

'Building on straws' from The Guardian (28 May 1973)

Caption: On 28 May 1973, the British daily newspaper The Guardian publishes an article by Julian Critchley, Conservative MP and Rapporteur for the Defence and Armaments Committee of the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU), in which he outlines the issues surrounding the deterrent force and speculates on the position of France and the United Kingdom on this matter.

Source: Critchley, Julian. "Building on straws" from The Guardian. London: Guardian Newspapers. 28.05.1973, p.8.

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UNTIL TEN years ago the Plateau D'Albion in Southern Provence was a desert. It now grows lavender, melons and wheat. It also contains 18 intermediate range ballistic missiles, two thirds of the eventual complement of France's land-based nuclear deterrent force. The farming is done by "pieds noirs" repatriated from Algeria, with water piped from the Durance by the French Air Force which is responsible for the missiles.

Last week a party of MPs—members of the Defence Committee of the Western European Union Assembly, were the first civilian foreigners to pay a visit to St Christophe, a base built both on, and within, a mountain of limestone. The visit was the result of an invitation by M Debré, at that time still the French Minister of Defence, given at a meeting of the Assembly in Paris last December. The invitation came as a surprise, and may not be without significance.

The committee met in Paris on Thursday morning to discuss the future of European nuclear defence. The WEU is an assembly of parliamentarians from the seven countries that signed the Brussels Treaty in 1954. Whatever the difficulties between France and NATO in the past, the French have never withdrawn from Western European Union, and the twice yearly meetings in Paris have served as a point of contact. While France shows no signs of joining the Eurogroup in Brussels or the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, there has been evidence of a quickening of her interest in WEU.

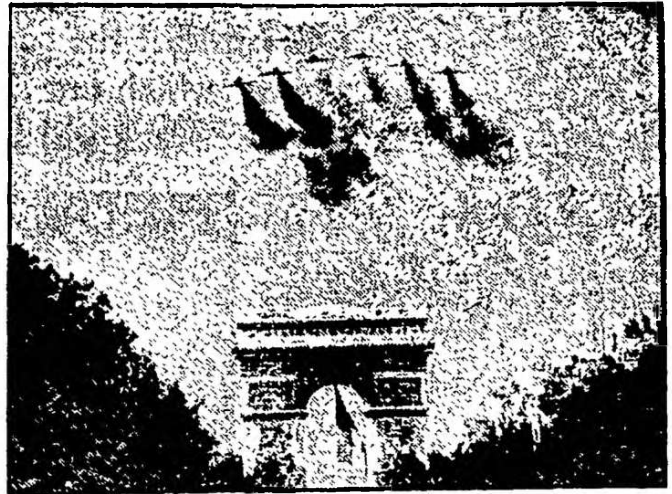
After lunch the party, 30 strong, which included Mr John Morris, a Labour Party front bench spokesman on defence, and Mr Philip Goodhart, the chairman of the Conservative backbench Defence Committee, were flown to Orange in President Pompidou's Caravel. Orange is one of the nine fields of the "Forces Ariennes Strategiques," and we taxied past a flight of four Mirage IVs, parked ready for takeoff. Like the United States, but unlike Great Britain, France has a little of everything: a force of 40 Mirage bombers, which has been in service since 1964, and will remain operational until 1975; 18 solid-fuelled IRBMs, with another nine coming into service before 1980, and five nuclear missile carrying submarines, two of which are in service. The Pluton tactical missile is due to come into service this year in the French Army.

If Provence in May has

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Fundamental decisions on Western Europe's defence will have to be made long before 1980 when the British and French deterrents will lose their credibility. JULIAN CRITCHLEY reports on the significance of a visit to Provence.

French defence: "a little of everything."



become a travel writer's cliché, so too has the description of rocket installations. It is the air force which operates the missiles in both countries, and the officers of the 1st Groupe-ment de Missiles Strategiques, share the cropped and lean intensity of Strategic Air Command. In such consultations politicians become conscious of their second chins. There is an attempt to illustrate the paradox of deterrents by emblem, in this case a dove perched upon a mailed fist in the process of unsheathing a sword, but there is nothing of the ballyhoo of the Americans. Proclamation such as "Peace is Our Business" are not to be found, and were they ever to have been erected they would by now be covered by roses, as is everything else in Provence.

The Plateau d'Albion is a limestone massif which dominates the small town of Apt. The French have eaten into the mountain like termites, and the command "capsule" from which the order to fire would be given, is buried a mile inside, and 400 metres below the summit. The galleries are endless, and unlike Nevada where one is whisked along on a Congressional type miniature railway, there was nothing but an abandoned bicycle.

The silos themselves—the name and the specification, were borrowed from Minuteman — are left unguarded. There is a fence, and within the perimeter, the steel lid let into concrete. We have

no need for guards," said our escort. "The missile is locked away in a coffre fort." The lid was drawn open, and the party tiptoed around the edge of the hole so as not to disturb its occupant. The warhead was yellow and shapely. We viewed it in silence broken only by one of the secretaries. "Quelle horreur," she hissed.

But it is the warhead which is the weakest link in the chain of French nuclear deterrents. It is a "doped" fission warhead with a reported yield of between 150 to 500 thousand tons of TNT. It is an atomic, and not a hydrogen bomb. France may have "first division" missiles which she has, unlike the British, produced herself, but they are crowned with "fourth division" warheads. Is there then the making of a bargain?

The cancellation of Blue Streak in 1962 left Britain without a missile. France has built her own land and sea missiles, solid-fuelled but of short range. Britain has bought American, but we have produced our own thermo-nuclear warheads. Not only do we measure yield in millions of tons of high explosives, but we have also fitted multiple, although not independently-targeted, warheads to Polaris. Unaided, France will not re-equip with fusion warheads until at least 1978.

This is the guts of the problem of an Anglo-French, or of a European deterrent. Clearly for as long as cooperation with Europe remains intergovernmental, there can be no such

thing as a European deterrent. By the same token a joint Anglo-French force is inconceivable. But cooperation certainly is not. What would be the effect of such cooperation upon the Americans, or upon the Germans, upon the Russians or even upon the British Labour Party. Would it run counter to the Non - Proliferation Treaty? Would an exchange of information imply a British abrogation of the partial Test Ban Treaty? Would Franco-British cooperation encourage France to strengthen her conventional forces and integrate them with those of her allies, given the inevitability of American forces reduction? The questions posed are of immense complexity.

The final irony is this: neither the British nor the French deterrent will remain credible after 1980. Thus a decision will have to be taken before 1975 by both countries whether to continue as nuclear powers? And if so, with what weapon? A Gaullist France and a Conservative Britain will wish to stay nuclear (the Labour Party is keeping mum), in which case Britain can either buy American, if they let us, build them herself, or share the cost with France. Last week's visit to Provence may have been a courtesy of no significance, an opportunity to boast, or a straw in what could become a prevailing wind.

Julian Critchley, Conservative MP for Aldershot, is rapporteur of the Western European Union Assembly's defence committee.