

Letter from Hervé Alphan to Maurice Couve de Murville (Washington, 31 December 1962)

Caption: On 31 December 1962, Hervé Alphan, French Ambassador to Washington, informs Maurice Couve de Murville, French Foreign Minister, of the outcome of his meeting with the US President, John F. Kennedy, regarding the conclusions of the Nassau talks and the US initiative concerning the Polaris nuclear weapons system. The French Ambassador outlines the views of the US President, who sees the Nassau proposal as an 'opening', a kind of framework that he hopes France will be ready to consider and discuss, including the creation of a multilateral nuclear force.

Source: M. Alphan, ambassadeur de France à Washington, à M. Couve de Murville, Ministre des Affaires étrangères: Washington, 31 décembre 1962, T. nos 7213 à 7223. Secret. Réserve. Dans: Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Commission de publication des documents diplomatiques français. Documents diplomatiques français: 1962, Tome II, 1er juillet-31 décembre. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1999. Numéro du document 216. pp. 604-606.

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Last updated: 25/10/2016

Letter from Hervé Alphand to Maurice Couve de Murville (Washington, 31 December 1962)

T. Nos 7213 to 7223.

Washington, 31 December 1962.

Secret. Limited distribution.

(Received: 1 January 1963 at 1.45 a.m.)

On 29 December, the President of the United States invited me to lunch with him aboard his yacht in Palm Beach. During this lunch, at which there were just the two of us present, he spoke to me at length about the recent talks in Nassau and the offer made in his recent message to General de Gaulle.

Mr Kennedy emphasised the thinking behind this initiative. On the one hand, it sought to help Britain and France to acquire an effective nuclear capability that could be used either for the Western Alliance or on an individual basis in the event of a threat to the paramount interests of France or Britain. On the other hand, the President wanted to find a way to discourage the other Atlantic powers from also creating nuclear forces whose proliferation, in his view, would be a serious threat to peace. The Nassau proposal was therefore an 'opening', a kind of framework that he hoped France would be ready to consider and discuss.

1. Britain and France should unquestionably be able to decide unilaterally to deploy *Polaris* in the event of a challenge to their paramount interests. Submarine crews would therefore be totally British or French. In the event of a threat to paramount interests, they would follow only national orders. They would be able to operate autonomously, without needing foreign radio systems. The restrictive interpretation given by the correspondent of the London Times ¹ was categorically denied by the President, as it was by my British colleague, whom I was also able to meet.

As an example, the President referred to Suez and Kuwait. If, following unilateral action by France or Britain (a move not directly affecting the United States), those countries were threatened by Soviet missiles, they could decide in their turn to use *Polaris* against Moscow or Kiev, in order to avoid being blackmailed by the enemy.

2. In accepting the *Polaris* system, Britain and France in no way limited their right to build other, national nuclear capabilities, free of any external dependence and using their own resources. Mr Kennedy nevertheless recognised that the simultaneous implementation of two such enormous programmes would doubtless impose an excessive financial strain on our economies.

3. How a so-called 'Atlantic' or 'European' multilateral force could work effectively still remained to be worked out. The President does not know who would be in command or who would take the decision to deploy it. However, it is essential, in his view, in order to dampen certain European states' nuclear ambitions, particularly those of Germany, to give them the impression that they will have a nuclear capability at their disposal, with 'a European finger on the trigger and able to pull it.'

I told Mr Kennedy that I was sceptical. The solution had never been found, and how could it be thought possible that, as time went by, other European powers, starting with the Germans (however much we do not want to see it happen), would not try to possess their own nuclear weapon?

The President was not convinced. He believes that the three powers could prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons by offering the sort of agreement outlined in Nassau.

4. Mr Kennedy recognises that France's situation differs from Britain's. France has maintained complete independence. At the same time, it is less advanced than its neighbour. It is difficult, several years ahead of time, to say if and when her industries would be able to produce a thermonuclear warhead that could be

fitted onto *Polaris* missiles or fired from the submarines that could carry them. He knows that we are not asking for anything, but I also felt that, in this area of nuclear cooperation with France, where America has always been negative, its position could change.

Following this conversation, my feeling is that the President of the United States very much wants us not to take any final decision until there has been an in-depth discussion of the American proposal and its strategic, political and financial implications.

During our meeting on 29 December, Mr Kennedy told me he had read General Pierre-Marie Gallois' articles in this week's *Candide* ². He took objection to its tone and to the doubts that it raised about American intentions.

'It is possible,' the President told me, 'to justify an independent French strike capability, but not with the arguments used by General Gallois. In particular, it is not true to say that, in his book, General Taylor does not recommend the use of the United States' deterrent force to defend Western Europe. This is, in fact, a vital US interest. The use of nuclear weapons to prevent Europe from falling under the control of the East is, and will always be, an essential element of US policy.'

I have already pointed out (see my telegrams Nos 4243–4246 dated 1 August 1962 ³) that the press had misinterpreted General Taylor's writings and doctrines.

During our conversation, Mr Kennedy showed great concern about what might happen to Mr Macmillan. If he were removed from office, along with the Conservative Party, it is to be feared that new forces will come into play in England that are against the real interests of Europe and the Western Alliance.

The movement that is seeking a British troop withdrawal from the continent, an end to unrestricted nuclear testing, recognition of East Germany and a 'dovish' approach to Moscow, might prevail in London.

The way that the talks go on British entry into the Common Market will doubtless have a major impact on the current Prime Minister's political future.

I reminded Mr Kennedy that France had no wish to see the talks fail. At the same time, they should not destroy the European agreements that we have struggled so hard to establish. While the British accept these agreements in principle, in the day-to-day negotiations they insist on exclusion clauses that would spell the end to those agreements. It seems that Britain has not yet understood European Community rules. Will it be able to change its spots in time to save the ruling party and its overall policy? No one can guarantee that at the moment.

(Pacts. PAN 8-1 sd. New weapons. A multilateral force. The Nassau Agreements.)

1. 26 December. An article by the New York correspondent of *The Times* said that continuing with the *Skybolt* programme would have been cheaper than buying *Polaris*. He added that, just before the Nassau meeting, London had altered its attitude and was ready to ask for *Polaris*, but the Americans were not informed of this. Mr Kennedy began the discussion by offering to continue the *Skybolt* programme before proposing a substitute, the *Hound Dog*. *The Times* viewed Mr Macmillan's choice as meaning that, for several years, Great Britain would be without a nuclear deterrent.

2. An article which repeated statements attributed to General Taylor, the US Joint Chief of Staff. 'It would not be credible to ... use our nuclear response forces for any other purpose than to ensure our national survival.' Since the United States could only protect itself, Europe might be prey to 'limited conflicts' (Drawn from the article in *Le Monde* of 28 December, p. 3).

3. Not reproduced here. An article in which Mr Alphand rejected the view of some journalists that General Taylor had said that the United States would deploy its nuclear forces only if they were faced with a direct threat.