Weighing Capabilities and Intentions: George Kennan and Paul Nitze Confront the Bomb

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by
LUKE GRIFFITH

has been approved for
the Department of History
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Chester Pach
Associate Professor of History

______________________________
Howard Dewald
Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

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Weighing Capabilities and Intentions: George Kennan and Paul Nitze Confront the Bomb

Director of Thesis: Chester Pach

While countless historians have studied George Kennan and Paul Nitze, there has yet to be a comprehensive account of Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons throughout the Truman administration. Prior to the Soviet atomic test in 1949, Kennan and Nitze worked in tandem to preserve the U.S. atomic monopoly and to build a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal. Kennan and Nitze also rejected the notion that the Truman administration could negotiate an international atomic energy agreement. In the wake of the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb, however, Kennan and Nitze fundamentally disagreed over the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies. Contrary to his previous analysis, Kennan advocated a strategy of minimal deterrence and a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. Nitze, though, supported efforts to retain U.S. nuclear superiority and to initiate a massive buildup of U.S. conventional strength. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that Nitze, not Kennan, shaped the Truman administration’s approach to U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations, U.S. military strategy, and U.S. nuclear policy throughout the final years of Truman’s presidency.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Chester Pach

Associate Professor of History
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INTRODUCTION

On September 3, 1949, an American B-29 took off from Japan and headed north toward the Kamchatka Peninsula. The U.S. Air Force had patrolled the area throughout 1949, as it was downwind of the suspected location of the Soviet Union’s atomic test site in Siberia. The plane was equipped with “sensitive instruments using specially treated filter paper to pick up any radioactive dust,” and on September 3, the pilot detected an abnormally high amount of radioactive particles.¹ While initially skeptical, the Truman administration quickly determined that the Soviet Union had successfully tested its first atomic bomb during the previous week. America’s nuclear monopoly had ended.

The Truman administration was shocked; it had not expected the Soviet Union to develop atomic capabilities for several more years.² President Truman quickly approved a $319 million expansion of the existing atomic weapons program and formed a committee—consisting of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission David Lilienthal—to determine if the United States should develop the hydrogen bomb. Instead of using fission, the H-bomb—also known as a thermonuclear weapon or “super” bomb—relied on fusion to generate its massive explosion, and it was estimated to be 1,000 times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.³ As 1949 wore on, it became apparent that Acheson’s vote would determine the committee’s recommendation,

¹ Paul Nitze, From Hiroshima to Glasnost (New York: General Publishing Company, 1989), 82.
² Harry Truman, Years of Trial and Hope (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), 306
as Johnson fully supported the thermonuclear project, and Lilienthal strongly opposed it.\(^4\) Acheson’s perspective on the hydrogen bomb, however, was by no means predetermined, which meant that his advisors, specifically George Kennan and Paul Nitze, would play a critical role in shaping his recommendation.

Although the current director of the Policy Planning Staff, George Kennan, and the deputy director of the Policy Planning Staff, Paul Nitze, had previously supported efforts to maintain the U.S. atomic monopoly and develop a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal, the theoretical “super” bomb fundamentally altered Kennan’s policy recommendations. It should also be noted, however, that Kennan was not only morally repulsed by the prospects of thermonuclear warfare, he had also grown increasingly frustrated with his inability to influence U.S. foreign policy, specifically his failure to prevent the division of Germany and U.S. participation in NATO.\(^5\)

Kennan responded to the Soviet Union’s atomic test by isolating himself throughout the final month of 1949 to write a seventy-nine page memorandum on the international control of atomic energy, which he later described as “one of the most important, if not the most important, of all the documents I ever wrote in government.”\(^6\) Kennan’s policy prescriptions, ultimately, were predicated upon Soviet intentions. In contrast to the majority of the Truman administration, Kennan argued that maintaining U.S. nuclear superiority was unnecessary, as he claimed that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States. Kennan, therefore, urged the Truman


\(^5\) Ibid., 71.

administration to abandon its quest for the hydrogen bomb and to adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence, which he explained would only require the Truman administration to retain enough fission weapons to make a nuclear strike against the United States or its allies “risky, unprofitable, and irrational.” Kennan also implored the Truman administration to implement a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use and to reopen U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. Contrary to his previous analysis, however, Kennan claimed that the Soviet Union would seriously consider U.S. proposals, and that the Truman administration should not insist upon establishing a reliable means of on-site inspections to ensure Soviet compliance.

Nitze, unlike Kennan, built bureaucratic support for his policy prescriptions throughout the final months of 1949. Nitze, too, believed that a Soviet preemptive nuclear strike against the United States was unlikely, but he argued that the Truman administration must retain U.S. nuclear superiority. In contrast to Kennan, Nitze also demonstrated a keen understanding of U.S.-Soviet relations and domestic politics throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Nitze recognized the mounting domestic pressure on the Truman administration to build the hydrogen bomb, especially in the wake of “losing” China, and he realized that the American people, Congress, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff would never accept a unilateral U.S. moratorium on thermonuclear research, a strategy of minimal deterrence, a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, or an international atomic energy agreement that did not establish a reliable means of on-site inspections.

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inspection. Although Kennan was the State Department’s leading Soviet expert, Nitze, not Kennan, also understood that the Soviet Union would not agree to an international atomic energy treaty. Unlike Kennan, however, Nitze was also willing to compromise: while he urged the Truman administration to determine the feasibility of the fusion bomb, he also supported a total review of U.S. security policies, which he hoped would move the Truman administration away from reliance on nuclear weapons by bolstering U.S. conventional strength. Although Acheson seriously considered Kennan’s arguments, Acheson, ultimately, found Nitze much more persuasive.

Nitze’s policy recommendations also meshed with the Truman administration’s growing reliance upon nuclear weapons. It should be noted that President Truman was committed to limiting military spending, which he believed could be accomplished by relying on cost-efficient nuclear weapons, rather than maintaining a large standing army. Truman, therefore, was dedicated to retaining U.S. nuclear superiority: he stated, for instance, that the United States “must be the strongest in atomic weapons.”\(^9\) U.S. war plans to defend Western Europe were also completely dependent upon the U.S. nuclear arsenal. By the fall of 1949, for example, despite pledging to defend all NATO members, the United States only had five U.S. Army divisions stationed in Western Europe, which paled in comparison to the Soviet Union’s 5.8 million man military.\(^10\)

Although Nitze had already replaced Kennan as Acheson’s primary adviser within the State Department, Nitze officially succeeded Kennan as the director of the Policy

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Planning Staff on January 1, 1950. During the winter and spring of 1950, Nitze and Acheson spearheaded the State Department’s review of U.S. security policies, which eventually became NSC-68. While Kennan supported Nitze’s overarching objective, which was to move the Truman administration away from dependence upon nuclear weapons by strengthening U.S. conventional capabilities, he objected to NSC-68’s portrayal of Soviet intentions and capabilities. Nitze, for instance, depicted a Soviet Union that was bent on world domination and that was willing to risk all-out nuclear war the moment its military capabilities exceeded that of the United States. Nitze, ultimately, urged the Truman administration to triple its defense budget in order to maintain a large standing army.

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A comparison of the evolution of Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons throughout the Truman administration is warranted for several reasons. First and foremost, as the first two directors of the Policy Planning Staff, Kennan and Nitze played a critical role in developing the U.S. strategy of containment. Although both had called for a firmer policy toward the Soviet Union before the Truman administration heeded their advice, Kennan’s Long Telegram and the X-article sold the idea of containment to the upper levels of the Truman administration and convinced it that U.S.-Soviet negotiations would not be fruitful until there was a fundamental change in the Soviet system. Nitze, moreover, authored one of the most important documents of the Cold War: NS-68. Unlike the Long Telegram and the X-article, though, NSC-68 stressed the military threat posed by the Soviet Union, and contrary to Kennan’s recommendations, it
urged the Truman administration to retain U.S. nuclear superiority and to initiate a buildup of U.S. conventional strength. Historians later claimed that NSC-68 militarized Kennan’s strategy of containment, which had previously emphasized the political nature of the Soviet threat.\textsuperscript{11} Nitze, however, was unimpressed by such criticisms: after reading a master’s thesis which stated that NSC-68 “militarized containment,” Nitze drew a line through “militarized containment” and wrote that “this paper \textit{more realistically set forth the requirements necessary to assure success of George Kennan’s idea of containment.”\textsuperscript{12}

Although Kennan has often been labeled the architect of containment, this thesis paints a very different picture of Kennan. By tracing Kennan and Nitze’s policy prescriptions regarding U.S. nuclear strategy throughout the Truman administration, this thesis reveals that Nitze was much more influential than Kennan in shaping U.S. nuclear strategy and policy. While Kennan affected U.S. foreign policy throughout 1947, his policy recommendations were falling out of sync with the Truman administration by 1948. Kennan, for instance, was unable to prevent the division of Germany and U.S. participation in NATO. Nitze, however, increasingly gained power within the State Department, especially after Acheson became secretary of state. By the summer of 1949, in fact, Nitze had already replaced Kennan as Acheson’s primary adviser.

While countless historians have studied Kennan and Nitze, there has yet to be a comprehensive account of their views on nuclear weapons throughout the Truman administration. Kennan and Nitze were among the first U.S. officials to grapple with the ramifications of the atomic age, and both played a role in developing the Truman

\textsuperscript{11} See John Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of Containment} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 97 for an example.

\textsuperscript{12} Thompson, \textit{The Hawk and the Dove} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 114.
administration’s approach to the bomb during a formative period of U.S. nuclear strategy. Kennan, for instance, provided analysis of U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations to James Byrnes and George Marshall throughout their tenures as secretary of state and served as the chief U.S. representative regarding Anglo-American-Canadian nuclear energy sharing. As a director of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, Nitze spearheaded Washington’s first effort to study the effects of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and he was one of the first U.S. statesmen to advocate building civil defense networks throughout the United States.

Kennan and Nitze also advised the Truman administration on one of the most important decisions regarding U.S. nuclear strategy and policy during the Cold War: whether or not to build a hydrogen bomb. Although Nitze and Acheson were not persuaded by Kennan’s arguments, Kennan was among the first American officials to champion unilateral U.S. restraint in the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race, and as John Gaddis explains, his ideas of minimal deterrence and no first use shaped “the strategic debates of the 1970s and 1980s.”13 The Truman administration, though, adopted the policies that Nitze advocated throughout the hydrogen bomb debate, including a total review of U.S. security policies, which eventually became NSC-68. NSC-68, moreover, influenced U.S. nuclear strategy and policy after it was approved by President Truman. NSC-68, for example, reinforced Truman’s commitment to maintaining U.S. nuclear superiority and his skepticism that a U.S.-Soviet atomic energy agreement could be negotiated; it debunked Kennan’s assertion that the United States should implement a

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“declaratory policy” of non-American first use; and it moved the Truman administration away from reliance on nuclear weapons by bolstering U.S. conventional strength.

By studying Kennan and Nitze throughout the Truman administration, this thesis also examines the factors which allowed Kennan and Nitze to shape U.S. nuclear policy. This thesis will demonstrate, first and foremost, that Kennan and Nitze’s personalities played a critical role in their ability to affect U.S. nuclear strategy. Although Marshall respected Kennan and granted him considerable leeway to craft U.S. foreign policy, Acheson increasingly curbed Kennan’s influence within the State Department. Acheson, for instance, disliked Kennan’s moody pessimism, his growing penchant for prophecy, his preference for predicating U.S. security policies solely upon Soviet intentions, and his tendency to inject morality and philosophy into his assessment of U.S.-Soviet relations.¹⁴ Acheson and Nitze’s personalities, however, meshed, and both doubted that Soviet experts, such as Kennan, possessed unique insights into U.S.-Soviet relations.¹⁵

This thesis, moreover, will demonstrate that Kennan’s failure to effectively work within the State Department’s bureaucracy and his inability to adapt to the politicized nature of Cold War America undermined his influence within the Truman administration. In contrast to Nitze, Kennan argued that U.S. foreign policy should be crafted by experts—who he considered regional specialists, like himself—not “amateur” politicians or the American public.¹⁶ Unlike Nitze, Kennan also did not think that his policy recommendations had to be sold to the American people, Congress, and President

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¹⁴ Beisner, Dean Acheson, 117-119
¹⁵ Ibid., 119-120; Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 70 & 95-97.
Truman. As Kennan explained in 1947, for example, he believed his job required him to represent U.S. “interest vis-à-vis foreign governments” and his “specialty was defense of U.S. interests against others, not against our own representatives.”

This thesis will also build on existing historiography by discussing several issues that John Gaddis, Nicholas Thompson, and David Callahan disregard: it explains, for instance, Kennan and Nitze’s views on atomic diplomacy, their respective visions of a U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement, their estimate of how long the U.S. atomic monopoly would last, their support of efforts to limit the effectiveness of a nuclear strike against the United States, and their analysis of U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. Finally, this thesis will challenge the notion that Kennan was a realist, as his policy prescriptions in the wake of the Soviet Union’s atomic test were driven by his overwhelming moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb.

Chapter one traces the evolution of Kennan and Nitze’s nuclear thinking throughout 1945 and 1946. Contrary to what existing historiography suggests, this thesis demonstrates that Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons were almost identical in the aftermath of World War II. Kennan and Nitze, for instance, were opposed to sharing U.S. atomic “secrets” with the Soviet Union and in contrast to Dean Acheson; both doubted that an international atomic energy agreement could be negotiated. Kennan and Nitze also believed that an effective international atomic energy treaty would require a reliable means of on-site inspection, which they argued the Kremlin would never agree to. Kennan and Nitze, moreover, rejected Bernard Brodie’s notion that the fission bomb

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18 See Mayers, George Kennan, for an example.
was an “absolute weapon,” but they accepted Brodie’s assertion that the atomic age required the Truman administration to rethink traditional military strategy and tactics.

Chapter one also reveals that unlike Secretary of State James Byrnes, Kennan claimed that the Truman administration should not engage in atomic diplomacy. Kennan and Nitze, finally, were dedicated to building a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal, and both supported efforts to limit the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States.

Chapter two discusses Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons throughout Kennan’s tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, which lasted from the spring of 1947 until January 1, 1950. This chapter reveals that prior to the Soviet atomic test; Kennan and Nitze were committed to maintaining the U.S. atomic monopoly and building a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal. Both, moreover, continued to doubt that an effective international atomic energy treaty could be negotiated, as both believed that the Kremlin would never allow on-site inspections. This chapter, however, demonstrates that in the wake of the Soviet nuclear test, Kennan’s nuclear convictions fundamentally changed. The shift in Kennan’s nuclear thinking, ultimately, can be attributed to two factors: first and foremost, Kennan had decided in September 1949 to leave the State Department by the end of the year, which allowed him to push his policy prescriptions throughout the State Department without the need to cultivate political capital with Acheson. Kennan, though, was also morally appalled by the prospects of thermonuclear warfare, which also shaped his policy recommendations. Unlike Kennan, Nitze was the nuclear realist: he did not dwell on the moral ramifications of the hydrogen bomb; he concentrated on whether it could be built. This chapter, moreover, will reveal that
although Kennan’s arguments for minimal deterrence and a unilateral U.S. moratorium on thermonuclear research should have been more seriously considered, Nitze, ultimately, persuaded Acheson to support the H-bomb, as he accounted for the impact of domestic politics and the likelihood of Soviet compliance with an atomic energy treaty.

Chapter three follows the evolution of Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons throughout Nitze’s tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, which lasted from January 1, 1950 until President Dwight Eisenhower took office. This chapter primarily focuses on Nitze’s work on NSC-68, specifically his prescriptions for U.S. nuclear strategy and Kennan’s reaction to NSC-68. This chapter will prove that Kennan and Nitze disagreed on several nuclear issues throughout the latter years of the Truman administration: Nitze, unlike Kennan, believed that a preponderance of nuclear weapons, especially a thermonuclear monopoly, would grant the United States political leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, which would allow the Truman administration to engage in atomic diplomacy to achieve political objectives. Throughout NSC-68, Nitze also rejected Kennan’s assertion that the Truman administration should adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, and that it should reopen U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. Contrary to Kennan’s analysis, Nitze, in order to shock the Truman administration into action, also predicted that if the Kremlin calculated that it could destroy U.S. retaliatory capabilities or inflict a crippling blow against the United States, Moscow would be tempted to launch a nuclear first-strike. Chapter three, moreover, demonstrates that Kennan and Nitze were dedicated to an “action policy” of non-American first use, as both opposed efforts to unleash the U.S. nuclear arsenal during the
Korean War. Chapter three, finally, will discuss Nitze’s continued commitment to civil defense.

This thesis, ultimately, argues that Nitze was a shrewder strategist than Kennan. Contrary to Kennan’s analysis, Stalin’s quest for thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed, and the Truman administration would have been foolish to adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. As Nitze explained, rather, by maintaining the appearance that the Truman administration would respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe with nuclear weapons, the United States generated a powerful deterrent to Soviet aggression. Also, NSC-68 and NSC-112, which were written by Nitze during his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, had a greater impact on U.S. military strategy and nuclear policy than NSC-20/4, which Kennan completed in the summer of 1948. Although President Truman initially resisted the conventional buildup that NSC-68 advocated, the Korean War persuaded Truman to implement Nitze’s recommendations. After NSC-112 was approved by Truman in July 1951, moreover, it dictated Washington’s approach to U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations throughout the remainder of Truman’s presidency. Ultimately, Nitze, not Kennan, shaped the Truman administration’s stance on U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations, U.S. military strategy, and U.S. nuclear policy during the final years of the Truman administration.
CHAPTER ONE: MAINTAINING AMERICA’S “PREPONDERANCE OF STRENGTH”

In late October 1943, Paul Nitze and George Kennan boarded a train bound for Washington, D.C. Kennan was on the final leg of an exhausting five-day journey from Portugal to Washington. At the time, Kennan was working for the U.S. Foreign Service, and he was in the process of negotiating U.S. access to Portugal’s Azores islands. Kennan, however, had become fed up with Washington’s approach to the negotiations—as he would throughout his career—and he was about to present his argument that the Roosevelt administration should request the use of Portugal’s Azores bases while openly acknowledging “Portuguese sovereignty over all Portuguese possessions, including [the] Azores,” to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George Marshall, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and, eventually, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nitze, however, was returning to Washington to complete his work with the Foreign Economic Administration, which oversaw the procurement of raw materials throughout Latin America for the Allied war effort.¹⁹

Although Kennan and Nitze had never previously met, they quickly struck up a conversation that sparked a lifelong friendship. The two discussed southern European politics and, more importantly, the dangers of Soviet communism. As Kennan had argued throughout World War II, he warned Nitze that the Grand Alliance would quickly unravel after Nazi Germany was defeated, and he claimed that Moscow’s “relentless search for security would soon lead to confrontation” between the United States and the Soviet

Union. Nitze later recalled Kennan as “charming, witty, and urbane,” and, unlike the majority of the State Department, he found Kennan’s argument persuasive.²⁰

Kennan and Nitze were among the first U.S. officials to call for a firmer policy toward the Soviet Union. They were, however, also two of the first U.S. statesmen to grapple with the ramifications of the atomic age, and both advised the Truman administration on how it should integrate the bomb into U.S. foreign policy and U.S. military strategy. Nitze, for instance, spearheaded the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey’s analysis of the bomb’s effects at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Kennan provided analysis of U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations to Secretary of State James Byrnes. Kennan also attempted to persuade the Truman administration that total war between two nuclear states, which he expected the Soviet Union to soon become, was inherently suicidal and unlike Byrnes, he rejected the notion that the Truman administration should engage in atomic diplomacy.

Despite Kennan and Nitze’s friendship, though, their personalities were radically different, which greatly impacted their ability to shape U.S. nuclear strategy and policy. Unlike Nitze, Kennan had become one of the State Department’s first Soviet specialists, and he argued that U.S. foreign policy should be crafted by regional experts, not amateur politicians. Nitze, however, preferred to quantify problems, largely due to his training as an economist. In contrast to Kennan, moreover, Nitze was not profoundly affected by criticism or rejection, which allowed him to operate more effectively within the State Department’s bureaucracy.

While countless historians have studied Kennan and Nitze, there has yet to be a comprehensive account of their views on nuclear weapons throughout 1945 and 1946. Existing historiography, moreover, fails to reveal how similar Kennan and Nitze’s policy prescriptions were throughout 1945 and 1946, and it does not demonstrate that in contrast to the latter years of Truman’s presidency, Kennan’s recommendations meshed with the Truman administration’s established policies. Kennan and Nitze, for instance, rejected Bernard Brodie’s thesis that the atomic bomb was an “absolute weapon” and like the Truman administration, they opposed any effort to share U.S. atomic “secrets” with the Soviet Union. Kennan and Nitze were also committed to preserving the U.S. atomic monopoly, and they urged the Truman administration to build a powerful retaliatory nuclear arsenal and to take steps to limit the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States. Nitze and Kennan, ultimately, argued that maintaining America’s “preponderance of strength” was the safest way to ensure U.S. security.

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George Kennan and Paul Nitze’s early experiences shaped their initial perspectives of the Soviet Union, their approach to crafting U.S. foreign policy, and the way they would later work within the Policy Planning Staff. George Frost Kennan was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on February 16, 1904. Kennan’s mother died soon after childbirth and his sister, Jeanette, quickly filled the void—despite being only two years older than her brother. Kennan also spent countless isolated hours throughout his childhood—as he would throughout his career—reading, writing, and thinking deeply about the world around him. At age twelve, he enrolled in John’s Military Academy in
Delafield, Wisconsin, where he continued to experience profound loneliness, as he
recalled not having any close friends. He then proceeded to Princeton University.\footnote{Walter Hixson, \textit{George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 2.}

While Kennan enjoyed the intellectual challenge of Princeton, he remembered
experiencing a “crude ostracism” from the university’s social clubs. In addition, he felt
“hopelessly and crudely Midwestern” among the East Coast elite, which reinforced his
belief that he was an outsider, which would become a theme throughout Kennan’s life.
Upon graduation, however, Kennan decided to pursue a field in international politics, as
he “feared falling into some sort of occupational rut.” Kennan joined the U.S. Foreign
Service in 1926, and he later recalled his decision as the “first and last sensible decision I
was ever deliberately to make about my occupation.”\footnote{Ibid., 3; George Kennan, \textit{Memoirs 1925-1950} (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1967), 17.}

Paul Henry Nitze was born on January 16, 1907. Nitze’s grandfather moved from
Germany to the United States after the U.S. Civil War, and the Nitze family had been
American citizens ever since. Paul became fluent in German as a child, and he was
always extremely proud of his heritage. He once stated that “I am all German. I am proud
of being German. There is nothing non-German about me.” Nitze graduated from the
University of Chicago High School at the age of fifteen, and he decided to attend
Hotchkiss preparatory school in Connecticut. At Hotchkiss, however, Nitze was
constantly getting into trouble. He committed so many school infractions, in fact, that he
was eventually “sequestered”—the school’s highest form of punishment. He later
recalled that “the main thing on my mind [at Hotchkiss] was my peers and having fun
with them.” Despite struggling academically, Nitze proceeded to Harvard University in the fall of 1924.23

In contrast to Kennan, who struggled to fit in at Princeton, Nitze’s primary focus at Harvard continued to be socialization and recreation, not his academic career. Nitze later recalled that “in those days grades didn’t count. Harvard was more like a European University. You just tried to absorb wisdom. We all drank too much, had girls, and a rich, glorious life.” Nitze even skipped a final exam in an economics course, which was his major, to attend a party in Newport, Rhode Island. He received a zero in the class. Nitze also met Charles Bohlen—who, like Kennan, would become one of the leading Soviet experts within the Truman administration—at the prestigious Porcellian club, whose members were chosen for their wit, sense of adventure, and, most importantly, their ability to drink.24

While Nitze’s priority was never academics at Harvard, he eventually graduated with a degree in economics, which influenced the way he approached problems throughout his career. As Kennan later explained:

“Paul was in one sense like a child. He was willing to believe only what he could see before him. He felt comfortable with something only if it could be statistically expressed. He loved anything that could be reduced to numbers. He was mesmerized by them. He was not content until he could reduce a problem to numbers. He’d have a pad before him, and when he wrote down the numbers, it was with such passion and intensity that his pen would sometimes drive right through the paper.”25

Despite his father’s career, however, Nitze was never drawn to academia. Nitze, ultimately, respected academics’ intelligence, but he believed “they were having no

23 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 11-14.
24 Ibid., 15-17.
impact upon the things that were going on in the world that seemed to me to be the most tragic and important.” Nitze, instead, chose to “get into the world of practical affairs as rapidly as possible.”

After graduation, Nitze became a cost accountant for his brother-in-laws’ factory in Philadelphia. Nitze, however, quickly grew tired of accounting, so he pursued a career in investment banking. After meeting Clarence Dillon—the head of the investment firm Dillon, Reed and Company—Nitze took a position with the firm in October 1929, only a few weeks before the stock market collapsed. Although Wall Street was hit hard by the Great Depression, Nitze not only had a high paying job throughout the 1930s, he soon became Dillon’s favorite employee. Dillon also had an enormous impact on Nitze’s career: Nitze recalled that he “had never seen anybody who had a more clear, analytical mind combined with this radical and brutal decisiveness in taking the course of action which flows from the analysis.” As David Callahan explains, Nitze emulated Dillon’s “style with similar results” throughout his tenure in government.

As World War II erupted in Europe in 1939, Nitze left Dillon, Read and Company, despite his mentor’s adamant protests, to pursue graduate studies at Harvard University. Nitze never intended to acquire a graduate degree, though, as he only spent two semesters at Harvard. He did, however, hope to gain an intellectual framework he could utilize to comprehend contemporary events, specifically the outbreak of World War II in Europe and Asia. Nitze studied sociology, religion, politics, and for the first time, he grappled with Soviet communism. Nitze, for example, took classes with Pitirim Sorokin,

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26 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 15-17.
27 Ibid., 18-23 & 27.
a Russian émigré who had fled the Soviet Union soon after the Bolsheviks seized power, who taught Nitze that authoritarianism, whether communist or fascist, posed a mortal danger to western democracies. Nitze also studied with George Pettee, a “political thinker,” who argued that the Soviet Union was an inherently aggressive, revolutionary state whose leaders’ power hinged upon internal repression. While Sorokin and Pettee profoundly affected Nitze’s thinking, especially regarding the dangers of Soviet communism, he concluded “that the people at Harvard didn’t really know more about this than I did. They knew a lot of background, a lot about the structure of the communist party, a lot about the theory of the communist party, and a lot about what people had written about fascism, but when you got down to the inwardness of what was going on, I came to conclusions that they weren’t really that good.” Although Nitze, ultimately, respected intellectuals, he never believed that regional specialists, such as Kennan, were uniquely qualified to analyze international relations or U.S. foreign policy.  

Nitze returned to Wall Street after two semesters at Harvard, as he “preferred the realm of action over the realm of thought,” but he was soon summoned to Washington D.C. On June 22, 1940, Nazi tanks rolled into Paris, and the White House also announced that James Forrestal, the former president of Dillon, Read and Company, would be joining the Roosevelt administration as an economic adviser. Forrestal’s task was to oversee America’s countless rearmament programs, and as David Callahan explains, he needed an aide, ideally a former “Wall Streeter,” who could “follow orders” and “was used to working the way Forrestal liked to work.” Nitze received a telegram soon after: it

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28 Ibid., 19-30.
said “BE IN WASHINGTON MONDAY MORNING. FORRESTAL.” Nitze’s lifelong career in government had begun.29

Upon joining the U.S. Foreign Service in September of 1926, Kennan became one of the first U.S. Foreign Service officers to receive specialized training in Russian affairs. Kennan mastered the Russian language and was trained extensively in Russian culture and history. Kennan’s perspective of the Soviet Union was also dramatically shaped by his mentor—Robert F. Kelley, the head of the State Department’s European Affairs division—who stressed that the Soviet Union was a “pariah regime” which, ultimately, aimed to conquer the world. Although Kennan served in a variety of locations throughout Europe during the late 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union remained his primary interest.30

On November 17, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. Roosevelt also appointed William Bullitt, who had served the Wilson administration as a Russian expert, to serve as the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. Bullitt, soon after, asked Kennan to act as his personal aide and interpreter in Moscow, and Kennan accepted the assignment, which he described as “a thunder-stroke of good luck.” Bullitt and Kennan, therefore, established the first U.S. embassy in the Soviet Union, which solidified Kennan’s credentials as one of the State Department’s leading Soviet experts. Despite his new position, however, Kennan’s views on the Soviet Union did not shift: he later stated that “never—neither then nor at

29 Ibid., 31-32.
30 Hixson, George Kennan, 6.
any other date—did I consider the Soviet Union a fit ally or associate, actual or potential, for this country.”

Shortly after Kennan arrived in the Soviet Union, Stalin initiated a series of deadly purges to eliminate any potential political opponents—real or imagined. Kennan witnessed firsthand the sheer terror that ravaged Moscow, and he quickly determined that Stalin did not care for “principles, ideals [or] human lives.” In addition, as tensions continued to escalate in Europe throughout the late 1930s, Kennan attempted to convince his colleagues in the State Department that the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany, posed the primary threat to U.S. interests. Kennan later admitted, however, that “those of us who served in Moscow were not quick enough to understand the whole Nazi phenomenon, because we couldn’t imagine that there could be any regime as nasty as the one with which we were confronted.” After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Kennan acknowledged the advantages of extending economic and military aid to the U.S.S.R. He insisted, however, that the Roosevelt administration should not associate itself politically or ideologically with the Soviet Union, as it would provide “the German war effort a gratuitous and sorely needed aura of morality” because Stalin’s regime was “widely feared” and “detested”—even by its own people. As John Gaddis explains, though, Kennan “certainly believed that Germany posed a greater threat than the U.S.S.R. to the balance of power in Europe, and hence to the security interests of the United States.”

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31 Ibid; Gaddis, George Kennan, 73.
32 Hixson, George Kennan, 11-18; Gaddis, George Kennan, 142-145.
Kennan and Nitze’s early experiences played a fundamental role in shaping their perspectives of the Soviet Union, their approach to crafting U.S. foreign policy, and the way they would later operate within the Policy Planning Staff. Kennan, for instance, believed that regional specialists possessed unique insights into U.S.-Soviet relations. Nitze, however, preferred to quantify problems, rather than rely on experts’ analysis. Kennan’s exposure to the brutality of Stalin’s regime and Nitze’s graduate studies at Harvard University also convinced Kennan and Nitze that although a U.S.-Soviet alliance was necessary to defeat Nazi Germany, both doubted that it could be maintained in the wake of World War II.

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Despite their friendship, Kennan and Nitze’s personalities were radically different. As Nicholas Thompson explains, “If Nitze treated wounds as scratches, Kennan felt scratches as wounds.” Unlike Kennan, Nitze was not profoundly affected by failure or rejection, which allowed him to shape U.S. foreign policy and military strategy throughout much of the Cold War. Kennan, however, was unable to adapt to the politicized nature of Cold War America. While Kennan was a brilliant writer and demonstrated an “uncanny ability to predict many of the great events of his lifetime,” such as his predictions that the failure to reunify Germany and the decision to create NATO would cement the division of Europe, “minor slights sent Kennan into deep despair.” Kennan, unlike Nitze, could not brush off criticism or rejection, which
fundamentally undermined his ability to influence U.S. foreign policy and military strategy throughout the latter years of the Truman administration.\textsuperscript{33}

Nitze’s first task in government was with the Office of Inter-American Affairs. He was assigned to coordinate the acquisition of raw materials—such as zinc, copper, and manganese—from Latin America to assist the Allied war effort. Nitze, however, was a man of action, and he quickly grew tired of the slow bureaucratic nature of the assignment. Despite his brewing frustration, he continued to serve in the Office of Inter-American Affairs—although it was absorbed by the Board of Economic Warfare in 1942 and by the Foreign Economic Administration in September of 1943. In the fall of 1944, however, Colonel Guido Perera, a family friend, approached Nitze about working for the newly formed U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. Not long afterward, Nitze got into an argument with his boss, Leo Crowley, over a group of people Nitze “borrowed” from elsewhere in the State Department to help on a project. Nitze, ultimately, resigned out of protest, despite Crowley’s threat that “if you do this [resign] you will never again get a job in a Democratic administration.” Within two hours, Nitze had a job with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey.\textsuperscript{34}

The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey was created to assess the impact of Allied strategic bombing in Germany, specifically by concentrating on the effectiveness of Allied aerial assaults directed against German industry. Washington was also eager to analyze the results, as strategic bombing was still a relatively new military concept. Nitze became one of the Survey’s nine directors, and he was assigned to the Ball Bearing and

\textsuperscript{33} Thompson, \textit{The Hawk and the Dove}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 10-13; Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 21-38.
Machine Tool Division, which was later renamed the Equipment Division. Nitze’s work with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey began almost immediately after the surrender of Nazi Germany in May of 1945. Despite touring Berlin and Hamburg, which had been devastated by Allied aerial assaults, Nitze quickly determined that Allied bombing had done little to slow German wartime production. Nitze, in fact, stated that “not one end item of German war production had been delayed a single day by virtue of the attacks on the ball bearing plants.”

In June 1945, Nitze was summoned to Washington. Having already established himself as one of the Survey’s elite analysts, Nitze met with General George Marshall, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, and the Pentagon’s Joint Target Group on June 19 to plan the Allied aerial offensive against Japan. As Nitze would throughout his career, he argued that U.S. bombers should concentrate on Japan’s industry and infrastructure—specifically oil, steel, and transportation—not civilian population centers. He claimed that “the destruction of one of these segments [oil, steel, or transportation] alone is sufficient to completely disrupt” Japan’s war effort. Nitze justified his argument by stating that German war planners, specifically Albert Speer, “were of the opinion that it would have been absolutely impossible for them to disperse either their chemical or oil plants or their power facilities or their steel or their transportation.” Nitze also advocated blockading Japan and initiating an “overwhelming attack on the Japanese rail network and on coastwise shipping.” Nitze predicted that his prescribed course of action would bring about Japan’s capitulation by November 1945. U.S. military officials, though, were not persuaded by

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35 Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 38-46.
Nitze’s argument, and the United States continued to concentrate Allied bombing on Japan’s population centers. More importantly, though, the United States tested the world’s first atomic bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico in July 1945, which made the debates over U.S. strategic bombing targets increasingly irrelevant.36

As Nitze demonstrated in the aftermath of his argument with Crowley, he did not dwell on rejection. Nitze’s position with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, moreover, not only allowed him to develop expertise regarding strategic bombing, it put him in a unique position to spearhead Washington’s first effort to grapple with the effects of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unlike Nitze, however, Kennan struggled to ignore criticism, especially when his portrayal of Soviet intentions was questioned. While Kennan’s inability to brush off criticism did not play a critical role in his ability to shape U.S. foreign policy prior to Dean Acheson’s succession of George Marshall as secretary of state, Acheson increasingly challenged Kennan’s analysis, which eventually convinced Kennan to leave the State Department.

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According to Michihiko Hachiya, the director of Hiroshima Communications Hospital, the morning of August 6, 1945 was “still, warm, and beautiful.” Unbeknownst to Hachiya, however, it was all about to change. At 2:45 AM the Enola Gay took off from a U.S. base on Tinian Island and headed west toward Hiroshima. At 8:15 AM, the Enola Gay’s crew opened the bomb bay doors and unleashed its deadly cargo—an atomic bomb. With a sudden flash of light much of Hiroshima was instantly destroyed and over 105,000 people were incinerated. Three days later, the United States dropped another

36 Ibid., 46-49; Thompson, The Hawk and the Dove, 12-22.
atomic bomb over Nagasaki; over 35,000 people were killed. Soon after, Japan surrendered to the United States.\footnote{Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 50; Thompson, \textit{The Hawk and the Dove}, 43.}

On August 8, 1945, the current ambassador to the Soviet Union, Averell Harriman, and George Kennan met with Joseph Stalin. While the primary topic of conversation was the Soviet Union’s decision to join the war against Japan, a discussion of the implications of the U.S. atomic bomb quickly ensued. Kennan explained that although Stalin’s “words were few,” they were “reasonable and sensible.” Kennan claimed, moreover, that “an unforewarned visitor would never have guessed what depths of calculation, ambition, love of power, jealously, cruelty, and sly vindictiveness lurked behind this unpretentious façade.” Stalin’s words were indeed “few:” he stated that although the atomic bomb would be a “very expensive” and “very difficult problem” for the Kremlin to “work out,” the atomic bomb would likely provide the “Japanese” the “pretext” they needed to “replace the present government with one which would be qualified to undertake surrender.” Stalin also agreed with Harriman that “if the Allies could keep” the atomic bomb and “apply it for peaceful purposes it would be a great thing.” Stalin, in fact, stated that it “would mean the end of war and aggressors,” but he warned Harriman that the “secret [of the atomic bomb] would have to be well kept.”\footnote{Gaddis, \textit{George Kennan}, 207; David Holloway, \textit{Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy 1939-1956} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 128.}

Although there is no evidence of Nitze’s immediate response to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kennan’s initial reaction, as Gaddis explains, to “Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been a jumble—relief that the war was over” and “regret at the destruction employed to bring this about.” While it should be noted that Stalin never
requested U.S. assistance to construct a fission bomb, Kennan, like the majority of the Truman administration, was dedicated to preserving the U.S. atomic monopoly, and he firmly opposed any American effort to aid the Kremlin’s quest to acquire fission capabilities. He recalled that “his first reaction” after meeting with Stalin was “Oh God, if we’ve got something like this, let’s be sure that the Stalin regime doesn’t get it.” Kennan also warned Harriman that “it would be a tragic folly for us to hand over the secrets of atomic energy production to the Russian,” and he informed James Byrnes, who had recently been appointed secretary of state, that

> “there is nothing—I repeat nothing—in the history of the Soviet regime which could justify us in assuming that the men who are now in power in Russia, or even those who have chances of assuming power within the foreseeable future, would hesitate for a moment to apply this power against us if by doing so they thought that they might materially improve their own power position in the world.”

While it should be noted that President Truman never seriously considered giving away U.S. atomic “secrets,” Secretary of War Henry Stimson, for instance, proposed a “covenant” between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. Under Stimson’s potential “covenant,” the Truman administration would only have provided the Soviet Union with scientific information dealing with the peaceful uses of atomic energy. While there is no evidence that Kennan specifically grappled with Stimson’s recommendations, there can be little doubt that he would have opposed Stimson’s proposals. He stated, for example, that it was his “profound conviction that to reveal to the Soviet Government any knowledge which might be vital to the defense of the United States,” specifically U.S. atomic “secrets, without adequate guaranties for the control of its use in the Soviet Union,” such as reliable system of on-site inspections, “would
constitute a frivolous neglect of the vital interests of our people.” While Kennan did not believe that the Soviet Union’s acquisition of the atomic bomb would imply that the Kremlin would immediately launch an atomic attack against the United States, he claimed that Moscow would wield its nuclear arsenal to further its power and undermine the U.S. international position. Kennan also stated that the Kremlin would use its atomic stockpile to increase its power at the expense of the United States—regardless of how the U.S.S.R. obtained the bomb.39

In contrast to the latter years of the Truman administration, specifically after the Soviet atomic test in August 1949, Kennan’s early views on the atomic bomb meshed with the majority of the Truman administration. Secretary of State James Byrnes, for instance, was also dedicated to preserving the U.S. atomic monopoly, and he opposed any U.S. effort in the immediate wake of World War II to negotiate an international atomic energy agreement. Byrnes, unlike Kennan, though, rejected the notion that the U.S. atomic monopoly would be short-lived, and he initially believed that the atomic bomb would provide the United States political leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. It was not until Kennan joined the National War College in April 1946, however, that he seriously grappled with the effectiveness of atomic diplomacy or how long the U.S. atomic monopoly would last.40

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On February 9, 1946, Joseph Stalin delivered an “election” speech to several thousand party, government, and military officials at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre. The address was given on the eve of the first “election” for the symbolic Supreme Soviet, and many Americans, such as columnist Walter Lippmann and James Byrnes, viewed it as an unofficial declaration of war by the Soviet Union. Stalin began his speech by congratulating the Soviet military, the communist party, and the government for achieving a tremendous victory in World War II. He also called upon the Soviet Union to begin another five-year plan, which he claimed would increase the Soviet Union’s industrial production threefold. More importantly, though, Stalin—relying on Marxist-Leninism and World War I and World War II as examples—confidently proclaimed that conflicts between “imperialist” capitalist governments were inevitable, and he warned the West that although the Soviet Union desired peace, it would be ready for “all possible contingencies.”

Upon reading Stalin’s speech, Nitze “took Stalin’s ominous references to ‘all possible contingencies’ as a military threat.” He proceeded to present his belief that the address was a “delayed declaration of war against the United States” to his old colleague—Secretary of the Navy James Forestall. Although Forestall agreed with Nitze’s analysis, he warned Nitze that the White House did not. Nitze was not deterred, however, and he took his concerns to Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, who informed Nitze that he was “just seeing mirages” and “hobgoblins under the bed.”

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Forestall did not realize, though, that Kennan’s Long Telegram was about to change everything.\footnote{Ibid.}

Kennan had warned the Truman administration throughout World War II that the Grand Alliance would quickly unravel after the defeat of Nazi Germany, so he was not surprised by Stalin’s speech. Kennan, in fact, believed that Stalin’s address was so “routine” that he merely summarized it for the State Department. The State Department, however, was puzzled by Kennan’s self-imposed silence, which was extremely uncharacteristic. Foggy Bottom, therefore, “asked for an interpretive analysis of what we may expect in the way of future implementation of these announced policies.” Eager to exert influence within the Truman administration, Kennan seized the opportunity and authored the Long Telegram, which was a 5,000 word explanation of the Soviet Union’s behavior.

The Long Telegram claimed that Moscow’s policies were designed to justify its domestic legitimacy, as Stalin needed an external enemy to maintain his regime’s internal repression. Kennan also argued the Kremlin believed it lived within an “antagonistic capitalist encirclement” and that peaceful coexistence with the West was impossible. The Long Telegram, however, stated that the Kremlin had no intention of invading Western Europe or starting a war with the United States, but, rather, the Soviet Union posed a political threat to the United States, which would primarily take the form of political subversion via local communist parties in Western Europe. Kennan explained, moreover, that the Kremlin would only participate in international organizations if it furthered Soviet interests—which were ultimately to increase the Soviet Union’s power vis-à-vis...
the West—which profoundly influenced his early analysis of the prospects of an international atomic energy agreement. Also, unlike “Hitlerite Germany,” Kennan stated that Kremlin “does not work by fixed plans. It does not take unnecessary risks.” While Moscow was “impervious to logic of reason,” it was “highly sensitive to logic of force.” Kennan, ultimately, implored the Truman administration to maintain western solidarity and to contain the Soviet Union’s expansionist tendencies through measures short of war.43

As Kennan later acknowledged, the timing of the Long Telegram was crucial: “six months earlier this message would have probably been received in the department of State with raised eyebrows and lips pursed in disapproval. Six months later, it would probably have sounded redundant.”44 By 1946, the Truman administration was searching for an explanation of the Kremlin’s foreign policy. Although the President Truman initially hoped to cooperate with the Soviet Union in the wake of World War II, Washington had become convinced that a new approach to U.S.-Soviet relations was necessary, as it had become increasingly clear that the Kremlin had no intention of allowing Eastern Europe the right to self-determination. As Wilson Miscamble explains, “Kennan’s message helped construct the intellectual supports for the already developing disposition of firmness towards the Soviet Union.”45 James Forrestal was particularly impressed by the Long Telegram, and he circulated it throughout Truman’s cabinet.46

43 Kennan, Memoirs 1925-1950, 547-559.
44 Ibid., 295.
46 Ibid.
Forrestal also arranged for Kennan to take a position at the newly founded National War College in Washington D.C. in April of 1946.

It should also be stressed that although Kennan urged the United States to abandon its isolationist sentiments and assume a position of world leadership in the wake of World War II, he had “little faith in the ability of the United States, as a democracy, to conduct an activist foreign policy.” He explained that democracies—unlike authoritarian regimes, which Kennan believed were better suited for international relations—lacked the “patience and freedom of action to conduct an effective diplomacy.” Throughout Kennan’s life, he advocated government by an “intelligent, determined ruling minority, responsible in a general sense to the people at large rather than in a direct sense to groups of politicians and lobbyists or to voters in individual districts.” Kennan also argued that U.S. foreign policy should be crafted by experts—who he considered regional specialists, like himself, who spoke the region’s language and knew its history, culture, and politics—not “amateur” politicians or the American public. Nitze, however, adamantly disagreed with Kennan’s belief that regional specialists possessed unique insights into U.S. foreign policy, which led to profound disagreements between Kennan and Nitze in the wake of the Soviet Union’s successful atomic test.

Although Kennan and Nitze were skeptical that the Grand Alliance could be maintained in the wake of World War II, the Truman administration did not initially heed

47 Hixson, George Kennan, x-xi.
48 Ibid., 9.
49 Ibid., 7.
50 Mayers, George Kennan, 5.
their advice. Stalin’s “election” speech and the Long Telegram, however, convinced the Truman administration that a new approach to U.S.-Soviet relations was necessary.

Kennan’s analysis of Soviet intentions and his prescriptions for U.S. military strategy in the Long Telegram, moreover, remained largely consistent throughout the remainder of Truman’s presidency. He continued to claim, for instance, that the Soviet Union primarily posed a political threat, as he argued that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States. In contrast to Nitze, Kennan’s commitment to elite-driven foreign policy, however, failed to seriously consider domestic politics and also undermined his ability to shape U.S. foreign policy throughout the latter years of the Truman administration.

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Upon learning of the destruction of Hiroshima, Bernard Brodie informed his wife that all “previous work concerning the effect of technology upon warfare was obsolete.” Although Brodie had only been a member of Yale University’s faculty for five days, by June 1946 he had published a work, entitled *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*, which earned him the title of the first, “both in time and distinction,” American nuclear strategist. By 1946, however, Brodie had already established a reputation as a strategic thinker, largely due to his research regarding the relationship between newly invented military technology, such as the machine gun in World War I, and military strategy. *The Absolute Weapon*, ultimately, was one of the first scholarly
attempts to wrestle with the impact of the atomic age, and it had an enormous impact on George Kennan and Paul Nitze’s early nuclear convictions.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{The Absolute Weapon} was a series of essays compiled and edited by Brodie. Among others, it included Brodie’s essays entitled “War in the Atomic Age” and “The Implications for Military Policy.” Brodie’s thesis was that “the atomic bomb” was “not just another and more destructive weapon to be added to an already long list. It is something which threatens to make the rest of the list relatively unimportant.” Brodie claimed, in short, that the bomb’s unprecedented ability to inflict instantaneous destruction, without warning, made the fission bomb a unique and “absolute” weapon. Brodie also argued that unlike conventional weapons, there was no defense against an atomic bomb. He stated, in fact, that attempts to draw parallels between the fission bomb and “any military invention of the past” were “ridiculous.” Brodie also explained that existing military technology, specifically long-range bombers, made preemptive nuclear strikes deep into the United States or the Soviet Union possible—without attaining traditional military prerequisites, such as forward operating bases, unchallengeable control of the air and sea, or technological superiority. Brodie claimed, moreover, that a preponderance of atomic weapons would not guarantee U.S. security, as “a specific number of bombs will be useful to the side using it, and anything beyond that will be a luxury.” Brodie, however, did not specify how many atomic bombs would be “useful”, as he stated “that the specific number…is now wholly impossible to determine.”\textsuperscript{52}

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Brodie also predicted that “other powers besides Britain and Canada will possess the ability to produce [atomic] bombs in quantity within” five to ten years. Brodie not only cited the American scientific community’s support for this argument, he highlighted the plethora of raw fissionable materials throughout the globe, to which he claimed the Soviet Union had access. Brodie concluded, therefore, that “thus far the chief purpose of our [the U.S.] military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.” That being said, Brodie’s essays did not engender confidence that nuclear warfare could be indefinitely avoided: he argued that even if both sides initially refrained from unleashing their nuclear arsenals, “once hostilities broke out, the pressures to use the bomb might swiftly reach unbearable proportions.” Brodie doubted, moreover, that nuclear warfare could be limited—he stated that “the atomic bomb will be introduced into” a conflict “only on a gigantic scale. No belligerent would be stupid enough…to use only a few bombs. The initial stages of the attack will certainly involve hundreds of bombs, more likely thousands.”

While Brodie doubted that states with fission capabilities could resist unleashing their nuclear arsenals in future wars, he stressed the need to build a powerful atomic deterrent. Brodie explained that “it is most probable that if war comes we [the United States] will receive the first blow rather than deliver it.” The Truman administration, therefore, could not depend on a prolonged mobilization period, as it traditionally had, before it mobilized for war. Brodie explained that without the ability to retaliate instantaneously, the United States would tempt potential belligerents to launch a

53 Ibid., 76-86.
preemptive nuclear strike against the United States. Brodie’s solution was to continue building long range bombers and a potent nuclear arsenal, which would allow the Truman administration to retaliate swiftly. Brodie urged the United States, moreover, to separate its nuclear stockpile and bombers from its populated urban centers and industry, which he believed would be the first targets in nuclear war. Brodie, for example, advocated relocating manufacturing outside city limits. Brodie argued, ultimately, that a potent atomic arsenal—combined with the “dispersal” of industry, cities, and nuclear retaliatory capabilities—would create a powerful deterrent against a nuclear first strike.\(^5^4\)

From October until December 1945, Paul Nitze and the other members of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey examined the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which was Washington’s first official effort to evaluate the impact of the atomic bomb. Specifically, the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey was instructed to examine the physical destruction induced by the atomic bombs; the effectiveness of civil defense at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and the impact of the fission bomb on Japanese morale, community life, industry, transportation, and Tokyo’s capitulation.

While there is limited evidence to suggest that Nitze read *The Absolute Weapon* in the summer of 1946, it is clear, as Strobe Talbott explains, that he believed “his task [with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey was] to demystify the Bomb,” and “to treat it as another weapon rather than the Absolute Weapon.” Nitze, in fact, later stated that Brodie allowed himself to “get mired down in words like ‘absolute’.” Nitze, rather, explained

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 87-103.
that “I don’t believe in ‘absolute weapons.’ I think absolutist pronouncements lead to
disaster.”

Nitze, like Brodie, acknowledged the bomb’s unprecedented ability to inflict
instantaneous destruction, as he stated that “the most striking result of the atomic bombs
was the great number of casualties.” He explained, though, that the atomic bomb had
been particularly effective at Hiroshima because the attack had been a surprise: the bomb,
in fact, exploded forty-five minutes after an “all clear” had been issued, which ensured
that Hiroshima’s residents had not taken cover in underground bomb shelters. Nitze also
argued that Hiroshima’s flat terrain and densely concentrated industry and population
centers maximized the bomb’s destructive potential, as there was little separation
between Hiroshima’s commercial, residential, and industrial districts. The atomic bomb,
therefore, “wiped out” all manufacturing at Hiroshima’s center, but it left factories on the
city’s outskirts relatively unscathed. Nitze claimed, moreover, that the “atomic bomb
shattered the normal fabric of community life and disrupted the organizations for
handling the disaster.” He also emphasized the enormous damage inflicted upon
Hiroshima’s transportation system.

Unlike Brodie, though, Nitze also went to great lengths to emphasize the limited
scope of the bomb’s power: he explained, for instance, that Hiroshima’s train system was
restored to minimal operating levels by August 8—two days after the bomb had been
detonated. He also stressed that Hiroshima’s water reserve, which was protected
underground by reinforced concrete, was relatively undamaged and that electricity had

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56 U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
been restored to the remainder of the city by August 7. Nitze claimed, moreover, that “at Nagasaki the scale of destruction was greater than at Hiroshima”—as the bomb was more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima—but “the actual area destroyed was smaller because of the terrain and the point of fall of the bomb,” which had barely missed its intended target. Nitze emphasized that although the bomb’s power was “unbelievably great,” it was also “finite.” Ground-zero, for example, had been obliterated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unlike Hiroshima, though, minimal steps had been taken at Nagasaki to prepare for the attack, which greatly reduced the loss of life. Bombing sirens, for instance, had been activated in Nagasaki, which allowed 400 people—30 percent of Nagasaki’s population—to hide in underground bomb shelters. Ultimately, the civilians who took cover were unharmed by the U.S. nuclear strike, which reinforced Nitze’s growing commitment to civil defense.  

Nitze also strove to debunk Brodie’s notion that the atomic bomb was an “absolute weapon.” As Nitze had already grappled with the overwhelming devastation inflicted upon Nazi Germany by Allied conventional bombing, he drew parallels between conventional and atomic weapons. He explained, for example, that 2,100 tons of orthodox bombs delivered by 210 B-29s could deliver a blow of comparable power to the attack on Hiroshima, and he argued that 1,200 tons of bombs carried by 120 B-29s would produce a similar result as Nagasaki. Nitze acknowledged, however, that there were also fundamental differences between conventional and nuclear weapons: first and foremost, the fission bomb’s “blast effects were on a new scale,” as he estimated that fission

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increased the “destructive power of a single bomber by a factor of somewhere between 50 and 250 times, depending on the nature and size of the target.” Nitze also explained that the bomb’s ability to unleash deadly radiation made it unique, and he claimed that as much as 20 percent of the casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a result of radiation poisoning.\(^58\)

Nitze also attempted to grasp the bomb’s impact on Japanese wartime morale and Tokyo’s capitulation. He explained that “the primary reaction to the bomb was fear—uncontrolled terror,” which was “strengthened by the sheer horror of the destruction and suffering witnessed and experienced by the survivor.” Nitze claimed, moreover, that the fission bomb convinced many of Hiroshima and Nagasaki’s residents that “victory for Japan was impossible.” Nitze, though, drew sharp contrasts between the civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the rest of Japan: he explained that while 40 percent of Japanese citizens in Hiroshima and Nagasaki “reported defeatist feelings induced by the bomb,” only 28 percent of Japanese civilians outside Hiroshima and Nagasaki did. Nitze concluded, therefore, that citizens’ proximity to Hiroshima and Nagasaki greatly affected their perspective.\(^59\)

While Nitze argued that “the atomic bomb had more effect on the thinking of the Government leaders than on the morale of the rank and file of civilians outside the target area,” he did not believe “that the atomic bomb convinced the leaders who affected the peace of the necessity of surrender.” He claimed, rather, that the attacks on Hiroshima


and Nagasaki emboldened the peace faction within Japan’s government, and that the atomic bomb “permitted the [Japanese] Government to say…that no army without the weapon [the atomic bomb] could possibly resist an enemy who had it,” which allowed Tokyo to surrender while saving “face.” Ultimately, though, he stated that “it seems clear that, even without the atomic bombing attacks, air supremacy over Japan could have exerted sufficient pressure to bring about unconditional surrender and obviate the need for invasion.”

Nitze not only analyzed the impact of the atomic bomb in Japan, he also prescribed policies for the Truman administration to implement. He claimed, ultimately, that “scattered through those findings [at Hiroshima and Nagasaki] are the clues to the measures that can be taken to cut down potential loss of lives and property. These measures must be taken and initiated now.” According to Nitze, the Truman administration needed to build a credible military deterrent, which required the Truman administration to ensure that a preemptive nuclear strike against the United States would not be decisive, and that the United States could enact swift retaliation. He explained that like Japan, the United States was extremely susceptible to a nuclear attack, as it had countless densely populated cities. He argued, therefore, that the Truman administration should immediately authorize the construction of countless underground bomb shelters, as he claimed that “the most instructive fact of Nagasaki was the survival, even when near ground zero, of a few hundred people who were properly placed in the tunnel

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shelters.” He also stated that “without question, shelters can protect those who get in them against anything but a direct hit.” 61

Nitze also believed that early warning defense systems, such as bombing sirens and radar, were critical to U.S. security, as they would “ensure that a maximum number get to shelter.” Like Brodie, Nitze argued that the “dispersal” of vital industries and civil defense were crucial to limiting the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States, and he claimed those measures could deter a potential aggressor from launching a nuclear strike. He explained that “all major factories…on the” outskirts of” Hiroshima and Nagasaki “escaped serious damage.” He stated, therefore, that the “production of essential manufactured goods—civilian and military—must not be confined to a few geographically centralized plants.” 62

Nitze, like Brodie, also doubted that the U.S. atomic monopoly could be maintained indefinitely: while he failed to specifically mention the Soviet Union in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, it is clear he believed the Kremlin would acquire fission capabilities, which he feared would threaten U.S. security. He stated, for instance, that “an enemy viewing our [the U.S.] economy must not find bottlenecks which use of the atomic bomb could choke off to throttle our productive capacity,” as it would encourage a preemptive nuclear strike against the United States. Nitze acknowledged, though, that although “protective measures can substantially reduce the degree of devastation of an atomic bomb…we must accept also the fact that no defensive measures alone can protect us.” Nitze, like Brodie, argued that the Truman administration should build a powerful


62 Ibid.
nuclear retaliatory arsenal and that “it was essential that in the field of military weapons
[specifically nuclear weapons] and tactics she [the United States] be technically not
merely abreast of, but actually ahead of any potential aggressor,” as the threat of
“retaliation” would “restrain a potential aggressor.” He also claimed that “a wise military
establishment will make sure—by dispersal, concealment, protection, and constant
readiness of its forces—that no single blow or series of blows can cripple its ability to
strike back in the same way or to repel accompanying attacks from other air, ground or
sea forces.” 63

Nitze also recognized that nuclear weapons did not “eliminate the need for ground
troops, for surface vessels, [or] for air weapons,” but rather that the atomic bomb
“changed the context in which they [conventional weapons] are employed to such a
degree that radically changed equipment, training, and tactics will be required.”
Ultimately, though, like Brodie, Nitze recognized that the best way to “avoid destruction”
was to “avoid war,” which he believed would require the United States to maintain its
preponderance of military strength.64

Unlike Kennan’s Long Telegram, few government officials read the U.S.
Strategic Bombing Survey, despite the fact that Nitze mailed it to every member of
Congress. Nitze grew so frustrated with the lack of reception that he began enclosing
salmon with copies of the Strategic Bombing Survey, but that, too, failed to generate
interest. Nitze, however, was not deterred by the Strategic Bombing Survey’s limited

63 U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
64 Ibid.
impact, and he continued to urge government and private individuals to implement his policy prescriptions. Nitze, in fact, was so committed to civil defense that he built an extensive bomb shelter, complete with emergency provisions, at his nineteen-hundred-acre estate in Maryland. When a friend mocked the shelter, Nitze replied “I want the Nitze children to be saved so that they can continue the human race.” As Strobe Talbott explains, Nitze was not “joking.” Nitze also implored Robert Moses, a city planner in New York City, to build bomb shelters in all newly constructed buildings in New York. Moses, though, was not persuaded: he told Nitze that his suggestion was “mad—absolutely mad.” He also warned Nitze that “nobody will pay any attention to that.”

Nitze was also disheartened by the rapid demobilization of the U.S. military in the wake of World War II: he warned James Forestall that “the country was going back to bed at an alarming rate.” Despite his initial shock at the rapidity of U.S. demobilization, though, Nitze reluctantly acknowledged that his policy prescriptions had been ignored, as he stated that the “issue was not whether one group or another was right about what the impact of these weapons [nuclear bombs] upon military affairs was, but the attitude was to ‘forget the whole darn thing and let’s get back to normalcy’.” As historian Gregg Herken explains, Nitze, therefore, concluded that because of “the rapid disintegration of the nation’s mammoth military machine, and the postwar mood of the citizenry…the temporary mainstay of America’s defense would necessarily be its atomic arsenal.” As would become glaringly obvious throughout the latter years of the Truman

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65 Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 64-65; Herken, Counsels of War, 45-47; Talbott, Master of the Game, 39.
administration, though, Nitze maintained reservations about wedding U.S. security policies to the bomb.66

In conclusion, while Nitze agreed with Brodie that the atomic age required the Truman administration to rethink traditional military strategy and tactics, he did not believe that the atomic bomb was an “absolute weapon.” Nitze, rather, went to great lengths to debunk Brodie’s thesis: Nitze, for instance, quantified the damage inflicted upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki in conventional bombing terms, and he stressed that civil defense and early warning radar systems would be crucial to limiting the effectiveness of a nuclear strike against the United States. As Kennan would later argue, Nitze also claimed that although atomic weapons were incredibly powerful, they did not negate the need for U.S. conventional strength.

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Kennan primarily lectured on military-political issues pertaining to Soviet-American relations at the National War College, which was a midcareer educational establishment for Army, Navy, and Foreign Service officers. Throughout his tenure at the National War College, Kennan was determined to come to grips with the ramifications of the atomic age, and he maintained a diary of every book he read. Kennan, for example, studied Bernard Brodie’s book The Absolute Weapon, which strongly influenced his views on nuclear weapons. Kennan, like Brodie and Nitze, did not question the necessity of maintaining the U.S. atomic monopoly or building America’s nuclear stockpile. He was, however, strongly opposed to a policy of American first use, as he argued that the United States should only employ atomic bombs in retaliation to a nuclear strike against

66 Herken, Counsels of War, 45-47.
the United States or its allies. He accepted, therefore, that “our temporary [atomic]
monopoly is thus not much use to us,” barring its use as a powerful deterrent to Soviet
aggression, “as far as actual employment of weapons is concerned.”

Throughout his lectures, Kennan stressed the need to integrate military and
political objectives in future wars, and he strove to debunk the notion that future conflicts
would resemble the wars of the recent past. He argued that unlike the American Civil
War and the World Wars, total victory would elude the United States in any potential
U.S.-Soviet conflict, as “atomic weapons” made “wars of annihilation impossible”
because “wars of annihilation or overthrow spell enormous and lasting political
responsibility for the victor which is scarcely apt to be desirable.” Kennan explained that
even the “best circumstances (i.e., that the Russians lack atomic weapons or facilities for
employing them against us)” implied “on our part [the United States] a war against the
Russian people and the eventual occupation of Russian territory…and in the worst
circumstances, the virtual ruin of our country as well as theirs.” Even under the “best
circumstances,” though, Kennan was extremely skeptical that the United States could
successfully occupy the postwar Soviet Union, as he stated that “it is doubtful rather we
could or wish to put forth the physical effort necessary to achieve such authority” over
postwar Russia, “and it is certain that we [the United States] would not be morally
competent to exercise it to good effect.”

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67 GFK 1946 National War College notebook, 9-15, GFK Papers, 231: 14; Thompson, *The Hawk
and the Dove*, 63; Gaddis, *George Kennan*, 237.
68 GFK 1946 National War College notebook, 22-23, GFK Papers, 231: 14; Gaddis, *Kennan*, 233-
Kennan, like Nitze, also accepted Brodie’s argument that the U.S. atomic monopoly could not be maintained indefinitely, as he explained that “in relation to destructive power, raw [fissionable] materials were abundant.” Kennan, in fact, noted several abundant sources of raw atomic materials in his diary—Northern Canada, the Belgian Congo, Colorado, Madagascar, India, and Soviet Turkestan—and he believed that the United States would be unable to prevent the Soviet Union from accessing fissionable materials. He accepted, moreover, Brodie’s claim that “regardless” of U.S. actions, “other powers than Great Britain and Canada will possess the ability to produce bombs in 5-10 years” and Brodie’s estimate that it would cost future states half what it had cost the United States to acquire fission capabilities. Kennan, however, did not believe that Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb would result in overt Soviet aggression: he predicted, rather, that however improbable, the “purpose of a Russian atomic attack would be to prevent us from denying Russian access to objectives on [the] Eurasian landmass,” and that a Soviet atomic “blitz” against “weaker countries she had planned to overcome” was incredibly “unlikely.”

Unlike Brodie, though, Kennan also believed that war between two nuclear states could be limited. In fact, Kennan’s solution to the unprecedented destructive power of the atomic bomb was a return to 18th century limited warfare, as he claimed that “it is certain that we [the United States] cannot undertake a war of destruction or annihilation. Against Russia we must wage a political war, a war of attrition for limited objectives.” While reading Carl Von Clausewitz, a prominent 19th century military theorist, Kennan also jotted these illuminating notes: “Does not significance of atomic weapons mean that, if

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we are to avoid mutual destruction, we must revert to strategic political thinking of the
XVIII century? Total destruction of enemy’s forces can no longer be our objective.”

Kennan stated, rather, that U.S. objectives should be limited to “preventing the
Sov. Gov’t from extending to point vital or important to US or British Empire” and to
bring about “the discrediting of those forces in Russia who insist that Russia regard itself
as at war with the western world.” Kennan explained that the U.S. strategy of
containment should “execute our [the U.S.] strategic dispositions in such a way as to
compel Sov. Govt. either to accept combat under unfavorable conditions (which it will
never do), or withdraw. In this way we can contain Soviet power until Russians tire of the
game.” Kennan also concluded that the United States must “be like a porcupine who only
gradually convinces the carnivorous beast of prey that he is not a fit object of attack.”
According to Kennan, the U.S. goal, ultimately, was to “contain Russian expansionism
for so long a time that it would have to modify itself.” Kennan predicted it would take
between “10 or 15 years.”

Kennan was also extremely skeptical that an international atomic energy
agreement could be negotiated. He claimed that despite expressing interest in an
international atomic energy treaty, the “Soviets would not hesitate to promise to forego
production and proceed nevertheless to produce” nuclear weapons. He also argued that
“Russian proposals—for exchange of information and for mutual renunciation of atomic
weapons—were drafted” and “designed to give the USSR the facilities (particularly the
know-how) for the production of atomic weapons, while denying them to the capitalist

70 Ibid., 5-15 & 22-23; Gaddis, Kennan, 233-236.
71 GFK 1946 National War College notebook, 5-15 & 22-23, GFK Papers, 231:14; Kennan, Memoirs
1925-1950, 309-310; Thompson, The Hawk and the Dove, 63-64; Gaddis, George Kennan, 234-246.
world.” He explained, though, that Moscow would be “much more likely to accept” an international atomic energy agreement “if they perceive our degree of preparation to be such that any other course is futile.” He stated that the Truman administration’s objective “must therefore be to convince the Russians that it is in their interest to disarm themselves—by acceptance of an international atomic energy authority,” which he claimed would require the Truman administration to build a potent retaliatory atomic arsenal.72

Kennan, like the Truman administration, also rejected the notion of giving away U.S. atomic “secrets” to the Soviet Union. After delivering a speech to the University of California at Berkeley in the summer of 1946, Kennan was confronted by an atomic scientist who argued that if the United States aided the Kremlin’s quest to obtain fission capabilities, “all would be well.” Kennan, however, was not convinced: he stated that it had not occurred to the nuclear physicist that the bomb’s destructive power might “whet the” Kremlin’s “desire to find a way of using it.”73

Kennan’s nuclear convictions and his dedication to limited warfare also shaped his prescriptions for the U.S. military. Kennan argued that military force could “be employed to temper the ambitions of an adversary, or to make good limited objectives against his will” but it would be unable to destroy an enemy’s power. Kennan also claimed that “military coercion could have, in the future, only a relative—never an absolute—value in the pursuit of political objectives,” which he believed were of the utmost importance. Kennan, however, urged the Truman administration to maintain a

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72 GFK 1946 National War College notebook, 5-23, GFK Papers, 231:14
73 Gaddis, George Kennan, 237.
“preponderance of strength,” but unlike Secretary of State James Byrnes, he rejected the notion of atomic diplomacy: he stated, for example, that the United States should not wave “clubs at people” and tell “them if they don’t do this or that we are going to drop a bomb [conventional or atomic] on them.” Kennan, though, also explained that “there could be no greater protection than the deterrent effect of overwhelming retaliatory power in the hands of this country.” Kennan, like Nitze, argued a “preponderance of strength” would cast a powerful shadow over U.S.-Soviet relations, which was the “most peaceful of all measures” the United States could “take short of war because the greater your strength, the less likelihood that you are ever going to” have to use it.\(^74\)

Kennan, like Nitze, also argued that although the atomic age required Washington to reexamine traditional military tactics and strategy, the “day of land forces [was] not over.” He explained that the United States needed to retain its atomic monopoly, build a powerful retaliatory nuclear arsenal, and maintain “small, compact, alert forces, capable of delivering at short notice effective blows on limited theaters of operation far from our shores.” He also stated that the armed forces must be able to mobilize quickly and be capable of rapidly seizing strategic territory. He explained, moreover, that the atomic bomb required the United States to avoid large concentrations of military units and to shift its navy away from large battleships and carriers—which he believed were extremely vulnerable to atomic attacks—and place a greater emphasis on “small, mobile, lightly equipped forces.” Kennan also accepted Brodie’s argument that the Truman administration could drastically reduce the size of its air force, as “air forces \(\frac{1}{2}\) as large as those in past wars” could “destroy in a single day all the cities of any other

nation.” Although Kennan later disputed it, Nitze claimed that Kennan believed that “two high-quality marine divisions, with the Navy support necessary to put them ashore where needed, would be fully adequate.” Outside of his account, however, there is no evidence to sustain Nitze’s assertion.  

In December 1986, Kennan informed Strobe Talbott—who was writing a book dedicated to Paul Nitze’s life—that “Paul never accepted the premise that I have always started from, and that is that there is no defense against nuclear weapons, therefore once both sides had them, there was no use for them.” Kennan’s statement in 1986, however, did not accurately depict his thinking in 1946. Although it should be stressed that Kennan never advocated civil defense as adamantly as Nitze did, he, too, believed that steps could be taken to reduce the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States. Like Nitze and Brodie, Kennan argued that the “dispersal” of U.S. industry, the U.S. military, and U.S. retaliatory capabilities would ensure that a preemptive nuclear strike against the United States was not decisive, and that it would allow the United States to enact swift retaliation, which he claimed could also deter a potential aggressor from an atomic attack. While Kennan never seriously grappled with what the “dispersal” of U.S. urban centers, manufacturing, and U.S. armed forces would look like in practice, he would have supported, for instance, efforts to relocate vital military-industrial factories outside city limits.  

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76 Talbott, The Master of the Game, 53; See GFK 1946 National War College notebook, 150, GFK Papers, 231:14 for Kennan’s notes on the necessity of “dispersal.”
It should also be stressed that Kennan viewed containment as a political—not a military—strategy. He consistently argued that “it is not Russian military power which is threatening” the United States; “it is Russian political power.” Kennan was also extremely reluctant to put concrete policy prescriptions—especially pertaining to military strategy and policy—on paper. Instead, he preferred to react to individual circumstances and events, rather than be tied to an inflexible policy course. As Kennan explained, the problem with policy planning was that by the time a paper was finally approved and its prescriptions had been put into action, “the thing you were planning for took place the day before yesterday.” Kennan’s hesitancy to prescribe the specific means necessary to achieve his desired ends undermined his ability to shape U.S. foreign policy and military strategy throughout the latter years of the Truman administration—especially after Dean Acheson became secretary of state.77

While Kennan and Nitze disagreed over U.S. nuclear strategy throughout the majority of the Cold War, they prescribed similar policies throughout 1945 and 1946. Kennan and Nitze had called for a firmer policy toward the Soviet Union long before the Truman administration heeded their advice, and both argued that if the Soviet Union acquired fission capabilities, it would threaten U.S. security. Kennan and Nitze, therefore, rejected any notion of giving away U.S. atomic “secrets” to the Soviet Union, and both were committed to preserving the U.S. atomic monopoly. Kennan, unlike Secretary of State James Byrnes, also did not believe that the United States should engage in atomic diplomacy. While Kennan and Nitze also accepted Brodie’s argument that the U.S. atomic monopoly could not be maintained indefinitely, they rejected Brodie’s claim that

77 Gaddis, George Kennan, 277 & 284.
the atomic bomb was an “absolute weapon,” as they explained that conventional weapons would continue to play a critical role in preserving U.S. security. Kennan and Nitze, however, claimed that the atomic age required the Truman administration to reexamine traditional military tactics and strategy.

Ultimately, though, Kennan and Nitze believed that maintaining America’s “preponderance of strength” was the surest way to guarantee U.S. security, as both argued that “the greater your strength, the less likelihood that you are ever going to” have to use it. Kennan and Nitze, moreover, urged the Truman administration to build a powerful retaliatory atomic arsenal—which they believed would act as a potent deterrent—and they adamantly supported efforts to limit the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States. Although Kennan would later dispute it, he and Nitze—like Brodie—advocated the “dispersal” of vital U.S. industry and nuclear retaliatory capabilities outside city limits, and both favored the construction of bomb shelters throughout the United States. It was not until the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in August 1949 that Kennan and Nitze began to disagree over U.S. foreign policy and military strategy.
CHAPTER TWO: “DRIFTING TOWARD A MORBID PREOCCUPATION” WITH SOVIET CAPABILITIES

On April 29, 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall called George Kennan into his office. Marshall had recently returned from the Foreign Ministers Conference in Moscow, which convinced him that Washington needed to address the deteriorating situation in Europe. Although Stalin did not attend the conference, he and Marshall met to discuss Europe’s future. Marshall expressed his overwhelming concern for the vast economic problems confronting Europe, but Stalin assured him that the situation was not “tragic.” Stalin, in fact, spent the majority of the meeting doodling pictures of wolves on his notepad, which was one of his favorite tactics for “disconcerting visitors.”

Although Marshall had only briefly interacted with Kennan prior to their meeting, he respected Kennan, especially his Soviet expertise. Marshall informed Kennan that he was to leave the National War College and begin work with the Policy Planning Staff. Kennan’s first task was to analyze Europe’s future—specifically by assessing Western Europe’s economy—and he was to inform Marshall what he “ought to do.” Kennan proceeded to ask Marshall if there were any additional assignments. Marshall merely replied: “avoid trivia.”

Kennan shaped U.S. foreign policy throughout Marshall’s tenure as secretary of state, as Marshall relied heavily on his analysis. While Kennan’s initial request to add Paul Nitze to the Policy Planning Staff was blocked by Acheson, Nitze, ironically, rapidly gained power within the State Department after he joined the Policy Planning

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79 Ibid.
Staff in the summer of 1948, largely because of his relationship with Acheson. Although it should be emphasized that Acheson did not force Kennan out of the State Department, he increasingly curbed Kennan’s influence, especially regarding U.S. military strategy and U.S. nuclear policy. Like Nitze, Acheson did not believe that Soviet experts, such as Kennan, maintained unique insights into U.S.-Soviet relations, and he disliked Kennan’s ignorance of domestic politics.

This chapter will trace the evolution of Kennan and Nitze’s views on nuclear weapons from 1947 until President Truman authorized the U.S. fusion project on January 31, 1950. While countless scholars have studied Kennan and Nitze, there has yet to be a comprehensive account of their nuclear convictions throughout this time period. Nicholas Thompson, for instance, acknowledges that “Nitze and Kennan had sailed side by side” prior to the Soviet atomic test in August 1949, but he fails to stress how similar their recommendations were throughout 1947 and 1948. Prior to August 1949, Kennan and Nitze, for example, continued to urge the Truman administration to build a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal, and they argued that the Kremlin would never accept an international atomic energy treaty.

By the summer of 1948, though, Kennan’s views on nuclear weapons were slowly falling out of sync with the Truman administration. In contrast to the majority of the Truman administration, for instance, Kennan explained in PPS/33 that Soviet acquisition of fission capabilities would not influence the Kremlin’s foreign policy, and he ignored the potential psychological impact of a Soviet atomic test on the American people and Congress. The Soviet detonation of a fission bomb, moreover, fundamentally altered

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Kennan’s recommendations regarding U.S. nuclear policy. This chapter will demonstrate, ultimately, that Kennan should not be considered a realist, as his overwhelming moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb shaped his policy prescriptions throughout the final months of 1949. Nitze, rather, was a nuclear realist: unlike Kennan, he did not dwell on the moral ramifications of the hydrogen bomb; he focused on whether it could be built. It should also be noted, however, that Kennan had decided in September 1949 to leave the State Department by the end of the year, which allowed him to voice his moral arguments against the H-bomb without fear of losing political standing with Acheson.

This chapter, ultimately, argues that Nitze’s mastery of the State Department’s bureaucracy and his keen understanding of U.S. domestic politics and U.S.-Soviet relations allowed him to shape U.S. nuclear strategy and policy throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Unlike Kennan, Nitze recognized the mounting domestic pressure on the Truman administration to build the “super” bomb, especially after the “loss” of China. Nitze realized, therefore, that the American public, Congress, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff would never accept a unilateral U.S. moratorium on thermonuclear research, a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, a strategy of minimal deterrence, or an international atomic energy agreement that did not establish a reliable means of on-site inspections.\(^\text{81}\) In contrast to Kennan, Nitze also correctly predicted that the Soviet Union’s quest for thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed, and he was willing to compromise with opponents of the H-bomb: while he supported a decision to build the “super” bomb, he also advocated a total review of U.S. security policies, which

\[\text{81 See Paul Nitze, Paul H. Nitze on National Security and Arms Control, eds. Kenneth Thompson and Steven Rearden (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 51-62 for Nitze’s definition of a “declaratory policy” and an “action policy.”}\]
eventually garnered Dean Acheson and David Lilienthal’s support for his position. Although Kennan’s strategy of minimal deterrence would have provided the United States adequate security, he failed to grasp that domestic politics prevented the Truman administration from implementing his policy prescriptions.

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Kennan’s tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff represented the zenith of his career in the State Department; never again was he able to affect U.S. foreign policy so profoundly. Kennan’s office was directly adjacent to Marshall’s, and he had an open invitation to walk in whenever he liked. Marshall also allowed Kennan considerable leeway to craft and analyze U.S. foreign policy. After Dean Acheson succeeded Marshall as secretary of state in January 1949, however, Kennan’s influence within the Truman administration rapidly declined. While Acheson acknowledged Kennan’s profound intelligence, he resented Kennan’s moody pessimism and “proclivity to angst.” As Nitze later explained, moreover, Acheson did not view Kennan as a “very useful policy adviser,” as many of Kennan’s policy prescriptions, such as his recommendation that the U.S. base its security policies solely upon his interpretation of the Kremlin’s intentions, would have caused the Truman administration to suffer severe Republican criticism in Congress.”

Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson explained that the Policy Planning Staff was designed to “look ahead…beyond the vision of operating officers caught in the smoke and crisis of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to

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come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them.” Kennan’s first assignment with the Policy Planning Staff was to assess the economic and political situation in postwar Europe. As Kennan was not an economist, he immediately sought to bolster the Policy Planning Staff’s expertise by adding Nitze. Ironically, though, Acheson blocked Kennan’s request for Nitze to join the Policy Planning Staff. Acheson told Kennan that “you don’t want” Nitze. He is a “Wall Street operator. You want some deep thinkers.”

After finishing his work with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, Paul Nitze sought a new profession. Despite being offered a lucrative job on Wall Street, Nitze returned to Washington, as he admitted to catching “Potomac Fever.” Nitze took a position as the deputy director for the Office of International Trade Policy, where he was assigned to assess Western Europe’s economic needs. Nitze was, obviously, well suited for the task, as he had been trained as an economist. Nitze, moreover, was deeply committed to reestablishing economic and political stability in Western Europe. Like Kennan, Nitze not only favored a firmer policy toward the Soviet Union, he believed that the economic recovery of Western Europe was crucial to U.S. security. Kennan and Nitze also feared that unless the United States filled the economic and political void in Western Europe, the Soviet Union would. As David Callahan explains, Nitze, like Kennan, believed that the “best defense against a future conquest of domination for the people of Europe was to usher in a new era of order and prosperity.”

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83 Gaddis, George Kennan, 253; Thompson, The Hawk and the Dove, 70.
The Truman administration, though, still had to persuade an increasingly hostile Republican Congress, which was enjoying its first congressional majority in almost twenty years, to fund the Marshall Plan. Kennan, however, was unable to marshal the courage to testify before Congress. As he would throughout his career, he did not believe it was his duty to sell his policy prescriptions to the American people or Congress: after getting into an argument with columnist Joe Aslop, Kennan stated that his job required him to represent U.S. “interest vis-à-vis foreign governments” and that his “specialty was defense of U.S. interests against others, not against our own representatives.” Nitze, as Nicholas Thompson explains, however, “had no such qualms.” He quickly became one of the Truman administration’s leading experts on Europe’s economy, and he eventually produced a “series of ‘brown books’ that documented the balance of payments deficit of all sixteen nations and gave a precise statement of the assistance needed by each country.” Nitze testified before Congress “several dozen times,” which was a grueling process, as Republicans consistently forced him to answer extremely detailed questions—such as why Austria required over twenty-five thousand tons of beans. Although the Marshall Plan was eventually passed by the end of 1948, Nitze, “already a lean man,” lost over fifteen pounds from the stress.\(^5\)

Although Kennan and Nitze both supported the Marshall Plan, Kennan was unwilling to testify before Congress. Unlike Kennan, Nitze recognized the need to sell his policy prescriptions to the American people and Congress. While Kennan’s ignorance of domestic politics did not undermine his ability to shape U.S. foreign policy throughout Marshall’s tenure as secretary of state, largely because of Marshall’s respect for

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\(^5\) Thompson, *Hawk and Dove*, 79-83.
Kennan’s Soviet expertise, Acheson increasingly curbed his influence within the State Department. By the summer of 1949, moreover, Nitze had replaced Kennan as Acheson’s primary adviser, as Acheson preferred his pragmatism and willingness to operate within the realm of political feasibility over Kennan’s growing penchant for prophecy.

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Unlike Nitze and Kennan, Dean Acheson was slow to abandon hope that U.S.-Soviet negotiations could be fruitful: it was not until the Truman Doctrine was enacted that his views began to shift. Acheson and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, in fact, proposed to share basic scientific information pertaining to the peaceful uses of atomic energy with the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Like Kennan and Nitze, Acheson and Stimson believed that the Soviet Union would eventually develop its own nuclear capabilities. Acheson and Stimson, however, also claimed that U.S. efforts to maintain its atomic monopoly were “futile and dangerous,” as they would exacerbate U.S.-Soviet tensions. Unlike Kennan and Nitze, Acheson also believed that U.S.-Soviet cooperation was possible, even collaboration on atomic energy, and he feared that maintaining the U.S. atomic monopoly would spark a U.S. Soviet arms race, which would eventually lead “towards mutual destruction.”

In early 1946, Secretary of State James Byrnes asked Acheson to develop a plan for the international control of atomic energy. Eventually, Acheson’s recommendations became known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report. In order to create the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, Acheson formed a committee—primarily consisting of scientists, like future Atomic Energy Commissioner David Lilienthal and nuclear physicist Robert

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86 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 31-35.
Oppenheimer—who were open to sharing scientific data regarding the peaceful uses of atomic energy, not U.S. atomic “secrets,” with the Soviet Union. The Acheson-Lilienthal Report proposed the creation of an International Atomic Development Authority, which would own all uranium mines and raw fissionable materials. If implemented, the Acheson-Lilienthal Report would have allowed the United States to maintain its atomic monopoly and build additional atomic bombs, but all nuclear weapons would eventually be handed over to the International Atomic Development Authority. In order to overcome Soviet objections, the Acheson-Lilienthal Report did not emphasize on-site inspections, which Acheson doubted could ensure Soviet compliance anyway, and it rejected sanctions against violators of the agreement. Acheson believed that if sanctions were necessary, international control would have already failed. Acheson claimed, ultimately, that the Acheson-Lilienthal Report would build “lasting peace through international agreement.”

While the Truman administration initially contemplated proposing the Acheson-Lilienthal Report to the United Nations, President Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes’ selection of Bernard Baruch as the U.S. representative to the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission in February 1946 marked the first concrete step towards the international control of the bomb. Acheson and the other members of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report continued to fight for their views throughout the spring of 1946, but Baruch was unconvinced by their arguments. In fact, despite his lack of scientific expertise, Baruch did not seek the opinions of nuclear experts, as Acheson had, and his advisory team did not include a single scientist. Baruch justified his decision by stating

87 Ibid.
that “I concluded that I would drop the scientists because as I told them, I knew all I wanted to know. It went boom and it killed millions of people, and I thought it was an ethical and political problem and I would proceed on that theory.”

As many analysts within the Truman administration suspected, Truman’s decision to appoint Baruch to spearhead the U.S. effort to achieve an international atomic energy agreement destroyed all hope of U.S.-Soviet cooperation. In contrast to the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, the Baruch Plan would have required the Soviet Union to be immediately subjected to an unrestricted survey of the Soviet Union’s raw fissionable materials. Also, under the Baruch Plan, the United States would not have to liquidate its atomic arsenal until the Soviet Union had already submitted itself to a series of on-site inspections.

The Soviet Union officially rejected the Baruch Plan on December 31, 1946. In sum, the United States and the Soviet Union were unwilling to compromise on two crucial points: the United States refused to dismantle its atomic arsenal until an effective international control agency, which was capable of conducting on-site inspections, was established. The Soviet Union, however, insisted upon the immediate liquidation of the U.S. atomic monopoly—before the Kremlin sacrificed its territorial sovereignty to an international inspection agency. While pro forma negotiations continued within the United Nations over the next two years, the State Department declared in August 1947 that “no modification in detail can, under present circumstances, conceivably make the U.S. proposal acceptable to the USSR.” After the Baruch Plan was defeated in the United Nations, negotiations continued, and the final treaty was signed on August 2, 1958.

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89 Ibid., 163-189.
Nations, President Truman no longer believed that an international atomic energy agreement could be achieved.\footnote{Ibid.}

Kennan watched the Truman administration’s efforts to negotiate an international atomic energy agreement with growing skepticism throughout 1946 and 1947. He not only offered his analysis of the Kremlin’s motivation, he also prescribed policies for the Truman administration to implement. He argued that the U.S. atomic monopoly provided the United States diplomatic and military leverage, and he claimed that the United States should not dismantle its nuclear arsenal until an effective system of on-site inspections was established. He also explained that the Soviet counterproposals to the Baruch Plan were designed to bring about the earliest possible nuclear disarmament of the United States and to eradicate America’s atomic stockpile. Kennan also believed that it would be extremely difficult to derail the Soviet Union’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. He stated that if the Truman administration agreed to liquidate its atomic arsenal before an international authority was established, the U.S.S.R. would continue its quest for fission capabilities behind a veil of secrecy. Kennan argued, ultimately, that the Soviet Union would depend on America’s respect for international agreements to ensure U.S. compliance, and the Kremlin would rely on its territorial sovereignty to conceal its atomic production facilities from the world.\footnote{Kennan argued that an international atomic energy treaty would need to closely resemble the Baruch Plan to ensure proper security for the United States, and he claimed that the Kremlin recognized the logic of U.S. proposals. He explained that the Soviet

Union’s primary objection to the Baruch Plan was that it provides “no loopholes through which the Soviet Union could itself achieve monopolistic possession of the atomic weapons.” Kennan, however, believed an agreement could be reached. He stated that a treaty could only be achieved if the Truman administration was able to convince the Kremlin that pursuing fission capabilities was “dangerous to the security of their state.” In addition, he urged the Truman administration to “develop the U.S. capacity to absorb atomic attacks and effect instant retaliation” and to “effect intelligent ‘dispersal’ of essential services in our country,” while it simultaneously attempted to negotiate an international atomic energy agreement. Kennan hoped, ultimately, that a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal would convince the Kremlin that a nuclear strike against the United States or its allies was a “pipe dream.” He explained, however, that the United States would continue to face a long uphill battle to ensure Moscow’s compliance with any international atomic energy treaty, as “powerful elements” within the U.S.S.R. would do everything in their power to undermine the agreement.92

Kennan also maintained that the best possibility of reaching an atomic energy agreement was a direct appeal to Stalin. He hoped that a meeting could be arranged between Stalin and an American Soviet expert who was fluent in Russian—preferably himself. Ideally, this meeting would be kept secret, in an effort to display the sincerity of America’s efforts, which would ensure that a failure to achieve an international treaty lay

92 Ibid.

In August 1947, the Policy Planning Staff, led by Kennan, once again offered its analysis of the floundering atomic energy negotiations within the United Nations. By 1947, both superpowers still refused to compromise and were becoming increasingly entrenched in their respective positions. As before, Kennan argued that the United States would be unable to modify its current proposal without sacrificing U.S. security. He implored the Truman administration not to sit idly as the U.S.S.R. continued to stall the negotiations, however, as he claimed that the Soviet Union was pursuing its own fission capabilities. He explained that Soviet officials would continue to employ delay tactics until the Truman administration was able to convince the Kremlin that international control was in Moscow’s best interest. Kennan also argued that the Truman administration should immediately launch a campaign to “mobilize public opinion in this country and other countries in support of its position.” He claimed that the disagreements within the UNAEC appeared “esoteric and philosophical” to the American public, and that the Truman administration needed to demonstrate that Soviet-American dissimilarities were substantive and concrete. Kennan, for example, argued that President Truman should highlight the U.S-Soviet positions on the mechanics of international inspection in a national press conference. While Kennan believed the Soviet Union was unlikely to comply with an international atomic energy agreement, he claimed the Truman administration would reap propaganda benefits by continuing to seek an atomic
energy treaty. Finally, he stated that the Truman administration should announce its renewed dedication to atomic energy negotiations with Great Britain and Canada, as Anglo-American-Canadian atomic energy sharing would improve western solidarity, expedite scientific research through collaboration, and increase the U.S. supply of raw fissionable materials by granting the U.S. access to Great Britain’s excess uranium stockpiles.\(^9^4\)

Throughout 1948 and early 1949, Kennan also made critical contributions to Anglo-American-Canadian atomic energy sharing. He explained that the failure to engage in serious diplomacy with Canada and Great Britain was undermining western solidarity, as the British longed to rekindle their special relationship with the United States. Kennan was also aware that the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission required additional raw fissionable materials to meet the current U.S. demand for atomic bombs, and that Great Britain maintained a stockpile of excess of uranium, which the AEC and Kennan hoped to transfer to the United States. Kennan also recognized that the United States would have to exchange scientific information for its primary objective: uranium. He argued, moreover, that all three states—especially Great Britain, as it retained access to the most abundant source of raw fissionable materials in the world, the Belgian Congo—should concentrate on acquiring all the atomic resources within their borders.\(^9^5\)

The Combined Policy Committee meeting on January 7, 1948 produced the first substantial Anglo-American-Canadian atomic energy agreement in the aftermath of

\(^9^4\) Ibid., 607-611; Mayers, *George Kennan*, 304
World War II. Prominent diplomats from all three governments were present, including Kennan. The Combined Policy Committee determined that all fissionable materials extracted from the Belgian Congo throughout 1948 and 1949 would be allocated to the United States. If the uranium proved insufficient to meet U.S. demands, however, Great Britain’s excess stockpiles would be shipped to the United States. In 1949, for example, the United Kingdom transferred an estimated 600 to 1000 tons of uranium to the United States. The agreement also allowed for the exchange of scientific data in nine vital areas, although it did not include information regarding plutonium production or the manufacturing process necessary to produce nuclear weapons, as scientific collaboration was limited to the “non-military phases of atomic energy.”

On September 30, 1949, Kennan attended his final Combined Policy Committee meeting. He had been reassigned in the wake of the Soviet Union’s successful nuclear test, but not before his contributions to Anglo-American-Canadian atomic energy sharing were recognized. He had served as the primary U.S. representative on the Combined Policy Committee’s Strategic and Military Considerations subgroup, and he guarded U.S. security interests throughout the exchange of scientific information. Before his departure, he also negotiated an American-Anglo-Canadian agreement, which determined the distribution of raw fissionable materials between the United States, Canada, and Great Britain throughout 1955.

Although Nitze never seriously grappled with U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations prior to the hydrogen bomb debate, the evidence suggests that his views

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 551.
were similar to Kennan’s thinking and that his nuclear convictions did not undergo a radical transformation between 1946 and 1949. Nitze, like Kennan, had been calling for a firmer policy toward the Soviet Union long before the majority of the Truman administration, especially Dean Acheson. Nitze also recognized that although the atomic bomb’s power was finite, it could inflict unprecedented destruction without warning. It is unlikely, therefore, that Nitze would have believed that U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations could be fruitful, and it is even more improbable that he would have advocated sharing U.S. atomic “secrets” with the Soviet Union. Like Kennan, it is far more likely that Nitze believed the United States should maintain its atomic monopoly and continue to develop its ability to inflict instant retaliation, which he hoped would deter Soviet aggression.  

In June 1948, Great Britain, France, and the United States announced that a new currency would be circulated throughout Western Germany, which signaled the unification of their respective occupation zones. The Soviet Union responded by blockading Berlin, which prompted the Berlin airlift and frantic attempts within the Truman administration to negotiate a solution. Throughout the summer and fall of 1948, Secretary of Defense James Forrestal also attempted to prepare for a potential U.S.-Soviet military conflict. Forrestal asked Kennan to determine if the U.S. military should be “geared to meet a given anticipated peak period of danger or should it be laid out on a basis that we could expect to maintain permanently, on the theory that the degree of danger will be relatively static.” Kennan eventually produced PPS/33 and PPS/38—

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which became NSC-20/4—but the documents revealed Kennan’s fundamental shortcomings as a military planner. Kennan, first and foremost, doubted that the Policy Planning Staff was capable of producing that information. He explained to Secretary of State Marshall that Soviet intentions and military capabilities were “hopelessly intertwined” and that it was wholly impossible to “calculate with precision the political imponderables” of Soviet intentions. He did, however, reluctantly take on the assignment, but, as John Gaddis explains, “it was not quite what Forrestal had in mind.”

Kennan finished PPS/33, which was entitled “Factors Affecting the Nature of U.S. Defense Arrangements in the Light of Soviet Policies,” in June 1948. In the document, Kennan explained that it would be extremely unwise for the U.S. military to prepare for a “peak period of danger.” As he had throughout his tenure at the National War College and as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, Kennan claimed that the Soviet Union primarily posed a political—not a military—threat to the United States and Western Europe. He explained that the Kremlin did not desire a war with the West, as Moscow was aware that it would be unable to deliver a “decisive blow to the North American military-industrial potential in the initial phase” of the conflict. Kennan highlighted, moreover, the vast destruction inflicted upon the Soviet Union by the German military in World War II, which reinforced the “war-weariness of the Soviet people.” Ultimately, instead of preparing for a “peak period of danger,” Kennan argued that the U.S. military should maintain a “long-term state of readiness,” as it would act as

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a powerful deterrent to Soviet aggression and cast a shadow over U.S.-Soviet negotiations.\textsuperscript{100}

PPS/33 also discussed how Soviet atomic capabilities would affect the Kremlin’s intentions. Kennan explained that even if the Soviet Union acquired fission capabilities, if “the Soviet leaders felt that there would be a strong probability of [atomic] retaliation,” it would dissuade the Kremlin from invading Western Europe or launching a preemptive nuclear strike against the West. Kennan also argued that the “mere possession of atomic weapons will not alone determine Soviet thinking,” as the United States had a considerable “head start” in building its atomic arsenal, acquiring raw fissionable materials, and developing effective delivery systems for an atomic attack. Kennan did, however, believe that Moscow would be more likely to consider an atomic energy agreement if it gained “some measure of power of disposal over” its nuclear weapons, and if it no longer felt it were “negotiating at so great a disadvantage.”

Kennan, as he had in PPS/33, explained in PPS/38 that preparing for a “peak period of danger” was foolish, as Moscow had no intention of invading Western Europe. PPS/38 also outlined U.S. objectives in times of war and peace, but it did not present the means necessary to achieve Kennan’s aims: Kennan argued that the United States should strive to bring about a fundamental change in the way Moscow conducted international relations and that the Truman administration should attempt to reduce the Soviet Union’s power and influence worldwide. PPS/38, in sum, called for a “peaceful rollback” of

\textsuperscript{100} Nelson, ed., \textit{The State Department’s Policy Planning Staff Papers, 1948}, 281-292.
Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, which Kennan hoped could be accomplished through “measures short of war.”

PPS/33 and PPS/38, ultimately, had little impact on U.S. military strategy and policy. As Gaddis explains, as secretary of defense, Forrestal’s “peacetime objective was to be sure that the United States could win a war, and on this issue Kennan had nothing to offer.” Moreover, Forrestal’s primary problem was “that inadequate military resources might lose a war—not what to do after winning one.” PPS/38 assumed an American victory in a potential U.S.-Soviet conflict—it did not, however, prescribe the means necessary to ensure that victory, as it primarily focused on the terms a “triumphant West should impose upon a defeated Soviet Union.” Kennan also “made no effort to connect his political analysis with Pentagon war planning or with White House budgeting.”

PPS/33 and PPS/38, moreover, revealed Kennan’s fundamental shortcomings as a policy planner: unless Kennan was given strict word limits, as Gaddis explains, “Kennan tended to ramble.” PPS/38 was over 10,000 words, which was twice the length of the Long Telegram. Finally, as Kennan was not an economic expert—in fact, he did not have an economist on the Policy Planning Staff at this time—PPS/33 and PPS/38 failed to discuss the levels of sustained military spending the United States could afford to maintain a “long-term state” of military “readiness.”

By the summer of 1948, Kennan’s policy prescriptions regarding U.S. nuclear strategy were slowly falling out of sync with the majority of the Truman administration. The divide between Kennan and the rest of the Truman administration continued to grow.

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101 Ibid., 372-411; Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 325-327.
102 Gaddis, George F. Kennan, 325-327.
throughout Kennan’s remaining months in the State Department, especially after Acheson became secretary of state. As would become obvious during the hydrogen bomb debate, the Truman administration rejected Kennan’s assertion that atomic capabilities would not affect the Kremlin’s foreign policy. Many U.S. officials, such as Nitze, argued that Soviet fission capabilities would result in a more aggressive Soviet foreign policy. Unlike Acheson and Nitze, Kennan also ignored the potential psychological impact of a Soviet atomic test, specifically on the American public and Congress.

In order to comprehend Kennan’s role in the hydrogen bomb debate, it is crucial to understand that Kennan’s influence had been waning throughout 1948 and 1949. Although Kennan was able to shape U.S. foreign policy throughout 1947, by 1948, his arguments no longer carried significant weight within the Truman administration. Despite his profound opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the division of Germany, Kennan was unable to affect U.S. foreign policy, as the Truman administration increasingly based U.S. security policies upon the Soviet Union’s military capabilities, not Kennan’s portrayal of the Kremlin’s intentions.

On March 10, 1948, Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg signed the Treaty of Brussels, which was a five-year collective defensive pact. The agreement stated that an attack on one country would be regarded as an attack on all. President Truman applauded the treaty, and it became the basis for NATO. Kennan, however, continued to insist that the Soviet Union primarily posed a political—not a military—threat to the United States and Western Europe. Kennan also argued that NATO would cement the division of Europe, undermine U.S. efforts to liberate Eastern
Europe, and destroy all prospects of a settlement in Austria and Germany, which he believed would make the Cold War a permanent fixture of U.S.-Soviet relations. He later stated that NATO “must have appeared to the Russians as, of course an alliance against them… from then on it must have appeared to the Kremlin leaders that there were only two possibilities conceivable from the standpoint of their interests: either the firm retention of their hold on eastern and central Europe, or a military conflict.” He claimed, ultimately, that NATO would “close the doors to any eventual peaceful solution” and “leave the Russians no way out even if they wanted to get out.” Despite Kennan’s adamant opposition, however, NATO was formed on April 4, 1949, and the United States was a founding member.  

President Truman’s decision to appoint Acheson to replace Marshall as secretary of state in January 1949 also had a dramatic impact on Kennan and Nitze’s careers. While Acheson initially blocked Kennan’s request to appoint Nitze to the Policy Planning Staff in 1947, Acheson quickly “came to admire” Nitze and “enjoy his company.” It should also be stressed that Acheson did not force Kennan out of Washington: as Robert Beisner explains, Kennan’s “departure from the State Department was self-propelled.” Acheson, however, increasingly curbed Kennan’s influence within the Truman administration, especially regarding U.S. military strategy and policy. Unlike the majority of the Truman administration, Acheson was not impressed by Kennan’s Long Telegram, which he later described as a “footnote of the Truman presidency.” Acheson also did not find Kennan’s writing style effective: he later claimed that Kennan’s prose was not “seductive,” as many

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officials within the Truman administration believed, but rather it was “mostly padding” and had little substance.\textsuperscript{104}

Acheson and Kennan’s personalities also failed to mesh. Acheson resented Kennan’s moody pessimism, his emotionalism, and his tendency to inject morality and philosophy into his assessment of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, as Dorothy Fosdick, a former member of the Policy Planning Staff, recalled “Kennan had a sense of being a philosopher king. He felt he had special insights” into U.S.-Soviet relations, and “he felt he should make policy.” Acheson, however, resented Kennan’s sense of entitlement, and as Fosdick explains, “it was impossible for Acheson to deal with Kennan toward the end” of his tenure as director of the Policy Planning Staff.\textsuperscript{105}

In order to understand the hydrogen bomb debate, it is also crucial to comprehend the Truman administration’s growing reliance upon the U.S. atomic monopoly to counter and deter Soviet aggression, however unlikely, in Western Europe. By the summer of 1949, the defense of Western Europe hinged upon the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Despite pledging to defend all NATO members, the United States only maintained five U.S. Army divisions in Western Europe in 1949, which paled in comparison to the Soviet Union’s 5.8 million man military. To make matters worse for the Truman administration, U.S. troops in Western Europe were occupation units, which were not combat ready. While the United States retained an advantage in airpower, U.S. forces were hopelessly

\textsuperscript{104} Beisner, \textit{Dean Acheson}, 117-119; Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 70 & 118.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
outnumbered and it is doubtful that the United States could have prevented a Soviet blitzkrieg from overtaking Western Europe without resorting to nuclear warfare.\textsuperscript{106}

The Truman administration’s only answer was the atomic bomb. It should be noted, though, that the Truman administration had increasingly based U.S. war plans to defend Western Europe on the use of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. While Nitze and Kennan were wary of wedding U.S. security policies to the bomb, President Truman believed that the U.S. atomic monopoly would deter Soviet aggression and that the U.S. nuclear arsenal would prove decisive in any potential U.S.-Soviet conflict. The Truman administration, however, also relied upon the U.S. atomic monopoly because of President Truman’s strict ceilings on defense spending, as fission bombs provided “more bang for the buck” than conventional forces. Throughout 1946 and 1947, however, U.S. military plans failed to reflect U.S. nuclear capabilities: by June 1946, the United States had nine atomic bombs and less than a year later, it only had thirteen. It was not until 1948 that U.S. war plans reflected U.S. atomic capabilities: the United States possessed 56 fission bombs by the end of 1948, 200 by the fall of 1949, and over 300 by June 1950. While dropping hundreds of fission bombs on Soviet cities might have forced Soviet capitulation, it would have killed untold millions of Soviet civilians and produced international outrage. If the United States, rather, employed an air-atomic blitzkrieg against advancing Soviet forces in Western Europe, it might have halted the invasion, but

\textsuperscript{106} Beisner, \textit{Dean Acheson}, 224-226.
it would have inflicted unprecedented destruction and unleashed deadly radiation throughout Western Europe.¹⁰⁷

While flawed, the Harmon Committee Report, which was completed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the spring of 1949, also corroborates this analysis: it predicted that even if the United States unleashed the entirety of its atomic arsenal against the Soviet Union, the Red Army would have reached the English Channel by the time the United States mobilized for the attack. The report, moreover, doubted the Strategic Air Command’s—which was the primary delivery system for a U.S. air-atomic blitzkrieg—ability to penetrate Soviet air defenses and accurately strike Soviet cities. The report, however, also claimed that even if the United States killed millions of Soviet civilians, leveled countless Soviet cities, and destroyed Soviet oil industry; it would not force Soviet capitulation. The report, moreover, argued that an air-atomic attack directed at Soviet cities would “validate Soviet propaganda, unify the [Soviet] people, and increase their will to fight.”

There is, obviously, reason to question the Harmon Committee Report’s conclusions, specifically its claim that decimating Soviet cities and incinerating untold millions of civilians would not produce Soviet surrender. The report’s overarching argument that the United States should not wed its security policies to the bomb, however, should not have been disregarded by the Truman administration.¹⁰⁸

In the wake of the Berlin blockade, the U.S. military reexamined the bomb’s role in military planning. While previous war plans had considered the possibility that atomic weapons could be nullified by an international atomic energy agreement, the war plan

¹⁰⁸ Beisner, Dean Acheson, 226.
Intermezzo emphasized that international control—not nuclear warfare—had become unacceptable. Intermezzo declared that the atomic bomb would be vital to America’s success in any future U.S.-Soviet conflict, and it argued that the United States would need to employ fission bombs in quantity to ensure an American victory. The U.S. military, however, developed the war plan Fleetwood soon after Intermezzo, and it expounded on Intermezzo’s assumptions: Fleetwood envisioned a massive air-atomic blitzkrieg, which was designed to obliterate seventy Soviet cities with the entirety of America’s nuclear arsenal. On September 13, 1948, the Joint Chiefs of Staff announced that all future military plans would need to be based on Fleetwood’s fundamental assumption that an air-atomic blitzkrieg was essential to an American victory.  

By 1948, the U.S. military also acknowledged that the defense of Western Europe hinged upon the U.S. atomic arsenal. The Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that the fission bomb was the sole American counterbalance to the Soviet Union’s overwhelming conventional superiority. Secretary of State George Marshall, in fact, stated that the “atomic bomb—in American hands—may well be all that protects the people of Europe and the Near East from another war. It is the chiefest weapon in Europe’s arsenal.” Truman also corroborated Marshall’s statement. He, too, believed “that the atomic bomb was the mainstay and all he had” to counterbalance the Soviet Union’s conventional superiority in Europe. He also claimed that without the atomic bomb, “the Russians would have probably taken over Europe a long time ago.”

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110 Ibid., 267-272; Beisner, Dean Acheson, 226; Donovan, The Presidency of Harry S Truman 1949-1953, 100.
NSC-30, which was finished in September 1948, represented the culmination of the Truman administration’s dependence upon nuclear weapons. It recognized that the defense of Western Europe rested upon the atomic bomb, and it stated that the United States would employ nuclear weapons in any war against the Soviet Union, even if the United States initiated the conflict. It is crucial to understand, therefore, that by August 1949, U.S. war plans were completely reliant upon nuclear weapons, which would have made it incredibly difficult to shift U.S. strategies to defend Western Europe away from the bomb, especially considering Truman’s unwavering dedication to limiting military spending. Truman, in fact, even acknowledged that the United States “must be the strongest in atomic weapons.” The Truman administration, in short, was unwaveringly dedicated to preserving U.S. nuclear superiority by the fall of 1949, which made successful efforts to restrain the development of U.S. nuclear capabilities increasingly unlikely.\(^{111}\)

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On August 29, 1949, Soviet physicist Igor Kurchatov, the lead scientist on the Soviet atomic energy project, watched as the Soviet Union prepared to test its first atomic weapon. Lavrenti Beria, who had been appointed to oversee the Soviet physicists’ progress, had eagerly been anticipating the test for some time, and Kurchatov did not want to disappoint his boss. Luckily for Kurchatov, it was the Truman administration that was disappointed. RDS-1, which stood for the abbreviation “Russia did it on her own,” created a massive “fireball, which quickly turned orange” and “red. Then dark streaks appeared. Streams of dust, fragments of brick and board were drawn into it, as into a

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
funnel. The atomic mushroom was blown away to the south, losing its outlines, and turning into the formless torn heap of clouds one might see after a gigantic fire.” Kurchatov excitedly exclaimed “it worked.” Ultimately, Kurchatov’s life was not only spared, he was rewarded with a huge bonus, “a ZIS-110 car, and a dacha in the Crimea.”

The Truman administration was shocked to learn of the Soviet Union’s successful atomic test, as most intelligence reports predicted it would take the Soviet Union several more years to unlock the “secrets” of atomic energy. President Truman, especially, was dumbstruck: he had previously told nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer that the Soviet Union would “never” be able to build an atomic bomb, and he continued to maintain that the U.S.S.R. had not detonated a real nuclear device for “months” after the Soviet test; he believed the “radioactivity might have come from an exploding nuclear reactor.” Truman, however, eventually accepted the truth, and he approved a $319 million expansion of the existing U.S. atomic weapons program. In October 1949, a member of the Atomic Energy Commission, Lewis Strauss, presented the idea of the theoretical hydrogen bomb to Truman. Instead of using fission, the H-bomb—also known as a thermonuclear weapon or “super” bomb—relied on fusion to generate its massive explosion, and it was estimated to be 1,000 times more powerful than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although Truman had never heard of the hydrogen bomb, he “showed an immediate interest.”

There is limited evidence to suggest that Kennan’s views on nuclear weapons began to shift prior to the hydrogen bomb debate, but it should be stressed that his commitment to preserving the U.S. nuclear monopoly never wavered and that he continued to claim that the U.S. should maintain a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal. In early 1948, Kennan acknowledged “the suicidal nature of atomic warfare in a world in which more than one country has [atomic] bombs,” but, as Gaddis explains, “he was not yet ready to think about that” and Kennan’s concerns did not affect his policy prescriptions. Moreover, in a State Department meeting on August 2, 1949, which discussed appropriating additional funds to bolster the U.S. nuclear arsenal, Kennan surprised Acheson by stating that he had “an uneasy feeling that we were travelling down the atomic road rather too fast.” He also explained that it was his “personal feeling that it perhaps would be best for this country if it were decided that atomic bombs would never be used.” Acheson, however, was not convinced. As it did throughout the hydrogen bomb debate, domestic politics shaped Acheson’s perspective: he stated that it would be incredibly difficult to justify not employing atomic weapons in a U.S.-Soviet conflict to the American people and Congress, “particularly if our failure to use atomic weapons meant a great loss of lives or a defeat in war.”

While Acheson did not force Kennan out of the State Department, he approved Undersecretary of State James Webb’s initiative in September 1949: instead of Kennan’s memorandums going directly to Acheson’s desk, they would be filtered through Webb’s office, which deprived Kennan of his direct access to the secretary of state. Kennan was outraged. He claimed that “the whole raison d’être of this staff was its ability to render an

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114 Gaddis, *Kennan*, 374-381.
independent judgment on problems coming before the Secretary.” The new procedure within the State Department, however, was not the only catalyst for Kennan’s departure: he had grown increasingly frustrated with his inability to affect U.S. foreign policy, especially regarding the future of Germany and U.S. participation in NATO, and he believed the Truman administration was “drifting toward a morbid preoccupation with the fact that the Russians conceivably could drop atomic bombs on this country.” Instead, he continued to claim that the U.S. should focus on Soviet “intentions, rather than capabilities,” as he argued that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States. Kennan, ultimately, informed Webb on September 29 that he planned to leave the State Department by the end of the year, which, as Callahan explains, allowed him to push his policy prescriptions without the “burden of currying favor” with Acheson. By the fall of 1949, in short, Kennan preferred to be remembered by history as the man who had opposed the hydrogen bomb, rather than work within the realm of political feasibility.\footnote{Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 71; Thompson, \textit{Hawk and Dove}, 101.}

Kennan learned of the Soviet Union’s atomic test on September 13—two weeks after it had occurred. Although Kennan later acknowledged that he had been a “fiery hardliner” prior to the Soviet Union’s successful detonation of a fission bomb, his nuclear convictions began to change. It is unclear, however, when Nitze first discovered the Soviet Union’s atomic test, but, as David Callahan explains, “his immediate reaction was to link Soviet possession of the A-bomb to the possibility of Soviet aggression in western Europe.” Nitze began to study nuclear weapons, U.S. military strategy, and the possibility of an international atomic energy agreement with unmatched vigor. It should also be
stressed that although Nitze had only recently joined the Policy Planning Staff, he was not a novice in dealing with U.S. national security or the atomic bomb. While he had spent the majority of his career studying economics and finance, Nitze had also extensively grappled with the ramifications of the atomic age during his tenure with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. Moreover, as Nitze would throughout his career, he relied on quantitative analysis to shape his perspective on U.S. nuclear strategy and the possibility of international control.\footnote{See Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 63-68 and Thompson, \textit{Hawk and Dove}, 101 for the debate over Nitze’s initial reaction to the Soviet atomic test; Gaddis, \textit{George F. Kennan}, 376-377.}

Nitze, unlike Kennan, was dedicated to preparing for worst case scenarios, as his policy prescriptions were predicated upon the fact that the Soviet Union had the capability of building a hydrogen bomb. The difference between Kennan and Nitze, as Kennan later explained, was that Nitze had “no feeling for the intangibles—values, intentions. When there was talk of intentions, as opposed to capabilities, he would say, ‘How can you measure intentions? We can’t be bothered to get into psychology; we have to face the Russians as competitors, militarily’.” Kennan, moreover, claimed that Nitze, unlike himself, “accepted the characteristic assumptions of” the “Pentagon, which was stiff, meaningless,” and “without nuance or political sensitivity.”\footnote{Strobe Talbott, \textit{The Master of the Game} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 57.}

It should also be stressed that Kennan’s profound moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb fundamentally shaped his policy prescriptions throughout the fall of 1949. While Kennan was also morally appalled by the unavoidable civilian casualties implied by fission warfare, as he doubted that atomic bombs could be employed in limited conflicts to achieve political objectives, he reluctantly acknowledged that the
United States needed to retain atomic weapons for the purposes of deterrence and retaliation. Kennan, for example, was also morally repulsed by the destruction Allied forces inflicted upon Hamburg during World War II. After visiting Hamburg in March 1949, Kennan stated that “for the first time I felt an unshakeable conviction that no momentary military advantage—even if such could have been calculated to exist, could have justified this stupendous careless destruction of civilian life and of material values.” He also argued that the West “had to learn to fight its wars morally as well as militarily, or not fight them at all.” Kennan, however, did not abandon his commitment to maintaining the U.S. atomic monopoly: he claimed, for example, that the United States still had “to be militarily stronger than its adversaries by a margin sufficient to enable it to dispense with those means which can stave off defeat only at the cost of undermining victory.”

As Kennan did not believe that the Kremlin had any intention of initiating a war with the United States, even if the Soviet Union acquired a thermonuclear monopoly, he stated that the hydrogen bomb was unnecessary. He claimed, moreover, that thermonuclear weapons could only destroy lives, not shape them. He explained to Acheson that “warfare should be a means to an end other than warfare, an end connected with the beliefs and the feelings and the attitudes of people, an end marked by submission to a new political will and perhaps a new regime of life, but an end which at least does not negate the principle of life itself.” Despite Kennan’s numerous objections, however,

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118 Gaddis, George Kennan, 346.

Nitze and Kennan first grappled with how the Truman administration should respond to the Soviet Union’s atomic test and, at Kennan’s request, the possibility of reviving international atomic energy negotiations in a series of Policy Planning Staff meetings in October 1949. Kennan opened the meeting on October 11 by arguing, as he had throughout his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, that the “best evidence available to us indicates that the Russians are not planning to start a war.” He also claimed that the Truman administration, specifically the U.S. military, “drew their conclusions from the maximum capabilities of the enemy [the Soviet Union] which they based on the improbable to a greater degree than on the probable course of events.”\footnote{U. S. Department of State, \textit{Foreign Relations of the United States}, 1949. Vol. I: \textit{National Security Affairs, Foreign Economic Policy} (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), 191-192 & 399-403.}

Kennan also restated his support for limited warfare: he explained that “neither” the “total annihilation nor complete surrender of the enemy is possible and, therefore, that limited rather than total warfare should be our objective.” Kennan claimed that because of the recent Soviet acquisition of fission capabilities, it might be impossible for the United States to “retaliate with the atomic bomb against a Russian attack with orthodox weapons.” Kennan explained that although Truman ultimately decided if the United States would unleash its atomic arsenal in a potential U.S.-Soviet conflict, it was almost inevitable that the United States would employ atomic weapons, as U.S. war plans hinged upon the U.S. atomic stockpile. Finally, Kennan argued that using atomic weapons
against Soviet cities would strengthen the resolve of Soviet citizens, and he claimed that the Truman administration should adopt a declared U.S. policy of no first use.\textsuperscript{121}

Although Nitze and Acheson were intrigued by aspects of Kennan’s argument—specifically Kennan’s dedication to reexamining the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies, especially regarding U.S. strategies to defend Western Europe—they were not convinced. Nitze agreed that Soviet atomic capabilities had made “conventional armaments and their possession by western European nations, as well as ourselves [the United States] all the more important.” Unlike Kennan, though, Nitze also prescribed the means to achieve his desired ends: he predicted that a sufficient military buildup would cost the U.S. over $35 billion, which would make it necessary “to lower rather than to raise civilian standards of living in order to produce arms against consumer goods.” Nitze and Acheson, moreover, disagreed with Kennan’s proposal for an openly declared U.S. policy of no first use.

Nitze and Acheson claimed that in order to acquire the time necessary to complete a conventional buildup capable of deterring Soviet aggression, U.S. nuclear deterrence had to be credible. They argued, in short, that Moscow needed to believe that the United States would respond to a conventional invasion of Western Europe with atomic bombs. Finally, as he had since 1946, Nitze urged the Truman administration to build a vast and “effective civil defense in this country” to protect against nuclear strikes, which he believed “might affect the determination of the enemy to use the bomb.”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid; Gaddis, \textit{George Kennan}, 389.

On October 12, Kennan, Nitze, and the Policy Planning Staff met with military officials to discuss U.S. nuclear strategy and the possibility of reviving U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. The Pentagon officials began by explaining that because the United States lagged behind the Soviet Union in conventional capabilities, the United States would be unable to defend its NATO allies without employing atomic weapons. The Defense Department experts also dismissed Kennan’s argument that an international atomic energy agreement could be negotiated, and they stated that “this would be the worst time possible for us to have the majority UN plan accepted as we now have such a tremendous superiority in our stockpile of atomic weapons.” They explained, moreover, that the threat of nuclear retaliation would not deter the Soviet Union from employing atomic weapons in a potential U.S.-Soviet conflict, as Moscow would unleash its atomic arsenal if it “found it was desirable and effective.” They argued, therefore, that the United States had to maintain its nuclear superiority, and they urged the Truman administration to develop a system of civil defense.\(^\text{123}\)

The Policy Planning Staff also met with military experts and members of the Atomic Energy Commission on October 14, 21, and 24, which reinforced Nitze’s commitment to maintaining U.S. nuclear superiority and his skepticism that an international atomic energy agreement could be negotiated. Both the Pentagon officials and the Atomic Energy Commission sought to debunk Kennan’s claim that an international atomic energy treaty could be achieved. They explained that the Soviet Union would never agree to international control, especially if the agreement required the

Soviet Union to open its closed society to an international inspection agency, which, as Kennan had previously argued, was crucial to ensuring that the Soviet Union was not violating the agreement. The Defense Department officials, moreover, claimed that an international atomic energy agreement would provide the Soviet Union an enormous military advantage, as the United States would be unable to deter or counter a potential Soviet invasion of Western Europe without its nuclear arsenal. Finally, the nuclear scientists and military experts argued that the Truman administration should develop a system of civil defense to protect against a Soviet nuclear strike.\textsuperscript{124}

In his memoirs, Nitze claimed to have discovered the possibility of a fusion bomb from Robert LeBaron, an atomic energy adviser to Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson. Like Truman, Nitze was immediately intrigued by the possibility of a hydrogen bomb, and he quickly sought to determine if the “super” bomb could be built. In order to accomplish this feat, Nitze met with nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer, the State Department’s chief consultant on atomic energy. Although Oppenheimer played a pivotal role in the development of the atomic bomb, his views on nuclear weapons had radically changed by the fall of 1949. In fact, soon after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Oppenheimer informed Truman that “I feel I have blood on my hands.” Truman, however, was not impressed by Oppenheimer’s show of remorse: after the meeting he exclaimed “blood on his hands! Dammit, he hasn’t half as much blood on his hands as I. You just don’t go around bellyaching about it.”\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Paul Nitze, \textit{From Hiroshima to Glasnost} (New York: General Publishing Company, 1989), 87-92; Thompson, \textit{Hawk and Dove}, 103.
Like Kennan, Oppenheimer’s overwhelming moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb and the Truman administration’s growing reliance upon nuclear weapons fundamentally shaped his policy prescriptions throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Despite his moral opposition to the H-bomb, however, Oppenheimer employed technical arguments in his meeting with Nitze. Oppenheimer began the meeting by explaining that the hydrogen bomb was not technically feasible. Oppenheimer argued that if the fusion bomb could be built, which he claimed to doubt, it could never be effectively employed in warfare: Nitze recalled that Oppenheimer believed that the “super” bomb would be an “unusable weapon,” as “the equipment required” to deliver it “would be so massive and heavy that it could not fit into an airplane.” Oppenheimer also explained that “the amount of nuclear materials required to produce a single fusion weapon would be so great that it would be more effective to make a number of fission weapons...than to make a single fusion weapon.” Finally, Oppenheimer stated that because of the excessive secrecy within the Soviet Union’s scientific community—namely the inability to publish research—Soviet physicists would be unable to build a fusion bomb unless the United States first “demonstrated its feasibility.”

Undeterred, Nitze also met with nuclear physicist Edward Teller. Like Oppenheimer, Teller had played a critical role in developing the U.S. atomic bomb. Unlike Oppenheimer, however, Teller did not dwell on the moral ramifications of his work and his support for the hydrogen bomb never faltered. Teller began the meeting with a two-hour lecture, which he was able to put into layman’s terms, which explained why the hydrogen bomb was technically feasible. Ironically, although the model Teller

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126 Nitze, From Hiroshima to Glasnost, 87-92.
utilized in his presentation failed to produce a fusion bomb, it convinced Nitze that thermonuclear weapons could be built.¹²⁷

Finally, Nitze met with the director of the University of California’s Radiation Laboratory, Ernest Lawrence, who flew to Washington for the meeting. Nitze hoped that Lawrence could provide impartial analysis of Teller and Oppenheimer’s arguments, and he was not disappointed. Lawrence corroborated Teller’s account that the hydrogen bomb could be built, and he explained that Oppenheimer’s arguments were driven by his personal views, not scientific data. He argued that even if the United States did not “demonstrate the technical feasibility” of the fusion bomb, Soviet physicists would eventually be able to build thermonuclear weapons. Nitze, ultimately, was convinced: he later stated that “Oppenheimer was not being totally straightforward with him,” and that Oppenheimer “was letting his political views cloud his scientific judgment.” As Nitze explained in his memoirs, moreover, he came to the conclusion that if the “super” bomb was feasible—as Teller argued—and if the Soviet Union could develop it—as Lawrence claimed—“then our [the Truman administration’s] operation assumption had to be that the Russians were already working on the H-bomb.” Therefore, although Nitze agreed with Oppenheimer that the “world’s future prospects would be better without thermonuclear weapons,” he believed the United States could not afford to fall behind the Soviet Union in nuclear technology.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ibid; Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 104.
¹²⁸ Nitze, From Hiroshima to Glasnost, 87-92.
Acheson’s views on nuclear weapons had changed since he drafted the Acheson-Lilienthal Report in 1946, as he had grown increasingly skeptical that U.S.-Soviet negotiations could be fruitful. His recommendations regarding the hydrogen bomb, however, were by no means predetermined. Unlike President Truman, Acheson had long been wary of wedding U.S. security policies to the atomic bomb, and the Soviet successful atomic test reinforced those apprehensions. In fact, in June 1949, Acheson privately informed several senators that the United States “had too few atomic bombs to stop an invasion of Western Europe,” and he consistently stressed that the U.S. atomic monopoly failed to prevent the Czech coup or the Berlin blockade. Moreover, unlike Truman, Acheson was not shocked to learn of the Soviet Union’s atomic test: he stated, in fact, that “we have been fully aware that sooner or later this development would occur.” Acheson, like Kennan and Nitze, also pushed for a total strategic review of U.S. security policies and military strategy, which he hoped would encourage the Truman administration to initiate a conventional military buildup. As Beisner explains, Acheson believed “the real solution to Soviet nuclear power was to build situations of strength across the board, conventional, as well as nuclear.”

While the Policy Planning Staff meeting on November 3, 1949 reveals the slow evolution of Acheson’s views on the hydrogen bomb, it demonstrates how rapidly Kennan and Nitze’s policy prescriptions hardened. Kennan began by expressing his overwhelming concern that because the United States lagged behind the Soviet Union in conventional strength, U.S. security policies were increasingly “tied to the atom bomb.”

Kennen advocated, therefore, bolstering U.S. conventional strength—although he failed

129 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 228-235; Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 63.
to specify the means or how large the U.S. military buildup should be. He also claimed that the hydrogen bomb would not grant the U.S. military and political leverage, and he feared that a decision to build the “super” bomb would undermine any prospect of a sweeping U.S.-Soviet agreement over the future of Germany, which he had adamantly supported since 1948.\textsuperscript{130}

Acheson, as he often did, proceeded to contemplate the Truman administration’s alternatives aloud, without committing himself to one course of action. Acheson stated that the Truman administration should consider a two-year moratorium—“bilateral if possible, unilateral if necessary”—on the development of “super” bombs. He claimed that a temporary halt on thermonuclear research could produce an international atomic energy agreement—although he was skeptical it could be achieved. Acheson explained that if the United States was unable to negotiate an international treaty, the Truman administration could “go ahead with overall production of both [atomic and thermonuclear weapons],” as the United States would have made its “best effort to do otherwise.” Ultimately, although Acheson, Kennan, and Nitze agreed that the Soviet Union was pursuing thermonuclear capabilities, Nitze, as he did throughout the H-bomb debate, claimed that the burden of proof should lie with those, like Kennan, who claimed that developing the fusion bomb would not provide political and military leverage or bolster national security.\textsuperscript{131}


\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
Emboldened by the Policy Planning Staff meeting, Kennan presented Acheson’s notion of a temporary moratorium on thermonuclear research to Oppenheimer on November 16. As Gaddis explains, however, Oppenheimer “threw cold water on” Kennan’s proposals. Despite Oppenheimer’s overwhelming moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb, he doubted that the Truman administration would accept a temporary halt on thermonuclear research, even if it was bilateral. Oppenheimer claimed that although it was a reasonable plan—one, in fact, which he supported—he explained that those who demanded “rigid and absolute” safeguards to ensure Soviet compliance would never accept Kennan’s proposals. As Kennan had previously argued, without a reliable system of on-site inspections, there could be no guarantees that the Soviet Union was not secretly developing its own fusion bomb.132

Kennan, however, was undeterred by Oppenheimer’s skepticism. On November 18, Kennan drafted a presidential announcement for Truman to read to the American people. While Truman never saw Kennan’s memorandum, it encapsulated Kennan’s profound moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb. Kennan’s proposed address stated that the American people viewed “with abhorrence all weapons of mass destruction,” and that the United States only reluctantly built its existing atomic arsenal because the “failure to reach international agreement on atomic energy control…made it necessary.”133

Despite expressing an early interest in the hydrogen bomb, President Truman wanted to avoid a “snap decision.” He created, therefore, a special NSC committee—consisting of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and

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133 Ibid.
Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission David Lilienthal—on November 19 to recommend whether to develop thermonuclear capabilities. As 1949 wore on, it became apparent that Acheson’s vote would determine the committee’s recommendation, as Johnson fully supported the thermonuclear project, and Lilienthal strong opposed it. By November, moreover, Acheson was still considering a number of alternatives, including a temporary moratorium on thermonuclear research. Acheson, ultimately, instructed Kennan and Nitze to draft separate reports containing their recommendations on the hydrogen bomb debate, as he realized they would disagree. As Gaddis explains, although “Acheson’s sympathies were with Kennan,” as he had previously read “an early version” of Kennan’s policy prescriptions, his “political instincts” were with Nitze.\textsuperscript{134}

Acheson seriously considered Kennan’s recommendations, but his decision to appoint Nitze, Gordon Arneson, and Adrian Fisher—rather than Kennan, Lilienthal, or Oppenheimer—to the Working Group of the Special Committee on November 28 was a crucial step toward building the hydrogen bomb. Like Nitze, Arneson and Fisher, who served as advisors to the State Department, supported the hydrogen bomb, which ensured that the Working Committee would recommend that the Truman administration determine the feasibility of the fusion bomb. Unfortunately for Kennan, Acheson also instructed the Committee on December 3 “not to direct its efforts toward the ultimate moral question at this time,” but rather to focus on the military and political implications of the “super” bomb. Acheson, for example, wanted the Committee to concentrate on questions such as “if both sides have it [the hydrogen bomb], will either use it? He also

\textsuperscript{134} Gaddis, \textit{George F. Kennan}, 378.
asked the Committee to determine “what would happen if the Soviets went forward and the Americans did not?”

On December 19, Nitze presented his policy prescriptions to Acheson. Unlike Kennan, who had isolated himself throughout December of 1949 to draft his own memorandum, Nitze, as Thompson explains, “fought for the bomb by land, sea, and air.” Also in contrast to Kennan, whose moral opposition to the H-bomb was undermining his ability to influence U.S. military strategy, Nitze offered opponents of the hydrogen bomb, such as Lilienthal, compromises: he argued, for example, that the Truman administration should refrain from building thermonuclear weapons until it had determined if the fusion bomb was “technically feasible.” Nitze supported, moreover, a total reexamination of U.S. “aims and objectives in the light of the U.S.S.R.’s probable fission capability and possible thermonuclear capability,” which, ultimately, persuaded a reluctant Lilienthal to endorse Nitze’s policy prescriptions. More importantly, though, Nitze, as Acheson had instructed, did not dwell on the moral ramifications of thermonuclear weapons. Unlike Kennan, Nitze was a nuclear realist: he did not question whether the hydrogen bomb should exist; he concentrated on whether it could exist. Nitze’s memorandum was also thirty times shorter than Kennan’s: it could be read in less than two minutes, and it presented a clear and persuasive argument that, eventually, garnered Truman, Acheson, Lilienthal, and Louis Johnson’s support.

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136 Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 105; Gaddis, George Kennan, 378-381; Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 83.
Nitze’s memorandum explained that there was a 50 percent possibility that the United States and the Soviet Union could develop thermonuclear capabilities. Nitze claimed, therefore, that it was critical for the Truman administration to determine if the hydrogen bomb was feasible. Nitze also recognized the legitimacy of Kennan’s profound concerns, but he aimed to debunk Kennan’s argument. He accepted, for example, Kennan’s assertion that despite the Soviet Union’s recently acquired fission capabilities, the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States: like Kennan, he believed “that the most immediate risks facing the security…of the U.S are in the ideological, economic, and political aspects of the Cold War,” and “that emphasis by the U.S. on the possible employment of weapons of mass destruction, in the event of a hot war, is detrimental to the position of the U.S. in the Cold War.” Nitze accepted, moreover, Kennan’s argument that “it is probable that the USSR would actually use weapons of mass destruction only in the event of prior use by others.” Unlike Kennan, though, Nitze claimed that it was “essential for the U.S. not to find itself in a position of technological inferiority.”

In contrast, Kennan’s memorandum was seventy-nine pages long, and Kennan failed to heed Acheson’s warning to avoid discussing the moral implications of the “super” bomb. Kennan’s moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb, which he championed without fear of losing political standing with Acheson, fundamentally shaped his policy prescriptions. As Gaddis explains, Kennan’s central argument was that morality lagged behind technology. Kennan claimed that the United States must “not fall into the error of

initiating, or planning to initiate, the employment of these weapons and concepts, thus hypnotizing ourselves into the belief that they may ultimately serve some positive national purpose.” Kennan’s memorandum also argued that U.S. nuclear policies had been inconsistent and ambiguous. Kennan explained that while the Truman administration had expressed interest in an international atomic energy treaty, military and political leaders increasingly based U.S. war plans upon the use of nuclear weapons. He claimed that because the United States lacked the conventional forces necessary to stop a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, without employing atomic bombs, the Truman administration was relying upon nuclear weapons without considering the implications. He urged the Truman administration not only to reconsider its current stance on international control, but also, like Nitze, he implored it to rethink the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies.  

Kennan’s memorandum also claimed that if the United States desired to eradicate nuclear weapons, it should no longer insist upon a deep-seated internal change in the Soviet system. The Truman administration, for example, should not require the Soviet Union to open its closed society to an international inspection agency. Kennan now believed that the mechanics of nuclear testing would provide the Truman administration adequate warning if the Soviet Union violated the agreement, which would allow the United States sufficient time to rebuild its retaliatory atomic arsenal. Contrary to his previous analysis, Kennan also claimed that the United States should not demand that proper security controls, such as a reliable system of on-site inspections, be established before the Truman administration liquidated its atomic arsenal. He stated that the Truman administration had expressed interest in an international atomic energy treaty, military and political leaders increasingly based U.S. war plans upon the use of nuclear weapons. He claimed that because the United States lacked the conventional forces necessary to stop a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, without employing atomic bombs, the Truman administration was relying upon nuclear weapons without considering the implications. He urged the Truman administration not only to reconsider its current stance on international control, but also, like Nitze, he implored it to rethink the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies.  

Kennan, Memoirs 1925-1950, 473; Gaddis, George Kennan, 379-381.
administration should make “unequivocal assurances” that all nuclear power facilities would be immediately shut down and that all existing atomic bombs would be destroyed. Furthermore, he argued that the United States could permit the Soviet Union to retain unilateral veto privileges within the U.N. Kennan explained, ultimately, that by eliminating the veto issue, abolishing an intentional inspection authority, and agreeing to immediately obliterate the existing U.S. nuclear stockpile, the United States would have countered all Soviet objections to the existing U.S. proposals for an international atomic energy agreement. 139

Kennan, like Nitze, also urged the Truman administration to reconsider the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. military planning. He posed a series of penetrating questions, which he argued should guide U.S. action regarding the hydrogen bomb debate. For instance, did the United States maintain its nuclear arsenal solely for deterrence and retaliation purposes? Also, would the United States employ atomic weapons—without hesitation—at the outbreak of any potential U.S.-Soviet conflict, or would the United States only launch an atomic attack in retaliation to a nuclear assault on the United States or its allies? Kennan claimed that the answers to these questions would determine the U.S. position on the hydrogen bomb.

Kennan explained that if the Truman administration was willing to immediately respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe by unleashing its nuclear arsenal, the United States should develop thermonuclear weapons, as the U.S. objective would be to inflict as much damage and psychological shock as possible upon the Soviet

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Union. If the United States, however, retained atomic devices for the sole purposes of deterrence and retaliation, the United States only needed to maintain a position of minimal deterrence, which Kennan explained would only require the United States to maintain enough fission weapons to make a nuclear strike against the United States and its allies “risky, unprofitable, and irrational.” Kennan stated, therefore, that the hydrogen bomb would be unnecessary and redundant. He also claimed that if the Truman administration adopted a strategy of minimal deterrence, it should also immediately attempt to negotiate an international atomic energy agreement, which would eradicate all existing atomic bombs. Contrary to his previous analysis, Kennan now believed that an imperfect system of international control, which did not establish a reliable system of on-site inspections, would provide the United States more security than a position of minimal deterrence. He continued to argue, moreover, that a secret direct appeal to Stalin afforded the agreement the best chance of success, as it would not only ensure that Stalin understood the seriousness of the U.S. proposals, but also minimize the influence of public opinion.  

Like Nitze, Kennan also urged the Truman administration to bolster its conventional forces. He explained that if the use of nuclear weapons depended upon Soviet action, the United States may never unleash its atomic arsenal. In that case, the United States needed to be able to hold off an invasion of Western Europe, however unlikely, without employing nuclear weapons. Unlike Nitze, though, Kennan never specified the means to achieve his ends—he did not, for instance, provide estimates of

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140 Ibid., 29-43.
how much a buildup would cost or specify how large the U.S. military needed to be to accomplish his objectives.\textsuperscript{141}

Kennan did not believe, however, that the United States should link an international atomic energy treaty with Soviet conventional arms reductions. Combining conventional disarmament with the liquidation of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear stockpiles was popular within the Truman administration, as it would require both superpowers to dismantle their primary military advantage. Kennan explained, though, that the Soviet Union’s military loomed so dangerously over Western Europe because of the absence of a German counterbalance. As he had throughout 1948 and 1949, Kennan implored the Truman administration to negotiate the removal of all foreign forces from the center of Europe and to arrange for the reunification and remilitarization of Germany. He argued that with a self-sustaining Germany to act as a buffer between Western Europe and the Soviet Union, Moscow’s conventional superiority would appear less threatening. Kennan, however, failed to explain how the Truman administration could persuade the Kremlin to abandon eastern Germany or convince its NATO allies to rearm Germany, which, obviously, undermined his argument.\textsuperscript{142}

As Nitze replaced Kennan as the director of the Policy Planning Staff on January 1, 1950, Kennan’s memorandum took the form of a personal paper to Acheson. As Kennan later explained, he “was afraid that this report might be embarrassing to have on record as a formal Staff report.” Kennan also doubted that his policy prescriptions were

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 30-34.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
seriously considered by Acheson: he guessed, correctly, that Acheson’s reaction was
“one of bewilderment and pity for my naiveté.”

Before Acheson read Kennan’s memorandum, however, Nitze sent him a severe
critique of Kennan’s policy prescriptions, which reinforced Acheson’s growing
skepticism that Kennan’s proposals could be implemented. On January 17, Nitze, once
again, expressed his belief that the United States must accelerate its efforts to determine
the technical feasibility of thermonuclear weapons, as he argued that the Soviet quest for
the hydrogen bomb had already begun. Nitze also restated his argument that the Truman
administration could not allow the Soviet Union to gain a monopoly on the fusion bomb,
as it would provide the Soviet Union military and diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the
United States. While Nitze accepted Kennan’s argument that an American policy of first
use “may impede the establishment of those conditions under which a more general
relaxation” of U.S.-Soviet tensions could occur, he argued that the U.S. nuclear deterrent
was all the Truman administration had to counterbalance of the Soviet Union’s
overwhelming conventional superiority in Europe.

Nitze also disagreed with Kennan’s thesis that a flawed system of international
control would provide the United States adequate security, and he posed this penetrating
question: if the treaty’s inspection mechanisms were faulty, how could the Truman
administration be sure the Soviet Union was not secretly building nuclear weapons? Nitze
doubted, moreover, that Kennan’s proposals were negotiable. He explained that the
Soviet Union would never accept an international atomic energy agreement, and he

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143 Gaddis, 378-381.
argued that Canada and Great Britain would also reject a flawed system of international control. Nitze’s recommendations, ultimately, boiled down to one fundamental assumption: if the hydrogen bomb was feasible, the Soviet Union was pursuing it, which made it critical for the Truman administration to develop fusion capabilities. Nitze, in retrospect, continued to claim that the Truman administration acted prudently. He stated that if the United States had not created an H-bomb, the Soviet Union would have achieved unchallengeable nuclear superiority by the late 1950s.145

As Kennan explained, his policy prescriptions “conflicted with what was already established military policy. They conflicted with the ideas we had formed as to where the essentials of our own defense were to be found. They conflicted with the reaction of Congress, the military establishment, and the public to the news of the detonation by the Russians of an atomic bomb.” By January 1950, domestic pressure was rapidly mounting on the Truman administration to build the hydrogen bomb. Although Truman intended to keep the debates secret, his efforts did not prevent public speculation. It should also be noted that the Truman administration had increasingly suffered severe Republican criticism in Congress, especially in the wake of “losing China,” which continued throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Senator Brien McMahon, the chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, for example, informed Truman that “if we let Russia get the super first, catastrophe becomes all but certain—whereas, if we get it first, there exists a chance of saving ourselves.” Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, moreover, sent Truman a memorandum from General Omar Bradley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which claimed “it is difficult to escape the conviction that in war it is folly to argue

145 Ibid; Nitze, Hiroshima to Glasnost, 90-92
whether one weapon is more immoral than another. For, in the larger sense, it is war itself which is immoral, and the stigma of such immortality must rest upon the nation which initiates hostilities.”

By January 1950, the hydrogen bomb debate had also leaked to the press, which increased the pressure on the Truman administration to build the “super” bomb. On January 15, renowned Washington columnist, Drew Pearson, discussed the fusion bomb on his Sunday night radio talk show, and the *New York Times* ran a front-page story on the hydrogen bomb on January 17. Public opinion polls in January and February also showed “overwhelming support” for building the H-bomb, as four out of five Americans “wanted a bigger U.S. bomb.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff, moreover, claimed it “would be intolerable” for the Soviet Union to have a monopoly on the “super” bomb.

If Kennan was to influence the Truman administration’s decision, he needed to persuade Dean Acheson. While Acheson wanted to explore all possible courses of action, including a temporary U.S. moratorium on thermonuclear research, before recommending that the Truman administration build thermonuclear weapons, domestic politics and the likelihood of Soviet compliance with an international atomic energy treaty, ultimately, shaped his perspective. Although Kennan, Acheson, and Nitze agreed on the need to reexamine the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies, Acheson was unable to “overcome two stubborn facts: that our delaying research would not delay Soviet research, contrary to an initial hope I had briefly entertained.” Unlike Kennan, Acheson and Nitze also

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146 Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 84-85.
recognized “that the American people simply would not tolerate a policy of delaying nuclear research in so vital a matter while we sought for further ways of reaching accommodation with the Russians after the experiences of the years since the war.” Acheson explained that Truman could not “survive a policy of not making the H-bomb,” as Truman would suffer unbearable criticism if it was discovered that he had enacted a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research. Acheson also rejected Kennan’s argument that Soviet nuclear policy and strategy hinged upon U.S. actions: unlike Kennan, Acheson doubted the United States could “persuade a paranoid adversary to disarm ‘by example’.”

More importantly, though, Acheson disdained Kennan, Oppenheimer, and Lilienthal’s moral arguments against the hydrogen bomb. Although there is no evidence to sustain Acheson’s assertion, he claimed that Kennan stated it would be better for Americans to “perish rather than be party to a course so evil as producing that weapon,” to which Acheson allegedly replied “if that was your view you ought to resign from the Foreign Service and go out and preach his Quaker gospel, but don’t do it within the department.” As Beisner explains, although “Acheson’s retrospective bark was worse than his contemporary bite,” he had grown increasingly wary of Kennan’s tendency to inject morality and philosophy into his assessment of U.S.-Soviet relations and U.S. nuclear strategy. Acheson, moreover, resented Kennan’s growing proclivity to prophecy—he later stated that “it was not by chance that the Prophets used to go up in the

148 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 228-235.
mountains and fast and think and be in solitude.” Ultimately, Acheson deliberately suppressed Kennan’s memorandum, which ensured that Truman never read it.  

On January 31, 1950, Truman met with Acheson, Johnson, and Lilienthal to determine the U.S. position on the “super” bomb. The conference was extremely brief, as it lasted less than seven minutes. Truman’s decision also appears to have been made with relative ease: he had, in fact, already decided to build the hydrogen bomb as early as January 21. Truman, moreover, failed to recall any internal dissent, despite the fact that Lilienthal vocalized many of his reservations. Truman interrupted Lilienthal’s presentation to pose a simple question: “can the Russians do it?” The three replied, “Yes they can.” Truman responded by saying, “In that case, we have no choice. We’ll go ahead.”

On January 31, 1950, President Truman announced that the Atomic Energy Commission would “proceed to determine the technical feasibility of a thermonuclear weapon.” As Kennan feared, it was ultimately a decision to maintain nuclear superiority. The New York Times correctly interpreted Truman’s message, and its front-page headline the following day read “TRUMAN ORDERS HYDROGEN BOMB BUILT.” As Kennan later explained, his policy prescriptions conflicted “with the growing tendency in Washington…to base our own plans and calculations solely on the capabilities of a potential adversary…and to exclude from consideration, as something unsusceptible to exact determination, the whole question of that adversary’s real intentions.” In November

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149 Ibid; Gaddis, George Kennan, 381.
150 Truman, Years of Trial and Hope, 309; Donovan, Tumultuous Years, 155.
151 Bundy, Danger and Survival, 213; Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 85.
1952, the United States exploded the world’s first thermonuclear weapon on the deserted Pacific island of Eniwetok. The Soviet Union detonated its own less than a year later.\textsuperscript{152}

Ultimately, although Kennan and Nitze both foresaw aspects of the impending nuclear arms race, neither fully understood the ramifications of their policy prescriptions. Unlike Nitze, Kennan predicted that the Truman administration’s decision to pursue the hydrogen bomb would accelerate the U.S.-Soviet arms race and exacerbate U.S.-Soviet tensions, which made a sweeping settlement over the future of Germany and Eastern Europe increasingly unlikely. Kennan’s argument that the Truman administration should have enacted a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research also should have been taken more seriously. It is doubtful that the Truman administration could have achieved an international atomic energy agreement, but it was worth another try. Eventually, if the Truman administration had continued to seriously pursue an international atomic energy treaty throughout the remainder of Truman’s presidency, Moscow’s position may have softened, especially in the wake of Stalin’s death in 1953.

Contrary to Nitze’s analysis, a strategy of minimal deterrence would have provided the United States adequate security, and it would have slowed the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race and allowed the Truman administration to divert resources toward conventional weapons and domestic spending. As Kennan explained, the mechanics of nuclear testing would have allowed the Truman administration to detect if the Soviet Union had developed thermonuclear capabilities, which would have granted the Truman

\textsuperscript{152} Bundy, \textit{Danger and Survival}, 213.
administration sufficient time to build its own hydrogen bomb.\textsuperscript{153} Moreover, the existing U.S. atomic stockpile—which contained over 500 fission bombs by the end of 1950 and over 1,000 by 1952—would have provided the United States a credible nuclear deterrent against a Soviet atomic strike or a conventional invasion of Western Europe, as the U.S. atomic arsenal could have easily destroyed every Soviet city many times over.\textsuperscript{154} The hydrogen bomb, therefore, was unnecessary and redundant.

As Kennan had throughout his career, though, he failed to grasp that domestic politics prevented the Truman administration from implementing his policy prescriptions. Nitze’s policy recommendations, however, were based on the fact that the Soviet Union had the capability of building thermonuclear weapons, which were better suited for the politicized nature of Cold War America. Although history revealed that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the West, U.S. statesmen could not be sure in 1950, contrary to Kennan’s analysis. Acheson and Nitze accepted Kennan’s assertion that the Soviet Union would not invade Western Europe nor launch a preemptive nuclear strike against the United States. Acheson and Nitze, however, believed that Soviet atomic capabilities, especially a potential Soviet thermonuclear monopoly, would enhance “the Kremlin’s penchant for risk-taking,” which, ultimately, they feared may “lead to an accidental outbreak of general military conflict.” Especially in the wake of “losing China,” Acheson and Nitze also recognized that the Truman administration could no longer accept Kennan’s assumption that “the danger of war was remote, asymmetry could be tolerated indefinitely, and that negotiations, if in the interest of both sides, could be

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 222-229.
\textsuperscript{154} Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 79; Beisner, \textit{Dean Acheson}, 235.
productive.” Although military capabilities could be difficult to determine in the Soviet Union’s closed society, capabilities—unlike intentions—could be quantified and were much less subjective. Although rare, intentions, unlike capabilities, could also shift over night.\textsuperscript{155}

Nitze, unlike Kennan, also correctly predicted that Stalin’s pursuit of thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed, even if the United States enacted a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research. Unlike U.S. physicists, Soviet scientists began experimenting with the hydrogen bomb in 1946, and Stalin ordered an immediate acceleration of the Soviet thermonuclear project in the wake of the Soviet Union’s successful atomic test, three months before Truman made his decision. Stalin did not hesitate, as he believed that only a comparable atomic arsenal could deter the United States from unleashing its nuclear weapons. Andrei Sakharov, who worked on the Soviet hydrogen bomb project, recalled that Lavrenty Beria “drove us without mercy, day and night, the most demanding taskmaster one could imagine. The strain was intense, with Beria hurling a continuous series of threats at us as to what would happen if we didn’t produce faster.”\textsuperscript{156}

Sakharov also explained that “any American steps to suspend or permanently cancel the development of a thermonuclear weapon would have been judged as either a sly, deceptive move, or the manifestation of stupidity and weakness. In both cases the reaction would have been unambiguous—not to get caught in the trap and to take


\textsuperscript{156} Vladislav Zubok, \textit{Cold War Statesman Confront the Bomb} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60; Nitze, \textit{Hiroshima to Glasnost}, 91.
immediate advantage of the stupidity of the enemy.” David Holloway corroborates Sakharov’s argument. Holloway claims that Stalin would never have agreed to an international atomic energy treaty, and he argues that the Soviet Union’s pursuit of thermonuclear weapons could not be derailed. Contrary to Kennan’s analysis, Holloway stated that Stalin would have “pressed ahead with the hydrogen bomb in order to avoid a possible trap, or to exploit American stupidity. It is hard to imagine that he would have seen American restraint as evidence of good will, or as a sign that agreement was really possible.”

Finally, the Truman administration would have been foolish to adopt a declared policy of non-American first use. As Nitze later implied in his 1956 article “Atoms, Strategy, and Policy,” Kennan failed to grasp the difference between a “declaratory policy,” which was aimed to produce a political effect, and an “action policy,” which guided U.S. actions in a potential conflict. Nitze, like Kennan, argued that the United States should adopt an “action policy” of non-American first use. Unlike Kennan, though, Nitze did not believe the United States should enact a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. First and foremost, it is doubtful that the Kremlin would have believed the Truman administration would stick to its “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, especially during the course of a U.S.-Soviet conflict. A “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, moreover, would have forced the Truman administration to maintain an enormous conventional military, which would have cost the Truman administration untold billions of dollars. Rather, as Nitze argued, by maintaining

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the appearance that the Truman administration would respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe with nuclear weapons, the United States generated a powerful deterrent to Soviet aggression.

Although Kennan and Nitze had previously agreed that the United States should maintain its atomic monopoly and develop a potent retaliatory atomic arsenal, Kennan’s moral opposition to the hydrogen bomb and his decision to leave the State Department the previous summer fundamentally altered his policy prescriptions. Unlike Nitze, Kennan did not believe that the H-bomb would grant the United States political leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, bolster U.S. security, or that a Soviet thermonuclear monopoly would enhance “the Kremlin’s penchant for risk-taking.” He claimed, rather, that the Truman administration should adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence, and he argued that the “super” bomb was unnecessary and redundant. Nitze, however, accepted Kennan’s assertion that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States and that the Truman administration should rapidly reexamine the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies, but he believed that the United States could not allow the Soviet Union to have a monopoly on thermonuclear weapons. Under mounting pressure from Congress and the American public, Acheson reluctantly endorsed Nitze’s policy recommendations. Acheson and Nitze’s priority, ultimately, was to minimize the risk posed by the Soviet Union and “it seemed wiser to base decision on measurable quantities than on what Kennan himself admitted was ‘the unfirm substance of the imponderables’.”

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159 Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 330.
160 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 81-82.
While Truman wanted to avoid a “snap decision” regarding the hydrogen bomb, it is difficult to imagine the Truman administration adopting Kennan’s strategy of minimal deterrence or a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use.\footnote{Gaddis, \textit{George F. Kennan}, 378.} By the fall of 1949, the Truman administration was under intense domestic pressure to build the “super” bomb, and U.S. war plans to defend Western Europe were increasingly dependent upon the use of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Truman, moreover, retained ultimate control over the U.S. decision to build the fusion bomb, and it should be noted that Truman was determined to maintain U.S. nuclear superiority. There is also no evidence to suggest that Truman seriously considered abandoning America’s quest to develop thermonuclear capabilities. Truman had, in fact, decided to build the hydrogen bomb a week before he met with Acheson, Lilienthal, and Johnson.\footnote{Donovan, \textit{Tumultuous Years}, 155.}

If Kennan had persuaded Acheson not to support the construction of the hydrogen bomb, however, it may have affected Truman’s decision. If Acheson had opposed the H-bomb, it is likely that Lilienthal would have maintained his initial aversion to the “super,” which would have swung the committee’s recommendation against developing thermonuclear capabilities. It is difficult to imagine that Truman would have ignored the committee’s suggestion, especially if Acheson and Lilienthal opposed the fusion bomb. Although Acheson was aware of the mounting domestic pressure on Truman to build the “super,” he seriously considered Kennan’s policy prescriptions: Acheson, in fact, had tentatively proposed a temporary moratorium on thermonuclear research as late as November 3, 1949.
As Kennan had throughout 1948 and 1949, however, he failed to account for the influence of domestic politics or acknowledge, as he previously had, that the Kremlin would never accept an international atomic energy agreement which required a reliable means of on-site inspections. Kennan, moreover, refused to heed Acheson’s instructions to ignore the moral ramifications of the H-bomb, which undermined his attempts to slow the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race. It was Nitze, rather, who mastered the State Department’s bureaucracy and demonstrated a keen understanding of domestic politics and U.S.-Soviet relations. Although Kennan was the State Department’s leading Soviet expert, Nitze foresaw that the Kremlin’s pursuit of thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed. Nitze, unlike Kennan, was also willing to compromise: while Kennan insisted upon a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research, Nitze advised the Truman administration to determine the feasibility of the hydrogen bomb, and he won Acheson and Lilienthal’s support for his position by advocating a review of U.S. security policies, which he hoped would move the Truman administration away from reliance upon nuclear weapons. While Kennan and Nitze agreed on the bomb’s role in U.S. security policies prior to the Soviet atomic test, it was Nitze, ultimately, not Kennan, who influenced U.S. military strategy and nuclear policy throughout 1949 and 1950, as domestic politics made his policy prescriptions the only viable alternative.
CHAPTER THREE: FRUSTRATING THE “KREMLIN’S DESIGN”

On March 22, 1950, Paul Nitze, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson met to discuss the State Department’s review of U.S. security policies, which would eventually become NSC-68. Less than five minutes into Acheson’s presentation, though, Johnson interrupted by shouting that he had not received the State Department’s paper—although he had been sent a copy a week earlier—and he claimed that he “was not going to agree to anything he had not read.” He also expressed his displeasure at “being called to conferences without having an opportunity to read the appropriate materials,” and he stated “that this was the fourth time the Department of State had done this to him, and that he did not want any more of it.” He proceeded to tell Nitze that he should “remember that in the future,” he “held no authority to arrange such conferences.” Johnson stormed out of the meeting; it had only lasted fourteen minutes.163

Immediately after Johnson’s abrupt departure, General James Burns broke into tears: he claimed that he had “consulted with the Secretary [Johnson] about this. He agreed to it. He never told me he was going to blow up like this.” Johnson’s behavior was so “outrageous” that Acheson concluded he was “mentally ill.” Acheson later recalled that “from this time on until the President felt it necessary in September to ask for Johnson’s resignation, evidence accumulated to convince me that Louis Johnson was mentally ill. His conduct became too outrageous to be explained by mere cussedness. It did not surprise me when some years later he underwent a brain operation.”164

164 Ibid.
Throughout the winter and spring of 1950, Paul Nitze built bureaucratic support for what he would later call the most important document of his career: NSC-68. George Kennan played no role in drafting NSC-68, as he was in Latin America throughout much of the winter of 1950, but he and Nitze advised the Truman administration throughout the Korean War. While NSC-68 and the Korean War have been studied by countless historians, this chapter will concentrate on Kennan and Nitze’s nuclear convictions throughout Nitze’s tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff.

This chapter will reveal that while Kennan and Nitze disagreed over many issues regarding U.S. nuclear strategy, they advocated similar policies in several crucial areas. Kennan and Nitze, for instance, both advocated a total reexamination of U.S. security policies, which they hoped would move the Truman administration away from reliance on nuclear weapons. Both recognized, therefore, that this would require the Truman administration to bolster its conventional strength—although they disagreed over how large the military buildup should be—as it would allow the Truman administration the flexibility to respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe without employing nuclear weapons. Kennan and Nitze also supported an “action policy” of non-America first use, which became obvious throughout the Korean War.

This chapter will demonstrate that Nitze was a shrewder strategist than Kennan. While Kennan was unable to build bureaucratic support for his policy recommendations in the aftermath of the Soviet atomic test, Nitze mastered the State Department’s

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bureaucracy and demonstrated a keen understanding of U.S.-Soviet relations and U.S.
domestic politics throughout his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff.

Nitze’s ability to shape U.S. nuclear strategy, though, was also a product of his
relationship with Acheson. Unlike Kennan, Acheson and Nitze did not believe that
regional specialists possessed special insights into U.S.-Soviet relations, and they
recognized the need to sell their policy prescriptions to the American people, Congress,
and President Truman. While it took the Korean War to convince Truman to approve
NSC-68, he eventually implemented the conventional buildup that Nitze advocated. After
Truman made NSC-112 U.S. policy in the summer of 1951, moreover, it dictated the
Truman administration’s approach to U.S.-Soviet atomic energy and arms control
negotiations throughout the remainder of Truman’s presidency. Contrary to David
Callahan’s analysis, however, Nitze’s commitment to arms control was not
disingenuous. 167 If the Kremlin had been willing to negotiate, Nitze would not have
rejected a sweeping U.S.-Soviet arms control treaty. Unlike Kennan, though, Nitze
realized that the Kremlin would never agree to an international atomic energy treaty.

It should also be noted, however, that Nitze’s assertion that a U.S. thermonuclear
monopoly would allow the Truman administration to elicit political concessions via
atomic diplomacy from the Soviet Union was flawed. Despite maintaining a
preponderance of nuclear weapons throughout Truman’s presidency, the U.S. nuclear
arsenal did not provide the Truman administration political leverage in U.S.-Soviet
negotiations.

167 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 143.
Historians and statesmen later argued that NSC-68 was an oversimplification of the Cold War, an exaggerated portrayal of Soviet capabilities, and an inaccurate depiction of the Kremlin’s intentions. Others have also claimed that NSC-68 “militarized” Kennan’s strategy of containment, as Kennan had emphasized the political—not the military—threat posed by the Soviet Union. John Gaddis, for instance, stated that while Kennan preferred to “block Soviet expansionism” by “political, economic, psychosocial, and military measures, NSC-68 concentrated almost exclusively on the last of these.” Nitze and Acheson, however, were unimpressed by such criticisms: after reading a master’s thesis which stated that NSC-68 “militarized containment,” Nitze drew a line through “militarized containment” and wrote that “this paper more realistically set forth the requirements necessary to assure success of George Kennan’s idea of containment.”

Nitze explained in 1980 that “NSC-68 was very much a product of its time,” and indeed it was. By the winter of 1950, many U.S. officials feared that the international balance of power had shifted in favor of the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong’s communist forces had recently emerged victorious in China, which appeared to threaten U.S. interests throughout Asia. As David Callahan explains, moreover, the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship in February 1950 bonded “the world’s largest country and the world’s most populous country…in an alliance against the United States.”

The Truman administration’s apprehensions were also exacerbated by the Soviet Union’s successful atomic test in August 1949, as it ended the U.S. atomic monopoly and threatened to nullify the U.S. atomic arsenal. U.S. officials, such as Acheson and Nitze, feared that the United States would no longer be able to counter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe with nuclear weapons, as the Soviet Union would soon be able to retaliate against U.S. cities. While the United States possessed an advantage over the Soviet Union in airpower, U.S. and NATO conventional forces were hopelessly outnumbered in Europe, and it is doubtful that they could have withstood a Soviet invasion without resorting to nuclear warfare. By the fall of 1949, the United States, in fact, maintained a mere five U.S. army divisions in Western Europe, while the Kremlin commanded an army of over 5.8 million men. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained in a Policy Planning Staff meeting on February 2, 1950, the Soviet Union “could invade Europe from a standing start,” which ensured that the “usual signs of mobilization and preparation would be lacking.”

Domestic pressure was also rapidly mounting on the Truman administration to get tough on communism at home and abroad. In January 1950, Acheson testified before Congress on behalf of Alger Hiss, who had been accused of passing confidential information to communist spies. Acheson declared that “whatever the outcome of any appeal which Mr. Hiss or his lawyers may take in this case, I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss.” Acheson’s credibility, ultimately, was damaged in the eyes of Congress and the American public, and he soon garnered the nickname the “Red Dean”

170 See Beisner, Dean Acheson, 224-226 for a full discussion of the inadequacy of U.S. military posture in Western Europe; Thompson, The Hawk and the Dove, 114.
among many Republican senators. Walter Lippmann, in fact, wrote in the aftermath of Acheson’s testimony that Acheson was “treated on Capitol Hill with less courtesy and with smaller regard for the rules of evidence than if he were a convicted horse thief.”  

To make matters worse for the Truman administration, Klaus Fuchs—the chief of the Theoretical Physics Division of the British Atomic Research Establishment, who had also worked on the Manhattan Project during World War II—was arrested and charged with passing classified information to the Soviet Union on February 2, 1950. Less than a week later, Joseph McCarthy delivered a speech at Wheeling, West Virginia: he claimed that the State Department was harboring 81 communists, which unleashed a hunt within Washington to eliminate communist spies and sympathizers. It was, ultimately, within this context that NSC-68 was written, and as Nitze later claimed “it was very much a product of its time.”

Under Nitze’s leadership, the Policy Planning Staff operated much differently than it had under Kennan. As Robert Tufts, a former member of the Policy Planning Staff, recalled, “very big changes” were enacted after Nitze replaced Kennan. Tufts also explained that when Kennan was director, he “produced papers so fast you could hardly keep up with the drafts, and staff meetings tended to take the form of verbal comments on the paper Kennan was writing at the moment.” According to Dorothy Fosdick, who also served on the Policy Planning Staff under Kennan and Nitze, Kennan merely “wanted a court. Our role was to help him make up his mind.”

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171 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 92-94; Thompson, The Hawk and the Dove, 111.
172 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 92-94.
173 Ibid., 95-97.
As Tufts recalled, though, with Nitze as director, it was “a very different operation. Mr. Nitze didn’t like to write and didn’t write except when he had to. I and the other members of the Staff would produce papers which he then criticized.” According to Fosdick, Nitze, unlike Kennan, was “interested more in a consensus view. He didn’t think he had the answers, he felt that he had to use the wisest brains.” Finally, as John Paton Davies, also a former member of the Policy Planning Staff, later claimed, “Kennan was inclined to be rather cosmic in his outlook. Nitze on the other hand was much more pragmatic and much more issue focused.” Nitze’s commitment to building consensus, ultimately, allowed him to cultivate bureaucratic support for his policy prescriptions before they arrived on President Truman’s desk.\footnote{Ibid.}

Acheson and Nitze’s personalities also meshed, which greatly increased Nitze’s ability to shape U.S. foreign policy and military strategy. Nitze later wrote that “the happiest and most productive years of my life were those from 1947 to January 1953, when I was among those working closely with Dean creating the modern world.” Without question, Acheson also enjoyed working with Nitze. Lucius Battle, who served as a special assistant to Acheson, explained that “in intellectual terms, Dean found Paul very rewarding. He was decisive; he was clear; he was thoughtful; he was an outsider but also an insider in the sense of knowledge and intellect and associations.” William Bundy, Acheson’s son-in-law, also corroborates this analysis. He stated that “from the time Paul became head of the policy staff he was on Acheson’s wave length.” Tufts, moreover, recalled that “if the matter was high on Mr. Acheson’s agenda, it tended to be high on Mr. Nitze’s agenda. Whatever Acheson was deeply concerned with, Nitze tended to get
involved with.” Robert Beisner even wrote that Nitze “became a virtual alter ego of Acheson.” Although Acheson’s reputation suffered in the wake of his defense of Hiss, Truman remained supremely confident in his secretary of state, which made Nitze a powerful man within the State Department.\(^{175}\)

Acheson and Nitze also maintained a similar approach to U.S. foreign policy. Both doubted that Soviet experts, such as Kennan, possessed unique insights into U.S.-Soviet relations, and both were convinced that before U.S.-Soviet diplomacy could be fruitful, the United States needed to negotiate from a position of strength—nuclear, conventional, political, and economic. While Acheson and Nitze supported the construction of the hydrogen bomb, their ultimate solution to the Soviet threat was a rapid buildup of U.S. conventional strength. When discussing the impact of Soviet atomic capabilities upon U.S. nuclear strategy, Acheson explained to Senator Theodore Francis Green in 1951 that “if you and I are standing close together and I am appointing a .38 at you and you are pointing a BB gun at me, I have a considerable advantage. But if we are standing very close together and I am pointing a .45 at you and you are pointing a .38 at me, the advantage has declined. I do not think I should go into this anymore.”\(^{176}\)

While Acheson and Nitze did not believe that the Kremlin was planning to invade Western Europe, they were committed to retaining U.S. nuclear superiority and bolstering U.S. conventional capabilities. Acheson and Nitze, therefore, claimed that it was crucial for the Truman administration to be able to respond to a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe without resorting to nuclear warfare or undergoing a prolonged

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\(^{175}\) Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities*, 70 & 95-97; Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, 119-120.

\(^{176}\) Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, 117 & 243-245.
mobilization period, which they argued would require the Truman administration to triple its defense budget. Kennan, too, supported efforts to build U.S. conventional strength, but unlike Acheson and Nitze, he was averse to maintaining a large standing army.

Although Acheson later admitted that “we overreacted to Stalin, which in turn caused him to overreact to” U.S. policies, he continued to argue that the Truman administration had acted prudently. As secretary of state, Acheson claimed he could not afford to trust Kennan’s assertion that Moscow had no intention of initiating a war with the United States. Acheson, for instance, wrote in 1960 that Soviet experts were “dangerous” advisers, as they advocated “uncommunicable” policy prescriptions that “must be accepted by those who have not the same occult power of divination.” Acheson and Nitze, rather, argued that Soviet intentions were masked behind the Iron Curtain, and they stated that contrary to Kennan’s analysis, the Kremlin’s intentions were revealed by the massive conventional military it maintained at the heart of Europe. Acheson and Nitze, ultimately, preferred to “brandish strength” rather than “depend on artful ‘maneuver’,” as Kennan did, which Acheson described as a mix of “monasticism and the diplomacy of earlier centuries.” He also explained that although he “recognized and highly appreciated the personal and esoteric skill of our Foreign Service officers,” specifically Kennan, he “believed that insofar as their wisdom was ‘non-communicable,’ its value, though great in operations abroad, was limited in Washington.” Acheson, ultimately, believed in 1950 that Soviet intentions and capabilities created a “very grave danger to the survival of free nations and free institutions.”

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In a Policy Planning Staff meeting on February 2, Nitze argued that the “dangers of war were considerably greater than last fall.” Nitze also expanded on his analysis in a memorandum he completed on February 8. He explained that “recent Soviet moves reflect not only a mounting militancy but suggest a boldness that is essentially new—and borders on recklessness.” He claimed, moreover, that although “nothing about the moves indicates that Moscow is preparing to launch in the near future an all-out military attack on the West,” they suggested “a greater willingness than in the past to undertake a course of action, including a possible use of force in local areas, which might lead to an accidental outbreak of general military conflict.” Nitze, therefore, concluded that “the chance of war by miscalculation” had “increased.”

In February 1950, Kennan left the State Department to embark on a fact-finding trip to Latin America. His goal was to analyze the historical, cultural, economic, demographic, and environmental problems that affected the region. Before Kennan departed, however, he sent Acheson a parting memorandum on February 17, which revealed how far out of sync Kennan had become with the Truman administration, especially Acheson and Nitze. Kennan opened his memorandum by stating that there was “little justification for the impression that the ‘cold war’ by virtue of events outside of our control, has suddenly taken a drastic turn to our disadvantage.” Unlike the majority of the Truman administration, Kennan argued that while the loss of China was “serious,” it was “neither unexpected nor necessarily catastrophic,” as he stated that Mao would not

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become a puppet of the Kremlin. Kennan also claimed that “the demonstration of an ‘atomic capability’ on the part of the USSR likewise adds no new fundamental element to the picture.” He admitted, though, that the “H-bomb” was “a severe complication of the difficult and dangerous situation which has prevailed ever since the recent war,” as it generated “a new intensity, and a heightened grimness, to our existing problems.” Unlike Nitze, however, Kennan explained that even if the Soviet Union gained a thermonuclear monopoly, the hydrogen bomb would not grant the Soviet Union political leverage vis-à-vis the United States. Kennan, as he had since 1946, also rejected the notion that the United States and the Soviet Union would be able to elicit political concessions from the other superpower via atomic diplomacy: he believed, rather, that “the idea of their threatening people with the H-bomb and bidding them ‘sign on the dotted line or else’ is solely of our own manufacturing.” Kennan, moreover, urged the Truman administration to pursue an international atomic energy treaty, as he claimed the Kremlin would seriously consider U.S. proposals.179

Kennan admitted, though, that “our [the U.S.] international situation” was “not secure, or one that could justify complacency.” He explained, rather, that the international balance of power and the nature of the Soviet threat had not significantly changed since 1945, despite the “loss” of China and the recent Soviet acquisition of atomic capabilities. Kennan, like Acheson and Nitze, recognized the Soviet Union’s overwhelming conventional superiority, and he acknowledged that if the Soviet Union invaded Western Europe, which he believed was incredibly unlikely, the Red Army could overrun Western Europe.

Europe with relative ease. As Kennan had since 1946, however, he claimed that Soviet political—not military—power posed the primary threat to the United States.\textsuperscript{180}

Kennan, as usual, failed to specify the means to achieve his desired ends or account for the impact of domestic politics. Kennan, first and foremost, urged the Truman administration to restore the international balance of power by reunifying and remilitarizing Germany and Japan, although he recognized that the Truman administration would likely not implement his recommendations. Kennan, like Nitze, also supported efforts “in the military sphere,” to “act at once to get rid of our present dependence in our war plans on the atomic weapon.” Kennan explained that developing war plans that were not dependent upon the atomic bomb would ensure that the United States had a “straightforward” stance on the international control of atomic energy, and he argued that building U.S. conventional strength was “necessary because the atomic weapons are already an infirm and questionable element in our military posture, and likely to become more so as time passes.” Kennan also feared that “as long as we are determined to use the weapons willy-nilly, the conduct of war on that basis is inevitable. Only if we ourselves would be prepared, as a starter, to refrain from their use on a basis of mutuality, could there even be a chance of avoiding atomic warfare in the event of hostilities.”\textsuperscript{181}

Kennan realized, as Nitze did, that shifting U.S. security policies away from reliance upon nuclear weapons would be a “tremendous undertaking.” He claimed, therefore, that it might “require a state of semi-mobilization, involving some sort of

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
compulsory military service and drastic measures to reduce the exorbitant cost of national defense.” Kennan, however, failed to elaborate on what a “state of semi-mobilization” would look like in practice or explain how the Truman administration could sell the idea of “compulsory military service” to the American people and Congress. Acheson and Nitze, therefore, largely ignored Kennan’s parting memorandum.\footnote{Ibid; Gaddis, \\textit{George Kennan}, 389-391.}

As Gaddis explains, although “Acheson later implied that he had sent Kennan south to get him out of town while Nitze’s review was getting underway,” Kennan’s trip had been planned for over a year. Kennan’s absence, though, did not bother Acheson and Nitze, as it allowed them to push their review of U.S. security policies—almost unchallenged—throughout the State Department. While Kennan was unable to generate bureaucratic support for his policy prescriptions in the aftermath of the Soviet atomic test, Nitze skillfully built consensus within the State Department and, eventually, the Defense Department for his recommendations. Kennan, in fact, admitted to Nitze and Acheson in the summer of 1950 that “it never occurred” to him “that you two would make foreign policy without having first consulted me.” That, however, was exactly what Acheson and Nitze did.\footnote{Thompson, \\textit{The Hawk and the Dove}, 109-110; Gaddis, \\textit{George Kennan}, 386 & 390; Paul Nitze, \\textit{From Hiroshima to Glasnost} (New York: General Publishing Company, 1989), 86.}

President Truman, though, resisted efforts to increase defense expenditures and his dedication to preserving U.S. nuclear superiority never wavered. Truman, however, authorized the State and Defense Departments on January 31, 1950 to conduct a “reexamination of our objectives in peace and war…in light” of the fission bomb capability “and possible thermonuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union.” Nitze and
Acheson had advocated a total reevaluation of U.S. security policies throughout the hydrogen bomb debate, as both had grown increasingly skeptical that the United States had the military capabilities to meet its treaty obligations abroad, specifically to NATO allies, without resorting to nuclear warfare. As Nitze explained in 1980, he had been convinced that over time “the U.S. atomic monopoly and strategic significance thereof, would progressively decline,” which made it critical for the Truman administration to “move away from primary reliance upon nuclear weapons.”

Nitze, however, did not intend to write the State Department’s review of U.S. security policies alone. Instead, he relied heavily upon the Policy Planning Staff—specifically Robert Tufts, Garlton Savage, George Butler, and Harry Schwarz—for assistance. That being said, as Gaddis explains, “Nitze dominating the drafting” of NSC-68, “much as Kennan had always done” throughout his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff.

Despite Kennan’s departure to South America and Acheson’s unwavering support of Nitze’s efforts to increase U.S. military spending, Nitze still had to surmount several obstacles before his policy prescriptions were enacted. Congress, like Truman, was also dedicated to curbing defense expenditures. As Robert Beisner explains, “Congress, whether under Democratic or Republic rule, reinforced” Truman’s “fiscal caution.” The Truman administration, therefore, was under intense Congressional pressure to cut taxes and Truman’s solution was to place strict ceilings on defense spending and to continue to rely on the threat of nuclear retaliation to defend Western Europe. Truman, for example,

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184 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 100-101.
185 Ibid., 102; Gaddis, George Kennan, 391.
allocated a maximum of $11.8 billion in 1947 and $13 billion in 1951 to the armed forces. The Soviet atomic test had not even shaken Truman’s commitment to parsimony: he had, for instance, rejected the Air Force’s request in October 1949 to increase its budget by $800 million.\footnote{Beisner, \textit{Dean Acheson}, 235-238.}

Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson also presented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle for Nitze and Acheson to overcome. Johnson had taken over Truman’s Finance Committee during the 1948 election and according to David Callahan, Johnson “preformed miracles.” Ultimately, Truman rewarded Johnson by appointing him to replace James Forrestall as secretary of defense in March 1949. Johnson’s political ambitions also reinforced his unwavering commitment to enforcing Truman’s ceilings on military spending. Johnson, ultimately, hoped to run for president, and he believed that if he contained the military-industrial complex, he could win an election on an economic platform. Johnson’s dedication to fiscal conservatism earned him the unflattering nickname the “secretary of the economy” within the Truman administration.\footnote{Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 101-102.}

In contrast to Kennan, Nitze mastered the State Department’s bureaucracy throughout the winter of 1950. In part due to his background in economics, Nitze was aware of the fiscal implications of his policy prescriptions, which he expected to more than triple the defense budget. He, therefore, went to great lengths to conceal how radical his recommendations were. Nitze, first and foremost, enacted strict controls on the State Department’s review of U.S. security policies, which required anyone who wanted to examine its contents to acquire a “Q clearance,” as it was labeled “top secret—restricted
Nitze’s secrecy was also designed to prevent other departments, such as the Treasury and Budget Bureau, from derailing NSC-68 before it was complete. Nitze, moreover, privately informed Acheson that his recommendations would likely require a defense budget of over $40 billion. While Acheson unwaveringly supported the massive military buildup that Nitze advocated, he instructed Nitze not to place an estimate in NSC-68. Acheson, in fact, said:

“Paul, don’t you put that figure in this report. It is right for you to estimate it and tell me about it and I will tell Mr. Truman, but the decision on the amount of money involved should not be made until it is costed out in detail. One first out to make the decision as to whether this is the policy one wants to follow, and then the degree to which one actually implements it with appropriations is a separate question…but don’t get into this figure.”188

Truman initially hoped that the Defense and State Departments could consolidate their separate reports into a single document. While Nitze collaborated with the Policy Planning Staff throughout the writing process, Foggy Bottom’s policy prescriptions were, ultimately, his and Acheson’s brainchild. General Truman Landon, on the other hand, had written the Defense Department’s paper, although it soon became clear that he did not believe its contents: he had, rather, merely followed Johnson’s orders. The Pentagon’s analysis epitomized Johnson’s unquestioning commitment to limiting defense spending, as it argued that the United States maintained adequate military strength to deter and counter Soviet aggression. It also claimed that the U.S. atomic arsenal would continue to present a credible military deterrent, which made increased U.S. defense expenditures unnecessary.189

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188 Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 111; Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 120.
189 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 102-103.
Nitze, however, was not persuaded by the Defense Department’s arguments, and he ridiculed the Pentagon’s assumption that the United States maintained a military advantage over the Soviet Union. He also disagreed that the U.S. atomic arsenal would continue to deter Soviet aggression. As Nitze had since the fall of 1949, he argued that although the U.S. atomic arsenal would continue to generate a deterrent to Soviet aggression, the Truman administration could no longer count on nuclear weapons to counter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, however unlikely, as the Soviet Union would soon be able to retaliate against U.S. cities. Nitze, therefore, concluded that the United States must bolster its conventional strength, and he claimed that the $13 billion ceiling on defense spending would seriously jeopardize U.S. security. Landon and Burns, ultimately, were persuaded by Nitze’s arguments, which convinced Nitze that “it was possible to mobilize the complete support of the Joint Staff and all the resources of the JCS organization” against Johnson. 190

Nitze, in contrast to Kennan, also recognized that NSC-68 needed to persuade a fiscally conservative Truman and Congress to triple the defense budget. “The purpose of NSC-68,” as Acheson later explained, was, therefore, to “bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’ that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out.” Nitze, in order to sell his policy prescriptions, inaccurately depicted Soviet intentions, inflated Soviet capabilities, and presented a simplistic portrayal of U.S.-Soviet relations throughout NSC-68. While Nitze realized that the Cold War was more complex than the “slave society” and “free society” dichotomy that NSC-68 forged, he intentionally simplified U.S.-Soviet dissimilarities to persuade the Truman

190 Ibid.
administration that his policy prescriptions must be enacted as soon as possible. The “task of a public officer,” Acheson later argued, “seeking to explain and gain support for a major policy is not that of the writer of a doctoral thesis. Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality in carrying home a point.” Acheson also claimed that the Truman administration needed “education in the obvious rather than investigation of the obscure.”

Although Kennan and Nitze believed that bolstering U.S. conventional strength was crucial to ensuring U.S. security, it was Nitze, not Kennan, who shaped U.S. security policies. Unlike Kennan, Nitze demonstrated his ability to work within the State Department’s bureaucracy throughout the winter and spring of 1950, and he was aware that his policy prescriptions had to be sold to the American people, Congress, and Truman. Nitze’s strategy of exaggerating Soviet capabilities, inaccurately portraying Soviet intentions, and simplifying U.S.-Soviet dissimilarities, however, failed to persuade Truman to approve NSC-68. The Korean War, rather, convinced Truman to implement Nitze’s recommendations.

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Although NSC-68 was completed in April 1950, it was not declassified until February 27, 1975. NSC-68, therefore, developed a powerful mystique, even though, as Melvyn Leffler explains, it “reaffirmed the assumptions that had been driving U.S. foreign policy” throughout “the Truman administration.” NSC-68, however, was novel because it called for “more, more, and more money to implement the programs and to achieve the goals already set out.” While Nitze admitted that the U.S. military was the

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strongest it had ever been in a time of peace, he claimed that U.S. military capabilities were woefully inadequate to meet U.S. treaty obligations abroad—specifically in Western Europe.¹⁹²

Nitze began NSC-68 by explaining that the world was divided into two camps: one, directed by the Kremlin, was a “slave society;” the other, which was led by the United States, was a “free society.” He also stated that the “fundamental purpose” of the United States was to “assure the integrity and vitality of our free society which was founded upon the dignity and worth of the individual.” The Kremlin’s “fundamental design,” however, was to “retain and solidify” its “absolute power, first in the Soviet Union and second in the areas now under their control.” On this issue, Kennan and Nitze agreed. Kennan, too, had argued since 1946 that Moscow was primarily concerned with fostering its domestic legitimacy and preserving its empire. Nitze, though, pushed his analysis farther: he claimed, for example, that the Soviet “design” called “for the complete subversion and forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin.” He argued, therefore, that Moscow viewed the United States as the only obstacle standing in the way of its ultimate objective: world domination.¹⁹³

Nitze’s analysis in NSC-68, however, contradicted what he had previously argued. Like Kennan, Nitze had stated in February 1950, for instance, that there was no


evidence that the Soviet Union was preparing to invade Western Europe. In order to “bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’,” however, Nitze inaccurately portrayed Soviet intentions and inflated Soviet capabilities throughout NSC-68. While the Kremlin’s intentions were masked behind the Iron Curtain in 1950, it is now clear, as Kennan had claimed since 1946, that Stalin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States, which made Nitze’s assertion that Moscow was pursuing world domination tenuous at best. What was evident in 1950, however, was that the Soviet Union, despite its superiority in conventional forces, had not sought a military conflict with the West throughout Truman’s presidency. Moscow, in contrast to Nitze’s analysis, also did not have the capabilities to conquer the world: although the Soviet Union maintained a numerical advantage over American and NATO forces in Europe, Soviet naval and airpower lagged behind the United States, especially long-range bombers. Nitze’s analysis, therefore, was not based on Soviet capabilities: it was, rather, predicated upon Soviet ideology, specifically Nitze’s argument that Moscow was dedicated to furthering the international proletariat revolution by any means necessary.

NSC-68 also reaffirmed that the objectives outlined in NSC-20/4, which Kennan had written at James Forestall’s request in 1948, remained “fully consistent with the objectives stated in this paper, and they remain valid.” NSC-68, for example, maintained that the Truman administration should strive “to reduce the power and influence of the U.S.S.R. to limits which no longer constitute a threat to peace; to bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the government in power in Russia; to encourage the development among the Russian peoples of attitudes which may help to

194 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 111.
modify Soviet behavior;” and among others goals, the Truman administration should “create situations which will compel the Soviet government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts.” Nitze hoped, as Kennan had, that the Truman administration could accomplish these objectives through “methods short of war.”

NSC-68, however, also radically differed from NSC-20/4 in several ways. Nitze, first and foremost, argued that “the growing intensity of the conflict which has been imposed upon us” required a “change of emphasis.” Nitze explained that the fission bomb capability and “possible thermonuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union” made it necessary for the Truman administration to “face the fact that we can expect no longer abatement of the crisis unless and until a change occurs in the nature of the Soviet system.” Nitze, however, continued to doubt that a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system was likely to occur.

Nitze, unlike Kennan, also believed that the Truman administration must prepare for a peak period of military danger, which he predicted would occur in 1954. Kennan’s analysis in NSC-20/4 had been predicated upon Soviet intentions: he stated, for example, that since Moscow had no intention of invading Western Europe or initiating a war with the United States preparing for a peak period of danger was foolish. Nitze, however, was not convinced: Nitze explained that the Soviet Union was “developing the military capacity to support its designs for world domination,” and he claimed that the Soviet Union maintained “armed forces far in excess of those necessary to defend its territory.”
He ignored, however, that the United States also possessed “‘armed forces far in excess of those necessary to defend its territory.’” Nitze argued, therefore, that the Truman administration must initiate a massive military buildup as quickly as possible. Nitze stated, for instance, that the Soviet Union could easily “overrun Western Europe;” launch devastating air raids against Great Britain; strike U.S. lines of communication in the Atlantic and Pacific; and most importantly, “attack selected targets with atomic weapons, now including…Alaska, Canada, and the United States.” Nitze also explained that Soviet fission capabilities would prevent the United States from utilizing Great Britain as a potential base of operations to liberate Western Europe and make a “Normandy” type invasion impossible, as both would be incredibly susceptible to Soviet nuclear strikes. Nitze concluded that “unless the military strength of Western European nations” was “increased on a much larger scale than under current programs and at an accelerated rate,” NATO forces would be unable “to oppose even by 1960 the Soviet armed forces in war with any degree of effectiveness.”

Nitze—based on studies conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency, State Department, Army, Navy, and the Atomic Energy Commission—also estimated the Soviet Union’s “fission bomb stockpile” over the next five years. He predicted that by mid-1950, the Soviet Union would have 10-20 atomic bombs; 25-45 by mid-1951; 45-90 by mid-1952; 70-135 by mid-1953; and 200 by mid-1954. While Kennan argued that nuclear superiority would not grant the United States or the Soviet Union political or military leverage, Nitze took a very different approach: he concluded that a preponderance of atomic bombs would not only cast powerful shadows over U.S.-Soviet

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197 Ibid., 64-67 & 81.
relations, it might encourage Moscow to launch a preemptive nuclear strike, especially if the Kremlin believed it could seriously damage U.S. retaliatory capabilities or force U.S. capitulation.  

Nitze argued, therefore, that 1954 presented the year of maximum danger, as the Soviet Union would have gained the capability to inflict a decisive blow against the United States. Nitze explained that since there would likely be a “40-60” percent success rate in a nuclear attack, the Soviet Union could drop 100 or more fission bombs against U.S. targets by 1954. Nitze stated, in short, that when the Kremlin calculated it had “a sufficient atomic capability to make a surprise attack against us, nullifying our atomic superiority and creating a military situation decisively in its favor, the Kremlin might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth.” Nitze, unlike Kennan, also concluded that “the existence of two large atomic capabilities…might well act, therefore, not as a deterrent, but as an incentive to war.” He claimed, moreover, that “possession by the Soviet Union of a thermonuclear capability in addition to this substantial atomic stockpile would result in tremendously increased danger.” Nitze also stated that “only if we had overwhelming atomic superiority and obtained command of the air might the U.S.S.R. be deterred from employing its atomic weapons as we progressed toward the fulfillment of our objectives.” NSC-68, in sum, “portrayed a Soviet Union resolved to risk war as soon as its capabilities exceeded those of the Americans and their allies.”

Nitze claimed that although “the United States” possessed “the greatest military potential of any single nation in the world,” its present military capabilities lagged behind

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198 Ibid., 64-67 & 81-84.
199 Ibid; Gaddis, George Kennan, 391.
the Soviet Union, specifically its “numerical inferiority in forces in being and total manpower.” He argued, therefore, that “if the potential military capabilities of the United States and its allies were rapidly and effectively developed, sufficient forces could be produced to deter war” and to “withstand the initial Soviet attacks, stabilize supporting attacks, and to retaliate in turn with ever greater” military force. He predicted that a sufficient military buildup would take between two and three years, which would give the Truman administration adequate time to prepare for the peak period of danger—1954.200

Nitze also explained that the United States possessed the “atomic capability, including both numbers and deliverability, estimated to be adequate.” He stated, though, that the existing U.S. atomic stockpile would be unable to destroy the Soviet Union’s ability to wage a protracted war, and that it would be unable to force Soviet capitulation, even if the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal was unleashed. Nitze’s analysis, however, should be questioned: the United States, for instance, possessed 500 fission bombs by the end of 1950, which could have decimated every Soviet city several times over.201 Nitze, though, underestimated U.S. fission capabilities because he hoped to persuade the Truman administration that it could not continue to rely on the threat of nuclear retaliation to deter and counter Soviet aggression in Western Europe. Nitze concluded, therefore, that the United States must increase its “general air, ground and sea strength and that of our allies to a point where we are militarily not so heavily reliant upon atomic weapons.” Nitze, as he had since 1946, also advocated building “air warning defense systems, air defense, and vigorous development and implementation of a civil defense program,” which he

201 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 235.
believed would limit the effectiveness of an atomic attack against the United States and deter potential aggressors.  

The Truman administration, according to Nitze, could not allow the Soviet Union to gain a thermonuclear monopoly. Nitze, unlike Kennan, believed that nuclear superiority, especially unilateral control of the hydrogen bomb, would allow its possessor to engage in atomic diplomacy to achieve political objectives. He argued, for instance, that “if the U.S.S.R.” developed “thermonuclear weapons ahead of the U.S., the risks of greatly increased Soviet pressure against the free world, or an attack against the U.S. will be greatly increased.” Nitze also stated that “if the U.S.” built a “thermonuclear weapon ahead of the U.S.S.R.” it would cast a powerful shadow over U.S.-Soviet diplomacy, which would allow the United States “for some time” to “be able to bring increased pressure on the U.S.S.R.” Nitze expanded on these assumptions in 1951: he stated that “if the U.S. atomic capability is dramatically increased in the near or medium term through the development of thermonuclear weapons, this accretion of effective power may serve as an instrument for securing the objectives expressed in NSC 68 without war.” Nitze also explained in his 1956 article *Atoms, Strategy, and Policy* that “the atomic queens may never be brought into play,” and “they may never actually take one of the opponent’s pieces. But the position of the atomic queens may still have a decisive bearing on which side can safely advance a limited-war bishop or even a cold-war pawn.”

Nitze also doubted that the United States and the Soviet Union could resist unleashing their nuclear arsenals in the event of a U.S.-Soviet conflict. He stated, in fact,

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that “in the event of general war with the U.S.S.R., it must be anticipated that atomic weapons will be used by each side in the manner it deems best suited to accomplish its objectives.” Nitze’s solution, therefore, was to continue stockpiling atomic and thermonuclear bombs—assuming, of course, that the hydrogen bomb proved “feasible and would add significantly to our net capability.”

NSC-68 also grappled with Kennan’s recommendation that the Truman administration adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. While Nitze adamantly supported an “action policy” of non-American first use, he firmly opposed a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. He argued that “in our present state of relative unpreparedness in conventional weapons, such a declaration would be interpreted by the U.S.S.R. as an admission of great weakness,” which he feared would encourage Soviet aggression. Nitze also claimed that a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use would be perceived by U.S. allies, specifically in Western Europe, “as a clear indication that we intend to abandon them.” Nitze, moreover, explained that it was “doubtful whether such a declaration would be taken sufficiently seriously by the Kremlin to constitute an important factor in determining whether or not to attack the United States.” Nitze stated that Moscow would place a higher emphasis on U.S. “capabilities,” as he did, rather than on alleged U.S. intentions.

Nitze also strove to debunk Kennan’s recommendation that the Truman administration should pursue an international atomic energy treaty. While Nitze accepted Kennan’s assertion that “it would be in the long term advantage of the United States if

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205 Ibid.
atomic weapons were effectively eliminated from peacetime armaments,” he did not believe that an international atomic energy treaty could be negotiated. He explained that “no system of international control can prevent the production and use of atomic weapons in the event of a prolonged war” between the United States and the Soviet Union. He argued, therefore, that “in order to assure an appreciable time lag between notice of violation and a time when atomic weapons might be available in quantity, it would be necessary to destroy all plants capable of making large amounts of fissionable materials.” Nitze explained, as Kennan previously had, that this would require the Soviet Union to submit itself to a series of on-site inspections. He stated, however, that “such opening up is not compatible with the maintenance of the Soviet system in its present rigor. This is the major reason for the Soviet refusal to accept the U.N. plan.” He also explained that the “absence of good faith on the part of the U.S.S.R. must be assumed until there is concrete evidence that there has been a decisive change in Soviet policies,” which was “doubtful.” Nitze concluded, “in short,” that it was “impossible to hope that an effective system of international control could be negotiated.”

While Nitze did not outline any new U.S. objectives in NSC-68, he called for unprecedented levels of sustained military spending in a time of peace. He argued that unless the Truman administration initiated a “more rapid buildup of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world,” the Soviet Union would gain the upper hand in the Cold War, which he feared would encourage the Kremlin to launch devastating attacks—conventional and nuclear—upon Western Europe and the United States. Nitze also believed that a “rapid buildup” of U.S. conventional and nuclear

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206 Ibid., 81-87.
strength was necessary for U.S.-Soviet negotiations to be fruitful, as he urged the Truman administration to negotiate from a position of strength.207

Unlike many U.S. officials, such as Louis Johnson, Nitze claimed that “the United States could achieve…a buildup of economic and military strength of itself and its allies without suffering a decline in its real standard of living.” As an economist by training, Nitze relied on Keynesian economics and quantitative analysis to present his argument: he explained that “the total economic strength of the USSR compares with that of the U.S. is roughly one to four.” He also highlighted, for instance, that the U.S. gross national product was $250 billion, which greatly exceeded the Soviet Union’s $65 billion GNP, and he stressed that the United States could produce more oil, steel, aluminum, and electric power than the Soviet Union. He argued, moreover, that the Soviet Union’s military capabilities exceeded that of the United States because Moscow devoted a much larger portion of its GNP to military spending: the Kremlin, in fact, allocated 13.8 percent of its GNP to its armed forces, compared to only 6-7 percent of the United States.208

Kennan later explained that he “had nothing to do” with the “preparation of NSC-68,” and that he was “disgusted about the assumptions” it presented “concerning Soviet intentions.” Kennan’s statement in 1960, though, misrepresents the common assumptions he and Nitze held in 1950. Kennan, for instance, disagreed with NSC-68’s depiction of Soviet intentions: he argued that despite the recent Soviet acquisition of atomic capabilities, the Kremlin would continue to be extremely cautious. Kennan, unlike Nitze, continued to claim that even if the Kremlin gained a significant military advantage vis-à-

207 Ibid.
208 Ibid., 63 & 71-74.
vis the United States, Moscow had no intention of invading Western Europe or launching a nuclear strike against the United States.

Kennan also believed that documents such as NSC-68 assumed “a static world. They freeze policy, making it impossible to respond to external change.” Kennan, as Gaddis explains, had grown “increasingly wary of policy papers whose contents had to reflect a consensus and whose implementation he could not control.” Kennan, years later, also stated that “you don’t understand how hard this was for someone like myself, who felt that what you do has to be flexible, according to the situation of the moment.”

Kennan, moreover, detested the overly simplistic “slave society” and “free society” dichotomy that NSC-68 presented, and he was unimpressed by Acheson’s argument that the Truman administration “needed education in the obvious more than the investigation of the obscure.” Kennan, in fact, responded to Acheson by employing his own quotation from Acheson’s former mentor, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.: he explained that a great man realized “he couldn’t write out his philosophy of law; he could express it only as it applied to specific cases.”

As Gaddis explains, though, despite Kennan’s numerous objections to NSC-68, he “sympathized with Nitze’s” overarching objective: strengthening “nonnuclear as well as nuclear means of deterrence.” Kennan, like Nitze, supported efforts to move away from reliance upon atomic weapons, which he reluctantly acknowledged would require the Truman administration to bolster its conventional forces. Kennan, in contrast to Nitze, did not believe, however, that this would require a costly military buildup. Kennan, rather, hoped that U.S. defensive posture could be maintained without excessive

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209 Gaddis, *George Kennan*, 289-392
expenditures, which as Gaddis explains, made his policy recommendations—however vague—closer to “Truman, Johnson, and other fiscal conservatives” than Acheson and Nitze.\textsuperscript{210}

Both Kennan and Nitze, ultimately, supported efforts to shift U.S. military strategy toward what would eventually be known as “flexible response.” Kennan and Nitze, however, maintained different visions of what “flexible response” would look like in practice. Kennan recognized that the capacity for rapid mobilization was crucial to U.S. security, but he preferred the U.S. armed forces to primarily consist of “small, compact, alert forces, capable of delivering at short notice effective blows on limited theaters of operation far from our shores,” which were cheaper to maintain. Kennan, in short, preferred “horizontal flexibility,” which required the Truman administration to have the “ability to employ limited military force where appropriate, but to be able to make at least equal if not greater use of economic, diplomatic, and psychological instruments of containment.” Kennan, as he had since August 1949, also urged the Truman administration not to develop thermonuclear capabilities or try to retain nuclear superiority, as he claimed that a position of minimal deterrence would adequately deter Soviet aggression.\textsuperscript{211}

Nitze, however, argued that the Truman administration should develop “vertical flexibility,” which would allow the United States unlimited flexibility “up and down the spectrum of military capabilities, ranging from peacetime deterrent through nuclear war” to contain Soviet aggression. Nitze, in short, believed that the United States must be able

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid., 389-392 & 398.
to counter whatever Soviet threat materialized—whether political, economic, conventional, or nuclear—with equal force and without having to undergo a prolonged period of mobilization.\textsuperscript{212}

While flawed, Nitze’s policy prescriptions throughout NSC-68 were better suited for the politicized nature of Cold War America than Kennan’s parting recommendations. Nitze, unlike Kennan, realized that the American people and Congress would never accept a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use or support efforts to reopen U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. Nitze, unlike Kennan, moreover, recognized that the Kremlin would not agree to an international atomic energy treaty, especially if it required the Soviet Union to submit itself to on-site inspections, and he understood that his preference for “vertical flexibility” had to be sold to the American public, Congress, and President Truman. Nitze’s commitment to maintaining U.S. nuclear superiority, in contrast to Kennan’s arguments for minimal deterrence, also meshed with the Truman administration. Contrary to Nitze’s analysis, however, it is difficult to see how a thermonuclear monopoly would allow the Truman administration to “be able to bring increased pressure on the U.S.S.R.”\textsuperscript{213} As Kennan explained, rather, “the idea of their threatening people with the H-bomb and bidding them ‘sign on the dotted line or else’ is solely of our own manufacturing.”\textsuperscript{214}

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\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
As Callahan explains, although Louis Johnson’s outburst and abrupt departure from the State and Defense Department meeting on March 22 “laid” his “obstructionism…bare for all to see” and effectively “nullified the Pentagon’s vast powers of dissent,” NSC-68 had not yet been approved by President Truman. NSC-68 was eventually circulated throughout the upper levels of the Truman administration but unlike the Long Telegram, Truman was not immediately persuaded by NSC-68. Truman recognized that NSC-68 called for a massive military buildup which would shatter his ceilings on defense spending. Truman, therefore, returned NSC-68 to the National Security Council, and he instructed the National Security Council to “provide me with a clear indication of the programs which are envisaged in the Report, including estimates of the probable cost of such programs.”

Truman also resisted Acheson’s efforts to rally U.S. public opinion behind NSC-68’s policy recommendations. Truman, for instance, denied Acheson request to publish a “sanitized” version of NSC-68, and he announced in a national press conference on May 4 that he would maintain a strict ceiling on defense spending throughout 1951. Acheson, in fact, even walked in on Truman and Johnson “throwing darts at his NSC-68 trial balloons” in May. Truman, moreover, proclaimed to the American public on June 1 that the world was the closest to peace that it had been since September 1945.

By June 1950, it appeared that NSC-68 would die in the policy planning process. Despite’s Nitze’s ability to circumnavigate an increasingly hostile Johnson, Truman demonstrated no willingness to increase the defense budget or move away from a reliance

215 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 113-123.
216 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 245-247.
on cost-efficient nuclear weapons. He had told Johnson, for example, on April 20 that if
the United States required additional military equipment, Johnson should find it on a
shelf—even if it was “rusting.” As Callahan explains, though, even if NSC-68 had
persuaded Truman to adopt its policy prescriptions, “Congress was sure to reject such
increases” in defense spending. Just as the “most important” document in Kennan’s
career—his memorandum on the international control of atomic energy—NSC-68 had no
immediate impact on U.S. military strategy or foreign policy. Nitze, in fact, became so
frustrated that he departed on vacation on June 7 to New Brunswick. Little did he know,
however, that Kim Il-Sung, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong were about to change
everything.217

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On June 24, 1950 Paul Nitze was enjoying a much needed vacation. He had spent
the previous several months attempting to persuade the Truman administration to adopt
NSC-68, but despite his best efforts, it appeared that NSC-68 would never been
implemented. Nitze was miles from the nearest road when he learned of the North
Korean invasion: he was salmon fishing on the Upsalquitch River when he heard the
news on a radio one of his guides had brought. He quickly began paddling upstream, and
he rushed to the airport to take the first flight possible to Washington, D.C.218

Kennan had also been enjoying a relaxing weekend the day of the North Korean
attack. He had taken his entire family to their farm in East Berlin, Pennsylvania. The
Kennan family farm, however, did not have a phone, so Kennan did not learn of the

217 Ibid., 245-247; Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 358; Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 112;
Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 120-123.
218 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 124-126.
North Korean invasion until the following morning. It was then that he saw the front page of the *Washington Post*, which simply read “North Korean Forces Drive into South, Seoul Hears.” Kennan later lamented that “nobody had thought to notify me and perhaps there was no reason anybody should have; but I could not help but reflect that General Marshall would have seen that this was done.”²¹⁹

Although Kennan had fallen out of favor in Washington, especially with Acheson, he returned to the State Department to advise the Truman administration on how it should proceed. As Gaddis explains, “the next two months were an extraordinary moment in Kennan’s career: at no other point did he operate nearer to the top levels of government in a major crisis, or with greater freedom to provide advice.” Despite Kennan and Nitze’s disagreements over U.S. nuclear strategy and policy within the previous ten months, they worked in tandem throughout much of the Korean War.²²⁰

Nitze had predicted since the winter of 1950 that the recent Soviet acquisition of atomic capabilities would encourage Soviet aggression, likely on the periphery of U.S. interests, so he was not shocked by the North Korean invasion. He had advocated a buildup of U.S. conventional strength for months, and now NSC-68 appeared prophetic, as the majority of the Truman administration feared that the Soviet Union had engineered the attack. Nitze stated, for instance, that “it had been apparent from the first that the North Korean aggression was not a product of North Korean resources and intentions.” He explained, rather, that “it was conceived in Moscow. It was conducted with Moscow-supplied weapons.” While Nitze was correct that the Soviet Union had provided North

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²²⁰ Ibid.
Korea with conventional weapons, the attack was not Stalin’s brainchild: Kim Il-sung, rather, had been pestering Stalin for months to green-light the invasion, and he only reluctantly approved it.  

Although NSC-68 failed to convince Truman that a massive military buildup was necessary, Truman did not hesitate to support South Korea. The lessons of Munich were still ingrained in many U.S. officials’ minds, and most believed that the United States had no choice but to counter North Korea’s aggression. On this issue, Nitze and Kennan were in agreement with the Truman administration. Kennan and Nitze argued that although South Korea was of limited strategic value to the United States, a communist conquest of South Korea would have profound international ramifications. Kennan, for instance, stated that it was his “deep conviction that the U.S. had no choice but to accept this challenge,” as “the damage to world confidence and morale” would be devastating if the Truman administration failed to act. Nitze, too, believed that the United States could not allow North Korea’s aggression to go unchallenged. He claimed, for instance, that if the Truman administration did not intervene, it would shatter U.S. allies’ confidence in the United States, especially in Western Europe. Nitze later explained that “we had to react by counter military measures. The entire program for collective security was at stake.” Kennan also argued on June 25 that it was critical “that Formosa did not fall to the communists since this, coming on the top of the Korea attack, would be calamitous to our

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221 Callahan, Dangerous Capabilities, 124-129; Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 116-118. See Gaddis, George Kennan, 395-397 for a discussion of Stalin’s decision to green-light the invasion.
position in the Far East.” Kennan, therefore, applauded the Truman administration’s decision to deploy the U.S. Navy to patrol the Taiwan Strait.222

Despite his aversion to large standing armies, Kennan believed that it was “absolutely essential” that the United States mobilize for the Korean conflict. Kennan had opposed a massive military buildup in times of peace, but he had argued since 1946 that the U.S. armed forces must be able to mobilize rapidly. As Gaddis explains, Kennan was “furious” after the Council of Economic Advisors informed him that there was no need for drastic mobilization measures. Kennan claimed, as Nitze had throughout 1950, that the United States would not go bankrupt “even if” it was “forced to shell out three times as much for defense.” He explained, for instance, that if in World War II U.S. commanders had been told [that their only task] was to cope with an army of 90,000 Koreans with 100 tanks and small air support and to occupy Korea to the 38th Parallel, they would have considered it a small operation indeed.”223

Despite Truman’s initial commitment to limiting defense expenditures, the Korean War forced his hand. In the aftermath of North Korea’s invasion, NSC-68 appeared prophetic, as Nitze had predicted that the Soviet Union’s atomic capabilities would enhance “the Kremlin’s penchant for risk-taking.” NSC-68, ultimately, was revised several times, but Truman finally approved it in September 1950. As a result, the U.S. armed forces ballooned to 3.2 million men by June 1952; U.S. military assistance to

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222 Ibid.
223 Gaddis, George Kennan, 398-403.
NATO allies was significantly increased; and an additional $500 million was allocated to civil defense.\textsuperscript{224}

As the Korean War progressed, Nitze also grappled with the possibility of utilizing fission weapons in Korea. In July 1950, Nitze and the Policy Planning Staff argued that the Truman administration should only employ nuclear weapons in Korea in the unlikely scenario that their use was certain to save American lives, not precipitate Sino-Soviet intervention, and not generate international outrage. Nitze also expanded on those conclusions in a memorandum he completed on November 4, 1950. He began by explaining that “if the bomb were used in Korea, it would be for tactical purposes against troop concentrations.” He stated, though, that large “concentrations” of communist forces were unlikely to occur “normally,” which meant that “very few atomic bombs” would be used. He also claimed that “the use of the bomb for” military “purposes might prove a deterrent against further Chinese participation,” as he believed that Mao would not intervene if the United States demonstrated its willingness to unleash its atomic arsenal. Nitze, moreover, doubted that under “the present circumstances the atomic bomb would be military decisive in Korea,” and he argued that its use would greatly increase the chances of bringing “the Soviet Union into the war,” especially if the bomb were used against targets in Manchuria.\textsuperscript{225}

Nitze also urged the Truman administration to carefully consider the impact of using atomic weapons on international public opinion. He explained, for instance, that employing fission weapons in Korea “would help arouse the peoples of Asia against us.”

\textsuperscript{224} Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 134-138; Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, 330.
He also argued that the use of nuclear bombs would have “world-wide repercussions,” which would be amplified because the United States was fighting under the U.N. flag. Nitze claimed that if the Truman administration wanted to unleash its nuclear arsenal in Korea, it needed to gain U.N. “concurrence,” as it “might keep the moral forces of the world with us in the use of the bomb, whereas a unilateral decision to use it might leave us in a disadvantageous moral position.” Nitze stated, however, that openly debating the merits of employing the U.S. atomic arsenal within the United Nations would “be of military value to our adversary.” Nitze, in short, believed that the negative ramifications on international opinion and the likelihood of drawing the Soviet Union into the conflict outweighed any possible benefit of using nuclear weapons in Korea. While there is no evidence that Kennan specifically grappled with the possibility of the Korean War going nuclear, there can be little doubt that he would have supported Nitze’s conclusions.226

While U.N. forces struggled throughout the early months of the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur’s amphibious landing at Inchon altered the course of the conflict. As Kennan and Nitze feared, however, MacArthur continued to advance north towards the Yalu River and on November 25, Mao authorized a massive Chinese counteroffensive. There is, however, evidence to suggest that Mao may have attacked U.N. troops regardless of whether or not they crossed the 38th parallel.227

As U.N. forces retreated in the aftermath of China’s counteroffensive, Truman held a press conference on November 30. He began by explaining that “we will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation,” to which a reporter asked if

that included the possibility of atomic bombs. Truman replied “that would include every weapon we have. There has always been active consideration of its use.” The shocked audience asked Truman to clarify his statement: “did we understand you clearly that the use of the atomic bomb is under active consideration?” Truman merely stated “always has been. It is one of our weapons. It is a matter that the military people will have to decide.” 228

As Nicholas Thompson explains, “Nitze was a hawk when it came to stockpiling nuclear weapons, but not when it came to using them.” Although Nitze disagreed with Kennan’s assertion that the Truman administration should adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, he supported an “action policy” of non-American first use. Nitze was, therefore, horrified when he heard Truman’s comments, and he urged the Truman administration to alter the transcript of the press report to state that Truman—not the military—retained ultimate control over the U.S. atomic arsenal. As the press had already recorded Truman’s comments, however, Nitze’s advice was disregarded. 229

Nitze continued to push for increased U.S. military spending throughout the remainder of the Truman administration. He did, however, outline a sweeping U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement in NSC-112, which was completed in July 1951. As Callahan explains, NSC-112, ultimately, served “as a foundation of U.S. negotiating policy for the next two years” after it was adopted by the Truman administration on July 19, 1951. Unlike Kennan, though, Nitze supported efforts to link conventional and nuclear arms reductions, and he doubted that there could be an effective arms control

228 Thompson, Hawk and Dove, 123-125.
229 Ibid.
treaty until there was a general relaxation of U.S.-Soviet tensions and until a fundamental change in the Soviet system had occurred.\textsuperscript{230}

In a speech delivered at the United Nations in late 1950, Truman publically committed the United States to arms control negotiations. Soon after, he instructed the National Security Council to begin work on a “plan for the reduction and regulation of armaments and armed forces.” As the director of the Policy Planning Staff, Nitze spearheaded the State Department’s efforts to design a potential arms limitation treaty. In a memorandum he completed on March 10, Nitze explained that a possible U.S.-Soviet disarmament plan hinged upon the current state of U.S.-Soviet relations: he stated, for instance, that “international tensions” had “become so acute and so widespread that it seems unlikely that important progress can be made on any major issue except in the context of a comprehensive approach to the general reduction of tensions.” Nitze, for example, envisioned linking an arms control agreement with the reunification of Germany or a cease-fire in Korea.\textsuperscript{231}

Nitze also argued that a U.S.-Soviet disarmament plan should include “all weapons and armed forces,” not just nuclear weapons, as Kennan had advocated in his lengthy memorandum on the international control of atomic energy. Nitze, for instance, proposed imposing ceilings on the size of a country’s armed forces, the percentage of a state’s GNP it could spend on its military, and the number of tanks, planes, and naval vessels a nation could maintain. Nitze explained, moreover, that atomic weapons could be dealt with “in accordance with the U.N. plan or with some other plan which is equally

\textsuperscript{230} Callahan, \textit{Dangerous Capabilities}, 141-146.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
or more satisfactory.” Nitze, ultimately, hoped that a U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement would result in the “regulation, limitation, and balanced reduction of armed forces and armaments to a level which would decrease substantially the possibility of a successful initial aggression.”\textsuperscript{232}

Nitze’s proposed arms control treaty, as Kennan’s had been, was seriously flawed. Nitze acknowledged that any U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement would require the Soviet Union to open its closed society to an international inspection agency. Nitze, however, did not think this was likely: he stated, in fact, that “I knew perfectly well that the Soviets would never buy the idea; nor, even if they did, would we have any way of getting a true account of how much they were spending or how many men they were keeping under arms.” Had Moscow been open to his proposals, it is hard to believe that Nitze would reject a sweeping U.S.-Soviet disarmament plan—assuming, of course, that it established a reliable means of on-site inspections. Nitze’s statement, moreover, does not imply that his commitment to arms control was disingenuous, as Callahan argues. It reveals, rather, that Nitze realized that the Kremlin would never agree to an arms limitation treaty or allow on-site inspections. It is difficult to imagine Nitze’s plan in practice, especially regarding the various enforcement and inspection mechanisms which would have been crucial to its integrity, but it is equally hard to believe that the Soviet Union would have seriously considered his proposals during Stalin’s lifetime, a fact which Callahan ignores.\textsuperscript{233}

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid.
Despite Kennan and Nitze’s numerous disagreements over U.S. foreign policy and nuclear strategy throughout the latter years of the Truman administration, both were dedicated to shifting U.S. security polices away from a dependence on nuclear weapons. Both accepted, therefore, that the United States needed to bolster its conventional forces. When their nuclear convictions were tested during the Korean War, Kennan and Nitze were also committed to an “action policy” of no American first use, as both feared that the use of nuclear weapons would precipitate a wider conflict.

Nitze, in contrast to Kennan, also mastered the State Department’s bureaucracy throughout the final years of the Truman administration. Unlike Kennan, who failed to adapt to the politicized nature of Cold War America, Nitze recognized that his policy prescriptions had to be sold to the American people and Congress. He, therefore, inflated the Soviet threat and inaccurately portrayed Soviet intentions throughout NSC-68. While Nitze was able to circumnavigate an increasingly hostile Johnson, it, ultimately, took the Korean War to persuade a reluctant Truman to adopt his policy prescriptions. In the wake of North Korea’s invasion, however, Truman initiated the military buildup that Nitze had been recommending for months.

Nitze wielded profound influence throughout his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff, just as Kennan had during Marshall’s time as secretary of state. His prescriptions regarding U.S. nuclear policy and his analysis of Soviet intentions, however, were flawed: although NSC-68’s overarching purpose was to shock the Truman administration into action, it portrayed a Soviet Union that was willing to risk nuclear war as soon as it gained the capability to inflict a decisive blow against the United States.
It is now clear, however, that the Kremlin had no such intention, as Kennan maintained. Contrary to Nitze’s analysis, it is also difficult to fathom how an arsenal of 500 fission bombs by the end of 1950 and 1,000 by the end of 1952 would have failed to generate a credible nuclear deterrent, even if the Soviet Union gained a thermonuclear monopoly. Instead of pouring resources into a self-perpetuating nuclear arms race, the Truman administration could have diverted funds to bolster its conventional forces.

While Nitze’s policy prescriptions were flawed, he, unlike Kennan, recognized that U.S. domestic politics prevented the Truman administration from adopting a strategy of minimal deterrence and a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, especially in the wake of “losing China” and the rise of Joseph McCarthy. Nitze, moreover, recognized the critical difference between a “declaratory policy” and an “action policy.” He, unlike Kennan, saw no need for the Truman administration to proclaim its intentions, as it is doubtful that the Kremlin would have taken a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use seriously.

Nitze, like Kennan, also believed that a Soviet preemptive nuclear strike and an invasion of Western Europe were incredibly unlikely. Unlike Kennan, however, he was determined to prepare for worst case scenarios. Unfortunately for Kennan, prudence dictated that Acheson could not blindly trust his assertion that the Soviet Union had no intention of initiating a war with the United States, especially considering the Soviet Union’s overwhelming conventional superiority stationed in the heart of Europe. If the Truman administration wanted to respond to a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, however unlikely, without immediately unleashing its atomic arsenal, the military

234 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 235.
buildup that Nitze prescribed—and Kennan also supported, though on a lesser scale—was essential for U.S. security. Deploying U.S. conventional forces to Western Europe, moreover, was also crucial to ensuring that the Truman administration could counter a Soviet blitzkrieg of Western Europe, as it would negate the need for a prolonged mobilization period. Kennan has often been labeled the architect of containment, but his impact on U.S. foreign policy was extremely limited in the wake of Acheson’s succession of Marshall as secretary of state. It was Nitze, ultimately, not Kennan, who shaped the Truman administration’s approach to U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations, U.S. nuclear policy, and U.S. military strategy throughout the latter years of the Truman administration.

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235 It should be noted, however, that despite Acheson and Nitze’s best efforts, Congress only approved the deployment of four U.S. divisions to NATO. See Beisner, Dean Acheson, 449-452 for a discussion of the “Great Debate.”
CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that George Kennan and Paul Nitze held similar positions on several issues regarding the atomic bomb’s role in U.S. security policies prior to the Soviet atomic test in August 1949. Kennan and Nitze, for instance, worked in tandem throughout the early years of the Cold War to preserve the U.S. atomic monopoly and build a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal. Kennan and Nitze also urged the Truman administration to take steps to limit the effectiveness of a nuclear strike against the United States, and they argued that the fission bomb was not an “absolute weapon.” They acknowledged, however, that the atomic age required the Truman administration to rethink traditional military strategy and tactics. Before August 1949, moreover, Kennan and Nitze’s analysis of U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations meshed with the Truman administration’s established policies. Like the Truman administration, they argued that an effective international atomic energy treaty would require the Soviet Union to consent to on-site inspections, and they believed that the Kremlin would never accept such an agreement.

The Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb, however, fundamentally altered Kennan’s policy prescriptions. Kennan, though, had also decided in September 1949 to leave the State Department, which shaped his policy prescriptions throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Kennan, ultimately, was morally appalled by the prospects of thermonuclear warfare. While Kennan had also been repulsed by the unavoidable civilian casualties implied by fission warfare, he did not question the necessity of cultivating a potent retaliatory nuclear arsenal. Kennan, for instance, had been horrified by the
destruction of Hamburg, which had been obliterated by Allied bombing during World War II, when he visited it in March 1949. His imminent departure from the State Department, however, allowed him to voice his profound moral opposition to the H-bomb without fear of losing standing with Acheson. By the fall of 1949, he argued that the Truman administration should implement a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research and reopen U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations. Kennan claimed, finally, that the Truman administration should adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence and a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use.

Kennan and Nitze’s personalities also played a critical role in their ability to affect U.S. nuclear policy and strategy. By the summer of 1949, Kennan had grown increasingly frustrated with his inability to shape U.S. foreign policy, especially after Dean Acheson succeeded George Marshall as secretary of state in January 1949. While Kennan had wielded influence throughout Marshall’s tenure as secretary of state, Acheson and Kennan’s personalities failed to mesh. Acheson, like Nitze, disliked Kennan’s penchant for prophecy, his tendency to inject morality and philosophy into his analysis of U.S.-Soviet relations, and his ignorance of domestic politics. Like Nitze, Acheson also did not believe that Soviet experts, such as Kennan, possessed unique insights into U.S.-Soviet relations, and he was not persuaded that the Truman administration should base its security policies solely upon Kennan’s portrayal of the Kremlin’s intentions: he argued, rather, that he could not afford to blindly trust Kennan’s assertion that Moscow had no intention of initiating a war with the United States.
As Kennan previously had, Nitze doubted that Moscow would agree to an international atomic energy treaty, and he believed that the Soviet Union’s quest for thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed. Unlike Kennan, Nitze also argued that if the Kremlin acquired a thermonuclear monopoly, it would enhance “the Kremlin’s penchant for risk-taking,” which he feared may “lead to an accidental outbreak of general military conflict.”

Nitze, in contrast to Kennan, also stressed that Soviet nuclear superiority would allow the Soviet Union to engage in atomic diplomacy, which would aid the Kremlin’s pursuit of political objectives. Nitze, therefore, opposed Kennan’s strategy of minimal deterrence, and he argued that the Truman administration must determine the feasibility of the “super” bomb.

Nitze was also not persuaded by Kennan’s assertion that the Truman administration should adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. First and foremost, Nitze doubted that the Kremlin would take such a declaration seriously. Kennan, according to Nitze, failed to grasp the difference between a “declaratory policy” and an “action policy.” Like Kennan, Nitze was dedicated to an “action policy” of non-American first use, which became obvious throughout the Korean War. Nitze, however, argued that by maintaining the appearance that the Truman administration would respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe with nuclear weapons, the Truman administration would generate a powerful deterrent to Soviet aggression.

In the wake of the hydrogen bomb debate, Acheson and Nitze spearheaded the State Department’s review of U.S. security policies, which eventually become NSC-68.

While Kennan supported Nitze’s overarching objective, which was to shift U.S. security policies away from a dependence on nuclear weapons by bolstering U.S. conventional strength, he opposed NSC-68’s portrayal of Soviet intentions and capabilities. Contrary to Kennan’s analysis, NSC-68 depicted a Kremlin that was unwaveringly dedicated to world domination and that was willing to risk all-out nuclear war the moment its capabilities exceeded that of the United States. It should be noted, however, that Nitze claimed as late as February 1950 that there was no evidence to suggest that the Kremlin was planning to invade Western Europe or initiate a war with the United States.  

As Acheson later explained, though, Nitze’s purpose was to “bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’ that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out.” Nitze, therefore, exaggerated Soviet capabilities and inaccurately depicted the Kremlin’s intentions throughout NSC-68, as he argued that increasing the Truman administration’s defense budget threefold was crucial to preserving U.S. security and deterring Soviet aggression.

While Kennan and Nitze both foresaw aspects of the impending U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race, neither fully grasped the ramifications of their policy prescriptions. Nitze, for instance, failed to comprehend that a strategy of minimal deterrence would have provided the United States adequate security. As Kennan stated, the mechanics of nuclear testing would have allowed the Truman administration to detect if the Soviet Union had developed thermonuclear capabilities, which would have granted the Truman

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administration sufficient time to build its own hydrogen bomb. The existing U.S. atomic stockpile—which contained over 500 fission bombs by the end of 1950 and over 1,000 by 1952—would have provided the United States a credible nuclear deterrent against Soviet aggression, as the U.S. atomic arsenal could have easily destroyed every Soviet city many times over. As Kennan explained, the hydrogen bomb was unnecessary.

Contrary to Kennan’s analysis, though, the Truman administration would have been foolish to adopt a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. Nitze, like Kennan, argued that the Truman administration should only unleash its nuclear arsenal in response to an atomic attack against the United States or its allies, but he did not support a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. First and foremost, it is doubtful that the Kremlin would have believed the Truman administration would stick to its “declaratory policy,” especially during the course of a U.S.-Soviet conflict. A “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, moreover, would have forced the Truman administration to maintain an enormous conventional military, which would have cost the Truman administration billions of dollars. Rather, as Nitze argued, by maintaining the appearance that the Truman administration would respond to a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe with nuclear weapons, the United States generated a powerful deterrent to Soviet aggression.

In contrast to Kennan, Nitze demonstrated a keen understanding of domestic politics and U.S.-Soviet relations throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Unlike Kennan, Nitze recognized the mounting domestic pressure on the Truman administration to build

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239 Ibid., 79; Robert Beisner, Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 235.
the hydrogen bomb. He understood, therefore, that the American public, Congress, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff would never support a unilateral U.S. moratorium on thermonuclear research, a strategy of minimal deterrence, a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use, or an international atomic energy treaty that did not establish a reliable means of on-site inspections. In contrast to Kennan, Nitze also correctly predicted that the Soviet Union’s quest for thermonuclear capabilities could not be derailed, and that Moscow would never accept an international atomic energy agreement. As David Holloway explains, Stalin would have “pressed ahead with the hydrogen bomb in order to avoid a possible trap, or to exploit American stupidity. It is hard to imagine that he would have seen American restraint as evidence of good will, or as a sign that agreement was really possible.”

Nitze’s assertion that U.S. nuclear superiority would grant the United States political leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, however, was flawed. Although the United States maintained a preponderance of nuclear weapons throughout the Truman administration, it was unable to elicit political concessions from the Soviet Union via atomic diplomacy. As Stalin explained in 1946, he was not intimidated by the U.S. atomic monopoly: he stated, for instance, that “atomic bombs” were “meant to frighten those with weak nerves.” He also claimed that the United States attempted to “frighten [us] with the atomic bomb, but we are not afraid of it.” Contrary to Nitze’s analysis,

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243 Ibid.
Kennan grasped that a thermonuclear monopoly would not allow the Truman administration to successfully engage in atomic diplomacy: he argued, rather, that the “idea of their threatening people with the H-bomb, and bidding them ‘sign on the dotted line or else’ is solely of our own manufacturing.”

Prudence dictated, however, that the Truman administration could not afford to trust Kennan’s assertion that the Kremlin had no intention of initiating a war with the United States. While history revealed that Moscow had no plans to invade Western Europe, the Truman administration could not be sure in 1950. By the spring of 1950, moreover, the United States did not have the conventional capabilities to counter a Soviet blitzkrieg of Western Europe without resorting to nuclear warfare. The Soviet Union not only possessed a significant advantage vis-à-vis the United States in manpower, its military was stationed directly in the heart of Europe. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained on February 2, 1950, the Soviet Union “could invade Europe from a standing start,” which would ensure that the “usual signs of mobilization and preparation would be lacking.”

While Nitze inflated Soviet capabilities and inaccurately portrayed Soviet intentions throughout NSC-68, Nitze’s overarching objective, which was to strengthen U.S. conventional capabilities, was justifiable. Without the military buildup that Nitze prescribed, the Truman administration would have been unable to counter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, however unlikely, without resorting to nuclear warfare. If unleashed, the U.S. nuclear arsenal may have forced Soviet capitulation, especially if the

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245 Ibid., 142-143.
Truman administration obliterated countless Soviet cities, but all-out nuclear warfare would have resulted in tens of millions of civilian casualties and incited international outrage. In the wake of the Soviet atomic test, moreover, U.S. cities would have been vulnerable to a Soviet retaliatory nuclear strike. By building U.S. conventional capabilities and stationing U.S. troops in Western Europe, rather, the Truman administration provided itself the flexibility to respond to a Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe without unleashing the U.S. atomic arsenal.

Henry Kissinger stated in 1979 that Kennan “came as close to authoring the diplomatic doctrine of his era as any diplomat in our history.” This thesis, however, paints a very different picture of Kennan: it has revealed that Nitze, not Kennan, shaped U.S. nuclear policy throughout the hydrogen bomb debate. Despite Kennan’s best efforts, the Truman administration did not adopt a strategy of minimal deterrence, a unilateral moratorium on thermonuclear research, or a “declaratory policy” of non-American first use. Kennan was also unable to persuade the Truman administration to drop its demand that a U.S.-Soviet atomic energy agreement establish a reliable means of on-site inspection. The Truman administration, rather, implemented the policies that Nitze advocated: Truman authorized, for instance, an effort to build a “super” bomb and a total review of U.S. security policies.

This thesis has also demonstrated that Nitze influenced U.S. nuclear strategy and policy throughout his tenure as the director of the Policy Planning Staff. While it took the Korean War to persuade Truman to adopt NSC-68, he eventually implemented a military buildup and authorized over $500 million for civil defense, just as Nitze advocated. After

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NSC-112 was approved by Truman in the summer of 1951, moreover, it dictated Washington’s stance on arms control negotiations until President Dwight Eisenhower took office. It was Nitze, therefore, who shaped the Truman administration’s approach to U.S.-Soviet atomic energy negotiations, U.S. military strategy, and U.S. nuclear policy throughout the final years of Truman’s presidency.
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