

Matter Of Fact . . . By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

The Great Debate

IN THE 1930s, a wrong order of priorities destroyed Britain as a great power and all but destroyed Britain as a nation. The British leaders of the period—men of the highest attainments and best possible intentions—genuinely believed their own catch phrase, which excused their long neglect of Britain's defenses:

"We must remember that Britain's first line of defense is Britain's economic strength."

Unfortunately, the event proved that a balanced budget would not stop a Panzer division or a Heinkel bomber, as it cannot be counted on today to stop a Soviet TU-4. It is at least highly significant, therefore, that the same order of priorities seems likely to be officially established by the Eisenhower Administration.

The debate has been going on for three months. In the somewhat airless chamber of the National Security Council, the President and the key members of his Cabinet have been wrestling continuously and prayerfully with the same problem of priorities on which Britain foundered. The tentative result—and it must be emphasized that it is only tentative—is a decision that "economic destruction" is just as much to be feared as national destruction in the more literal sense of the phrase.

This debate has been the real, unseen drama of the Eisenhower Administration to date. The issues in dispute were first raised in September, 1949, by the explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb.

TO BEGIN the policy story at its very beginning, the Soviet atomic explosion resulted in March, 1950, in a National Security Council policy paper known as NSC-68. Previously we had relied on our atomic monopoly as our sole defense. NSC-68 for the first time established the principle that Soviet military power must be in

a measure matched by American military power.

President Truman and Secretary of Defense Johnson signed NSC-68 in March, but continued their contrary policy of American disarmament until June, 1950, when the Korean aggression taught them the error of their ways. The Korean war brought NSC-68 into force with a vengeance.

As early as 1951, however, a reexamination of NSC-68 was launched in the inner circle, largely on the motion of Secretary of Defense Lovett. This further study by the National Security Council revealed much that was deeply disquieting.

Despite the heaviness of our own defense burden, the Soviet military-industrial effort was still on a greater scale than ours. Meanwhile, the growing Soviet atomic stock and strategic air force were beginning to constitute a very serious threat to this country. Overall America, once invulnerable, was becoming very vulnerable indeed. Such were the findings.

These findings led to a revision of NSC-68 known as NSC-141, calling for considerable intensification of the American defense effort in certain important spheres—especially in the sphere of air defense. This was Truman's legacy to Eisenhower.

NSC-141 and its supporting documents, such as the report on Project Lincoln's investigation of the air defense problem, were waiting for the President when he took office, like so many skeletons in the White House closet. The question was—and is—what to do about these skeletons, which in effect gnashed their ugly jaws and demanded a reversal of the President's campaign promises about the budget and fiscal policy.

The argument about this issue first broke out on the cruiser Helena, with Secretary of the Treasury Humphrey pleading for conservative fiscal policies, and Secretary of State Dulles arguing for a national effort adequate to safeguard the American future. This has been the main division ever since. Secretary Dulles has been supported by Mutual Security Administrator Harold Stassen and Undersecretary of State Bedell Smith.

According to credible reports, Vice President Nixon, who is playing a remarkably useful part behind the scenes, also took this side. And the President himself was also much impressed at first by NSC-141.

and insisted that every Cabinet member give the closest study to this paper, its facts and its conclusions.

In the last analysis, however, any Cabinet member usually wins an argument mainly concerning his own department. In this instance Secretary of Defense Wilson, the chief party at interest, strongly sided with Secretary Humphrey. Hence the new doctrine, which is reported to be in process of official formulation by the Security Council, that we must fear "economic destruction" just as much as air-atomic devastation.

The biggest problems raised by NSC-141, such as the air defense problem, were not seriously tackled in the Truman defense budget, huge as this Truman budget was. Hence the President's cuts of the Truman budget do not absolutely preclude these problems being dealt with. Then, too, the wisest men in the Administration pardonably argue that they cannot tackle gigantic new problems until they feel themselves in full control of the vast, unfamiliar Government machine. Yet the indicated order of priorities is still wrong; for if worst comes to worst, who would not rather be a bankrupt American than an atom-bombed American or a defeated American?

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