

Wash Post 9 Sept 53

Matter Of Fact . . . By Joseph and Stewart Alsop

Operation Candor

AFTER INTERMINABLE wavering, the Eisenhower Administration has at last decided to tell the country some of the truth about the national situation. The decision was taken before the Kremlin tested its first hydrogen bomb, but this event has further strengthened the hands of the advocates of "Operation Candor," as the project is called in the Administration's inner circle.

The President will do the talking. The time, the place and the medium are now under discussion. The method most favored at the moment is an informal television talk, or perhaps a combination of a television talk with a full dress radio speech.

Such is the final upshot of a debate that has been going on inside the American government since the final period of the Truman Administration. Certain officials of the old psychological strategy board were the first to insist that it was dangerous to keep the country in ignorance of the threat to national survival implicit in the steadily growing Soviet air-atomic capabilities. They were also the first to argue that a frank White House briefing was the only way to get the truth across to the country.

Hence the problem was on the National Security Council table, so to speak, when President Eisenhower took office. Active discussion of "Operation Candor" began early mid-winter. In the spring, at least one major meeting of the National Security Council was devoted to the subject; and Drs. J. Robert Oppenheimer and Vannevar Bush were invited on this occasion to make the case for being candid.

Nonetheless, the wavering continued into mid-summer. And even now, there are certain leading members of the Administration who hope that the Security Council decision—for such it is—may yet be reversed.

THE ARGUMENT most often used by the opponents of frankness is the highly specious one, "that the country knows everything but the real military secrets already." It is true, of course, that the real national situation is well understood by a small number of persons who have struggled to find it out. It is also true that some of these persons have done their best to make the hard facts more widely understood.

But this is not only specious; it is also irrelevant. The country as a whole does not yet understand the national situation, because the country's leaders have thus far persisted in concealing or misrepresenting the hard facts known to the experts. In difficult and unpleasant technical matters, the country does not listen to every chance voice. The country's leaders must inform the country, and no one else can do so.

The proof of this has just been given, in dramatic form, by the inquiring Dr. Gallup. The experts know very well that the Soviet Union already possesses the atomic bombs for a crippling attack on this country. They know also that the Soviet long range air arm is entirely capable of delivering the bombs. They know further that unless drastic measures are taken to improve our air defenses, the Kremlin will be able to make a totally devastating air-atomic attack on

the United States within 18 to 24 months.

But the country at large plainly does not know about all this. In fact when Dr. Gallup's pollsters asked their victims whether they thought their cities could be destroyed by Soviet atomic bombs, less than a third thought there was much risk. In short three quarters of the people of the United States are living in a dream of false security.

THOSE WHO HAVE wished this dangerous dream to be prolonged fall into three categories. There are the neurotic advocates of "maximum security," common in the Pentagon and now gaining ground at the Atomic Energy Commission, there are the State Department officials—George F. Kennan used to be one of them—who fear that the American people will demand all kinds of dangerous and impulsive remedies if they are told the plain truth. Finally, there are the high Administration officials who think high taxes are more dangerous than atomic bombs.

This last group is of particular importance. They think that if the truth is told, a strong demand will immediately be felt for heavier defense outlays on air defense and for other purposes. In this they are undoubtedly correct.

Maybe the promised presidential candor will not be so very candid after all. But if he is fully candid, it can be taken as certain that the current approach to defense problems will no longer be tolerated. And it is hard to believe that the decision to be candid does not imply a further decision, to make a different approach to defense.