Matter Of Fact . . . . . . By Stewart Alsop

Operation Confusion

A SERIOUS-MINDED citizen these days can hardly be blamed for feeling a little like one of those laboratory rats exposed to conflicting stimuli, is reduced to a condition of quivering rodential neurosis. For American citizens in recent days have been subjected to an avalanche of wildly conflicting statements about the Soviet air-atomic threat, all emanating from supposedly well-informed officials. "Operation Candor" looks like becoming "Operation Confusion."

This type of neurosis is subject to argument.

In support of his decision, Wilson says that "it will be perhaps three years before they (the Russians) have a reasonable number of bombs and airplanes that could deliver them." This statement is subject to argument. Secretary Wilson apparently refers only to hydrogen bombs, for example, conveniently overlooking the fact that for more than one year the Soviets have been stockpiling atomic bombs. A mere half dozen or so big atomic bombs could destroy the larger cities in this country.

AGAIN, Secretary Wilson remarked in support of his decision that "panicky" persons were giving the Russians credit for "some bombs they don't have." Presumably one of these panicky persons is Wilson's Chief of Air Staff, Gen. Nathan Twining. Twining said some months ago that the Soviet "long-range bomber force is now so big" that the Soviets no longer need to "increase its size," but only to improve the quality of the plane.

But let this pass. Assume that Secretary Wilson is perfectly correct in estimating that it will be three years before the Soviet air force can devastate the United States. By any reasonable test, this estimate is the best possible argument for going all out immediately on a major continental defense effort. Under any circumstances, it will take a long time to build a fully mature early warning net, and above all the weapons to respond effectively to the warning. But if we do indeed have three years grace, the job can still be done, according to the best experts in the field, if not a minute is wasted in the meantime.

The other arguments advanced by Secretary Wilson against a major air defense effort, which are echoed by high Pentagon sources, are equally confusing and conflicting. At his press conference on Wednesday, for example, Wilson intimated that no more than the half billion additional he proposes could be spent, even if much more money were available.

On the very same day, Gen. Benjamin Chidlaw, chief of the Air Defense Command, also had something to say. He remarked sadly that it was impossible to provide even adequate protection under present money and other limits. "I feel confident," he added, "that when it becomes fully apparent to our national leaders that an adequate degree of protection cannot be provided within the limits imposed, the present restrictions will somehow be relaxed." The conflict with Wilson's statement needs no underlining.

ANOTHER argument is that nothing more can be done under present manpower ceilings. Actually, a study of precisely this problem, under Air Force sponsorship, known by the code name "Operation Corrêde," has concluded that a deep area defense can be manned with available manpower. Even if this conclusion is over-optimistic, it is surely a little odd to argue that a nation of 160 million people cannot provide the men to prevent its own destruction.

A final argument is that it is no use making a big investment in air defense, since Soviet perfection of new devices like the intercontinental ballistic missile will render such a defense obsolete. This flies straight in the face of the reassuring estimates of Soviet capabilities cited above. What is more, it is precisely like saying that it is no use going to a doctor, since everyone must die in the end anyway. This is a complicated subject, full of thorny technicalities. It is possible that Secretary Wilson and those who agree with him are right, and that for some undisclosed technical or other reasons the great number of experts who have studied the subject are wrong. It is possible that these reasons have nothing to do with the desire to lower taxes and balance the budget, or with the congenital affection of the military for the utterly out-dated "balanced force" or three-way split concept. But the reasons so far advanced for a penny-wise approach to the continental defense problem, which seems really the problem of national survival, are confusing, conflicting, and very far from convincing.