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## It's no time to ban the bomb: Britain still needs its nuclear deterrent

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SO "DON'T MESS with Britain" gives way to "Ban the Bomb". The cynic's account of Michael Portillo's most recent political evolution — into an opponent of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent — almost writes itself.

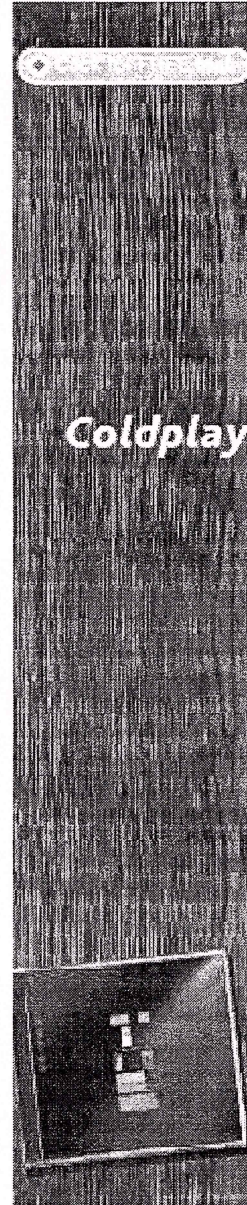
The cynic would be wrong. Mr Portillo was an effective Defence Secretary, and has initiated an important debate. He does not argue that nuclear deterrence is futile, or immoral or destructive of international comity. He concentrates on the British independent nuclear deterrent, and concludes that it is an extravagance whose *raison d'être* expired with the Soviet Union. It distorts our defence budget and our relationship with the United States. Replacing the current Trident programme will also undermine our credibility in countering nuclear proliferation.

This is a serious and seductive argument that suffers only from being the reverse of the truth. An independent deterrent has become more important since the Cold War, not less, as the relatively stable bilateral relationship between the superpowers has been superseded by new potential challengers. Remarkably, the only potential adversaries that Mr Portillo cites are the undeterrable "urban guerrilla detonating a dirty bomb in a suitcase in one of our cities" and the "residual risk" of Russia's nuclear arsenal. These scarcely exhaust the possibilities.

During the Cold War, the argument was that a second centre of nuclear decision-making within Nato strengthened deterrence. But the effect was marginal. Brutal and expansionist as they were, Soviet leaders were also sufficiently risk-averse not to wish to test the US commitment to Europe's defence, with or without a British nuclear force.

In our "second nuclear age", the US and its allies have a common interest with Russia in countering Islamist terrorism, and with China in containing North Korea. But beyond is an anarchic order in which regional powers and non-state actors complicate traditional notions of deterrence. Most potent of these threats are states for whom nuclear, chemical and biological weapons are, in President Bush's words, "not weapons of last resort, but militarily useful weapons of choice".

Seeking to sublimate regional conflict in international agreements is a noble venture and occasionally a useful one, but the ultimate guarantor of peace in a world lacking a sovereign international legal authority is the threat of superior force. Mr Portillo decries spending on a new nuclear programme sums that "dwarf our new-found generosity to Africa", but this is rhetoric: Mr Portillo does not appear to be calling for the money to be diverted to the overseas aid budget, but instead wants it spent on conventional forces. If an independent



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"nuclear deterrent adds something qualitative to our defence for which there is no substitute, then the money must be better spent this way than on additional aircraft or tanks.

Does an independent deterrent in fact provide an extra dimension of security? It does, in circumstances we may not expect but ought prudently to anticipate.

Consider a thought-experiment. When Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982, anti-nuclear campaigners were quick to point out that the independent nuclear deterrent had not deterred. This was true but superficial. Suppose that Argentina had been a nuclear-armed power too. Would the British government still have sent a task force to retake the islands? The likelihood would surely have been diminished, even with a low risk of direct nuclear exchange. Suppose further that Argentina had possessed nuclear weapons and — as the Labour Party then urged — Britain had not. In that case, it would have been inconceivable for any British Government to seek to recapture the Falklands. Merely by possessing nuclear weapons and without any explicit threat of nuclear blackmail, a dictatorship would have won territories it coveted, by force of arms and in defiance of international law.

The initial instincts of the Reagan Administration when the Falklands crisis broke were to mediate rather than take sides against the aggressor. Where the writ of collective security does not run, an aggressive state might rationally calculate (even if mistakenly) that the US would stand aside. The domestic pressures for the US to do that are always present. As the analyst Colin Gray has noted: "Americans may decide that while it is wise to remain No 1, they will remain No 1 solely to protect No 1. It would not be sensible, but domestic politics are not ruled by strategic reason."

Nuclear proliferation, or even just the suspicion of a rudimentary nuclear capability in the hands of a rogue state, exacerbates the problem.

The risk of nuclear blackmail by an emerging regional power is not negligible. It is as plausible as Saddam Hussein's annexation and plunder of Kuwait in 1990, which would have been irreversible had he possessed the ability to render Kuwait a radioactive wasteland. A nuclear deterrent allied to, but independent of, the US might in some circumstances cause an aggressor to reconsider, simply because it confers an additional and irreducible political counterweight not possessed by, say, Canada. That European capability cannot be left France alone, for the reason it is doubtless impolitic to mention that gangster regimes in autocratic states have scant historical grounds for regarding France as an impediment to their ambitions.

Strengthening nuclear counterproliferation measures is important, but the impact of a British nuclear renunciation would be minimal. The states most amenable to diplomatic pressure are not Iran or North Korea, but those such as South Africa (which voluntarily relinquished its nuclear capability) or Brazil that threaten no one. Israel has compelling independent reason not to commit to nuclear abolition; Pakistan will do so only if India does; India will not if China does not.

Mr Portillo perceives an internal political dynamic to Labour's deliberations. Having been electorally crippled by its anti-nuclear policies in the 1980s, Labour now wishes to avoid any hint of being soft on defence. But that is not an ignoble motivation. Labour Governments took Britain into Nato and modernised the old Polaris fleet, whereas the last Conservative Government disgracefully acquiesced in Serb aggression against Bosnia's multi-ethnic democracy. It will be historically appropriate if Labour takes the right and patriotic course once more.

*people used by Tories*