



BOOK REVIEWS

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COMMISSIONING THE PAST:

*Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation
Commission*

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During the mid-1970s until 1989, South Africa embarked upon a nuclear weapons programme in response to her own national security concerns.¹ In doing this, the country's political leaders took great pains to position themselves as the last bastion, in Africa, of the Western free world against perceived global communist expansion.² This was necessary for two main reasons: first, for purposes of locking herself within the broader strategic underpinnings of the international security system; and second, to enable the country to tap into the available technical assistance in the West.

On 24 March 1993, President F.W. de Klerk informed a joint special session of Parliament that the country had developed a small nuclear arsenal and was now going to dismantle and destroy the same. In the bland public statement, he also asserted that the programme had evolved *without any outside assistance*.³ However, Norm Dixon, citing comments made by Gary Milhollin—a Washington-based nuclear weapons expert—and Cape Town academic Renfrew Christie—who was jailed in 1980 for passing nuclear related information to the African National Congress (ANC)—argues to the contrary when he wrote that:

It is laughable for de Klerk to state South Africa developed its nuclear weapons capability without outside help. It is a well known fact that SAFARI-1 Reactor was provided by the US in 1965 and France assisted the Koeberg nuclear plant, with Israel collaborating on military and other nuclear issues.⁴

The address to Parliament by the state president elicited immediate comments and inquiry from many different quarters, including the 'official opposition', the ANC. The latter had in fact previously launched a series of attacks on elements of the nuclear programme, in its evolution.⁵

Of the many questions that were raised, the following were some of the more prominent and continue to be posed. For instance, it has been asked precisely when and why the country took the decision to acquire offensive nuclear weapons.⁶ Put differently, what was the purpose and strategic objective(s) of apartheid South Africa's nuclear strategy? Second, given her technical inability to achieve this ambition, which foreign countries came to her assistance? Third, during the evolution of the programme, the Vastrap test site closed in 1979 and was reopened in 1986. Why? Fourth, why was the programme so abruptly abandoned? Given the timing that coincided with the release of Nelson Mandela from Polsmoor prison in February 1990, soon ushering in black majority rule by April 1994, the suspicion has always been that the decision was as a result of fear by the West of ANC links with such countries as Libya, Cuba, Iraq and Iran, and that these could be extended to the nuclear field once the party came into office. According to this line of argument, the decision to abandon the programme was therefore designed to present the new African majority government with a *fait accompli* by simply implementing the provisions of the non-proliferation treaty.⁷ Fifth, questions have been raised on what happened to the excess highly enriched uranium (HEU) that was produced. During the life of the programme, 550 kg of HEU had been produced. This was well beyond the needs of the local project, comprising seven devices that could only absorb an estimated 150 kg. However, how the excess was disposed of has never been revealed.⁸ Finally, questions still rage on what adverse effects, if any, have been experienced

then and now on both the environment and the people who worked on the nuclear programme.⁹ To this day many of the above questions have still not been adequately dealt with.¹⁰

Against this background, Dr Hannes Steyn, Dr Richardt van der Walt and Lieutenant General (Retired) Jan van Loggerenberg's book *Armament and Disarmament South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Experience* has obviously drawn much attention and interest.

This review briefly dissects the book and its sources, assesses what the book misses out given the range of questions characterising the debate on South Africa's nuclear experience and examines what contributions the book has made before drawing some conclusions.

What was the motive of three senior former practitioners on the secret nuclear programme to put pen to paper? Writing the book was undertaken against the knowledge that the current South African Government is operating under a discussion moratorium, that was part of the 'safeguards' negotiated by the outgoing President De Klerk regime with the international community before 1994. In response to this implied question, the authors argue that they are unhappy with the effects of the moratorium. In their view, this has created room for "unnecessary speculation and the casting of unnecessary aspersions and suspicions".¹¹ Second, the authors assert that—perhaps as commanders in their various fields given their specialties and complementary functions during the programme—they felt constrained to "acknowledge the contribution of the 'back-room-boys' whose participation has not been recognised then and since".¹² We shall return later to comment on the implications of this course of action.

The short 126-page book is arranged in 11 chapters and a preface, preceded by a fairly lengthy foreword in which the writer finds common cause with the authors. Its focus is an attempt at reflecting on the internal workings of the nuclear project, without being too concerned with the wider political questions that informed the country's nuclear strategy. This is significant as amongst the authors, there is no political representation from the parties that were responsible for the strategic

decisions culminating in the launch, evolution and suspension of the programme. The net effect of this focus on the technical aspects is to reduce the work to a technical and perhaps tactical description of events, lacking the political context and the higher vision associated with the project and events of the period.

The book is based on three sources, two of which are unavailable for interrogation by those interested in following up and checking on the veracity of the claims made. The first source is of course the authors' combined recollections as practitioners. However, according to their own testimony, this has been done without relying on official documents.¹³ Second, the writers carried out interviews with surviving colleagues. A decision appears to have been taken not to name those interviewed.¹⁴ This anonymity, however, means that one is not able to check out independently some of the facts attributed to those interviewed. Finally, the text is written in a style that is characterised by self-censorship jargon.¹⁵ While this clearly must have been the in-thing in officers' messes and places where the practitioners gathered at different times, it is unhelpful in a publication. For instance, in the discussion, the writers fail to account for the inferred 'over-supply of aircraft and helicopters' received by the South African Air Force in the 1970s, whose quantity was well beyond the capacity of the available manpower.¹⁶ By now it should be obvious to the writers that assets and manpower levels relating to forces of a particular state are not necessarily a secret in strategic studies. What is secret, however, is the intentions—in other words, what one decides to do with the offensive assets is the secret. As a result, lacking empirical or verifiable inputs, the book fails to make the grade as an important academic contribution to the topic and the many questions still to be addressed.

Despite this major handicap, however, the book—written in a somewhat anecdotal fashion—has some useful dimensions. The first is to reassess its credibility in the absence of empirical evidence or other verifiable persons interviewed or referred to. This is because despite its obvious handicaps, it does attempt to throw some light on a gray area of South

Africa's military history. Because the work is deliberately aimed at addressing the audience made up of participants in the nuclear programme, what comes out is more than likely to be an accurate description, if not interpretation, of the events. Consequently, the book is considered to pass the judgement test on its credibility threshold. If we accept this rationale, then the second important reason is to read between the lines, as it were, hoping to learn something from the presentation after all. By taking this approach interesting aspects come to the fore, making the book a must-read for those still interested in finding answers to the questions posed.

South Africa's offensive nuclear programme spanned three phases: the early period from the 1947 to early 1970s, the second era from about the end of 1973 until President F.W. de Klerk came into office in September 1989. The third and final phase, from late 1989 to March 1993, concerned the abandonment of the nuclear strategy and the dismantling of the devices. During the entire 1947–93 period, the decision-making pyramid on the nuclear question in Pretoria rested on four important groups: politicians, scientists, the military and technocrats.¹⁷ Furthermore, the factions diluted or mixed in collaborative, complex and cross-cutting relationships that were entered into for purposes of seeking to influence the national security policy decision-making process. However, while at no time during this period were the politicians displaced from the top of the decision-making pile, the other categories jostled for bottom and middle positions. This book is written by a scientist, a technocrat and a military officer, representing a sect that was very close to the politicians during the second phase of 1977–89 before losing their pinnacle position during the post-1989 De Klerk period. It is therefore argued that this dynamic partly explains the groups' current perception of a lack of acknowledgment for their contribution.

There are a number of points that detract the book from making a contribution to the debate and may in fact serve to further polarise relations between government and those it purports to represent. The first is its lack of political sensitivity and objectivity, nearly a decade

after the final de-colonisation of Southern Africa. For example, the book refers to the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) guerrilla activities at the time as "aimed at intimidating the locals and harassing the white commercial farmers".¹⁸ With Namibia being a neighbouring state of South Africa and given the Southern African Development Community's (SADC's) regional political integration ethos, this assertion perhaps misses out on the role and context of the armed struggle, that is, the use of violence for a political purpose, forced upon the African peoples in Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, in which many lives were lost. Significantly, all the struggles began with a civil disobedience phase that had been preceded by futile attempts to negotiate racial political parity, before the monumental decision to engage in armed struggle was taken. To then try and relegate this evolution in the political struggles of the region, and Namibia—a country in which SWAPO only took the momentous decision to "employ all possible means to achieve national liberation in July 1966"—in particular, is to demonstrate a lack of sensitivity that is unhelpful.¹⁹ In practice, this is the type of commentary that continually forces current South African government officials to go around SADC and the rest of Africa apologising on behalf of insensitive comments made by former SADF functionaries. Second, the authors also argue that the US withdrawal from the region was "as a result of losing its nerve versus communist penetration on the African continent".²⁰ To imagine these writers continuing to hold such a view against the current US administration, boasting such Afro-American luminaries as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, is to reflect a lack of appreciation of the ever changing global security dynamics that was so evident in Southern Africa during 1989 and the 1990s. This is precisely when the centre of communism collapsed, soon to be followed by the demise of the apartheid regime and such states as the then Zaire, which all had become unsustainable even in the so-called Free World. Finally, on this wider political question, the authors assert that their work will not pay attention to the alleged involvement of Israel in the local

nuclear programme, and then proceed at every opportunity to cite positive similarities with Israel. Credible sources already in the public domain, including declassified US intelligence materials and Israeli agents' testimonies, conclusively confirm the role and participation played by Israel in the South African nuclear programme.²¹ To then seek to deny this is to unnecessarily prejudice the relevance of the work presented.

Several criteria—lack of political sensitivity; not appreciating the global political dynamics of the late 1980s in Southern Africa; continuing to deny obvious facts that have become common cause related to the nuclear programme; and observing curious self-censorship tenets—have denied the work a meaningful contribution towards addressing five of the six questions raised earlier. The work partly addresses the question surrounding the Vastrap events, but even then it fails to disclose the nature of the call received ordering the urgent dismantling of the prepared site. Furthermore, the text does not acknowledge the now widely acknowledged participation of Israeli operatives at Vastrap at the time.²² The authors have preferred to perpetuate the legacy of double-speak on this issue against the background of a major contribution that they are making—confirming the existence of a nuclear programme during the apartheid era.

Assessing its relevance, the work is a first cut by practitioners who had hands-on experience of the workings and operations of the nuclear programme and, as already alluded to, their major contribution is to confirm the existence of a nuclear programme in apartheid South Africa. Making these statements before 1990 would most certainly have resulted in incarceration. However, by the same token, it raises the question: Why make the statement now when the current government is clearly under an obligation not to reveal the inherited knowledge on the programme? The suspicion that the international dimension more than a desire by the apartheid regime to disarm led to the decision to abandon the programme, still hangs over the debate and this work has done little to dissipate this perception. The second contribution is to restate the fact that the authors fully understood the concept of

nuclear strategy—argued in the vein of the seminal work by Bernard Brodie *The Missile Age*—that is, that it rests mainly in its non-use.²³ Third, both the authors as well as the foreword writer are correct in asserting that the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) went much deeper than was deemed necessary by local actors in emasculating South Africa of any residual nuclear capability that had been acquired as a result of the programme. Investment in the programme worth an estimated R7 billion, over and above the extensive overseas training stints of scientists and other technicians sometimes lasting as much as three years, was all rendered useless almost overnight. This school of thought, to which we subscribe, argues that some of the acquired capacity could have been retained while the offensive elements of the programme were shut down.²⁴ In this, nuclear research targeted at peaceful purposes in advancing mining, environmental, health, production, the training of a new cadre of nuclear scientists and manufacturing activities could have benefited immensely.

Given the discussion in *Armament and Disarmament South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Experience*, the jury is still out on our intimate understanding of the purpose, evolution and abandonment of South Africa's offensive nuclear programme. Perhaps in future, given the correct political environment and access to verifiable empirical documents, the men and women who worked on the programme will be able to tell their stories in a much more credible manner.

Notes

- 1 See Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col.) Roy E. Horton III, Pretoria's nuclear weapons experience, *Occasional Paper* No. 27, USAF Institute for National Security Studies, August 1999, <<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/rsa/nuke/ocp27.htm>> (8 August 2003); M Duvenhage, *South Africa's Nuclear Option*, pp. 2–3, <http://www.geocities.com/sadf_scrapbook/sanuc.htm> (8 August 2003).
- 2 Horton, op cit, contends that the option was “an extreme expression of South Africa's desire to be linked to the West,” p 4.
- 3 Horton op cit, pp 4–5, points out that the US provided the SAFARI-1 reactor used for training South African scientists as well as providing fuel, until

- halted through the intervention of the UN General Assembly in 1975.
- 4 Norm Dixon *ANC demands full truth on Nuclear Weapons*, pp 1–2, <<http://www.greenleft.gor.au/back/1993/95/95p21b.htm>> (7 August 2003); See also Horton, op cit, pp 4–7.
 - 5 See R Williams, The other armies: A brief historical overview of Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), 1961–1994, in *Military History Journal* 11(5), p 8, <<http://radidhttp.com/milhist/vol115rw.html>> (22 August 2003).
 - 6 There are currently two official versions with one citing April 1978 and yet another asserting May 1974 following the April Armed Forces coup on Lisbon, Portugal that had strategic significance to the security of Southern Africa as a colonial power in Angola and the then Portuguese East Africa now Mozambique. See also R Beri, South Africa's nuclear policy, <<http://www.idsa-india.org/anoct8-2.html>>, p 3; H Steyn et al, *Armament and Disarmament South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Experience*, Network Publishers, Pretoria, 2003, pp vii, p xv.
 - 7 Dixon, op cit, pp1–2; Duvenhage, op cit, pp. 1, 2 and 8; South Africa: The making of US Policy, 1962–1989, pp 4–6 <<http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/saintro.htm>, (22 August 2003); D Albright and M Hibbs, South Africa: The ANC and the Atom Bomb in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientist*, April 1993, p 36.
 - 8 Dixon, op cit, cites IISS in London confirming that South Africa was assisted by the US, UK, France, former West Germany and Israel, p 1.
 - 9 This safeguards and safety question has implications on reparations and compensation.
 - 10 D Linder, Secretary for Environment and Justice, SA Catholic Bishops Conference Opposition, New Reactor-Old Headaches, *Business Day*, 25 August 2003, p 8.
 - 11 Steyn et al, op cit, p xiii.
 - 12 Steyn et al, op cit, pp i, xvii; See V Harris & S Hatang, SA nuclear weapons and secrecy, *SA History Archive*, February 2003, <<http://216.239.37.104/speech?q=cache>> (7 August 2003); W Stumpf, Birth and death of the South African nuclear weapons programme, presented at the '50 Years After Hiroshima' conference, Castiglione, Italy, 28 September–2 October 1995, organised by the Union of Scientists for Disarmament, pp 6–7.
 - 13 Steyn et al, op cit, p 20.
 - 14 Ibid, pp xiv, xv and xvi.
 - 15 Ibid, pp 20, 42, 69 and 81.
 - 16 Ibid, p 20.
 - 17 Dr Hannes Steyn was senior manager, Research and Development at Armscor, Dr Richardt van der Walt was general manager at the Atomic Energy Corporation and Lieutenant General (Retired) Jan van Loggerenberg was chief of operations at the SADF and later chief of the South African Air Force. I thank Major General (Retired) Len le Roux for this clarification. The missing representative is from the politicians, forever on top of the decision-making process during the period; See also Lieutenant Colonel Roy E. Horton III, Out of (South) Africa: Pretoria's Nuclear Weapons Experience, USAF Institute for National Security Studies, *Occasional Paper 27*, August 1999, Table 2. Relative Influence of Key Players, p 11.
 - 18 Steyn et al, op cit, pp 20, 5 and 19.
 - 19 *Namibia – UNTAG Background*, p 3 <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/untagFT.htm> (3 September 2003).
 - 20 Steyn et al, op cit, p 3.
 - 21 Lt Col Roy Horton III already cited is probably the most succinct study on the subject available; See also Beri, op cit, pp 2–5; Harris and Hatang, op cit—both have maintained a meticulous body of data on the subject. In February 2003 they pointed out that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission deliberately and significantly chose not to place the nuclear weapons programme under scrutiny, <<http://216.239.37.104/search?q>> (7 August 2003); Chadwyck, *South Africa: the Making of U.S. Policy, 1962–1989*, pp 2–4 <<http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/santro.htm>> (22 August 2003).
 - 22 Steyn et al, op cit, p 42; See Dixon, op cit, p 3, citing reports of the international intrigue in *Washington Post*, August 1977 and the reactivated 1987 test.
 - 23 See also A Wohlstetter, Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N + 1 Country, in *Foreign Affairs* 39(3), April 1961.
 - 24 See W Stumpf, South Africa's nuclear weapons programme: From deterrence to dismantlement, *Arms Control Today*, 25.

**COMMISSIONING THE PAST:
*Understanding South Africa's Truth and
Reconciliation Commission.***

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The truth is a tricky fellow and hard to pin down even in very long books. This admirably short book (256 pages) acknowledges the difficulty and gives us three views: insider accounts; victim stories; and outsider assessments. Since most readers will be outsiders, the insider views and victim stories are very attractive because they promise something new. Strangely, this reviewer found the outsider assessments to be the best part of the book, perhaps because they were easier to identify with. Nevertheless, the entire book is

a very readable and respectable collection of thoughts and arguments about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Other countries in Africa, and Rwanda and Sierra Leone in particular, are beginning their own TRC experiences and the literature on this field will soon widen far beyond the South African experience. This book is about the South African TRC but is bound to be helpful to many African states which have set up formal commissions about the truth of the past. The papers edited by Posel and Simpson go to great lengths to show how complex the truth usually is and the price that any society must pay for the search. Excavating the past and confronting the lies openly has its benefits, as all the writers make clear. But what comes through very strongly throughout this volume are the limits and the difficulties. As the introduction puts it: "The TRC could only render up a range of fractured, incomplete and selective truths."

Having grasped the limitations, the insider accounts make it clear that TRC staff generally did the best they could with what they had. Cherry Daniel and Fullard describe, with some dismay, the change from "producing a radical new history" to a "state directed investigative commission". It is evident that those on the inside had high hopes and, on behalf of the rest of South Africa, suddenly faced the pressures of time, space and money. They describe the final report as "premature in almost every respect" and express their frustration at having to sacrifice much of the nuance and complexity. Almost hidden amongst the long list of problems is some optimism: "The South African TRC has done innovative, principled work that future commissions can build on."

The second chapter, written by Piers Pigou of the regional Investigation Unit directs the attention to two committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee and the Amnesty Committee. This helps to show that the TRC was not monolithic but was made up of many parts, some of which were more successful than others. Pigou identifies the lack of an effective investigative capacity as "the greatest obstacle to determining the truth". The implication is that the TRC should not have been a passive recipient of information and statements: it had to

challenge these accounts and find the dark corners where the truth had been hidden. This sets a good stage for Lars Buur's argument that the truth is quite often produced and managed, and not simply acknowledged.

Sicelo Dlomo, Thandi Shezi and Duma Khumalo are the three victims whose stories are told in Part Two. What they have in common is that none of them received any satisfaction from the TRC. They illustrate, again, the limitations and the sadness that the expectations of many victims have not been met. Dlomo was murdered but no motive was established and many contradictions in the evidence given at the TRC were never investigated. Shezi was raped by policemen while in jail. Shezi's appearance at the TRC is described as "a victory" but also as a very painful experience where she felt "abused all over again". Duma Khumalo was one of the Sharpeville Six, found guilty of the murder of a local councillor. The TRC had no power to order the retrial that Duma desperately wanted. All three chapters appear extremely well researched and present a balanced picture of what might have been done, what was done, and explore possible reasons for the failings of the process. Certainly, they seem designed to arouse indignation that in the new, free South Africa, these worthy cases have been glossed over.

The third part of the book is not easy to review because it is a review itself. All three chapters are full to the brim with insights, assessments and carefully thought out criticisms. Questions are asked and challenges issued; tensions are identified and definitions are offered. The result is a very dense text that offers no easy answers. Posel's chapter on the actual TRC report is itself a fairly good template for the review of historical documents. Posel finds the report bland and lacking a unified analysis, and offers good reasons why this is so. While reeling off impressive lists of its shortcomings, Posel occasionally pauses to remind the reader why the report is so special and why it is a remarkable achievement despite everything. Like many of the other authors, Posel sounds optimistic and is careful not to let the reader lose sight of the fact that the TRC has "initiated a process of truth-telling" which is of undoubted benefit.