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Secretary of State ✓

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Head of Defence Dept

## THE ARGENTINE CARRIER

- Perhaps I should explain the origins of the attached draft.
- I was at a meeting this afternoon with Sir R Armstrong, Sir M Palliser, Sir F Cooper, Sir Henry Leach and others to discuss the draft message to Mr Haig following the Cabinet's decision. After our consideration of that, Sir R Armstrong said that he knew that you and the Home Secretary were extremely worried about the possibility of an attack on the carrier in its present position close to or in Argentine territorial waters and moving North and that the Attorney General had expressed anxiety on this score at the earlier OD(SA) meeting. He also thought that the Chancellor of the Duchy had doubts too. Sir Henry Leach of course argued the Ministry of Defence view that if the carrier was not immobilized when opportunity offered there might not be another easy chance.
- I had to leave the meeting at that point to come back to the FCO for another engagement. When I returned I was told that it had been agreed - rightly - that a ministerial decision was necessary to change the present rules. It had also been agreed that a draft should be put to you for this purpose and that, since I had not heard all the arguments, it could be prepared in the Cabinet Office.
- Sir R Armstrong, Sir M Palliser and I strongly agree with the argumentation set out in the draft. I am not sure of Sir F Cooper's position but I have no doubt that he sees the point. Sir Henry Leach is, of course, opposed.
- Although I entirely accept that the carrier can be a serious future threat to British forces, I think that it would be disastrous if it were sunk at the present time and in present circumstances. As you know only too well, this is a highly charged issue but I believe that one more effort would be worthwhile. I also think that something is needed in writing setting out the arguments rather than an oral discussion.
- I have wondered whether Sir R Armstrong could put a minute to the Prime Minister but the points in the draft are essentially ones for the Foreign Office.

Antony Acland

5 May 1982

SECRET

Antony Acland

SECRET

Reference Dept.

PSW/203  
see PS  
Newington  
McWilliam  
Hd / Def. Dept.  
New Zealand



PM/82/34

PRIME MINISTER

1. We agreed at Cabinet this morning that, if the Cabinet accepted the latest United States proposals, it should be on the basis that instructions to ceasefire should not be issued until an agreement had been formally concluded, and that there was no immediate need to change the rules of engagement for our forces in the South Atlantic. I am content with that; but I am strongly of the view that we should look again at the position of the Argentine aircraft carrier during this phase of the diplomatic discussions.

2. We have good reason to believe that she is in, or very close to, Argentinian territorial waters, heading North and so away from the Falkland Islands and our task force, and that her attack capability is reduced to six aircraft with a radius of only 200 miles. Thus the carrier in her present posture can hardly be regarded as a direct or imminent threat to our task force.

3. I know that the Attorney General considers that, so long as the carrier is on its present course and in its present posture, our justification for attacking it would be questionable.

4. I am in no doubt whatever about the political consequences of an attack upon the carrier in that posture, while we were waiting for the Argentine response to the proposals which Cabinet endorsed this morning. International opinion would be outraged. We should, I believe, forfeit much of our Parliamentary and public support at home. We should make it impossible, at least in the short term, for Argentina to accept an agreement of the kind envisaged. And,

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most important, we should be thought by the Americans, and by Mr Haig in particular, to have deliberately destroyed the prospects of an initiative to which we had just given our conditional agreement. I believe that the consequences of that for American public opinion and the American Government's support could be incalculably grave.

5. No doubt we should have to accept these consequences if the carrier represented an imminent military threat to our people in the South Atlantic; and clearly, if the fighting in the South Atlantic has to continue, and particularly if we have to make a landing and try to repossess the Falkland Islands by force of arms, it will be important to eliminate the threat posed by the carrier. But there is not in my judgement an immediate military need to attack the carrier in its present posture. In the next few days, therefore, so long as the latest initiative is running, I think we need to have possible political consequences of an attack on the carrier at the front of our minds.

6. Thus I should like to urge that the instructions to the submarine concerned should now be modified, at least until we know whether the Argentines are going to accept the Haig proposals, to the effect that the submarine should not attack the aircraft carrier so long as she continues on a northerly course in or close to Argentine territorial waters. During this period the submarine Commander might be authorised to attack the carrier only if she has moved out of the vicinity of Argentine territorial waters and has changed course in a direction which clearly implies hostile intent.

7. I am sending copies of this minute to the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Attorney General and Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'F.P.', with a horizontal line underneath.