

Press conference held by Charles de Gaulle (Paris, 11 April 1961)

Caption: On 11 April 1961, during a press conference held at the Élysée Palace in Paris, French President Charles de Gaulle reaffirms France's determination to continue nuclear tests in the Sahara Desert.

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Press Conference in Paris by General de Gaulle

11th April 1961

Question: Does France still intend to pursue her atomic armament programme and to continue her nuclear tests in the Sahara?

Answer: During the world war, the Americans, with the aid of a certain number of European scientists and technicians, began to produce atomic bombs. These were used at the end of the last war. Following this there has been fierce competition in nuclear armament between the Anglo-Saxons and the Soviets, a competition which is gaining in intensity. It is true that the two parties have momentarily suspended their tests, but tests are no longer necessary because those which have been carried out already have enabled both sides to build up sufficient resources to destroy the whole world. Today, this competition is centred mainly on the means of delivery, and such means enable the destructive capability of the warheads to be increased, as one might say, to an unlimited extent. The frightening thing about this race is that it reflects the fundamental situation of our universe, i.e. the rivalry which exists between two camps, and consequently there is something quite inevitable about it.

In any case, no State has ever made any kind of positive protest against either side which has manufactured and is still manufacturing these terrible weapons. To my knowledge no State in the world has broken off relations with London, Moscow or Washington because of that. I am not aware that the United Nations have called upon America, the Soviet Union or Britain to destroy their nuclear armaments or their means of delivering them. In view of this — since the two parties are not giving up their nuclear weapons, quite the contrary — France, for reasons connected with her own defence and that of others, finds she is likewise obliged to provide herself with such weapons. It is quite true that the armaments she is producing and is capable of producing will be only a fairly small part compared with those the others are producing. It is also true that the tests she is carrying out are far less numerous than those the others have completed. But that does not matter; the hue and cry you already know about is being raised against France, and France alone.

Since French tests are held in the Sahara, attempts are being made to sow terror among the populations which are at some considerable distance away — these tests are carried out in the middle of a completely desert region — by stressing the danger of radioactivity. But not once has anyone discovered the slightest indication that any of the three French atomic tests which have been held already has affected the health of anyone. Moreover, why should the three French atomic tests be considered more dangerous than the 120 tests — at least — carried out by the two parties I mentioned just now?

Since the Sahara is in Africa, attempts are being made to persuade the African States that their rights are being endangered. The Americans are known to have carried out nuclear tests in the Nevada desert, but I have not heard of strong protests being made by the 27 other American States. The Russians are known to have carried out their tests in Turkestan, in Siberia. I am not aware that the 28 Asiatic States made many protests. The Americans and the British have carried out tests in the Pacific: I am not aware that the 27 countries — and I counted them — around the Pacific considered that their interests were in danger.

Certainly we can understand that the powers who possess atomic armaments, i.e. the United States, the Soviet Union and Britain, have no wish to see France equipped with them. Certainly we can understand that these three powers are able to find support amongst the States which are more or less linked with them to back their plans and decry the French plan. Certainly, it is France's duty to herself and to everyone, to take the strictest precautions in the tests it has yet to carry out, and these precautions will be taken, as has always been the case. But as long as others have the means to annihilate her she must have the means to ensure her own defence.

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