

## **A New Look: From Containment and Conventional Arms to Deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction**

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Framing the first years of the Cold War in a cataclysmic forewarning, members of the Departments of State and Defense wrote President Truman on April 7, 1950 in a top secret National Security Council policy paper known as NSC 68, that “a ... rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength ... in the free world ... is the only course” of action both consistent with the United States’ “fundamental purpose” and preventive of “the destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, by 1953, following the vast military expansion wrought by NSC 68, U.S. Cold War policies had begun to undergo a shift from the strategy of containment -- favoring conventional military buildup which characterized the Korean War -- to the deterrence-based nuclear defense comprising Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy.

Deterrence through massive retaliation became the focal point of national security, and while the U.S. reduced spending on conventional weaponry, it compensated by engaging in an escalating nuclear arms race against the Soviet Union in an effort to uphold its position of military prowess.<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower’s partiality toward nuclear deterrence instead of conventional containment was rooted in his belief that the former would be more sustainable in the pursuit of long-term peace and stability. While NSC 68 alluded to the holistic importance of political, economic, and military strength, policy under the Truman administration and assertions of the policy paper itself placed stark emphasis upon the last. The historiographical school known as Domestic Statists portray Eisenhower’s New Look as a means to center Cold War policy around political and economic strength, and that forbearance in matters of defense was prudent when faced with prolonged conflict. While fear that immoderate military expenditure would debilitate the domestic economy and lead to self-interested political posturing was certainly among the qualms that led to Eisenhower’s reduction in defense spending, the foremost impetus for his New Look, as the opposing school of International Statists contend, was a conviction that modernization of the U.S. defense arsenal and enforcement against a hostile first strike was necessary to preserve national security and avoid calamitous conflict between the East and West.

Only through a short-term build-up of nuclear weaponry and a de-emphasis on conventional arms was the prospect of disarmament and peace possible in the long run. Eisenhower’s attempts to strike a balance between domestic political-economic strength and military prowess were largely in keeping with the “middle way” which governed his presidency. Yet, although he succeeded in his evasion of nuclear holocaust, he did not find the domestic stability and international demilitarization he dreamed of. At the end of his two terms in January 1961, Eisenhower was forced to concede that a disentanglement of corporate and political interests had eluded him, and that the country’s domestic integrity was menaced by the rise of a military-industrial complex.<sup>3</sup> Congruously, on the international front, deterrence through the escalation of nuclear arms had not led to concession and armistice as he had hoped, but rather to the emergence of mutually assured destruction.

**Context for the New Look**

The detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviet Union in August of 1949, and victory in China by the Peoples' Liberation Army in October of that year persuaded Secretary of State Dean Acheson and President Harry S. Truman to undertake a reevaluation of U.S. national security objectives. A team of analysts from the Departments of State and Defense was assembled to draft a policy paper in January 1950, and a copy was presented to Truman and members of the National Security Council the following April. A reinforcement of the tenets of strategy of containment established by George F. Kennan's "X" article and the Truman Doctrine, NSC 68 underscored the necessity of a holistic commitment by the U.S. military, political and economic apparatus to the resistance of Soviet communism.<sup>4</sup> The onset of the Korean War seemed only to confirm the document's prognosis, and when military spending tripled between 1950 and 1952, an unprecedented modern defense budget was born (q.v. Appendix 1). When Truman left office in 1953, his successor was left with the reins of an unbridled horse. Eisenhower, a former general in the U.S. army and a fiscal conservative, was less than convinced of the need for such a martial surfeit: in the summer of 1953, he convened a circle of senior cabinet officials, present among which were Kennan and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, atop the White House, to again reassess the current approach to foreign policy. The national security conference, christened Project Solarium, deemed the unilateral guidelines set forth by NSC 68 as inadequate in addressing the scope of troubles the administration faced. Officials partaking in Project Solarium regarded the Soviet conflict as likely to be a drawn-out one, and stressed the importance of economic integrity and prudent military action to develop prolonged endurance; from these conclusions NSC 162/2 was produced, a policy paper whose call for an enlargement of the nuclear arsenal to unprecedented levels braced U.S. foreign policy until the Cold War's end.

A chief concern Eisenhower bore into the presidency was that a military establishment with unchecked capital and unwarranted influence could obstruct the economy and subvert policy, thereby posing a threat to individual freedoms and national security. As Cold War historian Robert Griffith contends, "at the heart of Eisenhower's thinking was a struggle to reconcile the most fundamental conflicts of modern society."<sup>5</sup> Especially in the affluence of postwar America, domestic political-economic concerns such as "industrialization, mass production and distribution ... and growth of urban populations" aligned to "create a complex, interdependent social system" which Eisenhower believed was the keystone of national strength and security.<sup>6</sup> This domestic statist historiography prevails when one considers Eisenhower's disparagement in 1952 of the "expenditure of 'unconscionable sums' for an indefinite duration"; all foreign outlay, he insisted, had to be "gauged in the light of ... internal effect."<sup>7</sup> The president's beliefs were backed by the results of his Project Solarium, which concluded that the ability for the U.S. and "the whole free world" to endure such a protracted conflict against the Soviet Union was "dependent on ... the long-term expansion of the U.S. economy," and that therefore all "expenditures for national security ... must be carefully scrutinized" to ensure that they do not "[constitute] a danger" to "[fiscal] stability and growth."<sup>8</sup>

Threats to the national economy were not the only worries Eisenhower had, however. Convinced that drastic military spending had led to a rising military establishment with undue political posture, he cautioned against "selfish pressure groups" that he worried would use fear-mongering and other politicized internal conflict to "impose their narrow ends on the state."<sup>9</sup> Speaking to an audience at Columbia University, Eisenhower warned that the "power of

concentrated finance ... is fully capable of destroying individual freedom.”<sup>10</sup> Order and vigilance against “class conflict, ... acquisitiveness, and contentious party politics” in a modern “corporate society” were crucial to sustaining America’s national survival in extended conflicts abroad. Gratuitous military expenditure, in the president’s eyes, would weaken the domestic economy and empower concentrated finance, menacing the stability of politics and thus national security.

With regard to the historiographical explications of Eisenhower’s positions, the most compelling Domestic Statist argument aligns in several ways with contentions of the opposing school. “This world in arms is not spending alone,” Eisenhower expounded in a speech delivered in 1953, following the death of Joseph Stalin.<sup>11</sup> Facing mounting pressure for an increased military budget, Eisenhower likened extraneous defense spending to “theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”<sup>12</sup> So long as “humanity” hung from its “cross of iron,” it would suffer from financial disparity and strife and always fail to achieve a “just and lasting peace.”<sup>13</sup> Though a conservative, Eisenhower was keenly aware of how his country had inadvertently tied itself to the international fiscal burdens of the postwar world, and of its ensuing need to adapt to the shifting economic landscape of the latter twentieth century. The U.S. was left with an exorbitant defense budget after it withdrew from the Korean peninsula, and a cutback on conventional armaments in favor of nuclear warheads was not only sensible, but vital. Indeed, the president’s investment in global peace was bolstered by the \$234 billion decrease in annual military spending following the end of his two terms (q.v. Appendix 1). A modern society called for a modern adaptation to defense, and Eisenhower’s New Look was an attempt to reconcile the demands of the latter with the needs of the former.

Despite these considerations, whether political or economic, it was not for domestic affairs that Eisenhower resolved to undergo such a drastic transformation of the U.S. approach to foreign policy. Rather, the former five-star general was convinced that the most fundamental of Clausewitzian principles, the notion of war being an extension of policy, had been rendered obsolete by the phenomenon of modern warfare. It was in the best interest of national security and survival that standing conventional armies yield to an updated nuclear arsenal; in brief, that the primary purpose of the armed forces had become to deter warfare rather than to wage it. The president believed the focal point of this modernization of the U.S. mode of defense should rest on nuclear weapons because they were now “the centerpiece of major confrontation and potential military conflict,” and had “given a new character to warfare.”<sup>14</sup> The new character alluded to by Eisenhower was largely informed by the findings of Project Solarium; NSC 162/2 outlined that “in the face of the Soviet threat, the security of the United States requires ... development and maintenance of ... A strong military posture, with emphasis on the capability of inflicting massive retaliatory damage by offensive striking power.”<sup>15</sup> The centrality of massive retaliation to national security in the Eisenhower years was such that Secretary Dulles delivered an address to the Council on Foreign Relations in 1954 detailing the reasons for such a pursuit in foreign policy: citing the unabating build-up of conventional arms necessitated by NSC 68, Dulles reproached that “measures cannot be judged adequate merely because they ward off an immediate danger ... It is essential ... to [protect ourselves] without exhausting ourselves.”<sup>16</sup> What the Eisenhower administration sought was a “maximum deterrent at a bearable cost;” the cost Dulles hesitated to pay was not simply in greenbacks, as Griffith would contend, but also in boots on the ground. “Emergency measures,” such as the massive mobilization of forces to the Korean peninsula, “are costly; they are superficial; and they imply the enemy has the initiative.”

Therefore they “cannot be depended on to serve our long-time interests,” Dulles concluded, before stressing again the “critical importance” of the “‘long-time’ factor.”<sup>17</sup>

It was not only the prospect of a draining long-term cost in matériel and personnel that drove Eisenhower and Dulles toward a strategy of deterrence, but also one of efficacy and efficiency. The National Security Council under the Eisenhower administration considered a nuclear arsenal most advantageous in establishing collaboration with the U.S.’s allies in Europe and Asia, while providing for their dependence on U.S. military support. The “principle of collective security through the United Nations” and the “assumption by the United States ... as leader of the free world” impelled the U.S. to provide military aid to allies who “lack that atomic capability which is the major deterrent to Soviet aggression,” it found. In accordance with Eisenhower’s domino theory and the Truman doctrine of his predecessor, the Council also declared maintenance of the “freedom and security of [other] free nations” to be an “essential contribution to the maintenance of [America’s] own freedom and security.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet, Eisenhower’s belief in the necessity of a proliferation of nuclear warheads and his endorsement of the massive retaliation doctrine were merely short-term means to an end, insurance for his aspirations of international demilitarization, collaboration, and peace in the long-term. “The Eisenhower years,” historian and presidential archivist Thomas Soapes explains, “were a time when the United States and the Soviet Union began to move, however slowly, away from nuclear confrontation and toward negotiation.”<sup>19</sup> However in conflict Eisenhower’s objectives may have seemed, he did not regard his pursuit of nuclear disarmament as inherently “contradicted by the ‘New Look.’”<sup>20</sup> He realized that obtaining a satisfactory arms agreement that would “leave the United States secure while at the same time reducing the nuclear threat ... would be a difficult and lengthy process;” to achieve such a goal, the U.S. would have to maintain its military strength, both to defend itself and to preserve its bargaining power in future negotiations concerning disarmament, for another forty years--as Eisenhower predicted in 1958.<sup>21</sup>

Nuclear holocaust haunted Eisenhower, and alongside his build-up of the nuclear arsenal he pursued a trajectory of eventual de-escalation and disarmament of nuclear testing and weaponry to avoid its realization. While the U.S.’s doctrine of massive retaliation was meant to deter the possibility of a first strike by any aggressor, Eisenhower was advised that “America’s retaliatory capability emphasized the value to an enemy of achieving surprise.”<sup>22</sup> To ensure that such a catastrophic mishap never occur, the president’s policy stipulated that “the United States should promptly determine ... an adequate system of armament control which would effectively remove or reduce the Soviet atomic ... threat, and on what basis the United States would be prepared to negotiate or obtain it.”<sup>23</sup> Eisenhower also believed it was conducive to America’s public image to pursue armistice. In a 1954 meeting with members of the National Security Council, the president emphasized the necessity of gaining some “significant psychological advantage in the world,” lamenting that “everybody seems to think that we’re skunks, saber-rattlers and warmongers” and explaining that taking steps toward armistice would “make clear our peaceful objectives.”<sup>24</sup> The Cold War, as Soapes puts it, was “a continuous battle for world opinion, and Eisenhower saw the peace issue as a topic of major public concern.” Despite setbacks such as the 1960 U-2 incident, in which a U.S. reconnaissance plane was shot down in Soviet airspace during negotiations between Western and Soviet leaders, Eisenhower’s interest in pursuing a

moratorium on nuclear testing laid the framework for the eventual Limited Test-Ban Treaty signed 1963 and ratified by the U.S., U.K., and U.S.S.R.<sup>25</sup>

Most high-minded and salient among Eisenhower's justifications for the New Look was his conviction about the potential for "peaceful use of atomic energy."<sup>26</sup> The president's much remembered "Atoms for Peace" speech in 1953 made concessions to the dangers of engaging in an "atomic armaments race" in an extraordinary entreaty for global collaboration extended to the Soviet Union. Eisenhower proposed that "fissionable materials" be contributed by all the "nuclear powers" to an agency under the U.N. aegis "charged with developing peaceful uses for atomic energy in agriculture, medicine, and electrical power."<sup>27</sup> In some attainable future, Eisenhower hoped "contributing Powers" across the globe would, in the process of disarmament, dedicate their nuclear strength toward "[serving] the needs rather than the fears of mankind."<sup>28</sup>

When Eisenhower's two terms came to a close in 1961, he left office unconvinced of his successes and dissatisfied with his shortcomings. In his farewell address to the nation, the president chose not to rest on his laurels but rather to urge the public to stay vigilant and "guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex ... [to] never let the weight of [its] combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes."<sup>29</sup> Too often, scholars have portrayed the Eisenhower era as a time of stagnancy, homogeneity, insipid conservatism; indeed, in assessing the decades following his departure from the White House, one may conclude that he failed in his attempt to separate embroiled interests of state and defense, and that he was unable to successfully avert the phenomenon of mutually assured destruction which loomed over his New Look. But Eisenhower knew that the extent of change he endeavored to effect, in all its breadth and intricacy, far outweighed that which could be feasibly done in the span of eight years. He would have to leave the little details to be realized by his successors. Instead, the president took on the daunting task of erecting a foundation upon the rocky uncertainties of the early Cold War years, one upon which every future American leader has knowingly or unknowingly built. Eisenhower's answers to questions posed about national security challenged preexisting assumptions about the nature and purpose of the American military establishment. He saw the exigency, as in Project Solarium, Atoms for Peace, and his adaptation of Dulles' doctrine of massive retaliation, of sacrificing short-term urgencies for the benefit of long-term ends, always prioritizing the greater good of an eventual, lasting peace. And faced with the trying tensions of an evolving modern civilization, Eisenhower was able to reconcile and realign foreign interests with domestic policy while keeping the country's gaze set on the horizon and, with all the foresight of a traditional visionary, redefining America's role in the vast and formidable landscape of the postwar world.

Appendix 1  
 Annual U.S. Military Spending, 1945-1996<sup>30</sup>  
 (\$bil. 1996 in outlays)\*

Year	Spending	Year	Spending
1945	962.7	1971	311.7
1946	500.6	1972	289.1
1947	133.7	1973	259.5
1948	94.7	1974	243.8
1949	127.8	1975	242.0
1950	133.0	1976	234.0
1951	225.7	1977	232.7
1952	408.5	1978	233.2
1953	437.0	1979	237.4
1954	402.1	1980	246.2
1955	344.5	1981	260.8
1956	320.7	1982	282.0
1957	322.4	1983	303.2
1958	317.9	1984	318.1
1959	306.9	1985	343.7
1960	289.6	1986	363.7
1961	291.1	1987	371.1
1962	300.0	1988	372.8
1963	293.3	1989	376.2
1964	294.8	1990	358.7
1965	268.3	1991	316.5
1966	297.3	1992	328.6
1967	354.1	1993	312.1
1968	388.9	1994	290.3
1969	371.8	1995	272.1
1970	346.0	1996	265.6 (est.)

\*converted to \$bil. 2018 in body

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 68*, comp. James S. Lay, Jr., by Dean G. Acheson and Louis A. Johnson (1950), 4 (corrected), 54.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Dulles, "Speech on Massive Retaliation," address, January 12, 1954, ABC-CLIO eBook Collection.

<sup>3</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Presidential Farewell Address to the Nation," address, January 17, 1961, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>4</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Truman Doctrine," speech, March 12, 1947, ABC-CLIO eBook Collection; George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, 1, ABC-CLIO eBook Collection; U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 68*, 10-12.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (February 1982): 89, JSTOR.

<sup>6</sup> Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower," 89.

<sup>7</sup> Eisenhower to Eric Larrabee, March 25, 1947, in Eisenhower Papers, 8: 1631; *Eisenhower Diaries* (January 22, 1952), 209-1; quoted in *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 162/2*, comp. James S. Lay, Jr. (1953), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower," 90.

<sup>10</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Columbia University 13th Presidential Inaugural Address," speech, October 12, 1948, Columbia Spectator Archive.

<sup>11</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, "The Chance for Peace," address, April 16, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower: Presidential Library, Museum and Boyhood Home.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Goodpaster Oral History Transcript, pp. 99-100, 104-6; memorandum of telephone call, Eisenhower to Dulles, 16 March 1958, Diary Series, Eisenhower Papers; quoted in Thomas F. Soapes, "A Cold Warrior Seeks Peace: Eisenhower's Strategy for Nuclear Disarmament," *Diplomatic History* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1980): 70, JSTOR.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 162/2*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Dulles, "Speech on Massive," address.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Truman, "Truman Doctrine," speech; U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 162/2*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Soapes, "A Cold," 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Defense, *NSC 162/2*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Sarell Everett Gleason, "Memorandum of Discussion at the 195th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, May 6, 1954," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, National Security Affairs* 2 (May 8, 1964): 1427.

<sup>25</sup> Soapes, "A Cold," 59.

<sup>26</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Atoms for Peace," speech, December 8, 1953, ABC-CLIO eBook Collection.

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- <sup>27</sup> Soapes, "A Cold," 60-61.
- <sup>28</sup> Eisenhower, "Atoms for Peace," speech.
- <sup>29</sup> Eisenhower, "Presidential Farewell," address.
- <sup>30</sup> Martin Calhoun, comp., *U.S. Military Spending, 1945-1996*, 1, July 9, 1996,  
<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/milspend.htm>.



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