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Does Britain need nuclear missiles? No. Scrap them

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I don't want you to think me hopelessly incompetent, but when I was defence secretary I managed to make a hash of launching Britain's nuclear deterrent. I was on board one of the four enormous submarines that carry bunches of the Trident missile and the Royal Navy was demonstrating to me what would happen if the call came from No 10 to unleash mayhem against the enemy.

The secret codes arrived and were matched. The dual keys were inserted and the moment came when I was invited to press the button.

You may not have given much thought to the proper manner of initiating Armageddon. I gave the button a little stab as one might when pressing nine for an outside line. Be warned, reader, you need to press hard and long.

My effete attempt to obliterate Britain's foes led the system to enter an abort sequence. Bells clanged, lights flashed and sirens whooped. I think it might have been quieter if I had fired the missile. It was not easy to disguise the fact that I had goofed. While the crew struggled to reboot the boat's computers, I was led away for a less demanding briefing on the sonar array, this time strictly hands-off.

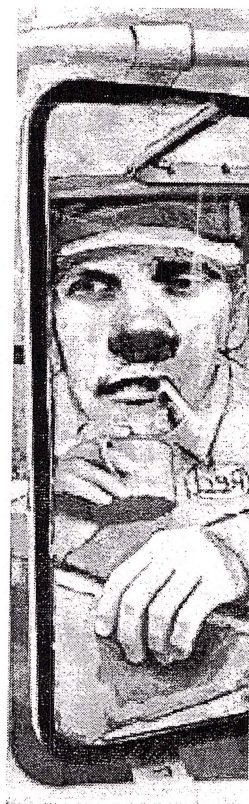
Perhaps it is wrong to be flippant about the dreadful destructive power that Britain keeps lurking under the waves 24 hours a day and 365 days a year. But the point is that nowadays nobody expects it to be used. That was the position when I visited the submarine nearly a decade ago.

The Soviet Union collapsed long ago. There is no threat from China. The new nuclear weapons states, from India to Israel, do not have the capability to hit us. Relations between Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac may be strained, but as yet we have no reason to fear a nuclear strike from *la force de frappe*.

So it seems rather surprising that according to some reports the government has decided to replace the Trident D5 missile and the submarines that carry it, at a cost of tens of billions of pounds.

Blair prides himself on being forward looking. His flexible mind impatiently discards the shibboleths of old think. Labour started its period in government with a review of defence policy to take account of the end of the cold war. But none of that new realism is allowed to affect the doctrine of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent.

Blair is scarred by the experience of Michael Foot, whose policy of



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It's time to fly
UNITED
A STRA BELLINCE MARINES

unilateral nuclear disarmament cost Labour dearly in the 1983 election. A Tory poster parodied his defence policy by showing an unarmed British soldier with his hands raised in surrender. Foot's manifesto was described as the longest suicide note in history.

But in those days there was a Soviet Union and an arms race. Even so by 1986 President Reagan (not generally thought a patsy) sought agreement with Mikhail Gorbachev at the Reykjavik summit to abolish both countries' nuclear weapons. He was restrained by Margaret Thatcher, who argued rightly that since the world cannot un-invent the technology, the United States must maintain a nuclear deterrent.

The arguments for Britain are quite different. Blair lacks the flexibility even to bring his thinking into line with where Reagan's was nearly 20 years ago.

The case for Britain having an independent nuclear deterrent depended on the existence of the Soviet Union. That superpower had the capacity to launch warheads simultaneously to wipe out the cities and the land-based nuclear forces of the United States and western Europe.

Confronting such a well equipped enemy, we had to complicate his calculations. The Russians might not believe that America would risk nuclear war in defence of its European allies. So France and the UK acquired their own systems to reduce the uncertainty and increase the deterrence.

Three Nato nations would have submarine-launched missiles and the Soviet Union could not hope to trace all of them. Russia could not mount a first strike without the near certainty that in response Moscow would be obliterated.

None of those considerations applies today. Whatever residual risk may be posed by Russia's poorly managed nuclear arsenal can be handled by the United States. If the UK diverts billions of pounds from its future defence budgets into nuclear weapons that will never be used, it will have less money to spend on useful things such as aircraft carriers and submarines that fire cruise missiles. We could be more powerful and a more useful ally for America if we did not waste money on renewing the nuclear deterrent.

Apparently Downing Street does not want to allow the French to become Europe's only nuclear weapons power. It's an argument that would look well in a Yes, Minister script, but in real life it is beneath contempt.

What advantage does France reap from its nuclear status? Certainly in our diplomatic dealings with Paris we never give it a thought. Is Blair seriously arguing that we should spend billions of pounds on a nuclear upgrade not because it is necessary or useful but because we don't want the French to feel smug? If there were any merit in having nuclear weapons we could quite cheaply attach a warhead to a cruise missile that would be fired from an aircraft. Some defence mandarins are horrified at the idea because it would remove the element of surprise. But in truth that is just a "boys' toys" argument: they simply want the most complex system possible for its own sake. We have no need to surprise, say, North Korea. The more notice it has that we are loading the weapon onto the plane the better our chance of avoiding war.

In reality our most likely nuclear opponent is not a country but an urban guerrilla detonating a dirty bomb in a suitcase in one of our cities. Trident would be ready to retaliate and someone better trained than I could fire it. But at whom, exactly? Whitehall thinks that possessing nuclear weapons helps to secure Britain's position as one

of the five permanent members of the United Nations security council. But if the ability to blow up the planet is the qualification for presiding over the world's peacemaking body, then we should already have rewarded India, Pakistan and Israel with membership and we should be preparing to welcome Iran and North Korea.

It is a dangerous line of argument. We encourage developing countries to believe that we will take them more seriously and invite them to the top table if they acquire nuclear weapons. Indeed, since Pakistan joined the nuclear club and recklessly spread weapons technology to the world's most terrifying states, General Musharraf, its leader, has been feted by President Bush.

In general the West's approach to proliferation is desperately muddled. The US gives the impression that it might go to war to stop Iran getting the bomb. That cannot be because it is a Muslim country nor because it gives its secrets to rogue states, since those points apply to Pakistan. Is it because Iran is not a democracy? In the past week it has voted for its president. Musharraf is unelected.

Britain welcomed Ukraine's decision to give up its membership of the nuclear club voluntarily. If it is right for Kiev, why is it unthinkable for us? Blair purports to lead the world towards eradicating world poverty and reversing climate change. However, when it comes to non-proliferation he remains silent.

Whether Blair will reduce global inequality or carbon emissions must be highly doubtful because it is not in his gift. However, it lies entirely in his hands to make a unilateral cut in the global arsenal of weapons and to lead the world by example.

It may be wrong to blame Blair alone. Apparently Gordon Brown is complicit in his decision. The Labour party is asleep. The Tories are too busy counting angels on the head of a pin to think about the world beyond London SW1.

Britain is about to spend sums on new nuclear weapons that dwarf our newfound generosity to Africa. The paltry sum of our European Union rebate doesn't stand comparison. Yet the chances are that Britain will commit itself to new weapons without debate.

Our political system fails us again. If only there were a switch we could throw to put it right. But don't ask me to do it. I would just cock it up.

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