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# Promoting Air Power

## *The Influence of the U.S. Air Force on the Creation of the National Security State*

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After nearly four years of global war, Americans yearned for a reversion to normality, but the years immediately following World War II brought instead a permanent state of crisis and a perceived need for continual preparedness. This mood led to the creation of a national-security state concerned essentially with the threat from Soviet communism. The United States assumed new responsibilities for the containment of communism in Europe and Asia as well as leadership of the “free world.” The pragmatic consequences of a strategy of continual preparedness and an interest in maintaining a preponderance of U.S. global power were increased budgetary and military obligations (Leffler 1992, 13–15; Sherry 1995, 130). The broader consequences influenced public perceptions and U.S. foreign policy.

The limited funds available to the military dictated that in these early Cold War years, each military service would seek to enhance its prominence in the postwar defense establishment, influence the pattern of defense budgets, and determine how best to provide defense and deterrence. Impatient to succeed in the bureaucratic contest with other military services, the United States Air Force influenced the discourse and the political culture of the national-security state in the early Cold War years. It persuaded the American public that creating air supremacy would be the least costly

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and most effective strategy in the face of a Soviet threat that the air force itself helped to overstate. When combined with forces that focused on an assumed internal communist threat, the debate over air power matched the wartime home-front mentality that had been part of World War II and was becoming institutionalized in American society. My focus in this article is the air force's attempts to sway public opinion to make air power the cornerstone of national security.

The result of this air force strategy was a budgetary and public-relations controversy that influenced public thinking about military security. The budgetary dilemma developed when President Harry S Truman, who was determined to maintain a balanced budget, confronted dissension within his administration, especially from a secretary of the air force intent on creating parity status for the air force with the older services. The air force had been created as an independent service, with a status equal to that of the army or the navy, by the National Defense Act of 1947, which also created a unified service under the secretary of defense. Interservice rivalry, competition, and quarrels over functions grew out of the unification debate (Huntington 1961, 41; Call 1997, 4). Demands for military demobilization and Truman's objective of controlling federal spending clashed with the nation's growing global responsibilities, dissent within the administration, and the military's persistent demands for increased funding.

The air force argued that funding for additional personnel and planes, especially more sophisticated bombers, at the expense of appropriations for the army and the navy, would limit the number of armed forces personnel required to serve around the world and would best safeguard the United States. A capital-intensive military that favored air power over the other, more labor-intensive armed forces had definite public appeal. These efforts continued until the Korean War generated an immediate requirement for increased funding. At that point, Truman submitted a supplemental request for appropriations that included a substantial amount for the air force (Truman 1948–50, 724). The air force had succeeded in laying the groundwork that justified this increase.

These budget debates were intertwined with Cold War considerations in the early years of tense U.S.–Soviet relations, years in which it was accepted that any gain in the world for the Soviets would be a loss for the United States. Much of this friction was part of a public discourse that took place between 1947 and 1950 over the future of U.S. defenses in a world perceived as bipolar and in which the United States had assumed a proactive, even interventionist role. The services agreed that the next war would be a total war (Huntington 1961, 49). They disagreed on how best to prepare for it. The air force used Cold War assumptions, often genuinely grounded in World War II experiences, during the budget process. A multitude of global events appeared to be part of a pattern indicative of a communist quest for global power: Soviet refusal to withdraw troops from Iran in 1946; conditions in Greece and Turkey, which led to promulgation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947; removal from office of the noncommunist-elected Hungarian leader in 1947; European Communist Party

electoral victories that preceded the Marshall Plan blueprint for European economic recovery in 1948; the communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia in 1948; Russian interference with Western ground access to Berlin in 1948; the communist victory on the Chinese mainland in 1949; and the ominous Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 that obliterated America's nuclear monopoly and shocked the American public.

The capacity and budgets of the postwar defense establishment, however, were determined by domestic politics as well as by these international events. The Joint Chiefs of Staff identified the Soviet Union as the singular threat to U.S. postwar security, and they speculated that should a war occur, it would result from a Soviet land invasion of western Europe, against which a diminished United States Army would be ineffective. A consensus emerged that atomic weapons, which they considered more powerful and more effective than conventional bombs, were qualitatively distinct from all prior instruments of warfare (Ross 1988, 154–55; S. McFarland 1996, 5). Simply by threatening to strike, a bomber force alone would be unequalled in imposing America's determination (Sherry 1977, 41–42, 110). Many in the administration and Congress, though, were convinced that unrestrained military spending would generate an undesirable inflation. Truman believed that a strong military defense, which would serve as a powerful deterrent to war, depended on a sound economic system with low inflation, and this policy approach entailed holding the line on expenditures (Mrozek 1972, 70; Gaddis 1982, 58).

## The Military and the President

Preparedness for war took precedence in these early Cold War years. The new commitments and assumed threats led to a previously unknown peacetime allocation of resources to the military establishment and the national-security state. Prior to 1947, each service had argued individually for its budget before Congress (Snow and Brown 1997, 136; Hogan 1998, 166, 464, 467). Now the Department of Defense was supposed to present a unified budget. The contentious process of unifying the forces, however, continued with the fractious dealings among the military bureaucracies over the allocation of defense dollars. Divided roles and missions further worked against interservice unity. How best to provide defense and deterrence became increasingly contested. The creation of the new position of secretary of defense to administer the national military establishment signaled a change in policy for all the services. Emphasis would now be placed on preparedness rather than reaction and on prevention of rather than engagement in wars (Brynes 2000, 47). Determining how to carry out this policy, with each service retaining substantial autonomy, led to competition. The new law reserved to the service secretaries power not granted to the defense secretary and gave the civilian heads of the services the right to appeal the defense secretary's decisions to the president (Wolk 1997, 395). When the National Security Act failed to provide coordination between the services or consolidation of the defense effort,

advocates of air power, together with the secretary of the air force—certain that strategic air power, under air force instead of navy control, would decide further conflicts—sought to fill the vacuum.

Truman believed in a balanced budget and in the values of American political culture it exemplified. At the same time that he accepted the necessity of a national-security state, he did not want to institutionalize military preparedness at wartime levels. Undue emphasis on a garrison state might eventually allow military needs to dictate budgets and even to empower military leaders to challenge civilian authority. Truman's traditional fidelity to a balanced budget and his determination to rein in raucous military-bureaucratic politics contended with the massive cost of national security that prescribed a large military establishment (Truman 1948–50, 272; Leffler 1992, 13; Hogan 1998, 20, 71–72).<sup>1</sup> Truman was skeptical of the military's demands and convinced that it squandered billions of dollars. He complained that Congress could not bring itself "to do the right thing—because of votes." The "air boys" sought only "glamour," and the navy had "the greatest propaganda machine" (qtd. in Ferrell 1960, 34). Actually, it was the air force that had the superior propaganda machine. The wartime glamour of aerial warfare persisted as part of the public consciousness, as did an overly simplified perception of the contribution that military aviation had made to victory in Europe during World War II (Trest and Watson 1997, 413; S. H. Ross 2003, 197).

Truman's anxiety about public resistance to increased taxes in a presidential election year strengthened his determination that the military adhere to a \$15 billion budget for fiscal year 1949. He knew that even the Berlin Blockade and airlift of 1948–49, which taxed cargo aircraft, had failed to rouse public opinion to rearm for possible military conflict with the Soviet Union (Kolodziej 1966, 58, 442; Haynes 1973, 120; Kirkendall 1987, 187; Kinnard 1990, 25). Truman allotted an annual defense budget and expected secretary of defense James V. Forrestal and the service secretaries to divide the funds, make choices, and establish priorities. From his perspective, added defense requests were the result of incessant interservice rivalry and could be reduced (Donovan 1982, 55–57). Unfortunately for Forrestal, the Department of Defense was rife with internal bureaucratic friction among the services. Policy recommendations were based on budgetary as well as strategic concerns, and Forrestal often served reluctantly as mediator (Trest 1997, 416; Sale 1998, 205). Convinced that the military establishment wished "to go back on a war footing," Truman, whose special interest in the military budget process began during World War II, grew more resolute that the military not overstep the budget (Truman 1956, 34; Leffler 1992, 265).<sup>2</sup> The administration, dismayed by the strife among the services but unable to manage it, confronted the realities of economic factors and postwar inflation as well as the

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1. Leon Keyserling Oral History, May 10, 1971, 116, Harry S Truman Presidential Museum and Library (hereafter "Truman Library"), Independence, Mo.; David Stowe Oral History, July 27, 1963, 11, Truman Library.

2. Memorandum, Harry S Truman to Dr. Edwin G. Nourse, Chairman, Council of Economic Advisors, March 25, 1948, President's Secretary's Files, Subject File—Agencies—Council of Economic Advisors,

public's lack of enthusiasm for a large military establishment (Kolodziej 1966, 75; Yergin 1977, 358; Greenwood 1979, 321–32; Rearden 1984, 315).

## The President and the Air Force

Although Truman accepted dubious Cold War assumptions of the worsening military position of the United States, he continued to argue for a balance between the nation's air strength, expenditures, and the ability to thwart threats other than those that air power might allay effectively. The president, confident in the nation's unilateral possession of the atomic bomb, was not yet prepared to extend the military dimension of containment (Williamson and Rearden 1993, 86). To Truman's dismay, this resolve proved difficult, even within his own administration. He considered the claims of air power's capability to be overstated and careless (Kirkendall 1987, 184). To avoid large-scale deficit spending, he ordered the military bureaucracies to subordinate their separate goals to advance his broader national policy "both in public and in private." In particular—and in vain—he cautioned his long-time friend W. Stuart Symington, the first secretary of the air force, to "make a conscious effort to subordinate personal and service preferences to the broader interests of the national program."<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Symington, a staunch air force advocate, privately pushed for air force programs within the administration and grasped every opening to discuss air force needs in public forums (Whynot 1997, 210). Symington disagreed privately and publicly with administration policies. Within the administration, he protested the Bureau of the Budget determination to hold the air force to fifty-five groups (the equivalent of army divisions), which he denounced as failing to sustain "the minimally adequate Air Force imperative for national defense."<sup>4</sup> He wrote Forrestal that he "keenly regretted" how the administration presented the air force program to Congress.<sup>5</sup>

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box 148, Harry S Truman Papers. See also Statement by the President, May 21, 1948, Papers of Clark Clifford, Subject File: National Military Establishment—Air History, 1963, 18; David Stowe Oral History, July 27, 1963, 11–12; Leon Keyserling Oral History, May 10, 1971, 116; Grover Ensley Oral History, October 7, 1977; Edwin G. Nourse Oral History, March 7, 1972, 89. All in the Truman Library.

3. Memorandum, Kent Benetsen to Clark Clifford, April 8, 1948, Clark Clifford Papers, Subject File: National Military Establishment—Air Force [1947–48] folder, box 11; Statement by the President to the Secretaries of Defense, the Secretaries of the Three Departments, and the Three Chiefs of Staff, May 13, 1948; Memorandum to the Secretary of the Air Force, April 13, 1948, President's Secretary's Files: Subject File—Cabinet, Department of the Air Force—Secretary of War for Air—W. Stuart Symington folder, box 157; Points for Discussion Between the President and Civilian Heads of the Military Establishment, March 4, 1949, President's Secretary's Files, General File, box 138. All in the Truman Papers, Truman Library.

4. Memorandum, Kent Benetsen to Clark Clifford, April 8, 1948, Clark Clifford Papers, Subject File: National Military Establishment—Air Force [1947–48] folder, box 11; Statement by the President to the Secretaries of Defense, the Secretaries of the Three Departments, and the Three Chiefs of Staff, May 13, 1948; Memorandum to the Secretary of the Air Force, April 13, 1948, President's Secretary's Files: Subject File—Cabinet, Department of the Air Force—Secretary of War for Air—W. Stuart Symington folder, box 157; Points for Discussion Between the President and Civilian Heads of the Military Establishment, March 4, 1949, President's Secretary's Files, General File, box 138. All in the Truman Papers, Truman Library.

5. Memorandum, W. Stuart Symington to James Forrestal, April 21, 1948, D-General, Democratic National Committee Correspondence File, Declassified Documents, Box 4; W. Stuart Symington Testimony, President's

Unafraid to rebel against his superiors for the cause of air power, Symington used the rhetorical skills he had developed as a successful Missouri businessman and the independence that the National Security Act gave him as a separate civilian service secretary to sell the importance of air power to Congress. Charming, likeable, and energetic, Symington had a keen political sense and knew how to make the best use of publicity. Determined to preserve the gains of the recognition of the air force as a separate service, he vigorously protested any reductions of air-power strength (Ransley 1968, 171; Symington 1984, 93; Kirkendall 1987, 180).<sup>6</sup> Whereas the administration had to balance the requirements and aspirations of all three services, Symington had just one cause, the air force. In particular, he saw his most critical function as staunch proponent and chief spokesman for the air force before Congress (Watson 1993, 53). Symington's belief in air power, however, transcended mere organizational loyalty. His conviction that air power was the means of checking Soviet-inspired communist expansion, which he feared and distrusted, was sincere and strongly felt (Eden 1985, 131; L. McFarland 2001, 1–2).

Truman's difficulties grew worse when congressional committees, already lobbied extensively by air-power advocates intent on sustaining the newly created air force in its competition with the long-established army and navy, heard conflicting messages from the administration. On the one hand, the Bureau of the Budget, headed by Truman's ally James Webb, reduced military requests, including those for aircraft procurement. Webb was apprehensive that the administration's internal friction would communicate a message of dissension and weakness that might influence foreign policy adversely (Berman 1979, 42).<sup>7</sup> At the same time, however, Symington pressed for the seventy-group program envisioned by the highly regarded air force chief of staff General Carl A. Spaatz, who had tremendous influence over Symington (Borowski 1982, 144; Boettcher 1992, 141–42).<sup>8</sup> For example, on the same day that Secretary of Defense Forrestal appeared before the House Subcommittee on Military Appropriations to support a balanced defense budget and a forty-eight-group air force, Symington undermined that recommendation by telling the subcommittee members that seventy groups were the minimum necessary for national security. Political disloyalty created what a Forrestal aide characterized as a "running sore" in the administration (Hoxie 1977, 137, 142; Watson 1993, 76, 101).<sup>9</sup> Incidents such as this one only aggravated tensions between Forrestal, the navy man, and Symington, the air man, that dated back to the conflict over service unification under the National Security Act, in which

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Air Policy Commission Hearings, November 26, 1947, box 16, Papers of W. Stuart Symington, 1946–50. All in the Truman Library.

6. Rosewell J. Gilpatric Oral History, January 19, 1972, 20, 23; Karl R. Benetsen Oral History, November 9, 1972, 197–71. Both in the Truman Library.

7. James Webb, Notes of Conference, November 9, 1946, Subject: Bureau of the Budget, Federal Budget, 1948, box 15, James Webb Papers, Truman Library.

8. Letter, W. Stuart Symington to Carl Spaatz, 1953 Retirement File, Stuart Symington, 1948–63, box 4, Carl Spaatz Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

9. Max Leva Oral History, June 12, 1970, 53, 55–56, Truman Library.

Symington had worked assiduously to establish the air force as a separate branch (Futrell 1971, 218, 234; Borowski 1982, 144; Boettscher 1992, 141–42; Hoopes and Brinkley 1992, 360; L. McFarland 2001, 10). Truman could only joke when a reporter asked if he intended to “spank” Symington (Truman 1948–50, 78). Why then did Truman retain Symington? One historian speculates that he did so because of his loyalty to his subordinates and his faith in Symington’s abilities. Symington was also one of Truman’s trusted friends, a part of the inner circle with whom Truman often played poker on weekend outings aboard the presidential yacht (Boettscher 1992, 138; Pitts 1996, 461; L. McFarland 2001, 3; Whynot 1997, 215).

Ironically, Symington resigned over his disagreement with the administration’s defense policies just two months before the outbreak of the Korean War generated a demand for the seventy-group force that had become symbolic for the air force (Mills 1951, 463–65; Rogrow 1963, 295; Watson 1987, 186, 188; Meilinger 1989b, 139, 158; Kinnard 1990, 29). In a speech delivered just prior to his departure from office, Symington emotionally echoed the case the air force had made to Congress and the American public throughout the early postwar period: “What is the advantage of a balanced budget if we—and, what is more important, our children—end up in the concentration camps of a slave state?” (qtd. in Green 1960, 307). Despite this hyperbole, Symington candidly regarded the administration’s decision as harmful to national security (L. McFarland 2001, 36).

Cleverly turning Truman’s demand for a balanced defense budget to its advantage, the air force lobbied for capital-intensive strategic air power as an alternative to maintaining large naval and ground forces. Although air power’s achievements during World War II would not have been effective without considerable land and sea support, the public perception of its effectiveness made it easier to characterize air power as the weapon of the future. The exaggerated promise that a capital-intensive military of strategic bombers would be more formidable than land or sea forces against the Soviets found favor with a public historically reluctant to tolerate a large standing army and opposed to the president’s Universal Military Training (UMT) proposal to train 850,000 men. Air power’s position that the air force would allow for smaller armies with less need for a military draft was appealing (Goldberg 1957, 117; Haynes 1973, 119; Gaddis 1982, 63; Rearden 1984, 313). Air Force supporters countered army advocates of UMT with newly developed bombers that fortified the attraction of strategic air power. In the public-opinion campaign, the air force was more successful than the army, and the UMT legislation died in committee. Air-power advocates did not create a fascination with air power as much as they used popular culture to appeal to the public’s interest in aviation and to direct it to adopt air power (Huntington 1961, 41).

## The Air Force and American Public Opinion

Each service, with the exception of the United States Marines, appealed to public opinion. Despite its complaints about weakness, the air force public-relations campaign was

most effective (Huntington 1961, 43). Air-power supporters became proficient at employing the popular press to persuade the public of the efficacy of their case and to create a mystique of air power that would counter the “Red Menace.” In its public-opinion campaign, the air force magnified foreign threats to generate public pressure on an administration reluctant to increase defense spending dramatically. Use was made of press reports of Russian expansion in Iran, Manchuria, and eastern Europe (Yergin 1977, 219; May 1991, 274; Leffler 1992, 14). Whether this deception was deliberate is not clear. Michael S. Sherry argues persuasively that this “glorification of air power did not ordinarily constitute conscious deception” because air-power advocates “had internalized their faith in strategic bombing.” It was “the sincerity of their convictions” that “hid them from their failure to analyze their arguments” (1977, 52). Questions were not asked about Soviet intentions. Air force intelligence information—data not used in the budgetary campaign—forecast that the Soviet Union would remain a land power, and the army would continue to be the most effective force against an attack in the foreseeable future. The substantial superiority of U.S air forces over those of the Soviets in the late 1940s was known to military leaders. In order to justify budget requests, the air force sought out the appropriate threats (Yergin 1977, 338; Boyer 1985, 105–6, 336). Public fears of nuclear attack, especially after the Soviet successful testing of an atomic bomb in 1949, enhanced the air force position.

In popular magazines—*Newsweek*, *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, *American Mercury*, *Colliers*—Americans read how air power would safeguard peace. Bombers would supplant the sacrifices of masses of fighting men. Early use of abundant offensive air power might eliminate or considerably diminish the requirement for ground combat. Strategic bombing could deliver victory without heavy losses and also function as a restraint to Soviet aggression (S. McFarland 1966, 5; Martin 1988, 34). Some of the reporting bordered on the irresponsible. A *U.S. News and World Report* article, headlined “Blueprint for a 30-Day War: Proposed ‘Air Blitz’ as Strategy of Future,” reported that “victory in one blow or a brief series of blows” against Russia would be possible using the atomic bomb. An air force colonel outlined the strategy:

If all the critical industrial systems could be destroyed in one blow, so that recuperation were impossible within any foreseeable time, there seems little question but that a nation would die just as surely as a man would die if a bullet pierces his heart and his circulatory system is stopped. Food and fuel would cease flowing. In a matter of days starvation would set in at every urban area. Any attempt to conduct warfare would immediately break down through a complete absence of logistical support. (“Blueprint” 1948, 15)

Although the article indicates that the air force chiefs of staff repudiated the “whole idea of preventive air blitz,” they did so on practical grounds that Soviet defenses might prove stronger than estimated, that the element of surprise would be difficult



to sustain, and that Soviet ground troops might occupy western Europe, where the United States would be adverse to using atomic weapons. No mention was made of a public discussion about whether or not the atomic bomb ought to be considered along with conventional weapons (“Blueprint” 1948, 15–16). For the time being, at least, “orthodox concepts” still guided the Joint Chiefs. This approach called for a seventy-group air force, consisting of 12,400 heavy land-based bombers and long-range fighter escorts to be on active duty by the end of 1949, that could be used to fight and win a war against the Soviet Union by relying heavily on conventional strategic heavy bombers (Gentile 2001, 140). Congress and public opinion had to be persuaded to allocate funds for these costly bombers. In *Look Magazine*, a 1947 two-page photo presentation of “test models,” including a huge B-36 bomber developed to carry atomic bombs on intercontinental missions, identified as a “139-ton Goliath,” maintained that air-power readiness was “highly questionable”: “If war comes tomorrow, the planes on these pages and a few recently stepped up versions of World War II planes, will be required immediately. . . . But many of the planes pictured . . . are ‘one of a kind’ test models. Despite their amazing performance, our military leaders say, they are in no sense an air force” (“139-Ton Goliath” 1947, 36–37).

A nasty confrontation unfolded when the navy and the air force competed over which service was most qualified to thwart the Soviet threat. The air force contended that ground and naval forces were too exposed to attack and too slow to mobilize for the sudden warfare that strategists were convinced would be part of the post-World War II situation. Strategic air power, the air force argued, had replaced sea power as the first line of defense (Meilinger 1989a, 81–82; Trest 1995a, 18). The commanding general of the former Army Air Force, Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, who had a strained relationship with the navy, wrote an article supporting the “air arm” for *National Geographic* that contained sixty-five dramatic black-and-white and full-color photos that set the role of air power in World War II in the best possible light. Arnold even prophesied that “it is entirely possible that the progressive development of the air arm, especially with the concurrent development of the atomic explosive, guided missiles, and other modern devices, will reduce the requirement for, or employment of, mass armies and navies.” Without air power, even in combination with the other services, “there can be no national security.” Arguing that “the weapons of today are the museum pieces of tomorrow,” Arnold made a forceful case for continued development of modern bombers (1946, 137, 176; see also Trest 1998, 106–9). General Spaatz countered that the navy’s exclusive province over the oceans ended “the instant the long-range bomber was able to cross the oceans.” The navy, in effect, was trying “to create a second air force.” Spaatz employed hyperbole to alarm his readers: this discord “might well bring us to military disasters that would make Pearl Harbor seem insignificant” (Spaatz 1948a, 94, 97). By 1949, the air force long-distance B-36 bomber contended with a navy super aircraft carrier designed to secure the navy a role in air power. The resulting protracted dispute, known as the “Revolt of the Admirals,” culminated in an anonymous document widely circulated by the navy that called into question the effec-

tiveness of the B-36 specifically and strategic air power generally. The air force considered large carrier task forces incapable of accomplishing long-range strategic air operations (Meilinger 1989a, 81–95; for a fuller treatment of these accusations and House hearings, see Goldberg 1957, 115–17; Hammond 1963; Rearden 1984, chapter 14; Wolk 1984, 57; Trest 1995b; Brett 1996).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the conservative, flag-waving *Reader's Digest*, which seized on popular American anxieties about the postwar world order, took a pro-air force stand in this bureaucratic quarrel (Sharp 2002, 85). The American “strategic plan against the one potential enemy” would “be an air plan,” a deterrent for the Soviets who knew that the air force could “give Moscow and Magnitogorsk multiplied doses of what struck Hiroshima.” Misgivings about any future use of atomic weapons were not mentioned. Instead, the article presented a simple bureaucratic conflict “not between the Navy and the Air Force,” but “between the Navy bureaucracy and the American people.” This attack on the navy admirals appealed to raw emotions. Readers were reminded, for example, that “[o]n the day that 2800 men died at Pearl Harbor these admirals were still restricting the flight of land-based bombers from Hawaii *to not more than 300 miles off-shore!*” (Huie 1948, 62–63, 65, italics in original). In another article, the same author contended that an unchallenged air force would provide “the one means with which we can *immediately* deliver our atomic, radiological, bacteriological, and psychological weapons to Russia’s heart,” thus assuring “protection without bankruptcy.” “Every citizen who wants to place his hope on the air-atomic weapons for peace” was urged to “write his Congressman and Senator *now*” (Huie 1949b, 28, 34, italics in original). A 1949 simplistic lead article declared the air war was the “warfare to be feared in the future,” especially because the United States already had “airplanes which can take off from this continent, fly to Moscow, drop an atomic bomb, and return.” Here was a classic case of “visionaries” versus “obstructionists”: “In this the fourth year after Hiroshima, the battle to make America strong in the air is still being fought in Washington. On the side of the Air Force, as always, are the men of vision, backed by the American people. Arrayed against them are the Maginot minds, the yearners for Yesterday, the men who oppose any innovation that may lessen their prestige” (Huie 1949a, 129–30).

In his position as air force chief of staff, General Spaatz spearheaded the campaign for increased funding. He was an influential and prolific military writer in the drive to influence postwar political culture regarding the military. Perhaps because of its magnificent photography, *Life Magazine* became a favorite outlet for Spaatz. A few weeks after the bombing of Hiroshima, in an issue replete with compelling photos of the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the popular magazine featured the four-star general “Tooey” Spaatz on the front cover, with the caption “Bomber of Japan” (1945, 1). Four months after the cessation of fighting, Spaatz wrote in *Col-*

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10. U. S. Congress, House, *Investigation of the B-36 Bomber Program: Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services*, 81st Cong., 1st sess., 1949.

*lier's* that “the developments of World War II have made the entire globe a potential battleground.” Given “the recent failure of isolation and unpreparedness,” America would “never again . . . be able to prepare *after* war starts.” Unless America stood in “split-second readiness,” it would “lose a future war.” Only a “policy of offensive readiness” would be acceptable (Spaatz 1945, 11–12, italics in original).

In an argument that stretches credulity, Spaatz wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that it was “conceivable that the fact of an American air force in being, with full potential in 1939, might have prevented the outbreak of war.” Despite evidence that bombing raids did not diminish the German will, he claimed that “air power . . . was the spark to success in Europe.” In a future war, he warned that the United States, “Target Number 1,” would not have the time to produce the necessary air power (1947b, 394, 396). In an extensive two-part *Life Magazine* article, combined with absorbing full-page illustrations and a cover photo of F-84 Thunderjets flying in formation, Spaatz described why only air power could bring victory in a war he anticipated would be fought with the Russians. “The fateful political concessions made to the Russians in the European war and to draw them into the Japanese war might not have been made,” he maintained, had “the revolutionary potentialities of the strategic air offensive been fully grasped by the men running the war” (1948c, 35). In actual fact, however, during World War II, air power would have been relatively ineffectual without the backing from ground and amphibious troops and the interdiction of enemy supplies and reinforcements (Sherry 1977, 321–22).

After retiring from the air force, Spaatz joined *Newsweek* as air and military consultant and contributing editor, and in that capacity he did much, over a thirteen-year period, to champion the causes of land-based (instead of carrier-based) air power (Mets 1998, 334). Retirement did not imply neutrality over how best to protect American security or the appropriate means of attacking the industrial heart of an adversary. Despite intelligence information to the contrary, Spaatz asserted it was a widely held conviction among military thinkers that in the event of another war, it would originate with a strategic aerial attack. Until the threat of a third world war dissipated completely and the United Nations became an international body of tangible authority and effectiveness, the United States had to sustain the most powerful air force in the world. He demanded that funding for the seventy-group air force not be postponed further. Europe was the first line of defense, and only the air force could safeguard Europe from the Soviet Union’s massive ground forces. Public anxiety over a possible nuclear attack, especially after the successful Soviet testing of an atomic bomb in 1949, strengthened the air force position. Given the administration’s budgetary restraints, money spent on navy aircraft carriers and their supporting forces could not be spent on air force heavy bombers, which, he argued, had been proved the best means of attacking the industrial heart of an enemy (Spaatz 1947a, 1948a, 1948b, 1948c, 1949a, 1949b, 1949c, 1949d; Mets 1998, 334; Yergin 1977, 338). In addition to these magazine articles, Spaatz delivered numerous speeches, many of which were picked up by network radio (Call 1997, 137). One historian compares

this Spaatz-promoted “emblem of a great power” to “the Great White Fleet” of half a century earlier (Worden 1998, 33).

By early 1948, the results of the air force campaign to influence public opinion was evident. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed were willing to pay more in taxes to support a larger air force. A year later 70 percent of those questioned thought the size of the air force should be increased, and 77 percent were now willing to pay more in taxes to support a larger air force. When asked whether the number of planes in the air force should be cut if national-defense expenditures had to be reduced, 66 percent thought they should not be. In the summer of 1949, an astonishing 84 percent of those questioned thought that if the United States should become involved in another world war, the air force “would play the most important part in winning the war.” The army and navy received 4 percent support each (Roper Public Opinion Poll 1989). In the long run, strategic air power, with its promise of effective security at a lower cost, achieved the dominant role in the nation’s defense plans.

### **The Finletter Commission and the Defense of Air Power**

Reports issued by the president’s blue-ribbon Air Power Commission (Finletter Commission) and by the congressional Air Policy Board (Brewster-Hinshaw Board), both established in 1948 to assess U.S. air-power needs, proved a major source of support for the air force (Kinnard 1990, 25). Truman, aware that a fact-finding panel was apt to recommend the rapid expansion in aircraft procurement he hoped to avert, appointed the Finletter Commission—to be headed by Thomas K. Finletter, a respected Washington, D.C., lawyer—only because Congress was about to appoint its own policy board (Steinert 1980, 220–21).

The commission took literally Truman’s challenge, articulated in his appointment letter, to be “so broad in scope and purpose” as to “assist in revising old policies and in framing new ones” (“Secretary Patterson Resigns” 1947).<sup>11</sup> The presidential commission report “Survival in the Air Age” overlooked both its mandate for a balanced military force and the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a phased buildup of air force and navy aviation through 1952, when the Soviets were expected to acquire their first atomic weapons. Instead, it took the position that U.S. military security must be based on air power (Rearden 1984, 415). This sympathetic study of the present and future needs of national aviation policies projected immediate additional air-power appropriations of \$2.3 billion, thus magnifying Truman’s funding dilemma. The president reluctantly released it only after he had submitted his fiscal 1949

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11. Letter, Harry S Truman to Thomas K. Finletter, July 18, 1947, Personal Memoranda, box 15, Papers of Thomas K. Finletter; Public Hearings Opening Statement to Thomas K. Finletter, September 15, 1947, Folder: Report—President’s Air Policy Commission, box 6, Papers of Horace E. Weinmiller. Both in the Truman Library.

budget to Congress in January 1948 (Williamson and Rearden 1993, 78; Trest 1997, 415).

Interest in the hearings was pronounced, with extensive reporting that went beyond the customary accounts of defense planning in the *New York Times* and military magazines and journals to include weekly news magazines and regional newspapers. Articles were carried on the first page of 55 percent of the nation's leading newspapers. The remainder carried accounts on the second page. Eighty percent of these newspapers published editorials, all but three of them favorable. The influence was so extensive that its term "A-Day" became synonymous with January 1, 1953, when the commission warned that the United States must have an air force capable of dealing with a possible Russian atomic attack (Norcross 1948, 5; President's Air Commission 1948, 19).<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the commission's three months of hearings, during which 150 witnesses testified at two hundred sessions, it became clear that the cause of air power would triumph. Commission members toured the country to inspect air-defense installations, aircraft factories, and flying fields. Most witnesses and commissioners accepted air power, essentially without question, as either a crucial and equal component of defense or even as the sole cornerstone for a competent defense in the post-war era (Mrozek 1972, 219). Although World War II hero General Dwight D. Eisenhower acknowledged that "air is going to have a very predominant role," he added a reservation, one that the Joint Chiefs of Staff also called for: an integrated strategic plan must also include ground and sea forces (Kolodziej 1966, 75; Yergin 1977, 358; Rearden 1984, 315).<sup>13</sup> Air-power proponents ignored this advice. Symington wrote to the Air Power Commission in support of "the preeminent importance of the air combat force."<sup>14</sup> General Spaatz cautioned that air attacks of the future would come with little or no warning (Wolk 1984, 2).<sup>15</sup> Although he acknowledged that the air force was part of a larger national-security team, he believed that it required "an exceedingly high priority"—that is, seventy groups—to maintain "the political inde-

12. *The Observer*, February 13, 1949, Newspaper Clipping File, Thomas K. Finletter Papers, Truman Library.

13. Air Power Commission Hearings, November 11, 1947, 2250, Eisenhower folder, box 15, Truman Library.

14. President's Air Policy Commission Hearings, September 9, 1947, 2513, November 26, 1947, 2520, 2525, Symington folder, box 17, Truman Library; President's Air Policy Commission Papers, Symington folder, box 18, Truman Library; Letter, W. Stuart Symington to Carl A. Spaatz, August 3, 1953, Carl A. Spaatz Papers, W. Stuart Symington 1948–63 folder, box 11:14, Library of Congress.

15. Spaatz testimony, President's Air Commission Hearings, November 17, 1947, 2343–44, Spaatz folder, box 15, Truman Library; see also MacLissac 1979, 28.

16. Memorandum, W. Stuart Symington to James Forrestal, January 27, 1949, D-General, Democratic National Committee, Correspondence File, Declassified Documents, 1946–50, box 4; Letter, Symington to Louis Johnson, November 8, 1949, Correspondence File, 1946–50, Symington Papers, Truman Library; Thomas K. Finletter Oral History, February 15, 1972, 35, Truman Library. See also: Memorandum, Curtis E. LeMay to Thomas K. Finletter, May 23, 1950, file B-4685/60, box 195, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, Library of Congress.

pendence and territorial integrity of the United States.” Russian detonation of the atomic bomb in 1949 imperiled “the survival of the United States.”<sup>16</sup>

Air force officials were not adverse to disclosing flawed intelligence reports about Soviet aircraft advances that implied that the Soviets had already overtaken the Americans in such areas as jet fighters (Yergin 1977, 219, 267–68, 338, 358; May 1991, 274; Leffler 1992, 14). After listening to an overwhelming majority of witnesses who championed air power and the aviation industry, the five-member commission concluded that America’s defense depended on air power. It recommended a seventy-group modern air force of 6,869 airplanes and support and reserve groups that would give the air force a dominant military role. The report went much further than Truman wished in linking the nation’s survival to a greatly expanded and expensive air force (D. Wilson 1978, 293).

In an analytically weak but convincingly argued document, the president’s commission maintained that the United States had until 1952 to prepare for a Soviet atomic attack. It called for faster aircraft procurement and a seventy-group air force plan for a permanent peacetime force that gave priority to heavy land-based bombers and long-range fighter escorts, aircraft that would replace World War II equipment by the end of 1949 (Witze 1970, 105).

In addition to the widely circulated public report, the commission sent Truman a supplemental narrative, classified as “top secret,” that reflected acrimonious closed-door debates among the army, navy, and air force commanders. Worthy of attention is the commission’s failure to deal with the bitter interservice bickering between the navy and the air force explicit in the testimony. The commission concluded that a war with the Soviet Union, whether deliberately planned or accidental, was a distinct possibility. The present-day air force, therefore, was insufficient. Only seventy groups, no later than 1950, “would be adequate from a defensive and counter-offensive standpoint.”<sup>17</sup>

Finletter, who worked tirelessly on the commission report, defended the cost of the proposed program. As ardent as Symington, Finletter was more diplomatic in underscoring the prominence of strategic air capacity as the cornerstone of the nation’s defense. He could “think of nothing that would encourage those fourteen individuals in the Politburo more than to be informed that the United States was in a position where it couldn’t resist an attack by the Soviets, and where it really didn’t have much to strike back with.”<sup>18</sup> Finletter would succeed Symington as secretary of the air force, a position he held until the Eisenhower administration took office in 1953. In 1954, after the air force had received greatly increased funding during the Korean War, he reasserted his belief that nuclear supremacy was the backbone of

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17. “Supplemental Classified Report of the President’s Air Policy Commission,” December 31, 1947, 15–16, 23, 25, 30; President’s Air Policy Commission Papers, Proposed Classified Report folder, box 41. Both in the Truman Library.

18. Off-the-record remarks, New York State Chamber of Commerce, May 4, 1950, Public Statements of Thomas K. Finletter, 1950 (volume 1), box 11, Finletter Papers, Truman Library.

deterrence and that national self-preservation came before economy. He wrote that “we are moving relentlessly toward this date of absolute Russian air-atomic power when they will have enough bombs and planes to destroy our cities, our industry, and, if we are not properly prepared, our ability to hit back” (1954, 2–3).

Concerns for the viability of a developing aviation industry, significantly dependent on military appropriations, lent further justification to the air force case. In the early years of World War II, the National Aircraft War Production Council, a key coordinating body of the aircraft industry, had worked to create attitudes favorable to the strengthening of the aircraft industry after the war (Mrozek 1972, 64). A month after the end of the war, the aircraft industry had recommended an industry lobbying campaign to obtain congressional assistance for the transition period to a peacetime military (E. Wilson 1945, 29). The lengthy, well-publicized Finletter Commission hearings considered the crucial relationship between the fledgling aircraft industry and the production of strategic bombers. Aircraft industry executives testified about their predicament to the commission, which recommended increases in aircraft procurement by several million dollars. Conversion to civilian production was proving far less extensive than had been hoped, and the industry might well have collapsed without government support (Futrell 1971, 225; Galbraith 1972, 64–71; Mrozek 1974, 93; Yergin 1977, 267; McDougall 1985, 11; Whynot 1997, 124–27).

## Congress and the Air Force

Bypassing the customary channels of communication with the secretary of defense and the president, the air force appealed directly to Congress for increases in aircraft procurement (Eden 1985, 153). With air-power weapons changing more rapidly and drastically and becoming more expensive than those of either land or sea warfare, the air force labored to convince Congress and the American public that it should replace the conventional World War II planes that were rapidly becoming obsolete in the wake of the new jet fighters. Between 1944 and 1954, for example, the cost of a single heavy bomber increased from \$218,000 for a B-17 to \$500,000 for a B-29 to \$3.6 million for a B-36 to \$8 million for a B-52 (Goldberg 1957, 117; MacCloskey 1967, 65–66; Trest 1997, 413; Pattillo 1993, 192).

Congressional debates over the military budget reflected these rapidly increasing figures, the executive conflict with the military, the air force’s popular-opinion campaign, and international events. Absent was a national debate or an analysis regarding how much money and sacrifice might be necessary to contain Soviet expansion policies, whether an armed confrontation with the Soviets might occur, the extent of Soviet Union’s expansion, or even what the character of Soviet plans for such expansion was. Few asked about American national objectives. Although academics and others debated the question, insufficient political deliberation was committed to pondering national objectives, creating a unified strategic policy, or developing alternatives. Reliance on strategic air power transformed traditional thoughts about war.

Congress did not challenge how the seventy-group figure had been arrived at or what capacity such a force would render in protecting American interests in the world. Whatever analysis Congress did was concentrated on specific hardware items (Schilling 1962, 88; Hammond 1963, 552–53; Kolodziej 1966, 35–36, 40–41). Conservatives in the Senate, determined to reduce military costs without surrendering military capability, favored air power (Hogan 1998, 100). Symington, who had many friends on both sides of the aisle in Congress, exaggerated figures to create a perception of U.S. inferiority to Soviet air power (L. McFarland 2001, 34). Not only were both the House and Senate controlled by Republicans in 1947 and 1948, but Truman could not rely on his own party. Representative Carl Vinson (D-Georgia), head of the House Armed Services Committee, was one of the principal congressional advocates of a seventy-group air force. At one time pro-navy, he now wanted to be considered the father of the air force (Katz 1949; Schilling 1962, 69; Hammond 1963, 553–54; Bailey and Samuel 1965, 362). An “impressive array of evidence” persuaded Vinson that the nation could not “afford to quibble or skimp.” He was “not prepared to take the responsibility for refusing to meet the requirements” corroborated by the presidential and congressional air commissions, and he bluntly announced that he would take the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in military matters over that of the Bureau of the Budget (“A New Defense Chapter” 1949).<sup>19</sup> Another Symington friend was Representative Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Texas), a member of the House Armed Services Committee and an avid defender of air power (L. McFarland 2001, 24–25). In committee appearances, Symington was frequently led by sympathetic questions to reiterate his support for a seventy-group air force. Representative Paul Kilday (D-Texas), a ranking committee member, announced that “it’s up to us to ask Symington the right questions and force him out” (*Aviation Week*, January 24, 1949, 15–16).<sup>20</sup> Doing so was not difficult.

As passed, the appropriations bill for 1949 provided for a defense budget of \$13.8 billion, plus an additional \$822 million to bring the air force up to seventy air groups (*Aviation Week*, January 24, 1949, 44–46). Truman impounded the additional funds and held the Air Force to forty-eight groups (Goldberg 1957, 116). While discussing the budget for fiscal year 1950 at a press conference, Truman said of the Air Force: “You never can satisfy them. I have to put my foot down and tell them what they can have. If you didn’t do that they would take all the money in the budget.”<sup>21</sup> At a news conference the following year, when asked about the seventy-group Air Force, he said that he was “opposed to an air force group for which we can’t pay,” and the budget would not permit that many groups (Truman 1948–50, 437). The security information available to the president in these early Cold War years, the

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19. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, 80th Cong., 2d sess., April 14, 1948, pt. 4, 4452–53.

20. For Kilday’s support of a seventy-group program, see U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Congressional Record*, 80th Cong., 2d sess., April 15, 1948, pt. 4, 4533.



development of presidential power in foreign-policy matters, and Congress's unwillingness to nullify the impounding of funds made it possible for the administration to assert temporary control over air-power expenditures. At this point, Truman remained unconvinced of the central importance of strategic air power, an essential factor in formulating the character of the American defenses (Halperin, Stockfish, and Weidenbaum 1973, 2–3; Greenwood 1979, 321–32).

## Conclusion

The alarmist, faulty, and simplistic predictions of a massive Soviet arms buildup contained in a confidential analysis commissioned by the president and, especially, the outbreak of the Korean War would end the debate over the defense budget. In 1949, in response to the Soviet development of an atomic weapon and the communist takeover of mainland China, Truman directed Secretary of State Dean Acheson to evaluate U.S. military policies. NSC-68, the lengthy top-secret paper that Truman received in 1950, assumed continual struggles between the United States and the Soviet Union. In light of the document's conclusions that the Soviets were determined to dominate Europe and Asia, if not the entire world, a significant arms buildup seemed the only logical conclusion. From an air-power perspective, the document predicted that the Soviets would soon attain the nuclear capacity to destroy the United States. As chairman of the National Security Resources Board, a position to which Truman had appointed him, Symington sat on the National Security Council. In his response to the NSC-68 proposals, he supported the necessity of powerful air power and reiterated his Cold War attitudes toward the Soviet Union (L. McFarland 2001, 36, 42). Acheson reported to the president that "NSC-68 reveals that Soviet war readiness is increasing faster than the readiness of the United States and our allies and, that if present trends continue, United States security will be menaced in four or five years" (Acheson 1969, 373–80; May 1993, 14, 23–28).<sup>22</sup>

At first, Truman resisted the rearmament implications of NSC-68 as too expensive, although the authors of the document explained that the economy could withstand such an increase, and he ordered that the report be kept secret. He continued to support cuts in defense spending as a means of balancing the budget and reducing taxes. The Korean War, which broke out two months after NSC-68 was written, changed the situation dramatically. Military appropriations increased from \$14.2 billion for fiscal year 1950, the year before the Korean War, to \$47.3 billion for fiscal

21. September 8, 1949, Truman 1948–50, 34. For Truman's concern that any present military commitments would necessitate additional expenditures in subsequent years, see "Points for Discussion Between the President and Civilian Heads of the Military Establishment," March 4, 1949, President's Secretary's Files, General File, box 138, Truman Library.

22. Memorandum to the President, April 21, 1950, President's Secretary's Files, National Security Council Files—Meetings, Folder: Memorandum for the President—Meeting Discussion (1950), Truman Papers, Truman Library. See also Karl R. Benetsen Oral History, May 9, 1972, 220, Truman Library.

year 1951 and then to \$59.9 billion for 1952. Truman remarked that “although the maintenance of our posture of defense is expensive and will put on the American economy and on the American taxpayer,” he believed in the need “to maintain a high level of military spending” (qtd. in Goldberg 1957, 117; Acheson 1969, 492).<sup>23</sup> The air force received the funds it requested to fulfill its goals. From an air force perspective, the Korean War supplied a new role for rapid-response tactical air power against communist aggression (Martin 1988, 62). During the war, the air force expanded to ninety-five groups for offensive and defensive strategic air operations (Greenwood 1979, 217).

Throughout the 1950s, strategic air power, with its promise of exceptional security at lower cost, would play a dominant role in the nation’s defense plans. At a time of intense public insecurity, the outspoken rhetoric of air-power defenders did little to educate the American public about actual Soviet air strength. Americans received inadequate and spurious information about promises of bombing and the widely believed expectations of an armed confrontation with the Soviet Union. They heard that air power would eliminate the need to send American soldiers into the dangers of combat warfare. Air-power successes in the Korean War would then fortify the doctrine of reliance on air power that came to be known in the 1950s as *massive retaliation*. The national-security state was now in place. In the early years of its creation, therefore, the air force had played a pivotal role in constructing the popular dialogue that would be accepted as conventional wisdom during the Eisenhower administration.

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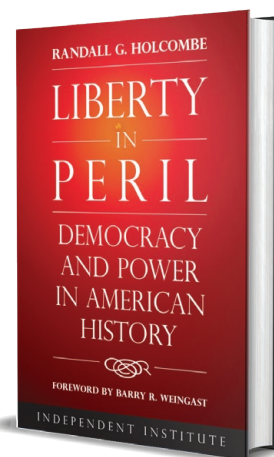
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