

Select Committee on Defence Minutes of Evidence

Examination of Witnesses (Questions 780 - 799)WEDNESDAY 19 JANUARY 2000 [*Afternoon*]

THE RT HON GEOFFREY HOON MP, MR KEVIN TEBBITT, MR RICHARD HATFIELD, AIR MARSHAL SIR JOHN DAY, AIR MARSHAL MALCOLM PLEDGER AND MR JOHN HOWE

780. That was the response?

(*Mr Hatfield*) In a sense, there is not very much to clarify. My own personal feeling is that it is partly, what is now the standard term, "sub-strategic" which leads to the problem. It suggests, as it were, these might be tactical weapons used for war fighting. That has never been the case, at least not for about 20 years even in theory. The point of sub-strategic weapons is to give you an option in extreme circumstances other than going straight for a full-scale nuclear exchange. Those circumstances are even more remote for this country at the moment than they were in the past but you can never rule them out.

781. The previous Secretary of State gave an answer to a question on 26 March last year, Column 433, in which he referred to, "In extreme circumstances of self-defence, a capability for the more limited use of nuclear weapons would allow us to signal to an aggressor that he has miscalculated our resolve, without using the full destructive power which Trident offers."

(*Mr Hatfield*) That is a more elegant description of what I just said.

782. I was wondering whether what you had said and the speech in September to which you have referred—

(*Mr Hatfield*) March.

783. No, you referred to a speech made in September by the previous Secretary of State.

(*Mr Hatfield*) No, it was March. March 7 I think[2].

Mr Gapes: The Aberdeen speech was in March, so that is around the same time.

Chairman

784. Did you write it, Mr Hatfield?

(*Mr Hatfield*) I contributed!

Mr Gapes

785. What I am trying to get at is the circumstances in which Trident would be used as a sub-strategic nuclear system and a clear definition of where we are with regard to our nuclear strategy. I would be grateful for some clarification. If there is not time now, you might want to write to us but I would be grateful to have some clarity about where we are today, in the year 2000, as opposed to a year ago. Linked to that is one final area I want to probe, which relates to paragraph 8 of the Defence White Paper, which is the whole question of the American testing, or the failed testing I suppose you could say, of anti-ballistic missile systems. Clearly that has enormous implications for not just our

of anti-ballistic missile systems. Clearly that has enormous implications for not just our own future but also future European security. The statement in paragraph 8 is, "... it would be premature to decide on acquiring a ballistic missile defence capability."

(*Mr Hoon*) That remains the position.

786. Can I put it to you that I think that is rather weak? Defending the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty has considerable benefits for this country so it may not just be premature, it actually might be very dangerous to our national security. I would welcome your response to that statement.

(*Mr Hoon*) I do not accept it. I think we have to have regard to developments—

Mr Cohen

787. The Prime Minister does. He has called on the United States to protect the ABM Treaty and abide by it.

(*Mr Hoon*) That is not quite the point which Mike was making, with respect. What we have to do is have regard to developments which are occurring around the world without necessarily questioning the validity of the existing treaties. We cannot simply ignore the developments which are occurring and obviously in looking at them we have to be ready to respond if necessary, but that does not in any way qualify either what the Prime Minister said about existing treaties or indeed undermine our support for them.

Mr Gapes

788. So when are we going to see the outcome of this re-thinking which is going on on these matters?

(*Mr Hoon*) I do not think that depends on any particular calendar date or any particular period of time which will have to elapse. It depends entirely on the nature of the threat and the nature of those developments.

789. So it does not depend on what the Americans decide and whether the Americans decide to go ahead and then their negotiations with the Russians and the Russians saying, "No way are we prepared to accept change in the ABM Treaty" and then we have a crisis between America, Europe within NATO and with Russia?

(*Mr Hoon*) On the contrary, these are matters which will have to be carefully considered amongst our allies and it is those kinds of discussions which I was alluding to when I talked about developments. This is not a matter peculiarly for the United Kingdom, it is a matter which NATO will have to look at very carefully, and we have very considered discussions on these kind of developments.

(*Mr Hatfield*) Could I also clarify one point? There are two forms of ballistic missile defence being discussed in paragraph 8, only one of which concerns the American's National Missile Defence programme and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The other is Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence which is a separate issue, which does not conflict with the ABM Treaty even in principle, which several countries, not only the United States, are developing or thinking of buying into. That is a second issue which was discussed in the Strategic Defence Review and which we would also judge, for the moment at least, as premature for this country in relation to its particular circumstances.

790. Perhaps it would have been helpful if the paragraph had been split because it would have made clear that distinction. As it is worded at the moment, I think there is a certain ambiguity in the paragraph. Leaving that aside, there is one other point which is the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. What progress is there on having an

is the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. What progress is there on having an enhanced protocol on that matter? Is there anything positive you can report? There was a proposal, was there not, to have a conference in London this year. Where are we on that?

(*Mr Hoon*) We have certainly played a major role in that process and indeed, as you say, we have offered to provide a venue at which a concluded treaty might be signed, but that does not entirely depend on our decision-making.

791. Where is the obstacle?

(*Mr Hoon*) There are a number of discussions which still have to take place.

(*Mr Tebbit*) The main difficulty is a verification regime which works. It is no good having arms control treaties without that.

792. That is a problem with the existing biological weapons one.

(*Mr Tebbit*) That remains the obstacle. Can I just go back to one of your earlier points about nuclear weapons, because I think there is a mystique developing which is not here? The fundamental principle of nuclear deterrents is uncertainty and uncertainty in the mind of the potential aggressor about the precise way in which he might be attacked in a way which makes the damage disproportionate to any gain he might wish to have but certainty that if he did miscalculate the consequences of our action would be devastating on him. Trident is a very good system in both cases but it does not help to say precisely the circumstances in which we might use Trident in a sub-strategic way, it is sufficient for the potential aggressor to know that if it were used it would outweigh any benefit he might wish to gain. That is a fundamental principle of deterrence and it remains exactly the same.

793. I am aware of the formulation. It has been there since Sir Michael Quinlan and—
(*Mr Tebbit*) It remains the same in this context.

794. Nevertheless, Committees have consistently asked those questions over the years and I am sure they will continue to do so.

(*Mr Tebbit*) And I think you will continue to get the same answer, which is why I thought it worthwhile to give it to you now. So the precise target and the precise circumstances are not that different from the aircraft which used to deliver the W-177 bombs but delivery through Trident makes it the more determined and effective.

Mr Cohen

795. But the problem is that it is almost certainly not a proportionate response. For example, you are prepared to use this against non-nuclear powers. If it was about a more limited use of nuclear weapons, this is still a massive increase over what was said at Washington, for example.

(*Mr Hatfield*) We have not said that. What I was trying to explain earlier was that it is a weapon we would use in very extreme circumstances. I think the answer to the question, "What has changed", not only over the last "year but the last ten years", is the degree of risk of those circumstances arising. The circumstances in which you would wish to rely on it are when the country has not got any other option and in the current strategic environment that seems very unlikely. You could argue the Russians have gone through exactly the opposite process, which is why they invented a doctrine which is rather similar because they now regard themselves as conventionally weak. If nobody threatens us in a way which threatens our vital interest, we will not use Trident, and the whole point of it is not to use it.

Chairman

Chairman

796. Thank you. Mr Hatfield, you made a remark about Aberdeen University. Were you being frank and totally serious? Was that the response we asked for, a speech delivered in Aberdeen? With all due respect to an ancient and venerable university, is that the Ministry of Defence's response to our request for greater clarification on policy? I do not speak as any member of CND or ex-CND, I have never worn the badge, either in front or behind, but I think it does require greater clarification and perhaps you could at least send us a copy of your—sorry, Lord Robinson's—presentation please, but I do not think that is quite what we had in mind.

(Mr Hatfield) Chairman, I am afraid I was responding to the exact quote which was from our side of the table, which was that we were looking for an opportunity to say something on public record about this. That was the Aberdeen speech. I entirely accept that this Committee also likes to have an answer and indeed the rather more precisely worded answer was the parliamentary answer. I think part of the problem which we have been grappling with today is that I think the Committee is looking for a long and detailed explanation on this point when actually we do not think there is a long and detailed explanation. It is a very simple point which I have just been trying to convey to you and I hope I have done better at this attempt than I did last time.

(Mr Tebbit) That is why the Permanent Secretary intervened, to try to make that point, and I am impressed and flattered that you should have linked me to Michael Quinlan.

Mr Cann

797. I detect in paragraph 126 a certain amount of frustration about the misunderstandings about what defence diplomacy means and does not mean. Would you like to take this opportunity verbally to say what you think it does mean and how much progress has been made to change the quantity and focus of our activities to go along with that?

(Mr Hoon) I do not want to simply repeat the words which are set out in the paragraph before but the purpose of adding defence diplomacy as an explicit responsibility of the Ministry of Defence was to try to draw together a number of separate activities which in the past have been looked at in a rather incoherent way. Supporting arms control, outreach to Central and Eastern Europe and the other activities, some of which have been touched on already, are now explicit responsibilities within the Department and people are within the Department responsible for carrying through those activities in a way which, as I indicated earlier, also involves other departments and means we are working in a very joined-up way in this particular area of activity.

798. Does that mean we have just put them all into the same file or are we doing anything new?

(Mr Hoon) I have mentioned already some of the new things we are looking at but I think it is inherent in defence diplomacy that it is sometimes, in the short term at any rate, difficult to see a precise result. It is something we can point to and say, "Look, we have managed to prevent this kind of conflict or that kind of conflict." It is a process of trying to ensure a process of educating people from other countries. We are committed to ensuring that those countries which are appropriate should have the benefit of the kind of military courses which are available to people here, which are frankly the admiration of many places around the world. Part of what that instils is a commitment to democracy, for example, and not simply emphasising the purely military aspects but putting the military implications into a constitutional context which in the longer term—and I cannot prove this and it would be absurd if I was going to try—might well mean that someone who rises to a very senior military position might be, because of

mean that someone who rises to a very senior military position might be, because of the course he or she had undertaken very many years before, less likely to resort to military action in defiance of, say, a democratically elected government. These are very long term considerations.

(*Mr Hatfield*) I can actually list the activities we are doing, even though I cannot—

799. Are they new?

(*Mr Hatfield*) I will only list the new ones. For example, we have at the moment six military and six civilian advisers attached to governments around Central and Eastern Europe; we have several short term training teams in Eastern Europe; we are establishing a military training team in the Czech Republic which will be based there permanently but will also train some of the other countries in the region, and that will probably be about 25 people strong when it gets into place very shortly; we have already mentioned defence attachés where we are putting extra people into this area. So I think there is quite a lot we are doing. In one sense you can measure what we are doing because we are gradually spending some more money on it.

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