

Matter of Fact

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Central Problem of Defense

AS TIME PASSES, the problem of the defense of the American continent against actual physical destruction looms larger and larger, until it begins to dwarf or engulf all other national problems.

Only a little while ago, the threat of devastating atomic attack seemed to most people something to worry about later. Now the threat is so real and visible—at least to those officials with access to hidden facts—that it begins to seem that something really serious may belatedly be done about it.

Two distinguished special commissions—the last in a long series—have been appointed, to study once again the central and dominating problem. One of these commissions was appointed by the National Security Council. It is composed of high Government officials and of outside experts, among whom the most important is Dr. James Killian of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The second commission was appointed by Rep. W. Sterling Cole, chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. It consists of four distinguished citizens and four of the younger scientists. The chairman is Lieut. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer. The other nonscientific members are Lieut. Gen. Elwood R. Quesada, Gordon Dean, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, and Charles Lindbergh, the great aviator.

The scientific members are Herbert York, director of the Livermore Laboratories in California; Frederic de Hoffmann, a brilliant younger physicist from Los Alamos;

William Havens, a neutron specialist from Columbia; and Bernard Brodie of Yale.

The familiar problem which confronts both these commissions is in its essence simple enough. Two years ago, the Lincoln Project report proposed a serious effort to create a continental defense against air-atomic attack. This effort was to consist essentially of two parts.

The first part was an early warning line or lines, to provide several hours warning of impending attack by the Soviet "long range air army." The second part was the means to respond to the attack. An effective response would require a chain of fighter and missile bases, reaching up into Northern Canada, so that any attacking force would have to run a murderous gantlet of defensive fire.

The warning system is relatively cheap, and there is no longer any real argument about it. The Mid-Canada warning line is already going forward, and the construction of the Far North line, on the continental fringes, has been approved at least in principle. But an effective response will be anything but cheap. The needed chain of fully equipped fighter and missile bases would soon add from 2.5 billion dollars to 5 billion dollars to the yearly budget.

Throughout the whole, long, wasting argument about air atomic defense, this has been the real sticking point. The proponents of balancing the budget at whatever cost to national security instantly attacked the Lincoln Report as dream stuff by long-hairs. They were joined by the big bomber generals and their spokesmen, who feared—without any visible justification whatever—that a serious air defense would bite into the Strategic Air Command's budget.

In the face of such powerful opposition to an effective air defense, the Administra-

tion adopted a tactic of buying time by appointing committees. The Lincoln Project is the distant ancestor of the present commissions, but they have all sorts of intermediate ancestors, including the Kelly, Bull and Sprague inquiries, and many less formal studies.

Each study produced essentially the same answer—a far more effective defense against air atomic attack is both possible and essential. The fact that the original Lincoln study set an 80 percent "kill rate" as a target was supposed to be evidence of unrealistic "Maginot Line thinking." As a result of the more recent studies, the target of attacking bombers destroyed has been upped to 90 percent—enough to insure against really crippling attacks, even with hydrogen bombs.

With this background, the two new commissions are getting on with their work in a wholly new atmosphere. Significantly, Dr. Killian, who is playing the major role in the study for the NSC, also contributed importantly to the Lincoln Project report.

As for the Wedemeyer group, at least two members—Wedemeyer himself and Charles Lindbergh—have deep budget-balancing instincts. But the group has been working hard, and receiving an intensive education in air-atomic realities in the process. And there is already some reason to expect a strong and unanimous report proposing a much accelerated air-atomic defense effort.

Meanwhile, of course, almost two years have been largely lost. And now a new argument is being heard—that the Soviets will soon have ballistic missiles, against which there is no known defense. This may be so. But at least it is worth bearing in mind that the people who are now saying it is too late are the very same people who were responsible for the delay.