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Taxes And H-Bomb Pose U. S. Dilemma

By Joseph Alsop

THE GOVERNMENT analysts are reported to be tentatively convinced that the Soviet hydrogen bomb was an interim weapon, similar to the American bomb tested at Eniwetok in 1951.

If this is correct, the purposes of the Soviet explosion were to gain preliminary data on the hydrogen fusion reaction, and to test the very large atomic bomb that is needed to trigger a full-scale hydrogen bomb. The 1951 Eniwetok bomb designed for these purposes had a power of about 250 kilotons, or about 250,000 tons of TNT. The next year we tested our full-scale hydrogen bomb, with a power of three to five megatons, or three million to five million tons of TNT.

These facts are enough to establish the reality of the American atomic lead. They sufficiently explain the statement of the chairman of the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Representative W. Sterling Cole, that the American atomic program is still "pre-eminent."

The question is, unfortunately, whether "pre-eminence" matters. According to the American Government's official estimates, the Kremlin is now able to cripple this country by air-atomic attack. According to the same estimates, the Kremlin will gain the ability to devastate this country—to strike a knockout blow that will force our surrender to the enemy—within 18 to 24 months.

THE RECENT Soviet bomb test plainly suggests that these American Government estimates have erred, if at all, on the side of caution. When the Kremlin has the bombs and the airpower to destroy this country, it will be a very poor consolation to know that we have more bombs than the Kremlin. The consolation will be all the thinner, moreover, since the Kremlin is rapidly building an air defense against our bombs, while we have no air defense worthy of the name and are unlikely to buy one.

The story of how our policy makers have handled this vital problem of the changing air-atomic balance between the Soviet Union and the United States can be allowed to speak for itself.

In brief, when Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the White House last winter, the first thing he found was a warning of grave danger, and an ambitious American air defense program to ward the danger off. Initially, the President seems to have been much impressed. But the air-defense program was going to cost a lot of money, and a good many Eisenhower advisers tend to think that taxes are more dangerous than hydrogen bombs.

As a result, the National Security Council has been walking up to and backing away from this vital problem for eight long months. The vast accumulation of data left behind by the Truman Administration has now been supplemented by no less than three major committee reports.

The Kelly committee, composed of leading scientists and industrialists, recommended a strong air-defense program. The Edwards committee, named to assess Soviet air-atomic capabilities, sharply underscored the extent of the danger. The Bull committee, chosen by the Eisenhower National Security Council to get a "report from our own people," recommended an even stronger program than the Kelly committee. Those who fear taxes more than H-Bombs were still displeased.

THERE IS a new motto, however—"if you don't like the last committee's report, get a new committee." Consequently a fourth Committee on Air Defense has now been named, composed of industrialists and others whose most conspicuous qualifications appears to be total ignorance of the problem. The most interesting thing about this new group is the presence in their midst of James B. Black, president of the Pacific Gas & Electric Co.

Last spring Mr. Black served on the "seven wise men," still another committee carefully selected by Budget Director Joseph Dodge and his allies. As desired by their sponsors, the seven wise men told the National Security Council that balancing the budget was far more important than the defense of the United States. The reappearance of a member of this packed jury on the new committee to consider air-defense problem is a coincidence altogether too striking to be ignored.

It all seems to add up to the conclusion that the growing Soviet air-atomic threat is to be utterly ignored, or at best dealt with by half-measures. It will feel a bit odd to be taking the road so brilliantly pioneered by Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. But that seems to be the road that will be taken, unless the President himself firmly decides otherwise or the new Joint Chiefs of Staff powerfully intervene. These are the two last hopes.