

Why I rejected nuclear deterrence

*Commander
Robert Green*

Commander Green retired from the Royal Navy in 1982, after 20 years' service. His uniquely well informed reflections on the pitfalls of nuclear armaments should be required reading for all those engaged in Ohio Replacement, let alone UK Successor (Trident) ballistic missile submarines. This excerpt is from his book, Security without Nuclear Deterrence (Astron Media, New Zealand, 2010). Word Power Books, Edinburgh, among other independent bookshops, has copies. An ebook is also available.

At the time I was a newly promoted Commander working in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall, London, as Personal Staff Officer to an Admiral who had the responsibility of recommending the replacement for Britain's four Polaris nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines. I witnessed the debate in the Naval Staff, and watched the nuclear submarine lobby campaign ruthlessly for a scaled-down version of the huge US Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile system. Yet it introduced a destabilising first-strike capability with its greater firepower and accuracy, and its massive cost threatened the future of the Royal Navy as a balanced, useful force.

Margaret Thatcher had just become Prime Minister. Addicted to all things nuclear, she forced the British nuclear energy industry to accept the US pressurised water reactor design that had recently failed at Three Mile Island. She welcomed the stationing of US nuclear-armed Cruise missiles on British soil in the face of huge public protest; and she decided to replace Polaris with Trident without consulting her Cabinet. Despite misgivings, the Chiefs of Staff were brought into line. One consequence was that the British surface fleet would shrink to become smaller than Japan's, while the nuclear submarine lobby's contribution to offsetting the cost of Trident was to allow a brand new class of conventionally powered submarines to be sold to the Canadian Navy.

Nevertheless, I still accepted the rationale for a nuclear submarine force like Polaris. This was a dangerous time in the Cold War: the Soviets had just invaded Afghanistan; the Polish trade union

movement *Solidarnosc* was pioneering the East European challenge to Soviet hegemony; and new and more impressive Soviet warship designs were emerging almost every month. It was therefore also a very stimulating time to work in military intelligence. In my last appointment as Staff Officer (Intelligence) to Commander-in-Chief Fleet, I ran the team providing round-the-clock intelligence support to Polaris and the rest of the Fleet from the command bunker in Northwood just outside London.

In 1982, Britain suddenly found itself at war with an erstwhile friend, Argentina, over the Falkland Islands. The war was directed from Northwood; and at one point the outcome hung in the balance. If Argentine aircraft had sunk a troopship or aircraft-carrier before the landing force had got ashore, the British might have had to withdraw or risk defeat. What would Thatcher have done? Until the war, she had been the most unpopular Prime Minister in British history. Now she had become the Iron Lady, determined to show both the British and the world her leadership prowess. Nevertheless, Polaris had clearly not deterred Argentina's President Galtieri from invading. With victory in his grasp, it is doubtful he would have believed even Thatcher would have seriously threatened a nuclear strike on Argentina.

I was never aware of the location of the deployed Polaris submarines. However, after leaving the Navy I heard rumours of a very secret contingency plan to move a Polaris submarine south within range of Buenos Aires, which in the event was not required. More on Thatcher's probable intent emerged in a memoir by former French President François Mitterrand's psychoanalyst, Ali Magoudi. Apparently, Mitterrand told him about a phone call he received from Thatcher after a French-supplied Exocet missile fired by the Argentinians from a French-supplied Super Etendard strike jet disabled the British destroyer *HMS Sheffield*. The British Prime Minister threatened to carry out a nuclear strike against Argentina unless he informed her of the secret codes that would enable the British to jam the missiles' acquisition system. Mitterrand had been so convinced of her seriousness that he had complied.

Clearly, defeat would have been unthinkable for the proud British military against such a foe, and it would have consigned Thatcher to political oblivion. Furthermore, Thatcher was a true believer in nuclear deterrence. Had she so threatened, it is probable that Galtieri would have called her bluff very publicly and relished watching US President Ronald Reagan try to rein her in. The Polaris submarine's Commanding Officer, briefed by me on the Soviet threat before he went on so-called 'deterrent' patrol, would have been faced with a bizarre shift of target and new rules of engagement. In the last resort,

would he have refused the firing order or faked a malfunction, and returned to face a court martial with a clear conscience?

Although this nightmare did not arise, for me the Falklands War raised major concerns relating to nuclear weapons. First, there was the huge danger of the dilemma for any leader of a nuclear-armed state faced with possible defeat, but especially by a non-nuclear state. For make no mistake: if the US had failed to restrain Thatcher, a nuclear strike – even with just a single 200-kiloton Polaris warhead – on the airbase for the Exocet-armed Super Etendard jets at Cordoba would not only have caused massively disproportionate collateral damage and long-term casualties from radioactive fallout, but would have redoubled Argentina's resolve to keep fighting. The horrific prospect would then have arisen of escalating to a nuclear strike on the capital, Buenos Aires. International outrage would have already made the UK a pariah state, its case for retaining the Falkland Islands lost in the political fallout from such a war crime. This led me to confront the realities of operating nuclear weapons on behalf of a leader in such a crisis. Had the Polaris Commanding Officer been given such an order and obeyed, the failure of nuclear deterrence would have compounded the ignominy of defeat with that of being the first to have broken the nuclear taboo since Nagasaki.



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