

Matter Of Fact By Stewart Alsop

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Operation Confusion

A SERIOUS-MINDED citizen these days can hardly be blamed for feeling a little like one of those laboratory rats which, exposed to conflicting stimuli, is reduced to a condition of quivering rodentia 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."

The confusion has been compounded, moreover, by the nature of Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson's arguments against any really major effort to strengthen the continental defense against nuclear attack. Secretary Wilson has said that he proposes to spend no more than an additional half billion or so for air defense, as against the very much larger effort recommended in the Lincoln Project report, the Kelly committee report, the Bull committee report, and a host of other special expert studies.

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 four years 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 bombers 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 Russian "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 some-

how 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 Corrode," 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 is really the problem of national survival, are confusing, conflicting, and very far from convincing.

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