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Secretary of State



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SEE (14)

SEE (15)

Mr Gillmore

2) Private Secretary

1) Mr Wright

ALQ 050/11 c.c.

13 MAY 1982

PS/PUS
Mr Wright
Mr Giffard
Mr Bullard
Mr Ure
Mr Fearn, SAmD
Mr Darwin, Legal Advisers
Mr Fenn, News Dept
Mr Mallaby, Planning Staff

FALKLANDS : BOMBING ARGENTINE AIRFIELDS

Problem

1. What should be our attitude if a proposal should surface at ODSA to bomb airfields on the Argentine mainland?

Recommendation

2. I recommend strongly that the Secretary of State should oppose any such suggestion, on the grounds that it would be wrong, militarily uncertain and politically disastrous.

Background and Argument

3. The possibility of 'taking out' military airfields on the Argentine mainland in order to neutralise Argentine land-based air power has already been mooted by some back benchers in the House. It would be surprising if a formal proposal to this effect were not to emerge soon from the Chiefs of Staff, although others in the MOD are known to have profound reservations. Obviously it would be very gratifying if there were some way of neutralising at a stroke the land-based Argentine air power which is still available for use against the Task Force, particularly if an amphibious landing on the Falklands is contemplated. The problem of land-based air would be increased if the Argentines were to move aircraft from their carrier southwards to permanent land-basing.

4. There are two categories of objection, however, to bombing the mainland. In military terms it will be very difficult to achieve the main objective, although the Chiefs

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of Staff will no doubt hotly contest this. Even the more modest aim of rendering Port Stanley airstrip permanently unuseable by the Argentines has so far escaped us. Logistically we are very ill-placed to mount strategic bombing sorties of the scale and frequency required. US military experience (confirmed to the Department, unsolicited, by a former senior Pentagon policy adviser) is that bombing runways with iron bombs is highly un-cost-effective, since holes can be filled in quicker than they are dug. It is therefore a matter of actually destroying the offending aircraft on the ground. If Argentina's airforce and maritime air assets are concealed, protected and distributed widely over useable airfields on the Argentine mainland, (and we must assume such precautions to be self-evident), a very large bombing effort would be required to catch them all, with a very high degree of precision if non-military damage and casualties were to be avoided.

5. The other main category of objection is political. (I do not deal here with the degree to which such action could be justified legally in certain circumstances as an extension of our arguments for 'self-defence', or by a formal declaration of war). It has to be accepted that for the overwhelming body of international opinion British bombing of the mainland of the second largest country in South America would be a quantum change in the level of hostility. It would almost certainly produce a new critical mass in Latin American opinion and lead instantly to a fresh recourse to Security Council and Rio Treaty procedures directed against us. We would forfeit most of the support for us from European partners and allies. The position of the United States in practice would also become highly equivocal, to put it no more strongly (notwithstanding recent nods and winks from Mr Haig - Washington telegram number 1678).

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. 3.

It would lead to widespread retaliation against British interests and personnel, particularly on the South American continent. As a measure of disproportionate force it would be seen to eclipse the original Argentine offence of a 'bloodless' military occupation of the Falklands. It would also, though this is perhaps not for the Department to judge, put paid to the chances of maintaining broad domestic political support for the Government's policy.

P J Weston
Defence Department

11 May, 1982

/I wholeheartedly

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Mr ~~Weston~~ (Defence Department)

Falklands: Bombing of Argentine Airfields

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The Secretary of State has seen your submission of 11 May and Mr Gillmore's and Mr Wright's comments on it. He is very much in agreement with your recommendation that we should strongly oppose any proposal to bomb Argentine airfields. He agrees that, in this conflict, international support for our position is not simply desirable but is in fact essential if we are to have any chance of achieving our objectives, including our military objectives. Bombing of the Argentine mainland would almost certainly mean that we would forfeit the great majority of international support.

J. E. Holmes
 (J E Holmes)

12 May 1982

cc: PS
 PS/PUS
 Mr Bullard
 Mr Wright
 Mr Giffard
 Mr Gillmore
 Mr Ure
 Mr Fearn, SAmD
 Sir I Sinclair, Legal Advisers
 Mr Mallaby, Planning Staff

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1. I wholeheartedly endorse Mr Weston's recommendation. The political damage to Britain's position, if we attacked mainland bases, could be catastrophic. If bombing took place this week it would almost certainly put paid to our chances of persuading our Community colleagues to continue economic sanctions. Even at a later stage it would, I believe, so undermine our political position, not only in Europe but with the Commonwealth and other un-aligned countries; that we would find ourselves virtually isolated.
2. There is a tendency in the MOD to underrate the importance of the political support which we enjoy. Even if in the end we are obliged to expel the Argentine garrison from the Falkland Islands by force, we shall need for a long while thereafter the help and support of our friends in sustaining our military presence in the Islands and in the ensuing negotiations. We cannot therefore afford an action of doubtful military value with such potentially grave political consequences.
3. No formal proposal for bombing the mainland has yet been put forward by the Chiefs of Staff. But, judging by past performance, the Secretary of State may face such a proposal at very short notice (or even no notice at all), perhaps this week. I am convinced we should resist it.

11 May 1982

cc PS/PUS
 Mr Wright
 Mr Giffard
 Mr Bullard
 Mr Ure
 Mr Fearn, SAmD
 Mr Darwin, Legal Advisers
 Mr Fenn, News Dept
 Mr Mallaby, Planning Staff

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D H Gillmore

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I also strongly support Mr. Weston's recommendation. Although it is true that Mr. Haig continues to encourage us to maintain maximum military pressure on Argentina, it is worth noting that, in his latest conversation with Sir N. Henderson (Washington telegram No. 1686) Mr. Haig also has argued against attacks on the mainland that might involve civilian targets.

(P.R.H. Wright)
11 May, 1982.

cc PS/FUS

Mr. Giffard
Mr. Bullard
Mr. Ure
Mr. Gillmore
Mr. Fearn, SAmD
Mr. Darwin, Legal Advisers
Mr. Fenn, News Dept.
Mr. Mallaby, Planning Staff
Mr. Weston, Defence Dept.

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Mr Fearns
Mr Giffard

1 agree with number of this. The
main points are effectively covered
in para 5 of the West's minute
of 11 May (which I agreed in draft).
On 12 below, we must have some
officially in "reassuring moderation"
in Latin America: but will of
course need to try.

J. G. Ham 12/1

BOMBING MAINLAND ARGENTINA: THE SOUTH AMERICA DIMENSION

A 1. I strongly endorse the domestic and international arguments advanced in Mr Weston's submission of 11 May against bombing air bases on the Argentine mainland. In addition there are also compelling Latin American arguments for discounting this military option. (13)

2. So far Latin America has not been prepared to provide much more than verbal/moral support to Argentina. Colombia, Brazil, Paraguay and Ecuador have limited sympathy for Argentina and do not wish to be dragged into the conflict. Even the more hawkish states (Venezuela, Peru, Bolivia and Panama) have so far refrained from providing proven material assistance. These countries see Lima telegram no. 167 and (184) Caracas telegram no. 156 have indicated that any attack on South America's continental mainland might oblige them to honour their international commitments under the Rio Treaty to send troops and aircraft etc. The Chilean Airforce Commander (see Santiago telegram no. 214) has also drawn our attention to the serious consequences of bombing mainland airfields. (185) ALQ 50/504/1

3. An attack would provide Argentina with the necessary ammunition for further recourse to the Rio Treaty Organisation and in these circumstances it should not be difficult for her to secure the majority required to impose diplomatic, economic and possibly military sanctions against the UK. The uniting of Latin America against the UK would have grave political, military as well as economic consequences. (26) ALQ 50/362/2

4. In return for the limited benefits to be gained from attacking mainland air bases, given the failure to knock out completely the much easier target of the Port Stanley airstrip, we would place the considerable armed might of Latin America at Argentina's disposal. Argentina would be able to replace any Mirage lost in the raids on the mainland with planes from her neighbours and would have access to their spares and support facilities. There would also be the risk of neighbouring states providing naval assistance and the mere threat of this would pose further headaches for the task force. In economic terms, it would mean that our trade with Latin America which amounted to a thousand million pounds worth of exports in 1980, our investments of £1.5 billion and bank loans totalling US \$40 billion would be in jeopardy.

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5. While we might consider risking our relations with Latin America and our economic stake, it is quite clear that our EEC and North American partners would not. Once the conflict with Argentina had been transformed into a struggle between the UK and the whole of Latin America, we would be on our own.

6. While one understands the Military Commander's legitimate concern for the vulnerability of their troops to air attack from the Argentine mainland during the landing, the short term gains from bombing the mainland bases would be outweighed by the longer term military consequences. The MODs reluctance to renounce this option publicly is comprehensible, but it would be wise if the landing goes ahead for our Ambassadors to convey reassuring signals to the moderates in Latin America. The message would justify the invasion on the grounds that Argentina's intransigence and refusal to negotiate seriously rendered it unavoidable. It would underline our common concern with the international community to avoid any further escalation by attacking the mainland at this time and that we would only consider such action as a last resort, if air attacks from the Argentine mainland were posing a major threat to our troops. Argentina's neighbours would be invited to urge restraint on Argentina and persuade her back to the negotiating table.

R. J. Chase

R J Chase
South America Department

12 May 1982

cc: PS/PUS
Mr Gilmour
Mr Weston, Defence Dept
Mr Ure

*This was passed on the basis of the Minister's
submission under reference. These pp. should
now be put away, please.*

*Call
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