

SUBJECT

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

12 September 1984

VIP VISITORS: CARRIAGE OF ARMS BY BODYGUARDS

The Prime Minister held a meeting this afternoon with the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Sir Robert Armstrong to consider the rules governing carriage of arms in the United Kingdom by the bodyguards of VIP visitors.

The Home Secretary recalled that the practice hitherto had been to refuse permission for the carriage of arms. Only very few unpublicised exceptions had been made, notably for US Presidents and Vice-Presidents. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, who exercised statutory responsibility under the Firearms Act, would much prefer to maintain this position.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary agreed that a strict 'no arms' policy was to be preferred. But since the exception made for President Reagan at the London Economic Summit had become public knowledge, it was increasingly difficult to hold the position. A number of other governments were pressing strongly for exceptions to be made for their VIPs. It was important that whatever position the Government took should be applied without discrimination, at least between the major Western powers.

In discussion the point was made that, while it was desirable to enforce the strictest possible limits on the carriage of firearms, it was in practice impossible to enforce an absolute ban. The Americans, in particular, would always exert the strongest pressure for some of the President's bodyguards to carry arms. In other cases, a ban might simply be ignored, with consequent fuss if the evasion became public knowledge. There was also a risk that if we refused to allow certain countries to arm their bodyguards they would retaliate by refusing to allow the bodyguards of

UK VIPs to carry arms. This could increase the risk to UK Ministers.

It was suggested that a possible solution would be to rest on the formal position of refusing any request for the carriage of arms, while turning a blind eye to breaches of the policy. Against this, it was argued that since the issue of the carriage of arms had now aroused public interest, it was quite likely that the Government would have to answer questions about whether bodyguards of specific visitors were armed. A better solution might be to have a general rule against the carriage of arms but to allow specific exceptions, either to a particular list of countries or to countries who were prepared to agree reciprocal arrangements. It was recognised that difficulties would arise in restricting the number of exceptions.

Summing up, the Prime Minister said that the aim must be to get as close as possible to a situation where no foreign bodyguards were allowed to carry arms. But it had to be recognised there would always be some exceptions. It would probably be preferable to regularise these than to tolerate evasions. The matter should be examined further by officials in the Cabinet Office, Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the views of the Commissioner sought. The result should be reported to Ministers for further consideration.

I am sending copies of this letter to Len Appleyard (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

(C.D. POWELL)

Hugh Taylor, Esq.,
Home Office

PRIME MINISTER

VIP Visitors : Carriage of Arms by Bodyguards

You are to discuss this with Sir Geoffrey Howe and Mr. Brittan tomorrow at 1530.

2. The problem is this. Past breaches of the 'no guns' rule in favour of US Presidents and Vice-Presidents have been kept secret. But since the London Economic Summit, they have become public knowledge. As a result several other governments are pressing for exceptions to be made for them as well. The first test case is likely to be President Mitterrand's state visit. If we do not grant exceptions, others may refuse permission for your detectives to be armed.

3. There are in theory at least several options:

- (i) To impose a strict 'no guns' policy and make no exceptions. To carry credibility with other governments we should have to confirm publicly that there would be no future exceptions for the American President and be prepared to stick to this - despite the very heavy pressure which there would certainly be.
- (ii) To have a 'no guns' policy but make a specific and public exception for President Reagan, on the grounds that he has actually been shot and must be regarded as particularly at risk.
- (iii) To have a 'no guns' policy but to be ready to make secret exceptions for the Americans. But is there any realistic chance of keeping such exceptions secret in future?

/(iv) To have

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- (iv) To have a 'no guns' policy, but to say that every VIP visitor will be subject to a specific threat assessment and that exceptions may on occasion be granted. But won't this open the floodgates?
- (v) To make exceptions for a number of our major allies and partners.

A point to be weighed in assessing the options is the extent to which we think the risk to you would be increased if a limited number of other governments refused permission for your detectives to be armed.

C D P

C. D. POWELL

11 September, 1984