

U.S. Government Debated Secret Nuclear Deployments in Iceland

U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy toward Iceland, 1951-1960

U.S. Ambassador Objected, Arguing That If Iceland Discovered a Covert Deployment It Could Cause a “Dramatic Row” and Prompt Iceland’s Exit from NATO

Declassified Document Discloses Atlantic Command Requirement for Nuclear Storage Site in Iceland

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Foreign Minister Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson greeting President Lyndon B. Johnson during John F. Kennedy’s funeral, November 1963. A few years earlier Guðmundsson had asked Ambassador Tyler Thompson whether the United States was storing nuclear weapons in Iceland (National Archives, Still Pictures Branch, RG 59-PR, box 9)

U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy toward Iceland, 1951-1960

Washington, D.C., August 15, 2016 – During the Cold War the United States never deployed nuclear weapons in Iceland but a recently declassified State Department record shows that U.S. government officials debated whether they should do so, including through secret deployments. A letter from a U.S. ambassador to Iceland in August 1960, published today by the National Security Archive, rejected such proposals, but the revelation of internal discussions on the subject ties in to the broader issue of the practice of U.S. nuclear deployments overseas during the Cold War.

The author of the recently released letter, U.S. Ambassador Tyler Thompson, was aware that Icelandic authorities wondered whether Washington had ever deployed nuclear weapons there. Recognizing that Iceland's ties to NATO and the Western security system were fragile, he argued that if Reykjavik learned about a secret deployment, it could leave NATO. Furthermore, a "dramatic row" could "be expected to have an unfortunate effect on our friends and allies, to affect adversely our interests as far as neutrals are concerned, and to provide a propaganda field day for our enemies."



U.S. Ambassador to Iceland Tyler Thompson, whose long letter to the State Department raised critical questions about the possibility of secret nuclear deployments in Iceland (National Archives, Still Pictures Branch, RG 59-SO, box 17).

All references to Iceland were deleted from the archival release of Thompson's letter but his signature and other evidence confirms that the subject matter was Iceland. Further research indicated that nuclear weapons had been an issue in U.S. relations with Iceland since the Korean War when Icelandic officials asked whether the U.S. had deployment plans. Washington did not, but at the time Thompson wrote the letter U.S. officials were exploring nuclear storage options and secret deployments. Moreover, archival documents discovered by an Icelandic historian and published here today demonstrate that the United States had plans for at least one nuclear weapons storage site in the event World War III broke out.

Included in today's posting are:

- A request for assurance in November 1951 by Foreign Minister Bjarni Benediktsson that the United States was not planning an "atomic base" in Iceland
- A State Department telegram from December 1951 authorizing the U.S. minister to assure Benediktsson that the United States "has no (rpt no) intention [of] going beyond letter or spirit of [the] defense agreement" which had been negotiated earlier in the year.
- A question posed by Foreign Minister [Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson](#) to ambassador Thompson in June 1960: was the United States keeping atomic bombs at Keflavik air base or carrying them through the base in transit?
- A draft reply to [Guðmundsson's](#) question indicating that nuclear weapons had not been deployed in Iceland but noting that CINCLANT [Commander-in-Chief, Atlantic Command] had a "requirement" for a nuclear weapons storage site.

That the United States never deployed nuclear weapons to Iceland is a settled issue. In 1998, Robert S. Norris, William Arkin, and this writer published an article in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* in which they analyzed a recently declassified Defense Department history of U.S. nuclear deployments from 1945 to 1978. The study included several alphabetically arranged lists of nuclear weapons deployments in various parts of the world, including Western European members of NATO. Because many country and place names were excised the writers made educated guesses about some of them. One guess was Iceland. Certain details, such as Strategic Air Command activities during the 1950s, appeared to support the conclusion. The report in *The Bulletin* was widely publicized and when the news reached Iceland it created [a political furor](#); the Icelandic government quickly denied the premise and the Clinton administration immediately supported the denial. In a significant departure from the usual "neither confirm nor deny" approach to nuclear weapons locations, the U.S. deputy chief of mission in Reykjavik declared that putting Iceland on the list of Cold War nuclear deployment sites was "[incorrect](#)." Further research led to the identification of Iwo Jima as the deployment site. [\[1\]](#)

The fact that the U.S. government never deployed nuclear weapons in Iceland does not mean, however, that it had no nuclear plans for Iceland. Previous research by Valur Ingimundarson and William Arkin demonstrates that during the Cold War Iceland was

considered a potential storage site. As Ingimundarson discovered, at the end of the 1950s the U.S. Navy ordered the construction of a facility for storing nuclear depth bombs, an Advanced Underseas Weapons (AUW) Shop at the outskirts of Keflavik airport. The AUW facility was built by local Icelandic workers who thought its purpose was to store torpedoes. Whether Ambassador Thompson knew about it remains to be learned. During the 1980s Arkin reported that a presidential directive from the Nixon period treated Iceland as one of several “Conditional Deployment” locations, where nuclear weapons could be stored in the event of war. An AUW storage facility would make sense in that context. Nevertheless, all such arrangements were kept deeply secret because of the political sensitivity of the U.S. military presence in Iceland. [\[2\]](#)

The heavily excised release of the Thompson letter suggests that the U.S. national security bureaucracy does not presently acknowledge that Iceland figured in American nuclear weapons planning during the Cold War. This is not surprising because the U.S. government has not acknowledged the names of a number of other countries which directly participated in the NATO nuclear weapons stockpile program during the Cold War (and later): Belgium, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey (only West Germany and the United Kingdom have been officially disclosed). As for Iceland’s status as a “conditional” deployment site, even though the horse left the barn years ago in terms of the previous archival releases, time will tell whether declassifiers take that into account when making future decisions on classified historical documents concerning Iceland and nuclear weapons.



Pictured here is a MK-101 “Lulu” nuclear depth bomb. which the U.S. Navy could have deployed to a storage site at Keflavik airport, Iceland, in the event of World War III.

Weighing 1,200 pounds, with an explosive yield of between 10 and 15 kilotons, the Lulu was in service from the late 1950s to 1971. An air-dropped weapon designed for use by all Navy aircraft, Lulu would have been available to British, Canadian, and Dutch naval forces under NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. (Source: [photograph](#) by Mike Fazarckly at [Nuclear Weapons: A Guide to British Nuclear Weapons](#). Thanks to Stephen Schwartz for pointing out these photos.)

DOCUMENTS

Document 1: U.S. Legation Reykjavik telegram number 82 to State Department, 18 November 1951, Secret

Source: U.S. National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State records [RG 59], Central Decimal Files 1950-1954 [CDF], 711.56340B/11-1851

On 5 May 1951, Iceland and the United States secretly signed a defense agreement which became public just two days later. Under the agreement, the United States took over the defense of Iceland, a decision which local elites believed was necessary in light of the Korean War and Iceland's historically disarmed status. The arrangement was nonetheless contentious for many citizens and by some accounts bordered on illegal; the three major non-Communist parties therefore agreed to keep parliament in recess to minimize controversy (when Iceland joined NATO in 1949, riots had broken out). Two days later, on 7 May, 300 U.S. troops arrived, the first of a contingent which the Icelandic government limited to a tightly sequestered 3,900 troops out of fear of adverse public reaction (to the point that Reykjavik successfully insisted on the exclusion of African-American soldiers).

While the fine print of the defense agreement was still being negotiated, in November 1951 Foreign Minister Benediktsson showed U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Morris N. Hughes a London *Times* article quoting Senator Edwin Johnson (D-CO) that Iceland, North Africa, and Turkey were better deployment sites for atomic weapons than the United Kingdom. To assuage the foreign minister's concern that Communist Party members and other critics would exploit Johnson's statement, Hughes recommended "official reassurance" that the United States had no plans to deploy atomic weapons in Iceland.

Document 2: U.S. Legation Reykjavik telegram number 85 to State Department, 24 November 1951, Secret

Source: RG 59, CDF, 711.56340B/11-2451

A few days after the above exchange, Benediktsson told Hughes that he had showed him the *Times* article so he could tell "critics and worried colleagues" that he had immediately sought U.S. reassurances about U.S. atomic plans. When the foreign minister wondered whether an "appropriate quarter" could provide "some reassurance," Hughes agreed to inform the State Department "of his anxiety." The reference to McGaw is to General Edward John McGaw, the first commander of the Iceland Defense Force, the U.S. unified command which provided for Iceland's military security from 1951 to 2006.

Document 3: U.S. Legation Reykjavik Despatch 198 to State Department, "'First Icelandic Reaction to Senator Johnson's Statement on Atomic Bases,'" 27 November 1951, Secret

Source: RG 59, CDF, 711.56340B/11-2751

Chargé Hughes reported that the Communist newspaper, *Thjodviljinn* [Will of the Nation] had commented on Senator Johnson's statement, noting that the "Americans feel that it does not matter if Iceland should be subjected to the attack and horrors such bases would bring

upon the nation."

Document 4: U.S. Legation Reykjavik telegram number 97 to State Department, 20 December 1951, Secret

Source: RG 59, CDF, 711.56340B/12-1951

With no answer to his question about atomic bases, Benediktsonn asked Hughes again about the problem, noting that Communist opponents could "embarrass" him.

Document 5: State Department telegram 98 to U.S. Legation Reykjavik, 21 December 1951, Top Secret

Source: RG 59, CDF, box 3180, 711.56340B/11-2451

Benediktsonn's second query was the charm. Responding to Hughes' message, a State Department telegram sent under the name of Secretary of State Dean Acheson warned that any public statements would violate the policy to "not deny or affirm rumors" about the locations of atomic weapons. That was a military necessity to prevent the Soviet Union from determining the "pattern" of U.S. defenses. Nevertheless, the Department authorized Hughes to inform Benediktsonn confidentially that the United States would "make no move without [the] full consultation and agreement" of Iceland's government.

Document 6: U.S. Legation Reykjavik Despatch 238 to State Department, "Further Reaction to Threatened Use of Iceland as Atomic Base," 29 December 1951, Secret

Source: RG 59, CDF, box 3180, 711.56340B/12-2951

Hughes provided a fuller account of his meeting with Benediktsonn on 20 December and of his efforts during the holidays to pass on the gist of the State Department message to the permanent undersecretary and then to the foreign minister himself at a dinner. Whether there were any follow-up discussions remains unclear because the records covering the 1952-1954 period in the 711.56340B decimal file series are missing from box 3181. [\[3\]](#)

Document 7: U.S. Department of State Executive Secretariat, "Top Secret Daily Staff Summary," 22 June 1960, top secret, excerpt

Source: RG 59, Executive Secretariat, Daily Staff Summary, 1944-1971, box 45, Daily Staff Summary, Top Secret, June 1960

According to the State Department summary of telegram 367 from the U.S. Embassy in Iceland, in light of the recent U-2 crisis, Foreign Minister [Guðmundur Í. Guðmundsson](#) asked

Ambassador Thompson whether the United States had used Keflavik air base for U-2 flights, had stored nuclear weapons there or had moved them through Keflavik. While the Foreign Minister had not asked for assurances about advance agreement, according to the summary Thompson "feels that the storage of atomic warheads in Iceland without the latter's prior agreement would be a mistake and suggests that, if we have no intention to do this, we so inform the Icelandic Government without awaiting its request to this effect." This conversation is cited on the bottom of page 2 of the Tyler Thompson letter (Document 8) with the references to Iceland excised.



From the original Air Force caption: "A view of the famous Terminal Hotel at Keflavik Airport, Iceland, is pictured here. In the foreground are two MATS [Military Air Transport Service] aircraft parked out front of the hotel." Ambassador Thompson's letter captured the problems raised by the air base's wide open status for proposals for secret nuclear weapons storage: the base's "security problem" was "complicated by the small size of the secure areas, accessibility of the base to the public, the small community atmosphere there with everyone knowing to a large extent what is going on, and the speculation which new, and stricter security regulations might arouse." (National Archives, Still Pictures Branch, RG 342-B, box 1458, Foreign Locations—Iceland)

Documents 8A-B: Answer to Gudmundsson's Questions

A: Draft telegram to U.S. Embassy Iceland, 24 June 1960, Top Secret

B: Draft telegram to U.S. Embassy Iceland, circa 1 July 1960, Top Secret

Source: RG 59, Bureau of European Affairs, Office of Atlantic Political and Military Affairs, Subject Files, 1953-1962, box 11, Iceland Keflavick [sic] Air Base

In response to Guðmundsson's questions about U-2 flights and nuclear weapons, State Department officials prepared a response; the finished, delivered version remains classified

in State Department decimal files, but drafts of the response are available, of which the one dated 1 July 1960 is probably close to what was sent. The ambassador could assure the foreign minister that the U.S. had not stored nuclear weapons in Iceland or shipped them through Keflavik airbase. But this information was not for public consumption because of the U.S. government's "neither confirm nor deny" policy. In response to Thompson's suggestion that the U.S. pledge that it would consult the Icelandic government in advance about nuclear weapons deployments, the State Department believed this would "not [be] desirable." Before any assurances could be given the subject would need careful study in Washington; if asked for such assurances, Thompson was to tell Guðmundsson that he needed to seek instructions. Thompson's letter (below) does not indicate that a follow-up conversation with Guðmundsson *had occurred*, only the possibility that he might ask the question about nuclear deployments again.

The 24 June draft telegram mentions the CINCLANT requirement for a nuclear weapons storage site and its ongoing construction but that item was dropped from the 1 July draft, perhaps because of its sensitivity. The final version of the telegram remains classified but has been requested.

Document 9: Ambassador Tyler Thompson to Ivan White, 5 August 1960, top secret, excised copy

Source: RG 59, DF 1960-1963, 711.5611-8560

Probably to respond to the issues raised by Guðmundsson's *questions*, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Ivan White sent Thompson a letter on 21 July 1960. It was one of those "official informal" communications then used by State Department officials to communicate with its embassies on matters that were too complex and sensitive to handle by telegram. White's letter has not surfaced and is not indexed in the State Department decimal files. But judging from the tenor of Thompson's reply, White may have asserted that the U.S. government was free to deploy nuclear weapons in Iceland without securing the agreement of Reykjavik. If that was the case, the Eisenhower administration had departed from the Acheson policy of assuring "full consultation and agreement." It is possible that the previous ambassador, John Muccio, was the individual whom Thompson described as "recommending against prior consultation" out of fear that information about the deployment would leak to the Soviets.

If war was imminent or had broken out, Thompson believed that a secret emergency deployment would be permissible, but under peacetime circumstances he recommended seeking Iceland's consent. Given that the Soviets probably suspected that Iceland was already a storage site, Thompson believed that it would be worse if the government of Iceland discovered a secret deployment; that would produce a diplomatic crisis, including Iceland's possible withdrawal from NATO under protest. Moreover, "from the point of view of respect for the rights and sovereignty of [Iceland], the fact that it might not agree to the storage of nuclear weapons here could be considered as making prior consultations all the more necessary."

To make deployments technically possible, Thompson suggested the construction of storage areas, but consulting the government if Washington ever wanted to use them. If war was approaching it would be possible to deploy weapons under emergency conditions because the possibility of objections would be “minimized.” If, however, the United States wanted to use the storage areas for actual deployments it should consult the Icelandic government. Thompson may not have been aware of the SACLANT storage site mentioned in the draft telegram cited above.

Thompson’s letter met with some internal criticism, mainly on the first page: a handwritten “no” next to his observation that U.S. nuclear weapons storage in NATO countries depends on the agreement of the country concerned; a question mark next to the comment about Canadian consent for storage of nuclear weapons in Canada; a comment “No! Canada on record,” suggesting that Ottawa would accept clandestine U.S. storage; and another comment which is harder to decipher: “tech ... doesn’t get UK OK.”

For the archival release of this letter the State Department and the Defense Department justified the excision on two grounds. The State Department cited Section 3.3 (b) (6) of Executive Order 13526 – that declassification would “reveal information, including foreign government information, that would cause serious harm to relations between the United States and a foreign government, or to ongoing diplomatic activities of the United States.” The Defense Department cited exemption (b) (6), ruling that declassification would “reveal formally named or numbered U.S. military war plans that remain in effect, or reveal operational or tactical elements of prior plans that are contained in such active plans.” Whether the declassification of a document which is well over half a century old could have such impacts on U.S. diplomacy or military planning appears highly doubtful.

Notes

[1]. William Arkin, Robert S. Norris, and William Burr, “They Were,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November–December 1999, pp. 25-35; Arkin, Norris, and Burr, “How Much Did Japan Know,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January-February 2000, pp. 11-13, 78-79.

[2]. Valur Ingimundarson, *The Rebellious Ally: Iceland, the United States, and the Politics of Empire, 1945-2006* (Dordrech, The Netherlands, 2011), 86; William Arkin, “Iceland Melts,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (50) January-February 2000, p. 80.

[3]. One relevant item that could show up in box 3181 was published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States*: a [memorandum](#) to the Deputy Under Secretary of State on “Additional Military Operating Requirements in Iceland,” dated 12 June 1952. It briefly recounts the discussions with the Icelandic foreign minister and mentions a NATO request to the U.S. and the Government of Iceland for a strategic air base in Iceland, but any further discussion of nuclear weapons was excised in the *FRUS volume*.

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