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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

31 March 1983

*Dear Mr Owen,*

Thank you for writing to me again on 23 March.

I am bound to say that I am somewhat surprised by the contents and tone of your letter. You originally wrote asking me to investigate the incident which had been related to you. This we did, and did with some urgency. Now you complain that I failed to write a private and confidential letter; but I am not at all clear what purpose such a letter would have served. You have alleged that I failed to take up your suggestions about the conduct of the investigation, or to follow up the information which you had. But I must point out that shortly after you wrote to me with your proposals, the Ministry of Defence reported the results of their enquiries to me; and I passed these straight to you inviting you to let us know of any further information you might have which would add to what we had discovered.

In my letter to you of 9 March, I spelled out the facts fully and frankly. They show, as you recognise, that while there were some mechanical faults with the Thor control system, the essential principle of two-man operation was preserved; and this answered the concern which you originally expressed. You asked about publication of our correspondence, and I felt it right to consult the United States Government, a proposition which you readily accepted. My view remains that nothing would be gained by publication, and that there is a danger that the incident will be inflated and exploited by people who do not have our best defence interests at heart. But as I made clear in my letter of 23 March, the decision is entirely yours.

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I appreciate that you are convinced about the desirability of a "dual key" system of control for the cruise missiles. I do not believe, however that the Government can be accused of turning its back on this question. We have considered the alternatives to the present arrangements very thoroughly indeed, but we remain satisfied that the arrangements for joint decision-making which have governed the use of United States forces in this country for over thirty years are as effective and appropriate as they have always been.

In all this, I firmly believe that what matters is that we should maintain deterrence and thus preserve the peace and freedom which we in this country enjoy. It is crucial for this purpose that the Russians continue to find credible the Alliance's strategy of deterrence. For them to do that, they must see that the Alliance can stand together and adhere to decisions that they have taken together. Against this background I am sure it would be wrong to depart from arrangements which we, like successive Governments, have found to be fully effective.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Thatcher

The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen, M.P.