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Ref. A07679

PRIME MINISTER

*Simply we can
mention it - really
this Thursday
and say why.
not.*

Prime Minister*11 or 15 March for the**announcement?**My own preference has been**for 15 March all along.*Trident: Announcement Date

MISC 7 on 4 March is likely to approve the Trident D5 agreement, subject to final endorsement by Cabinet on 11 March. Mr Coles's letter to Mr Wright of 23 February recorded your view that the agreement should be announced the following Monday, ie 15 March. When I came to discuss business with you on 26 February, I showed you the Secretary of State for Defence's letter to me of 25 February (copy attached), and you said that, if that was the Secretary of State for Defence's preference, you were prepared to move the announcement date forward to the afternoon of the Cabinet decision day, ie 11 March.

2. The Secretary of State for Defence's preference for an announcement on the same day as the Cabinet discussions was based on the fear that, if the announcement was deferred over the weekend, the decision could leak from the Cabinet into the weekend press and complicate his handling of the announcement. He thinks that his advance briefing has diminished the risk of his Cabinet colleagues feeling that their decision has been taken for granted. But bringing forward the announcement to 11 March does not eliminate the risk of leaks, because of the way the American machine works. There has to be an announcement in Washington at the same time as the announcement in Westminster. The announcement in Washington will take the form of a message from the President to the Congress. In the two or three working days before such a message, key Congressional leaders are briefed in confidence about what is coming. Leaks are, therefore, likely. If the announcement is on 11 March, Congressional briefing will take place on 8-10 March, and leaks could well (and almost certainly will) occur before Cabinet has taken its decision. At the worst, such leaks might force us into a premature announcement on, eg 9 or 10 March. That is what happened over the C4 announcement in July 1980. If the same happened this time, we should once again have to go public before Cabinet could meet. But if the announcement is fixed for 15 March, then even if we were forced into premature disclosure (eg on 11 March) Cabinet's position would have been safeguarded.

3. When I put this point to the Secretary of State for Defence, he agreed that it was an important consideration and undertook to give the problem further thought. He has now said that he is content to leave the decision to Mr Wade-Gery and me; it has been made clear to him that I shall wish to refer it to you.

4. The Secretary of State for Defence sees the danger of planning for an 11 March announcement. But that remains his firm preference. He fears that Washington leaks may occur from 8 March onwards in any case; and that the media are almost bound to discover that Trident has been discussed at Cabinet on 11 March.

They did not find out about the earlier decision

5. Mr Wade-Gery and I still think that the lesser evil would be to aim at an announcement on 15 March. If we re-emphasise the need for discretion vis-a-vis Congress, there should not be too great a danger of American leaks, at least before Cabinet meets. We could ask them if it would be possible to avoid briefing Congressional leaders until Thursday 11 March. The danger of leaks from Cabinet itself can be minimised if the subject is not mentioned in the circulated agenda and is dealt with in a paper tabled only in the Cabinet Room and collected before the meeting ends. There is no doubt that the Americans would prefer 15 March; if we go for 11 March, they will not finally know that we have taken our decision until about three hours before they have to make their announcement.

6. I should be grateful if I might tell both Mr Nott and the White House of your final decision, as between 11 and 15 March, as soon as possible.

7. I assume that the form of the announcement should follow the July 1980 pattern; ie a statement in the House by the Secretary of State for Defence and the simultaneous tabling of a White Paper in your name containing the texts of the two Exchange of Letters.

8. I am sending a copy of this minute to the Secretary of State for Defence.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

1 March 1982

SECRET



*I spoke to the Holt
He will reconsider,
and we will
have another meeting
early next week.*

CABINET OFFICE
A 962
25 FEB 1982
FILE INSTRUCTIONS
FILE NO.

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2HB

TELEPHONE 01-218 9000
DIRECT DIALING 01-218 2111/3

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25th February 1982

Thursday
statement
at the Cabinet
not

cc. Mr Wade-Gery
M. Facer,

Dear Robert

Your Private Secretary's letter of 23rd February set out a plan for considering the Trident issue on a Thursday Cabinet with an announcement the following Monday. As I have explained to Robert Wade-Gery and others, I am not at all happy about this suggestion. Even if Trident does not appear on the Cabinet agenda there will be widespread enquiries from now on, each Thursday, as to whether Cabinet has considered the matter and I find it difficult to believe that the Thursday discussion will not become known. If this arises we can expect a media field day throughout the following four days which could well be extremely harmful to a successful presentation of the arguments on the following Monday. I am sure you will agree that it is always damaging for the press to sniff a forthcoming statement and to speculate on all its disadvantages in advance.

We should be ready with the Open Government document and all the other necessary administrative arrangements by Thursday 11th March. And the question, therefore, remains as to whether Cabinet colleagues will feel that they are being consulted in a full and proper way if a statement is planned for the same day. My own judgement is that we are in an entirely different position to the C4 announcement where Cabinet were only informed of the decision and there then followed a 15 minute discussion at a time when Trident had not even been properly considered. This

Sir Robert Armstrong KCB CVO



time round the course the situation is fundamentally different. The subject has been a matter of open debate for many months, I briefed everyone of my Cabinet colleagues many months ago and we are now going through the further detailed briefing with every member of the Cabinet which was given to MISC 7. We still have one more session but I see little reason to doubt that Cabinet would take a firm view in favour of D5 having had the fullest opportunity to ask questions and debate the issue at the briefing sessions.

I would, therefore, be grateful if you could reconsider the issue. It is a vitally important statement, on which I would like to go straight out of Cabinet on 11th March with a firm decision and announcement. If, of course, there were any problems in Cabinet the statement could anyhow be deferred until the following week. My Department does not see any overriding problems about informing our Allies and other interested parties on the timetable that I propose. Needless to say if for one reason or another March 11th was premature then I would prefer a special Cabinet early in the next week followed by an immediate announcement rather than the gap now proposed.

John
Nott

John Nott