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Defence

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.

/ I appreciate

HL

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.



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
MAIN BUILDING WHITEHALL LONDON SW1
Telephone 01-930 7022 ~~XXXX~~ 218 6169

D/S of S/62/83

30th March 1983

Dear Willie,

In your letter dated 23rd March, addressed to Nick Evans, you enclosed a copy of a further letter of the same date to the Prime Minister from Dr David Owen MP; and you asked for a suitable draft reply for the Prime Minister to send.

I attach a draft for the Prime Minister's consideration. I doubt if the Prime Minister would wish to become involved in a detailed exchange with Dr Owen about the merits of "dual-key", or any of the other substantive issues raised in his most recent letter. Inevitably, the tone of the letter must depend on the Prime Minister's judgement; but the attached draft is aimed at avoiding giving Dr Owen further cause or material for publication. In case he does decide to publish all the correspondence, the final paragraph of the draft is designed to provide a more emphatic statement of the negative aspects of any change to physical "dual-key" control.

A press line on a release of the correspondence might be along the following lines:

- a. there is nothing to add to the detail set out in the Prime Minister's letter: it shows that although there were one or two faults in the system, the overall security and safety of the system was not jeopardised. The missiles could not have been fired by one man acting alone;
- b. the Thor was a first generation missile system withdrawn from service 20 years ago. Thor can in no sense be compared to cruise missiles, which are designed to take advantage of major advances in technology over the last quarter of a century;
- c. the Thor experiences described in the correspondence in no way makes a case for dual key control of cruise missiles. The Prime Minister has said repeatedly that our arrangements for joint decision with the Americans on the use of cruise missiles have been reviewed recently and are perfectly satisfactory.



Finally, the response to the question "why were Ministers and senior officials not informed?" might be to the effect that "it is not possible, at this distance in time, to comment on what was reported at the time and to whom; those concerned were rightly giving priority to making sure that the fault was quickly rectified".

No doubt you will let me know if you require any further information.

A copy of this letter goes to Roger Bone (FCO).

Yours ever,
Bary Neale

(B P NEALE)

conqueror

DRAFT

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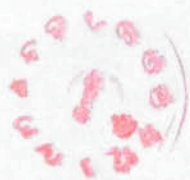
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Defense: David Owen

These missiles are 82



MAR 15 1982

ack'd. 23/3 etc

From: The Rt Hon Dr David Owen MP

Prime Minister

Dr Owen tries to put me
back back in my court.

WM
23/3



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

23 March 1983

We must check
the way with great care -
but we must answer
to all their
points

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

Dear Prime Minister,

As you know there have been a number of discussions over the last week with your Private Secretary over the publication of our correspondence and I agreed to stop publication while the United States were consulted. I have now received your letter of today's date.

I am extremely unhappy about the way you have handled this issue. It was open to you at any time to write to me a private and confidential letter but you have never sought to do so. You have never taken up my offer to put my information to anyone you choose to investigate the matter, either the Secretary of the Cabinet or Sir Anthony Duff. Nor have you taken up my alternative suggestion of referring the matter to the Security Commission. I can only assume, therefore, that you do not wish the information in your letter to be classified in any way and as you know I have explained to your Private Secretary that if there were any parts of the letter that by inadvertence had been included, which should be classified, I would be quite happy for any exclusions to be made.

You conclude that public debate about the details of the control arrangements for nuclear missiles can only be of help to the Soviet Union. I assume that it is not the disclosure of the facts of the situation that concern you but the revelation that the mechanical arrangements covering six of the 60 Thor missiles were defective for a number of years. Yet it is quite clear from the procedures that were adopted that despite the fact that one key turned both locks the other control arrangements were sufficient to have ensured that no Thor missile could ever have been fired without the specific authority of the British Government through the action of an RAF technician manually operating valves and switches to allow the automatic launch sequence to start.

What I think you ignore in your letter is that there is already considerable public debate in this country about the control arrangements for any Cruise

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missiles, if they were to be deployed, and judging from what Michael Heseltine said yesterday it appears that the Government are becoming resigned to the fact that Cruise missiles are likely to be deployed. I still hope that the INF negotiations will be successful and that the Soviet response will be sufficiently constructive in relation to the deployment of SS-20s that it will not be necessary to deploy Cruise missiles. Whatever the outcome you know that it is my carefully considered view that Cruise missiles should not be deployed in Britain without it being clearly seen that Britain is physically involved in the launch mechanism and thereby, in effect, has a finger on the safety catch.

I regret that this has become a matter of political debate and that you have not followed the precedent established by your predecessor, Harold Macmillan, in granting dual control. The wish for dual control is now one which has wide support in the House of Commons, including a not insubstantial number of your own Members of Parliament. It is supported by a wide range of public commentators, including powerful editorial support for the dual key mechanism from the Sunday Times, the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail. This issue cannot therefore be avoided and those of us who believe that you should introduce a dual key mechanism believe that it would strengthen the British and US position in relation to the Soviet Union.

I do not believe it would be right for me to suppress what happened 21 years ago, purely and simply because it might be embarrassing. I recognise that one runs the risk of the unilateralists exploiting the issue but how much more would they exploit the argument if they believed that I had been party to a conspiracy of silence on this issue. There are legitimate anxieties which I believe Parliament ought to debate, for instance, why Ministers were not informed about this issue in 1962 and why you were not able to substantiate my information by documentary evidence but had to question officers who served with the Thor force. I do not think you would deny that were such a comparable incident to occur in 1983 you would expect to be informed immediately about it.

It is my judgement that your continued refusal to consider a dual key mechanism, against the background of this incident, is wholly unjustified. I do not believe the Government's case is helped by quoting a grossly exaggerated cost to Britain of £1 billion to introduce such a mechanism. It is firmly in the interests of the United States that any deployment of Cruise missiles in Britain, were it to be necessary, carries the support of the people of this country. All past experience indicates that the American Government would not seek to impose such a heavy financial cost on Britain. But even were this to be the case, I suspect that the British people, as Harold Macmillan wisely recognised in 1958, would be prepared to pay a price for the certain knowledge that any missile with a US nuclear warhead could under no circumstances be launched without the full involvement of British Service personnel acting on the specific instructions of the Prime Minister of the day.

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If you personally do not want me to publish the correspondence I would of course find this argument far easier to accept if you were to tell me that you were prepared to look again at the whole question of dual key or that you were referring the matter to the Security Commission, as I suggested. Unless you can produce any other arguments I feel the public are entitled to know about this incident.

*John Henry
David Owen*

DAVID OWEN



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23 Nov 1983
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