ON NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF SIR MICHAEL QUINLAN

Tanya Ogilvie-White

IISS

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Tanya Ogilvie-White, July 2011

One of the intellectually most brilliant and influential civil servants of his generation ... The philosopher of defence … The leading civilian thinker within the British Government on defence policy … admired for his powers of analysis, respected for his integrity and liked for his infinite courtesy, his kindness and his generosity. There indeed is the Michael so many of us, to different extents and in many different contexts, had the privilege of knowing.

Fr Michael Holman SJ,
Sir Michael Quinlan Thanksgiving Mass,
Westminster Cathedral, 18 June 2009

Editorial Note

I have sought the consent of all of the living correspondents whose private letters are discussed in this book, and in many cases, was able to enrich the text through the anecdotes and feedback that some of them provided. Biographical information for Quinlan's correspondents that I have cited (both living and dead) is included, along with notes about key people who are mentioned in the letters.

The format I have adopted for this book is quite unusual for a book of correspondence, in that I have presented extracts from Quinlan's letters, linked by passages of analysis. I have also provided brief histories where necessary and have drawn on numerous relevant publications (including Quinlan's own published work). I decided on this approach because it suits the nature of the material. Quinlan's letters typically contain long and detailed critiques of draft texts sent to him by his correspondents. While the first part of his letters can be captivating, the same is not true of all the detailed, point-by-point critiques. For that reason I included very few of the latter, relying mainly on extracts from the opening paragraphs. I took the liberty of leaving out the letter endings, because (with very

few exceptions), Quinlan signed off his letters using the same words: 'yours sincerely' (to people he did not know well) and 'yours ever' (to friends and colleagues). I omitted all of these to avoid repetition. I also deleted the numbers from Quinlan's numbered paragraphs, because this bureaucratic style (widely used in the civil service worldwide) doesn't lend itself to a book of correspondence.

The letters (of which there are thousands) were filed alphabetically and often without contextual material, and it quickly became obvious that they needed to be presented thematically and framed using a variety of different sources to make them more accessible. With this in mind, I decided to organise the correspondence around three themes, to show how Quinlan's thinking on nuclear weapons developed. These topics are: the logic and morality of nuclear deterrence; key strategic decisions in which he was closely involved; and arms control and disarmament. Nearly all of the correspondence fits within these themes. I did not deliberately miss out any major topics that are covered in the files that I collected from the Quinlans' home. There was nothing at all, for example, on the topic that Richard Mottram mentions in his foreword – the issue of reshaping the British Armed Forces for a post-Cold War world. It is possible, however, that additional subjects are addressed in the letters that were removed before the start of the project (this is explained in the introduction). I might also have missed interesting points in some of Quinlan's handwritten letters, as many of these had faded with time. Thankfully, the vast majority of the correspondence was typed.

As a final note, it is worth pointing out that the volume of Quinlan's letters became thinner and then petered out altogether by the mid-1990s, and as a result there is far less material covering Quinlan's post-retirement thinking about nuclear weapons. Part of the reason for this is the advent of

e-mail, which became the dominant means of communication as the 1990s progressed, and which, due to its instant nature, is often less valued than a letter by both writer and recipient, and therefore less consciously collected and stored for posterity. This is a great loss to historians and scholars, because nothing can replace the 'sense of person' that a collection of letters can provide. We know how Quinlan's ideas changed thanks to his post-retirement speeches and publications, many of which continued to focus on the topics of deterrence logic and morality, and others that covered new ground on regional proliferation, global terrorism and, finally, disarmament. But speeches and formal publications lack the appeal of personal correspondence: they are honed by the author and the editor into a polished finished product. Because of this, they hide the scribblings and the inner workings of the mind that expose individual motivations and illuminate personality. As this book reveals, Quinlan left behind a gold mine of correspondence that offers unique and deep insight into his thinking and that of the Western defence experts and moral philosophers in the 1980s.

Foreword by Sir Richard Mottram

Given his formidable intellect, fascination with testing and weighing propositions, and energy and commitment, it should not perhaps come as a surprise that Michael Quinlan found time – even as a busy official – to write many private letters on defence-related issues, which he carefully preserved. We might in a 'Quinlanesque' spirit of inquiry ask 'why publish extracts from this correspondence now?' Four reasons come to mind.

Firstly, from the 1970s until his death in 2009 Michael Quinlan played key roles in formulating and communicating British defence policy. His influence continued long after his retirement from the civil service in 1992 both through those civil servants who – like me – had learned and continued to learn much from him, and from a wider circle of admirers amongst politicians, journalists and academics.

Secondly, from his spells serving in NATO in the early 1970s, and above all in the key Ministry of Defence (MoD) post responsible for strategy and policy from 1977–81, he greatly influenced NATO policy and built a wide circle of international contacts and friendships which he also kept up for the rest of his life.

Alongside these official dimensions to his life there was a third personal strand. Michael Quinlan was a Catholic with a strong interest in ethical issues. He came to the top of the civil service at a time when defence was a big political issue. The possibility of nuclear war and its consequences became an issue of wider public interest, in which religious voices mattered. He had the credibility to influence this debate if only, while he was a serving official, discreetly in the background. Later his interest in 'just war' led him to cogent and uncomfortable questioning of the justification for the invasion of Iraq.

Finally, while much of this correspondence is of historical interest, it also has contemporary relevance to, for example, the debate around the future of the British nuclear deterrent, on which it will be seen he had a more nuanced view than is often assumed.

Quinlan spent much of his official and subsequent life thinking about nuclear weapons – summarised in his book of that title published shortly after his death. As he himself commented, the nuclear issue was intellectually congenial to him because of its complexity and abstract nature. The correspondence shows to the full his interest in logic and rationality and there are many examples in what follows of their profitable application to the analysis of complex problems. At the same time we need perhaps to pose the question – as he accepted – of how far such finely graded argument drove motivation and action, amongst both our friends and prospective enemies.

His underlying interest was not in nuclear weapons. It was more fundamental: how to prevent war of any kind between the major powers. The contribution of effective deterrence to this task was a crucial element in his thinking particularly in the Cold War years. But as the world changed so he looked at issues from a fresh perspective, as this book illuminates.