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1949-1954**

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A “Wasting Asset” | Marc Trachtenberg

American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954

In January 1946, General Leslie Groves, the wartime commander of the Manhattan Project, prepared a memorandum on the military implications of the atomic bomb. “If we were ruthlessly realistic,” he wrote, “we would not permit any foreign power with which we are not firmly allied, and in which we do not have absolute confidence, to make or possess atomic weapons. If such a country started to make atomic weapons we would destroy its capacity to make them before it had progressed far enough to threaten us.”¹

In the late 1940s and well into the early 1950s, the basic idea that the United States should not just sit back and allow a hostile power like the Soviet Union to acquire a massive nuclear arsenal—that a much more “active” and more “positive” policy had to be seriously considered—was surprisingly widespread. The American government, of course, never came close to implementing a preventive war strategy. As far as the public as a whole was concerned, the idea seems to have had only a limited appeal.² What ran deep, however, was a tremendous sense of foreboding. If the Soviets were allowed to develop nuclear forces of their own, there was no telling what might

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1. General Leslie Groves, “Statement on the atomic bomb and its effect on the Army,” appendix to JCS 1477/6, January 21, 1946, in CCS 471.6 (8-15-45), sec. 2, Record Group (RG) 218, United States National Archives (USNA), Washington, D.C. There is a slightly different version, dated January 2, 1946, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1946, Vol. I, pp. 1197–1203. Eisenhower, who thought Groves’s views were “perhaps extreme in some respects,” nevertheless had a high regard for the paper as a whole. See Louis Galambos, ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, Vol. VII, pp. 760–761, 641–642, n. 7. See also James Schnabel, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. I, 1945–47 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [U.S. GPO], 1979), pp. 281–282.

2. Thus in September 1954 a Gallup poll asked: “Some people say we should go to war against Russia now while we still have the advantage in atomic and hydrogen weapons. Do you agree or disagree with this point of view?” Thirteen percent of the sample agreed, 76 percent disagreed, 11 percent had no opinion. Similarly in July 1950, right after the outbreak of the Korean War, 15 percent of a Gallup sample thought the United States “should declare war on Russia now.” Hazel Gaudet Erskine, “The Polls: Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Energy,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 27 (1963), p. 177; George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), Vol. 1, p. 930.

happen. If they were so hostile and aggressive even in the period of America's nuclear monopoly, what would they be like once this monopoly had been broken? There was no reason to assume that a nuclear world would be stable; wouldn't the Soviets some day try to destroy the one power that prevented them from achieving their goals by launching a nuclear attack on the United States? The clouds of danger were gathering on the horizon. Was the West, through its passivity, simply drifting toward disaster? Wasn't some sort of more "positive" policy worth considering?

The basic goal here is to study how people dealt with these problems—how they came to terms with the dramatic shifts in the military balance and the extraordinary changes in the overall military environment that were taking place in the first decade of the nuclear age. The nuclear revolution, the loss of the American atomic monopoly, and the coming of thermonuclear weapons in the early 1950s were all of enormous importance to the formation of American policy. It had been clear from the very beginning of the nuclear age that America's nuclear monopoly, even its nuclear superiority, was inevitably a "wasting asset."³ But what did this imply in terms of foreign and military policy?

Most of the analysis here will focus on the purely historical problem of how this set of concerns worked its way through the political system. But two important points emerge from re-examination of this period. The first has to do with the role of trends in the military balance. Concerns about the way the balance was changing—about the expected opening and closing of "windows of vulnerability"—carried a good deal of political weight; indeed, they turned out to be far more important than I ever would have imagined.⁴ The whole concept of "windows," it became clear, was not simply an abstract, academic construct, artificially imposed on historical reality. Although the term itself was not used at the time, one is struck by how real the "window" concept was; its impact on actual policy was both enormous and pervasive. In particular, concerns about anticipated shifts in the military balance played a critical role in shaping not only grand strategy, but also policy on specific issues, especially during the Korean War. The reluctance to escalate during the winter of 1950–51 was due to a sense among "insiders" familiar with the true state of the military balance that a window of vulnerability had opened up, and that the Soviets might be tempted to strike before the United States was able to close it. It followed that this was not the time to run risks. By 1953 the situation had altered dramatically as a result of the extraordinary buildup of American military power then taking place; this shift in the balance led to a greatly increased willingness to escalate in Korea if the war could not be ended on acceptable terms. America's window of vulnerability had been shut; and a window of opportunity opened. A key question during the early Eisenhower

3. The term "wasting asset" was quite common at the time. See, for example, Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. I, pp. 258–259.

4. For a discussion of some of the theoretical issues relating to this question, see especially Stephen Van Evera, "Causes of War" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1984), chap. 2, and pp. 89–94, 330–339; see also Jack Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107.

period, therefore, was whether this new situation could be exploited before it too disappeared.

The second major point to emerge from the study is that aggressive ideas were taken very seriously in the American government in the early 1950s, even at the highest levels of the administration. This aggressive mood was in part rooted in concerns about the shifting military balance. This is not to say that an aggressive policy was ever implemented. The real question is not whether such a policy was ever adopted, but what sort of political weight this kind of thinking carried.

This article, therefore, has the following structure. A brief survey of "preventive war" thinking in the first section simply sets the stage: It turns out that support for a highly aggressive strategy was much more widespread than has ever been recognized. But these explicit calls for a showdown with the Soviets "before it was too late" were just the tip of the iceberg, a surface manifestation of a much more pervasive, but also more amorphous, set of concerns about what the loss of America's nuclear advantage might lead to.

But was all of this just talk, or did these anxieties have a real impact on policy? This issue will be addressed in two parts. First, I examine the sort of thinking that took shape as high government officials grappled with these issues on a fairly abstract and general level. The analysis in the second section will therefore focus on statements of grand strategy, and especially on NSC 68. The test, however, of how seriously such documents are to be taken is whether the sort of thinking they reflected had any impact on specific issues. The third section, therefore, examines how concerns about the shifting balance affected actual policy, especially during the Korean War. The fourth section takes the story to its conclusion by looking at how preventive war arguments were finally confronted and laid to rest during the early Eisenhower period, in the Solarium exercise and its aftermath in 1953–54. I end by exploring some of the implications of the argument for understanding the overall course of American foreign and military policy in the early 1950s, in the Far East, Central Europe, and elsewhere around the globe.

"Preventive War" Thinking, 1945–53

The sort of argument that General Groves made in 1946 was quite common in the early atomic age. The idea that the United States had to take some sort of action before its nuclear edge was neutralized was by no means limited to the lunatic fringe. William L. Laurence, for example, the science correspondent for the *New York Times* and then America's leading writer on nuclear issues, wanted to force the Soviets in 1948 to accept nuclear disarmament, through an ultimatum if necessary. If they turned down this American demand, their atomic plants should be destroyed before bombs could be produced. If that meant war, he said, it would be one forced on America by Soviet "insistence on an atomic-armament race which must inevitably lead to war

anyway. Under the circumstances, it would be to our advantage to have it while we are still the sole possessors of the atomic bomb."⁵

Those who wanted a more "positive" policy often argued that an unrestricted nuclear arms race would "inevitably" lead to war. Groves also assumed that "the world could not long survive" an "armament race in atomic weapons."⁶ Senator Brien McMahon, the influential chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, thought that "almost nothing could be worse than the current atomic armaments race and that victory in a future war, whatever its sequel in other respects, would at least assure effective international control over weapons of mass destruction."⁷

This argument for a more "positive" policy was a favorite theme of a number of scientists and intellectuals. Bertrand Russell had advocated a Laurence-style ultimatum in 1946.⁸ By 1948, he was calling for preventive war pure and simple.⁹ The famous physicist Leo Szilard had evidently argued for preventive war at the very beginning of the atomic age: it was "from the lips of Leo Szilard," Bernard Brodie wrote, that he had "heard, in October of 1945, the first outright advocacy in [his] experience of preventive war."¹⁰

Preventive war was a very live issue among the civilian strategists at the RAND Corporation well into the early 1950s, and there is some evidence that the Navy was interested in the question in 1948.¹¹ At the State Department, even moderates like

5. William L. Laurence, "How Soon Will Russia Have the A-Bomb?" *Saturday Evening Post*, November 6, 1948, p. 182.

6. Groves, "Statement on the atomic bomb."

7. Senator Brien McMahon to Harry S. Truman, November 21, 1949, *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. I, p. 591. Note also McMahon's remarks in a top secret hearing held on January 20, 1950, Stenographic Transcript of Hearings before the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, January 20, 1950, Vol. I, "Projected Development of Super Weapons" (TS), CD 471.6 A-Bomb, RG 330, USNA, quoted in Samuel Williamson (with Steven Rearden), "The View from Above: High-Level Decisions and the Soviet-American Strategic Arms Competition, 1945-50," p. 199 (unpublished manuscript, October 1975, available from Office of the Secretary of Defense, Freedom of Information Office); and also *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, Vol. II, pp. 584-585. For additional information on preventive war thinking in the Senate, see n. 62 below.

8. See Bertrand Russell's statement in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 2, No. 7-8 (October 1946), pp. 19-21.

9. See the report of Bertrand Russell's speech of November 20, 1948, at the New Commonwealth School, London, in the *New York Times*, November 21, 1948, p. 4.

10. Bernard Brodie's recollection is in Brodie to Thomas Schelling, January 8, 1965, enclosure, Brodie Papers, Box 2, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Library. See also the last paragraph of Leo Szilard to Vannevar Bush, January 14, 1944, in Gertrude Weiss Szilard and Spencer Weart, eds., *Leo Szilard: His Version of the Facts* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), p. 163. Szilard's article, "Calling for a Crusade," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 3, No. 4-5 (April-May 1947), p. 103, while not of course an argument for preventive war, nonetheless betrays a certain attraction to the idea. See also the Fermi-Rabi statement of October 1949 opposing the development of the hydrogen bomb: the last sentence seemed to take it for granted that the United States could retaliate even against Soviet production of a "Super." *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. I, p. 573.

11. The mathematician John Williams, then one of the leading figures at RAND, was the principal champion there of a preventive war strategy. He and Brodie had a very interesting memorandum debate on the issue in 1953 and 1954. See John Williams, "In Response to Paxson's

Charles Bohlen and George Kennan were worried about what would happen if matters were allowed to drift and the Soviets began to build large nuclear forces of their own. "We were not now in the military phase of our relations with the Russians," Bohlen pointed out at a State Department meeting in April 1949, but America had to "look ahead" and think in long-range terms. Suppose that by 1953 Russia had recovered from the war and was "in possession of the atomic bomb." The United States might then wonder: "What should we have done in 1949?"¹² As for Kennan, he thought in 1950 that a war that the Soviet Union stumbled into at that point, before she had really built up an impressive nuclear force, might in the long run "be the best solution for us."¹³

Or take the case of Winston Churchill. In 1946, he predicted that there would be a war with Russia in perhaps seven or eight years. How, he was asked, could Britain take part in an atomic war? "We ought not to wait until Russia is ready," he replied. "I believe it will be eight years before she has these bombs."¹⁴ He argued repeatedly in 1948 for a showdown with the Russians—for "bringing matters to a head" before the American nuclear monopoly was broken. If this led to a war, he told the House of Commons at the beginning of the year, having it then offered "the best chance of coming out of it alive."¹⁵ If the Soviets were so aggressive now, he argued in October, when only America had the bomb, imagine what they would be like "when they got the atomic bomb and have accumulated a large store." Matters could not be allowed to drift; a more active policy was necessary; "no one in his senses can believe we have a limitless period of time before us."¹⁶ Thus Churchill, even before the Berlin

Memo on the Probability of War," February 3, 1953, and "Regarding the Preventive War Doctrine," July 27, 1953, unpublished RAND papers. The memoranda that Brodie, Williams, and others exchanged on the question are in the folder "Strategic Objectives Committee," in James Digby's personal files at RAND; I am grateful to Mr. Digby for allowing me to consult them. On Navy interest in the idea, see the "Agenda for [Navy] General Board Serial 315. Study of Nature of Warfare within Next Ten Years and Navy Contributions in Support of National Security," March 30, 1948, CD 23-1-10, RG 330, 1947-50 series, USNA, especially question 119. The study itself, evidently written by the future Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Arleigh Burke, is apparently still classified.

12. Record of the Undersecretary's Meeting, April 15, 1949, *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. I, p. 284.

13. "Memorandum of National Security Council Consultants' Meeting," June 29, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 330. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 48n. Note also some information that came out during the John Paton Davies affair of November 1954: when Davies was dismissed as a security risk, he defended himself (among other ways) by presenting evidence that he had called in 1950 for a "preventive showdown with the Soviet Union." *The New York Times*, November 6, 1954, pp. 8, 9.

14. This is an extract from Lord Moran's diary, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940-1965* (London: Constable, 1966), p. 315; note also pp. 505, 545.

15. *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, January 23, 1948, p. 561.

16. Winston S. Churchill Llandudno speech, October 9, 1948, *New York Times*, October 10, 1948, p. 4. These speeches made a big impression on political scientist Hans Morgenthau, who also stressed the dangers of a policy of drift and agreed with Churchill that matters needed to be brought "to a head" with the Soviets. See Morgenthau, "The Conquest of the United States by Germany," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1950), esp. pp. 23-26. Morgenthau complained that the American government ignored the tremendous significance of the breaking of the U.S. nuclear monopoly, but he was reacting simply to the blasé image that

blockade, privately urged the American government to present the Soviets with an ultimatum: they must either withdraw from East Germany or see their cities destroyed by atomic attack.¹⁷

The real heart of preventive war thinking at this time, however, lay within the U.S. Air Force. The preventive war policy was, as Brodie pointed out in 1953, "for several years certainly the prevailing philosophy at the Air War College."¹⁸ General Orvil Anderson, the commanding officer at that institution, had in fact "been in the habit of giving students at the college a completely detailed exposition, often lasting three or four hours, on how a preventive war through strategic airpower could be carried out." "Give me the order to do it," he said, "and I can break up Russia's five A-bomb nests in a week. . . . And when I went up to Christ—I think I could explain to Him that I had saved civilization."¹⁹

General Anderson's views were evidently shared by other high-ranking Air Force officers, including General George Kenney, the first commander of the Strategic Air Command, and his successor, General Curtis LeMay.²⁰ General Nathan Twining, Air

American officials were deliberately trying to project: see, for example, the instructions on how to react to the Soviet atomic test in the William Frye memo, September 23, 1949, P & O 091 Russia (sec. 1), RG 219, Military Records Branch, USNA.

17. Lewis Douglas to Robert Lovett, April 17, 1948, *FRUS*, 1948, Vol. II, p. 895. 1948 was also the year that Churchill published *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), his account of the origins of the Second World War. This book can be viewed as the intellectual pivot linking the interwar period with the nuclear age. The political message of the book certainly has to be interpreted in the light of the other things that Churchill was saying that year. Note especially the "theme of the volume": "how the English-speaking peoples through their unwisdom, carelessness, and good nature allowed the wicked to rearm," and the extraordinary passage on pp. 346–348 (pp. 310–311 in the Bantam paperback edition), a powerful argument for acting before it was too late.

18. Bernard Brodie, "A Commentary on the Preventive-War Doctrine," RAND paper, June 11, 1953, p. 1. See also his Air War College talk of April 17, 1952, "Changing Capabilities and National Objectives," Brodie Papers, Box 12, UCLA, p. 23ff; both, in Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *The Development of American Strategic Thought* (New York: Garland, 1988), vol. 3.

19. *The New York Times*, September 2, 1950, p. 8.

20. The point about Kenney is based on William Kaufmann's personal recollections; it came out in a conversation the author had with him in 1986. Kaufmann knew Kenney quite well in the late 1940s. Kenney, however, was more discreet than Anderson in his public remarks, and did not go beyond an argument about the inevitability of war. See "White Star vs. Red," *Newsweek*, May 17, 1948, pp. 30–32. As for LeMay, he pointed out much later that there had been a time, before the Soviets had accumulated a stockpile of atomic bombs, when the U.S. could have destroyed the entire Soviet capability to wage war "without losing a man to their defenses." He denied that he had ever formally advocated a preventive war strategy, but he did admit that he might have said to some people at SAC, "We've got this capability. Maybe the Nation ought to do it." Curtis E. LeMay with MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 481–482. Note also the discussion in the book by LeMay's successor as SAC commander, General Thomas S. Power, who discussed the idea at some length and took a "balanced" approach to the subject: "the concept of 'preventive war,'" he said, "is too complex to justify conclusive opinions either for or against it." Thomas Power, *Design for Survival* (New York: Coward McCann, 1965), pp. 79–84. See also the transcript of a series of discussions held in Princeton in late 1953 and early 1954, pp. 1317–1319, Acheson Papers, Box 76, Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), hereafter cited as "Princeton Seminar." According to Nitze, there was a group,

Force Chief of Staff and then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) under Eisenhower, was also sympathetic to Anderson's point of view. In the mid-1960s, a good ten years after preventive war had essentially died out as an issue, he wrote that Anderson had been a "brilliant officer," and his difficulty "lay in his outspoken evaluation of the basic moral issue involved in our confrontation of the Communist conspiracy." For Anderson, preventive war had simply been the lesser of two evils, but his views, Twining complained, "were never given a fair hearing by the State Department, or for that matter, by the military establishment."²¹

The Loss of Monopoly: NSC 68 and American Strategy, 1950–52

The most important government officials at the time were quite hostile to the "preventive war" thesis. But this is not to say that they were not concerned with the problems that would result from the ending of America's nuclear monopoly. The Soviet explosion of an atomic device in late 1949, in fact, led to a major rethinking of American strategy. NSC 68, the basic document here, was written mainly by Paul Nitze, Kennan's successor as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff. The report also reflected the views of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, its chief defender in high government circles; it can in fact be seen as a kind of fleshing out of the Acheson strategy of creating "situations of strength."²² Contrary to what is commonly believed, the strategy called for in NSC 68 was *not* essentially defensive in nature, and the aggressive thrust of the document was probably linked to concerns about long-term trends in the strategic balance. Indeed, it turns out that window thinking had an important impact on American grand strategy, especially in the period after the outbreak of the Korean War.

The authors of NSC 68 believed that America's atomic monopoly was the one thing that had balanced Soviet superiority in ground forces; they were concerned, therefore, that with growing Soviet atomic capabilities, America's nuclear edge was being neutralized more rapidly than conventional forces could be created to fill the gap: hence

centering on elements in or connected with the Air Force, that was convinced in 1950 that general war was inevitable, and that this notion had implied something like a preventive war strategy. The group (as he recalled it) included Colonel Herschel Williams of the Air Force; apparently James Burnham (the name is garbled in the transcript) was the major figure in the group.

21. Nathan F. Twining, *Neither Liberty Nor Safety: A Hard Look at U.S. Military Policy and Strategy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 18–19. See also pp. 49, 56, 60, 276. Note also the August 1953 Air Force study "The Coming National Crisis," discussed in David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), p. 33. This study, Rosenberg says, argued that "the time was approaching when the U.S. would find itself in a 'militarily unmanageable' position. Before that time arrived, the nation would have to choose whether to trust its future to 'the whims of a small group of proven barbarians' in the USSR, or 'be militarily prepared to support such decisions as might involve general war.'"

22. See, for example, Dean Acheson's "total diplomacy" speech of February 16, 1950, *Department of State Bulletin*, March 20, 1950.

the sense of a danger zone. But they did not believe that, once American ground forces had been built up and an overall balance had been restored, that would be the end of the problem: they did not believe that the threat of retaliation would be an adequate deterrent to nuclear attack. The Soviets, it was predicted, would be able to deliver a hundred atomic bombs on target by 1954. This did not mean that the Soviets could wipe out American industry as such, for this was still the early atomic age, but they could destroy America's "superiority in economic potential." The Soviets could thus prevent the United States from "developing a general military superiority in a war of long duration." Even if they had to absorb an American retaliatory attack, it was "hardly conceivable that, if war comes, the Soviet leaders would refrain from the use of atomic weapons unless they felt fully confident of attaining their objectives by other means."²³ In fact, as a Policy Planning Staff paper emphasized in mid-1952, NSC 68 did not hold that "the existence of two large atomic stockpiles" would result in a nuclear stand-off, but instead had predicted that it might well "prove to be an incitement to war."²⁴

Because of the advantages of getting in the first blow, there would be a constant danger of surprise attack: the incentive to preempt would be a permanent source of instability. The need, therefore, was not simply to cover a gap; the concern was not limited to the next four or so years. The real problem was more far-reaching, but what could be done about it?

NSC 68 explicitly ruled out a strategy of preventive war, in the sense of an unprovoked surprise attack on the Soviet Union.²⁵ But a number of the document's key points echoed the standard preventive war arguments: the developing situation was not stable, the country was moving into a period of enormous danger, and this situation could not last indefinitely. Nitze and Acheson took it for granted that America was dealing not with an ordinary adversary, but with a ruthless enemy intent on world domination, and ultimately on the destruction of the United States.²⁶

23. NSC 68, April 7, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 251, 266, 268. Emphasis added. See also a Policy Planning Staff paper written in mid-1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 62, para. 9.

24. Enclosure in Paul Nitze to H. Freeman Matthews, July 14, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 62. These were all very controversial issues within the government, especially in 1950. Nitze himself had earlier leaned toward the line that nuclear forces tended to neutralize each other (*FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 14), and it is not clear to what extent NSC 68 marked a genuine shift in opinion on his part, as opposed to an accommodation to those, especially in the military, who took the opposite line. For a fascinating inside account of these disputes, see Harvey to Armstrong, June 23, 1950, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Box 7, folder "Atomic Energy—Armaments 1950," RG 59, USNA. For the views of the military, see JIC 502, January 20, 1950, CCS 471.6 USSR (11-8-49), "Implications of Soviet Success in Achieving Atomic Capability," sec. 1, in RG 218, USNA; this document was their contribution to the process that culminated in NSC 68. For a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) contribution, see ORE 91-49, February 10, 1950, file CD 11-1-2, Box 61, RG 330 (1947-50 series), USNA.

25. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 281-282. According to General Twining, however, in the discussions leading to NSC 68, the preventive war option was "advocated with much more vigor" than all but one of the three other policies considered in the report. Twining, *Neither Liberty nor Safety*, p. 49.

26. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 207-208, 145.

It was widely assumed in official circles that it might not be possible to work out a satisfactory *modus vivendi* with the Soviets. One high official in the State Department went even further and "suggested that in the last analysis we may find that we have to drive out the rulers of the Kremlin completely."²⁷ Acheson himself argued that we already were in a "real war" with them, although the American people still did not realize it.²⁸ And Robert Lovett, then a consultant to the NSC, developed the point: the United States should "start acting exactly as though we were under fire from an invading army. In the war in which we are presently engaged, we should fight with no holds barred. We should find every weak spot in the enemy's armor, both on the periphery and at the center, and hit him with anything that comes to hand. Anything we do short of an all-out effort is inexcusable."²⁹

The most important point about NSC 68 is that this was *not* a defensive-minded, status quo-oriented document.³⁰ For Acheson and Nitze, the fundamental aim of American policy was quite ambitious: to bring about a "retraction" of Soviet power—to force the Soviets to "recede" by creating "situations of strength."³¹ The policy of NSC 68 was, in its own terms, a "policy of calculated and gradual coercion"; the aim was "to check and to roll back the Kremlin's drive for world domination." To support such a policy, it was important to go beyond merely balancing Soviet power, and to build up "clearly superior overall power in its most inclusive sense."³²

What was the point of such an ambitious policy? The document itself presented two rationales, but neither is entirely satisfactory. First, it argued that a merely

27. R. Gordon Arneson, special assistant to the undersecretary of state for atomic energy policy, from the Record of the Meeting of the State-Defense Policy Review Group, February 27, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 174.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 207; see also *ibid.*, p. 293.

29. Record of the Meeting of the State-Defense Policy Review Group, March 16, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 198. Lovett had been undersecretary of state until January 1949; he was appointed deputy secretary of defense in September 1950, and the following year succeeded Marshall as secretary of defense.

30. The large literature on the subject assumes that NSC 68 called for an essentially defensive policy. The early account by Paul Hammond, "NSC-68: Prologue to Rearmament," in Warner Schilling, Paul Hammond and Glenn Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), was written before the text of the document became available. The more recent literature is therefore more interesting in this connection. See in particular Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat," *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Fall 1979), pp. 116–158; and Steven Rearden, *The Evolution of American Strategic Doctrine: Paul Nitze and the Soviet Challenge* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984) esp. pp. 22–26. The chapter on NSC 68 in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, is as close to a standard account as we have. Gaddis (p. 100) repeats his earlier judgment (in "NSC 68 and the Problem of Ends and Means," *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 [Spring 1980], p. 168) that the military buildup called for in the document was intended "to be defensive in nature."

31. For Acheson, see Memorandum of Conversation, March 24, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 208. The term "retraction" appears in many documents from this period. See especially NSC 68, April 7, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 252, 289. Note also a Nitze memorandum of July 14, 1952, in *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 58–59.

32. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 253, 255, 284. Note also the reference to the H-bomb in *ibid.*, p. 267: "If the U.S. develops a thermonuclear weapon ahead of the U.S.S.R., the U.S. should for the time being be able to bring increased pressure on the U.S.S.R."

defensive policy was inadequate because the "absence of order among nations [was] becoming less and less tolerable." The enormous tensions of the Cold War could not continue for long and would eventually be replaced by "some kind of order," either on their terms or on ours.³³ But an argument of this sort seems much too abstract and academic to be the real taproot of thinking about basic policy.

The other argument was that a "process of accommodation, withdrawal and frustration" was needed in order to bring about "the necessary changes in the Soviet system." The Kremlin could be "a victim of its own dynamism": if its "forward thrusts" were frustrated, and the Soviets had to deal with a "superior counterpressure," "the seeds of decay within the Soviet system would begin to flourish and fructify."³⁴ This is quite similar to the argument Kennan had made in July 1947 in the famous "X-article" in *Foreign Affairs*, but there the claim was that an essentially defensive strategy would be sufficient to produce these results. Why did NSC 68 propose to go further? Why was a more aggressive American strategy more likely to bring about these changes in the Soviet system? Despite its length, NSC 68 contained no answer to this basic question. One is therefore left with the suspicion that some unarticulated motive was the real basis for the aggressive strategy called for in NSC 68.

It seems that concerns about the shifting balance played a major role in shaping the policy outlined in NSC 68. The report assumed that in time a Soviet surprise attack on the United States might well be militarily decisive. An American buildup "might put off for some time" the date when the Soviets would be able to launch such an attack. But when that time came—and the document seemed to assume that it would come eventually—the Soviets "might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth."³⁵ The assumption that the Soviets were intent on world domination and thus on the destruction of American power, and the belief that they were absolutely ruthless and that their policy was "guided only by considerations of expediency," implied that they would strike when they had developed this capability.³⁶ In that case, it did not make sense to opt for a strategy of simply "buying time," in the hope that there might be a basic transformation of the Soviet system in the next few years.³⁷ Taken to their logical conclusion, these arguments pointed to a much more extreme policy than the one called for in NSC 68—perhaps to a strategy of "bringing matters to a head" with the Russians before it was too late. But this was not the strategy that people like Nitze and Acheson seem to have been reaching for. One has the sense instead that the architects of NSC 68 could scarcely bring themselves to accept the conclusions that followed from their own arguments. It seems instead that they settled, as a kind of psychological compromise, for the lesser strategy of "rollback"

33. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 241, 263.

34. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 248, 287.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 266–267.

36. The quotation is from Paul Nitze, "Recent Soviet Moves," February 8, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 145.

37. On "buying time," see a Policy Planning Staff document of December 9, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 464; also see NSC 68, *ibid.*, p. 287.

and forcing a "retraction of Soviet power," and for the buildup that might make these possible.

This is not to argue that NSC 68 had a hidden agenda and that the real goal of the aggressive strategy was to generate situations that might lead to a war before America's nuclear advantage was lost forever. It is clear, in fact, that neither Nitze nor Acheson actually wanted a war, above all, not in 1950. What they wanted was to create such overwhelming power that the United States could achieve its goals without actually having to fight. But such a military strategy was extremely ambitious. As Nitze put it in mid-1952, it would take "clearly preponderant power" to make progress by peaceful means, "probably more power than to win military victory in the event of war."³⁸

At the end of the Truman administration, Nitze would complain that even the extraordinary buildup of military power that had taken place during the Korean War had been inadequate. The defense budget might have tripled, but the "situations of strength" that national policy had called for had never been created. In January 1953, he worried that the United States was becoming "a sort of hedge-hog, unattractive to attack, but basically not very worrisome over a period of time beyond our immediate position"; Nitze was upset that the goals laid out in documents like NSC 68 were not being taken "sufficiently seriously as to warrant doing what is necessary to give us some chance of seeing these objectives attained."³⁹

A war itself was never desired, but it does seem clear that Nitze was willing to accept a real risk of a nuclear conflict, but only *after* the trends had been reversed and American power had been rebuilt. For the time being, he wrote in 1950, the United States was weak and needed above all "to build a platform from which we can subsequently go on to a successful outcome of this life-and-death struggle" with the Kremlin. "We must," he stressed, "avoid becoming involved in general hostilities with the USSR in our present position of military weakness if this is at all possible without sacrificing our self-respect and without endangering our survival."⁴⁰ But then? The clear implication is that when "our position of weakness" turns into a "position of strength," it would become less necessary to tread cautiously.⁴¹

In the meantime, however, the country was going to have to cross a danger zone. With the outbreak of the Korean War and the rearmament decisions that were made in its wake, the argument was extended to take note of another danger: the risk that the Soviets might strike preemptively, in order to head off the shift in the balance of military power that American rearmament would bring about. The assumption was

38. Paul Nitze to H. F. Matthews, July 14, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 59.

39. Nitze to Dean Acheson, January 12, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 205.

40. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 464. This sort of thinking was fairly common during the late Truman period.

41. Note also in this context Acheson's complaints in May and June 1953 about the "weakness" of the Eisenhower policy, and the new administration's failure to follow through on Truman's policy of "building strength." Acheson to Truman, May 28, 1953, Box 30, folder 391, and Acheson Memorandum of Conversation, June 23, 1953, Box 68, folder 172, both in the Dean Acheson Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

that a "window" favoring the Soviets had opened, and that the American attempt to close it might well lead to a war.

Such window thinking is a recurrent theme in the published *Foreign Relations* documents. NSC 73/4 of August 25, 1950, for example, argued that the Korean events might be "the first phase of a general Soviet plan for global war." In that case, the Soviets would avoid war until they had calculated that "the United States had reached the point of maximum diversion and attrition of its forces-in-being," or until the USSR had developed its nuclear forces "to the point which it deemed desirable for a general attack on the West." As long as America's forces were being drawn increasingly into the fighting in Korea, "the Kremlin might not hasten the outbreak of general hostilities since the USSR would be increasing its own capabilities as those of the U.S. diminished." But this could change, the document warned, "at the point where the Kremlin estimated that our maximum weakness had been reached, and that further passage of time leading to the material strengthening of the relative position and military posture of the United States would not work to Soviet advantage."⁴²

A CIA memorandum a few weeks later was even more specific about dates: "In the belief that their object cannot be fully attained without a general war with the Western Powers, the Soviet rulers may deliberately provoke such a war at the time when, in their opinion, the relative strength of the USSR is at its maximum. It is estimated that such a period will exist from now through 1954, with the peak of Soviet strength relative to the Western Powers being reached about 1952."⁴³ Window arguments of this sort were very common, especially in 1951.⁴⁴

The sense that a great window of vulnerability had opened up helps explain why the U.S. government as a whole, and especially those officials who really understood military matters, were so afraid of general war in late 1950 and 1951: for the time being, the military balance favored the Soviets, who might therefore soon choose to precipitate a war with the West. For the same reason, the West had to move with great caution during this period. Indeed, these assumptions had begun to take shape in early 1950, even before the outbreak of the Korean War. It had been predicted that the shift in the balance resulting from the ending of the American nuclear monopoly would embolden the Soviets and lead to an increase in communist aggressiveness.⁴⁵ The events in Korea seemed to confirm this prophecy, and thus to vindicate this

42. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 378. See also *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 523.

43. NIE-3 of November 15, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 415. Even more specific is the estimate of the "Moscow-Peiping Time-Table for War," written by the Director of the State Department's Office of Chinese Affairs (O. Edmund Clubb), December 18, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 478ff. See also CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith's memo of December 11, 1950, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 3.

44. See *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 40, 111, 126, 131, 153, 198–199, for various documents with similar "window" themes. Note also an interesting variation in an NSC staff document of August 12, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. II, p. 74, para. 3: this was a "bringing matters to a head" argument in reverse.

45. For a typical example of such a prediction prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, see the Policy Planning Staff paper, "The Current Position in the Cold War," April 14, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. III, esp. pp. 858–859; note also Nitze's comments in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 143.

whole way of viewing things; a good part of the reason the Korean War had such an extraordinary impact on American policy in this period is that the ground had been prepared in this way. Indeed, what the Korean War seemed to show was that the situation was even more serious than NSC 68 had assumed. The fact that the Soviets had been willing to accept the risk of war with America—first, in approving the North Korean attack, and then in supporting China's intervention in the war—showed how strong they thought their position now was, and thus how far they might now be prepared to go, not just in the Far East, but in Europe as well.⁴⁶

It followed that the central goal of diplomacy, as Bohlen put it in 1951, was to steer the country through the danger zone: "It is axiomatic that when one group of powers seeks to close a dangerous disparity in its armed strength in relation to another group of powers, a period of danger by that factor alone is to be anticipated. The diplomatic arm of the United States should be utilized in this period in such a fashion as to minimize rather than intensify the danger of a general war resulting from a Soviet response to what they might regard as an increasing threat to their existence."⁴⁷

It was, therefore, important to be discreet about America's real long-term aims. There was a great danger, according to a 1952 Policy Planning Staff paper, that if the Soviets thought war was unavoidable, they might initiate a war that would push the United States "back to the Western hemisphere" and allow them to take over the vast resources of Eurasia. To achieve this goal, which would put them in a commanding position for the final phases of the world struggle, they might even be willing to absorb "whatever damage we can inflict" through atomic bombardment. It was thus important at present to avoid giving them the impression that war was inevitable. Talk of rollback was ill-advised at a time when a period of stability was needed to enable the West to develop its power, and in particular to build up its forces in Europe. It followed that public pronouncements for the time being had to

46. See Acheson's remarks in the special NSC meeting held on November 28, 1950, especially the passage summarized on p. 15 of Elsey's notes of this meeting; Elsey Papers, Box 72, "Korea. National Security Council Meeting, 3:00 p.m., November 28, 1950," HSTL. "Time is shorter than we thought, Mr. Acheson said. We used to think we could take our time up to 1952, but if we were right in that, the Russians wouldn't be taking such terrible risks as they are now." (There is a less revealing record of this meeting in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 1242ff.) Note also NIE-15, "Probable Soviet Moves to Exploit the Present Situation," December 11, 1950, president's secretary's files (PSF), Box 253, HSTL, especially the first paragraph in this document. Finally, see Acheson's later discussion of all this in the Princeton Seminar, p. 906. None of this, of course, should be taken as implying that there was no hard evidence that fed into these assessments. There were in fact important indications from intelligence sources of a general increase in Soviet aggressiveness and preparations for war. See in this regard Kennan's comments in the Princeton Seminar, pp. 1189–1190, and the memorandum of an intelligence briefing requested by the secretary of defense on "Soviet Activity in Europe During the Past Year Which Points Toward Offensive Military Operations," October 26, 1950, CD 350.09, RG 330 (July–December 1950 series), USNA.

47. Bohlen memorandum, September 21, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 172. The last phrase hints at a sense of the "security dilemma" aspect of the situation; the first sentence echoes Tirpitz's pre-World War I arguments about a "danger zone."

be strictly defensive in tone. "It seems dangerous," the paper argued, "to adopt the political posture that we must roll back the Iron Curtain" at a time when the West was not yet able to defend even the present line of demarcation.⁴⁸

Policy in Practice: Korea, and Elsewhere

In this section, I want to show first how the sort of thinking described in the previous section was related, (a) to the decision not to escalate in Korea during the terrible winter of 1950–51; and (b) to the extraordinary rearmament decisions made in late 1950. Second, I examine how the dramatic buildup of American military power that eventually did take place, and the shift in the strategic balance that this brought about, affected the course of American strategy, especially in Korea, but elsewhere as well.

The first point to make about the Korean War is that the United States never really opted for a "limited war" strategy in that conflict. American policy was *not* shaped by a belief that as a matter of principle any escalation of the fighting was to be avoided. Rosemary Foot's conclusion about the "thinness of the dividing line between a limited and an expanded conflict" is correct.⁴⁹ It was taken for granted that a serious Soviet intervention in the war would lead to World War III, and not just to a local U.S.–Soviet war in the Far East.⁵⁰ As for a Chinese intervention, there was originally

48. Policy Planning Staff paper, n.d., *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 67–68. Once again, the parallels with pre-World War I Germany are striking. Paul Kennedy gives some amazing examples of German frankness (among themselves) about the importance of concealing their ultimate goals from the outside world while German naval power was being built up. For example, when Prince Henry of Prussia visited Britain in 1903, he "informed Tirpitz that 'the cat is out of the bag,' and regretfully added that 'we would have been much further than we are now, had we understood the art of keeping quiet.'" Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), pp. 257–258. Note also the examples of the German recognition of the need for discretion in "Strategic Aspects of the Anglo-German Naval Race," in Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945* (London, Boston: Allen & Unwin/Fontana, 1984), pp. 132, 159–160.

49. Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950–1953* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 37. Later on, however, she implies that there was a more or less definitive decision to fight a limited war. A "crucial turning point" was reached in early 1951: unless the administration soon opted for "expanded operations against China," she says, the Americans would be settling "for a limited conflict" (p. 120).

50. This was a very common assumption in the documents. For the JCS views, see the Bradley memorandum of July 10, 1950 (circulated as NSC 76), and November 9, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 346 and 1121. The more guarded official State Department view is reflected in NSC 76/1 of July 25, 1950, *ibid.*, pp. 475–477. Formal policy was reflected in NSC 73/4 of August 25, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 375ff; see esp. p. 386. The less formal documents are more revealing: see esp. the "Summary of United States–United Kingdom Discussions," July 20–24, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 463, para. 8; and Memorandum of Conversation, August 25, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 647. For the views of important officials, see the record of U.S.–Canadian discussions, May 25 and June 14, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 841, 850 (Nitze and Acheson); and the minutes of meeting between high State and Defense Department officials, August 6, 1951, *ibid.*, p. 878 (Lovett). The one piece of evidence I saw that points in the opposite direction is the record of high-level meeting held in late June. When General Vandenberg pointed out that American air power would only be effective against North Korean armor if Soviet jets did not intervene,

no intention to fight a war limited to the Korean peninsula; the initial impulse was to respond to a Chinese attack by a certain widening of the conflict.⁵¹ In fact, American officials at this point even considered the possibility that the United States should respond to a Chinese intervention with an attack on the Soviet Union itself.⁵²

This extreme idea was quickly ruled out. But reading the documents, one does detect a certain undercurrent of emotion—an impulse to escalate, held in check only by considerations of expediency. As CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith put it at an NSC meeting in November 1950, the Chinese intervention had raised "the question as to what point the U.S. will be driven to, to attack the problem at its heart, namely Moscow, instead of handling it on the periphery as at present."⁵³ The implication was that this point was not that far off, that the United States could only be pushed so far and was rapidly reaching that limit. The same kind of thinking is reflected in a Joint Chiefs of Staff paper of January 3, 1951, which argued that it was "militarily foolhardy" to get involved in a land war against China while the "heart of aggressive COMMIE power remained untouched."⁵⁴

President Truman himself was also attracted, at least on a visceral level, to the idea of bringing matters to a head with the Russians. He warned publicly in July 1950 that new acts of aggression "might well strain to the breaking point the fabric of world peace."⁵⁵ On September 1 (that is, two months before the Chinese intervened), he issued another warning that fighting in Korea might "expand into a general war" if "Communist imperialism" drew new armies and governments into the Korean conflict. The warning was given despite the fact that Truman had just approved NSC 73/4, which argued for localization of any new conflict.⁵⁶ Perhaps the president's warning was essentially a bluff, or perhaps it is to be understood in domestic political terms as a response to Republican pressure, since leading Republican politicians had been loudly calling for threats of this sort.⁵⁷ But it seems that something visceral was

Truman asked about America's ability to knock out Soviet bases in the area, and then ordered the Air Force to "prepare plans to wipe out all Soviet air bases in the Far East." Memorandum of Conversation, June 25, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 157–161.

51. Foot, *Wrong War*, pp. 82–84.

52. "Summary of United States–United Kingdom Discussions," July 20–24, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 463, para. 9; see also p. 465.

53. Minutes of the 71st Meeting of the National Security Council (November 9, 1950). Available on microfilm: "Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council," University Publications of America, reel 1 (hereafter MNSC).

54. JCS 1776/180, January 3, 1951, "Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," University Publications of America microfilm publication (1979), Part II (1946–53), Section C (Far East), reel 9, frame 832 (henceforth cited in the form: RJCS/II/C/9/832). Emphasis in original.

55. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S Truman*, 1950, pp. 527–537; cited in *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 837.

56. *New York Times*, September 2, 1950, p. 4. NSC 73/4 would limit the American response to a Chinese intervention to "appropriate air and naval action" against China. A widening of the war to include, in such a case, an attack on the Soviet Union itself was not even considered in the document, which generally took the line that in dealing with Communist moves "over the next two or three months" conflicts were to be localized. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 375ff, esp. 385–388.

57. *New York Times*, August 16, 1950, pp. 1:7, 17:1.

being expressed, something that also comes out in Truman's famous diary reflections written a year and a half later, where he considered issuing a nuclear ultimatum to the Soviets as a way of ending the war.⁵⁸

The late summer of 1950 also saw a flurry of articles in the public press dealing with preventive war. The secretary of the navy, Francis Matthews, gave a speech on August 25 calling for the United States to initiate a "war of aggression." Americans, he said, should become the world's first "aggressors for peace."⁵⁹ This was followed by a report by the *New York Times's* well-informed military correspondent, Hanson Baldwin, that Matthews was launching a trial balloon, and that his speech reflected the thinking of Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, "who has been selling the same doctrine of the preventive war in private conversations around Washington."⁶⁰ A day later, the same day that Truman's warning about a "general war" was printed, the *Times* published an account of General Orvil Anderson's advocacy of preventive war.⁶¹ (Truman then dismissed Anderson for going public with the idea.) Even before the Korean War, the preventive war idea had some support in the Congress, and now Senator John McClellan spoke out in favor of the policy.⁶²

58. The passages are quoted and commented on in Foot, *Wrong War*, p. 176, and in two articles by Barton Bernstein: "Truman's Secret Thoughts on Ending the Korean War," *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 10 (November 1980); and "New Light on the Korean War," *International History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 1981). Note also General Douglas MacArthur's "Memorandum on Ending the Korean War," in his *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), pp. 410–412; and Bob Considine's related interview with MacArthur, published immediately after MacArthur's death, *New York Times*, April 9, 1964, p. 16.

59. *New York Times*, August 25, 1950, p. 1:6.

60. *New York Times*, September 1, 1950, p. 4:2; republished in part in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (October 1950), p. 318; a similar report had appeared in Marquis Childs' column in the *Washington Post* on August 31. Note also Truman's objection to the last paragraph in the Defense Department's proposed directive to MacArthur in an NSC meeting held on June 28, 1950, which, he said, seemed to imply that "we were planning to go to war with Russia." Memorandum for the President, June 30, 1950, MNSC, reel 1. On this, see also Harry Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), p. 341. Given his general approach, it is astonishing that Johnson as late as July 1949 had been unwilling to increase the budget for analyzing the intelligence on Soviet nuclear capabilities that had been gathered, an increase that had been strongly recommended to him by a committee that had looked into this issue. Memorandum of July 8, 1949, CD 11-1-2, Box 61, RG 330 (1947–50 series), USNA.

61. It is sometimes implied (e.g., by Dean Acheson, in *Present at the Creation* [New York: Norton, 1969], p. 478) or claimed (e.g., by Barton Bernstein, in "Truman's Secret Thoughts," p. 31) that Matthews, like Orvil Anderson, was removed from his position for taking this line. But in fact when he offered to resign Truman simply told him to "forget about it" and in spite of his general incompetence was allowed to continue in office for another year. George Elsey, "Memorandum for File," October 2, 1950, Elsey Papers, Box 72, HSTL.

62. McFall memorandum, January 26, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 140–141; and *Newsweek*, February 13, 1950, p. 20, where Congressman Henry M. Jackson was linked to the "preventive war" idea. McClellan's remarks are quoted in "Both Parties Back Truman Arms Call," *New York Times*, September 3, 1950, p. 11:1. Another Senator (Millikin) is identified as a supporter of preventive war in Williamson, "The View from Above," p. 195. On the mood in the country at the time, note the discussion between Secretary Acheson and a group of senators and congress-

The Matthews and McClellan speeches appear to be the most extreme outcroppings of a somewhat inchoate but very widespread wave of feeling: that the aggressive thrust of Soviet policy reflected in the North Korean attack was something the United States could not live with forever, and that perhaps the time was coming when it would have to be dealt with directly, before matters got completely out of hand. What kept this in check was not an abstract commitment to the philosophy of limited war, but rather a sense for America's current military weakness. Major rearmament decisions were made in late 1950, but it would be a long time before the actual military balance could be reversed. The CIA, for example, assumed that the period from 1950 through 1954 would thus be a time when "the strength of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis the Western Powers is at a maximum"; this sort of assumption was then quite common within the government.⁶³ It was therefore the Soviets who might deliberately provoke a war during this period; for the United States to plunge into a general war, or take actions which ran a serious risk of it, might actually play into Russian hands. A general war that broke out in 1950 or 1951 might well be a disaster for the West. As General Omar N. Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pointed out at an NSC meeting in November 1950, if a global war broke out, "we might be in danger of losing."⁶⁴

To understand this fear, it is necessary to probe a bit more deeply into how global warfare was understood at this time. This was still not a period when it was taken for granted that all-out war meant the destruction of whole societies. The Harmon and Hull reports of 1949 and 1950 had made it clear that the initial "atomic blitz" could not be counted on to destroy the war-making power of the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ By the same token, a Soviet atomic attack in the early 1950s would have had only a

men on August 10, 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. III, pp. 197–204. Here Senator Estes Kefauver insisted that "sentiment throughout the country was building up" in the direction of preventive war; pp. 204, 199. See in this context Demaree Bess, "How Close is War with Russia?" *Saturday Evening Post*, November 24, 1951, esp. p. 107; and also Senator Paul Douglas's view, reported in *Time*, December 18, 1950, pp. 20–21, that in the event of new communist aggression, the U.S. should "unleash such power as we have directly upon Russia itself." The fact that Douglas was one of the most liberal members of Congress shows just how far this sort of thinking extended at the time. The leading newspapers generally reacted negatively to the Matthews speech, but some important journalists supported the navy secretary. See, for example, David Lawrence, "Matthews Speech is Realistic If Not in Line With Policy," *Washington Star*, August 28, 1950. Note finally a short article in *Time*, September 18, 1950, p. 30: "Background for War: War Now? Or When? or Never?" This article called for a buildup followed by a "showdown" with the Russians by 1953.

63. CIA memorandum, October 12, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 937–938.

64. Minutes of the 71st Meeting of the National Security Council, November 9, 1950, MNSC, reel 1.

65. Harmon Report: JCS 1953/1, May 12, 1949, CCS 373 (10-23-48), RG 218, USNA, analyzed in David Alan Rosenberg, "American Atomic Strategy and the Hydrogen Bomb Decision," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (June 1979). Hull Report: JCS 1952/11, February 10, 1950, same file, discussed in Richard Rowe, "American Nuclear Strategy and the Korean War" (M.A. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1984), pp. 26ff. See also the second paragraph in section C of NSC 68, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 281.

limited effect on the American war economy: it could not prevent the United States from mounting a major military effort.⁶⁶ The reason was that unlike the high-yield weapons being developed in the early 1950s, the early fission bombs were weapons of relatively limited power. As Edward Teller pointed out in 1947, even if a large number of such bombs—"say a thousand or ten thousand"—were launched against America, "many millions" would die, but if certain elementary precautions were taken, the country as a whole "could survive heavy atomic bombardment" and go on to win the war. This would not be the case with the new weapons already on the horizon.⁶⁷

It was thus taken for granted in the early 1950s that a third world war would be long.⁶⁸ In the first few weeks of the war, the United States would be swept off the continent of Europe, at least up to the Pyrenees. America would then begin to mobilize its resources and mount a sustained bombing campaign with atomic bombs and aircraft produced after the outbreak of the war. The Soviets, who now had the great resources of Western Europe to draw on, would at the same time be conducting their own air offensive against the United States and its bases and allies overseas. This would be a war of endurance, and the intensity with which this air war was conducted would be an important determinant of its outcome. The ability to base forces overseas (so that a much more intense bombing campaign could be conducted with medium bombers) was therefore still very important. It was for this reason that the bulk of the bomber fleet was composed of medium bombers, B-29s and B-50s; the B-36 intercontinental bomber, which became operational in 1947 (and which, like the B-29, could carry just one fission bomb), made up only a small fraction of the bomber force. At the end of 1950, for example, there were only 38 B-36s in the Air Force, in contrast to 477 medium bombers. Such a small force could scarcely operate effectively by itself.⁶⁹

66. See the report of the Special Evaluation Subcommittee of the National Security Council (Edwards Committee), NSC 140/1, May 18, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 343.

67. Edward Teller, "How Dangerous Are Atomic Weapons?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (February 1947), pp. 35–36.

68. The JCS mobilization guidance, for example, assumed that it would last at least five years. "National Stockpiling Program," prepared by the Defense Department and the Office of Defense Mobilization, October 12, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 211.

69. For the figures, see Walter Poole, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. IV, 1950–52, p. 168. My conclusion that effectiveness of air warfare with such a small force would be limited is based on the following considerations. Soviet air defenses would be proportionately more effective against a B-36 attack; a more massive strike that used both medium and heavy bombers would be better able to saturate the air defense network. Attrition of the B-36 force might therefore be significantly higher, and the Air Force might be forced to adopt tactics—night bombing, for example—that reduced attrition, but sacrificed a degree of accuracy. But since the goal was to destroy war-sustaining industrial installations which, as a rule, were located on the outskirts of cities, a loss of accuracy could seriously affect the ability of the air offensive to achieve its goals. Because the shock wave from the bomb spreads over three dimensions, the blast effect falls off roughly in proportion to the cube of the distance from the center of the explosion—a doubling of the average error, for instance, would mean that overpressure would be cut on the average by a factor of eight. Given the limited power of the early fission bombs, this meant that an air offensive with B-36s in late 1950 might have had only a very limited impact on Soviet war

America was therefore highly dependent on the use of bases in Britain, and the implications of this point were well understood by many American officials in this period.⁷⁰ This dependence on Britain was a source of weakness for both military and political reasons. The bases that the Strategic Air Command (SAC) planned to use in Britain were considered "exceedingly vulnerable to air attack." In early 1950, none of them even had any "organized ground defenses."⁷¹ Beyond such technical considerations, there was a persistent and pervasive fear that the Soviet ability to bring the British isles under air attack might well lead to a "neutralization" of the United Kingdom, and thus to the loss of these bases, even if Britain itself could not actually be conquered.⁷²

In a long war, there were many uncertainties, and no one could be sure what the outcome would be. To those familiar with America's military problems, it was also clear that the outbreak of the Korean War had exacerbated an already dangerous situation. As the JCS's Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC) pointed out on July 14, 1950, the allocation of forces to Korea had "drastically reduced" America's "capability to implement our plans for global war." It followed from that, the JSPC argued, that top priority had to be placed on the "regaining of our ability to implement our plans for a global war." This point would be stressed in many important documents from the period.⁷³

Concerns about current weakness lay at the heart of the Nitze strategy. Nitze's analysis, and especially the assumptions about a danger zone that the country would

potential. Even the bombs (admittedly less powerful) dropped on a completely unprepared and undefended Hiroshima had left the bulk of the city's industrial plant intact. According to the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), factories "responsible for nearly three-fourths of Hiroshima's industrial product could have resumed normal operation within thirty days of the attack, had the war continued." USSBS, *The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1946), reprinted in David MacIsaac, ed., *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey* (New York: Garland, 1976), Vol. VII. This analysis had a major impact on thinking about strategic air warfare in the early atomic age.

70. Thus when Truman in December 1950 alluded (accurately, as we now know) to the fact that nuclear weapons were being considered for use in Korea, Prime Minister Clement Attlee quickly came over to Washington to try to make sure that nothing of that sort would happen. Acheson commented in this connection that British views could not be ignored "since we can bring U.S. power into play only with the cooperation of the British." Memorandum for the President, December 12, 1950, MNSC, reel 1.

71. This was the judgment of the Hull Report, paragraph 79 (see n. 65).

72. Even before the Soviets had tested their first atomic bomb, this fear of a "neutralization" of Britain through air attack was very real. In BROILER, the Joint Outline War Plan for 1949, it was noted that the plan "depends critically on the use of the U.K. as an operational base," and it had been assumed in the plan that this would be possible. But the Joint Intelligence Group, the document pointed out, had noted that "neutralization of the U.K. by air and guided missile attacks and partial air and submarine blockade would probably be a Soviet capability in 1948" (Enclosure to JSPG 496/4, March 8, 1948, p. 3). BROILER is available on microfilm in RJCS/II/A/4/353ff. With the Soviet atomic bomb, these fears became much more intense: see for example JIC 435/36 of October 5, 1949, RJCS/II/A/3/257ff., and JIC 435/52, February 7, 1951, "Estimate of the Scale and Nature of a Soviet Attack on the United Kingdom between now and mid-1952," RJCS/II/A/6/849ff.

73. JCS 1924/20, July 14, 1950, RJCS/II/C/9/135, 138, 159.

have to cross, had (as noted above) led him in early 1950 to expect an increase in Soviet aggressiveness.⁷⁴ The North Korean attack, and then the Chinese intervention, seemed to support the idea that the Soviets were willing to accept, at the very least, an increased risk of war during this period of America's relative weakness. But by the same token it was important that America avoid a war with Russia at this time. The United States therefore had to avoid action that might increase the risk of such a war, such as crossing the 38th Parallel, or (after the Chinese intervention) expanding the war into Manchuria. It was for this reason that Nitze then took a relatively dovish line on issues relating to the escalation of the war. In this he was joined by officers like General Bradley who, while obviously extremely frustrated by the situation, were nevertheless convinced that this was not the time to take risks.⁷⁵

The turnabout of John M. Allison, director of State Department's Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, provides a good example of the link between this sense of weakness and the reluctance to escalate in Korea. On July 24, 1950, Allison had attacked Nitze's line as "a policy of appeasement," "a timid half-hearted policy designed not to provoke the Soviets to war." He argued instead for the conquest of North Korea. "That this may mean war on a global scale is true," he said, but "when all legal and moral right is on our side why should we hesitate?" "The free world," he concluded, "cannot any longer live under constant fear."⁷⁶

But by mid-August he had changed his mind. He now recognized the need to avoid a global war as a limiting factor, and it is clear that a new sense for America's current military weakness played the key role in bringing about this shift in position. The argument in the memorandum where Allison registered his new opinion turned on a key passage from NSC 73/1: "The United States is not now capable of conducting immediately a general military offensive against the USSR because our forces are either not appropriately positioned or are so inadequate as to be incapable of effective action."⁷⁷

The Allison example illustrates in a particularly striking way the important distinction between the views of "outsiders" and "insiders" on these issues. 1950 may have marked the high tide of "preventive war" agitation, but those who called for such highly aggressive strategies were for the most part simply ignorant of military realities. The "insiders" were acutely conscious of American weakness at that point. Indeed, what they were afraid of was that the Soviets would take advantage of the opportunity that had opened up for them and would deliberately pursue aggressive policies that

74. Paul Nitze, "Recent Soviet Moves," February 8, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 147. Korea was mentioned as one of the places where Soviet moves might be made.

75. Policy Planning Staff memo, July 22, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 449-454; "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," NIE-2, November 8, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 1102; JCS memo, November 9, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 1121; memoranda of State-Defense Department meetings, December 1 and 3, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 1279 (for Bradley's caution) and p. 1330 (for his frustration); Minutes of Truman-Attlee talks, December 7, 1950, *ibid.*, p. 1457 (for Secretary Marshall's frustration). See also Foot, *Wrong War*, p. 117.

76. Allison memorandum, July 24, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 460-461.

77. Allison memorandum, August 12, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 571-572.

might lead to war with the United States. The Soviets might even choose to initiate their own preventive war before the balance began to turn against them.

For the insiders, both civilian and military, it was therefore clear by the end of the year that a major escalation which ran the risk of Soviet involvement, and thus of global war, had to be ruled out, even though the military situation in Korea was extremely bleak. The one partial exception among top military officers was General Hoyt Vandenberg, the Air Force Chief of Staff. In a discussion with high Defense Department officials in December 1950, he pinpointed August 1951 as the "point of greatest danger," the point at which the Soviets were most likely to "initiate an early war." If this was correct, he said, the next eight months "would not work in our favor since we would not improve our ground potential significantly but would in that period have given the Soviets a chance to produce additional atomic bombs." "He did not say so specifically," according to the record of the meeting made by Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "but the implication was that it would be better for us to precipitate hostilities at an early date in order to prevent further USSR atomic buildup."⁷⁸

It is striking that the most forceful advocates of air power were the ones who took the most aggressive line at this time. Stuart Symington, for example, secretary of the Air Force from September 1947 to April 1950 and then chairman of the National Security Resources Board, was a great champion of air power. Although in two memoranda written during this bleak period of the war he denied that he wanted to expand the Korean conflict into a general war with Russia, these memoranda sounded the standard themes of the preventive war thesis. The United States was already at war with the Soviets, he said, and the country was currently losing this life-or-death struggle, because it had opted for the purely defensive policy of containment; it had sought always to "localize" aggression, and had drawn back from dealing with the problem at its heart. A "clear and positive" policy had to replace the policy of drift, because, with the development of Soviet nuclear capabilities, time was "running out far more rapidly" than most Americans realized. Symington argued for a strategy of withdrawal from Korea, and replacement of the ground war by an air and naval war against China; if this led to Soviet involvement, the result (announced in advance) would be "the atomic bombardment of Soviet Russia itself."⁷⁹

78. Dean Rusk, Memorandum of Conversation, December 19, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, pp. 1572–1573. In general, the Air Force's access to inside information was more than balanced by what can only be called its nonrational attachment to air power, which led it to overestimate the effectiveness both of a Soviet air strike on the U.S. and of a U.S. air attack on the USSR; the two arguments together greatly strengthened in the minds of many Air Force officers the case for a "positive" policy. The nonrationality of Air Force thinking on this issue—what the Army liked to refer to as the Air Force's "subjectivity"—comes out very clearly in the documents recording the extraordinary debate on basic strategy that took place at the JCS level from 1948 to 1950. See the portion of the file CCS 373 (10-23-48) in RG 218 at the National Archives covering this period; and the file P & O 373 TS for 1949 and P & O Hot Files for 1950–51, Box 11, RG 319. On Air Force "subjectivity," see General Ray Maddocks, Memoranda for the Army Chief of Staff, February 8 and (especially) March 16, 1949, P & O 373 TS, RG 319, USNA.

79. NSC 100, January 11, 1951, and Symington memo, n.d., *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 7–18, 21–

The general response to Symington's arguments was quite hostile, and shows that the more extreme "air power" position then had very limited appeal.⁸⁰ President Truman's personal reaction was quite negative. He characterized a long series of Symington's points as "bunk" or "drivel"; and he drafted (but evidently did not send) a short note to Symington: "My dear Stu, this is [as] big a lot of Top Secret malarky as I've ever read. Your time is wasted on such bunk as this. HST."⁸¹

The mainstream position, shared by the Joint Chiefs and the State Department, was that the United States could not run the risk of escalation *at that point*. It was currently too weak to take on a global war. The top priority was therefore to build up American power first. As Admiral Forrest Sherman, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), put it in a memorandum which was to become the basis of the official JCS position, the crucial thing was to "*delay* a general war with Russia until we have achieved the necessary degree of military and industrial mobilization."⁸² General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff, was even more precise as to when escalation might be possible: "Since the United States is not now prepared to engage in global war, and will not be ready before 1 July 1952, we should take all honorable means to avoid any action that is likely to bring Russia into open conflict with the United States prior to that date."⁸³

Once the general thinking about trends in the global military balance is understood, many of these documents relating to Korean War strategy take on new meaning. Phrases that one might otherwise overlook, or dismiss as merely pro forma, are suddenly seen in a new light—for example, General Bradley's comment on December 1, 1950, that if Chinese air came in, the United States might have to "defer" striking back, or the military view in February 1951 that "retaliatory action against China," because it might lead to Soviet intervention, "would involve excessive risks *at this time*."⁸⁴

33. See also Foot, *Wrong War*, pp. 115–116. According to Harriman in the Princeton Seminar, Symington "under [Bernard] Baruch's influence," took the position that there was going to be a war with Russia, and that total mobilization was therefore necessary. It was taken for granted in the discussion that followed that these arguments were closely related to the preventive war idea. Princeton Seminar, p. 1317ff. Harriman's account is substantiated by the file of correspondence with Symington in Box 95 of the Baruch Papers at the Seeley G. Mudd Library in Princeton. See for example Bernard Baruch to Stuart Symington, November 21, 1950, Symington to Baruch, November 24, 1950, and especially Baruch to Symington, December 5, 1950.

80. See Foot, *Wrong War*, pp. 115–116.

81. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 21–33. The Truman note is on p. 33.

82. Sherman memo on "Courses of Action Relative to Communist China and Korea," JCS 2118/5, January 3, 1951, JCS Records, II/C/2/677. Emphasis added. The final document recording the JCS position (JCS 2118/10 of January 12, 1951) was revised to take account of General Collins's memo, cited below. The text was circulated as NSC 101; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 71.

83. JCS 2118/9, January 12, 1951, RJCS/II/C/2/688. The July 1, 1952, date corresponded to official policy. As a result of the new crisis created by the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, the target date for completing the military buildup needed to support the goals laid out in NSC 68 was advanced from mid-1954 to June 30, 1952. The new date was set in NSC 68/4 of December 14, 1950; *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, pp. 467ff. For related documents, see *ibid.*, pp. 466–467, 474–475; and *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 131–132.

84. Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 1279; Record of Department of State–JCS meeting, February 13, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 177. Emphasis added.

General Bradley's famous comment, in particular, that a war with China would be "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy," takes on a whole new dimension of meaning when seen in this context. This remark has come to be taken as a symbol of the "limited war" policy—of America's desire to avoid an expansion of the conflict. But what Bradley was implying was that if the United States were forced to fight the Communists, the *right war* was a war against Russia itself, and the *right place* to fight it was not at the periphery, but at the heart of Soviet power. Most importantly, it implied that if it had to be fought at all (Bradley of course hoped it could be avoided), there was a *right time* for fighting it, namely, after American power had been built up. Indeed, he went on to point out that the United States was "not in the best military position to seek a showdown," and that he would not support any policy that would "rush us headlong into a showdown before we are ready."⁸⁵ Similar themes were reflected in many documents of the period. Acheson, for example, commented in December 1950 that the "great trouble is that we are fighting the wrong nation. We are fighting the second team, whereas the real enemy is the Soviet Union."⁸⁶

State Department views were not far removed from those of the military. It was taken for granted that the United States should avoid an extension of the Korean conflict and prevent "the development of general war, particularly during the period in which the United States and its allies are in the process of achieving the requisite degree of military and industrial mobilization."⁸⁷ A month later, Acheson reiterated the point: a general advance north of the 38th Parallel, he wrote Secretary of Defense George Marshall, was to be avoided because of the "risk of extending the Korean conflict to other areas and even into general war at a time when we are not ready to risk general war."⁸⁸

It was absolutely crucial, therefore, to build up America's military power, and one of the most important themes stressed in these documents was the vital importance of such a buildup.⁸⁹ In fact, the rate of American military spending was to triple during this period, and only a small fraction of this was due to the Korean campaign as such.⁹⁰

85. 82nd Cong., 1st sess., Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, *Military Situation in the Far East* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1951), pp. 1917–1920.

86. Memorandum of Conversation, December 3, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 1326.

87. "U.S. Action to Counter Communist Chinese Aggression," January 17, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, pp. 1515–1516.

88. Acheson to Marshall, February 23, 1951, enclosure, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 193. Emphasis added. Note also Truman to MacArthur, January 13, 1951: "pending the build-up of our national strength, we must act with great prudence in so far as extending the area of hostilities is concerned." In Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, pp. 435–436; reprinted in James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. III, *The Korean War* (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1979), p. 420. Emphasis added.

89. See, for example, JCS memo, July 13, 1951, Schnabel and Watson, *History of the JCS*, p. 667; Position Paper for Washington Foreign Ministers' Meeting and British talks, September 8, 1951, *ibid.*, p. 889.

90. The ending of the Korean War, it was assumed in 1953, would result in a \$2 billion saving in a projected \$41 billion defense budget. *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 279, 284, 311.

The result was an extraordinary buildup of military strength, which acted like an acid, gradually eating away at all those constraints that had kept the United States from escalating at the end of 1950 and in early 1951. The key to the history of the Korean War, in fact, is America's increasing willingness to escalate the conflict. This shift took place in two phases. First, in 1951, it gradually became clear that the government's worst fears about Soviet aggressiveness had been exaggerated: East Germany did not invade the Federal Republic, there was no new Berlin Crisis, Yugoslavia was not attacked, Soviet forces did not move into Iran.⁹¹ As fears of a great risk of war with the Soviets began to fade, the American government felt somewhat freer to act in the Far East.

The second and more dramatic phase began with the resurgence of American military power in late 1952 and 1953. This led to a much greater willingness to escalate, if that was needed to bring the Korean conflict to a successful conclusion. The decisions of the Eisenhower period, with regard both to the war in Korea and to global strategy as a whole, have to be understood as the climax of a process begun years before in the Truman administration.

The relatively small issue of the bombing of Rashin, a port near North Korea's border with the Soviet Union, provides one early indicator of this increasing willingness to escalate the war. In 1950, the State Department blocked plans for the bombing of Rashin; it feared that such action "might entail the gravest consequences." As one high official put it, "both the Defense Establishment and the State Department feel very strongly that we do not want active Soviet participation in the Korean war or the commencement of worldwide hostilities *this year*. We believed that if the Soviet authorities are undecided or are hesitating as to whether to move on a wider basis now, the bombing of Rashin or similar moves might well prove an important deciding factor."⁹² But the Truman administration reversed the decision as early as August 1951.⁹³

There was a striking evolution of American policy more generally on the extension of the air war. JCS 2118/4 of January 12, 1951, had provided for air strikes against China only if the Chinese Communists attacked American forces "outside of Korea."⁹⁴ But in April 1951, General Matthew Ridgway, the U.S. Commander in the Far East, was authorized to attack enemy air bases in Manchuria and the Shantung peninsula "in the event of a major enemy air attack from outside Korea."⁹⁵ In November and December the terms were extended a bit further. The JCS wanted American planes to be able to attack air bases in China "whenever the scale of enemy air activity is

91. These fears are reflected in many documents from the early Korean War period. See, for example, "Meeting of the NSC in the Cabinet Room of the White House," June 28, 1950, Acheson Papers, Box 65, "Memoranda of Conversation, May-June 1950," HSTL; and especially NIE-15, "Probable Soviet Moves to Exploit the Present Situation," December 11, 1950, PSF, Box 253, HSTL. Note also Acheson's and Nitze's later comments in the Princeton Seminar, pp. 906, 908.

92. Matthews memorandum, August 14, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. VII, p. 574. Emphasis added.

93. See Foot, *Wrong War*, pp. 76, 149-150.

94. Schnabel and Watson, *History of the JCS*, p. 419.

95. JCS to Ridgway, April 28, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 386.

such as seriously to jeopardize the security of United States forces in the Korean area."⁹⁶ This meant that *preemptive* action would be authorized if the Chinese built up their bomber force to a level that might jeopardize the security of American forces.⁹⁷ The proposal was approved, with the provisos that such action would have to be "specifically authorized by the President," and that if there was time, the key allies would be informed of the decision in advance.⁹⁸ These conditions somewhat limited the effect of the decision, but it is nonetheless clear that the Truman administration was becoming increasingly willing to escalate the war.

These early shifts, however, were minor compared with what would come later when the mobilization effort finally made itself felt in terms of increasing military end-products. For example, General Vandenberg pointed out in September 1951 that the production curve for fighters would begin to go up in the spring, but "we won't really get rolling until next fall."⁹⁹ Overall output did increase dramatically in 1952. "U.S. monthly production of military end items," one document reported in August 1952, "is five or six times as large as it was June 1950. Between July 1951 and May 1952 the monthly deliveries of military end items have risen from an annual rate of \$6.4 billion to \$17.8 billion, and the trend is sharply upward."¹⁰⁰

The American military buildup was particularly dramatic in the nuclear weapons area. Since 1950, there had been a great expansion in the production of fissionable material, and there had been very important qualitative changes as well, especially with regard to tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁰¹ By early 1952, the Atomic Energy Com-

96. JCS memo, November 3, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 1108.

97. Johnson memo, November 7, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 1094.

98. *Ibid.*, pp. 1261, 1383. For some indication of the seriousness with which the matter of preemption in the Far East was taken at the highest political level, see Churchill to Acheson, February 18, 1952 (with enclosure), and Acheson to Churchill, February 19, 1952, Acheson Papers, Box 63, folder "Churchill, Winston S.," HSTL. Note also Admiral Blandy's reference (in this context) to "anticipatory retaliation" on the "Longines-Wittnauer Chronoscope," June 11, 1951, videotape T76:0145, Museum of Broadcasting, New York. Blandy, who had recently retired from the Navy, had long been close to nuclear weapons matters and had, for example, been the commander at the Crossroads tests in 1946.

99. Notes of Department of State-JCS meeting, September 25, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. VII, p. 943.

100. NCS 135/1, Annex, August 22, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 106. Some of the reasons mobilization was taking so long are discussed in NSC 114/1, August 8, 1951, enclosure, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 137; and in NSC 114/3, enclosure 1, May 10, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, pp. 29-30. For a detailed description of the mobilization program, see Annex 1 to NSC 114, July 27, 1951, in Documents of the National Security Council (University Publications of America microfilm publication), Supplement 1, reel 1 (hereafter DNSC). There are frequent references in the documents to the depressingly slow pace of industrial mobilization. See, for example, the summaries of discussion at the 103rd and 105th meetings of the NSC, September 27 and October 18, 1951, PSF, Box 220, HSTL. Note also the discussion at the Princeton Seminar, p. 1314.

101. See Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill," esp. pp. 23-24, and the sources cited there. Note also C. Savage, "Increase in Production of Fissionable Material," September 26, 1950, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Box 6, folder "Atomic Energy—Armaments, 1950," RG 59, USNA: "This program to increase the production of fissionable material calls for an expansion of production at a rate as rapid as the limiting factor of ore permits, without resorting to extreme

mission had developed atomic bombs small and light enough to be used by "such fighter aircraft as the F-84 and some Navy carrier planes." As a result, "between May 1951 and July 1953 the Air Force moved rapidly to build a tactical atomic force."¹⁰² By 1952, "techniques and procedures" for the use of atomic weapons on the battlefield had been worked out.¹⁰³ At about the same time, the stockpile of bombs had become so large that, from the JCS point of view, scarcity no longer carried any weight as an argument against the use of nuclear weapons in Korea.¹⁰⁴

The result of this buildup was an increasing willingness in 1952 and early 1953 to escalate the war in Korea if no armistice agreement could be reached. By early 1953, it was clear that the use of nuclear weapons had become an integral part of an overall policy of escalation.¹⁰⁵ Expansion of the war would involve, at the very minimum, an attack on air bases in Manchuria; nuclear weapons would provide a very effective way of destroying those targets.¹⁰⁶ It should be noted that this shift was not due solely to the change of administration. It was the same JCS that had been so cautious at the end of 1950 and in early 1951 that now advocated a nuclear escalation: the thinking in JCS circles in this regard had obviously begun to shift before the new Eisenhower administration took over.¹⁰⁷

By the beginning of 1953, it was clear that the overall balance had shifted dramatically in America's favor. The United States, said Secretary of State John Foster Dulles

measures of diminishing returns. The rate of production under it probably could not be appreciably increased even if we were *sure* that war was inevitable." Emphasis in original.

102. George F. Lemmer, "The Air Force and Strategic Deterrence, 1951-1960," pp. 14-15. A sanitized, declassified version is available at the Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base, Washington. For some indication of the increasing size of nuclear forces deployed to Europe in support of NATO in this period, see JCS 2220/4, January 31, 1952, "Information for General Eisenhower on Availability of Atomic Weapons," RJCS/II/G/3/1077; and JCS 2220/19, May 6, 1953, "Revision of Information for General Ridgway on Availability of Atomic Weapons," RJCS/II/G/4/54ff.

103. Rowe, "American Nuclear Strategy," pp. 61-64. The tactics and operational techniques were developed partly through tests conducted in Korea in October and November 1951 involving "actual atomic bombs, less nuclear components." *Ibid.*, p. 62.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 64. Note also Nitze's comments in a memo to Acheson of January 12, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 204.

105. Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC), "Future Courses of Action in Connection with the Situation in Korea (Estimate)," JSPC 853/145, January 26, 1953, RJCS/II/C/11/1041ff, esp. frames 1051, 1052; JCS memo of March 28, 1953, "Future Courses of Action in Connection with the Situation in Korea," White House Office Papers, NSC series, Policy Papers subseries, Box 2, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Ks. (DDEL), discussed in Rowe, "American Nuclear Strategy," pp. 66-68; JCS memo, May 19, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. XV, pp. 1059-1064; and esp. minutes of May 20, 1953, NSC meeting, *ibid.*, pp. 1064-1068.

106. JCS memo, May 19, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. XV, p. 1061; memorandum of Department of State-JCS meeting, March 27, 1953, *ibid.*, p. 818 (Vandenberg's remarks). Note also General Hull's comment in the May 13, 1953, NSC meeting, *ibid.*, p. 1014, General Clark's June 1952 request for nuclear-capable F-84s for the counter-air mission, and General Collins's favorable answer, anticipating that they would be sent by November, in RJCS/II/C/10/1102, 1106.

107. Eisenhower was sworn in as president on January 20, 1953. JSPC 853/145, the document on which the JCS based its recommendations, was circulated just six days later; it was based on a report by the Joint Strategic Plans Group, JSPC 853/142, the work for which had been done considerably earlier.

in early 1953, could now get better armistice terms in Korea than had earlier been possible "in view of our much greater power and the Soviet Union's much greater weakness currently."¹⁰⁸

The shift in the military balance between 1950 and 1953 had a major impact on American policy not just in Korea but elsewhere around the globe. There was a striking change in U.S. policy on Berlin in this period. In the policy documents on Berlin from the end of the blockade through early 1951, caution had been the keynote: if the blockade were reimposed, there should be no "probe"; the JCS thought the Western powers were too weak to undertake a ground action of this sort. In February 1951, the JCS was reluctant to recommend any major military action, even if Soviet forces attacked West Berlin: "Only the Berlin garrison, augmented by the West Berlin police, should be used to resist the attack, pending further consideration at the highest governmental level." The United States had, of course, undertaken to defend West Berlin; the problem was, as the Joint Strategic Plans Committee bluntly pointed out, that the country neither had, nor would soon have, "the military capability to carry out completely our commitments in this regard."¹⁰⁹

By the spring of 1952, however, high officials had already begun to rethink American policy on the use of force in any new Berlin crisis: "We were opposed to it before," General Bradley said on May 14, "but it should be reconsidered now."¹¹⁰ And in fact, by mid-1952, the U.S. line on Berlin had completely swung around to a much tougher position: in NSC 132/1 of June 12, 1952, a military probe was accepted, and it was now taken for granted that an attack on Berlin would almost certainly lead to general war. The American position on Berlin became even tougher during the early Eisenhower period; and the JCS documents make it clear that it was, at least from their point of view, the improved military situation that had made possible this dramatic shift of policy.¹¹¹

108. Notes of NSC meeting, April 8, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. XV:1, p. 894.

109. See especially NSC 24/3, "Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade," June 14, 1949, DNSC, reel 1; Marshall to Lay, October 18, 1950, in NSC 89, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. IV, pp. 893-894; JCS 1907/62, January 24, 1951, RJCS/II/G/5/418ff. This last document was the basis for the official JCS memorandum to Secretary of Defense George Marshall, February 7, 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. III, p. 1892ff. During the blockade itself, the American attitude was surprisingly weak: Truman was unwilling even to shoot down a barrage balloon if that had proved necessary to maintain access to Berlin, because that might have led to a war for which "the U.S. did not have enough soldiers." Williamson, "The View from Above," p. 104.

110. *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. VII, p. 1241.

111. The basic document on Berlin for the late Truman period was NSC 132/1 of June 12, 1952 (*FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. VII, p. 1261ff), much of which was evidently carried over into NSC 5404/2, the key Berlin policy document for the early Eisenhower period. This latter document has not been declassified, but one can learn a good deal about it from the Operations Coordinating Board Progress Reports on it of January 7, 1955 and May 17, 1956, DNSC, Supplement 2, reel 1, and Supplement 4, reel 1, respectively. For the military view that the shift in the balance had made all this possible, see the Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC) report on NSC 173, JCS 1907/101 of December 5, 1953, in RJCS/II/G/5/909ff. Note especially the JSSC's contrast with the earlier period "when the military posture of the Allies was too weak to permit of forceful measures in the assertion of the Allied right of surface entry into Berlin." This text was carried

There was a parallel shift in American policy on Indochina during this period. In 1950, the military felt that the United States was too weak to risk escalation of the conflict even if the Chinese intervened in force in the area; by 1952, the American strategy for the defense of Indochina was based on the idea that if the Chinese moved in, the Western powers would have to widen the war and attack China itself.¹¹²

This examination of the effect of the shifting balance on American foreign and military policy is important because of the light it sheds on the way nuclear forces influence political behavior. It was the overall strategic balance that was crucial, not specific, isolated gestures like particular deployments of nuclear-capable bombers at various points in time. What counted was the actual willingness to escalate, rather than overt threats or ultimata, which the Eisenhower administration was in fact anxious to avoid.¹¹³

A Time for Decision: "Preventive War" under Eisenhower

In May 1953, when the Eisenhower administration was making its final decisions about the Korean War, Vice President Richard Nixon argued at an NSC meeting that these choices should be made "only in the context of the longer-term problem which would confront us when the Soviet Union had amassed a sufficient stockpile of atomic weapons to deal us a critical blow and to rob us of the initiative in the area of foreign policy." The President "agreed with the views of the Vice President, and

over into the JCS Memorandum of January 19, 1954 on NSC 5404, which pressed for a toughening of the text with the argument that there was "no question, all factors considered, but that the Western Powers are now in a stronger military position relative to the Soviet Bloc than they were in 1949." Declassified Documents Collection, 1984/828. Comparing this document with, for example, the corresponding JCS documents from the beginning of 1951, one cannot help but be struck by an extraordinary difference in tone: the virtual defeatism of early 1951 was replaced by an attack on "temporizing measures" and an insistence that the West not hesitate to take "positive action" as soon as its position in Berlin was challenged.

112. See "The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam. History of the Indochina Incident, 1940-1954," JCS Historical Division, 1971, Military Records Branch, USNA, pp. 190, 194-198, 225, 241-258, 294-295, 388, 453-454. A number of the documents summarized here have been published in *FRUS* and in the *Pentagon Papers*, but some of the most important ones are still classified.

113. As early as November 1950, Bedell Smith, then CIA director, argued against laying down an ultimatum, and spoke instead of "quiet exploration with implied threats." Memorandum for the President, November 10, 1950, MNSC, reel 1. Smith, one of Eisenhower's closest associates from World War II, became undersecretary of state in 1953. He soon took a hand in a diplomatic initiative aimed at getting the Soviets to help bring about a Korean armistice. Once again, the theme is avoidance of the appearance of "a threat or ultimatum" and just setting forth a "simple statement of facts" as to what was likely to happen if an arrangement was not worked out. *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. XV, p. 915; see also pp. 1081, 1096, 1103, 1110-1111. This is in fact one of the basic techniques of coercive diplomacy: the pose of an impartial observer objectively pointing out—even regretfully—how matters were likely to evolve. Another related technique is the ruling out of alternative possibilities—that is, pointing out what the U.S. was *not* going to do.

explained that Project Solarium was being initiated with this precise problem in mind."¹¹⁴

The result of the Korean War buildup had been to transform America's "window of vulnerability" into a "window of opportunity." Would the United States take advantage of it, or would it allow its strategic edge simply to waste away as the Soviets built up their nuclear forces? The aim of this section is to tell how this issue was handled during the early Eisenhower period. What is striking here is, first, how seriously this problem was taken: the most aggressive strategies were never simply dismissed out of hand, but instead had broad appeal, even at the highest political level. But it is also important to note that the impulse to pursue a "dynamic" and "positive" policy was contained; a more or less final decision to rule out such a policy was reached at the end of 1954.

It was during the Solarium exercise of 1953 and its aftermath in 1954 that the Eisenhower administration confronted the issues raised by the shifting nuclear balance. But it was not just asymmetries in military capabilities that were important; the military environment as a whole was changing dramatically at this time. In the early atomic age, a full-scale nuclear war was still actually fightable.¹¹⁵ An attack that resulted in even a million deaths would of course have been an appalling catastrophe; but the level of devastation that such a figure represents was still quite modest compared with what would be possible a few years later.¹¹⁶ And these estimates assumed a Soviet surprise attack; if the United States struck first, a Soviet retaliatory attack might have had a much more limited impact. Thus even as late as 1953 or 1954 fighting and, in some meaningful sense, winning an air-atomic war was still "thinkable." It would probably be a long war, and the devastation would be terrible, but the United States would survive as a functioning society.

The extraordinary advances in nuclear weapons technology taking place in the early 1950s were to shatter this image of what a general atomic war would be like. The coming of high-yield weapons, and especially of thermonuclear weapons, was of fundamental importance. As Edward Teller had predicted, a single weapon could now devastate "three or four hundred square miles," instead of just three or four square miles, and the radiological effect might be even more devastating than the increased yield.¹¹⁷ It was clear, even from the open sources, that these new weapons could generate vast amounts of lethal fallout.¹¹⁸ The combination of increased yields

114. Minutes of NSC meeting, May 13, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. XV, p. 1016.

115. If war had broken out in 1953, for example, the American estimates implied that a surprise Soviet nuclear attack might have caused something on the order of 3,000,000 deaths; the casualty estimates could perhaps be cut in half if the U.S. took some rudimentary civil defense measures. This is based on information provided in *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 187, 225; and *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, pp. 334-335, 337, 344-345.

116. See the chart in *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 651.

117. Teller, "How Dangerous Are Atomic Weapons?" p. 36.

118. Hans Bethe, "The Hydrogen Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (April 1950), pp. 99-104, 125. The passage referred to is on p. 101, and is immediately followed by a reference to the Teller article cited above, which, Bethe said, had already described this threat. Because Bethe here seemed to hint at the way the H-bomb was actually being designed, this

and fallout meant that the new hydrogen bomb was truly an area weapon. The United States could scarcely survive an attack with even a relatively small number of these bombs.

For some people in the government, the increased potential for devastation simply underscored the importance of not allowing the enemy to strike first. This emphasis on getting in the first blow was not new: from the beginning of the atomic age, preemption had been considered very important, especially in military circles.¹¹⁹ By 1952, the idea had worked its way up to the presidential level: “startled” by a briefing on U.S. vulnerability he had received in September of that year, Truman concluded that “there wasn’t much of a defense in prospect except a vigorous offense.”¹²⁰ Under Eisenhower, this point became absolutely central to American strategy. As David Rosenberg says, “massive retaliation” really meant massive preemption—certainly at the level of military operations, but also, in a more ambiguous way, at the level of general strategy.¹²¹

It was understood that the question of how dangerous this new world was going to be turned on the issue of the vulnerability of strategic forces, or more precisely on the tractability of the vulnerability problem, which ultimately would determine how much of an incentive there would be to preempt. As an NSC study pointed out in 1952, “the controlling relationship in the atomic equation appears not to be that of

article “caused a memorable storm” in the AEC. On the AEC reaction, see the editorial note by Eugene Rabinowitch, “The ‘Hydrogen Bomb’ Story,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 8, No. 9 (December 1952), p. 298. A basic description of the link between fallout and bomb design was laid out in J. Rotblat, “The Hydrogen-Uranium Bomb,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (May 1955), pp. 171–172, 177.

119. The “principle of pre-emptive attack,” characterized by the author of the official JCS history as a “strange, new strategic concept for U.S. military planners,” had emerged in late 1945. See Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. I, p. 278, summarizing JCS 1477/1, October 30, 1945, a study of the military implications of the atomic bomb, and p. 148, summarizing JCS 1518 of October 9, 1945, the basic JCS “strategic concept and plan”; see *ibid.*, p. 305, for the effect of this line of thinking on JCS basing policy. See also *ibid.*, pp. 58, 311. Note finally the Compton Board’s argument for a strategy of preemption, and thus for the need to “redefine” what constituted an “aggressive act,” an idea that General LeMay quickly picked up on. “The Evaluation of the Atomic Bomb as a Military Weapon. The Final Report of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Evaluation Board for Operation Crossroads,” June 30, 1947, PSF, Box 220, Subject File, “NSC—Atomic—Atomic Test—Crossroads,” HSTL. For LeMay’s thinking, see Lemmer, “Air Force and Strategic Deterrence,” p. 35.

120. Minutes of NSC meeting, September 3, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 121.

121. A strategy of preemption is implied in a large number of documents from the Eisenhower period. See, for example, A. J. Goodpaster, Memorandum of Conference with the President, December 22, 1954, pp. 1, 3, Ann Whitman File (AWF), Ann Whitman Diary (AWD), Box 3, ACW Diary, December 1954 (2), DDEL. Note also Eisenhower’s remarks at an NSC meeting on July 29, 1954, especially the allusion to Clausewitz’s principle of “diminishing as much as possible the first blow of an enemy attack,” and his comment at another NSC meeting in early 1957 that since a massive Soviet nuclear attack would cause casualties “on the order of 50,000,000 people . . . the only sensible thing for us to do was to put all our resources into our SAC capability and into hydrogen bombs.” It is obvious that the only way this additional capability could make a difference was if the U.S. struck first. Discussion at 208th and 312th meetings of the National Security Council, AWF, NSC series, Boxes 5 and 8, DDEL.

stockpiles to each other, but rather the relationship of one stockpile, plus its deliverability, to the number of key enemy targets, including retaliatory facilities, which must be destroyed in order to warrant an attack."¹²² In 1951, the Air Force believed that the Soviets had already achieved the capability "critically to hamper" America's ability to strike back after an attack.¹²³ The Policy Planning Staff therefore wondered whether it was possible to build forces that could survive a surprise attack and go on to launch a heavy retaliatory strike. If this turned out to be impossible, a fundamental "reconsideration of national strategy" would be required.¹²⁴

The "reappraisal" of strategy thus turned in large part on issues related to what would now be called the stability of deterrence. One State Department official outlined some of the basic questions in May 1952: "Does currently approved U.S. national strategy remain valid in the light of apparently rapidly growing atomic, and possibly thermonuclear, capacity of the USSR? In other words, is time of the essence? Can we really hope to 'contain' the Soviet Union even if we maintain a high-level military strength indefinitely? Or must we adopt a more 'aggressive' policy?"¹²⁵ The argument for a new and more aggressive strategy was based on the assumption that there was no way, short of striking first, of preventing the Soviets from developing forces able essentially to destroy America's retaliatory capability in a surprise attack.

But this was only part of the problem. The extraordinary changes in the nature of general nuclear warfare taking place in the early 1950s were raising a whole series of fundamental questions about national policy. Should the nation simply accept this new world of thermonuclear weapons and nuclear plenty? Should it resign itself to an almost inevitable loss of strategic superiority, and to living in a world where an absolutely devastating surprise attack might be a very real risk? Gordon Dean, the recently retired Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, did not mince words on this issue: "Can we as a nation and can the nations of the now free world permit the Soviet to reach the position where, if it chooses, it can completely annihilate this country?"¹²⁶ The implication was that the United States might have to do something about this developing situation before it was too late, while it still had enough of a strategic edge to take some sort of "decisive action."

Project Solarium was the key device the new administration used to bring such basic policy issues into focus. The idea for this unusual exercise in the making of grand strategy came from Secretary of State Dulles, and Eisenhower himself took it very seriously.¹²⁷ Three task forces were set up. Each was to elaborate and defend a

122. "NSC Staff Study on Reappraisal of United States Objectives and Strategy for National Security," August 22, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 111.

123. Memorandum by the Policy Planning Staff to the Secretary of State, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, pp. 224-225, 227. See also Nitze to Acheson, January 12, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 203: "I do not think that there is, even now, a general understanding in the U.S. government that vulnerability to Soviet attack may prevent SAC from ever leaving the ground."

124. October 16, 1951 memo, *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. I, p. 227.

125. Schwartz to Bohlen, May 12, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 14.

126. Quoted in a lead article in *Time*, October 5, 1953, p. 24. For a fuller text, see Gordon Dean's "Tasks for the Statesmen," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 1954).

127. See Robert Cutler, *No Time For Rest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), p. 307ff.

different line of strategy. Even the most cautious strategy, Alternative A, called for the United States "to assume the strategic offensive in its conflict with Soviet Communism." Rollback was to be a basic goal.¹²⁸ Alternative B, which called for drawing a line and threatening massive retaliation if the Soviets should cross it, was more a strategy than a policy—a means of supporting the goal of containment, rather than an alternative to it.

Alternative C was by far the most extreme position: "The U.S. cannot continue to live with the Soviet threat. So long as the Soviet Union exists, it will not fall apart, but must and can be shaken apart."¹²⁹ This task force concluded that "time has been working against us. This trend will continue unless it is arrested, and reversed by positive action."¹³⁰ The idea was to take American *war* objectives—ending Soviet domination outside Russia, "curtailing Soviet power for aggressive war," reducing the strength of "Bolshevik elements left in Soviet Russia"—as the "true objectives of the United States," to be achieved through Cold War, "although admittedly running greater risk of general war." There is no doubt that this line of policy proposed to rely not just on the usual instruments of Cold War strategy—covert operations, propaganda, economic measures—but on military power as well. One of its basic principles was to "exploit to the fullest, use of military forces as instruments of national policy to achieve political, propaganda and prestige objectives by both military and diplomatic means." The one limitation was that the country should not *initiate* a general war, but it should be perfectly willing to risk one. To support this strategy, a massive expansion in the military budget was called for.¹³¹

In setting its timetable for action, Task Force C's "basic problem was to correlate the timing of actions by the United States against the time when the Soviet Union will be capable of dealing a destructive blow to the United States (five years)." Its fundamental assumption "was that under current policies, or under those of A and B, time will be working against us to the point where the Soviet threat will soon become unbearable and the survival of the United States problematical."¹³² During this period, there would be a war with China, perhaps growing out of a new war in Korea. By 1958, the United States would have dealt "a severe blow to Chinese prestige through the administration of a sound military defeat and the destruction of some of

128. *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 400–401, 406.

129. "Summary of Points Made in Discussion Following Presentation by Task Forces, July 16, 1953," *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 434. The full Solarium reports were declassified in 1987 (with portions exempted), and are available in Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (OSANSA), NSC series, Subject subseries, Box 9, DDEL, and also in the NSC files at the USNA, Judicial-Social-Fiscal Branch.

130. The rest of this section is deleted from the published version of the document, probably indicating it is even more extreme than what was left in. That the censors sometimes "sanitize" out the more extreme passages of this sort is clear from a comparison of a reference to a report by Arthur Flemming, Director of Defense Mobilization, during an NSC meeting in November 1954, and the "sanitized" text of the report. *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 791, 782–783.

131. "Summaries Prepared by the NSC Staff of Project Solarium Presentations and Written Reports," transmitted July 22, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 417–418, 422.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 416; "Project SOLARIUM. Summary of Basic Concepts of Task Forces," July 30, 1953, NSC Meeting Files, No. 157, Tab D, NSC Records, USNA.

her industrial centers," presumably through atomic bombardment.¹³³ The two basic long-term goals, to be achieved after 1965, were the "overthrow of the Communist regime in China" and "the reduction of Soviet power and militancy and the elimination of the Communist conspiracy."¹³⁴

It was against the backdrop of the Solarium discussions that Eisenhower and Dulles came to grips with the basic dilemma of the New Look: the sense that nuclear forces had become a fact of life, and that policy had to be built on a nuclear basis, but on the other hand, that the nuclearization of global politics might generate a fear of nuclear war that might shatter the Western alliance. It was clear, especially to Eisenhower, that primary reliance would have to be based on nuclear forces, particularly on the Strategic Air Command. It was not that the president viewed nuclear weapons as a godsend, in that only they allowed the West to neutralize the massive military manpower of the Soviet bloc. In fact, he thought it unfortunate that nuclear weapons even existed, since in any nonnuclear war, "he was certain that with its great resources the United States would surely be able to whip the Soviet Union."¹³⁵ But the clock could not be turned back, and there was no way that any agreement could be worked out that would assure with certainty that these weapons could be abolished.

The basic realities of this new world had to be faced without sentimentality. Eisenhower was never able to accept the argument about a nuclear stalemate and the possibility that a general war might be fought with only conventional weapons.¹³⁶ Nuclear weapons dominated all lesser forms of weaponry, and it was obvious to him that in a major conflict they would, in the final analysis, be used. His thinking was right out of the first few pages of Clausewitz: war has an innate tendency to become absolute. Winning was the only thing that mattered. "In such a war," he said, "the United States would be applying a force so terrible that one simply could not be

133. This was obviously closely related to the debate that had just come to a head on an expansion of the war in Korea. The discussion can be followed in *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. XV:1.

134. *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 423, 430–431.

135. Notes of NSC meeting, June 23, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 1469. Eisenhower repeated the point the next day: "he would gladly go back to the kind of warfare which was waged in 1941 if in 1945 the A-bomb had proved impossible to make." Notes of NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 688.

136. General Ridgway, at an NSC meeting in December, had argued that if the U.S. did not resort to nuclear attack, the Russians might not use nuclear weapons either. But Eisenhower "said he did not believe any such thing." Notes of NSC meeting, December 3, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 804. This sort of argument, he said in another meeting, was "completely erroneous." Notes of NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 689. Eisenhower held to this view throughout his administration. For example, in a conversation with Robert Bowie in August 1960, Eisenhower "said that he agreed that we are not going to have a tactical nuclear war in Western Europe. In fact, he said he cannot see any chance of keeping any war in Europe from becoming a general war. For this reason he thought we must be ready to throw the book at the Russians should they jump us. He did not see how there could be such a thing as a limited war in Europe, and thought we would be fooling ourselves and our European friends if we said we could fight such a war without recourse to nuclear weapons. If massive land war operations such as the Ludendorff offensive in early 1918 in World War I were to occur, he was sure that nations would use every weapon available to them." A.J. Goodpaster, "Memorandum of Conference with the President," August 19, 1960, Declassified Documents Collection, 1987/1139.

meticulous as to the methods by which the force was brought to bear."¹³⁷ Thus for Eisenhower, the fundamental role of nuclear weapons was something permanent and ultimately inescapable.

It was, however, also simply a fact of international life that the nuclearization of great power politics was generating fears that might well lead to a neutralization of front-line allies in Europe and the Far East.¹³⁸ The United States, however, could not go it alone in the world. Secretary Dulles hammered away at this theme again and again. "No single country," he said, "not even the United States, could, out of its own resources, adequately match the strength of a powerful totalitarian state. We were in no position to extract from our people what tyrannical rulers could extract from their people. The attempt to do so would 'bust us.' Accordingly, the only way the free world could hope to maintain sufficient strength so that each of its members did not 'go broke,' was the pooling of resources." Isolation, he warned, "would cost the United States dearly in the long run."¹³⁹

Dulles laid out the basic problem in an important memorandum of September 6, 1953. On the one hand, the United States was going to shift its military policy in the direction of increased emphasis on nuclear capabilities and the withdrawal of ground forces from Europe. But with the growth of Soviet nuclear forces, he wrote, "the NATO concept [was] losing its grip" in Europe. SAC bases overseas were coming to be seen more as "lightning rods" than as "umbrellas." America was becoming so vulnerable to Soviet retaliatory attack that the Europeans were beginning to believe "that we might stay out if Europe were attacked first. And if the U.S. were attacked first, Europe might prefer to stay out." The American strategy of redeployment and a build-up of continental defense would, moreover, be interpreted "as final proof of an isolationist trend and the adoption of the 'Fortress America' concept." Dulles doubted "that any eloquence or reasoning on our part would prevent disintegration and deterioration of our position, with our growing isolation through the reaction of our present allies. The resources of the free world would then no longer be in a common fund to be drawn on for community security, and the balance of world power, military and economic, would doubtless shift rapidly to our great disadvantage." A basic conclusion followed: "we cannot avoid a major reconsideration of collective security concepts." For Dulles, there was only one answer to the dilemma: détente with the Soviet Union, "a spectacular effort to relax world tensions on a global basis."¹⁴⁰

137. Notes of NSC meeting, March 25, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 639–641.

138. The fear of a nuclear-generated neutralization of Europe and the Far East was a minor theme in the *Foreign Relations* documents as early as 1950; see, for example, a passing reference to this prospect in NSC 68, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. I, p. 265. By 1953, it had become considerably more important: see Nitze's comments, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 203 (where he called this "a subject of utmost delicacy"); the National Intelligence Estimate of October 23, 1953, para. 4(a), *ibid.*, p. 552; State Department Paper, November 15, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 773; Allen Dulles paper, November 18, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 777.

139. Notes of NSC meeting, August 27, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 452.

140. Dulles memorandum, September 6, 1953, *ibid.*, pp. 457–460. According to Dulles, the "line of thinking" initiated here ended in Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" speech of December 1953.

But for Eisenhower, détente was not the only solution. He reacted to Dulles's argument by briefly considering the idea of preventive war. He and his secretary of state discussed the issue at length on September 7, and on September 8 he summed up his views in a memorandum to Dulles. If there was to be a "real revision in policies—some of which may temporarily, or even for a very extended time, involve us in vastly increased expenditures," he said, we would have to start educating the American people now. Given the power of nuclear weapons, and the fact that the Soviets blocked international control, the only reasonable assumption was that they were "contemplating aggressive use." America's policy therefore "could no longer be geared" toward simply avoiding "disaster during the early 'surprise' stages of a war." The United States would instead "have to be constantly ready, on an instantaneous basis, to inflict greater loss upon the enemy than he could reasonably hope to inflict upon us." This, he said, "would be a deterrent—but if the contest to maintain this relative position should have to continue indefinitely, the cost would either drive us to war—or into some form of dictatorial government." "In such circumstances" he concluded, "we would be forced to consider whether or not our duty to future generations did not require us to *initiate* war at the most propitious moment that we could designate."¹⁴¹

This was not the only instance of Eisenhower's interest in preventive war at the time. Lord Moran, for example, recalled in his diary an encounter between Churchill and Eisenhower at the Bermuda conference in December 1953: "'Of course,' said the P.M. pacing up and down the room, 'anyone could say the Russians are evil minded and mean to destroy the free countries. Well, if we really feel like that, perhaps we ought to take action before they get as many atomic bombs as America has. I made that point to Ike, who said, perhaps logically, that it ought to be considered.'"¹⁴² And when Dulles, in an NSC meeting in June 1954, pointed out that most of America's allies would not support a tough policy, Eisenhower said that "if this were indeed the situation, we should perhaps come back to the very grave question: Should the United States now get ready to fight the Soviet Union? The President pointed out that he had brought up this question more than once at prior Council meetings, and that he had never done so facetiously."¹⁴³

Why then was a preventive war strategy, in any of its variants, never adopted as policy? It was not that Eisenhower was shocked or appalled by this way of thinking.¹⁴⁴

Dulles, Memorandum for the President, May 12, 1954, Dulles Papers, White House Memoranda Series, Box 1, "White House Correspondence, 1954 (1)," DDEL.

141. Eisenhower to Dulles, September 8, 1953, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 461. Emphasis in original. Note also Dulles, "Memorandum for Mr. Bowie," September 8, 1953, Dulles Papers, White House Memoranda series, Box 1, "White House Correspondence 1953 (2)," DDEL. The reference to "vastly increased expenditures" suggests a link to Alternative C from the Solarium Study, which had recently been discussed at the NSC level.

142. Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival*, p. 505.

143. Notes of NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 696.

144. See, for example, his reaction to the Solarium presentations, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 397–398, 438. What the president wanted was a blending of all three alternatives, but to his annoyance those who had worked on the project rejected this as impossible. Note also his

But with a decision of this magnitude, many other considerations had to be taken into account, and one in particular was always decisive: even if a general war was won in any meaningful sense, the problems that would have to be faced in the postwar period would be staggering. There was one point, Eisenhower said, that he, as president, had to live with all the time, "namely, what do you do with the world after you have won victory in such a catastrophic nuclear war?"¹⁴⁵ "The colossal job," he said, "of occupying the territories of the defeated enemy would be far beyond the resources of the United States at the end of such a war."¹⁴⁶ He in fact doubted "whether any nations as we now know them would continue to exist at the conclusion of this war."¹⁴⁷ At one point he even made the startling comment that "the only thing worse than losing a global war was winning one."¹⁴⁸

As a result, very little of Alternative C from the Solarium project ended up in NSC 162/2, the carefully worked out statement of basic national security policy adopted on October 29, 1953. The sense of a need to act before America's nuclear lead had been lost was reduced to a fairly anodyne sentence in paragraph 45: "In the face of the developing Soviet threat, the broad aim of U.S. security policies must be to create, prior to the achievement of mutual atomic plenty, conditions under which the United States and the free world coalition are prepared to meet the Soviet-Communist threat with resolution and to negotiate for its alleviation under proper safeguards."¹⁴⁹

By 1954, what was left of Alternative C was simply a strong feeling that perhaps the United States ought to take advantage of her fading nuclear superiority before she lost it completely. Those, especially in the military, who argued along these lines at the time predicted that the loss of America's nuclear edge would lead to a dangerous upsurge in Soviet aggressiveness. In such a case, the only alternative to appeasement would be an enormously destructive war, one that the nation could scarcely hope to win in any meaningful sense. But they did not argue that the United States should therefore try to provoke a war before this situation came to pass. Instead, they called simply for a more "active," "dynamic" or "positive" policy, without spelling out precisely what they had in mind.

As in Solarium, the interest in a more "aggressive" strategy was clearly linked to concerns about the shifting nuclear balance. This is illustrated by two memoranda presented by the new Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1954.¹⁵⁰ The first was a JCS attack, dated June 23, 1954, on the whole idea of negotiation with the Soviet bloc. The enemy was unrelenting, it argued, and would settle for nothing less than total victory. From the

reaction to the "preventive war" briefing by the JCS's Advanced Study Group, 200th Meeting of the NSC, June 4, 1954, AWF, NSC series, Box 5. For more on this briefing, which had earlier been presented to Eisenhower, see Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 34.

145. Notes of NSC meeting, December 3, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 804. See also Eisenhower's comments to some military officers in June 1954, in R. H. Ferrell, ed., *The Diary of James Hagerty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 69.

146. Notes of NSC meeting, March 4, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 636.

147. Notes of NSC meeting, March 25, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 642.

148. *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 397.

149. *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. II, p. 595.

150. For the context, see Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. V, 1953-54, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1986), chap. 2, esp. pp. 45-46, 48-52. *

U.S. standpoint, things were already bad, and, with the development of Soviet nuclear capabilities, could only get worse: "the engulfment of a large segment of the world and its people by the Soviets has been accomplished during the period in which the United States first held a monopoly and then a significant superiority in atomic weapons and in the means for their delivery. It may properly be assumed that, unless the Soviet attitude is altered by outside influences, the aggressive and irresponsible tactics pursued with success by the Soviets thus far will be only a prelude to the proportions which such tactics will attain once the present atomic superiority of the United States has been neutralized." The United States, the Chiefs argued, had to exploit its present nuclear superiority by taking "positive actions": the Soviets had to be made to see that failure on its part to make concessions would "involve grave risks to the maintenance of their regime."¹⁵¹

The JCS contribution to the annual review of basic national security policy, dated November 22, 1954, similarly argued that the world conflict was now in a "critical" stage, and within a few years would "probably reach a decisive state."¹⁵² It, too, pointed out that the allies were drifting away: the fear of atomic war was driving them toward neutralism. (One thinks of the Kaiser on the eve of World War I complaining about how his allies were falling away "like rotten pears.") And then the call for action:

The non-Communist world, if it takes positive and timely *dynamic* countermeasures, presently has ample resources to meet this situation, and with high chance of maintaining world peace without sacrifice of either vital security interests or fundamental moral principles, or in the event of war being forced upon it, of winning that war beyond any reasonable doubt. On the other hand, failure on the part of the free world and particularly of the United States to take such timely and dynamic action could, within a relatively short span of years, result in the United States finding itself isolated from the rest of the free world and thus placed in such jeopardy as to reduce its freedom of action to two alternatives—that of accommodation to Soviet designs or contesting such designs under conditions not favorable to our success.

Complaining that the government had not acted with the proper sense of urgency, and that policy had been too passive and reactive, the JCS called for a policy "of unmistakably positive quality." The nation should not be "required to defer" to the most cautious allies. The United States, they argued, had to be ready "to undertake certain risks inherent in the adoption of dynamic and positive security measures."¹⁵³

What sort of "timely and dynamic action" could possibly solve the problems resulting from the growth of Soviet nuclear power? Perhaps the JCS had a hidden agenda that they did not dare to set out explicitly; perhaps they were forced to speak in "code language" because the preventive war option had been ruled out in 1953. There is some evidence that the Chiefs, and especially JCS Chairman Radford, were

151. JCS to Wilson, June 23, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 680–686.

152. Taken literally, what this implied was that matters were coming to a head, and the struggle would be *decided* one way or the other. Admiral Radford, in an NSC meeting at which these issues were discussed, said specifically that unless communist action was forestalled, the United States could not "hope for anything but a showdown with Soviet Communists by 1959 or 1960." Notes of NSC meeting, November 24, 1954, *ibid.*, p. 792.

153. Wilson to Lay, November 22, 1954, *ibid.*, pp. 785–787. Emphasis in original.

indeed thinking in these terms.¹⁵⁴ But this evidence is by no means conclusive, and it is certainly possible that top military leaders at the time had never really worked this issue through in their own minds: they knew what they did not like, namely, the growth of Soviet nuclear capabilities, and felt very strongly that a policy of drift might lead to catastrophe, but were not quite sure what could be done about it.

In any case, the JCS soon got a hearing: the issue of a more “positive policy” came to a climax in the NSC at the end of 1954. In these discussions it was Dulles, a hawk during the discussions about ending the Korean War, the man who had called during the presidential campaign for a “policy of boldness,” who now took the lead in arguing for a relatively mild policy.¹⁵⁵ What, he asked, was the point of the aggressive strategy that the Chiefs had recommended? The problem was not simply that the allies would not follow us; this was an important consideration, but if the policy was

154. Radford, it is now clear, was in favor of a highly aggressive strategy that would have forced the Soviets both to disarm and to abandon their empire in Eastern Europe; a rejection of these demands would have led to a discriminate counterforce attack and perhaps ultimately to full-scale war. This was the basic strategy called for in the Air Force’s Project Control, a major study conducted out of the Air War College in 1953–54; when Radford was briefed on the project in August 1954, these ideas received his enthusiastic support. “If the U.S. did not adopt and successfully follow through on a course of action similar to Project Control,” he said, it was his belief “that in the period mid 1957–1960 there would be either an all-out atomic war or the U.S. would be forced into an agreement which would mean victory for the U.S.S.R.” Radford commented that this strategy would face political obstacles; the idea would, he thought, be resisted by both the State Department and the allies. In fact, when Project Control was briefed to the State Department, Robert Bowie, the head of the Policy Planning Staff, opposed it as “simply another version of preventive war.” This is based on Tami Davis Biddle, “Handling the Soviet Threat: Arguments for Preventive War and Compellence in the Early Cold War Period,” draft manuscript presented at conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., June 9–11, 1988, pp. 44–45 (the Project Control strategy), pp. 61–62 and n. 148 (Radford and Bowie). Note also her discussion of the official Air Force reaction, pp. 55–57, and an excerpt from a 1953 book by Air Force General Dale Smith, quoted in George Lowe, *The Age of Deterrence* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 54. As for the other Chiefs, note some rather suggestive passages in CNO Admiral Carney’s speech in May 1954. In dealing with the communists, Carney argued, the United States should not simply “rush around plugging the dike” with localized military actions, but should have the “guts” to take the “rougher road” that at least gave some hope of a decent outcome. The choice had to be made quickly; “we’re traveling at high speed and I don’t believe much time will be vouchsafed us.” According to Lowe (p. 56), Carney was “widely thought to be suggesting a preventive war.” The text of the speech is in the *New York Times*, May 28, 1954, p. 2. Air Force Chief of Staff Twining’s sympathy for this sort of thinking is suggested by the passages quoted above from his book: if Twining took this line in public even in the mid-1960s, one imagines that the line he took in private around 1954 must have been considerably stronger, especially given the kind of thinking common in Air Force circles at the time. Even General Ridgway, Army Chief of Staff and by far the strongest advocate of the “limited war” philosophy in the JCS, had by 1954 evidently moved very far toward the idea of hitting the enemy at his heart: if the U.S. were to intervene militarily in the Indochina conflict, it should avoid getting bogged down in a local war and should instead initiate mobilization and “neutralize the sources of Viet Minh strength” by taking military action against China. JCS Historical Division, “History of the Indochina Incident,” p. 388.

155. On Dulles’s line at the start of the Eisenhower administration, see especially his handwritten notes of his comments at a high-level meeting on December 11, 1952, Dulles Papers, Subject File, Box 8, “S.S. Helena Notes,” DDEL.

right, Dulles said, he would go along with it anyway.¹⁵⁶ The real problem was that it did not make any strategic sense. There was only one respect in which the United States was facing a deterioration in its global position, "namely, the forthcoming achievement of atomic plenty and a nuclear balance of power between the U.S. and the USSR." "But how," Dulles asked in a key NSC meeting in November 1954, "were we to prevent the Soviet Union from achieving such a nuclear balance of power without going to war with the USSR? Certainly no actions on the periphery of the Soviet Union would stop the growth of the atomic capabilities of the Soviet Union."¹⁵⁷ Eisenhower himself had long had doubts about "how much we should poke the animal through the bars of the cage."¹⁵⁸

Dulles now appeared comfortable with present American policies, which he described in surprisingly Kennanesque terms: "Our alliance system has staked out the vital areas of the world which we propose to hold even at the risk of general war. These vital areas include currently all the areas of immediate strategic value to us or which possess significant war potential. The NATO area is by all odds the greatest single U.S. asset."¹⁵⁹ Dulles stressed his personal sympathy for the JCS position. He reminded them that he himself had called for a more dynamic policy during the 1952 presidential campaign, and even after taking office, had supported a policy of bringing about "the disintegration of Soviet power."¹⁶⁰ But, he noted in the December 1954 NSC meeting, his views had changed: Experience showed that beyond a certain point, the "dynamic" policy could not be translated into specific courses of action.¹⁶¹

The general mood at this NSC meeting was in harmony with Dulles's more relaxed views. Treasury Secretary George Humphrey and Defense Secretary Charles Wilson were essentially willing to accept coexistence (although the latter did not particularly like the word). As for Eisenhower, he was not opposed to the idea of negotiation with the Soviets. Even the old idea that all outposts had to be held, which Dulles had supported at the beginning of the Eisenhower period, was now abandoned: Indochina, Dulles said, was not terribly significant to us, and Eisenhower had already pointed out at an earlier meeting that if people did not want to be free, and would not fight for their freedom, there was not very much the United States could do about it.¹⁶²

The December 21, 1954, NSC meeting marks, in a sense, the end of an era. The period had begun with the Soviet atomic test in late 1949. The tensions generated by that event had played an important role in the American policy debates of the early

156. Notes of NSC meeting, June 24, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. II, pp. 694–695.

157. Notes of NSC meeting, November 24, 1954, *ibid.*, pp. 789–790. The kind of minor aggressions that had been proposed were "such projects as the detachment of Albania or an assault on Hainan Island." Notes of NSC meeting, October 29, 1953, *ibid.*, p. 569.

158. Cutler to Dulles, September 3, 1953, *ibid.*, p. 457.

159. Notes of NSC meeting, December 21, 1954, *ibid.*, pp. 833–834.

160. Notes of NSC meeting, March 31, 1953, *ibid.*, p. 267.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 833.

162. *Ibid.*, p. 837 (for Humphrey); p. 840 (for Wilson); p. 843 (Eisenhower on negotiations); p. 266 (for Dulles's domino argument in early 1953); p. 835 (for his later, milder views on the subject); p. 709 (for Eisenhower, on people not willing to fight for their freedom).

1950s, but by the end of 1954 had essentially worked themselves out. This is not to argue that “preventive war” thinking disappeared without a trace: even as late as 1959, Eisenhower was still wondering whether America “should start fighting now” instead of “waiting to go quietly down the drain.”¹⁶³ And in 1960, fed up with “Khrushchev and his threats,” the President “strongly intimated that he wished there was no moral restriction that prevented him from one night pushing the proper button and sending all of our atomic bombs in the direction of the Communist bloc.”¹⁶⁴

But these were now merely isolated expressions of frustration. It was too late for anything like this to be seriously considered as a real policy option. Dulles’s reaction in 1958 to an argument that the United States should consider taking some action before it lost its strategic edge over the Soviet Union probably comes much closer to capturing the heart of Eisenhower administration thinking on this issue in the late 1950s. The question of preventive war, of course, had been around for a long time: Dulles recalled how in June 1946 he and Senator Vandenberg had “speculated” on whether force would be justified if the Soviets refused to accept international control of nuclear weapons. But this was no longer an open question: “No man,” Dulles felt, “should arrogate to himself the power to decide that the future of mankind would benefit by an action entailing the killing of tens of millions of people.”¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

The nuclear revolution was like a great earthquake, setting off a series of shock waves that gradually worked their way through the world political system. The basic aim here was to study one part of this process, the way people dealt with the problem

163. Bryce Harlow, Memorandum for the Record, March 26, 1959, AWF, DDE Diaries, Staff Notes, March 1–15, 1959 (1), DDEL; also Declassified Documents Collection, 1978/118C.

164. Notes for Files, September 25, 1960, AWF, AWD, Box 11, DDEL.

165. Dulles’s interlocutor was Robert Sprague, in 1954, consultant to the NSC on continental defense, in 1957, chief architect of the Gaither Report. In his 1958 conversation with the secretary of state, Sprague argued that for the next two and one-half years, “the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union will be at its strongest,” and that “during this period we can knock out the Soviet Union’s military capability without taking a similar blow from the Soviet Union.” He had therefore asked the president to appoint a study group to consider “what the U.S. should do during the few years in which we will retain a margin of advantage.” Memorandum of Conversation, January 3, 1958, Dulles Papers, General Correspondence and Memoranda Series, Box 1, “Memoranda of Conversation—General—S(1),” DDEL. A few years earlier, Sprague, in briefing the NSC on continental defense, had evidently referred to preventive war as an option open to the U.S.; in another NSC meeting a few weeks later, he argued that the U.S. could not afford “to leave in Soviet hands the question of whether they should or should not attack us” in the near future. “Discussion at the 205th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, July 1, 1954,” (allusion by Dulles, p. 19); and “Discussion at the 208th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, July 29, 1954,” p. 4, both in AWF, NSC series, Box 5, DDEL. (Incidentally, in November 1957, three members of the Gaither Committee urged reconsideration of the whole idea of preventive war.) David Alan Rosenberg, *Toward Armageddon: The Foundations of United States Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1961* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1983), p. 236.

of the shifting strategic balance, and especially the loss of the American nuclear monopoly, in the period from 1949 to 1954. This story is of interest because of the light it sheds on the problem of how the world came to terms with nuclear weapons—how they were absorbed into the international system, and how people accommodated to the basic realities of the nuclear age.

What surprised me the most as I went through these sources was that so much attention was given to the extraordinary *shifts* then taking place, both in the military balance and in the military environment as a whole. It was a surprise that such window thinking loomed as large as it did; it was perhaps not quite so surprising that the global balance, as such, played an important role in shaping policy. But once this became clear, all kinds of other things began to fall into place.

In this concluding section, I want to explore some of the implications of the argument here in three areas, specifically: (a) American military policy; (b) American foreign policy; and (c) global politics as a whole. The sort of thinking discussed above was obviously not *directly* translated into policy, but this set of concerns did enter into the matrix out of which policy developed, and the *indirect* effects were of considerable importance.

MILITARY POLICY. The sort of thinking that was emerging in response to concerns about the shifting nuclear balance was clearly one of the major elements factored into the Eisenhower strategy. The New Look took it for granted that if the Soviets turned out to be totally impossible to live with, that if they insisted on pursuing highly aggressive policies and sought relentlessly to force a retreat of American power especially from Europe and the Far East, then the United States would have to go to war with them. In such a war, the goal would be to destroy Soviet power totally, once and for all. If the Soviets were in fact this bad, and if as a result such a war had to be fought, it might be dangerous to try too hard to avoid a showdown. Given the way the military balance was bound to shift, the United States would be well-advised to make its stand sooner rather than later. Moreover, if general war was a real possibility, then it was obviously important that the United States be able to strike quickly, so that any Soviet counter-attack could be blunted.

This thinking helps explain the emphasis that American military policy in the 1950s placed on preemption, as well as the targeting philosophy based on destroying "the heart of Soviet power." All of these ideas were cut from the same cloth, and tended, at least in a psychological sense, to be mutually reinforcing. They all added up to a way of looking at the world that carried a certain political weight—influencing, for example, how broadly the conditions for preemption were defined.¹⁶⁶ This body of evidence thus helps support the conclusion that the Eisenhower strategy has to be taken seriously, that it was not at bottom (as some people argue) simply a gigantic bluff. Ideas of this sort, in their pure form, were never able to dictate policy, but they certainly affected the way the policy balance was struck.

166. The term "preemption" was not used in the NSC documents, which generally referred instead to the conditions under which the United States would have to assume that general war was imminent.

FOREIGN POLICY. How did these concerns about trends in the military balance relate to American foreign policy as a whole in this period? The strategy of building up American and allied power, especially the dramatic shift in late 1950 on the German question—that is, the opting for the rearmament of West Germany—clearly has to be understood in this context.

In the Far East, concerns about the balance played an important direct role in foreign policy. In the winter of 1950–51, they acted as a force for restraint. But after the balance had shifted in late 1952, the tenor of high-level American policy discussions became noticeably more hawkish.¹⁶⁷ The evidence is spotty, but one suspects that the increasing pressure for a more aggressive American policy in East Asia was linked to the sort of thinking reflected in documents like the Solarium Task Force C report. From the point of view of people like Admiral Radford, the China area must have seemed like the best place in the world to try to implement a “dynamic” and “positive” policy.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, for some military officers, a general war with China was attractive precisely because it might have led to an all-out war with the Soviet Union as well, before it was too late. General K.D. Nichols, who for years had been one of the most important officers concerned with nuclear matters, argued at the end of 1952 for the deliberate use of nuclear weapons in the war against China. One goal, he said, was to “precipitate a major war,” evidently against the USSR, “at a time when we have greatest potential for winning it with minimum damage to the U.S.A.”¹⁶⁹

By the end of 1954, however, American policy as a whole was drawing back from what was referred to even in internal documents as an “aggressive” strategy against China; from that point on, the United States sought in practice simply to support the status quo in the Far East.¹⁷⁰ This was probably linked to what was going on at the level of general policy making at exactly this time—the defeat of the JCS in the NSC, also in late 1954, and the opting for a policy of coexistence with the Soviets.

167. This can be followed in some detail in *FRUS*, 1952–54, Vol. XIV; there is also some relevant material in Vol. XII.

168. Even in 1952 (when he was U.S. commander in the Pacific), Radford was pressing for a more aggressive U.S. policy in the China area. See the report by General Merrill to the Policy Planning Staff, April 17, 1952, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, Box 32, “Policy Planning Staff Meetings (1950),” RG 59, USNA. Radford was thinking in terms of the seizure of Hainan Island by the Chinese Nationalists (with U.S. support), and maybe even a “lodgment” in “one of the coastal provinces.”

169. Memorandum quoted in K.D. Nichols, *The Road to Trinity* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 12; see also p. 291.

170. The JCS were informed on September 28, 1954, that the president had “suspended” the policy of supporting Chinese Nationalist raids on the mainland. JCS Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, October 1, 1954, File for NSC Meeting, No. 216, Tab C, NSC Records, USNA. Another important development a little later was the conclusion of the Mutual Defense Treaty with the government on Taiwan. This had been considered earlier, but the U.S. had preferred in 1954 not to negotiate such a pact “primarily because a defensive pact might have the effect of tying the hands of the GRC.” NSC Operations Coordinating Board, Progress Report on United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Formosa and the Chinese National Government, July 16, 1954, p. 5, NSC 146 File, NSC Records, USNA.

GLOBAL POLITICS, 1949–54. Finally, the shifting balance seems to have had an important bearing on the course of global politics as a whole in the period down to 1954. The Soviets were deeply concerned with what was going on in the United States in this period. The harsh anti-communist rhetoric coming out of Washington was bad enough; but now, on top of this, the West had taken a series of extraordinary moves to build up its military power. In this context, certain signals were especially important. Remarks that seemed to indicate that influential elements in the U.S. government thought that the emerging military situation was intolerable, and that a more "positive" strategy might be necessary, were bound to alarm the Soviets. Thus, for example, Senator William Knowland's call in late 1954, for a basic change in U.S. policy before time ran out and the communists were able to resume their advance under cover of an "atomic stalemate," was just one of many pronouncements that might have been taken as indications of the way official thinking was moving in the United States. Knowland was the Republican leader in the Senate; although the administration publicly distanced itself from his views, the Soviets may well have wondered whether this was because Knowland was more radical than Eisenhower and Dulles, or simply less discreet.¹⁷¹

Statements coming from more authoritative sources were worrisome enough. In August of 1954, General Twining had made the somewhat ambiguous point that the proof of America's peaceful intentions was that "there is already sufficient reason for war, if we are seeking war."¹⁷² Eisenhower himself, in his first State of the Union address in early 1953, also made a comment that was susceptible to more than one interpretation: he warned that the "free world cannot indefinitely remain in a posture of paralyzed tension." It is unlikely that such remarks passed unnoticed in the USSR. Indeed, as Eisenhower himself put it, the Russians must have been "scared as hell" at this time.¹⁷³

It seems quite clear that the USSR accommodated to the new thrust of American policy. The most important shift was on Soviet policy on the German question. There were three great steps along the road to a full resurgence of German power: the creation of the Federal Republic, the rearmament of West Germany, and the nuclearization of the Bundeswehr. The first and third led to crises: The decisions taken at the London Conference in 1948 made it clear that a West German state would soon be brought into being, and the Soviets reacted by blockading West Berlin in 1948–49. Similarly in the late 1950s, when it seemed that West German armed forces were well on their way toward acquiring nuclear forces of their own, the Soviets also provoked a very serious Berlin crisis.¹⁷⁴ But the second phase in this process, the rearmament

171. "Knowland Warns of Policy Danger; Calls for Review," *New York Times*, November 16, 1954, p. 1. The text of the statement is on p. 18.

172. Quoted in the *New York Times*, August 21, 1954, p. 5.

173. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Eisenhower*, 1953, p. 13; notes of NSC meeting, June 4, 1953, FRUS, 1952–54, Vol. II, p. 369.

174. See Marc Trachtenberg, "The Berlin Crisis," in Charles F. Brower, ed., *The Theory and Practice of American National Security, 1960–68* (forthcoming).

of West Germany, did not lead to anything comparable, in spite of the fact that a very sharp Soviet reaction was widely expected at the time.¹⁷⁵

This, in other words, was a Berlin crisis that did not happen. Instead of responding aggressively to what was going on, the Soviets opted for a conciliatory policy. The series of moves culminating in the famous Soviet note on Germany of March 10, 1952, is best understood in the context of these Soviet fears and anxieties.¹⁷⁶ The Soviets, in other words, had accommodated to the shift in the balance that had taken place in the early 1950s.

This, in any case, was the view the Soviet leaders themselves came to have of this period. Nikita Khrushchev, for example, later referred with apparent distaste, evidently to the period around 1952 to 1954, as a time when the West really did have the upper hand strategically. "It is high time," Khrushchev said in his speech of

175. The key decisions on the American side were made in late 1950 after the outbreak of the Korean War. Even before Korea, the Soviet reaction to German rearmament was a source of great anxiety, not just in Western Europe but also in the United States. "The rearmament of Germany," U.S. High Commissioner John McCloy wrote in early June 1950, "would undoubtedly speed up any Soviet schedule for any possible future action in Germany and would, no doubt, be regarded by them as sufficiently provocative to warrant extreme countermeasures." McCloy to Acheson, June 13, 1950, PSF, Box 178, "Germany. Folder 2," HSTL. After the war in Korea broke out, these fears became more intense, although they were counterbalanced by fears about what would happen if the West did nothing while its nuclear advantage gradually disappeared. The CIA, for example, in early 1951 thought that there was a better than fifty-fifty chance that West German rearmament would lead to war with the Soviets. Memorandum for the President, January 25, 1951, p. 4, MNSC, reel 1. See also the CIA study, "Probable Soviet Reactions to a Remilitarization of Western Germany," NIE-17, December 27, 1950, PSF, Box 253, HSTL, esp. paragraphs 7 and 9. In 1952, when the agreements creating a framework for German rearmament were finally signed, there was again a great fear that the Soviets would react by provoking a new Berlin crisis. But again, the American government, somewhat to its surprise, was struck by the fact that no aggressive moves were taken around Berlin; the situation on the access routes remained normal in 1952-53. *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. VII, pp. 1239, 1236, 1272, 1294, 1373.

176. There was, and to a certain extent still is, a tendency in the West to dismiss the Soviet offers as being purely tactical in their purpose, the aim supposedly having been to derail the process leading to the military integration of West Germany into the NATO bloc. The best scholarship, however, demonstrates that this was not the case. A superb dissertation by Paul Willging provides a very effective analysis of this issue: Paul R. Willging, "Soviet Foreign Policy in the German Question: 1950-1955" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1973). This work can now be supplemented by, for example, important documents from British, French and American archival sources, which show that many Western statesmen believed at the time that these Soviet moves reflected a real shift in policy on the German question. There was a parallel shift in the tone of official East German utterances. In late 1950, East German Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl quite clearly threatened that what had happened in Korea might well be repeated in Germany, and communist party leader Walter Ulbricht said the regime had decided against building a new seaport "since soon 'democratic Germany' would have Hamburg and Lubeck." Cited in Thomas Schwartz, "From Occupation to Alliance: John J. McCloy and the Allied High Commission in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949-1952" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1985), p. 303; see also p. 354, n. 14. By early 1952, however, the East Germans increasingly emphasized defense. The parallel with Korea, still a theme in Grotewohl's remarks, was now much more ambiguous. It was no longer an East German invasion of the West that was threatened; instead, Grotewohl spoke simply of the "great danger" of a "fratricidal war of Germans against Germans." Quoted in McCloy to State Department, May 16, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-54, Vol. VII, p. 341.

November 10, 1958, "to realize that the times when the imperialists could act from 'positions of strength' with impunity have gone never to return, and try as they may, the imperialists will not be able to change the balance of forces in their favour."¹⁷⁷ These shifts on the Soviet side, especially the turn toward conciliation during the late Stalin and early post-Stalin periods, in turn had a major impact on the policy of the Western powers, and all this was part of a much broader process whereby the fate of Germany, and with it the structure of power in Europe, was worked out.

We as a society suffer today from what can only be called an extraordinary case of collective nuclear amnesia. A picture of the past has taken shape that has very little to do with what our nuclear past was really like.¹⁷⁸ It is now often taken for granted that even in the 1950s nuclear war was simply "unthinkable" as an instrument of policy; that nuclear forces were never "usable" and served only to "deter their use by others"; and that the threat of "massive retaliation" was at bottom just pure bluff, because the United States would never be the first to launch a nuclear strike. This picture has taken shape because it serves important political purposes for both the left and the right, but one cannot immerse oneself in the sources for this period without coming to the conclusion that something very basic has been forgotten. The historical documents themselves give a very different picture.

It is important to see the past as it really was, to understand that thirty-five years ago people lived in a much more frightening world than anything we know today. Out of that world a stable peace eventually took shape. How this happened is a problem of more than just historical interest. The one thing that is now clear is that this is an extremely interesting problem to explore, and one where historical scholarship has barely begun to scratch the surface.

177. This speech, of course, marked the beginning of the great Berlin crisis of 1958–62. For the text, see U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Documents on Germany, 1944–1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1961), p. 339. There is an even more striking admission in Khrushchev's August 11, 1961, speech. "There was a time," he said, "when American Secretary of State Dulles brandished thermonuclear bombs and followed a position of strength policy with regard to the socialist countries. . . . That was barefaced atomic blackmail, but it had to be reckoned with at the time because we did not possess sufficient means of retaliation, and if we did, they were not as many and not of the same power as those of our opponents." *Ibid.*, pp. 718–719. A series of other retrospective comments by East German and Soviet leaders are quoted in Willing, "Soviet Foreign Policy." Note finally, for what it is worth, Khrushchev's comment in his memoirs that Stalin "lived in terror of an enemy attack." Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, ed. and trans. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 393.

178. For a couple of interesting examples, see Paul Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Era of Détente," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (January 1976), p. 211; and Henry Kissinger, "A New Era for NATO," *Newsweek*, October 12, 1987, p. 60. Kissinger wrote here that he has "argued for 30 years that the threshold at which nuclear weapons have to be used should be raised much higher." But exactly thirty years earlier, he had published *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, the book that established his reputation, in which he argued for a limited war strategy based on tactical nuclear weapons. These, he wrote, needed to be employed more freely than was possible in a strategy based on massive retaliation. The Eisenhower strategy had locked us into a posture that was much too defensive in nature; strategy instead needed to be oriented toward such "positive goals" as the reunification of Germany and the liberation of Eastern Europe. Needless to say, all this is forgotten today. See Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper/Council on Foreign Relations, 1957).