

Extract from Lord Owen's book, *Nuclear Papers*, (Liverpool University Press, 2009).

Some Republicans are trying to attack President Obama for his decisions in the nuclear field in the mistaken belief that they represent weakness in the face of Russian protests. I do not believe that this criticism can be sustained on any rational basis. President Obama had made it clear publicly that he does not criticise President George W Bush's original decision in relation to Poland and the Czech Republic, and nor does he believe the Russian protests that deployment in central Europe would have provided any credible threat to Russia. Nevertheless it is a fact that the Russian military had persuaded President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, that this deployment did provide a threat, in that the missiles could be turned around to target Russian missile sites. This fear, whether paranoid or not, was blocking further progress on arms control and the reality of resetting a relationship is that it does involve changing some of the parameters. Glib talk about Russia and the US going back to a Cold War have even less credibility in 2009 than when it was fashionable a few years ago.

What is now potentially opening up is a return to the sort of confidence-building negotiations on nuclear arms that have long existed between Russia and Republican as well as Democratic Administrations in the US. The seeds of an opportunity to move forward on more far reaching agreements are now in place. Many difficult questions arise as to whether it might be sensible to site interceptors and radars in and around Europe capable of shooting down a potential Iranian intercontinental missile bound for Washington, DC. Much will depend in the next few years on whether President Obama's initiative towards Iran succeeds in enabling both countries to 'unclench the fist'.

Missile defence is an issue on which Moscow and Washington should be able to agree if the political and strategic climate starts to improve. The problem over missile defence is that it has become the subject of political emotion ever since President Reagan's original concept became labelled 'Star Wars'. The truth is that Reagan was right, albeit simplistic, in wanting to grapple with missile defence and missile elimination if we were ever to move away from the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

Missile and warhead reduction negotiations are only a stepping stone towards a far more important long term goal and that is the elimination of nuclear weapons. This aspiration has many serious champions today in the US amongst the realist school of politicians, not least Henry Kissinger and George Schulz. Schulz was Secretary of State when President Reagan tried but failed to convince Margaret Thatcher that a world free of nuclear weapons was feasible. President Obama is already under attack for trying to aim for the same objective. Today, in the UK, it is important that on a cross party basis, many in the TLG (Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation) who have been very close to nuclear weapon strategy are combining to work for a world free of nuclear weapons.

We know today a lot more of how close the world came to a nuclear disaster in 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Quite apart from Robert Kennedy's famous words soon after the Missile Crisis that if seven of the distinguished people advising the President around the table in the White House had themselves been President, there would have been a nuclear exchange. We also know more from recently published documents, particularly from Russia. During the night of 26 October 1962, the Soviet troops in Cuba moved three FKR cruise missiles, with 14 kt nuclear warheads, to within 15 miles of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay. On the morning of Saturday, 27 October Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, asked what the Chiefs of Staff had in mind when they wrote about 'early and timely execution' of the air strike plan against Cuba. The US Air Force chief, General Curtis LeMay gruffly replied: 'Attacking Sunday [next day] or Monday'. Fortunately Khrushchev had already sent an urgent cable to the Soviet commander in Cuba: 'It is categorically confirmed that it is forbidden to use nuclear weapons from the missiles, FKR's and Lunas without approval from Moscow. Confirm receipt.'¹

I first wrote about the significance of the Cuban missile crisis in 1972² and I have never doubted that it represented one of the times when the world came very close to a nuclear exchange. This crisis took place very largely under the public gaze while President Kennedy privately overrode his military advisers with the constant support of Robert McNamara. Kennedy chose a maritime blockade rather than an attack on Cuba and he was ready to give Khrushchev some political lee-way to withdraw his missiles. Kennedy promised Khrushchev that the US would never attack Cuba – necessary given Kennedy's earlier involvement in 1961 in the failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. But he also went further and offered secretly that if Khrushchev withdrew the missiles from Cuba, six months later he would withdraw the US Jupiter missiles in Turkey, which he did and which had been targeted on the USSR.

I have also written about Kennedy's health³ and formed the judgement that he was in far better medical condition to handle the missile crisis in 1962 than ever he would have been in 1961. For example, there is little doubt that when he first met Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961 he was given by Dr Jacobson an intravenous injection of amphetamine which contributed, along with his Addison's disease and painful back, to a disastrous meeting. This was followed by an underestimation of Kennedy's qualities by Khrushchev which led him to deploy missiles and nuclear warheads in Cuba in the spring of 1962.

There have been other occasions when because the nuclear trigger was in reality a 'hair trigger' the world could have been plunged into a nuclear exchange almost by accident. I myself experienced a troubling incident involving the British nuclear deterrent in the late 1960s and I have never forgotten it. More recently, some Russians have revealed how, in 1983, one Soviet, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanislav Petrov, acting on instinct overrode the

¹ David Owen, *In Sickness and In Power: Illness in Heads of Government during the last 100 years* (London: Methuen, CT: Praeger, 2008), pp.181-186.

² David Owen, *The Politics of Defence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972) pp.35-51

³ David Owen, *In Sickness and In Power: Illness in Heads of Government during the last 100 years* (London: Methuen, 2008). pp. 164-180

warning systems that could have triggered the firing of nuclear weapons while Yuri Andropov, the Soviet leader, was on a kidney dialysis machine in a Moscow sanatorium.⁴ Public literature covers a number of other incidents. For anyone to seriously argue that there was stability in the Cold War due to the possession of nuclear missiles by the adversaries is quite simply living in cloud cuckoo land and it is vital that these bogus arguments are revealed for what they are: an attempt to perpetuate a dangerous myth often by people who did not live their adult life during that period. We had to grapple with the reality of nuclear weapons, but we would have been better off without them. As I argued as Foreign Secretary in a book called *Human Rights* “we must keep stressing the appalling magnitude of the problems of the arms race and the imperative need to achieve speedier progress. Complacency in this area of human activity can easily trigger our own destruction. The risks are real, the dangers ever-present.”⁵

For all these reasons I believe it is essential that President Obama’s courage in starting to deal with the massive problem of eliminating nuclear weapons in their entirety is fully supported.

⁴ Gordon S Barrass, *The Great Cold War. A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp.1-2.

⁵ David Owen, *Human Rights* (London: Jonathan Cape and US: Norton, 1978), p.147