

Launch-pad Britain an

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IAN BRUCE looks at a new book which is certain to fuel bases in Britain, and whether, in the event of war, we American nuclear weapons

US policy on the subject is perhaps best spelled out in a Top Secret memorandum from US Air Force Secretary Thomas K. Finletter in 1950, now declassified and on public record, which says that although he is convinced that the UK "will come along if we do get engaged in war," he knows the British well enough "to know that sometimes they can be very slow."

He adds: "This strategic countermeasure is something which cannot afford to be held up while the British Cabinet is debating about things."

Mr Campbell, who says he has obtained 90% of his material from published sources, and was initially given every assistance by the US military until the Ministry of Defence ended that co-operation, has identified seven US intelligence bases, 25 air bases, and 30 communications' centres in the UK.

He points out that fully 20% of the USAF's front-line aircraft, about 400, are already here in bases across south-east England, accompanied by 26,000 servicemen and women.

In wartime, or a time of international tension likely to lead

to conflict in Europe, that total would treble. Added to that would be much of the strength of other Nato air forces, operating from surviving British airfields as a backstop to the battle in Germany.

Scotland emerges as a vital facet of the US war and intelligence machine.

At Holy Loch, where the US Navy has its Poseidon submarine base, involving docking, repair and maintenance facilities for 10 ballistic missile boats, the Americans are breaching their own safety regulations.

According to the US Navy's rules, a tender servicing Poseidon submarines must have a three-mile diameter "clear zone" to allow for accidental explosions and the release of radioactivity. At Holy Loch, both Sandbank and Kilmun, and even part of Dunoon itself falls within that zone.

In the United States, it is also the rule that nuclear missiles must be unloaded before a submarine enters a harbour for refit work. This is not done at Holy Loch, which the Pentagon regards as being "remotely located."

In 1981, a Poseidon missile

BRITISH Government would have no say — short of stopping the process by force — in the launch of American nuclear weapons from UK soil, according to a new and painstakingly-tailed analysis of the growing military presence in this country.

More than 130 American bases and facilities already exist or are planned for the near future, including a number of key strategic installations in Scotland which would inevitably be prime clear targets for the Soviets.

Despite repeated Government statements about "dual key" control of the Pentagon's strategic arsenal here, the author, New Statesman journalist Duncan Campbell, provides evidence to show that the US has never made any attempt to allow Britain or any of its other allies to have a say in life-or-death decisions.

His book, "The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier," is a catalogue of the failure of successive UK governments — both Conservative and Labour — to put a brake on American military expansion since the end of the Second World War.

He reveals that, within a month of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, the top brass of the American services, had already planned to "seize and hold, if necessary" airfields in the

UK to allow them to mount atomic bombing raids on Russia.

Since then, full-scale alerts to US nuclear forces stationed in Britain have gone out twice, in 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis, and in 1973 during the Yom Kippur war in the Middle East, without the slightest gesture towards consultation with Downing Street.

Humiliatingly for the British Prime Minister of the time of Cuba, Mr Harold Macmillan, President Kennedy actually cut off communications during the final, crucial 36 hours of the crisis, when the world teetered on the brink of global war.

Through the 1970s and '80s, the Pentagon and the US Government has been noticeably reticent about the practicality of Britain having any veto on nuclear strikes. When questioned, the Americans always refer to the vague wording of the 1952 Churchill-Truman statement which said that any nuclear attack from the UK would be "a matter for joint decision . . . in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time."

As Mr Campbell argues, the ambiguities of that statement make it possible for a British Government to reassure the electorate about controls while it knows full well that the US authorities probably would not or could not deliver, and would certainly never guarantee.

Open house for US bases?

the controversy over the number of US would have any control over the use of stationed here.

being unloaded by crane from a submarine berthed alongside the tender USS Holland in the loch slipped and fell 17ft. The fall was arrested by an emergency brake, but the missile swung violently and collided with the side of the ship.

Each nuclear warhead has a proportion of conventional explosive as part of its mechanism. The particular explosive being used then, codenamed LX09, was extremely volatile. If it had exploded, although there would have been no danger of a nuclear blast, the plutonium core of one or more warheads could have been scattered over a wide area as radioactive dust.

The dust would have contaminated the nearby villages and polluted the loch, possibly causing loss of life among civilians and livestock, as well as the crews of both submarine and tender.

It is only one of a number of near-disastrous incidents involving US nuclear weapons documented by Mr Campbell.

But Holy Loch, a base likely to be in use until the end of this century, is far from the last word in US involvement with Scotland.

More nuclear weapons, this time depth charges for use by the US, Dutch, and Canadian anti-submarine forces, are stored at Machrihanish.

Prestwick airport houses permanent US Navy and Air Force transport units and would be a major staging post for reinforcements in a crisis.

Edzell, one of the locations selected for protest demonstrations by CND at Easter, is a signal intelligence monitoring post whose radar arrays scan the northern seas for the radio emissions of Soviet ships.

Mormond Hill, near Peterhead, provides a communications' terminal linking US airborne command posts loaded aboard EC-135 aircraft with all US and Nato military signals in Europe.

At Scatsta, Sullom Voe, there is a position-fixing centre beaming signals to the US missile submarine fleet which allows them to work out their location to within 100 metres. This information is vital for accurate targeting of missiles.

Two separate facilities to the east and west of Thurso send out very low frequency signals which

permit orders to be sent to submerged submarines. The missile boat captains can thus receive instructions without having to surface and betray their positions.

In addition, there are a series of high-capacity microwave relay stations dotted across Scotland which link US Navy communications and make them independent of Telecom equipment.

Mr Campbell's revelations, all fully documented, are an indictment of Britain's open house policy towards the United States. That policy also means that US servicemen have absolute immunity from British law, a breach of sovereignty which no other Nato ally accepts.

It is also a fact that no US forces contribute directly to the defence of the UK. US air bases in England are protected by British Rapier batteries, and defence in the air is left to the RAF's perilously small array of interceptor aircraft.

Britain would seem to have become, as the book's title suggests, "an unsinkable aircraft carrier" for the US. But it is apparently regarded merely as a transit centre for troops, a launch pad for nuclear bomber strikes, and a convenient base for intelligence gathering by both electronic eavesdropping and even spy flights.

Drawing the threads of his research together, Campbell

contends that Britain has a number of more sensible, and possibly safer, options open to it than passive acceptance of US expansion.

The Government could either "emulate de Gaulle" and demand the complete withdrawal of US forces; offer the Americans the choice of pulling out or accepting realistic terms for their continued presence — including physically enforceable safeguards on nuclear weapons; adopt a "go-it-alone" policy of "determined and armed neutrality;" or opt for a European defence union not dependent on US strategic firepower.

Perhaps the opening paragraph of Campbell's study, quoting a prophetic warning from Winston Churchill dating back more than three decades, is a fitting tribute to his perseverance in collating information in the face of enormous official opposition.

Churchill, ever historically far-sighted, said: "We must not forget, that by creating an American atomic base in East Anglia (the first) we have made ourselves the target, and perhaps the bullseye, of a Soviet attack."

Whether, in the light of recent Soviet strategic thinking, the elimination of US bases on our soil would make us any less of a target is a matter for debate. It is possible, and Campbell philosophically concedes the point, that it might not.