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Matter Of Fact By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

The Explanation Owed

ON FEBRUARY 19 of this year, one of the most significant meetings in recent American history was held at the White House.

The man who called the meeting was the President himself. Those present were the principal congressional leaders of both parties, plus the senior Republican and Democratic members of the Armed Services Committees of the House and Senate. The purpose of the meeting was to brief the congressional chieftains on the most important problem posed by the last great policy paper of the Truman National Security Council, NSC-141.

In some sense, NSC-141 was a confession of bankruptcy of the Truman Administration's defense policy. On the basis of a reportedly formidable array of supporting facts, it is known to have argued that all our vast defense expenditures were not buying reasonable security for the United States and the free world.

NSC-141 is further known to have paid particular attention to the special problem that has often been raised in this space—the problem of American air defense. The facts, as set forth at the White House meeting in the presence of President Eisenhower, were little short of hair-raising.

IN CRUDE summary, it was forecast the Soviet Union would have the power to launch a totally destructive air-atomic attack on this country within two to three years. It was admitted that our existing and presently planned air defenses were wholly inadequate to stop such a Soviet attack. And it was stated that an adequate American air defense could not be achieved without a great and urgent effort, in-

volving massive money outlays not included in the Truman budget.

Recognizing such an omission in their own planning must have been an unpleasant task for the Truman Administration leaders who prepared NSC-141. Although members of a new administration were now doing the talking at the White House, none of them suggested that the facts were incorrectly set forth, or that the conclusions drawn were false in any respect. On the contrary, there was evidence that the President and his staff were then most seriously considering launching the air defense program that NSC-141 had urged as needful.

The meeting itself was such evidence. What other motive could the President have had, in raising and carefully defining this terrible problem, except to prepare for the time when he would have to propose a solution? Then too, costs were mentioned at the meeting. It was indicated that the global cost of the necessary air defense program might run as high as 20 billion dollars over a period of years. What could have been the motive of mentioning these outlays, if the President was not inclined to ask the Congress for the money?

At this meeting on February 19, the Eisenhower staff member for Security Council business, Robert Cutler, and Undersecretary of State W. Bedell Smith carried the main burden of exposition. But at the end, President Eisenhower in effect indorsed what had been said, telling the assembled congressional leaders that they now shared one of the worst worries. He confessed that he had been losing sleep ever since he took office and discovered the true air defense situation.

AND SO the White House meeting of February 19 ended, with a suggestion by House Minority Leader Sam Rayburn (Tex.) that the President do any subsequent talking, and a public statement by the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Styles Bridges (R-N.H.), that the news had been "grim."

Because of this meeting, with the consent of all the other Democratic congressional leaders, Rep. Rayburn wrote the President to pledge Democratic support for any defense appropriations that might be requested. Somewhat later, at his budget press conference, the President stated that earlier estimates of the Soviet air-atomic threat had not been changed. Such are the facts on one side of the balance sheet.

On the other side is the Eisenhower defense program. It contains no serious provision of any visible kind for solving the air defense problem. The needed extensions of the air warning net, the better communications systems, the improved and strengthened interceptor forces, are just not going to be contracted for. If these essentials are not contracted for now, they will not exist when the time of danger begins. The lead time of disaster, unhappily, is much shorter than the lead time of new airplanes.

The President's budget speech was very fine and even very moving. But it offered no explanation whatever of the gigantic discrepancy between what was said at the White House on February 19, and what is included in the new defense budget. If ever an explanation was owing, an explanation of this discrepancy is now owed to the American people.