

In May 1976 Fred Mulley, the Defence Minister, imposed a two year ban on all work into a long-term successor to Polaris. This was ignored by at least one senior Navy official, who described the order as being like King Canute trying to stop the tide.²⁵

Who argued this

In September 1977 there was formal consideration of the need for some initial studies. Denis Healey, the Chancellor, was concerned about the rising cost of the Chevaline programme. David Owen, Foreign Secretary, accepted the argument that it was too late to cancel the upgrade, but he challenged the validity of the Moscow criterion.²⁶ The Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office agreed that there should be a factual updating of the 1972 JIC assessment. This was carried out and reaffirmed their earlier judgment of the need for the Moscow criterion.²⁷

Against this background, Healey, Owen, Callaghan and Mulley met on 28 October 1977 to discuss Chevaline and a successor system. The bundle of papers on Chevaline included a report on the Moscow criterion, probably based on the new JIC assessment.²⁸ Denis Healey said Chevaline should be cancelled if the Moscow criterion was not required.²⁹ The meeting commissioned three studies. One was into Cruise Missiles and another into the timing of decisions on a successor. The third was "a study of the continuing validity of the Moscow criterion for the effectiveness of a British deterrent."³⁰

On 2 November 1977 Sir John Hunt brought together senior officials and they discussed how to take forward these studies. The review of the Moscow criterion became "a fundamental review of our philosophy of deterrence".³¹ It was to "avoid any preconceptions of about the importance of Moscow as a target".³² It was initially unclear what period this study would focus on -

"Although Ministers had not related the study to a particular timescale, it was seen as an issue distinct from the continuation of Chevaline and thus not restricted to the period in which Polaris would remain effective".³³

²⁵ "a political veto on the subject was imposed in the well-practiced tradition of Canute, and officially it still applies." Longer Term Basis of UK Deterrent, James Clarke, head of the Polaris Programme Assessment Group, 27 May 1977.

²⁶ Chevaline and Successor Systems, cover note for Defence Secretary's ministerial meeting, Michael Quinlan, 24 October 1977, DEFE 70-783 e59.

²⁷ "The Moscow criterion holds good. The JIC have updated the facts on which the judgment of its importance rested, and there is no basic change." Chevaline and Successor Systems, cover note for Defence Secretary's ministerial meeting, Michael Quinlan, 24 October 1977, DEFE 70-783 e59

²⁸ Chevaline and Successor Systems, cover note for Defence Secretary's ministerial meeting, Michael Quinlan, 24 October 1977, DEFE 70-783 e59

²⁹ "[On 28 October 1977] Mr Healey tended to argue that if the Moscow criterion was unnecessary Chevaline should be cancelled", Criteria for Deterrence, Draft minute from Sir John Hunt to Prime Minister, 12 July 1978, DEFE 23-219 e71

³⁰ Nuclear Matters, Note of a meeting held in Sir John Hunt's Room, 2 November 1977, DEFE 68-405 e1

³¹ Nuclear Matters, Note of a meeting held in Sir John Hunt's Room, 2 November 1977, DEFE 68-405 e1

³² Nuclear Matters, Note of a meeting held in Sir John Hunt's Room, 2 November 1977, DEFE 68-405 e1

³³ Nuclear Matters, Note of a meeting held in Sir John Hunt's Room, 2 November 1977, DEFE 68-405 e1; Clive Rose's proposed outline has a heading International Factors with a sub-heading "Forward look (to 2000)", suggesting that initially the proposed timeline was up to 2000. Framework for the study of the criteria for deterrence, Clive Rose, 7 November 1977 DEFE23-291 e05

The work was assigned to a small group chaired by Sir Antony Duff (the Duff group). Duff had been a submarine captain in the war and had then joined the Foreign Office. In 1978 he was chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

The title for the group was "Criteria for Deterrence". At their initial meeting they noted that their work was likely to be part of a wider study into a replacement for Polaris/Chevaline.³⁴ The group said that they would be looking at the period up to 2010. They were refining their focus into the timescale of a successor system and beyond the Chevaline period.

In November 1977 Sir Clive Rose, Cabinet Office, had drafted an outline for the study into ~~the criteria for deterrence~~. This included sub-headings – Minimum criterion, maximum criterion and targeting options.³⁵

~~The study was led by Sir Antony Duff.~~ The Duff group report presented three options: (1) Command centres inside and outwith Moscow, (2) Moscow, Leningrad and 2 other big cities, and (3) Targets excluding Moscow – (3a) 10 cities and (3b) 30 single-warhead targets. *These are the 3 options* His report concluded - "These three options are in order of certainty of deterrent effects; but we believe that any one of them would be adequate".³⁶

The most certain or "surest" deterrent might also, in Rose's earlier term, be described as the maximum criterion.³⁷ This was Option 1. In the same way, the minimum deterrent could be considered to be Option 3, which was still adequate.

The original deadline for completion of the Duff report was May 1978. This timescale wasn't met, but by June the report was almost complete. However, senior civil servants were reluctant to present it immediately to ministers. There were two issues. One was whether the report should be delayed for six months, until the study into practical options for a successor system was completed. The second was that Duff's report indicated that the Moscow criterion was not essential. Options 3a and 3b, which excluded Moscow, were considered "adequate". This was a concern because the rationale for Chevaline depended on the Moscow criterion and a major decision on future funding of this secret project had been scheduled for July 1978.

On 27 June 1978 Sir Douglas Wass of the Treasury wrote to Sir John Hunt, the Cabinet Secretary –

"There could be a problem about the progress report on Chevaline due to be put to Ministers shortly, especially if it is suggested that the project should now be funded to completion. The view taken in Tony Duff's report that the credibility of the deterrent could be maintained if we had the ability to cause unacceptable damage to certain major cities and other targets in Russia, excluding Moscow, seems to me to call the requirement for Chevaline into question."³⁸

On 7 July Sir Frank Cooper, Permanent Under Secretary at the Ministry of Defence, wrote to Hunt in response to the points raised by Wass. Cooper argued that the Duff report addressed the situation

³⁴ Criteria for Deterrence, Note of a meeting on 4 January 1978, DEFE 68-405 e2

³⁵ Framework for the study of the criteria for deterrence, Clive Rose, 7 November 1977 DEFE23-291 e05

³⁶ Criteria for Deterrence draft report, 25 May 1978, DEFE 23-219 e50;

³⁷ The term surest is in a handwritten comment from "R" (Richard Mottram), Successor Systems, letter from Michael Quinlan, 22 October 1979, DEFE 23-221 e35.

³⁸ Criteria for Deterrence, letter from Douglas Wass to Sir John Hunt, 27 June 1978, DEFE 23-219 e57.

from the 1990s to 2015, rather than the shorter timescale of Chevaline, and that “whatever the validity of the Moscow argument in the abstract, the abandonment (inevitably public) of Chevaline would be the worst possible way of proceeding.”³⁹

Hunt sent Callaghan a draft of the Duff report in July. The covering note referred to the proposed meeting on ~~future funding for~~ Chevaline –

“I am not sure that it would be right to seek such a decision now unless you want also to discuss the Moscow criterion study. ... If a long-term decision is sought on Chevaline I feel certain that both Dr Owen and Mr Healey will ask about the criteria study and the latter at least will be reluctant to agree to funding Chevaline to completion until it has been discussed.”⁴⁰

Following Hunt’s advice, the Prime Minister postponed the ministerial review of Chevaline and authorised 12 months funding for the project.⁴¹

Hunt wanted consideration of the Duff report to be put back until the end of the year. Callaghan agreed to postpone it until the Autumn. On 27 October Hunt wrote to Callaghan explaining that the “Studies on the Future of the British Deterrent” were now in the form of a three part report and that it would be better to take all three together. This meant a further delay, until December, before the Chancellor and Foreign Secretary saw the Duff report.⁴² Duff’s “Criteria for Deterrence” was part 2 of the overall study. Part 1 was a paper on the politico-military background which had also been drafted by the Duff group. Part 3 was an analysis of alternative systems including Trident.

Callaghan, Owen, Healey and Mulley finally met, five days before Christmas 1978, to discuss the report. They agreed that there was a strong case for Britain remaining a nuclear power, because the future was uncertain, but they felt that Duff’s options were “unnecessarily exacting”.⁴³ Destroying less than 10 cities, excluding Moscow, might be enough.

David Owen presented an alternative paper. In it he stated “I am not convinced that the Soviet leadership would be willing to risk even a single major Soviet city for the limited prize of an attack on Britain alone”.⁴⁴ Owen offered an alternative criterion. He said that one million deaths anywhere in the Soviet Union would be “more than adequate”.

Owen had been arguing for a force of submarines armed with Cruise Missiles rather than Ballistic Missiles. Cruise was rejected on the grounds that it could not readily meet the Duff criteria,

³⁹ Strategic Deterrence, letter from Sir Frank Cooper to Sir John Hunt, 5 July 1978, DEFE 23-219 e67. The letter had been drafted by Michael Quinlan, DEFE 23-219 e64

⁴⁰ Criteria for Deterrence, Draft minute from Sir John Hunt to Prime Minister, 12 July 1978, DEFE 23-219 e71

⁴¹ “The Prime Minister had decided that:- (a) there will be no early Ministerial meeting to discuss the criteria for deterrence but there should be one in the Autumn. ... (b) he approves the funding of CHEVALINE for a further year from now on and Ministers will decide later about funding to completion.” Nuclear Matters, letter from Sir Frank Cooper, 10 August 1978, DEFE 23-291 e 84

⁴² Studies on the Future of the British Deterrent, Draft minute from Sir John Hunt to Prime Minister, 27 October 1978, DEFE 23-291 e98

⁴³ Cabinet Nuclear Defence Policy, Note of a meeting held at 10 Downing St on 21 December 1978, PREM 16-1978 e4

⁴⁴ Letter from David Owen to Jim Callaghan, 11 December 1978, PM/78/138, Nuclear Papers, David Owen, Liverpool University Press, 2009, p 150.

particularly the more demanding options 1 and 2. If the lower criterion proposed by Owen had been accepted, then Cruise might have been looked at more favourably.

There was a second ministerial meeting on 2nd January 1979 at which they was agreed that Callaghan should make an initial approach to President Carter, about Trident and Cruise, when the two leaders met in Guadeloupe. Carter gave a sympathetic response with regard to Trident, but Callaghan did not follow this up until the eve of the May 1979 election.