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Attach B

DIRECTOR OF DEFENSE RESEARCH AND ENGINEERING
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

LOG NO. 67-4589

28 AUG 1967

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: Aldabra Island

1. Problem: In view of increasingly strong objections by U.S. and U.K. scientists, and by the public, should the U.S. modify the present plan to support the U.K. in establishing an air staging facility on Aldabra Island in the Indian Ocean.

2. Overview: The U.K., with U.S. encouragement and financial support, decided to establish a defense facility on Aldabra Island to be used for East African contingencies. Construction is now estimated to cost about \$50-78 million, with the U.S. paying 50%. There is a lengthy history to the development of plans for Aldabra, culminating in a recent letter from Minister Healey which invites final go-ahead (TAB A).

Scientists and conservationists in both the U.K. and the U.S. are strongly opposed to the plan because Aldabra is regarded as a unique site for biological studies. There has been considerable publicity, and a few Congressional inquiries, criticizing the proposed construction. Administration policies over the last few years have put increasing emphasis on conservation, preservation of wildlife, and the adverse effects of technical progress on our environment.

In March, Dr. S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution, questioned whether all alternatives had been examined thoroughly. On 10 March you asked me to meet with representatives of the National Academy and the Smithsonian to review this matter (TAB B). The following provides a review of my analysis concerning the advisability of proceeding with the present plan for Aldabra.

3. Review of Situation:

History: Aldabra belongs to the British Indian Ocean Territory established in late 1965 by an Order in Council. BIOT was set aside by the U.K. (under an agreement concluded with the U.S. on December 30, 1966) to meet U.S./U.K. defense requirements.

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The choice of Aldabra for an air staging base was a British decision based upon strategic/political and economic considerations: (a) Use of Aldabra as a refueling stop would enable British long-range transport aircraft to fly to Ascension around the Cape of Good Hope without having to transit non-British national air space. (b) Aldabra is sufficiently close (approx. 400 mi.) to East Africa for U.K. forces to mount operations from there in support of U.K. objectives in those areas. (c) Aldabra has no indigenous population and the land belongs to the Crown.

Economic Factors: The U.K. initially estimated that an austere air staging base with support facilities, including harbor and communications, would cost approximately \$50 million. Their current estimate is approximately \$78 million.

The U.S. accepted in principle the British proposal for joint financing (50-50) of the proposed Aldabra facility in return for equal rights of use. The Air Force has budgeted \$25 million in FY 68.

Of the three other island groups (atolls) which comprise BIOT, apparently only Farquhar (300 miles East) is a plausible alternate for Aldabra. Chagos Archipelago is in mid-ocean (over 1000 miles East), and Ile des Roche is 200 miles farther than Farquhar from both the African coast and from a desirable staging point on a transocean route (such a point would be half-way between Diego Garcia and Ascension).

There are a variety of cost estimates available for the proposed construction on Aldabra and on Farquhar. It is not clear that any estimate is detailed or reliable enough to form the basis of a valid comparison. But the general consensus is that the total cost on Aldabra would be approximately \$50-75 million and that the total cost on Farquhar would be \$100-150 million.

Scientific Case: The scientific case for preserving Aldabra is substantial, and is summarized in TAB C. The scientific argument is that Aldabra is a "biological treasure house," possessing a unique ecological system. This system includes at least 30 essentially unique species of birds and plants, such as the giant 400 pound land-tortoise, the frigate bird, the so-called flightless rail, the so-called pink footed

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booby, and rare terrestrial and marine plants. As an impressive historical point, you may recall that Dr. Ripley mentions Charles Darwin's successful plea in 1874 that the island be protected by the Royal Navy from commercial exploitation.

Largely because of the controversy surrounding the island's possible utilization as a defense facility, the Royal Society has undertaken a scientific expedition at the island beginning this month and extending through March 1968. There is no reason to believe that this survey will exhaust the scientific potential of the island. Rather, this survey probably will reinforce the international scientific community's view that Aldabra should be preserved.

Perhaps the scientists' most significant argument--from an operational point of view--is Aldabra's enormous population of birds which, they claim, will present a substantial "bird-strike" problem. They suggest that Farquhar, by comparison, will not present such unusual bird-control requirements.

Political-Strategic Case: U.S. policy is to support the British--in terms both of their responsibility in the region and of our financial assistance for the construction of facilities that then would be available for possible U.S. use. The current U.S. and U.K. strategic interest in a base in the Indian Ocean is to establish a staging area suitable for possible contingency operations. Any candidate site in the Indian Ocean thus must fulfill certain criteria related to likely strategic use concepts and strategic constraints. These criteria include the distance to Africa, the distance between Ascension and other points on air routes (especially if African over-flights are not permitted), the suitability of an island for U.S. and U.K. aircraft, and pay-loads transportable to Africa.

Publicity Factors: Minister Healey and the MOD have taken a hard line with the British Royal Society and the British press concerning Aldabra. They have dismissed the scientific concerns as quite secondary to classified military interests, and thus have indirectly strengthened the concern and persistence of the American scientific community. The British have taken a public stance of ruling out consideration of any other island.

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Recently there has been publicity concerning both U. S. contributions to the acquisition of the BIOT (\$14 million) and the U. S. commitment to pay half the costs of any military development. This has led to Congressional and Press inquiries focused on a common theme: supporting the scientific case for preserving Aldabra, and criticizing an allegedly arbitrary military decision. There is no question that U. S. involvement will become increasingly visible under the present plan. There then will be an extraordinary amount of critical press coverage by scientific, Congressional, and lay conservationist groups throughout the world.

When construction on Aldabra becomes a more visible public issue, two forces may converge and cause serious political consequences. First, Congress may perceive any Indian Ocean facility as another case of the U. S. over-extending the role of "world policemen." Second, the naturalists' case will be raised actively and find acceptance by Congressmen already hostile to DoD influence on foreign policy.

Political Consequences: Should we change our position on Aldabra, there will probably be some political repercussions when we tell the British. When they approached us with the proposal for sharing the cost of the construction, they made a point of reminding us that the British Indian Ocean Territory had sprung in the first place largely from our desire to build a communications facility at Diego Garcia--a plan we later cancelled. The British then proposed the air staging facility at Aldabra as their major interest in the area if we would share the costs.

Should the U. S. decline to continue with Aldabra, U. K. interest in an Indian Ocean facility might decline or disappear. If we suggest use of another island, the U. K. might not be willing to contribute 50% of any increased costs. Therefore, if we want access to an Indian Ocean facility, it might have to be developed largely with U. S. support. Under such circumstances, the concept of "British predominance" might be seriously eroded. However, assuming careful discussions with the British, the U. K. might go ahead with another site under a renegotiated cost-sharing arrangement.

On balance, the case looks like this. Aldabra site would be cheaper and would fulfill the British (and U. S.) strategic objectives more satisfactorily because it is closer to East Africa. In addition, continuing with Aldabra would insure British participation. But continuing

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X 4 with Aldabra will provoke a storm of domestic and international criticism. Farquhar site is farther from Africa, would cost more for required construction, but probably would pose a less severe bird-control problem. If U.S. suggests an alternative, British may ask that U.S. pay all or most of increased costs.

X In summary, the "Aldabra issue" can be formulated this way: Is Aldabra worth the roughly \$50 million cost penalty that would be paid for using another island if a mutually suitable alternative could be found which would save a unique scientific site and eliminate great adverse publicity?

X 4. Conclusions: On the basis of my staff's review of available evidence, we come to three conclusions. (1) There is insufficient data to prove that Aldabra is the only possible site. (2) The scientific case for "Aldabra's uniqueness" is strong, and its large bird population may pose a serious operational problem. (3) There is no compelling reason to rush into construction on Aldabra, especially when we know the public/press reactions will be violent unless careful explanations are presented. J

5. Recommendations: Based upon the likely adverse domestic political consequences of an immediate decision to go ahead with Aldabra-- and upon the legitimate concerns of the international scientific community-- I recommend that we reconsider our future course before accepting Healey's invitation to complete the detailed plans for Aldabra construction.

Specifically, I recommend that we approach the British (below the ministerial level) as soon as possible to:

- . advise them of current and potential U.S. public, scientific, and Congressional reactions to the Aldabra plan, and the financial implications of this trend;
- . note the possible bird-strike problem, and attempt to define it more thoroughly;
- . ascertain the extent of U. K. willingness to consider alternatives to the Aldabra site, while emphasizing continued high U.S. interest in project;

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. if conditions are favorable, propose consideration of Farquhar, and state our willingness to pay more than 50% of any increased costs at such an alternative site;

. work with the U.K. toward the following press guidance: No public statements except to indicate that there will be no construction on Aldabra until joint U.K. -U.S. planning is completed, and publicly announced. A great deal of the sensitivity in the scientific community, and in the press, is simply the result of uncertainty about present situation. Much adverse journalistic pressure can be relieved by candor on the point of our genuine concern for scientific significance of Aldabra.

Subject to your approval, ISA will work with State and the Air Force to conduct exploratory discussions with the British as outlined above.

ISA and AF concur in this memorandum.

~~SIGNED~~

John S. Foster, Jr.

Approved _____

Disapproved _____

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