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PRIME MINISTER

You will have seen the lead story in yesterday's Guardian, by the paper's defence correspondent, David Fairhall, about Polaris replacement. I attach a copy herewith.

2. I have discussed the article with the Ministry of Defence.
3. As to matters of substance, I understand that, in so far as it is well based and some of the material is positively wrong - there is nothing that an able and experienced defence correspondent could not have picked up from material already known to be available, plus reasonable deduction. There are two exceptions to this: the reference to the fact that the Chiefs of Staff collectively support the Trident proposal (though this might have been deduced from Sir Peter Hill-Norton's article in the Economist) and the assertion that some design work relevant to MIRVs has already been done at AWRE.
4. What is new, and in the light of President Carter's message extremely damaging, is the reference to the fact that the subject is shortly to go to a Committee of Ministers. There was an earlier reference in a PA piece on 25th September to the existence of an overseas and defence affairs Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by you, which would produce a report to go to the full Cabinet six or eight weeks later for a decision in principle. I understand that the author of this piece told Sir Frank Cooper that, though he would not disclose his source, he could say that it was no-one working in the Ministry of Defence. We believe that Peter Hennessy of the Times also knows about MISC 7. But we do not think that Mr. Fairhall's references are based just on the piece of 25th September: they are too accurate and up-to-date for that.
5. The only conclusion can be that somebody is leaking. Because the journalist is a defence correspondent, the suspicion naturally falls on the Ministry of Defence - though, if what was said earlier is to be believed, no-one working in the Ministry of Defence was responsible for the earlier story.

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6. The Ministry of Defence agreed that procedural disclosure is deplorable and damaging. They are making discreet enquiries to try to find out more about the possible source. They do not believe that there is a clear case at this stage for a full "leak" enquiry in respect of their Department.

7. I have no great confidence that a "leak" enquiry would be more likely to discover the source in this case than it has been in earlier cases. But I regard the disclosure as very serious and damaging, and I do not think that we should let it go without any action. I am minded to wait until after the weekend, to see whether the Ministry of Defence's soundings have produced any further indications. If they have not done so, I am disposed to initiate a full interdepartmental leak enquiry. In the circumstances, this would have to be extended to Ministers as well as to officials and to the military. The extension to Ministers would require your agreement; I should be glad to know whether you would be prepared to agree to that.

8. I also think that we should try to put the record straight with the Americans, who will no doubt pick up this story. I propose to do this by means of a letter from Mr. Wade-Gery or me to Dr. Aaron, who was the bearer of President Carter's message.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

2nd November, 1979

UK ready to buy Trident missiles

By David Fairhall,
Defence Correspondent

A firm decision has been taken at the Ministry of Defence that Britain's independent nuclear deterrent should be replaced in the 1990s by a fleet of five submarines carrying American Trident missiles fitted with British warheads.

A recommendation will be submitted next week to a special Cabinet sub-committee, chaired by Mrs Thatcher, which is expected to endorse the plan.

The hope is that the Trident's purchase, a direct suc-

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cessor to the Polaris missile deal but not on such favourable terms, can then be finalised with President Carter during Mrs Thatcher's visit to Washington in December.

The plan is to have the first of the new submarines in service by the mid-1990s, with a fleet of five boats eventually replacing the Royal Navy's present fleet of four Polaris submarines so as to have at least two boats on patrol at any time.

Each of them will probably carry 16 Trident I missiles, which are three-stage ballistic rockets with a range of 7,000 kilometres, currently under development for the US Navy.

The Aldermaston Atomic Weapons Research Establishment will be asked to develop a new warhead carrying MIRVs (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles) on which some design work has already been done. It is not clear whether the British warhead would have as an option manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles (MARVs) as planned for the American Trident I, but either design would presumably require a major testing programme.

The cost of the new deterrent force can hardly be less than £4,000 millions, since the last authoritative estimate of such a replacement, prepared by Ian Smart for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, suggested that it might cost nearly £3,000 millions in 1976.

The Pentagon seems to have

made a reasonable preliminary offer for the Trident sale, in terms of the proportion of development costs the British missiles would carry, but there would be no question of repeating the generous terms on which the Polaris system was handed over in the wake of the embarrassing Skybolt cancellation.

Although the Ministry of Defence proposal has been approved by the joint chiefs of staff under the chairmanship of Admiral Sir Terence Lewin, as Chief of the Defence Staff, both the Army and the RAF are known to have some reservations about the prospect of spending perhaps 10 per cent of our defence budget on a deterrent force during the peak four or five years of its development.

They would probably have been a lot more restive had this expenditure not fallen beyond even the long term, 10-year costing period. The submarines will not be under construction until the early 1990s.

None of the projects currently being pursued by the generals and air marshals, such as Rhine Army's new main battle tank or the RAF's Harrier/Jaguar replacement, will therefore be directly affected.

But if Mrs Thatcher and her Ministers do endorse the Trident plan next week, its public debate is likely to be vigorous both in Parliament, where the Defence Secretary, Mr Francis Pym, has already promised a debate, and in the US Congress.

The Government is bound to be challenged as to why Britain still needs an "independent" nuclear deterrent, why the Polaris system cannot be modernised and, above all, why the deterrent force should not consist of much cheaper nuclear-armed cruise missiles of the kind we are in any case proposing to have based in this country—owned and operated by the Americans—as part of the collective plan to modernise NATO's so-called theatre nuclear weapons.

The vast amounts of money saved, some will argue, would buy conventional forces giving far more real "independence" and freedom of manoeuvre in NATO than nuclear weapons that would only be used as a last, suicidal resort.

*Extract from The Guardian
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