



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

9 March 1983

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*JB*

*Mr. Owen.*

When I wrote to you on 23 February, I said that I would write again when we had carried out some more detailed enquiries into the incident you described involving the Thor missile. Since then I have received your letter of 25 February. In the meantime I have had a report from Michael Heseltine about his further enquiries and I thought that I should let you know the outcome of these immediately.

We have been unable to find any documentary evidence to substantiate the story precisely as it was related to you. But a number of officers who served with the Thor force have been interviewed and we have established that there was in the early 1960s an incident which bears some resemblance to the one which you described, although it did not involve a situation in which the man alone could have fired a missile. An RAF technician discovered during routine servicing of an inert missile that a British key turned the USAF lock. A comprehensive check of the other missiles revealed that this was also the case for one other USAF lock. All the locks were changed as a result.

Nonetheless, the fact that the UK and US keys were occasionally interchangeable did not mean that one person could gain control of the system. The launch countdown required the use of both keys to complete the launch sequence: the UK key which had begun the process of activating the missile had to remain in place as the US key was inserted some minutes later to begin the activation of the warhead. Furthermore, the key holders (the US Authentication Officer and the RAF Launch Control Officer) were never alone in the control trailer when a live missile was on standby - the standard complement in the trailer was five (4 RAF and 1 USAF),

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all of whom had a part to play in the launch sequence. More importantly, the engagement of the keys was only one element in a complex missile launching procedure in the early stages of which it was necessary for a technician, located at the actual launch site some 150-200 yards from the trailer, manually to operate valves and switches to allow the automatic launch sequence to supply the missile with fuel, liquid oxygen and electrical and hydraulic power.

I hope that this will reassure you on the Thor missile. I think that you will agree that we have taken the matter you raised in your letter of 14 February very seriously indeed and enquired into it as fully as we can at this remove in time. In these circumstances I do not believe that much more would be gained by involving the Secretary of the Cabinet. But if you have more information which you think we should have, Michael Heseltine would be happy to see you about it.

More generally, you referred to the comment I made in my letter of 17 January that you had not dissented on the dual key issue at the time the deployment decision was made. I did not of course mean to imply by this statement that you took a decision while in office; but to remind you that when the decision was announced in December 1979 you made to the best of my knowledge no reference to the issue. I entirely agree with your proposition that the question is too important to become a matter of party politics; and I recognise that your concern reflects a concern which is felt by others as well. I do assure you, however, that we as a Government have given very careful thought to the matter, and we have satisfied ourselves that the existing arrangements for joint decision-making give us the control we need.

Yours sincerely

Raymond Stiller