

THE MYTH OF STRATEGIC SUPERIORITY: U.S. NUCLEAR WEAPONS
AND LIMITED CONFLICTS, 1945-1954

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The nuclear age provided U.S. soldiers and statesmen with unprecedented challenges. The U.S. military had to incorporate a weapon into strategic calculations without knowing whether the use of the weapon would be approved. Broad considerations of policy led President Dwight Eisenhower to formulate a policy that relied on nuclear weapons while fully realizing their destructive potential. Despite the belief that possession of nuclear weapons provided strategic superiority, the U.S. realized that such weapons were of little value. This realization did not stop planners from attempting to find ways to use nuclear weapons in Korea and Indochina.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, the legend of Prometheus, who sought to steal the secret of fire from the gods and who was punished by being forced to spend the rest of his life chained to a rock, has been the symbol of the penalties of presumptuous ambition. It was not understood that the punishment inflicted on Prometheus was an act of compassion; it would have been a much more severe penalty had the gods permitted their fire to be stolen. Our generation has stolen the fire of the gods and it is doomed to live with the horror of its achievement.¹

It was evident from the outset that nuclear weapons were qualitatively different. The evident power that the bomb displayed at the Alamogordo bombing range and more importantly, upon the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, ushered in the nuclear age and compounded postwar tension between the superpowers. The Truman administration faced unprecedented challenges with the new weapon that complicated, rather than solved diplomatic issues. The United States, which had sole possession of the bomb, had to face the problems that the bomb created. The idea that atomic energy could be used exclusively for non-military purposes faded with the rise of East-West tension. In fact, “[t]he bomb itself was intensifying Soviet-American distrust.” Although, according to Truman, the use of the atomic bomb on Japan “saved untold thousands of American and Allied soldiers,” the president continued to view the bomb as a terror weapon—fundamentally different from conventional armaments. This view of atomic weapons combined with a desire for a sound system of international control of atomic energy were typical of a President who did not want to consider the issues surrounding the military use of atomic weapons in the future. This dynamic, in turn, meant that military planners who dealt with incorporating the new weapons into war plans had little to no political guidance on how the

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957) 65.

weapons were to be used. Interestingly, this did not stop the Joint Chiefs of Staff from preparing plans that included and even emphasized atomic weapons.²

The polarized nature of the Cold War meant that war plans were directed at the Soviet Union and its satellites, which possessed a significant manpower advantage. The power of atomic weapons was viewed by the U.S. as a way to protect its interests and allies in Europe, despite being outnumbered. Ironically, Korea served as the next battlefield for the U.S. Suffering major reversals and over thirty thousand dead, the U.S. kept its most powerful weapon on the shelf.

The beginning of the Korean War coincided with an effort to augment the U.S. nuclear capability with larger conventional forces. Many within the Defense establishment viewed larger conventional forces as necessary, but more forces meant more money. Dwight Eisenhower campaigned for the presidency on a promise to fight the high costs inherent in supporting large numbers of troops in places like Korea. Making up for the lack of manpower, once again, would be the deterrent of atomic superiority, which the U.S. still possessed. As with Truman, Eisenhower would not face a general war with the Soviet bloc, but bush wars and limited conflicts in which the use of atomic weapons were untried and controversial. The Eisenhower-Dulles team took credit for ending the Korean War through their use of “atomic diplomacy,” but this claim was questionable.

After Korea, Eisenhower steered the U.S. away from intervention and the use of atomic weapons during the Indochina crisis. This is noteworthy because of Eisenhower’s New Look

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 25; Harry Truman, Special Message to Congress on Atomic Energy, October 13, 1945, Public Papers of Harry S. Truman 1945-1953, <http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/viewpapers.php?pid=165>, accessed February 15, 2012. Also See Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008); Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950* (New York: Garland, 1988); James F. Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Volume I: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1945-1947* (Washington: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996).

policy, and its cornerstone, “massive retaliation,” a doctrine that treated nuclear weapons “as other munitions” and put them in a central role in defense policy. The U.S. atomic weapons stockpile was enlarged and strengthened under both Truman and Eisenhower, but neither president expressed great willingness to use such weapons and it appeared that a taboo surrounding atomic weapons was emerging by the outbreak of the Korean War.³

For the U.S., the first eight years of the nuclear age brought enhanced technology, an increased stockpile, changes in defense policy, and intensified rhetoric involving nuclear weapons. When push came to shove, however, Eisenhower treated nuclear weapons like his predecessor. The Eisenhower administration inherited its basic attitudes vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and nuclear weapons from Truman. Eisenhower’s priorities were the American economy and “way of life,” which influenced both his defense policy, and his nuclear strategy. The Korean War and the Indochina crisis provided dissimilar situations for the U.S. to contemplate escalation in the form of nuclear weapons. However, U.S. policymakers would find that the hypothetical use of nuclear weapons could usher in a host of complications. Truman and Eisenhower both relied on the deterrent power of nuclear weapons, but it was Eisenhower’s New Look that would officially stress deterrence. Eisenhower’s mindset, as well as experience and confidence in foreign affairs, were influential in his fiscal conservatism and boldness in foreign and defense policy. Facing the issues of escalation, intervention, and, in particular, the use of

³ Over the course of Truman’s presidency the nuclear warhead stockpile increased from 6 in 1945 to 800 in 1952. Eisenhower oversaw the stockpile increase from 1,000 in 1953 to 6,874 in 1961. “Table of U.S. Nuclear Warheads,” last modified November 25, 2002, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab9.asp>; Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954, Volume II (Washington: Government Printing Office) 593; For more on the “Emerging Taboo,” See Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization* 53 (Summer 1999) 433-468.

nuclear weapons, Eisenhower took into account risk, reward, and policy implications and steered the U.S. response accordingly.⁴

Indochina came to be associated with Korea and the two were seen as different fronts in the Cold War. Eisenhower's atomic diplomacy and handling of the end of the Korean War is a popular topic for historians. The New Look, massive retaliation, the Dien Bien Phu crisis, and the decision to not to intervene remains relevant to historians. This thesis attempts to tie together the end of the Korean War, the advent of the New Look, and non-intervention in Indochina, while examining the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons in crises abroad. These events took place within roughly the first year and a half of the Eisenhower presidency and the decisions surrounding them speak to the utility of nuclear weapons and defense policy.⁵

⁴ Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); John Lewis Gaddis, Phillip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May, and Jonathan Rosenberg eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jerome Kahan, *Security in the Nuclear Age: Developing U.S. Strategic Arms Policy* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 1975); Douglas Kinnard, *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management: A Study in Defense Politics* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989); Richard M. Saunders, "Military Force in the Foreign Policy of the Eisenhower Presidency," *Political Science Quarterly* 100 (Spring 1985) 97-116.

⁵ Edward Keefer, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War," *Diplomatic History* 10 (July 1986) 267-289; Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War," *International Security* 13 (Winter 1988-89) 50-91; Rosemary Foot, "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict," *International Security* 13 (Winter 1988-89) 92-112; Edward Friedman, "Nuclear Blackmail and the End of the Korean War," *Modern China* 1 (January 1975) 75-91; Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1981); Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New Look Defense Policy, 1953-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Warner Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn Snyder, *Strategy Politics and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962); Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); John Prados, *The Sky Would Fall: Operation Vulture: The U.S. Bombing Mission to Indochina, 1954* (New York: Dial Press, 1983).

CHAPTER 2

U.S. ATOMIC STRATEGY, 1945-1950

Since 1942 the United States government had owned a piece of land in the remote areas of southern New Mexico. Roughly two hundred years earlier Spanish settlers had named the area Jornada del Muerto, the journey of death. After the government's purchase of the land, it had been named the Alamogordo Bombing Range and in 1945 expanded into what was to be known as the Trinity test site. The first atomic bomb would be tested there. Several years' worth of American-led work had come down to this.

In fact, the story behind the unleashing of atomic energy as a weapon began before the United States played any relevant role. Theorizing about splitting the atom had begun in the early 1930's by some of the top scientific minds of the time including Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard, who called for an allied effort to develop an atomic weapon out of fear that Nazi Germany would do so first. Initial British work on the bomb became a joint British-Canadian-U.S. effort (solidified by the Quebec Agreement of 1943) led by figures such as Szilard, Enrico Fermi, and J. Robert Oppenheimer. The focus of the joint project took place at the Manhattan Engineering District in New Mexico and was named the Manhattan Project.

By 1945 the prospects for success looked good. The Trinity test site itself, with its miles of roads and barracks that housed several hundred people, cost roughly \$5 million. On 16 July 1945, all of the money and manpower that had been invested in the Manhattan Project would come to fruition. Just before 5:30 a.m. the first atomic bomb was detonated. Descriptions of the event are fantastic. A scientist who witnessed the blast said, "Suddenly there was a flash of light,

the brightest light that I have ever seen or that I think anyone has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you.”⁶ The atomic age had begun. The question of *if* atomic energy could be unleashed was solved—now arose the questions of how and when.

These two questions were not particularly difficult to solve. Nazi Germany, from whom the initial atomic threat had come, had already surrendered and was not a factor militarily. Only two weeks before Trinity, the battle at Okinawa was officially declared over, ending some of the most savage fighting in the Pacific. While taking Okinawa was important to the U.S. and Japan, it was not decisive. The hardest fighting seemed to be ahead. The planning for Operation Olympic, the plan for the initial invasion of the Japanese home islands, had begun. The few people within the U.S., including President Harry Truman, who were aware of the Manhattan Project and of the success at Trinity, knew that it had the potential to bring the bloody Pacific war to an end. Writing on the advent of atomic weapons, General Dwight Eisenhower commented, “In an instant many of the old concepts of war were swept away. Henceforth, it would seem, the purpose of an aggressor nation would be to stock atom bombs in quantity and to employ them by surprise against the industrial fabric and population centers of its intended victims.”⁷

The tenacity of the Japanese defense to this point, the estimated casualties of an invasion of the home islands, and the desire to limit Soviet expansion and influence in the east all contributed to the decision to use the bomb against Japan on 6 and 9 August 1945.⁸

⁶ Quoted in Gerard DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 61.

⁷ Dwight Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 456.

⁸ Casualty estimates for an invasion of Japan varied in 1945 and have since become controversial. During a news conference in 1947, President Truman cited 250,000 soldiers potentially killed as motivation for dropping the atomic bomb. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), 381.

Announcement of the Japanese surrender came on 15 August with the formal surrender taking place on 2 September.

With the end of World War II there came an endless number of questions as to how the postwar world would be run. The future of atomic energy was also in question. Scientists of the Manhattan Project knew that the theoretical knowledge behind the bomb was well known throughout the world and that other nations could develop atomic weapons in the near future. This was frightening given the increasing tension of U.S. postwar relations with the Soviet Union. Civilian and military leaders also saw the immense danger of atomic weapons in the hands of antagonistic governments.

Vannevar Bush, head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD), a driving force behind the Manhattan Project, wrote to Truman in 1945, “down one path lies a secret arms race on atomic energy; down the other international collaboration and possibly ultimate control. Both paths are thorny, but we live in a new world and have to choose.”⁹ While Truman defended his decision to use atomic weapons against Japan, he also saw the danger in a world where such weapons were commonplace. Before the bomb had ever been dropped on Japan, Secretary of War Henry Stimson said, “While the advances in the field to date had been fostered by the needs of war, it was important to realize that the implications of the project went far beyond the needs of the present war. It must be controlled if possible to make it an assurance of future peace rather than a menace to civilization.”¹⁰ During the immediate postwar years, Truman expressed an interest in the international control of atomic energy. On the day of the Hiroshima bombing, he stated, “Normally...everything about the work with atomic energy

⁹ “September 25, 1945 Memo Subject: Scientific Interchange on Atomic Energy from Vannevar Bush, director of OSRD to Harry S Truman,” president’s secretary’s files: James F. Byrnes file, box 173, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO. (Hereafter cited as HSTL).

¹⁰ Quoted in Craig and Radchenko, 71.

would be made public. But under present circumstances it is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications, pending further examination of methods protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction.”¹¹ Truman would continue to show interest, at least publicly, in international control. However, the U.S. was dealing with a highly sensitive issue in the area of atomic energy. Given the devolving nature of relations with the Soviet Union, Truman was even more wary of sharing information. Truman made an initial gesture of good faith, however, with the release of the Smyth report, which was a basic history of the Allied bomb project. While the report “contained the most important single set of technical disclosures in the history of atomic weapons,” it was also “silent on all sorts of details; it was intended to be a citizen’s introduction to this ‘New World,’ not as an engineering handbook.”¹² U.S. proposals for international control of atomic energy (most notably in the Acheson-Lilienthal and later Baruch Plan) never came to fruition. Whether the United States or the Soviet Union was to blame for the failure of international control is still debated.¹³ Ultimately, American civilian and military leaders whose opinions held the most sway felt that no reasonable option existed other than atomic secrecy.

International control was an idea that would not go away in the postwar years because of the fear of a nuclear war. That fear was not enough to prevent military leaders from planning to use such weapons in the next major conflict. It makes sense that those responsible for military planning attempted to integrate the most powerful weapon the world had yet seen. The power of

¹¹ This statement was drafted before the Potsdam Conference and released on August 6. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. Harry S Truman, 1945 (1961) 199-200.

¹² Bundy, McGeorge, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988) 134.

¹³ Arguments go both ways as to whether the U.S. or the Soviet Union was to blame. See DeGroot, pp. 112-125, Craig & Radchenko, pp. 111-161.

atomic weapons could make up for shortcomings elsewhere. However, formulating a realistic military strategy based on large-scale use of atomic weapons would prove impossible.

Not surprisingly, the applications and implications regarding atomic weapons began to be examined immediately after the Second World War. In 1946, Yale Professor and theorist Bernard Brodie made the now-famous observation: “Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”¹⁴ Despite protests from the Soviets, and some within the U.S. Congress, the U.S. proceeded with atomic tests in January 1946. Codenamed Crossroads, the tests were a success. However, U.S. insistence on conducting the tests calls into question its stated desire for international control.

At any rate, American desire for international control became moot with the passing of the McMahon Act. Officially known as the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, the McMahon Act (named after Senator Brien McMahon) assured civilian control of atomic energy and weapons through the Atomic Energy Commission and prohibited the sharing of atomic information—even among atomic allies Britain and Canada. While this was not welcome news in Britain, the reaction was far worse in the Soviet Union, which accused the U.S. of attempting to bully it with a weapon that it was desperately trying to develop itself. The JCS had its reasons as to why atomic information should not be shared with the British particularly. First, with Russia in mind, they did not want atomic energy installations that close to potential enemy territory. Also, the JCS priority was to enhance the U.S. stockpile, which was not possible if resources had to be shared. Finally, the JCS feared giving Britain sensitive information because of the risk of leaks. The atomic bomb was already contributing to tensions of the early Cold War. While the fear of a

¹⁴ Bernard Brodie (ed.), *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946) 76.

future war that might end civilization existed, the new weapon and all of its power could not be ignored by planners. The challenge of fitting atomic weapons into a broader strategy fell primarily to the Joint Chiefs of Staff—an organization whose existence was not guaranteed in the immediate postwar years. During World War II, the JCS advised Roosevelt and other civilian leadership that they should be “represented in important groups concerned with postwar planning,” and that “Post-war military problems should be studied as a whole rather than as separate problems for the ground naval, and air forces.”¹⁵

Indeed, it was the JCS who would take on this task despite no formal declaration of their responsibilities for the time being. Incorporating the bomb into postwar military strategy was not particularly popular, but it was necessary. Concrete planning was hindered due to the possibility of international control. The placing of atomic weapons in civilian hands through the McMahon Act led to planners not knowing how and when atomic weapons might be authorized for use. A JCS intelligence estimate in 1945 believed that even a demobilized Soviet Army would still possess approximately four million troops. This presented a major problem to U.S. planners who saw the Soviets as a potential threat, while American forces were rapidly leaving Europe. While the American military did not believe that the Soviets desired a conflict, it was believed that a war could begin through Soviet miscalculation. By the end of 1945, there were an estimated ninety-one Soviet divisions in Europe—outnumbering Allied forces by a factor of three. Conventional Soviet strength would be a thorn in the side, as well as a major influence of American military strategy.¹⁶ Despite these concerns, demobilization continued to take place

¹⁵ JCS 570, 570/1, 570/2 quoted in James F. Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1945-1947* (Washington D.C.: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996) 63.

¹⁶ Historian David Alan Rosenberg wrote “From 1945 on, the realization that the United States was unprepared to counter Soviet conventional forces shaped military strategy.” In Rosenberg, “American Atomic Strategy and the Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” *The Journal of American History* 66 (June 1979) 64.

while Soviet actions continued to appear aggressive. A Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC) paper in early 1946 argued that atomic weapons gave the U.S. a strategic advantage but did not justify the dismantling of conventional forces. The bomb was clearly not seen as a decisive weapon, but reliance on it would continue to grow.

The strategic bombing campaigns of World War II culminated in the use of the atomic bomb against Japan and influenced postwar strategy as well. Air power advocate Giulio Douhet had prophesied that bombing an enemy's industrial base and population would be decisive. He wrote, "Such offensive actions can not only cut off an opponent's army and navy from their bases of operations, but can also bomb the interior of the enemy's country so devastatingly that the physical and moral resistance of the people would also collapse."¹⁷ In 1942, air power proponent Alexander De Seversky commented "the most significant single fact about the war now in progress is the emergence of aviation as the paramount and decisive factor in warmaking."¹⁸ Even though it was questionable as to how decisive strategic bombing had actually been during World War II, the atomic bomb confirmed, to some, the supremacy of air power. Bernard Brodie commented "Douhet's ideas can hardly be said to have been vindicated by World War II, because that war proved, among other errors, he had enormously exaggerated the damage and thus the strategic consequences to be expected from dropping a given tonnage of bombs. However, the nuclear weapon came along at the end of the war to rescue him from this error, and now his philosophy is more ascendant than ever."¹⁹

The Army Air Forces, soon to become the independent U.S. Air Force in 1947, promoted the use of a strategic atomic offensive. The lessons of World War II aside, it argued that the

¹⁷ Giulio Douhet, *Command of the Air* in Gerard Chaliand ed., *The Art of War in World History: From Antiquity to the Nuclear Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 896.

¹⁸ Alexander De Seversky, *Victory Through Air Power*, in Chaliand ed., 962.

¹⁹ Brodie, Bernard, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1959) iv-v.

enhanced technology of atomic weapons meant a decisive role for the USAF. One Air Force general commented:

When we consider that 100 atom bombs will release more foot pounds of energy than all the TNT released by all the belligerents of World War II combined...and that the effort could be put down in a single attack, it is evident that the long, drawn-out war is out of date.²⁰

A 1948 article in the *Air University Quarterly Review* argued that the “atomic bomb is real...There need be no doubt about its combat effectiveness.”²¹ Doubts, however, would continue to exist over the effectiveness and utility of the bomb.

The role of the bomb was debated inside the military establishment with the advocates of air power being its strongest proponent. As U.S. war plans would show, “airpower dominated postwar thinking about the conduct of war.”²² The opposite view was taken by the Army, who believed that war had not fundamentally changed. Secretary of the Navy and Defense James Forrestal wrote, “I do not believe that air power alone can win a war any more than an Army or naval power can win a war, and I do not believe in the theory that an atomic offensive will extinguish in a week the will to fight.”²³ For various reasons during this era, Soviet statements about the bomb echoed those of Forrestal. “The public pronouncements of the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons in the period from 1945 to 1949 consistently labeled them as useless and militarily insignificant, incapable of reversing the outcome of any war.”²⁴ Demobilization had made the bomb a tempting weapon to lean on, and military planners had to account for the one weapon that no one else yet possessed. One of the problems of relying on the bomb was its

²⁰ Letter from Lt. Gen. George C. Kenney to Maj. Gen. Robert Harper, quoted in Robert Futrell, *Ideas, Concepts, Doctrine: Basic Thinking in the United States Air Force, 1907-1960* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama: Air University Press, 1989) 239.

²¹ Col. Dale O. Smith, “Operational Concepts for Modern War,” *Air University Quarterly Review* 2, no.2 (Fall 1948) 15-36. Quoted in Futrell, 240.

²² Adrian Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007) 45.

²³ *The Forrestal Diaries*, Walter Millis ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1951) 514.

²⁴ George Quester, *Nuclear Diplomacy: The First Twenty-Five Years* (New York: Dunellen Publishing, 1970) 39.

limited numbers. By the Summer of 1946, the U.S. only possessed nine bombs of the nuclear implosion type, the majority of which yielded around twenty kilotons.²⁵ Effective planning would require far more.

Official planning for war began in 1946 with the Pincher series of emergency war plans drafted in March. Civilian and military leaders understood that the role of the U.S. had changed and that the luxury of sitting out the next major war did not exist. The JCS expressed this by saying “any future conflict between major foreign powers will almost certainly precipitate a third world war, in which we could not hope to escape being involved.”²⁶ The Pincher plans foresaw a war with the Soviet Union and while the use of atomic weapons was a possibility, their use was not a given because of their small numbers. This posed a problem considering the lack of U.S. conventional strength in Western Europe—the area a conflict was likely to begin. This being the case, planners assumed that Western Europe would be overrun.

As Pincher evolved, the bomb took a more prominent role. The concept of striking first with atomic weapons was also considered. “Although there was no consideration on their part of launching a surprise, unprovoked nuclear attack against Russia, [the JCS] did not rule out the possibility of responding to a conventional Russian attack—or even an unspecified Soviet provocation—with the bomb.”²⁷ The JSSC, commenting on the value of surprise with the bomb commented on the need “not only of readiness for immediate defense, but also for striking first if necessary.”²⁸ Early in 1947, the Joint War Planning Committee (JWPC), a group within the JCS, devised a plan which would target the Russian economy while inflicting psychological damage on the population as part of Pincher. This plan called for thirty-four bombs to hit twenty Russian

²⁵ David Alan Rosenberg, “U.S. Nuclear Stockpile, 1945-1950,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38 (May 1982) 26.

²⁶ Quoted in Schnabel, 66.

²⁷ Herken, 223.

²⁸ Quoted in Schnabel, 128.

cities, with seven of them hitting Moscow alone. By the time the U.S would do this, the JWPC assumed that the U.S. would have between one and two hundred bombs. For the next couple of years, the U.S atomic stockpile would fall far short of this number. Historian Gregg Herken observed that “the deliberate mass killing of civilians that Pincher contemplated was another foreboding departure from traditional American military thought. However, this marked perhaps the culmination of an evolutionary trend in modern warfare, and represented therefore a change in degree rather than in kind.”²⁹

In 1946 the McMahon Act solidified civilian authority over atomic energy and atomic weapons, through the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission. The next year saw the passing of the National Security Act of 1947, establishing a unified National Military Establishment (later named the Department of Defense) under a Secretary of Defense. The Act also gave the JCS a sanctioned role in military planning. The JCS still faced the same problems: demobilization and lack of conventional strength, the possibility of a general war with Russia, and how to fit atomic weapons into military strategy. Lack of dependable data on the Soviet Union would frustrate American planners who, at times, had to rely on Tsarist era maps in order to formulate targeting plans.

The passing of the McMahon Act coincided with the declaration of the Truman Doctrine, a commitment of military aid to the non-Communist governments of Turkey and Greece. An expanded American commitment with the goal of halting the expansion of Communism made it even more important for the JCS to formulate war plans with Russia in mind.

In 1947, another sub-group of the JCS, the Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC) submitted war plan CHARIOTEER. This plan proposed to use atomic weapons from bases in the U.S. while forward bases were being prepared. Forward bases were essential for any strategic air

²⁹ Herken, 223.

offensive, atomic or otherwise. A conventional air offensive was not seen as being particularly effective. The JSPC in CHARIOTEER “strongly implied that atomic warfare alone could be decisive in a war against Russia.”³⁰ Essential bases for this plan were Great Britain, Greenland, Iceland, Alaska, Pakistan, Okinawa, and Japan. Because of the conventional inferiority of U.S. and allied forces in Europe, CHARIOTEER, like many of the war plans of its time, assumed that Soviet forces would overrun Western Europe.

Many of the plans drawn up by the various groups within the JCS were not concrete contingency plans (CHARIOTEER included); they were simply formulated as a basis for planning. They do, however provide a look at the strategic challenges faced by the JCS and how they intended to deal with them.

For planning purposes, CHARIOTEER was placed at a lower priority than plan BROILER. BROILER was an emergency plan that called for the early use of atomic weapons with little or no knowledge of the current stockpile. It was assumed that the current number would be adequate to force a surrender or weaken Russia enough for a successful counterattack. An atomic offensive at the beginning of hostilities was the centerpiece of BROILER and it was the result of a definite lack of confidence in any other option. A revised version of BROILER also planned for the use of atomic weapons at the outset of hostilities. Planners feared using conventional forces except to secure the forward bases that were necessary for a strategic air offensive. BROILER, and its successor FROLIC, were plans full of holes. Neither had guidance from civilian leadership which meant that it had been planned with no idea of the ultimate political goals or whether atomic weapons would be authorized for use.

It was becoming apparent in 1947 to the General Advisory Committee (GAC) of the AEC and to the President as well, that the present atomic stockpile was inadequate. President Truman

³⁰ Ross, 61.

was unaware of the size of the atomic stockpile (until April) which was considerably smaller than he thought. Truman would later comment on this era, “the number of bombs was disappointing, and those we had were not assembled.” Also, “in no document in my office, in the AEC, or anywhere in government, could anyone find the exact figure of the number of bombs in the stockpile, or the number of bombs to be produced, or the amount of material scheduled for production”³¹ In February, the JCS made it known to the Secretary of War and Navy that the current number of atomic bombs was “inadequate to meet the security requirements of the United States.”³² As a member of the GAC, Robert Oppenheimer commented on the U.S. stockpile at the beginning of the year: “Our atomic armament was inadequate, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the tempo of process throughout was dangerously slow.”³³ Realizing the problem, the JCS in late 1947, informed the AEC of the need for expanded production leading to four hundred atomic bombs by 1953. B-29’s capable of carrying atomic weapons were also lacking. At the beginning of 1946, the U.S. only possessed twenty-nine atomic-capable B-29’s, the production of which continued to be slow.³⁴ Up to this point, all the bombs in the American stockpile were 10,000 pound implosion models of the “fat man” variety. The B-29’s responsible for delivering the bombs would not be able to do so in a quick manner. The bombs themselves were assembled by a thirty-nine-man team and it took them over two days. The loading process was also cumbersome. “Because the bombs were so large and heavy, they could only be loaded on their bombers by installing a special hoist in a twelve foot by fourteen foot by eight foot deep pit, trundling the bomb into the pit, rolling

³¹ *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: 1946-1952, Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1996) 296, 302.

³² William D. Leahy to the Secretaries of war and navy, Feb. 26, 1947. Quoted in Rosenberg, *Hydrogen Bomb Decision*, 66.

³³ General Advisory Committee to the U.S. AEC, Dec. 31, 1947. HSTL, Subject File, 1940-1953, National Security Council-Atomic File. “Atomic Energy Advisory Committee” folder. Box 173.

³⁴ Rosenberg, “Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” 65.

aircraft over it, and then hoisting the weapon into the specially modified bomb bay.”³⁵ Adding to all this was a munitions board report at the beginning of 1948 which stated that plans BROILER, FROLIC, and CHARIOTEER required resources that did not exist.

While the issues of an inadequate stockpile and delivery capability were being addressed, planning for war continued. War plan BUSHWACKER came out in 1948 and planned for a war four years in the future. The plan’s estimate of Soviet troop strength was frightening. It was estimated that the Soviets would have a hundred and ten divisions at the outbreak of war and five hundred divisions after six months of mobilization. These forces would be complemented by 20,000 combat aircraft and 1,600 long-range bombers. These factors led planners to believe there was a possibility that Britain, America’s closest ally, could be overrun—rendering it useless as a base for a counter-offensive. The goal, therefore, was to defend strategic bases during the initial phase of the war until allied forces could go on the offensive. The offensive would consist of an atomic offensive, complemented by biological and conventional weapons. This would be carried out by twenty-eight bomber groups that would target urban centers and Soviet offensive capabilities. While revisions of BUSHWACKER took place, the atomic offensive remained.

In 1948, British, Canadian, and American officials met to discuss earlier war plans. The meeting produced a joint plan entitled HALFMOON, which was approved by the JCS in May 1948. HALFMOON was a loose agreement between the allies that resembled earlier American plans in that it wrote off Western Europe and assumed that civilian approval of atomic weapons would be given. No specific targets were given but an atomic and conventional air offensive would be launched from England, the Cairo-Suez area, and Okinawa using approximately fifty

³⁵ Rosenberg, David Alan, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960,” *International Security* 7 (Spring 1983) 14-15.

bombs on twenty cities. HALFMOON, renamed FLEETWOOD, entertained the possibility of Soviet possession of the bomb. Having assumed that the U.S. would use atomic weapons, the same was assumed of the Soviet Union if, in fact, they had such weapons. American planners did not believe that to be a strong possibility. The updated FLEETWOOD called for a U.S. “air-atomic offensive against vital elements of the Soviet war-making capacity, and to regain Middle East oil for use during later phases of the war.”³⁶

It was not only the JCS that considered the possibility of an atomic offensive against the Russian homeland. The National Security Council also tried to formulate broad concepts that would guide the use of atomic weapons. They did realize that if a general war with the Soviet Union broke out, there would be little chance of limiting the methods of violence. The NSC concluded “if war itself cannot be prevented, it appears futile to hope or suggest that the imposition of limitations on the use of certain military weapons can prevent their use in war.”³⁷ Of course, the NSC did not wish to, nor could they determine specific instances in which the atomic arsenal would be used. The council commented that the “United States has nothing presently to gain, commensurable with the risk of raising the question, in either a well-defined or an equivocal decision that atomic weapons would be used in the event of war.”³⁸

It was clear that the NSC did not want to commit to using atomic weapons but realized that the chances of limiting a general war against Russia were slim to none. The JCS had to take atomic weapons into account when planning for war. The situation that the JCS had to deal with in respect to Russia, made them theoretically rely on atomic weapons because of the lack of viable alternatives. This was a frightening prospect, because although it was not likely that the

³⁶ Condit, Kenneth, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1947-1949* (Washington D.C.:Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996) 157.

³⁷ NSC-30, “United States Policy on Atomic Warfare,” *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Hereafter cited as *FRUS*): 1948, Vol. I (Washington, 1976) 626.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Soviet Union desired war, war was possible and there could be numerous events that could lead to it. The previous HALFMOON/FLEETWOOD war plans were replaced by plan TROJAN in January 1949. Trojan served as an update to the previous plans with one considerable addition—an annex with guidelines for an atomic offensive. This offensive would be expanded and intended to hit seventy Soviet cities with one hundred thirty-three bombs. Among the targets would be the petroleum and war industries. This was, no doubt, an attempt to cripple or hinder the conventional capacity of the Soviets. The atomic offensive would be carried out by B-29 and B-50 medium bombers that would fly out of the UK, the Cairo-Suez area, and Okinawa. Additional B-36's would fly out of the U.S. The bomber groups flying out of Cairo-Suez and the U.S. would not take part in the attack initially, but would join the offensive within a year of the outbreak of hostilities. This plan placed emphasis on atomic-air offensive carried out by the Air Force. Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg, however, did not place much confidence in TROJAN and felt it was too ambitious. Vandenberg argued that “it would be inadvisable to prepare to implement a concept that was beyond U.S. and Allied capabilities.” Also, the “1950 budget would force a reduction in forces and render many operations in Trojan unfeasible.”³⁹ Through TROJAN, American military strategy had placed heavy emphasis on an atomic offensive in the event of war. Commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC), Curtis LeMay was influential in planning the atomic offensive in TROJAN. LeMay wanted SAC to “increase its capability to such an extent that it would be possible to deliver the entire stockpile of bombs, if made available.”⁴⁰ Even the role of conventional forces was unrealistic given continued demobilization. Demobilization continued to hinder planning. A 1948 estimate had the Soviet Army at around 2.5 million men which, according to the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) was

³⁹ Ross, 97.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Rosenberg, “Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” 70.

adequate to launch offensives in Europe, the Middle East, China, and Korea simultaneously, all while providing logistical support. For the U.S., the bomb continued to be the only strategic advantage. Planners attempted to address the main issue that TROJAN posed—that of means and ends.

The JCS concluded that “their current strategy could not be implemented with the forces that could be generated under the stringent spending ceilings ordered by the President.”⁴¹ Formulating a plan that would incorporate available force levels would prove difficult. Budget cuts and reliance on atomic weapons in the event of war went hand-in-hand, but this pattern attracted critics. It did not help that the emphasis on the Air Force, and SAC in particular, cut into the budgets and influence of the other branches. Rear Admiral Daniel V. Gallery expressed his and the navy’s doubts about the direction of U.S. strategy. He argued:

For a “civilized society” like the United States, the broad purpose of a war cannot be simply destruction and annihilation of the enemy... They seem to feel that if we ever have another war, the only objective will be “not to lose it” and so they have adopted the Douhet concept of flattening the enemy’s cities from the air... If our only objective in war is to avoid military defeat while the shooting is going on, then perhaps a Douhet war is the easiest way to accomplish the objective... Some authorities estimate that the damage done by strategic bombing of Germany was equivalent to 500 Atomic Bombs. But Germany did not surrender until her armies were defeated... In addition, leveling large cities has a tendency to alienate the affections of the inhabitants and does not create an atmosphere of international goodwill after the war... A strategy based on the sole object of preventing defeat in war is an unworthy one for a country of our strength. It is a strategy of desperation and weakness. I believe we should abandon the idea of destroying enemy cities one after another until he gives up and find some better way of gaining our objective.⁴²

Full-scale mobilization was never a politically feasible way to solve American reliance on atomic striking capability. Budget restrictions hamstrung the military whose force levels dropped roughly by 10.5 million only two years after the end of the Pacific war. In June 1947

⁴¹ Condit, 159.

⁴² Daniel V. Gallery to the deputy chief of naval operations, Jan. 17, 1949. Quoted in Rosenberg, “Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” 70.

the number of the American Armed Forces totaled just over 1.5 million troops.⁴³ Less than a year later a JCS estimate had Soviet ground troops alone exceeding 1.5 million. U.S. leaders knew that a Russian atomic bomb project existed, but when it would come to fruition was debated. Given this situation, the U.S. decided to expand its atomic stockpile. In April 1948, the JCS requested that the AEC have the stockpile increased to 150 bombs. In May, the Air Force Chief of Staff requested that enough bombs be produced in order to strike 220 targets. The consensus was that atomic expansion was needed, but there were those such as Secretary Forrestal who continued to have reservations on an air-atomic strategy. In October 1948, Forrestal ordered a study to be completed that would analyze the ability of the Air Force to “deliver the bombs to their assigned targets and an estimate of what the impact would be if all the bombs were delivered.”⁴⁴ The study, however, hit multiple snags and was not available for almost two years. The JCS assigned a second study to be done by a committee consisting of two officers from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, headed by Air Force Lieutenant General Hubert Harmon. The Harmon committee completed a unanimous report on the possible effects of an atomic offensive against Russia. The committee took into account “target selection procedures and intelligence; atomic weapons effects data; the nature of Soviet cities, industry and armed forces; and possible psychological effects of an air offensive on the Soviet economy, citizenry, and military...”⁴⁵ The report’s conclusions cast doubts on the idea of an atomic offensive which intended to hit seventy Soviet cities. The report said that the attack would not “per se, bring about capitulation, destroy the roots of Communism, or critically weaken the power of Soviet leadership to dominate the people.” It could have the opposite effect because “for the majority of the people, atomic bombing would validate Soviet propaganda against foreign powers,

⁴³ Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Army, 1947 and Navy, 1946, 1947. Quoted in Schnabel, 109.

⁴⁴ Rosenberg, “Hydrogen Bomb Decision,” 72.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

stimulate resentment against the United States, unify the people, and increase their will to fight.” Unfortunately, “the capability of Soviet armed forces to advance rapidly into selected areas of Western Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East would not be seriously impaired.”⁴⁶ The strategic weapon appeared to have limited operational effectiveness. Other conclusions of the report were also discouraging. It estimated that even a massive offensive would reduce Soviet industrial capacity thirty to forty percent and that the reduction was not necessarily permanent. The atomic attacks could kill 2.7 million people and cause four million additional casualties. Conducting such an offensive would also open up the conflict to unrestricted violence from the Soviets. At this point it was not believed that the U.S. monopoly of the bomb would be broken in the near future. Despite the negative findings of the Harmon report, it concluded that an atomic offensive was the best option given that it could deliver the maximum amount of bombs quickly. It would weaken resistance and therefore minimize casualties in the following conventional U.S. offensive. Also, the budget ceiling of the armed forces continued to be cut, basically ruling out a viable alternative.

On March 17, 1948, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Brussels, creating the Western European Union. This changed the strategic landscape for the U.S. The agreement made collective security a feasible option which the U.S. encouraged. The Brussels Pact quickly led to the NATO alliance, and an official U.S. commitment. Given this new strategic situation, special advisor to the Secretary of Defense Dwight Eisenhower called for a revised strategy that would defend Western Europe at the Rhine, or at least hold a substantial bridgehead in Europe.

The Brussels was signed just as U.S.-Soviet tensions were on the rise over the Berlin blockade and airlift. It seemed war could break out at any moment. This brought up the

⁴⁶ Ibid. These are pieces of the report quoted by Rosenberg.

question of custody of atomic weapons. With war looming around the corner, Secretary of Defense Forrestal lobbied President Truman to transfer custody of atomic weapon into the hands of the military. On 21 July, Forrestal met with Truman and members of the AEC to formally request transfer of atomic weapons over to the National Military Establishment. Forrestal's "chief reasons being that the user of the bomb, who would ultimately be responsible for its delivery, should have custody of it with the accompanying advantages and familiarity, etc., which this would bring, and concentration of authority—unified command." Truman responded that the bomb was his responsibility and that he intended to keep it. At lunch a week later, Forrestal addressed the bomb in regards to Berlin and the larger strategic situation. He commented "I said in view of the tensions in the European situation that I felt it was difficult for me to carry out my responsibilities without resolution of the question whether or not we are to use the A-bomb in war. I observed also that it seemed to me that the Secretary of State had a deep interest in this, because, if there were any questions as to the use of this weapon, he was automatically denied one of the most potent cards in his pack in negotiation."⁴⁷ Truman stood firm on his previous decision, although B-29's were sent to Britain as a show of strength. The bombers were not atomic capable and it seems the Soviets were meant to draw their own conclusion. R. Gordon Arneson, Special Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Atomic Energy Affairs, said "by sending the B-29's, we hoped to leave the impression that...they were armed with nuclear weapons, and that we were prepared to use them...[it was] psychological warfare."⁴⁸ On 18 July, the first two B-29 squadrons arrived in Britain, taking place mainly at the request of the British themselves and additionally "underlined the inadequacy of [British]

⁴⁷ Millis, *The Forrestal Diaries*, 460-463.

⁴⁸ WGBH Interview with Arneson, quoted in Robert Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 44.

Bomber Command's front line forces."⁴⁹ In the years leading up to the Berlin airlift, unofficial Anglo-American agreements were reached regarding the use of British air bases for a U.S. atomic offensive in the event of war with the Soviet Union. Although the B-29's sent in 1948 were not atomic-capable, the move demonstrated the cooperative nature of the Anglo-American relationship.

The emphasis put on atomic weapons would remain, but the problem of means and ends in military planning would be addressed in emergency war plan OFFTACKLE, which kept in mind the U.S. commitment to NATO. Political guidance for OFFTACKLE was found in NSC 20/4, a document released while the Berlin airlift was in full swing. NSC 20/4 made the point that there "is the possibility that the USSR will be tempted to take armed action under a miscalculation of the determination and willingness of the United States to resort to force in order to prevent the development of a threat intolerable to U.S. security."⁵⁰ A war arising from miscalculation had been discussed before. In OFFTACKLE, U.S. ground forces were not expected to have full combat equipment and the air force would expect an initial shortage of aviation fuel. During the first phase of the war, the U.S. would rely on a strategic air offensive against Russia using conventional and atomic bombs. This offensive would attempt to wipe out important elements of Soviet war-making capacity—not simply to hinder them. The targeting plan aimed at the "disruption of Soviet industry; elimination of the political and administrative controls of the Soviet government over its people; undermining the will of the Soviet government and people to continue the war; and disarming of the Soviet armed forces." Atomic and conventional bombing would be primarily responsible for this by "inflicting critical damage

⁴⁹ Steven Twigge and Len Scott, *Planning Armageddon: Britain, the United States and the Command of Western Nuclear Forces, 1945-1964* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000) 31.

⁵⁰ NSC 20/4, "Note by the Executive Secretary on U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security." *FRUS 1948, Vol. I*, 666.

on petroleum refineries, electric power plants, submarine construction facilities, high octane aviation gasoline production facilities, and other war supporting industries.”⁵¹ The air offensive would also target Soviet ground forces attempting to advance through Western Europe. Bombing would take place within the first three months of the outbreak of war. The Soviet industries would be hit by 292 atomic bombs and 17,610 tons of conventional weapons in this three month period, followed by 246,900 tons of conventional bombs by the end of the second year of war. Seventy-two of the atomic bombs would be held in reserve for a second attack. These operations predicted a major stoppage of the Soviet war-making industry as well as “the creation of chaos and possible panic among the labor force.”⁵² The U.S. now possessed 120 atomic-capable planes, thirty of which could be refueled mid-flight. The aerial offensive would be launched from the U.S., UK, and Okinawa. OFFTACKLE provided for the frightening prospect that the Soviets could possess the bomb by the time war began, but their delivery capabilities were estimated to be minimal. Atomic facilities within the U.S. were suspected to be prime targets of Communist subversion which led to planning for two infantry regiments to serve as domestic atomic security. OFFTACKLE aimed at the preservation of Western Europe, contemplating a re-invasion of the continent if necessary. The required number of atomic bombs would be in the projected stockpile by the time the plan would be theoretically executed. Therefore, the planners of OFFTACKLE had certain U.S. limitations in mind and the plan was in line with current policy, but was still questionable militarily. Doubts arose as to whether an atomic offensive would be decisive. If this were the case, even an atomic war could be drawn out. The lack of conventional forces, NATO included, was a major problem.

⁵¹ Condit, 161.

⁵² Ibid.

The pattern of U.S. war plans had been one of constant modification. The challenge was to formulate a feasible plan, while taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. which led to a reliance on its one strength—atomic weapons. In 1949, a committee consisting of an officer from the Army, Air Force, and Navy examined a war plan with a target date of 1957. The planners were to take into account broad strategy and an estimate of men and materiel requirements. This planning came to be called DROPSHOT. Taking into account enhanced Soviet capabilities, DROPSHOT assumed that atomic weapons would be used by both sides. This would obviously nullify, at least partially, the strategic advantage that the U.S. had possessed to this point. The JCS estimated that within one year of the war's outbreak, Soviet troop strength could reach 500 divisions. Initial phases of the war would, by necessity, be defensive. Holding a line in Western Europe was still a strategic goal; it was felt that the Rhine-Alps-Piave line would be most realistic. The defensive phase would be followed by an air force-led atomic and conventional offensive. Soviet atomic capability led to an expanded target list from previous plans. Despite relative atomic parity, DROPSHOT listed atomic weapons as a U.S. advantage. According to the plan, the "most powerful immediately available weapon the Allies will possess in 1957 which can be applied against the USSR will be the A-bomb. A strategic air offensive against the USSR utilizing the A-bomb supplemented with conventional bombs should be instituted immediately after the outbreak of hostilities." The plan was clear regarding the areas that the offensive should strike. "This offensive—directed against facilities for production of weapons of mass destruction, key government and control facilities, major industrial areas, and POL [petroleum, oil, lubricant] facilities—would accomplish great disruption of the Soviet war potential." Atomic bomb production facilities and bases from which to launch an atomic offensive was another priority. DROPSHOT'S aerial offensive planned to

contribute operationally as well. “Attacks should also begin immediately against Soviet and satellite LOC’s, supply bases, and troop concentrations.”⁵³ Twelve bomber groups would conduct the attack from the continental U.S., Alaska, Okinawa, England, and the Cairo-Suez area. Further study determined that the atomic offensive would not be decisive and that DROPSHOT would simply serve as a study to determine the cost of war. Trying to formulate a detailed plan with a reliance on atomic weapons was proving futile.

The various U.S. war plans had already expressed the need for forward bases—Britain being the chief among them. Anglo-American cooperation had been demonstrated with the joint discussion of the BROILER/FROLIC plans. Amicable relations in the areas of defense and atomic weapons were necessary for both sides. Fortunately, the Anglo-American atomic relationship had its strong roots in the cooperation experienced in the Second World War. This spread to the postwar years despite the passing of the McMahon Act. Anglo-American relations were based upon the conviction that both nations needed each other. Despite the McMahon restrictions, there were types of information that could be passed along, and the British welcomed it because of their desire for their own atomic weapons. The U.S. was able, formally and informally, to come to agreements with the British that would grant the Americans facilities from which to launch an atomic offensive. The British welcomed this because of their lack of atomic weapons and because their air forces were qualitatively and quantitatively inadequate. The British would provide bases and the Americans would provide protection and limited information. The “special relationship,” while not perfect, extended into the area of atomic weapons and energy.

⁵³ Anthony Cave Brown ed., *Dropshot: The United States Plan for War with the Soviet Union in 1957* (New York: Dial Press, 1978) 159.

In August 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. It sent shockwaves throughout the U.S. It was assumed that Russia would develop a bomb, but only a few predicted that it could be as early as 1949. In 1945, Leo Szilard said “I would say that it is more likely than not that another country will have [the bomb] in six years. In two-and-one-half it is possible; it might not be probable.”⁵⁴ In the same year, a group of Manhattan District scientists named the Franck Committee, concluded “if no efficient international agreement is achieved, the race for nuclear armaments will be on in earnest not later than the morning after our first demonstration of the existence of nuclear weapons. After this, it might take other nations three or four years to overcome our present head start...”⁵⁵ Responding to the end of the American monopoly, Bernard Brodie said, “armaments races are always deplorable, and one of atomic arms would be much more so.”⁵⁶

The U.S. had to face some hard truths. Its monopoly on the atomic bomb no longer existed. Since the end of World War II, the atomic bomb had been America’s strategic advantage, and the object upon which military planners had placed primary reliance. The Soviet bomb coincided with growing unease in the U.S. over said reliance and a desire to enhance America’s conventional forces. Since 1947, efforts had been made to enhance its atomic stockpile as well. Prior to the Soviet bomb test, the JCS had submitted a proposal to the AEC which “set forth requirements in terms of fissionable material to allow for technical improvements in weapons design.”⁵⁷ Roughly two months before the discovery of the Soviet bomb, Truman ordered a study to determine whether the expansion of fissionable material was needed. The study was conducted by Secretary of Defense, State, and Chairman of the AEC.

⁵⁴ Taken from an excerpt from hearings before the House Committee on Military Affairs, October 18, 1945. Quoted in “Did the Soviet Bomb Come Sooner than Expected?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Vol. 5 (Oct. 1949) 262.

⁵⁵ Excerpt from the Franck Committee Report. Ibid.

⁵⁶ Bernard Brodie, “What is the Outlook Now?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 5 (October 1949) 268.

⁵⁷ Condit, 283.

This committee, for reasons of national security, determined that accelerated atomic production should be pursued but as a continuation of present policy, not as a response to the Soviet bomb. The JCS agreed with the proposed increase in atomic weapons in order to maintain a feasible deterrent, as well as “increased flexibility in use of atomic weapons resulting from a plentiful supply.”⁵⁸

The years 1948-1949 saw the U.S. attempting to enhance its atomic stockpile, as well as methods of delivery. By 1950, SAC would possess 264 aircraft capable of carrying atomic weapons and twenty-two assembly teams. The release of atomic weapons by the AEC, at the order of the President, was still not guaranteed, and “to a military mind seemed dangerously cumbersome.”⁵⁹

Despite the improvement in the U.S. atomic stockpile, the Soviet bomb led U.S. policymakers to attempt to regain the strategic advantage. The recent efforts to enhance the atomic stockpile were not believed to be enough. This implied the creation of a bigger bomb that had been envisioned as early as 1942. President Truman desired to be ahead in the field of atomic energy if international control could not be achieved. By the summer of 1949, Truman admitted that he did not believe international control to be possible in the near future.⁶⁰ The President wrote “I believed that anything that would assure us the lead in the field of atomic energy development for defense had to be tried out...”⁶¹ Even though military planners had not legitimately integrated atomic weapons into realistic war plans, the development of the hydrogen bomb commenced.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 286.

⁵⁹ Ken Young, “US ‘Atomic Capability’ and the British Forward Bases in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 1 (January 2007) 123.

⁶⁰ Rosenberg, “*Hydrogen Bomb Decision*,” 76.

⁶¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 308.

The successful Soviet test, therefore, set in motion the chain of events that would lead to the development of the hydrogen bomb—nicknamed the “super.” It also led to the drafting of NSC-68 which was an appeal to increase the size of U.S. conventional forces and further address the issue of means and ends within U.S. strategy. The outbreak of the Korean War led to the acceptance of the principles of NSC-68.

The period 1945-1950 saw U.S. military planners, more specifically the JCS, trying to come to grips with two situations. One situation was the reality of postwar demobilization in order to protect the American economy, while the other was a growing concern with an aggressive Soviet Union that threatened Western Europe. As the U.S. became more committed to the defense of Western Europe, it became even more apparent that the American military did not have the conventional means to neutralize Soviet power. The flawed assumption that was made during this period was that superior technology, in the form of atomic weapons, could make up for this shortcoming. The various war plans that were prepared stressed atomic weapons but were flawed in their conception. While they were extremely powerful, atomic weapons had no usefulness operationally on the battlefield or strategically against enemy cities. War planners had to fit a weapon of limited usefulness into a military strategy that often lacked direct political guidance. Strategy can be defined as “the proper relationship of means to ends in order to achieve a political objective.”⁶² This demonstrates that U.S. military strategy, with atomic weapons theoretically bridging the gap between a flawed relationship of means and ends, was inherently flawed. It would take the outbreak of the Korean War and the adoption of NSC-68 to attempt to correct this situation.

⁶² This specific definition is taken from Ingo Trauschweizer, *The Cold War U.S. Army: Building Deterrence for Limited War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008) 4.

CHAPTER 3

EISENHOWER AND THE BOMB IN KOREA

The last two years of the Korean War are typically described as a stalemate. The conflict had lost the movement which characterized its first year. Despite any substantial progress on either side the war continued. Not only did each side wish to negotiate from a position of strength, but also there were issues such as POW repatriation that proved to be a thorn in the side of the negotiators. The coming of the Eisenhower presidency in 1953 brought a new outlook on the war. At times Eisenhower's rhetoric regarding nuclear weapons was meant to remove their taboo and to convey the idea that they were simply a bigger bomb to be used when needed.

With this attitude, Eisenhower attempted to use what has been called “atomic diplomacy” or “nuclear blackmail” in order to bring the Korean War to an end. An armistice was signed in July 1953, roughly six months after the new president had taken office. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would both later claim that nuclear coercion had played a decisive role in bringing the war to a conclusion. They argued that they had given the Communists the choice of either ending the war or facing an expanded conflict along with the probable use of atomic weapons. When asked by his personal assistant, Sherman Adams, what had brought about peace in Korea, the President answered “danger of an atomic war.” He then added “We told them we could not hold it to a limited war any longer if the Communists welched on a treaty of truce. They didn't want a full-scale war or an atomic attack. That kept them under some control.”⁶³ Eisenhower's Vice-President Richard Nixon would later say “Eisenhower let the word go out—let the word go out diplomatically—to the Chinese and North

⁶³ Sherman Adams, *Firsthand Report: The Story of the Eisenhower Administration*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, Inc., 1961) 49.

[Koreans] that he would not tolerate this continual ground war of attrition. And within a matter of months, they negotiated.”⁶⁴ After the armistice, Dulles claimed “the fighting was stopped on honorable terms because the aggressor was faced with the possibility that the fighting might, to his own great peril, soon spread beyond the limits and methods which he had selected.”⁶⁵ Some scholars have come to question these assertions. Edward Friedman cites the Communist publication *People’s China* in arguing that China’s behavior was not altered by the possibility of an expanded war under Eisenhower. Friedman states that Mao Tse-tung, in the event of an expanded war, expressed his “commitment to continue fighting against an America ‘making wild attempts to extend the aggressive war in Korea’.”⁶⁶ There is also the possibility that claims of decisive atomic diplomacy were after-the-fact justification for the New Look defense policy.⁶⁷ While the effectiveness of aggressive diplomacy might have been overstated, there remains the question of “was the Eisenhower Administration ready and willing to use nuclear weapons?” The use of such weapons would prove difficult to justify and came with a long list of potential complications as Eisenhower would discover.

By the time Eisenhower took office in January 1953, U.S. and U.N. forces had been fighting Communist forces inconclusively for over two years. There was domestic pressure to end the war either through a negotiated peace or through a military victory. Although the former seemed more realistic, Eisenhower gave the impression that the latter was a viable option. He spoke of “liberation” during his campaign, not “containment,” which was too defensive-minded

⁶⁴ Tape-Recorded conversation at a secret caucus of southern Republican national convention delegates in Miami. August 6, 1968. As quoted in Edward Friedman, “Nuclear Blackmail and the End of the Korean War,” *Modern China* 1, 1 (1975) 76.

⁶⁵ John Foster Dulles, “The Evolution of Foreign Policy,” Department of State Bulletin 30 (25 January 1954): 107-110, as quoted in Samuel F. Wells, Jr., “The Origins of Massive Retaliation,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 96 (1) 1981, 34.

⁶⁶ Friedman, 83. Mao is quoted in the 1 March 1953 issue of *People’s China* pp. 1.

⁶⁷ The New Look defense policy under Eisenhower would place new emphasis on the deterrent power and economic efficiency of nuclear weapons over conventional weapons and manpower. See Chapter 3.

and reactionary. He wrote “we could not stand forever on a static front and continue to accept casualties without any visible results. Small attacks on small hills would not end this war.”⁶⁸ In essence, Eisenhower promoted a departure from the policies of Truman. Whether or not this would alter the approach of the U.S. military in the context of Korea was yet to be seen. Commander of U.N. forces from May 1952 until the end of the war General Mark W. Clark expressed frustration with limited war and Communist negotiators. He claimed that “winning a satisfactory peace... is more difficult than winning a war.”⁶⁹ Clark summed up the situation that Eisenhower inherited by saying, “we either had to get an armistice, win the war or get out of Korea.”⁷⁰

The idea of the use of atomic weapons was not unique to the Eisenhower administration. Since the beginning of the war, the Truman administration had considered their use in various situations. The ebb and flow of battlefield action, during the Truman years, created a different set of circumstances in which to consider the use of atomic weapons. Because of nuclear superiority over the Soviets that would remain for the duration of the war, there developed the idea that such superiority should be exploitable.

Early setbacks suffered by U.N. forces at the hands of the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) brought about the possibility of U.N. forces being driven from the peninsula. It was in this setting that Truman and his military advisors began to consider the use of nuclear weapons. In June 1950, Eisenhower, while visiting several Army Staff members, suggested that atomic weapons could be used “if suitable targets could be found.”⁷¹ In July 1950 many staff officers in the Pentagon predicted a public and congressional outcry to use nuclear weapons if the military

⁶⁸ Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953-1956*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963) 24.

⁶⁹ Mark W. Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954) 257.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷¹ Conrad Crane, “To Avert Impending Disaster: American Military Plans to Use Atomic Weapons During the Korean War.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, 2 (2000) 73.

situation became desperate. This echoed an earlier prediction made by Dulles who claimed that the American public would desire the use of nuclear weapons if the military situation called for it. Also during July the Army and Air Force conducted a study of the possible use of nuclear weapons in Korea. One conclusion of the study was that there were no good targets in Korea itself, primarily because most of the supplies aiding the NKPA were coming into the country from outside. Bombing tactical targets was also seen as ineffective, while at the same time destroying sections of South Korean territory. This act could put America in the “untenable position of a butcher discarding his morals and killing his friends in order to achieve his ends.”⁷²

During initial Communist success in the summer of 1950, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not act on Chairman Omar Bradley’s suggestion that atomic weapons should be put in the hands of Douglas MacArthur, Commander of U.N. forces. The JCS argued that such action could hurt European alliances and if used, atomic weapons would not be decisive. During the same time and with the British government’s approval, President Truman had nuclear-configured B-29’s, minus the nuclear cores, sent to Britain. Several weeks later, nuclear-configured B-29’s were transferred to the Far East Air Force and sent to Guam while early debates took place over the usefulness of tactical atomic weapons in Korea. “One Pentagon staff study argued that the general deterrent value of atomic weapons unused far exceeded the benefits that might flow from their employment with indeterminate results on the remote Korean peninsula.”⁷³ The Policy Planning Staff at the State Department argued that atomic weapons should be used only if China and Russia both intervened and could achieve a decisive military victory. Emergency use was not out of the question. The stabilization around the Pusan perimeter and the subsequent U.N. counter-offensive and Inchon landing did away with any serious thought of using atomic

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Roger Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War.” *International Security* 13, 3 (1988-89) 60.

weapons for the time being and the nuclear-configured B-29's returned to the U.S. But it would be later that same year that the use of atomic weapons would be considered once again.

U.N. success was followed by a large-scale retreat when Communist Chinese forces intervened in November 1950. Once again, being driven from the peninsula was a possibility. MacArthur believed that atomic weapons could be employed to create a radioactive barrier cutting off North Korea from its supply routes. The airburst bombs available were considered unsuitable for this purpose. Soon-to-be-Commander of the Eighth Army, Matthew Ridgway, commented that Chinese intervention provided "much justification" for the use of atomic weapons.⁷⁴ The fact remained, however, that there was no place for such a weapon in Korea. This did not change. Prior to the initial Chinese offensives and fearing such an eventuality, State Department policy planners looked at the use of atomic weapons and concluded that the use of atomic weapons would not produce favorable results. "They argued with cool logic that the probable costs of doing so—measured in terms of shattered UN unity, decreased respect in Asia, and possible war with China—far outweighed any possible military gains."⁷⁵

UN forces were able to stabilize the front once more thanks, in part, to the leadership and presence of Ridgway. The battlefield situation was not as serious as it had been. The desire to up the ante with atomic weapons diminished considerably. The spring of 1951 presented new challenges to the Truman administration. In April, Truman was warned of a major buildup in Chinese forces accompanied by a concentration of Soviet submarines at Vladivostok with troop movement on southern Sakhalin. The worse-case scenario was a massive Chinese offensive along with Soviet intervention and an attempt to cut off U.S. reinforcements coming from Japan, or even taking Japan itself. In response to this threat, Truman decided to send nuclear-

⁷⁴ Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967) 237.

⁷⁵ Dingman, 67.

configured B-29's along with complete atomic weapons to the Pacific. "Washington also sent General Ridgway, MacArthur's successor, a directive that gave him qualified authority to launch atomic strikes in retaliation for a major air attack originating from beyond the Korean peninsula."⁷⁶ There would be no Soviet intervention and the military situation would not reach crisis proportions.

With another crisis averted and stalemate being the nature of the war on the ground, both sides began negotiations in July 1951 as the fighting continued. Initially, there was very little to show for either the continued fighting or the negotiations. Dwight Eisenhower campaigned as the Republican candidate for the Presidency with foreign policy, Korea in particular, as his main focus. Before his inauguration, Eisenhower fulfilled his campaign promise of going to Korea in an attempt to size up the main foreign policy issue that faced his new administration. Earlier comments made by Eisenhower implied that he was open to the idea of expanding the war with atomic weapons. Dulles had echoed this sentiment. Eisenhower communicated early on that expansion of the war was not something he took lightly, although he became convinced that the policies of Truman, which had produced a costly stalemate, could not continue. Commander Mark Clark realized that with a new president could come new initiatives to win the war. Clark had prepared a plan for escalation named O-Plan 8-52 which consisted of a drive to the "waist" of Korea, large-scale amphibious and airborne assaults, and air and naval attacks on China. To succeed, O-Plan 8-52 would require extra U.S.-U.N. divisions and additional divisions from South Korea and Nationalist China, but most importantly it suggested the use of atomic weapons. During his trip to Korea, however, Eisenhower did not meet with Clark to discuss plans for escalation. Clark's plan seemed far-fetched at the time and in 1952 Secretary of the Army, Frank

⁷⁶ Ibid, 76.

Pace, claimed that “such a plan prior to 1954 is simply out of the question.”⁷⁷ On his trip home, Eisenhower for the first time mentioned his consideration of the use of atomic weapons. Prior to inauguration, Eisenhower also consulted with former commander of U.N. forces, General Douglas MacArthur. In this conversation MacArthur suggested the use of atomic bombs along with amphibious landings in North Korea, and bombing Chinese bases across the Yalu. Eisenhower remained non-committal on the subject.

An expanded war became closely tied with the use of atomic weapons. The additional consideration did nothing to simplify plans for winning the war. Despite a perceived new attitude and aggressiveness of the Eisenhower and Dulles team, “the new administration acted even more cautiously than had its predecessor in using nuclear weapons to help bring the Korean War to and end.”⁷⁸ Truman had claimed earlier in the war “there has always been active consideration of [the bomb’s] use.”⁷⁹ Eisenhower would never go that far publicly. His caution was influenced by several factors. In 1951 a study had been done, Operation Hudson Harbor, in which dummy atomic weapons were implemented to simulate the deployment of atomic weapons. The operation experimented with fake tactical atomic warheads being carried by new fighter-bombers, later to be put in the form of an artillery shell. Tactical atomic bombs were first tested in 1951 and were initially thought to be useful in breaking the stalemate against the vast manpower resources of Communist China. There had always been doubts as to their effectiveness and the argument that the consequences of their use would outweigh any potential benefit. Also, the simulations carried out with fighter-bombers were thought to be too slow to be

⁷⁷ Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1953*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 187.

⁷⁸ Dingman, 79.

⁷⁹ Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*. (Washington: The Brookings Institute, 1987) 33.

of any significant use on the battlefield. Eisenhower began weighing these various factors when he took office in January 1953.

Contrary to campaign rhetoric, Eisenhower lacked a defined plan for ending the war during the early months of 1953. Multiple options, many including the use of atomic weapons, were on the table. Eisenhower and even Dulles were wary of any potential war-winning strategy in Korea. To U.S. leaders, Korea stood in the greater context of the Cold War, and could very well be a Communist feint for aggression somewhere else. Dulles told Eisenhower “there is no doubt that Moscow looks on the Korean war as only one of many fronts.”⁸⁰ Not only that, but a conflict in Korea potentially threatened Japan. From this point of view, simply ending the war would be advantageous. Eisenhower would end up pursuing an end to the war while discussing how best to expand it, should the need arise.

In February 1953 the Eisenhower administration began to formally discuss an expansion of the war in Korea at the request of Commander Mark Clark. Clark desired to do away with the “Kaesong Sanctuary,” a twenty-eight square mile area along the front that had previously been designated for negotiations. An influx of Communist troops into the Kaesong area convinced Clark that an offensive was coming. He asked for permission to go on the offensive “as soon as Communist attack is imminent.”⁸¹ Dulles felt that since the negotiations were defunct for the time being, the sooner the sanctuary was ended the better. Eisenhower proposed that the use of tactical atomic weapons be considered for the Kaesong area, which he felt was a “good target for this type of weapon.”⁸² The suitability of the target was not the only issue, however. Allied fear of an expanded war and in particular, the use of atomic weapons in

⁸⁰ Memorandum by John Foster Dulles to Dwight D. Eisenhower, 26 November 1952, *FRUS, 1952-1954: Korea*, Vol. XV, 892.

⁸¹ Memorandum of Discussion at the 131st Meeting of the NSC, Wednesday, February 11, 1953, *Ibid.*, 769.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 770.

Korea, was a major consideration for the U.S. At the time of the meeting, General Bradley stated that the subject of atomic weapons should not yet be broached with the allies. Dulles expressed frustration with the attitude given toward atomic weapons and claimed that “we need to break down this false distinction.”⁸³ Eisenhower then suggested that the U.S. begin diplomatic maneuvers in order to prepare various allies for a possible expansion of the war. In frustration, he added that “if they objected to the use of atomic weapons we might well ask them to supply three or more divisions needed to drive the Communists back, in lieu of the use of atomic weapons.”⁸⁴ These early discussions show that fear of an expanded war continued to outweigh the desire for military victory. Also, using even smaller tactical atomic weapons was difficult to justify, especially with a relatively stable front. As the last months of the war progressed, the argument for the use of atomic weapons became more difficult to make.

Doubts continued to persist. The use of atomic weapons was brought up for discussion in March. Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins believed that atomic weapons would do little to benefit the military situation in Korea. In particular, he argued that the tactical weapons, the ones usually discussed, would be wasted against the well-fortified positions that the Communists held. He also referred to recent tests conducted with tactical atomic weapons which suggested that a well-entrenched force could survive an initial blast. Complicating matters was the fact that the Communist lines stretched approximately one hundred fifty miles. State Department official Paul Nitze, expressing the opinion of a group of civilian consultants, argued for the use of the bomb, saying that the U.S. supply of atomic weapons had been developed at a high cost and the current situation could serve as suitable conditions to test them. The State Department addressed this by saying that there was “no unshakeable policy barrier to the use of atomic weapons, but

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

the real question was whether the advantages would outweigh the disadvantages.”⁸⁵ Clearly, this was the main question when considering an expanded war or the use of atomic weapons in Korea. If the use of atomic weapons did not bring about a successful conclusion, not only would it diminish the deterrent value of the remaining stockpile, but also tension with allies would be made worse. Such use could possibly provoke the Soviets to retaliate in kind. General Bradley argued that the cost in casualties of a renewed general offensive suggested that atomic weapons might need to be used in such a situation. Chief of Staff for the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenberg, expressed a desire to use atomic weapons against Chinese bases in Manchuria. In the view of General Collins, this would incur retaliation against the areas around Pusan and Inchon, where U.N. troops were most highly concentrated. Communist forces, on the other hand were well dug in and scattered, providing poor targets.

Public opinion during this time was relatively aggressive. In a discussion with several civilian consultants, Eisenhower expressed his opinion that while there was a lack of good targets for atomic bombs, their use might prove worth it if “we could achieve a substantial victory over the Communist forces and get to a line at the waist of Korea.”⁸⁶ Civilian input suggested that the American people would support an effort aimed at a “massive victory” if time passed by with no real hope of an armistice. Deane Malott, president of Cornell University, argued outright that atomic weapons should be used in Korea. In response, Eisenhower demonstrated his cautious side by saying that “we should not blind ourselves to the effects of such a move on our allies, which would be very serious since they feel that they will be the battleground in an atomic war between the United States and the Soviet Union.”⁸⁷ Eisenhower

⁸⁵ Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion at a Department of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, March 27, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 817.

⁸⁶ Special Meeting of the National Security Council, March 31, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 826.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 827.

and Dulles agreed that at this time there existed a taboo against atomic weapons that needed to be removed. Revisiting an ever-present argument, Dulles “admitted that in the present state of world opinion we could not use an A-bomb, we should make every effort now to dissipate this feeling.”⁸⁸ Despite Dulles’ rhetoric at times, the Eisenhower administration, along with the JCS displayed relatively little desire to use atomic weapons. There were moments when Eisenhower appeared to be a restraining influence on the more aggressive Dulles. The president was told that his secretary of state believed a favorable settlement could be gained in Korea after “giving the Chinese one hell of a licking.” Eisenhower responded that “if Mr. Dulles and all his sophisticated advisers really mean that they can not talk peace, then I am in the wrong pew... Now either we cut out all this fooling around and make a serious bid for peace—or we forget the whole thing.”⁸⁹ The crisis atmosphere that arose several times during the Truman administration simply was not present during the first six months of Eisenhower’s presidency.

Showing signs of cooperation, Communist China accepted, in principle, the voluntary repatriation of prisoners of war on March 30. From the time the negotiations began two years before, voluntary repatriation had been the main point of contention. This did not mean that the war was over. Shortly before the Communist Chinese showed signs that they were willing to negotiate, General Clark’s request to have complete atomic bombs redeployed in Korea was rejected by the JCS. The JCS also “concealed from [Clark] the fact that no complete nuclear weapons were in close physical proximity to his command.”⁹⁰ Communist Chinese flexibility regarding POW’s had paved the way for an acceptable conclusion to the war but this could not have been known at the time. Clark’s aggressive spirit was not matched by the more cautious

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Emmet John Hughes, *Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years*. New York: Athaneum, 1963.

⁹⁰ Dingman, 82.

JCS and while the prospects of peace were reason for optimism, discussion of expanding the war persisted.

There continued to be a lack of consensus concerning the end of the war. Some believed atomic weapons could force a satisfactory end to the war while others believed intensified conventional operations were the key. Attempts to formulate contingencies for the use of atomic weapons accomplished very little. It proved to be a disjointed effort. “Only twice during the seven NSC meetings between February and May of 1953 when nuclear possibilities were discussed were President Eisenhower, his secretaries of state and defense, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Present.”⁹¹ Chairman Omar Bradley continued to disagree with others over the subject of atomic weapons in Korea, but he also believed that it was wise for the JCS to stall on any kind of concrete decision since a political decision would preclude a military one. Eisenhower was presented with the early phases of contingency plans for the transfer of atomic weapons to military custody. He sent the contingency plans back to NSC subcommittee for further study, claiming that such plans were not needed at the time. Eisenhower’s fluctuating positions on the use of atomic weapons suggest the lack of any defined plan to end the war.

Sudden accommodation by the Communists was seen as a possible ploy to buy time before attempting another offensive. While an armistice was desired, attaining it was not taken for granted. Now that Communist negotiators showed signs of yielding, U.S. planners stepped up efforts to formulate real contingency plans. Several days later, on April 2, the NSC met to discuss “possible courses of action in Korea.” The council formulated six potential courses of action, with each plan assigned a letter ranging from A to F. Plans A through C maintained the current restrictions on the war while plans D through F removed the restrictions. Course A represented following the current path and supplementing U.S. forces with additional ROK

⁹¹ Ibid.

forces with the intent of redeploying U.S. forces elsewhere. Course B promoted intensified ground operations along with aggressive naval and air operations in an attempt to achieve a favorable armistice. Course C was aimed at large-scale destruction of enemy forces while advancing to the narrow waist of Korea. The remaining plans intensified operations considerably. Plan D implemented air attack and naval blockade against Manchuria and Chinese mainland and possible ground action “with a view to making hostilities so costly to the enemy that a favorable settlement of the Korean war might be achieved.”⁹² Course E favored a coordinated offensive to seize and hold the waist of Korea along with a blockade and air and naval attacks directly against Manchuria and the Chinese mainland. Course F planned to use intensified ground operations along with major air and naval offensives “with a view to the defeat and destruction of the bulk of the communist forces in Korea and settlement of the Korean war on the basis of a unified, non-communist Korea.”⁹³ Each course of action, except A, left open the possible use of atomic weapons to support the operations. However, such weapons were not necessarily required for courses B through F and “this determination should be made only after a thorough study of the military, psychological and political implications of the use of atomic weapons has been completed, and considered by the National Security Council.”⁹⁴

Further study demonstrated the complications of an expanded war and showed Eisenhower both sides of the coin, both militarily and politically. Atomic weapons would considerably strengthen U.S.-U.N. forces and help make up for their manpower disadvantage. They could also possibly help bring about the end of hostilities in Korea by destroying Communist Chinese means of making war on the peninsula. If effective, the deterrent quality of atomic weapons, whether in a general or limited war, would be strengthened. Ultimately, the

⁹² NSC 147, “Analysis of Possible Courses of Action in Korea,” April 2, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 840.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 845.

most attractive quality of atomic weapons was the belief that they could help achieve military goals in Korea far more efficiently than conventional weapons.

The risks would ultimately outweigh the rewards in Eisenhower's decision-making. NSC planners identified an equal amount of military complications and problems with the use of atomic weapons in Korea. The deterrent component of these weapons depended on fear of their use which, as NSC planners had calculated, could be enhanced if their use brought about a substantial military victory. However, unless their use produced a decisive victory, the deterrent effect would be considerably lessened. Because there were few suitable targets on the Korean peninsula, Manchuria and the Chinese mainland presented themselves as a much more suitable target for strategic use of atomic weapons, but again fear of an expanded war made this a remote possibility. Also, there was the possibility of Chinese or even Soviet retaliation through the air. In contrast to the entrenched and sprawling nature of the Communist front, the highly-concentrated U.S.-U.N. forces provided a better target for Communist attacks.

Political influence, which was pervasive in all aspects of the Korean War, probably served as the most important factor in the discussion of the use of atomic weapons. Despite many drawbacks, there were political advantages. The NSC argued that it would be politically advantageous if the use of atomic weapons on the peninsula resulted in a military victory without escalating the war. Their use might become politically necessary in order to avoid a military disaster, as was contemplated during the Truman era, and served as one of the few situations on which most could agree.

The complex nature of limited war, along with the destructive capabilities of atomic weapons combined to provide a list of political complications and questions to which there appeared to be no good solutions. Most of the issues dealt with U.S. allies. It was estimated that

allied relations could be damaged if atomic weapons were used, especially if U.S. allies and other free world nations adhered to certain views. Most notably among these views were the belief that “the use of atomic weapons in Korea would involve the West in general hostilities with Communist China or the use of atomic weapons against Communist China would involve the West in hostilities with the USSR,” and if “the use of atomic weapons is not required to avert military disaster and if they believe, particularly in the light of current Communist peace offers, that our military and political objectives in Korea can be achieved without their use.”⁹⁵ Any use of atomic weapons would be undertaken only after prior consultation with allied and other free world governments. It was the consensus among the NSC that, of the possible courses of action, foreign opinion would favor Course A and disapprove of the other courses, the more aggressive they were. Even suggesting their use was seen as a risky move by U.S. officials who feared a loss of allied support simply by mentioning it.

More important than allied reaction was the possible Communist reaction to an expanded war. The use of atomic weapons would undoubtedly communicate western determination to the Communists. However, superseding this point was the realization that a Communist reaction was unpredictable. It was understood that, while the American people did not reject the use of atomic weapons in principle, they ultimately favored a cautious policy overall. Now, with a confident public and a fresh mandate, Eisenhower had more freedom to pursue a cautious policy which he believed the majority of the American people favored.

In May, an expanded war became more closely tied with the use of atomic weapons. During an NSC discussion in May it was argued that none of the possible courses that required action outside of Korea would be effective without the use of atomic weapons. “The Joint Chiefs of Staff were convinced that they must be used in considerable numbers in order to be

⁹⁵ Ibid, 846.

truly effective.”⁹⁶ The lack of strategic targets in Korea itself was understood, but “the military were most anxious to make use of atomic weapons in any of the courses of action which involved operations outside of Korea.”⁹⁷ Eisenhower steered the conversation back to the topic of tactical atomic weapons, not being completely satisfied with the argument that they could be of no use in Korea. He then inquired into the use of tactical atomic penetration bombs which had recently been tested. The results had been inconclusive, as far as practical use in Korea was concerned. “The effect had been as of an earthquake, but there was some doubt as to whether use of such weapons could really be justified in terms of the large-scale destruction of enemy personnel and materiel.”⁹⁸ Eisenhower countered with the argument that tactical use of these bombs could still be more efficient monetarily than conventional weapons, especially “if one took into account the logistic costs of getting conventional ammunition from the country to the front lines.”⁹⁹ Ultimately, the JCS found it difficult to endorse any of the courses outlined in NSC 147. Each course could potentially run into considerable political or military problems.

On May 20 the NSC met with the President to discuss possible courses of action. By this time, Eisenhower had been informed that “positive action in Korea required carrying the war to China with atomic weapons.”¹⁰⁰ More specifically, the JCS promoted “air and naval operations against China, including attacks on air bases in Manchuria, with sufficient atomic weapons to ensure success; a ground offensive to secure the waist of Korea; and increased preparations for additional operations to destroy Communist military power in Korea and to cripple their capacity for further aggression in the Far East.”¹⁰¹ This action made the president fear “the possibility of

⁹⁶ Memorandum of Discussion at the 144th Meeting of the NSC, May 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 1014.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Keefer, 278.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

attacks by the Soviet Air Force on the almost defenseless population centers of Japan.”¹⁰²

General Collins added that U.S.-U.N. troops in the Pusan and Inchon areas would be just as vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. Despite fear of Soviet intervention, Eisenhower had the record show “that if circumstances arose which would force the United States to an expanded effort in Korea, the plan selected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff was most likely to achieve the objective we sought.”¹⁰³ The President’s lukewarm response to the NSC discussion reveals his lack of enthusiasm for an expanded war. The NSC discussion did not necessarily serve as a plan to be implemented. However, it did reveal the type of plan that Eisenhower would favor *if* the U.S. should be forced into taking such steps. Referring to this discussion, Edward Keefer argues that “Eisenhower came as close as he ever did to making a formal decision on contingency planning.”¹⁰⁴ While the President and NSC may have been somewhat close to developing contingency plans, no plans were ever made. The same problems with a general war and atomic weapons were still present. These problems forbade a leader, who simply desired peace, to make contingency plans that could lead to another world war.

Eisenhower felt it necessary to indirectly convey the possibility of an expanded atomic war to the Communist Chinese if acceptable armistice terms were not reached. On May 21 during a discussion of Korea with Indian Prime Minister Nehru, Dulles said “that if the armistice negotiations collapsed, the United States would probably make a stronger rather than a lesser military exertion, and that this might well extend the area of conflict.”¹⁰⁵ Dulles made this comment with the assumption that it would be sent to Beijing. Also, chief U.N. negotiator, General Mark Clark, was “instructed to explain to his communist counterparts that this position

¹⁰² Memorandum of Discussion at the 145th Meeting of the NSC, May 20, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 1065.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 1067.

¹⁰⁴ Keefer, 278.

¹⁰⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, by the Secretary of State, May 21, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 1068.

was final and that he was calling a one-week recess in the talks in order to allow the Chinese and North Koreans to consider this last position.”¹⁰⁶

Roughly two months after Dulles’ discussion with Nehru, an armistice was signed. The decisiveness of atomic diplomacy has been called into question. Although armistice was signed soon after the Dulles-Nehru meeting, there remains Nehru’s denial of ever having passed the message to Beijing. The fact also remains that the Communist Chinese had already made major concessions prior to any calculated attempts at coercive diplomacy. While atomic diplomacy might not have accomplished what Eisenhower and Dulles claimed, it is possible that it kept the pressure on Communist negotiators and encouraged them not to back out of discussions. Historian Edward Keefer states that “the atomic ultimatum was designed to sustain the momentum at Panmunjom.”¹⁰⁷ While Communist negotiators gave way on some issues after the Dulles-Nehru meeting, they were relatively minor in comparison to the larger problem of repatriation that had been settled beforehand.

The signing of the armistice was a great relief to America’s allies who had feared an expanded war. The destructive power of atomic weapons created a moral dilemma to those who might consider their use. This dilemma was considered unnecessary by Dulles who expressed a desire for atomic weapons to simply be used where militarily appropriate. However, Dulles was caught between an aggressive attitude and the cautious approach of U.S. allies, whose partnership Dulles valued. Allies’ attitudes would serve as a restraint on Dulles in Korea and the Cold War in general.¹⁰⁸ Dulles’ attitude was not unique. Former Secretary of State Dean

¹⁰⁶ Foot, “Nuclear Coercion,” 98.

¹⁰⁷ Keefer, 281.

¹⁰⁸ See John Lewis Gaddis, “The Unexpected John Foster Dulles,” in Richard Immerman ed., *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 47-78.

Acheson, whose rhetoric was not as aggressive as Dulles', believed that the use of atomic weapons would result in "incalculable consequences,"¹⁰⁹ including the loss of allied support.

Britain and Canada remained steadfast throughout the war in their desire to limit the conflict in Korea. Neither of these allies shared America's ideological commitment to contain Communism, however, they did send military aid to Korea. Because of its limited military contribution, Canada stressed the fact that Korea was part of a more extensive issue of U.N. collective security. Canada desired to maximize U.N. authority because it would, in turn, "reduce, in the Canadian view, the danger of uncontrolled military escalation."¹¹⁰ For Ottawa "it had become very much a part of national interest to limit as fully as possible the intensity, duration, and territorial scope of the hostilities."¹¹¹

The British followed a similar course. There was an overall consensus within the British government that favored aiding the American-led effort in Korea. The belief existed in London that any escalation, including use of atomic weapons, would have to be approved by the British government. Ultimately, the British feared the U.S. over-committing in Korea, leaving Europe defenseless and a reckless America starting another world war. "From Britain's point of view, everything had to be done to prevent the U.S. from being sucked into a major war in Asia which would only deflect the American administration from its recent commitment to Western European defense."¹¹² It was allied attitudes such as these that concerned Eisenhower and Dulles.

¹⁰⁹ Dean Acheson, *The Korean War*. (New York: Norton and Co. Inc., 1971) 78.

¹¹⁰ Denis Stairs, *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, The Korean War, and the United States*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 94.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 93.

¹¹² John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defense Relations, 1939-1984: The Special Relationship*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984) 61.

The signing of the armistice did not remove the prospect of war from the minds of American planners. It was believed that the re-initiating of hostilities by Communist forces was a possibility. If this were to take place, some evidence suggests that striking back with atomic weapons would have been strongly considered. One State Department memo states that in such a circumstance and in the “scope of a United Nations war,” there was a distinct possibility of “the use of full power, atomic or otherwise, in Korea;” along with “the bombing by atomic weapons, or otherwise, of Chinese air bases north of the Yalu which were being used by the enemy in connection with Korean operations and Chinese Communist communication lines and troop concentrations in the vicinity of Korea.”¹¹³ Perhaps renewed Communist aggression would have served as the right set of circumstances which would, in the words of Eisenhower, “force the United States to an expanded effort in Korea.”¹¹⁴

Although it was expected that the majority of the U.S. people would support the use of atomic weapons in Korea, and while the U.S. maintained atomic superiority throughout the war, atomic weapons were never used. Less than a decade earlier, the use of two atomic bombs resulted in massive destruction in Japan. The next conflict revealed that “political and military leaders clearly felt some inhibitions when considering nuclear options.”¹¹⁵ There were simply too many complications and potential consequences. The possibility of provoking a general war against the Sino-Soviet alliance compounded with the probable loss of allied support in Europe, an area considered more vital to U.S. interests, was not worth risking. The most destructive weapon ever created had no place in a limited war. Using atomic weapons in Korea would have been a case of forcing a square peg into a round hole.

¹¹³ State Department Memo, John Foster Dulles Papers, White House memoranda series, Box 8, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (hereafter cited as DDEL).

¹¹⁴ *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XV*, 1065.

¹¹⁵ Tannenwald, 443.

CHAPTER 4

EISENHOWER'S NEW LOOK AND MASSIVE RETALIATION

After the conclusion of the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration had to shift its focus toward fulfilling one of its primary campaign promises—formulating a new national security policy. While the conclusion of the Korean War and the alleged effectiveness of atomic diplomacy could have influenced Eisenhower, the roots of what became known as the “New Look” went deeper than Korea. The new President and his Secretary of State had campaigned on the idea that U.S. national security needed to be more positive and less reactionary in nature. NSC-68 promoted a “program for rapidly building up strength” and added “[b]udgetary considerations will need to be subordinated to the stark fact that our very independence as a nation may be at stake.”¹¹⁶ The document proposed that the U.S. build up its military for a point in time when the danger of war with the Soviet Union would be at its height. The Korean War and NSC-68 had been highly influential, under President Harry Truman, in bringing about unprecedentedly large expenditures for the armed forces. During the Truman presidency, America saw its atomic primacy disappear with the Soviet Union’s successful test of an atomic weapon in 1949. Fearing atomic parity, and lacking strong conventional forces, the proposal of NSC-68 was welcome news to many in the defense establishment. The outbreak of the Korean War appeared to confirm the scenario anticipated by NSC-68. While the size of the armed forces inevitably would have been reduced after Korea, Eisenhower wished to take it a step further and shift policy away from indefinitely high spending. In 1948, then-General Eisenhower expressed that a total defense budget of \$15 billion was too much. Exemplifying a divergence of this view

¹¹⁶ NSC-68. *FRUS, 1950, Volume I*, 285.

was Truman, who left in office 1952 with a “proposed defense budget of \$45 billion,” along with a recommendation that it be increased.¹¹⁷

A desire to reduce force levels, and the reduction in expenditures that would inherently come with it, had been a promise of Eisenhower’s presidential campaign. In 1952 he stated that “we must achieve both security and solvency.” He elaborated by saying “the foundation of military strength is economic strength. A bankrupt America is more the Soviet goal than an America conquered on the battlefield.”¹¹⁸ By the time Eisenhower took office, the Cold War was well-established and seen as long-term, and a sound, economical foreign policy was required. During an NSC meeting in early 1953, Eisenhower expressed a desire for a “respectable posture of defense...without bankrupting the nation.”¹¹⁹ The problem of security and economy was even addressed by the president-elect and his advisors aboard the USS *Helena* on their way back to the U.S. from the famous trip to Korea, as the discussion turned from how to end the conflict honorably to broader policy questions. In Eisenhower’s estimation, military and economic strength were two sides of the same coin. “The relationship,” he would later write “between military and economic strength is intimate and indivisible.”¹²⁰ Fighting a costly war in Korea, a theater that no one believed would be decisive in the Cold War, as well as preparing for a period of maximum danger in relation to the Soviet Union was defensive, costly, and too reactionary. The Eisenhower administration was faced with the challenge to regain the initiative at a lower cost. The challenges of the Cold War were to be met at the “discretion of the United

¹¹⁷ Bundy, 247.

¹¹⁸ *New York Times*, September 13, 1952, 1. Quoted in Glenn Snyder, “The ‘New Look’ of 1953,” in *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets*, Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 388-389.

¹¹⁹ Memorandum of Discussion at the 131st Meeting of the National Security Council. Wednesday, February 11, 1953. *FRUS, 1952-1954, Volume II*, 236.

¹²⁰ Eisenhower, *Mandate*, 534.

States and would not be dictated by the Kremlin.”¹²¹ The New Look was all-encompassing—it was designed to protect the stability of the economy and act as a guide to military and foreign policy.

The new Secretary of State in 1953, John Foster Dulles, had been a strong proponent of a new approach to foreign policy. He also wanted to depart from a reactionary policy that attempted to constantly meet Communist challenges, wherever they arose. Dulles believed that if “the Free World adopted that strategy, it could bankrupt itself and not achieve security over a sustained period.”¹²² Dulles believed that, historically, war had arisen out of miscalculation by those involved. It was his hope to instill a policy that would act as a clear deterrent to a given aggressor—in this case the Soviet Union and its satellites. He believed it vital that “a potential aggressor should know in advance that he can and will be made to suffer for his aggression more than he can possibly gain by it.” Dulles promoted a policy of deterrence based upon America’s superiority in the area of nuclear weapons. In his view, these “new weapons” could be used for strategic bombing and “extensive tactical use” in order to “produce defensive power able to retaliate once and effectively against any aggression.”¹²³

The Truman-era policy of containment was to be replaced by the policy of deterrence. Instead of containing the spread of Communism with large numbers of troops spread around the globe, Communist expansion would be deterred more economically in the area where the U.S. held a quantitative and qualitative advantage—nuclear weapons. There would be little to no incentive to start limited, costly wars on the periphery, such as Korea. The basic goal was “to inhibit aggression at its source by the threat of general war.”¹²⁴ The members of the Joint Chiefs

¹²¹ Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower’s New Look Security Policy, 1953-61* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) 3.

¹²² John Foster Dulles, “Policy for Security and Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* 32 (April 1954): 358.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Kissinger, 54.

of Staff (JCS) were associated with the Truman administration and were considered an obstacle to much-needed cost cutting measures. Some Republicans, including Eisenhower's main challenger for the party's nomination, Senator Robert Taft, accused the JCS of a lack of professionalism, and that they had "become partisans of existing policies."¹²⁵ President Eisenhower did not have to wait long to replace the principal members of the JCS because their terms expired in mid-1953. The most important change came with the chairman of the JCS—a position given to Admiral Arthur Radford. Radford had previously held the rank of Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) and shared Eisenhower's fundamental views on the future of policy. His appointment as chairman of the JCS was important given the influence that rank held within the military and as advisor to the NSC. The remaining positions within the JCS would be filled by General Nathan F. Twining, General Matthew Ridgway, and Admiral Robert B. Carney representing the Air Force, Army, and Navy respectively. Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Lemuel Shepherd would continue in his role.

The problems inherited by Eisenhower were well defined but it would prove somewhat difficult to make any significant, sudden changes in policy with a war still being fought in Korea. Even with an almost completely new JCS, the body that would be the driving force behind formulating new military policy, change would be gradual. In April 1953 NSC 149/2 argued that a "vital factor in the long-term survival of the free world is the maintenance by the United States of a sound, strong economy." The report also said that force levels could not be significantly reduced while fighting in Korea continued and therefore stressed that current policy should put "increased emphasis" on ending the fighting with "a final settlement acceptable to us."¹²⁶ While

¹²⁵ Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Volume V: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1953-1954* (Washington D.C.: Historical Division, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1986) 14.

¹²⁶ NSC 149/2, April 29, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 307-308.

NSC 149/2 did not effect much actual change, it was a small initial step in implementing the New Look.

Two months later a restatement of U.S. basic national security policy appeared. It did not include any drastic changes, but was “modified in the direction of NSC 149/2.”¹²⁷ The new policy, NSC 153/1, identified two main threats to the U.S.: “the formidable power and aggressive policy of the communist world led by the USSR,” and “the serious weakening of the economy of the United States that may result from the cost of opposing the Soviet threat over a sustained period.” The task, therefore, was to “strike a proper balance between the risks arising from these two threats.”¹²⁸ NSC 153/1 began to use the language of deterrence. According to the new statement, U.S. policy objectives (among others) were “to deter general war, protect the continental United States, and provide the basis for winning a general war if one should be forced upon us.” The next objective was “to maintain a sound and strong U.S. economy based on free enterprise.”¹²⁹ The objectives “vis-à-vis the USSR in the event of war” had still not changed since the adoption of NSC 20/4 in 1948.¹³⁰ The summer of 1953 brought in a restatement of U.S. basic national security policy, which provided minimal changes, as well as an end to active fighting in Korea.

With the end of hostilities came a shift in focus to developing a substantially different policy. NSC 153/1 had shown that new policy could be drafted without promoting real change. Eisenhower instructed a study to be undertaken in order to examine the potential courses that future policy could follow. The study, named Operation Solarium, consisted of three task forces comprised of military and civilian personnel, which would examine three potential directions of

¹²⁷ Watson, 9.

¹²⁸ NSC 153/1, June 10, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 379.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹³⁰ Watson, 10.

future policy. Alternative A proposed to stay the course with current policy and to “re-examine the existing containment policy in the light of a new emphasis on defense economy.”¹³¹ This alternative promoted containment over deterrence, opposing Communist expansion, and maintaining “over a sustained period armed forces to provide for the security of the United States and to assist in the defense of vital areas of the free world.” Alternative B proposed drawing a line around the perimeter of the Soviet bloc that was not to be crossed without the risk of war. In Asia, the loss of a free world country to Communism “would involve war against Communist China (but not necessarily global war).” Alternative C was the most aggressive of the three options and stressed an offensive strategy designed to rollback Communism and “produce a climate of victory.”¹³²

The final Solarium study was presented by its three task forces at an NSC meeting in July 1953. Task Force A, headed by George F. Kennan argued that no significant change was needed within current policy except for efforts to enhance U.S. security through some initial spending increases that were well within the means of the country. Task Force B stated that Communist expansion beyond its current perimeter would be “considered by the United States as initiating general war,” and a “clear indication” of these intentions would serve as a deterrent to war. Task Force C argued for a “forward and aggressive political strategy in all fields and by all means.” These fields would include military, economic, diplomatic, covert and propaganda.” The methods of Group C would “admittedly [run] greater risk of general war.”¹³³

The NSC studied the results of Solarium in an attempt to find common ground and create consensus for future policy. In this process, Alternative C was disregarded because it was

¹³¹ Dockrill, 33.

¹³² Memorandum for the Record by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler), May 9, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 325-326.

¹³³ Summaries Prepared by the NSC Staff of Project Solarium, *Ibid.*, 399-431.

thought to be too dangerous by risking general war. Policy formulation went ahead in an attempt to meld options A and B. The Solarium study led to further examination of policy options which resulted in a more significant change in national security policy which was officially expressed in NSC 162/2.

It took time to weigh alternatives A and B. Several months of debate took place before an “uneasy agreement” was reached.¹³⁴ Eisenhower endorsed an all-encompassing policy that provided for U.S. defense while protecting the economy and American institutions and values. This view ran into a degree of opposition from the JCS, who believed that the cost of national security should be paid, even at the risk of other areas of American life. The JCS view held that “we must take measures to defeat the Soviet threat even if in the process we changed our way of life.”¹³⁵ The President made his opposition known. “We could lick the whole world,” said Eisenhower, responding to the JCS line of thinking, “if we were willing to adopt the system of Adolph Hitler.” He added “we can endure anything for a year or two,” referring to high defense spending, but argued that the U.S. must protect the economy long term by stating “this sound dollar lies at the very basis of a sound capability for defense.” The president summarized his view of the Cold War by saying that the U.S. was “engaged in defending a way of life as well as a territory, a population, [and the] dollar.” Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey also opposed the JCS saying that the “military ought to be so damned dollar conscious that it hurts.”¹³⁶ The struggle to reach a consensus over national security policy led one historian to

¹³⁴ While NSC 162/2 did represent U.S. basic national security policy, it was also drafted as a guide for future policy because of the disagreement over certain issues. Dockrill, 35-41.

¹³⁵ Memorandum of Discussion at the 165th meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday October 7, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 517.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 519-521.

write “if the budget were to be reduced, the Joint Chiefs of Staff would be of little use in providing the rationale.”¹³⁷

The debate continued throughout the latter part of 1953. While the JCS had been instructed to present lower numbers for required force levels, which implied lower defense spending, they found the task difficult. The Eisenhower administration’s idea from the outset was to rely upon America’s advantage in nuclear weapons and its subsequent deterrent. However, because no new policy had been drafted that outlined how nuclear weapons were specifically to be used, the JCS argued that they could not recommend “significant changes in the level of combat forces.”¹³⁸ Further discussion led Eisenhower to say that they should all be trying to “achieve a respectable posture of defense,” not a “perfect defense,” and should “bear in mind a defense posture related to the long pull.”¹³⁹ The President also attempted to reassure Admiral Radford that nuclear weapons “could certainly be used by the United States if it were attacked.” Eisenhower went on to say that a war an enemy initiated was the only kind of war that the U.S. truly feared and restated his previous position saying that “in such a contingency we could always use atomic weapons” from U.S. bases. Responding to a question from Radford regarding the use of nuclear weapons in Korea in the case of renewed Communist aggression, Secretary Dulles said that because the U.S. was the U.N. command in that theater, “of course we could use these weapons if military considerations dictated their use.” Eisenhower then added that he believed the U.S. should employ the bomb if the Communists resumed fighting but that such a decision could “cause a dangerous breach in allied solidarity.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Snyder, “The New Look of 1953,” 396.

¹³⁸ Memorandum of Discussion at the 166th Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, October 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 542.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 544.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 545-546. Eisenhower went on to say that launching an atomic attack from allied bases could be a problem.

Finally, in late October, a consensus was reached and a new basic national security policy was adopted. The new policy was embodied in NSC 162/2, a document that has since become synonymous with Eisenhower's New Look. The basic problems of national security, as defined by NSC 162/2 were not new. The U.S. must be able to "meet the Soviet threat to U.S. security," and "in doing so, to avoid seriously weakening the U.S. economy or undermining our fundamental values and institutions."¹⁴¹ Eisenhower inherited a defense budget of roughly \$5.26 billion, and subsequently oversaw budgets of \$4.03 billion and \$3.59 billion the following two years.¹⁴² New policy stated that the U.S. requires "a strong military posture, with emphasis on the capability of inflicting massive retaliatory damage by offensive striking power." In the face of the Soviet atomic threat, the free world would have to rely on U.S. atomic capability. This would mean that the U.S. would need a sufficient amount of atomic weapons and effective delivery systems. Probably the most striking part of NSC 162/2 was its statement on nuclear weapons and war. It stated "in the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions."¹⁴³

The U.S. had viewed nuclear weapons as a deterrent to Communist expansion since before the Eisenhower administration. Also, war plans had been formulated that placed these weapons in a central role. However, official policy had never placed nuclear weapons on the same level as other munitions. Discussing the difficulty of fitting nuclear weapons into policy, Secretary Dulles said earlier that month that "somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons."¹⁴⁴ Dulles and Eisenhower had expressed this opinion

¹⁴¹ NSC 162/2, Basic National Security Policy, October 30, 1953, *Ibid.*, 578.

¹⁴² "A Historical Perspective on Defense Budgets," last modified July 6, 2011, accessed February 20, 2012, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/07/historical_defense_budget.html.

¹⁴³ *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II.*, 582-593.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 533.

since the administration took office and the new policy actually appeared to be headed in this direction.

The armistice in Korea, new public pronouncements of policy, and the “epochal developments which were transpiring in nuclear armaments,” paved the way for substantial change in the latter part of 1953.¹⁴⁵ Eisenhower had inherited the Truman era concept that “new weapons,” as they were often referred to, could serve as a deterrent against Soviet aggression. Also inherited was a nuclear stockpile that had been increasing in quantity and quality since 1949. What made Eisenhower unique was that he wanted to make nuclear weapons a central part of policy. He did not want to implement a “radically new kind of defense establishment.” Rather, the nation’s defense “should concentrate more on the latest weapons.” This implied “a greater reliance on deterrent nuclear weapons, which could be delivered by the Strategic Air Command and later by intermediate and long-range ballistic missiles.”¹⁴⁶ Secretary Dulles said that America’s technological lead in the area of nuclear weapons was “from the standpoint of prestige of the United States perhaps our greatest single asset,” and losing this advantage “would be a grave blow to the security and to the leadership of the of the United States.”¹⁴⁷

The Eisenhower administration’s shift in policy was first referred to as the “New Look” in a speech given by JCS Chairman Radford in December 1953. He described the New Look as a “reassessment of our strategic and logistic capabilities in the light of foreseeable developments,” and mentioned that it was “not the first such review of military policy.” Radford stressed the ability for the U.S. to “be ready for tremendous, vast retaliatory blows” in the event of war, and that a “strong armed posture” would “convince the men of the Kremlin that neither a global nor a localized war would be to their advantage.” He added that “atomic weapons have

¹⁴⁵ Eisenhower, *Mandate*, 538.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁴⁷ NSC meeting, Tuesday, October 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 539.

virtually achieved conventional status within our armed forces,” and could be employed by any branch of the military.¹⁴⁸

On January 12, 1954, Dulles made a speech before the Council on Foreign Relations in which he publicly expressed the doctrine of massive retaliation, which would be central to the New Look. In addition to a free world “community security system,” deterrence would seek through “massive retaliatory power” and the ability “to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.”¹⁴⁹ In a speech to the North Atlantic Council the Secretary of State spoke about the utility of nuclear weapons. Dulles expressed that it was the purpose of the U.S. and the free world “to deter aggression and prevent the outbreak of war. In our opinion nuclear weapons have a vital role to play in achieving this purpose.”¹⁵⁰ The implication was clear—aggression would be met with a nuclear strike from the U.S. While Eisenhower and Dulles would attempt to clarify that statements such as these did not necessarily mean that an atomic strike would be the proper response to all aggression, the policy still received substantial criticism. Although the New Look and NSC 162/2 were designed to address broad aspects of policy for the long run, there were aspects that seemingly fell through the cracks. The U.S.-backed French effort in Indochina fell into this category and would prove to be a far more complex question than that of general war with the Soviet Union.

Although the perception of the New Look was that the U.S. intended to retaliate at the heartlands of Russia or China in response to Communist aggression around the globe, this was not necessarily the case. U.S. objectives for war were still the same as they had been in 1948, and only targeted the USSR. This would begin to change, however, toward the end of 1953.

¹⁴⁸ Admiral Arthur W. Radford, “The ‘New Look’: Defense Plans for the Nation,” *Vital Speeches of the Day*, January 1, 1954, 171-173.

¹⁴⁹ Speech of John Foster Dulles, before the Council of Foreign Relations, January 12, 1954, quoted in Bundy, 256.

¹⁵⁰ Statement by the Secretary of State to the North Atlantic Council Closed Ministerial Session, Paris, April 23, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Western European Security, Vol. V*, 509.

During this time the JCS faced the problem of devising a military strategy that fell in line with basic national security policy. Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson, discussed with Radford several “salient factors” in attempting to meet security requirements. Among these factors, Wilson listed “we have entered an era where the quantity of atomic weapons and their military application necessitates a review of their impact on our strategy. We shall assume that such weapons will be used in military operations by U.S. forces engaged whenever it is of military advantage to do so.”¹⁵¹ NSC 162/2 also addressed other aspects of defense policy that affected nuclear weapons. Another important piece of the New Look was the role of U.S. allies. Official policy stated that the U.S. “cannot, however, meet its defense needs, even at exorbitant cost, without the support of allies.” Allied forward bases had been seen as essential to launch a strategic nuclear strike against the USSR during the Truman years. In NSC 162/2, it was predicted that the need for “overseas bases on foreign territory,” would be required “for some years to come.” Allied territory would be required, but allied approval would be important as well. It was specified that “U.S. strategy including the use of atomic weapons , therefore, can be successfully carried out only if our essential allies are convinced that it is conceived and will be implemented for the purpose of mutual security and defense against the Soviet threat.” The next sentence qualified allied approval and ultimately gave the U.S. the final say. It said “U.S. leadership in this regard, however, does not imply the necessity to meet all desires of our allies.”¹⁵²

It was the responsibility of the JCS to formulate war plans of various types that would serve as guides in the event of war.¹⁵³ The Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) predicted a

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Watson, 27.

¹⁵² NSC 162/2, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 583.

¹⁵³ These consisted of the Joint Strategic Objectives Plan (JSOP), which planned for a war in three years; the Joint Long-Range Strategic Estimate (JLRSE), which served as a general guide to likely areas of conflict, and

six-month effort to blunt a Soviet offensive in Europe, followed quickly by an allied offensive. War planning continued throughout the drafting and approval of NSC 162/2. However, there was disagreement among them as to the role and effectiveness of nuclear weapons. Not surprisingly, the biggest proponent of nuclear weapons was the Air Force that argued that the U.S. advantage in nuclear weapons “could serve to neutralize the Communist preponderance of ground forces.” Implying the use of nuclear weapons, the Air Force also endorsed “an offensive capability, particularly the capability to inflict massive damage on Soviet war-making capacity.” This counter-offensive, in the opinion of the Air Force, would consist of “strategic air warfare operations to create conditions...which would permit satisfactory accomplishment of Allied war objectives.” The other branches did not believe that the Air Force’s reliance on the effectiveness of nuclear weapons and strategic bombing was warranted.¹⁵⁴ However, they also believed that the counter-offensive’s ground operations should not commence until strategic bombing had crippled the enemy.

A Joint Strategic Objectives Plan (JSOP) was written and revised throughout 1953. The JSOP was another plan that was divisive among the services. One point of contention was the role of nuclear weapons, which the Air Force emphasized. Efforts to complete the JSOP were undermined by disagreement between the services as well as by the fact that it suffered from a lack of guidance because NSC 162/2 was still being drafted and was yet to be approved. Planning within the JCS machinery in 1953 was characterized by disagreement. This was not lost on the JCS who attempted to move forward and resolve the differences. Fortunately, as

requirements five years in the future; and the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) which covered the approaching fiscal year. Ibid., 89-90.

¹⁵⁴ The initial JSCP was contained within JCS 1844/151, *ibid.*, 95.

1953 came to a close, there was an approved basic national security policy that could serve as guidance to the future.

Planning continued into 1954 and the JSCP was revised in order to make it satisfactory to all the services. This meant to downplay the overarching role of airpower in a future war. The new JSCP sought a “strong security posture, with emphasis upon offensive retaliatory strength and defensive strength,” which would be based on a “massive retaliatory capability” of the U.S. and its allies. Further planning led the JCS to conclude that “the U.S. superiority in atomic weapons should serve to reduce, but not to eliminate, the Soviets’ manpower advantage.” Also, inflicting “massive retaliatory damage” was viewed as an integral part of the early phase of a war. However, it was unclear as to how “these operations alone would achieve U.S. war objectives.” The JSCP was designed to deter war or place the U.S. in a favorable position to win with the assumption that in a general war against the Soviet bloc nuclear weapons would be used by both sides.¹⁵⁵

During this time of JCS planning and revision, there were predictions and assessments on a future war that came from other sources. Looking ahead to a future war painted a bleak picture. The NSC expected a general war to include American allies and the Soviet Union, its satellites, and Communist China. Assuming nuclear weapons would be used, the NSC predicted “massive destruction to selected major urban areas of the United States,” which would, in turn, result in a significant drop in civilian living standards.¹⁵⁶

Further NSC studies also saw the grave reality of a global war in which nuclear weapons were used. In a war in which both sides implemented strategic nuclear weapons, the result would be “such extensive destruction as to threaten the survival of Western civilization and the

¹⁵⁵ The revised JSCP was given guidance by JCS 2101/113—a more generally-worded document which allowed for more flexibility. *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁵⁶ Interim Defense Mobilization Planning Assumptions, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 605-607.

Soviet regime.” Despite this gloomy outlook, it was advised that for the U.S. to be able to fight a general war “with a maximum prospect of achieving U.S. objectives,” its “ability to do so depends, in part, on its determination and ability to mount massive nuclear attacks upon the USSR.”¹⁵⁷

Nuclear weapons strategy was categorical throughout the Cold War. One category involved public pronouncement, which is how official policy is communicated for domestic and foreign consumption. The Eisenhower administration addressed this aspect with NSC 162/2 and the public statements regarding the New Look. The second category was procurement policy, which was expressed in budgets. The New Look, and its cornerstone massive retaliation, shifted focus from containment with conventional forces to nuclear deterrence. This allowed defense expenditures to decrease, especially after the build-up due to NSC-68 and the Korean War. The third category concerned operational strategy which hypothetically directed the manner in which the U.S. employ nuclear weapons in the event of war.¹⁵⁸

Operational ideas on how to utilize nuclear weapons had changed relatively little from one administration to the next. They were seen as playing a vital role in a general war with the Soviet bloc. In the mid to late 1940’s, war plans like BROILER, HALFMOON, and FROLIC all placed heavy emphasis on an atomic offensive on the Soviet heartland.

Because of Truman’s reluctance to embrace nuclear weapons, he “left office without ever establishing a basic framework of national policy to guide the development of nuclear strategy and nuclear war planning.”¹⁵⁹ Eisenhower came into office with a different outlook from top to

¹⁵⁷ Tentative Guidelines Under NSC 162/2 for FY 1956, June 14, 1954, Ibid., 655-656.

¹⁵⁸ This method of breaking down nuclear strategy is found in David Alan Rosenberg, “Reality and Responsibility: Power and Process in the Making of United States Nuclear Strategy, 1945-1968,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 9 (March 1986) 35-51.

¹⁵⁹ David Alan Rosenberg, “U.S. Nuclear War Planning,” in *Strategic Nuclear Targeting*, eds. Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) 43.

bottom. Not only did the New Look place emphasis on a weapon that Truman was reluctant to accept. The Eisenhower also began to “disperse and deploy” nuclear weapons, basically doing away with Truman’s “structure for civilian control of the atomic weapons stockpile.” This was done “both to reduce stockpile vulnerability and to improve military readiness.”¹⁶⁰

While Eisenhower immediately tried to alter defense policy regarding nuclear weapons, and basically did with the approval of NSC 162/2, there was still a significant gap between policy and operational planning. This gave JCS Chairman Radford reason to continually probe for presidential direction regarding the proper situations in which the use of nuclear weapons would be used. Eisenhower remained cautious, however, and apparently did not explore this question. Approved policy on atomic warfare would not change under the Eisenhower administration until 1959.¹⁶¹ This means that policy on atomic warfare was still based on the Truman-era policy of NSC-30, approved in 1948. In March 1954, NSC 5410 was approved which expressed U.S. objectives in a war with the Soviet bloc. U.S. objectives included, but were not limited to “[achieving] a victory which will insure the survival of the United States,” as well as “preserve and retain as many of its effective allies,” and “reduce by military and other measures the capabilities of the USSR to the point where it has lost its will or ability to wage war against the United States and its allies.”¹⁶² However, the objectives gave no insight as to how nuclear weapons would be employed to achieve them.

The lack of guidance did not stop the military from planning for the use of nuclear weapons. There were many separate plans that were drafted by the various groups within the JCS. The plans addressed different periods of time and different aspects such as mobilization,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Rosenberg, “Origins of Overkill,” 13.

¹⁶² NSC 5410, “U.S. Objectives in the Event of General War with the Soviet Bloc,” *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. II*, 645.

logistics, and the roles of the different branches. Roles and missions were debated but it was clear that the Air Force would be primarily, if not solely, responsible for the delivery of nuclear weapons in the event of war. This was, in part, due to the fact that the Air Force, through the Strategic Air Command (SAC), under the leadership of General Curtis LeMay, had claimed responsibility for itself and was, by far, the most capable of nuclear weapons delivery. SAC had been made an Air Force priority during the late 1940's, and it showed as its "nuclear capable aircraft increased from 60 in December to over 350 by June 1950."¹⁶³

SAC would continue to grow during the Eisenhower years. The emphasis put on massive retaliatory offensive capability in conjunction with a nuclear deterrent meant that SAC was more relevant than before. "By the end of 1953, SAC contained 10 heavy and 25 medium bomb and reconnaissance wings, nearly 23 of which were considered combat ready, along with 28 refueling squadrons." This meant that overall SAC commanded "over 1,500 aircraft, including 1,000 nuclear capable bombers."¹⁶⁴ In December 1953, a program was approved that put the ultimate goal at 137 wings—a number lower than what the Air Force desired.

Tactical nuclear weapons seemed to be a means to deter and possibly fight local aggression. It was predicted that the most likely place these weapons might be tested would be in Western Europe. Project Vista, a study concluded during the Truman administration, made an optimistic conclusion as to the effectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons in the defense of Western Europe.¹⁶⁵ The smaller yields of tactical nuclear weapons were thought to be more suited for battlefield use by the Army and Air Force, while Western Europe was seen as a vital area that required defense since the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. Tactical weapons were a way to strengthen the shrinking U.S. conventional capability at a lower cost.

¹⁶³ Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," 19.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

The view of nuclear weapons as simply strategic weapons was changing. An Air Force briefing in 1954 over “national security and Air Force concepts” provided a look at how nuclear weapons were not simply viewed as strategic weapons anymore. In this briefing, Major General R.C. Lindsay argued that “the concept that only a target as large as a city is suitable for atomic weapons is obsolete. Any target that is vulnerable to high explosives is suitable for atomic weapons; the principal determinant of whether to use atomic weapons is the size of our stockpile. A single enemy battalion is a worthwhile target, and we will soon have enough weapons to use them that freely.”¹⁶⁶ The Army, the branch that was asked to change the most in order to fit tactical nuclear weapons into its structure and doctrine, never fully did.¹⁶⁷

There were a considerable number of technological developments in new weapons by the time Eisenhower took office. Not only was the overall size of the U.S. nuclear stockpile getting larger, but the size of bombs was getting smaller. The Mark 5 and Mark 7 bombs, which weighed 3,000 and 2,700 pounds respectively, were replacing the bulkier 10,000 pound bombs of the mid to late 1940’s. The Mark 12, introduced in 1954, weighed 1,000 pounds and had roughly the same yield as the Mark 1, or “Little Boy” model, which was dropped on Hiroshima and weighed just less than 9,000 pounds.¹⁶⁸ At this stage there were bombs such as the Mark 12, which produces a relatively small yield of twelve kilotons, as well as bombs which reached fifteen megatons. By the end of the Eisenhower administration, the U.S. tactical nuclear

¹⁶⁶ Briefing by Major General R.C. Lindsay (Air Force Director of Plans) at Headquarters Military Air Transport Service on “National Security and Air Force Concepts,” in folder OPD 350.001 (2 Mar 51) Sec 4, Record Group (RG) 341, Air Force—Plans, 1942-1954, Box 227, National Archives (hereafter cited as NA).

¹⁶⁷ Kenneth Jerold Comfort, *National Security Policy and the Development of Tactical Nuclear Weapons, 1948-1958* (Cohoos: Public Administration Institute, 2005) 219-221.

¹⁶⁸ Rosenberg, “Origins of Overkill,” 30; Nuclear Weapons Archive, “Complete List of All Nuclear Weapons,” <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Usa/Weapons/Allbombs.html> (Accessed December 14, 2011)

capability had grown and tactical weapons had come to comprise a large portion of the overall nuclear arsenal.¹⁶⁹

These technological achievements did not mean that the new weapons were integrated into military planning. The ultimate control over the use of nuclear weapons by the President, and caution of other civilians regarding the use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War had led many in the military to doubt that the weapons would ever be authorized for use. This attitude changed with the approval of NSC 162/2. The document was not a contingency plan, but it provided a different outlook.

During this period, SAC planned to accomplish three objectives which were designated by the codenames Bravo, Delta, and Romeo. The Bravo mission was the “blunting of Soviet capability to deliver an atomic offensive against the United States and its allies.” Delta consisted of the “disruption of the vital elements of the Soviet war-making capacity.” Romeo was a slight divergence and was intended for “the retardation of Soviet advances into Western Eurasia.”¹⁷⁰ The three codenames were established in 1952 but the objectives, themselves, went back to 1950. Objective Delta, an offensive to take out the Soviet war-making capacity, had been a constant in U.S. war plans and dated back to 1945. The objectives of Romeo had been assigned to SAC in 1949 with the advent of NATO.¹⁷¹ This was done before the prevalence of tactical nuclear weapons which were more suited to this purpose. Since the successful Soviet atomic test in 1949, the blunting mission in Bravo was given top priority. An Air Force memorandum in 1954 illustrates this priority by stating “the strategic atomic offensive, given the advantage of the

¹⁶⁹ One estimate argues “Of the 18,000 weapons in the United States arsenal by 1960, only about 4,000 appear to have been strategic weapons.” In Rosenberg, “Reality and Responsibility,” 42.

¹⁷⁰ David Alan Rosenberg and W.B. Moore, ““Smoking Radiating Ruin at the End of Two Hours”: Documents on American Plans for Nuclear War with the Soviet Union, 1954-1955,” *International Security* 6 (Winter 1981-1982) 9.

¹⁷¹ The responsibility for the retardation objective began to be transferred to NATO tactical nuclear forces in 1952. However, SAC “continued to claim a role in implementing the retardation objective through 1956, in order to maximize its allocation of nuclear weapons.” *Ibid.*, 10.

initiative at the outset, will neutralize the Soviet atomic threat to the United States and will contribute the decisive factor in gaining control of the air over Russia.”¹⁷²

The idea behind how a strategic nuclear offensive would be carried out was simple. To minimize the risk of flight time over hostile territory, and in the hopes of landing a quick knockout blow, SAC desired “to launch as many aircraft and weapons as possible against every identifiable target in a single massive nuclear strike.” Because the target lists provided by SAC meant a certain bomb requirement, planners had an “institutional stake in identifying as many targets as possible.” This would, in turn, lead to enormous numbers of potential targets. “By the early 1950’s, as many as 6,000 separate targets for nuclear attack had been identified by Air Force planners.”¹⁷³ One target list comprised striking 1,700 designated ground zeros (DGZ’s), over 400 of them being airfields. In order to overwhelm Soviet defenses, the SAC Basic War Plan in March 1954 called for 735 bombers to hit Soviet targets designated as “early warning screens” and to do this “from all directions simultaneously.” This plan was also designed for all targets to be hit in one large blow. The scale and nature of the SAC offensive “was not necessarily what the President and his top policy advisers had envisaged.”¹⁷⁴

There was a gap between official security policy and the way in which the Air Force, through SAC, planned on fighting because of the lack of clear direction on how and when nuclear weapons would be used in official policy. Admiral Radford had pushed, for some time, for clarification on the use of nuclear weapons, but Eisenhower was reluctant to provide any. For the President, it seemed difficult to predict contingencies for the use of certain weapons or even the objectives to be sought in a future war. During an NSC meeting, Eisenhower said that

¹⁷² Project Control Research Memorandum: The Strategic Atomic Offensive, Air War College Air War University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, June 1954, OPD 350.001 (2 Mar 51) Sec 4, RG 341 Air Force—plans, decimal file 1942-1954, Box 227, NA.

¹⁷³ Rosenberg, “Reality and Responsibility,” 41.

¹⁷⁴ Rosenberg, “Origins of Overkill,” 35.

“he believed that the chaos resulting from a third world war would be so great as to render it impossible for the National Security Council to determine in advance our precise objectives and courses of action in the event of such a war.”¹⁷⁵ Several months later, the President warned against the seemingly indiscriminate plans to bomb the USSR. “If we batter Soviet cities to pieces by bombing, what solution do we have to take control of the situation and handle it so as to achieve the objectives for which we went to war?” He also encouraged finding a way to “attain our national objectives with the minimum cost and the least dislocation to the world.”¹⁷⁶ Eisenhower encouraged a strategy that avoided cities and attacked military targets.

SAC capabilities had increased by the Spring of 1954. By March, SAC possessed 2,131 aircraft and of those 2,095 were “combat capable,” including the B-36, B-47, and B-52. Bomber crews at this time numbered over one thousand, not including crews assigned to fighters, air-refuelers, reconnaissance, strategic support, and air rescue. SAC missions could be flown out of thirty-one “operational and staging bases for 2,005 aircraft in the U.S. and overseas.” Given these resources, planners estimated that SAC could, under fire, deliver 600-750 bombs. This would be done by approaching Russia from various directions in the hopes of striking Bravo and Delta targets. Within the span of two hours, SAC would hypothetically achieve the blunting of Soviet atomic capability and striking at vital elements of its war-making capacity. “The final impression was that virtually all of Russia would be nothing but a smoking, radiating ruin at the end of two hours.”¹⁷⁷ Some estimates painted a different picture. Other Air Force studies perceived the ability for the U.S. to strike a crippling blow against Russia years into the future.

¹⁷⁵ Memorandum of Discussion at the 187th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, March 4, 1954, *FRUS 1954-1954, Vol. II*, 636.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Rosenberg, “Origins of Overkill,” 35.

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum OP-36ljm, Subject: Briefing given to the representatives of all services at SAC Headquarters, Offutt Air Force Base, Omaha, Nebraska on March 15, 1954. Document in Rosenberg and Moore, “A Smoking Radiating Ruin,” 20-22.

In January 1954, a study was forwarded to SAC headquarters, which “proposed that SAC develop the capability, by 1965, to destroy most of Soviet offensive capabilities in 72 hours.”¹⁷⁸

Within the first two years of the Eisenhower presidency, the military had vastly improved its nuclear capability. The U.S. strategic nuclear stockpile had increased significantly and tactical nuclear weapons had become prevalent to the point their use was assumed in NATO’s defense of Western Europe and possibly in other local Communist aggression around the globe. SAC’s role and ability had increased because the priority it had in defense expenditures. During the period 1954-1957, the Air Force averaged 47 percent of the total defense appropriations.¹⁷⁹ The Army was also being included in realm of new weapons with the use of tactical nuclear weapons being expected on the battlefield of Western Europe. The Navy was also in the process of “[acquiring] a powerful and flexible atomic weapon delivery capability within its carrier task forces.”¹⁸⁰

The U.S. had evolved from a position of reluctance to reliance regarding nuclear weapons. Programs for the improvement of the nuclear stockpile had begun under Truman but began to really come to fruition under Eisenhower. This was accompanied by a national security policy that would view nuclear weapons “as other munitions” in war. While a main purpose of this policy was to deter general war with the Soviet bloc, the posture that the U.S. took during the early years is ironic considering the challenges faced by the administration—crises and limited wars.

¹⁷⁸The study “Force requirements for SAC in the thermonuclear age,” is referred to in “Unilateral Air Force thinking about future wars,” October 1, 1956, OPD 350.001 (2 Mar 51) Sec 4, RG 341 Air Force—plans 1942-1954, Box 227, NA.

¹⁷⁹ Rosenberg, “Origins of Overkill,” 29.

¹⁸⁰ Report by the Joint Strategic Plans Committee on the status of U.S. programs for national security as of 30 June 1954, : CCS 381 U.S. (1-31-05) Sec. 41, RG 218 Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Geographic File, 1954-46, Box 37.

CHAPTER 5

INTERVENTION AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS AT DIEN BIEN PHU

Communist China has been and is now training, equipping and supplying the Communist forces in Indochina. There is the risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina. I say this soberly...in the hope of preventing another aggressor calculation.

This statement by Dulles displays the manner in which the U.S. viewed the issue of Indochina. The Pentagon Papers summarize this quote by saying that if China became Directly involved, “the United States would be forced to follow suit, preferably with allies but if necessary, alone.” The frightening implication was “that in keeping with its policy of massive retaliation the United States would administer a punishing nuclear blow to China without necessarily involving its land forces in an Asian war.”¹⁸¹

The United States’ involvement in Asia was not limited to support for South Korea and the Nationalist Chinese in Taiwan. The Eisenhower administration inherited U.S. commitments in Southeast Asia as well, in the form of monetary and military aid to the French in their ongoing war against the Communist insurgent Viet Minh. Indochina, in particular the protectorates of Tonkin, Annam, and the colony of Cochinchina, which formed Vietnam, was seen as an important strategic location well before Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953. Southeast Asia was

¹⁸¹ Dulles Speech before the American Legion, St. Louis, Missouri, September 2, 1953, in “Perceptions of the Communist Threat to Southeast Asia and to Basic U.S. Interests,” Pentagon Papers, U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, A-50.

even a reason for mounting U.S.-Japanese tension before the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941.¹⁸² The Japanese had occupied the region and subsequently ousted the French government of Indochina in 1945 shortly before the end of the war in the Pacific. The end of the war created a power vacuum in which competing forces tried to fill. One such force was France attempting to reclaim a piece of its empire and in turn, its place as a great power. Competing with France was a movement comprised of the native Vietnamese who adhered to Communist-infused nationalism.

For the U.S., which saw Indochina as an important strategic location, Communism, represented by the Viet Minh, and European colonialism, represented by the French, were both undesirable options. The lesser of two evils became more apparent during the Truman administration as the Soviet Union, China, and international Communism came to be seen as the larger threat, while the U.S. attempted to minimize conflict with France regarding postwar designs for Europe. U.S. policy regarding Indochina was relatively undefined in 1949, but that changed significantly with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. In the eyes of the U.S., Indochina evolved “from an essentially local anticolonial struggle into a focal point of the Cold War.”¹⁸³

By 1952, the U.S. desired to “prevent the countries of Southeast Asia from passing into the Communist orbit.” Chinese intervention in Korea made the U.S. fear their involvement elsewhere. Such involvement would have, according to U.S. policy, “serious implications,”

¹⁸² Southeast Asia has been described as the “prime irritant in deteriorating U.S.-Japanese relations,” in Richard H. Immerman, “Perceptions by the United States of Its Interests in Indochina,” in *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955*, Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin eds., (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1990) 1-2.

¹⁸³ William Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 87.

meaning the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism, one country at a time.¹⁸⁴ President Truman believed that the U.S. was “seeing a pattern in Indochina... timed to coincide with the attack in Korea as a challenge to the Western world.”¹⁸⁵ The possibility of an armistice brought about fears that China would intervene in Indochina as it had in Korea. The U.S. viewed Indochina and Korea as similar—even simply as different fronts of the Cold War. After Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953, Secretary of State Dulles elaborated that “Indochina was more important than Korea because its loss could not be localized.”¹⁸⁶

The threat in Indochina was large enough for the U.S. to devote large sums of money to the French war effort there. An initial commitment of \$10 million was made in May 1950. Hostilities in Korea led U.S monetary aid to expand to \$107 million in fiscal year 1951.¹⁸⁷ The U.S. continued to back the French with money and materiel, but there was little to show as far as results and there did not appear to be any real alternatives. This caused aggravation in Washington, who was paying for 80 percent of the war by the spring of 1954.¹⁸⁸ As Eisenhower came into office, his administration inherited an “Indochina policy that was essentially without optimism and without ideas.”¹⁸⁹ The French needed a show of support from Eisenhower, and even suggested that the President-elect visit Indochina in 1952, during his famous trip to Korea. The government in Paris believed that “such a visit would have extremely favorable repercussions in France, and throughout Asia.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁴NSC 124/2 “U.S. Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia,” June 25, 1952, *FRUS 1952-1954, East Asia and the Pacific Vol. XII*, 127.

¹⁸⁵ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 380.

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Duiker, 135.

¹⁸⁷ Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 48.

¹⁸⁸ George Herring, “Franco-American Conflict in Indochina,” in Kaplan et. al., 40.

¹⁸⁹ Duiker, 128.

¹⁹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation between Alfred Gruenther and Minister Pleven, November 15, 1952 (Sent in a letter to Eisenhower the next day), John Foster Dulles Papers, 1951-1959, Subject Series, Box 8, DDEL.

As the U.S. monetary commitment grew, so did the desire for a higher degree of influence within the French war effort along with the desire to instill a more offensive-minded attitude. U.S. pressure appeared to be paying off in June 1953 when Joseph Laniel was elected French Prime Minister who backed a more aggressive strategy devised by the French commander in Indochina, General Henri Navarre. *Time* magazine branded Navarre as an “old cavalryman, with the cavalryman’s dislike of position warfare,” who had “no illusions of cheap successes or quick victory.”¹⁹¹ The Navarre Plan appeared sound enough and gained the support of the U.S. The plan called for strengthening of the indigenous Vietnamese National Army (VNA) and deploying fresh French battalions in order to conduct more aggressive operations throughout northern Vietnam. The Navarre Plan predicted military success in 1954 that would lead to military victory in 1955. However, it did not take long for events to go badly for the French and Americans. Late 1953 saw the Viet Minh invasion of neighboring Laos. This turn of events did not seem to reflect a war in which the French had control. The French effort under Navarre had arguably not changed in the eyes of the U.S. and “the situation was similar to last year’s campaign in which French Union Forces were widely dispersed and in defensive attitudes.”¹⁹² In January 1954, the U.S., Britain, France, and Soviet Union agreed to hold a conference in Geneva to settle the issues of the Korean and Indochina wars. The U.S. desired to see the Navarre plan through to military victory, but also feared that a war weary France would simply settle for any terms they could get at the upcoming Geneva Conference.

Coinciding with the Viet Minh invasion of Laos, the French launched Operation Castor, an airborne drop to occupy a northwestern area of Vietnam, in the valley of Dien Bien Phu in November 1953. Ronald Spector has argued that “the precise reasons,” as to why Navarre and

¹⁹¹ “The Battle of Indochina,” *Time*, September 28, 1953.

¹⁹² Office of Joint History, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina Crisis, 1947-1954* (hereafter cited as *JCS and Indochina*) (Washington: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004) 138.

the French chose this location “remain obscure.”¹⁹³ It appears that initially the French desired to occupy Dien Bien Phu in order that it serve as a “mooring point,” or base for offensive operations, using the valley’s small airstrip as its lifeline. Also, the French hoped that the occupation of Dien Bien Phu would allow them to block the prime invasion route to Laos or present a target that would tempt the Viet Minh to fight a conventional battle.

In January 1954 the U.S. revised its policy on Indochina. The change was embodied in the new document NSC 5405. Since Chinese intervention in Korea, the U.S. viewed the complications in Indochina not simply as a result of French ineptitude, but as Chinese meddling as well. In the event of overt and covert Chinese participation, which jeopardized the Tonkin region, the U.S. might be led (after consulting France, the Associated States, the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand) to take action. Potential action could include a request for the U.N. to “take whatever action may be necessary” against Communist China, possibly “without geographic limitations.” NSC 5405 also entertained the possibility that “expanded military action against Communist China” could be called for, and could involve air and naval action, in “conjunction with at least France and the U.K.,” against “all suitable military targets in China which directly contribute to the war in Indochina.”¹⁹⁴ The U.S. discussion of intervention reflected what it saw as the danger of the overall French military position.

Because of Dien Bien Phu’s distinction as a mooring point, defensive positions and combat engineering in general had been neglected. This would severely hurt the French as the mooring point became a fortress and the role shifted from offensive to defensive. French

¹⁹³ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1985) 183.

¹⁹⁴ NSC 5405, *FRUS 1952-1954, Indochina Vol. XIII*, 975-976.

reconnaissance patrols were being engaged by the enemy closer every day and after March 11, the French found themselves under siege.¹⁹⁵

Two days later, on March 13, the Viet Minh began their attack, which was the culmination of months of transporting supplies through hundreds of miles from supply bases near the Chinese border. This effort, managed by the Viet Minh Front Supply Commission, embodied the commission's motto "everything for the front, everything for victory."¹⁹⁶ Victory was not assured however, considering the Viet Minh experience of attacking French defensive positions. Similar attacks over the past several years had resulted in Viet Minh defeats with high casualties. An attack at Dien Bien Phu could benefit the French who favored a set piece battle.

After one day of fighting, the French had already lost one of their defensive strongpoints. By March 14, not only had Viet Minh anti-aircraft fire seriously complicated aircraft approach and landing, but all of Dien Bien Phu's local air support had been destroyed by the Viet Minh artillery that had crept far closer than the French had predicted it could.¹⁹⁷ Using human power, the Viet Minh transported disassembled artillery pieces to the surrounding heights around Dien Bien Phu, a feat that the French believed impossible. This turn of events was compounded by the ineffectiveness of the French counterbattery fire which led to the French artillery commander's suicide. After two days of fighting, the French were in a poor position and there was little room for optimism.

The scene in Washington exemplified a lack of optimism. The looming Geneva conference would be taking place in a little over a month and the last thing the French needed was a military setback. A French defeat at Dien Bien Phu before Geneva could jeopardize U.S.

¹⁹⁵ Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: the Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002) 87.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁹⁷ Fall, 141, 144; Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 168-175.

objectives in Indochina. A tenet of the New Look was to rely on indigenous forces abroad, in areas that were important to U.S. security interests. Although not authentically indigenous, the French served as local forces, as far as the U.S. was concerned because of the lack of progress in developing the indigenous Vietnamese National Army. It was of prime importance, therefore, to keep France fighting and to use all “feasible means to influence the French government and people against any conclusion of the struggle on terms inconsistent with basic U.S. objectives.”¹⁹⁸

After roughly a week of fighting, intelligence sources in Washington estimated the odds of a French victory at Dien Bien Phu were fifty-fifty. During the same week, the French had lost their three northern strongpoints and native T'ai troops allied to the French began to desert. Eisenhower described the scene in Paris as “not hopeful.”¹⁹⁹ It was against this backdrop that France sent its senior military official, General Paul Ely, to Washington to discuss the bleak situation one week after the Viet Minh began their assault. The Ely mission was interpreted differently by the U.S. and France and created confusion that would characterize the two countries' efforts for the duration of the Dien Bien Phu crisis. The U.S. believed that Ely had come to discuss broadening American assistance and therefore its role in Indochina. Paying for the majority of the war, this was something that U.S. officials wanted. However, the French saw the Ely mission partially as paving the way in American minds that a negotiated settlement could be a sound idea. In addition to additional material aid, Ely also requested the assurance of U.S. intervention should China become overtly involved.²⁰⁰

The French believed that Chinese intervention would occur through the air, with MiG's stationed at airfields in Southern China. Although the U.S. did not see Chinese aerial

¹⁹⁸ NSC 5405, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 974.

¹⁹⁹ Eisenhower, *Mandate*, 417.

²⁰⁰ Billings-Yun, 29-31.

intervention as a likely scenario, the French more than likely desired a guarantee of U.S. intervention as leverage at Geneva. On March 20, Ely had dinner with JCS chairman Radford, Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Allen Dulles, and Vice President Nixon. Ely, while acknowledging the bad news coming from Dien Bien Phu, maintained that there was still no reason to widen the war. Ely's personal views and the purpose of his trip would evolve. At this point, Ely appeared much more at ease than did his American colleagues.

Ely's counterpart Radford desired a more active role for the U.S. in Indochina, as well as an opportunity to test the New Look which implied the use of nuclear weapons as conventional armaments.²⁰¹ Nuclear weapons or airpower in general could be just what the French needed. Radford began to plant the idea that the U.S. might be willing to use airpower in situations not limited to combating Chinese MiG's. On March 23, Ely proposed to Radford the question that would exasperate the two allies—"Can direct intervention by U.S. aircraft be envisaged, and, if such is the case, how would it take place?" Lower level staff talks between the French command in Indochina and their American counterparts had occurred in the past, and it was Ely's desire to initiate "more precise studies and more detailed staff agreements."²⁰² The next day, in a conversation with Secretary Dulles, the President confided that he did not "wholly exclude the possibility of a single strike, if it were almost certain this would produce decisive results."²⁰³

In the meantime, the situation at Dien Bien Phu had become worse. The demoralized French commander, Colonel Christian de Castries, rarely left his bunker by the time of the Eisenhower-Dulles conversation on March 24, and de Castries' second-in-command, Lieutenant

²⁰¹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰² Memorandum by the Chairman of the French Chiefs of Staff to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 23 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1160.

²⁰³ Memorandum by the Secretary of State, 24 March 1954, Ibid., 1150.

Colonel Pierre Langlais had assumed informal command. While those in Washington probably did not know of this turn of events, they could sense the gravity of the situation and began seriously discussing the possibility of intervention. By the time of Ely's departure from the U.S., Admiral Radford had suggested that there existed the possibility of U.S. action against Viet Minh positions if the French were formally to request it.

In fact, Radford and the rest of the Special Committee on Indochina, which included Allen Dulles, Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roger Kyes, and White House advisor on Cold War Strategy, C.D. Jackson, had discussed U.S. intervention since the beginning of March. Eisenhower and the Special Committee had already decided in January to agree to a French request for air force technicians. The U.S. sent roughly two hundred mechanics to Indochina and received assurances from the French that they would not be subject to capture. This news was not popular in the U.S., where many opposed Eisenhower's sending the mechanics without Congressional approval, as well as the belief that it would lead to ground troops entering the war. The President publicly commented, "I will say this, there is going to be no involvement of America in war unless it is a result of the constitutional process that is placed upon Congress to declare it. Now let us have that clear; and that is the answer."²⁰⁴ After this controversy had died down, Eisenhower wrote "[i]t seems incredible that a nation which had only the help of a tiny British army when it turned back the German flood in 1914 and withstood the gigantic 1916 attacks at Verdun could now be reduced to the point that she cannot produce a few hundred technicians to keep planes flying properly in Indo-China."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Eisenhower Public Papers, 1954, quoted in John Prados, 70.

²⁰⁵ Letter from Eisenhower to Alfred Gruenther, 26 April 1954, Papers as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File) NSC series, box 5.

For the U.S., the wheels for possible intervention had been in motion even before Ely visited Washington. On February 15, the U.S. Navy's Carrier Division 3, of the Seventh Fleet, was ordered to the Philippines in order to conduct training exercises or to assist the French if needed. On March 19, one day before Ely arrived in Washington, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Robert Carney, ordered Vice Admiral William Phillips in the Philippines, to "maintain a twelve hour alert and prepare to steam near the entrance to the Gulf of Tonkin," in order to be able to support the French on three hours' notice. Admiral Carney, knowing the sensitive nature of this move stressed:

Although there is no approved plan nor even any tentative plan for intervention in Indochina, authorities here including Secretary Dulles are aware of the potential critical military situation in Indochina and the possible implications of serious French reversals. There is an approved expression of national policy recognizing the grave consequences that could result from loss of Indochina to the Communists.²⁰⁶

Back in Washington, Admiral Radford informed Secretary Dulles of the recent naval developments. Eisenhower was briefed on the capabilities of the carriers on March 20. Carney ordered that, although there had been no offensive operations authorized, the force in the Philippines should "be placed in a position to support the defenders of Dien Bien Phu." The carrier striking group set out on March 22, allegedly for routine training, equipped with high-frequency radios, that could receive communications from the French if needed. At this time, talks also began between the Navy Pacific Fleet's staff and Army General Thomas Trapnell, who headed the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) for Indochina. The two parties held confidential discussions in order to deal with preparations for air support for the French.²⁰⁷ In Washington, Radford, Eisenhower and the Defense Department agreed to meet

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Edwin B. Hooper, Dean Allard, and Oscar Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict Volume I: Setting the Stage* (Washington: Naval Historical Division, Department of the Navy, 1976) 247.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

requests from the French government for additional aircraft, although it was “believed that the real problem [in Indochina] was French failure to make efficient use of the aircraft they had.” Aside from material needs, Ely pressed the issue of American support in the event of Chinese intervention through the air with the Secretary of State. Dulles expressed that the “American reaction would depend upon the circumstances.”²⁰⁸

On March 24, Radford wrote to Eisenhower regarding his ongoing discussions with Ely, and how the general expressed pessimism over the French position overall—not only on Dien Bien Phu. Ely now told Radford that “military successes but not total military victory were to be expected in 1954-55.” He went on to state that what France required for victory were “resources greatly in excess of those which France can supply.” Radford, who adhered to the tenet that the loss of Indochina could lead to the loss of all of Southeast Asia, believed that action should be taken, telling the President, “if this [a French defeat and Communist control of Southeast Asia] is to be avoided, I consider that the U.S. must be prepared to act promptly and in force to a frantic and belated request by the French for U.S. intervention.”²⁰⁹ Radford questioned Ely whether he believed the French government would request U.S. involvement in the event of Chinese aerial intervention. He also stated that planning for U.S. participation in Indochina, in the form of dispatching carrier aircraft, had begun, but the decision had to be made on a higher level. Radford said that the Chinese reaction would have to be considered but that if and when the decision was made, the U.S. had the ability to unleash 350 carrier aircraft within two days of deciding.

The National Security Council met on March 25 to discuss the deteriorating situation at Dien Bien Phu. While no decisions were made, it was argued that the likelihood of Chinese

²⁰⁸ *JCS and Indochina*, 153.

²⁰⁹ Memorandum by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President, 24 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1159.

aerial intervention was unlikely, and that even if it occurred, Congressional approval would be needed for the U.S. to respond militarily. The NSC planning board was given the task of studying the “extent to which and the circumstances and conditions under which the United States would be willing to commit its resources in support of the Associated States in the effort to prevent the loss of Indochina to the Communists.” The questions and issues that had been addressed at the beginning of the year, in the form of NSC 5405, now had to be confronted head on. The problem of Indochina that the Eisenhower administration faced in the spring of 1954 was similar to the problem it faced during the Korean War in 1953. Could U.S. expansion of the conflict bring about the desired results, or would it result in the outbreak of general war with China, and perhaps even the Soviet Union? Could a conventional airstrike, or one that involved the use of tactical nuclear weapons, be a simple solution to a complex question? Civilian and military officials would have to weigh the same factors that they had weighed in Korea, and apply them to this new situation.

By March 25, the battle at Dien Bien Phu had taken a turn for the worse for the French. The Viet Minh had dragged their artillery close enough to make landing on the small airstrip virtually impossible, an event that dictated a costly French counterattack. Ely went back to France believing that an American airstrike was only a request away, and that it would be a one-time mission to reverse the French fortunes at Dien Bien Phu. While Radford believed that intervention would be “the obvious answer to the problems of France and the Associated States” at Geneva, he realized it would take more than simply a French request for the U.S. to authorize military action. He also disagreed with Ely, fundamentally, on what the airstrike was to be.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ *From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: the Memoirs of Arthur W. Radford*, ed. Stephen Jurika (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1980) 417.

For Radford, a bombing mission “should be the first step in an increasing role in the war.”²¹¹

Unfortunately, Ely left for Paris believing that the two allies had “reached complete accord on all matters.”²¹²

During the March 25 NSC meeting, Eisenhower had already begun to discuss the conditions for U.S. intervention. These conditions included a formal French request, other nations willing to join the effort, and Congressional approval. Eisenhower believed that the U.S. should stick to the principles of the New Look, relying on monetary aid and indigenous soldiers to fight a war in Asia, and was non-committal regarding direct U.S. involvement. On March 29, Secretary Dulles publicly mentioned the possibility of U.S. intervention if it was part of united action. A partner whom the U.S. considered vital to united action was Britain, which was not altogether turned off by the idea. It was far more pessimistic about French chances and lacked any political support for such a venture. The British believed that the French loss of Indochina could have negative repercussions in Southeast Asia, but were ultimately too concerned about their stake in Malaya to favor united action to assist the French.²¹³ The French, on the other hand, disliked the idea of their allies having a stake in Indochina, where the French were ultimately fighting to maintain hegemony despite promises to the U.S. of “perfecting” Vietnamese independence. In the same speech Dulles, using the language of the New Look, said that “recent statements have been designed to impress upon potential aggressors that aggression

²¹¹ *JCS and Indochina*, 155.

²¹² In Paul Ely, *L'Indochine dans la Tourmente*, quoted in Billings-Yun, 35.

²¹³ While not inherently opposed to forming a long-term collective security arrangement for Southeast Asia, the British were fearful that the U.S. might simply use such a coalition for immediate military intervention—something that the British feared would jeopardize the upcoming Geneva Conference. Geoffrey Warner, “Britain and the Crisis over Dien Bien Phu, April 1954: The Failure of United Action,” in Kaplan et al., 55-77.

might lead to action in places and by means of free world choosing, so that aggression would cost more than it could gain.”²¹⁴

On the same day that Dulles was publicly calling for united action, Ely and his colleagues in Paris were discussing their options. Ely addressed the Committee of National Defense, and said that he believed that an airstrike around Dien Bien Phu would be effective and that Chinese intervention in response was unlikely. The committee remained undecided and sent Ely’s aide, Colonel Raymond Brohon, to Indochina, to discuss with General Navarre the possibility of an airstrike, now codenamed “Operation Vulture” by the French.²¹⁵

What form would “Vulture” take? Late March and early April would introduce what would be called the “nuclear threads” to the issue of American intervention. Would the U.S. provide an airstrike of several hundred tons of bombs on the entrenched Viet Minh, or would “new weapons” be employed? In essence, the question of intervention and its nuclear threads provided the “first operational test” for the New Look.²¹⁶ One account states that by the end of March, the French feared a “violent reaction on the part of China” because Vulture was no longer a mission that would drop “five hundred tons of bombs, but several A-bombs intended to wipe out the besiegers.”²¹⁷ Navarre’s aide, Major Jean Pouget, rejects this story, claiming that a discussion of the use of nuclear weapons did not take place “even under a veiled form.”²¹⁸ Regardless, the U.S. completed a study on March 25 which “concluded that atomic weapons could be used to relieve the beleaguered garrison at Dien Bien Phu in a number of ways,

²¹⁴ Speech to the Overseas Press Club of America, March 29, 1954, in Allan Cameron ed., *The Viet-Nam Crisis: A Documentary History Volume I: 1940-1956* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971) 235.

²¹⁵ “Vautour” in French.

²¹⁶ Presenting Dien Bien Phu as the “first operational test” of the New Look as well as the term “nuclear threads,” are found in Bundy, 260-261.

²¹⁷ Roy, 203.

²¹⁸ In Jean Pouget, *Nous étions à Dien-Bien-Phu*, quoted in Fall, 378.

including bombing of the besieging Viet Minh, of areas intentionally abandoned by Viet Minh, and of supply base areas serving the Viet Minh forces around Dien Bien Phu.”²¹⁹

The proactive Admiral Radford remained busy in Washington. On March 31, the JCS Chairman called a meeting of the to make a case for intervention. Every other member expressed their opposition to intervention, believing that Dien Bien Phu was a lost cause, that aerial intervention would lead to the involvement of ground troops, or a combination of the two. Ridgway was adamant that Vietnam in general “was devoid of decisive military objectives.”²²⁰ To prove his point, Ridgway ordered a study that took into account roads and harbors for logistics, as well as terrain to get a true picture of what intervention would ultimately entail. He later commented, “we very nearly found ourselves involved in a bloody jungle war in which our nuclear capability would have been almost useless.”²²¹ Over lunch on April 1, Eisenhower brought up the possibility of sending carrier aircraft to save Dien Bien Phu. However, the President concluded that “of course, if we did, we’d have to deny it forever.”²²²

The situation at Dien Bien Phu continued to deteriorate for the U.S. ally. On April 1, the French Union forces, who continued to resist the Viet Minh onslaught, did so by expending around 4,500 rounds of artillery. This became more problematic when the majority of the ammunition that had been paradropped that day by the French, “fell into enemy hands and twenty-five percent of the air resupply missions aborted.”²²³ However, the Viet Minh threatened to take critical portions of strongpoint “Huguette,” which would, in essence, cut off the French from their lifeline, the airstrip.

²¹⁹ Spector, 210.

²²⁰ Ibid., 213.

²²¹ *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1956)

²²² Prados, 89-90; Duiker, 159.

²²³ Fall, 211-213.

The same day in Hanoi, there convened a meeting of the Restricted War Committee, which included Colonel Brohon; General Navarre, Commander of French forces in Tonkin, René Cogny; Navarre's Deputy, General Pierre Bodet; and Commissioner General in Indochina, Maurice Dejean. According to Jules Roy, the Committee discussed the complications of nuclear weapons being implemented in Operation Vulture. Surprisingly, this account states that such a mission, as discussed by the Council, was not to target Communist supply depots or logistic networks that were miles away. Instead, a tactical nuclear strike would aim for as "close as possible to the center of resistance." Obviously, even the smaller yields of tactical nuclear weapons would cause serious problems for the defenders compounded with the fact that the Dien Bien Phu was located in a valley where radioactivity would be a concern. By this time, the Viet Minh were using a network of trenches to surround and strangle the various French strongpoints, and their artillery was entrenched on the surrounding hills. The Viet Minh position led the Restricted War Committee to ask the question that the U.S. had dealt with in Korea: how effective would a nuclear strike (much less a conventional one) be upon a well-entrenched enemy? Another issue that the French had to address was the response of China to U.S. intervention and whether "the game of diplomatic complications that would inevitably follow," be worth the risk.²²⁴ After discussing these issues, the Committee members parted without making a decision.

The following day, Navarre, after weighing his options, replied to Paris that he did not believe that Operation Vulture should be pursued because of the possibility of Chinese retaliation. The attitude in Washington regarding the fate of Dien Bien Phu was pessimistic. On April 2, in a meeting with the President, Dulles, and Secretary of Defense Wilson, Radford expressed his opinion that the outcome of the siege "would be determined in a matter of hours,"

²²⁴ Roy, 213.

and added that if Dien Bien Phu fell, the situation might “call for more active U.S. intervention.” During the same meeting, Secretary Dulles, discussing a possible congressional joint resolution that would authorize U.S. involvement in Indochina, stated that he “thought that there might be some difference in approach” on the purpose of the resolution. Dulles regarded the resolution as “a deterrent,” designed to give the U.S. “a strong position with which to develop strength in the area,” providing a united front with France, the Associated States, Thailand, Indonesia, the UK, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. Dulles believed that Radford viewed the resolution “as something to be immediately used in some ‘strike’ and irrespective of any prior development of an adequate measure of allied unity.”²²⁵ Later that day, on the authority of Secretary of Defense Wilson, Radford called another meeting of the JCS to address the question of how the U.S. was to respond in the event that France formally requested American intervention. General Ridgway and Marine Commandant Lemuel Shepherd remained fundamentally opposed to intervention while “Admiral Robert Carney [was] ambivalent and General Nathan Twining [gave] his qualified approval.”²²⁶

In a memo to Radford, Shepherd wrote that intervention by air “would be an unprofitable adventure. If I could convince myself that such intervention—on any scale now available to us—would turn the tide of military victory in favor of the French I would hold an entirely different opinion despite the hazards and uncertainties attending such a course.” He later added “[i]t follows that action by our air forces in Indochina, if initiated today, would be taken in the face of impending disaster and holds no significant promise of success.”²²⁷

²²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation with the President, April 2, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1210-1211.

²²⁶ Duiker, 160; *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1220-1223.

²²⁷ Memorandum for Radford, Twining, Ridgway, and Carney, April 2, 1954, Folder 091 Indochina (April), RG 218 Chairman’s File Admiral Radford 1953-1957, 091 Indochina (1953) to 091 Indochina (July-December 1954), Box 19, NA.

The next day, Secretary Dulles, Admiral Radford, and Congressional leaders met to discuss the possible use of U.S. air and sea power in Indochina. Radford briefed the group on a plan to use carrier-based forces from the carriers U.S.S. *Essex* and U.S.S. *Boxer* reinforced from Air Force units located in the Philippines. The consensus among the Congressional leaders was that allied approval was essential for an act as serious as intervention. In a conversation with Eisenhower later that day, Dulles argued that “Congress would be quite prepared to go along with some vigorous action if we were not doing it alone.” Congress also believed that the “people in the area” should be involved, not simply Western powers. Eisenhower and Dulles agreed with this idea and the President added that “you can’t go in and win unless the people want you. The French could win in six months if the people were with them.” All talk of intervention on the part of the U.S. still envisioned a conventional airstrike but that would change. The Congressional leaders all agreed that they desired no more “Koreas.”

In Paris on April 4, Colonel Brohon, who had just returned from Hanoi, met with General Ely to discuss Navarre’s rejection of Operation Vulture. During the meeting, a message arrived from Navarre in Indochina, saying that he now favored the air mission and believed it should be carried out in six to eight days. This turn of events caused Ely to call an emergency meeting of the Restricted War Committee. The committee concluded that Operation Vulture was now necessary, “provided, to quote the words used by General Navarre in his telegram, it was prompt and massive.”²²⁸ At one in the morning Paris time, U.S. Ambassador in Paris, Douglas Dillon, cabled Washington. Having already spoken to Prime Minister Laniel and Foreign Minister Bidault, Dillon wrote that “[t]hey said that immediate armed intervention of U.S. carrier aircraft at Dien Bien Phu is now necessary to save the situation.” Dillon’s message also contained an update from Navarre, who described the battle at Dien Bien Phu as being “in a state of precarious

²²⁸ Roy, 221.

equilibrium.” The French hoped to sway American thinking on intervention by arguing that the Communist effort at Dien Bien Phu was being substantially helped by the Chinese. Chinese intervention, according to the French, was “fully established” because of Chinese technical advisors, telephone operators, supply truck drivers, as well as actual soldiers manning anti-aircraft guns.²²⁹

During the first week of April, the Navy’s Task Force 70 of the Seventh Fleet was still in the Gulf of Tonkin conducting reconnaissance and prepared to act if word came from above. The task force had originally been scheduled to return at the end of March, but Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), Admiral Felix Stump, granted a request that delayed its redeployment by two weeks.²³⁰ According to Jules Roy, “the two aircraft carriers of the Seventh Fleet,” meaning the *Essex* and *Boxer* of Task Force 70, “were equipped with A-bombs” and “cruising in the Gulf of Tonkin.”²³¹

The battle at Dien Bien Phu continued to rage. April 3-6 saw the Viet Minh assault stronghold “Huguette,” which directly overlooked the French airstrip. The casualties were high on both sides, but for the French the losses were irreplaceable. The French effort had repelled the second Viet Minh offensive, and technically won, but the victory had come at a price that seriously endangered the French strategic position.²³²

On April 5 in London, Prime Minister Churchill received a message from Eisenhower regarding the creation of a united front on Southeast Asia, one that would “make clear to the Chinese Communists that the continuation of their material support to the Viet Minh will

²²⁹ The Ambassador of France to the Department of State, Paris, April 5, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1236-1237.

²³⁰ Hooper et al., 249.

²³¹ Roy, 222. This claim is unconfirmed.

²³² Fall, 218-224.

inevitably lead to the growing power of the forces arrayed against them.”²³³ The British, who wished to avoid any conflict that would threaten a solution at the Geneva Conference, were wary of the efficacy of such a move and, in the words of British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, “would not be hustled into injudicious military decisions.”²³⁴

In Washington, the National Security Council met on April 6 to discuss the possibility of U.S. intervention in Indochina “in the event that there was no other means of saving the area from Communist control.” While the intelligence community disagreed about the chances of overt Chinese intervention, C.I.A. director Allen Dulles stated that the chances “were very significant and should be taken into consideration in the Council’s deliberations.” Dulles and Admiral Radford also dismissed French claims that Chinese personnel were actively participating in the assault or operating anti-aircraft guns. The President emphasized that “there was no possibility whatever of U.S. unilateral intervention in Indochina.” Secretary Dulles added to this, saying “it would be impossible to get Congressional authorization for unilateral action.” He would later add during the meeting that he did not believe that the U.S. situation was, fundamentally, about a “decision to intervene with military forces in Indochina.” Rather, Dulles felt that the U.S. should make the “effort to build up strength in the Southeast Asia area to such a point that military intervention might prove unnecessary.” Vice-President Nixon agreed that a coalition could be an effective means to prevent aggression but that the problem that faced Indochina was one of internal subversion. From a military perspective, Admiral Radford gave his “personal view that the French stood a very good chance of losing the battle at Dien Bien Phu and that the consequences were very hard to predict.” He also passed along the point of view held by Prime Minister Laniel and Foreign Minister Bidault, “that the fate of Indochina rested on

²³³ *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1240.

²³⁴ *Full Circle: the Memoirs of Anthony Eden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 104.

the outcome of the battle at Dien Bien Phu.”²³⁵ Although a small percentage of French Union troops were fighting in the besieged valley, the battle had developed into something greater than its military worth. Eisenhower and his advisors in Washington “recognized that while the location of Dien Bien Phu was of minor military significance, the far reaching psychological effects which the loss of this garrison of fine troops might have on the French would be serious.”²³⁶

The same day, Secretary Dulles passed a message to the French government through U.S. ambassador Dillon, in an attempt to downplay the psychological aspect of the current fighting in Indochina. Dulles communicated the mindset of the “military advisors” in Washington, saying they “see no reason why the fate of all of Indochina should be decided in ten days at Dien Bien Phu since this battle must be greatly exhausting to the military potential of the enemy.” On a side note, exclusively for Dillon, Dulles referenced a recent French request for a loan of ten to twenty B-29’s, along with U.S. mechanics. Dulles called the use of B-29’s “impractical,” but that “the military may recommend an alternative offer of light planes,” and that the “matter is still under study.”²³⁷ The French request would later be rejected by the NSC.

Another nuclear thread emerged in a memo from Admiral Radford’s assistant to Secretary Dulles that was to be “on a most confidential basis.” The memo reflected a much more extreme response to the Dien Bien Phu crisis:

The ‘advance study group’ in the Pentagon has been making an estimate of whether atomic weapons could be used to clean up the Vietminh in the Dien Bien Phu area. It has reached the conclusion that three tactical A-weapons, properly employed, would be sufficient to smash the Vietminh effort there.

This study in turn raised in Admiral Radford’s mind the question of whether in the event of establishment of a coalition in Southeast Asia, in which the U.S. participates and

²³⁵ Memorandum of Discussion at Meeting of the NSC, April 6, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1250-1260.

²³⁶ Eisenhower, *Mandate*, 411-412.

²³⁷ Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, April 6, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1268-1269.

commits forces, we could use atomic weapons on the Vietminh if this seemed the best means of smashing them and cleaning up Indochina.

In the event we are successful in forming a coalition in Southeast Asia, Admiral Radford wondered whether we could not go to the French and get their approval for using atomic weapons in Indochina if this became necessary when the coalition was participating in operations. His feeling was that if we could get French acceptance of the principle of the use of such weapons, the whole conception of gaining acceptance of their use would be assisted. Furthermore, if we got French approval in principle after the coalition was formed but before we actively committed forces to Indochina, we could later use such weapons when our forces (air) were engaged.

Douglas MacArthur II, who drafted the memo, stated his personal opinion that “the French government would not agree or accept the responsibility for using an A-bomb.” He added that simply approaching the French for such an operation “would in turn cause a great hue and cry throughout the parliaments of the free world, and particularly among some of our NATO allies, notably the U.K.” Another implication was that the image of the U.S. would inevitably be viewed as reckless, and “many elements in the free world would portray our desire to use such weapons in Indochina as proof of the fact that we were testing out weapons on native peoples and were in fact prepared to act irresponsibly and drop weapons of mass destruction on the Soviet Union whenever we believed it was necessary to do so.”²³⁸ Radford’s aggressive tone in this memo confirmed Dulles’ suspicions, that Radford was seeking not simply a deterrent against aggression but a pretext for escalation

In a conversation with Ambassador Dillon that morning in Paris, Bidault expressed what the U.S. already knew—Dien Bien Phu had come to symbolize the entire war to the Vietnamese, General Navarre, and to the citizens of France. If the battle were lost to the Communists, Bidault

²³⁸ Memorandum by the Counselor (MacArthur) to the Secretary of State, April 7, 1954, *Ibid.*, 1270-1271. Douglas MacArthur II was the nephew of General Douglas MacArthur, the former Far East Commander and UN Commander in Korea.

added “it would be an irreparable blow to Vietnamese morale and probably also to Navarre’s morale and to French public opinion.”²³⁹

The gravity of the situation in Indochina was not lost on those in Washington. Eisenhower remained committed to collective security in Southeast Asia, and favored a coalition to defend the region even if Indochina fell to the Communists. France, on the other hand, favored unilateral intervention because of expediency and the desire to protect its colonial interests, which would be threatened if more nations had a stake in Indochina.

A study dated April 8, completed by the G-3 Plans Division, envisioned “Navy carrier aircraft during daylight against Viet Minh positions around Dien Bien Phu” employing from one to six 31-kiloton atomic weapons. The study concluded that incorporating atomic weapons like this could have positive tactical and strategic results. According to Ronald Spector, not all who read the study agreed with its conclusions, arguing that even a heavy, conventional bombing mission would do little good against a dispersed and entrenched force. Soviet and Chinese reaction, as well as loss of support from allies and Asian nations were seen as considerable downsides by those to whom the study was forwarded.²⁴⁰

The fighting at Dien Bien Phu was relatively quiet on April 13, but that did not mean that the French would be spared bad news. The previous night, a supply mission gone awry had missed its target, meaning the French would not be receiving five plane-loads of ammunition.²⁴¹ Although intervention appeared to have hit a snag with Eisenhower’s insistence on united action and Britain’s refusal to go along, ideas for military action in Indochina were still circulating in Washington. On the 13th, Radford wrote a memo to Secretary of Defense Wilson, conveying his thoughts on intervention. The atomic option was still viable according to the Chairman of the

²³⁹ The Ambassador in France to the Department of State, April 7, 1954, *Ibid.*, 1272-1273.

²⁴⁰ Spector, 200-201. The G-3 Plans Division also conducted the study of March 25.

²⁴¹ Fall, 242.

JCS. “U.S. Naval and Air Forces with the use of atomic capacities, as may be appropriate, plus U.S. ground forces,” Radford argued, “would constitute the most suitable U.S. contribution to collective action in Indochina.” Radford was thinking on a large scale, including allies and atomic weapons. He viewed the problems of Indochina in the context of its more powerful neighbor to the north, stating “a point of transcendent importance,” was “to make suitable provision for carrying the war to Communist China, itself, in the event that such action becomes necessary.” Referring to this, Radford added that “preparations should include: to maintain immediate readiness to neutralize the sources of Communist power in the Far East by U.S. air and naval action, employing atomic weapons as appropriate, against Communist China.”²⁴²

Radford was not the only member of the JCS who entertained the idea of an atomic strike to solve the crisis in Indochina. General Twining, who gave his qualified approval of intervention on April 2, later elaborated on his position in an oral history interview:

There was only one way to save [Dien Bien Phu] that late and Radford and I were the only ones that agreed. We didn't want to bomb the mainland of China—the whole area. But what we thought would be—and I still think it would have been a good idea—was to take three small tactical A-bombs—it's a fairly isolated area; Dien Bien Phu—no great towns around there, only Communists and their supplies. You could take all day to drop a bomb, make sure you put it in the right place. No opposition. And clean those commies out of there and they could play the “Marseillaise” and the French would come marching out of Dien Bien Phu in fine shape. And those Commies would say “Well, those guys may do this again to us. We'd better be careful.” We might not have had this problem we're facing in Vietnam now had we dropped these small “A” weapons...I don't think that three small A-bombs placed properly would have caused too much trouble or set a precedent, but it would have taught those Chinese a good lesson, we would have saved the French, and perhaps our present difficulties in Southeast Asia could have been avoided.²⁴³

An episode that possibly complicated the diplomatic wrangling between the U.S. and France was Dulles' alleged offer of atomic weapons to France in a conversation to Bidault in

²⁴² Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, April 13, 1954, RG 218 Chairman's File Admiral Radford, 1953-1957, 091 Indochina (1953) to 091 Indochina (July-December) Box 10, NA.

²⁴³ Quoted in Bundy, 267.

April. It was assumed by MacArthur that Radford would discuss the April 7 planning board study with Dulles and the most likely date of this discussion was April 20 in a meeting that included Secretary of Defense Wilson.²⁴⁴ Dulles, who later denied any such offer, admitted that Bidault may have misunderstood what he was trying to say during a meeting of NATO officials in Paris on April 23, where nuclear weapons were being discussed. Although Dulles spoke good French and Bidault was a former English teacher, there possibly was a legitimate misunderstanding due to Bidault's exhausted mental state and the likelihood that Dulles mentioned atomic weapons without ever making an actual offer.²⁴⁵

On April 20, head of U.S. Far East Air Force (FEAF) Bomber Command, General Joseph Caldara, arrived in Saigon to discuss with Navarre's staff the particulars of a bombing mission for Dien Bien Phu. The Caldara mission envisioned a conventional rather than atomic strike, but precision remained important because of the close proximity of the Viet Minh to the French defenders. After several days of planning and reconnaissance (some of the missions flown by Caldara himself) plans were completed for the evolving Operation Vulture. The plan, which took into account the entrenched nature of the Viet Minh, called for ninety-eight B-29's, carrying fourteen tons of bombs each and taking a route that would minimize the chance of contact with Chinese fighters, to hit Dien Bien Phu. This mission, in Caldara's estimation "could have effectively destroyed the entire enemy force."²⁴⁶ Operation Vulture, however, was running into various forms of resistance in Paris, London, and Washington.

²⁴⁴ See note in *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1272; Bundy, 268.

²⁴⁵ Adding to the confusion is Bidault's claim that the Dulles offer occurred April 14 which is unlikely due to the probability that Dulles had not been informed of the planning board study yet. See Fall, 306-307. Bundy calls Bidault's memoirs "bitter and polemical," and "not convincing in detail." Bundy concludes that while Dulles probably never actually offered Bidault atomic weapons, "[a]t the very least he said enough to create a misunderstanding," and "it is hard to believe that nothing at all was said." Bundy, 268-269. George Herring and Richard Immerman call Bidault's claim "highly implausible." In Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dien Bien Phu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," Kaplan, et al., 92.

²⁴⁶ Prados, 146-147.

The day before the NATO meeting, Bidault made another request for U.S. intervention, which was seemed unlikely at this point. On April 24, Dulles told Bidault that an airstrike would mean “active U.S. belligerency,” which would require Congressional approval, something that was unlikely without united action. Dulles also added that the losses inflicted on the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu would ultimately favor the French. During his time in Paris, Dulles spoke with British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden about organizing a united front before Geneva. If the British approved, intervention could be authorized. Eden “frankly did not believe that conditions in Indo-China could be remedied by outside intervention alone at this hour, even if help were immediately available.”²⁴⁷ It only took until April 25 for Washington to receive the official “no” from London, ending any thoughts of British participation.

British refusal to go along with united action hampered, but did not end American thoughts of intervention. The U.S. looked at the possibility of joining a regional alliance that included France and the Associated States of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Intervention brought up the question of whether the U.S. should consider using “new weapons” if such weapons could be loaned to the French, and what the Chinese reaction would be if such weapons were used. One view argued that deterrence in relation to China would be strengthened if new weapons were used while the U.S. had superiority in that field, but that refusal to use them while maintaining that superiority would have the opposite effect. It was Eisenhower’s opinion that atomic weapons would be of little use in the jungles of Indochina, that loaning the French new weapons was a possibility, but that a public declaration of the U.S. response to Chinese aggression was the “important deterrent.”²⁴⁸ Despite these new ideas which were being thrown

²⁴⁷ Eden, 113.

²⁴⁸ *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. XIII*, 1447-1448.

around in late April, the possibility of intervention lost momentum after the British refusal to go along. On May 7, Dien Bien Phu fell after fifty-five days of fighting.

Even after the fall of Dien Bien Phu intervention remained an option for the U.S., but Dulles commented that it “might involve consequences of the utmost gravity. Reactions of Communist bloc could not be predicted.”²⁴⁹ The JCS attempted to clarify the role of the military should intervention be approved. Naturally, agreement with the French regarding command structure would have to be reached and the JCS also promoted an expanded training program for Vietnamese troops. One assumption that the JCS made was that “atomic weapons will be used whenever it is to our advantage.” It seems clear that the U.S. did not want to hamstring itself if it decided to pursue military action in concert with the French in Indochina. The hypotheticals of intervention and the possibility of using atomic weapons died with the collapse of the Laniel government in June. Succeeding Laniel was Pierre Mendes France who pledged to negotiate with the Communists at Geneva and end the war in Indochina, thus ending U.S. thoughts of escalation for the time being. As in previous crises, U.S. planners found that atomic weapons were no substitute for diplomacy.

²⁴⁹ Secretary of State to Embassy in France, May 11, 1954, *Ibid.*, 1535.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The one place where the bomb may have served American interests was at the negotiating table at Geneva. It is impossible to know how nuclear weapons entered into Communist calculations, but the attitude of U.S. allies is worth noting. Anthony Eden and the British were clear in their opposition to U.S. intervention. It is possible that the British believed that escalation in Indochina could lead to nuclear war, in which they would be caught in the middle. Days before the French forces surrendered, at a meeting in the White House, Dulles said that he “found the British, and particularly Churchill, scared to death by the specter of nuclear bombs in the hands of the Russians.”²⁵⁰ Dulles attributed the British fear to Radford’s aggressiveness. The British fear of a nuclear war may have had different roots. At the Bikini atoll in early March, the U.S. had tested a fifteen megaton nuclear device, which Churchill would say was “out of all comparison with everything else.”²⁵¹ Of course, it was not solely the bomb that made the Churchill and Eden unenthusiastic about direct support for the French in Indochina. Churchill had already made the point that after giving up India, the British people would not support France in clinging to its colonial possessions.

The ambiguity of the U.S. position regarding intervention and nuclear weapons may have helped at Geneva. That the Communists were willing to accept a partition of Vietnam is surprising given their situation. It is even more so when considering that the option of partition was closer to the French opening position than it was to that of the Viet Minh. It is interesting that the Soviets and Chinese were willing to accept this, but it is possible that they, like the British, feared an expansion of the conflict. Both sides at Geneva feared the uncertainties that

²⁵⁰ Memorandum of conference at the White House, May 5, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. 13*, 1467.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Bundy, 271.

would be created by a general war rising out of the tensions in Indochina. Conceivably, “of those uncertainties [in the minds of the Chinese and Soviets] the most important were the possible reactions of the Americans.”²⁵²

Neither Korea nor Dien Bien Phu was destined to be the proving ground for nuclear weapons post-World War II. In Korea, as the first postwar conflict for the U.S., it appears only natural that nuclear weapons would at least be debated. In a war in which the objective changed from unification under a non-Communist government to the status quo ante and in which the number of U.S. killed seems unfathomable today, nuclear weapons could easily be seen as a quick, simple way to end the fighting. In NSC debates, however, nuclear weapons created more problems than they solved. They did not offer strategic superiority for the occasion. Indochina, in particular, provided a unique situation that the New Look was not fully prepared to address. It did not take Eisenhower by surprise because he realized that any security policy, including the New Look, was not a perfect policy but one designed to meet America’s security interests for the “long haul.” In another sense the problems of Indochina were addressed by the New Look by attempting to rely on allied, instead of U.S. troops, around the globe. When the ally in Indochina faltered and threatened to lose an area that had been deemed vital to U.S. interests, various options for improving the military situation were explored. It was a scenario in which the U.S. explored ways to implement massive retaliation but disregarded such ideas for practical purposes. Despite the studies that discussed nuclear weapons in Indochina, and those in high places who might have favored it like Radford and even Twining, nuclear escalation, which was often tied to intervention, was not seriously considered by Eisenhower.

This was the same president, along with Dulles, who had argued roughly a year earlier that the taboo surrounding nuclear weapons needed to be removed. Eisenhower made comments

²⁵² Ibid., 272.

like this when contemplating the end of the Korean War, and before the New Look had become official policy. His statements regarding Korea appear more aggressive and it is clear that he viewed the two conflicts as fundamentally different—which they were. Eisenhower showed little enthusiasm for any kind of intervention and this probably reflected his understanding of how Korea and Indochina differed.²⁵³ During the Dien Bien Phu crisis it was Eisenhower (and even Dulles to a degree) who played the role of dove, and restrained the hawk Radford, who, in the words of a British diplomat, was “obviously raring for a scrap.”²⁵⁴

The differences between Korea and Indochina were relatively clear in 1954. In the former, North Korea launched a conventional invasion of a nation with U.S. ties. Although early post-World War II war plans envisioned letting South Korea fend for itself with the initiation of hostilities, the U.S. intervened in an attempt to halt Communist aggression. In the latter, there existed a Communist insurgency, supplied by Communist China, that threatened the French position and U.S. interests.

In both conflicts, Eisenhower and those around him considered and debated the use of nuclear weapons. In both instances it was possible that nuclear weapons could produce favorable results on the battlefield. However, such weapons were ultimately determined to be impractical and ill-suited for the situation. The U.S. took into account the many consequences of the use of nuclear weapons and, in the case of Dien Bien Phu, even decided against a conventional bombing mission. It is understandable why the U.S. chose to do nothing as the Indochina crisis became more dire during April and May when one considers the adoption of the New Look. The U.S., attempting to rely to the greatest extent on the local troops of its allies, was obviously wary of intervening in another war in Asia. Although it debated intervention and

²⁵³ Betts, 50.

²⁵⁴ Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh telegram, quoted in Warner, “Failure of United Action,” in Kaplan et al., 71.

nuclear weapons, the Eisenhower administration's decision to sit by and let developments in Indochina play out make sense when viewed in the greater context of the New Look. Eisenhower's seeming inaction is understandable when looking at U.S. defense policy as a whole, despite the doctrine of massive retaliation. Eisenhower knew that military force and policy were intertwined and that highly destructive weapons were no substitute for sound policy and diplomacy. When asked about the difference between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons in 1955, the President responded "war is a political act, so politics—that is, world politics—are just as important in making your decisions as is the character of the weapon you use."²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ The President's News Conference, January 12, 1955, Eisenhower, Public Papers 1955, accessed February 15, 2012, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=10232#axzz1nk1rPBgr>.

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