

## NUCLEAR SCARE

To the Editors:

The end of the Cold War has provided scholars with a remarkable opportunity to study in detail the many facets of the Soviet-American military confrontation. Professors Purcell and Galbraith have taken advantage of a newly declassified document about a Net Evaluation Subcommittee (NESC) briefing to President Kennedy to raise questions about American nuclear policy and war planning during one of the periods of greatest Cold War tension, the 1961 Berlin Crisis.

Unfortunately, their essay is an ill-informed and amateurish effort that takes an ambiguous single-page summary of a National Security Council meeting and attempts to concoct a cataclysmic plot: possible U.S. preparations for a first strike on the USSR in 1963. Although the authors' interest in first-strike proposals is not misdirected, their interpretation would be plausible if this document and only this document had been available fifteen years ago before major declassification efforts brought about the release of large amounts of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy-era nuclear policy documents and military planning papers. Today, however, with even more documents available—including declassified formerly top-secret government histories of the Berlin Crisis and the strategic arms competition—their interpretation is unfounded and from a scholarly point of view, egregiously irresponsible. Finding one document in a file and building a case for it without examining the larger archival record is an abuse of sound historical methodology and frankly appears—especially in light of the NPR *All Things Considered* coverage of the article—a blatant effort at headline grabbing.

The truth of Kennedy administra-

tion nuclear planning is by no means transparent but it is clear that the document that Professors Purcell and Galbraith have chosen to sensationalize is merely a part of a long-term, complex planning and assessment process that began in the 1940s and continues in the U.S. national security structure to this day. There are so many things wrong with their essay that we hesitate to point out individual points of error for fear of writing an even longer paper than Purcell's and Galbraith's original essay. Fortunately, one of the undersigned (David Alan Rosenberg) has written a series of essays and monographs going back some fifteen years that elucidates key issues and the larger context for the American role in the nuclear arms competition. However, in the interest of aiding the readers of *The American Prospect* in understanding the problems inherent in this essay, we offer the following specific points to put the document in proper perspective.

■ The document is from Vice President Lyndon Johnson's National Security File, at the LBJ Library. That library is a remarkable archive, but any serious research on the early 1960s must begin at the National Archives and especially the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. The latter, while notoriously slow at opening national security files, has nevertheless yielded a great deal of material on the larger foreign and military context of the summer of 1961 and subsequently. Resort to the published record of the U.S. diplomacy, Foreign Relations of the United States, including the volumes on the Berlin Crisis that Galbraith and Purcell cite, is by no means enough to understand this period.

■ The authors claim that a preemptive strike against the Soviet Union did not become an important military option until 1957 but give no source for

that claim. However, declassified documents available and published since the early 1980s show that by 1950 the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were giving first priority to "blunting" missions designed to destroy Soviet nuclear capabilities—essentially a preemptive approach. This mission continued into the 1960s.

■ The authors suggest that the July 20, 1961 briefing was the first NESC briefing received by a U.S. president about the results of a hypothetical nuclear war. This is incorrect. President Eisenhower had been receiving a form of annual net assessment briefings on outcomes of a nuclear war since the mid-1950s and NESC had been in business since 1958. The process continued through the early 1960s until President Johnson dissolved the committee.

■ The authors are confusing a grim bureaucratic routine with the intentions and preparations of civilian and military policymakers. The NESC's responsibility was not to prepare "calendars" or timetables for nuclear war. Its work was analytical in nature: "to provide integrated evaluations of the net capabilities of the USSR, in the event of general war, to inflict direct injury upon the continental United States" as well as to project the impact of U.S. preemptive or retaliatory attacks upon the Soviet Union. NESC's charter did not include recommendations for war or peace nor would the committee members have presumed to give such advice.

■ The Burris memo is imprecise, but even if one ignores the NESC's charter, a careful reading of the document shows that the authors' first-strike interpretation is altogether improbable. For example, if the briefing was about a U.S. surprise attack, then it necessarily would have included data on damage to the Soviet Union; Kennedy would not

have had to ask for information on the destruction. Moreover, despite the authors' claims, nothing in the document suggests that Kennedy inquired about the effects of a U.S. first strike in the winter of 1962. He asked about an "attack"—he didn't say by whom. Without any doubt, he was referring to a Soviet attack—it was they who had "fewer missiles" at the time, not the Americans. Thus, when Kennedy asked about citizens staying in fallout shelters "following an attack," again, he is talking about a Soviet attack—although Kennedy would have been concerned about the fallout generated by U.S. retaliation. In any event, it is highly unlikely that Col. Burris, the author of the memorandum, would have provided such a brief overview without an explanation of who would be striking whom first unless he knew that it would have been obvious to Vice President Johnson (who, incidentally, did attend the briefing as his daily schedule shows). Finally, given the great sensitivity of a plan for a U.S. first strike in 1963, it is unlikely that the document would have been classified merely top secret; it would have been treated much more restrictively.

■ The authors misrepresent what the National Intelligence Estimates show about the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance and misread the Roger Hilsman quote that they produce. Citing Hilsman, they claim that the NIEs of the late 1950s present an "estimated missile gap . . . in America's favor." But Hilsman was making the opposite point. Indeed, newly declassified NIEs confirm that estimates prepared prior to 1961 were mistaken about Soviet ICBM progress; these mistakes should not be misconstrued. Moreover, while the authors suggest the U.S. had useful satellite photographs of Soviet ICBMs during 1960, satellite-produced intelli-

gence breakthroughs on Soviet strategic forces did not occur until the summer of 1961.

■ Anyone writing about U.S. nuclear war plans should begin with the Single Integrated Operational Plan [SIOP], the American plan for nuclear war which was the organizational responsibility of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff and the Strategic Air Command in Omaha. Curiously, the authors do not mention the SIOP until halfway through their story. The SIOP that was in effect in July 1961 was SIOP-62, a blueprint for the use of all existing U.S. nuclear strategic and theater delivery forces in a single devastating twenty-four hour strike on the USSR, the People's Republic of China, and the satellites. That plan was a carryover formulated in the fall of 1960 during the Eisenhower administration. With more than 14 hours of alert, it envisioned strikes against 1,060 groups of targets (Designated Ground Zeros) with more than 3,200 nuclear weapons yielding more than 7,500 megatons. More than eighty percent of the DGZs were military targets. If SIOP-62 was executed in full, military planners estimated that more than 285 million fatalities in the Sino-Soviet bloc would occur. Although there were significant factors that would have made it difficult to launch this devastating plan as a preemptive strike, it was clearly designed to catch the much inferior Soviet bomber and missile forces on the ground, by surprise if possible. The authors miss this important point.

■ The authors also overlook the history of presidential thinking during the Cold War about first strikes, especially President Eisenhower's consideration, during the mid-1950s, of the pros and cons of an American surprise attack against the Soviet Union while the nuclear balance was still in the U.S.'s

favor. In the end, Eisenhower concluded that a U.S. surprise attack was both politically impossible and violative of U.S. national traditions. One suspects that President Kennedy would have agreed with his predecessor on this point.

■ Surprisingly, the authors overlook the most significant discussion of first-strike options during mid-1961, the efforts of Deputy National Security Adviser Carl Kaysen to design a counterforce first-strike alternative to SIOP-62 which could be executed in a crisis over Berlin. Kaysen proposed a small preemptive attack against existing Soviet nuclear forces which intelligence had just confirmed were smaller than anticipated. Only 88 DGZs would be struck, with the rest of the U.S. nuclear force held in reserve to deter Soviet counter-attack on U.S. cities. A document describing this proposal, dated September 7, 1961, can be found in the JFK Library. The ultimate impact of this civilian-originated proposal is difficult to trace, but it is plainly of greater historical importance than the 1961 NESC briefing that the authors have chosen to dramatize.

■ Although the authors present a scenario of President Kennedy facing an "excruciating choice" in 1963 between peace and nuclear oblivion, they miss the more interesting point that on September 12, 1963, during another NESC briefing, President Kennedy and his advisers had been informed that "victory" in nuclear war was militarily unachievable. According to the briefers, there "was no way of launching a no-alert attack against the USSR which would be acceptable." As Kennedy put it, the level of damage that the U.S. would receive after it preempted would be "unacceptable." This information comes from another Kennedy Library document, declassi-

fied in 1990.

What President Kennedy thought in 1963 does not settle the history of first strikes and preemption in U.S. nuclear planning. But anyone attempting to investigate the role of first strikes and preemption in American nuclear strategy must avoid making mountains out of molehills. Ambiguous reports on war games must not be confused with the plans of civilian decisionmakers. There is already enough misinformation available on U.S. nuclear strategy and its history; Professors Purcell and Galbraith have provided us with some more.

William Burr  
David Alan Rosenberg

*Mr. Burr is a nuclear history analyst at the National Security Archives and an adjunct professor of history at George Mason University. Mr. Rosenberg is an associate professor of history at Temple University, and the 1988 recipient of a five-year MacArthur Foundation fellowship in recognition of work on the history of U.S. nuclear strategy*

## JAMES GALBRAITH AND HEATHER PURCELL REPLY:

Burr and Rosenberg's letter is a pastiche of misreadings, plain and provable errors, and long, irrelevant digressions.

Among their many misreadings, all easily checked: (1) We do not rely solely on the Burris memorandum. (2) We do not claim that the Net Evaluation Subcommittee was making a "recommendation for war or peace." The subcommittee's role was analytical, an evaluation of plans, a point which supports our argument that plans existed. (3) The statement that the studies on this subject began in 1957 is in the Burris memorandum itself. (4) We stated our uncertainty over whether Eisenhower had earlier been briefed in person; we state correctly that the July 1961 meet-

ing would have been the "first one given to President Kennedy and his advisors." (5) We quote Hilsman correctly and describe his contribution, which was coy but honest, exactly.

Burr and Rosenberg's assertion that research "must begin" in one or another archive is silly. Professional historians who have worked here know that the Burris files in the Johnson Library are a singular resource—a frank, confidential, and contemporary record by a meticulous reporter with complete access at the highest level. If other archives have yielded material on the July 20, 1961 meeting, fine, let's see it. Burr and Rosenberg produce nothing about this from those other archives.

On the history, Burr and Rosenberg begin with a red herring. Certainly, strategic war plans dated to the early 1950s. But the weapon then was bombers, which are comparatively slow and vulnerable. A surprise attack by bombers would have been immensely difficult to bring off, as Eisenhower no doubt rightly concluded. ICBMs, with their 30-minute flight times and pinpoint accuracy, seemed to solve those problems in the early 1960s. An overwhelming ICBM advantage therefore might possibly mean a chance to destroy the enemy without being destroyed oneself. As we say,

But did Kennedy know, in July of 1961, that the U.S. held an overwhelming advantage in ICBMs?

Burr and Rosenberg are dead wrong on this crucial question. They write that the "intelligence breakthrough" which exploded the missile gap "did not occur until the summer of 1961." We cite Richard Reeves that the breakthrough came with the first CIA satellite, Corona, orbited in August 1960 and returning photographs by parachute in January 1961. Writing in 1988, McGeorge Bundy had already con-

firmed this (p. 350 of Bundy's *Danger and Survival*): "By the end of his term Eisenhower had learned enough from the first satellite to say with confidence in his last State of the Union message that the 'missile gap' showed every sign of being a fiction."

Turning to the text, Burr and Rosenberg write that the meeting must have concerned a Soviet surprise attack on the United States. Yet the document states bluntly that "... the President asked if there had ever been an assessment of damage results to the USSR which would be incurred by a preemptive attack." "Preemptive" or "surprise" attacks, in the nuclear age, go in one direction only. They also require the advantage of numbers: You cannot destroy more missiles with fewer if the targets are properly dispersed. As we have just shown, President Kennedy did know by July 1961 that the U.S. held a strong missile advantage. Given that fact, alongside the second-strike power of U.S. bomber and submarine forces, Kennedy therefore also knew that the Soviets did not have and would never acquire the capability for a successful surprise attack.

Burr and Rosenberg argue that the next paragraph, with its reference to "fewer missiles," must show that the document refers to a Soviet first-strike on the U.S. "since the Soviets had fewer missiles." Note the contradiction: The Soviets did have fewer missiles, but in their own letter Burr and Rosenberg try to argue that the U.S. still did not know this. On the words themselves, the Burr/Rosenberg interpretation of this passage is absurd. We repeat the two key sentences in full: "Since the basic assumption of this year's presentation was an attack in late 1963, the President asked about probable effects in the winter of 1962. Mr. Dulles observed that the attack would be much less effective

since there would be considerably fewer missiles involved." "Fewer" here compares 1962 with 1963, not the Soviet Union with the United States. The word "effective" is also telling; the only possible "effective" strike in 1963 would have been by the U.S., against the USSR. And that, like it or not, was what the meeting was about.

Much of the rest of Burr and Rosenberg's letter—the sections dealing with SIOP, with Carl Kaysen's September 1961 proposal, and with Eisenhower—has no bearing on their dispute with us. The briefing of September 1963 also does not prove anything about what was believed of 1963 in July 1961.

The memorandum was classified "Top Secret," which was the highest formal classification then in use. "Eyes

Only," an informal additional restriction Burris used rarely, is marked on the document. Special restrictions for atomic secrets ("restricted data") or intelligence information would have been incorrect.

On the one issue of Johnson's presence, we may have erred. LBJ normally did not attend meetings on which Burris reported, but in this case the daily record, for what it's worth, does say he attended. The point is incidental, and can only reinforce confidence in the accuracy of Burris's account.

Finally, on the larger point about Kennedy, and also Eisenhower and later Johnson, we do agree. Clearly President Kennedy and his civilian advisers opposed plans for a nuclear first strike by the United States against the Soviet Union, for late 1963 or any

other time. Kennedy's vehement reaction to the July 20th meeting reflects this, and his later behavior is fully consistent. But this is a major point of our article. The fact that Burr and Rosenberg missed it is just more evidence of the haste and carelessness of their letter.

James K. Galbraith  
Heather A. Purcell

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