The International Institute for Strategic Studies was originally established as The Institute for Strategic Studies in November 1958, and the first issue of its journal, *Survival*, appeared in March–April 1959. It was then a purely British institution, and its priorities were determined by the British circumstances of the 1950s.

Some three years earlier, on 1 March 1955, Winston Churchill had revealed to the House of Commons the full implications for the British people of the ‘hydrogen bomb’ – the thermonuclear weapon that the United States had successfully tested at Eniwetok in 1952, to be followed by the Soviet Union a few months later. Half a dozen such bombs, Churchill told his audience, would make the British Isles uninhabitable, and no defence could possibly be guaranteed. Their use, he admitted, could only be ‘deterred’; so Britain was building its own ‘deterrent’ to threaten comparable damage against any attacker. But in the event of nuclear war Britain would be wiped off the face of the map, whatever happened to its allies or its enemies. ‘It may well be’, Churchill concluded hopefully, ‘that we shall, by a process of sublime irony, have reached a stage where safety will be the sturdy shield of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation.’ But such a happy outcome could by no means be guaranteed.

It took some time for the implications of Churchill’s revelations to soak in. Too much else was occupying the foreground of public events. A year later, in 1956, the British government and its Conservative supporters...
would be thrown into confusion by the humiliation of the Suez campaign. Simultaneously the Labour opposition, especially the fellow-travelling left wing, was equally disoriented by the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The first event showed that the United States could not always be relied on to protect British vital interests; the second, that the disappearance of Stalin did not mean that the antagonism between the Soviet Union and the Western world was in any way abated. Meanwhile the British Armed Services were engaged in bitter in-fighting, between an Army concerned with the defence of the European mainland, a Navy defending sea communications to British overseas commitments, an Air Force charged with maintaining ‘the deterrent’, and a Treasury reluctant to provide money for any of them. Debates in the House of Commons were monopolised by Conservative members demanding more money for the Services and Labour demanding less; while among the general public there was a massive lack of interest.

Public opinion became seriously concerned by the nuclear threat only when in the spring of 1957 a tough defence minister, Duncan Sandys, tried to solve his problems by making massive reductions in ‘conventional’ forces – including the abolition of National Service – and making it explicit that the defence – indeed the survival – of the United Kingdom would henceforth depend entirely on the credibility of its own nuclear deterrent. But already there had been private stirrings. On the left, the prospect of nuclear annihilation had revived traditional demands for disarmament, if need be unilateral, that were to crystallise a few years later in the vastly popular Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. But others, not least many within the Armed Services themselves, were equally concerned over a policy that seemed to raise more questions than it answered. Given the enormous power of the American nuclear arsenal, was a British ‘deterrent’ necessary at all? Was it affordable? Was it credible? If used, should its strike be pre-emptive, or retaliatory? If the first, was it justifiable? If the second, was it feasible? How were nuclear weapons to be factored in to the defence of Europe? And given the horrific consequences of a nuclear strike, was it justifiable ever to use one, even in retaliation?

These, it was felt, were not questions to be dealt with in profound secrecy by a small group of specialists in the Ministry of Defence. They were not
just military but, in the profoundest sense, political. More, they were moral. And more even than that, they were existential. At stake was not just the ‘security’ of the United Kingdom but the survival, possibly, of mankind. At very least such matters demanded widespread debate of the kind they were already receiving in the United States. But Britain had no specialist bodies to promote such debate on the model of the RAND Corporation, or centres for concerned scientists such as MIT. Few people were aware of the work being done in the States by such thinkers as Bernard Brodie, Albert Wohlstetter, Thomas Schelling and Hermann Kahn. But among those who were so aware were Denis Healey, one of the very few members of the Labour Party who took an informed interest in defence questions; a small number of well-informed journalists, notably Richard Goold-Adams of The Economist and Alastair Buchan of The Observer; and the Nobel-winning scientist P.M.S. Blackett , whose work The Military and Political Consequences of Nuclear Energy was one of the very few British contributions to the nuclear debate.

British scientists did not on the whole agonise so publicly about the development of nuclear weapons as did their American colleagues who published The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, with its clock ticking inexorably towards midnight. But the moral dilemma posed by nuclear war was being urgently considered by a group of British clergy under the leadership of Bishop Bell of Chichester, one of the few clerics who had publicly objected to the ‘area bombardment’ of German cities during the Second World War. The British Council of Churches was thus a major focus of debate. Another was ‘the Military Commentators Circle’, an informal club of journalists, politicians and retired military figures presided over by the doyen of military experts, B.H. Liddell Hart. A third was the Royal Institute for International Affairs at Chatham House, a sibling of the New York Council on Foreign Relations that had sponsored the young Henry Kissinger’s Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy, a work that created considerable interest in Britain. It was at Chatham House that Blackett, Healey and Goold-Adams came together, joined by a retired senior naval officer Sir Anthony Buzzard, to discuss and publish a pamphlet that examined the possibility of limiting the use of nuclear weapons. Buzzard, a dedicated Christian, then enlisted the help
of the British Council of Churches to organise a conference in Brighton in January 1957 at which politicians, journalists, churchmen and senior retired military officers were invited to discuss the whole problem of nuclear war.

I was invited to that conference: since I was then in the process of creating what was to become the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, I was one of the tiny number of British academics who showed any interest in the subject. Somewhat to my disappointment I was allotted, not to one of the groups discussing the substance of the subject, but to that whose task was to recommend what should be done about it. That group agreed that we neither could nor should form any kind of pressure group, or propose any specific course of action. The best thing we could do would be to create an informed body of public opinion, so that decisions could at least be taken, and judged, against a background of informed discussion. To this end we recommended that we should set up a body whose primary, if not main, purpose should be the collection and dissemination of information about nuclear weapons and their implications for international relations. It was a proposal that the conference, perhaps sobered by discussions that revealed how little they knew about the subject, endorsed with some enthusiasm. And so the Institute was born.

In the half century since its foundation the Institute has expanded both its interests and its membership far beyond those modest beginnings, and gladly recruits members of all views and interests from all over the world. But at its core there remains the existential question: in a world of sovereign states with differing ideologies and interests, how can conflicts, even if they cannot be peacefully resolved, at least be kept within bounds that prevent them from escalating to mass holocaust, if not indeed to the ‘annihilation’ against which Churchill had warned? The founders of the Institute had been concerned, not so much with the ineffable goal of ‘peace’ – a term that attracts so much goodwill but begs so many questions – but rather with the condition that necessarily precedes peace of any kind: survival. Hence the title of our journal.