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Author(s): Michael Gordon Jackson

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Beyond Brinkmanship: Eisenhower, Nuclear War Fighting, and Korea, 1953-1968

MICHAEL GORDON JACKSON

Brown University

This article examines the question of how serious President Eisenhower was in contemplating the use of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and Chinese mainland. To do this, it surveys Eisenhower's thinking and policies about the issue from 1953 to 1968 in regard to maintaining the security of South Korea. In contrast to many in the literature who argue that Eisenhower would have been very reluctant to authorize their use or who downplay the significance of his many statements about the use of nuclear weapons, it maintains that the president was much more willing to use nuclear compellent force than many have supposed. In regard to Eisenhower's reputation, this article adopts a post-revisionist stance that questions the consensus in the literature that he viewed them as instruments of deterrence, not war fighting. It also suggests that more research should be initiated to investigate the relationship between presidents' national security policies, commitments, and the option of nuclear compellence.

The role of nuclear weapons during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953 to 1961, and questions about their potential use during his administration, have generated a veritable cottage industry of scholarship.¹ Whole shelves of books have been written about his national security policies during the Cold War, and the paramount role he placed on the military and political utility of nuclear weapons.² The “New Look”

1. Since the 1970s, with the declassification of many key sources from the Eisenhower era, a massive amount of revisionist analysis of the Eisenhower administration has been completed, especially concerning its national security policies. For good guides to the literature up to the early 1990s, consult Stephen G. Rabe (1993), Richard Immerman (1990), Anthony J. Jones (1985), and Alan H. Luxenberg (1991).

2. Several pertinent works about Eisenhower, the New Look, and nuclear weapons have become available in recent years, including surveys by Timothy J. Botti (1996) and Andreas Wenger (1997), along with those by Richard Immerman and Robert B. Bowie (1998), Peter J. Roman (1996), Saki Dockrill (1996), and Campbell Craig (1998). All offer rich and detailed analyses of Eisenhower's national security policies. Campbell Craig presents a novel interpretation, namely, that Eisenhower's insistence on massive retaliation and nothing else was a “masterly chief executive” strategy designed to rein in his own advisers' desire for planning limited nuclear war. He made the options “all or nothing,” thereby giving the Communists no

Michael Gordon Jackson is lecturer of political science at Brown University and other colleges and universities in the New England region. He has published articles in International Journal of Politics and Ethics and White House Studies.

of the Eisenhower administration, committed to “security and solvency,” stressed making deep cuts in conventional armed forces, increasing strategic air power, and brandishing the threat of nuclear retaliation. If general war broke out between the United States and the Soviet Union, according to Eisenhower, it would have inevitably become a nuclear conflict, with catastrophic consequences for the world. It would, indeed, have been “suicidal” for both the superpowers to engage in such a conflict (Immerman and Bowie 1998, 247).

Yet, paradoxically, in spite of the emphasis Eisenhower placed on these awesomely destructive weapons, his administration is not usually identified by most as one committed to robust nuclear war fighting. Instead of examining Eisenhower’s views about the possible use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield, many scholars have preferred to analyze their role in strengthening deterrence and war prevention, in serving as instruments of coercive diplomacy, or in serving as a tool of “brinkmanship” during the 1950s. Eisenhower has a reputation in history as a commander-in-chief who was revolted by the thought of actually using nuclear weapons in war. There is abundant evidence in the record that Eisenhower was fully aware of the ghastliness of nuclear war and publicly supported the process of arms control. Though nuclear weapons were at the core of his New Look national security program, it has been said that his horror about such a war made him, in essence, a supremely cautious and prudent decision maker during crises. In other words, because he was a “rational” and moral leader, nuclear war fighting would have had to have been forced upon him by the most extreme political and military events.

In almost hagiographic terms, historian Douglas Brinkley recently describes him as “Eisenhower the Dove,” praising him as an honest and compassionate president. He was, according to Brinkley, determined to control defense spending and the “military industrial complex” and was dedicated to peace and keeping the United States out of war (Brinkley 2001, 63). According to John Lukacs, this perception is still widely held. “The general and accepted impression is that of a benevolent, often smiling, moderate man of judgment behind whose outwardly simple demeanor lay the considerable hidden wisdom of a great soldier and statesman” (Lukacs 2002, 68). Or, as Saki Dockrill concludes, “Behind the ‘magnetism of his sunny personality,’ President Dwight D. Eisenhower was an astute operator and a cautious statesman” (Dockrill 2000, 345).

Yet, at least in regard to questions about nuclear weapons and their use by Eisenhower, the literature seems schizophrenic. While it is widely acknowledged that his national security policy was based on the threat to use nuclear weapons if deterrence had failed, whether he *would* have used them has usually been presented in a decidedly more nuanced fashion. Eisenhower is often given the benefit of the doubt, the assumption being that he would have stepped back from the precipice and never have had to make the decision. To be sure, the literature concedes that Eisenhower was “serious” about

choice but to keep the peace. In short, the “primary objective of his (Eisenhower) presidency, the avoidance of a thermonuclear war with the Soviet Union,” was to make U.S. military policy “so dangerous that his advisers would find it impossible to push Eisenhower toward war and away from compromise” (1998, 69). Roman makes a similar argument, pointing out that Eisenhower’s conviction that “small wars” could lead to general nuclear war made him very cautious: “To Eisenhower, massive retaliation posed fewer risks and imposed fewer costs than expanding limited war capabilities” (1996, 87).

placing the weapons at the center of the New Look. Nevertheless, in spite of key sources in the record that indicate that Eisenhower strongly advocated their use, many have tried to rationalize and mitigate his frequent comments about their employment. His words are described as loose talk on his part, as deliberately ambivalent, or as indicative of a master statesman bluffing his opponents and manipulating the risk of war. According to Norman Friedman, “Eisenhower could not play his version of nuclear poker too publicly. He had to be able to bob and weave, to make threats and then very quickly withdraw them” (Friedman 2000, 201).

As the above suggests, there is a tendency in the literature to portray Eisenhower as a reluctant nuclear warrior. Analysts exhibit a real wariness about squaring the circle of the nuclear war fighting logic of the New Look and acknowledging the many strong and positive comments made by the president about their use. They avoid arriving at uncomfortable conclusions about Dwight Eisenhower’s willingness to use nuclear force, preferring to perpetuate the image of the “Man from Abilene,” who first sought peace, not war.

This predisposition to interpret Eisenhower’s views about nuclear weapons benignly can be found in several important works about the Korean conflict.³ Roger Dingman, in an often-cited study, flatly declares that “coercive atomic diplomacy” was not part of the Eisenhower administration’s war termination strategy for Korea. To Dingman, “NSC deliberations proved more discursive than decisive” and were nothing more than “rambling conversations” about the war (Dingman 1988/1989, 79, 81-82, 84). Edward Keefer notes that the president realized that his “quick-fix atomic strategy” would not work on the battlefield and hoped that his bluffs would result in not having to make a decision to expand the war with nuclear weapons (Keefer 1986, 268, 288-89). Michael Schaller makes the case that much of Eisenhower’s nuclear operational plans were “either loose talk or contingency planning” (Schaller 1986/1987, 162-66).

Others have also given Eisenhower a strong benefit of the doubt. Barton J. Bernstein concludes that Eisenhower’s vigorously positive language about the use of nuclear weapons should be interpreted not as an intention to use them, but more as an example of “frustration” and “mulling aloud” on his part (Bernstein 1998). Ernest R. May notes, “Even when Eisenhower urged his inner circle to consider using nuclear weapons in Korea, he can be viewed as intending only to force consideration of the possibility. Inwardly, he may have been resolved not to use nuclear weapons because he viewed them as different in kind from other weapons” (May 1999, 7). In a recent popular biography of the president, journalist Tom Wicker declares that Eisenhower “kept his options open . . . He never issued a public or probably did not make a private threat” to use nuclear weapons in Korea (Wicker 2002, 27). More fundamentally, according to John Lewis Gaddis, the political, military, and moral/ethical constraints against the use of nuclear weapons would have precluded *any* serious consideration of their use by Eisenhower. “What is clear is that the President was more eager to talk about the possibility of using nuclear weapons there [Korea] than he was actually to do so” (Gaddis 1987, 128-29).

3. They include books and articles by Edward Friedman (1975), Daniel Calingaert (1988), Roger Dingman (1988/1989), Richard K. Betts (1987), Edward C. Keefer (1986), and Conrad C. Crane (2000). Rosemary Foot also examines this question (1985), (1988/1989), and (1990). Excellent reviews of the literature about the Korean armistice case are by James I. Matray (1992) and Edward C. Keefer (1996).

Campbell Craig's original and provocative treatment of Eisenhower's thinking about nuclear weapons is an extreme version of this desire to soften and exonerate the president of the charge of atomic bellicosity. To Campbell, President Eisenhower, ever the pupil of Clausewitz, deliberately and cleverly created a national security policy that would be all or nothing if implemented, acknowledging that there was no way to limit war with the Soviet Union. By convincing officials of his administration who were dedicated to the logic of the New Look that the only options were humiliation or suicide, "His strategy to evade nuclear war was to make American military policy so dangerous that his advisers would find it impossible to push Eisenhower toward war and away from compromise" (Craig 1998, 69).

To Craig, the frequent examples of Eisenhower's forceful talk about the use of nuclear weapons should be interpreted not as evidence that he supported their use, but as part of his Machiavellian strategy to avoid nuclear war. Though Craig's analysis is fresh and interesting, the fact is that it is brief, circumstantial, and ultimately not persuasive. He does not really examine the question of Eisenhower and Korea, or the president's commitment to saving money by relying on nuclear weapons. It also does not do the ex-president justice by arguing that most of his comments about nuclear war and strategy were attempts to dissemble or manipulate those around him. This would have been an unlikely course of action. As will be shown later, Eisenhower strongly supported institutions such as the National Security Council (NSC) as arenas where decision makers, including himself, could frankly and clearly make their views known.

Granted, a few scholars have not hedged their bets regarding Eisenhower and the use of nuclear weapons.⁴ However, as suggested above, the overall trend is exculpatory. As a result, a corrective regarding Eisenhower and his reputation is needed. The fact of the matter is that President Eisenhower was much more committed to the *necessity*, if not the *desirability*, of nuclear war fighting than most have been willing to accept. This article will illustrate the point by exploring the strong continuity and consistency in Eisenhower's thinking about nuclear war fighting on the Korean peninsula between 1953 and 1960, and in 1968 during the Pueblo Crisis.

Much has been written about the administration's debate in the winter and spring of 1953 about whether to expand the Korean War with nuclear weapons and compel the North Koreans and Chinese to accept an armistice. Most agree that by the time of a critical meeting of the NSC on May 20, 1953, it seemed that serious discussions had already led to some planning, in principle, to expand the war with nuclear weapons in the future if the conflict did not end.⁵ In addition, signals of this intention may have been con-

4. Betts (1987) notes that records show that Eisenhower "considered (nuclear escalation) from his earliest days in office." Andrew P. N. Erdman (1999), in a collection of excellent articles about nuclear weapons and statecraft, bluntly states that in the Korean armistice case, "The evidence that Eisenhower was not bluffing is compelling" (1987, 102).

5. Betts (1987) concludes that the May 20th NSC meeting was much more than just a typical debate about contingencies. "NSC Action 794 was not a commitment, but it was as close to a final decision as a president can come, short of the moment of execution." The meeting was "climactic." Eisenhower "went to unusual lengths to formalize and confirm a plan for (the) use of nuclear weapons" (1987, 41-42). Considering that soon after the meeting the armistice was reached and that implementation of operational, strategic, and logistical moves would have taken nine months, it is not surprising that an order to execute was not immediately forthcoming.

veyed to Communist leaders by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and others. Because the North Koreans and Chinese agreed to an armistice that June, it cannot be known for sure whether the administration had really agreed to conduct a future campaign of nuclear compellence. An archival “smoking gun” has not been found that would conclusively settle the issue.

To buttress the case that Eisenhower was a seriously committed nuclear war fighter at least on the Korean peninsula, this article will examine the argument from several perspectives. First, the debates within the administration about how to respond to a renewal of the Korean War by the Chinese and North Koreans will be looked at. Then, the discussion about Eisenhower’s approval of the introduction of dual-capable nuclear weapons systems into Korea in 1957 will be examined. Finally, President Eisenhower’s forceful and affirmative comments about the *first* use of nuclear weapons in Korea, made after 1953 and throughout his post-presidential years, will be surveyed. Viewed in its entirety, over a period of years, the continuity in Eisenhower’s beliefs about the subject becomes clear and striking. The record suggests that Eisenhower assertively promoted the utility of nuclear weapons. Indeed, as will be shown, even during the Pueblo Crisis of 1968, he strongly urged the Johnson administration to consider the use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear War Fighting and the Breaking of the Korean Armistice

In the months after the Korean armistice was signed, a pattern of tough talk by Eisenhower regarding the use of nuclear weapons emerged. Even more so than during the earlier debates within the NSC about expanding the war with nuclear weapons, the president continued to press the case for the use of tactical nuclear weapons against the North Koreans and Chinese if they launched a major attack against South Korea. In fact, Eisenhower at times appeared to be much more forceful about the issue than Secretary of State Dulles, who is often portrayed as being the primary architect of the administration’s “massive retaliation” strategy.⁶

These discussions usually took place during NSC meetings. How important were they to President Eisenhower? Were they only, as some assert, forums for debate and not an authentic and real arena for decision making about national security? Even if Eisen-

6. “The American Experience: Race for the Superbomb—PBS Documentary.” Interview with John Lewis Gaddis. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/bomb/filmmore/reference/interview/gaddis7.html>. A typical example of this is John Lewis Gaddis’s comments about Eisenhower’s military strategy expressed in a recent PBS documentary. When asked by the interviewer why Eisenhower promoted the “New Look,” Gaddis noted, “The ideas [New Look] here really originate with [John Foster] Dulles. The idea is that one should use the nuclear superiority that we had; make overt and direct threats; be prepared to use atomic bombs . . . make them normal instruments in the arsenal. Eisenhower had some qualms about this strategy, and it’s evident from the correspondence between Eisenhower the candidate and Dulles, his adviser in the 1952 campaign. But on becoming president and facing the situation of how to end the Korean War and how to keep the war from breaking out again once the ceasefire is originated, Eisenhower in effect buys into the Dulles strategy.” In recent years, some scholars have emphasized Dulles’s disputes with Eisenhower about the need to modify the rigidities associated with massive retaliation and prepare to use conventional forces and flexible responses short of all-out general nuclear war. See Roman (1996) and Craig (1998).

hower did talk aggressively about the use of nuclear weapons during such meetings, did this mean that he was committing himself to a course of action? In point of fact, it is not surprising that the president often brought up these issues in the NSC.

The NSC was not just a debating forum used by Eisenhower to openly vent his frustrations. Philip G. Henderson correctly points out that the NSC under Eisenhower “became the principal forum for the formulation of implementation of national security policy.” With the creation of the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, as well as expansion of the NSC staff and the Planning Board and Operations Coordinating Board, the president “institutionalized the NSC and gave it clear lines of responsibility and authority.” Typically, the president would arrive at a tentative decision during the NSC meeting. Unless he deferred a decision, a “Record of Action” would be drafted, expressing Eisenhower’s views about the national security policy that had been decided. It would be given to the president within 48 hours of the meeting, who would review it and amend it if he wished. Once signed, “it became an official statement of policy to be adopted by the executive branch.”⁷ The NSC was hardly an institution used by the president only for meaningless conversation. Dams describes the importance of the NSC: “Whereas Truman had rarely presided over its meetings, Eisenhower intended the council to become the principal forum for vigorously debating foreign policy issues and developing consensus behind *presidential decisions*” (emphasis mine; Dams 2002, 28).

The question of what steps the administration should take if the North Koreans and Chinese broke the armistice agreement was soon weighed by the NSC. On October 13, 1953, Admiral Arthur Radford, who had become the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), pointedly asked during an NSC meeting whether the JCS could count on the use of nuclear weapons if the armistice were broken. Both Dulles and Eisenhower observed that allied public opinion would have to be prepared first if nuclear weapons were to be used, with the president adding that their use might cause a “dangerous breach in allied solidarity.” Nevertheless, Eisenhower concluded, “we should use the bomb in Korea if the aggression is renewed.”⁸

Two weeks later, meeting with the NSC, “the President interposed to observe that when the Council has earlier discussed action which the United States would take if the Communists broke the armistice and resumed hostilities, it was agreed that we would use atomic bombs to meet the situation.” He asked whether the allies had been informed about the U.S. position regarding the use of nuclear weapons in Korea. Dulles replied that he was certain they had been, though no formal consultations had taken place.⁹

7. Henderson (1988, 74, 84-85). Philip G. Henderson points out how the Eisenhower administration compiled 656 records of actions on issues brought before the NSC in the first two years. In contrast, the Truman administration recorded only 699 actions for an entire five-year period of NSC. Meena Bose (1998, 10, 99-100, 103) also acknowledges the importance of the NSC. Though Eisenhower would make the final decisions, “he was particularly committed to structured, coherent decision-making processes” and the “need for explicit organizational structures.” The president welcomed input from multiple advocacies to assist him with his decision making; Eisenhower expected NSC meetings to grapple with many policy issues. Group forums were important.

8. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (DDEL), Papers as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (PPUS), Ann Whitman File (AWF), National Security Council (NSC) Series, “166th Meeting of the NSC,” October 13, 1953, Box 4.

9. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “168th Meeting of the NSC,” October 29, 1953, Box 4.

On November 27, the JCS submitted their recommendations to Defense Secretary Wilson about what courses of military action to take if war resumed in the Korean peninsula. The Chiefs were very adamant. Unlike the plans discussed in May, which envisioned a 9- to 12-month buildup of military forces before offensive operations could begin against the Communists, there would be no delay. Retaliation would be swift and severe; the role of nuclear weapons would be critical. To achieve victory would mean “employing atomic weapons, conduct large-scale air operations against targets in China, Manchuria, and Korea.” The number one implementing action would be to “obtain now the necessary Presidential authority to enable the immediate employment of nuclear weapons in sufficient quantity to insure success of the proposed course of action.”¹⁰

At the next meeting of the NSC, on December 3, Radford was asked to present the recommendations of the JCS. He told the NSC that the United States would not have time to build up its forces before an attack. American and allied ground forces would be limited to Korea itself and not deployed in China or Manchuria. A “massive atomic air strike” would be launched. Its purpose? The defeat of Communist forces in Korea, making them incapable of launching attacks anywhere else in the Far East.

Eisenhower asked whether the JCS had laid out their targeting system. Radford replied that they had not. The president then asked whether the plan contemplated “going further” into China than the military operations outlined by the JCS in the spring of 1953. After Radford commented that there had been a “misunderstanding” on the point of expanding operations into China, Eisenhower interrupted forcefully:

“. . . the President expressed with great emphasis the opinion that if the Chinese Communists attacked us again we should certainly respond by hitting them hard and wherever it would hurt most, including Peiping itself. This, said the President, would mean all-out war against Communist China.”

Later in the meeting, Eisenhower asked Radford to answer a “simple but very serious question.” Did the chairman believe that the United States would be at war if China attacked? Radford said yes, noting that the United States would have “to strike against the Communist Chinese in the air from Shanghai all the way north.” The president said that this “fitted exactly into his thinking” and “he could see no other way of treating a renewed Communist attack.” Eisenhower then wondered how long it would take to get a declaration of war from Congress, pointing out that Truman should have done this at the beginning of the Korean conflict. He told the NSC that favorable congressional, U.S., and foreign public opinion was vital in order to wage the war the JCS was recommending.

Perhaps worried about the direction the discussion was going, Dulles proposed a more cautious course of action. He outlined the very real political and military constraints and the “grave disadvantages” that would result if the recommendations of the JCS were accepted without amendment. He talked about the dangers of Soviet intervention, the possibility of Japanese neutrality, the complication of Nationalist Chinese

10. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1952-1954*, XV, “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Wilson),” November 27, 1953, pp. 1626-29.

forces wanting to attack mainland China, and the likelihood of a dispute breaking out between the administration and U.S. allies in Europe. Dulles instead urged “a full atomic strike in Korea itself,” the bombing of troop concentrations in Korea, the blockade of China’s coast, and the seizure of Hainan Island.

Impatiently, Eisenhower took issue with the secretary of state’s recitation of the political consequences of the JCS plan. He asked Dulles whether he was advocating “a course of action which would be similar to the kind of war that we had prosecuted in Korea since 1950.” Dulles said no. The State Department wanted policies that would “produce a victory in Korea,” not the prosecution of a war that would achieve “total victory over China.” After more debate, the president was clear about one point: There would be no “sanctuaries” for Chinese aircraft in bases in Manchuria.¹¹ It was also apparent that the president was making the case for an all-out war with China if they intervened in the Korean peninsula, a war that would involve the use of nuclear weapons if the JCS plan were fully implemented.

The following day, the president and Dulles went to Bermuda for scheduled talks with British and French officials. On December 4, 1953, Eisenhower met with Prime Minister Churchill. In line with their wish to “educate” allied public opinion about U.S. plans to use nuclear weapons in Korea if the armistice were broken, the president and Dulles made an extraordinary effort to convince the British that nuclear weapons would have to be used in Asia. The official record of their talks demonstrates the seriousness with which Eisenhower and Dulles began their efforts to make the allies understand the policy, and the need to implement it if deterrence failed and South Korea were invaded by North Korea and China.

In Dulles’s memorandum of the talks, U.S. options in the event of a Communist attack were discussed first: “1. Korea. The President said if there was deliberate breach of the Armistice by the Communists we would expect to strike back with atomic weapons at military targets.” He added that he did not expect that cities would be bombed; only areas that were “directly supporting” armed Communist forces.¹² On December 7, the secretary of state told the British that U.S. retaliation would not be restrained, nor would the United States conduct the war as it had prior to the armistice. “A stronger and more vigorous effort” would be made.¹³

Eisenhower pressed the point that the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons was a positive development. British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, according to his secretary Evelyn Schuckburgh, describes one of his discussions with the president about their use in Korea:

11. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “173rd Meeting of the NSC,” December 3, 1953, Box 5.

12. FRUS, 1952-1954, XV, “Eisenhower-Churchill Meeting, Mid-Ocean Club, Bermuda,” December 4, 1953, p. 1739.

13. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, International Meetings, Bermuda-State Department Report, Box 1, “Memorandum of Restricted Meeting of Chiefs of Delegations—Bermuda,” December 7, 1953. Dulles at this meeting again highlighted the importance of the nuclear diplomacy practiced in the spring: “The principal reason we were able to obtain the armistice was because we were prepared for a much more intensive scale of warfare. It would not be improper to say at such a restricted gathering that we had already sent the means to the theater for delivering atomic weapons. This became known to the Chinese Communists through their good intelligence sources and in fact we were not unwilling that they should find out.”

Ike said the American public no longer distinguished between atomic and other weapons . . . nor is there logically any distinction, he (Eisenhower) says. Why should they confine themselves to high explosives requiring thousands of aircraft in attacking China's bases when they can do it more cheaply and easily with atoms? The development of smaller atomic weapons and the use of atomic artillery makes the distinction impossible to sustain . . .

Eisenhower emphasized that the question of atomic weapons had to be considered in a "larger field." The tension between budgetary considerations and national security needs was crucial:

The President said that he did not know how many billions we had spent to develop the atomic bomb. Our people would say why we were not ready to use it if attacked. We had never indicated that we would use it other than against aggression. We would not react hysterically, but only against a clear-cut breach of the armistice (Shuckburgh 1986, 114).

Retreating a bit from his earlier and stark "total war" statements made during NSC meetings, the president assured the British that nuclear weapons would be used against military targets, while major Chinese urban and industrial centers would be spared. Air bases would be primary targets for such a nuclear attack.¹⁴

Furthermore, as directed by the president at the December 3rd NSC meeting, the JCS and State Department had prepared a joint memorandum about what military objectives should be achieved if the armistice were broken. Its stated primary goal would be the destruction of "effective Chinese Communist military power applied to the Korean effort." The United States would employ nuclear weapons in an air-atomic offensive against military targets in Korea, Manchuria, and China that were "directly" supporting the aggression, along with conventional military operations. Reflecting the president and Dulles's worries about adverse public opinion, every effort would be made to convince the world that the Communists were the aggressors. And, in order to lessen the danger of Soviet intervention, "massive" atomic attacks on "numerous" targets in China, with the goal of the "complete overthrow" of the Chinese regime, were to be avoided.¹⁵

On January 8, 1954, the NSC discussed the joint recommendations. Debate about any use of nuclear weapons, and political constraints against their employment, again

14. In his *Diary* entry describing a meeting alone with Prime Minister Churchill on December 4, Eisenhower recalled how he told the British leader that if the Communists broke the armistice with a "massive attack . . . I (Eisenhower) informed him of our intention to strike every military target in the region, but to avoid useless attacks upon civilian centers. I also informed him that we intended to use every weapon in the bag, including our atomic types." In a subsequent *Diary* entry describing his dinner on December 5 with Dulles, Churchill, and British Foreign Secretary Eden, Eisenhower noted British hesitations about reliance upon nuclear weapons: "They (British) apparently cling to the hope (to us fatuous) that if we avoid the first use of the atom bomb in any war that the Soviets might likewise abstain. Our thinking, on the other hand, has come a long ways past this kind of conjecture and hope. Specifically we have come to the conclusion that the atom bomb has to be treated just as another weapon in the arsenal." "Diary Entries for December 4th and 6th," in *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The Presidency: The Middle Way XV*, edited by Louis P. Galambos and Daun van Ee (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 728, 733.

15. *FRUS*, 1952-1954, XV, "Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of State to the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Lay)," January 7, 1954, pp. 1700-03.

figured prominently in the session. On the question of whether military commanders in the field could use them if the Communists attacked, Radford said it would take 22 hours to initiate retaliation with nuclear weapons. This would be ample time to get presidential permission. Eisenhower fully agreed with the chairman.

The President commented that there would be no trouble about the mechanics of the matter. The real problem was how to get public opinion in the free world nations to grasp the fact that the Communists had initiated the hostilities. Sir Winston Churchill has been afraid that if the United States reacted too promptly with atomic weapons, we might fail to secure understanding that the Communists were the guilty party. 22 hours, however, the President thought, should certainly be sufficient to establish Communist guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

Radford pointed out that there were over twenty airfields that military commanders in the area would want to knock out. Eisenhower replied that he understood this, and was confident that U.S. forces would promptly attack these bases with conventional armaments. Though the decision to use nuclear weapons would be solely his, the president made it clear that it would be made quickly. "Our people," continued the president, "have understood the atomic weapon, but must be a little patient with our allies, who had not as yet fully grasped the import of atomic warfare."

Eisenhower also declared that he would not approve use of nuclear weapons in response to ambiguous moves by the Communists:

At least, said the President, let us be sure of one thing: that we are not going to use the A-bomb in any "border incident." This was to be reserved for a major Communist attack.

The president also made it plain that if war came, it would necessitate immediate and full U.S. mobilization: ". . . We should get tough right away quick and get into the business with both feet. Let's have all our plans ready to go full out . . . When you finally decide to resort to force you should plan no limits to its use." Treasury Secretary Humphrey agreed, telling the NSC that "when you drop your first atomic bomb you go to full mobilization."

Eisenhower concluded the meeting by asking that the record show that if circumstances required the United States to expand beyond its present military posture, "full mobilization" would be required. The president wanted operational planning complete before the administration went to Congress and asked for the authority to implement a general mobilization. The NSC then adopted, with amendments, the joint JCS-State Department report.¹⁶

Was the president really convinced that the Chinese Communists were poised to break the armistice and massively intervene in the Korean peninsula in late 1953 and early 1954? If he was not, could his nuclear bravado be described more as a ploy to impress his subordinates with his tough mindedness about choices that he would never have to make? This is unlikely for several reasons. During the months leading up to the

16. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, "179th Meeting of the NSC," January 8, 1954, Box 5.

signing of the Korean armistice on July 27, 1953, the record suggests that the Eisenhower administration was, at a minimum, discussing the option of initiating a campaign of nuclear compellence and war expansion against the Communist Chinese and North Koreans in order to force them to agree to peace. Chinese forces were already fully engaging U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) forces; in fact, on July 13, more than 80,000 Chinese soldiers launched an attack along a 20-mile sector of the east-central Korean front.

Certainly, once the armistice was signed, the major source of friction between the Communists and the United States concerned issues about repatriation of prisoners of war. Yet, tensions in the region remained high. On September 2, Secretary of State Dulles publicly warned Communist China that it would find itself under attack if it renewed the war in Korea or went into Indochina, another hot spot that was beginning to worry the administration. Several weeks later, General Maxwell D. Taylor, U.S. commander in the area, charged that the Communists were rebuilding their forces under the cover of the armistice. President Rhee of the ROK, often viewed by Eisenhower as a major irritant, was threatening to renew the war if talks did not achieve “Korean unification.” On October 2, the UN Command charged that China was violating the armistice by shipping “reinforced combat aircraft” in crates from Manchuria to North Korea.¹⁷ Though an “imminent” Chinese attack so soon after the armistice did not appear to be likely, the situation around the peninsula was certainly dangerous and volatile, a fact that would have been a legitimate concern of President Eisenhower’s.

There are two other reasons why Eisenhower’s bellicose talk aimed at Communist China and North Korea during this period should be taken seriously. If the president truly believed that a threat from China was remote, why did the administration make such determined efforts to convince key allies of the United States, especially the British, that they had to accept the fact that Eisenhower would use nuclear weapons if deterrence failed, and, in addition, accept the argument that nuclear weapons had achieved “conventional” status? As mentioned earlier, Eisenhower and Dulles made a concerted effort to “reeducate” Prime Minister Churchill at the Bermuda Conference in December 1953 about the necessity for their use on the Korean peninsula.

Another reason why the president’s forceful comments about nuclear weapons represented more than simply an effort to placate hardliners in his administration is the fact that deliberations within the NSC, as previously noted, were taken very seriously by Eisenhower. Much later, on December 6, 1960, President Eisenhower met with President-elect Kennedy to brief him about various issues and the structure of the presidency. The president told him emphatically that “the National Security Council had become the most important weekly meeting of the government.” There, members could present their “frank opinion on any subject.” During Eisenhower’s eight years in office, the NSC had met 366 times, on a regular basis, with him presiding over 329 of them. Though the final decision about an issue was usually arrived at by the president in subsequent meetings with small groups of advisers, Eisenhower firmly believed that the NSC process (planning, debate, coordination, and implementation) critically “informed” his opera-

17. Merritt (1979, 320, 332, 336, 340).

tional decisions.¹⁸ The argument that the president would have “hyped” his views about nuclear weapons and their use against China and North Korea in order to impress his subordinates, considering his fervent trust in the NSC structure and process, is ultimately not convincing.

New Weapons, Korea, Honest Johns, and “Atomic Cannons” 1956-1958

A few years later, the question of nuclear preparedness and the defense of South Korea came up in a formal review. Once more, President Eisenhower, in spite of strong opposition from the State Department, pushed for the nuclear option.

The goal was to reassure President Rhee of South Korea about the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend his country against Communist attack. In line with the policy of cutting U.S. and South Korean military manpower and creating mobile “Pentomic” army divisions, equipped with weapons giving them the dual capability of fighting either on an atomic or non-atomic battlefield, the JCS began to push the president to authorize the actual positioning of nuclear weapons in South Korea itself.

There was a problem, though. The 1953 armistice agreement explicitly ruled out the introduction of qualitatively “new weapons” into the area by either side (Cumings 1999, 127-28). Admiral Radford wanted the administration to “reinterpret” the armistice agreement unilaterally to allow the introduction of new weapons, such as 280-mm nuclear cannons and Honest John 762-mm rockets, into South Korea. The Honest John was a simple rocket, launched from a truck carrier, with the capability of providing battlefield nuclear fire support to a range of 22 miles. The 280-mm nuclear cannon, weighing 83 tons and moved by two tractors, could fire a nuclear artillery shell up to a range of 17 miles.¹⁹

Dulles and the State Department opposed the move. At an NSC meeting on April 4, 1957, the secretary of state argued that introduction of these dual-capability weapons

18. DDEL, PPUS, AWE, Meetings, “Account of My December 6th Meeting with President-Elect Kennedy,” December 1960, Box 11. Fred Greenstein and Richard Immerman (2000, 341, 343-44) strongly dispute the charge that Eisenhower’s NSC system was a “bureaucratic machine that spewed piles of useless paper.” Impressed by the number of NSC meetings and Eisenhower’s participation in them, they argue to the contrary, “The NSC meetings and the processes leading up to them made for a well-informed, rigorously analytical national security team, which contributed to the coherence of the administration’s policies.” They also quote an insightful passage from one of Eisenhower’s later oral histories, “I [Eisenhower] have been forced to make decisions, many of them of a critical character, for a good many years, and I know of only one way in which you can be sure you have done your best to make a wise decision. That is to get all of the (responsible policy makers) with their different viewpoints in front of you, and listen to them debate. I do not believe in bringing them in one at a time, and therefore being more impressed by the most recent one you hear than the earlier ones. You must get courageous men of strong views, and let them debate and argue with each other. You listen, and see if there’s anything been brought up, any idea, that changes your own view, or enriches your view or adds to it. Then you start studying. Sometimes the case becomes so simple that you can make a decision right then. Or you might wait if time is not of the essence. But you make it.”

19. A. J. Bacevich (1986, 82-84, 94-95) presents a detailed history of U.S. Army weapons systems and battlefield doctrines during the Eisenhower years.

would cause “serious repercussions around the world.” The allies would feel that the United States was violating its own oath about the armistice. The president acknowledged the “responsibility” of the State Department to note the “political effects” of a move like this; then, in a comment that he would repeat later, he wondered whether it so important to bring attention to their deployment if it occurred. Couldn’t they be introduced quietly? However, acknowledging Dulles’s point, the president postponed a decision until international public opinion could be changed about the issue.²⁰

On June 10, the NSC once more discussed the issue. The secretary of state conceded the need to draft a statement indicating that the United States believed it appropriate to modernize its weapons in Korea. However, Dulles bluntly challenged the wisdom of introducing “conspicuous” weapons, such as the 280-mm cannons. “He [Dulles] could not understand why in the world it was essential that we be able to haul these great monsters around.” Advertising the existence of these weapons would cause “very serious repercussions.” To Dulles, “Sending such weapons to Korea would be resented throughout Asia because such . . . were identified with the West and with the hated doctrine of white supremacy, quite apart from the weapons themselves.”

After these strong words, the president seemed to accept Dulles’s argument, telling Radford that while it was acceptable for the United States to introduce “jet aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons” into Korea, more explaining would have to be done before the introduction of such things as atomic cannons. The president summarized by noting that the United States would make an announcement about the deployment of new weapons into South Korea and inform its leadership. The record suggests that the president agreed that the 280-mm cannons and Honest Johns would not be introduced.²¹

The Defense Department and the JCS continued to lobby hard for the dual-capability weapons, though. During a conference with the president on July 23, General Lemnitzer, Commander-in-Chief, Far East Command, stated there was a crucial need to bring Honest Johns and 280-mm cannons into Korea. Eisenhower seemed to agree. “The President said he felt that on such actions, they should simply be taken without making a great public announcement about them.” Lemnitzer agreed, stating that if people saw new weapons around and asked questions about them, they should be told that details must remain classified. “The President strongly endorsed this procedure.”²²

On August 8, 1957, the NSC discussed the president’s decision to suspend Article 13(d) of the armistice and modernize U.S. forces in Korea with new weapons. Dulles again questioned the plan to introduce dual-capability nuclear cannons and missiles. They, he said, only had “psychological” significance, designed to impress upon the South Koreans the reality and strength of the U.S. commitment. However, by now, the military point of view had prevailed. Eisenhower commented that if the South Koreans agreed to reductions in their forces, “. . . we in turn will agree to modernize our U.S. forces in Korea with Honest John rockets and the 280 mm Cannon.” As an aside, the

20. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “318th Meeting of the NSC,” April 4, 1957, Box 8.

21. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “326th Meeting of the NSC,” June 10, 1957, Box 9.

22. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, DDE Diaries, Folder—July 1957—Staff, “Memorandum of Conference with the President,” July 23, 1957, Box 14.

president noted the high stakes involved and the truth of a point made by the JCS in 1949:

... namely, the statement that while Korea is of no military importance to us in general war, it is psychologically and politically of such importance that to lose it would run the risk of the loss of our entire position in the Far East. Accordingly, we have got to carry on in South Korea.²³

The issue was settled. In January 1958, the United States introduced 280-mm nuclear cannons and Honest John nuclear-capable missiles into South Korea. A year later, the Air Force “permanently stationed a squadron of nuclear-tipped Matador cruise missiles in Korea.” These missiles had a range of 1,100 kilometers, with the capacity to hit China, the Soviet Union, and North Korea (Cumings 1999, 129-30). The president, in spite of the political risks and sharp reservations expressed by Secretary of State Dulles, had approved the introduction of nuclear weapons into the Korean peninsula and accelerated the process of fully integrating them into the force structure of U.S. troops there.

Nuclear Escalation, Korea, and China: Resolve and Justification

In multiple forums at numerous times between 1956 and 1960, one finds President Eisenhower, usually within the context of basic national security policy, talking about the necessity for nuclear escalation if North Korea or China invaded South Korea. Not only that, but he would also remind listeners of the administration’s apparent decision to expand the Korean conflict with nuclear weapons had the Communists not agreed to an armistice, and the fact that atomic threats were indirectly transmitted to the Communists in the spring of 1953. As will be shown, the link between the use of nuclear weapons in general and their use against North Korea and China specifically would persist into his post-presidential years.

In February 1956, the president discussed the question of limited wars and the use of nuclear weapons with the JCS. Eisenhower was clear about “peripheral” wars: He would not commit “small packets of [U.S.] troops” around the globe. “In local wars, where the attack is clear, he [Eisenhower] felt sure that he would use tactical atomic weapons against local aggression,” though in some situations “political effects” might be overriding and preclude their use, “at least at the outset.”²⁴

Eisenhower returned to the issue of peripheral wars later in the month during an NSC meeting. He told the Council he was “puzzled” about the use of the term “peripheral war”:

He [the President] reminded the Council that when his Administration had first come into office, back in January of 1953, our big complaint was the Korean War, which we

23. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “334th Meeting of the NSC,” August 8, 1957, Box 9.

24. “Memorandum for Record—Conference of JCS with the President,” February 10, 1956, Box 4, Folder: JCS (2) January-April 59, White House Office Staff Secretary, DOD Subseries, DDEL.

were obliged to fight with handcuffs on. Under the circumstances, we could not win such a war, and that left us no option but to end the war . . .

What point, the president asked the NSC rhetorically, was he trying to make? That, "in the future these peripheral wars must not be permitted to drag out." Then, dramatically raising the stakes, Eisenhower stated:

. . . We must now plan to fight peripheral wars on the same basis as we would fight a general war. After all, there was no good reason for drawing distinctions between peripheral and general wars. Had we not made up our minds that if the Communists renewed their aggression against Korea we would go 'all out' to meet it?²⁵

General war, of course, to Eisenhower, meant the use of all forces and rapid escalation to nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union.

In the spring of 1956, the president met with Admiral Radford to talk about the Joint Strategic Objectives Plan (JSOP). In the course of the discussion, Eisenhower returned to the subject of limited war, Korea, and nuclear weapons. The president assured Radford that "he [Eisenhower] was inclined to feel that we would not get involved in a 'small war' extending beyond a few Marine battalions or Army units. If it grew to anything like Korea proportions, the action would become one for use of atomic weapons."²⁶

The president also talked, in unambiguous terms, about how the administration had made the decision to expand the Korean War with nuclear weapons in 1953 if no armistice had been signed. For example, during an NSC meeting in July 1959, within the context of addressing State Department concerns about limited nuclear war,

. . . He [the President] pointed out that as far back as 1953 we had publicly stated that if the Korean War continued the U.S. would make use of nuclear weapons. This was the kind of a war in which we would obviously use nuclear weapons. . . .

Though sympathetic to the State Department's position, "the President added that we must try to keep up with the latest techniques of weaponry."²⁷

25. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, "277th Meeting of the NSC," February 27, 1956, Box 7. Perhaps alarmed by Eisenhower's nuclear bellicosity and his erasure of the distinction between general and local war, Dulles then rhetorically asked the president what would happen if the Vietminh attacked South Vietnam. Would the United States drop "atomic bombs on Peking"? Eisenhower said no, though if the Chinese intervened in South Vietnam, "we would certainly bomb the bases in China which were supporting the aggression."

26. FRUS, 1955-1957, XIX, "Memorandum of a Conference with the President," May 14, 1956, pp. 302-03.

27. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, "412th Meeting of the NSC," July 9, 1959, Box 11. Later in the discussion, Eisenhower heatedly pointed out that a general war with China would involve the use of nuclear weapons. A Chinese attack on Formosa would be general war; the consequences, drastic: ". . . With considerable warmth, the President insisted that it was nonsense to imagine that we could invade the vast land mass of China, with a population of 600 million people, without making use of nuclear weapons. If anyone thought differently on this subject, then he, the President, would recommend that such an individual cease to act as one of the President's advisers. It seemed inconceivable to the President that we could engage Communist China in full-scale war without depending on nuclear weapons." Perhaps sensing tension in the room, the president subsequently told the NSC that many of them knew that he sometimes used "strong language" and sentiments, that they should still express their own views. He did not qualify his statements, though, about the folly of considering a war against China without the use of nuclear weapons (p. 248).

In the fall of 1960, during another NSC discussion about nuclear weapons, limited war, and the Offshore Islands (Quemoy and Matsu) issue, Eisenhower reiterated that the war would have been expanded without an armistice agreement:

The President referred to the idea that both sides might use air-to-air nuclear weapons in the Offshore Islands area. He recalled that in 1953 a decision had been made in this room to use nuclear weapons if the enemy refused an armistice in Korea. Of course, the relative stocks of nuclear weapons made such a decision easier at that time. . . .²⁸

During his post-presidential years, Eisenhower continued to talk about the strategy and positive outcome of using nuclear threats to end the Korean War. The Johnson administration often briefed Eisenhower and asked for his advice about world issues, especially the conduct of the Vietnam War. Eisenhower applied lessons he learned from the Korean War to the conflict in Southeast Asia.

On February 17, 1965, Eisenhower met with President Johnson, Robert McNamara, and other top military and political officials. The purpose of the meeting was to give Eisenhower a chance to present fully to the Johnson administration his views about the conduct of the Vietnam War, and how to win it. The ex-president's opinions were direct, if not blunt. Analogies with the Korean War figured heavily in Eisenhower's thinking:

He [Eisenhower] next considered the question of Chinese Communist or Soviet intervention. He said that if they threaten to intervene we should pass the word back to them to take care lest dire results occur to them. He commented on how the armistice was brought about in Korea. Following two years or more of inconclusive effort, shortly after he came to office, he had three messages passed to the Koreans and Chinese, one through Nehru, one through Chiang Kai-Shek, and one through officials at lower level who were participating in armistice discussions. The gist of the messages was that if a satisfactory armistice were not signed promptly, we would remove the limits we were observing as to the area of combat and the weapons employed.

Eisenhower urged that the Communists be informed that the United States would do the same in South Vietnam, and "that we would act against them quickly." It should not be done publicly, but "quietly."

Later in the meeting, perhaps wanting to be sure he understood what Eisenhower was advocating, President Johnson asked for clarification. Once more, the ex-president confirmed that he had threatened the North Koreans and Chinese with expansion of the war:

The President asked just what General Eisenhower had done in 1953 to bring the war in Korea to a close. He said he had had the word passed through the three channels he had previously mentioned telling the Chinese that they must agree to an armistice quickly, since he had decided to remove the restrictions of area and weapons if the war had to be continued. General Eisenhower said that the greatest danger in his judgment in the present situation is that the Chinese get the idea that we will go just so far and no further in terms of the level of the war. . . .

28. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, "462nd Meeting of the NSC," October 6, 1960, Box 13.

Eisenhower was very tough in this meeting. He also made the case for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam if the Chinese intervened. Asked by President Johnson what he would recommend if the Chinese attacked in force in Indochina,

General Eisenhower said he would hit them at once with air, picking out the key points along their support routes. He would use any weapons required, adding that if we were to use tactical nuclear weapons, such use would not in itself add to the chance of escalation. With regard to starting a bigger war he felt that the Chinese would not do this unless they had made the decision on their own. He further stated that he believed they would not come in to the war, but that, if they should, he would use some additional ground units against, but would essentially shift to use of *different* [emphasis mine] weapons. He commented that the U.S. must take extreme care never to allow itself to get over-deployed. Our rule must always be to “hit the head of the snake”. . . .

Perhaps startled by the ex-president’s forceful statements about the use of tactical nuclear weapons, Defense Secretary McNamara, when President Johnson and Eisenhower had returned from a brief break, “asked for further comment on how General Eisenhower would advise responding to escalation, and what he had in mind regarding tactical nuclear weapons.” Eisenhower did not back down from his previous statements:

General Eisenhower said he would make use of our carrier strength in the area for instant retaliation. For this purpose it should be kept in constant readiness. He would pass warnings to the Chinese Communists. Pick out the two or three points in South Viet-Nam, such as Saigon and the air bases, and guard these strongly . . . General Eisenhower said tactical nuclear weapons should be used when the enemy comes in large strength as organized formations. If these have strong forces these will have depots which can be struck. General Wheeler commented that there are bridges very important to such a campaign over the Red River south of Hanoi. General Eisenhower said that this would be in effect a new war. We should be sure that the enemy does not lack an appreciation of our strength and determination to keep nations free by whatever means required. . . . He referred to the Chinese in Korea. There was a gentlemen’s agreement between us and our allies after the early days of the war—well known to the Chinese . . . that we would not cross the Yalu or even strike the bridges on the Yalu, nor would we use nuclear weapons. With regard to South Vietnam, we should let it be known that we are not bound by such restrictions.²⁹

The Seizure of the *Pueblo* and Nuclear Options—1968

In January 1968, in the midst of the Pueblo Crisis with North Korea, Eisenhower was asked for his advice, on behalf of Johnson, on what options he would consider. As was his custom, President Johnson wanted the ex-president’s suggestions and support. During a meeting on January 26 in which the president and other top officials of his national security team were seriously debating what courses of action to take, Johnson

29. DDEL, Post-Presidential Papers, 1961-1969, Goodpaster Briefings, “Memorandum of Meeting with the President,” February 17, 1965, Box 9.

directed that Eisenhower be briefed about the crisis and asked “what is our best constitutional way to proceed.”³⁰

The next day, in a telephone conversation with General Goodpaster, Eisenhower was assured that the discussion was “entirely confidential” and that he was not being “put on the spot.” Goodpaster told him that President Johnson wanted to pose two specific questions to him: First, if diplomacy failed, necessitating the use of military force, what specific military actions would he recommend? Second, how should President Johnson approach the Congress about the crisis?

With regard to Congress, the ex-president urged the administration to consult with them and receive their backing. Regarding military action, Eisenhower offered several concrete suggestions. He observed that “quarantine” would be the least provocative military action. If that did not work, the Congress would have to take stronger action “while the iron is hot” and while “the Pueblo affair is fresh in people’s minds.” He cautioned that the administration should not demand or threaten anything that could not be backed up. Then Eisenhower, calmly and analytically, weighed the nuclear option:

... Next he [Eisenhower] raised the possibility of bombing the bridges over the Yalu. I [Goodpaster] pointed out that these lie on the border with Red China, and that this action would tend to be a challenge to the Chinese. I suggested that there might be critical points on the communications routes south of the Yalu. He commented that a key question is whether we would be prepared to use atomic weapons, particularly since these would give assurance of destruction of bridges for example, and could be utilized in places where no civilian losses would be involved.

Eisenhower dismissed the danger of nuclear escalation:

General Eisenhower said that if he were sitting in the President’s place he would have the staffs consider every possible thing that might be done, not excluding anything out of hand, as a basis for top level consideration and decision. He commented that he doesn’t see much danger of a nuclear holocaust arising over this affair. (I had previously mentioned to him the treaties of the USSR and CHICOMS with the North Koreans.) He thought that the Russians and the Chinese would be guided by their own interests.

While Eisenhower also noted that the diplomatic front should not be ignored, including a call for a special session of the UN Security Council, he still insisted “he would intensify the bombing in Vietnam to a maximum at this time, and let it be known that this step up was related to the North Korean incident.”³¹

Two days later, Eisenhower’s suggestions were read by President Johnson to a group of his senior national security advisers. In this meeting, various military options against North Korea were weighed. Ten possible actions were considered, including airborne

30. FRUS, 1964-1968, XXIX, “Notes of President’s Friday Morning Meeting on the Pueblo Incident,” January 26, 1968, pp. 521-29.

31. “Memorandum for Record—Telephone Conversation with General Eisenhower,” January 27, 1968, Department of Defense, the National War College, Office of the Commandant, DDRS, pp. 1-2.

reconnaissance, buildup of military assets in South Korea, the mining of Wonsan Harbor, seizure of North Korean vessels, selected air strikes against North Korea, raids across the DMZ, a naval blockade, and economic sanctions. To the group, all of these courses of action seemed dangerous and inadequate. McGeorge Bundy stated, "Any warfare will pin these boys in rather than get them out. We are too big a power to start a war over this." Clark Clifford agreed: "Any way you look at it this incident is a loser. We cannot come out even. We must cut our losses. I doubt we will ever want to use any one of the ten military alternatives." There were also calls to bring the matter to the World Court, and noted by others that it was unclear what really had happened while the *Pueblo* was on station.

"The President then read a memo from a distinguished American. (The President later identified this as General Eisenhower.) This memo outlined what courses this 'distinguished American' thought were offered to us." The transcript of this meeting does not indicate that any of Eisenhower's points were discussed by the group after Johnson presented the contents of the memo.³²

Upon first reflection, Eisenhower's comments seem extreme. During the *Pueblo* crisis, there is no evidence to suggest the Johnson administration was discussing nuclear options at any level. Indeed, while they seemed to rule out the use of military force, it was only Eisenhower among Johnson's advisers who made the strong case for military action. Yet, in the context of Eisenhower's general approach to the Korean War and the threat of Chinese intervention, the ex-president was being quite consistent. In spite of the fact that China then had nuclear weapons, he was still, one year before his death, making the case for the use of nuclear weapons in the Korean peninsula and against China.

Conclusions

A close examination of the record finds substantial continuity in Eisenhower's thinking about North Korea, China, and the use of nuclear weapons, both for deterrence and for nuclear war fighting. One searches in vain for examples of Eisenhower being open to the option of abandoning South Korea in response to a renewed Chinese or North Korean invasion, rather than risk nuclear escalation or general war. He was, however, concerned about the possibility of negative public opinion or a split with U.S. allies. Still, in contrast to his statements in different situations about the ghastliness of an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union, Eisenhower dispassionately talked about, planned, and counted on using the nuclear option in Korea.

Sometimes, consistent, declaratory policy and comments, in multiple forums, over a long period of time, can *mean* what they appear to *mean*. The tone in the cited record, in meetings, and in private conferences is definite and purposeful. And it is matched by force structure, dependence on nuclear weapons, and the strategic doctrine of the New

32. FRUS, 1964-1968, XXIX, "Notes of the President's Luncheon Meeting with Senior American Advisors," January 29, 1968, pp. 562-68.

Look.³³ If it were an elaborate bluff, it would not be unreasonable to have predicted Eisenhower conceding in the 1960s that he was never serious about expanding the war with nuclear weapons in 1953 or resorting to the use of nuclear weapons in response to major attacks by North Korea or Communist China. As documents show, he was still steadfastly talking about the importance of nuclear threats in the 1960s as an option to be used by the Johnson administration in ending the Vietnam War.

Granted, Eisenhower was very sensitive about world opinion and wanted to “educate” our allies about the necessity, if not the obligation, to use nuclear weapons. Yet, his worries rarely were expressed within a moral or ethical framework, but usually in pragmatic terms about how to get others in line with the administration’s thinking.³⁴ Though the president spoke at times, especially in the winter of 1953, about the danger of Soviet intervention against Japan or other targets, he generally believed that the United States could get away with using nuclear weapons in the Korean region. This was both during the era of “nuclear plenty,” when North Korea and China did not have nuclear weapons capability and the atomic balance was totally asymmetrical, and in the 1960s, when China was developing its nuclear weapons arsenal. He was confident that the Soviet Union would not risk a general nuclear war with the United States by intervening on the side of North Korea or China.

A persuasive case can be made that the combination of national interest, reputation, strategic doctrine, and his *positive preference* were the key rationales for Eisenhower’s support of nuclear war fighting campaigns in the Korean peninsula. In contrast to his image as a peacemaker, the president was also committed to maximizing the political, psychological, and military utility of atomic weapons. Nuclear weapons would be his “first weapon” of choice for retaliation against a future North Korean or Chinese invasion. His decision making, though difficult for many to accept in an age of nuclear threat

33. Distinctions between the explosive yields of nuclear weapons were important to Eisenhower. Asked by Harold Stassen in an NSC meeting whether if the United States used nuclear weapons in a “local war” it would escalate into a “general war,” the president replied that a diagram he had seen that morning indicated that a 2KT tactical nuclear weapon would create “only one-twentieth of the damage wrought on Tokyo by the fire bomb raids of 1945.” Thus, “it therefore seemed ‘silly’ to the President to think that resort by the United States to the use of these small tactical nuclear weapons would necessarily start a general nuclear war.” The fact of smaller amounts of high explosives in tactical nuclear weapons appeared to make them much more usable in the president’s mind and more “conventional” as a weapon. DDEL, PPUS, AWF, NSC Series, “314th Meeting of the NSC,” February 28, 1957, Box 8.

34. Nina Tannenwald (1999, 433-68) also notes the lack of “moral” revulsion on the part of Eisenhower, Dulles, and other American officials about the use of nuclear weapons in Korea. She makes a strong case that a key reason for the non-use of nuclear weapons by states since 1945 was the strength of the normative taboo against their use in world public opinion. Eisenhower “deplored and disparaged” the taboo, and was determined to overturn it. Tannenwald concludes that the president viewed the taboo in instrumental, not moral, terms as a constraint on the freedom of the United States to use all weapons in its arsenal, and an obstacle to the “casual” use of tactical nuclear weapons (pp. 446-50). While not directly addressing the question of President Eisenhower and the use of nuclear weapons, Gary Schaub, Jr. (1998, 52-53) also speculates about normative restraints against the utilization of atomic weapons against non-nuclear states. He concludes that it was erroneous to assume that the amount of nuclear punishment would necessarily exceed the value of the objective, and reduce the credibility of the threat. Leaders may not care about violating nuclear taboos. The costs of using compellent nuclear force may be higher in their minds than not using it. According to Schaub, “possession of nuclear weapons by the compeller may increase the probability of compellence success if it can demonstrate its lack of concern for these normative factors.”

and risk, was based upon a “rational” analysis of the stakes and means, at least as he saw them.

This conclusion suggests several fruitful avenues for future work about Eisenhower’s presidency, the Cold War, and broader presidential studies. First, a “post-revisionist” analysis of Dwight Eisenhower and his national security policies is long overdue. As shown in this article, many have underestimated the extent to which he viewed nuclear weapons and their military utility in positive, not negative terms, and not just for political or psychological purposes. Recent post-revisionist arguments, like David Tal’s, that Eisenhower was never really committed to nuclear disarmament but embraced initiatives like “Atoms for Peace” primarily for tactical reasons, are beginning to come forth and should be welcomed (Tal 2001). As Saki Dockrill points out, analysis of the Eisenhower record is now gradually “shifting from the almost unqualified praise of revisionist historians to a post-revisionist more ‘objective’ and rather more mixed appraisal” (Dockrill 2000, 345-46).

Eisenhower’s genuine and enthusiastic embrace of the nuclear option during the Cold War also challenges a common view about nuclear weapons policy during this era. There is no question that Eisenhower hoped that his “massive retaliation” doctrine would deter any major attack against the United States or its allies. However, many believe that “deterrence is easier to achieve than compellence.” Yet, certain cases may challenge this assumption.³⁵ And, it is necessary to make concise judgments about whether a threat is a deterrent or compellent act.³⁶

35. Thomas C. Schelling (1966, 71-73) has been credited with being the first to make the argument that deterrence is easier to achieve than compellence. He argues that “Compellent threats tend to communicate only the general direction of compliance, and are less likely to be self-limiting, less likely to communicate in the very design of the threat just what, or how much, is demanded.” In other words, they are less clear in their goals, hence, they are harder to achieve. Walter J. Petersen (1986, 282-85) disputes the “*ceteris paribus*” assumption of deterrence theory. He argues that the vast majority of international disputes are initiated under conditions that favor the initiator. Based on his examination of case studies, Schelling’s proposition may not hold. Compellent actions need not be “reckless,” either. Petersen observes, “The idea that coercive diplomacy is in some way ‘reckless’ behavior should not be taken to mean that nonanalytic behavior dominates the decisionmaking process.” To Petersen, decision makers often calculate the costs of war before taking a compellent action.

36. Richard Ned Lebow (1998, 33, 42-43) makes a distinction between deterrence and compellence. To Lebow, “Deterrence and compellence are strategies of coercive bargaining. Deterrence is a strategy of crisis and war prevention. Crisis management relies more on compellence. . . . Compellence exploits superior military capability to threaten punishment if the target does not comply with one’s demands.” Lawrence Freedman (1998, 3) develops a broader term, “strategic coercion,” to describe all threat-based strategies. He defines the concept as “the deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to influence another’s strategic behavior.” Using Freedman’s concept of strategic coercion, Peter Viggo Jakobsen (1998, 11-17) argues that threats such as deterrence, coercive diplomacy, compellence, and blackmail all fall within its scope, with differing definitions. However, in regard to the subject of compellence, the subject is not noted for its conceptual or theoretical clarity. Gary Schaub, Jr. (1998, 37-60) notes the absence of rigor and agreed-upon terms to use when defining threats to change the status quo, as Eisenhower attempted to do in 1953. He criticizes the tendency to use terms such as coercion, coercive diplomacy, or compellence “interchangeably.” It has resulted in “confusion” and a “conceptual vacuum” about compellence. Schaub argues that with the exception of *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, edited by Alexander L. George and William E. Simon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), there have not been many “clear” and sustained efforts to identify cases in which compellent threats were issued, test hypotheses about whether the threats succeeded or failed or offered “policy prescriptions.” In comparison to the richness and rigor associated with deterrence studies, Schaub is correct to point out the “lack of a systematic and comprehensive literature on compellence as a separate form of coercion.”

To Robert Jervis, a key weakness of classic deterrence theory is that it is “apolitical” in nature and pays little attention to the “goals of policy.” It has a lot to say about “how” to act in a crisis, little about how to avoid one.³⁷ Robert Powell agreed that while “accident,” “irrationality,” or “misjudgment” may be sufficient conditions for nuclear escalation to take place, “Escalation may be the result of an interaction of decisions that, given the goals of the states and the conflict of interest underlying the crisis, are completely rational.” In short, the “greater the initial stakes,” the more likely a nuclear exchange.³⁸

Because of the high political, psychological, and military stakes involved, it is not so unthinkable that Eisenhower concluded that the use of nuclear weapons in defending South Korea could be justified. Credibility was important, too. As Jonathan Mercer pointed out, “And yet, because the threat to use nuclear weapons may seem incredible, the need for reputation as a tool to make these threats credible may seem more important than ever.”³⁹ In contrast to the notion that rational decision makers during the Cold War viewed nuclear weapons primarily as instruments of deterrence, Eisenhower’s serious advocacy of their use on the Korean peninsula strongly implies that presidents can also perceive them as weapons of compellence. Indeed, the current administration of President George W. Bush is actively exploring the feasibility of developing and using a whole range of “mini-nukes” as future weapons of compellence against underground command-and-control bunkers, weapons facilities, and other battlefield targets related to “rogue states” and support for international terrorism.⁴⁰ The continuum between deterrence and compellence needs to be examined further.

Marc Trachtenberg’s conclusion is apropos. “This body of evidence thus helps support the conclusion that the Eisenhower strategy has to be taken seriously, that it was not at bottom (as some people argue) simply a gigantic bluff.”⁴¹ At least in the case of Korea, it appears that President Eisenhower was quite prepared to be the second U.S. president to authorize the use of nuclear weapons in Asia, in spite of the formidable political and moral constraints he himself recognized.

37. Jervis (1979, 322-23). In short, according to Robert Jervis, “The theory takes the high interest of both sides for granted and goes on from there. But if the world is heterogeneous and each side places different values on different objectives, then states must consider their goals, employ deterrence only when it is both necessary and likely to succeed, and utilize a whole range of alternative and complementary diplomatic instruments.”

38. Powell (1985, 87-92). Robert Powell challenges the argument that no state could rationally wage nuclear war. Classic deterrence theory focuses on technique: “utilizing threats that leave something to chance,” manipulation of the risk of escalation, credibility, resolve, and so on. To Powell, this is analytically deficient. Analyses of the stakes in a crisis are crucial to understand whether a state would risk nuclear escalation. “The greater the initial stakes, therefore, the more likely an escalation to the level of nuclear exchanges. . . .” The “why,” of course, is the political and military dimension.

39. Mercer (1996, 221-22).

40. See “Nuclear Posture Review—2002” for the Bush administration. Retrieved October 10, 2004, from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>.

41. Trachtenberg (1988/89, 45). In another book, Marc Trachtenberg (1991, 14) also speculates that the development of the New Look might have been related to the Korean War, “to assumptions about the way the war should have been fought, to lessons drawn about the role that nuclear threats played in ending it, to the conclusion that the United States was not going to be, in Richard Nixon’s memorable phrase, ‘nickel and dimed to death’ by Korea-style aggression in the future.”

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