Matter of Fact

Air Vulnerability Shifts Grimly

By Joseph Alsop

FAIRLY HARD EVIDENCE is now available
that the Soviet air force has started series
production of a six-engine turboprop bomber
with a roundtrip range of approximately 6000
miles.

In addition, it is known that the important
group of aviation factories in the neighborhood
of Moscow, which formerly produced the
MIG-15, have now been converted to produc-
tion of a new Soviet fighter. The evidence
strongly suggests that this new airplane which
is now in mass production, is a night and all-
weather fighter for the use of the Soviet Air
Defense Command.

If what is important were always paws, both
the foregoing small, dry paragraphs would
rate eight-column headlines in American news-
papers. They have, at any rate, a rather inti-
mate meaning for every citizen of the United
States.

As to Paragraph 1 above, a debate has been
going on ever since 1941, when the prototype
of the new Soviet strategic bomber was ob-
served at the Moscow air show. The question
was whether Type 31, as this single plane was
named, presaged or did not presage a Soviet
effort to turn out an aircraft comparable to
our B-36.

Most intelligence experts forecast that such
planes would be in quantity production this
year, after the usual interval for testing and
improving the prototype. But the Pentagon,
with its customary reckless optimism about
Soviet deficiencies, maintained this forecast
was quite groundless.

IT IS NOW ALMOST CERTAIN that the
forecast has come true. The new Soviet strat-
egic bomber is known to exist. There is every
reason to believe, in addition, that it is being
produced in quantity.

The meaning of these particular facts is
bleakly simple. The new bomber has approxi-
mately the range and weight-carrying charac-
teristics of the American B-36, which is the
backbone of our own strategic air arm. Hence
it overcomes the main weakness that the Soviet
strategic air has suffered from to date.

As more and more units are equipped with
the new bomber, the Soviets will cease to be
dependent on the TU-4, which can only reach
American targets on one-way, sacrifice missions.

Every American target will be within round-
trip range of the Soviet advanced bases in
Kamchatka and on the Arctic fringe. In addi-
tion, the new bomber is a more modern aircraft
than the B-36, with better speed, altitude and
other qualities.

As the TU-4 can be equated with our B-50,
and as B-50s and B-52s make up the bulk of our
Strategic Air Force, it can be seen that the
Soviets are beginning to be serious competitors
in this vital form of air power.

AS TO THE SECOND of the foregoing items,
its significance can be equally unpleasant. To
all intents and purposes, the United States has
no air defense, to guard against the growing
power of Soviet strategic air. As has just been
revealed in this space, our air defenders are
not expected to destroy more than one-tenth
of 1 percent of the attackers, in the event of
an air-atomic attack launched by night.

By way of contrast, the Soviet air defense
is massive and well developed, having only
one weakness. It depends upon the B-36, which
is a day fighter, blind by night. It is
because of this dependence of the MIG-15 that
the Soviet air defense is thought to be pen-
etrable by our obsolescent B-36s and B-52s. Our
air planners admit the B-36s and B-52s will
become wholly obsolete when the Soviets can
produce a good night fighter in quantity.

Concerning the Soviet night fighter, there
has again been controversy. The argument was
brought to a head last summer, when a Navy
patrol plane was intercepted in solid soup over
the Black Sea and chased, still through solid
soup, all the way to Cyprus. Only a night
fighter could have accomplished this.

The Air Force was still reluctant to face the
facts, but an inter-service agreement was
reached, nonetheless, that Soviet night fighter
production was on the way.

THE CONVERSION of the Moscow factories
obviously provides the missing piece in this
particular puzzle. Analysts who are not warped
by service special interests give the odds at
approximately 4 to 1 that the conversion is be-
ing made to produce the new night fighter.

The capacity of the Moscow air complex is
very large. Thus it is entirely conceivable that
the $600 to 4000 MIG-15s which now constitute
the Soviet home defense force will be replaced
with the new night and all-weather fighter,
with its air-borne tracking radar, within two
years or a little more.

Sum up these facts. On the one hand, the
vulnerability of this country is again increas-
ing, by another quantum jump. On the other
hand, the vulnerability of the Soviet Union is
again being lessened; the deterrent value of
our Strategic Air Command is being restored,
and thus this kind of protection is also weak-
ening. These are trends about which no sane
American can be complacent.