



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

9 March 1983

*Handwritten:* Owen.

When I wrote to you on 23 February, I said that I would write again when we had carried out some more detailed enquiries into the incident you described involving the Thor missile. Since then I have received your letter of 25 February. In the meantime I have had a report from Michael Heseltine about his further enquiries and I thought that I should let you know the outcome of these immediately.

We have been unable to find any documentary evidence to substantiate the story precisely as it was related to you. But a number of officers who served with the Thor force have been interviewed and we have established that there was in the early 1960s an incident which bears some resemblance to the one which you described, although it did not involve a situation in which the man alone could have fired a missile. An RAF technician discovered during routine servicing of an inert missile that a British key turned the USAF lock. A comprehensive check of the other missiles revealed that this was also the case for one other USAF lock. All the locks were changed as a result.

Nonetheless, the fact that the UK and US keys were occasionally interchangeable did not mean that one person could gain control of the system. The launch countdown required the use of both keys to complete the launch sequence: the UK key which had begun the process of activating the missile had to remain in place as the US key was inserted some minutes later to begin the activation of the warhead. Furthermore, the key holders (the US Authentication Officer and the RAF Launch Control Officer) were never alone in the control trailer when a live missile was on standby - the standard complement in the trailer was five (4 RAF and 1 USAF),

/all

all of whom had a part to play in the launch sequence. More importantly, the engagement of the keys was only one element in a complex missile launching procedure in the early stages of which it was necessary for a technician, located at the actual launch site some 150-200 yards from the trailer, manually to operate valves and switches to allow the automatic launch sequence to supply the missile with fuel, liquid oxygen and electrical and hydraulic power.

I hope that this will reassure you on the Thor missile. I think that you will agree that we have taken the matter you raised in your letter of 14 February very seriously indeed and enquired into it as fully as we can at this remove in time. In these circumstances I do not believe that much more would be gained by involving the Secretary of the Cabinet. But if you have more information which you think we should have, Michael Heseltine would be happy to see you about it.

More generally, you referred to the comment I made in my letter of 17 January that you had not dissented on the dual key issue at the time the deployment decision was made. I did not of course mean to imply by this statement that you took a decision while in office; but to remind you that when the decision was announced in December 1979 you made to the best of my knowledge no reference to the issue. I entirely agree with your proposition that the question is too important to become a matter of party politics; and I recognise that your concern reflects a concern which is felt by others as well. I do assure you, however, that we as a Government have given very careful thought to the matter, and we have satisfied ourselves that the existing arrangements for joint decision-making give us the control we need.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Stiller



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1  
Telephone 01-~~XXXXXX~~ 218 6169

D/S of S/62/83

8th March 1983

PM's letter to David Owen  
dated 9/3/83 removed  
by WR on 18/3

Dear Willie,

If it is not too late, and if the Prime Minister has not yet written to Dr David Owen MP along the lines of the draft which I supplied with my letter of 4th March (and which I discussed yesterday evening with John Coles), could I take this opportunity of passing to you a couple of minor amendments to the draft letter which have been proposed by Mr Peter Blaker, the Minister of State for the Armed Forces?

Paragraph

Mr Blaker has proposed that the wording in the fifth line of the second on the first page of the draft might read: "..... 1960s an incident which bears some resemblance to the one which you described; although it did not involve a situation in which one man alone could have fired a missile. An RAF technician ....."

Perhaps you would care to consider incorporating these proposed changes in the draft letter from the Prime Minister to Dr Owen?

Yours ever,  
Barry Neale

(B P NEALE)  
Private Secretary

W F S Rickett Esq



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE  
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1  
Telephone 01-250 7092 218 6169

D/S of S/62/83

4th March 1983

*re. Lynn letter*

*AN 7/3.*

*Dear Willie,*

You wrote on 28th February, enclosing a copy of a letter to the Prime Minister from Dr David Owen MP, who was replying to the Prime Minister's of 23rd February about the control of Thor missiles when they were based in this country.

I enclose a draft letter which the Prime Minister might send to Dr Owen, responding to his two letters of 14th and 25th February.

We have conducted extensive checks on our records for the period when Thor missiles were deployed in this country, but we have been unable to trace any documentary evidence to substantiate Dr Owen's story. We have also seen and interviewed a number of RAF officers, both retired and still serving. From the recollections of such people we have been able to reconstruct a detailed picture of what was involved in operating the Thor missiles; and we have established that there was at least one incident which bore a very marked resemblance to the one described by Dr Owen. The draft letter attached has been produced in the light of our researches, and does try to show that there is no question of this Department trying to cover anything up.

Regarding Dr Owen's suggestion that the Secretary of the Cabinet or Sir Antony Duff should personally investigate his allegations, the view taken after consulting Sir Robert Armstrong is that there would be no overriding advantage in this, and anyone else would only have to go over the ground which we here have already covered, almost certainly without being able to add anything. This question must, of course, be a matter for the Prime Minister's political judgement, but our view is that there is no need for her to agree to Dr Owen's suggestion.

*Yours ever,  
Barry Neale*

(B P NEALE)  
Private Secretary

W F S Rickett Esq

DRAFT REPLY FROM THE PRIME MINISTER TO DR DAVID OWEN

When I wrote to you on 23 February I said that I would write again when we had carried out some more detailed enquiries into the incident you described involving the Thor missile. Since then I have received your letter of 25 February. In the meantime I have had a report from Michael Heseltine about his further inquiries and I thought that I should let you know the outcome of these immediately.

We have been unable to find any documentary evidence to substantiate the story precisely as it was related to you. But a number of officers who served with the Thor force have been interviewed and we have established that there was in the early 1960s an incident similar to the one which you described. An RAF technician discovered during routine servicing of an inert missile that a British key turned the USAF lock. A comprehensive check of the other missiles revealed that this was also the case for one other USAF lock. All the locks were changed as a result.

Nonetheless, the fact that the UK and US keys were occasionally interchangeable did not mean that one person could gain control of the system. The launch countdown required the use of both keys to complete the launch sequence: the UK key which had begun the process of activating the missile had to remain in place as the US key was inserted some minutes later to begin the activation of the warhead. Furthermore, the key holders (the US Authentication Officer and the RAF Launch Control Officer) were never alone in the control trailer when a live missile was on standby - the standard complement in the trailer was five (4 RAF and 1 USAF), all of whom

had a part to play in the launch sequence. More importantly, the engagement of the keys was only one element in a complex missile launching procedure in the early stages of which it was necessary for a technician, located at the actual launch site some 150-200 yards from the trailer, manually to operate valves and switches to allow the automatic launch sequence to supply the missile with fuel, liquid oxygen and electrical and hydraulic power. [This was, in effect, an early example of the operation of "the two man principle" which is standard practice today with all nuclear systems, and to which you properly ascribe great importance in your letter.]

I hope that this will reassure you on the Thor missile. I think that you will agree that we have taken the matter you raised in your letter of 14th February very seriously indeed and inquired into it as fully as we can at this remove in time. In these circumstances I do not believe that much more would be gained by involving the Secretary of the Cabinet. But if you have more information which you think we should have, Michael Heseltine would be happy to see you about it.

More generally, you referred to the comment I made in my letter of 17th January that you had not dissented on the dual key issue at the time the deployment decision was made. I did not of course mean to imply by this statement that you took a decision while in office; but to remind you that when the decision was announced in December 1979 you made to the best of my knowledge no reference to the issue. I entirely agree with your proposition that the question is too important to become a matter of party politics; and I recognise that your concern reflects a concern which is felt by others as well. I do assure you, however, that we as a Government

have given very careful thought to the matter, and we have satisfied ourselves that the existing arrangements for joint decision-making give us the control we need.

A.F.C.  $\frac{7}{3}$

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10 DOWNING STREET

PRIME MINISTER

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Dr. Owen hopes that our investigations into the alleged breakdown of dual control of Thor missiles some time ago can be speedily conducted.

He suggests that Sir Robert Armstrong or Anthony Duff *Check!* should be put in charge. *FERB*

*WR*

*we will let you have a reply*

*mt*

28 February 1983



Dr. David OWEN, 91P

cc CO

4/3

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

28 February 1983

Willie

Barry Neale tells me this  
came over on Friday morning.  
Have you received it? Kay  
7/3

Thank you for your letter of 21 February, and for the draft reply for the Prime Minister to send to Dr. David Owen. As you will know, the Prime Minister wrote as drafted on 23 February. This has prompted the attached reply from Dr. Owen. He hopes that your investigations can be dealt with speedily, and suggests that the Secretary or Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet should be put in charge of them.

I should be grateful for a draft reply for the Prime Minister's signature as soon as possible, preferably before the end of this week.

I am sending a copy of this letter and its enclosure to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

WR

Barry Neale, Esq.,  
Ministry of Defence.



10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

28 February 1983

I am writing on behalf of the Prime Minister to thank you for your further letter of 25 February. A reply will be sent to you as soon as possible.

W. F. S. RICKETT

The Rt. Hon. Dr. David Owen, MP.

From: The Rt Hon Dr David Owen MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

25 February 1983

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London SW1

*126/2*

*Dear Mrs Thatcher*

Thank you for your letter of 23 February. I am, of course, ready to make available all the facts that I possess but I would like to know a few more details about the investigation. This is a very grave matter and I have deliberately decided to put the matter initially to you and not to seek publicity. I am quite confident, from further information that I have received, that the events that I outlined to you did in fact take place. But I think it is not unreasonable for me to request that the investigation is dealt with speedily, within a matter of 2-3 weeks, and with a degree of authority.

I wonder if you would consider asking the Secretary of the Cabinet, or Sir A Duff, to personally investigate the matter in which case I would be very happy to deal with either direct. An alternative would be the Security Commission but I would imagine that they would not be familiar with a lot of the technicalities and they may not be able to report within a matter of weeks.

*Yours sincerely  
David Owen*

David Owen

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28 FEB 1983

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