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CC(86) 15th
Conclusions

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CABINET

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet
held at 10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 15 APRIL 1986
at 10.30 am

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Viscount Whitelaw
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Lord Hailsham of St Marylebone
Lord Chancellor

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Nigel Lawson MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Douglas Hurd MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

The Rt Hon Sir Keith Joseph MP
Secretary of State for Education and Science

The Rt Hon Peter Walker MP
Secretary of State for Energy

The Rt Hon George Younger MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon John Biffen MP
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt Hon Norman Fowler MP
Secretary of State for Social Services

The Rt Hon Norman Tebbit MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

The Rt Hon Nicholas Ridley MP
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Lord Young of Graffham
Secretary of State for Employment

The Rt Hon Kenneth Baker MP
Secretary of State for the Environment

The Rt Hon Kenneth Clarke QC MP
Paymaster General

The Rt Hon John MacGregor MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Malcolm Rifkind QC MP
Secretary of State for Scotland

The Rt Hon Paul Channon MP
Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

The Rt Hon John Wakeham MP
Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury

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Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr C L G Mallaby
Mr D E J Jago

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FOREIGN
AFFAIRS---
LibyaPrevious
Reference:
CC(86) 14.2

1. The Cabinet considered the military action taken by the United States forces during the preceding night against specific targets in Libya as a result of Libyan involvement in terrorism against United States citizens.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that, as she had reported to the Defence and Oversea Policy Committee on the previous day, she had received a message from President Reagan on 8 April, indicating that he had decided to respond to the latest Libyan terrorist acts against American citizens by attacking specific targets in Libya. The message sought British support for this action and for the use in it of American aircraft based in the United Kingdom. The President had asked for a quick response. After discussion with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence, her initial response had raised a number of questions and concerns about the scale of the proposed American action and the risk that it might not deter Colonel Qadhafi but rather incite further terrorist acts, so endangering the lives of British and American citizens. The President's powerful and well argued reply had stressed the incontrovertible evidence of Libyan complicity in recent acts of terrorism, had indicated that American action would be directed against specific targets providing direction and support for terrorism, and had blamed the lack of a firm Western response for building up the prestige of the Libyan leader. The President had also underlined that the request for support came at a crucial moment in Atlantic relations when lukewarm or no support from closest allies for action to curb terrorist crimes would have a profound effect on the American people.

In considering her response with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence and the Attorney General, she had felt obliged to take into account not only doubts about the effectiveness and consequences of such an attack but also the implications of refusing the President's request for the long term relationship with the United States in the defence of Europe, as well as the inherent right of self-defence of the United States in the face of Libyan terrorism against American citizens and the evidence that more terrorist acts were planned. The case for the use of F111 aircraft from bases in the United Kingdom was that it would maximise the accuracy of targetting, minimise collateral damage and reduce the risk to United States service personnel. Despite all the reservations, it had been agreed that the reply to the President should state that the United States could count on United Kingdom support for "action directed against specific Libyan targets demonstrably involved in the conduct and support of terrorist activities", wording which the Attorney General had advised was consistent with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. The Prime Minister's reply had also informed the President that the United Kingdom Government would be ready to agree to the use of United States aircraft from bases in this country against targets which fell clearly within this definition, if he concluded that that was necessary. The reply had made clear that the Americans could not count on British support for more generalised military action which was less clearly directed against terrorist targets.

THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH SECRETARY emphasised the difficulties which had been faced in reaching the decision to give the Americans the support which they had requested. Given the indisputable proof of Libyan guilt and the right of the Americans to take action in self-defence against specific terrorist targets, it would have been wrong to deny the Americans the use of bases within this country and, thereby, the means of maximising the accuracy of their targetting and of minimising civilian casualties. It was clear that the United States had chosen targets linked with terrorist activities. Detailed information on the results of this action was not yet available but it had been reported that about 100 civilians had been injured, with damage to residential accommodation and to the French Embassy which was in the vicinity of the Libyan intelligence headquarters. It had also been reported that two sons of Colonel Qadhafi had been injured. There had been no reports of street demonstrations against the British community. The British Caledonian Airways flight that day had been cancelled because of the closure of Libyan airspace. It had not yet been possible since the United States military action to convey advice to the 5,000 British residents in Libya. There was no question of them leaving Libya quickly because exit visas were needed and took ten days to obtain. The best advice to them would be to stay at home.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE said that incontrovertible evidence existed to indicate that the United States Administration were confronted by a long term and carefully planned Libyan campaign of terrorist acts against American targets. Faced with the dilemma of deciding how to respond in an effective way, the Americans deserved British support in the action they had taken. Furthermore, to have repudiated the actions of a close ally in these circumstances would have done enormous damage to the United Kingdom's long term relationship with the United States, especially in circumstances where she had provided unstinting support to the United Kingdom at the time of the war in the South Atlantic.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that he had fully supported the decision which had been taken by the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence, in responding to President Reagan in the manner described. There had been no middle course available between giving or withholding support, and the consequences of denying support to the Americans in such a crisis would be far-reaching, particularly in circumstances where the United States Administration enjoyed strong backing from American public opinion.

In discussion, the following points were made -

- a. Although there were doubts about the handling and timing of the President's decision, there had been no alternative to giving support to American action within the terms of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. It was important, however, that the Americans should not be drawn into further military action which might lead to an escalation of ever increasing violence. The greater influence with the Americans which United Kingdom support

had gained should be used against this and against any further American decisions which might embarrass this country. This was particularly important in circumstances where events in the period immediately ahead could have far-reaching effects on transatlantic relations and on the Soviet Union's opportunities for undermining the cohesion of the Alliance.

b. Despite the clear justification for American military action in self-defence, there would be adverse public reaction within the United Kingdom and other North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries. Convincing proof of Libyan complicity in terrorist acts should be brought into the public domain, based on Colonel Qadhafi's public statements as well as information from intelligence sources, so far as this was possible.

c. Although it was clear that the Americans would have attacked with or without United Kingdom support, and without it there might have been more civilian casualties, presentation of this point was difficult because it would be argued that use of bases in the United Kingdom increased the threat to British lives. It would be important to recall the evidence of previous Libyan attacks against the United Kingdom, notably the death of Woman Police Constable Yvonne Fletcher in St James's Square, and to expose the failure of critics of the American action to suggest other ways of deterring terrorist violence.

d. The fact that the United Kingdom had no quarrel with the Libyan people but only with those engaged in terrorism should be stressed, not least because of the current danger to the 5,000 British residents in Libya. There was no realistic prospect of a rescue operation against opposition for these United Kingdom citizens and the other large numbers of Europeans and Americans in Libya.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, expressed gratitude to the Cabinet for their support of the difficult decision which she and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence had faced following the approach made by President Reagan. In her Parliamentary statement that day, she would give the fullest possible justification for this decision, stressing that the British Government had agreed to the use of bases in this country for action taken in self-defence against targets demonstrably involved in the conduct and support of terrorist activities and had reserved its position on the question of more generalised military action. Close contact with the United States Administration would be maintained in order to influence their decisions in the critical period ahead and to co-ordinate the presentation of information about the purpose and effect of the United States military action. European NATO partners should be consulted as far as possible in the interests of maintaining solidarity within the Alliance and of safeguarding the security of European residents in Libya. The Secretary of State for Defence should keep plans for the possible evacuation of British citizens from Libya under the closest review.

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The Cabinet -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up.

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SHOPS Bill
Previous
Reference:
CC(86) 8.1

2. THE HOME SECRETARY said that, as the Government had been defeated in the House of Commons the previous evening on the Second Reading of the Shops Bill, the law relating to Sunday trading, including the Shops Act 1950, would continue in force as at present. The enforcement of the law was the responsibility of district councils, although an ordinary ratepayer who could not persuade his district council to act could make representations to the Attorney General that he should do so. It was likely that there would for the time being be an increased number of prosecutions, but that thereafter matters would revert to the state in which they were before the Auld Committee had reported. He had no proposal for the introduction of further legislation on this subject: there seemed to be no prospect of any kind of consensus on a reform of the law which fell short of the abolition proposed in the Shops Bill.

The Cabinet -

Agreed that there should be no further attempt to reform the law on Sunday trading in the lifetime of the present Parliament.

Cabinet Office

15 April 1986