

The Uses of Threat Assessment in Historical Perspective: Perception, Misperception and Political Will

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Introduction

This paper examines threat assessment in three distinct historical periods: the early Cold War (1950-1963), when Americans struggled to craft a sustainable national security strategy for countering the Soviet threat; the mid- to late-1970s, when advocates of détente and arms control competed with those convinced of the need to confront the Soviets; and the late 1990s, when the nation was still coming to grips with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, and was not yet prepared to deal with new ones in the form of international terrorism.

This paper seeks to capture the intellectual climate of the time in which each of the reports were issued. The three distinct narratives describe the historical context within which the threat assessments were written, the key players involved, and the type and depth of reception that the several reports received among policymakers and the national media, with the ultimate goal of understanding how the various reports were used by policymakers, but also why particular assessments were favored over other competing interpretations of threat. The work concludes by identifying common themes that emerge from each of the three narratives, in an attempt to draw broader lessons for threat assessments going forward.

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Section I - Threat Assessment in the Early Cold War, 1950-1963¹

Threat assessment in the immediate aftermath of World War II was shaped by a lingering war-weariness, and a desire on the part of the American public to return to peacetime pursuits. While cognizant of the potential national security threat posed by the Soviet Union, President Harry S Truman had drastically cut military expenditures in the late 1940s on the assumption that the United States' preponderant military and economic power would serve as a deterrent to Soviet adventurism.² As the Cold War deepened, and as U.S. national security commitments around the globe began to strain military resources, Truman resisted efforts to increase the size of the defense budget. Louis Johnson, who had replaced James Forrestal as secretary of defense in March 1949, joined Truman in battling the military chiefs who warned of overextension during the late 1940s, and who were seeking greater funding for their respective services. Other fiscal conservatives, including Edwin Nourse, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers (CEA), supported Truman's efforts.³

Keyserling, Nitze and NSC 68

There were competing voices, however. Several of Truman's more liberal economic advisers, including CEA members John Clark and Leon Keyserling, adopted a dramatically different view of the wisdom of restraining military spending during sluggish economic times.⁴ Events in the late summer and early fall of 1949 forced to the surface the debate over the proper relationship between the domestic economy and the nation's security, and placed new pressures on President Truman to increase the defense budget.

Following Nourse's departure in October 1949, Keyserling's ascension to the position of chairman of the CEA represented an important turning point in Truman's national security policies because of Keyserling's advocacy for a vast increase in defense expenditures. His efforts were facilitated by the findings of NSC 68, a comprehensive assessment of the global communist threat that also mapped out a new strategy for fighting -- and winning -- the Cold War. Keyserling may not have had a direct hand in composing NSC 68, but his views permeated all levels of government in late 1949 and early 1950.

His ideological ally in this endeavor was Paul Nitze, the principal drafter of NSC 68. Having served on the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey during World War II, Nitze was one of the first Americans to witness first hand the destruction and devastation wrought by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Nitze observed that the effects of the bombings were horrific, but not paralyzing. He concluded that nuclear

¹ The material in this section draws heavily from Christopher A. Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).

² See, for example, Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); and Benjamin Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949-51* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

³ Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 309.

⁴ Aaron Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 107.

weapons alone would not determine winners and losers in future conflicts. The key to survival was preparedness on a broad front, preparedness that would require the dedication of considerably more resources to national defense.

Nitze's appointment to head the Policy Planning Staff coincided with a new push to remake U.S. national security strategy. At the behest of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and with the tacit support of Keyserling and others, Nitze and his staff prepared a document that painted a stark picture of the communist threat, and called for a dramatic increase in defense spending to safeguard U.S. security.⁵

At the crux of the issue was the uncompromising hostility of the Soviet regime, whose very existence posed a constant and tangible threat to U.S. security. "The Soviet Union . . . is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own," NSC 68 explained, "and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world."⁶ Any form of compromise was ultimately dangerous because Soviet leaders would forever seek ways to undermine U.S. security. Meanwhile, the very nature of our political system left the United States vulnerable in negotiations "with dictatorial governments acting in secrecy and with speed" while our own "democratic process necessarily operates in the open and at a deliberate tempo."⁷

In a text replete with frightening visions of the imminent demise of our free society, a few passages stand out:

The risks we face are of a new order of magnitude, commensurate with the total struggle in which we are engaged. For a free society there is never total victory, since freedom and democracy are never wholly attained, are always in the process of being attained. But defeat at the hands of the totalitarian is total defeat. These risks crowd in on us . . . so as to give us no choice, ultimately, between meeting them effectively or being overcome by them.⁸

The impending acquisition by the Soviet Union of a deliverable atomic capability [anticipated by the year 1954] would pose an intolerable threat to U.S. security because "it is hardly conceivable that, if war comes, the Soviet leaders would refrain from the use of atomic weapons."⁹ Given the proximity of the "year of maximum danger" – 1954 – NSC 68 asserted that immediate and urgent action was needed by the U.S. government to achieve "rapid progress toward the attainment of the United States political, economic, and military objectives" in order to forestall the Soviet Union's dangerous and destabilizing rise.¹⁰

Truman Hesitates

Truman reacted skeptically when NSC 68 was presented to him in April 1950. The original document advanced no precise cost estimates, but they were expected to be

⁵ NSC 68 was declassified in full in 1972, and the text is now widely available. The single best source, which includes the document in its entirety, as well as introductory essays by leading diplomatic historians, and commentary by Nitze, Kennan, Acheson and others, is Ernest R. May, ed. *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

“high.” Truman appointed a commission to review the document and to estimate the cost to implement its recommendations. At the time, according to Truman biographer Alonzo Hamby, Truman told Budget Director Fred Lawton that “fiscal conservatism [was] his overriding priority.”¹¹

The shock of the Korean War, combined with the ascendance of communism in China and recent advances in the Soviet nuclear weapons program, ultimately convinced Truman of the need to increase dramatically the defense budget. When Truman approved NSC 68 as official policy in September 1950, it represented a marked shift in the government’s attitude toward defense spending and economic growth.¹² The authors of NSC 68 acknowledged that the concerted military build up would be costly and might require sacrifices in the form of either higher taxes or reductions in other forms of government spending. The document stressed, however, that “[b]udgetary considerations will need to be subordinated to the stark fact that our very independence as a nation may be at stake.”¹³

Noting that the Soviet Union was dedicating nearly 14 percent of its available resources to defense, and another 25 percent to “investment” much of which was in “war-supporting industries,” NSC 68 maintained that the United States was limited more by “the decision on the proper allocation of resources” than by its ability to produce more military hardware.¹⁴

Truman’s effort to dramatically increase defense spending was aided by a diverse group of current and former government officials, including Tracey Voorhees, John McCloy, James Conant, and Robert Patterson, who organized in order to generate political support for a diversified conventional and nuclear capability as envisioned by NSC 68. The group, the Committee on the Present Danger, “took its name from Oliver Wendell Holmes’ injunction that no person had a right to yell ‘Fire!’ in a crowded room unless there was a clear and present danger.”¹⁵

Scholars have debated the relative long-term impact of NSC 68 on U.S. policy and strategy. According to Aaron Friedberg “NSC 68 was, in essence, a battering ram with which its authors hoped to shatter the existing budget ceiling.”¹⁶ As Paul Pierpaoli observes, where governments had once determined the aggregate budget and then adjusted programs to fit into that budget, “the opposite became the rule after 1950: policymakers determined national security requirements first and then adjusted aggregate

¹¹ Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 527-529; and David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 771-773.

¹² Nitze argues otherwise, saying that NSC 68 reaffirmed the policies of NSC 20/4 drafted in 1948 by George Kennan, see Paul H. Nitze, with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision – A Memoir* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 97.

¹³ May, *American Cold War Strategy*, 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45, 46.

¹⁵ Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 274-275. See also, Jerry W. Sandler, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 64-67; Strobe Talbott, *The Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 59; and David Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 121.

¹⁶ Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*, 107-8. See also Paul Y. Hammond, “NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament,” in Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder, eds., *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962); and Samuel F. Wells, Jr., “Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat,” *International Security*, IV (Fall, 1979), 116-138.

fiscal policy to meet security demands.”¹⁷ The budgetary estimate for the proposals within NSC 68 (which were given an added push following the outbreak of war in Korea) was for defense spending in excess of \$40 billion, an increase of nearly 300 percent.¹⁸

...and Hesitates Again

These numbers proved difficult to swallow for President Truman. In mid-July 1951 when the Bureau of the Budget projected a deficit of \$10 billion for FY 1951 and \$12 billion for FY 1952, Truman requested a reappraisal of NSC 68. The NSC issued Charles Bohlen’s study of the “Bases of Soviet Action” in the summer of 1952, and Truman approved the report as NSC 135/3 on September 25, 1952.¹⁹

Bohlen’s study chiefly took issue with NSC 68’s interpretation of the aggressive nature of Soviet foreign policy. Unlike Nitze, Bohlen believed that the Soviet leadership would not take actions that were likely to threaten the regime. He also dismissed Nitze’s notion of a year of maximum danger, believing instead that Soviet moves would be cautious, and confined largely to exploiting opportunities on the periphery, in areas of Western weakness. Given that Soviet aims were likely to be circumscribed, NSC 135/3 advised against an aggressive “rollback” strategy that might aggravate international tensions.²⁰ However, just as NSC 135/3 recommended a less aggressive strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, this study agreed that U.S. forces were badly overextended. Accordingly, the report called for a reappraisal of current spending programs to determine if scarce resources might be better allocated for the purposes of national defense.

A follow-on study called for by NSC 135/3 – later dubbed NSC 141 – concluded that, in spite of a reassessment of the Soviet threat, current spending programs were still inadequate. Approved on Truman’s last day in office, on January 19, 1953, NSC 141 differed with many of the specific conclusions and policies of previous reports, but it largely reaffirmed and extended the assumptions underlying NSC 68. Both NSC 135/3 and NSC 141 emphasized one clear point: military budget cuts were unwise and unwarranted. Both documents called for still more spending on a diversified defense establishment, although the latter made no specific cost estimates. Truman’s military budget for fiscal year 1953 dedicated nearly 14 per cent of Gross National Product (GNP) to defense, the highest of the post-World War II period. Truman’s final budget (for FY 1954) was submitted in January 1953 and projected total defense spending of \$45.5 billion, or just under 13 per cent of projected GNP.²¹

Truman appeared to adopt the softer language inherent in the latter reports when he eschewed talk of “rollback” in his farewell address. However, the general direction of

¹⁷ Paul G. Pierpaoli, Jr., *Truman and Korea: The Political Culture of the Early Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 8-10.

¹⁸ See, on the range of policy choices relative to NSC 68, Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 355-60; Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 120-23; and Ernest May, “NSC 68”, in May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, 15.

¹⁹ Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33-34; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 124-125.

U.S. military planning at the end of the Truman years suggested the need to prepare for a number of near-term contingencies in order to respond to Soviet threats around the globe.²² By his words and by his actions, Truman bequeathed to his successor a national security strategy based largely on the principles articulated in NSC 68, namely that “budgetary considerations [would] need to be subordinated” to meet the demands of national security.

The Roots of Eisenhower’s National Security Strategy

Eisenhower and his advisers did not agree. Whereas the authors of NSC 68 had argued that means could – and must – be expanded to fit the nation’s perceived security interests, Eisenhower believed that the nation’s economy could not sustain the level of expenditures envisioned by Truman’s NSC 68 and NSC 141; instead, he intended to establish a balance between military needs and the capabilities of the domestic economy.

These attitudes had been formed long before Eisenhower become president. In 1947, Eisenhower explained to his longtime friend and adviser, Walter Bedell (“Beetle”) Smith that there was “very obviously a definite limit to our resources.” Strategists, Eisenhower concluded, must recognize that “national security and national solvency are mutually dependent” – otherwise the U.S. economy could crumble under the “crushing weight of military power.”²³

Eisenhower repeated this theme time and time again. In testimony before Congress in 1951, Eisenhower had stressed that the United States must maintain its military strength in the face of competition from the Soviet Union, but he emphasized that this must be done within the reasonable constraints of the domestic economy. “[O]ur system,” Eisenhower said, “must remain solvent, as we attempt a solution of this great problem of security. Else we have lost the battle from within that we are trying to win from without.”²⁴ Eisenhower reiterated this philosophy in his State of the Union address in 1954: “Our problem,” he said, “is to achieve adequate military strength within the limits of enduring strain upon our economy. To amass military power without regard to our economic capacity would be to defend ourselves against one kind of disaster by inviting another.”²⁵

Eisenhower was convinced that the level of spending envisioned by NSC 68 and NSC 141 might fundamentally alter the relationship between the citizen and the state. He warned that the United States risked creating a garrison state if the burden of military spending exceeded a set amount because he envisioned national security to be a product of *both* military strength and economic strength, a function that he referred to as the

²² *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S Truman, 1952-53* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965), 1197-1202, cited in Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 492.

²³ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 44.

²⁴ From Congress, Senate, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Committee on Armed Services on S. Con. Res. 8, 82nd Cong., 1st Sess.* (Washington, 1951), 2, cited in Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 96.

²⁵ John W. Sloan, *Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 75. State of the Union speech reprinted from *New York Times*, 8 January 1954.

“Great Equation.”²⁶ “Spiritual force, multiplied by economic force, multiplied by military force is roughly equal to security,” he explained, “If one of these factors falls to zero, or near zero, the resulting product does likewise.”²⁷

Project Solarium

The belief that the nation’s means were finite shaped Eisenhower’s perception of interests, and threats. But it did not preclude a consideration of several options for safeguarding U.S. security. In the summer of 1953, Eisenhower directed his national security staff to undertake a unique project to test competing strategies for addressing the Soviet threat. Project Solarium, so named because it was first conceived in the White House solarium, involved teams of national security experts, each tasked with making a case for one of three distinct strategies.

A committee chaired by General James Doolittle was responsible for drafting detailed guidelines for each of the three teams. The members of each team were chosen according to guidelines established by Eisenhower’s national security adviser, Robert Cutler, CIA Director Allen Dulles, and Eisenhower confidante Walter Bedell (“Beetle”) Smith. Eisenhower himself had a crucial hand in several instances, for example, choosing General (then-Colonel) Andrew Goodpaster to serve on the task force advocating an aggressive rollback strategy. Eisenhower insisted that George Kennan chair the group responsible for articulating a classic containment (in other words, Kennan’s own) strategy. A third task force called for containing Soviet aggression through deterrence, but one, unlike Kennan-style containment, which would be exercised “less timidly and more unilaterally.” A crucial component of this more aggressive containment strategy would be the threat of general war to deter the Soviets.²⁸

Eisenhower’s national security strategy, ultimately delineated in NSC-162/2 and later dubbed the “New Look” by contemporary observers, was informed, if not shaped, by the Solarium Project. When Secretary of State John Foster Dulles declared in January 1954 that the United States would deter Soviet aggression by responding “at places and with means of its own choosing . . . [with] massive retaliatory power” the most memorable phrase from his speech became synonymous with public perceptions of Eisenhower’s overarching national security strategy.

There was more to the New Look, however, than simply massive retaliation. On some level, Eisenhower was sympathetic to Kennan-style containment. Kennan’s confidence in the long-term prospects for victory were analogous to Eisenhower’s desire that U.S. national security be planned for the long haul. But at the same time Eisenhower was anxious to regain the initiative in the Cold War. “No foreign policy really deserves

²⁶ On Eisenhower and the “garrison state,” a term coined by Yale sociologist Harold Lasswell, see Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*, 133. On the Great Equation, see Sloan, *Eisenhower and the Management of Prosperity*, 76-77; and Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 44, 47.

²⁷ Eisenhower to Lucius Du Bignon Clay, 9 February 1952, *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, ed. Louis Galambos, 13:963, cited in Richard H. Immerman, “Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist: An Agonizing Reappraisal,” *Diplomatic History* 14 (Summer 1990), 328.

²⁸ The single best source on the Solarium Project, and on the formulation of Eisenhower’s national security strategy more generally, is Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, especially 123-138. See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 145-146.

the name,” the president insisted in 1953, “if it is merely the reflex action from someone else’s initiative.”²⁹

Meanwhile, Eisenhower seems to have doubted the efficacy of nuclear weapons as a vehicle for advancing U.S. security interests. He once warned, for example, against seeing nuclear weapons as a “cheap way to solve things.”³⁰ We now know covert operations conducted far from public view were a key component of the Eisenhower administration’s foreign policies. But while Eisenhower may have voiced concerns about nuclear weapons privately, and while covert actions in Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia and elsewhere have attracted attention, and some measure of criticism, by historians, the public pronouncements of his administration implied an affinity for nuclear weapons that horrified many contemporary observers. For the next seven years, the debate would revolve around the wisdom or folly of the New Look’s apparent over-reliance on nuclear deterrence.

The New Look Under Assault – *Sputnik* and The Gaither Report

Critiques of the New Look generally failed to arouse popular sentiment during Eisenhower’s first term. Then in the latter half of 1957, men and women who had not previously questioned Eisenhower’s strategic judgment began to harbor doubts about the state of the nation’s defenses. This shift in attitudes was prompted by three successive revelations relating to the Cold War nuclear arms race, which raised the anxiety level for millions of Americans.

In August 1957, the Soviet Union successfully launched the world’s first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Then, on October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, the first man-made earth-orbiting satellite. One month later, on November 3, the Soviets launched *Sputnik II*, a satellite weighing more than 1,100 pounds, and carrying a living creature into space – a dog named Laika. American fears and doubts rose when the attempt to launch a much smaller U.S. satellite, *Vanguard*, crashed on the launch pad at Cape Canaveral, Florida on December 6. Casual observers in the United States, who had taken American technological leadership for granted, feared that the United States had fallen behind the Soviets in the space race.³¹

Perceptions of technological inferiority vis-à-vis the Soviets were only reinforced when the contents of a secret report detailing the anticipated shortcomings of the U.S. nuclear weapons program were leaked to the media in December 1957. While the *Sputnik* launches had attracted considerable attention among the general public, the findings of the Security Resources Panel generated anxiety about the state of the nation’s defenses among the policymaking elite.

²⁹ Eisenhower quoted in Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 146.

³⁰ Quoted in David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960,” in Steven E. Miller, ed., *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence: An International Security Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 137.

³¹ On the psychological and cultural impact of the *Sputnik* launches see Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge: Eisenhower’s Response to the Soviet Satellite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xiii-xiv, 43, 71, and *passim*; Rip Bulkeley, *The Sputniks Crisis and Early United States Space Policy: A Critique of the Hystorgraphy of Space* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3-8; and Walter A. MacDougall *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 142-151.

President Eisenhower had charged the panel, initially chaired by H. Rowan Gaither and since that time known as the Gaither Committee, with studying the nation's civil defense needs, but the committee members soon went beyond this narrow mission to consider all aspects of the nation's defenses. The panel's report was written by Paul Nitze, the principal author of NSC-68, and West Point professor and retired Army Colonel George Lincoln.³² The Gaither Report echoed the increasingly pessimistic attitude of the late 1950's. "We have found no evidence," the introduction stated, "to refute the conclusion that USSR intentions are expansionist." Consequently, the Gaither panelists warned of "an increasing threat which may become critical in 1959 or early 1960" and went on to highlight the widening disparity between the U.S. and Soviet weapons programs. The report concluded by advocating an acceleration of U.S. programs in order to close this gap at an estimated cost of an additional \$44 billion.³³

Given Nitze's central role in the drafting of both the Gaither Report and NSC 68, it is perhaps not surprising that much of the language in the Gaither Report was similar to that of the earlier document. What is striking, however, is that Nitze's views would be given so prominent a forum within Eisenhower's administration. Nitze seized this forum with relish, repeating almost verbatim many of the same arguments from NSC 68.³⁴ For example, the Gaither Report stressed that the next two years would be "critical," whereas NSC 68 foresaw a year of maximum danger on the near horizon that demanded immediate and urgent action. And, as in 1950, the Gaither panelists warned that failure to act "at once" to redress the deficiencies in the nation's security programs would be "unacceptable."³⁵

Further, the Gaither Report, like NSC 68 before it, argued that the U.S. economy could easily support and sustain considerably more defense spending. For example, the Gaither Report noted that current spending on all national security programs constituted less than 10 percent of the nation's total production, whereas 41 and 14 percent of GNP had been dedicated to defense programs in World War II and Korea, respectively. The total spending envisioned by the Report, the panelists explained, would be less than what was required during the Korean War and "[t]he demands of such a program . . . on the nation's economic resources would not pose significant problems." Rather, the "increased defense spending" was expected to have positive economic effects that would help to sustain production and employment during a moderate recession.³⁶

³² For a thorough analysis of the Gaither Committee see David L. Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1999). On George Lincoln's career and philosophy, see *ibid.*, 64-69. The first comprehensive account of the Gaither Report was Morton Halperin "The Gaither Committee and the Policy Process," *World Politics* 13:3 (April 1961): 360-384. See also Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 125-154; Herken, *Counsels of War*, 112-121; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 184-186; and Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 67-70.

³³ Quoted from *Deterrence and Survival in the Nuclear Age (The "Gaither Report" of 1957)* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976) (Hereafter cited as The "Gaither Report"), 12.

³⁴ David Callahan characterizes Nitze's good fortune at having been tapped to write the report as "a prayer answered." For the man who "had been an exiled prophet in the wilderness, decrying the strategic heresies of Eisenhower and Dulles," Callahan writes, Nitze now "had a pulpit...[a]nd from it he would denounce massive retaliation." Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 169. See also Talbott, *Master of the Game*, 67-69; and Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 166-169.

³⁵ May, *American Cold War Strategy*, 101.

³⁶ The "Gaither Report," 23.

Eisenhower disagreed. He did not share the committee's sense of alarm with respect to Soviet advances. He objected to the high costs of the Gaither Report's proposals. He did not believe, as the panelists had argued, that the economic effects of a dramatically expanded military and national security infrastructure would have no harmful effect on (and might even boost) the nation's economy.³⁷ Given these and other concerns, Eisenhower specifically directed that the report be kept secret. The contents, however, were widely leaked. By late December 1957 journalists were speaking openly of the "secret" NSC report.³⁸

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund Report – An Unclassified Gaither Report

Early the following year, in January 1958, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund published a series of reports that repeated and refined many of the criticisms of the Eisenhower administration's policies. Written under the direction of Henry Kissinger, the report on national security claimed that the United States was "rapidly losing its lead in the race of military technology" and urged immediate action to reverse the trends.³⁹ The Kissinger report hoped that the recent Soviet "advances in the field of earth satellites [would] serve to spark a deep review of the basic attitudes and policies affecting the security of our country and of the free world" and they viewed the United States's lag in missile development and space exploration as "a symptom and not a cause" of "national complacency over the past dozen years."⁴⁰

The report argued that the U.S. military establishment must be capable of deterring general war and also must be prepared to react to limited aggression, for example in the form of guerilla conflict. It also asserted, as had the Gaither Report, that more effective civil defense measures must be considered as part of the United States overall strategic posture. Other specific recommendations included modernization of aircraft procurement, acceleration of intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) and ICBM development and deployment, improved readiness for the Strategic Air Command (SAC), and expedited development and deployment of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The additional costs for such programs were estimated at approximately \$3 billion each year for the next several fiscal years.⁴¹

In a brief discussion of the burden that an expanded military program would impose upon the economy, the panelists asserted that current military expenditures could not meet the needs of even the current force levels, let alone the increased levels called for in their report. While they conceded that the price for ensuring the nation's survival

³⁷ Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War*, 129-130.

³⁸ Drew Pearson, "Gaither Report Release Sought," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 18 December 1957, D11; Arthur Krock, "In the Nation: A Clue to the Top Secret N.S.C. Report," *New York Times*, 20 December 1957, 26. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke complained bitterly of this security breach, see CNO to the JCS, memorandum, December 20, 1957, "Leak of Gaither Report to Press," JCS, 1810/70, *Declassified Documents Quarterly Catalog (DDQC)*, 1983/207; see also Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War*, 138-141.

³⁹ "International Security: The Military Aspect," published as Report 2 in The Rockefeller Panel, *Prospect for America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 93. On Kissinger's role, see Marvin Kalb, and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1974), 55-56.

⁴⁰ "International Security: The Military Aspect," Rockefeller Panel, *Prospect for America*, 93.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

would not be low, the panelists were “convinced . . . that the increases in defense expenditures [were] essential and fully justified.” “We can afford,” the authors concluded, “to survive.”⁴²

Desmond Ball observes that the Gaither and Rockefeller reports were “invariably mentioned together” during the defense debates of the late 1950s. “Their findings and recommendations were very similar,” Ball writes, “and there were half a dozen members common to both groups” including Colonel George Lincoln, James Fisk, and James Killian. Other prominent foreign policy experts, including Walt W. Rostow, Roger Hilsman, and Roswell A. Gilpatric, a principal author of the Rockefeller Report, advised Democratic politicians in the late 1950s. As such, Ball continues, “The Rockefeller Report was . . . often regarded as something like an unclassified version of the Gaither Report.”⁴³

Eisenhower may have objected to many of the findings of these two reports, but he did not simply dismiss the recommendations out of hand. In fact, during the late 1950’s, Eisenhower presided over a substantial expansion of the United States’ nuclear weapons programs. For example, in the two years *before Sputnik*, the nation’s nuclear stockpile had expanded dramatically, growing from 2,110 weapons in 1955 to 5,420 in 1957. Meanwhile, the destructive force of these weapons had expanded even faster – from a mere 154 MT in 1955 to over 16,000 MT in 1957.⁴⁴ In retrospect, the most striking thing about the dramatic growth in the size of the nuclear arsenal is that it occurred at a time when Eisenhower was increasingly convinced that the arsenal was already far larger than strategic requirements dictated.⁴⁵

There is no evidence, however, that the Gaither or Rockefeller Reports influenced Eisenhower’s behavior in the late 1950s. Much of the work to diversify and stabilize the security of the nuclear deterrent force had been prompted by the report of the Technological Capabilities Panel, headed by James R. Killian, which had been created by Eisenhower to study the challenge of confronting – and surviving – a surprise attack on the United States by the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Among its several recommendations, the Killian Report, issued in February 1955, called for accelerating ICBM programs, as well as the Polaris SLBM.⁴⁷ In the final years of his presidency, Eisenhower placed particular emphasis on accelerating these so-called second-generation, solid propellant, missiles which were more stable than the liquid-fueled Titan and Atlas rockets that were projected to form the foundation of the U.S. nuclear missile force in the late 1950s. Second-generation missiles were also less susceptible to a surprise attack than manned bombers. Collectively, improvements to the nuclear deterrent force initiated during Eisenhower’s tenure moved the United States considerably closer to its goal of developing a survivable

⁴² Ibid., 151-152.

⁴³ Desmond Ball, *Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missile Program of the Kennedy Administration* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 31.

⁴⁴ Peter Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 22.

⁴⁵ Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” 176, and passim; Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap*, 177.

⁴⁶ On the Killian Committee see, for example, Richard V. Damms, “James Killian, the Technological Capabilities Panel, and the Emergence of President Eisenhower’s ‘Scientific-Technological Elite,’” *Diplomatic History* 24:1 (Winter 2000), 57-78; and Snead, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War*, 35-39.

⁴⁷ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 248.

second-strike capability, even in the event of a massive surprise attack, and fundamentally changed the dynamics of the nuclear arms race.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, many of these efforts were not immediately apparent to Eisenhower's critics who focused on the highly visible signs of U.S. decline relative to the Soviet Union to argue that the threat to U.S. security had grown during Eisenhower's tenure in office.

Perspectives on the Threat Assessments in the 1950s

Believing in the hostility of the Soviet regime, and believing that, unchecked, the Soviets would extend their domination of Eastern Europe to other regions, policy makers, foreign policy experts, and military leaders differed over the proper means for mitigating the Soviet threat. If we look at threat assessment in the 1950s as an intellectual jousting match between the advocates of Kennan-style containment versus Nitze-style confrontation, Nitze's view often prevailed -- but not completely.

On the one hand, President Eisenhower was confident that intelligence estimates had accurately captured the true character of the Soviet missile program. On the other hand, the evidence remained too uncertain to convince the handful of skeptics who feared that the Soviets had been particularly adept at concealing their missiles from the prying eyes (and ears) of American intelligence.

But confusion over the interpretation of inconclusive intelligence data was only part of the problem. The national security debate framed by NSC 68, Solarium/New Look, and the Gaither/Rockefeller Reports also revolved around divergent attitudes toward defense spending, the perennial "how much is enough?" question. Truman was initially reluctant to embrace the enormous increases in defense spending called for in NSC 68; by 1952, he was generally committed to spending more money on *both* nuclear and conventional forces. Conversely, the keys to Eisenhower's ability to largely hold down defense expenditures were his faith in the principle of nuclear deterrence, his willingness to cut some areas of military spending particularly conventional forces, and his commitment to strategic planning for the "long haul." Believing that the nation's limited resources were best employed by private enterprises, Eisenhower argued that it was wise to control government spending in order to secure the nation's economic strength. This economic might, Eisenhower reasoned, was the true source of American power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower had tried to convince his countrymen that it was unwise to spend more money on defense when the nature of the threat was unclear. But he and other senior officials failed to redirect attention to the "deterrent" value of the nation's defenses, including the broad range of assets in the American arsenal, rather than to a presumed gap in the number of Soviet and American ICBMs. In the end, the president's harshest critics had the final word on the nature of the threat, and on the appropriate national security strategy for countering that threat.

Many scholars now praise Eisenhower for restraining military spending at a time when others were demanding that the United States spend much more on defense, even as

⁴⁸ Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap*, 121-22, 192; Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 248; Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge*, passim.; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 327-328.

some question the heavy emphasis placed on nuclear deterrence that contributed to the dramatic increase in the size and destructive capacity of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.⁴⁹

Contemporary critics of the New Look questioned the utility of nuclear deterrence, particularly in the era of nuclear plenty, when both the United States and the Soviet Union had acquired such a number of nuclear weapons that neither party could reasonably expect to achieve a strategic advantage. Strategists in the mid-1950s were particularly fearful that even the appearance of U.S. weakness might embolden the Soviets to become more aggressive. Eisenhower himself was not particularly sanguine about the “benefits” of nuclear weapons, but he believed that they were an effective deterrent to total war, and they allowed him to reduce the relative importance, and the associated costs, of conventional forces within the overall military mix.

In 1960, however, the nation chose another path. The United States, John F. Kennedy said, could not afford to gamble its survival on the assumption that excessive defense spending would do long-term damage to the U.S. economy. It was better, he said, to gamble with dollars than with lives, and to invest in both conventional weapons *and* advanced nuclear weapons. The voters agreed.

As president, John Kennedy implemented changes to the nation’s military that ultimately provided he and his successors with a greater range of options, options which were used to disastrous ends in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the mid- to late-1960s, and which did little to mitigate the Soviet threat that persisted well into the 1970s and beyond.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For a sobering assessment of the many risks associated with nuclear weapons, see Scott D. Sagan *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5; and Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 417-419.

Section II - Team B, the Committee on the Present Danger and the Collapse of Détente, 1975-1980

Background

The high point of optimism with respect to détente and arms control occurred in 1972, coinciding with the signing of the SALT and ABM agreements, and the opening to China. But within a few short years, the public had soured on the concept, and by 1980 they had elected a person who pledged to confront the Soviet Union and achieve peace through strength.⁵¹

There was not, as John Newhouse had predicted, any single “convulsion in the public mood” that signaled popular disenchantment with arms control. Rather, the popular mood reflected “ambiguity and confusion” toward the entire question of the Cold War arms race.⁵² The public had not entirely bought into the concept of détente, and was therefore receptive to other arguments.

Raymond Garthoff attributes much of the public dissatisfaction on both governments who “oversold détente to their constituencies and interpreted it in terms that placed the burden of fulfillment of high expectations on the other side.”⁵³

The shifting attitudes toward détente differed, however, between the two sides. “[I]n the Soviet Union détente itself remained in favor,” Garthoff explains, “while the United States was blamed for the decline of détente. In the United States . . . the very idea of détente was attacked and eventually discredited, with blame placed not only on the Soviet Union but also on the U.S. leaders who had supported it.”⁵⁴

The process had begun almost immediately after the signing of the first SALT Treaty. In 1973, Congress denied funding for a more accurate missile guidance system, in part on the grounds that such a system might interfere with arms control efforts. The following year, Congress approved the same request.⁵⁵

The Nixon White House, and later President Gerald Ford, also signaled a shifting attitude toward détente. In November 1975, Ford dismissed Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger on the grounds that Schlesinger had not been sufficiently supportive of détente. Yet, within a few months, Ford himself directed the White House and his campaign to cease using the suddenly controversial term.⁵⁶

Paul Nitze traced the shift to 1974, and a series of articles by Albert Wohlstetter of the Rand Corporation that accused U.S. intelligence agencies with consistently underestimating the Soviet threat.⁵⁷ Wohlstetter had achieved some notoriety during the missile gap controversy with his warning of the “delicate balance of terror.” Unchastened when the missile gap proved illusory, he resurfaced in 1967, again criticizing the CIA for underestimating the danger posed by the Soviet Union to the United States. “In Wohlstetter’s telling, the Soviet Union had been engaged in an arms race throughout the

⁵¹ See Anne Cahn, *Killing Détente: The Right Attacks the CIA*, (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1998).

⁵² Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 273.

⁵³ Raymond Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), 325.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵⁵ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 273; see also, Cahn, *Killing Détente*, 11-15.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Herken, *Counsels of War*, 273; Cahn, *Killing Détente*, 46-48.

⁵⁷ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 351; see also Cahn, *Killing Détente*.

1960s, while the United States was essentially standing still.”⁵⁸ Nitze himself continued in this vein in January 1976, with an article in *Foreign Affairs* arguing that the Soviet Union would continue to seek “nuclear superiority . . . designed to produce a theoretical war-winning capability.”⁵⁹

Nitze also took issue with the logic of mutual assured destruction (MAD), on the assumption that Soviet civil defense measures would enable “the Soviet leadership, deep in their hardened bunkers” to “remain unscathed” in the event of a nuclear exchange.⁶⁰ Nitze argued that the United States needed a substantial strategic buildup “to deny the Soviet Union the possibility of a successful war-fighting capability.” Among the weapons systems that he favored, were a mobile land-based missile, stepped up development of a next-generation SLBM, the Trident II, and deployment of the B-1, a new long-range strategic bomber.⁶¹

Beyond unease over apparent Soviet gains was a far more fundamental anxiety over America’s relative decline. “For some in the national security establishment,” Nitze’s biographer David Callahan explains, “the most enduring lesson of Vietnam was that America had to reduce its reliance on military power. It had to accept the end of Pax Americana.”⁶² By contrast, “Nitze believed that there was nothing wrong with the ideas of NSC 68. The problem had been in application.”⁶³ For the many Americans who agreed with Nitze, the very notion of limits on American power was anathema.⁶⁴ Arms control agreements with the Soviet Union that had even the appearance of extending parity to the communists were just another manifestation of these unjust limitations.

If anything, Nitze believed, the experience of Vietnam, having undermined U.S. prestige and the country’s will to fight, necessitated an even more confrontational stance to deter a suddenly emboldened Soviet Union. The Vietnam Syndrome proved short-lived, in at least some respects. By the time of the 1976 presidential election, polls showed support for more defense spending. Both President Ford, and the Democratic challenger, Jimmy Carter, were ambivalent about détente during their respective campaigns.

The Origins of the Committee on the Present Danger

There had long been an undercurrent of suspicion toward détente. Nitze and Wohlsetter had worked together within the Committee for a Prudent Defense Policy in the late 1960s lobbying in favor of a missile defense system, but that effort stalled with the signing of the ABM Treaty in May 1972. A group of anti-McGovern Democrats formed a successor organization, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, after the election of 1972, but as Eugene Rostow admitted years later “It never got anywhere.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 272-273.

⁵⁹ Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 144.

⁶⁰ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 381.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 385.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶⁴ For example, on Albert Wohlsetter see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 158-163.

⁶⁵ Rostow quoted in Herken, *Counsels of War*, 274.

Angered and energized by Ford's firing of Schlesinger as secretary of defense, Rostow hosted a meeting at his home just after Thanksgiving, 1975. "We started over," Rostow said, "but with the same people and the same ideas."⁶⁶

Rostow chaired the first formal organizational meeting of the Committee on the Present Danger held at the Metropolitan Club in Washington on March 12, 1976. It was at the same place where, some twenty-six years earlier, the first CPD had formed.⁶⁷ Reflecting the bipartisan nature of the new group, other members included Ronald Reagan, Dean Rusk, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, J. Lane Kirkland, William Casey, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Perle, Ben Wattenberg, Norman Podhoretz, and Richard V. Allen.

Between March and November 1976, the group met ten more times, hammering out word by word a manifesto, "Common Sense and the Common Danger."⁶⁸ Then, at a public event held just two days after Jimmy Carter's election, the new Committee on the Present Danger introduced itself to the world at large. According to Nitze, the members "believed that the country required a fresh, bipartisan consensus," similar to that "which had sustained our foreign policy between 1940 and the mid-1960s."⁶⁹

The parallels to the early Cold War period are striking. The original CPD was formed to pressure the Truman administration to take a harder line with the Soviets as advocated by NSC 68. Nitze had been the primary author of that earlier document that had languished for a few months – until the Korean War spurred a dramatic increase in defense spending. The newly-formed CPD was cut from the same cloth, but with one notable exception – they did not have a classified report to rally around. That would soon change.

Team B

As noted above, Nitze and Wohlstetter had been highly critical of the CIA. In his memoirs, Nitze explained that some CIA analysts were afflicted with "a sense of guilt" over their past inaccurate assessments of Soviet weapons programs, particularly during the bomber and missile gap period of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This guilt had caused the analysts to overcompensate into the early 1970s. According to Nitze, these analysts, doubting their own predictive ability, believed that the National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) "should not forecast future Soviet arms developments or deployments . . . unless there was positive and unambiguous evidence" to support their predictions.⁷⁰

Compounding the alleged tendency of CIA analysts to understate the Soviet threat was a view that "Soviet decision makers act or react in given circumstances in a manner analogous to the way in which U.S. decision makers might react in similar circumstances." "The result," Nitze explained, "had been a fairly consistent record . . . of understating future threatening developments."⁷¹

Attacked by both the left and right for abuses and failings in Vietnam and elsewhere in the early 1970s, the CIA was feeling increasingly beleaguered. Intelligence

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Max Kampelman, *Entering New Worlds: The Memoirs of a Private Man in Public Life* (New York, Harpercollins, 1991), 233.

⁶⁹ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 354.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 352.

⁷¹ Ibid., 352; see also Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 379.

analysts, who by and large had had nothing to do with the worst abuses, were nonetheless highly susceptible to political pressure. In January 1976, President Ford dismissed William Colby as CIA Director, and appointed George Bush to replace him.

Within this environment, where criticisms of the agency's failures to accurately report on the nature of the Soviet threat were seen as contributing--fairly or unfairly--to Colby's dismissal, Bush introduced what Raymond Garthoff later described as a "bizarre" experiment in competitive analysis.⁷² According to Strobe Talbott, the Team B project "was Bush's attempt to help the [Ford] Administration fend off the challenge from the right, particularly from Ronald Reagan."⁷³ There had been a public outcry over Ford's firing of Colby and Schlesinger, and this may have indicated the extent to which "disagreement over the Soviet threat was becoming an issue outside as well as inside the government."⁷⁴ But beyond blunting criticism, Team B was also part of an effort by the Ford administration to garner the support "of influential, hawkish private citizens" who had objected to Ford's enthusiasm for détente.⁷⁵

The group assigned the task of testing alternative theories of Soviet behavior tended to the "hawkish" view. More charitable assessments might characterize it as a somber view, but at least one CIA expert labeled it grim.⁷⁶ The selection of Richard Pipes as chair "insured that Team B would take a pessimistic view of Soviet intentions." Pipes was "known in his field as a fierce anti-Soviet ideologue" who had risen to prominence in Washington as a consultant to Senator Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson.⁷⁷ On every substantive point, explains Garthoff, Team B stressed and enlarged "the impression of danger and a threat."⁷⁸

Other Soviet experts and analysts questioned Team B's perspective. Physicist Richard Garwin recalled what he considered to be the unsophisticated nature of Pipes' critique. When presented with technical arguments of American superiority, Pipes demurred. His line of argument, Pipes explained to Garwin, was based on "his deep knowledge of the Russian soul."⁷⁹

Although Pipes was not the first choice to chair the committee, he exerted considerable influence on the selection of its members. The team would include other like-minded critics, including several of the founding members of the Committee on the Present Danger, such as Nitze and USC Professor William Van Cleave.⁸⁰ The group first met in late August in Arlington, Virginia and by late October they had finished a report that was a predictable reflection of its authors' long-held views.

⁷² Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 328.

⁷³ Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 145.

⁷⁴ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 276.

⁷⁵ Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 146.

⁷⁶ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 277.

⁷⁷ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 378.

⁷⁸ Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 329.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Herken, *Counsels of War*, 287; see also U.S. Congress, House 96/2, Armed Services Committee, *Hearings: U.S. Strategic National Security Programs* (GPO, 1978).

⁸⁰ The other members of Team B were Gen. Daniel O. Graham, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency; Paul Wolfowitz, then with the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; Seymour Weiss, a career foreign service officer who was serving at the time as Ambassador to the Bahamas; Foy Kohler, another career diplomat; and retired Air Force generals Thomas Wolfe and John W. Vogt, Jr. Technical advisers included Wohlstetter, and Thomas "T.K." Jones.

The widest differences between the Team A and Team B assessments pertained to Soviet intentions and motives. Here there was enormous opportunity for subjective interpretation and highly intuitive judgment. As Pipes recalled, Team B “concluded that the evidence indicated beyond reasonable doubt that the Soviet leadership did not subscribe to MAD but regarded nuclear weapons as tools of war whose proper employment, in offensive as well as defensive modes, promised victory.”⁸¹ “We found . . . the danger posed by Soviet capabilities was greater than was being reported in the NIEs,” Nitze explained, “but also that there was little evidence to indicate that the Soviets subscribed to our concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD). . . . they appeared to be striving for a nuclear war-fighting, war-winning strategic posture.”⁸²

An Unfair Playing Field

Pipes’ and Nitze’s recollections, offered before the reports were declassified, are accurate, but incomplete.⁸³ The actual text of the two studies, compared side-by-side, reveal many of the flaws of Team B, both as an exercise in competitive threat analysis generally, and in its (it is now known) grossly inaccurate assessments of the Soviet threat specifically.⁸⁴

For example, as planned the Team B Reported that Team A “would follow established NIE procedures” while Team B was tasked with making “its best substantive case for a more pessimistic viewpoint.”⁸⁵

In fact, in its final form (as NIE 11-3/8-76) the Team A report “gave prominence to dissenting opinions from within the intelligence community.” By contrast, Team B “abandoned the formula agreed upon for the experiment, in favor of a detailed critique of the assumptions and methodologies that underlay strategic forces NIEs produced over the previous decade or so.”⁸⁶

The crux of the Team A case boils down quite simply to their belief that the Soviets were not confident in their ability to conduct an attack “so effective that the USSR could devastate the US while preventing the US from devastating the USSR.”⁸⁷ Convinced that the Soviets responded to the danger of total annihilation in a manner similar to that exhibited by their American counterparts, Team A anticipated that uncertainty on the part of the Soviets would continue to deter aggressive or reckless behavior.

Because Team A was ultimately responsible for drafting the official NIE, their case was undermined by a number of dissenting opinions inserted as italicized text

⁸¹ Quoted in Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 379.

⁸² Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 352.

⁸³ The Team A and Team B reports were declassified, with relatively few redactions, in September 1992.

⁸⁴ “Team B was wrong on almost every count,” writes Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 329. For a useful and concise critique of the numerous flaws in the Team B report, see Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 329-331. See also Raymond Garthoff, “On Estimating and Imputing Intentions,” *International Security*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Winter 1978), pp. 22-32.

⁸⁵ “The A-Team/B-Team Experiment and Its Aftermath,” in Steury, ed., *Intentions and Capabilities*, 335. (Hereafter cited as “The A-Team/B-Team Experiment”).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁸⁷ NIE 11-3/8-76 “Soviet Forces for Intercontinental Conflict Through the Mid-1980s,” in Steury, ed., 343. (Hereafter cited as “NIE 11-3/8-76”).

throughout the report. Most outspoken was Major General George Keegan, who, as the head of Air Force intelligence, was entitled to weigh in on the conclusions contained within the official NIE.⁸⁸ In a series of pointed critiques, Gen. Keegan challenged the official findings contained within the estimate, including the central assumption that the Soviets were deterred by the threat of nuclear retaliation.

For example, Keegan argued his belief “that this Estimate understates, as have previous NIEs, the Soviet drive for strategic superiority”⁸⁹ Their efforts, the nearly two-page long dissent continued, “have already placed the U.S. in a position of serious strategic disadvantage.”⁹⁰ In short, Keegan continued, “the present NIE . . . falls far short of grasping the essential realities of Soviet” conduct, and of their drive to expand their military capability. Keegan characterized these efforts as “the most extensive peacetime war preparations in recorded history – a situation not unlike that of the mid-1930s.”⁹¹

This dissenting opinion, afforded nearly equal treatment within the official NIE, is strikingly similar to Team B’s conclusion. In such a competitive environment, with one of Team B’s “players” in Team A’s huddle, figuratively speaking, it was relatively easy for Team B to make its case. The official estimates, going back for nearly 15 years, Team B said, were “filled with unsupported and questionable judgments about what it is that the Soviet government wants and intends” and that this had led the intelligence services to consistently underestimate “the intensity, scope, and implicit threat of the Soviet strategic buildup.”⁹²

But the Team B report was not merely a critique of past threat assessments; the authors seem even to question the assumptions guiding U.S. foreign policy for decades, if not generations. In a curious passage that exudes a sneering contempt for American traditions, the Team B report concludes “The unspoken assumptions . . . about Soviet international behavior derive from several sources,” including the “U.S. commercial tradition” which believes “peace and the pursuit of profit are ‘normal’ whereas war is always an aberration” and that “human nature everywhere [is] the same. . . corresponding to the rationalist, utilitarian model.”⁹³ Other American traditions that seem to have hampered a sober-minded view of Soviet intentions and capabilities were the “democratic tradition which regards social equality as ‘natural’ and elitism of any sort as aberrant” and “an insular tradition derived from . . . immunity from a strategic threat to its territory.” “These three traditions,” the panelists concluded, “have imbued the United States with a unique outlook on the world, an outlook that is shared by no other nation, least of all by the Russians.”⁹⁴ Given these and other fundamental misconceptions of the “Soviet mentality” the panelists

⁸⁸ The insertion of dissenting opinions within NIEs is standard practice, and can be seen in the estimates from the 1950s as well. Notably, however, the dissenting opinions in the 1950s were consigned to footnotes, whereas the dissent in the Team A report appears as italicized text in the body of the report.

⁸⁹ NIE 11-3/8-76, 345.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 345.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁹² “B-Team Report: Soviet Strategic Objectives: An Alternative View,” in Donald P. Steury, ed., *Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996), 375. (Hereafter cited as “B-Team Report”).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 375.

profess to not be surprised “that the NIEs consistently underestimate the significance of the Soviet strategic effort.”⁹⁵

Team B did have a dramatic and immediate impact at Langley and beyond. Agency veteran Howard Stoertz, who headed up Team A, had fielded a group of young and inexperienced analysts to take on the older men on Team B. When the two groups met to debate their findings, “It was an absolute disaster for the CIA,” said one agency official.⁹⁶ Pipes recalled, no doubt with some measure of satisfaction, that the Agency emerged “badly mauled.”⁹⁷

After the encounter between the two groups, Team A seemed to revise its report to reflect some of Team B’s conclusions. Nitze biographer David Callahan reports that “Pipes listened in disbelief” on December 2, 1976, when the official report was presented to the PFIAB, “as Stoertz advanced views that largely agreed with the findings of Team B.” In Callahan’s telling, “Bush’s effort to impose a new assessment of Soviet intentions on the CIA had succeeded.”⁹⁸

Policy Implications – SALT and Détente

With respect to policy, to proceed with arms control talks and a broader policy of détente under so flawed an assessment of Soviet capabilities and intentions was, from Team B’s perspective, not merely unwise, it was dangerous. With respect to SALT, specifically, the Team B panelists asserted that the “the Soviets view SALT as a means through which they can achieve a superior strategic position over the U.S.” and that SALT I “has had little, if any, constraining impact on programs designed to give the Soviets strategic superiority over the U.S.”⁹⁹

Gen. Keegan, the de-facto Team B member firmly ensconced within Team A (at least as so far as the final NIE was concerned), agreed completely with this assessment: “There now is a substantial basis for judging that the Soviets’ negotiations at SALT,” Keegan explained in one of his many dissenting comments, “and their détente, economic, and arms-control diplomacy have thus far been exploited by them for strategic advantage.”¹⁰⁰

But Team B sensed an even more sinister motive. “The effect of such a policy of ‘détente’ is expected to be a reduction in the influence of those elements in U.S. society which desire greater military preparedness and military R&D,” they predicted, “resulting in a weakening of the United States precisely in that sphere where lies its particular strength.”¹⁰¹

The conclusions were strikingly similar to those stated twenty-six years earlier in NSC 68. The Team B project was also “reminiscent of the Gaither Committee,” observes Strobe Talbott, in that “Team B went far beyond its charter of estimating Soviet

⁹⁵ Ibid., 381.

⁹⁶ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 380.

⁹⁷ Richard Pipes, “Team B: The Myth Behind the Reality,” *Commentary* (October 1986), 36.

⁹⁸ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 380.

⁹⁹ NIE 11-3/8-76, 359.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 345.

¹⁰¹ B-Team Report, 386.

intentions and capabilities [and] ended up prescribing what amounted to a crash program of American buildup.”¹⁰²

Max Kampelman explained “The intellectual basis for the Committee grew out of the work of the now-famous Team B,” but this is not exactly true. It is probably more accurate to say Team B grew out of CPD. Either way, the two were formed within the intellectual climate of late 1975 and early 1976, when enthusiasm for détente was rapidly waning.¹⁰³ The CPD would draw heavily upon the Team B report, in 1977 and beyond, when a new presidential administration tried to put its own stamp on détente and arms control.

The Aftermath of Team B

The policy implications of the threat assessment contained within Team B, and of the experiment in competitive analysis more broadly, are difficult to ascertain.

While reluctant to point to periods of uncertainty within the agency, the historians at the CIA concede that the Team A/Team B experiment failed to resolve “the controversy over Soviet strategic objectives.”¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, in a cover memo to recipients of NIE 11-3/8-76, George Bush defended the competitive exercise. “The purpose,” he explained, was “to determine whether those known for their more somber views of Soviet capabilities and objectives could present the evidence in a sufficiently convincing way to alter the analytical judgments.” “The views of these experts,” he concludes “did have some effect.”¹⁰⁵

But at the same time, Bush was incensed by “allegations [that] have appeared in the press that the judgments appearing in this official Estimate were shaped by pressure from the Team B.”¹⁰⁶ Bush categorically denied these allegations, and he rejected the suggestion that leaks to the media had “diminished the integrity of the Estimate itself [or] the integrity of the Intelligence Community.”¹⁰⁷

Notwithstanding Bush’s protestations, selected leaks of the contents of Team B report – notably without the benefit of the qualifiers and conditions contained within the Team A report – served to heighten public anxiety about the Soviet threat, an experience eerily reminiscent of that associated with the Gaither Report in 1957.¹⁰⁸

Critics in Congress saw the Team B episode as a blatant attempt to undermine the objectivity of intelligence and twist CIA estimates to fit an ideological agenda.¹⁰⁹ Democrats, in particular, suspected that Team B was aimed at saddling any incoming administration with a preordained, anti-Soviet pessimism. Senator Gary Hart saw “competitive analysis” and the use of selected outside experts as “little more than a

¹⁰² Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 146.

¹⁰³ Kampelman quoted in Talbott, 147, from Charles Tyroler, *Alerting America: The Papers of the Committee on the Present Danger* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey’s, 1984).

¹⁰⁴ “The A-Team/B-Team Experiment and Its Aftermath,” 337.

¹⁰⁵ NIE 11-3/8-76, 339.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond Garthoff makes this same point. See Garthoff, *A Journey Through the Cold War*, 330.

¹⁰⁹ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 380.

camouflage for a political effort to force the National Intelligence Estimate to take a more bleak view of the Soviet threat.”¹¹⁰

Scholars differ on the relative influence of Team B on intelligence assessment, writ large, and on policymaking. McGeorge Bundy contended “Their argument does not seem to have had great impact on public opinion or political behavior, except as a modest contribution to the perception that President Jimmy Carter was weak on national defense.”¹¹¹

Intelligence analysts at the CIA and elsewhere had begun to change their assessments of the Soviet buildup in 1975 and early 1976, well before the formation of Team B. A CIA report issued in February 1976, for example, estimated that the Soviets were dedicating ten to fifteen percent of GNP on defense, twice as much as previous NIE’s had predicted.¹¹²

From Greg Herken’s perspective, the exercise again pointed to the significant differences of opinion that separated the experts, and this did have a “tangible effect” on “subsequent CIA estimates concerned with Soviet intentions.” “Henceforth,” Herken explains, “the analysts at Langley tended to be more circumspect on the sensitive question of what the Russians actually intended.” “Intellectually, that argument [surrounding Soviet intentions] was not resolved,” wrote another observer, “Politically, it was. Team B won.”¹¹³

Knowledgeable outsiders also sensed a shift following the Team B exercise. Daniel Patrick Moynihan noted a “new reality” to arms control in the mid-1970s when the previous minority view of the Soviet threat passed “from heresy to respectability, if not orthodoxy.”¹¹⁴

The Committee on the Present Danger – Team B’s Think Tank

But if a particular threat assessment was restricted to intelligence analysts, or if certain warnings were known only to those within policymaking circles, then its impact would have indeed been very small. The difference is that Team B had a public relations division, of sorts, in the form of the Committee on the Present Danger.

According to Nitze, reactions to the Team B report as it was leaked to the public, “were hostile.” “Members of the incoming Carter administration . . . generally denounced the report.” “Détente was still the conjuring watchword,” he explained, and that “tended to foreclose serious thought.” But “within a few years,” he continues, “most of the substantive recommendations and many of the organizational and procedural changes we had urged were implemented.”¹¹⁵

This did not happen by accident, but it also didn’t happen because President Carter changed his mind. Max Kampelman contends that “no private public affairs

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Pipes, “Team B: The Myth Behind the Reality”; also see Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 380.

¹¹¹ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 556.

¹¹² John Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Russian Military Strength* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 247.

¹¹³ “Viewpoint,” *Washington Post*, July 31, 1981, quoted in Herken, *Counsels of War*, 278.

¹¹⁴ Moynihan quoted in Richard Barnet, “The Search for National Security,” *The New Yorker*, April 17, 1981, 16.

¹¹⁵ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 353.

organization that has had a greater influence in such a short period of time on U.S. foreign and defense policy issues” than the CDP.¹¹⁶ Still, no one group could have altered an entire country’s views toward détente and the arms race, and it would be erroneous to grant the CPD too much credit in doing so.

As already noted, the public was decidedly ambivalent on questions of détente and arms control in the mid-1970s, and the presidential election of 1976 did not turn on either candidate’s alleged commitment to warm relations with the Soviet Union. Nitze biographers David Callahan and Strobe Talbott both note, however, the extent to which personal animus between Paul Nitze and Jimmy Carter influenced the tenor of the continuing intellectual debate over the Soviet threat.

Nitze vs. Carter (and Warnke)

In a surprisingly subdued passage in his memoir, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, Paul Nitze explains “I did not play a part in Jimmy Carter’s 1976 campaign.” “I had done what I felt I could to influence his thinking, but my ideas had not been well received.”¹¹⁷

Indeed, they had not. An encounter between Nitze and Carter during the 1976 campaign, and Carter’s subsequent decision not to offer Nitze a role within the new administration, go a long way toward explaining Nitze’s heated opposition to Carter’s initiatives, not all of them grounded in disagreements over Soviet intentions and the wisdom of détente.

In July 1976, during what was supposed to be a relatively informal meeting with the putative nominee in Plains, Georgia, Nitze presented Carter with his view of the world, one that Nitze had held for over 25 years, of the imminent threat posed by the Soviet Union, and of the need for urgent action to protect American security.

“The encounter was a critical point in Nitze’s star-crossed career,” Talbott explains, “He overplayed the role of stern elder.” Carter later recalled his reaction to the performance in unflattering terms. “Nitze was typically know-it-all” he said, “He was arrogant and inflexible”¹¹⁸

The episode clearly stuck out in Carter’s mind. Zbigniew Brzezinski tried to secure a place for Nitze, but Carter would have none of it. “I don’t think that man has the breadth or balance we need,” the president-elect reportedly told Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.¹¹⁹

Callahan concludes that this was a critical mistake on Carter’s part. “Carter could have . . . given him a post in the arms control bureaucracy – as head of ACDA or as chief SALT negotiator.”¹²⁰ Instead, he made an enemy.

An enemy with connections. Nitze’s involvement with the CPD was crucial. He was listed as “Chairman, Policy Studies” of the group, and in this capacity his “attacks on the policies of the new Administration became highly personal.”¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Kampelman, *Entering New Worlds*, 234.

¹¹⁷ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 350.

¹¹⁸ Carter quoted in Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 149.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 388.

¹²⁰ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 389.

¹²¹ Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 151.

The first battle between Paul Nitze, the CPD and the Carter administration was particularly personal. Nitze describes his involvement in the fight over Paul Warnke's appointment to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and as chief SALT II negotiator as a "a serious debate not only on the nomination of Paul Warnke but on our posture toward the Soviet Union."¹²² The Warnke fight brought into focus the continuing debate over the direction of U.S. policy. It became a test of strength for the coalition of groups who opposed détente, and the Committee on the Present Danger was in the vanguard of this fight.¹²³

In other words, Warnke himself was not really the issue. "The opponents have made him a symbol," explained Anthony Lewis in the *New York Times*, "of something they dislike so much that they want to destroy him."¹²⁴ The fight became "an early opportunity to put the Carter administration on notice, to send the message that it would be allowed little flexibility in the realm of strategic policy and that an imperfect SALT II treaty would meet the same opposition as the man who negotiated it."¹²⁵

In the Senate the fight against Warnke was led by Henry Jackson, one of the intellectual godfathers of the CPD. After a bruising campaign for and against the nominee, Warnke was easily confirmed as director of ACDA by a vote of 70 to 29, but by the much narrower margin of 58 to 40 as chief SALT negotiator. Nitze explained that the latter vote "should have been a warning to the Carter administration."¹²⁶

The Death of Détente

The fight against détente did not stop there. In July 1977, shortly after the dust-up over Warnke's appointments, Team B chair and CPD executive committee member Richard Pipes published an article in *Commentary* magazine with the frightening title "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War." The article, McGeorge Bundy admits, "attracted unusually wide attention, partly because of its frightening title and partly because the author had recently served on a panel that correctly criticized American intelligence estimates for underestimating Soviet plans for deployment."¹²⁷

Bundy notes: "[W]hen the arguments of these more expert analysts are carefully read, it appears that not one of them wrote anything that supported the assertion in the title of the Pipes essay, that the Soviet Union thought it could fight and win a nuclear war."¹²⁸ One acknowledged expert on Soviet policy, Raymond Garthoff demonstrated "that Soviet political and military thinking did *not* support [the] contention of Soviet belief that it could win a nuclear war." Garthoff admits that his article, which appeared in the journal *International Security*, "had little impact on the general public" even though it

¹²² Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 355.

¹²³ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 390.

¹²⁴ Anthony Lewis, "The Brooding Hawks," *New York Times*, February 20, 1977, quoted in Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 390.

¹²⁵ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 391.

¹²⁶ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 355; see also Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 393; Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 154.

¹²⁷ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 560.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 561.

was “well received in academic security studies circles.”¹²⁹ But this is precisely the point. Team B gave traction, even respectability, to arguments that for a long time were considered – and rightly so – quite marginal, while genuine experts competed for attention.

And the CPD stayed on the offensive. In the summer of 1978, the CPD convened a meeting “aimed explicitly at finding ways of influencing the Carter administration.”¹³⁰ The focus was the SALT II Treaty. Richard Perle, then a legislative assistant to Senator Jackson predicted “It would be a stupendous political development if SALT were defeated.”¹³¹ CPD executive committee chair Eugene Rostow weighed in a few months later with “The Case Against SALT II,” published in *Commentary* magazine.¹³²

The Carter administration did not take criticisms of SALT lying down, and Carter himself was not about to simply abandon arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Carter saw arms control as crucial to reducing the most serious threat to global security: namely, thermonuclear war. He recognized that SALT I, and subsequent treaties, were not panaceas; but he also believed that confidence-building measures could have useful effects.¹³³

By contrast, the members of the Committee on the Present Danger had opposed the SALT process from the beginning. They saw arms control and détente as a vehicle for lulling Americans into a false sense of security, and even complacency. Meanwhile they expected that the Soviets would continue their arms buildup in the pursuit of a strategic superiority. “For many of the committee members . . . almost no agreement with the Soviet Union would answer these criticisms.”¹³⁴

Many Americans shared the CPD’s distrust of the Soviet Union and these sentiments were growing. As the United States sank into a malaise of energy shortages, uncured social ills, and mounting self-doubt, it seemed that the Soviets were winning. A complicated treaty did not appear to be able to solve these problems.

Despite this, part of the Carter administration’s strategy for ratifying SALT II was to appeal directly to the American people in the hope that they would put pressure on their senators.¹³⁵ It was a risky strategy. “Public sentiment for an arms control treaty was not high,” recalled Carter, and “[p]ublic interest in the whole subject was rather tepid.”¹³⁶

¹²⁹ Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 334, emphasis in original. Garthoff’s article is “Mutual Deterrence and Strategic Arms Limitation in Soviet Policy,” *International Security*, vol. 3., no. 1 (Summer 1978): 112-147.

¹³⁰ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 284.

¹³¹ From William Van Cleave and W. Scott Thompson, eds., “Strategic Options for the Early Eighties: What Can Be Done?” National Strategy Information Center, New York City, 1979, p. 180, quoted in Herken, *Counsels of War*, 285. See also Strobe Talbott, *Endgame: The Inside Story of SALT II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 52-54.

¹³² Eugene Rostow, “The Case Against SALT II,” *Commentary*, January 1979.

¹³³ See, for example, Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 69-70.

¹³⁴ Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2000), 102. See also Dan Caldwell, *The Dynamics of Domestic Politics and Arms Control: The SALT II Treaty Ratification Debate* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

¹³⁵ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 406.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*; see also Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983), 344.

Nonetheless, by the late summer of 1979, recalled Brezezinski, the efforts appeared to be paying off.

The Carter administration had already tried nearly everything possible to neutralize Nitze. Brzezinski even attempted to secure Nitze's support for "Presidential Review Memorandum No. 10, or PRM-10, which recommended proceeding with new Trident submarine missiles, upgrading Minuteman ICBM warheads, building the MX, a ten-warhead successor to the Minuteman, and developing cruise missiles." All of these specific programs, explains Strobe Talbott, were "seen as correctives to the alleged 'decade of neglect.'"¹³⁷

It did not work. "PRM-10," Nitze grouched, "*tried* to be another NSC 68."¹³⁸

In his initial Senate testimony on the subject, Nitze stopped short of opposing the treaty outright. During a second round before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Nitze, as the CPD's point man on SALT II, was more forthright about his objections, expressing his concern--the same concern that he had been voicing since his earliest days in government--that euphoria and complacency on the part of the American people was allowing the Soviet Union to gain a crucial strategic advantage.

It is inaccurate to say that Team B or the CPD killed détente, as the somewhat breathless title of Anne Hessing Cahn's otherwise solid book suggests. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ended any hope that SALT II would be ratified by the Senate. After SALT II was withdrawn from consideration, Nitze insisted "that he had not opposed ratification."¹³⁹ But Nitze's selective memory notwithstanding, it is likely that the public, never entirely enamored of détente, would not have supported ratification even in the absence of the Soviet's bizarre and ill-advised behavior in December 1979.

¹³⁷ Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 154.

¹³⁸ Sandler, *Peddlers of Crisis*, 244. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁹ Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 411.

Section III – Post-Cold War Threat Assessments

In the late 1990s, several panels were convened to conduct threat assessments and to provide policy recommendations for how to address the threats. These commissions included:

- the Hart-Rudman Commission (officially the United States Commission on National Security in the 21st Century);
- the Bremer Commission (officially the National Commission on Terrorism);
- the Gilmore Commission (officially the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction); and
- the United States Government Interagency Domestic Terrorism Concept of Operations Plan (CONPLAN).¹⁴⁰

As might be expected, each panel emphasized the increasing urgency of the threat of terrorism. Notably, though, there was also broad agreement among the different panels that a large-scale attack could occur in the United States in the near future. The Hart-Rudman Commission's Phase I report was the most emphatic:

America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland, and our military superiority will not entirely protect us...Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers.¹⁴¹

Although the threat of terrorism was emphasized in all of the reports, much of the focus was on nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) attacks, not asymmetric conventional attacks similar to those conducted on 9/11.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also issued a report, in December 2000, that warned of the threat of terrorism. Since its findings mirrored most of those in the above reports, it is mentioned for informational purposes. CSIS, "Homeland Defense: A Strategic Approach," December 2000, <http://www.csis.org/burke/hd/reports/hdstrategicappro.pdf>.

¹⁴¹ U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, "New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century – Major Themes and Implications," *The Phase I Report on the Emerging Global Security Environment for the First Quarter of the 21st Century*, September 15, 1999, 4. (Hereafter cited as *Hart-Rudman Phase I Report*.) The Bremer Commission noted that "the threat of attacks creating massive casualties is growing" and also that "[o]f the large number of foreign students who come to this country to study, there is a risk that a small minority may exploit their student status to support terrorist activity." National Commission on Terrorism, "Countering the Changing Threat of International Terrorism," June 7, 2000, iii, 29. (Hereafter cited as the *National Commission on Terrorism Report*.)

¹⁴² In fact, most of the reports emphasized NBC as the source of primary threat. See for example *Hart-Rudman Phase I Report*, 4; "United States Government Interagency Domestic Terrorism Concept of Operations Plan," January 2001, 1. (Hereafter cited as *CONPLAN*.) The Bremer Commission did point to the normally conventional nature of terrorist attacks and somewhat downplayed the primacy of threats from NBC. See *National Commission on Terrorism Report*, 4-6. In addition, the Gilmore Commission, while only charged to cover the question of WMD, conceded that "terrorists can still ably achieve their objectives of fear and intimidation without resorting to more exotic weaponry or futuristic tactics" and that this should serve as "an important lesson for the United States not to discount the continuing use by terrorists of explosives and other conventional weapons." Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, "First Annual Report to the President and the Congress: Assessing the Threat," December 15, 1999, 19. Hereinafter *Gilmore Commission First Report*.

Regardless of this analytical shortcoming, the fact remains that there was no shortage of prestigious commissions warning the public and the federal government about the dangers of international terrorism to the United States.

A full treatment of the analysis and recommendations of each report is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁴³ Instead, this section seeks to capture the intellectual climate of the late 1990s by describing how the reports were received by policymakers, both legislative and executive, and by examining the nature of the coverage afforded to each report by the national media. Drawing on interviews with former participants and staff members, and on publicly available sources describing the nature of the national security debates that were ongoing at the time that each commission reported its findings, this analysis seeks to establish a narrative of how and why the reports were received in the manner they were. It closes with an attempt to draw broader lessons for threat assessments going forward.

Background, Media Coverage, and Congressional Reception

Created by President Bill Clinton, championed by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and sponsored by the Defense Department, the Hart-Rudman Commission issued three phases of reports: Phase I on September 15, 1999, Phase II on April 15, 2000, and Phase III on January 31, 2001.¹⁴⁴ The Phase I report represented the Commission's assessment of various threats in the coming 25 years, and the Commissioners made every effort to push the primacy of the danger of terrorism as the lead for press coverage and congressional attention.¹⁴⁵ Their efforts notwithstanding, this warning fell largely on deaf ears, in Congress and in the national media, and the Commission and its findings would be largely rejected by the Bush administration, although there was renewed interest after the attacks of 9/11.¹⁴⁶

The Bremer Commission was established by Congress in 1999 with a mandate to “review the laws, regulations, directives, policies and practices for preventing and punishing international terrorism directed against the United States, assess their effectiveness, and recommend changes.”¹⁴⁷ Its report featured a relatively thorough description of recent terrorist attacks both failed and successful, and included a number of specific policy prescriptions designed to counter the threat of terrorism.

The Gilmore Commission was also established by Congress in 1999, but with a narrower mandate to assess readiness, and to evaluate the quality of response programs and coordination between federal, state, and local governments. The Commission was also tasked with identifying deficiencies and recommending improvements to the nation's capabilities for mitigating the effects of a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear

¹⁴³ For more details on the nature and methodology of the Hart-Rudman Report, see Dara K. Cohen, “Background Briefing Paper for the Princeton Project on National Security,” March 4, 2005, 2-3.

¹⁴⁴ The Phase I Report was to describe the national security environment as the Commission expected it to develop over the next 25 years, the Phase II report was to craft a holistic national security strategy to meet the challenges of the world envisioned, and the Phase III report was to recommend particular policy changes to implement the strategy crafted in Phase II.

¹⁴⁵ Telephone interview with Commission Co-Chairman Gary Hart, April 19, 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Though the Hart-Rudman reports were issued during the Clinton administration, the Commission's mandate was to continue its work and present its findings comprehensively to the next administration.

¹⁴⁷ *National Commission on Terrorism Report*, Appendix B, 49.

attack.¹⁴⁸ Notwithstanding this particular mandate, the Gilmore Commission's first report was focused on threat assessment, and thus falls well within the purview of this paper.

CONPLAN was created by Presidential Decision Directive 39,¹⁴⁹ issued by President Bill Clinton on June 21, 1995, as an interagency working group to "provide overall guidance to Federal, State, and local agencies concerning how the Federal government would respond to a potential threat or actual terrorist incident that occurs in the United States, particularly one involving WMD."¹⁵⁰ (Though it did not provide its own threat assessment, it focused on improving the federal government's ability to respond to a WMD attack, and therefore deserves mention.)

The Hart-Rudman Phase I report received little press coverage from the major national newspapers. The wire services did produce several substantive articles, focusing on the lead the Commission sought: the prediction that the threat of terrorism on U.S. soil was real and that the national security bureaucracy was unprepared to deal with such an attack. *USA Today* ran a page 7 article pointing to the finding, as did the *New York Times*.¹⁵¹ Although the commissioners visited with the editorial boards of both the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* to discuss the Commission's findings, neither paper ran stories or editorials on the report.¹⁵²

Co-chairs Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, along with Commissioners Norman Augustine and Andrew Young, testified before the House of Representatives' Committee on Armed Services on October 5, 1999. During the congressional hearing, the threat of terrorism was highlighted and emphasized by the Armed Services Committee's Chairman, Rep. Floyd D. Spencer (R-SC).

That said, Hart-Rudman received more press than any of the competing reports. The Gilmore Commission, for example, generated one story in the *Washington Post*,¹⁵³ but no coverage in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, or *USA Today*. Much of the coverage of the Bremer Commission's report focused heavily on its findings that Greece had not cracked down on the November 17 terrorist group in that country.¹⁵⁴ Other articles focused on the Bremer Commission's recommendation that the CIA should relax its rules on recruiting "unsavory" informants abroad.¹⁵⁵ The *Wall Street Journal* ran an op-ed by Milt Bearden and Larry Johnson, both veterans of the CIA, accusing the Commission of "inflating a diminishing threat" which "only achieves the terrorists'

¹⁴⁸ See "Charter of the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction." <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/terrpanel/charter.html>.

¹⁴⁹ PDD 39 is available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd39.htm>.

¹⁵⁰ See *CONPLAN*, iv.

¹⁵¹ Steven Komarow, "Report Urges U.S. to Reshape Its Defenses," *USA Today*, September 16, 1999; Steven Lee Meyers, "Federal Commission Predicts Increasing Threat of Terrorism," *New York Times*, September 21, 1999.

¹⁵² Harold Evans, "What We Knew: Warning Given...Story Missed," *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2001, <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2001/6/evans-warning.asp?printerfriendly=yes>.

¹⁵³ R. H. Melton, "Panel Criticizes U.S. Anti-Terrorism Preparedness," *Washington Post*, December 16, 1999.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, Editorial, "Greece's Failure," *Washington Post*, June 13, 2000; Wayne Merry, "Punish Greece for Terrorism," *USA Today*, June 20, 2000; David J. Lynch, "U.S. Views Greece as a 'Critical' Danger Zone," *USA Today*, June 19, 2000.

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, Vernon Loeb, "Panel Advocates Easing CIA Rules on Informants: Agency Disputes Commission Finding," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2000.

objectives—to instill fear in the U.S. public.”¹⁵⁶ Only *USA Today* ran an op-ed by the panel’s chair, L. Paul Bremer III, that explained and defended the Commission’s findings.¹⁵⁷

In the end, the press failed to adequately cover each commission’s warning about the threat from terrorism. Probably representative was the remark of a *New York Times* reporter who was leaving the Hart-Rudman press conference before it was over: it just was not much of a story.¹⁵⁸

Policy and Political Conflicts

Although there was broad consensus among the panels convened to assess the threat of terrorism, there was no consensus within the foreign policy community at large that terrorism presented the primary threat to America in the coming century. The “China threat” came into vogue in the mid-1990s, and many scholars saw the potential for great power conflict as the most likely threat in the foreseeable future.¹⁵⁹

The potential for a common understanding on the nature and extent of the terrorist threat was further undermined by dramatically divergent opinions about America’s proper role in a post-Cold War world. Anthony Lake’s framework of “enlargement” represented the establishment foreign policy view of the Democratic Party, but there was considerable dissent within the Republican Party at the end of the century. In September 2000, the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) released a report titled “Rebuilding America’s Defenses,” that would gain favor with many Republicans. Its view was of an America unconstrained, and it advocated “preserv[ing]” and “extend[ing]” a “Pax Americana.”¹⁶⁰

The tone of the PNAC report echoed prior calls from neoconservatives for a more ambitious national security strategy. PNAC’s grand strategy often clashed with the operating assumptions guiding many of the threat assessments examined in this paper. For example, compare this quote from the Hart-Rudman Phase I report:

Although a global competitor to the United States is unlikely to arise over the next 25 years, emerging powers—either singly or in coalition—will increasingly constrain U.S. options regionally and limit its strategic influence. As a result, we will remain limited in our ability to impose our will, and we will be vulnerable to

¹⁵⁶ Milt Bearden and Larry Johnson, “Don’t Exaggerate the Terrorist Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2000.

¹⁵⁷ L. Paul Bremer III, “U.S. Cannot Rule out Military,” *USA Today*, June 7, 2000.

¹⁵⁸ Evans, “What We Knew,” *Columbia Journalism Review*.

¹⁵⁹ See for example Charles Krauthammer, “Why We Must Contain China,” *Time*, July 31, 1995, 78; Ross H. Munro, “China: The Challenge of a Rising Power,” in Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2000), 47-73.

¹⁶⁰ Project for a New American Century, “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century,” September 2000, 2, 11. Many of those involved in crafting the PNAC report, including Stephen Cambone, Eliot Cohen, I. Lewis Libby, Paul Wolfowitz, and Dov Zakheim, would go on to prominent positions in the Bush administration. On the other hand, some conservatives and libertarians within the GOP were uncomfortable with PNAC’s ambitious goals for U.S. foreign policy. See, for example, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

an increasing range of threats against American forces and citizens overseas as well as at home.¹⁶¹

with this from William Kristol's and Robert Kagan's "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy":

the enormous disparity between U.S. military strength and that of any potential challenger is a good thing for America and the world. After all, America's world role is entirely different from that of the other powers. The more Washington is able to make clear that it is futile to compete with American power, either in size of forces or in technological capabilities, the less chance there is that countries like China or Iran will entertain ambitions of upsetting the present world order.¹⁶²

By the time Hart-Rudman had released its second report, the presidential elections had begun to heat up. PNAC's Tom Donnelly issued a withering denunciation in the *Weekly Standard* against its findings. Donnelly accused Hart-Rudman of being "an expensive flop," "a joke on the taxpayer," and of having "produced mush."¹⁶³ Importantly, Donnelly revealed that Lynne Cheney, originally a member of the Commission, had resigned because "Cheney was unhappy with the suggestion that American power was bound to decline..."¹⁶⁴ Donnelly's piece seemed in part to be an attempt at preventing the Commission's assumptions from gaining traction in Republican foreign policy circles.

Cheney's resignation, taken in the context of the policy and political struggles of the time, may reveal more than even Donnelly suggests. There was a good deal of dispute within the Hart-Rudman Commission over what the world would look like going forward and what the primary threat to U.S. national security might be. According to one Commission member, Cheney put forward the view that China, not terrorism, posed the single greatest threat to American security. Cheney surmised that a new Cold War would emerge, and she emphasized the need to contain China.¹⁶⁵ Partly as a result of her frustration stemming from the inability or unwillingness of her fellow Commissioners to endorse this view, Cheney resigned. It is logical to speculate that Cheney may have communicated her disgust over the policy disagreements within the Commission to her husband, and that this may have poisoned the well for the Commission having any chance of getting a fair audience with the new administration.

Others involved with the Commission suggested that there may have been political animus as well. Panel Co-Chair Warren Rudman had supported the presidential bid of John McCain in the crucial New Hampshire primary. Rudman's early enthusiasm

¹⁶¹ Hart-Rudman Phase I Report, 4.

¹⁶² William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996).

¹⁶³ Tom Donnelly, "Newt Gingrich's Last Boondoggle: The Hart-Rudman National Security Commission Shows Every Sign of Being an Expensive Flop," *Weekly Standard*, May 29, 2000, 28.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ This view aptly represented the view of PNAC, with which Dick Cheney had been affiliated. PNAC had long advocated a hard-line on China, going so far as to accuse the Republican Party of "sometimes seem[ing] to love commerce more than it loathes Chinese communism." Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "Clinton's Sorry Excuse for a China Policy," *Weekly Standard*, March 22, 1999, 9-10.

for George Bush's most determined challenger might have tainted his credibility with a campaign (later an administration) that was renowned for its hard-line on loyalty.

One can only speculate about the extent to which personal, political, or ideological differences tempered the Bush administration's enthusiasm for the recommendations contained within the Hart-Rudman report. But what the administration ended up doing on the question of terrorism in its early days seems to support some combination of these explanations.

On May 8, 2001, President Bush announced his strategy for countering the threat of terrorism. In accordance with the consensus at the time, particular emphasis was placed on WMD attacks. In a statement, Bush noted that "the threat of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons being used against the United States—while not immediate—is very real." In response to this threat, President Bush "asked Vice President Cheney to oversee the development of a coordinated national effort so that we may do the very best possible job of protecting our people from catastrophic harm." In turn, Bush promised to sponsor a National Security Council meeting to assess progress.¹⁶⁶

Members of the Commission interviewed for this report indicate that they believe the terrorism review was added to Cheney's portfolio in order to take the issue off the table, not really to address it; the *Washington Post* would later report that "[n]either Cheney's review nor Bush's took place."¹⁶⁷

Analysis: How and Why?

Neither the ideological disputes nor the possible personal or political squabbles described above provide a satisfactory answer as to how and why the national security bureaucracy failed to respond to the analysis and recommendations of a number of high-level panels tasked with assessing threats to national security. Though ideology or politics may have played some role, there are structural matters within the government - and even some problems with the reports themselves - that likely also contributed to the government's failure in this case.

First, all four of the reports examined in this paper were astonishingly broad in scope. In particular, the Hart-Rudman Commission took a holistic, sweeping approach to its work.¹⁶⁸ All of those interviewed lauded this aspect of the Commission's work, yet it may have had some important drawbacks.

Although the findings on the threat of terrorism were prominent in the Phase I report, the Commission took up an array of issues, addressing trade and economics, scientific and environmental issues, and others. While this is not necessarily an analytical shortcoming, it provides two possible explanations for why the Commission's most important finding may have been overlooked. First, if someone disagreed with the analysis or prescriptions in another part of the document, he or she was more likely to

¹⁶⁶ "Domestic Preparedness Against Weapons of Mass Destruction," Statement of the President, May 8, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/05/print/20010508.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Barton Gellman, "A Strategy's Cautious Evolution: Before Sept. 11, the Bush Anti-Terror Effort Was Mostly Ambition," *Washington Post*, January 20, 2002, A1.

¹⁶⁸ See Cohen, Working Group Paper, 3.

dismiss the report as a whole.¹⁶⁹ Second, Congress continues to broaden the scope of activities it feels required to regulate and legislate.

With Congress focusing its attention on an ever-increasing number of issues, it becomes increasingly difficult for legislators to focus their attention on the most fundamental national concerns. Hart-Rudman in particular was a thoughtful, long-term work that could easily have slipped under a harried congressman's radar. Perhaps if a Commission of prestigious leaders had been convened to narrowly assess the threat of terrorism to the United States, and provided only a threat assessment and not policy prescriptions, policymakers may have welcomed the report more than they did, and moved forward with a sense of purpose.¹⁷⁰ As Sen. Fred Thompson (R-TN) would lament to Hart, Rudman, Gilmore, and Bremer during their testimony after 9/11:

We get these reports up here. They don't filter up to the executive branch. They don't filter down to the average person. They may show up a paragraph on – have a hearing, and three or four of us are around. Maybe not. Maybe, you know, page 16 a paragraph, you know, but nothing really happens.¹⁷¹

In addition, the Hart-Rudman Commission was convened by President Clinton, but presented its findings to the Bush administration. Historically, incoming administrations have been eager to take the reins of national policy – particularly security policy – away from the outgoing administration entirely and re-start from the basics to craft its own approach to national affairs. One Commissioner mentioned that the Bush administration seemed “obsessed with being the anti-Clinton administration,” and that that may have contributed to a skepticism about the findings of a Commission created by that administration.

But the Clinton administration also bears some of the blame. One Commissioner noted that that administration had a “feckless” approach to national security policy, and was often reluctant to deal with the issue in part because of the sense that it was a political liability. As a result, the Clinton administration was handicapped, and either unable or unwilling to take decisive action in addressing or implementing the Commission's prescriptions.

Also as a political matter, the Republicans on the Commission were suspect in the eyes of both the Clinton and Bush administrations. The centrality of former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's involvement certainly did not go unnoticed by the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration was reportedly leery of involvement with him after his rather ignominious exit from the House.

Finally, the transition of power was abnormally hampered by the controversy surrounding the 2000 presidential election. As a result, the incoming Bush administration lost precious time in assembling and convening a cabinet and in staffing other crucial positions.

¹⁶⁹ Donnelly's *Weekly Standard* article may represent a case of discarding substantive findings because of ideological differences.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Kohn noted that Gen. Boyd had attempted to make the Hart-Rudman Commission's reports crisp, readable, and punchy, presumably in an effort to increase the number of people who would actually read the reports. Telephone interview, May 2, 2005.

¹⁷¹ U.S. Senate Governmental Affairs Hearing on Responding to Homeland Threats, September 21, 2001.

In addition to this political whirlwind, soon after taking power, the Bush administration would have to deal with a major diplomatic crisis in the form of the EP-3 incident with China. Even if the Bush administration had been genuinely committed to an open-minded national security review, the EP-3 crisis was a significant distraction.

What Happened After 9/11

After the attacks of 9/11, the work of the commissions resurfaced. The media issued several self-recriminating articles, and commissioners from the Bremer, Gilmore, and Hart-Rudman Commissions were all called to Congress to testify.¹⁷² The main tension that emerged was whether the administration should establish a single, cabinet-level agency that would absorb the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Border Patrol, the Coast Guard, and several other agencies (Hart-Rudman's recommendation), or whether the Gilmore Commission's proposal should be implemented, which was to create a "National Office for Combating Terrorism" within the executive office of the president, but not a cabinet level agency. Both the Hart-Rudman and Gilmore reports indicated that the new head of any homeland security department or agency should have budgetary control over its subsidiaries.

At first, the Bush administration opposed the creation of such an agency, instead creating an Office of Homeland Security in the White House in October 2001. By November 2002, however, under pressure from Congress, Bush had changed his mind. A new cabinet level agency with budgetary authority was created, and assets from other agencies were transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS). FEMA, for example, was transferred *in toto* to DHS, as was the Secret Service and the Coast Guard.¹⁷³

None of the commissioners of any of the panels ever suggested that, had their recommendations been implemented at time of issuance, 9/11 could have been avoided. But the fact that the warnings were so consistently ignored can help draw broader lessons for threat assessments and how to craft them effectively.

¹⁷² See, for example, Evans, "What We Knew," *Columbia Journalism Review*; David S. Broder, "Now Will We Pay Attention?" *Washington Post*, September 21, 2001; Richard Leiby, "Rueful Prophets of the Unimaginable: High-Level Studies Warned of Threat," *Washington Post*, September 22, 2001; Bremer, Rudman, Hart, and Gilmore all testified before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on September 21, 2001; Hart-Rudman's Executive Director testified before the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee on October 12, 2001; many other articles appeared and many other witnesses testified before congress.

¹⁷³ Department of Homeland Security, "History: Who Became Part of the Department?" http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/interapp/editorial/editorial_0133.xml.

Threat Assessment in Historical Perspective: Some Observations

This paper set out to craft three distinct narratives of threat assessment, two from the Cold War era, and one from the post-Cold War period. The purpose was to identify and explain the ways in which policymakers have used such assessments to guide their decision making.

On at least one level, it is difficult to draw comparisons. The accepted nature of the Soviet threat in the 1950s or 1970s was dramatically different from the threat posed by terrorism in the late 1990s. On the other hand, certain recurrent themes do emerge. These conclusions focus on three of them: the importance of key individuals; the importance of timing; and the persistent problem of threat exaggeration and a lack of accountability when past assessments prove inaccurate.

People Matter

It is obvious that, in the process of developing threat assessments, individuals, and groups of like-minded individuals, play a central role. Individuals exert their influence at all levels. Intelligence analysis, a crucial building block of threat assessment, is a highly subjective exercise. Two individuals looking at the same piece of evidence can come to radically different conclusions.

In turn, estimates, which draw on interpretive and inferred intelligence, but which add the complication of attempting to predict future events, invariably reflect an individual's ideology. With respect to the Cold War-era assessments, the usual suspects led to the usual conclusions. But equally important were dominant ideologies that transcended individuals. These are not ideologies in the traditional left/right, conservative/liberal sense. Rather, the ideologies that matter in threat assessment pertain to *a priori* assumptions about the way the world works.

In their classic book *Thinking in Time*, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May suggest that policy makers ask themselves "Alexander's Question." Dr. Russell Alexander, a professor at the University of Washington asked his colleagues "What fresh data... would cause [them] to revise or reverse their judgment?" May and Neustadt place the emphasis on presumptions. "What new *Knowns* would bring you to change items *Presumed*?"¹⁷⁴ Recall physicist Richard Garwin's description of the Russian expert Richard Pipes. Technical arguments about American superiority, Garwin explained, were turned aside by Pipes' "deep knowledge of the Russian soul."¹⁷⁵ What new information would have caused Pipes to change his mind? In short, preconceived notions matter--*a lot*.

People matter in at least two other, related, respects. To the extent that threat assessment is a political exercise, and a persistent theme running through all three case studies is that it is, selling threat assessments requires a combination of personal passion and political skill. It is not immediately clear that the advocates of Hart-Rudman had this passion, although they did have considerable political experience and skill. Meanwhile, Raymond Garthoff, George Kennan and other Soviet experts were personally committed

¹⁷⁴ Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 152-153.

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Herken, *Counsels of War*, 287.

to offering an alternative assessment of Soviet intentions, but they lacked the political skill to carry the message.

By contrast, the members of Team B were passionate about their point of view, but they also had a de facto think tank or political action committee in the form of the CPD. Meanwhile, although there was no comparable organization in the late 1950s, the Gaither Report's threat assessments were publicized through the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and through the work of journalists such as Joseph Alsop, but also politicized by the increasingly contentious national security debates of the era.¹⁷⁶

Timing Matters

Threat assessment is conducted within a temporal intellectual climate. The shock of particular events might shape a renewed interest in, or perspective on, a given threat, but events per se might not cause policy makers to change course; even in those rare instances where the experts are in general agreement (e.g. terrorism), this does not necessarily cause policymakers to change their minds. Assessments combined with discrete events may often be interpreted as simply confirming preconceived notions.

One lesson to take away from the three narratives is that a threat assessment has a much better chance of shaping policy if it catches a wave of public opinion. Team B's skepticism about Soviet motives generally coincided with a growing public disenchantment with détente. The Gaither Report made a splash coincident with the immediate aftermath of *Sputnik*, when public anxiety about America's perceived technological vulnerabilities reached a near fever-pitch.

On the other hand, while it is not easy to catch a wave, it is even harder to make one. There was ample evidence to support the general conclusions of the threat assessments in the late 1990s. These real-world warnings of terrorism even coincided with terrifying stories in the fictional literature, such as Tom Clancy's *Sum of All Fears* (1991), or feature films like *The Peacemaker* (1997) and *The Siege* (1998). Notwithstanding the near unanimity of the terrorism threat panels, however, there were several other competing narratives offered by other organizations. And even more importantly, the American public, fatigued after decades of persistent Cold War threat, were reveling in intellectual peace dividends: an unprecedented economic boom, and a feeling that the end of history may, in fact, have arrived.

Being Right or Wrong Doesn't Matter (the Next Time Around) – But It Should

According to Gregg Herken, Nitze admitted that his notions of “a thermonuclear Pearl Harbor” were directly tied into his warning from as early as 1956 that the United States was losing “its strategic edge to Russia.” “Like his 1950 warning of a coming ‘year of maximum danger’ and his 1957 prediction concerning an impending missile gap,” Herken explains, “Nitze’s 1976 endorsement of the notion of an impending ‘window of

¹⁷⁶ See Preble, *John F. Kennedy and the Missile Gap*; on Alsop, see Robert Merry, *Taking on the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop--Guardians of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 1996); and Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., *Joe Alsop's Cold War: A Study of Journalistic Influence and Intrigue* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

vulnerability' identified a new and previously unappreciated threat from Russia."¹⁷⁷ This was all part of the broader view that the American people must be frightened in order to support a costly, confrontational foreign policy.¹⁷⁸

During the Cold War period, the common error was inflating a threat that either wasn't there, or wasn't as serious or urgent as implied. Although Nitze and others openly conceded that they might be wrong, they largely carried their day with the argument that it was better to be wrong, and alive, than right and dead.

That said, there are at least two different ways in which persistent exaggerators can be brought to heel. The first is through the use of probabilistic assessment. The authors of the Team B report explicitly (incredibly?) dismissed the concept of probability in its entirety. In their focus on establishing what the Soviet's strategic objectives were likely to be, they explained "We are making no attempt to assess the probability of the Soviet Union attaining its strategic objectives" despite the fact that they admitted to evidence "that the USSR is running into many difficulties" and that "the record of its grand strategy is spotty."¹⁷⁹

A wiser course is for policy makers to ask "What are the odds?"¹⁸⁰ Another technique that would combine probability and personal risk is a futures market. The idea was roundly criticized when it was learned that the Pentagon was considering the creation of such a market in order to test competing theories of threat. But while the idea does have some important problems, there does seem to be a need for holding people accountable for past inaccurate assessments and rewarding accuracy.

Finally, with respect to competitive analysis, Raymond Garthoff's take on Team B seems most instructive: The notion of "outside experts offering some alternatives to test was not without merit," Garthoff wrote, still "the terms of reference should have been clear, and there should have been two alternative teams and viewpoints, one more pessimistic but the other more optimistic." "It is clear in retrospect," he concludes a few pages later, "that what had been needed in 1976 was not a hard-line Team B, but a more imaginative and far-seeing 'Team C.'"¹⁸¹

If this had been the case, the Team B exercise would have looked more like Project Solarium. But, in retrospect, Team B was not about getting it right, per se. Rather, it was a policy *coup d'etat*. "Questions of intentions are of course even more difficult to estimate and more liable to deliberate or unintended subjective distortion and error than are evaluations of forces and capabilities," Garthoff writes, "The main Team B report . . . presented an unjustified ominous picture."¹⁸² And this was the intention all along. Indeed, the one-sided nature of the Team B project, from its conception, impeded, rather than aided, a realistic assessment of the Soviet threat.

It is sometimes said (unfairly, I think) that war is too important to be left with the generals. A similar thing can be said with respect to threat assessment: gauging the nature of the threats facing the nation, and proposing measures for mitigating these threats, is too important to be left to the ideologues.

¹⁷⁷ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 257.

¹⁷⁸ This is a persistent theme in Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martins, 1994).

¹⁷⁹ B-Team Report, 387.

¹⁸⁰ May and Neustadt suggest the same thing, see *Thinking in Time*, 152.

¹⁸¹ Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War*, 328, 333.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 332.