

Internal note from the Foreign Office to the Ministry of Defence on controlling the use of the British nuclear deterrent (London, 21 March 1958)

Caption: On 21 March 1958, an internal note from John Henry Gladstone Leahy, a British diplomat in the Foreign Office, to the Ministry of Defence addresses the question raised by Sir James Hutchison, a Conservative MP at the Western European Union (WEU) Assembly, on the machinery for controlling the use of the nuclear deterrent. The note presents the British position on this issue and states that the Chiefs of Staff hold strongly to the view that the control of the deterrent should remain exclusively in the hands of the United States and the United Kingdom. There would be no prospect of the British agreeing to discuss the matter in NATO or WEU until the situation has been clarified with the United States.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Political Departments, General Correspondence from 1906-1966. WESTERN ORGANISATIONS (WU): Western European Union-WEU (WUW). Control of nuclear weapons. 01/01/1958-31/12/1958, FO 371/137932 (Former Reference Dep: File 1241).

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/internal_note_from_the_foreign_office_to_the_ministry_of_defence_on_controlling_the_use_of_the_british_nuclear_deterrent_london_21_march_1958-en-38d24d82-860f-42ef-a512-d7bcc8b1571b.html



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By 2.30 pm

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form

Registry
No. WJW 1241/1

Top Secret.
Secret.
Confidential.
Restricted.
Open.

Draft.

L.J. Sabatini,
Esq.,
Ministry of
Defence.

NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN IN THIS MARGIN.

from:

J.H.G. Leahy.

With enclosure

J.H.G. Leahy

21/3

S.S. 21/3

Mr High-Jones
PUSD (Mr Hanley)

RECEIVED IN
21 MAR 1958
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WJW 1241/1

Thank you for your letter of March 6 enclosing a copy of a letter from Sir James Hutchison about the machinery for controlling the use of the nuclear deterrent. I am sorry to have taken so long in replying but we have been considering ^{the matter} rather carefully. ~~how much it would be desirable to take Sir James into our confidence.~~

2. As I mentioned to you before, the subject has been raised before by the W.E.U. Assembly and you may like to see in this connection pages 12 - 14 of the enclosed ^{draft} minutes of the joint meeting between the W.E.U. Council and the Assembly Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments which was held in Rome recently.

Sir James Hutchison was ^{not} present at this meeting but will have received a copy of the record.

3. As you know, the Chiefs of Staff hold strongly to the view that the control of the deterrent should remain exclusively in the hands of the United States and the United Kingdom. Depending on the pressure which may be exerted on us in NATO and W.E.U. to discuss the question of sharing the responsibility for "pressing the button" - and governments, as opposed to members of the W.E.U. Assembly have not exerted pressure on us so far - it ^{might} be necessary to reconsider H.M.G.'s position. There ^{is} however, ^{no} prospect of our agreeing to discuss the matter in NATO or W.E.U. until we had sorted out our ideas with the Americans and the latter are unlikely to give any consideration to it ^{at least} until they have got over the McMahon Act hurdle.

4. ~~Sir James Hutchison is a "good European"~~
/and it

~~and it would not be wise for the Minister of Defence to tell him the whole of the above. However, we see no harm in Mr. Sandys giving him on a personal and confidential basis the gist of the final sentence of the previous paragraph. In doing so, Mr. Sandys should, we suggest, specifically ask Sir James not to disclose it to his colleagues in the W.E.U. Assembly. We leave it to the~~

Naturally we leave it to the Minister of Defence to decide how much of the above to tell Sir James Hobkison. However, bearing in mind that ^{Sir James'} ~~his~~ colleagues were told at Rome that ~~that~~ NATO was considering these problems, which is not strictly true, Mr Sandys may

think it best not to tell him that we have no present intention of discussing the position in NATO. ~~On the other hand I see~~

~~that Sir~~ Since writing the above I see that Sir James has put down a position ^{to the Minister of Defence} on this subject ~~for answer by the~~ for answer next Wednesday (Not 94).

We talked about this on the telephone and agreed that ideally the best thing would be if Mr Sandys could ~~be~~ persuade Sir James to ~~be~~ withdraw the position. To do so he would ^{almost certainly} need to take Sir James fairly fully into his confidence.

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NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN IN THIS MARGIN.