4 The struggle over the bomb in the French Fourth Republic

Introduction

"Hurray for France! From this morning she is stronger and prouder!" Such was the February 13, 1960 reaction of President Charles de Gaulle to the news of the first French nuclear explosion.[1] Since that day, it has been hard to dissociate the French nuclear arsenal from de Gaulle's foreign policy of *grandeur*, from the "monarchical" presidential system he introduced in 1958, and indeed from overall French national identity.[2] But in fact, the coming of the French nuclear arsenal was far from foreordained. Indeed, on several occasions the French Fourth Republic establishment almost succeeded in *signing away* France's rights to nuclear weapons.

This chapter details the struggle over the bomb in the French Fourth Republic. It argues that this struggle reflected the very different conceptions of French national identity that were held by French "Europeans" and by French "nationalists." As detailed in Chapter 3, the "Europeans," who dominated the French Fourth Republic establishment, held an oppositional subaltern NIC *vis-à-vis* Germany. This NIC led them to be hostile to the idea of a French nuclear weapons drive. By contrast, the "nationalists," including de Gaulle and Pierre Mendès France, held an oppositional nationalist NIC *vis-à-vis* Germany. This NIC led them to embrace the idea of a French nuclear weapons drive, a drive that Mendès France jumpstarted with his dramatic nuclear decision of December 26, 1954.

While offering strong confirmation of the theoretical perspective adopted in this book, the chapter demonstrates the particularly glaring problems the French case poses for conventional theoretical perspectives on proliferation:

[1] Marcel Duval and Dominique Mongin, *Histoire des forces nucléaires françaises depuis 1945* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), p. 46.

[2] See, for instance, Beatrice Heuser, *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France, and the FRG* (London: Macmillan, 1998), ch. 3.

- Realists generally view the French nuclear effort as a classic confirmation of the poor credibility of US extended deterrence once the Soviets had developed the wherewithal to threaten the American homeland.[3] But as this chapter will show, the French bomb decision took place at a moment when the credibility of the American nuclear deterrent was still high. Even more problematically, the chapter shows that the French bomb project was more a response to the perceived *German* challenge than to the Soviet menace.
- Meanwhile, institutionalists generally portray early instances of nuclear proliferation, such as the French case, as having occurred because the international non-proliferation regime and "nuclear taboo" had not yet been constructed. But this chapter finds that, faced with the absence of an existing non-proliferation regime, the French "Europeans" invented one – only to see a later French leader scuttle it. Moreover, it shows that the "nuclear taboo" was well internalized by many French leaders as early as 1946. Thus, the French case of proliferation cannot be seen as a product of supposedly benighted early years of the nuclear age, but rather poses as much a puzzle for the institutionalist approach as contemporary cases of proliferation.
- Finally, bureaucratic and domestic politics models generally have a field day with the French Fourth Republic, which was not a place where the head of government could typically have his way.[4] This chapter finds that in spite of the complex institutional context, the choice to go nuclear indeed was made by a single prime minister over the objections of most of his normal political and bureaucratic allies. But the chapter does also find that once the initial top-down decision was made, domestic institutions and actors other than the prime minister greatly mattered for the continued progress of the weapons drive.

The rest of the chapter presents a detailed look at French nuclear policymaking from 1945 to July 1956, the date after which the construction of a French nuclear bomb became essentially inevitable. The second part documents the efforts of the French "Europeans" to tie France's hands in the nuclear arena up to 1954. The third part covers the crucial year of decision, 1954. And the fourth explains how the December 1954 bomb

[3] Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[4] Not surprisingly, this general model is a popular one for describing the French case. An important early study was Lawrence Scheinman, *Atomic Energy Policy in France under the Fourth Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). See also Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) and Alain Peyrefitte, *Le mal français* (Paris: Plon, 1976), pp. 283–290.

decision established a firm direction toward French nuclear weapons, which persisted in spite of subsequent attempts to reverse it.

Nuclear France before 1954

De Gaulle in the immediate postwar period: "We have time."

The French nuclear program was born soon after the destruction of Hiroshima. On October 18, 1945 Charles de Gaulle, as head of the Provisional Government, signed a decree creating the *Commissariat à l'énergie atomique* (CEA). The CEA was to be an entirely civilian atomic energy commission – the first of its kind in the world – while at the same time holding the monopoly on any future defense projects.[5] This defense mission is best understood in terms of de Gaulle's desire to maintain political control over nuclear affairs – and, in particular, to keep the atom out of the hands of the French military. The CEA's unusual organizational structure, which featured an administrative and a scientific chief who were coequal in power, was also designed in order to ensure political control – in no small part because Frédéric Joliot-Curie, the obvious choice for scientific chief, was a card-carrying Communist.[6]

De Gaulle neither ruled in nor ruled out a French bomb drive during his first, brief stint in power. As he told the press on October 13, a week before forming the CEA, "As to the atomic bomb, we have time. I am not convinced that atomic bombs will be used in the short run. At any rate, the French government will not lose sight of this question, which is most serious for the entire world, and whose consequences are clearly immense."[7] Why did de Gaulle not immediately declare that the CEA's purpose was to build nuclear weapons? For one thing, war-ravaged France was technically in no position to achieve that goal. Indeed, given the circumstances, that de Gaulle created the CEA at all is a rather remarkable tribute to his deep-rooted nationalism. But, in addition, in 1945 Germany – the object of de Gaulle's oppositional nationalism – was an occupied country that de Gaulle still hoped would be permanently divided and deindustrialized. Germany's prostrate condition in 1945 is presumably a significant part of why de Gaulle felt that "we have time." As the chapter demonstrates below, once Germany's return to sovereignty and rearmament became

[5] The civilian US Atomic Energy Commission was created two years later, in 1947. Dominique Mongin, *La bombe atomique française* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1997), p. 42.

[6] Ibid., p. 39.

[7] De Gaulle, cited in Bertrand Goldschmidt, *Atomic Rivals: A Candid Memoir of Rivalries among the Allies over the Bomb*, translated from the French by Georges M. Temmer (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

a certainty, de Gaulle's position in favor of a French bomb hardened quickly.

The early years of the Fourth Republic: an "absence of nuclear-mindedness"

After de Gaulle resigned in January 1946, the early hints of a military direction for French nuclear activities vanished. Joliot-Curie focused the CEA's early work on pure scientific research and on peaceful applications of nuclear energy.[8] The pacific orientation of the CEA's research took on the character of official policy when France's ambassador to the United Nations, Alexandre Parodi, announced to the UN disarmament committee in June 1946,

> I am authorized to state that the goals that the French government has assigned to the research of its scientists and engineers are purely peaceful. Our wish is that all nations do the same as soon as possible and it is with determination to reach this goal that France will submit itself to the rules that will be judged best to assure the control of atomic energy in the entire world.[9]

The Parodi declaration certainly was not a contractual obligation to abstain from building the bomb, but it did reflect the considered judgment of the French government that a significant French nuclear arsenal was neither feasible nor necessary. Such was the gist of a secret 1946 note by CEA executive committee member Pierre Auger for Foreign Affairs Minister Georges Bidault.[10] The note argued that France could perhaps muster the technical and mineral resources to build the bomb, but that strategically such an effort would be nonsensical. Auger projected the "probable attitude" of the six contemporary nuclear-weapons-capable states (Belgium, Canada, France, UK, US, and USSR) as follows: while the USSR and the US would definitely become nuclear powers, the other four would "honestly renounce the construction of destructive atomic weapons, for these cannot bring them any advantage." Moreover, the US and USSR themselves would not be able to use their arsenals at least in the near to medium term because of the restraints imposed both by "public opinion" – an indication that a "nuclear taboo" was already in place in 1946 – and by the "insufficiency" of available delivery systems.

[8] Ibid., p. 290.

[9] Alexandre Parodi, cited in Bertrand Goldschmidt, "La genèse et l'héritage," in *L'Aventure de la bombe: De Gaulle et la dissuasion nucléaire 1958–1969*, actes du colloque organisé par l'Université de France-Comté et l'Institut Charles de Gaulle (Paris: Plon, 1985), p. 27.

[10] "Note on the Atomic Bomb" marked "Very Important" from Pierre Auger to Georges Bidault, dated 1946. Georges Bidault papers, 457 AP 4, Archives Nationales, Paris.

The French military in these years generally shared the diplomats' and scientists' lack of enthusiasm for a French bomb. The military's lack of interest in the bomb was based on two major elements. First, it saw the bomb as essentially an arm for the superpower confrontation taking place above France's head, and besides, it viewed the American fear of a Soviet "bolt from the blue" as exaggerated. Second, it saw the bomb as essentially unusable for any rational military purpose – a comforting thought for an institution intent on maintaining its traditions. The military top brass would later consider these points of view confirmed by the non-use of nuclear weapons in the Korean War.[11]

In sum, the French Fourth Republic in the late 1940s displayed, as others have put it, a nearly "total absence of nuclear-mindedness."[12] To some extent, this lack of interest can be attributed to the priority the French accorded to the massive task of economic and social reconstruction. But it would not have cost any additional economic resources simply to list the creation of a nuclear arsenal as one of the CEA's long-term goals. That this did not happen shows the fallacy of the widespread assumption that states in the early years of the nuclear age simply assumed that they would eventually acquire the bomb. The French of the 1940s already understood the momentousness of going nuclear, and for the most part their strong inclination was to abstain from doing so.

Then, in 1950, a shock occurred – intense US pressure for German rearmament. France's "eternal enemy" was to be revived. This immediately raised the profile of the nuclear question. The prospect of German rearmament pushed the reigning Fourth Republic establishment not to reverse, but instead to *codify* France's abstention from the bomb.

1950–52: Discussions of German rearmament and the first attempted renunciation

With the dawning of the Cold War, the US began pressuring for the rearmament of the western portions of Germany. It officially proposed (West) German rearmament and membership in NATO in September 1950.[13] The issue of German rearmament was to divide French society profoundly in the next years. That debate was not over the value of

[11] Jean-Christophe Sauvage, "La perception des questions nucléaires dans les premières années de l'Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale 1948–1955," in Maurice Vaïsse, ed., *La France et l'atome* (Brussels: Bruylant, 1994), esp. pp. 77–78.

[12] Christian De la Malène and Constantin Melnik, "Attitudes of the French Parliament and Government toward Atomic Weapons," RAND Research Memorandum RM-2170-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1958), p. 1.

[13] From now on, I will use the word "Germany" to refer to West Germany. This was the way in which the French debate was framed.

German rearmament – practically all French elites agreed it was a disaster for France. Rather, the debate was over how best to respond to this frightening new military, political, and status threat.[14]

As noted in Chapter 3, the French Fourth Republic establishment held an oppositional subaltern NIC *vis-à-vis* Germany. Its natural reaction to the pressure for German rearmament was therefore not to increase French capabilities, but rather to seek a "European" solution that kept Germany down while mollifying the American big brother. In October 1950, France's ambassador to the United States, Henri Bonnet, wrote a long memorandum to the Foreign Ministry stating that the US was serious about its goal of recreating a German national army. But this, Bonnet wrote, would produce the "historical inevitability" of a German "reconquest by arms, or the recuperation by an alliance with the East [Soviet bloc], of the lost eastern provinces."[15] To head off that "inevitability" while avoiding a lessening of the American military commitment to Europe, Bonnet suggested the integration of German troops into a supranational European army.[16] Most of the rest of the French Fourth Republic establishment had the same fearful reaction, and on October 24, Prime Minister René Pleven presented his proposal for a supranational European Defense Community (EDC) to Parliament. The Pleven Plan quickly found support among France's less-German-phobic alliance partners, and negotiations over the precise form of the EDC soon began in earnest. The initial fears sparked by the sudden prospect of a renaissance of German military power were only to grow with time. As the French ambassador to Bonn, André François-Poncet, wrote to Robert Schuman in December 1952, "Since their military help was asked for and their liberation from their last chains promised, they are returning so naturally to the ways of thinking and of acting of the Hitlerian Reich, that distrust of them is justly reawakening."[17] François-Poncet argued that this

[14] Jacques Bariéty, "La décision de réarmer l'Allemagne, l'échec de la Communauté Européenne de Défense et les accords de Paris du 23 octobre 1954 vus du côté français," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (1993), pp. 354–383.

[15] Henri Bonnet, "Projet de memorandum sur la politique européenne de la France et le réarmement allemand," October 4, 1950, Henri Bonnet papers on microfilm, PA-AP, Vol. I, p. 179, archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (henceforth MAE), Paris.

[16] Ibid. The reason why the French were so eager to keep the United States in Europe again had more to do with the goal of suppressing Germany's resurgence than it had to do with the goal of defending against an eventual Soviet attack. Indeed, during that period there were significant worries that the Americans were *too* willing to fight the Soviets (and with nuclear weapons, no less). These attitudes only changed during the 1960s. Alfred Grosser, "France and Germany in the Atlantic Community," *International Organization*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer, 1963), p. 564.

[17] Telegram from André François-Poncet to Robert Schuman, December 22, 1952, in Cabinet du Ministre Robert Schuman dossier No. 43, MAE, Paris.

reawakening was all the more reason to persist in the "edification of the European–Atlantic Community."

If German rearmament with *conventional* forces was France's worst nightmare, German *nuclear* armament was simply "not conceivable."[18] Germany at the time had essentially no activities in the nuclear field, and the French aimed to keep things that way. But according to the "European" principle of non-discrimination, any restrictions placed on Germany had to be placed equally on all EDC partners.[19] Therefore, the parties agreed on Article 107 of the EDC treaty, which specified that all fissile material produced or acquired by any EDC state had to be devoted to non-military purposes. Moreover, this general principle was given teeth: the supranational EDC authorities had to approve any member state's production, importation, or exportation in one year of more than 500 grams of fissile material – far less than is necessary for a nuclear explosion. Supranational inspectors would verify compliance with these strictures.[20] The EDC treaty was signed on May 27, 1952 by Robert Schuman for France and by five other European states (Germany, Italy, and the Benelux nations). In short, *the French had signed away the right to sovereign nuclear weapons in exchange for the certainty that Germany could never have them either*.[21]

The Article 107 commitment is hardly surprising in the context of EDC, for the notion of a supranational European army made no sense if states were also building national nuclear weapons stockpiles. But that commitment is entirely at odds with the usual picture of a unitary French state inexorably lured by the power and prestige benefits of a nuclear arsenal. The French "Europeans" were not lured by those so-called temptations. The fact that the US, USSR, and Britain all had or would soon have nuclear weapons did not faze the French "Europeans" in their willingness to give up France's right to them.[22] From the point of view of the French "Europeans," France could do without the bomb if that was the price of keeping Germany non-nuclear. Indeed, their oppositional subaltern NIC

[18] For example, letter, marked "Very Secret," from Cabinet du Ministre, Ministère de la Défense Nationale et des Forces Armées to the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, September 1954, Papiers Wormser 25, MAE, Paris. One finds the words "*inconcevable*" or "*pas concevable*" again and again in records of the time, with respect to this possibility.

[19] France did get a major exception for its armed forces stationed outside of Europe.

[20] "Note pour le Secrétaire Général, a.s. lettre du Commissariat à l'Energie atomique relative au traité instituant une Communauté européenne de defense," le jurisconsulte, Ministère des Affairs Etrangères, March 15, 1954, in Secrétariat Général, dossier CED, 70: dossier général 1er janvier–18 juin 1954, MAE, Paris.

[21] Though, in theory, the door was still open to a "European" bomb. This option would in fact attract some "Europeans" in subsequent years.

[22] Britain exploded its first bomb, in Australia, in October 1952. For more on that episode, see Chapter 5.

led them not merely to submit to a non-proliferation treaty regime, but actually to *invent* such a regime as a means of containing Germany.

The French "European" nuclear stance was not resisted by the important bureaucracies of the French state. The Foreign Ministry was highly in favor, and the military generally assented as well. It is true that CEA officials *later* objected to Article 107, arguing that during the EDC negotiations they had not been apprised of its content.[23] But the text was certainly available to an important organ of the state if it had cared to look for it.[24] Indeed, before the CEA chiefs finally contacted the Foreign Ministry on the issue in March 1954, Article 107 had already been clarified by a further protocol of March 1953. This protocol essentially guaranteed that the European authorities would grant the French the right to produce fissile material for peaceful purposes over the 500 gram limit – a step made necessary by the major nuclear plan passed by the French Parliament in July 1952.[25] So the EDC negotiators were certainly paying attention to the progress of the CEA. Why did the CEA not pay attention to the progress of the EDC negotiations? The most reasonable hypothesis is that the CEA at that time did not see itself as the guardian of the French bomb option.

EDC could have been the end of the French nuclear weapons story, but the French "Europeans" were to fail in their effort to convince Parliament to ratify the treaty. Therefore, when the oppositional nationalist

[23] Note from L'administrateur Général, délégué du gouvernement, et le Haut-Commissaire [du CEA] à Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, March 1, 1954, in Secrétariat Général, Dossier CED, 70: "Dossier Général 1er janvier–18 juin 1954," MAE, Paris.

[24] As Goldschmidt reports CEA administrative chief Pierre Guillaumat later admitted to him. Goldschmidt, in "Débats," in Georges-Henri Soutou and Alain Beltran, eds., *Pierre Guillaumat: la passion des grands projets industriels* (Paris: Editions Rive Droite, 1995), p. 71.

[25] Such a big civilian nuclear effort is something that my characterization of the French "European" establishment's NIC does not anticipate, and therefore it is a missed prediction for the theory. But the 1952 plan was not a fig leaf for a weapons drive. The government's internal discussions over the plan were entirely devoted to its economic utility – plutonium was at the time considered to be a new "black gold" (see Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, pp. 168–169). Moreover, one of the original members of the CEA, Bertrand Goldschmidt, noted to me that the prime mover behind the 1952 plan, Secretary of State for Atomic Energy Félix Gaillard, was "not very interested [in the bomb] and slightly anti-military" (interview with Bertrand Goldschmidt, French atomic scientist and diplomat, Paris, September 29, 1998). My interpretation here is somewhat complicated by the fact that *after* the 1952 plan was passed, the CEA's pro-bomb faction led by Pierre Guillaumat actually optimized the new reactors for the production of weapons-grade plutonium. This technical choice did indeed bring France "closer" to the bomb (see Hecht, *The Radiance of France*). It is thus a caveat to the general story of French lack of interest in preparing military applications in the pre-1954 period. However, this was a technical development that pushed the limits of the settled policy; for various reasons outlined below, Guillaumat would find that he could not build the bomb without political assent.

Pierre Mendès France came to power in 1954, he was able to undo the restrictions on proliferation that his predecessors had fashioned.

The year of decision: 1954

Under the EDC treaty, France had signed away its right to acquire nuclear weapons. But in August 1954, Parliament rejected the EDC treaty. Then, on December 26, 1954, Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France secretly informed his government of his determination for France to have nuclear weapons. What explains this dramatic turnabout?

Various scholarly analyses have argued that the triggering factor was one of the following three events: the April–May 1954 military disaster of Dien Bien Phu; the new massive retaliation strategy of NATO codified in the summer of 1954 in the New Look policy; and/or the reality that German rearmament was going to go forward even though EDC had been voted down.[26] We must consider all three of these hypotheses carefully. Given Mendès France's oppositional nationalism toward Germany, the theory developed in this book would expect the third trigger to have been the determinant one, and as we shall see, indeed it was.

Dien Bien Phu

The Indochina war had not been going well for France. The Eisenhower administration, impatient to see positive results as it increasingly shouldered the financial burden for the war, pushed the French to launch a knockout blow. As a result, at the end of 1953 the French found themselves in a heavily fortified but isolated position in Northwest Vietnam, near a village named Dien Bien Phu.[27] That taking up this position was a mistake soon became apparent. It was not the French but the Viet-Minh who launched the knockout blow in March 1954.

Through early April the French fortress was still holding, but the situation looked very bleak. In a mission to Washington, Foreign Minister Georges Bidault and General Paul Ely secretly asked for a massive American air intervention, including the use of atomic bombs if necessary. President Eisenhower determined – though not without hesitation – that

[26] Others have pointed to the crushing political defeat in the Suez Crisis as a trigger. But clearly this could not have been so, for the decision occurred two years before Suez.

[27] The Americans had not precisely counseled taking this position, but this situation did result from the Americans' pressure on the French to be more bold. George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (September 1984), esp. pp. 344–345.

the French proposition was seriously flawed from a military point of view and potentially disastrous from a diplomatic point of view.[28] The Americans refused the French request, and Dien Bien Phu fell soon thereafter.

Avery Goldstein and others have argued that the refusal to assist the French at Dien Bien Phu led French leaders to doubt the credibility of the American nuclear security guarantee, even in the case of a Soviet attack on Western Europe.[29] The perceived decrease in the credibility of the guarantee, Goldstein writes, explains the decision later that same year to build the bomb. This deduction has some intellectual plausibility but is flatly contradicted by the historical record.

First, the French establishment's pleading with the Americans to save them from disaster at Dien Bien Phu was simply the end of their gradual process of submission to American strategic advice and support – not merely in Indochina, but globally. Bidault, for instance, did not view the American assistance as a substitute for French efforts; rather, he saw it as France's *only hope*. These men, with their subaltern NICs, did not have the gumption to jumpstart the French bomb program.

Second, the American refusal to internationalize the Indochina war was not a blow to "France," but only to the French supporters of the war. The man who actually would decide to build the bomb, Pierre Mendès France, actually strongly opposed the Indochina war and wanted it to end as swiftly as possible. In fact, Mendès France *caused the government to fall* by revealing its attempt to bring the Americans and atomic weapons into the conflict.[30] As he put it on June 9, 1954:

> In the absence of [peace] talks or negotiations, you had a plan . . . that involved the massive intervention of American air power, risking Chinese intervention and general war. For facing disasters that one can no longer hide, the temptation is great to integrate them into a world conflict without pausing to consider the danger of major catastrophes, a sort of unconscious raising of the stakes in this infernal poker game where the fate of millions of human lives hangs in the balance . . . I do not know myself of any other case in which a French government has taken such responsibilities in such secrecy, and in such scorn of Parliament.[31]

In sum, Dien Bien Phu hardly convinced Mendès France that henceforth the Americans should not be trusted. Indeed, he was relieved that on this

[28] Ibid. On the atomic dimension, see esp. pp. 357–358.
[29] Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century*, pp. 189–191.
[30] Jacques Nantet, *Pierre Mendès France* (Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1967), p. 135.
[31] Speech of Pierre Mendès France of June 9, 1954, *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, *Débats de l'Assemblée Nationale, 2e legislature, Vol. 25, session de 1954, tome IV, du 4 mai 1954 au 9 juin 1954* (Paris: Imprimerie des Journaux Officiels, 1956), p. 2851. Note that Mendès France specifically mentioned the Bidault request for the US *atomic* intervention elsewhere in his speech.

occasion France's ally had shown more sense than its own government. Much of the country was similarly relieved as well, and soon thereafter Mendès France was elevated to the post of prime minister.

New Look and the nuclearization of the Cold War

Some scholars have argued that the trigger for the French nuclear program was not a loss of confidence in extended deterrence, but just the reverse. In mid-1954, NATO adopted the New Look policy of automatic, instantaneous, and massive atomic reprisals against any Soviet incursion into the West. As part of this policy, the US asked the French and other European states to host American nuclear installations. The French perceived this as a major increase in the credibility of the US commitment – indeed, they feared that the policy was so robust that it might provoke the Soviets instead of deterring them.[32] But, so the argument goes, the nuclearization of the Cold War represented by New Look made the French reconsider their nuclear option not on military grounds, but in order to retain their great power status.[33]

In the past, NATO planning had essentially been based on the notion of conventional defense against a Soviet attack. Thus the French, who provided the bulk of the troops on the continent, had a major voice in NATO decisionmaking. The 1954 doctrinal shift toward an early and massive nuclear riposte led many French military officials such as General Valluy, the permanent French military representative to NATO, to worry about the complete loss of French influence in the alliance. Valluy expressed this worry in a letter to new Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France in August 1954.[34]

One way of rectifying the situation was clearly to embark on a nuclear weapons program. This option began to make headway in some political circles, and especially in Charles de Gaulle's entourage. The notion of a bomb program even made some sense to the army's General Staff. But the General Staff, a stronghold of support for the EDC, did not want to do anything that would imperil the prospect of a supranational integration that contained Germany. Therefore, even after EDC was voted down at the end of August, in September the General Staff produced an important paper that pronounced in favor of *an integrated,*

[32] Olivier Pottier, "Les armes nucléaires américaines en France," *Cahiers du Centre d'études d'histoire de la defense*, No. 8 (1998), pp. 35–60. See also Alphonse Juin, *Mémoires*, Vol. II (Paris: Fayard, 1960), pp. 254–255.

[33] For instance, Georges-Henri Soutou, "La politique nucléaire de Pierre Mendès France," *Relations Internationales*, No. 59 (Autumn 1989), esp. pp. 319–320.

[34] Ibid., pp. 319–320.

"European" bomb program. It justified the notion of a supranational bomb program on the basis of France's limited technological and financial capacity to mount an independent nuclear deterrent. But this supposedly "technical" argument was clearly a fig leaf for the top brass' strong "European" inclinations.[35] Indeed, at the time that Mendès France eventually did decide on a sovereign bomb program, as the then-chief of the CEA's Chemistry Division (later nuclear historian) Bertrand Goldschmidt comments, "the strongest force against the bomb was in the army itself."[36]

Thus the still dominant "Europeans," even in the face of New Look, demonstrated a continuing desire to subordinate French nuclear policy choices to their objective of European integration. Even, so, New Look clearly helped to shift the French nuclear debate into a higher gear. But the causal linkage here requires nuance. The effects of New Look were more pronounced because it coincided with the epic battle over the EDC Treaty and German rearmament. The pure prestige factor of being part of the "Big Three" may have warmed the "nationalists" up to the idea of going nuclear, but what really convinced them was that a French bomb seemed a means of keeping a newly rearming Germany out of that exalted grouping. It is well to remember that previous challenges to France's international status, such as Britain's 1952 entry into the nuclear club, did not produce any significant momentum toward a French bomb. As the influential Marshal Alphonse Juin (a strong voice against EDC) wrote in a personal 1956 letter to Senator Edgar Pisani, "Though we still figure at the side of the two Anglo-Saxon atomic powers in the military directorate of NATO, we risk to be supplanted there one day by West Germany if we limit ourselves merely to conventional weapons."[37]

As we will see below, Pierre Mendès France, with his NIC of oppositional nationalism toward Germany, shared these sentiments and indeed was even clearer about the central role of the German threat in his nuclear policy.

35 Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, pp. 251–252.

36 Tape-recorded interview with Bertrand Goldschmidt by Dominique Franche, Jan. 13, 1998, Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris. Part of the reason for this was concern about turf. The army's main bomb advocate, General Paul Bergeron, devoted most of his time and energy to attacking the atomic monopoly of the supposedly "Communist-infiltrated" CEA. See, for instance, Note by General Bergeron, "Eléments de décision pour un Programme Atomique Militaire," November 18, 1954, Fonds Blanc (145 K5), Service des Archives Privées, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Château de Vincennes.

37 Alphonse Juin, letter to Edgar Pisani, April 14, 1956, Fonds Juin (238 K5 Dossier 2), Service des Archives Privées, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Château de Vincennes.

Pierre Mendès France and the attempt to contain German rearmament

Mendès France became prime minister in June 1954, in the wake of Dien Bien Phu. He first moved to sign a peace agreement with the Viet-Minh, and then he turned to the matter of the EDC. After being signed in 1952, the EDC had been twisting in the wind waiting for ratification, as the "nationalists" assaulted it on a number of fronts and the French "Europeans" dared not bring it to a vote. Though his government was divided on the issue, Mendès France decided to liquidate the treaty. In an electric atmosphere, Parliament voted down the treaty on August 30, 1954 by a 319–264 vote, with the bulk of the anti-EDC votes coming from the Communists and the Gaullists. Those who had defeated EDC triumphantly sang *La Marseillaise*. The Communist Jean Nocher yelled out, "We now ask that the partisans of the EDC sing us *Deutschland über alles!*"[38]

Having driven the last nail into EDC's coffin, Mendès France now had to wrestle with the prospect of a German national rearmament. His preference ordering was clear: even in a world of nuclear powers, Mendès France *preferred a non-nuclear France facing a disarmed Germany to a nuclear France facing a conventionally armed Germany*. In short, it was not keeping up with the "Big Three," but keeping ahead of Germany that fundamentally drove Mendès France's stance. And he believed that given Germany's status as an occupied country and France's status as a great power, he could have his first preference. The means of doing so, primarily, was to generate a Cold War *détente*.[39] When his diplomatic gambit failed, however, Mendès France issued his political decision in favor of a French nuclear arsenal. This section describes those crucial days in some detail, with particular attention to the relevance of Mendès France's NIC of oppositional nationalism toward Germany for understanding both his nuclear decisionmaking process and his ultimate choice.

Mendès France's first effort to cool down the arms race, and thus obviate the need for German rearmament, involved an opening to the Soviets before the French Parliament's ratification debate over EDC. But a July 1954 meeting Mendès France arranged with the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov bore no fruit. As Mendès France told the historian Georgette Elgey, "It was not absurd to think that the signature by France of peace in Indochina and the rejection of the European army could

[38] Jean Nocher in *Journal Officiel de la République Française, Débats Parlementaires – Assemblée Nationale*, 2e séance du 30 Août 1954, p. 4471.

[39] This logic was initially laid out in the article by the historian Jacques Bariéty, "La décision de réarmer l'Allemagne."

have brought the Russians to a modification, at least a technical one [of their position]. They could have attempted to dissuade the West [from rearming Germany]; they did nothing."[40]

Mendès France knew that his was a dangerous game that risked complete diplomatic isolation. The Americans – not to mention many Frenchmen – viewed his actions with great suspicion. As he told Elgey:

> We justly feared bilateral US–German accords and that German rearmament be made against us. I was dominated by that fear . . . When the EDC was rejected, Foster Dulles had the immediate reflex to go to Bonn. He avoided Paris and refused to see me. The catastrophic situation of a German–American accord was spared us by Churchill and Adenauer, who preferred all the same that we be included.[41]

A Nine-Power Conference thus commenced in London in late September.

Mendès France's main proposal at London was to maintain the principle of national armies and to place strict limits on German national rearmament in terms of production and acquisition of heavy or advanced weapons. His diplomatic trick was that the restriction on German heavy weapons and atomic, biological, and chemical weapons would not legally be the result of any "discrimination" against it, but rather simply because it was a "strategically exposed area" with borders on the Soviet bloc.[42] German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer understandably objected to this concept, but Mendès France held fast. The issue was sent to a working group that eventually produced a compromise in a late-night session.[43]

Mendès France was in for a surprise. The French Foreign Ministry was one of the bastions of Europeanism. As they had done in 1952, French diplomats that night again dropped the discriminatory provisions against Germany in favor of a binding commitment by all the continental European states (France, Germany, Italy, and the Benelux) not to produce atomic, biological, or chemical weapons. The agreement made the only way of escaping the commitment a decision of the North Atlantic Council of NATO – in other words, if the French wanted the bomb, the Americans would have to give them permission.[44] In short, French "European" negotiators, eager to bind Germany, had once again bound France on the

[40] Transcript of Mendès France interview with Georgette Elgey, corrected in Mendès France's hand, October 27, 1965, fonds Elgey, Archives Nationales, Paris.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Verbatim record (in English) marked Secret, "Conférence des Neuf: Londres 1954," Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, carton 15.419, Brussels.

[43] Interviews with Jean-Marc Boegner, then *ministre plénipotentiaire* in the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, later head of the Service des Pactes, Paris, January 27 and 30, 1998.

[44] Ibid.

issue of nuclear proliferation, this time right under the nose of their prime minister.

The next morning Mendès France, alerted by the diplomat Jean-Marc Boegner, resolved to fight this concession tooth and nail.[45] His efforts were fiercely resisted by all the delegations. The Belgian Premier Paul-Henri Spaak led the resistance, saying that although "we must give guarantees to France against excessive rearmament by Germany . . . I presume it is necessary also to give to Germany guarantees against an excessive rearmament by France."[46] The real heart of the issue, according to Spaak, was the question of production of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons. The best way to satisfy France without discrimination against Germany was for all the continental powers to renounce the production of such weapons. He asked pointedly:

> Is it really in the intention of one of the Brussels powers to start building or producing atomic, biological or chemical weapons? And as we are always speaking of the presentation and the effect on public opinion, would it not be good if the continental partners of the Brussels Treaty should undertake not to produce on the continent any weapons of an atomic, biological, or chemical kind?[47]

Such an agreement, according to Spaak, would once and for all allow the West to "organize a common defence, and not armies which might be able to fight each other."[48]

[45] Ibid. See also Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, p. 321.

[46] "Conférence des Neuf" verbatim transcript.

[47] Ibid. Note Spaak's clear allusion to a non-proliferation norm that was already very significant in the minds of Western leaders.

[48] Ibid. The isolation of France at the London talks and in general at that moment in history is quite significant for theory testing. Two possible arguments against the perspective I am advancing are (1) what I am calling France's "oppositional" consensus against Germany was actually just an objective assessment of the reality of the German threat; and (2) the other European states, if they had not been so small, would also have built nuclear weapons to counter that threat, but since they could not, they encouraged France to do so. These arguments add up to a quasi-Realist critique of my theory. This critique notably overlooks the important division between French nationalists and French "Europeans" on how to deal with the German threat, but of course many Realists pride themselves on resolutely ignoring domestic politics. Thus, in order to consider this critique on the international plane, I embarked on a "shadow case" study of Belgium, which had every "objective" reason to share French attitudes toward Germany in the early 1950s. The main finding of this study is that *the strategic debate in France differed markedly from that of its neighbor, Belgium*. This demonstrates the value of this book's focus on identity, as opposed to the Realist alternative. The debate differed especially in two aspects. First, *Belgian leaders on all sides feared the Soviet threat more than the German threat*. This mental flexibility differs markedly from France's continuing rigid focus on Germany. As Spaak told the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in September 1954, "Today, your famous longtime Franco-German quarrel has not much importance – excuse me for saying so – in the great conflict in which France and Germany are on the same side of the barricade, in the great conflict that today opposes East and West, in the

Mendès France's response was firmly negative: France would not accept any restrictions and Germany must accept significant ones. The following day, as the debate dragged on, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who had been silent throughout the entire discussion, finally made a stunning statement, seemingly out of the blue: "I do not like to feel fractious or quarrel, therefore, I am prepared to declare, on behalf of the Federal Republic that we will voluntarily renounce the manufacture of A B C [atomic, biological, and chemical] weapons, not on the reasons of strategically exposed zones, but quite voluntarily!"[49] In the face of this, the conference adjourned.

When the conference reconvened for the 10th plenary session, also on October 2, the various powers attempted to shame Mendès France into agreeing to the same restriction as Adenauer had previously done. The Belgian Spaak led off by stating his willingness to follow Adenauer and renounce nuclear weapons unilaterally and without condition; then came the Italian Martino and the Dutch Beyen with similar pronouncements. All eyes turned to Mendès France. He disappointed them by repeating, this time more bluntly than ever before, his mantra: no renunciations by France and much more than a merely verbal renunciation of ABC weapons by Germany:

Rightly or wrongly the French parliament refused to ratify the EDC for various reasons; one of these – if the Chancellor will allow me to say it in his presence – is

great conflict that is no longer about defending a sacred territory but great ideas, a common civilization, moral rules and common policies and the same honorable conception of man" (Paul-Henri Spaak, "Pour l'Europe, la lutte continue!" Address September 18, 1954 to the Assembly of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, in folder 12.486 "France 1954," Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, Brussels). Second, *an important segment of Belgian opinion actually preferred a national German army to EDC*. Their thinking was that German direct participation in NATO would be more efficient for the purpose of protecting Western Europe against the Soviets. For instance, Spaak's main political rival, Paul van Zeeland (who was prime minister in 1950) sent off this telegram to his representative to the NATO discussions on German rearmament: "Would like to see the discussion end in compromise. However if you were confronted by absolute necessity to pronounce for a European army or NATO army my preferences go to NATO army" ("Projet de telegramme" from Van Zeeland to London, November 28, 1950, in folder 15.397 "CED 1948–Oct. 1951," archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Brussels). Apart from Raymond Aron, it is difficult to find any French elites taking such a position at any point during the EDC debate. Finally, it is worth repeating that *the Belgians were anything but favorable to the French nuclear adventure*, as is shown by Spaak's attempt to isolate Mendès France at London.

[49] "Conférence des Neuf" verbatim transcript. This transcript strongly supports the interpretation in Spaak's memoirs that Adenauer voluntarily renounced the bomb, and at the same time it casts strong doubt on the recollections of French officials, reported in Elgey, *La république des tourmentes*, p. 250, that they had defeated an Adenauer who insisted that Germany needed atomic weapons. It would appear that the French misunderstood Adenauer's demands.

the French fears about German rearmament. How can I imagine that tomorrow I would present myself in front of the French parliament with a new text which would give to the Federal Republic the possibility of manufacturing arms in categories 4, 5, and 6 [various types of heavy weapons] which were previously prohibited.[50]

The UK representative, Anthony Eden, then criticized Mendès France strongly for his stubbornness: "Frankly what I cannot see is how we can expect to get at this table the whole of what was obtained under the EDC system when the EDC system is no longer there." Mendès France replied that he merely wanted to hear Adenauer "extend the engagement which he has just said to the whole of Annex II" (the list of heavy weapons). Adenauer replied with yet another stunning declaration, "I have before this meeting spoken to Mr. Mendès France. We recognize that he is faced with psychological difficulties *vis-à-vis* the Federal Republic and I would also be prepared to say that we would not manufacture any teledirected missiles." He also offered to accept some restrictions on other types of weapons.[51]

By the time the 11th plenary meeting convened, later that same day, Chancellor Adenauer was trying to some degree to wriggle out of the restrictions he had just accepted. He wanted to make all of his and other countries' engagements – including on the atomic/biological/chemical renunciation – subject to revision by decision of NATO. In this he was supported by the other delegations. Mendès France, knowing he had been victorious in the previous meeting, opposed the possibility of changes by anything but unanimous assent. Mendès France again pointed to the "psychological impact" of the issue of German rearmament, noting that if Adenauer had his way, "Tomorrow I will see in the press articles saying that in two or three years we will see atomic bombs and heaven knows what being produced [by Germany], and you know to what point public opinion will use this." Now, for the first time in the entire conference, Adenauer lost his patience with Mendès France, saying:

I think you are not looking at this in the right psychological light. You said that you could not accept the prohibition of A B C for France . . . If NATO proposes to review these renunciations, that is really not reducing your demands. You have completely achieved your demands today. France alone retains the right to produce A, B, and C weapons.

There followed a pause as the various delegations attempted to come to agreement. Finally they did reach a compromise: all of Germany's engagements would be subject to revision by 2/3 majority vote except

[50] "Conférence des Neuf" verbatim transcript. [51] Ibid.

for its renunciation of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons, which would be for all time.[52]

At the London Conference, Mendès France was fighting for the *right* to build the bomb and for a restriction on Germany from doing the same. But at the same time, he was also warming up to the idea of *actually* building the bomb. In the light of the verbatim transcript of the conference, Mendès France's rationale appears clear. French military power must remain at least one order of magnitude superior to Germany's; thus, the fewer the restrictions on German conventional weapons, the greater the need for a French atomic force. As he later told Elgey:

> At London, there was a rather theoretical discussion [among the French delegation]: should France have an atomic bomb or not? Certain scientists, like Francis Perrin, were against it; many military men were for it; others, who were against it, said, "We should maintain this negotiating leverage." Personally, it was disagreeable to me to see France on the same footing as Germany. I fought for the right to the atomic bomb because it was intolerable that France suffer discriminatory treatment by the Americans and English and find itself reduced to the rank of Germany. My idea was to keep the atomic bomb as a negotiating tool.[53]

On October 26, 1954, three days after the London and Paris accords were signed, Mendès France signed a secret decree which created the *Commission Supérieure des Applications Militaires de l'Energie Atomique*. He also formally requested a precise budget projection for a French bomb without delay.[54] This represented a crucial green light for formal contacts between the military and the CEA, in order to study the questions of nuclear bombs and submarines. In fact the full *Commission* never met, because the military top brass was still opposed to giving the CEA a lead role in the production of the atomic bomb. But a sub-committee headed by the more amenable General Jean Crépin, dubbed the *Comité des Explosifs Nucléaires*, met for the first time on November 4 and began working on the technical question of just what it would take to build

[52] Ibid. In fact, Germany's renunciation was greatly watered down compared to what it had agreed to in the EDC Treaty, for there was to be no supranational inspection system, and the door was implicitly left open to its getting nuclear weapons from other states or even to producing nuclear weapons outside of its own soil. It does not appear, however, that any of these eventualities were seriously considered by anyone at the time. But, later on in the 1950s, they were. See Georges-Henri Soutou, *L'Alliance incertaine: les rapports politico-stratégiques franco-allemands, 1954–1996* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

[53] Transcript of Mendès France interview with Georgette Elgey, corrected in Mendès France's hand, August 20, 1969, fonds Elgey, Archives Nationales, Paris. This quote also appears in Elgey, *La république des tourmentes 1954–1959*, pp. 256–257.

[54] Aline Coutrot, "La politique atomique sous le gouvernement de Mendès France," in François Bédarida et Jean-Pierre Rioux, eds., *Pierre Mendès France et le mendésisme: L'expérience gouvernementale (1954–1955) et sa postérité* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p. 312.

a plutonium bomb.[55] All of this work was in deep secrecy; as Mendès France and several of his ministers discussed in an early November meeting, if public opinion learned of these preparations the government would likely fall.[56]

But as he noted in his interview with Elgey, even though Mendès France was now actively preparing the bomb option, he had not yet given up his hopes of realizing his first preference: a Four-Power Conference that would cool down the arms race, reducing the need for a major German rearmament and thus for a French bomb. In pursuit of this goal, Mendès France planned a major surprise for an upcoming speech he would be making at the United Nations in New York. He wanted to propose not only a Four-Power Conference, but also an international ban on atomic tests.[57] If Mendès France's hoped-for test ban were to materialize, this would of course block France from acquiring nuclear weapons. But Mendès France was willing to trade France's right to go nuclear to keep the global nuclear arms race in check and therefore, not coincidentally, to render German rearmament unnecessary. Mendès France believed that the Soviets had been responsible for the failure of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's earlier call for a test ban.[58] He believed that he could do better than Nehru and better than his own previous fruitless approaches to the USSR, now that the threat of German rearmament was hanging in the background. German rearmament had been accepted in principle but still awaited ratification by the French Parliament. This was the moment at which Mendès France considered his bargaining leverage with the Soviets to be at its peak.[59]

Mendès France asked his friend and political ally Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber and his CEA scientific chief Francis Perrin to develop the test ban proposal for him. They did so with enthusiasm.[60] On November 16, the text was ready.[61] But after arriving in the US, Mendès France decided to drop the proposal from his address. He had developed his strategy on

[55] Jean Crépin, "Histoire du Comité des Explosifs Nucléaires," in *L'Aventure de la bombe*, p. 80.

[56] The meeting was originally called to discuss the Algerian insurrection. Interviews with Henri Caillavet, French politician (Mendès France's secretary of the navy), January 28 and 30, 1998 and May 15, 1999, as well as written communication on May 11, 1999.

[57] Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, *Passions* (Paris: Fixot, 1991), esp. pp. 297–306.

[58] Pierre Mendès France, *Choisir: conversations avec Jean Bothorel* (Paris: Stock, 1974), p. 78.

[59] Bariéty cites a note from Mendès France to Parodi on August 8 outlining this very strategy. See Bariéty, "La décision de réarmer l'Allemagne," pp. 374–375.

[60] Servan-Schreiber, *Passions*, p. 299.

[61] Letter marked "Very Urgent" from Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber "for the President," November 16, 1954, Carton "Voyage du Président en Amérique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.

the theory that the Soviets were the main stumbling block to a test ban treaty; but he learned in Washington that the Americans were no more interested in a test ban than were the Soviets. Especially because Dulles still suspected him of disloyalty to the Western alliance, Mendès France felt he could not push his luck.[62] Servan-Schreiber felt betrayed:

> For the first time, I find myself in *moral* disaccord with him . . . I have begun to sense the approach of the end of our beautiful and productive adventure, the end of this epic of a France led by a just man [*un juste*], dragging the rest of the world by his vision to institute a human order founded not on the balance of terror, but on education and creative intelligence . . . For me, a life ends.[63]

Mendès France returned from his American tour in late November. It was probably then that a second informal meeting in his Quai d'Orsay office was held on the subject of the bomb.[64] Present were Minister of the Interior François Mitterrand, Minister of Defense Emmanuel Temple, and Mendès France's chief of staff Jacques Pelabon, plus the secretaries of the Army, Air Force, and the Navy, Jacques Chevallier, Diomède Catroux, and Henri Caillavet, respectively. In this quite long meeting, the men discussed in depth the question of a French atomic bomb from all sides – "political, cultural, ethical, military."[65] But, interestingly, the main topic of discussion was the opposition to the bomb among French socialists and intellectuals such as the biologist Jean Rostand, who argued that use of the bomb would affect the human gene pool and thereby extinguish the human race. Those at the meeting felt that in the face of such widespread public resistance, it would be impossible to declare openly for the bomb. Mendès France thus requested that Caillavet, as secretary of the Navy, look into the possibility of doing bomb research under the cover of ongoing research on nuclear propulsion for a submarine.[66] But also they were not entirely certain that anti-nuclear activists such as Rostand were wrong, and Temple in particular voiced reservations that building the bomb might lead to an unforeseen catastrophe. This was a great responsibility to assume, he repeated several times. Mendès France finally became impatient with Temple's indecision. That is why we are here, he told Temple, to choose and to take responsibility. Caillavet came away from the meeting with the definite impression that Mendès France had decided for a secret program to build the bomb. And in fact, Mendès France would not disappoint him.

[62] Pierre Mendès France, *Choisir*, p. 78.
[63] Servan-Schreiber, *Passions*, pp. 305–306.
[64] Interviews with Caillavet. Note that Caillavet is not certain if this meeting occurred before or after Mendès France's New York trip.
[65] Interviews with Caillavet.
[66] On Mendès France's orders, Caillavet prepared a budget proposition for Navy research, in which credits for the bomb were hidden. Interviews with Caillavet.

On December 26, 1954, an unusually large group of approximately forty high officials were summoned to Mendès France's office for a secret meeting.[67] They were presented with a draft decision whose first sentence read simply, "The making of atomic bombs is decided."[68] A separate paper prepared for the meeting, entitled "Strategic Conceptions," argued that while a French atomic bomb was "not necessary" for purely military purposes, since the "USA builds the bomb at an industrial rhythm," possession by France *did* "present a double interest: political [and] technical."[69] The initial cost estimate was 80 billion francs for the bomb and 45 billion for two submarines, spread out over five or six years.[70]

In the meeting, for which unfortunately no transcripts have surfaced, the prime minister asked anyone who wished to do so to make the case for or against a French atomic bomb. He listened patiently as various colleagues one by one took the floor to voice their opposition or support. The meeting was stiffly formal, and there was very little discussion or give-and-take. The meeting ended with Mendès France apparently taking a final decision. Bertrand Goldschmidt recounts that Mendès France argued:

> It was a good idea to start fabricating prototypes of nuclear submarines and bombs, because it was capital for France's international influence, because even in disarmament discussions we would have more of a say if we had the bomb, and thirdly, and he insisted on this point, this would be what would differentiate us from the Germans, since the recent signature of the Paris Accords.[71]

Mendès France then turned to Finance Minister Edgar Faure, who had been reading his newspaper for the entire meeting (!), and said "And, *Monsieur le Ministre des Finances*, you will have to manage somehow!"[72]

[67] The information in this paragraph, in large measure, comes from the tape of Dominique Franche's interview with Bertrand Goldschmidt, held at the Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris, and my own interviews with Goldschmidt. Caillavet, who was also present at the meeting, confirmed the veracity of Goldschmidt's remarks. Others present included the following – from the military: Bergeron, Vernoux, Lardin, Crépin, Combeaux, Guntzberger, Briard, Argoux. From Mendès France's Cabinet: Maignon, Jobert, Neurisse, Juillet, Binoche, Boris, Pelabon. Ministers or secretaries of state: Faure, Moch, Longchambon, Temple (plus Widmer from Temple's Cabinet), Caillavet, Catroux, Chevallier. From the CEA: Perrin, Goldschmidt, Guillaumat. "Réunion 26.12" file, Carton "Energie Atomique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.)

[68] Note "Projet de Décision," Dec. 26, 1954, Carton "Energie Atomique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.

[69] The note was vague on these points, especially on the precise political utility of the bomb. The only elaboration was as follows: "Political: toward our allies, toward our eventual enemies, toward Germany, toward the Union Française. Technical: military utilization implies a sufficient development of the civil infrastructure of the atomic industry." Note "Conceptions Stratégiques," December 26, 1954, in folder "Réunion Dimanche 26.12," Carton "Energie Atomique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Hymans interview with Goldschmidt. Substantially confirmed in interview with Caillavet.

[72] Hymans interview with Goldschmidt.

After the meeting, opponents of the bomb attempted to get Mendès France to retreat from his decision. Jules Moch sent the prime minister a letter on December 28 in which he reiterated his opposition to the conclusions to which Mendès France had come at the end of the meeting.[73] Perrin also did so, stressing the practical tradeoffs between industrial and military applications of atomic energy and the "attitude of the CEA personnel" in favor of keeping the French atomic effort "peaceful." Perrin argued finally that the initial steps toward the bomb were in any case indistinguishable from the next steps needed for the civil program, and thus it made no sense to hurry into a decision for the bomb.[74]

Mendès France would later claim in public that he never did make the ultimate decision to go nuclear, using Moch and Perrin's arguments as his own.[75] Privately, however, he made the more subtle argument that although he did make the decision, he subsequently never authorized the money to implement it.[76] This is true, but only because at the January 23 Council of Ministers meeting, Minister of Finance Edgar Faure objected to Mendès France's pressure to devote large resources to the nuclear program (three times the 1952 nuclear Five-Year Plan), on the basis of a flimsy and vague budget request concocted in the wee hours of the morning. As Faure later recalled, "The subject was brought up between 1 and 2 AM, while the meeting had begun at 6 PM. I opposed not the principle, but that a decision was to be taken in such hurried conditions."[77] They therefore agreed to take up the matter at their next meeting; but there was no next time, for the Mendès France government fell two weeks later. Thus Mendès France was *unable* to follow up his political decision with enough funding to ensure its implementation, but the initial political decision stood. Furthermore, the crucial indication that Mendès France had not changed his mind was that while he was trying to pass the bomb program through the normal channels, simultaneously he had Caillavet busily working on finding a way to sneak funding for the bomb program into the Navy's research budget.[78] Mendès France was not hesitating; he knew what he wanted and was willing to do just about anything to get

[73] Jules Moch, letter to Pierre Mendès France, December 28, 1954, Carton "Energie Atomique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.

[74] Francis Perrin, letter to Pierre Mendès France, apparently December 29, 1954, Carton "Energie Atomique," Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris.

[75] Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, pp. 340–1.

[76] This was how he explained himself to Bertrand Goldschmidt (Hymans interview with Goldschmidt). The ex-premier's motive for disowning parentage is clear enough: after 1958 he became a vociferous opponent of Charles de Gaulle and of de Gaulle's plans for the *force de frappe*.

[77] Edgar Faure, "Témoignage," in *L'Aventure de la bombe*, p. 87.

[78] Interviews with Caillavet. Caillavet emphasizes that since the government fell, the Navy budget never was used for these purposes.

it. In the end, in spite of Mendès France's failure to secure funding for the decision, it was his political decision for the bomb that served as the crucial catalyst for the march to the French bomb.

Mendès France's oppositional nationalism and the bomb decision

Before showing the effects of Mendès France's decision, it is necessary to conclude this longest and most crucial section of the chapter with a review of the performance of this book's theoretical perspective as an explanation for the French bomb decision.

In spite of the major upheavals on the world stage, the democratic nature of the regime, the rickety governmental coalition, and the play of powerful bureaucratic interests, the story of the decision for the French bomb is above all the story of a single oppositional nationalist prime minister's quest to do what he felt to be in the best interests of France.

Nuclear weapons, for Mendès France, were not like other weapons. As he had vociferously attacked the previous government for endangering the world over Dien Bien Phu, so he agonized over the choice to endanger the world by bringing into being another nuclear weapons state. He and his close associates together worried about contributing to the end of life on earth. And yet, in the end, in full cognizance of the moral and political responsibility he was placing on his shoulders, he took the fateful decision to go nuclear. In making that choice, he explicitly pointed to his hope that a French bomb would fundamentally reverse the dual trends of German resurgence and French decline. As noted previously, in the December 26 meeting, "Mendès France portrayed the bomb as capital for France's international influence," and "this would be what would differentiate us from the Germans."

It was Mendès France's oppositional nationalism *vis-à-vis* Germany that gave him the motivation and the certitude necessary to cross what was quite clearly an enormous psychological hurdle. As the theory developed in this book would expect, the fundamental driving factor in Mendès France's thinking on the bomb was Germany's resurgence on the international scene. The word that we find again and again in Mendès France's discourse on the issue of German rearmament, whether in his interviews with Elgey or in his statements at the London conference, is "fear": "We justly feared bilateral US–German accords"; "I was dominated by that fear"; "The French fears about German rearmament." This fear of Germany was nothing unique for a French leader. But Mendès France also had a strong nationalist pride. He liquidated EDC, refused to be "reduced to the rank of Germany," and truly believed even that he could bring the great powers together to head off German rearmament.

His desire for a test ban in particular shows that he could even accept some degree of lesser status *within* the great power club in order to keep Germany *out* of it and at the same time militarily inoffensive.[79]

Indeed, as Mendès France's reiteration of the word "fear" implies, this was an emotional decision for him.[80] Mendès France's desperation over the resurgence of Germany produced the same hasty and undemocratic decisionmaking process that he had so harshly criticized in the previous government's request for American intervention at Dien Bien Phu. While he did inform certain members of his government of his decision, he did not inform Parliament – much less put his decision to a vote. He tried to force through a vague but massive budgetary request in the middle of the night. In case that did not work, he told his Navy Secretary Henri Caillavet to prepare a way to sneak funding for the bomb into the naval research program. All of this effort to circumvent normal processes came in the service of what can only be described as a half-baked project. The decision to build nuclear weapons in 1954 came years before France was technically ready to implement it. Mendès France could only rely on some very preliminary analyses of the budgetary and technical requirements for building the bomb, and he had essentially no idea of France's requirements in terms of delivery systems. The nuclear submarine program he launched at the same time as the bomb program may have been hazily conceived as a potential delivery system, but if so this would have piled technical unknown upon technical unknown and, in any case, for it to serve this purpose there would also have to have been a major effort to develop submarine-launched missile technology, which there was not. In the end, France began developing a strategic bomber, the Mirage 4B, in 1957 but then gave it up for technical and cost reasons. As a consequence, France was "the first nation to go into atomic weapons without a clear plan for a strategic nuclear delivery system against her major potential enemy."[81] All of these examples demonstrate the great and indeed untoward haste with which Mendès France launched France into the nuclear weapons game.

[79] As stated in Chapter 2, the idea of the test ban – a non-discriminatory accord – is compatible with nationalist sentiments, whereas the idea of an accord that binds only non-nuclear weapons states is not. In parallel to this, as documented in Chapter 7, Indian nationalists long supported a CTBT while opposing the NPT.

[80] Bertrand Goldschmidt seconds this interpretation: "From 1954 on, it was the [establishing the] difference with Germany that counted . . . You see, we had just been occupied by Germany. We had to have, it was a kind of revenge, if you want, from this humiliating occupation. We had to have . . . differentiation." Transcript of Bertrand Goldschmidt interview for WGBH Boston television series "The Nuclear Age," Liddell Hart archives, King's College, London.

[81] Leonard Beaton and John Maddox, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 89.

Oppositional nationalism, nuclear symbolism, fear, pride, and haste, all coming together to produce a determination to build the bomb: the theory finds its clear echo in the case of Pierre Mendès France. But do decisions to build nuclear weapons matter? Was his decision truly responsible for the French acquisition of the bomb?

After 1954: the road to the bomb

Mendès France alone did not bring the French bomb into being, and indeed, the decision by Mendès France to build the bomb was not the end of the struggle over France's nuclear fate. But as this section will show, Mendès France's decision had a rapid, catalytic effect. Mendès France's decision was crucial for creating substantial, and as it turned out, unstoppable momentum toward a French nuclear arsenal on at least three levels: intra-bureaucratic (within the CEA), inter-bureaucratic (notably between the CEA and the military), and political.

First, Mendès France's decision had important ramifications inside the CEA itself. This was in no small part because Mendès France had enormous prestige with the CEA's leftist scientists. Notably, since it was Mendès France who had made the choice, the previously anti-bomb CEA scientific chief, Francis Perrin, came to accept the project.[82] The conversion of Perrin gave the CEA's pro-bomb administrative chief, Pierre Guillaumat, free rein to pursue his longstanding desire for a bomb.[83] As Yves Rocard, a rare pro-bomb scientist, writes in his memoirs:

> At this juncture, a miracle happened: the policy brusquely changed. In 1954, Mendès France gave what everyone took for his orders, and Guillaumat found himself then strong enough to free himself of the hindrances that he had endured until then. He called on me: "I'm going to keep your land [that the CEA had offered Rocard for some unrelated experiments]. That's where we're going to make the bomb!"[84]

Indeed, merely three days after Mendès France's bomb decision, Guillaumat set up the *Bureau d'Etudes Générales*, which managed the bomb project, as "an increasingly autonomous unit within the CEA, with its own rules and management."[85] The existence of the Bureau was still hidden from most of the CEA, with much of its work taking place outside the main CEA campus in front corporations.[86] But it could not be

[82] Hymans interview with Goldschmidt.
[83] Georges-Henri Soutou and Alain Beltran, eds., *Pierre Guillaumat: la passion des grands projets industriels* (Paris: Editions Rive Droite, 1995).
[84] Rocard, *Mémoires sans concessions* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), pp. 175–176.
[85] Albert Buchalet, "Les premières étapes (1955–1960)," in *L'Aventure de la bombe*.
[86] Rocard, *Mémoires sans concessions* covers this in detail.

hidden from Perrin, so his conversion was crucial to the creation of real bureaucratic and technical momentum toward the bomb. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Mendès France's decision jumpstarted the French bomb program.

Second, on the inter-bureaucratic level, Mendès France's decision also had immediate and lasting effects. I previously noted the importance of Mendès France's initial October nuclear decision, which led to the initial contacts between the CEA and military officials. After Mendès France's definitive December decision, those contacts deepened quickly. Indeed, Guillaumat placed the *Bureau d'Etudes Générales* under the direction of a general, Albert Buchalet.[87] Without the political cover provided by Mendès France's decision, Guillaumat and Buchalet could not have set up the *Bureau*. Buchalet came to play an important bridging role between the military and CEA. As a result, an inter-ministerial protocol was signed in March 1955 that – finally – gave the CEA the clear leading role in the study and development program for the bomb.[88] This cleared the way for fast progress toward the objective of building the bomb.

Finally, on the political level, Mendès France's secret decision that France should obtain nuclear weapons was seminal. Buchalet recounts, "From then on, with each new government, the Prime Minister designate was informed of the verbal accord given by his predecessor, for him to confirm verbally."[89] Edgar Faure – who took over the top job after Mendès France's fall – writes that his "anxieties" about the bomb were vastly calmed by the idea that he was not responsible for making the fateful choice.[90] This peace of mind clinched Faure's approval of a huge, 85.5 billion franc budget request for nuclear bomb research (increased to 100 billion later that year).[91] Faure also gave *carte blanche* (again his words) to two Gaullist ministers, Pierre Billotte at Defense and Gaston Palewski, the state secretary for atomic energy, to arrange the bureaucratic modalities of the bomb program.[92] It is true, however, that some of Faure's successors, notably the solidly "European" Guy Mollet, felt angered rather than relieved to learn of Mendès France's decision and resolved to fight it tooth and nail.

Last gasp of the "Europeans": the near-renunciation of 1956

Despite the defeat of EDC and the secret development of a national atomic bomb program, some of France's "Europeans" were not yet

[87] Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, p. 348.
[88] Buchalet, "Les premières étapes (1955–60)," p. 45.
[89] Ibid., p. 45. See also Guillaumat's comments in the same volume, p. 70.
[90] Faure argues however that the real choice for the French bomb was put off until de Gaulle. Faure, "Témoignage," pp. 87–88.
[91] Ibid. [92] Ibid.

willing to quit. Still holding on to their oppositional subaltern NIC *vis-à-vis* Germany, they still felt as they had in 1954: that European integration was the only conceivable method for France to keep Germany under control, and that a French bomb would derail the integration process. In January 1955, the idea of a European atomic energy community as a means of preventing proliferation was first broached to the paradigmatic "European," Jean Monnet, by Max Isenbergh of the US Atomic Energy Commission. Monnet was immediately taken by the idea and was soon holding day-long sessions with Isenbergh. Monnet's proposal for a European Atomic Energy Community or EURATOM became one of the key proposals of the Conference of Messina's relaunch of the European integration process in May of that year.[93]

In January 1956, Guy Mollet of the Socialist Party became prime minister of France. Mollet was an outspoken proponent of European integration, an ally of Monnet's, and a fierce opponent of a French atomic bomb. Before his investiture, he signed the Monnet Declaration which declared not only that EURATOM must be dedicated exclusively to civil applications, but also that it must control all fissile materials – so that, in other words, national bomb programs would be impossible.[94] In his investiture speech before the French Parliament, Mollet reiterated this commitment.[95] This strongly felt and also politically popular anti-bomb stance could potentially have represented a serious, or even mortal blow to the nascent French bomb effort. Mollet the "European" meant it to be just that.

Needless to say, the "nationalists" who were the bomb's proponents reacted vigorously against the threat. This redux of the anti-EDC coalition included such political heavyweights as Marshal Juin; the CEA's Pierre Guillaumat; Charles de Gaulle and his parliamentary allies led by Michel Debré; and also Mendès France himself, who was serving as a minister without portfolio in Mollet's government.[96] As Debré wrote to Mendès France, under EURATOM if France ever wished "to liberate itself from the bonds that will have been imposed on it, however provisional or light they are, it will only be able to do so to the extent that, at the same time, Germany will be liberated."[97] Mendès France replied that he was in agreement: "This revenge [by the French "Europeans"]

[93] François Duchêne, *Jean Monnet: The First Statesman of Interdependence* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1994), p. 264.

[94] Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, p. 400. [95] Ibid., p. 398.

[96] Michel Debré, *Trois républiques pour une France: Mémoires, 1946–1958 "Agir"* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1988), p. 236.

[97] Exchange of letters between Michel Debré and Pierre Mendès France, in Pierre Mendès France, *Oeuvres complètes IV: Pour une république moderne 1955–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 202–203.

has gone very far, since it has even consisted in the *de facto* renunciation of the controls on German rearmament."[98]

Faced with Mollet's challenge, the French "nationalists" threatened to rip the country apart in a replay of EDC.[99] Mollet and his allies could not afford another EDC-style political train wreck, which would definitively bury any hopes for European integration. They therefore had to swallow the bitter pill of allowing the nuclear weapons program to continue. Indeed, Mollet ended up having to agree to *accelerate* the bomb program. As Georges Guille, state secretary for atomic affairs (who was himself anti-bomb), explained to the prime minister, "If, parallel to the ratification of the Common Market and EURATOM treaties, you do not devote funds for an uranium isotope separation plant, the EURATOM treaty will not pass."[100] Mollet would later write that although his government had pushed for a different nuclear policy outcome, "parliamentary opinion did not follow it."[101]

It was a disheartened and beaten Mollet who appeared before the French Assembly on July 11, 1956 to defend the much watered-down EURATOM plan. For the first time, a French prime minister admitted the existence of a bomb program from the tribune of the Assemblée Nationale and said that it would continue. He implied that plans for the uranium isotope separation (enrichment) plant were also being elaborated. The only bone he could throw to his anti-bomb allies was that France would not conduct a test explosion before 1961, which he admitted was not much, since the CEA did not believe it could do it any sooner.[102] Having been offered these concessions, the Parliament passed the EURATOM motion.[103]

It was a great day for the bomb advocates. As General Charles Ailleret – the man who would eventually push the button on the first French nuclear test – writes in his autobiography:

[98] Ibid.

[99] Debré, *Trois républiques*, p. 233.

[100] Pierre Guillaumat, cited in Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, p. 402. The plant was another part of the French drive for an independent nuclear bomb capacity. See Goldschmidt, "La genèse."

[101] Guy Mollet, Report on EURATOM, Sept. 1956, cited in Pierre Guillen, "La France et la négociation du traité d'Euratom," in Michel Dumoulin, Pierre Guillen, and Maurice Vaïsse, eds., *L'Energie nucléaire en Europe: Des origins à Euratom* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 121.

[102] Guy Mollet speech before the Assemblée Nationale, July 11, 1956, cited in Mongin, *La bombe atomique française*, p. 432.

[103] This was not the final vote on the EURATOM treaty, which would not come until a year later; but it did consolidate the position of the pro-bomb side.

One could deduce from this that the battle for the French nuclear bomb had been won. Effectively, it was. Not only did the text passed by the *Assemblée* hardly constrain the action of France, but the Parliament had become conscious of the need and of the possibility to fabricate nuclear weapons in France. It would subsequently create no difficulties, in discussions over *loi-programmes* or annual budgets, to the idea that a French national defense with a real degree of independence required a national nuclear armament.[104]

Even after July 1956 there were important decisions on the bomb, including a new infusion of funds after the Suez crisis, the 1958 green light to prepare for the test in the Sahara, and the ultimate 1960 decision to test.[105] But these decisions were essentially mere ratifications of a bomb program whose existence and ultimate objective had already been accepted by all sides of the political mainstream.

In time, the anti-German rationale for the French bomb disappeared. The French nuclear arsenal would find new justifications under de Gaulle's regime. The transition, however, was slower than it outwardly appeared. Bertrand Goldschmidt recounts that whenever de Gaulle, as president of the Fifth Republic, would come to the CEA, he would ask "each time the same question: he wanted to know when, how, how fast and in how much time the Germans could in turn build themselves the bomb, if, repudiating their international engagements, they decided to make it. Despite a uniting Europe and the newly created links [between France and Germany], the General had never forgotten."[106]

[104] Charles Ailleret, *L'Aventure atomique française* (Paris: Grasset, 1968).

[105] Though no longer attempting to quash the bomb effort, the French "Europeans" did make one more foray into the question, with an attempt to "Europeanize" it along the lines suggested by the General Staff's recommendations of September 1954. Guy Mollet took the initiative in November 1956 and the negotiations with the Germans and Italians continued until de Gaulle stopped them upon his return to power in 1958. See Colette Barbier, "Les négociations franco-germano-italiennes en vue de l'établissement d'une coopération militaire nucléaire au cours des années 1956–1958," *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*, Vol. 104, Nos. 1–2 (1990), esp. pp. 86–87. This episode, though interesting, was of little historical consequence. Pierre Guillaumat wrote that since the CEA was not involved in the negotiations, legally "an engagement of the Ministry of National Defense represented a bad check. The German interlocutor became fully conscious of this fact in 1958; I do not know if he was surprised." (Pierre Guillaumat, letter to Maurice Vaïsse, Feb. 13, 1991, held at Institut Pierre Mendès France, Paris).

[106] Bertrand Goldschmidt, *Pionniers de l'atome* (Paris: Stock, 1987), p. 267.