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# Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War

Roger Dingman

In January 1956, *Life* magazine published an article that purportedly explained how the Eisenhower administration had ended the Korean War. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles revealed that he had conveyed an “unmistakable warning” to Beijing that the United States would use nuclear weapons against China if rapid progress toward a negotiated settlement was not made. He asserted that it was “a pretty fair inference” that this nuclear threat had worked. Dulles made this claim in defense of the notion that nuclear weapons were useful, indeed essential, tools of statecraft: When nuclear capability was combined with communication of intent to use it if necessary, deterrence—and even compellence—worked.<sup>1</sup>

Dulles spoke in response to partisan critics at the beginning of an election year, but his words influenced policy and history long after the 1956 contest ended. They defined the parameters of a debate about the political and diplomatic utility of nuclear weapons generally and the outcome of the Korean War in particular.<sup>2</sup> However, the secretary of state’s claim was doubly deceptive. It focused analysts’ attention on the six months of Republican conflict management, to the neglect of the preceding two and one-half years of Democratic stewardship. Moreover, Dulles’s claim prompted a debate over

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1. James Shepley, “How Dulles Averted War,” *Life*, January 16, 1956, pp. 70–72ff.
  2. Edward C. Keefer, “President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 1986), pp. 267–268, summarizes the historiographical debate triggered by Dulles’s claim. A recent restatement of Dulles’s argument, based primarily upon published sources, is Daniel Calingaert, “Nuclear Weapons and the Korean War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 177–202.

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the effects of Washington's atomic diplomacy that deflected attention from its substance and character. The result was to reinforce an essentially partisan interpretation of what occurred and to leave unconsidered more fundamental questions as to how, when, and why the United States tried to use nuclear weapons to its advantage in managing a limited war.

This article attempts to answer those basic questions. It focuses on Washington's attempts to derive political and diplomatic rather than tactical military advantage from the possession and deployment of nuclear weapons. What follows differs from earlier explorations of this subject in three vital respects. First, it reviews the entire war to demonstrate that atomic diplomacy was an element of American statecraft throughout the conflict and not just in its concluding months. Secondly, the story rests upon a deeper and broader documentary foundation than earlier treatments of this subject. The availability of previously top-secret documents from the papers of key individuals, the several armed services, the State and Defense Departments, the National Security Council (NSC), and Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) permits a more detailed analysis of Washington's attempts to use nuclear weapons as tools of conflict management.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the examination goes beyond words to deeds. By tracing military and diplomatic actions as well as parsing political intentions, the narrative that follows seeks to provide fresh insight into the history of United States Korean War policies and the evolution of American thinking about the utility of nuclear weapons.

### *Attitudes and Assumptions*

American statesman and military professionals brought three basic assumptions about nuclear weapons to the task of conflict management during the Korean War. They believed that the United States enjoyed clear, but qualified nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union. They assumed that such superiority ought, somehow, to be usable. They also thought that the combination

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3. Two sorts of previously unavailable archival materials proved most useful in the development of this essay. The papers of senior U.S. Air Force and Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) officials, most notably those of General Curtis E. LeMay, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and AEC Chairman Gordon A. Dean, include not only individual diaries but also official papers unavailable elsewhere. Many of the personal daily schedules of ranking officials—most notably those of Dean G. Acheson, Omar N. Bradley, J. Lawton Collins, Louis A. Johnson, and Hoyt S. Vandenberg—contain notations of visitors and telephone conversations. When used in conjunction with departmental documents, these materials facilitated detailed reconstruction of patterns of decision and action.

of restraint and resolve in atomic diplomacy during the Berlin Blockade of 1948–49 had worked and could prove effective in future crises. Because these three ideas profoundly influenced the decisions of both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, they deserve further explication.

In June 1950, Washington had a clear but qualified nuclear advantage over Moscow. America had nearly three hundred atomic bombs in its stockpile, and more than two hundred sixty aircraft capable of putting them on Soviet targets.<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union had exploded its first nuclear device only ten months earlier and could strike the United States only by one-way bomber missions or by smuggling nuclear weapons into American harbors aboard merchant vessels.<sup>5</sup> While both powers dramatically increased their nuclear stockpiles and improved their delivery systems during the Korean War, this balance favoring the United States did not change fundamentally between 1950 and 1953.<sup>6</sup>

But American decision-makers recognized that their nuclear superiority was qualified in two respects. First, despite flaws in enemy delivery capabilities, the grim truth was that Moscow's ability to strike the American heartland was growing.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, Washington acknowledged real limitations in America's ability to put nuclear weapons on enemy targets. Although

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4. David Alan Rosenberg, "U.S. Nuclear Stockpile 1945 to 1950," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (May 1982), p. 26.

5. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Intelligence memorandum 323-SRC, August 25, 1950, intelligence file, president's secretary's file (PSF), Box 250, Harry S Truman papers, Truman Library, Independence, Missouri (hereafter "Truman papers, HSTL").

6. Executive Secretary, National Security Council (NSC), to Chairman, AEC, December 6, 1950, NSC atomic weapons file, PSF, Box 202, Truman papers, HSTL; Briefing: Air Estimate of the Situation, 1951–1954, U.S. Air Force Commanders' Conference, October 30, 1951, item 168.7026-9, Charles Cabell papers, Simpson Historical Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama (hereafter "Cabell papers"). The briefing document puts Soviet nuclear strength at less than half the estimated American stockpile as of January 1951. *New York Times*, October 2, 1951; Office of the Historian, Strategic Air Command (SAC), *Development of Strategic Air Command, 1946–1976* (Omaha: U.S. Air Force SAC, 1976), pp. 20, 27, 33, 35, 38; Secretary of Defense to Executive Secretary, NSC, June 8, 1953, Office of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (OSANSA), NSC subject file, atomic energy series, Box 1, Dwight D. Eisenhower papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas; Office of the Historian, Strategic Air Command, Status of Strategic Air Command, January–June 1953, Volume 1, frame 0481, reel K4263, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base, Maryland.

7. President Truman publicly acknowledged American vulnerability to Soviet attack in April 1951; *Public Papers of the President, 1951* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [U.S. GPO], 1965), pp. 225–226. This series will hereafter be cited as *Truman Public Papers*, with dates and pages. By early 1953, President Eisenhower's advisers were debating the extent, not the possibility, of damage from Soviet nuclear strikes. See *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter "FRUS"), 1952–1954, Volume 2, *National Security Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1984), pp. 203, 213–214, 232–233.

war plans called for launching an atomic blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union in the event of general war, not one nuclear-configured aircraft was deployed outside the continental United States when the Korean fighting began.<sup>8</sup> Strategic Air Command (SAC) planners estimated that it would take three months to bomb Moscow into submission, given the inadequacy of forward bases and overseas fuel supplies.<sup>9</sup> By 1953 the probability of swifter, successful strikes against the Soviet Union had increased thanks to the introduction of jet bombers, the development of overseas bases, and the deployment of aircraft carriers modified so as to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> But the Pentagon did not have custody of any complete atomic bombs, and the State Department had not begun negotiations for their deployment to foreign soil.<sup>11</sup> That meant that Washington had no immediately usable nuclear force near Korea.

Despite these limitations, President Truman, President Eisenhower, many of their key advisers, and probably most politicians along with a majority of the general public believed that nuclear superiority *ought* to be usable.<sup>12</sup> While the two presidents were sensitive to the moral dilemmas posed by the indiscriminate destructiveness of atomic weapons, both, as trained military men, placed them at the top of the hierarchy of usable force. Within days of the outbreak of fighting in Korea, both men alluded to the possibility of using atomic arms.<sup>13</sup> By early July 1950, Pentagon staff officers and the commander

8. SAC, *Development of SAC*, pp. 20–21; David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 15–18, 25.

9. Office of the Historian, Strategic Air Command, “History of the Strategic Air Command: January–June 1950,” Volume 2, chapter 7 (declassified by author’s Freedom of Information Act request); Major General S.E. Anderson, Director of Plans, U.S. Air Force, to Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington, April 11, 1950, Box 100, Office of Secretary of the Air Force papers, Record Group (RG) 330, U.S. National Archives (hereafter “NA”).

10. SAC, *Development of SAC*, pp. 35, 38; Status of Strategic Air Command, January–June 1953, Volume 1, frame 0502, reel K4263, Volume 7, frame 0946, reel K4264, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base.

11. James Lay to Truman, December 5, 1950, Secretary of Defense to Executive Secretary, NSC, May 1, 1951, NSC atomic file, PSF, Truman papers, HSTL; Atomic Energy Commission, “Weapons Custody and Use,” April 25, 1961, AEC 867/49, file 1442, folder 2, Atomic Energy Secretariat papers, Department of Energy (hereafter AEC, “Weapons Custody and Use”); Herbert B. Loper to Clinton P. Anderson, November 10, 1960, “Memorandum on History of Atomic Weapons Custody,” Minutes, Box 5, Records of Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE), RG 128, NA (hereafter cited as “Loper memorandum”).

12. Carlton Savage to George Kennan, memorandum, “Preliminary Study of Attitudes of U.S. Population about U.S. Use of Atomic Bomb in War,” December 21, 1949, Box 50, Paul Nitze file, Policy Planning Staff files, Department of State papers, RG 59, NA.

13. David E. Lilienthal, *Journals: The Atomic Energy Years 1945–1950* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 391; Robert Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 175–176; *FRUS*, 1950, Volume 7, *Korea*, pp. 159–160.

in chief of the Pacific fleet surmised that, if the situation in Korea became desperate, Congress and the public would demand the use of atomic weapons.<sup>14</sup>

The change of administrations in January 1953 strengthened official Washington's belief that nuclear weapons were usable tools of statecraft. The new secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, had argued in 1948 that the public would demand a resort to nuclear arms if the situation appeared to require their use.<sup>15</sup> His May 1952 *Life* magazine article, entitled "A Policy of Boldness," prefigured the Eisenhower administration's "New Look" strategy by championing reliance on nuclear weapons and strong alliances as deterrents to future communist aggression.<sup>16</sup> Thus the question confronting American statesmen as the war neared its end, just as at its beginning, was not whether, but how and when, to employ nuclear weapons for conflict management.

Democratic and Republican statesmen looked back to the dispatch of two squadrons of B-29s to Western Europe during the Berlin Blockade of 1948–49 for guidance on how best to use American nuclear superiority. Although the press described the flight of these aircraft, similar to those that had dropped atomic bombs in 1945 but not actually configured to do so, as a training mission, their deployment was widely interpreted as a demonstration of resolve in the face of Soviet pressure.<sup>17</sup> In fact, President Truman and his diplomatic advisers practiced restraint at the same time, rejecting Pentagon requests for custody of nuclear weapons and avoiding negotiating tactics that might back Moscow into a corner from which there was no face-saving escape.<sup>18</sup> In the summer of 1948, American statesmen doubted that the B-29 deployment contributed directly to settlement of the Berlin Blockade crisis.<sup>19</sup>

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14. Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT Radford) to Chief of Naval Operations (CNO Sherman), 080941Z, July 8, 1950, enclosure to JCS 1776/25 in Ops TS Korea file, Box 34a, section 14, cases 41–60, Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations, U.S. Army papers, RG 319, NA; Cabell memorandum, "Action to Prevent a Dunkirk in Korea," shown to General Norstad, July 12, 1950, TS 189327, Cabell papers.

15. James V. Forrestal diary, October 10, 1948, cited in Avi Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 1948–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 359.

16. John Foster Dulles, "A Policy of Boldness," *Life*, May 19, 1952, pp. 151–158; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 33–34.

17. *New York Times*, June 19, 1948, July 16, 18, 26, 28, 1948; Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, pp. 235–239, 337–341; Harry Borowski, *A Hollow Threat: Strategic Air Power and Containment before Korea* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), pp. 125–130.

18. *Truman Public Papers*, 1948, p. 415; AEC, "Weapons Custody and Use"; Loper memorandum; Ronald Pruessen, *John Foster Dulles: The Road to Power* (New York: Free Press, 1982), pp. 376–377.

19. Lilienthal, *Journals*, Vol. 2, p. 391; Robert Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess* (New York: Norton, 1983), pp. 554–555.

But as time hazed over the particulars of this episode, they came to believe that atomic arms could be instruments of “force without war.”<sup>20</sup> Their credibility might even exceed their actual capability if they were used, without overt threats, for purposes of deterrence rather than compellence.<sup>21</sup> Thus American statesmen and soldiers brought to the Korean War the conviction that atomic arms, if properly employed, could be extremely valuable tools for conflict management.

*From Resolve to Restraint, June 1950–June 1951*

During the first year of the war, a pattern in the use of nuclear weapons took shape in Washington. Forced repeatedly by battlefield circumstance to consider their tactical use in and around Korea, the Truman administration time and again turned away from such action. Driven by the same circumstances to consider how atomic weapons might help manage the political and diplomatic aspects of the conflict, the administration came to appreciate their utility in dealing with its enemies, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC); with its principal ally, Britain; and with its partisan foes at home. How and why President Truman and his senior advisers developed what might even be termed a strategy for the use of nuclear weapons can be seen by analyzing their behavior at four moments of crisis during the first year of the Korean conflict. Two of those moments came early in the fighting, in July 1950. A third followed at the end of November, when massive Chinese intervention confronted the United States with “an entirely new war.”<sup>22</sup> The fourth and most serious of these crises struck Washington in April 1951.

FIRST USE: BOMBERS TO BRITAIN

The possibility of using nuclear weapons tactically came up during President Truman’s very first wartime meeting with his senior advisers at Blair House on Sunday evening, June 25, 1950. The president raised the issue by asking Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt S. Vandenberg if American planes could “take out” Soviet bases near Korea. The general replied affirmatively, but said it

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20. The phrase “force without war” is the title of a book by Barry Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1978); Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, p. 359.

21. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 108–110.

22. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, p. 1237.

would require atomic bombs. That response prompted Truman to order the preparation of plans for launching an atomic attack in the event the Soviet Union entered the fighting.<sup>23</sup>

During the next three weeks, however, the president and his advisers came to see more diplomatic and political than military utility in nuclear weapons. That perception grew out of developments surrounding the first engagements between American and North Korean forces. Washington intervened in Korea to defend the principle of collective security and America's leadership of the non-communist world.<sup>24</sup> Policy-makers hoped for "resounding military success achieved by demonstrably overwhelming power."<sup>25</sup> But neither bombing North Korea nor blocking key roads slowed the enemy juggernaut plunging southward. In their first encounters, it was American troops rather than Pyongyang's soldiers who retreated.<sup>26</sup> Alarmed by these results, General Douglas MacArthur begged Washington to double the force at his disposal so that he might hold at least the southern tip of the Korean peninsula.<sup>27</sup>

But his superiors were not prepared to make definitive choices at this point. Meeting with the Cabinet on July 7, 1950, the president groped for some way to "let the world know we mean business." Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Roscoe Hillenkoetter proposed seeking United Nations sanction for use of the atomic bomb even if doing so could not guarantee that Moscow would restrain Pyongyang and Beijing. Although he remained skeptical of Soviet intentions, Truman declined to make so overt a threat. Downplaying the immediate danger, he insisted that the Soviets were "seventy percent bluffers."<sup>28</sup> Then, making a Solomonic choice between the Pen-

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23. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–160. It should be noted that no one present voiced the slightest objection to the president's order.

24. Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 75–78; William Stueck, Jr., *The Road to Confrontation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 191–192, 255–257.

25. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, p. 278.

26. Roy K. Flint, "Task Force Smith and the 24th Division: Delay and Withdrawal, 5–19 July 1950," in Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles 1776–1965* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), pp. 266–299; Clay Blair, *Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950–1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), pp. 101–111.

27. D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, Vol. 3 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), pp. 441–442; James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, Volume 3, *The Korean War*, part I (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], 1978), pp. 179–185.

28. Cabinet meeting notes, July 7, 1950, Box 1, Matthew J. Connelly papers, Truman Library; "Memorandum on psychological use of the Atomic bomb in Korea Conflict," July 6, 1950,



tagon's desire to call one hundred thousand men to arms and the Treasury's fear of the economic effects of full-scale mobilization, he let it be known that the Defense Department could exceed its current budget and use the draft.<sup>29</sup>

Two days later, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) postponed a decision on General MacArthur's troop request and set aside Chairman Omar Bradley's suggestion to put atomic weapons at MacArthur's disposal.<sup>30</sup> Their choice reflected doubts about MacArthur's judgment, unwillingness to allow Korea to disrupt Europe-first strategic priorities, and hesitancy to use nuclear weapons in a manner that seemed less than likely to be decisive.<sup>31</sup> They then decided that two of their number should visit General MacArthur in Tokyo and the battlefield in Korea before further decisions on force levels and deployments were made.<sup>32</sup>

In the interim, the Truman administration decided that nuclear strength must be used to demonstrate its determination to prevail in Korea. On July 8, 1950, SAC Commander Curtis LeMay was ordered to repeat, in effect, the Berlin Blockade B-29 feint of 1948.<sup>33</sup> The order grew out of General Vandenberg's desire to do *something* to counter the impression of ineffectiveness conveyed by the meager results of American bombing in Korea.<sup>34</sup> Sending aircraft to Britain carrying "Russian target materials" also implemented President Truman's previously expressed desire for expedited planning for attacks against the Soviet Union. LeMay, hoping to improve the readiness of his force still further, proposed that the B-29s carry everything but the fissionable cores of nuclear weapons.<sup>35</sup> If they did, and if this deployment was rounded out by the dispatch of ten nuclear-configured B-29s across the Pacific

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Hillenkoetter memorandum to the president, July 7, 1950, intelligence file, PSF, Box 249, Truman papers, HSTL.

29. *New York Times*, July 8, 1950.

30. Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 185–186; July 9, 1950 memorandum, Historical Record, June–July 1950 folder, Box 16, Matthew B. Ridgway papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

31. *Ibid.*; Gruenther to Bolte, July 9, 1950, CCS 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), section 23, Joint Chiefs of Staff papers, RG 218, NA; James, *MacArthur*, Vol. 3, p. 443; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, p. 185.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 185–186.

33. LeMay telecon with Commanding General, 3rd Air Division, July 8, 1950, summarized in LeMay diary, July 8, 1950, Curtis E. LeMay papers, Library of Congress. (A telecon was an exchange of teletype messages, flashed upon a screen so that they might be viewed simultaneously by more than one person.)

34. Memorandum of Norstad-LeMay telephone conversation, July 2, 1950, Box 7/10, Lauris Norstad papers, Modern Military Records Branch, NA.

35. LeMay diary, July 8, 1950, LeMay papers. "Russian target materials" presumably referred to maps and charts, prioritized target lists, radar scope information, etc.

and the overseas prepositioning of tankers and support aircraft, the time needed to commence and wage atomic war against the Soviet Union would be dramatically reduced.<sup>36</sup>

The JCS gave only qualified approval to the modified proposal, probably out of fear that its nuclear aspect might create diplomatic difficulties. Initial British reactions confirmed that concern, for the Royal Air Force, arguing that the proposed deployment had “wide consequences” and might be regarded as “an unfriendly act” by Moscow, refused to accede to the American request without prior agreement at the political level.<sup>37</sup> By nightfall on July 9, 1950, however, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Lauris Norstad had persuaded Air Marshal Lord Tedder, who headed the British Joint Liaison Mission in Washington, to support the proposal; Norstad had also obtained clearance “at the highest level” to seek the approval of the British Chiefs of Staff for it.<sup>38</sup>

Much more significantly, Secretary of State Dean Acheson approved the deployment as a demonstration of resolve. While he may have shared Soviet expert Charles Bohlen’s belief that “some measure” beyond military and economic mobilization was necessary to keep the Soviets from intervening in Korea or stirring up trouble elsewhere,<sup>39</sup> Acheson was more immediately concerned to impress the British with America’s determination to prevail in Korea. The secretary of state was unhappy with London’s recognition of the PRC and its dissent from interposition of the United States Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>40</sup> Although he had been assured that Britain would not seek a return to the *status quo ante* in Korea by letting the PRC have Taiwan, he worried lest London promote a peace settlement requiring withdrawal of American forces from the peninsula. His doubts were not dispelled by talks with British Ambassador Sir Oliver Franks on Sunday afternoon, July 9.<sup>41</sup> The next day Acheson sent London a note that rejected paying a price for disengagement in Korea and called for Anglo-American solidarity on ques-

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36. *Ibid.*, July 10, 1950.

37. General Joseph Lawton Collins daily schedule, July 9, 1950, Box 40, Collins papers, Eisenhower Library; Norstad to LeMay, July 9, 1950; Commanding General 3rd Air Division to Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, 091200Z, July 9, 1950, Box 86, Hoyt S. Vandenberg papers, Library of Congress.

38. Chief of Staff, USAF, to Commanding General 3rd Air Division, 092016Z July 9, 1950; Norstad to LeMay, July 9, 1950, Box 86, Vandenberg papers.

39. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 326–327.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 330–331, 340.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 331, 337; Acheson daily schedule, July 9, 1950, Box 45, Dean G. Acheson papers, Truman Library.

tions “of the gravest importance” certain to arise when the “fiction” of Soviet and Chinese non-involvement wore thin.<sup>42</sup> Sending B-29s to Britain was simply one more way to underline the gravity of the situation, demonstrate America’s resolve, and elicit the cooperation of its most important ally.

The next morning the American ambassador in London called Prime Minister Clement Attlee out of a Cabinet meeting to put the deployment proposal before him. Recalling the events of 1948, Attlee suspected that Washington wanted to make the B-29 movement a demonstration of strength for Moscow’s benefit. He was convinced that it would be wrong to do so. When he asked if the planes would carry atomic bombs, the ambassador confessed that they would “probably” have everything but the nuclear cores aboard. Attlee then took the American proposal to his Cabinet colleagues who, after considerable debate, approved it with one proviso: London and Washington must coordinate publicity so as to make the deployment appear purely routine.<sup>43</sup>

That requirement did not trouble President Truman, who readily gave formal approval to the proposed deployment on July 11.<sup>44</sup> The president had every reason to do so. The movement of B-29s across the Atlantic would enhance strategic readiness as he had ordered on June 25. Already reported in that morning’s *New York Times* as a “normal rotation,”<sup>45</sup> the deployment might remind Moscow of America’s nuclear strength without provoking the Soviets. Putting nuclear-configured B-29s in Britain also underlined the need for renewed Anglo-American solidarity. But the deployment neither risked a wider war nor loosened Truman’s control over atomic weapons, for their nuclear cores would remain in the United States.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the president may have perceived domestic political advantages in sending bombers to Britain.

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42. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 347–352.

43. Commanding General 3rd Air Division to Vice Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, July 10, 1950, Box 86, Vandenberg papers.

44. Norstad to LeMay, XG 68/102205, July 10, 1950, *ibid.*, indicated that the AEC and Defense Department had agreed to present to the president their request to send nuclear “hardware” to Britain; Truman schedule, July 11, 1950, indicates that the president conferred early that morning with W. Averell Harriman, his newly designated special assistant for mutual security affairs. Harriman, a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, may have advised Truman on what to do at this point; Johnson schedule, July 11, 1950, Louis A. Johnson papers, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, and Gordon A. Dean diary, July 11, 1950, confirm their meeting with the president that afternoon; Norstad to Commanding General 3rd Air Division, 111729Z, July 11, 1950, Box 86, Vandenberg papers.

45. *New York Times*, July 11, 1950.

46. Gordon Dean to Truman, July 10, 1950, Box 4931, RG 326, U.S. Department of Energy Archives.

Cooperation in this endeavor might ease frictions between his secretaries of state and defense and thus deprive Republican critics of grounds for attacking the administration's management of the war.<sup>47</sup>

#### DETECTING THE CHINESE—AND THE REPUBLICANS

Less than three weeks after he sent nuclear-configured bombers across the Atlantic, Truman dispatched ten similar aircraft across the Pacific to Guam. His decision to do so took shape at a moment of uncertainty and crisis. While his advisers pondered tactical use of atomic weapons in Korea, they were deeply divided over whether, when, and how to do so. One Pentagon staff study argued that the general deterrent value of atomic weapons unused far exceeded the benefits that might flow from their employment with indeterminate results on the remote Korean peninsula.<sup>48</sup> Yet senior Operations Division officers suggested that Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins query General MacArthur about possible use of nuclear weapons in Korea.<sup>49</sup> At the State Department, a Policy Planning Staff (PPS) study concluded that atomic bombs should be used in Korea only if Moscow or Beijing entered the fighting, and their employment promised decisive military success.<sup>50</sup> But after hearing the director of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project, which managed the nuclear stockpile, say that the bomb might be used to prevent American forces from being pushed off the peninsula by North Korean forces

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47. Eben Ayers diary, June 29, 1950, July 3, 10, 1950, Eben Ayers papers, Truman Library, indicates that the president knew that his defense secretary had telephoned congratulations to Republican Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio on his speech calling for Secretary Acheson's resignation. Ayers on July 10 noted Truman's sensitivity to what he perceived as excessive Republican partisanship.

48. Report by an Ad Hoc Committee, Plans Division, "Employment of Atomic Bombs in Korea," July 12, 1950, Ops 091 TS Korea (July 12, 1950), RG 319, NA. Assistant Secretary of Defense Stephen Early made a similar argument, on grounds that the Soviet public would never be made aware of American use of the bomb in Korea. See Johnson to Truman, July 6, 1950, CIA Memoranda 1950-52 folder, intelligence file, PSF, Box 249, Truman papers.

49. Bolte to Gruenther, July 25, Ops 091 TS Korea (July 24, 1950), section 6; D.D. Dickson to Bolte, with enclosures, July 17, file 333 Pacific, case 3, Army General Staff Operations Division papers, RG 319, NA. The recommendation that Collins raise the question of tactical use of nuclear weapons with General MacArthur may have been designed to elicit the latter's opinions on arguments in a study titled "Employment of Atomic Weapons against Military Targets," prepared by Lt. Col. Harry L. Hillyard of the Joint War Plans Branch of the Army Operations Division, June 30, 1950, Hot Files, Box 11, Army General Staff Operations Division papers, RG 319, NA. It argued that atomic attacks might soften up ports prior to an amphibious assault, and it called for the use of penetration-type bombs against enemy forward air bases.

50. Carleton Savage to Paul Nitze, July 15, 1950, Atomic Energy-Armaments folder, 1950, Box 7, Policy Planning Staff Papers, RG 59, NA.

alone, Paul Nitze, the new PPS director, hinted to Secretary of State Acheson that the door for tactical use of atomic weapons in Korea remained open.<sup>51</sup>

By the beginning of the last week of July, however, such divergence of opinion became an unaffordable luxury. Washington suddenly faced circumstances that suggested that the atomic bomb might have to be used as a deterrent to limit the scope and determine the outcome of the fighting in Korea. There the enemy had squeezed American forces into a ninety-mile perimeter around Pusan. Within five days, despite General MacArthur's insistence that there be no further retreat, the North Koreans pushed Yankee and South Korean defenders back into an area that was two-thirds its previous size.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, it appeared that Washington's effort to isolate the Korean battlefield by interposing the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait might collapse. Its commander complained that he could not fight in Korea and stop a PRC invasion at the same time.<sup>53</sup> When the CIA reported a buildup of Chinese amphibious and paratroop forces opposite Taiwan, President Truman rejected the pleas of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) for a pre-emptive strike against them.<sup>54</sup> Yet the NSC could not agree on providing military aid to the Nationalist leader.<sup>55</sup> On top of all this, Dean Acheson's efforts to enlist Britain's sympathy, if not support, for denying Taiwan to PRC control proved fruitless.<sup>56</sup>

Amidst fears that the line that Washington had drawn across Korea and in the Taiwan Strait might crumble, a proposal to send nuclear-configured

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51. Nitze to Acheson, July 17, 1950, *ibid.* Nitze was reacting to both General Kenneth D. Nichols' thought that the bomb might have to be used short of a war with the Soviet Union, and Hanson Baldwin's *New York Times* column of July 17, 1950, that argued that the bomb must not be used in Korea under any circumstances.

52. *New York Times*, July 26–30, 1950; James, *MacArthur*, Vol. 3, p. 446.

53. Memorandum of Rusk-Burns-Orem meeting, July 24, 1950, Box 18, Office of Chinese Affairs papers, RG 59, NA; Commander Seventh Fleet (Joy) to Chief of Naval Operations (Sherman), 250256Z, July 25, 1950, Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (Radford) to Chief of Naval Operations, 251224Z, July 25, 1950, Navy Department Top Secret Message Files, reel 50, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.; and Commander in Chief Far East (CINCFE) to Joint Chiefs of Staff, CM In 15682, July 26, 1950, cited in G-3 Operations Log, 1950, tab 5, 091 Korea TS, Section I-1, Book I, RG 319, NA; these detail the Army-Navy dispute on this matter; James A. Field, Jr., *The United States Navy in the Korean War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1962), pp. 108–110, 115–116, 119–120, 125.

54. CIA memorandum 312, July 26, 1950, cited in Clubb to Rusk, August 3, 1950, file 306.00111, Office of Chinese Affairs papers, RG 59, NA; Truman to Acheson, and Clubb to Rusk, *ibid.*, July 18, 1950.

55. Acheson memorandum on NSC meeting, July 27, 1950, Box 65, Acheson papers.

56. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, p. 330; Dean G. Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 543.

bombers across the Pacific took shape. Air Force Chief of Staff Vandenberg was the driving force behind it. When he and General Collins met General MacArthur in Tokyo, the Army Chief of Staff declined to raise questions about possible use of nuclear weapons in Korea as his subordinates had suggested. But when Vandenberg asked MacArthur about how he might cut off Chinese communist forces if they entered the fighting, the old general replied that he saw “a unique use for the atomic bomb” in isolating them in North Korea. If Vandenberg would “sweeten up” the B-29 force at his disposal, the job could be done. The air force general immediately promised to do so.<sup>57</sup>

When Vandenberg returned to Washington, however, this scheme was modified to meet the needs of the increasingly desperate military situation. Convinced that “things were in a hell of a mess,” Vandenberg suggested to JCS Chairman Bradley that SAC B-29s should be sent to destroy North Korean cities.<sup>58</sup> Cool to the idea at first, Bradley warmed to it when he met the chiefs on Friday July 28. His colleagues, who were increasingly concerned about the situation in the Taiwan Strait, recommended approval for Chinese Nationalist “offensive-defensive” actions there, despite President Truman’s previous rejection of that course of action.<sup>59</sup>

The next morning the chiefs added ten nuclear-configured B-29s to the SAC task force about to cross the Pacific.<sup>60</sup> Doing so made perfect sense from their point of view. The deployment answered their subordinates’ earlier call for prepositioning nuclear strike forces abroad. It probably seemed a more potent and less controversial response to the threat of Chinese action against Taiwan than allowing Jiang Jieshi to attack the mainland. The movement of the bombers implied agreement with General MacArthur’s ideas; and even though he would not have operational control over them, their dispatch could be taken as an indication of resolve which would soften his unhappi-

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57. Minutes of MacArthur-Collins-Vandenberg conference, July 13, 1950, Ops 333 Pacific (1950–1951), case 3, RG 319, NA.

58. Memoranda on LeMay-Norstad and Ramey-LeMay telephone conversations, July 29, 1950, LeMay diary.

59. *Ibid.*; General Omar N. Bradley, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, Diary (hereafter “Bradley schedule”), July 28–29, 1950, Box 107, Omar N. Bradley papers, U.S. Military Academy Library, West Point, New York; Collins schedule, July 28–29, 1950; Vandenberg daily diary (hereafter “Vandenberg schedule”), July 28–29, 1950, Box 4, Vandenberg papers; Johnson schedule, July 29, 1950; Acheson memorandum on NSC meeting, July 27, 1950, Box 65, Acheson papers.

60. LeMay-Norstad and Ramey-LeMay telephone conversations, July 29, 1950, LeMay diary.

ness over Washington's unwillingness to approve his Inchon counteroffensive.<sup>61</sup>

Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson readily approved the chiefs' proposal for the deployment, and he may have told the president about it even before Truman boarded the *Williamsburg* for a weekend cruise.<sup>62</sup> When the yacht returned on Sunday afternoon, July 30, Johnson met the president at the Navy Yard pier and made what must have been a potent argument for resorting to nuclear arms.<sup>63</sup> Although he had publicly denied three days earlier that he was considering using the atomic bomb in Korea, Truman readily approved transfer of its nonnuclear components to military custody for deployment to Guam.<sup>64</sup>

Why did he do so? What did he expect to achieve through this action? In the absence of detailed records of this decision, answers to those questions must remain speculative. Truman may simply have seen the deployment as a contingent response to the North Korean offensive, launched that very day, which sought to force American troops out of Korea.<sup>65</sup> He may have regarded it as an expression of resolve that, if known to Beijing, would deter the Chinese in Korea and the Taiwan Strait. Almost certainly, that was how Dean Acheson regarded the deployment. One of his China experts had previously suggested that "a calculated indiscretion"<sup>66</sup> by the American ambassador in New Delhi about the dire consequences of Chinese military action would be passed on to Beijing.<sup>67</sup> Acheson had used that channel to emphasize Washington's hope that the PRC would stay out of the fighting. But now he reverted to the mode of communication used three weeks earlier and in 1948: Within hours after Acheson was informed of the proposed deployment, a *New York Times* reporter knew about it. The next day's newspaper printed

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61. *Ibid.*, July 30, 1950; James, *MacArthur*, Vol. 3, pp. 443–444; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 204–207.

62. Richard G. Hewlett and Francis Duncan, *A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1969), Vol. 2, pp. 524–525; Truman and Johnson schedules, July 29, 1950.

63. Johnson schedule, July 30, 1950.

64. *Truman Public Papers*, 1950, p. 562; Hewlett and Duncan, *History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission*, Vol. 2, p. 525.

65. *New York Times*, July 31, 1950.

66. John Paton Davies memorandum, "Calculated Indiscretion by Ambassador Henderson," Box 19, Office of Chinese Affairs papers, RG 59, NA.

67. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 488–489.

news of the impending movement of B-29s across the Pacific for all, including the enemy, to read.<sup>68</sup>

Truman may also have acted in anticipation of the need to demonstrate toughness to blunt Republican attacks on his Korean policies. The day after the president approved the deployment of nuclear bombers westward, the Chairman of the Republican National Committee criticized the administration's "fumbling, stumbling ineptness" in managing the war.<sup>69</sup> In what may have been an attempt to shut Republican mouths, Truman then sent Secretary Johnson and Chairman Bradley to testify before the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE), whose membership included Senators William F. Knowland and Bourke Hickenlooper, two of the most vociferous critics of administration East Asian policies.<sup>70</sup>

Did the second B-29 deployment achieve any of the goals Washington may have had in mind? The aircraft took no part in the bombing of North Korea, and they returned to the United States before Chinese forces began crossing the Yalu.<sup>71</sup> Despite the *New York Times* article about their dispatch and the newspaper accounts that speculated that nuclear weapons might be aboard one of the planes that crashed near San Francisco,<sup>72</sup> there can be no certainty that either Chinese or Soviet intelligence picked up the "resolve" implicit in their capabilities. Nor can it be argued that the deployment changed Moscow's and Beijing's intended courses of action. The PRC did not invade Taiwan but moved crack military units to the northeast where they began preparation for action in Korea in August.<sup>73</sup> Republican criticism of admin-

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68. Acheson schedule, July 31, 1950. The fact that Acheson, alone among those who knew of the proposed deployment, met with someone likely to have spoken directly to the press (i.e., State Department press spokesman Michael McDermott), suggests that he was probably responsible for the leak; *New York Times*, August 1, 1950.

69. *New York Times*, August 1, 1950.

70. Truman, Johnson, and Bradley schedules, August 1–2, 1950; White House telephone logs, August 1, 1950, Truman papers, HSTL; see *Congressional Record*, 81st Cong., 1st sess., pp. 9641, 9754–9755, 9910–9911, 10054, 10065–10066, 10174, 10926–10927, for details of Republican criticism. *Congressional Directory*, 81st Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1950), p. 219, indicates committee memberships.

71. Evidence on the return of nuclear-configured B-29s to continental United States in "History Strategic Air Command: July–December 1950," Volume 1, frame 482; and LeMay diary, September 13, November 8, 1950.

72. On August 3, 1950, one of the nuclear-configured B-29s crashed shortly after takeoff from Fairfield-Suisun (later renamed Travis) Air Force Base, killing the prospective commander of the nuclear strike force. The huge explosion that resulted was compared with a nuclear one, but none of the press photographs of the wreckage showed that all of the component parts except the fissionable core of an atomic weapon were aboard the aircraft. LeMay diary, August 3–6, 1950; *New York Times*, August 7, 1950.

73. Jonathan Pollack, "The Korean War and Sino-American Relations," unpublished paper



istration Korean policies proved neither as fierce nor as focused on conduct of the war as the White House feared.<sup>74</sup> But opposition restraint may have arisen as much from Republican fears of seeming to undercut American troops and their popular commander as from awareness of the president's dispatch of nuclear-configured bombers across the Pacific.

What, then, was the significance of this second attempt to use nuclear weapons in managing the Korean conflict? The decisions of late July 1950 demonstrated the strength of Washington's belief that such weapons, even if deployed without explicit statements of intent, could serve as deterrents. They also intensified the Truman administration's determination to be ready in the event that atomic arms might again be needed. Before the B-29s returned to their bases, State Department officials began to consider how best to help the Air Force select targets in the PRC.<sup>75</sup> Even more importantly, the president's senior advisers recognized that the highly personal, *ad hoc* style of decision-making that produced this second deployment of nuclear-configured bombers might not be adequate for the future. They proposed, and President Truman accepted, formation of a special NSC subcommittee on atomic matters to consider principles and procedures for future transfers of nuclear weapons to military custody.<sup>76</sup> If another crisis arose, the administration intended to be better prepared to consider whether or not atomic arms should be used to resolve it.

#### NEITHER DETERRENCE NOR COMPELLENCE

The next, more serious crisis hit Washington late in November 1950, when Chinese troops poured across the Yalu, halting the United Nations forces' conquest of North Korea. That disaster triggered talk of atomic bombs. President Truman told reporters that he would take "whatever steps are neces-

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prepared for conference of Chinese and American historians, Beijing, October 1986, pp. 6–10, uses interviews and recently published official Chinese military histories to reconstruct Beijing's decisions of late July and early August pointing toward intervention in Korea.

74. Ayers diary, August 3–4, 1950. My generalizations about the mildness and relative paucity of Republican attacks on the administration's Korean War policies are based upon the *Congressional Record* and *New York Times* for August 3–11 and 26–30, 1950, periods immediately following the decision to send B-29s across the Pacific, General MacArthur's visit to Taipei, and President Truman's insistence that the general withdraw planned remarks about China and Taiwan to the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

75. Clubb to Stuart, August 8, 1950, Box 18, Office of Chinese Affairs papers, RG 59, NA.

76. The membership of the NSC's special committee on atomic energy was to include the secretaries of state and defense and the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. Truman to Gordon A. Dean, August 15, 1950, NSC personnel file, PSF, Box 220, Truman papers.

sary" to deal with the situation and indicated that the use of nuclear weapons had "always been [under] active consideration." When he added that the military commander in the field would be "in charge of" their use, the president ignited a political and diplomatic crisis of the first order.<sup>77</sup> Despite White House "clarification" of Truman's remarks, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee announced that he was flying to Washington for talks with the president, presumably to get Truman's finger off the nuclear trigger.<sup>78</sup> Four days later, on December 4, Truman and his senior advisers reluctantly began a series of summit talks.<sup>79</sup> Amidst these dramatic developments, SAC Commander Curtis LeMay thought his nuclear bombers might be ordered westward once again at a moment's notice.<sup>80</sup> But those orders never came.

That they did not reflected restraint in Washington born of changes in military, psychological, and political circumstances since July 1950. The Pentagon did not propose repeating the B-29 deployments of the preceding summer for two reasons. First, experts' sense of how atomic weapons might be used tactically in Korea had narrowed in a most unpleasant manner. Before the Chinese intervention crisis broke, senior staff officers had stopped short of recommending that the joint chiefs seek approval to deploy atomic bombs across the Pacific.<sup>81</sup> Their reluctance then probably mirrored doubts about Beijing's intentions and uncertainty about the utility of air-burst weapons against small units of enemy forces. Once large numbers of Chinese troops were in Korea, however, the Joint Strategic Planning Committee con-

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77. *Truman Public Papers*, 1950, pp. 725–728.

78. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, both, December 1, 1950.

79. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, both, December 5, 1950; *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 1361–1374; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 618. Roger Dingman, "Truman, Attlee, and the Korean War Crisis," *International Studies* (London School of Economics: International Centre for Economics and Related Disciplines, 1982), Vol. 1, pp. 1–42; and Rosemary Foot, "Anglo-American Relations in the Korean Crisis: the British Effort to Avert an Expanded War, December 1950–January 1951," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter 1986), pp. 43–51, offer detailed discussions of the summit talks.

80. LeMay to Vandenberg, December 2, file B-8852/2 and LeMay memorandum for the record, December 6, 1950, file B-8706/1, Box B-196, LeMay papers. It should be noted that LeMay, in the first message, expressed opposition to actual use of nuclear weapons in Korea.

81. Major General Charles Bolte to Collins, November 16, 1950; Collins to JCS, November 20, 1950; Secretaries of Joint Staff to JCS, November 21, 1950; JCS 2173, Plans and Operations Division, Korea TS file, Box 34a, Section III, cases 41–60, RG 319, NA. The fact that the Joint Strategic Survey Committee recommended redeployment of nuclear-configured B-29s to the vicinity of Korea without preparing the usual draft letter from the Joint Chiefs to the secretary of defense and without advising the chiefs to seek approval for "certain preparatory measures" for such a deployment hints at lingering doubts or dissent about this recommendation among Committee members.

cluded that defense, rather than deterrence or compellence, was the only logical reason for using nuclear arms there.<sup>82</sup> Thus the JCS recommended that British Prime Minister Attlee be told that the United States had “no intention” of using nuclear weapons in Korea unless they should be needed to protect evacuation of UN forces or to prevent a “major military disaster.”<sup>83</sup>

Secondly, the chiefs were not certain that the situation in Korea was so desperate as to make their only options nuclear. Spurred, perhaps, by Chief of Naval Operations Forrest Sherman’s doubts about the accuracy of General MacArthur’s reports, they decided to send General Collins, previously a skeptic about tactical use of nuclear weapons, and Air Force Intelligence Chief General Charles Cabell, a vigorous advocate of their use in war against the Soviet Union, to Tokyo.<sup>84</sup> They found the UN Commander guardedly optimistic. While he had previously discussed nuclear targeting in China with his staff, he now felt that the ground situation in Korea was stabilizing, and advised postponing any nuclear decisions.<sup>85</sup> Reassured, General Collins announced publicly that he saw no need to use atomic bombs in Korea.<sup>86</sup>

The soldiers’ caution was matched by restraint at the State Department. In mid-November, second-level officials there had considered but rejected using nuclear weapons in Korea. They argued with cool logic that the probable costs of doing so—measured in terms of shattered UN unity, decreased respect in Asia, and possible war with China—far outweighed any possible military gains.<sup>87</sup> The psychology of the situation early in December reinforced the strength of that argument for Secretary of State Dean Acheson. He feared for reason on all sides at this point. Truman had spoken imprudently about using nuclear weapons. Prime Minister Attlee had rashly invited himself to

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82. Bolte to Collins, December 3, 1950, G-3 AWPB/71684, comments on JCS 2173/2, Operations Division, Hot Files, tab 67, Box 11, RG 319, NA.

83. Bradley to Secretary of Defense, with enclosures, December 4, 1950, JCS 2173/3, Plans and Operations Division, Korea TS file, Box 34A, Section III, cases 41–60, RG 319, NA.

84. Joy to Sherman, 010702Z, December 1, 1950, Navy Top Secret files, reel 50; *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, p. 1278. Collins’ views on possible responses to the Chinese intervention were also strongly colored by his low estimate of Korea’s strategic value. See *ibid.*, p. 1279; *New York Times*, December 4, 1950.

85. Lieutenant General George E. Stratemeyer diary, December 1 and 7, 1950, George E. Stratemeyer papers, Simpson Historical Research Center (SHC), Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. This first-hand account casts doubt on Dean Acheson’s later claim that General MacArthur, according to Collins’ first report, thought atomic weapons might have to be used in North Korea unless there was a ceasefire or a new policy authorizing air attacks on and naval blockade of the PRC. See Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 616.

86. *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, December 6, 1950; *Washington Post*, December 6, 1950.

87. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 1098–1100.

Washington. Acheson's own political enemies were sharpening their knives.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, he had wildly overestimated the rationality of the Chinese leaders in assuming that they would accept Washington's protestations of innocent intent during the UN drive toward the Yalu.<sup>89</sup> If Beijing had misread his calculus of deterrence then, could he be certain now that the Chinese would respond rationally to any intimation of intent to resort to nuclear arms? The secretary of state thought not. It was definitely a time to keep his powder dry.<sup>90</sup>

President Truman was drawn to that conclusion for the same reasons that his diplomatic and military advisers were. But domestic political conditions quite different from those of the preceding July also counseled nuclear inaction during the first weeks of December 1950. Then, nuclear action had offered at least some prospect of strengthening his leadership. Now, having apparently erred in his November 30 remarks about possible use of atomic weapons, the president could best demonstrate leadership by resisting forces pulling him in opposite directions. Administration representatives succeeded in silencing those who spoke of atomic war on Capitol Hill.<sup>91</sup> The president also knew that he must resist pressures from "the Limeys" to share command and control over both Korean operations and any possible use of nuclear weapons.<sup>92</sup> Self-control and inaction became, in short, the preferred ways of demonstrating and defending presidential leadership.

Thus Truman and his most senior advisers never seriously considered using nuclear weapons during the first grim weeks of December 1950. This third crisis, nevertheless, helped crystallize Washington's thoughts about their utility in two important respects. First, by narrowing the prospect for tactical use of the weapons to covering the retreat of UN forces from Korea, this episode reduced the bomb's attractiveness to military professionals. Late in January 1951, General MacArthur refused even to consider a proposal for forward deployment of nuclear weapons for that purpose.<sup>93</sup> Second, the

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88. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, both, December 5, 1950; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 627.

89. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 1142, 1158; Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, pp. 248–250.

90. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 1323–1332.

91. Dingman, "Truman, Attlee, and the Korean War Crisis," pp. 51–52, details the administration's efforts to prevail over congressional foes at this point.

92. George Elsey minutes and memoranda, n.d. (but internal evidence clearly indicates that it was written during the December 1950 Truman-Attlee summit), Box 164, PSF, Truman papers, HSTL; *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 1431–1432.

93. CGEUSAK (Commanding General Eighth U.S. Army, Korea, Ridgway) to CINCFE, January

events of December 1950 reinforced senior civilian officials' distaste for atomic threats, without destroying their openness to other methods of using nuclear weapons. When National Security Resources Board Chairman Stuart Symington insisted that the atomic bomb was America's "political ace," Truman let Dean Acheson retort that it was a "political liability" whose threatened use would "frighten our allies to death" without worrying the Soviets. But that exchange within the NSC did not preclude other, more subtle uses for atomic weapons. Speaking at the president's request, CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith told the NSC that nuclear superiority was a wasting asset best used before the Soviet stockpile grew to such a point that Moscow would be willing to risk atomic war.<sup>94</sup> That no one objected to that argument suggested that the Truman administration intended to keep nuclear weapons among its tools for conflict management.

*Deterrence Without Compellence, April–June 1951*

Early in April 1951, President Truman picked up his nuclear tools for a third and final time. He did so in the gravest circumstances. The Korean fighting seemed about to take a dangerous new turn. While UN troops were poised to cross the 38th Parallel in force, the Chinese appeared to be readying a massive ground offensive.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Washington had indications that Moscow had moved three divisions into Manchuria and had positioned other forces for an attack on Japan.<sup>96</sup>

The administration faced this situation divided within itself and at odds with its allies. The State and Defense Departments had barely agreed on a Jesuitical distinction between immediate military and long-term political objectives in Korea.<sup>97</sup> Although some diplomats doubted that the enemy could

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18, 1951; CINCFE to CGEUSAK, January 30, 1951; both, Korea special file, Box 20, Ridgway papers.

94. NSC meeting minutes, January 25, 1951, NSC file, PSF, Box 220, Truman papers, HSTL.

95. J.M. Elizalde report on Rusk briefing to Elpidio Quirino, February 18, 1951, Elizalde-Quirino special correspondence, Elpidio Quirino papers, Ayala Museum, Makati, Manila, Philippines; *New York Times*, March 30, 1951, and April 1, 1951.

96. Gordon A. Dean diary, April 5, 1951, AEC Secretariat papers, RG 126, Department of Energy Archives, Germantown, Maryland. This document is reprinted in Roger M. Anders, ed., *Forging the Atomic Shield* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 127.

97. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 189–194, 203–206, 233, and 285–286, details civil-military differences over defining the objective to be achieved in the Korean fighting. Also see Executive secretary, NSC, to NSC Senior Staff, "United States National Objectives and Policy in Asia," March 15, 1951, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), sec. 11, RG 218, NA.

be compelled to negotiate,<sup>98</sup> the Joint Chiefs and General MacArthur believed that maintaining a strong position in Korea and imposing direct military and economic pressures on China could lead to a negotiated end to the fighting.<sup>99</sup> Efforts to resolve these differences only made matters worse. While Washington struggled to draft an appropriate presidential statement calling for cease-fire talks, General MacArthur warned Beijing that the UN might abandon its “tolerant effort” to limit the fighting to Korea.<sup>100</sup> The general’s remarks infuriated the president’s senior civilian advisers. But noting the Joint Chiefs’ refusal to condemn what MacArthur had said and the popular appeal of his words, they advised President Truman simply to issue what the press subsequently termed a “mystifying clarification” of his policy.<sup>101</sup>

The mildness of his response to what appeared to be a challenge by General MacArthur proved doubly troublesome to the president. Britons began to fear that “the mad satrap” in Tokyo was about to drag them into “full-scale war.”<sup>102</sup> Protests in London spiraled: the Chiefs of Staff opposed any major advance beyond the 38th Parallel; the Cabinet decided to press for a new, more restrictive directive to MacArthur; and the House of Commons tabled a motion of no confidence in the general.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, President Truman appeared weak and indecisive at home. His popularity fell to a new low,<sup>104</sup> and pundit Walter Lippman termed his relations with Congress “a danger to national security.”<sup>105</sup> Even though the Senate approved his request to send additional divisions to Europe, it attached conditions widely regarded as infringements on his prerogatives as commander in chief.<sup>106</sup> Summing things up, the assistant secretary of state for public affairs concluded that the people lacked confidence in their leaders’ ability to end the Korean War.<sup>107</sup>

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98. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 249–251.

99. JCS 1776/199, 200, March 19 and 23, 1951, CCS 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), section 44, RG 218, NA.

100. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 254, 263–266.

101. Lovett-Acheson telephone conversation memorandum, March 24, 1951, Box 66, Acheson papers; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, pp. 668–669; *New York Times*, March 25, 1951.

102. Gladwyn Jebb to Foreign Office, No. 368, March 26, 1951, Foreign Office (FO) 371/92061/f1017/10; Jebb to Foreign Office, No. 400, April 6, 1951, FO 371/92061/f1017/11, Public Record Office (PRO), London.

103. Chuter Ede to Herbert Morrison, April 6, 1951, FO 371/92815/fk1096/41; Cabinet minute 23–51, April 2, 1951, CAB 128/19, PRO.

104. *Washington Post*, April 1, 1951; Truman’s popularity dropped from 36 percent to a mere 26 percent approval level between January and mid-March, 1951. See George H. Gallup, comp., *The Gallup Poll, 1935–1971*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 958, 970.

105. *Washington Post*, April 5, 1951.

106. *Ibid.*, April 6, 1951; *New York Times*, April 3, 1951.

107. Undersecretary’s meeting minutes, April 4, 1951, UM-N327, Records of the Executive Secretariat, RG 59, NA.

On April 4, the situation reached crisis proportions. UN troops plunged across the 38th Parallel,<sup>108</sup> but Washington sank into deeper discord. The JCS gave preliminary approval to a memorandum that opposed any ceasefire in Korea that would tie down American troops there; they also urged immediate preparation for air and naval action against China.<sup>109</sup> The Department of State remained silent, trapped between Dean Acheson's desire to talk tough to the Soviets and his fear that doing so would alarm allies and ruin chances for any peace talks that might be initiated in Moscow.<sup>110</sup> Policy Planning Staff (PPS) Director Nitze made matters still worse by telling the joint chiefs that a proposed Seventh Fleet sortie along the south China coast was too provocative.<sup>111</sup> His objections probably swept away the last of their doubts on the necessity of forceful, even unilateral, action to bring the Korean fighting to an end.<sup>112</sup>

While his advisers quarrelled, Truman tried to bolster his sagging leadership. In a defensive, almost paranoid gesture, he had recently ordered the Cabinet to mobilize to counteract what he regarded as an organized campaign to discredit the presidency.<sup>113</sup> Now, on April 4, 1951, he summoned three of the "Big Four" congressional leaders, hoping to get their help in alerting Capitol Hill and the public to the dangers confronting the nation.<sup>114</sup> Shortly after that meeting, House Speaker Sam Rayburn warned that the country was "in greater danger of an expanded war today than . . . at any time since . . . 1945."<sup>115</sup>

But those words had little effect. In Tokyo, MacArthur's headquarters denied the existence of a Soviet buildup and yet claimed that the general was authorized to retaliate against a Soviet attack.<sup>116</sup> In Washington, Republicans scoffed at Rayburn's warning. Minority Leader Joseph Martin of Massachusetts read in public a letter from General MacArthur. It implied that

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108. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, both, April 4, 1951.

109. Decision on JCS 1776/202, April 4, 1951, CCS 335.14 (6-6-42), sec. 7, RG 218, NA; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 470-471.

110. Undersecretary's meeting minutes, April 4, 1951, UM-N327, Records of the Executive Secretariat, RG 59, NA.

111. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 1616-1619.

112. JCS 1776/202, April 5, 1951, CCS 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), sec. 45, RG 218, NA; Dean diary, April 5, 1951, hints that the JCS had virtually finalized a decision to request transfer of atomic weapons to military custody by the evening of April 4. See Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield*, p. 134.

113. Cabinet meeting notes, April 2, 1951, Box 1, Connelly papers.

114. Truman schedule, April 4, 1951; *New York Times*, April 5, 1951.

115. *Congressional Record*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., p. 3311.

116. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, both, April 5, 1951.

Washington misunderstood the global strategic significance of the Korean conflict and proclaimed that there was “no substitute for victory” in the fighting.<sup>117</sup> Taking those words as an unmistakable challenge to his leadership, President Truman launched the train of events that would culminate in his relieving General MacArthur of command.<sup>118</sup>

But before that decision became final, the president decided to send B-29s carrying complete atomic weapons across the Pacific. That choice took shape on Friday, April 6, 1951. That morning General Bradley brought him the latest reports on the enemy buildup and the chiefs’ recommendation that General MacArthur be authorized to retaliate against air bases and aircraft in Manchuria and Shantung in the event of “a major attack” on UN forces originating outside the Korean peninsula.<sup>119</sup> The president then conferred with CIA Director Smith, perhaps to get confirmation of reported concentrations of men and aircraft, perhaps to consider whether pre-emptive rather than retaliatory action was required.<sup>120</sup> After meeting with the Cabinet, he spoke with his innermost circle of advisers on national security matters about relieving General MacArthur and perhaps about preventing enemy escalation of the Korean fighting as well.<sup>121</sup> By mid-afternoon, his mind made up, Truman telephoned AEC Chairman Dean and asked him to come to the White House immediately.<sup>122</sup>

The president painted an ominous picture when Dean entered the Oval Office. Enemy planes were parked wingtip to wingtip on Manchurian airfields; Soviet submarines were concentrated at Vladivostok; and a sizable Soviet force had moved south on Sakhalin. Moscow might be about to try a one-two knock-out blow, striking UN forces by air in Korea and cutting them off at sea from their Japanese bases. To check this threat, Truman had decided to send complete nuclear weapons and SAC bombers across the Pacific. The bombs were not to be frittered away indecisively on the Korean peninsula, and he was not giving the Air Force a green light to drop them. Saying he

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117. *Congressional Record*, 82d Cong., 2d sess., pp. 3373–3380; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 298–299.

118. White House telephone log, April 5, 1951; Bradley schedule, April 5, 1951; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 535–536.

119. Truman schedule, April 6, 1951; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, p. 309.

120. Truman schedule, April 6, 1951.

121. *Ibid.*; Cabinet meeting notes, April 6, 1951, Box 1, Connelly papers; Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 210–211.

122. White House telephone log, April 6, 1951, Truman papers, HSTL.



hoped the need to do so would never arise, Truman promised that he would consult the NSC's special committee on atomic energy before taking any such decision. That convinced Dean, who upon returning to his office immediately telephoned General Vandenberg about transferring nine complete atomic bombs to Air Force custody.<sup>123</sup>

But was the situation in and around Korea as desperate as the president implied? His senior military and diplomatic advisers thought so—for a moment. While the president spoke with Dean, they sought Britain's agreement for retaliatory bombing beyond Korea if UN forces were attacked from outside the peninsula.<sup>124</sup> The next day, April 7, the 99th Medium Bomb Wing was ordered to pick up atomic bombs for transshipment to Guam.<sup>125</sup>

But by that time, the sense of military and diplomatic urgency attending the president's order weakened. The task force was ordered to wait on Guam, rather than to proceed as originally planned to Okinawa for "possible action against retardation targets," that is, Soviet forces poised to strike Korea or Japan. While nuclear weapons would be prepositioned on Okinawa, the prospective strike force commander would remain at SAC headquarters near Omaha instead of going to Tokyo.<sup>126</sup> General Bradley also held up a directive to General MacArthur, just approved by President Truman and Secretary Acheson, that authorized retaliatory strikes against air attackers from outside the Korean peninsula.<sup>127</sup> In marked contrast to his behavior the preceding July, Dean Acheson did not immediately refute British challenges to Washington's assessment of the threat or press London to concur in proposed responses to it.<sup>128</sup>

123. Dean diary, April 6, 1951, reprinted in Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield*, p. 137. What the president said on this occasion was considerably more alarming than the flow of incoming intelligence reports suggested. General MacArthur's G-2 reports suggested that the enemy buildup of an "international volunteer force" and his massing of aircraft was ominous but not necessarily indicative of immediate intent to attack. See Far East Command (FECOM) G-2 intelligence reports 31263131, April 16, 1951, Box 388, Record Group 338, Modern Military Records Field Branch, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland. The daily NSC/CIA memoranda to the president for this period made no mention of an enemy buildup. See CIA daily intelligence summaries, April 16, 1951, intelligence files, PSF, Box 250, Truman Library papers.

124. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 307–309; Bradley schedule, April 6, 1951.

125. 9th Medium Bomb Wing, Travis Air Force Base, History, April 1–30, 1951, frame 1060, reel 2325, SHC; LeMay diary, April 7, 1951.

126. LeMay diary, April 7–8, 1951; LeMay to Vandenberg, April 8, 1951, B-10526-3, Box B-197, LeMay papers; LeMay to Vandenberg, April 8, 1951, B-10526/1, Box 22, Vandenberg papers.

127. Bradley schedule, April 8, 1951; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 485–486; Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 630–631.

128. Acheson schedules, April 7–15, 1951; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 316–319,

But the sense of domestic political danger that informed the president's decision did not dissipate. Sending the nuclear bombers and approving a directive that conditionally authorized their use were essential to winning the joint chiefs' support for his decision to relieve General MacArthur. The chiefs were at first loath to do so.<sup>129</sup> But by deploying nuclear weapons Truman made clear the distinction between his disapproval of MacArthur's public statements and his acceptance of the strategic concepts underlying them. The president also strengthened the argument for relieving MacArthur on grounds of "confidence"; if nuclear operations were pending, it was absolutely essential that Washington have the utmost trust in its field commander. General Bradley used that argument with his colleagues, and they concluded, late Sunday afternoon April 8, that they must support the president's decision to bring MacArthur home.<sup>130</sup>

At this point, Truman may not have intended to make more explicit political use of the decision to deploy nuclear bombers abroad. But circumstances beyond his control all but forced him to do so. The president tried, but failed, to persuade AEC Chairman Dean to keep secret the transfer of nuclear weapons to military custody. When Dean reminded him that the JCAE had to be informed, Truman persuaded him to let Senator Brien McMahon of Connecticut, author of the legislation requiring such disclosure and a more politically potent spokesman than Dean, do so.<sup>131</sup> McMahon, in turn, tried unsuccessfully to limit knowledge of the atomic deployment to the most senior members of the JCAE. But its ranking Republicans insisted that the full committee be told of the president's decision.<sup>132</sup> Thus by Tuesday morning, April 10, eighteen legislators, including some of the sharpest critics of administration East Asian policies, knew that Truman was sending nuclear weapons abroad for the first time since 1945.<sup>133</sup>

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327–334, chronicle consultations with representatives of other nations with forces in Korea. These conversations revealed allies' reservations but did not prompt immediate State Department efforts to overcome them.

129. Bradley schedules, April 5–8, 1951; "Events in Connection with Change of Command in Far East," April 24, 1951, CCS 013.36 (4-20-51), RG 218, NA.

130. *Ibid.*; Bradley and Blair, *A General's Life*, pp. 631–635.

131. Truman schedule, April 9, 1951; Dean diary, April 9, 1951, reprinted in Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield*, pp. 137–139.

132. Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield*, pp. 139–140; Truman to McMahon, April 10, 1951, chronological name file, PSF, Truman papers, HSTL.

133. *Congressional Directory*, 82d Congress, 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1951), p. 220.

The next evening, they and the nation heard Truman deliver a speech carefully crafted to defend his relief of General MacArthur and his management of the Korean conflict. The president attacked his unruly subordinate, insisting that it would be “wrong, tragically wrong” for the United States to widen the war. Then he warned Moscow and Beijing that they would be “foolhardy” to escalate the fighting in Korea. The communists, he insisted, must “choose and bear the responsibility” for what might occur if they altered the rules of engagement by launching air attacks against UN forces.<sup>134</sup> That veiled threat, which made no mention of the nuclear-armed B-29s just ordered to cross the Pacific, was meant to convey a message of resolution, tempered by reasoned restraint, to all who heard him.

In the highly charged atmosphere following General MacArthur’s relief, such carefully balanced phrases proved inadequate for managing conflict at home and abroad. Eight days after Mr. Truman spoke, General MacArthur electrified Congress and the nation with an emotional speech in which he claimed that the joint chiefs concurred in his belief that expansion and escalation could bring victory in Korea.<sup>135</sup> Two weeks later, the general became the star witness in a protracted Senate inquiry into his dismissal and the policies that led to it.<sup>136</sup> In Korea, the Chinese, undeterred by anything the president had said or done, launched their largest ground offensive to date.<sup>137</sup>

Realizing that more must be done to deter and restrain its enemies, the administration made subtle use of atomic weapons in three ways over the next ninety days. First, the Pentagon managed the nuclear deployment so as to suggest that it might become something far more serious than a training exercise or deterrent feint. Late in April, following the renewed enemy ground offensive in Korea, Truman approved a second movement westward of nuclear-configured aircraft.<sup>138</sup> SAC sent a command and control team to Tokyo; its commander remained there to coordinate operational plans for possible atomic strikes.<sup>139</sup> Washington also sent to General Ridgway, Mac-

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134. *New York Times*, April 12, 1951; *Truman Public Papers*, 1951, pp. 223–227.

135. *New York Times*, April 20, 1951; James, *MacArthur*, Vol. 3, pp. 612–617.

136. *New York Times*, May 4–6, 1951; James, *MacArthur*, Vol. 3, pp. 621–633.

137. *New York Times*, May 16, 1951; Pollack, “The Korean War and Sino-American Relations,” p. 36; Bradley and Blair, *A General’s Life*, pp. 640–641. Blair, *The Forgotten War*, pp. 822–855, 874–893, provides the most recent, detailed account of these offensives.

138. LeMay diary, April 28–29, 1951; 9th Medium Bomb Wing, Travis Air Force Base, History, April 1951, frame 1061, reel 2325, SHC.

139. Thomas S. Power to LeMay, 020755Z, May 2, 1951, item B-10856/2; LeMay to Major General Thomas D. White, May 7, 1951, item B-10934/4; both, Box B-197, LeMay papers.

Arthur's successor, a directive that gave him qualified authority to launch atomic strikes in retaliation for a major air attack originating from beyond the Korean peninsula.<sup>140</sup> While the nuclear weapons remained on Guam, the bombers logged training flight time to prepare for using them.<sup>141</sup> Early in June, in a departure from previous practice that the enemy might interpret as a prelude to expanded fighting, reconnaissance aircraft overflew airfields in Manchuria and Shantung to obtain target data.<sup>142</sup>

Second, Washington sent a secret envoy to Hong Kong with what could be interpreted as a nuclear message for Beijing. Although earlier pourparlers had proven fruitless, PPS member Charles Burton Marshall's mission was to contact persons capable of getting that message to PRC leaders.<sup>143</sup> On the eve of his departure, he met with Dean Acheson. Although he was not informed of the nuclear deployment,<sup>144</sup> it appears that Marshall was instructed in the secretary of state's method of warning an adversary without overtly threatening him. What he told putative messengers to Beijing bore ominous hints of American nuclear power. Marshall warned the PRC not to misread MacArthur's relief and the administration's rejection of his call for expanded fighting as signs of weakness or timidity. There were limits to American patience and restraint, and Chinese leaders should be aware of Washington's ability to set their nation's development back for decades.<sup>145</sup> Those words were strong enough to raise doubts in Chinese minds about

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140. Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 488–489; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea*, pp. 386–387, 394–398.

141. Precisely what the nuclear-configured bombers sent to Guam did during the early part of their deployment remains somewhat unclear because the 9th Aviation Squadron History for May 1951 is presently unavailable. However, the absence of any indications of combat-related activity in the LeMay diary and correspondence or in the diaries of officers at Far East Air Force Headquarters who worked with the SAC Liaison Officer, together with the routine character of reports in the June 1951 squadron history, suggests that training operations may have been all that occurred. See 9th Aviation Squadron History, June 1951, frame 1471, reel 2325, SAC Histories, SHC.

142. Colonel Winton R. Close to Major General T.S. Power, June 6, 19, 1951, items B-11651, B-11843, Box B-197; CGFEAF (Commanding General, Far East Air Force) Tokyo to HQUSAF (Headquarters, U.S. Air Force), 080810Z, June 8, 1951, item B-11501, Box B-198, LeMay papers.

143. This mission was preceded by months of pourparlers between University of Washington Professor George A. Taylor and a former Chinese employee of the U.S. Army who had remained in the People's Republic after 1949. Taylor, who engaged in intelligence activities in China before and during World War II, had served as a consultant to the CIA. His unofficial status made him an ideal go-between at this point in the war. These contacts are detailed in *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 1476–1503, 1519–1521, 1530–1535, 1542–1548, 1550–1552, 1557–1562, 1583–1584, 1588–1589. Interview with George A. Taylor, Seattle, Washington, April 14, 1984.

144. Interview with Charles Burton Marshall, January 29, 1983.

145. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 1658–1653.

American nuclear intentions, yet they by no means constituted an overt atomic threat.

Third, the administration when dealing with domestic foes gave hints of its willingness to use nuclear weapons. By the time the Senate investigation got under way early in May 1951, the State Department, which had incorporated ideas strikingly similar to MacArthur's into revisions for the basic NSC East Asian policy paper, sought ways of expressing them without seeming to have stolen them from the general.<sup>146</sup> One way of doing so—and of crushing MacArthur politically—was to express determination to retaliate if the enemy widened the war. Administration spokesmen did so repeatedly in their testimony, Secretary of Defense Marshall no less than eleven times.<sup>147</sup> But his words carried a special meaning for the chairman and four other members of the investigating committee who also sat on the JCAE.<sup>148</sup> Knowing that President Truman had sent atomic bombs and bombers to the Western Pacific, could they doubt the administration's determination, or its insistence that the issue was MacArthur's behavior rather than the administration's conduct of the war?

What effect did this third Truman nuclear feint have upon his enemies and on his subsequent conduct of the war? Its impact upon foreign foes remains unclear. While the threat of air attacks from outside Korea never became reality, that threat may itself have been nothing more than a deterrent gesture. Despite the fact that Marshall's ominous words reached Beijing, it is not clear that PRC leaders also knew of the deployment of the nuclear-armed B-29s to East Asia.<sup>149</sup> It seems much more likely that the failure of the

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146. Minutes of Undersecretary's Advisory Committee, May 1, 1951, Korea Project Files, Box 28, RG 59, NA. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 6, *East Asia and the Pacific*, pp. 33–63, reprints NSC 48/5 in its final form.

147. U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services and Committee on Foreign Relations, 82d Cong., 1st sess., "Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from His Assignments in That Area," (Original) Report of Proceedings, microfilm edition, reel 1, pp. 808, 848, RG 146, NA; *ibid.*, reel 2, pp. 908, 1007, 1017, 1081–1082, 1091, 1272, 1300–1303, 1650, 1752 (hereafter cited as "MacArthur Hearings," with appropriate reel and page data).

148. *Congressional Directory*, 82d Cong., 1st sess., pp. 195–196, 220.

149. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, p. 1697, reveals C.B. Marshall's belief that his "message" got through to Chinese leaders. No evidence is currently available that might indicate whether signals intelligence could have provided Beijing with a clue as to the presence of nuclear-armed B-29s on Guam. It is possible that PRC leaders read American RB-45 reconnaissance overflights of Manchuria early in June 1951, which met with Chinese attacks, as evidence of American intent to expand and possibly escalate the fighting. CGFEAF to HQUSAF, 080810Z, June 8, 1951, item B-11501, Box B-198, LeMay papers, provides detail on this incident.

two major Chinese ground offensives launched after the bombers moved westward prompted Beijing's shift from an offensive to a defensive strategy in Korea.<sup>150</sup>

So, too, the nuclear deployment had at best an indeterminate effect on the president's domestic political enemies. Senate Republicans did not probe weaknesses in the administration's conduct of the war as vigorously or thoroughly as they might have. But their reluctance to do so did not derive exclusively from their knowledge of the nuclear movement. Some Republicans were loath to tie their political fates to that of General MacArthur.<sup>151</sup> Others were reluctant to weaken the bipartisan anti-communist consensus during a war.<sup>152</sup> Truman's opponents may also have been simply outmaneuvered by Senator Richard Russell, the crafty chairman of the investigating committee. His insistence on limited questioning on a rotating basis inhibited pursuit of any argument to its logical conclusion.<sup>153</sup>

The impact of this third episode of atomic diplomacy on the Truman administration's thinking about how best to use nuclear weapons is, however, much clearer. Rather than making senior officials eager to employ them, it reinforced their reluctance to do so. President Truman never again sent nuclear-armed bombers abroad. Nor did he use his power to do so to gain political advantage at home; he apparently saw his actions in the spring of 1951 as one-time measures justified only by the gravity of the situation. The Truman administration also stopped short of concluding that the nuclear deployment had compelled its foreign foes to negotiate an armistice in Korea. The B-29s and their nuclear cargoes returned home late in June 1951, just before the Soviet UN delegate delivered a speech that opened the door to armistice negotiations.<sup>154</sup> When they heard it, President Truman and his senior advisers reacted with surprise, rather than confidence that the nuclear deployment had forced the enemy to the negotiation table.<sup>155</sup>

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150. Bradley and Blair, *A General's Life*, pp. 641–642; Pollack, "The Korean War and Sino-American Relations," p. 38.

151. *Washington Post*, April 17, 1951; *New York Times*, April 20, 1951, and May 1, 1951.

152. Senator H. Alexander Smith diary, April 18, May 9, 17, June 1, 15, 1951, in H. Alexander Smith papers, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey; Thomas E. Dewey to Annie L.T. Dewey, April 11, 1951, Thomas E. Dewey papers, University of Rochester Library, Rochester, New York; Blair, *Forgotten War*, p. 812.

153. MacArthur Hearings, reel 1, pp. 10, 61.

154. 9th Aviation Squadron History, June 1951, frames 1471, 1478, reel 2325, Strategic Air Command History, SHC; *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 546–547; *New York Times*, June 24, 1951.

155. *FRUS*, 1951, Vol. 7, pp. 547–554; Ferrell, *Off the Record*, p. 214.

But this final episode of Truman's atomic diplomacy does appear to have strengthened the administration's belief in the persuasive power of nuclear weapons. They could be used to convince enemies to respect and allies to support an armistice in Korea. When truce talks showed signs of success, Washington tried to commit its allies to the so-called Greater Sanctions Statement, an agreement which threatened the enemy with war beyond Korea if he violated truce terms.<sup>156</sup> Implying that retaliation might be nuclear, Dean Acheson at that time argued that atomic weapons had been useful tools in prodding Beijing and Pyongyang into armistice talks.<sup>157</sup> Such a posture suggested that the Truman administration continued to believe that nuclear superiority, when used with subtlety and restraint, could help manage the Korean War to an acceptable conclusion.

*From Deterrence to Compellence? January–July 1953*

In January 1953, a new administration, bringing a desire and an intent but not the design to end the Korean War, came to power in Washington. For its first six months, the Eisenhower administration searched for a strategy to end the fighting. Despite retrospective claims to the contrary,<sup>158</sup> coercive atomic diplomacy was not a component of that strategy. Instead, the new administration acted even more cautiously than had its predecessor in using nuclear weapons to help bring the Korean War to an end.

The new Republican leaders proceeded slowly and circumspectly for at least three reasons. First, they faced the same constraints—qualified nuclear superiority, growing Soviet retaliatory capability, and a lack of forward-deployed atomic arms—that limited their predecessors. Second, neither Dwight Eisenhower nor his secretary of state-designate, John Foster Dulles,

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156. FRUS, 1951, Vol. 7, *Korea and China*, pp. 1156–1157, 1191, 1238–1239, 1249–1250, 1256, 1261–1262, 1350–1351, 1397, 1453.

157. *Ibid.*, pp. 897–898. Acheson, as always, veiled the reference to atomic diplomacy in telling British Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden that “it was possible to reach the conclusion” that Moscow had called for truce negotiations because Soviet leaders “foresaw” that otherwise the Korean fighting “might easily spread and endanger” their position.

158. Sherman Adams, *Firsthand Report* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 48–49; Adams claimed that “atomic missiles” were moved to Okinawa in the spring of 1953; he stated that Dulles “deliberately planted” a nuclear message for Beijing in New Delhi, and recalled Eisenhower’s later saying that an “atomic threat” had brought peace in 1953. The president implied that a hint of intent “to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons” produced agreement at the Panmunjom truce negotiations. See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), p. 181.

had honed their general ideas about nuclear weapons into a practical plan for ending the war. Their words and deeds during the 1952 campaign and in the weeks between election and inauguration were deliberately opaque and imprecise. Eisenhower went to Korea, as he had promised, but he studiously avoided discussing Op-Plan 8-52, which called for the use of nuclear weapons in and beyond Korea in conjunction with an advance to the narrow waist of the peninsula, with UN Commander Mark W. Clark.<sup>159</sup> The president-elect and Dulles met with General MacArthur, but neither would endorse the deposed general's proposal to use atomic bombs to isolate enemy forces already on the peninsula in the event Moscow refused neutralization for a united Korea.<sup>160</sup>

Third, caution and circumspection made good political sense at home and abroad. Domestically, they precluded a split within the Republican Party between those who thought along MacArthurian lines and the more knowledgeable and conservative legislators who feared that using atomic weapons in Korea might reduce the American nuclear stockpile to the point of weakening global deterrence.<sup>161</sup> Internationally, circumspect actions and imprecise words kept adversaries and allies uncertain of the new administration's intentions and fostered an impression of toughness which Dulles thought potentially useful in negotiations.<sup>162</sup>

But once in office, the new leaders had to think, speak, and act in more concrete terms. From the second week of February through the end of May 1953, they used the NSC as a forum in which to consider alternative ways to end the Korean fighting. Some analysts have interpreted their discussions, which touched on options ranging up to military use of atomic weapons in and beyond the peninsula, as a prologue to attempted nuclear compellence. They link the NSC's approval of contingency plans for the use of nuclear arms to John Foster Dulles's "signaling" that intention to Beijing by way of

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159. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Vol. 1, p. 569; Vol. 2, pp. 30–31. Op-Plan 8-52 was prepared by General Mark Clark as CINCFE in response to JCS inquiries about possible courses of action in the event truce negotiations failed. Its origins are detailed in Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 930–934, 936.

160. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Vol. 2, pp. 34–35.

161. *New York Times*, January 8, 1953. The man who worried about reducing the stockpile was New York Republican Representative W. Sterling Cole, chairman-to-be of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy.

162. Memorandum of Dulles remarks, December 11, 1952, USS *Helena* folder, subject files; Memorandum of Dulles–Selwyn Lloyd conversation, December 26, 1962, classified materials folder, subject files, Box 8, John Foster Dulles papers, Eisenhower Library.



New Delhi. If the negotiators at Panmunjom had not quickly reached a settlement acceptable to Washington, these observers have suggested, limited war in Korea might well have become nuclear.<sup>163</sup>

Close analysis and comparison of the Eisenhower administration's behavior in the spring of 1953 with the Truman administration's actions two years earlier, however, suggest more modest conclusions about the NSC discussions in particular and about the role of atomic diplomacy in ending the war in general. The NSC deliberations proved more discursive than decisive. They took place in relatively permissive circumstances rather than under the crisis conditions that beset the Truman administration. The enemy, rather than threatening escalation, showed signs of interest in accommodation. Late in December 1952, Moscow hinted that Stalin might welcome summit talks.<sup>164</sup> The dictator's death early in March 1953 revived hopes for relaxation of Soviet-American tensions and an end to the Korean fighting.<sup>165</sup> On March 30, Beijing, by proclaiming qualified acceptance of the principle of voluntary repatriation of prisoners of war, opened the door for removal of the key obstacle to a negotiated settlement in Korea.<sup>166</sup>

At home, the new administration enjoyed far more political leeway than had its predecessor in dealing with the war. While the hero-president could not mistake the public's desire to end the stalemate in Korea, he was not subjected to immediate and direct pressures to do so. Two out of three Americans were ready to take "strong steps" to stop the fighting. Polls suggested that a large majority was willing to do so unilaterally, if necessary, and less than half thought that great risks would be encountered in the attempt.<sup>167</sup> But popular desires did not focus on a particular solution to the Korea problem. Capitol Hill, moreover, remained strangely silent about how best to end the war, in part because of the "honeymoon" normally granted new presidents, in part because Dulles assiduously cultivated congressional

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163. Keefer, "President Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War," pp. 279–280; and Callum MacDonald, *Korea: The War Before Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 177–179. Keefer and MacDonald make the link between the NSC decision and the Dulles remarks most explicit. See Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, Vol. 2, p. 98; and Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean War* (New York: Knopf, 1986), pp. 319–320; Ambrose and Kaufman take the view that no nuclear threat was made because Beijing already knew of America's atomic strength and the possibility that Eisenhower might use it.

164. *New York Times*, December 26, 1952.

165. Kaufman, *Korean War*, p. 306.

166. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, p. 824.

167. Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 220.

support, and in part, perhaps, because senior Republicans knew about the Truman exercises in atomic diplomacy.<sup>168</sup>

The bureaucratic political atmosphere early in 1953 was also much less conducive to decision and action than it had been two years earlier. Then the JCS had agreed that a dangerous situation demanded deploying atomic bombs to the Western Pacific and giving the UN Commander contingent authority to use them. Now, they rejected General Clark's request for a repeat performance. In mid-February, just when the NSC began discussing possible uses for nuclear weapons in Korea, they refused to redeploy atomic bombs and bombers across the Pacific, declined to give Clark the authority he sought, and concealed from him the fact that no complete nuclear weapons were in close physical proximity to his command.<sup>169</sup>

Behind those actions lay sharp disagreement within the Pentagon over how atomic arms might be used in Korea. Unable to agree on Op-Plan 8-52, the chiefs referred it to the Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC) for study on a routine rather than an urgent basis. The report produced a month later bared sharp inter-service differences. While air force and navy staffers thought nuclear bombing might constitute sufficient pressure to force China into accepting reasonable armistice terms, army chief of staff Collins disagreed. In his view, only concerted ground, sea, and air operations promised success in an advance northward to the narrow waist of the peninsula or to the Yalu.<sup>170</sup> Division of this sort boded ill for speedy progress in NSC discussions of war termination strategies.

Those rambling conversations were more tentative and educational than decisive for several reasons. They did not always include all of those whose assent to any use of atomic weapons was essential. Only twice during the seven NSC meetings between February and May of 1953 when nuclear possibilities were discussed were President Eisenhower, his secretaries of state and defense, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff present.<sup>171</sup> On

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168. Generalizations as to the mood of Congress and the public are based on the *New York Times* for January and February 1953.

169. CINCFE to JCS, 090933Z, February 9, 1953, sec. 122; CSUSA (Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, Collins) to CINCFE, DA 93097, February 10, 1953; JCS 931744 to CINCFE, 182204Z, February 18, 1953; SM 314-53 Lalor to Generals White and Lemnitzer, and JCS 93174A to CINCFE, 182236Z, February 18, 1953, CCS 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), Sec. 123, RG 218, NA.

170. Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, Vol. 3, pp. 932-933, 949.

171. *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 769, 825, 892-893, 945, 975, 1013, 1064.

May 20, when some analysts argued that a contingent decision to resort to nuclear arms was taken, John Foster Dulles was in Saudi Arabia.<sup>172</sup>

The Pentagon and the State Department, each for reasons of its own, were content with discussion rather than decision in the NSC. JCS Chairman Bradley did not press the JSSC to complete quickly the options paper that eventually went to the NSC; and on April 8, he suggested that the “best solution for Korea” was “to drag our feet.”<sup>173</sup> Bradley and the Joint Chiefs did so, in part, because of their continuing disagreements over how to use the atomic bomb and because they felt a political decision should precede rather than follow discussion of its military employment in Korea.<sup>174</sup> General Bradley also delayed NSC consideration of the nuclear options paper until General Collins, the staunchest opponent of a resort to atomic arms, returned from a Latin American tour.<sup>175</sup> When the document finally went to the secretary of defense for NSC consideration, Collins had loaded it with so many preconditions as virtually to preclude tactical use of nuclear weapons in Korea.<sup>176</sup>

Dulles held back in deference to the trepidation of the allies, especially the British, about any escalation of the fighting. On March 5, he told British Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden that it might be necessary to expand the war in order to end it. If pressuring China “at the center” failed to keep Beijing from intensifying the fighting in Indochina and Korea, then operations to the Korean waist which might “as an incident” involve air action could not be ruled out. But Dulles left London without getting Eden’s clear assent to that proposition.<sup>177</sup> Early in April, he spoke of obtaining a Korean settlement “adroitly” so as not to offend allies.<sup>178</sup> By the eve of his departure for the Middle East and South Asia early in May, Dulles knew that London was retreating from its earlier support for the so-called Greater Sanctions Statement.<sup>179</sup>

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172. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 9, *The Near East and Middle East*, p. 113.

173. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, p. 893.

174. *Ibid.*, pp. 976–977.

175. Collins schedules, May 4–16, 19, 1953; JCS meeting agendas, May 16, 19, 1953, CCS 335.14 (6-6-42), Sec. 117, RG 218, NA.

176. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 1059–1064.

177. *Ibid.*, pp. 805–806.

178. *Ibid.*, p. 895.

179. *Ibid.*, pp. 968–969.

With allies in doubt and the Pentagon divided, President Eisenhower behaved more like an owl than a hawk throughout the NSC discussions. He was not inclined to take military risks at the outset of his administration. Contemplating cuts in SAC's strength and budget, he apparently did not know, as late as the end of March 1953, the exact size of his nuclear stockpile.<sup>180</sup> He had commissioned but not yet seen studies on how best to deal with the Soviet Union.<sup>181</sup> Thus when presented on April 28 with a preliminary study of contingency plans for transferring nuclear weapons to military custody, Eisenhower concluded that there was no immediate reason to do so and sent the issue back to the NSC special subcommittee on atomic energy for further study.<sup>182</sup>

The president also defined narrowly the kind of bluff he might employ in Korea. On April 28 he rejected a suggestion to fake a manpower buildup there. Eisenhower, who knew something about strategic deception from planning the Normandy invasion nearly ten years earlier, then shunted aside the idea of putting nuclear weapons in military hands so as "to create an impression of strength and determination." Doing so would put too much pressure on the enemy. Instead, one could impress the foe with American resolve and avoid "unduly alarming our allies or our own people" by acting so that "a foreign G-2," piecing together bits of information about the transfer, would conclude that "he had pierced the screen" of Washington's intentions. It could be announced that the president had authorized transfer of nuclear weapons to military custody, and "indications" that some atomic arms were actually being placed under Pentagon control would then be given. "With a little handling," the president concluded, "the desired effect could certainly be secured."<sup>183</sup>

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180. Office of the Historian, Strategic Air Command, Status of Strategic Air Command, January 1–June 30, 1953, frames 0476–0478, 0483, 0505, reel K4263, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base; Cutler to Dean, March 28, 1953, atomic energy sub-series, NSC series, OSANSA files, Box 1, Eisenhower papers.

181. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 2, *National Security Affairs*, p. 323.

182. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, p. 947, omits this crucial portion of the minutes, the full text of which appears in Memorandum of Discussion at the 141st Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, April 28, 1953 (text as partially declassified under Freedom of Information Act Request NLE 85-269), NSC summaries of discussion folder, Ann Whitman File, NSC series, Box 4, Eisenhower papers.

183. *Ibid.* The suggestion for faking a manpower buildup came from Undersecretary of Defense Roger Kyes.

Although this discussion ended with a decision to have the NSC special committee on atomic energy make recommendations “promptly” on the matter, Dulles, one of its key members, left for the Middle East and South Asia less than two weeks later without any action having been taken.<sup>184</sup> In his absence, President Eisenhower first steered the full NSC away from a firm decision on contingency plans for tactical use of nuclear weapons, then weakened the force of their approval. On May 13 he got Acting Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith to admit that expanding the Korean fighting would temporarily disrupt NATO. Then he remarked that Washington “desperately” needed its European allies. He also spurned Vice President Richard Nixon’s suggestion that drastic action might be preferable now rather than later, when Soviet nuclear strength would have grown.<sup>185</sup>

When the NSC on May 20, 1953, gave final consideration to nuclear contingency plans for Korea, Eisenhower qualified its approval. Informed that the plans involved nuclear strikes against China, he voiced the same concern that had stayed President Truman’s hand: the possibility of retaliatory Soviet attacks on Japan. While admitting the importance of speed and surprise in launching a nuclear attack, he also hinted at his openness to a summit meeting with the new Soviet leaders. Most importantly, Eisenhower brought the discussion to a conclusion in a way that suggested that he did *not* believe the time had come to begin assembling forces for implementation of the contingency plan. He simply acknowledged that “if circumstances arose which would force the United States to an expanded effort in Korea,” then the joint chiefs’ plan, which required a year of preparations, was “most likely to achieve the objective we sought.”<sup>186</sup>

That “decision,” stripped of implementing actions, was not the prologue to an attempt at coercive atomic diplomacy. Instead, Washington engaged in milder, nonnuclear persuasive diplomacy. State Department officials hoped to nudge Moscow into persuading Beijing and Pyongyang to accept a compromise on the prisoner of war issue. Their plan preserved the principle of no forced repatriation and established procedures for third-party custody, interrogation, and eventual release of prisoners. Ambassador Charles Bohlen was to emphasize the scheme’s importance and imply its finality when

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184. *Ibid.*; *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 9, *The Near and Middle East*, p. 1.

185. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 1015–1016.

186. *Ibid.*, pp. 1065–1068.

informing the Soviets of its terms. But he was “to all possible [extent] to avoid ultimatum connotations.” After discussing the scheme with the joint chiefs on May 18, the State Department forwarded its outlines to Dulles in New Delhi.<sup>187</sup>

It was in connection with this scheme rather than in response to the NSC nuclear contingency “decision” of May 20 that John Foster Dulles spoke to Jawaharlal Nehru. The Indian prime minister opened their May 21 conversation by appealing for an armistice lest the Korean fighting expand. When meeting Dulles again on May 22, Nehru twice expressed great concern about the possibility of intensified hostilities. On both occasions, however, Dulles responded mildly. He first indicated that if the Panmunjom talks failed, Washington “would probably make a stronger rather than a lesser military exertion [which] . . . might well extend the area of conflict.” But he quickly added that “only crazy people” could think that America wanted to prolong a struggle which had proven enormously costly in lives and dollars. The second day Dulles simply “made no comment and allowed the topic to drop.”<sup>188</sup>

Like Charles Burton Marshall two years earlier, Dulles expected his words to be passed on to Chinese leaders.<sup>189</sup> But his message was less threatening than Marshall’s and constituted an appeal for support of the new American negotiating position on the prisoner-of-war issue. Indeed, Dulles’s primary purpose in meeting Nehru was to persuade the Indians to drop their prisoner-of-war formula and support the American proposal.<sup>190</sup> If Nehru did so, China would be under all the more pressure to compromise on the last obstacle to peace in Korea.

Dulles’s mild behavior on this occasion was paralleled by Ambassador Bohlen’s manner in approaching the Soviets a few days later. Having previously ruled out making any explicit reference to what might happen if communist negotiators rejected the new American truce proposal, Bohlen got State Department approval to go no further than saying that failure of the armistice talks would “create a situation which the U.S. Government is

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187. *Ibid.*, pp. 1038–1056, 1111.

188. *Ibid.*, pp. 1051, 1068–1069.

189. *Ibid.*, p. 1068. Ambassador Douglas MacArthur III, who accompanied Dulles on his journey, recalled that the idea of getting the “message” to Beijing was of particular importance to Dulles. Interview with Douglas MacArthur III, June 30, 1987.

190. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 1069, 1071. It should be noted that the initial suggestion for Dulles to visit New Delhi was made in December 1952. See *ibid.*, Vol. 9, *The Near and Middle East*, p. 1.

seeking most earnestly to avoid."<sup>191</sup> When he met Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov on May 28, Bohlen added "most sincerely" to the approved phrase, to enhance the chances for acceptance of the latest American proposal.<sup>192</sup> His words in Moscow, like Dulles's in New Delhi, represented an appeal for cooperation more than a threat of atomic action in the absence of agreement.

This tactful approach may have had some effect, for a few days later the communist delegation at Panmunjom indicated willingness to accept some, and bargain over other, terms of the new American prisoner-of-war proposal.<sup>193</sup> But the Eisenhower administration did not, then or later, apply nuclear pressure to speed the armistice talks to conclusion.

The president did, on the eve of the truce agreement, authorize transfer of completed nuclear weapons to military custody for overseas deployment.<sup>194</sup> His decision, however, was not part of an atomic diplomacy scheme. It appears to have been shaped more by long-term strategic, rather than immediate Korean War-related, concerns. Early in June, 1953, the joint chiefs, through the secretary of defense, sought approval for deployment of "nuclear components" overseas "at the earliest possible date." They did not seek authorization to use the weapons, which, three weeks earlier, had been the very first item on their list of implementing actions for the contingency plans approved by the NSC. They tailored their proposal to meet State Department objections and AEC concerns about dispersal of the atomic stockpile.<sup>195</sup> The NSC's atomic energy subcommittee further modified the plan by reducing the number of weapons involved and postponing their deployment until surveillance of proposed sites could be completed.<sup>196</sup>

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191. *Ibid.*, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 1095–1096, 1103–1104.

192. *Ibid.*, pp. 1108–1111.

193. *Ibid.*, pp. 1133–1134, 1137–1138.

194. Loper memorandum.

195. Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, memorandum for the President, April 16, 1953, atomic energy sub-series, OSANSA files, NSC series, Box 1; Secretary of Defense to Executive Secretary, National Security Council, June 8, 1953, *ibid.*; declassified document 3 of NLE 85-535, Eisenhower papers. Handwritten figures on the latter document put the total number of American atomic weapons at 1600. While marked "OK-Guam," the document makes no reference to Okinawa as a possible forward deployment site. The weapons were to be stored afloat or ashore at sites where the decision to place them there rested solely with the United States. The number of nuclear "hardware" kits to go overseas would presumably be somewhere between the 176 already abroad and the 386 authorized for deployment, which would put slightly less than a quarter of the American atomic stockpile outside the continental United States.

196. Executive Secretary, NSC, to the President, June 19, 1953, atomic energy miscellaneous file, OSANSA files, NSC series, Box 1, Eisenhower papers.

President Eisenhower saw the proposal for the first time on June 20, just when Syngman Rhee's release of prisoners of war threatened to destroy the final compromises on a truce being negotiated at Panmunjom. But neither Eisenhower nor any of his senior advisers thought the situation desperate enough to warrant hints of atomic diplomacy.<sup>197</sup> Thus while Eisenhower approved the proposed nuclear deployment, it was not immediately implemented.<sup>198</sup>

More than a month later, on the eve of the signature of the Korean armistice agreement, the Pentagon renewed its request for custody of complete nuclear bombs.<sup>199</sup> That request came to the president less than twenty-four hours after the NSC had considered how best to respond to a buildup of enemy air forces and last-minute Chinese ground offensives. But neither President Eisenhower nor Secretary of State Dulles appears to have regarded forward deployment of nuclear weapons as the appropriate reaction to those developments. The president, worried lest the armistice prove "a dangerous hoax," called for immediate dispatch of Marine reinforcements to Japan and Korea. Dulles downplayed the significance of the enemy air buildup, arguing that because the communists really wanted an armistice, their actions should be considered tactical moves rather than indications of treacherous political intent.<sup>200</sup>

Thus even though the Eisenhower administration approved the overseas deployment of nuclear weapons shortly before the Korean truce, its decision was not part of an atomic diplomacy scheme. Washington did not drop the hints of action that the president believed would lead the enemy to conclude that it had "pierced the screen" of American intentions.<sup>201</sup> Republican leaders did not go as far as their Democratic predecessors in using the movement of

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197. Loper memorandum; *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, p. 1200–1205.

198. Loper memorandum; nearly a month later, testimony given before the JCAE suggested that neither overseas deployment site selection nor respective armed service apportionment of atomic bombs had been decided upon. See JCAE meeting minutes, July 15, 1953, Box 15, JCAE papers, RG 128, NA.

199. Loper memorandum.

200. *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. 15, *Korea*, pp. 1421–1422.

201. NLE 85-269, partially declassified Memorandum of Minutes of 141st Meeting of National Security Council on April 28, 1953, NSC Summaries of Discussion folder, Ann Whitman File, NSC series, Box 4, Eisenhower papers. No indication of any SAC aircraft movements at this time is to be found in Historian, Strategic Air Command, Status of Strategic Air Command, July–December 1953, Volume 1, reel K4265, Office of Air Force History, Bolling Air Force Base. Similarly, no mention of the deployment of bombers or ships capable of delivering nuclear weapons is to be found in the *New York Times*, at, or immediately following, the time of this decision.



nuclear weapons to try to modify Chinese, Soviet, or North Korean behavior. Thus the Eisenhower administration achieved an armistice in Korea without employing atomic arms for coercive diplomatic purposes.

### *Conclusion*

The Korean War ended, then, as it had begun, with not a single American nuclear weapon deployed within usable distance of the fighting. That state of affairs encapsulated one important truth, namely, that Washington never came close to tactical use of the atomic bomb in Korea. But it obscured another equally vital one: American statesmen repeatedly attempted to use nuclear weapons as tools with which to manage the politics and diplomacy of the war. As this article has demonstrated, they gave different answers to the question of how and when to do so.

The record of their actions reveals a story different from that traditionally told. Nuclear weapons were used politically and diplomatically by a Democratic administration long before Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles came to power. With the full record in view, it is possible to sketch a typology of their usage, ranging from verbal mention of nuclear potential only; through deployment of nuclear-configured bombers and nonnuclear weapons components and indirect disclosure of their movement; to deployment of bombers and bombs along with fuller, but still indirect, revelation of their departure from the United States. When considered in those terms, the relative seriousness and significance of the atomic diplomacy of the two administrations become much clearer. There can be no doubt that the real crisis, which triggered the most serious nuclear action, occurred in the spring of 1951. It is equally clear that Washington's actions two years later were the mildest and least threatening of the lot.

The full story also reveals the interplay of forces that conditioned the use by American statesmen of nuclear weapons as tools for conflict management. Some of those pressures prodded them into action. They were provoked by a sense of external danger: by fear of Soviet or Chinese action and British disaffection from their policies in July 1950; by enemy escalation of the fighting in the spring of 1951; and by frustration over enemy obduracy in negotiations two years later. They were also goaded toward action by pressures at home. The sense that the bomb *ought* to be useful, the fear that the public might precipitously demand its employment, and the surmise that it might help manage relations with Congress, all figured in the decisions

analyzed in this essay. Analogical reasoning also made American statesmen willing to practice atomic diplomacy. Both theoretically and experientially, the movement of B-29s during the Berlin Blockade provided them with guidance on how to threaten but not provoke; how to reveal but not flaunt nuclear strength before the enemy; and how to inform yet not alarm allies.

But those same forces, in different combination and under different circumstances, also constrained the atomic diplomacy of both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Both administrations feared provoking the enemy. While each respected, in differing measure, the concerns of allies, those constraints did not present absolute obstacles to action. In July 1950, Dean Acheson found ways to soften and even defy British concerns; six months later, London's desire for American restraint was only one, and not necessarily the determining, factor that ruled out nuclear deployments of any kind. John Foster Dulles's behavior in the spring of 1953 suggested that, despite his tough retrospective rhetoric, he understood the importance of preserving allies' support in the Korean struggle.

Domestic political considerations also constrained American statesmen in the use of nuclear weapons as tools for managing the Korean conflict. If, at times, they were concerned about public demands for atomic action, far more often their choices were shaped by professional and bureaucratic imperatives in the Pentagon. In July 1950, General Vandenberg's desire for action was crucial in bringing about B-29 deployments; six months later, his caution, General LeMay's desire to protect the integrity of the SAC striking force, and General Collins' skepticism about the utility of bombing alone, all worked against nuclear action of any kind. It also seems clear that military professionals' understanding of the psychology of nuclear deterrence and their reluctance to weaken it through precipitate action grew during the Korean conflict. Finally, Pentagon parochialism, as manifested in the service chiefs' quarrels over shares of weapons to be deployed overseas from December 1950 through July 1953, also constrained civilian leaders' ability to use nuclear weapons in managing the Korean conflict.

The results of Washington's resort to atomic diplomacy during the war were mixed. While deployments might have strengthened deterrence, they never supported coercive diplomacy. If employed indirectly and in combination with other words and deeds indicative of strength, they might demonstrate resolve. But that sort of action, as Presidents Truman and Eisenhower both discovered, was extremely difficult to manage. Nuclear weapons were cumbersome figuratively as well as literally. No president could decide

alone on their employment. It took crises, as President Truman learned, to cut through the obstacles to nuclear action of any kind. In the absence of that sense of urgency, his successor found that months were needed to build an imperfect consensus on possible uses for atomic arms in Korea.

Nuclear weapons were also slippery tools of statecraft. President Truman only with difficulty controlled the diplomatic consequences of his hint of a resort to nuclear weapons late in 1950. He could not determine as certainly as he wished the domestic politics of disclosure surrounding the April 1951 movement of atomic bombs and bombers across the Pacific. While both administrations resorted to indirect channels to communicate America's atomic strength to China, neither could be absolutely certain that the intended message had been communicated clearly to or had produced the desired effect upon the unwanted Chinese enemy in Korea.

What, then, was the significance of Washington's attempts to use nuclear weapons as tools to manage that conflict? Surely the lesson to be drawn is not the one that John Foster Dulles later touted. Nuclear weapons were not easily usable tools of statecraft that produced predictable results. One could not move from deterrence to compellence through their possession. They were more subtle instruments, whose use demanded a refined understanding of the practice of deterrence. The Korean War might be seen as an experience that schooled American statesmen in that practice. It offered not the determinative, but the first, of a series of lessons that would eventually produce full understanding of the paradox of nuclear weapons: They confer upon those who possess them more responsibility for restraint than disposable power.