

## Revisiting NSC 68

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NSC 68, the report produced by the Policy Planning Staff (PPS) of the U.S. State Department in 1950 under the notional joint oversight of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, provided the basis for the postwar U.S. rearmament program and was a milestone in the Cold War. Acheson, who rarely strayed into hyperbole, judged it “one of the most significant documents in our history. I don’t believe there is going to be one . . . equal to the analysis of this paper in terms of American survival in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Some more recent commentators, notably Graham Allison, have lauded NSC 68 for its strategic insight and continuing relevance.<sup>2</sup> The report has been subject to continuous analysis and commentary, ranging from the origins of the study itself and the internal politics of the Harry S. Truman administration to the contested nature of the Soviet threat and the problem of selling increased military spending to the American public. Identified by Herman Wolk as “the blueprint for Cold War defense,” NSC 68 has been depicted by some as essentially a continuation of existing policy and by others as a radical departure from it. Declassification of the report in 1975 sparked an intense debate between supporters of the policy position advocated by its principal author, Paul Nitze, and a formidable array of critics. Those divisions remain, shaping the continuing debate about the conduct of the Cold War.

Even though NSC 68 appeared at the midpoint of the twentieth century, it retains singular meaning in the 21st. In recent years, parallels have been drawn with the “war on terror” proclaimed by the administration of George W. Bush in September 2001. Observers have likened NSC 68 to Bush’s 2002

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1. See Joseph M. Siracusa, “NSC 68: A Re-appraisal,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (November–December 1980), p. 5.

2. Graham Allison, “National Security Strategy for the 1990s,” in Edward K. Hamilton, ed., *America’s Global Interests: A New Agenda* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 240. The revived debate of the 1990s is pulled together in Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1993).

National Security Strategy (NSS), stressing the “hyperbolic” language of both documents. Typical of this connection of past and present is the contention by Gordon Mitchell and Robert Newman that “NSC 68’s rhetoric constructs an epistemological framework that blurs important distinctions, distorts priorities, and complicates threat perception,” coloring successive administrations throughout the Cold War and after, up to and including that of George W. Bush. President Bush himself implied such a link when he claimed that the war on terror “resembles the struggle against Communism in the last century.”<sup>3</sup>

That reference to the 1950s has fueled the vigor of a renewed critique of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War and post–Cold War period, prompting, for example, Carol Winkler to observe that with NSS 2002 “the fundamental tenets of the conventional Cold War narrative reemerged and provided rhetorical continuity for members of Bush’s political base.”<sup>4</sup> Opposition to George W. Bush, then, injected new life into the debate about the significance of NSC 68, one in which the *fin de siècle* Project for a New American Century perhaps came to stand in place of the Committee on the Present Danger of half a century before.<sup>5</sup>

This article provides a critical rereading of NSC 68. Noting Beatrice Heuser’s judgment in 1991 that “the reasoning adopted by the advocates of NSC 68 has not been explained sufficiently,” the article first revisits the origins of NSC 68 to review, on the basis of sources that have become more recently available, the impulses that drove the project.<sup>6</sup> The article then discusses the historiographical disputes about whether the NSC 68 exercise should be interpreted as a response to a mounting Soviet threat or as cover for a push to economic hegemony. The article then turns to the still-contested issue of whether the report that emerged represented continuity with past policy or a sharp departure. I consider issues of style and tone that can divert at-

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3. Gordon R. Mitchell and Robert P. Newman, “By ‘Any Measures’ Necessary: NSC 68 and Cold War Roots of the 2002 National Security Strategy,” Ridgway Center Working Paper in Security Studies WP2006-3, University of Pittsburgh, 2006, p. 4.

4. Carol K. Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post–World War II Era* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), p. 166.

5. The original Committee on the Present Danger was established under Harvard University President James B. Conant in 1950 to rally support for the deployment of U.S. troops to Europe and the introduction of universal military service. The “present danger” that worried Conant and his associates was the huge conventional superiority of Soviet forces on the European landmass. When Nitze cofounded a hardline lobby group in 1979, he used the same name because “it seemed again to be an appropriate name for a new and different, but analogous problem.” See William M. Tuttle, “James B. Conant and the Committee on the Present Danger, 1950–1952,” unpublished ms.; and Nitze to Tuttle, 2 November 1979, in Nitze Papers, Box 68, Folder 1.

6. Beatrice Heuser, “NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat: A New Perspective on Western Threat Perception and Policy-Making,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 1991), p. 18.

tention from content and thereby mask both change and continuity, and I examine NSC 68's significance for the U.S. defense budget and its impact on the other transformational decision of the time; namely, Truman's commitment of resources to development of the hydrogen bomb. The article concludes with a reflection on how the window of opportunity that resulted from these events was seized by U.S. national security policymakers.

## **The Genesis of the Study**

When Secretary of State George Marshall created a PPS in May 1947 without assigning it any operational responsibilities, the apparent innocuousness of this move belied the impact the staff would subsequently have. The atmosphere in Washington at that time did not favor radical thought. Having pledged to hold down military expenditure, Truman, with support from his chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Edwin Nourse, secured further reductions in the defense budget.<sup>7</sup> In 1949, several months after winning the 1948 presidential election, Truman appointed Acheson as his secretary of state in succession to Marshall. The influence of the reorganized military establishment in the United States remained to be seen, but few observers at the time doubted the State Department's leverage. British observers, watching anxiously from the sidelines, predicted that under Acheson U.S. policies on nuclear weapons and foreign policy would be drawn together.<sup>8</sup> And so it proved.

Initially, domestic politics and international challenges pulled in different directions. Truman had originally set a limit of \$14.4 billion for the FY 1950 defense budget. The earlier resignation of Defense Secretary James Forrestal brought to office Louis A. Johnson, who was willing to pressure the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to keep military expenditures from rising. But Acheson proved more pragmatic, and events were militating against fiscal conservatism: the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, the Berlin blockade of 1948–1949, and the seemingly unstoppable advance of Communist forces in China through the summer and autumn of 1949 prompted a resurgence of military awareness. Meanwhile, the newly founded U.S. Air Force (USAF) was locked in a bitter struggle with the Navy, the outcome of which laid the foundations for the rise of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) as the principal instrument to contain Soviet ambitions. The U.S. nuclear monop-

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7. Edwin G. Nourse, oral history interview by Jerry N. Hess, 7 March 1972, Washington, DC, in Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL).

8. Chiefs of Staff Committee memorandum, 27 January 1949, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom, DEFE 32/1.

oly offered the sole decisive advantage to offset Soviet and Soviet-led ground forces in Europe. But it was apparent to many that the nuclear gap would narrow with time. The U.S. nuclear bomb was, in Marc Trachtenberg's phrase, "a wasting asset."<sup>9</sup>

Particularly important at this time was a report by an interservice study group, commissioned by the JCS and led by the USAF's own Lieutenant-General Hubert R. Harmon. This group produced a skeptical assessment of the impact of nuclear strikes on the Soviet Union and, by downplaying the role of airpower, exacerbated the conflicts between the Navy and Air Force. Although the Harmon group is not likely to have known just how limited the nuclear stockpile was at that time, the group's report dismisses the assumption that SAC's nuclear strikes could bring the Soviet Union to its knees, even after making the generous assumption that the USAF could deliver all the weapons provided for in war plan TROJAN with the desired level of accuracy.<sup>10</sup> Johnson, convinced that nuclear air power was the most cost-effective option for U.S. defense, went to considerable lengths to prevent Truman from receiving a copy of the Harmon report and actively misled him about its conclusions. As a result, Truman was somewhat out of the national security loop through the autumn of 1949.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet nuclear test of August 1949 transformed the U.S. national security scene. A subsequent presidential review overturned George F. Kennan's insistence that possession of the nuclear bomb would not induce the Soviet Union to take a more aggressive stance. The end of the U.S. nuclear monopoly caused U.S. officials to worry that Soviet leaders would prosecute their intentions with ruthlessness and violence, putting a premium on piecemeal aggression.<sup>12</sup> Truman ordered the Departments of State and Defense to undertake a reexamination of U.S. objectives in war and peace "and of the effect of these objectives on our strategic plans, in light of the probable fission bomb

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9. Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988/1989), pp. 69–113.

10. For a discussion of the report—*Evaluation of the Effect on Soviet War Effort Resulting from the Strategic Air Offensive*—and of the internal USAF backlash, see Phillip S. Meilinger, *Hubert R. Harmon: Airman, Officer and Father of the Air Force Academy* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Group, 2009); Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996), p. 295; and Stephen L. Rearden, "US Strategic Bombardment Doctrine since 1945," in R. Cargill Hall, ed., *Case Studies in Strategic Bombardment* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1998), pp. 383–467. The war plans of the time are summarized in Stephen T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945–1950* (London: Frank Cass, 1996).

11. David Alan Rosenberg, "American Atomic Strategy and the Hydrogen Bomb Decision," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (June 1979), pp. 62–87. Johnson's tactical suppression of the Harmon report is covered in Keith D. McFarland and David L. Roll, *Louis Johnson and the Arming of America: The Roosevelt and Truman Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 209–210.

12. Siracusa, "NSC 68: A Re-appraisal," pp. 10–11.

capability and possible thermonuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union.”<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), prompted by its executive secretary, Admiral Sydney Souers, decided to embark on its own assessment of the global threat in order to update the appraisal contained in NSC 20, which had been overseen by Kennan. The two reviews were subsequently merged and placed under a “State-Defense Policy Review Group” with staff drawn from the State and Defense Departments. Nitze, who had succeeded Kennan as head of the PPS in 1949, chaired the review, and the NSC’s James Lay provided the secretariat. The first version of their report, NSC 68, was on the president’s desk just two months later. The final version, presented in the tense period after China’s intervention in the Korean War, proposed to quadruple U.S. defense spending from its (controversially high) level of 5 percent of gross national product to 20 percent by 1951.

## **The Historiography of NSC 68**

Much of the attention devoted to NSC 68 since 1975 has focused on issues of language. Critics have contrasted what they see as the overblown rhetorical style of Nitze with the more measured style of Kennan. Even Steven Rearden, the official historian who was also a Nitze confidant, describes NSC 68’s language as “shrill” and “repetitive.”<sup>14</sup> The first major critical analysis of NSC 68 after the document was declassified was Samuel F. Wells’s “Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat,” published in 1979.<sup>15</sup> Like many of those who followed, Wells was critical of the language, quoting passage after passage of powerful and emotive overstatement. When discussing how NSC 68 came to be accepted by Truman as the foundation for U.S. security policy, Wells mockingly describes the process as the “Response to the Call.” The implication is that Truman was outwitted and steered by manipulative senior officials. To support this argument, Wells cites Acheson’s claim that the purpose of NSC 68 was to “bludgeon the mind of top government.” Acheson’s remark, however, is often misconstrued. Far from singling out Truman, Acheson was targeting what he termed the “mass mind” of top government. He was not offering fastidious criticism of the document’s language; rather, he considered the bludgeon of dramatic rhetoric more appropriate than the

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13. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 513–523 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

14. Steven L. Rearden, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, Vol. 1, *The Formative Years, 1947–1950* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1984), p. 528.

15. Samuel Wells, “Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat,” *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Autumn 1979), pp. 116–158.

rapier of forensic analysis in forging a consensus. In all, Acheson fully supported the “magnifications” of NSC 68.<sup>16</sup>

Neither Nitze nor his aides (much of the drafting was handled by Robert Tufts and John Paton Davies of the PPS) saw any need to apologize for their “purple prose.” Conscious of the need to prepare public opinion for massive rearmament, former Under Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett had urged the administration to use “Hemingway sentences” to communicate the message “simply, clearly, and in almost telegraphic style.”<sup>17</sup> Nitze, ever crisp and to the point, had no difficulty heeding Lovett’s advice (whereas Kennan undoubtedly would have resisted). Looking back in 1981, Nitze argued that NSC 68 “would be written in different language today” and reads “peculiarly” to the modern eye, but he staunchly defended the language as appropriate to the time and purpose.<sup>18</sup> He subsequently explained,

Granted it was written 33 years ago. The world has changed in preferences, and tastes have changed somewhat. Particularly in the political field. So you wouldn’t express things in the same way today if you’re writing that document. But it wasn’t hyped up for any purpose of wide audience or impressing anybody with its language. Was supposed to be clear document. . . . But it wasn’t too black-and-white for those days.<sup>19</sup>

“Black and white” is precisely what subsequent critics have objected to, not just in the prose but in the attribution of responsibility for escalating the Cold War.

The attribution of responsibility, not the language in which NSC 68 is couched, is the primary issue. Many of the reassessments of NSC 68 have been directed more at the entire course of postwar U.S. foreign policy. Whereas the traditional realist interpretation of the origins of the Cold War emphasizes Soviet expansionist designs, revisionist interpretations such as Lloyd Gardner’s *Architects of Illusion* are the mirror image, portraying the United States as responsible for the initiation and development of the Cold War.<sup>20</sup> But revisionists have tended to bury the particular significance of NSC

16. Robert L. Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 243–244.

17. Meeting with Bohlen, Memorandum on the Draft Report, 5 April 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 221–225.

18. Paul H. Nitze, U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview, 19–20 May 1981 and 14–16 July 1981, in Office of Air Force History, Headquarters USAF.

19. Discussion on memoirs, 13 April 1983, in Nitze Papers, Box 119, Folder 6.

20. Lloyd Gardner, *Architects of Illusion: Men and Ideas in American Foreign Policy, 1941–1949* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970). Revisionism is trenchantly critiqued in a recent set of essays by Truman scholar Robert H. Ferrell in *Harry S. Truman and the Cold War Revisionists* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). “Post-revisionists”—principally John Lewis Gaddis in the 1980s—portray the Cold War more in terms of interaction between the two great powers and are cautious about the

68 in a more general opposition to postwar U.S. foreign policy, centering their attack on

the assumptions that had shaped the way more traditional historians thought about U.S. foreign policy in the post-war period. In place of the orthodox version—according to which an essentially beneficent and defensive America had sought to contain the aggressive designs of totalitarian Russia—revisionists proposed a rather different reading of events. The Cold War, they argued, had little or nothing to do with Soviet expansion: rather it was the expression of something more profound, namely an American determination to secure its own dominant role in an international system made safer for capitalism by U.S. policies. The key to understanding the Cold War, therefore, was not Soviet aggression, but American imperialism and the American dream of an open world economy free of contradiction.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike traditional (anti-Soviet) accounts of the origins of the Cold War that stress ideological competition, “revisionist” accounts, predominantly of the political Left, see the drive to economic gain as the chief Soviet motive.<sup>22</sup>

More often asserted than demonstrated, revisionist accounts form what has been termed the “domestic political economy” school of analysis, which rejects the realist explanation of NSC 68 as a response to the deteriorating international security scene of 1949–1950. The most fully argued example is that of Benjamin Fordham’s *Building the Cold War Consensus*. Reexamining archival sources that pertain to economic decision-making, Fordham develops an account in which domestic political and economic considerations are the key drivers of rearmament. He claims that the Korean War provided only an occasion, not a cause, for rearmament, and he insists that the new Soviet nuclear challenge was insignificant. In his view, the authors of NSC 68 were from the outset pushing at the open door of the Oval Office. This reworking of the sources drives Fordham to the hard-to-sustain conclusion that “there is at least as much reason to believe that NSC 68 led to the Korean war as there is to believe the usual argument that involvement in Korea led to re-armament.”<sup>23</sup>

biases of relying on archival sources from just one country. See also Geir Lundestad, “How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War,” in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), pp. 64–65. A range of perspectives extending to “post-post-revisionism” are to be found in May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*.

21. Michael Cox, “Western Intelligence, the Soviet Threat and NSC 68: A Reply to Beatrice Heuser,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1992), p. 76. Cox uses “revisionist” in a restricted sense, and his use of the term “contradiction” is opaque.

22. Fred Halliday, “The Cold War: Lessons and Legacies,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1–28.

23. Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–51* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 65.

Interpreting NSC 68 in terms of U.S. commercial interests finds its apogee in the most recent addition to the historiographical literature, Curt Caldwell's exploration of the political economy of the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Caldwell, addressing the question of NSC 68's origins, argues that the "deeply flawed" conventional explanation emphasizing the Soviet nuclear bomb test and the loss of China "does not withstand sustained analysis." This, he argues, is due in part to the self-limitation of traditional authors, who confine themselves to the participants' own accounts of their actions and motives, although Caldwell (like Fordham) similarly combs the diaries and memoirs for more sanguine views of the crisis of 1949–1950.<sup>25</sup> He contends that the impetus behind the NSC study was much broader than the immediate military threat from the Soviet Union. The real wellspring, he avers, was the push to establish and maintain a liberal world economic order that could sustain free societies in "a healthy international community" within which the American capitalist system would survive and flourish. The overriding threat to this vision was not Soviet armor but economic collapse precipitated by the dollar gap. In weighing the factors bearing on U.S. policy at the time, these speculations go way beyond the standard book on the topic, Melvyn Leffler's carefully nuanced account of the role of economic issues in the national security policies of the Truman administration.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas the realist view of NSC 68 sees it arising from the shock of Communist successes in China and in nuclear diplomacy, the political economy approach interprets events through the prism of economic interest. In terms of method and respect for the sources, this approach is problematic. For example, in Caldwell's view, the traditional focus on participants' own accounts of their actions is a historiographical weakness, but most other scholars would see this approach as a positive one. Indeed, the first and most substantial and detailed account of NSC 68—Paul Hammond's 1962 study—offers a closely textured analysis of the bureaucratic political environment in which the review group members and others involved operated.<sup>27</sup> Little of what has been subsequently published has added much to that account, although Fordham reworks it somewhat. The special value of Hammond's blow-by-blow account of the working of the NSC 68 study group, which can hardly be

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24. Curt Caldwell, *NSC-68 and the Political Economy of the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–25.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–27, 28ff; and Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 312–323.

27. Paul Y. Hammond, "NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament," in W. R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and the Defense Budget* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 267–378.

replicated, is that it was based on contemporary interviews with almost all the key players in a large and complex game. That the account given is substantiated throughout by unattributed interviews is tantalizing, but these were people speaking off the record and with a candor rarely found on such sensitive matters.

Nitze, who read and retained copies of the scholarly papers on NSC 68, was scathing about conceptually driven interpretations of the report. Of Hammond's landmark essay, he wrote dismissively that it had a "peculiar twist" typical of the tendency of political scientists to see

bureaucratic rivalries between the various subsections of the armed services and the various agencies of government [as] almost as determinative as the attitudes that various people would take in respect of important issues of policy. So that what they were interested in, really, was the bureaucratic setting in which NSC 68 had its origin. . . . How effective was NSC 68 in accomplishing what should be the bureaucratic purpose of getting the State department's point of view "sold" amongst other agencies? That was really the way in which these fellows analyzed it, purely from the standpoint of bureaucratic rivalries.<sup>28</sup>

He dismissed analytic approaches that emphasized incrementalism or bureaucratic politics, describing them as "chic" interpretations that "missed the point" by privileging process over purpose.<sup>29</sup>

The early criticism of NSC 68 was followed, as is so often the case in historiographical disputes, by reconsideration. The more recent writings have paid closer attention than did the critics to the actual political circumstances that existed when the study was launched in early 1950, and they share the aim of making its proposals more explicable. These later authors have had the advantage of seeing declassified archival sources. Joseph Siracusa provides a careful account of how the earlier NSC 20 series of papers developed to the point that Nitze could plausibly claim to be seeking to operationalize the principles that had been laid down. Heuser's 1991 article deals at length with the intelligence sources available to U.S. policymakers at the time and shows how this intelligence shaped their appreciation of the dangerous world in which the United States and its allies found themselves.<sup>30</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, despite sometimes adopting (as might be expected of a biographer) a Kennanite position on the more militant prescriptions of Nitze, attributes much of the credit for bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end-

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28. Nitze, U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview. See also, Discussion on memoirs, 11 July 1985, in Nitze Papers, Box 119, Folder 13.

29. One such disparaged approach would be Sam Postbrief, "Departure from Incrementalism in U.S. Strategic Planning: The Origins of NSC 68," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (March/April 1980), pp. 34–57.

30. Heuser, "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat," pp. 17–40.

ing of the Cold War to the skillful timing of former Hollywood star Ronald Reagan, whose presidential rhetoric was more Nitzean than Nitze's own and who drew on NSC 68 in his speechmaking.<sup>31</sup> Of particular importance, because written with privileged access and close attention to Nitze's own role, is the SAIS monograph published by Rearden, Nitze's amanuensis, in 1984.<sup>32</sup> Also impossible to overlook is Robert L. Beisner's biography of Acheson, published in 2006, which accords due prominence to NSC 68 and draws on all the available archive sources while meticulously avoiding historiographical disputes on the—entirely reasonable—ground that they might weary the reader.<sup>33</sup>

The strength of much of the recent writing is that it takes a more limited, and thus more realistic, view of NSC 68's significance. Returning to the immediate political context in which the report was written has the advantage of placing it in the larger stream of events, thereby conceding something to the revisionist case.<sup>34</sup> Such a return also invites us to scrutinize Nitze's oft-repeated claim that NSC 68 was not a turning point in U.S. foreign policy and was instead a statement of continuity. The turn, Nitze asserted, had already been made with the Truman Doctrine, with Kennan providing the signposts. On this reckoning, Nitze's own role was simply to show how existing policy could be given operational effect and, except with regard to military capabilities, was essentially a projection forward of the realities of the time. Was, then, this new departure more rhetorical than real?

## Continuity or Major Departure?

For the defenders of NSC 68, the document represented continuity with existing "Kennanite" policy. For critics, it marked a sharp departure, constituting what we might today term "the confrontational turn" in U.S. foreign policy. To some extent that issue became personalized, with a key factor in both orthodox and revisionist analyses being the switch of the leadership of the State Department's PPS, along with the influence it carried, from Kennan to Nitze. When appointed as the founding director of the PPS, Kennan had pro-

31. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2005); and John Lewis Gaddis, *George Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), pp. 658–659.

32. Steven L. Rearden, *The Evolution of American Strategic Doctrine: Paul H. Nitze and the Soviet Challenge* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, 1984).

33. Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, p. 661n5.

34. Melvyn P. Leffler, "The Emergence of an American Grand Strategy, 1945–1952," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 1, *Origins* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 67–88.

posed Nitze as his deputy. Acheson blocked this on the grounds that the PPS needed a “deep thinker” in Kennan’s own mold, rather than an operational man. When Acheson left the State Department and Lovett replaced him as Marshall’s deputy, Kennan was successful in securing Nitze’s services.<sup>35</sup> Then, in 1949, Acheson returned, this time as secretary of state. Kennan had thrived under George Marshall, but he and Acheson were no longer comfortable with each other, and Kennan’s influence was waning. By the end of the year Kennan had been eased out, and Nitze took over as director of the PPS, adopting a different, less scholarly, and more focused style.<sup>36</sup>

As personalities, the two leaders could hardly have been more different, despite their long friendship. In his memoirs Kennan suppresses his feelings about the change and notes that he had wanted to spend time at Princeton. Yet he was later to tell Strobe Talbott, “I was physically healthy; I would go on with my life. But I regarded myself as defeated.”<sup>37</sup> Despite having earlier urged Nitze’s appointment as deputy head of the PPS, Kennan, who already knew he was about to be replaced by Nitze, indulged in some wishful thinking, writing to the like-minded Charles Bohlen in November 1949 that the directorship could be left vacant unless Bohlen was prepared to return to Washington and take over.<sup>38</sup> There was bitterness, and it was ill-concealed. Nitze recalled that when he and Acheson had lunch with Kennan after the change of directorship, Kennan blurted out, “When I left the department, it never occurred to me that you two would make foreign policy without consulting me.”<sup>39</sup> This sense of grandeur, however, did not prevent him from standing in as acting head of the PPS when Nitze was on leave, so creating a sense of continuity. Hurt pride, for sure, but no rancor.

Was the change more than personal, more than superficial? NSC 68 offered a signpost for policy. Did it also represent a crossroads? The basic alignment of world politics remained, despite the developments in China. In Kennan’s view, nothing much had changed. Nitze read the world differently and in NSC 68 set out guidance for restoring U.S. preponderance. In so doing, he found that playing down change was useful in maximizing the report’s

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35. Kennan had originally argued for Nitze on the grounds that he needed a deputy who understood economics. By the time Acheson returned as secretary of state, he and Nitze were seeing eye-to-eye, and Kennan was the one who was frozen out.

36. The relationship between these two architects of the Cold War is captured in the dual biography by Nitze’s grandson Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

37. Strobe Talbott, *The Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 53.

38. Thompson, *Hawk and the Dove*, p. 107.

39. An anecdote told to a PPS staffer. See Note for the Record, 27 July 1981, in Nitze Papers, Box 29, Folder 5.

chances of adoption. In one of his later comments on the matter, Nitze was at pains to deny that NSC 68 represented a major departure in foreign policy. Rather, it was a plan to give effect to a direction that had already been established:

What is misleading about the question of a “new” NSC 68 is that it implies the document was just such a comprehensive strategic review of foreign and security basics, undertaken with the intent of recommending a new policy, containment, and, in turn, formal American commitment to engagement abroad. In truth, the document was not part of the formulation of a new policy; it was a blueprint or strategy (not necessarily the only one, either) for the implementation of an existing policy. The distinction reveals an important difference between then and now. In the three years preceding NSC 68, President Truman had already made crucial political decisions regarding the direction of foreign policy. Most far-reaching of these was his determination to pick up an exhausted Britain’s mantle as a global, balancing power. Thus those who drafted NSC 68 mapped out an approach toward goals already set.<sup>40</sup>

Some writers characterize the position laid out in Kennan’s earlier NSC report 20/4 as one of “containment,” a position supposedly at odds with Nitze’s preference for confrontation. Nitze would not accept that distinction. In a speech in 1993 at the U.S. National War College, he attacked the “misconception” that NSC 68 recommended a sharp departure in U.S. policy. “To the contrary,” he claimed, “the report concluded by calling for the reaffirmation of policy already approved in NSC 20/4, a general policy paper on the US-Soviet relations that had been masterminded by Kennan in 1948.”<sup>41</sup> In his later years he annotated a student dissertation that accused him of having “militarized containment” with his own persistently held judgment that NSC 68 “more realistically set forth the requirements necessary to assure success of George Kennan’s idea of containment.”<sup>42</sup> Was that an accurate assessment? What was altered, and what remained as before? Robert Donovan argues that although NSC 68 fell short of a basic change in direction for the United States, it “brought about such a change in degree as to seem a change in substance.”<sup>43</sup> Such a judgment does not help. Instead we have to look more closely at three aspects of the internal debate.

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40. Paul H. Nitze, “Perspective on U.S. Foreign Policy Today,” *School of Advanced International Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1999), pp. 1–2.

41. Paul Nitze, “The Grand Strategy of NSC 68,” in S. Nelson Drew, ed., *NSC 68: Forging the Strategy of Containment* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1994), p. 14.

42. Thompson, *Hawk and the Dove*, p. 114.

43. Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1949–1953* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), p. 158. Donovan construed NSC 68 as “in line with long-existing policy but envisioned a dramatic increase in military, economic and political means for carrying it out” (p. 161).

## Changes in Style, Tone, and Outlook

In contrast to Kennan's subtle, sometimes almost empathetic, understanding of Soviet leaders, Nitze harbored a long-standing conviction that Iosif Stalin was intent on eventually waging war against the United States, a conviction that lent urgency to his analyses. Indeed, the term "design" appears 27 times in the text of NSC 68.<sup>44</sup> This was a matter on which Nitze deferred neither to Kennan's deeper knowledge of the Soviet Union nor to that of long-time Moscow hand Bohlen.<sup>45</sup> In 1947 Nitze had shared his forebodings with Forrestal, who agreed with him, and with Acheson, who disagreed and was so alarmed that he "threw him out of the room." But Nitze was moving with the tide of events, and Acheson's position was shifting to what Trachtenberg terms "extraordinary aggressiveness" in the years that followed.<sup>46</sup> The difference between Kennan's position and that of Nitze was subtle and asymmetric. Although the pair found themselves in disagreement from their first meeting as colleagues, Nitze claimed to be uncertain of the basis for their disagreement.<sup>47</sup> He later complained with apparent perplexity that although he had redrafted parts of NSC 68 to moderate its dim view of Soviet intentions he was never able to satisfy his predecessor's objections when Kennan was given the opportunity to comment on the text.<sup>48</sup> True, Kennan tended to emphasize the political threat of Soviet expansionism, but this was hardly his exclusive concern at the time despite his subsequent claims on many occasions that the appropriate response to the threat was diplomatic and political, not military. He later expressed regret at his "failure to make clear that what I was talking about when I mentioned the containment of Soviet power was not the containment by military means of a military threat, but the political containment of the

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44. Defining the U.S. interest as being "to frustrate the Kremlin design" is attributed to John Paton Davies, a PPS staffer who handled much of the drafting of NSC 68. See Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 391. For the lineage of the term "design" in the Cold War context, see Anders Stephanson, "Liberty or Death: The Cold War as U.S. Ideology," in Westad, ed., *Reviewing the Cold War*, pp. 81–100.

45. Revisionists make much of Bohlen's complaints that the authors of NSC 68 ignored *advice* on Soviet thinking and doctrine and instead provided a crude justification for military buildup. See Stephanson, "Liberty or Death," pp. 81–100. But the reservations Bohlen expressed at the time are today overstated. He thought "the present and dangerous discrepancy between Soviet military power and that of the West cannot be allowed to continue"; he supported "the purpose and general conclusions" of the Nitze study as "unchallengeable"; and his only concern was that the conclusions did not follow directly from the flawed argument that Soviet leaders were seeking world domination. See Memorandum on the Draft Report, 5 April 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 221–225.

46. Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 133–134.

47. Paul Y. Hammond, "NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament," in W. R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn Snyder, eds., *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 287.

48. Nitze, "The Grand Strategy of NSC 68," p. 11.

political threat.”<sup>49</sup> These post hoc demurrals, however, seem disingenuous at best. He surely was aware that political and military actions would be deployed together in an extended repertoire of responses to Soviet expansionism as the situation required. Indeed, Kennan was to play a central part in the development of aggressive U.S. covert operations against the Soviet bloc.<sup>50</sup>

To claim continuity with Kennan’s position, Nitze had to present their differences as limited to style and tone rather than substance. The tone did change. For the silky Kennan, who was incapable of being shrill, Soviet policy was “a fluid stream which moves constantly wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power.”<sup>51</sup> NSC 68 was more determinative and less allegorical. After the developments in international affairs of the preceding two years,

[the] risks crowd in on us, in a shrinking world of polarized power, so as to give us no choice, ultimately, between meeting them effectively and being overcome by them . . . it is clear that a substantial and rapid military building up of strength in the free world is necessary to support a firm policy necessary to check and roll back the Kremlin’s drive for world domination.<sup>52</sup>

That phrase—“roll back”—served as a lightning rod for the critics, and despite Kennan’s own advocacy of restricting the Soviet Union’s power and influence to its borders (rather than in Eastern Europe), he could not endorse the specific term. Rhetoric apart, however, the differences between the two protagonists were rooted less in disagreements about Soviet intentions than in judgments about the resources and capabilities available to the United States for tempering or blocking Soviet ambitions. Although Kennan himself graphically illustrated the reach and ubiquity of Soviet expansionism in his 1947 writings, he warned that the “fluid stream” of Soviet expansion could not be stemmed everywhere. Nitze, by contrast, had a greater sense of U.S. economic capacity, and as the leading figure on NSC 68 he was well placed—

49. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925–1950* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 358. In this the first volume of his memoirs, the fastidious Kennan recollects the circumstances in which his “Mr. X” paper came to be published, supposedly to his embarrassment. He complains that the popular press had picked up on a message that was never intended for public consumption, with the term “containment” “elevated, by common agreement of the press, to the status of a ‘doctrine,’ which was then identified with the foreign policy of the administration. . . . Feeling like one who has inadvertently loosened the large boulder from the top of a cliff and then helplessly witnesses its path of destruction in the valley below, chartering and wincing at each successive glimpse of disaster, I absorbed the bombardment of press comment that now set in” (p. 356).

50. Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy the Subvert to Soviet Bloc, 1947–1956* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

51. “Mr. X,” “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1947), p. 575.

52. Drew, ed., *Forging the Strategy of Containment*, pp. 66–67, 88.

and authoritatively advised—to assess the cost of doing so, at least in Europe, and he recommended accordingly.

The change was not just one of intellectual outlook; it also implied a switch of *modus operandi*. To that end, Nitze reshaped the PPS, redefining its role as

first, to identify and define the problem that needs to be dealt with, and to formulate the questions that need to be answered in order to deal with it. Second, to determine what the facts are which are required to answer the questions. . . . Third, to draw conclusions which analysis of the facts justifies, and to draw no conclusions which the facts do not justify.<sup>53</sup>

As one staff member described the daily meetings: “It’s something like a Quaker meeting. A decision is reached by arriving at the ‘sense of the meeting’ in which “qualities of cold-mindedness and toughness are especially required” by the new director.<sup>54</sup>

Although Kennan was the subtler analyst, Nitze was the more effective Washington operator. The jousting among academic commentators over the attention that was paid, should have been paid, or should not have been paid to Western intelligence analyses misses this point.<sup>55</sup> Reflecting on the climate in which NSC 68 was drafted, Nitze repeatedly insisted that the problem was decisional, not analytical:

there was a growing perception that the Russians would cause trouble wherever there was opportunity to. The internal U.S. arguments were therefore about *what should be done, in what sphere, and at what risk and what cost?* . . . [T]he United States was faced with the flight of Chiang Kai-Shek from China, and the Russian testing of an atomic weapon. The issue was then, *what do we do?* . . . We would therefore have to try to maintain some margin of nuclear superiority as long as possible. So the question remains: *what should the United States do to avoid complete reliance upon nuclear weapons?*<sup>56</sup>

Kennan at the time had drafted an extended soliloquy on nuclear weaponry invoking Shakespeare and St. Paul; that Nitze would spend time on such a thing is inconceivable.<sup>57</sup>

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53. Note on the Policy Planning Staff, n.d., in Nitze Papers, Box 153, Folder 9.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Cox, “Western Intelligence,” pp. 75–83; and Beatrice Heuser, “A Rejoinder to Michael Cox,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 1992), pp. 85–86.

56. Paul Nitze, “The Development of NSC 68,” *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Spring 1980), pp. 171–172; emphasis added. This commentary and the accompanying piece by Gaddis were published in response to Wells’s “Sounding the Tocsin.”

57. George Kennan, “Memorandum on International Control of Atomic Energy,” in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 22–44.

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## The Budget Challenge

Bernard Gordon observes, “To a degree not paralleled in any other field, in defense, dollars *are* policy.”<sup>58</sup> Arguably, the principal significance of NSC 68 was its impact on the disputes—unusually acrimonious even by Washington standards—over the budget limits for fiscal year (FY) 1951 and subsequent years. Any assessment of NSC 68 must consider the debate over U.S. defense budgeting. If the Nitze exercise has been often misunderstood, that may in part be because, despite the rhetorical overlay, its assessment of the Soviet threat could plausibly be presented as a continuation of what went before, whereas its radical budgetary implications were concealed for tactical purposes.

For presentational purposes, Nitze stressed the continuity of basic aims, frequently linking NSC 68 to Kennan’s earlier NSC 20. His first target was the presidential decision, for which he could either spell out a distinct policy in NSC 68 or present it as essentially the policy already set out and approved in NSC 20/4, “and I guess after consultation with Acheson it was decided to take the latter course, so that the only decision the President had to take was to reaffirm a preceding policy decision.”<sup>59</sup> This also chimed well with Truman’s inclination to take decisions in an orderly, judicious fashion. Because Nitze’s proposals implied a huge increase in military expenditure, he was tactically astute in emphasizing time and again that the fundamental policy position had already been established in NSC 20/4, which had concluded that “the gravest threat to the security of the United States within the foreseeable future stems from the hostile designs and formidable power of the USSR, and from the nature of the Soviet system” and that “[t]he risk of war with the USSR is sufficient to warrant, in common prudence, timely and adequate preparation by the United States.”<sup>60</sup>

Preparation was now timely. What would be adequate? Although both Kennan and Nitze favored a flexible response to threats, they conceived of it differently. For Nitze, flexible response implied the ability to generate the resources needed to match U.S. commitments. For Kennan, commitments

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58. Bernard K. Gordon, “The Military Budget: Congressional Phase,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23 No. 4 (November 1961), p. 695; emphasis added.

59. Paul Nitze, U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview, 25–28 October 1977, p. 241, in Office of Air Force History, Headquarters USAF.

60. “Report to the President by the National Security Council, NSC 20/4, 23 November 1948,” in Drew, ed., *Forging the Strategy of Containment*, p. 11. The third and last paper in the NSC 20 series was submitted to the NSC for its consideration on 2 November 1948. On 23 November 1948 the NSC adopted the report, with minor amendments, as NSC 20/4. Truman approved it the following day, and therefore “NSC 20/4 with its doctrine of containment writ large became the official policy of the Truman administration.” See Siracusa, “NSC 68: A Re-appraisal,” p. 9.

needed to be aligned with the available resources, an approach Nitze could not accept. Nitze's commitment to rigorous analysis and advocacy set him at odds with colleagues as well as his adversaries and critics, but in this instance his position was founded on a well-prepared assessment of U.S. financial capabilities.<sup>61</sup> Briefed by economic adviser Leon Keyserling, Nitze was confident that the United States could afford to expand the defense budget and put a strain on Soviet resources.

The argument between these two architects of Cold War strategy was in part a judgment not about Soviet intent, itself a matter of conjecture, but about the military capabilities required to block Soviet expansionism. That issue was dependent on the financial resources needed to realize those capabilities. When the two men initially met, Kennan had spelled out what he saw as the military implications of the containment policy, which he believed could be met within the then-current budget ceiling of about \$13.5 billion for FY1951—later revised downward to \$12.5 billion, then to \$12.2 billion before being submitted close to the original level—through the development of small, highly mechanized, highly mobile units of limited size. Bohlen, as the other Sovietologist in the picture, argued similarly for investment in qualitative rather than quantitative improvements in U.S. military forces.<sup>62</sup> Nitze was more demanding, seeking—and eventually achieving—a trebling and more of the military budget. In driving forward the policy review, Nitze used his mastery of bureaucratic politics to preempt criticism, neutralize opposition, and, when possible, freeze out those individuals who would balk at the financial implications of the direction in which he wanted to move.

In Nitze's view, capabilities were inextricably linked to expenditures:

there is always an inter-relationship between capabilities and intentions, tactics, and strategy. Because of the limitations of means—we had only seven active divisions at the time of the outbreak of the Korean War—our policy choices were obviously constrained. We had to tailor planning to the means available. As the means increased we could contemplate other, more powerful reactions in other places . . . the suggestion that we were not sensitive to the means available is a misreading both of the document itself and of the attitudes of those who had anything to do with the document. In fact, exactly the opposite was the principal point of NSC 68. Those who thought we must live within a \$12.5 billion budget would in fact have been responsible for our having no alternative to a doctrine of massive [i.e., atomic] retaliation.<sup>63</sup>

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61. W. Burr and R. Wampler, *"The Master of the Game": Paul H. Nitze and U.S. Cold War Strategy from Truman to Reagan*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 139, 202/994-7000 (National Security Archive, 2004), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB139/index.htm>.

62. Memorandum, Bohlen for Nitze, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 224–5.

63. Nitze, "Development of NSC 68," p. 175.

The issue of capabilities also arose in connection with the Soviet Union. Nitze was faced with relentless criticism from Bohlen, whose knowledge of the dynamics of Soviet decision-making was widely respected in the State and Defense Departments. For Bohlen, the confrontational turn represented by NSC 68 confused means and ends and equated Soviet capabilities with Soviet intentions. Those fallacies, he argued, obscured how the Soviet Union actually operated.<sup>64</sup> Faced with the unknowability of future Soviet actions, Acheson weighed in, pointing out that in the absence of any evidence about intent, capabilities provided the surest available guide to defensive planning.<sup>65</sup>

The political tensions in Washington were great, and neither Nitze nor anybody else was likely to square the circle. In particular, the PPS's expansionist perspective, which became the State Department's position, was bound to collide with the position taken by Defense Secretary Johnson, wedded as he was both to his promise to reduce defense expenditure and to a rigid view of his own prerogatives as defense secretary. Whereas Forrestal had persistently urged a realistic level of defense budgeting, Johnson had curbed expenditure with ruthless determination.<sup>66</sup> Far from trying to take the JCS with him, he browbeat them to the point that they would defend to Congress levels of expenditure they knew fell far short of what was required. Johnson had "put the fear of God into the Joint Chiefs."<sup>67</sup> Under pressure, they publicly supported Johnson's policy of fiscal constraint, as Acheson recalled.

In the spring of 1949 Louis Johnson called Eisenhower back as informal Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to review the "austerity" budget of \$13.5 billion which was proposed for the fiscal year 1950. Eisenhower worked with the Joint Chiefs and brought them into agreement on a budget in this amount. Louis Johnson then had a press conference at which Ike and all the Joint Chiefs were present, at which he explained the budget, said the budget was entirely adequate, and that the Joint Chiefs agreed with this view. . . . Ike, who was in the room, nodded vigorously. [Air Force Secretary] Stuart Symington, who was also in the room, indicated his lone dissent.<sup>68</sup>

NSC 68, however, sought to drive policy in the opposite direction. Nitze recalled that "[Lauris] Norstad and [Alfred] Gruenther had in mind something which might be of the order of 5 to 10 billion dollars. . . . I think we originally

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64. For a close analysis of Bohlen's continuing criticism of the Nitze position, see Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, pp. 85–91.

65. Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, p. 243.

66. Lawrence J. Korb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff: The First Twenty-five Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 96–102.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

68. File note by Acheson, n.d., in Nitze Papers Box 130, Folder 3.

had in mind that this implied a much larger effort than this.”<sup>69</sup> For the time being, Nitze faced an uphill struggle.

Nitze later claimed that Johnson’s insistence on cuts created a near-hysterical atmosphere when the PPS gave a briefing to Johnson and Acheson about the draft of NSC 68:

Louis Johnson entered the room in a towering rage and said that he wasn’t going to stay at this meeting. He said this entire effort was a conspiracy by me and General Landon to subvert his attempts to hold the Defense budget down to twelve and a half billion dollars. He wasn’t going to have any part of it and he was going back to his office without being briefed on the study at all. Acheson said, “Well, now look here. You and I are supposed to deliver this report and these are the people we’ve appointed to do the staff work for us. I can’t understand why you won’t let yourself be briefed on where they are. After all, the report’s going to be yours and mine. It’s not going to be theirs. We’re the ones that are going to have to sign this report.” Johnson said, “No, I won’t have anything to do with this conspiracy,” and stalked out of the room taking the chiefs with him.<sup>70</sup>

This account is supported by the official record of the meeting, which shows that Nitze and his team failed to anticipate the vehemence of Johnson’s response.<sup>71</sup>

Nitze knew that recent personnel changes in the administration had brought in economic policymakers who would support increases in defense expenditure. Changes in the internal political alignments within Washington transformed the politics of budgeting to make NSC 68 seem more affordable. Fordham’s detailed analysis of the politics of the FY1951 budget plots the re-configuration of fiscal power in Washington. By April 1950, officials supporting a low defense budget—Kennan, Nourse, and Frank Pace (director of the

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69. Transcript of the 1953 Princeton Seminar, in Nitze Papers Box 44, Folder 2.

70. Paul Nitze, interview, 5 August 1975, p. 242, in HSTL. Although this account omits the delicate detail that Major-General Burns burst into tears under the stress of the confrontation, it otherwise corresponds exactly with a wide range of confidential interviews published much earlier by Hammond. This is especially significant because Nitze was not listed as among those interviewed. Acheson’s recollection, inflamed by his view of Johnson as “mentally ill,” is even more dramatic. See Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), pp. 273–274. Perhaps closer to the truth is the judgment of former Department of Defense counsel Felix E. Larkin that Johnson was simply “a hard-fisted kind of a fellow whose relations with people were very poor indeed” and who was widely resented in Washington for having displaced Forrestal. See Felix E. Larkin, oral history interview by Jerry N. Hess, 18 September and 23 October 1972, in HSTL. Although McFarland and Roll do not add to this account of the confrontation over NSC 68, they provide a balanced account of the feud between the two men in *Louis Johnson*, pp. 225–226, 320–321.

71. The note of the meeting is in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, pp. 203–206. Nitze’s note to Acheson, in *ibid.*, pp. 202–203, shows that the meeting was otherwise carefully planned; it also reflects the extent to which Acheson “owned” what was supposed to be a joint study, whereas Johnson had been kept at arm’s length.

Bureau of the Budget)—had been moved to other posts or no longer held office. Those who wanted to increase the defense budget remained or had been advanced to more significant positions—most notably Nitze himself, having become head of the PPS.<sup>72</sup> To Fordham, these moves represent a carefully plotted rearrangement of the financial players to facilitate smooth passage for the rearmament proposals. But if this was the case, Truman would have had to have been pursuing a deliberate strategy, something for which scant evidence exists.

Johnson, now almost alone among the economizers, was still in office in April 1950, but he was greatly weakened and was increasingly under pressure to resign, which he did in the autumn. After the showdown, Nitze was confident that Johnson did not really have the support of the Pentagon:

NITZE: . . . we continued to work on NSC 68 and finally got the thing into an ultimate draft and took it up with the joint Staff. They, in turn, took it up with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and they finally approved the report. It was submitted to the service secretaries who signed the report. Eventually they signed a covering letter. This covering letter finally went up to Louis Johnson with the prior endorsement of each one of the chiefs; of LeBaron, chairman of the joint liaison committee [*sic*]; of each one of the service secretaries; and of the Secretary of State. He had the option, then, of having a lone dissent or of signing it. He finally did sign it and it went up to President Truman with the endorsement of everybody involved in the business.

INTERVIEWER: In the course of the work between the time that Secretary Johnson marched out of the office and the time the final draft was done, did you have the feeling that the people from the Pentagon side were working with his ideas of economy in mind?

NITZE: I had the view that there was, in fact, a revolt from within. They knew, perfectly well, that what this document presaged was the breaking of the twelve and a half billion dollar ceiling. And that's exactly what it presaged.<sup>73</sup>

The Pentagon's "revolt from within," as Nitze remembered it, was slow-burning, testimony to how thoroughly the JCS had been cowed by Johnson's aggressive leadership. But as the NSC 68 study progressed, military commanders, who had earlier sought a budget close to \$30 billion for 1950, came to recognize the potential to swing events in a favorable direction. They had accommodated themselves to Johnson's cuts, but General Truman H. Landon, who was given free rein to participate in the study, recognized that the thrust of the exercise was national security rather than political compliance

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72. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*, pp. 41–74.

73. Paul H. Nitze, interview by Richard D. McKinzie, 11 June 1975, in HSTL, p. 243.

and “saw an opportunity to break away from the cost-cutting mentality that had prevailed since Johnson’s arrival.”<sup>74</sup> Johnson had been seriously weakened by his outburst at the NSC 68 meeting. His days in office were numbered, although he was still hanging on, possibly with an eye to a presidential run. Despite signing, he did not slacken his advocacy of austerity and in so doing was careful to address himself to like-minded congressional figures.

Nitze argued that to hold defense expenditure to \$12.5 billion would incapacitate U.S. non-nuclear military forces, leaving them wholly reliant on the nuclear strike force that was the only U.S. advantage, and a transitory one at that. Much larger figures were mentioned, with Nitze deeming \$40 billion a sum sufficient to buy the broad-based defense capability required to contain the Soviet Union. That figure was the product of

off the cuff, back of the envelope, calculations; Acheson said “Paul, don’t put that figure into this report. He said, “it is right for you to estimate it and to tell me about it and I will tell Mr. Truman, but the decision on the amount of money involved should not be made until it is costed out in detail.” Accordingly, the sum emerged only much later, and was written into the budget only at the point when the international situation had changed so dramatically for the worse, as to force the consideration of such expenditure.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, expenditure was still constrained. Truman had referred NSC 68 back for work to identify the costs of the implied program of rearmament.

The situation was transformed in June 1950 when North Korean forces poured south across the 38th Parallel. Even Kennan was moved to swallow his distaste for NSC 68’s rhetorical exaggerations and to endorse a military response to the Communist challenge in Korea.<sup>76</sup> To Nitze’s satisfaction, “Mr. Truman felt that that attack was factual evidence that the general line of argument in the paper was correct.”<sup>77</sup> Speaking at a 1953 Princeton seminar, Herbert Feis contended that NSC 68 would not

have gotten very far without the attack, in Korea, despite the fact that it was signed [*sic*], just because it was being . . . nibbled to death by the ducks. . . . The people in Budget were cutting at it, people who were responsible for raising tax money were cutting at it.<sup>78</sup>

On that same occasion, J. Robert Oppenheimer asked the most pointed of questions: “What would have happened to it if the attack had not occurred in

74. Hammond, “NSC 68,” pp. 298–301.

75. Nitze, U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview, 25–28 October 1977, p. 240.

76. See Gaddis, *George Kennan* p. 398, noting that the North Korean invasion made Nitze look “prophetic.”

77. Nitze, U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview, 25–28 October 1977, p. 244.

78. Acheson Seminar, n.p., in Nitze Papers, Box 44, Folder 2.

Korea?” The answer was shockingly blunt: “We were sweating over it and then . . . thank God Korea came along.”<sup>79</sup>

As NSC 68/4 recorded, “The [subsequent] invasion of the Republic of Korea by the North Korean communists imparts new urgency to the appraisal of the nature, time, and scope of the program that is required to attain the objectives outlined in NSC 68.”<sup>80</sup> The attack took the argument only so far, however. Even though the invasion forced acceptance of the need to rearm, U.S. policymakers had to be mindful of the wider consequences for the U.S. economy. The North Korean invasion was less important than the subsequent Chinese intervention in shaping the outcome of these budgetary battles. A surge in supplementary appropriations followed. A PPS paper prepared for Nitze’s oral presentation envisaged a five-year program of military spending amounting to \$45 billion a year. In addition, large sums were detailed for internal security, training, reserves, nuclear energy (more than \$1 billion annually), stockpiling, and civil defense (respectively \$4.7 and \$6.25 billion over the period), and foreign and mutual defense aid of roughly \$6.5 billion annually. This plan in total represented an increase of \$100 billion over existing levels for the five years.<sup>81</sup> Nitze explained,

the Pentagon was doing detailed planning during this period, service by service, and when the Korean attack hit the problem was what kind of plan, how big an effort did you really decide on. I think all the various estimates from all the parts of the services were added together and this came to a great big program. . . . The result of this was that these schedules were debated during the entire summer and fall of 1950 and no program was approved. So that the war production and mobilization effort went on an *ad hoc* basis, with no agreed schedules prior to the time of the Chinese attack. I think Lovett had finally approved a considerably reduced program in about November or at the end of October, 1950. And this was about to go forward to the bureau of the budget and the President for final approval when the Chinese communists intervened. Then the whole thing took an entirely different aspect and Mr. Lovett and the Chiefs then promptly—within a week’s time—approved the previous summation of schedules.<sup>82</sup>

The budget decisions were much as Nitze remembered. In what Doris Condit terms “a budget for Korea,” assumptions were radically revised in response to the North Korean invasion. By September 1950, the NSC 68 cost

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79. *Ibid.*

80. “Report to the President by the National Security Council, NSC 68/4, 14 December 1950,” in Drew, ed., *Forging the Strategy of Containment*, p. 122.

81. Outline for oral presentation of NSC 68/1, 27 September 1950, in National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 59, National Security Policy, 1950–1957, Box 57.

82. Acheson Seminar.

estimates “enjoyed virtually unanimous Pentagon support.”<sup>83</sup> The Chinese intervention had transformed the situation, leading to a rewrite of NSC 68/4, which now referred to “the nature of the Soviet and International Communist threat to the United States and of the willingness of the communist leaders to employ force to achieve their objectives as delineated in NSC 68, even at the risk of global war.”<sup>84</sup> Johnson, still mindful of public opinion, was continuing to assure the president and Congress of his determination to contain spending.<sup>85</sup> His devotion to austerity stemmed from his view that U.S. military strength was more than sufficient to meet any challenge. But the initial success of the North Korean push and the subsequent Chinese intervention undermined Johnson’s position. Truman himself, initially cautious about increasing expenditure, dismissed Johnson on 21 September, replacing him with Marshall. A week later, the president endorsed the costs stipulated in NSC 68.<sup>86</sup> Marshall was skeptical about some aspects of the policy review group’s strategic thinking and worried about the economic effects of rapid rearmament. He wanted U.S. expansion efforts under NSC 68 to be “predicated not on the anxieties of the moment but on a long-term politically and economically feasible basis that Congress and the public would continue to support.”<sup>87</sup>

Expenditure ceilings and troop levels were now pushed upward. Truman approved NSC 68/3 in December as “a working guide for the urgent purpose of making an immediate start . . . [and] increasing and speeding up the programs.”<sup>88</sup> Adopted with amendments, the revised document became NSC 68/4. The NSC agreed that “while the force requirements as presented recently by the Department of Defense remain the same, the target date is now to be as much prior to 1954 as possible, *even if that entails a substantial impact on the civilian economy.*”<sup>89</sup> By 1952, the defense budget had been increased by 458 percent over 1951 levels, and manpower requirements had swelled from 2.2 million to almost 5 million men. As the situation in Korea deteriorated, Nitze’s policy review group had become a forum for reconciling

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83. Doris M. Condit, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, Vol. 2, *The Test of War, 1950–1953* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1988), p. 230.

84. Report by the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, 14 December 1950, in NARA, RG 59, National Security Policy, 1950–1957, Box 57.

85. See especially Rearden, *Formative Years*, pp. 369–384.

86. *Ibid.*, pp. 535–536.

87. Condit, *The Test of War*, p. 232.

88. Memorandum for the President, 15 December 1950, in Nitze Papers, Box 136, NSC Reports.

89. File note, 30 November 1950, in NARA, RG 59, National Security Policy, 1950–1957, Box 57; emphasis added.

budget requirements with the changing realities according to NSC 68's framing of the world situation.

## The Nuclear Stakes

While insisting that he was building on, rather than overturning, the position that Kennan had so successfully established just two years before, Nitze differed fundamentally from his predecessor concerning the loss of the U.S. nuclear monopoly. For him, the Soviet nuclear test was a watershed. He remarked drily that “my view, and that of Mr. Acheson were somewhat different than George Kennan’s view” about how best to react.<sup>90</sup> The key policy difference, publicly downplayed by Nitze, was that Kennan’s objections were less about conventional defense—the ostensible focus of NSC 68—than about the unarticulated doctrine of nuclear dependence that he imagined lay behind it. Kennan reflected bitterly some years later that

Paul never accepted the premise that I have always started from, and that is that there is no defense against nuclear weapons. . . . These people—and Paul was one of them—would have their way. I didn’t expect any good to come of it.<sup>91</sup>

In NSC 20/2, the circumlocutory Kennan had judged that “it is not probable that the pattern of Soviet intentions . . . would be appreciably altered in the direction of greater aggressiveness by the development of the atomic weapon in Russia.”<sup>92</sup> Soviet nuclear capability was now an established fact, and although Kennan continued to stand by that judgment as late as February 1950, his view no longer had traction within the administration. The point at issue, now that the gap between the two powers had dramatically narrowed, was whether U.S. policy could be based primarily on nuclear superiority. Neither Kennan nor Nitze wanted to do this. Kennan sought to “dispense with this dependence on the atomic weapon,” which “was already an infirm and questionable element in our military posture, and likely to become more so as time passes.”<sup>93</sup> Nitze, however, believed that development of the hydrogen bomb could maintain U.S. nuclear superiority in the short term and provide a protective umbrella as conventional forces were being expanded.

A thermonuclear weapon—a “Super”—offered the possibility of snatching back the lead over the Soviet Union that had been eroded by the 1949

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90. Nitze, interview, 5 August 1975.

91. Talbott, *Master of the Game*, p. 53.

92. *FRUS*, 1948, Vol. 1, p. 621.

93. Draft Memorandum for Acheson, by Kennan, not sent but circulated within the PPS, 17 February 1950, in *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 1, p. 164

Soviet nuclear test. Something that had been no more than a theoretical possibility until the autumn of 1949 suddenly became a matter for urgent decision.<sup>94</sup> As Nitze tells the story, a group of colonels who worked on nuclear matters for the JCS had earlier approached him and warned him that the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), under the influence of David E. Lilienthal and Oppenheimer, was refusing to pursue development of the hydrogen bomb. Nitze enlisted the help of Robert LeBaron, chair of the Military Liaison Committee (MLC), which favored development.<sup>95</sup> Nitze met with Edward Teller, who convinced him that the “Super” was possible and that Oppenheimer’s technical and scientific objections (that such a weapon was probably infeasible and certainly uneconomic) were unfounded.<sup>96</sup> Nitze, not yet director of the PPS, was now on board and pressing Acheson to accept his view.<sup>97</sup>

Lilienthal’s AEC continued to oppose development of the “Super” in the face of dissent from one of its members, Lewis L. Strauss. LeBaron’s MLC was keen to move ahead, but the AEC’s (civilian, scientific) General Advisory Committee (GAC), headed by Oppenheimer, was thought to be unanimously opposed.<sup>98</sup> Truman, who had no prior knowledge of the “Super” before being pressed by Strauss, was galvanized and sought immediate advice. The AEC, now split three to two against the “Super,” advised the president formally against its development. But on the other side was strong congressional support from the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE) chair, Senator Brien McMahon, who urged Truman that

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94. The most thoroughly researched account of the military discussions over the “Super” is Rosenberg, “American Atomic Strategy.” For a thorough account of the scientific disputes, see Barton J. Bernstein, “Four Physicists and the Bomb: The Early Years, 1945–1950,” *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1988), pp. 231–263.

95. The AEC, appointed by Truman under the 1946 Atomic Energy Act and initially chaired by Lilienthal, was itself subject to advice from two lesser statutory bodies, the General Advisory Committee (GAC), which provided the scientific input to the commission’s deliberations and was chaired by Oppenheimer, and the MLC, which represented the other pole in the spectrum of nuclear concerns and was chaired by LeBaron. Commission members held regular joint meetings with the GAC and MLC. See the meeting records in NARA, RG 236, AEC, Office of the Secretary, General Correspondence Relating to Weapons, 1946–51, Box 99.

96. Nitze, interview, 5 August 1975, pp. 235–236. In his memoirs, conscious perhaps of the niceties of protocol, Nitze records that he first approached LeBaron, who referred him to as the “atomic colonels,” for a briefing. See Paul Nitze with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision—A Memoir* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), p. 88.

97. Nitze’s drive to convince himself of the merits of the “Super” is captured in David Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities: Paul Nitze and the Cold War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 73–91.

98. Richard Pfau, *No Sacrifice Too Great: The Life of Lewis L. Strauss* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), pp. 111–127; and Richard G. Hewlett and Francis Duncan, *Atomic Shield: A History of the Atomic Energy Commission*, Vol. 2, 1947–1952 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 362–410. For the disputed role of Strauss, see Ken Young, “The H-Bomb, Lewis L. Strauss, and the Writing of Nuclear History,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 2013), forthcoming.

The profundity of the atomic crisis which has now overtaken us cannot, in my judgment, be exaggerated. The specific decision that you must make regarding the Super bomb is one of the gravest ever to confront an American President. . . . Those who oppose an all out “crash” effort on the Super impressed me as being so horrified at the path down which the world is traveling that they have lost contact with common sense and reality.<sup>99</sup>

Meanwhile, Senator Edwin C. Johnson, a member of the JCAE, disclosed that U.S. scientists were working on a new bomb, “one thousand times as powerful as the weapon detonated at Hiroshima,” exposing the debate to the public and narrowing the president’s options.

Truman responded to these pressures by asking Acheson and Johnson to work with Lilienthal as a special committee to study the alternatives and give him a recommendation. This scheme appears to have been Acheson’s solution to the deadlock. He meanwhile brought in Gordon Arneson as his special assistant for atomic affairs to work closely with him and Nitze. Arneson drafted a proposal for the president largely along lines earlier laid out by Nitze, who saw an opportunity to circumvent Lilienthal’s objections to the H-bomb project. According to Nitze’s recollection, the AEC chairman urged the administration to think through “what its policies would be in a world in which such weapons as thermonuclear weapons are part of the arsenals of the world.” Nitze had conceded that the two exercises were needed, but he persuaded Lilienthal that they should be pursued concurrently. This idea was added as a final proviso to the draft, which Acheson tabled.<sup>100</sup>

Matters moved slowly, in part because of Lilienthal’s continuing opposition. When the special committee met for the last time on 31 January, Lilienthal spent two hours setting out his reservations. After the meeting, the three officials, together with Souers, saw Truman. Acheson presented their recommendations: that the AEC should be asked to determine the technical feasibility of a further nuclear weapon; that the speed and scale of this project should be agreed between the AEC and the Department of Defense; and that the Departments of State and Defense should jointly conduct a reexamination of U.S. objectives and strategic plans from which NSC 68 emanated. From the outset, then, the H-bomb decision and the “State-Defense study,” as it was known, were inextricably linked.

The State-Defense review group had avoided becoming entangled in the “Super” controversy by excluding opponents from the review team. Arneson, a more significant player in these events than is usually recognized, recalled:

99. McMahan to Truman, 21 November 1949, in *FRUS*, 1949, Vol. 1, p. 588.

100. Nitze recollected the conversations at length in U.S. Air Force Oral History Interview, 25–28 October 1977, pp. 235–237. The actual sequence of events, with Arneson rather than Nitze drafting the advice to the president, is in Rearden, *Formative Years*, pp. 450–453.

The four principals in the State Department were Acheson, Nitze, Fisher and myself. I don't think it was necessary for any one of us to persuade anybody else; we all were of a mind that there really wasn't any choice [about developing the "Super"]. Acheson, I think, showed more flexibility than any of us. He talked to Dr. Conant at length; he talked to Oppenheimer at length; he talked to Lilienthal at length. They were all opposed, and he was not persuaded. He did try. I don't see how we could say we're not going to do this thing, that we will put it in a bushel basket somewhere; because if we didn't do it, certainly the Russians would, the British would, maybe even Pakistan, certainly the French.<sup>101</sup>

Although Truman had ordered a review of the prospects for developing the H-bomb, the decision to develop it had not yet been taken. That decision followed soon, on 10 March, after the NSC special committee—a committee on which physicist Henry D. Smyth stood in for the departed Lilienthal—recommended production. Arneson was emphatic that the initial presidential decision to authorize exploratory work on the H-bomb provided a crucial context for NSC 68: “That was one of the things that was [*sic*] required we do, if we went ahead. Nobody had any problem with that either. Kennan was no longer in the Department.”<sup>102</sup> By the time the group had completed its work, the United States was committed not just to exploration but to development.

The central question was not whether development of the hydrogen bomb was desirable in the abstract or as a luxury addition to the U.S. arsenal. Instead, the question was whether the Soviet Union might embark—or had already embarked—on that same path.<sup>103</sup> Oppenheimer, Lilienthal, and the earlier majority of AEC and GAC members feared that U.S. steps in that direction would invite the Soviet Union to follow suit. Nitze, Strauss, and others feared that the Soviet Union would lead rather than follow. In facing down Lilienthal before brusquely announcing his decision on 31 January, Truman

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101. R. Gordon Arneson, oral history interview by Niel M. Johnson, Washington, DC, 21 June 1989, transcript, in HSTL, pp. 62–63.

102. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–63. Arneson was an important, if secondary, figure in nuclear weapons policy from 1945 to 1954. He published a vivid account of the H-bomb decision in characteristically self-effacing form (as simply that of “a retired Foreign Service officer”) in successive issues of the State Department’s in-house publication, *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 5 (May 1969), pp. 27–29; and No. 6, pp. 23–27, 43.

103. Hans Bethe, one of the most vigorous critics of the hydrogen bomb from within the Los Alamos team, commented in the mid-1950s that it had come to be seen as axiomatic that once the development of the hydrogen bomb became possible it should actually be accomplished and that not to do so would expose the United States to great danger. Bethe strongly disagreed, later arguing that even if the Soviet Union developed a hydrogen bomb and the United States did not, the result would not necessarily have been fatal. He concedes that the possibility of Soviet development of the hydrogen bomb was “the most compelling argument for proceeding with our thermonuclear program. It was, in my opinion, the only valid argument.” Hans A. Bethe, “Comments on the History of the H-bomb,” *Los Alamos Science*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 1982), p. 51. This piece is a revised version of a paper published by Bethe in 1954.

had asked, “can the Russians do it?”<sup>104</sup> He worried that the USSR might leapfrog the production of more powerful fission weapons by going straight for fusion. These were, in the terms of a later secretary of defense, the “known unknowns”: First, could the hydrogen bomb be developed? Second, could the Soviet Union do it even if the United States abstained?

In Nitze’s view, Truman made the right decision “chiefly because he had no way of knowing what the Soviets might do.”<sup>105</sup> But the point was bitterly contested at the time, notably by nuclear scientist Herbert F. York, who continued to argue that the West would not have been disadvantaged if it had renounced development of thermonuclear weapons.<sup>106</sup> However, any reappraisal of the Cold War years should take account of hindsight in judging decisions taken during that period. The correct answer to Truman’s question “Can the Russians do it?” was the affirmative one he was given. Soviet capacity to develop the hydrogen bomb could be inferred from the state of scientific knowledge. Whether the Soviet Union *would* develop it was something that could not possibly have been known at that time. David Holloway’s monumental *Stalin and the Bomb* reveals that Stalin *did* proceed—independently of decisions taken in the White House.<sup>107</sup> Given the state of knowledge at the time, worst-case planning—for both the H-bomb decision and the NSC 68 process—was the rational option. Truman’s H-bomb decisions were one instance of worst-case planning; Nitze’s leadership of the NSC 68 group was another.

The two distinct processes of NSC 68 and the decision to proceed with development of the hydrogen bomb “were so intermixed that participants blended them in memory.”<sup>108</sup> They were distinct but closely linked. The decision to proceed with a study of the feasibility of the “Super” triggered the broader review that became NSC 68. That study complemented the H-bomb decisions by setting out a more balanced program for U.S. rearmament, to some extent compensating for raising the nuclear ante by providing a case for the more immediate expansion of conventional military power. Nitze, like Kennan before him, was keen to avoid the trap of overreliance on nuclear retaliation against a conventional Soviet attack. His prescriptions offered an ap-

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104. David E. Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, Vol. 2, *The Atomic Energy Years, 1947–1950* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 594, 601.

105. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, p. 91.

106. Herbert F. York, *The Advisors: Oppenheimer, Teller, and the Superbomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989). York returned to the issue in Herbert F. York, *Arms and the Physicist* (Woodbury, NY: American Institute of Physics, 1995), pp. 127–143.

107. David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 317–319.

108. Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, p. 229.

proach that was abandoned only after 1953 with Dwight Eisenhower's New Look doctrine. Although the unforeseen events in Korea would have forced U.S. rearmament, the manifesto and the budget plan for that next phase of national security policy had been written.

## **NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat**

In November 1948 the Soviet threat was understood in terms of the potential to launch simultaneous major offensives not just in Europe but in Asia and the Middle East. At that point the Soviet army had 2.5 million troops, with 31 Soviet divisions and 90 satellite divisions in Eastern Europe. The Soviet air force could field some 500,000 men and 15,000 aircraft.<sup>109</sup> The JCS warned that Soviet forces could overrun Western Europe "very quickly," advancing to the channel and neutralizing Britain.<sup>110</sup> That nuclear superiority alone, based on the assumption that the Soviet Union did not possess the nuclear bomb, could meet a challenge of that magnitude was not clear, although the Harmon review had cast grave doubt on the ability of the SAC to achieve it.

Twelve months later, Nitze and Kennan (who by this point was a State Department counselor) were asked to make their own reappraisals of the strategic challenges the United States would face in the light of the Soviet nuclear test. Kennan's assessment was remarkably, almost perversely, sanguine. The unexpectedly early development of Soviet nuclear weapons was "of no fundamental significance," he said, and although the prospect of thermonuclear war "gives a new intensity, and a heightened grimness, to our existing problems," the international situation remained essentially as it was in 1945. Moreover, "in so far as we feel ourselves in any heightened trouble at the present moment, that feeling is largely of our own making."<sup>111</sup> Kennan considered that Nitze and his team had made the fundamental error of imagining that Soviet leaders followed the same impulses in their strategic thinking as did the Pentagon. Although he based his assessment on his own understanding of Soviet thinking, he perhaps overstated his position for effect. Yet although Kennan's influence waned in the face of events, Bohlen, who claimed similar insights, advanced a similar critique with greater effect over the next eighteen months as NSC 68 was reviewed.<sup>112</sup>

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109. Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945–50* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), p. 104.

110. James F. Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. 1, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1945–1947* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996), pp. 78–80.

111. Draft Memorandum for Acheson, pp. 161–162.

112. Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, pp. 84–104.

The significance of NSC 68 is not that it proposed a new view of the U.S. national security interest but that it privileged Nitze's bleaker, more immediate but ultimately more apocalyptic assessment of the Soviet threat. Soviet intentions could be understood only in the most general terms and provided a poor guide to action. With the Communist takeover in China and the Soviet nuclear test came recognition that regardless of Moscow's intentions, Soviet leaders would have greater confidence and leeway to act. The Joint Ad Hoc Intelligence Committee's assessment that by 1954 the Soviet Union could disable the United States by attacking its cities and military facilities with 200 nuclear bombs underscored the threat. This assessment was not a prediction, but as an assessment of capabilities it displaced the Kennanite calculation of intentions. "American national security planners would now focus primarily on the threat posed by Soviet military capabilities, and less on political calculations surrounding a [Soviet] decision to go to war."<sup>113</sup> That change of perspective, by no means attributable to Nitze, relegated Kennan to the margins.

Former public officials have a natural propensity to reinterpret their past through the convenient lens of the present. *Old Men Forget* was the teasing title the British diplomat and writer Duff Cooper chose for his autobiography. Forgetfulness, though, is less of a problem than selective memory, which is often given a self-serving gloss. In disentangling the story of NSC 68, the claims made by protagonists and their partisans long after the event have to be tested against the contemporary record. A single example will suffice to make the point, that of Acheson's recollection of having brutally dismissed Kennan's moral reservations about the H-bomb as "Quakerism," which Beisner finds to be a case of "retrospective bark" arising from later estrangement, rather than "contemporary bite."<sup>114</sup> On the record Nitze, whose memory was sharp, accurate, and consistent, generally emerges with greater credibility than Kennan and most of his contemporaries in this respect. Nitze's claim of continuity with Kennan's own position, however, was disingenuous. Two very different streams flowed through U.S. foreign policy discourse at that time. The first, essentially defensive, was represented by Kennan's thinking, which stressed the inherent unsustainability of the Soviet regime. The other distinct stream, dominant in NSC 68, reflected the fevered debate on preventive war and called for the achievement of preponderant power in the face of a mounting, if yet distant, threat of global war. One can see continuity here, but it is not obviously with Kennan.

The literature of political science—a literature for which Nitze had little regard—is redolent with concepts that presuppose continuity: incremental-

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113. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

114. Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, p. 233–4.

ism, partisan mutual adjustment, and path dependency. They provide a neat fit with the claims Nitze made for having continued and extended Kennan's policy. Yet despite these carefully nuanced protestations, NSC 68 in actuality signaled a major shift in the U.S. government's response to the Soviet threat. Rather than relying on the potential to mobilize U.S. strength, the United States would embark on a sharp build-up of forces-in-being, capable of launching a devastating aerial attack.

The document signaled this change but did not necessarily achieve it. The budget estimates that Nitze's team hurried to prepare for Truman had a "what if" quality and became realizable only with the Korean War and especially the Chinese intervention. As Trachtenberg writes, the U.S. "window of vulnerability" was closed, and a "window of opportunity" opened.<sup>115</sup> To understand how that window of opportunity came about, we need to concede—as some recent authors do not—the importance of the Soviet nuclear test and the Communist takeover in China, the groundswell of political anxiety they induced, and the new policy agenda established by the prospect of thermonuclear weapons. Political scientists have shown how policy windows can be opened by a confluence of separate streams of political and policy development.<sup>116</sup> Such a window of opportunity does not in itself produce a decision, but it does enable skilled policy operators to seize the moment, change the agenda, and set history on a different path. In doing so, Nitze proved himself indeed to be the "Master of the Game."

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115. Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset,'" p. 70.

116. John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd Ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1995).

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