



**The Secret State:
Preparing for the
Worst 1945-2010,**
by Peter Hennessy
(Penguin, £10.99)

In 1950, a Whitehall committee secretly warned the government that a civil airliner might be used in a suicide attack against a British city using an atomic bomb: "It is possible and there doesn't seem to be any answer to it," said the report. As Peter Hennessy says, there is a "chilling symmetry" between this cold war scenario and today's threat from jihadi-related terrorism. First published in 2002, Hennessy's classic study of how Britain prepared to face nuclear doomsday has been revised and extended by some 200 pages to cover the post-cold war period, particularly the intelligence response to 9/11. But Hennessy is at his best on the fearful secret history of the cold war, such as the "endgames" which prepared Whitehall mandarins for the day when the PM would press the nuclear button. Jim Callaghan told the author "if I had lived after having pressed that button, I could never, never have forgiven myself". Mrs Thatcher doubted she would have pressed it: "I want grandchildren too". A superb history of Britain thinking the unthinkable.

PD Smith