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Nuclear Deterrence: Dissenting views heard in France's National Assembly, former Ministers challenging policy

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- Homepage - News - News Articles -

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France's nuclear weapons have now been contested by three Ministers of Defence: Hervé Morin, Alain Richard and Paul Quilès ; two Prime Ministers: Michel Rocard and Alain Juppé ; and one former President: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Each has chosen his time and manner, and some have spoken despite themselves.

Hervé Morin is the most recent: on Monday 9 December, during a colloquium in the National Assembly in which Michel Rocard also took part.

The next day, 10 December 2013, the parliament definitively passed to Military Programme Law for 2014-19, when the Senate voted it through on second reading. This Law commits 23 billion euros to maintaining and building new nuclear weapons, thus flouting France's obligations under international law, her humanitarian duties and her national Constitution.

There's a mistake there somewhere - find it!

Placed online in French : 21 December 2013

The colloquium was organised by the "Participation and Progress" Club, on the initiative of its president, Pierre Pascallon, a former MP (RPR, Puy-de-Dôme), in collaboration with the two revues "Défense Nationale" and "Défense et Sécurité Internationale", and in partnership with Jacques Myard, MP (UMP, Yvelines), who made the hall available. The colloquium's title: *"What future for France's nuclear deterrence in the face of the geostrategic challenges and changes today and tomorrow?"* About 150 people attended.

In his opening speech, Hervé Morin, formerly Minister of Defense in two Fillion governments (2007-2010), and now an MP (UDI, Eure), surprised the gathering by saying:

"A question to be faced in the long term, I think without naivety, is that of abolishing all nuclear weapons on the planet. I have said so before, I used to say this when I was minister, but then only in private (...) The international discourse that consists in considering that we are the only ones, because of past history, who can have nuclear weapons and prevent more important and influential powers from acquiring them is a discourse that won't stand up, I'm convinced it won't, whatever diplomatic success there may be with Iran. And if we want to avoid a nuclear winter in 20, 30 or 50 years, we Europeans must open the question of total nuclear disarmament worldwide. (...) To me, if we want to avoid proliferation, then that is the question we have to face, in the framework on a large diplomatic initiative, which could be European one."

After speaking in more detail, he concluded thus: *"...let nobody say that scenario is impossible. Let me remind you that several countries have renounced nuclear weapons in recent history (...) So I for one defend the idea that it would be a beautiful peace message, an idea that has been mentioned already by President Obama (...) and also, though I had noticed, by two former Prime Ministers... Alain Juppé et Michel Rocard. Therein lies a real message, a real question that deserves to be put, not in the short term, but in the medium term, without naivety, and confronting the Russians and Americans with their responsibilities."* (French text transcribed by Venance Journé from an audio recording and reproduced with her kind authorisation.)

Thus Hervé Morin joins Michel Rocard, who indeed had co-signed an article in le Monde on 15 October 2009, along

with three others including Alain Juppé, an op-ed entitled : *"For global nuclear disarmament, the only response to anarchic proliferation"*.

It is paradoxical that Hervé Morin didn't notice that article, at a time when he was Minister of Defence. It was also not noticed by his vigilant staff and his information services. If we can judge by this oversight, there is little serious attention paid in high places to nuclear deterrence. What does the strategy matter, provided we have the Bomb! Our missiles and subs and nuclear warheads all justify their exorbitant cost.

Never mind: on top of his disarming frankness, Hervé Morin has the merit that he asked himself those questions and is now raising them in public arena, where his voice counts.

As for Michel Rocard, he has the merit of having worried about these matters ever since the late 1980s. (It's a pity he didn't worry about nuclear power generation and France's 58 reactors, which resemble bombs we have positioned in our own place). Once Rocard retreated when attacked by the champions of nuclear weapons, as in June 2012 he proposed to *"suppress the nuclear deterrence force"* and then dismissed those words as a *"boutade"*. A tactical retreat, we might say, since now he has returned to the charge. Concluding the discussion introduced by Hervé Morin, Michel Rocard said bluntly that: *« nuclear deterrence is a useless and dangerous weapon"*. That was even the title he gave to his speech. The words of Air Force General Bernard Norlain, another signatory back in October 2009 and a former Director of the National Defense Institute, points in the same direction: *« Nuclear Arms: the Myth of the Absolute Weapon"*.

Two other former Ministers of Defense, both socialists, were not at the Colloquium, but are on record as denouncing the myth: Alain Richard when he co-signed the article in 2009, and Paul Quilès in April 2012 when he published the book *"Nucléaire, un mensonge français"* [Nuclear weapons, a French Lie], containing the "reflections on nuclear disarmament" which have inspired his active campaign for nuclear disarmament.

Michel Rocard, Bernard Norlain, Alain Richard and Paul Quilès are just four of numerous international personalities calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons in the non-governmental movement "Global Zero". Jacques Attali has joined them.

Alas, all those converts to abolition are exes. If they had said these things when in power, they might have changed French policy! In this country there is a sort of occult rule forbidding anyone both to seek or hold power and at the same time to criticise nuclear weapons. Hervé Morin admits this: *"I used to say this when I was minister, but then only in private fermé"*. Naturally.

Alain Juppé is living proof: recalled to cabinet in the third Fillon government, the Mayor of Bordeaux succeeded Hervé Morin on 14 November 2010. The next day, November 15, ACDN asked him what he intended to do with the convictions he had expressed a year earlier in the *Le Monde*, and requested an interview. But on 26 November, speaking in the Senate about the Defense budget, Alain Juppé declared : *"I dream, of course, of a world without nuclear weapons, but I have never said that France should set an example before all the others! As long as progress has not been made internationally, France must not lower her guard."* That phrase "not lower our guard" is an old leitmotif of those who champion the armed *status quo*. On 15 December Juppé's reply to the president of ACDN was: *"I was very interested in what you said in your letter. Unfortunately my very busy diary does not allow me to respond favourably to your request"*. His diary that very day included justifying France's nuclear policies live on France-Inter. He had become Minister again, he had resumed the official discourse. That's all part of the costume.

The most illustrious former office-holder to have criticised France's nuclear weapons is still Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Naturally he waited until he was no longer President to do so: in volume 2 of his memoirs which appeared in 1991.

What he wrote on this subject deserves to be widely known.

His memoirs recount how, during manoeuvres organised in May 1980 in the French-occupied zone of West Germany in order to test the recourse to nuclear weapons, he noticed that the commanders of the "Blue" forces did not use the tactical nuclear missiles (the "Plutons") despite an imbalance in conventional weapons with the "Red" forces. The generals realised that using nuclear arms against an opponent that has as many or more means you are likely to face retaliation, and in spades. Giscard adds:

"(And then, concerning mutually assured destruction, whatever happens - and I write this in parentheses to underline how this decision has always been present buried inside me -whatever happens, I will never take the initiative of any step which would lead to the annihilation of France. If the destruction were to be begun by the enemy, I would immediately take the necessary decision to avenge it. But otherwise, I would like to let the last chance of reviving France and her culture one day depend on the French people's fidelity to their own hidden convictions)" (Le pouvoir et la vie, vol II, p. 210)

In other words: if the Cold War had become hot and if the Warsaw Pact's tanks in superior numbers had been about to invade France, President Giscard would not have sent a nuclear missile as "final warning" to the Soviet leaders by bombing their tanks, let alone their cities. He would have preferred France to be occupied rather than annihilated. As in June 1940. People can hide their convictions from the occupier, resist secretly while waiting for better days, and in the end they can recover from an occupation. Not from an annihilation.

It was probably not the intention of Giscard d'Estaing in his memoirs to question France's so-called "deterrence" strategy. But the strategy is certainly harmed if not annihilated by his post-presidential admission: atomic bombs are useless against a determined enemy who has them too. They serve no purpose either preventively as a deterrent threat or (despite what Giscard wrote) as weapons of vengeance: to use them against the cities of an enemy that has already begun the destruction of France would only push him into "finishing his job" by destroying our country completely. That would quite literally be "mutually assured destruction." Let us hope that even in such a case the President would have renounced their use.

If France's nuclear weapons were already lacking in sense during the Cold War, they make even less sense today. The current President, his PM, his government and his Minister of Defence should all listen to the voices of the exes. And also, why not, the voices of the French people, for this is subject that certainly merits a national debate and referendum - something that General de Gaulle thought of holding but decided not to hold, back when he created France's nuclear strike-force.

Yes or no, "Do you agree that France should participate with the other states concerned in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, under a system of mutual and international monitoring that is strict and effective?"

That, today, is the question that needs to be put to France's citizens, because France's leaders are refusing to ask it themselves.

We as citizens have the power and duty to treat and cure the schizophrenia that is raging crazily at the head of the State.

Jean-Marie Matagne, 20 December 2013