

CONFIDENTIAL

Ref. A02641

PRIME MINISTER

Cabinet: Parliamentary Affairs

Under Parliamentary Affairs on 17th July you will want to tell the Cabinet of the background to the statement made by the Secretary of State for Defence to the House on 15th July about the eventual replacement of the Polaris force.

2. You had intended to raise the matter in Cabinet before an announcement was made, and the planned timing was for a discussion in the Cabinet on the morning of 17th July, before the Secretary of State for Defence made his statement in the afternoon of that day. Late on Monday evening, however, there was a warning from the White House that the New York Times had the full story, with details and dates, and was planning to carry the story of your correspondence with President Carter on Tuesday. Senator Baker also referred to the matter on television, though without details and dates. The White House canvassed the possibility of bringing forward the announcement by 48 hours so as to forestall the New York Times. After consulting a few colleagues (who took the view that bringing the announcement forward by 48 hours would be the best way out of a difficult situation) you agreed that the timetable should be advanced by 48 hours. Nothing in fact appeared in Tuesday's New York Times, but we have learnt that the correspondent, thinking that the announcement was to be on 17th July, thought he had a day in hand, decided to publish on 16th July, and is angry at having been forestalled.

3. You could say that the decision announced in the Secretary of State for Defence's statement was in line with the Government's general commitment to maintain the effectiveness of our strategic nuclear forces in the 1980 Defence White Paper which the Cabinet endorsed last January. It has been the tradition that specific decisions on defence nuclear equipment should not be taken to Cabinet, because of the extreme sensitivity of the subject (for instance, Mrs. Castle's diary complains about the failure of Sir Harold Wilson to consult Cabinet about Chevaline in 1974), and successive Cabinets have entrusted them

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

to the Prime Minister and the colleagues directly concerned. The decision announced on Tuesday was in fact taken some months ago, and you discussed with President Carter as long ago as December last the possibility that we might ask the United States Government to make the Trident system available. Though his response was encouraging, he insisted not only upon a delay of several months but also upon the tightest possible secrecy. The reasons for this insistence were initially the fear of damaging the prospects for ratification of SALT II, and later the fear of possible impact on decisions by some of the European allies on the modernisation plans for NATO's long-range theatre nuclear forces. We have successfully and scrupulously complied with this requirement of secrecy, and so until this week have the Americans: it is ironic that this leak, at the eleventh hour, should have come on the American side, and apparently at^a political level.

4. The gist of the decision is as follows. The Government regards the maintenance of a national strategic nuclear deterrent capability as an essential element in the defence effort we undertake for our own and Western security. The Chiefs of Staff have confirmed that from a military point of view they accord the highest priority to the maintenance of this capability. You have therefore asked, and President Carter has agreed, to supply us with the Trident I C4 MIRVed missile system. Once bought, it will be entirely in our own ownership and under our operational control. Like Polaris it will be assigned to NATO; but like Polaris it will be available for purely national use in a supreme emergency. As with Polaris, we shall design and build our own submarines and nuclear warheads for the system.

5. The Ministers directly concerned reached this decision after considerable study of possible alternatives. They concluded that by far the best buy to continue to give us an assured second strike capability was another submarine launched ballistic missile system, like Polaris, but with a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle capability to defeat the growing sophistication of the Soviet anti-ballistic missile defences. This virtually restricted the choice to an American system. The cost of developing such a system on our own would have been enormous. Of the American systems available, Trident I best meets our needs.

CONFIDENTIAL

6. Contrary to many Press reports, Trident will also be cheaper than any of the apparent alternatives (including sea-launched cruise missiles), since unlike them it will not have to be developed specially for the United Kingdom. Despite some public interest in their possibilities, ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) do not amount to a strategic nuclear deterrent. Those stationed in this country will not have the range adequately to penetrate the Soviet Union. Because of Britain's limited geographical size they would also be too vulnerable to constitute our ultimate weapon, although the United States GLCMs we shall be accommodating will with others elsewhere be an important element in NATO's collective long-range theatre defences. We considered the theoretical alternative of a joint development with the French; but we did not pursue this, since even if they were willing (which given their different attitude to NATO they might well not be) the result seemed certain to be more expensive and less militarily effective than Trident I.

7. The Trident system will be supplied to us in a manner generally similar to that in which Polaris was supplied. This was a very favourable deal from the point of view of this country, and we can welcome the achievement of another deal on the same basis. Your exchange of correspondence with President Carter has now been published as a White Paper and the Secretary of State for Defence has also published an unprecedentedly full memorandum to explain the reasons for our decision.

8. We are arranging for the Secretary of State for Defence to be ready to deal with any supplementary questions which may arise.

REA

(Robert Armstrong)

16th July, 1980