

'European atomic force as British policy?' from The Guardian (5 December 1962)

Caption: On 5 December 1962, the British daily newspaper The Guardian analyses the reactions to the address given by British Minister of Defence Peter Thorneycroft to the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU) and particularly focuses on the question of establishing a European nuclear force.

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EUROPEAN ATOMIC FORCE AS BRITISH POLICY?

Reading between the lines of Mr Thorneycroft's speech

From CLARE HOLLINGWORTH

Paris, December 4

Mr P. Thorneycroft, the Defence Minister, addressed the assembly of the Western European Union today. It was not so much what he said as what delegates inferred from his speech that caused discussion.

Mr Thorneycroft, who has the reputation of being a "good European," said that it was fortunate that Western Europe was populated by "happy and prosperous people" who, he suggested, provided a barrier to communism; whereas a weak and divided Europe would pose a difficult defence problem.

He stated that it would be myopic to defend the soil of Europe and fail to look at the world outside. The Minister was angered by disparaging remarks about the British nuclear deterrent.

He said: "I must touch on this point that the British deterrent can be regarded as dangerous and expensive, prone to obsolescence, and lacking in credibility. Indeed, it is prone to obsolescence certainly—so is everybody and everything. It is certainly expensive, for the price of deterring war is not cheap. Lacking in credibility as a deterrent? I think that is an illusion. Our task is not to criticise each other's efforts."

Nuclear knowledge

"The forces of Europe will demand—whether they are deployed on the central German plains or in the Persian Gulf—more and more sophisticated equipment. . . . What is needed for larger projects—and we are talking here of very large projects indeed—is capital resources and large markets, and it is these attributes which facilitated solutions which have been reached in the Soviet Union and the United States."

What many of the delegates read into these words was that the Minister either personally wished to see a third nuclear force established in Europe or

that he was "kite-flying" the proposals. Some delegates and observers went even further and suggested that he implied an offer to President de Gaulle to share nuclear knowledge on condition that the plans for Britain's admission to the European Economic Community were modified, at least sufficiently to enable the British electorate to accept them.

In a closed session the Minister is reported to have said that there were two ways of establishing a European force—one by buying the weapons from the US and the other by joint Franco-British production. At the end of the debate the Assembly recommended to the Ministerial Council that the member Governments consider making common proposals to the North Atlantic Council for "a NATO nuclear executive to be the sole authority deciding on the deployment and use of nuclear weapons in the territory covered by the Alliance." The territory is Europe.

The Assembly asked member Governments to make common proposals to the United States "to secure the integration of Allied nuclear forces into a single NATO nuclear force, possibly based on a European and an American component, within a single command structure coming under the control of a single political executive representative of the Alliance as a whole."

A greater sharing of knowledge about nuclear warheads and delivery systems was also advocated. In short, the assembly recommends that European countries have a finger on the nuclear trigger.