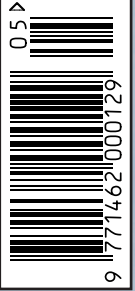


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IS TRIDENT A BROKEN SWORD?

COMMANDER ROBERT GREEN, WHO ONCE FLEW IN NUCLEAR-CAPABLE STRIKE JETS AND HELICOPTERS FROM UK AIRCRAFT CARRIERS, PONDERES WHETHER OR NOT THE BRITISH REALLY PREFER PRESERVING AND RENEWING THE TRIDENT DETERRENT TO AN EFFECTIVE ROYAL NAVY.

In 1979 Margaret Thatcher swept into 10 Downing Street as Britain's first woman Prime Minister. I was a newly promoted Commander RN and working in the Ministry of Defence. As Personal Staff Officer to the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Policy), I watched my admiral facilitate the internal debate on replacing the Polaris submarine force. Mrs Thatcher insisted upon a scaled down version of the massively expensive, over-capable US-origin Trident system, despite it threatening the future of the Royal Navy as a balanced, useful force. She rammed the decision through without consulting her Cabinet. The Chiefs of Staff, despite misgivings, were brought into line. My final appointment in the Navy was as Staff Officer (Intelligence) to Commander-in-Chief Fleet (C-in-C Fleet) in the Northwood command bunker

outside London, where operational control of the Royal Navy was coordinated. I ran the 40-strong team providing round-the-clock intelligence support to the Polaris submarine on so-called deterrent patrol, as well as the rest of the Fleet. In 1981, the Thatcher government, desperate to find savings because of the P.M.'s determination to have Trident, announced a major defence review. With projected cuts to the Royal Navy's aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates, my chances of commanding a ship - were slim, so I applied for redundancy. Notification of my successful application came one week into the 1982 Falklands

War. The Royal Navy's role was pivotal, so the war was directed from Northwood by my boss, Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse. At one point the outcome was in the balance: Our ships were being sunk and colleagues killed. If Argentinean strike aircraft or submarines had sunk an aircraft carrier or troop ship before the landing force got ashore, the British might have risked defeat. What would Mrs Thatcher have done? Until then, she had been the most unpopular Prime Minister in British history. Now she had become the Iron Lady, and needed a military victory to save her political career. Polaris had not deterred Argentina's President Galtieri

from ordering an invasion of the Falkland Islands. With victory in his grasp, would he have believed, let alone been deterred by, a threat from Mrs Thatcher to use nuclear weapons against Argentina? Defeat would have been unthinkable for the British military, and would have ended Mrs Thatcher's career. She was a true believer in nuclear deterrence. Yet, if she had threatened Galtieri with a nuclear strike, he would have publicly called her bluff and relished watching President Reagan try to rein her in. The deployed Polaris submarine's Commanding Officer, briefed by me before going on patrol, would have been faced with a shift of target. Had he obeyed the order, Britain would have become a pariah state, its case for retaining the Falklands lost in the international outrage at such a war crime, especially against a non-nuclear state. Nuclear deterrence failure would have compounded the ignominy of defeat. In January 1991, during the first Gulf War, Israel's nuclear weapons failed to deter Saddam Hussein from launching nearly 40 Scud missile attacks on its territory, luckily causing very few casualties. Meanwhile, as the crisis in the Gulf continued, in Britain, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) narrowly missed wiping out the entire War Cabinet with a mortar-bomb

attack, launched through the roof of a van parked in central London. A more direct threat to the government could barely be imagined. What if instead they had threatened to use even a crude nuclear device? A counter-threat of nuclear retaliation on the IRA would have had zero credibility. Recently, I have been reviewing the remarkable memoirs of retired US Air Force General Lee Butler. Titled 'Uncommon Cause', they are a riveting read, and will provide potent ammunition for those opposing Trident renewal. Volume I covers the dramatic story of how, as C-in-C Strategic Air Command 1991-92, Butler recommended and masterminded that organisation's replacement with a joint USAF-USN Strategic Command, of which he became the first C-in-C (1992-94) commanding the entire US nuclear war machine. Yet in 1996, following retirement, he came out against nuclear deterrence. Since meeting him when he spoke in New Zealand in 1997, he has been a powerful support for me. For these reasons, in 2010 I wrote a book 'Security Without Nuclear Deterrence', the creation of which helped me clarify my position against Trident Successor. With the debate over the issue ongoing in the UK as I write, here are my

responses to the main pro-Trident renewal arguments (with their assertions on why we should have it in italicised summary quotes): 'Britain cannot afford to risk its independent national security, lose credibility amongst its allies, and leave France as the sole European nuclear power.' The Government, Ministry of Defence, RN and public face a reality check regarding the defence budget. Respected commentators are expressing growing concern about the mismatch between ambition and austerity; and Trident replacement is set to be the single largest procurement programme of the next decade. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) failed to expose how vulnerable it is, especially when placed alongside the Government commitment to complete both super-carriers, equip and always keep operational one of them. As RUSI's Malcolm Chalmers observed in his recent report *Mind The Gap*, the attendant constraints 'will make the exercise of a clear-headed strategic intellect vital to the management of defence.' There also seems to be a gut instinct against allowing France to become the sole nuclear-armed power in Europe but how rational and responsible is this? It is even less rational when one considers that the so-called 'independent British deterrent' has come to depend upon a US-leased missile system, US software in the fire control system, US targeting data and satellite communications? This trumps any Little Englander political posturing about the French. Would it not be wiser to turn the current defence budget crisis to advantage, and exploit the opportunity cost to provide a far more tangible, useful and credible conventional deterrence capability? The US and UK would not have to sustain the fiction of UK nuclear independence; and the UK

government would be seen to have truly enhanced its Special Relationship as closest US ally, rather than nuclear vassal. 'Since 1945 nuclear deterrence has prevented war and provided stability between the major powers.' The Soviet motive in occupying Eastern Europe was to create a defensive buffer zone and ensure that Germany could never threaten Russia again. Soviet archives show that NATO's conventional capability and soft power were seen as far more significant than its nuclear posture. Nuclear deterrence meant that nuclear war was avoided by luck and there were moments when it was dangerously close (Cuban missile crisis, 1962; Exercise Able Archer miscalculation, 1983; Russian meteorological research rocket, 1995). Also, it prolonged and intensified the Cold War. As for stability, the reality is that nuclear deterrence stimulates arms races. Some 1,500 US and Russian strategic nuclear weapons remain at dangerously high alert states, especially with the reckless nuclear posturing over Ukraine. 'The number of states acquiring nuclear weapons has continued to grow.' This is a direct consequence of the use of nuclear weapons as a currency of power by the five permanent UN Security Council members (known as the P5); and their modernisation plans flout their obligation under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to get rid of their arsenals. For the 184 states which have made a treaty commitment to renounce nuclear weapons, the UK's moral authority is compromised by its nuclear posture. 'There was no international impact when South Africa and Ukraine abandoned nuclear weapons.' Neither qualified as a recognised nuclear weapon state. The UK was the third state to detonate a nuclear weapon, and is one of the P5. British anti-

nuclear breakout would, therefore, be a sensational game-changer. 'No benefit would flow from a UK decision not to renew Trident.' Seizing this moment to take the initiative would enable the Government genuinely to claim this was in line with its commitment under NPT Article VI, and to be the much quoted 'force for good in the world', from which it would reap massive kudos and global respect. Britain would, for example, retain its P5 status. The opportunity cost for the RN would be immediately measurable; and the Army and RAF would no longer resent the RN's preoccupation with a militarily useless irrelevance. In short, do the British really prefer the stick-on hairy chest of Trident to an effective Royal Navy? And finally, let's consider why no Prime Minister would have to 'press the button'. When it comes to the macho ritual nuclear test of British political leadership, the reality is that no Prime Minister would have to do this. That dirty work is delegated to the Commanding Officer of the deployed Trident submarine. Back when I was in the crew of a nuclear-armed Buccaneer strike jet or Sea King anti-submarine helicopter, we were also given that dreadful, suicidal responsibility.

• Cdr Green served in the Royal Navy from 1962-82. As a Fleet Air Arm Observer, he navigated Buccaneer nuclear strike aircraft tasked, potentially, to fly against a target in Russia, and then anti-submarine helicopters equipped with nuclear depth-bombs. He is now Co-Director of the Disarmament & Security Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand www.disarmsecure.org His book, 'Security Without Nuclear Deterrence' is now available in an updated, revised ebook version. It is available via Amazon and other online sources.

THE GREAT TRIDENT DEBATE

At one time Britain maintained a substantial carrier strike force, including HMS Ark Royal (pictured here in the 1970s with nuclear-capable Buccaneers embarked). Can it afford the same today and also Trident? Photo: Private Collection.



A Vanguard Class nuclear deterrent submarine returns to HM Naval Base Clyde. Photo: Nigel Andrews.