The Origins of Massive Retaliation

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On 4 November 1952 the American voters elected Dwight D. Eisenhower president with a clear “mandate for change” in foreign and defense policy. The Truman administration's national security policies over the previous two years had alienated the people and the Congress. Truman's decision to commit American forces to check the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950 had initially commanded great popular support. So too had the broad and expensive military buildup that the administration had begun after the outbreak of hostilities. But enthusiasm for both the war and the rearment drive that accompanied it had waned considerably by 1952. Voter frustration at the apparently deadlocked fighting in Korea proved especially potent, and the Republicans exploited it skilfully. They were probably headed for victory in any case when on 24 October Eisenhower promised if elected to visit the battlefield in Korea. This pledge, which seemed to indicate that Eisenhower would take a fresh look at a stalemate the Democrats seemed willing to ignore, quickly became the most effective slogan of the campaign. On its strength, in the last ten days before the election, probable victory became a landslide.¹

Beyond benefiting from Truman's difficulties, Eisenhower also won support on the basis of his campaign pledges for new departures in policy. Chief among these was his promise to lower federal spending in general and defense spending in particular. The military budget, since it consumed about 70 percent of federal expenditures, was the most obvious target for spending reductions. Through the

Republican party platform Eisenhower was also committed to the design of a new foreign policy—"a policy of boldness" that would reject "the negative, futile and immoral policy of 'containment'" and would regain for the United States the initiative in the international arena that the Democrats had surrendered to the Soviet Union in the years since 1945.2

All Republicans could agree on the need to cut the budget, but forming a consensus on the shape of a new foreign policy was not so easy. This task required a delicate balancing act. Eisenhower had, on the one hand, to consider the wing of the party led by Senator Robert Taft, his opponent for the Republican presidential nomination. Taft and his supporters, aptly called "the unilateralists," found the Democrats too eager for foreign alliances (especially NATO) and insufficiently attentive to the threat of Chinese communism and the strategic importance of American air power. On the other hand, Eisenhower had to take into account the "internationalist" wing of the party with which he was personally identified and which was firmly committed to the importance of NATO and the defense of Europe. Further complicating the equation was the pressure to adopt a policy of genuine novelty. As a result of the bitter feeling over American involvement in Korea, bipartisanship in foreign policy had lost its appeal even to the internationalists, and after twenty years of Democratic control of the White House few Republicans were satisfied with a policy that did not represent a clear break with the past.3

EISENHOWER'S NATIONAL SECURITY TEAM

To help carry out this difficult shift in government priorities, Eisenhower named to key cabinet and advisory positions men who differed strikingly in background from their counterparts in the Truman administration. His appointees came almost to a man directly from high positions in private business. The new secretary of defense, Charles E. Wilson, came from the presidency of General Motors; Roger Kyes, Wilson's principal deputy, came from the same company. George Humphrey, the secretary of the treasury, had been a Cleveland industrialist, and Joseph Dodge, director of the Bureau of the Budget, was a Detroit banker. John Foster Dulles, the secretary of state, was a slight exception. Despite his background in diplomacy, Dulles retained the logical mind of a seasoned corporation lawyer skilled in precedent law. Like the others, he had never held a major executive position in the government. For one of his most trusted

advisers Eisenhower created a post that had not existed in the Truman administration; he made Robert Cutler, president of Old Colony Trust in Boston, the special assistant for national security affairs. Cutler's primary responsibility was to organize the National Security Council (NSC) for the first time as the government's formal mechanism for long-range planning and decision making in foreign and defense policy. Eisenhower also made Treasury Secretary Humphrey and Budget Director Dodge regular members of the NSC so that the two officials most directly responsible for determining the size of the budget were directly involved in the national security policy process. All these changes and appointments reflected the president's desire to make national security planning an efficient business, with the emphasis placed on organization and economy.

Despite this drive for efficiency, almost a year passed between Eisenhower's inauguration and the declaration of the new national security policy. This delay resulted from an intense internal debate during the reexamination of American military force posture that produced what is known as the “New Look.” Hints of the new direction appeared throughout the year, but Eisenhower chose to wait until his State of the Union address on 7 January 1954 to advance a complete description. As his first principle in the section of the speech devoted to foreign affairs, he affirmed the paramount importance to American security of maintaining good relations with its allies. As the introductory principle to the section devoted to defense, he declared that American policy was to deter aggression by maintaining “a massive capability to strike back.” Later he explicitly mentioned the “heavy emphasis” that navy and air force air power would receive in his administration. Thus the speech neatly combined ideas cherished by the two conflicting wings of his own party. Elaborating on defense planning, Eisenhower pledged to “take into full account our great and growing number of nuclear weapons,” and he mentioned explicitly weapons designed for “tactical use.” He went on to say that introducing the new weapons would permit reductions in manpower needs. He also stressed the importance of centrally locating reserve forces and of strengthening the nation's continental defense. The economic implications of these decisions became clear two weeks later when Eisenhower submitted the fiscal 1955 budget to Congress, which called for new military spending authority of $31 billion, down $3.5 billion from the previous year. This, in turn, represented a substantial decrease from the $41.5 billion recommended by Truman in his last budget message of January 1953.

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Five days after the State of the Union address Secretary of State Dulles took up the president's theme of the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons at greater length and in more strident tones. On 12 January 1954, in a speech delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, Dulles for the first time as secretary expounded a strategic doctrine that will forever be associated with his name—massive retaliation. In his opening paragraphs, Dulles argued that the foreign-policy actions of the Truman administration, such as the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift, and the commitment of forces to Korea, while praiseworthy, were ultimately inadequate because they were "emergency" reactions to Soviet initiatives. Dulles argued that what he referred to as the "free world" community needed to imitate its opponent and adopt a strategy "suitable for an entire historical era." Its objective was to deter Communist aggression, but in pursuing it the free world community could not attempt the economically exhausting task of matching "the mighty land-power of the Communist world." Instead it had to make clear to any potential attacker that it faced resistance not confined to the point of attack.

Later in his speech when touching on changes in military planning, Dulles pointedly restated the type of response the new administration proposed to make on behalf of the free world. He informed his audience that the president and the National Security Council had decided "to depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our choosing," and that the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) could begin to plan accordingly. As proof that the policy could work, Dulles held up the example of the truce concluded in Korea six months before. "The fighting was stopped on honorable terms," he argued, "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." The unmistakable message of this rhetoric was that the administration had made the threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons against an enemy's homeland the cornerstone of its national security policy.

Contrary to most current references, massive retaliation was not just a doctrine of strategic deterrence. This speech, entitled "The Evolution of Foreign Policy," was an attempt by the secretary of state to place American international policy on an entirely new footing. It was Dulles's attempt to discharge the responsibility that the Republicans had assumed during the campaign of 1952 to develop a foreign policy fundamentally different from that of the Democrats. Gone was the talk of "liberation of captive peoples" that had been featured in the campaign. But Dulles did posit the threat of massive retaliation as the strategy that would restore the initiative to the free community and remove its harmful dependence on reactive measures. He linked this strategy to the hope

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that, with the long-term security such a policy would provide, the free world would eventually prevail in its struggle with communism. He firmly believed that Communist leaders could not forever suppress the basic human desires of the people they enslaved. The combination of massive retaliation with the hope of an eventual triumph over communism satisfied all the requirements for a new Republican international policy. It exploited America's technological superiority and provided the basis for reduced federal spending; it had broad popular appeal; and it flowed from the strong belief of the president and his top advisers in the utility of nuclear weapons for both deterrent and actual military missions.7

Eisenhower's discussion of military planning in the State of the Union address did not arouse particular public comment or criticism, despite his pledges to maintain a massive capability to strike back and to take into full account the United States's great and growing number of nuclear weapons. The same did not hold true for Dulles's speech, which elaborated the same themes, albeit in more bombastic terms. Reaction at home and abroad was angry and skeptical. Democrats charged that the administration had placed the United States in the untenable position of having constantly to choose between total nuclear war and the acceptance of limited Communist aggression. Allies feared that they might be dragged into a major war fought over minor issues about which they cared nothing. Strategic analysts outside the government argued that it was absurd to expect the United States to defend Western Europe by striking the Soviet Union with atomic weapons, since this would invite similar retaliation upon its own cities.8

Pronouncements by other administration spokesmen in the weeks after Dulles's speech did nothing to allay the fears of any of these groups. Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, in a reply to criticism by Adlai Stevenson, described the doctrine: "Rather than let the Communists nibble us to death all over the world in little wars we would rely in the future primarily on our mobile retaliatory power which we could use in our discretion against the major source of aggression at times and places that we chose. We adjusted our armed strength to meet the requirements of this new concept and, what was just as important, we let the world and we let the Communists know what we intended to do." The effect of these and other statements was, as James Reston declared, to create the impression throughout the world that "in the event of another proxy or


brushfire war in Korea, Indochina, Iran or anywhere else, the United States might retaliate instantly with atomic weapons against the U.S.S.R. or Red China.\textsuperscript{9}

Never again did Dulles espouse massive retaliation in terms as extreme as those he had used in his speech before the council, and he moved quickly to distance himself from reckless statements like that of the vice-president. An article by Dulles appeared in the April 1954 issue of \textit{Foreign Affairs} which defined for the careful reader a strategic doctrine quite different from the popular interpretations of massive retaliation. Not surprisingly, Dulles toned down his criticisms of the Truman legacy, which he now called bipartisan, necessary, and of much worth. He also devoted much less space to the prospects for a softening of Communist rule, declaring, “Despotism is entrenched as never before.” The portions of the article devoted to defense policy read almost like a retraction of his earlier speech. Dulles did reiterate that in order to deter aggression “the main reliance must be on the power of the free community to retaliate with great force by mobile means at places of its own choice.” But he also cautioned that “massive atomic and thermonuclear retaliation is not the kind of power which could most usefully be evoked under all circumstances,” and he reminded his readers that the strengths of the free world “include, especially, air and naval power and atomic weapons which are now available in a wide range, suitable not only for strategic bombing but also for extensive tactical use.” Dulles explicitly denied that the new doctrine meant “that if there is a Communist attack somewhere in Asia, atom or hydrogen bombs will necessarily be dropped on the great industrial centers of China or Russia.” On balance, the article represented an appreciable cooling of the rhetorical climate.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite this attempt at clarification, the belief prevailed that the Eisenhower administration might react to virtually any international provocation by dispatching the Strategic Air Command (SAC) to Moscow. The record was straight, for those who wanted to read it, that no decision had been taken to depend exclusively on retaliatory air power. If others—especially the potential adversaries the administration wanted to deter—thought any differently, no overwhelming pains were taken to correct them. One must assume that Eisenhower, never as unsubtle as commonly believed, desired this result. He was perfectly aware of the advantages of studied ambiguity in public foreign-policy statements, especially those concerning the possible use of American military forces. But intellectuals and scholars have been somewhat unkind to Eisenhower for failing to spell out exactly what his administration meant by massive retaliation. As a consequence, massive retaliation retains its reputation as almost a caricature of intelligent strategic doctrine—inflexible, incredible, and very dangerous.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9} Nixon is quoted in the \textit{New York Times}, 14 March 1954; Reston’s column is in ibid., 17 January 1954.

\textsuperscript{10} John Foster Dulles, “Policy for Security and Peace,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 32 (April 1954): 353–64. This article was drafted for Dulles by Robert R. Bowie, head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff.

\textsuperscript{11} For a fascinating insight into Eisenhower’s view on the advantages of vagueness, see...
The time for a tentative reassessment of the nuclear strategy of the Eisenhower administration has arrived. The story is by no means complete, but enough documents have now been declassified to give scholars insight into how Eisenhower and his associates viewed the operational and psychological utility of nuclear weapons. A new evaluation should start from the realization that massive retaliation as popularly construed—the indiscriminate lashing out with SAC forces—never was the operational policy of the Eisenhower administration. This does not mean that strategic retaliatory bombing was not important in its defense planning. It was, in both deterrent and war-fighting roles, in both general and limited wars. Nor does it mean that Dulles’s pledge to “retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our choosing” was all bluff, as many scholars and analysts have since maintained. The evidence is unmistakable that Eisenhower and his associates did intend to use nuclear weapons in military situations short of total war. For example, at a high-level conference in the president’s office in June 1954 they resolved that “in the event of overt, unprovoked Chinese Communist aggression in Southeast Asia . . . the U.S. should then [after getting a declaration of war from Congress] launch large-scale air and naval atomic attacks on ports, airfields and military targets in mainland China, using as militarily appropriate ‘new weapons.’ ”\textsuperscript{12} These are not the words of an administration espousing a doctrine for propaganda purposes only.

Close analysis of this contingency plan provides one clear measure of the administration’s strategy. In the first place, Eisenhower and his top colleagues explicitly identified overt, unprovoked Chinese Communist aggression as the cause for American intervention. Thus they implicitly ruled out one common interpretation of their doctrine, which held that the United States might react to “proxy” aggression by smaller states with atomic strikes against the Soviet Union or China. One could have inferred this from Eisenhower’s refusal to intervene at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam less than two months before, but the evidence from the June meeting strongly corroborates the inference. In the second place, this group agreed that if attacks were ordered against the Chinese, they would be limited to “military targets.” Whether such attacks would have caused extensive civilian casualties is an important but separate question. What matters here is that the administration did not consider unrestricted attacks against urban areas—another common interpretation of massive retaliation—a real policy option. In the third place, and probably most important, Eisenhower and his staff saw no reason, save military utility, to distinguish between conventional armaments and “new weapons”—the unmistakable euphemism for nuclear explosives. They were completely indifferent to the concept of a


"nuclear firebreak" that figures so importantly in later American defense planning. In the words of one of their most significant national security planning documents, they believed that the United States should "consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions."13

The policy of massive retaliation thus is by itself inadequate, even as a convenient catchphrase, to sum up the nuclear strategy of the Eisenhower administration. The term massive retaliation now evokes images of SAC on the rampage that are probably indelible, and the administration played the most important part in the creation of these images. But the administration's strategy was more subtle than its spokesmen were willing to admit. Analysts of the period should no longer, twenty-five years after the fact, continue to be seduced by the rhetoric of the Eisenhower administration.

Eisenhower's Views on Strategy and Forces

Eisenhower's nuclear strategy consisted essentially of three elements which, taken together, yield a picture rather different from that usually conjured up by massive retaliation. First, the president believed that nuclear weapons presented real and usable military options. If deterrence failed and it proved necessary to commit American forces to battle, Eisenhower was prepared to order the use of nuclear weapons in any situation where they would be militarily appropriate. Second, he and the members of his administration publicized their willingness to employ nuclear force in the belief that it would deter both large- and small-scale Communist aggression. Third, he ordered the military planning and force posture of all three services to reflect the possible use of nuclear weapons across a wide range of contingencies. The objective of this strategy was to achieve both a defense posture adequate for the long haul and, through lowered manpower requirements, the reductions in the defense budget that Eisenhower deemed necessary to the economic well-being of the nation. In the short term, the strategy may be seen as the culmination of the review of defense planning undertaken in the first year of the Eisenhower administration and called the New Look. In a broader frame of reference, a full understanding of the strategy comes only through an examination of the development of American nuclear strategy since 1945.14

The New Look, based on a review of all aspects of defense policy, stemmed from the president's belief that the preservation of the nation's economic strength required major reductions in federal and defense spending. After nine months of intense bureaucratic infighting, a marked shift emerged in spending


and force posture priorities from those of the Truman administration. The most succinct explanation of the changes appears in Eisenhower's memoirs, in which he describes five "logical guidelines" that shaped the policy review process: the United States would never start a major war; U.S. forces should be designed "primarily" to deter a war, although they might be compelled to fight; national security has economic as well as military components; U.S. forces must be kept modern; and the United States must maintain an alliance system to spread the defense burden around the free world. The president described the decisions taken in light of these guidelines as twofold. First, he listed five kinds of forces he believed the country required to protect its interests—forces for nuclear retaliation, overseas deployment, maintenance of open sea lanes, air defense of North America, and reserves. The administration, reports Eisenhower, decided to place greater emphasis on the forces needed for retaliation and continental defense, while cutting back the other three categories. Second, the administration decided to put "greater emphasis than formerly on the deterrent and destructive power of improved nuclear weapons, better means of delivery, and effective air defense units."  

Eisenhower believed that the two categories of forces stressed under the New Look would not be sufficient by themselves to give the United States a "war-winning" capability should deterrence fail and a major war break out with the Soviet Union. At a high-level conference in December 1954 he sketched out his views on the likely course of such a war. Since intelligence assessments of Soviet atomic capability suggested the possibility that the United States could "be knocked out within the first thirty days of combat," the overriding mission of American forces would be "to blunt the enemy's initial threat—by massive retaliatory power and ability to deliver it, and by a continental defense system of major capability." Although the army and the navy would "keep the land situation under control" and "keep the oceans clear," first priority would be given to retaliation and continental defense.

The president also expressed concern for the safety of American troops in Europe during this period, but he hoped that tactical atomic weapons could be used to protect them. In this manner, the New Look would provide forces for what Eisenhower pungently called "the aversion of disaster" phase of the next major war. Its second phase, when "we would go on to win," would be by implication a much more traditional campaign for which the force posture priorities of the New Look would not be especially suited. The second phase would involve clearing the sea lanes and assembling ships, men, and equipment for deployment overseas on a scale comparable to that during World War II. Since Eisenhower believed that the U.S. deterrent strategy would discourage the Soviets from taking action that might provoke all-out war and since lowered defense spending was of the utmost importance, the New Look's admitted operational shortcomings seemed an acceptable risk.  

Eisenhower's repeatedly expressed concern over the size of the federal budget was genuine and long-standing. A look at his views on defense policy during the rearmament fever induced by the outbreak of the Korean War is enlightening in this regard. On 28 September 1950, while still president of Columbia University, Eisenhower addressed a group of prominent Americans meeting in New York to discuss defense needs. At this time, in the wake of General Douglas MacArthur's successful landing at Inchon in South Korea, it appeared that the Korean War would soon be over. Eisenhower warned his listeners that "the Korean affair is a mere incident in a long deliberate campaign" and that in waging that campaign, "We must not go broke." He went on to say that "if our economy should go broke, the Russians would have won even a greater victory than anything they could obtain by going to war." He conceded that defense spending of $21 to $22 billion annually might be needed for the next few years to build sufficient military strength—quite a large increase over the spending limits imposed by the Truman administration prior to the Korean War, but not nearly as large as the budgets the administration would eventually recommend. Eisenhower maintained that the United States could not afford to have forces "at every danger spot" capable of defending "any sector wherever the attack might come." Instead the nation should have mobile and balanced forces "that can be quickly and efficiently transported to any danger point." The only suggestion he made at the meeting that would not eventually reappear in his administration was for the United States to institute universal military service, but even in making it Eisenhower urged that the conscripts be given "only nominal pay." 

By December 1950, after the Chinese intervention in Korea had convinced many Americans that World War III was imminent, Eisenhower's views had changed. On 11 December 1950 he met with a Council on Foreign Relations Study Group which had been organized to discuss American aid to Europe. He had served as the group's chairman; this was its last meeting before President Truman announced the general's return to active duty and his appointment as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. This time Eisenhower's tone was very somber. He called for the dispatch of additional American troops to strengthen the defense of Western Europe and once more urged adoption of a program of universal military service to raise the necessary troops. With regard to manpower policies, he declared that the Pentagon needed "a system that would work over a long period of time"—precisely his own approach to defense planning as a whole two years later. "The trouble with [our current] approach," he observed, "is that we are now dangling on a thread over the edge of a cliff." The views suggest that at a time of major international crisis Eisenhower was willing to abandon the priority he attached to economy and the long haul. But in more

17 Harry A. Bullis, minutes taken at "Citizens' Conference," 28 September 1950, Papers of Tracy S. Voorhees [hereafter Voorhees Papers], Alexander Library, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J.
normal circumstances, already in 1950 he was proposing that defense planning be put on a basis strikingly similar to that of the New Look.18

The evidence is much less clear as to when Eisenhower adopted the belief that massive retaliation should be the foundation of the United States deterrent strategy. At a meeting in Paris in May 1952, John Foster Dulles outlined for the future Republican nominee a foreign policy based on “the means to retaliate instantly.” Eisenhower reports in the discussion of this meeting in his memoirs that Dulles’s theories were “similar to ones I had long been pondering,” although portions of his argument were “oversimplified.” This account implies that Eisenhower and Dulles reached the same conclusion independently. It does not, however, jibe with an incident recounted by C. L. Sulzberger, who claims that Dulles inserted a phrase in the foreign-policy plank of the 1952 Republican platform about the importance of “retaliatory striking power” and that Eisenhower ordered it removed. In any case, by August 1952 Eisenhower had overcome his reservations; he declared in a campaign speech to the American Legion on 25 August that “we must have . . . security forces . . . whose destructive and retaliatory power is so great that it causes nightmares in the Kremlin whenever they think of attacking us.”19 What role Dulles played in Eisenhower’s “conversion” to massive retaliation must remain an open question.

DULLES AND MASSIVE RETALIATION

The evidence on the nature of Dulles’s long-standing commitment to massive retaliation is much less ambiguous. In the bleak days of December 1950, when Dulles was serving as a consultant to the secretary of state with responsibility for negotiating a peace treaty with Japan, he delivered a speech to the American Association for the United Nations that strongly endorsed the Truman administration’s five-year record in international affairs. But he cast his praise in terms that foreshadowed his doctrine of massive retaliation. In phrases that would soon become very familiar, Dulles warned of the impossibility of maintaining local forces strong enough to defend every possible point against Soviet attack. This statement was followed, however, by the claim that the free world could through economic, political, and military strength mount an effective defense against subversion, civil war, and satellite attack—a claim he would not repeat as secretary of state. As for dealing with direct Soviet aggression, Dulles held out the prospect of a strategy very much like that of massive retaliation—“the capacity of counterattack against the aggressor.” In this con-

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nection he mentioned explicitly the free world's "strategic air force and stock of weapons." With restraint he would later abandon, Dulles also cautioned that "total reliance should not be placed on any single form of warfare or any relatively untried type of weapon." He went on to argue for the importance of stronger naval power and ground forces, and he declared that "the arsenal of retaliation should include all forms of counterattack with maximum flexibility, mobility, and the prospect of surprise."20

When Dulles spoke again publicly on appropriate military strategy on 27 November 1951, the praise for the Truman administration found in his earlier remarks had almost disappeared. Although still serving as a consultant to Acheson, Dulles clearly sought to distance himself from the administration's record in foreign affairs. With the upcoming presidential election possibly in mind, Dulles on this occasion warned of the tendency to identify any one year as the "climax of danger," and he criticized the administration for stockpiling vast quantities of military equipment that "quickly becomes obsolete." He then asked rhetorically what had prevented the Soviets from seizing "their two most coveted prizes, Germany and Japan." Answering his own question, Dulles declared: "The most reasonable explanation is that the rulers of Russia knew that if they indulged in this open aggression in any area of vital concern to the United States or which by treaty we were bound to defend, their sources and means of power would have been visited with incredible means of destruction. Thus the free world has been getting the security of deterrent striking power." Elsewhere in the same speech Dulles stated, "The probability is, indeed, that for the last five years we have had that kind of [deterrent] protection, without fully realizing it." He went on to stress "the need to develop, consciously, dependence on punishing power as the means of community defense against direct aggression."21

Thus Dulles contended that the Truman administration had been reaping the benefits of a strategy of massive retaliation "without fully realizing it," and he asserted that the United States needed only to develop this policy more completely and more rationally. This was a strange and less than candid claim from someone who must have known that Truman and his associates often discussed openly their belief that fear of atomic retaliation deterred Soviet aggression against vital U.S. interests. Not surprisingly, he did not repeat it as secretary of state. It would have cast too much doubt on his later argument that massive retaliation was an essential part of the "New Look" in American foreign policy and strategic doctrine.

Dulles resigned his position as a consultant on 21 March 1952 after Senate ap-

20 John Foster Dulles, "Where Are We? A Five-Year Record of America's Response to the Challenge of Communism," Department of State Bulletin 24 (15 January 1951):85–89 (emphasis added). At this time in private conversations, Dulles was critical of Truman's management of foreign affairs including the decision to intervene in Korea. See Hoopes, The Devil and John Foster Dulles, pp. 114–66.
21 John Foster Dulles, "Can We Stop Russian Imperialism?" Department of State Bulletin 25 (10 December 1951): 938–41.
proval of the peace treaty with Japan. He was then free to pursue openly the position of secretary of state in the future Republican administration. Dulles first had to decide whether to support Taft or Eisenhower, the two leading contenders for the Republican nomination. After conversations with several prominent Eisenhower backers, Dulles concluded that the general's international views (and his prospects for election) were more attractive and that he should support Eisenhower. He withheld public announcement of his choice until he had had a chance to meet with Eisenhower in Paris in early May. Prior to this meeting Dulles prepared for the candidate's consideration the essay on a new foreign policy that appeared a few weeks later in *Life* magazine under the title of "A Policy of Boldness."

In the essay Dulles linked explicitly for the first time the deterrent protection offered by massive retaliation with the possibility of a more positive American policy for the "liberation of the captive peoples" of Eastern Europe. The general idea was that once the United States had regained the initiative in foreign affairs by threatening the destruction of the Soviets, it could turn its attention more positively to the enslaved nations. What effect this would have was never explained. In his memoirs Eisenhower notes his "substantial agreement" with Dulles's argument about massive retaliation; he passes over the argument's Eastern European corollary in silence. Most analyses of massive retaliation take this article as their point of departure, although it should be clear that, at least as far as military strategy was concerned, Dulles was only rehashing ideas he had held for a long time. The article did set the tone for the foreign-policy rhetoric that appeared in the Republican platform and that continued all through the campaign. After the election it disappeared, only to resurface without reference to liberation in the Council on Foreign Relations speech of January 1954.22

**DEVELOPING THE NEW LOOK**

The actual process of developing the "New Look" with the subsequent adoption of Eisenhower's force posture priorities has been thoroughly treated elsewhere. For our purposes an overview of these events will suffice.23 The process began immediately after the election, when Eisenhower was returning to the United

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23 Excellent contemporary coverage of the policy-review process is found in the column "Defense and Strategy," which appeared monthly from May to December 1953 in *Fortune* magazine. The column was most likely written by C.J.V. Murphy, *Fortune's* defense correspondent, a reserve officer in the U.S. Air Force who maintained excellent connections with the air force bureaucracy in the Pentagon. Despite its air force orientation, the column is unusually well informed. See Philip M. Stern with the collaboration of Harold P. Green, *The Oppenheimer Case: Security on Trial* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 201–4. The best subsequent study of the New Look is Snyder's "New Look"; useful supplementary information is found in Kinnard, *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management*, pp. 1–36.
States after making the trip to Korea that he had promised in the campaign. On board the U.S.S. *Helena* Eisenhower met with several of his closest advisers, including the future secretaries of state, defense, and treasury, and with Admiral Arthur W. Radford, whom Eisenhower would soon appoint chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. From the beginning Eisenhower was insistent that his administration would put defense planning on a sound footing for "the long haul"—a concept that would figure prominently in the rhetoric of the New Look. What it meant in practical terms was that the highest priority would be given to cutting defense spending with the expectation of keeping expenditures at reduced levels for years ahead.24

Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson and Deputy Secretary Roger Kyes tackled this project immediately upon assuming their jobs. They failed, however, to gain approval from the Joint Chiefs of Staff of any possible force reductions from the goals set in the Truman administration. Wilson and Kyes then set out to save money by implementing "sound management techniques"—a phrase which eventually meant the adjustment of procurement schedules. The results of their effort appeared in the fiscal year 1954 budget submitted to Congress in May 1953. The administration requested $36 billion in new obligatory authority for the Department of Defense, down from the $41.2 billion originally requested by the Truman administration. Despite the size of the reduction, none of the leaders of the economy drive were satisfied, and they resolved to do better in fiscal year 1955. It was clear, however, that altered force goals, not improved management, would have to be the vehicle of future savings.25

While Wilson and Kyes were struggling with the defense budget, other senior members of the administration began reviewing the basic principles of American foreign policy. The exercise was called "Operation Solarium," after the room in the White House where the initial participants first met with Eisenhower to explain their plans. Ultimately the participants in this top-level reassessment decided not to undertake the policy of "rollback" promised in the 1952 campaign. Instead they committed the administration to continue Truman's policy of containment, backed by a more explicit reliance on the retaliatory deterrent. Despite published reports that he did not participate, there is good evidence that Dulles was one of the most active members of the study group. The administration made a brief but abortive attempt (probably suggested by public relations specialist C.D. Jackson) to change the terminology of containment. "Resistance," which presumably had more positive connotations, was to be the new catchphrase. But the new phrase was intended to cloak the fact that the administration had decided against changing policy. The final report of Operation Solarium evolved into the Basic National Security Paper NSC 162/2.26

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26 Snyder, "New Look," pp. 406-10, does not mention Dulles as a participant in Operation Solarium. One active member, Robert Cutler, indicates, however, that Dulles not only participated
Thus the overriding question for the administration in the summer of 1953 was how most appropriately to synthesize its two most important objectives—the continuation of containment and the further reduction of defense spending through lower force goals. Under intense pressure from the Republicans, Eisenhower had already in April 1953 decided to name new members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to replace the incumbents whose terms would expire over the coming months. The arrival of a new set of top officers provided an excellent opportunity for a fresh examination of military needs as well, a fact that Taft and his supporters never failed to point out. Eisenhower instructed the new chiefs accordingly. In a memo of 1 July 1953 he requested that they, before taking office, examine all aspects of military policy, including strategic plans, service missions, composition of forces, the importance of new weapons, and military assistance. Although the memo did not specifically request lower force requirements, it was clear from the context that this “fresh view” was intended to be of use in the preparation of a new (and lower) defense budget.27

The new chiefs had little difficulty in endorsing a military establishment that emphasized those categories of forces that Eisenhower discussed in his memoirs, namely, those for retaliation and continental defense. But extracting from these new chiefs specific commitments to lower force levels proved almost as difficult as it had from their predecessors. After weeks of intense bureaucratic wrangling, on 13 October 1953 Secretary Wilson had to report to the National Security Council that in the opinion of the nation’s military leaders reduced force levels would endanger the national security. This report shocked Eisenhower and his civilian advisers, and they ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider the matter once more.28

At this point in the meeting Admiral Radford offered a suggestion that seemed to offer a way out of the impasse. Speaking for himself only (in fact, no other member of the JCS or civilian service secretary agreed with him), he argued that what prevented the chiefs from lowering force levels was their uncertainty whether nuclear weapons would be used in warfare. Heretofore the chiefs had assumed that under certain political and military circumstances a president might not approve the use of nuclear weapons. Hence in their planning they had had to consider the possibility of fighting an extended conventional war. If the chiefs could count on being able to use nuclear weapons, then smaller force levels were possible. The NSC adopted Radford’s suggestion on 30 October 1953 by incorporating it into NSC 162/2. Thus the United States became officially


committed to the use of nuclear weapons across a wide range of possible military conflicts. Using this commitment as a basis for action, Radford and Secretary Wilson imposed upon General Ridgway and Admiral Carney, the chiefs of the army and navy respectively, reductions in the size of their two services.29

Was Radford's intervention essential to the administration's adoption of a strategy based primarily on nuclear weapons, as much of the available literature implies? Unfortunately, documentary evidence that might help resolve the question is not yet available. But Eisenhower did refer repeatedly in public and private statements throughout 1953 to the need for the services to integrate "new weapons" more efficiently into their planning. Under the phrase "new weapons" he almost certainly included, among other things, nuclear weapons. It seems fair to conclude that Eisenhower had at the very least given serious thought to the all-purpose nuclear strategy before Radford spoke up at the NSC meeting of 13 October and that he would have eventually ordered planning along the lines suggested in NSC 162/2 in any case.30

On 9 December Admiral Radford submitted to Secretary Wilson a memorandum that contained what the Joint Chiefs agreed was an appropriate "military strategy designed to implement national policies contained in NSC 162/2." This very important document contains a succinct explanation of the operational nuclear strategy worked out in the first year of the Eisenhower administration. It may most instructively be compared with the administration's rhetorical nuclear strategy as expounded by John Foster Dulles one month later at the Council on Foreign Relations. The chiefs declared that emphasis should be placed "upon the capability of inflicting massive damage upon the USSR by our retaliatory striking power as the major deterrent to aggression, and a vital element of any U.S. strategy in the event of general war." The chiefs also recommended "the provision of tactical atomic weapons for U.S. or allied military forces in general war or in a local aggression whenever the employment of atomic weapons would be militarily advantageous."31 In a nutshell, the retaliatory force would be used to deter all kinds of aggression and invoked in response to aggression that meant general war. Tactical atomic weapons would be used in local conflicts or in general wars as appropriate. On the basis of these military decisions John Foster Dulles designed the rhetoric of massive retaliation.

The Eisenhower administration's nuclear strategy as endorsed by the JCS in their memorandum of 9 December 1953 rested on two operational elements and one doctrinal assumption. Among the operational elements, the first was a retaliatory strike force capable of delivering nuclear weapons at targets within the enemy's homeland. The second was a diversified array of nuclear weapons

suitable for use in military situations from the local battlefield to the strategic air offensive. Doctrinally, the basic assumption was that of deterrence—that fear of retaliation with nuclear weapons would prevent Communists around the world from undertaking a variety of actions inimical to U.S. interests that they otherwise might do. It is often forgotten in discussions of the New Look and massive retaliation that neither the operational elements nor the doctrinal assumption was the creation of the Eisenhower administration. It inherited both from its predecessor. One cannot hope to understand the origins of massive retaliation without probing into the operational and doctrinal legacy of the Truman years.

THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION AND STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

Between the end of World War II and the outbreak of the Korean War prominent administration spokesmen frequently endorsed a strategic doctrine that can only be called deterrence. When John Foster Dulles claimed in his speech of 27 November 1951 that the United States had been enjoying the security of deterrence “without fully realizing it,” he was quite plainly mistaken. Averell Harriman spoke for the mainstream of the civilian and military policymaking community when he testified in September of 1947 before the President’s Air Policy Commission that the fear of American air atomic retaliation kept the Soviets from undertaking virtually unlimited military aggression. Of course, some military planners doubted the wisdom of placing the greatest emphasis on the threat of devastating the Soviet Union; the B-36 controversy and the “Revolt of the Admirals” proved that. But Harriman did capture, if somewhat hyperbolically, a widely shared belief when he declared that “there is only one thing which the leaders of the Soviet Union fear, and that is the American air force.”

This confidence did not disappear in the wake of the first detection of a Soviet atomic weapons test. In an article published three weeks after the public announcement that the Soviets had developed an atomic bomb, General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued that the United States could still preserve meaningful nuclear superiority. “As long as America retains (as it can) a tremendous advantage in A-bomb quantity, quality, and deliverability, the deterrent effect of the bomb will continue.” In the same article Bradley mentioned two distinct missions for atomic weapons—the more traditional strategic countercity mission and the newer tactical battlefield mis-

sion. He waxed especially enthusiastic about the integration of atomic weapons into the defense of Western Europe because their enormous firepower would make possible turning "back invaders of vastly superior numbers."\textsuperscript{33}

Bradley did not mention that these two missions for atomic weapons were widely perceived in the late 1940s to be in direct competition with one another. To understand the controversy one must examine briefly how thinking on atomic weapons had evolved since 1945. Before the \textit{Sandstone} series of tests in the spring of 1948, strategic bombing had seemed the only appropriate military use for atomic weapons on basically three grounds. First, the weapons available or tested up to this point were so bulky that only a specially modified bomber could deliver them to their targets. Second, a team of physicists and engineers had to assemble each weapon individually in a laborious and expensive process. Third, the nation's supply of fissionable material was so limited that only a small number of atomic bombs could be produced each year. Data from the \textit{Sandstone} test series made the first two of these reasons obsolete. Scientists in the weapons development program concluded quickly that the production of atomic weapons could be put on a standardized "assembly-line basis" and that smaller and more manageable atomic devices were possible. Suddenly a whole new vista of possible military applications opened up. Here the controversy arose. Leaders of the air force resisted the immediate exploitation of these technological breakthroughs. They argued that diverting scarce fissionable materials from the production of weapons to be used in the strategic air offensive might prejudice the air force's ability to carry out the nation's most important military mission.\textsuperscript{34}

The obvious long-term solution to the problem was to expand the nation's production of fissionable material. Throughout the summer and early fall of 1949, strong pressure grew on President Truman, who alone could order such a move. It came from a variety of quarters—from Congress, where Senator Brian McMahon (D–Conn.) waged a personal crusade for the expansion of the atomic weapons program, and indirectly from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Military Liaison Committee of the Defense Department, which by statute was responsible for the transmission of the military requirements for atomic weapons to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The detection of the Soviet atomic test in September 1949 gave an added urgency to the situation, and on 19 October 1949 Truman ordered the expansion. At the same time he asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to indicate to him how the existence of the new fissionable material would alter strategic planning. The chiefs' reply, delivered 2 December 1949 and in effect confirming the position of the air force in the original controversy, noted that the development of new weapons and resulting changes in military strategy could come only after the new fissionable material became available. For the


time being, "the principal means of delivering the atomic weapon" would remain the heavy bomber. Evidently General Bradley's tactical atomic defense of Europe was still at least several years down the road.35

The primacy of the strategic deterrent over the creation of a tactical atomic arsenal received even stronger confirmation in January 1950 with President Truman's decision to approve accelerated development of the hydrogen, or "Super," bomb. In the debate over how to respond most appropriately to the Soviet acquisition of atomic weapons (which reached full intensity independently of the decision to expand the production of fissionable material which was in process before detection of the Soviet test), two schools of thought quickly emerged. One, led by J. Robert Oppenheimer and the General Advisory Committee of the AEC, called for the United States to devote its resources more heavily to the creation of tactical atomic weapons. The other, led by Edward Teller and Lewis Strauss, called for a major effort to develop a fusion weapon many times more powerful than the atomic fission weapons then available. The Joint Chiefs unanimously endorsed the Teller-Strauss position. They considered the "Super" bomb so important that its development was desirable even if that entailed a reduction in the production of atomic weapons. President Truman was of that opinion as well, and on 31 January 1950 he announced his decision to expand research on the "Super."36

One profound if indirect consequence of the outbreak of the Korean War was to eliminate the necessity for choice between nuclear weapons designed for strategic and tactical use. That choice had never been quite as clear-cut as Robert Oppenheimer maintained, since further refinement of fission weapons was necessary to develop an effective trigger for the fusion explosion of the "Super." But the outbreak of war, because it melted overnight Truman's long-frozen determination to emphasize spending austerity at the expense of military power, meant that suddenly sufficient resources would be available to pursue both objectives at a pace undreamt of before 25 June 1950.37

It has become part of the mythology of the Korean War that the purpose of the rearmament drive begun in the summer of 1950 was to lessen American dependence on nuclear weapons. Paul Nitze, for example, has argued that already in the winter of 1950 he and the other members of the State-Defense Policy Review Group who drafted NSC 68, a study recommending a massive military buildup against the Soviet Union, had identified the dangers implicit in complete reliance on the threat of atomic retaliation against the Soviet homeland to deter aggression. That much is true. But the corollary to Nitze's argument—that the buildup of American military power undertaken during the

Korean War to implement the directives outlined in NSC 68 emphasized conventional forces over nuclear weapons—is highly misleading. The Truman administration did build up conventional forces. But, just as important, it poured money at a furious rate into the improvement of American strategic nuclear forces and into the program for the creation of tactical atomic weapons.38

Truman's desire to boost the production of fissionable material for use in the weapons program became clear almost immediately after the North Korean invasion. On 7 July 1950 he asked Congress to provide the AEC with a supplemental $260 million appropriation. Neither Senator McMahon (now joined in his crusade by Congressman Henry Jackson, a recent convert to the advantages of an ever-growing weapons program), the Military Liaison Committee, nor General Bradley was satisfied with this increase. The president was sympathetic to their views, and on 8 August 1950 he ordered the Department of Defense and the AEC to undertake a study of the magnitude of effort required to achieve a large and immediate expansion of fissionable material production and the weapons program. Truman received the study, which used as its point of departure the assumption that both production and the stockpile were only about half as large as national security required, on 2 October 1950. It cited military requirements for the “strategic air offensive,” and for “weapons to be used in direct support of our surface forces in... Western Europe and other areas vital to our defense” and cautioned that given the “still expanding” range of military applications, national security might require larger expansion at a later date. The study called for the establishment of additional “gaseous diffusion facilities,” reactors for tritium production, and the acquisition of all available uranium ore.39 President Truman approved the study a week later, on 9 October 1950.

The “still expanding” range of military application did in fact create momentum for yet another major expansion of the atomic weapons program in the spring of 1951. Once more Senator McMahon and the Military Liaison Committee (whose chairman, Robert Le Baron, was also Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall's assistant for atomic energy affairs) spearheaded the drive. This time, however, several commissioners of the AEC were hesitant about “giving the military a blank check” for atomic weapons procurement. They pressed hard for a more exact definition of the military requirements for another expansion than the military leaders were willing to provide. As a result of this disagreement, formulating an expansion proposal was more difficult than it had been the previous year. Each side presented its case to President Truman at a meeting in the Oval Office on 16 January 1952. Robert Lovett, who had become secretary of defense the preceding September, built his argument around the contention “that recent technological advances opened up the prospect of almost limitless possibilities in the use of fissionable material,” and he put in a

38 Paul H. Nitze, colloquium presentation, 26 September 1979, Wilson Center, Washington, D.C.
special word for tactical weapons as well. Secretary Acheson strongly endorsed Lovett's position. Gordon Dean, chairman of the AEC, countered with the argument that his organization was not opposed to another expansion per se, but that it believed a thorough consideration of all the relevant issues by the NSC should precede it. Truman, without explanation of his views, evidently found Lovett's position more persuasive and ordered the expansion. The American atomic weapons program was now so large that in the fall of 1952 the hitherto insatiable Military Liaison Committee reported that it found no reason for further expansion.  

With regard to the balance of strength among the armed services, Robert Lovett emerged as the most formidable champion in the executive branch of the broad nuclear arsenal. He also took a series of manpower decisions that granted clear priority within the rearmament drive to the air force and the Strategic Air Command. When the administration's intention to continue rearmament became obvious the preceding spring, the services developed new force goals for fiscal year 1954. Each service requested increases, but the air force proposals dwarfed those of the other two branches. The army, for example, asked for an increase from twenty-one to twenty-seven active divisions, while the air force requested an increase from 87 to 140 combat wings. An intense debate followed among the Joint Chiefs about the need for such a precipitous increase. Lovett approved the position of the air force, and the force goals finally approved by the Joint Chiefs in September 1951 reflected his decision. They gave token increases to the army and navy, and a massive increase to the air force. Thus the Truman administration established a pattern in force structure that gave the air force unmistakable primacy over its rival services. The New Look refined this pattern, but did not change it.

**Conclusion**

Massive retaliation is one of those odd phrases in the lexicon of strategic discourse that is more symbol than reality. Prominent spokesmen of the Eisenhower administration used it as the rhetorical catchphrase to exploit a series of developments in American atomic capabilities and force structures that were well under way before they took office. Eisenhower and his associates did interpret the meaning and potential utility of these capabilities differently from their counterparts in the Truman administration. For example, the Republican leaders concluded that since the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China would be deterred by existing American nuclear forces and those under


development as a result of the Korean War buildup, they could resist any pressures for further expansion. In fact, once the Republicans were firmly in control after a year in office, Eisenhower achieved genuine cutbacks. They believed that the international situation was sufficiently calm to increase reliance on nuclear weapons as America’s principal line of defense as early as 1953, whereas Truman planners did not anticipate taking that step until 1956 at the earliest. Finally, Republican leaders were willing to invoke the threat of nuclear weapons to bring an end to the war in Korea while their predecessors were not. Yet these changes do not diminish the fact that the Eisenhower administration inherited from the Democrats the nuclear weapons and the strategic strikeforce on which its rhetoric was based.

Thus massive retaliation should not be viewed as a fundamental strategic innovation. Within the national security world, it was what advertising specialists would call an “image phrase.” But far from being without value for the administration, massive retaliation did serve two basic purposes. First, it gave the public and the pundits a distinctive new label for what the Republican administration was doing in foreign affairs, and it asserted a basic policy departure from the record of the previous administration. Second, massive retaliation gave the new administration and especially Admiral Radford an instrument to use in wringing reductions in force goals and defense spending from a most reluctant military establishment. In this sense, massive retaliation provided the rhetorical clout with which the administration could achieve its most cherished policy objective in national security affairs.

Massive retaliation gave a useful Republican label to a product researched and developed by the opposition party. It served important political and persuasive ends before being discarded by the Kennedy administration. When the Democrats took over the executive branch in 1961, they returned the favor that Eisenhower had done the Democrats eight years before. Suddenly the new concept was “Flexible Response,” which not surprisingly was the Kennedy administration’s catchphrase for implementing a range of balanced forces that its predecessor had in fact begun to develop.*

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