

*How Eisenhower Shaped
an Enduring Cold War Strategy*

WAGING PEACE



ROBERT R. BOWIE
and RICHARD H. IMMERMANN

Foreword by General Andrew Goodpaster

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ROBERT R. BOWIE

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Foreword

General Andrew J. Goodpaster
U.S. Army, Ret.

In our country, each presidential administration has a character of its own, and the Eisenhower administration was no exception. It bore the imprint—both direct and indirect—of Eisenhower himself. Its character was well displayed, in its broader outlines, by what was reported to the public at the time, but in later years it has been disclosed more fully and more deeply as records, interviews, and historical accounts give added insight and greater detail as to just how the major issues were handled, and how the major policies were pursued.

In this book, the reader will see Eisenhower in action, and is likely to come away with a quite different perception from what may previously have been held concerning his leadership. The reader will also be given a deeper understanding as to what the significance of the Eisenhower administration really was in terms of America's security and cold war strategy.

One key early finding, foreshadowed in Eisenhower's service as commander of NATO in 1951 and 1952, was that the National Security Council document NSC 68, a legacy of the Truman administration, would not be sustainable on a long-term basis as the foundation for American security and military planning. As a result, Eisenhower devoted himself as a top priority to the development of policy and doctrine for dealing with the realities of security that *would* be sustainable. In this process his views and conceptions were of central importance.

The authors of this volume make contributions of unique value. Each brings his own set of special qualifications to their combined task: Robert Bowie served as head of the State Department Planning Staff and senior advisor and assistant to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and he was the State member of the NSC Planning Board; Richard Immerman, through his background of previous scholarly work on both Eisenhower and Dulles, has equipped himself well for his part in this endeavor.

The circumstances with which Eisenhower and his administration had to deal on coming into office were dangerous and demanding. The war in Korea needed to

be brought to an end. The confrontation with the Soviet Union centering on the future of Germany had become highly militarized, and both sides were rapidly arming with nuclear weapons in increasing numbers. Stalin's early death left the Soviet Union under the control of untested leaders. The challenge was to manage the relation in a way that would avoid a third world war while keeping our allies confident and secure. It was necessary as well to forestall any loss of independent nations to Soviet communism at a time when many less developed countries, newly freed from colonialism, were undergoing the challenges and traumas of nation-building and were threatened by communist subversion and encroachment.

Drawing on my own opportunity to see Eisenhower in action, I think it is first of interest to recall how well he was equipped by outlook and experience—including his direct contact with top Russian leaders in the postwar period—to deal with problems of such gravity and complexity. His methods—bringing diverse points of view to bear, looking at problems through the eyes of others, understanding the value Russian leaders placed on holding onto their hard-won personal positions, awareness of nationalist feelings in the less developed world such as he knew from his prewar service in the Philippines with Douglas MacArthur—combined with the attributes of a seasoned strategic thinker.

A few further comments recalling Eisenhower's own approach to his responsibilities as president may add to an understanding of the decision-making process he put into practice during his administration, and may throw added light on the decisions made and actions taken, as presented in these pages. Two aspects seem particularly worthy of note: the method—primarily organization and process—that Eisenhower established at the outset and maintained throughout his two full terms in office, for the conduct of the business of government within the executive branch; and the role he himself took in the ongoing day-to-day, week-to-week activities in which he engaged as he carried out the responsibilities of his office.

He had given close attention following his election to the organizational structure that he thought would best serve his administration—both at the White House/executive office level and between that level and the cabinet departments and major agencies, that is, between himself and his operating “lieutenants,” as he liked to call them. Careful regard for organization was nothing new to him. He often expressed himself in almost identical terms, “Organization cannot make a genius out of a dunce. But it can provide its head with the facts he needs, and help him avoid misinformed mistakes.”

Eisenhower likewise established a systematic process closely bound to the organizational structures. At his own level he gave emphasis to developing policy and foresighted planning, delegating operations and implementation, insofar as possible, to the operating echelons of the executive branch. A constant aim was to keep matters of a straightforward or routine nature out of the White House, to the extent action could be taken by the departments or agencies under the policy guidelines once established. He himself would address those issues that he deemed to be of major importance, or that had not been fully foreseen, with the full participation of his responsible subordinates in Oval Office meetings wherein the particulars of these complex questions could be thoroughly aired, and courses of action thoroughly deliberated. In doing so, he would draw upon the policy and planning work

that had been done, while frequently reminding all those present that decisions should deal with actual realities, which habitually vary from even the best planning assumptions. He would typically revert to a quotation he attributed to the elder von Moltke, pointing out that at the time of decision “The plans are nothing, but the planning is everything.”

His week was carefully structured around four regular meetings. Tuesday morning was his meeting with the legislative leaders of Congress, normally with those of his own party, but with those of both parties when international issues were involved. Wednesdays were his press conferences, which followed a meeting with his senior staff beforehand. Thursdays were devoted to National Security Council meetings and Fridays to meetings with the cabinet. For all of these he insisted on careful staff preparation, of which the work of the National Security Council Planning Board was the most intensive and thorough. To these were added long sessions in the Oval Office with Secretary Dulles, Secretary Humphrey of Treasury, the director of the Bureau of the Budget, and on occasion the secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to deal with specific issues and crises. His long series of meetings with Secretary Dulles during the first year of his presidency were so thorough that he later said he thought, as a result, that he knew the inside of Dulles’s mind as well as he knew his own. In addition, he met often with members of his own staff, and with others from within the government as well as from without on issues of wide range and variety.

The meetings would bring together all who shared significant responsibilities in the matter. The purpose was examination of the particular issue by “each in the presence of all” (to borrow a phrase) and with the understanding that there should be “no non-concurrence through silence.” It often came with surprise to those at their first meetings with him to see the intensity and authority with which he led the discussion. He would often shape the discussion with one simple-sounding question, “What’s best for America?” His aim was to induce his advisors to rise above their parochial interests and approaches. Once a decision was made, it was well understood that it defined what was to be done, and that it was to be followed up to assure faithful execution.

The range of activities in which President Eisenhower and his executive branch associates engaged left a record of leadership methods and results well worth studying, notably with respect to each of the three facets of policy and action that experience shows to be of principal importance: defining America’s interests, devising policies and actions to serve and safeguard those interests, and building public and congressional understanding and support for the interests, policies, and actions. There is learning to be derived from examining each of these in the context of the specific issues and policy challenges of Eisenhower’s time, and this book will aid greatly in that process.

An administration will ultimately be known by its works, and in assessing such works, two questions have a special value with respect to a particular president. The first is what happened on his watch, with what resulting effect on the well-being of the people of the United States, and the second—admittedly more difficult and speculative—is what might have happened but did not, and (if possible to discern), *why* it did not. On both counts, Eisenhower’s record is impressive. He put in place

the basic elements of a viable cold war strategy and he effectively managed East-West and allied relations, defusing a series of crises, including Korea, Vietnam, Suez, Berlin, and Sputnik, which could have been disastrous if mishandled.

A further question is how the character that the president gave to his administration affected both these outcomes. The complex issues President Eisenhower confronted on his inauguration and those that required decision and action as time went on were enough to provide ample basis for judgment, and ample food for retrospective analysis. It is hoped that the presentation by these authors of the Eisenhower administration's handling of the issues they have selected will give added understanding to the nature of the American presidency in general and to the work of the American executive branch under President Eisenhower in particular in the fulfillment of his constitutional responsibilities.

Acknowledgments

Both of us have been interested in Eisenhower's policy-making process and national security strategy for many years: Bowie ever since serving as director of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department and its member on the National Security Council Planning Board from 1953 to 1957; and Immerman since the torrent of new archives from the administration began to become available in the mid-1970s. We discussed our shared interest when attending conferences on the Eisenhower foreign policies; and in 1987 we decided to undertake this study. Our aim has been to produce an analysis of the policy-process and its resulting strategy, drawing on both direct experience and the documentary record.

For help in pursuing our study, we owe thanks to many more institutions and individuals than we can name. Because Immerman was a Social Science Research Council/MacArthur Foundation Fellow in International Peace and Security, we are grateful to both organizations. And we are grateful to the editors of Oxford University Press for their patience.

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Finally, we must express our deepest gratitude to our families for bearing with us in this lengthy endeavor.

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Introduction

The ending of the cold war, with the disintegration of the Soviet regime and its empire in Eastern Europe, gives special relevance to a fresh analysis of the origins of the basic strategy pursued by the United States and its allies for three decades, which contributed to that outcome.

I

The thesis of this study is that credit for shaping that strategy belongs to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. While the cold war originated under Harry S. Truman, it took its mature form under Eisenhower. He developed the first coherent and sustainable cold war strategy suitable for the basic conditions that would prevail during the following decades.

Eisenhower did not inherit such a strategy from Truman. The latter's containment policy evolved by stages between 1945 and 1953, largely as a reaction to crises that shaped American perceptions of Soviet purposes and the measures deemed necessary to counter them. After the North Korean attack in mid-1950, the Truman administration adopted a more aggressive strategy, known as NSC 68, to counter the grave threat posed by a Soviet Union then developing a nuclear arsenal. The ambitious objectives and programs of NSC 68 had the goal of coercing "rollback" of Soviet power through military predominance before the Soviets achieved nuclear plenty—estimated to be 1954, the year of "maximum danger." This policy led to the tripling of the defense budget, the establishment of integrated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, and the decision to rearm West Germany. By the time Truman left office, the effort to pursue this strategy had produced a confused legacy of objectives, policies, and programs in disarray.

Moreover, in devising an alternate strategy for the period ahead Eisenhower

confronted conditions more typical of an extended cold war than those of the Truman years. The most salient of these were the following:

a) Within weeks of Eisenhower's inauguration, the death of Joseph Stalin brought to a close his nearly 30 years of dictatorship. Eisenhower, therefore, had to reassess the Soviet threat in the context of a post-Stalin Kremlin. How far might the new collective leadership modify Soviet policy and its relations with the outside world? To what extent did Stalin's death present a "chance for peace"?

b) Eisenhower presided over two revolutions in strategic weapons systems: the advent of nuclear plenty, including the hydrogen bomb, and the emergence of the ballistic missile for both sides. How should this condition of mutual nuclear plenty and missiles affect grand strategy, NATO, and security in general?

c) For all of its problems Western Europe was recovering and regaining confidence. Yet a divided Germany and Eastern Europe dominated by Moscow seemed almost certain to remain so for years to come. The implications for Europe's stability, its economic and political future, and NATO would be critical in shaping the international environment for the rest of the cold war.

d) The inexorable collapse of colonialism was rapidly spawning dozens of emerging nations—almost all of which were poor and unstable. Resentful of past Western domination, they seemed to offer fertile soil for Soviet propaganda and subversion. At the same time, the wars of liberation and other manifestations of nationalist hostility severely taxed the resources of America's major allies and created serious tensions within the North Atlantic alliance, particularly between the United States and the colonial powers.

e) The Korean conflict had shown the difficulty of conducting, and maintaining public support for, a protracted ground war in the developing world. To provide substance to the maxim "No more Koreas," Eisenhower and his advisors had to devise alternatives for dealing with such threats on the periphery.

II

Eisenhower and Dulles were convinced that an effective foreign policy required an explicit and integrated grand strategy. This was not to be a blueprint for the future that would provide mechanical answers for specific issues and problems as they arose. Such issues would be decided in the Oval Office in consultation with key advisors. But a strategic concept should establish longer term purposes and priorities that would ensure consistency in day-to-day decisions and coherence for the actions of the United States and its allies over time.

For Eisenhower, a systematic process was imperative for analyzing alternatives and making sound policy decisions. He designed the National Security Council (NSC) mechanism to obtain the full benefit of the expertise and data from the various departments and agencies, and the judgment and recommendations of his principal advisors and other inputs. In the end, however, after all the staff work, deliberations, and debate, the ultimate strategy reflected the president's own decisions. These decisions, in turn, were molded by the values, beliefs, images, and pre-

dispositions Eisenhower brought to the Oval Office and the impact on him of the advice, deliberation, and debate produced by the policy process.

In preparing his basic national strategy, commonly called the “New Look,” Eisenhower used this process to the full for exploring alternative courses and their implications, and for arriving at decisions regarding his strategy. In the end he rejected the objective of coercive rollback and the concept of a time of peak danger from the Soviet threat. In his view the task of preventing war and Soviet expansion, seeking to induce and encourage change in Soviet hostility, and mitigating the risk of war would require cooperative action by a vigorous free world over many years before the eventual decline of the Soviet system and threat. The strategy must be effective for these purposes and sustainable for the “long haul.”

This study analyzes the fundamental questions about the strategy. What were its premises, its objectives, and the means for achieving them? What methods did Eisenhower use to design his “New Look”? How valid was Eisenhower’s strategy for the conduct of the cold war in the light of its ultimate outcome? Are there lessons for policy making in the radically changed international environment of today? The focus is on the substance of Eisenhower’s strategy and the process by which he formulated it, which took place mainly in 1953 but for some components extended through 1954. It is, therefore, not a history of foreign policy during the Eisenhower years. In fact, even for the period it covers, significant episodes such as the Korean War and the East German uprising are discussed only as they relate to the evolution of the Eisenhower strategy.

III

Today, there is no need to justify treating Eisenhower as a serious and able policy maker. For his part, the president never had any doubts on this score. He was fully confident of himself and, for that matter, of his chief foreign policy advisor, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Dulles knows “more about foreign affairs than anybody I know,” Eisenhower said during his second term in office. “In fact,” he continued, “I’ll be immodest and say that there’s only one man I know who has seen *more* of the world and talked with more people and knows more than he does—and that’s *me*.”¹

Until a decade and a half ago, Eisenhower’s legion of critics would have dismissed this appraisal as not merely immodest but self-delusionary. While the public trusted and respected him, most politicians, scholars, and journalists depicted Eisenhower as a political innocent and intellectual lightweight with neither the requisite knowledge nor skill to navigate the rapids and tides of the cold war, and as largely disengaged from policy making, giving Dulles free rein. Dulles, the consensus held, was brighter than the president, but his thinking and judgments were severely distorted by his moralism, dogmatism, and egotism. Thus Eisenhower’s unfounded confidence in himself and his chief advisor, it was said, led to the administration’s stubborn pursuit of ill-conceived and ineffective policies and programs.

The last 15 years have seen a reversal of this caricature of both men. Documents from the 1950s reveal an Eisenhower actively in charge and informed.² He, not Dulles, made the decisions, and the secretary of state always acted according to Eisenhower's directives. This does not diminish Dulles's importance. He was the president's trusted advisor, relied on to help generate and execute policy and to negotiate with America's allies and adversaries. The archives also show Eisenhower and Dulles to be much more subtle, imaginative, and sophisticated than their contemporary public image.

What is certain is that Eisenhower now enjoys new—or renewed—respect. Whereas historians of the presidency once rated him slightly better than Andrew Johnson but a tad inferior to Chester Arthur, they currently rank him among the top 10 chief executives in the nation's history, and his stature is rising.³ The esteem in which Eisenhower is now held is based largely on the belated recognition of the leadership and decision-making skills with which he orchestrated policy and evaluations of the policy outcomes, especially when compared with those of his successors. Later events—the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Iran hostages and botched rescue, huge budget deficits, and Iran-gate—have enhanced appreciation of his prudence and sober judgment.⁴ In a turbulent and dangerous stage of East-West relations, with an untested and erratic Soviet leadership and a changing strategic environment, Eisenhower managed a succession of crises and set a course that preserved both security and peace. Moreover, because he assumed that the cold war would continue for decades, his goals and the means for their pursuit were designed to be sustainable by the Western coalition until internal pressures ended the Soviet threat. To attribute to Eisenhower—or for that matter the United States—primary credit for the radical transformation since 1989 would be simplistic and ahistorical. But to deny the legacy of the 1950s would be equally mistaken.

IV

In examining and analyzing the production and substance of Eisenhower's initial national security strategy, our study draws on the exceptionally rich archives the administration bequeathed to scholars. Because Eisenhower paid so much attention to systematic decision making, and because that decision-making system enveloped so many inputs, the president placed a premium on accurate record keeping. As a result, there is available an extraordinary amount of reliable material that identifies the issues that Eisenhower and his advisors debated and traces the steps through which the debates were resolved. Especially valuable are the memoranda of the discussions in the NSC by S. Everett Gleason, a historian serving on the NSC staff, which he used to debrief its Planning Board. Although recorded in indirect discourse, Gleason's notes faithfully reflect the words of the NSC members, and we treat them as such in extensive quotations relating to the Council meetings.⁵ The full records of the NSC and its Planning Board illuminate the interdependence between Eisenhower's strategy and the process that produced it. Interpreting these materials and putting them in context, moreover, has been

facilitated by the recollections of one of us (Bowie), who was intimately involved in the policy process.

In the main this strategy was embodied in the Basic National Security Paper approved on October 30, 1953. NSC 162/2, as it was known, resulted from months of study, discussion, and decision making. It took account of the administration's formal review of existing national security programs and its own reappraisal of the Soviet threat, U.S. objectives, and the available and potential resources of the United States and its allies. In addition to NSC 162/2, however, certain issues were dealt with in other papers, and some were not finally settled until a year or more of further debate. This study embraces all these components. The strategy, moreover, was subject to regular reappraisal as the cold war unfolded, in order to update it each year of Eisenhower's tenure. We do not attempt to trace these revisions. With a few exceptions noted in the concluding chapter, however, the key elements of the strategy remained intact.

Part one (chapters 1–4) serves as a prologue to the Eisenhower presidency. The first chapter analyzes the security policies and programs he inherited from Truman. We then examine the outlook, premises, and convictions that Eisenhower and Dulles brought to office on the basis of their earlier experiences and the positions taken in the 1952 campaign.

Part two (chapters 5–9) examines the processes and inputs used to produce the New Look national strategy. The prompt reform of the NSC system created the machinery for reshaping national strategy (chapter 5). Before tackling that directly, however, two specific tasks related to it demanded immediate attention. The first was the revision of the pending fiscal year (FY) 1954 budget, especially the defense component, as submitted earlier by Truman (chapter 6). The other was the necessity to respond to Stalin's death in March 1953 (chapter 7). Finally, as a major input to the strategic review, Eisenhower mounted the elaborate Solarium exercise to compare alternative approaches to the Soviet Union (chapter 8).

Part three (chapters 10–14) analyzes the premises and substance of the strategy's main components. We consider the appraisal of the Soviet threat, the clarification of U.S. objectives, the definition of the military and other means to pursue them, the emphasis placed upon maintaining a cohesive noncommunist world, and efforts for arms control.

In part four (chapter 15) we briefly offer our appraisal. It evaluates the suitability of Eisenhower's premises and policies, how far they provided enduring elements of cold war strategy for the following three decades, and whether his approach to policy making has relevance for the very different future the United States will confront.

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PROLOGUE

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The Truman Legacy

The review [NSC 68] recommended a greatly expanded program . . . for the purpose of creating the necessary military shield behind which a positive program designed to bring about a modification in Soviet intentions and behavior could be developed. . . .

At one time it was hoped to accelerate the program to a target date of 1952 [instead of 1954] in order to lay the basis for taking increased risks of general war in achieving a satisfactory solution of our relations with the U.S.S.R. while her stockpile of atomic weapons was still small. For various reasons this acceleration was not, or could not be carried out.¹

Paul Nitze (1954)

Eisenhower decided to run for the presidency for two principal reasons; both were directly related to the Truman legacy.² The first was to prevent the election of Senator Robert Taft, the Republican frontrunner, who Eisenhower believed would reverse the basic Truman strategy of cooperation with allies and collective security for containing the Soviet Union. Taft had opposed the Marshall Plan and the NATO Treaty and endorsed the call by Herbert Hoover after the Korean attack for an “American Gibraltar” relying on unilateral nuclear defense and isolation.³ Eisenhower’s second reason was his conviction that the Truman policies and programs for carrying out his strategy had to be reshaped to make them more coherent and sustainable for the “long haul” of the cold war. While supporting many of Truman’s actions, Eisenhower was appalled by the erratic decision-making process and confused policies and implementation.⁴

Thus an understanding of Truman’s legacy in foreign and security policy is critical to appreciating the situation Eisenhower inherited and the strategy that he developed. How then did Truman’s policies and programs answer the strategic questions of the cold war: What was the nature of the Soviet threat? How did it endanger U.S. interests? What should be U.S. objectives in seeking security? What means were most feasible and effective for pursuing them? Our concern is where the answers stood as Truman left office. But because they changed over time, it is necessary to consider their evolution. As will appear, the Truman legacy was far less coherent or clear than is usually assumed as his term ended.

By that time the cold war had been underway for six years. By 1947 George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” of February 1946, Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain”

speech the next month, Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, Iran, and Turkey, and the Clark Clifford–George Elsey report for Truman in September on the Soviet Union had produced a consensus among U.S. policy makers that the Soviet Union was implacably hostile to the noncommunist world, was dedicated to steady expansion toward global domination, and posed a grave security threat which had to be resisted. In mid-1947 Kennan's "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* outlined the containment doctrine, which was already being followed.⁵

At that point, however, "containment" was only a general concept. It provided a framework for concrete measures yet to be devised and implemented. That process took place largely in reaction to specific threats or crises, going through two distinct phases: the first from 1947 to mid-1950, and the second from then to January 1953.

Containment, 1947 to Mid-1950

The first phase, guided largely by Secretary of State George Marshall and Kennan, then heading the State Department Policy Planning Staff (PPS), focused mainly on the threat from Soviet political warfare and subversion. The challenge was to build up the political and economic strength of the vulnerable non-Communist nations to enable them to resist this threat. In March 1947 the Greek-Turkish crisis prompted the "Truman Doctrine," pledging U.S. support for "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures"; and stagnation in Europe led in June to Marshall's initiative for the European Recovery Program (ERP). The North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 was designed to reassure the Europeans after the Berlin crisis, the Point Four program for technical assistance to developing countries to help them make economic progress. The danger of Soviet military aggression was discounted: the U.S. atomic monopoly, though weapons were few, was expected to neutralize the very large Soviet conventional forces. Truman kept a tight ceiling on defense spending.

NSC 20/4

The first formal statement of national security strategy was prepared during the second half of 1948. In July, seeking to justify the higher defense budget he considered necessary, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal requested that the NSC prepare a strategic analysis of the security threats facing the United States, and of its interests, objectives, and means of coping with them, as a guide to budgeting and planning for forces and for making other security decisions.⁶ Truman, while authorizing the study, told Forrestal to proceed with preparing the defense budget within a \$14.4 billion ceiling. Over the next four months George Kennan and his PPS submitted to the National Security Council (NSC) several interim papers and a final document, NSC 20/4, the conclusions of which the president approved on November 24, 1948.

NSC 20/4 reflected the prevailing views based on nearly two years of containment. The gravest threat, it reaffirmed, stemmed "from the hostile designs of the USSR, and from the nature of the Soviet system." The Soviets were expected, how-

ever, to pursue their expansionist goals primarily through efforts short of war: to seek to subvert other states by exploiting political and economic weakness and discontent through tactics such as disruption, propaganda, and covert action, and through support of local Communist parties. While their large armed forces could probably overrun Europe and the Middle East and severely damage the United Kingdom in six months, the Soviets would be inhibited from initiating war involving the United States (unless by miscalculation) by the U.S. atomic monopoly and economic potential as well as their own domestic weaknesses.

To counter the Soviet threat the United States must pursue various measures “short of war,” taking care not to permanently impair the U.S. economy and its fundamental values and institutions by “excessive” military spending.⁷ To resist Soviet political warfare, it should assist nations able to contribute to U.S. security “to increase their economic and political stability and their military capability” and orientation toward the United States, and seek to discredit the Soviet Union and communism. In prudence, the United States should also maintain long-term military readiness as a deterrent to Soviet aggression, as support for U.S. foreign policy, as reassurance to nations resisting Soviet pressure, and for defense and rapid mobilization if necessary. Finally,

our general objectives with respect to Russia . . . should be:

- a. To reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations.
- b. To bring about a basic change in the [Soviet] conduct of international relations.

For this purpose, the United States should aim peacefully to promote “the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence,” to foster dissent, and “to create situations which compel the Soviet government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of present concepts.” The goal should be to “place maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power” and especially on its satellite relations.⁸

Strategic Nuclear Retaliation

One of Truman’s major legacies—creation of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and heavy reliance on strategic nuclear retaliation for deterrence and defense—had its origins in this first phase of containment. The U.S. nuclear monopoly made this reliance natural, Truman’s rigid ceiling on defense spending made it inevitable, and the pace of technology fostered its primacy during the rest of Truman’s tenure.

Initially, the risk of Soviet attack was greatly discounted, despite the U.S.S.R.’s massive conventional forces. Truman’s budget for FY 1949, submitted in mid-January 1948, requested only \$9.8 billion for defense, with a 55-group Air Force compared with the 70 groups recommended by a special Air Commission he had appointed. During 1948, however, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February and the Soviet Berlin blockade in June raised the spectre of possible hostilities and prompted serious war planning against a Soviet attack on Europe. The FY 1949 defense budget was raised to about \$13 billion.⁹

The war plans against a Soviet attack on Europe called for responding at once with the atomic air offensive. Truman was deeply troubled by this reliance on atomic bombing. In May 1948, when briefed on these plans, he expressed his desire for an alternative "without using atomic bombs." Again, during the Berlin crisis, he vented his horror of the bomb: "I don't think we ought to use this thing unless we absolutely have to. . . . It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses."¹⁰ In September, nevertheless, he assured his advisors that "if it becomes necessary [to use the bomb] no one need have misgivings but that he would do so," although praying it could be avoided.¹¹ Yet conventional defense in Europe was clearly out of the question even within the increased budget.

This dilemma was reflected in NSC 30, adopted at about this time in response to a Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) request for guidance on the use of nuclear weapons. It provided 1) that the military in case of war "must be ready to utilize promptly and effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic weapons, in the interest of national security and must therefore plan accordingly"; but 2) that the "decision as to the employment of atomic weapons in the event of war is to be made by the Chief Executive when he considers such a decision to be required."¹²

Growing Primacy of SAC

In preparing the FY 1950 defense budget during 1948, Forrestal sought to persuade the president of the necessity for larger defense funding to allow for more balanced forces. On March 13 Truman had notified him and the JCS that the FY 1950 defense budget would be limited to \$14.4 billion.¹³ The defense secretary's July request for the NSC national strategy paper (NSC 20), discussed earlier, was prompted by the hope of an increase. Meanwhile, in an effort to cope with JCS dissension over the total budget and service shares, Forrestal finally decided also to prepare an alternative budget of \$16.9 billion, but he was unable to enlist the support of Secretary of State George Marshall, who gave higher priority to the ERP and assisting European forces. To Forrestal's dismay, Truman found no grounds in NSC 20/4 for relaxing his strict constraint on the defense budget. When Forrestal presented his \$16.9 billion alternative along with the prescribed \$14.4 billion version, the president promptly adopted the lower budget.

Forrestal, giving up on balanced forces, now recognized that the only feasible strategy must be based on strategic air power, using nuclear weapons. In late December he urged Truman to provide \$580 million more to add six bombing groups. Truman refused.¹⁴ JCS war planning continued to be virtually immobilized by bitter disputes over allocating resources that all services considered inadequate, and especially between the Navy and Air Force over control of the strategic nuclear offensive. (Eisenhower, brought in to mediate, was dismayed by the service feuding but believed that a reliable \$15 or \$16 billion budget would be needed for adequate security forces.)¹⁵

During 1948–49 many other factors greatly enhanced the primacy of the nuclear air offensive as the mainstay of U.S. defense strategy. To begin with, nuclear weapons were in the course of becoming much more plentiful, more varied in design, and far greater in yields, as a result of major technological advances confirmed

by spring 1948. As a result, the nuclear stockpile could be increased from 50 in mid-1948 to 400 by the end of 1950 instead of 1952.¹⁶

The Air Force was also actively improving its capacity for strategic bombing. In October 1948 General Curtis LeMay was named commanding general of SAC, largely neglected until then. Forceful and dedicated, LeMay built SAC into an elite service, highly motivated and trained, well equipped for its mission, and enjoying top priority in budgets and programs. LeMay took steps to improve targeting data, and in February 1949 persuaded the Air Force to cancel programs for light and medium planes in order to procure 75 more intercontinental B-36s. Truman approved in May. By early 1949 the Air Force had available 120 B-29s and B-50s adapted for nuclear weapons (compared with 30 a year before).¹⁷

In late April 1949 Truman had asked Forrestal's successor, Louis Johnson, to look into how effective the strategic nuclear offensive would be in case of general war with the Soviets. Two studies initiated earlier by the JCS sought to provide an answer, based on the joint war plan approved in December 1948, which called for attacks with 133 bombs. Both concluded that such attacks would not be decisive. Reporting in late May 1949, the committee headed by General H. R. Harmon estimated that if perfectly executed, they would reduce Soviet industrial capacity by 30 to 40 percent but not "bring about capitulation, destroy the roots of Communism, or critically weaken the power of Soviet leadership to dominate the people." Nor would the attacks seriously impair the Soviet ability to overrun most of Western Europe, the Middle East, and some of the Far East. Yet the Harmon committee concluded that the early use of SAC was "the only means of inflicting shock and serious damage to vital elements of the Soviet war making capacity."¹⁸

The second report, submitted in January 1950 by the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group (WSEG), dealt with the feasibility of such an attack. It advised the JCS that under the most favorable assumptions 70–85 percent of the U.S. aircraft would reach their urban/industrial targets and damage one-half to two-thirds of the targeted facilities beyond repair. But U.S. aircraft losses would be extremely costly—about one-third in the case of night raids and one-half in daylight. In view of logistical problems and plane losses, the report questioned whether the attack on the scale planned was feasible.¹⁹

On December 8, 1949, the JCS adopted the Joint Outline Emergency War Plan code-named OFFTACKLE. Under this concept the immediate U.S. response to a Soviet attack would be a full-scale nuclear strike by SAC against Soviet urban/industrial targets to disrupt its war-making capacity. (In deference to the European allies, the JCS had also assigned SAC the task of slowing the Soviet advance into Western Europe, but that mission was infeasible until more weapons were available.) The resulting damage, while severe, was not expected to knock the Soviets out of the war or even prevent its huge land army from overrunning most of Western Europe and the Middle East. The United States and its allies, it was hoped, would be able to retain a damaged Great Britain and footholds on the continent, North Africa, and the Cairo-Suez area. From these, after mobilizing U.S. resources for two years or so, the JCS planned to conduct an extended war not unlike World War II to retake Europe and defeat the Soviets.²⁰ Although the scale of forces steadily increased during the next two years, the basic OFFTACKLE strategy remained unchanged through 1952.

Reaction to the Soviet Atomic Test

The first Soviet nuclear test, detected in September 1949, was a severe shock. By ending the U.S. nuclear monopoly earlier than expected, it threatened to undercut the main pillar of U.S. strategy.

Yet the Soviet test had no effect on preparation of the defense budget for FY 1951, which was then under way. Early on Truman had told the services they could plan on a \$15 billion budget, about the same amount as in FY 1950. Eisenhower, who at the time was president of Columbia University but also serving as an ad hoc JCS chairman, had been struggling with the services through June to work out a budget on this basis.²¹ Facing a deficit of \$5–7 billion, however, Truman had planned with the budget director in April to drop the ceiling nearly \$2 billion to \$13 billion, but he did not advise the JCS of the cut until July 1. Eisenhower complained in his diary that “one of our greatest troubles is inability to plan for a given amount of money . . . in spite of prior commitments by the President himself. . . . We work like the devil on an agreement on a certain sized budget, and then are told to reduce it.”²² Thus, the defense budget Truman sent to Congress in January 1950 requested \$13 billion for the fiscal year starting on July 1 and remained unchanged until the Korean invasion in June.

On the nuclear front, however, the response to the Soviet test was immediate and far-reaching. Two months before the test Truman had told his advisors, “Since we can’t obtain international control we must be strongest in nuclear weapons.” Accordingly, in October he approved a JCS proposal for substantially expanding nuclear production facilities.²³

Much more consequential was Truman’s decision in January 1950, after several months of heated debate, to develop the hydrogen bomb. Strongly opposed were the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) General Advisory Committee and a majority of the AEC. Vigorously in favor were scientists like Edward Teller, the JCS, AEC member Lewis Strauss, and influential congressmen. Approval was finally recommended by a special committee, composed of Acheson, Johnson, and AEC chairman David Lilienthal, although he had reservations. At his meeting with the committee on January 31, President Truman took only seven minutes to decide to go ahead with the hydrogen bomb development. His only question: “Can the Russians do it?” Five weeks later, reacting to the discovery of Klaus Fuchs’s espionage, Truman authorized AEC and the Department of Defense (DOD) not only to develop but to prepare to produce the fusion bomb.²⁴

Drafting NSC 68

In addition, the hydrogen bomb special committee recommended a broad strategic review. Thus, also on January 31, 1950, the president directed the secretaries of state and defense to reexamine “our objectives in peace and war and . . . our strategic plans, in the light of” the prospective Soviet fission and hydrogen bomb capability.²⁵

Their report, prepared during February and March by a State-Defense working group headed by Paul Nitze, Kennan’s successor as director of the PPS, was submit-

ted to Truman in early April as NSC 68. While calling urgently for a massive build-up of defense forces and related measures, the report purposely omitted any cost estimates, although privately Acheson and Nitze foresaw annual defense spending more than tripling to \$40 or \$50 billion. After reading NSC 68 but before acting on it, Truman requested further information on the "implications of the conclusions . . . [and] a clear indication of the programs which are envisioned in the Report, including estimates of the probable cost of such programs." And in the interim "existing programs should not be postponed or delayed." Meanwhile, in early May he said, "The defense budget next year will be smaller than it is this year," and three weeks later reaffirmed the \$13 billion cap on defense spending.²⁶

National Security Policy, mid-1950 to 1952

The North Korean attack of June 25, 1950, moved U.S. national security policy into a radically new phase, which was the source of most of the policies and programs inherited by Eisenhower. Responding to the North Korean aggression and managing the conduct of the war inevitably preoccupied Truman and his key security advisors during the rest of his term. Yet the impact on the broader strategy for the cold war itself was much more consequential. The attack was seen as validating the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of NSC 68. The costing process requested by Truman was overtaken by a huge defense expansion that quickly blew the lid off the defense budget. NSC 68's conclusions were formally approved by the president on September 29 as "a statement of policy to be followed over the next four or five years."²⁷

Interpreting NSC 68

Ominous in tenor and polemical in style, NSC 68 devoted over 50 pages to analyzing the implications of prospective Soviet nuclear capabilities for the communist threat, U.S. objectives, and the character and timing of the U.S. response required. The premise was that the Soviet Union would be able to deliver a crippling surprise nuclear attack on the United States by 1954 (the year of "maximum danger" assuming existing defense programs). In its conclusions, NSC 68 repeated verbatim and reaffirmed as valid ("allowing for the immediacy of the danger") the conclusions (regarding threat, objectives, and means) contained in NSC 20/4 adopted in 1948. The gravely intensifying struggle must be pursued, however, with far greater urgency and much larger resources, especially for military purposes. A massive U.S. defense build-up across the board was required to achieve preponderance in order 1) to deter war and, if attacked, to survive and go on to win; and 2) to support other U.S. foreign policy objectives outlined in the report.²⁸

Interpreting NSC 68 and appraising its significance has become a cottage industry for historians and others.²⁹ In his memoir, Nitze rejects as "erroneous" the contention that NSC 68 recommended a sharp departure in U.S. policy.³⁰ His claim is too modest. There was, of course, continuity: NSC 68 continued the basic objective of developing the political and economic strength of the noncommunist nations

and fostering their cooperation and cohesion in order to resist Soviet subversion and intimidation. In the context set out in NSC 68, however, the words of NSC 20/4 took on a totally different import than they had in 1948, when Soviet political subversion was perceived as the main threat, nuclear weapons were a U.S. monopoly, and internal ferment and decay were the eventual nemesis of Soviet power.

According to NSC 68, the prospective Soviet nuclear capacity transformed the severity and immediacy of the Soviet threat, the U.S. objectives necessary to meet it, and the requisite means for doing so, especially in the role and scale of military capability. Kennan, who had drafted NSC 20/4, vigorously protested against the premises and proposed policies of NSC 68. And in his memoir, Acheson entitled the chapter on NSC 68 "A New Definition of Foreign Policy" and treated it in those terms. In explaining its style, he called NSC 68 a "bludgeon" to facilitate a presidential decision, while conceding the merit of one reader's bon mot that it was "the most ponderous expression of 'elementary ideas' he had come across."³¹

For our purpose of assessing Truman's legacy, the important question is how far the actual policies and purposes at the end of his tenure reflected the premises, aspirations, and recommendations of NSC 68. Its implementation was significantly affected by continuing challenges and reappraisals, practical difficulties, conflicting priorities, and service feuding. What was the outcome in practice after two and one-half years?

To that we now turn. With respect to the basic strategic components—threat, objectives, and means—we will first analyze what NSC 68 proposed and then examine how it had been implemented, modified, and evolved by the end of Truman's tenure.

The NSC 68 Strategy

The Soviet Threat

The radical shift in U.S. strategy embodied in NSC 68 was driven primarily by its reappraisal of the Soviet threat. As depicted in NSC 68, the Soviet Union was far more menacing than it was in the view that prevailed from 1947 to mid-1950 and that underlay NSC 20/4. In both periods policy makers accepted that the Soviets were implacably hostile to the noncommunist world and would actively seek to expand their influence and control with the ultimate objective of world domination. Beyond that, the appraisals diverged sharply. In the earlier phase, as already discussed, the danger was viewed primarily as Soviet subversion of noncommunist countries through political warfare—using propaganda, economic and political leverage, indigenous Communist parties, and intimidation to exploit their vulnerabilities. But while persistent, Soviet leaders were cautious and patient, and especially careful to avoid any risk to the security of the regime, in keeping with communist doctrine, Russian tradition, and the impact of World War II. Despite their superiority in ground forces in Europe, the Soviets would almost surely not initiate deliberate military action in the face of the U.S. atomic monopoly and its industrial potential, though war might occur by accident or miscalculation. Nor did Kennan

expect that attaining atomic weapons would make the Soviets appreciably more aggressive.³² Truman's defense cap of \$13-14 billion until the Korean War had reflected this appraisal.

NSC 68 portrayed the Soviet threat in ominous terms. "[T]his Republic and its citizens in the ascendancy of their strength stand in their deepest peril. The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself." The analysis made it "apparent . . . that the integrity and vitality of our system is in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history." The "risks we face are of a new order of magnitude, commensurate with the total struggle in which we are engaged."³³

These judgments flowed from a much more aggressive concept of the Soviet Union. The U.S.S.R., according to NSC 68, was "inescapably militant because it possesses and is possessed by a world-wide revolutionary movement, because it is the inheritor of Russian imperialism, and because it is a totalitarian dictatorship." The Kremlin, "animated by a new fanatic faith," was dedicated to imposing "its absolute authority over the rest of the world . . . by violent or non-violent methods in accordance with the dictates of expediency." This "design, therefore, calls for the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin."³⁴

As the main obstacle to Soviet ambitions, the United States was its principal target. In the memorandum "Recent Soviet Moves," written while NSC 68 was being drafted, Nitze concluded, "In the aggregate, recent Soviet moves reflect not only a mounting militancy and increased confidence, but they suggest a boldness that is essentially new—and borders on recklessness." They had shown willingness to use "any maneuver or weapon which holds promise of success. For this reason, there appeared no reason to assume that the Soviets would in the future make a sharp distinction between 'military aggression' and measures short of military aggression."³⁵

For NSC 68, the projected Soviet nuclear capability "greatly intensified the Soviet threat" and made it "more immediate" than estimated by NSC 20/4. "For the moment our atomic retaliatory capability is probably adequate to deter the Kremlin from a deliberate direct military attack against ourselves or other free peoples." But once the Kremlin leadership "calculates that it has sufficient atomic capability to make a surprise attack on us, nullifying our atomic superiority and creating a military situation decisively in its favor, the Kremlin might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth." They would surely do so if confident of knocking the United States out. Mutual atomic plenty "might well act, therefore, not as a deterrent, but as an incitement to war."³⁶

NSC 68 predicted that this situation would arise by 1954, when the Soviets would have about 200 nuclear weapons; of these some 100 might be deliverable on the United States (by one-way missions). Thus 1954 would be the year of "maximum danger." By then, NSC 68 warned, their growing atomic arsenal would give the Soviets various options despite U.S. numerical superiority. A Soviet surprise attack could severely damage "vital centers of the U.S.," seriously curtail its retaliatory capacity, and greatly reduce its economic superiority for an extended war. And no longer would Soviet ground forces be neutralized by the U.S. nuclear mo-

nopoly. They might also be emboldened to embark “on a more violent and ruthless prosecution of its design” by subversion and intimidation, as well as “on piecemeal aggression against others, counting on our unwillingness to engage in atomic war unless we were directly attacked.” Yet “our present weakness would prevent us from offering effective resistance at any of several vital pressure points,” where the only choice would be between capitulation and a global war of annihilation. And while the “preferred Soviet technique is to subvert by infiltration and intimidation, . . . [it] is seeking to create overwhelming military force, in order to back up infiltration with intimidation.”³⁷

The NSC 68 conception of the Soviet threat was challenged by the two top Soviet experts. Kennan’s rejection of the premises and prescriptions of the paper has already been mentioned. The critique of Charles (“Chip”) Bohlen was more specific and more persistent (and ultimately effective, as will be discussed later). While supporting a military buildup to balance Soviet forces, Bohlen took strenuous issue with the depiction of Soviet priorities and their proclivity to take risks for expansion that underlay the analysis and strategy of NSC 68. He first voiced his criticisms in April 1950, when he was briefly recalled from his Paris post to comment on the completed draft.³⁸ His objections failed to persuade Acheson.

NSC 68: U.S. Objectives

Truman’s directive leading to NSC 68 was specifically to reexamine “our objectives” in the light of Soviet nuclear prospects. As already mentioned, that review had concluded that the objectives of the Truman strategy should continue to be the same as those set out in NSC 20/4 in 1948 and reaffirmed them verbatim. They were, in short,

- 1) to prevent the expansion of Soviet control and influence by political warfare, subversion, or military force; and
- 2) “to reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations,” and “bring about a basic change” in its conduct of international relations.³⁹

But the identity was purely verbal or formal. NSC 68 stressed that the emerging Soviet nuclear capacity had “greatly intensified the Soviet threat” and the “immediacy of the danger.”⁴⁰ In this ominous new context, NSC 68 gave these two U.S. objectives a profoundly different content from the previous period.

Achieving “preponderant power” as soon as feasible took top priority under NSC 68 for both objectives. For “reasonable assurance that the free world could survive an initial attack” by 1954, and still eventually attain its objectives, “it appears to be imperative to increase as rapidly as possible general air, ground, and sea strength, and that of our allies to the point where we are not so heavily dependent on atomic weapons.” Enhancing our retaliatory power to deter a possible surprise attack would also provide more time for “our policies to produce a modification of the Soviet system.”⁴¹

Deterring and if necessary defeating Soviet aggression and expansion, however, was only half of the NSC 68 strategy. “In a shrinking world, which now faces the