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Matter of Fact . . .

By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

The Guided Missile Race

THE NATION'S highest policy-making body, the National Security Council, might do well to call in a self-assertive, highly opinionated, former German general called Walter Dornberger.

The National Security Council is currently "seized" with the problem of the intercontinental ballistic missile. The IBM, as it is known among the knowledgeable, is the weapon which will be capable of flying half-way round the globe, at supersonic speed, carrying a hydrogen warhead. No one doubts that the IBM will one day be made, either in this country or in Russia. The question before the NSC is whether to embark on a major and ultimately very costly effort, patterned on the war-time Manhattan District, to make sure that the IBM is made in this country first.

On this point, General Dornberger is worth listening to simply because, more than any other man, he is the father of the missile art. An engineer-scientist in civilian life, he was chosen by the German General Staff to head the wartime Peenemunde Rocket Research Institute. It was at Peenemunde that the V-2 supersonic missile, which bombarded Britain in the last months of the war, was made.

DORNBERGER talks in a heavy German accent, and with an absolute Teutonic assurance. This dogmatism might be irritating in another man, but in Dornberger it is impressive. For as a technical and engineering achievement, the V-2 is rated by some experts ahead of the atomic bomb itself. Moreover, Dornberger knows our own missile effort very much from the inside—he has been working here on missiles ever since the end of the war, first for the Pentagon, more recently for the Bell Aircraft Co.

He has also had access to the best estimates of Soviet missile progress. Thus, when

he assesses the race for the IBM, he speaks with considerable authority. He says very flatly that as of today the United States and the Soviet Union are about even in this race. He says almost as flatly that the Russians are likely to take up to nine years to get an operational long range missile into the air, with six years as a minimum, whereas we could do the job in five years or conceivably less. But we will only win the race, Dornberger believes, on certain conditions.

To explain these conditions, he compares the past and the present.

The first V-2 hit London in September, 1944. Churchill and Eisenhower have both written that the whole course of the war would have been changed if the weapon had been ready in quantity a few months earlier. Dornberger passionately believes that his beloved V-2 was unnecessarily delayed by at least a year for three reasons.

ONE WAS a dream of Adolf Hitler, that the V-2 would never reach England. This caused Hitler to lose all interest in the weapon, so that essential materials had to be bootlegged to Peenemunde. Another was the bitter political rivalry in the Nazi high command. And the third reason, by no means the last, was the Nazi security system.

Dornberger has described in an interesting book he has written how Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler's flatfeet descended on Peenemunde in January, 1944, and arrested Dornberger's best men, throwing the whole operation into chaos. The charge was that they were "more interested in space travel than in winning the war." London very probably escaped total destruction because of this ludicrous charge.

Here in this country, Dornberger says, there are no Hitlerian dreams, no material

shortages, no bombings. The American obsession with security, he says, is beginning to dry up the immensely stimulating free exchange of opinion which so impressed him when he first arrived here. But, he says judicially, the American security system still does not have the absolutely paralyzing effect of the Gestapo.

YET IN MANY ways, he says, it was easier to make missiles, even when the art was wholly unknown, even under the bombs, than it is here. He himself left the Pentagon for fear of strangling in red tape. "Over there," he says, "you could get a decision made. It was often wrong, but at least you knew where you stood. Now, you have to get 27 men to make any decision, all generals, all changing their jobs and their minds all the time."

This country will only win the missiles race if the essential experimental part, at least, of the missile effort is taken right out of the Pentagon, Dornberger believes. What is needed is an organization in which the scientists and engineers have the freedom to experiment without justifying their every move to "27 generals." Above all, as in the Manhattan District, one man must be given the power to decide.

This view of Dornberger's is shared by the great majority of the most distinguished American scientists. This, indeed, is why the NSC is seized with the problem. There is bitter resistance to a Manhattan District effort—from the services which will lose empires, and from the economizers, since the effort will be very costly in the long run.

Yet the stakes are high. For, as General Dornberger told our intelligence services in 1945, the nation which first fully masters the new missile art will "lead mankind into the future."