



SECRET

BRITISH EMBASSY.

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20008

TELEPHONE (202) 462-1340

29 January 1985

FROM THE AMBASSADOR

The Right Honourable
Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Secretary of State for
Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs
London SW1

My dear Secretary of State,

STRATEGIC DEFENCE INITIATIVE

1. Like yourself, I have been wondering where we go from here over the President's Strategic Defence Initiative research programme. I listened to the President telling the Prime Minister on 22 December why he thought the programme a good idea, and to the Prime Minister telling the President why she accepted the need for it. The clear distinction drawn by the Prime Minister between research and deployment was, in my view, very helpful, not least in political terms. It made possible the armistice of Camp David. It has also, I see, attracted a good deal of support from other European governments. It ensured that we were not on the side of the Russians in opposing SDI.

2. So far so good. Except on one point. This concerns our unwillingness to involve ourselves in the research programmes now picking up steam under the SDI rubric. My Defence Staff and my Chancery have received repeated overtures from General Abrahamson, the energetic Air Force General running the SDI programme, about the possibility of his visiting the UK to brief British industry. So far the decision has been not to pick up the offer.

3. I think this is wrong. It is also inconsistent with our policy of approving research. The SDI under the President's inspiration has fired the American imagination. It is very popular: according to the polls, 60% of Americans think it a good thing. It therefore rates about the same level of popularity as the President himself, who won 59% of the popular vote on 6 November 1984. Its popularity now extends widely throughout the relevant branches of the Administration, the US armed services, and Congress, who will in my judgement vote at least the funds to see whether it will work.

SECRET

/...



4. There has thus been a significant sea change since the "Star Wars" idea was first unveiled to a fairly sceptical Washington on 23 March 1983. I think it is fair to say that there is now a national consensus behind SDI research and a national determination to get results. And the SDI is one of the things, perhaps the most important, that Ronald Reagan wants to be remembered by, like Jack Kennedy and putting a man on the moon. It gives the American "can-do" spirit something to aim at. He is not going to be deflected from it, and his call for a new conquest at the frontiers of knowledge appeals to the national mood.

5. The question therefore is: are we going to exclude ourselves from the revolution in defence technology that the SDI research programme is likely to ignite? If we continue to spurn US interest in involving us, I see a real danger of our missing the bus. If we indeed miss this bus, as we missed the space bus, we shall only have to instigate, in 10-20 years time, another Alvey catch-up operation in order to stay in the field of nations competent in the most advanced technologies. Isn't it better to get in on the ground floor? Isn't there high grade employment here for a lot of British brains? Isn't there work for eg Plessey, British Aerospace, Racal, GEC? And shouldn't our defence scientists be given a chance to remain up with the US front-runners?

6. I see at least three compelling reasons for giving positive answers. First, the programme will have spin-off in many areas of defence, and no doubt civilian, technology also. It may result, for example, in the transformation of thinking about conventional warfare. We need to make sure that we benefit from this; but in this, as in other fields, without input, we shall get no product. Secondly, there may well be business for enterprising British companies. Perhaps not all that much. But who knows, and why should we deny them the opportunity of competing for what there is, if their commercial judgement inclines them to have a go? Thirdly, we can only hope to have a real influence on US policy decisions on testing and deployment issues if we know what we are talking about. Which means keeping alongside the programme.

7. I am not suggesting that we need ante-up from the defence budget: I fully understand the constraints on defence resources. What I am suggesting is that we should 1) pick up the Abrahamson offer to brief British business, make some political mileage of it here, and see if we can, by so doing, get British firms on the inside track; and 2) task the appropriate MOD research establishments to explore the opportunities for associating themselves with the US research effort (not least because of the likely spin-off for developments in conventional and other areas of defence), and make some political mileage with the US out of that too.



8. I suggest therefore that when you and Mr Heseltine come to Washington with the Prime Minister, she should be advised to tell the President of our interest in the research programme and our wish to take up the US offer of a piece of the technological action. Such a request would in fact be consistent with our support for the research programme and a natural development of the agreement of Camp David. There would be no need for her to say that she had come round to the President's point of view on deployment. But a clear statement by her of British interest in the research enterprise would at once engage the President's interest and make it much more likely that a Presidential directive would issue to ensure that we were involved where it matters at the governmental level, and that British companies were well positioned to involve themselves if they wished.

9. I raise this now because 20 February seems to me likely to provide the best occasion to make our pitch. But if for whatever reason that tactical question were seen differently in London, I believe that the case for our making such a pitch rather soon would still stand.

10. I am sending copies of this letter to the Secretary of State for Defence and to the Private Secretary at No 10 Downing Street.

Two copies

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Oliver Wright', written in a cursive style.

Oliver Wright