tuck, who watched from alongside him, provided a series of sketches, in childish coloured pencil, of the phases of the explosion: the 'beautiful poplar tree shaped cloud, in turbulent motion, whose colour rapidly changed from dark orange through red to brown black'; the 'buff brown cloud on a stalk above the site, reaching halfway to the cloud base' and the 'strong, dark blue violet glow' that billowed in its margins. Most terrifying, however, is Chadwick's account of the aftermath.

> The steel tower (100 ft high) on which the gadget was placed has completely disappeared, probably vaporised in the great heat. There is a crater of about 140 feet in diameter, surrounded by a green area of some 1100 feet diameter. This is probably a vitreous surface formed by the action of the heat on the sand, a kind of bottle glass . . .
>
> Some estimates have been made of the amount of energy released, but they are still very rough . . . More accurate figures can do no more than confirm the main facts, which are already perfectly clear. The nuclear reaction works, and, as far as can be judged from the first analysis of the observations, exactly as

predicted. The implosion method of assembly, even in this first form, is successful. The efficiency of the nuclear reaction is high enough to give a weapon of military significance.

It would be less than a month before it was put into use.

'A vision from the Book of Revelation': British physicist James L. Tuck's sketches of the first experimental nuclear explosion in the New Mexico desert in July 1945. The National Archives, ref: CAB 126/250

When everything changed – 1945

It looks like nothing. Handwritten, barely legible, scrawled on a few sheets of yellow lined paper, evidently torn from an academic notepad. But for the words 'Top Secret', scrawled not once but twice across the top of the pages in bright red capitals, you might take it for a student's lecture notes. It is only as you read on that you realise exactly what you are holding in your hands.

> Outline plan for employment of Special Weapon
> 1. Targets considered suitable.
> HIROSHIMA. KYOTO. NIIGATA.

The latter two cities were dropped from the list in the weeks that followed, and Nagasaki was added. But this is an account of how things stood on 30 May 1945, when Field Marshal Henry Maitland

Wilson, head of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington, which was overseeing the Allied war effort, reported back to the government in London. His account came from James Chadwick, the chief British scientist on the atomic bomb project, ahead of official confirmation, as he explained to Sir John Anderson in Whitehall. 'I expect the American Chiefs of Staff will discuss it with me at a later date, but I feel it is most important that the Prime Minister and yourself should know what is contemplated before it is admitted officially.'

For plans were already at a very advanced stage. Chadwick's notes detail the height from which what was still being referred to as 'the TA Weapon' would be dropped, the time settings for its detonation, and the expected results:

RADIUS of demolition based on explosion of 5000 tons
Complete demolition ½ mile
Non-repairable structural damage 1 mile

The notes featured two comic names, which would soon come to sound far from funny:

Bomb LITTLE BOY to be ready to drop Aug 10–15
FATMAN month beginning 2nd week in August

and a measured, mathematical statement of requirements:

ESTIMATED EFFECT
HIROSHIMA AND NIIGATA require 2 Bombs
KYOTO requires 4 Bombs
Complete destruction of 3 Targets should be expected by Xmas 1945

It all came in well ahead of time. On 3 August, Sir John received a top-secret telegram from the Joint Staff Mission – 'The date of

the operation will almost certainly be tomorrow' – only for it to be cancelled less than 24 hours later – 'Following for Sir John Anderson from Field Marshal Wilson: Operation postponed owing to bad weather.'

Just one Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima, on 6 August. The scientists had been far too modest in their estimates. An area of more than a square mile was completely flattened, and two thirds of the buildings in the city were destroyed by the blast and ensuing fires. More than 100,000 people died. Tens of thousands more would perish from the long-term effects of radiation. Survivors suffered horrendous flash burns which seared the patterns of the clothing they had been wearing permanently on to their flesh. Three days later, another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, annihilating another 74,000 men, women and children.

'Somewhat disturbing' was Field Marshal Wilson's verdict of a report he passed on to London on 21 August, a week after the Japanese finally surrendered. But he was not talking about the unprecedented death and destruction. What was really exercising the British was that their chaps had very nearly not been allowed to take part.

'General Lemay [the US commander in charge of air attacks on Japan] did not wish to speak to me but Farrell [the military representative of the project to create the atomic bomb] asked him on my behalf whether I might take part in the operation as an observer,' reported RAF Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, who had been sent out to the American base in Guam to represent British interests alongside scientist William Penney. 'Lemay said there was no question whatsoever of this as he refused to allow anyone in the aeroplanes who was not vital to the operation . . . It was by this time obvious that I was being prevented from participating because of some policy decision and that the Americans were trying to make it appear as though it were due merely to a number of unfortunate technicalities.'

Clearly, this was outrageous. 'To a man everyone expressed great regret that we were not permitted to fly and stated openly that they considered it an insult to the British Empire,' Cheshire pointed out. 'They furthermore said that it was very different to the treatment they had received from the British when they were over in the European Theatre.'

The pair had to smuggle out a complaint to Lemay's superiors in Washington – 'since we were not allowed to send any communication to British authorities without first submitting it to Farrell' – and got word, just three hours before the bombers took off for Nagasaki, that they were to be permitted on board the observation plane. Cheshire was still not impressed. 'I was surprised at the lack of organisation and co-ordination,' his eminently detached account continues. 'Although the operation itself was a comparatively simple and routine affair, there was a great deal of excitement and confusion . . . There was, furthermore, a certain amount of friction between the air crews and some of the scientists, neither of whom showed any great inclination for each other's company.'

Nor were the military men any good at taking instruction. 'Neither of the operators were accustomed to photography and consequently no photographs of any value were obtained. The bomb aimer who operated the 16mm was so astonished at what he saw, in spite of a very adequate briefing from Penney, that he missed the explosion completely and thereafter, with the exception of a few feet of film, appears to have aimed his camera at the sky and not at the smoke . . . Both Penney and I recommended on several occasions that urgent steps should be taken to obtain adequate photographic cover of the operation. We suggested that this would not only provide valuable technical information but was the only means of providing history with a tangible and accurate account of something that the world might never see again.'

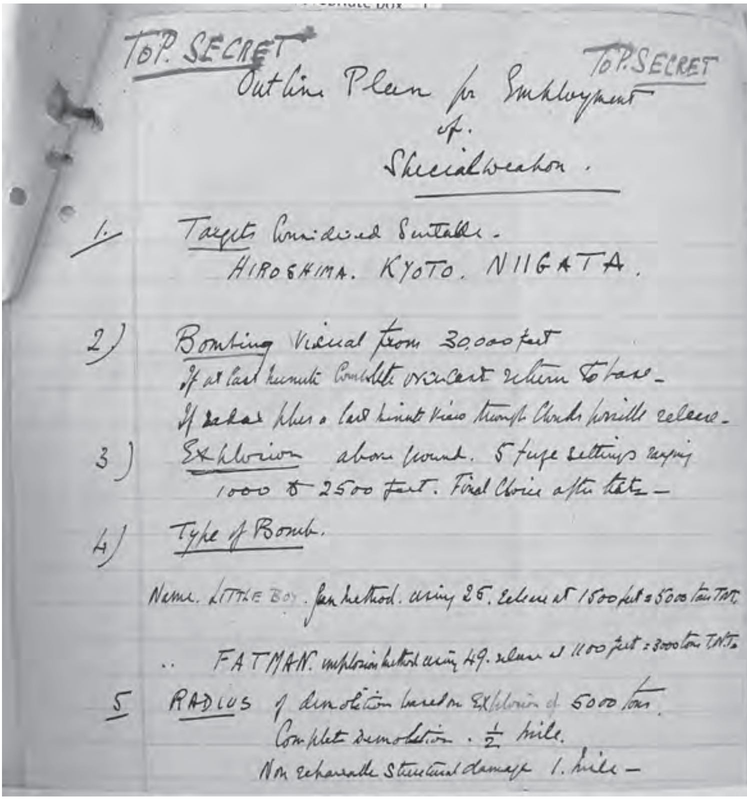
Penney, a mathematician by training, appears to have been just as emotionless an observer. Leading the scientific survey of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki that September, his chief complaint was that 'many peculiar effects due to fire winds were noted but not reported very accurately by the Japanese', who were rather busy being incinerated by them at the time.

The biggest concern all round, however, appears to have been that American bolshiness. 'It is hard to appreciate whether it was due to resentment on the part of some of the officers concerned at British participation in what hitherto has been regarded as a purely American theatre of operations, or whether there is something behind the idea mentioned by the scientists that the American Army Air Force will try to get complete control of the TA project in the future,' wrote Wilson to his political masters across the Atlantic. He urged them to swiftly come up with 'some agreed policy concerning TA to cover the interim period until definite decisions as to its future can be made'.

Back in London, the new prime minister Clement Attlee was wrestling with just that. 'What is to be done about the atomic bomb?' he wrote to his Cabinet colleagues on 28 August, in a memorandum that carries that smack of authentic desperation so absent from Cheshire and Penney's accounts:

> Scientists agree that we cannot stop the march of discovery. We can assume that any attempt to keep this as a secret in the hands of the USA and UK is useless. Scientists in other countries are certain in time to hit upon the secret.
>
> The most we have is a few years start. The question is what use are we to make of that few years start.
>
> We might presumably on the strength of our knowledge and of the advanced stage reached in technical development in the USA seek to set up an Anglo-American Hegemony in the world using our power to enforce a worldwide rigid inspection of all laboratories and plants.
>
> I do not think that this is desirable or practicable. We should



TOP SECRET

Outline Plan for Employment of Special weapon.

TOP SECRET

1. Targets Considered Suitable.
HIROSHIMA. KYOTO. NIIGATA.

2) Bombing visual from 30,000 feet
If at last minute complete overcast return to base.
If radar plus a last minute view through clouds possible release.

3) Explosion above ground. 5 fuse settings varying
1000 to 2500 feet. Final choice after tests –

4) Type of Bomb.

Name. LITTLE BOY. gun method. using 25. release at 1500 feet = 5000 tons TNT.

.. FATMAN. implosion method using 49. release at 1100 feet = 3000 tons TNT.

5 RADIUS of demolition based on explosion of 5000 tons.
Complete demolition. ½ mile.
Non repairable structural damage 1. mile –

'Outline Plan for Employment of Special Weapon': preparations for the bombing of Hiroshima take shape, and are reported back to London by James Chadwick. The National Archives, ref: CAB 126/250

not be able to penetrate the curtain that conceals the vast area of Russia. To attempt this would be to invite a world war leading to the destruction of civilization in a dozen years or so.

The only course which seems to me to be feasible and to offer a reasonable hope of staving off imminent disaster for the world is joint action by the USA, UK and Russia based upon stark reality.

We should declare that this invention has made it essential to end wars. The new World Order must start now.

While steps must be taken to prevent the development of this weapon in any country, this will be futile unless the whole conception of war is banished from people's minds and from the calculation of governments. This means that every vexed question will have to be settled without the use of force . . . The USSR must abandon, if it still holds them, its dreams of revolution by force or intrigue. The UK and the USA must abandon, if they have them, any dreams of overturning Left Governments. All nations must give up their dreams of realising some historic expansion at the expense of their neighbours. They must look to a peaceful future instead of a warlike past.

This sort of thing has in the past been considered a Utopian dream. It has become today the essential condition of the survival of civilisation and possibly of life on this planet.

When the boat comes in – 1950

How dull does the Imports Research Committee sound? Very dull indeed. Which is deliberate. It made it less likely that anyone would ask questions about it. So no one would ever get round to wondering why, along with representatives of the Board of Customs and Excise, the Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Supply, it also had senior figures from the Ministry of Defence, Directorate of Scientific Intelligence and Security Service sitting on it.

Because the committee, formed shortly after British troops had been sent into Korea to help stop the communists overrunning the whole country, was set up to look into one very specific import: one that no one wanted to see arriving on our shores. 'The Chiefs of Staff recently considered a report by the Joint Intelligence Committee on the clandestine introduction of weapons into the

UK, from which they conclude that the most serious threat seems to be the atomic bomb concealed in a merchant ship and exploded in harbour,' explained its newly appointed chair, Mr G. Wheeler of the MoD, on 6 September 1950. 'I need hardly say that the subject is of the greatest secrecy.'

Each of the eight members of the committee was circulated a copy of Dr Robert Oppenheimer's testimony to the US Senate hearings on atomic energy which had been held five years previously. It was a chilling read. 'The active material which makes it an atomic bomb is usually not near the surface, and I think that just by walking along past a crate you would not be able to tell that in that crate there was an atomic bomb. It would not tick,' pointed out the man who had spearheaded the development of nuclear weapons. 'If you hired me to walk through the cellars of Washington to see whether there were atomic bombs, I think my most important tool would be a screwdriver to open the crates and look. I think that just walking by, swinging a little gadget, would not give me the information.'

So they were faced with a weapon that was not only the deadliest in the world, but almost impossible to detect. It was difficult to imagine anything more terrifying. But at their first meeting, held on 28 September, the committee tried their hardest.

> In discussion it was pointed out that to produce the maximum effect an enemy might well use every means at once including
>
> 1) the merchant ship in harbour
> 2) a civil aircraft carrying a bomb to be detonated at a low altitude
> 3) detonation in a submarine . . .
>
> It would be possible to conceal a complete bomb, ready for detonation, in the structure of a ship so that no normal

> Customs search would find it. Alternatively, if it came concealed as ordinary merchandise there seemed no reason why it should necessarily come on a Russian or satellite ship. It could be arranged for it to come from any port, in any ship, with such transhipment as was necessary.
>
> . . . The detonation of the bomb in the aircraft at a low altitude would have to be undertaken by a suicide squad.

It took the committee's members two months – some of which they may well have spent sitting under the table gibbering – to come to an inescapable conclusion: 'there are no practicable and efficacious steps that can be taken in peace time to prepare against any of these threats'.

There were a few suggestions that might have helped a bit. Customs officers should look out for cargoes containing 'at least one package of the size of a grand piano', which probably covered most of them. And Mr G. L. Turney from the Directorate of Scientific Intelligence proposed that 'Russian and satellite shipping should be directed to some specified port, presumably one of the less important' to discourage attacks. 'The enemy would probably not think it worth while for the sake of destroying one minor port. Admittedly, the results might be unfortunate for the port chosen.'

Otherwise, Britain was just going to have to bluff it out. The committee recommended that 'there should be some deterrent value in a display of confident assurance on our part that we have an adequate answer to the threat'. They didn't, but hey. Whistling a happy tune to fool the people she feared worked for Anna in *The King and I*, which opened on Broadway the following spring, so it might do the trick here too.

As one unnamed official scribbled on the minutes, 'it will deceive our own people more than the Russians, but I suppose we must put on a bold front'.

Thermonuclear power? Yes please – 1954

In the summer of 1954, the Chiefs of Staff, the country's most senior military leaders, prepared a memorandum for the Cabinet on the 'Likely Form of a Future Global War'. It was the stuff of nightmares.

Although they estimated that the Soviets were unlikely to develop nuclear weapons long-range enough to reach the United States before 1970, this was not good news for the UK. In fact, the news was about as bad as it could get.

> The Russians will, we believe, appreciate that, apart from its importance as a strategic base, the United Kingdom is the major political target in Western Europe; and that the extinction of the United Kingdom would quickly lead to the disintegration of Western Europe and the break up of the Commonwealth and would greatly strengthen the Soviet position in any negotiations which they might hope to open with the United States. We therefore consider that, whatever the Russians' ability to attack the United States – and for the next few years they are not likely to be able to deliver more than sporadic attacks – the United Kingdom will be the primary military target for initial attack in any future war, and will be subjected to devastating attack by a large part of the Russian bomber effort together with any ground-to-ground missile capacity which she may possess.
>
> Our defence system within the foreseeable future will not be able to provide the complete protection necessary against air attack employing weapons of mass destruction . . . Thus, if war did break out, we should have to expect that the United Kingdom would be devastated in the opening days to such an extent that it could no longer function as a main support area. Indeed, the real problem might be one of mere physical survival.

Unsurprisingly, the chiefs concluded that 'More than ever the aim of United Kingdom policy must be to prevent war.' How best to do so? They recommended immediate upgrading of the UK's own nuclear deterrent to the latest thermonuclear or hydrogen bombs, hundreds of times more powerful than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki nine years previously.

This proposal, however, led to a difficult ethical question with which the Cabinet wrestled at their meeting of 8 July. 'Was it morally right that we should manufacture weapons with this vast destructive power? There was no doubt that a decision to make hydrogen bombs would offend the conscience of substantial numbers of people in this country.'

The solution? Blame the opposition. Winston Churchill's crew concluded that 'there was no sharp distinction in kind between atomic and thermo-nuclear weapons, and that, in so far as any moral principle was involved, it had already been breached by the decision of the Labour Government to make the atomic bomb'. The announcement that 'after fully considering all the implications of this step the Government had decided to proceed with their development and production' came the following February.

Be prepared . . . to die – 1960

The good news is, we'd have a full hour and a half's warning of a nuclear attack. The bad news is, quite soon after that almost everyone except the government would perish horribly.

This was the conclusion of the Home Defence Review Committee in a report submitted to the Cabinet in December 1960, slightly under two years before the Cuban Missile Crisis would bring the world as close as it has ever been to nuclear annihilation. Soviet nuclear strikes would, it cheerily predicted, be 'at present launched primarily by manned bombers . . . There would

be about ninety minutes warning of the moment of a Soviet attack on the United Kingdom.' However, 'if ballistic missiles were used now there could be no warning. By 1963 the threat could be entirely from ballistic missiles.'

Fortunately, the UK, along with America, was already putting the finishing touches to a Ballistic Missile Early Warning System – those great golf balls that dominate the landscape at Fylingdales in North Yorkshire – which meant that 'warning of the moment of attack might be as little as three minutes or as much as 12 minutes'. The latter left plenty of time for a leisurely stroll down to the cellar. You would even have time to pop out and buy a pint of milk and a snack on the way.

Actually, that might be a good idea: the report also admits that the last set of official recommendations for nuclear preparedness, issued in 1955, had largely been ignored – 'the stockpiling of food, the safeguarding of water supplies and the provision of other facilities on the scale then considered necessary for the continued survival of those who outlived the attack was not undertaken because of the cost'.

One of the committee's immediate recommendations was that an emergency food scheme, with 'just about enough to provide a Spartan diet for the survivors of attack' should be established by 1965. This was despite concerns that 'the printing of ration books, which could not be kept secret, might arouse public concern about the risk of war'. And probably also a terrible sinking feeling, given that the country had only been free of food rationing for six years: the end of restrictions on meat and bacon had been carnivorously celebrated in 1954, with members of the magnificently named London Housewives' Association hosting a special ceremony in Trafalgar Square.

Another topic considered at length was whether to instigate an official evacuation procedure, not just from cities to the countryside but also a mass move westwards to remove citizens from the vicinity

of all those RAF bases that lined the eastern side of the country and were assumed to be primary targets for the Russians. Not everyone should bother packing a suitcase. Four 'priority classes' for evacuation had been proposed in a 1950s plan: 'children, adolescents, expectant mothers and the aged and infirm'. Now, however, this was to be – literally – drastically culled. 'Leaving out some 800,000 adolescents, aged and infirm, it would be possible to have more, or somewhat larger, evacuation areas.'

Poor teenagers. They had only just been invented and they were already being thrown on the thermonuclear scrapheap. If they, or anyone else left behind, raised any objections, it was hoped the British sense of fair play would kick in: 'the Government of the day could appeal to the public sense of duty, state that there was no room in the reception areas for unofficial evacuees and give a warning about the risks from fall-out for people caught in the open; and it might be that their appeal for non-priority classes to stay put would in these circumstances meet with a considerable response'. Well, it might. But the committee was wise enough to point out that 'unorganised panic evacuation might bring the life of the country to a standstill'.

The committee was at least 'unanimous that there is one type of home defence measure which must be maintained, whatever view is taken of other measures'. Can you guess what it was? Yes, looking after their own: 'Preparations for carrying on the government of the country, including the provision of emergency headquarters for the central Government . . . staffed mainly from the Civil Service and the armed forces.' This appears to have been about the only thing the country *was* prepared for: 'the emergency underground headquarters for the central Government is due for completion in 1961–62'.

Though the report didn't say so – the information was far too sensitive even for a document stamped 'TOP SECRET' at the top and bottom of every one of its 36 pages – this bunker, codenamed Burlington, was, and still is, located 100 feet beneath the

town of Corsham near Bath. It had room for 4,000 key personnel, its own water supply and treatment plant and fuel to keep its four generators running and the air at a pleasant 20 degrees for up to three months. An operation code-named Visitation would see RAF helicopters landing in Horse Guards Parade to evacuate the Prime Minister and 23 ministers and officials via the back garden of 10 Downing Street and whisk them to Wiltshire, and safety.

The outlook was rather chillier for everyone else, despite the fortifications that still stood in many back gardens, pressed into peacetime service as sheds or chicken coops. 'Much shelter still exists from the last war, but the amount is steadily decreasing, and a good deal of it would be unsuitable for prolonged occupation. There is at present useful shelter for only a very small proportion of the population.' Besides, what existed was all but useless: cast iron and brickwork might have seen the bulk of the population through the Blitz two decades before, but 'the committee are unable to recommend any special provision at the present time for protection against blast and heat' from the new generation of weapons.

To look on the bright side, this was not the main threat: 'An initial attack on this scale would not, comparatively speaking, cause a great number of casualties but with present home defence preparations fall-out would account for millions of deaths, the number depending largely on the wind direction at the time of attack.' Decent shelters could cut the number of victims from 'more than thirteen millions to less than one million', but 'to provide such protection for a substantial proportion of city dwellers would be beyond our resources'. Oh, and no one would know when the deadly material was drifting in their direction anyway: 'there is no provision for warning the public against fall-out'.

So what was to be done in the face of what appeared to be certain doom for the bulk of the population? Er, 'further examination of these and other difficult problems is needed before any suggestions

can be put to Ministers . . . for the present Ministers are asked only to note that these studies are contemplated'.

Was it surprising that, as the report warned, 'many people have tended to conclude that the Government has lost faith in the practicability of this country's surviving a nuclear attack'? The report even apologetically reveals that some members of the committee held that view themselves. 'There is a minority view that home defence preparations have no place in our defence policy, since we could not afford to undertake preparations on a scale that would provide adequate protection against attack.'

In short: we were pretty much doomed. It was lucky that, that year at least, the Soviet premier seemed to be content with no more aggressive action than banging his shoe on the podium at the UN, and UK retaliation went no further than the notorious *Daily Mirror* headline: 'MR K! DON'T BE SO BLOODY RUDE!'

Mothers' milk – 1961

Like all the best supervillains from Herod onwards, the biggest danger the Soviets posed was to babies. The undeveloped thyroid glands of those under one year old can't cope with the radioactive isotope Iodine-131 in the way those of children and adults can; babies also drink a lot more milk, which soaks up high levels of the substance even after it's been processed through both grass and a cow (leafy vegetables like spinach take in a lot of it too, which is another good reason to refuse to eat your greens). And the obsessive nuclear testing programme the Russians were undertaking in central Siberia and the Arctic Circle during the autumn of 1961 – sometimes they were blowing up two or three atomic devices per day – meant that if the wind was blowing in the wrong direction, Britain's infants were at risk.

'The fall-out from the Russian explosion on 23rd October

could, if the bomb was of large size and if all conditions are adverse, be such that the contamination of UK milk would approach the maximum acceptable dose for the year,' warned the Ministry of Defence after consulting with the Met Office. 'It is estimated that the dangerous concentration would arrive here between 12th and 16th November [someone has ringed the dates in biro]. If this happens, babies under 12 months should stop having fresh milk.' Instructions from the Ministry of Health were clear: 'We must start planning now for the suspension of fresh milk supplies and we cannot wait to see how serious a situation may develop.'

On 25 October, instructions went out to all local health authorities in England. If Iodine-131 levels reached danger levels – calculated at an average of more than 130 micro-microcuries over a year – 'a public announcement on radio and television and in the press' would be made. They would all receive thousands of 16oz tins of evaporated milk which they were to hand out to parents from 'special points nominated by the authority'. Along with them they were to distribute the following instructions:

> How to feed your baby. Infants under 12 months should not be given fresh liquid milk whether as a drink or mixed with solid foods such as cereals, whether cooked or not. For the time being it is bad for them because of radioactivity from recent nuclear tests. They should only be given dried or tinned milk, and only dried or tinned milk should be used in preparing solid foods for them.

Thankfully, the measures were never necessary. Although the figures got up to frightening levels – 190 in Scotland, 160 in Northern Ireland – they didn't remain there long enough to take the yearly average up into the danger zone, and the tins remained in storage. Still, it is good to see that the government really had thought through all the possibilities. The file also contains a lengthy and detailed

correspondence between the Ministries of Science and Health fretting about the danger of people in remote areas who weren't on mains water recontaminating their emergency dried milk supplies by mixing it up with rainwater which had absorbed its own hefty dose of radiation. They concluded that 'we consider it unlikely that more than 50,000 persons drink water obtained in this way, though some persons who normally use streams or wells may of course turn to collected rainwater in exceptionally dry periods'.

Don't panic! – 1979

It happened at ten to four on a Friday afternoon, 9 November 1979. In the House of Commons, Leon Brittan had just embarked on a long-winded speech about the Representation of the People Bill. 'Diddy' David Hamilton was hammering out the hits on Radio 2's afternoon show. Across the country, little ones were being plonked down in front of the telly ready for *Play School* as their older brothers and sisters arrived home from school looking forward to *Crackerjack*. And an alert went off at the Pentagon that a massive nuclear attack was under way.

American pilots sprang into action at bases in Oregon and Michigan. The Canadian Air Force dispatched ten F-111s from British Columbia. The 'doomsday plane' from which President Carter would have been able to oversee the destruction of his country and most of the rest of the planet was launched. Across the Atlantic, the message flashed through to the UK's early warning station at Fylingdales at eight minutes past four: advanced alert state. The crew of our own interception aircraft were automatically put on 'cockpit readiness', prepared to take to the skies at ten minutes' notice.

But before the pilots had even got as far as their planes, some happy news came through from America: it was a false alarm. The attack was just a pretend one: a simulation intended to test operators at the

North American Air Defense command centre in Colorado. Only its contents had somehow been transmitted to two other military command centres, in Maryland and at the Pentagon – 'through possible mechanical malfunction', according to the US Defense Department, although a later investigation discovered that someone had actually just put the tape in the wrong machine – which immediately assumed the worst. But for now, everything was fine. The American and Canadian planes were recalled to their bases. And everyone swiftly agreed that there was no need to tell the President about it.

It was a different matter in Downing Street. 'Prime Minister – you may wonder why you were not involved in the false alarm concerning US strategic forces yesterday evening' begins a nervous handwritten note dispatched by Michael Alexander, Mrs Thatcher's foreign affairs adviser. He was at least able to insert a note of jingoism into his explanation. 'The early warning station at Fylingdales was alerted and identified the alert as a false alarm within 30 seconds – evidently rather more rapidly than the Americans themselves – so you were not troubled.'

But this was not enough for the Prime Minister. Beside a further reassurance from the Ministry of Defence that 'there was no indication from the Fylingdales radars of any threat to the UK, and indeed within seconds the information was shown to be suspect', she scribbled the single word 'How?'

She got an explanation that, stripped of its hi-tech language and acronyms, basically amounted to 'they had a look and couldn't see any bombs'. 'Fylingdales found no corroborative information on their own displays of the supposed missile attack,' wrote D. T. Piper of the MoD. 'NORAD was receiving no information from any of the three BMEWS – the other two are in Alaska and Greenland – that would confirm the warning, nor had any other US warning system indicated a danger.' The world was safe. And that is why no one now talks about the catastrophic attacks of 11/9.