
Matter of Fact

H-Bombs Know No Compromise

By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

THIS COUNTRY STILL seems largely unaware that the air defense problem even exists. Yet it is the subject of increasingly anguished debate within the highest Administration circles. One informed guess is that the Administration will move less than half-way toward the kind of air-defense effort proposed by the Eisenhower-appointed Bull committee and a host of previous committees.

Instead of raising current air defense outlays by three or four billion dollars a year, air defense may get an additional one or two billion dollars. With the Soviet air-atomic threat growing all the time, this seems rather like throwing a line half-way to a drowning man. Yet, in view of the painful fiscal and political dilemmas posed by the air-defense problem, a half-way compromise on the issue apparently is a reasonable guess.

The fiscal dilemma is obvious. In round figures, the Treasury stands to lose some nine billion dollars from prospective tax reductions. The deficit for the current fiscal year is estimated at more than three billion dollars. This means either new taxes, a heavily unbalanced budget, or huge reductions in spending—above all, for defense.

Short of new taxes, the budget President Eisenhower must present to Congress next January cannot even approach a balance, unless the defense budget is reduced well below 30 billion dollars. A defense budget less than that cannot conceivably include the kind of air defense appropriations which the Bull committee and its half-dozen predecessors have proposed as the minimum essential for the national security.

THE POLITICAL DILEMMA derives, of course, from this fiscal dilemma. A heavily unbalanced budget will be attacked effectively by the Democratic opposition, with many a quotation from campaign-time Republican promises. Any attempt to raise new taxes will be attacked even more forcefully.

Yet, a failure to deal at all with the air-defense problem, so dramatically highlighted by the Soviet hydrogen bomb, will also be grist to the opposition mill. And next year is an election year.

This enormously painful dilemma, moreover, must be resolved very soon, as the budget must be prepared well in advance of the President's January budget message. First among those who will influence the final decision are the new Joint Chiefs of Staff.

THERE IS GOOD REASON to believe that Air Force Chief of Staff Nathan Twining favors the Bull proposals, and some reason to believe that Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway does not. The most important voice will be that of the very able new chairman, Admiral Arthur Radford. Radford is deeply concerned over the air-defense problem, and quite aware that this country now has no real air defense at all.

But the new chiefs have only a few weeks to complete their "sweeping new look" at American defense planning. In this short time, they are unlikely to iron out a flat and final position on air defense. Some sort of compromise, such as their predecessors made repeatedly, seems much more probable.

Defense Secretary Wilson is deeply and publicly committed to the Joint Chiefs' "new look." For this reason, and because he greatly admires Radford, he is likely to go along with any Joint Chiefs' position on the issue. At least, he is much less likely to be the advocate of economy at any price he might have been six months ago.

The leader of the economy faction is Budget Director Joseph Dodge. Dodge performed a major service when he reorganized Japan's chaotic economy. But both as banker and Budget Director, deficits seem more dangerous to him than hydrogen bombs.

Able Treasury Secretary George Humphrey also is a passionate deficit-hater. He has taken the position that, if the experts decide that an effective air defense is really necessary, the Administration should bite the bullet and take the politically poisonous course of asking for new taxes.

THUS MOST of the influences on President Eisenhower are in the direction of half-way measures to meet the threat. Mr. Eisenhower is a natural believer in compromise, and he is also very conscious of his position as the neophyte leader of a party which stands for lower taxes and a balanced budget.

The trouble, of course, is that you cannot compromise with hydrogen bombs. For all his love of the "middle way," moreover, his whole background and character dispose the President to put national security first.

Since the decision in the end is the President's lonely responsibility, the half-way guess may not be a very good guess, after all. As half-way measures might quite conceivably be the prelude to national devastation, it is to be hoped that this is so.