

Why did the Eisenhower administration embrace nuclear weapons?

Introduction

During his administration, President Dwight D. Eisenhower radically altered the United States' approach to nuclear war by changing not only policy, but also by emphasizing the Air Force in his 'New Look' doctrine. The majority of the defence budget was spent on nuclear weapons, and very little was invested in ground forces or the navy. The reason for this strategy is mainly economic, but also based on ideological and theoretical assumptions that shaped the *zeitgeist* of 1950s America.

Before examining the Eisenhower's nuclear weapons record and the related strategic reasoning, it is important to define strategy in terms of the 1950s. Carl von Clausewitz, the father of modern strategic thought, defined war: '*Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln.*'¹ This statement has generally been translated to 'war is a continuation of policy with other means'. As the German language makes no clear difference between politics and policy, *Politik* could be translated either way.

For the purpose of this essay, but also for the purpose of a better understanding of Clausewitz' work, I suggest that policy is the wrong translation. Politics encompasses the whole affairs of a government, while policy is a 'course of action adopted and pursued by a government'.² Thus, policy is the result of politics. If, according to Clausewitz, strategy is the result of policy, it therefore is also the result of politics. In the prologue to *Vom Kriege*, Clausewitz describes his work as a scientific theory of the strategic system of war, which encompasses not only what happens in war, but also the '*Natur der Dinge*' (nature of things) that cause war.³ Naturally this encompasses politics, because war is originally caused by the political situation of a country.

The fact that strategy is not only influenced by policy, but is directly influenced by politics, becomes evident when examining the Eisenhower administration's Cold War strategy, for it was a

1 Clausewitz (2003), p. 44

2 *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (1997), p. 1497

3 Clausewitz (2003), p. 23

direct result of economic considerations, party politics, and ideological factors.

The Nuclear Administration

Although greeted with enthusiasm at first, the Korean War (1950-1953) became very unpopular with the American public, especially in the period prior to Eisenhower entering the Oval Office. 'Voter frustration at the apparently deadlocked fighting in Korea proved especially potent [in the election], and the Republicans exploited it skilfully.⁴ Thus, Eisenhower became president on 20 January 1953, mainly on the promise of ending the Korean war and cutting the defence budget, which at the time consumed roughly 70 percent of government spending.⁵ He subsequently succeeded in achieving both: The Korean war ended on 27 July 1953, and the US defence budget dropped from \$41.2 billion in 1953 to \$36 billion in 1954 – a trend which continued in the following years.⁶

President Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, his Secretary of State, both strongly believed that the ending of the Korean War had to be attributed to the fact that Eisenhower eventually threatened the use of nuclear weapons (rather than realizing that Stalin died two months earlier, which shook the confidence of the communist bloc).⁷ Subsequently, Eisenhower delved deeper into the issue of nuclear weapons, and contemplated how to employ them to formulate a strategy which would enable America to regain the initiative in the Cold War, as he had promised during his election campaign.⁸

Additionally, it needs to be noted that with the development of thermonuclear devices, nuclear striking power had not only become more potent, but also much cheaper. 'The era of nuclear plenty had arrived. This made it possible, as the newspaper wags put it, to get "a bigger bang for the buck."⁹ A team of analysts led by Ernst Plesset at RAND Corporation (the Cold War think-tank), analysed the effects of twenty-megaton hydrogen bombs on Russian cities by laying blast circles onto a map: The fifty largest cities of the Soviet Union could be wiped out by merely 55 H-bombs, killing 35 million people within seconds.¹⁰

Eisenhower launched *Operation Solarium*, a project consisting of three task forces, each of

4 Wells (1981), p. 52

5 *ibid.*

6 Kaplan (1991), p. 145; Roman (1995), pp. 19f; Wells (1981), p. 54

7 Hilsman (1999), p. 30

8 Wells (1981), p. 53

9 Hilsman (1999), p. 31

10 Kaplan (1991), p. 77

which had to independently find a solution to dealing with the Soviet Union. The three task forces each came up with different conclusions, all of which Eisenhower took into consideration when approving the historic National Security Council document *NSC 162/2* of 30 October 1953, which defined Cold War policy during the Eisenhower administration – the 'New Look' national security policy.¹¹ *NSC 162/2* stated that the United States needs to maintain 'a strong military posture, with emphasis on the capability of inflicting massive retaliatory damage by offensive striking power', and that the United States 'will consider nuclear weapons as available for use as other munitions.'¹²

Even though *NSC 162/2* did not explain the details of the Massive Retaliation theory, as it became known to the public, the document was received to have major policy implications, especially after Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on 12 January 1954, where he stated:

A potential aggressor must know that he cannot always prescribe battle conditions that suit him... He might be tempted to attack in places where his superiority was decisive... The way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.¹³

His statement was generally interpreted to mean that, if the Soviet Union or Communist China were to attack any country of the 'Free World', the United States would strike back with nuclear weapons, but not necessarily in the theatre of war, but possibly in the Russian or Chinese heartlands. Such interpretations were subsequently strengthened, for example in an article by Vice President Richard M. Nixon in *The New York Times* on 14 March, 1954:

Rather than let the Communists nibble us to death all over the world in little wars, we would rely in the future primarily on our massive mobile retaliatory power which we could use in our discretion against the major source of aggression at times and places that we choose.¹⁴

Only in April, Dulles made an effort to weaken the rhetoric in a *Foreign Affairs* article:

It should not be stated in advance precisely what would be the scope of military action if new

11 Dockrill (1996), pp. 33f

12 *NSC 162/2* (1953); also: Roman (1995), p. 21; Freedman (1989), p. 82

13 Dockrill (1996), pp. 54f; also: Poirier (1988), p. 87; Roman (1995), p. 21

14 Hilsman (1999), pp. 34f

aggression occurred... That is a matter to which the aggressor had best remain ignorant. But he can know and does know, in the light of present policies, that the choice in this respect is ours and not his.¹⁵

Thus, the Eisenhower administration stressed the importance of nuclear weapons in a strategy that was aimed at deterrence. Consequently, Strategic Air Command, the branch of the Air Force that was responsible for delivering nuclear bombs, received more attention in terms of budget. Before Eisenhower entered office, Army, Navy, and Air Force had roughly equal budgets. Yet under the 'New Look' policy, budgets and personnel of Army and Navy were severely cut, while size and budget of the Air Force were greatly increased.¹⁶ In the fiscal year of 1955, the Air Force spent \$16.4 billion, and \$16.8 billion in 1956. 'These sums represented half of the expenditure of the Department of Defense in these years... "striking power" was emphasized at the expense of manpower.'¹⁷

From 1953 to 1957 the stockpile of nuclear weapons increased from 1,000 to 5,420. Striking power increased from 154 megatons in 1955 to 16,300 in 1957. Additionally, the 'Eisenhower administration increased delivery capabilities by purchasing 956 B-47 medium-range jet bombers and 243 B-52 bombers....'¹⁸ From 1957 onwards, one third of the SAC bomber force was either airborne or on alert at any given point in time.¹⁹

Albeit not official policy and unknown to the public, the 'personal war plans' of SAC Commander in Chief Curtis LeMay were very much in line with the Massive Retaliation rhetoric. In a private meeting with Robert C. Sprague, LeMay stated that the SAC was constantly operating surveillance planes around Russia and that, 'if I see that the Russians are amassing their planes for an attack, I'm going to knock the shit out of them before they take off the ground.' When Sprague pointed out that this was not official policy, LeMay answered: 'I don't care. It's my policy. That's what I am going to do.'²⁰

On a more official note, in 1954 Marshal Montgomery, the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe stated: 'With us it's no longer: "[Nuclear weapons] may possibly be used." It is very definitely: "They will be used, if we are attacked."²¹

15 Freedman (1989), p. 86

16 Dockrill (1996), p. 53f; Hilsman (1999), p. 32

17 Dockrill (1996), pp. 119f

18 Roman (1995), p. 22

19 Hilsman (1999), p. 152

20 Kaplan (1991), p. 134

21 Freedman (1989), p. 84

The Nuclear Strategy

Clearly, nuclear weapons had become *the* means for achieving US national security goals. Had the Soviet Union or Communist China attacked an American ally, thermonuclear war would have been the answer. Even though the rhetoric changed from Massive Retaliation (onto the communist heartlands) to merely the US choosing scope and place for retaliatory strikes, the basic principle was the same. Even though Eisenhower's main security goal was deterrence, 'nuclear weapons presented real and usable military options. If deterrence failed... Eisenhower was prepared to order the use of nuclear weapons....'²² He approved the use of nuclear weapons, but kept as much control over them as possible (even though that may have been invalidated by Curtis LeMay's 'personal war plan').

For Eisenhower, America's task in the Cold War was to deter the Soviet Union from attacking, while America's allies were expected to muster the conventional forces to defend themselves. If deterrence failed, the US would have to destroy the enemy's striking capabilities as quickly as possible – with nuclear weapons.²³ 'Eisenhower's strategy... was relatively straightforward and sensible. His priorities were first, general deterrence, second, the Cold War, and lastly, peripheral wars.'²⁴

The Nuclear Reasoning

To understand the reasoning and aims of this strategy, it is also important to understand the politico-economic factors that the Eisenhower administration faced, US assumptions about the nature of the Soviet Union, American ideology in warfare, and theoretical assumptions that influenced policy-makers.

As stated above, one of the main reasons for relying heavily on nuclear weapons was an economic one. In Laurence Freedman's view, 'the centrepiece of American strategy was economic.'²⁵ For Eisenhower, a functioning economy was as important to surviving the Cold War as having military power. This is also evident in *NSC 162/2*, which mentions the importance of the

22 Wells (1981), p. 59

23 Dockrill (1996), pp. 37, 60, 70ff, 197

24 *ibid.*, p. 208

25 Freedman (1989), p. 78

'maintenance of a sound, strong and growing economy'.²⁶ He believed that the Cold War would become a long-drawn affair, and therefore the American economy had to be able to sustain a long-term military threat. Additionally, Eisenhower did not plan on attacking the Soviet Union; he rather hoped that it 'would eventually decay from its own internal weaknesses'.²⁷ Eisenhower had not only used reducing the military budget as a main election promise, but he had also promised to regain initiative in the Cold War – clearly a dilemma. The solution were nuclear weapons: 'Only nuclear weapons seemed to promise adequate defense at affordable cost.'²⁸

He also had to take into account party politics. Within the Republican party, there were two groups. One side wanted the United States to protect the whole free world ("the unilateralists"), led by Senator Robert Taft, Eisenhower's opponent for Republican presidential nomination. The others were mainly committed to defending Europe and to NATO ("the internationalists").²⁹ Thus, he could neither withdraw forces from Europe to save money (which would also have been a bad signal), nor could he ignore the Asian world in terms of communist threat. Nuclear weapons were the only way to defend every part of the world at low costs, while relying on allies for conventional forces.

Why defend the world, though? Certain assumptions about the Soviet Union during the 1950s must be examined. Policy-makers adamantly believed that the Soviet Union was a direct threat to the United States. Lawrence Freedman succinctly summarizes this notion: 'In fact aggression, in various forms and guises, was considered the normal mode of behaviour for the Soviet Union.'³⁰ This is also evident in *NSC 162/2*, which states that 'the Soviet rulers can be expected to continue to base their policy on the conviction of irreconcilable hostility [towards] the non-communist world.'³¹ In his 1958 study *Soviet Strategy in the Nuclear Age*, Raymond Garthoff stated that the Soviet Union, unlike the US, is retaining its conventional power and merely adding nuclear capabilities to its arsenal to prepare for total *and* limited wars. He clearly reflects the *zeitgeist* by then stating:

It is assumed that [the Soviet Union's] objectives of weakening and attempting to destroy the power

26 *NSC 162/2* (1953), p. 6

27 Dockrill (1996), p. 26, also: pp. 27, 36; Hilsman (1999), p. 31; Kaplan (1991), p. 145f

28 Hilsman (1999), p. 31

29 Wells (1981), p. 53

30 Freedman (1989), p. 95

31 *NSC 162/2* (1953), p. 1

centers of the Free World – above all, the United States – and of expanding Soviet control and influence wherever feasible, *do not require proof here*.³² (emphasis added)

The Soviet Union was seen as an aggressor, set on destroying the Western way of life, the United States being its prime target. In short: The Soviet Union was evil.

The 'evilness' of the Soviet Union is an important point to make. As Robert E. Osgood believes that, '...war as a means of punishing the enemy who dared to disturb the peace, war as a crusade – these conceptions are all compatible with the American outlook.'³³ If the enemy is evil (which is still evident in contemporary American rhetoric – 'the Axis of Evil'), the goal is to root out evil. 'Typically, during war the determining objective has been to obtain a clear-cut, definitive military victory in the most efficient manner as quickly as possible....'³⁴ War, in the American tradition, should not be an instrument of foreign policy, but it may well be an ideological instrument, which is evident in the Cold War.³⁵

The rhetoric of Massive Retaliation can also be explained by examining the American mindset, combined with Game Theory, which became popular in the 1950s. Even at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration, but certainly in the late 1950s, the Soviet Union was able to strike the United States with nuclear warheads – not necessarily as massively as the United States could strike the Soviets, but destruction and nuclear fallout would still cause immense damage to the United States and its citizens. In 1956, Eisenhower stated that nobody could truly win a nuclear war and that 'the destruction might be such that we might have to go back to bows and arrows.'³⁶ Why then the rhetoric of Massive Retaliation and the tactic of brinkmanship – to disproportionately increase the stakes to make the enemy withdraw?

In his exploration of the American system in the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the American people 'for the most part worship chance, and are much less afraid of death than of difficulty.'³⁷ Simply put: The Americans like to gamble. This gamble is very much what Game Theory tried to create rules for. Especially at RAND Corporation, the nuclear strategy think-

32 Garthoff (1958), p. 3

33 Osgood (1957), p. 99

34 *ibid.*

35 *ibid.* p. 102

36 Dockrill (1996), p. 193

37 Tocqueville (1840)

tank, Game Theory was highly popular. This was where the strategic minds of the time worked, who in turn influenced US policy.³⁸ The general consensus was that, in terms of nuclear strategy, the potential risks to the enemy must always outweigh the gains, if, for example, he was to attack an American ally.³⁹ To Eisenhower, the Cold War was a zero-sum game: Whenever the West gave in, the Soviet Union gained an advantage. In order to prevent this, the goal was to make the risks for the Soviets always higher than the potential gains – i.e. conquering Germany (gain) would result in the destruction of all Soviet cities (cost). With total destruction of one's own country looming on the horizon, no potential gain would justify the risks.⁴⁰ To summarize with words written at the time:

Three major assumptions about the communist world stand out quite starkly. The first is that, while communism may take many forms and appear in a great variety of places, its actions are instituted from and controlled by the Soviet Union and Red China. The second assumption is that, although the leaders of the Soviet Union and Red China may have objectives quite different from our own, their cost-risk calculations must be roughly the same. The third assumption... is that action on the periphery of the communist empire can be forestalled by forecasting to the enemy the costs and risks that he will run, provided always that the costs and risks are of a sufficient magnitude to outweigh the prospective gain.⁴¹

For the strategic planners at RAND, Clausewitz once again became a tool to determine security strategies. As early as 1945, Bernard Brodie and Jacob Viner realized that war had changed completely: A nuclear war could possibly be over within hours, as a whole country could potentially be destroyed. Thus, 'since all the cities on both sides will be destroyed in the aftermath, going first holds no advantage'.⁴² The Clausewitzian ideal of absolute war (the explosion of all of the two countries' forces within one instant) had nearly become true.

For analysts of the epoch, everything takes place as if, in allowing actual nuclear war to become synonymous with absolute war, the weapon of massive destruction strengthened certain assertions of Clausewitz. In effect, the American strategic school, searching for operational models, turned to the Prussian theoretician.⁴³

38 Kaplan (1996), pp. 10, 66f

39 Freedman (1989), p. 87; Knorr (1966), p. 89

40 Poirier (1988), p. 73

41 Kaufmann (1956), p. 263

42 Kaplan (1991), p. 27

43 Poirier (1988), p. 73

Original French: 'Pour les analystes de l'époque, tout se passe comme si, en permettant à la guerre nucléaire concrète de s'identifier à la guerre absolue... l'arme de destruction massive infirmait certaines assertions de Clausewitz. C'est en effet vers le théoricien prussien que se tourne l'école stratégique américaine à la recherche des modèles opératoires.'

Similarly, the Eisenhower administration policy-makers held the Clausewitzian notion that any confrontation with the Soviet Union would inevitably escalate into a total war – now a war fought with nuclear weapons. Thus, planning for limited wars was a useless endeavour. Due to the experience of Pearl Harbor, the expectation that any confrontation with the Soviet Union would inevitably start with a surprise attack was very strong in the United States. *NSC 162/2* explicitly calls for the maintenance of 'a retaliatory capability that cannot be neutralized by a surprise Soviet attack.'⁴⁴ Thus, Eisenhower focused the military budget on securing the SAC bases in order to retain retaliatory striking power in the event of an attack (which again would deter the Soviets from conducting such an attack). Defence and warning programmes were highly unreliable and, above all, costly – Eisenhower therefore preferred to gamble on deterrence.⁴⁵

While the United States would not allow Communism to gain ground in the world, it would also not initiate conflict. America believed to have learnt its lessons from weak European politics before World War II. The spectre of appeasement still lingered in the minds of policy-makers, as it was widely believed that this policy led directly to World War II. Evil regimes had to be stopped and to be contained within their own borders (if not attacked), and diplomatic solutions were seen as impractical, if not outright dangerous.⁴⁶ Thus, while America would not allow the Soviet Union to expand, other approaches apart from appeasement and war had to be found. President Eisenhower intended to make clear to the world that nuclear war would be an all-embracing catastrophe, and that all countries of the world would suffer equally. Nuclear war 'is a danger shared by all', he stated in his atoms for peace speech to the United Nations in 1953.⁴⁷ His immense threat of Massive Retaliation, combined with conciliatory speeches proposing diplomatic talks and calling for worldwide atomic energy cooperation, he was pursuing a 'carrot and stick approach to the Soviet Union'.⁴⁸

Lastly, being a Republican, Eisenhower was very much in favour of maximizing civil liberties. He was strongly opposed to building up large permanent military forces, not only because they were very costly, but also because they would require the state to exercise more controls over population and economy. 'Since we cannot keep the United States an armed camp or a garrison

44 *NSC 162/2* (1953), p. 25

45 Dockrill (1996), p. 113; Freedman (1989), p. 34; Roman (1995), p. 25

46 Freedman (1989), p. 95

47 Eisenhower (1953)

48 Dockrill (1996), p. 65

state, we must make plans to use the atom bomb if we become involved in a war', he stated on 03 December 1954.⁴⁹ Eisenhower's logic was influenced by Harold Laswell, an American sociologist of the time, who suggested that the constant threat of the Cold War, 'if continued would lead to a loss of freedom and ultimately the evolvment of a garrison state'⁵⁰ – a scenario that Eisenhower was truly afraid of.

The Nuclear Critics

Albeit successful insofar that no nuclear war occurred, there are certain problems with the over-reliance on nuclear weapons and the rhetoric of Massive Retaliation. As early as 1955, Army Chief of Staff General Taylor criticized the administration for planning as if only total nuclear war was possible.⁵¹

Launching a nuclear war in order to defend an ally was not a credible threat, as long as the Soviet Union was able to retaliate. As the United States could never have been sure to destroy the Soviet nuclear forces and would thus risk suffering nuclear war on American soil, no enemy would believe that the United States would sacrifice its own cities to protect another country. The threat had to be credible, in order to deter, or, as Thomas Schelling later suggested, the threat had to leave something to chance – something that cannot be controlled by whoever is making the threat.⁵² In his toned-down *Foreign Affairs* article, Dulles suggested that the United States would not necessarily start nuclear war, but would keep all options open.⁵³ Nonetheless, the public (and thus the Soviets) had already perceived a different threat.

Also, Eisenhower's belief that the United States had to lead in terms of nuclear numbers was only useful to a certain extent. Once the capability to destroy all of Russia and China (including the likelihood that some bombs would not be delivered) was reached, there was no reason to continue to build up nuclear weapons. Bill Fox realized this as early as 1946,⁵⁴ but Eisenhower increased striking power continuously.

49 *ibid.*, p. 60

50 Stanley (1996)

51 Dockrill (1996), p. 187

52 Hilsman (1999), p. 38; Schelling (1980), pp. 187-194

53 Freedman (1989), p. 86

54 Kaplan (1991), p. 29

Conclusion

To conclude, the Eisenhower administration embraced nuclear weapons to strike a balance between national security goals and economic pressures, while at the same time taking the initiative in the Cold War and preventing communist expansion. With the advent of the thermonuclear bomb, destruction had become a cheap commodity, which could be delivered easily. Motivated by the naturalized myth (in the Barthesian sense of ideological indoctrination)⁵⁵ that the Soviet Union aimed to take over the world by military as well as subversive means, the United States focused on deterring the Soviet Union, while relying on its allies to protect their borders with ground forces. Total nuclear war seemed the inescapable consequence of the current situation, and the United States wanted to be prepared in case deterrence failed.

These beliefs and the eagerness to stop the expansion of communism can be traced to basic American ideologies: The tendency to aim for complete results (total destruction of the Soviet Union), and the tendency to take chances in order to prevent economic strains, as well as the basic hate for communism. Game Theory is the tool to justify both, the threat of Massive Retaliation and the arms race. The consensus of the 1950s was: We need to be strong economically in order to withstand Soviet subversion, and at the same time we need to make sure that communism does not spread. The answer was the thermonuclear bomb.

55 Barthes (1972)

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