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MAY04 – SAPU, CONFERENCIA DEL SECRETARIO DE DEFENSA JOHN NOTT (prem 19/624)

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SOUTH ATLANTIC PRESENTATION UNIT (SAPU)

Attached for information is a transcript of the press conference given by the Secretary of State for Defence, Mr John Nott, on 3 May 1982

Cabinet Office

4 May 1982

Over the past 4 weeks since the invasion of the Falkland Islands my colleague the Foreign Secretary has rightly taken the leading role in explaining HMG's policies to the International and National Press.

The manner in which he has performed this role is evidence that our overriding aim will always remain a peaceful and lasting settlement for the future of the Falkland Islands. Military pressure is not - and must never be, an end in itself. It will remain merely one part of the search for a peaceful solution.

We must never forget that the Islands are British and are settled by people of British descent - and they have been invaded by an aggressor who must now withdraw.

But there is also a wider purpose in our endeavours. It is to ensure that armed aggression does not pay. Let our response as a member of the Western Alliance be an example that the Western democracies will respond to defend those principles which they hold dear.

So it is our solemn purpose to achieve the military objectives to which, reluctantly, we have been compelled, using the minimum of force and with the least loss of life on both sides, commensurate of course with our overriding duty to defend our own ships, aircraft and men.

Every action taken by our forces will remain under the strictest political direction and control, although decisions on the ground must be made by the Commanders on the spot. Each move that we have made in this affair has been determined by the need to bring home to those who apparently believe in force, that force cannot triumph

Every so often we must remind ourselves how we got here in the first place. We did not fire the first shot. It was only as the result of the skill of the Royal Marines on the Falkland Islands and in South Georgia, faced with armed attack, that our men did not suffer serious casualties and loss of life.

Let me then say a very few words on recent military events. The past week has been a notably successful one for our forces in the South Atlantic. It has already provided evidence of their skill and the quality of their equipment.

Over a week ago we had warned the Argentines that any approach on the part of their warships or aircraft which could amount to a threat to interfere with the mission of our Forces anywhere in the South Atlantic would encounter the appropriate response. We also made it clear that all Argentinian aircraft including civil aircraft and all their merchant vessels or fishing vessels engaging in surveyance of our Forces would be regarded as hostile and would be liable to be dealt with accordingly. If their Forces constitute a threat the Task Force Commander has the authority - and it is right that he should have the authority - to respond in self defence. I would like to reiterate this warning. We cannot accept any interference with our Forces wherever they may be. The action against the cruiser, General Belgrano, yesterday evening was fully consistent with our duty to defend our ships and men.

The announcement today of the bringing forward of 5 Brigade's notice is another demonstration of our resolve. This is not an escalatory move. It is merely prudent when contemplating operations - of whatever kind - so far from this country to have resources available nearer the area of operations.

The Argentine Government knows that there is one quick and simple way to avoid further casualties to their personnel and loss of their ships and aircraft - it is to keep out of the zones declared by us and to cease threatening and attacking our forces in the South Atlantic. Furthermore there is one quick and simple way to stop the fighting and that is for them to take their garrison off the Falklands in compliance with UN Resolution 502. Then negotiations for a peaceful long term solution can be resumed.

The information given to you here by our spokesman, Ian McDonald, will be based on fact, not on propaganda. The distances involved are very large between here and the operational area. Our forces may be engaged in action

so that our intitial reports may be less full than we would wish. You have already shown that you are not prepared to act merely as a channel for Argentine propoganda. Freedom of reporting, as it is here, is not available in Buenos Aires, and brings with it the need for balance that has always been the hallmark of a free press. Closest to our concern must be the anxiety of the families and friends of those in the Task Force.

I do not pretend that our forces face an easy task. Early success is certainly encouraging. We are confident that our mission will be successful but we will never be over-confident nor will we boast of our success.

Perhaps in conclusion I can quote the most famous of our naval heroes Admiral Nelson who said that: "magnanimity in victory will be the main aim of the British fleet".