

## America's Search for a Technological Solution to the Arms Race: The Surprise Attack Conference of 1958 and a Challenge for "Eisenhower Revisionists"

The allure of Dwight D. Eisenhower for historians emerges largely from the former president's profundity and subtlety of character. Unlike his more straightforward predecessor, Harry S. Truman, the heroic general approached foreign affairs with thoughtful, informed goals and aspirations, often disguised by ambivalent and apparently passive public positions. Richard H. Immerman and Fred I. Greenstein have written at length about the perspicacity of Eisenhower's analysis of the nuclear revolution and his "hidden-hand" leadership.<sup>1</sup> Ingeniously, the so-called revisionists argue, the president used threats, covert activities, and restraint in different circumstances to produce one of the most successful and cost-efficient foreign policy records of any American commander in chief. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War observers have trouble arguing with Eisenhower's alleged boast: "The United States never lost a soldier or a foot of ground in my administration. We kept the peace. People asked how it happened – by God, it didn't just happen, I'll tell you that."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Richard H. Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist: An Agonizing Reappraisal," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Summer 1990): 319–42; idem, "Eisenhower and Dulles: Who Made the Decisions?" *Political Psychology* 1 (Fall 1979): 3–20; Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York, 1982), esp. 58–65.

2. General statements of the revisionist case can be found in Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist"; Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York, 1984); and Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York, 1981). Accounts emphasizing the fiscal conservatism of the New Look and its use of "asymmetrical" threats and acts of restraint include John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982), 127–97; and McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 236–357. Studies focusing

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Postpresidential bombast notwithstanding, Eisenhower left office on a personally disappointing note. The promise of a nuclear test ban agreement at the Paris summit in May 1960 failed to reach fruition after the Soviet Union, only two weeks before the great-power meeting, shot down a secret American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft overflying its territory. The U.S. president, completing the last year of his second term, had agreed to a number of compromises on a proposed test ban in hope of concluding an arms control treaty he could leave for posterity. Eisenhower believed that the nuclear arms race, by the latter part of the 1950s, threatened both the security and the fiscal solvency of the United States. A Soviet-U.S. agreement, even one limited to nuclear tests alone, would serve as a “first step toward genuine nuclear disarmament.”<sup>3</sup>

In January 1961 Eisenhower retired to his farm in Gettysburg without overcoming the first hurdle on the long road to a safer world. While the departing president issued his famous warning about the “military-industrial complex,” the record reveals that his own administration did not escape its consumptive clutches. Between 1953 and 1961 America’s stockpile of nuclear weapons grew from a total of 1,200 to approximately 22,229 – a number that remained roughly constant through the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

In particular, the Soviet launching of the first artificial space satellite, Sputnik, on 4 October 1957, ignited a popular American outcry for greatly increased military appropriations to close a supposed “missile gap.” Public anxiety, interservice rivalries, and congressional politics pushed Eisenhower begrudgingly to authorize a buildup that produced a condition David Alan Rosenberg terms nuclear “overkill.” In this sense, Eisenhower’s “Farewell

on American covert activities during the Eisenhower presidency include Stephen E. Ambrose and Richard H. Immerman, *Ike’s Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment* (Garden City, NY, 1981), 181–322; Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin, 1982); and Michael R. Beschloss, *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev, and the U-2 Affair* (New York, 1986). Peter Grose’s recent biography of Allen Dulles provides an excellent discussion of CIA covert activities during the Eisenhower years. Peter Grose, *Gentleman Spy: The Life of Allen Dulles* (Boston, 1994), 333–528. H. W. Brands, Jr., has both embraced and criticized the revisionist interpretation of the Eisenhower administration; see *Cold Warriors: Eisenhower’s Generation and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1988), and “The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State,” *American Historical Review* 94 (October 1989): 963–89. In the latter work Brands emphasizes the ambivalence, passivity, and sometime confusion of Eisenhower’s leadership. The author argues that the inadequacies of the president’s leadership contributed to unprecedented increases in American defense spending and strategic vulnerability – the “national insecurity state.” In this article I will contend that in the case of arms control, and the Surprise Attack Conference in particular, the latter Brands assessment of Eisenhower proves more persuasive than the general revisionist case. Eisenhower faced intractable problems in arms control, but, as in the case of nuclear strategy described by Brands, the president failed to articulate and oversee a practical, coordinated administration policy. Eisenhower quoted in Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 626.

3. Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate* (New York, 1978), 213–323, quotation from 318; Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 554–80.

4. In June 1994, Secretary of Energy Hazel O’Leary revealed that the U.S. nuclear stockpile totaled 22,229 in 1961.

Address” represents as much an admission of failure in curbing the arms race as a prescient dictum for future leaders.<sup>5</sup>

This observation presents a fundamental challenge for the Eisenhower revisionists. Why did the president fail to control the nuclear arms race he so dreaded? Domestic politics and Soviet intransigence explain a large part of the story, but not all of it. In Immerman’s analysis, Eisenhower formulated a strategy to use nuclear weapons as symbols that would induce rational behavior by the Kremlin.<sup>6</sup> The president’s strategy, however, failed to provide a viable blueprint for resisting the spiraling pressures of a massive superpower arms buildup. More specifically, historians have found little evidence that Eisenhower prepared a concrete plan for arms limitations or disarmament with any realistic chance of acquiring Soviet approval. “Atoms for peace,” “open skies,” and the nuclear test ban stand as the only significant arms control initiatives of Eisenhower’s eight years in the White House – and only the first would have imposed substantive limits on the nuclear arms race.

David Holloway, in his most recent book, *Stalin and the Bomb*, argues that the Soviet “path of militarized development” prohibited a mutually beneficial arms control agreement.<sup>7</sup> This would appear to be true, at least in part; but then why

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5. David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill,” *International Security* 7 (Spring 1983): 3–71; Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge* (New York, 1993). Government studies, most notably the Killian Report (1954–55) and the more apocalyptic Gaither Report (1957), engendered fears of a devastating Soviet surprise attack on the United States. For a discussion of the government studies of surprise attack see Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York, 1983), 125–43; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960–61* (Washington, 1961), 1038–40; H. W. Brands makes a similar point regarding Eisenhower’s “Farewell Address”: “More than any administration before or after, Eisenhower’s promoted the growth of the military-industrial complex he decried.” Brands, “The Age of Vulnerability,” 988–89.

6. Immerman, “Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist,” 340–41.

7. David Holloway, after thoughtfully examining an impressive array of newly accessible documents and remembrances from the former Soviet Union, writes that Stalin’s successors, in spite of their fears of thermonuclear holocaust, remained committed to socialist expansion and ultimate worldwide victory over the capitalist system. “This ideological position,” in Holloway’s words, “precluded the adoption of a more limited policy, such as minimum deterrence” (p. 344). In this sense, the Soviet Union in the middle and late 1950s sought arms control but lacked the ideological inclination for equal and reciprocal agreement with the West. Holloway concludes his seminal work, writing, “I have been skeptical in this book about the possibility that changes in American policy would have elicited significant shifts in Soviet policy. . . . [Stalin’s] death resulted in a significant relaxation of tension in the Soviet Union and abroad, but the patterns that had been set in the early postwar years remained strong. The Soviet Union and the United States took new steps to manage their nuclear relationship, but the arms race continued apace” (p. 370). David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–56* (New Haven, 1994), 320–71, citation in text from 369. Aleksandr’ G. Savel’yev and Nikolay N. Detinov, the latter a member of the former Soviet arms control establishment, write that the Soviet Union did not develop the administrative apparatus for serious arms control negotiations until the late 1960s. The “Big Five,” which the authors describe as the high-level interagency core for Moscow’s negotiation efforts through 1991, first formed in November 1969 by order of the Politburo. The authors argue that in the years between the Cuban missile crisis and the creation of the “Big Five,” the Soviet Union began to consider serious disarmament proposals. Revealingly, the authors do not provide any evidence or references to Soviet arms control ambitions before the 1960s. Aleksandr’ G. Savel’yev and Nikolay N. Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (Westport,

did Eisenhower continue to muse in private and in public about the opportunities for disarmament? In his second term, while rejecting cries of a “missile gap,” the president falsely raised expectations for an arms control agreement to the point where the Democrats, John F. Kennedy in particular, criticized the former war hero for failing both to build sufficient weapons and to negotiate needed peace. In fact, Kennedy was half right. The Eisenhower administration made more weapons than any other, but it only talked, without substantive agreement, about peace with the Soviet Union. “There was,” as John Lewis Gaddis writes, “throughout the Eisenhower years, a persistent inability to align opportunities for negotiations with the administration’s own willingness to participate in them.”<sup>8</sup>

The Surprise Attack Conference of 1958, a long-forgotten arms control meeting between West and East, provides a unique and unexplored window into the Eisenhower administration’s attempts to restrain the threats of nuclear confrontation and the spiraling arms race. The meeting, officially titled “The Conference of Experts for the Study of Possible Measures Which Might Be Helpful in Preventing Surprise Attack and for the Preparation of a Report thereon to Governments,” convened in Geneva, 10 November through 18 December 1958. The conference, first proposed by Eisenhower in a letter to Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin on 12 January 1958, sought to address the issue of surprise nuclear attack for all of Europe and North America.<sup>9</sup> In order to preserve parity on both sides of the table, representatives (called “experts” in the parlance of the conference) from five states composed each delegation, West (the United States, Great Britain, France, Canada, and Italy) and East (the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Albania).

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CT, 1995), 1–42. For a dissenting opinion see Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Military Technologies* (Ithaca, 1988), esp. 262–67. In the 1950s, the author argues, the Soviets expressed interest in trading quantity (in this case, conventional forces) for quality (new American nuclear technology) as concessions in an arms control agreement. The United States, seeking to capitalize on its technological prowess, refused the Soviet offers, according to this explanation. Evangelista appears correct in his general analysis of American policy. The new, albeit incomplete, evidence presented by Holloway, Savel’yev, and Detinov, however, leads me to conclude that the Soviets lacked the political will and the administrative means for negotiated agreement in the late 1950s.

8. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 190; Herbert F. York, *Making Weapons, Talking Peace: A Physicist’s Odyssey from Hiroshima to Geneva* (New York, 1987), esp. 193–96.

9. Eisenhower wrote: “I also renew my proposal that we begin progressively to take measures to guarantee against the possibility of surprise attack. . . . The capacity to verify the fulfillment of commitments is of the essence in all these matters, including the reduction of conventional forces and weapons, and it would surely be useful for us to study together through technical groups what are the possibilities in this respect upon which we could build if we then decide to do so.” “Inspection Zone Proposals: 1955–1958,” 18 July 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 2, folder: Disarmament – Surprise Attack [July–December 1958] (1), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas; *Department of State Bulletin* 38 (1958): 122–27. For the correspondence between the U.S. and the Soviet leadership that continued through November 1958 see *Department of State Bulletin* 39 (1958): 278–81, 648–49; Johan J. Holst, “Strategic Arms Control and Stability: A Retrospective Look,” in *Why ABM? Policy Issues and Missile Defense Controversy*, ed. Johan J. Holst and William Schneider, Jr. (New York, 1969), 253.

The largely ignored documentary record of the conference sheds light on many of the Eisenhower administration's shortcomings in the field of arms control. My historical analysis will emphasize three themes in particular. First, American preparations for the meetings in Geneva reveal the depth of apprehensions surrounding the arms race, and the administration's near-exclusive focus upon technological solutions. While many historians have described Eisenhower's confidence that the Soviets would not launch a nuclear "bolt from the blue" against the United States,<sup>10</sup> the Soviet developments in bomber and missile technology during the late 1950s apparently shook some of the president's self-assurance.<sup>11</sup> The risks of incorrectly judging Soviet intentions became dangerously large.

Faced with the grave horrors of war with new, more destructive and threatening technologies, Eisenhower sincerely sought to limit the expansion of nuclear arsenals.<sup>12</sup> The White House, however, did not trust the Soviets to abide

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10. Both Immerman and Brands agree that Eisenhower often emphasized Soviet intentions more than capabilities when confronted with the prospect of mutually assured destruction. Immerman describes the president's "defensive avoidance" (an attempt "to avoid the trauma of thinking about the unthinkable") and his firsthand impressions of Soviet rationality in pursuit of power and personal ambition. Eisenhower, according to Immerman, thought the Soviets would use probes and subversion to achieve world domination, but, as the president told his special assistant for national security affairs, Robert Cutler, "I don't believe for a second they will ever attack." Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist," 332–35. Brands explains that Eisenhower emphasized Soviet intentions over capabilities to keep defense expenditures down and to avoid the existential angst of a life without hope. Brands, "The Age of Vulnerability," 976. Fred Kaplan corroborates the Immerman and Brands analyses, arguing that Eisenhower believed Pearl Harbor was the exception, not the rule, for how wars generally begin. "Eisenhower had enough background in military history and military affairs to know that wars tend not to start with a 'bolt from the blue,' that they arise out of extremely high tension; and that being the case, SAC was probably in pretty good shape." Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, 150–51.

11. Evidence related closely to Sputnik and the Soviet missile developments of the late 1950s does not negate the conclusions of the preceding note, but it gives reason to believe that Eisenhower entertained some doubts about the Soviet aversion to a surprise nuclear attack. David Alan Rosenberg writes that Eisenhower voiced apprehensions that modern weapons "had made it easier for a hostile nation with a closed society to plan an attack in secrecy and thus gain an advantage denied to the nation with an open society." Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill," 38. James Killian, who authored the government study in 1955 that greatly contributed to fears of Soviet surprise attack and who from 1957 to 1959 served as the president's special assistant for science and technology, writes in his memoirs that the strategic threat posed by Soviet secrecy "haunted Eisenhower throughout his presidency." James R. Killian, Jr., *Sputnik, Scientists, and Eisenhower: A Memoir of the First Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology* (Cambridge, MA, 1977), 68. Brands also acknowledges the fears Soviet technological developments raised for Eisenhower and his advisers. Brands, "The Age of Vulnerability," 974–75. In the end, as technological considerations could not be separated from political concerns, assessments of intentions could not be divorced from capabilities.

12. In a meeting with the special assistant for national security affairs, Dillon Anderson, and other advisers on 7 February 1956, Eisenhower voiced his desire for restraints on the arms race. Dillon Anderson, in a memorandum dated 9 February, paraphrased the president's words: "We simply [have] to find some method for getting at this thing – otherwise we are headed for an armaments race that would be ended in only one way – namely, a clash of forces which could not result in victory for anybody, or at the least, stupendous expenditures for an indefinite period." Eisenhower called on his advisers to give thought to this "awful problem" and bring forth any ideas for channeling nuclear materials and human energies to peaceful uses. "Memorandum of

by any agreement the United States could not strictly verify and enforce. Arms control negotiations conducted by the United Nations Disarmament Subcommittee in 1956 and 1957 encountered apparently impenetrable strategic, ideological, and personal barriers. After discussions collapsed in September 1957, leaders from both West and East groped to find a new framework for deliberations.<sup>13</sup> Technological means for providing reliable, but relatively unobtrusive, inspection became the core, and perhaps the only perceived resort, for the Eisenhower administration's arms control efforts. Where traditional political promises could not ensure the American and allied governments of Kremlin intentions, the White House pursued a new avenue of agreement built on an unprecedented level of transparency and verification. Simply stated, Eisenhower sought a primarily technological solution (inspection) to the combined technological (long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles) and political (distrust) sources of superpower tension. In theory this outline sounds feasible, but in reality the boundaries between technology and politics proved difficult to delineate at the conference table. The Soviet Union, and many analysts within the allied delegations as well, argued convincingly that inspections and arms limitations (technology and politics) could not be separated, even as a first step. For Eisenhower and his closest advisers, however, the mistaken dream of a technological panacea for the Cold War remained very much alive in 1958.

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Special Meeting of the National Security Council," 9 February 1956, National Security Council Papers, folder: NSC Meeting 275, 7 February 1956, National Archives, Washington, DC. In meetings with select advisers on 11 September and 21 November 1956, Eisenhower expressed grave fears about the economic costs of the arms race, the possibilities of nuclear proliferation in other states, the mounting concerns regarding radiation from atmospheric nuclear tests, and the possibilities of a debilitating surprise attack. "Summary of Conference at White House," 11 September 1956, and "Memorandum of Conference with the President," 21 November 1956, National Security Council Papers, folder: NSC Meeting 284, 10 May 1956.

13. Eisenhower and other administration officials frequently made serious statements claiming that the Soviets were bent on world domination and harbored an inherently greater capability for surprise nuclear attack than the United States. For instance, see "Review of U.S. Policy on Control of Armaments," 29 November 1954, National Security Council Papers, folder: NSC Meeting 236, 10 February 1955. Immerman confirms that Eisenhower believed the Soviet leadership sought world domination. Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist," 334. For a detailed discussion of the 1956 and 1957 United Nations Disarmament Conferences see Charles Albert Appleby, Jr., "Eisenhower and Arms Control, 1953-1961: A Balance of Risks" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1987), 190-218. On 5 May 1958, Eisenhower approved NSC-5810/1, which stated that "[t]he trends in military technology, together with the threat of catastrophic war, in the continuing development of nuclear weapons systems emphasize the overwhelming importance of seeking sound ways of limiting armaments. . . . Since any kind of arms limitation will probably have to be accompanied by a monitoring system, it is important to establish the principle of monitoring and inspection and to achieve an agreement which will give us experience in monitoring." "Extracts from Basic National Security Policy," Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary Series, Administration Subseries, box 23, folder: Killian, James R. 1957 (1), Eisenhower Library. Raymond Garthoff argues that the American emphasis on inspection in arms control negotiations dated back to 1955 and the deliberations surrounding the Geneva Conference. Raymond L. Garthoff, "Assessing the Adversary: Estimates by the Eisenhower Administration of Soviet Intentions and Capabilities," *Brookings Occasional Papers* (Washington, 1991), 25-29.



This dream, while attractive, left itself open to varied and contentious interpretations within the West. The shallow and passive resolution of bureaucratic disputes over critical arms control details will comprise a second theme. The strategic and tactical disagreements within the U.S. administration and the Western alliance as a whole left Eisenhower with little room to forge a consensus for a world with fewer nuclear weapons. American and allied governmental interests had become, by the late 1950s, largely wedded to the military security and political stability of mutually assured destruction. By emphasizing inspection as a technical and nonpolitical first step for arms control, Eisenhower found the least common denominator that would allow for a Western consensus on superpower discussions, at least in the short run. At the conference table, the narrow range of allied agreement gave birth to a large expanse of superpower dispute.

The American and Soviet differences revolved most closely around the strategic advantages that the Kremlin ostensibly gained from its obsessive secrecy – a third theme. Eisenhower understood that lifting the shroud of secrecy surrounding the Iron Curtain would provide disproportionate benefits to the West. While much of the information on the U.S. military posture could be obtained in the public press, American analysts had relatively little concrete, detailed, and reliable data on Soviet activities. In the late 1950s, with the unexpected launching of Sputnik and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's claims of missile superiority, this asymmetry of secrecy became a source of strategic anxiety for Washington.

Not coincidentally, in the summer of 1958 the National Security Council adopted a classified policy statement, NSC-5814. This document gave top priority to the development of a reconnaissance satellite capability, code-named WS-117L. The president worried that the American U-2 flights over Soviet territory could not continue without an eventual countermeasure. The orbit of Sputnik inadvertently legitimized space overflights of other nations, and Eisenhower placed great hope on using the emerging satellite technology as a new, more effective, and uncontroversial means of peeking behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower's "open skies" proposal in June 1955 presaged the more intense U.S. efforts to acquire knowledge of Soviet activities in later years – through an exchange of military blueprints, overflights, and satellites.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Robert Divine writes that the first true American reconnaissance satellites, Discoverer flights 13 and 14, provided revealing photographs of the Soviet Union from outerspace in August 1960. These satellites were part of the code-named Corona project, run by the CIA. Divine applauds Eisenhower's emphasis on reconnaissance satellites, arguing that they "proved invaluable in protecting American security in the early 1960s." Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge*, 154, 189–98. John Lewis Gaddis corroborates Divine's last point, writing that the tacit Soviet and American approval of reconnaissance satellites in the post-Eisenhower years provided for greater superpower stability. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries in the History of the Cold War* (New York, 1987), 195–214. See also Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 350–51.

15. Walt W. Rostow, *Open Skies: Eisenhower's Proposal of July 21, 1955* (Austin, 1982). Rostow writes that while the "open skies" proposal served propaganda and negotiating purposes for the United

American proposals at the Surprise Attack Conference added to this string of attempts by Washington to induce Soviet openness. At the conference the U.S. delegates focused almost exclusively on superpower inspection and transparency as protections against surprise air, land, or sea attack. Interestingly, in the aftermath of the conference, some American and other Western analysts began to question whether they indeed would like to open their own military installations to Soviet snooping. Eisenhower confronted stubborn opponents of openness both abroad and at home. Ultimately, the president could not convince the closed-minded to open their facilities.

In this sense, the Surprise Attack Conference serves as both a window and a metaphor for the failures of Eisenhower's arms control efforts. The three points elaborated above – the administration's belief in a technological panacea for largely political problems, America's emphasis on inspection as the only true point of consensus on arms control within Washington and the Western alliance, and Eisenhower's attempts to redress through legal reconnaissance the Soviet advantages derived from greater secrecy – highlight the salient weaknesses in Washington's proposals for agreement with Moscow. Like Eisenhower's presidency, the Surprise Attack Conference ended in frustration when the Soviet Union adamantly linked all technological initiatives to political concessions in central Europe and in nuclear weapons stockpiles. The Soviets would not separate technological issues from political concerns, they would not enter a consensus agreement on superpower inspections alone, and they would not give up the strategic advantage they derived from their obsessive secrecy for nothing in return. American proposals remained largely stagnant during the Surprise Attack Conference and the remainder of Eisenhower's second term. Soviet rejoinders only seemed to become more dogmatic and predictable as the conference and the last years of the decade proceeded.

All of the tedium, propaganda, and repetition aside, the Surprise Attack Conference reveals the sincerity of East and West, and their tragic inability to overcome divergent objectives and perceptions for the sake of a safer and more stable world. While blame should be shared by both sides, an examination of U.S. preparations and activities at the conference will expose substantial shortcomings in intellectual thought and administrative guidance from the highest echelons of the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon. The statements and actions of strategic thinkers, scientists, and policymakers in the aftermath of the conference, almost completely ignored by historians, identify

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States, elements within the administration, including Eisenhower, were serious about the idea. Divine's analyses of the nuclear test ban debate and American space policy seem to confirm the seriousness of Eisenhower's search for a means of opening the pall of secrecy around Soviet military activities and beginning a process of serious arms control. See Divine, *Blowing on the Wind* and *The Sputnik Challenge*. My examination of the Surprise Attack Conference confirms this argument. Superpower inspection served the more open society disproportionately. While the Soviets had more to lose, the Eisenhower administration sincerely believed that a more transparent world would be safer and more stable for all nations. See also Garthoff, "Assessing the Adversary," esp. 50–52.



a learning process where individuals sought to correct mistaken elements of the American approach. During later years many of these corrections and alterations did take shape in American arms control policy, but the Eisenhower administration proved strikingly unable to reformulate its own unsuccessful strategy before leaving office. The Surprise Attack Conference and the Eisenhower presidency ended with the United States pointedly failing to pursue potential arms control opportunities with wisdom and vigor.

The president, as mentioned earlier, first proposed a conference on measures to guard against surprise attack on 12 January 1958. Soviet premier Khrushchev did not reply affirmatively until 2 July – the second day of the technical conference on a possible nuclear test ban, convened in Geneva. On 3 July, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles asked James Killian, Eisenhower's special assistant for science and technology, to examine “the ways of obtaining, through an international agreement, significant enhancement of early warning abilities and capability [*sic*] to detect preparations for a major surprise attack, as well as reduce the chances of accidental war, both in the current period and in subsequent years when strategic missiles would have been developed in large numbers.” Dulles wanted the study to focus on “what would be the most important objects and means of inspection and control.”<sup>16</sup>

Killian, however, did not consider this focus practical. In his response to Dulles on 10 July Killian wrote that “no reliable system can be devised to provide dependable advance warning of a surprise attack except in conjunction with agreed limitations on weapons numbers or deployment.” He argued that aerial and ground inspections involve complicated military estimates. Without reductions in the numbers of long-range bombers or missiles, it would be extremely difficult for the United States to determine whether the Soviets were preparing for a surprise attack. For this reason Killian argued that the technical issue of inspection must be linked to the more political issue of disarmament. American preparations, according to Killian, required an interagency effort, including the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC), the State Department, the Defense Department, and the CIA.<sup>17</sup>

The similarities between Killian's argument and the later Kremlin position at the conference table are striking. While Dulles's emphasis on the technical issue of inspection logically followed from the Eisenhower administration's reservations about the nuclear arms race and distrust of the Soviet Union, Killian and other scientists realized the practical shortcomings of American policy. Ironically, America's emphasis on technical issues encountered serious dissent from the technical experts. The more politicized Soviet approach to

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16. Dulles to Killian, 3 July 1958, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, file 600.0012/7-358, National Archives (hereafter RG 59, with filing information); Divine, *Blowing on the Wind*, 225–28.

17. Killian to Dulles, 10 July 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 2, folder: Disarmament – Surprise Attack [July–December 1958] (1).

arms control had merits in the eyes of many scientists, conscious of the shortcomings in technical analyses alone.

On 12 July, Killian brought his case directly to the president. Eisenhower agreed to Killian's request for interagency conference preparations. The president stated, however, that "for the next several years the greatest threat to destruction continues to be the military aircraft; missiles will not be ready in such quantity. What we are aiming to determine is that bases within such and such a line have not been brought to a state suggesting imminent attack." As this last sentence indicates, Eisenhower's immediate aims centered almost entirely on inspection. In spite of public alarm about a supposed "missile gap," the president worried about aircraft, not missiles.<sup>18</sup> Only after creating arrangements for inspection would Eisenhower consider limitations on aircraft and missile deployments.

On 14 July, Eisenhower appointed Killian, Dulles, and Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy to a special Committee of Three overseeing "preparations for possible negotiations on measures to detect and discourage surprise attack." On 15 August the Interagency Working Group on Surprise Attack, chaired by scientist George Kistiakowsky, completed its first report. Like Killian's initial letter to Dulles, the report argued that "progress in weapons technology is making inspection schemes . . . less and less promising in reducing the danger of a massive surprise attack. Not only is warning time diminishing and becoming less susceptible of extension by an inspection system alone, but the strategic indicators of enemy intent that will be available in the missile age will be increasingly ambiguous." The Interagency Group believed that the United States should link inspection to some limited disarmament measures at the Surprise Attack Conference.<sup>19</sup> Once again, the administration's focus on inspection alone came into question.

In the aftermath of the Interagency Group report, a split between the State and Defense departments emerged in September. The general differences on arms control policy within the administration dated back to the "atoms for peace" and "open skies" initiatives of 1953 and 1955, respectively, and they found contemporary expression in the debate over a nuclear test ban treaty. While Defense adamantly opposed even minimal discussion of disarmament by the U.S. delegation, elements within State, echoing the arguments of Killian and the Interagency Group, believed that some analysis should be devoted to arms

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18. "Memorandum of Conference with the President, July 12, 1958," 4 August 1958, Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary Series, Administration Subseries, box 35, folder: Staff Memos July 1958.

19. "Memorandum for the Secretary of State," 14 July 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 8, folder: Disarmament - Surprise Attack [July 1958-April 1959]; "Report of the Interagency Working Group on Surprise Attack," 15 August 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 2, folder: Disarmament - Surprise Attack [July-December 1958] (2). The members of the Interagency Working Group were Richard M. Bissell, Jr. (CIA), Philip J. Farley (State), John N. Irwin II (Defense), Curtis E. LeMay (Air Force), Gerard Smith (State), Jerold Zacharias (PSAC), and George Kistiakowsky, chairman (PSAC).

limitations, even if the linkage with inspection was not necessarily explicit in the American position.<sup>20</sup> State would not consider any reduction in the U.S. nuclear stockpile, but the department did contemplate possible alterations and limitations in the readiness and posture of American forces. A decision, for instance, to prohibit nuclear-armed training flights in the Arctic region, as demanded by the Soviets, would have fallen within the State Department's scheme of thought.<sup>21</sup>

In a conversation on 26 September between representatives of State, Defense, PSAC, and the NSC, the State Department presented its position. Julius Holmes, who later served as the ranking official from Foggy Bottom on the U.S. delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference, pointed out that "the Soviets indicated in their September 15 note that they will raise questions of arms limitations, and that we must be prepared to deal with such matters." Undersecretary of State Christian Herter continued, commenting that "he did not want to see such a strait jacket placed on the Delegation that it could not probe Soviet intentions. He noted, moreover, that there were certain things the Soviets will want to talk about and that we cannot restrict the discussions only to subjects that interest us." Herter advocated allowing the talks in Geneva to range beyond inspection. "The experts," however, "will have no authority to

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20. The documents from NSC Meeting 236, convened on 10 February 1955, clearly reveal the early differences between elements of the State and Defense departments on arms control policy. See "Review of U.S. Policy on Control of Armaments," 29 November 1954, "Review of NSC 112," 7 February 1955, "Department of Defense Comments on State Department Working Group Review of United States Policy on Control of Armaments," and "Memorandum from the Executive Office of the President of the NSC to the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Chairman of the AEC," 10 December 1954, National Security Council Papers, folder: NSC Meeting 236, 10 February 1955. Interestingly, Secretary of State Dulles meandered between the positions articulated by State and Defense papers during the NSC meetings from 1955 through 1958. Dulles did not trust the Soviets, but he seemed to find Defense's hard line unsatisfactory. On this general point see John Lewis Gaddis, "The Unexpected John Foster Dulles: Nuclear Weapons, Communism, and the Russians," in *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War: A Reappraisal*, ed. Richard H. Immerman (Princeton, 1990), 47–77. Detailed discussions of the rift between State and Defense during the later half of 1958 appear in two PSAC documents. PSAC to Killian, 11 September 1958, U.S. President's Science Advisory Committee, box 5, folder: President's Science Advisory Committee (3), Eisenhower Library; and "Memorandum for Dr. Killian," from W. H. Minshull, Jr., 23 September 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 8, folder: Disarmament – Surprise Attack [July 1958–April 1959].

21. On 29 April 1958, Henry Cabot Lodge, the American ambassador to the United Nations, proposed an Arctic inspection zone to the Security Council. This initiative served as an American response to public Soviet protests regarding American nuclear-armed training flights in the Arctic Circle proximate to Russian airspace. During a conference with members of State, as well as the British, French, and Canadian embassies, Dulles pointed out that the proposal served propaganda and allied arms control interests. Like "open skies," the Arctic inspection proposal was a win-win proposition for America. Dulles wished "to emphasize the high degree of importance the United States attaches to this proposed action both as a desirable step in itself if agreed to by the Soviet Union, and as a counter to Soviet propaganda whether they accept or refuse." "Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense," from the JCS, 31 December 1957, National Security Council Papers, folder: NSC Meeting 350, 6 January 1958. The nuclear-armed training flight issue reemerged as a point of contention at the meetings of the Surprise Attack Conference.

negotiate any political agreements, but can only look at the surprise attack problem from the technical point of view.”<sup>22</sup>

The members of State understood the negative publicity that a very narrow minded U.S. approach to the Surprise Attack Conference would generate. At the time, information and expectation surrounding the impending meetings appeared in prominent newspaper ink. Herter, Holmes, and others in State realized that the United States must consent, at the very least, to considerations of something more than just inspection. Moreover, unlike Eisenhower, who was primarily concerned with long-range bombers, the State Department worried about supposed Soviet missile capabilities. While an inspection regime could provide significant warning for a bomber attack, inspection would be less useful in the case of solid-fuel missiles. The short preparation time, as well as the high speed at which missiles were predicted to fly, made ICBM warning less feasible in the eyes of PSAC and State. Assistant Secretary of State Philip Farley made this point to the minister and first secretary of the British embassy. “[O]ur studies of the surprise attack problem . . . led us,” Farley explained, “to the conclusion that any system must offer protection in the missile age and not be geared exclusively to present delivery systems such as long-range bombers. . . . Limitations on number, types or deployment of delivery systems might be necessary to afford really meaningful protection against the threat of surprise attack.”<sup>23</sup>

The Defense Department vehemently opposed State’s broad definition of arms control. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) expressed fears that, as the technical talks on a nuclear test ban in July and August had created strong momentum for a cessation of tests, American flexibility on inspection would engender painful pressures for a disastrous disarmament agreement. The JCS worried that if discussions went beyond inspection, the Soviets might not win at negotiation, but “they could win in Congress.” Gordon Gray, the president’s national security assistant, went so far as to state that “if the talks go beyond questions of observation and inspection, the USSR will try to talk about banning nuclear weapons and eliminating foreign bases.” Defense, somewhat obsessed with the vulnerability of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), had recently christened the expensive Polaris submarine program and initiated plans for Minuteman missile development. The Pentagon sought to smother any suggestion that these programs should be canceled.<sup>24</sup> The leaders of

22. Memorandum of conversation, 26 September 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/9-2658.

23. Memorandum of conversation, 3 September 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/9-358. Reports regarding the Surprise Attack Conference appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on seven occasions between October and December 1958. Many other prominent articles on the conference were published in the *New York Times* throughout the period.

24. At the technical conference on a possible nuclear test ban, in July and August 1958, the U.S. delegates agreed to an inspection system for verifying adherence to underground nuclear test restrictions. Later, when American scientists realized that the inspection scheme would not allow effective distinction between earthquakes and underground nuclear explosions of 20 kilotons or less, the Eisenhower administration encountered public difficulties backing away from its previous



President Dwight D. Eisenhower converses with Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy. Unlike officials in the State Department, McElroy and others in the Department of Defense wanted technical discussions rather than general arms limitation talks during the Surprise Attack Conference. Courtesy Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

America's armed forces did not ignore the State Department's worries about Soviet missile development but instead argued for a U.S. buildup in place of efforts at missile control.

On 30 September, Killian pressed Eisenhower to resolve the differences between State and Defense. Until this time the president had remained largely a spectator to a deep interdepartmental disagreement regarding arms control strategy. In spite of Killian's proddings, Eisenhower failed to arbitrate between the contending positions.<sup>25</sup> Through the month of October the Defense view-

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arrangement. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind*, 225–31, 241–61; interview with Henry Rowen, 19 January 1994, Stanford, California. See also Minshull's discussion of the JCS position on the Surprise Attack Conference in "Memorandum for Dr. Killian," 23 September 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 8, folder: Disarmament – Surprise Attack [July 1958–April 1959]. Gordon Gray's comments can be found in memorandum of conversation, 26 September 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/9-2658. For a discussion of general Defense Department concerns during this period see Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 155–73, 233–38.

25. Andrew Goodpaster, the commander in chief's close aide, summarized Eisenhower's response to Killian's proddings: "The president thought the first step is to determine what are the fields or areas wherein by certain actions we could limit or eliminate the danger of surprise attack. Then, what are the means of doing this, i.e., through observation or inspection; then what programs should be carried out to establish these means; then finally in what areas or in what respects could

point began to gain credence within the administration, largely because it represented the least common ground among the opposed positions. Both Defense and State agreed on the need for superpower inspection; State wanted more, but for the sake of bureaucratic agreement the department realized it would have to settle for less. The president had the power to redirect this flow of administration thought from the most ambitious proposals to the most shallow points of agreement, but he did not exercise it.

The Interagency Working Group apparently tried one last time, in early October, to broaden the scope of American proposals. The analysts advocated three aims for U.S. arms control efforts at the Surprise Attack Conference. First, the Interagency Group report argued that the United States should pursue limited zones of inspection, especially in the Middle East, to reduce the risks of local attacks threatening superpower interests. Second, acknowledging that the Soviets probably would not accept unlimited inspections of their territory, and fearing that elaborate inspection schemes could produce a false sense of security, the analysts advocated technical discussions of moderate reciprocal inspection schemes (for example, placement of inspectors at missile bases) that could enhance security and provide valuable experience for later agreements. Third, the Interagency Group counseled the administration to create a framework for mutual missile and bomber limitations. "We should stress the urgency of action," in the words of the State Department summary, "pointing out that the passage of time complicates the inspection problem and allows the further proliferation of a highly volatile weapons system, whose very existence increases the risk of accidental war."<sup>26</sup>

The logical and impassioned arguments of the Interagency Working Group fell on deaf ears in the White House. Unable to reach a consensus within the administration on any measures beyond reciprocal superpower inspections, the Committee of Three (Killian, Dulles, and McElroy) wrote a draft on 14 October of "Objectives and Terms of Reference for the U.S. Delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference." The document charged the American delegation to assess the prospects of Soviet-U.S. discussions on the technical requirements of inspection, examine specific Soviet concerns about surprise attack, and deter-

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these measures be expected to be effective. Dr. Killian concluded by saying that the president may have to decide, before the matter is resolved, as to whether to include limitation of arms and inspection of such limitation in the Surprise Attack proposal." "Memorandum of Conference with the President, September 30, 1958," 2 October 1958, Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary Series, Administration Subseries, box 36, folder: Staff Memos September 1958.

26. Policy Planning Staff memorandum, "U.S.-Soviet Surprise Attack Discussions," written by Henry Owen, 6 October 1958, RG 59, Policy Planning Staff, 1957-61, State Department Lot File 67D548, box 125, Atomic Energy - Armaments. The cover sheet for the memorandum reveals that Gerard Smith, then Dulles's assistant for arms control matters, received this staff summary report. One can safely assume, from Killian's close relationship with Eisenhower, that the president received either the full text or a summary of this last interagency report as well. I thank the anonymous reviewer from *Diplomatic History* for providing me with a photocopy of this document.



mine which first-step measures might begin the process of opening the Soviet bloc. The committee added that “the U.S. delegation will not be permitted to make any political commitments on behalf of the U.S. Government, and should restrict its discussions to technical–military factors.”<sup>27</sup> In this draft report Killian apparently conceded to Defense’s demand for a strict adherence to technical discussions of inspection at the conference. Dulles seemed to sympathize with the Defense viewpoint, not the position of others in the State Department at this time.

On 22 October the Committee of Three, with Herter sitting in for Dulles as acting secretary of state, approved a final statement of “Objectives and Terms of Reference for the Surprise Attack Conference.” The statement did not differ from the draft in its narrow focus on technical discussions of an inspection regime. The authors forwarded the paper to William C. Foster, the chairman of the U.S. delegation to the conference. Foster, upon receipt of the statement from the Committee of Three, organized working groups that became the foundation for America’s proposals in Geneva. Foster created five sections to examine the following technical concerns: instruments of surprise attack, instruments of detection, communications, control systems, and strategic implications.<sup>28</sup>

Whether Eisenhower personally dictated the terms of reference for the U.S. delegation is unclear from the available documents. On 24 October he intimated that the conference ought to limit its discussions to inspection measures. The president appeared to believe that, in the long run, the United States should consider discussions beyond strict technical proposals only if the Soviets displayed a serious desire for peace and agreement.<sup>29</sup> Moscow could fulfill this criterion by accepting American proposals for greater openness.

The president’s position raises two questions. First, why did he wait so long to side with Defense, and why are there no records of an authoritative statement on his part? Throughout the conference preparations, the president seemed to hedge his position in the NSC and private meetings, allowing debate to continue and devolve to the least common ground for the sake of interdepartmental agreement alone. Charles Appleby, Jr., in his detailed dissertation, “Eisenhower and Arms Control” (1987), describes the president’s stated incli-

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27. “Draft Objectives and Terms of Reference for the U.S. Delegation to Technical-Military Talks on Surprise Attack Safeguards,” 14 October 1958, White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, NSC Series, Briefing Notes Subseries, box 16, folder: Surprise Attack Negotiations 1958, Eisenhower Library.

28. Memorandum from William C. Foster to the secretary of state, 31 October 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/10-3158.

29. Appleby cites a memorandum of conversation with the president, dated 25 October 1958, from the Records of the Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs at the Eisenhower Library. Appleby, “Eisenhower and Arms Control,” 293. I could not find this particular document in the archive. Assuming this conversation did indeed take place, contextual evidence indicates that Eisenhower made cryptic comments rather than a clear, authoritative statement on the scope of American activities at the Surprise Attack Conference. See note 30.

nation on 24 October to limit the conference to inspection alone. According to Appleby, in a meeting with his special assistant for national security affairs, Gordon Gray, Eisenhower narrowed the scope of the conference to technical matters in order to overcome the “deep divisions” within the administration.<sup>30</sup> This is more the picture of a confused and reactive chief executive than the portrait of “hidden hand” leadership. The dearth of a clear, authoritative, and unequivocal presidential decision on the terms of reference for the U.S. delegation at the Surprise Attack Conference corroborates the unmistakable impression, from reading the declassified record, that Eisenhower provided passive and ambivalent oversight for arms control deliberations in late 1958.

Second, one must ask why the president, committed to arms reductions in the long run, did not seek to broaden the scope of the conference, as the Interagency Working Group and members of the State Department implored. Here it appears that Eisenhower believed, at least in part, that the technology of inspection alone could provide a basis for arms control deliberations and agreement. The president proposed the narrow framework for the conference in the first place, sincerely hoping that it would accomplish something of value. Eisenhower’s failure to push for anything beyond technical deliberations in Geneva reveals his own mistaken assumption that America could formulate a technological solution to the arms race. Subsequent events would prove the hero of one war tragically misguided in this new battle.

While hopeful about the conference, American representatives lacked adequate preparation. The administration only approved the final objectives and terms of reference for the U.S. delegation on 22 October, nineteen days before the first meeting in Geneva. American planning suffered from poor organization and insufficient coordination. State and Defense had very general ideas about what they wanted to do, but the departments failed to provide the resources, thoughtfulness, and guidance required for the detailed, technical analyses the United States would carry to Geneva.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Appleby, “Eisenhower and Arms Control,” 293. It appears that Gordon Gray himself did not believe that Eisenhower made a decisive decision on 24 October. In a telephone conversation after the morning Eisenhower-Gray meeting, Gray recounted to Herter that he had told the president “nothing in the surprise attack instructions . . . would require his [Eisenhower’s] making a decision at this time.” Gray did not add, in his recounting for Herter, that the president disagreed or made a decision anyway. Instead, Gray left the distinct impression that Eisenhower followed the advice of his national security assistant and did not make an authoritative decision. Record of telephone conversation, 24 October 1958, Christian A. Herter Papers, box 10, folder: Presidential Telephone Calls, Eisenhower Library.

31. On 7 October V. H. B. Macklen of the British Ministry of Defense wrote a letter to H. C. Hainworth of the Foreign Office, recounting a discussion Macklen had with George Kistiakowsky and William Minshull (PSAC). Macklen writes that the two Americans admitted that, because of time constraints, the U.S. preparatory committees for the conference failed to assess all issues related to surprise attack. Macklen to Hainworth, 7 October 1958, FO 371, 132676 IAD III/21, Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, England (hereafter PRO). After the adjournment of the Surprise Attack Conference, Jerome Wiesner, who served as staff director in Geneva, wrote that the United States “went to the conference knowing full well that it was ill-prepared.” Jerome Bert Wiesner, *Where Science and Politics Meet* (New York, 1965), 184.

Insufficient day-to-day leadership compounded American difficulties with conference preparations. After the dissolution of Harold Stassen's office in February 1958 (the former Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Disarmament), State acquired oversight for all American arms control initiatives. Philip Farley, with the help of a very small staff, managed the State Department effort. In late 1958 he focused his energies on the more promising test ban negotiations. One of Farley's assistants, Lawrence Weiler, received daily oversight responsibilities for the Surprise Attack Conference. Weiler had some previous experience with arms control negotiations, but he was less knowledgeable than Farley, and he became virtually the only person in State with a daily interest in the conference preparations. As a result, the American delegation suffered, before and during the conference, from "so little guidance that the value of many possible measures could not be properly assessed."<sup>32</sup>

The Eisenhower administration also encountered difficulty appointing a leader for its delegation. William C. Foster, who became chairman on 26 September, was the third man offered the job. Retired generals John E. Hull and Alfred Gruenther had both taken on the job, and then, citing the complexity of the undertaking, resigned soon thereafter.<sup>33</sup> Foster, unlike his two predecessors, was not a former general, but he had a distinguished record in business and government. He had served as one of the acting codirectors of the Gaither Committee, which in 1957 spoke in apocalyptic terms of a growing Soviet threat. While this experience ingratiated Foster with critics of disarmament, the new chairman's résumé lacked direct exposure to arms control deliberations. Most importantly, due to the prior resignations, Foster brought his inexperienced outlook to the directorship of the U.S. delegation with only six weeks remaining before the actual conference. Foster's task would have been extremely difficult for someone with more experience, a stronger organizational support group, and a greater amount of time; the realities of Foster's circumstance made effective, complete deliberations on the issue of surprise attack nearly impossible.

During the conference preparations, Foster relied on two individuals to coordinate scientific and military input. George Kistiakowsky, who probably knew more about the issues than anyone else, served as Foster's chief science adviser. On 7 October, Gen. Otto P. Weyland replaced Gen. James H. Doolittle, who initially worked as the chief military adviser for American preparations.<sup>34</sup>

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32. Wiesner, *Where Science and Politics Meet*, 185; telephone interview with Philip Farley, 7 October 1993.

33. General Hull was appointed in August and resigned on 3 September. General Gruenther was appointed on 4 September and resigned on 23 September. The evidence surrounding the resignations of Hull and Gruenther, while sparse, seems to indicate that the two men found the work of the American delegation tedious, frustrating, and fated for failure at the conference table. See memorandum from Max V. Krebs to Mr. Greene, 2 September 1958, Christian A. Herter Papers, box 5, file: [Chronological File] September, 1958 (3), Eisenhower Library.

34. General Doolittle resigned from the American delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference on 26 September 1958. He cited the need for a more influential military figure in the



President Eisenhower meets with delegation leaders (left to right) Gen. Otto P. Weyland, Dr. George B. Kistiakowsky, and William C. Foster on 5 November 1958 to discuss the American position for the Surprise Attack Conference. Foster headed the U.S. delegation, Kistiakowsky was his chief science adviser, and Weyland served as chief military adviser. Courtesy Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

Kistiakowsky and Weyland both served with Foster as “expert” delegates and assistants to the U.S. chairman at the Surprise Attack Conference.

Foster, Kistiakowsky, and Weyland assembled a group of approximately one hundred scientists, military personnel, and strategy specialists (often RAND fellows) to prepare for the conference. A very small number of the individuals within this cohort came from the State Department. The administration, because of the conference’s official technical nature, did not see much need for diplomatic or political advice in Geneva. Moreover, from the preceding months and years of interdepartmental debate, one can surmise that the personnel within the State Department lacked deep enthusiasm for the terms of American activity. Fifty individuals from the original American preparatory group, including Foster, Kistiakowsky, and Weyland, attended the conference, bringing an amazing store of brainpower to the meetings. Unfortunately, the fifty Americans in Geneva proved ill-prepared for arms control negotiations. Lawrence Weiler explains, “the trouble was we did not have a clear idea of what

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delegation. Telephone calls, 26 September 1958, Herter Papers, box 11, folder: CAH Telephone Calls 7/1/58–9/30/58 (1).

the conference was supposed to do beyond discussing all the technical data and hoping the Soviets would agree that some form of verification of forces and activity had value in its own right; mind you we never had a verification proposal itself to suggest.”<sup>35</sup>

The issues intimately related to surprise attack proved too complex for an ostensibly apolitical approach focused on inspection. The administration, however, would not abandon this framework. Consequently, following a very short period of mostly ad hoc preparations, the U.S. delegation arrived in Geneva with clear guidelines but without a viable proposal. America’s self-defeating activities evolved from the administration’s impractical separation of technical proposals from overt political considerations, the disorganization of government activities related to the issue, and the divergent interests of various bureaucratic offices. Eisenhower sent some of the best and brightest Americans to Geneva in November 1958, searching for an agreement on superpower inspection. These learned men, however, really did not know where to begin.

A ten-nation conference between East and West posed particular problems for American leaders and negotiators. Unlike the Warsaw Pact, which the Soviet Union effectively controlled (at least in most circumstances during the first postwar decades), the states in the Western alliance generally had more nationalistic, free-thinking leaders than those in the East. During crises and periods when other issues of immediate security became salient, American hegemony often proved quite powerful in the West. The more detailed and less immediate issues, however, like arms control deliberations, exasperated U.S. attempts to maintain allied unity. Unsurprisingly, during the preparations for the Surprise Attack Conference, the Americans and the British grew frustrated and irritated with what they saw as French intransigence.

French president Charles de Gaulle apparently did not have much direct input in the deliberations of the newly formed Fifth Republic with regard to the Surprise Attack Conference. De Gaulle’s suspicions of the United States, however, clearly dominated French thinking. Paris vehemently objected to many elements of America’s approach to arms control, and the Quai d’Orsay looked skeptically on the Surprise Attack Conference as a whole. As de Gaulle’s refusal to sign the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963 later illustrated, France chronically balked at submitting to superpower leadership in the area of military security. The French worked to limit what they perceived as the liabilities of the Surprise Attack Conference.<sup>36</sup>

Paris expressed opposition to the bipolar structure (“2 sides”) of the conference – “West” versus “East.” The French Foreign Ministry argued that the individuals at the conference should represent particular states, not one alliance

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35. Letter to author from Lawrence Weiler, 13 October 1993; “Official Report of the United States Delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference,” William C. Foster Papers, box 11, folder 8, George C. Marshall Research Foundation, Lexington, Virginia.

36. Ian N. Gibson, “Six Futile Weeks? The 1958 Surprise Attack Conference” (M.A. thesis, University of Oxford, 1993), 56.

or the other. Pierre Pelen, a counselor to the French embassy in Washington, stated that each government had specific concerns about surprise attack and a “separate national character” that should be recognized during deliberations.<sup>37</sup> De Gaulle’s government apparently feared that the Surprise Attack Conference would set a precedent for American domination of French security interests.

In terms of surprise attack per se, the French adamantly opposed any limited inspection zones in Europe (for example, the American plan for inspection zones in the Arctic Circle and the Soviet Rapacki plan for a nuclear-free Central Europe). Paris feared that isolated inspection zones would create illusions of security in Europe and prompt the United States to remove nuclear weapons from specific areas, as the Rapacki plan proposed. The French objected to arms control proposals that would motivate the United States to relax an already questionable nuclear commitment. Instead of limited inspection zones, the French Foreign Ministry argued that the discussions in Geneva should focus on a global inspection scheme, including the Soviet Union, the United States, Europe, and most of the oceans in the Northern Hemisphere. This arrangement would allow for the acquisition of real information on the deployments and intentions of the Soviet Union, nuclear and conventional, while a limited European inspection zone would not. If negotiators could not reach agreement on a global inspection regime, the French argued for abstract discussion at the conference, avoiding a particular area of coverage.<sup>38</sup>

The French objections did not smother U.S. efforts, but the intransigence of Paris did complicate the work of the Americans, the British, and presumably the Canadians and the Italians as well. Eisenhower had dealt with de Gaulle during World War II, and, like Churchill and Roosevelt, he harbored little affection for the former French general.<sup>39</sup> America and Britain believed that Paris’s opposition could ruin the conference. French outbursts in Geneva would create an image of Western fragmentation and weakness that the Soviets might seek to exploit. The United States, consequently, sought to craft a substantive compromise with the French – an arrangement that would alter U.S. plans but maintain unity in Geneva.

The Eisenhower administration agreed to renounce any limited European inspection zone. Washington’s abandonment of half measures represented a compromise with the French and a bow to perceived vital interests in central

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37. Memorandum of conversation, 18 July 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/7-1858; memorandum of conversation, 22 September 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/9-2258.

38. Memorandum of conversation, 24 April 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/4-2458; memorandum of conversation, 10 July 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/7-1058; memorandum of conversation, 18 July 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/7-1858; memorandum of conversation, 30 September 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/9-3058; FO tel. 7246 to Washington, 15 October 1958, FO 371, 132677; Gibson, “Six Futile Weeks?” 48. See my discussion of the Rapacki Plan later in this article.

39. In December 1958, Eisenhower warned that “de Gaulle is capable of the most extraordinary actions . . . watch out for him.” Eisenhower told Dulles that “it does not seem that our friend should cease insisting upon attempting to control the whole world . . . even before he had gotten France itself in good order.” Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 502.



Europe. America's decision to focus solely on global inspection schemes, however, added to the already significant rigidity of the allied approach to Geneva, further narrowing options at the conference. The East and the West might have had more success reaching agreement on some limited trial zone of inspection than on an ambitious global system. A possible basis for a *modus vivendi* with the Soviets was lost largely, but not entirely, because of French pressure.

Although America renounced limited inspection proposals, the Eisenhower administration did not appease French desires for multilateral representation in Geneva. The United States argued, with strong British support, that a bipolar approach – where delegates would label themselves “experts” without explicit national affiliations – was more conducive to technical deliberations. According to Washington, identification of individuals by their state of origin would raise additional political issues, like recognition of the “satellite” states, which the conference did not intend to address.

The French did not articulate the only objections within the alliance to American plans at the conference. Paris's words of dissent, however, proved loudest of all. The Americans and the British differed on a number of small issues, but ultimately Washington and London agreed on their basic approach to the conference. While the United States, because of its vastly superior technical staff, dominated the details of allied work, the structure of alliance politics prohibited exclusive American authorship of Western proposals. The allied steering committee held long, tedious meetings that did not affect many details in American working papers. These intra-alliance meetings did, nonetheless, prevent the American delegation from changing its approach or offering new proposals at the conference. The institutional framework designed for allied work at the Surprise Attack Conference, like other American concessions to Western counterparts, restricted the flexibility of the U.S. effort. As the internal debate about arms control policy in Washington reduced the American position to the lowest common denominator, allied interactions further constrained the intellectual rigor and creativity of Western positions.<sup>40</sup> Only strong leadership, absent from the U.S. delegation before the Surprise Attack Conference, might have restored dynamism to allied arms control efforts.

Lacking sufficient direction and clarity of purpose, deliberations at the Surprise Attack Conference, from the very first session, presented an all-too-familiar scenario of Cold War deadlock. The Eastern and Western delegations

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40. Hugh T. Morgan, a first secretary in the British Foreign Office, wrote that allied proposals at the Surprise Attack Conference were reduced “to the lowest common factor between the five delegations.” Minute by H. T. Morgan, 29 December 1958, FO 371, 132683. George Kistiakowsky, reporting from Geneva to Killian in Washington, lamented that “[h]aving four allies on our side, each pulling in a different direction, or not even knowing in which direction to pull and therefore objecting to everything, isn't making my life any easier.” Kistiakowsky to Killian, 20 November 1958, Record Group 359, White House Office of Science and Technology, box 79, folder: Disarmament – N/T Surprise Attack – Misc., National Archives. I thank the anonymous reviewer from *Diplomatic History* for this citation.

apparently assembled for entirely different conferences.<sup>41</sup> A comparison of Foster with Soviet chairman Vasily Kuznetsov accurately illustrates the salient differences in personnel. Unlike Foster, whose previous work had focused on technical capabilities and bureaucratic administration, not diplomatic issues, Kuznetsov, the first deputy foreign minister of the Soviet Union, had considerable experience with superpower negotiations. An engineer by training, Kuznetsov became one of post-Stalinist Russia's leading diplomats after entering the Foreign Ministry in 1953 and serving as the Soviet representative to the United Nations in the mid-1950s. While Foster was suited for a scientific or military conference, Kuznetsov arrived in Geneva for political negotiations. In contrast to the well-respected Soviet chairman, the highest-ranking U.S. State Department official at the conference, Julius Holmes, was not even an assistant secretary.

Forty-five individuals composed the Eastern delegation of experts, twenty-two of whom came from diplomatic offices and twenty-three from military departments; the representatives from the East divided almost evenly among diplomats and generals. Conspicuously, scientists did not appear in the delegation. Three deputy foreign ministers – Vasily Kuznetsov (Soviet Union), Marjan Naszkowski (Albania), and Jiri Hajek (Czechoslovakia) – composed the highest-ranking cohort of the Eastern representatives.

The participants from the West made up a much larger delegation, which tilted far more toward military and scientific interests. The roster of one hundred Western experts included twenty diplomats, sixty military leaders, and twenty scientists.<sup>42</sup> Together, military-scientific interests dominated the deliberations of the allies. A small cadre of inexperienced, low-level diplomats sat in the back seat, so to speak, for the West.

The different composition of the Eastern and Western delegations indicates that the conference had, in reality, very little promise from the beginning. When Foster and others told Kuznetsov that they were not prepared to address political issues, they were telling the truth. Similarly, when the Western experts tabled various technical papers at the conference, the Eastern representatives proved ill-prepared to assess and respond to the scientific details of inspection and warning. The environment and institutions of the Surprise Attack Conference placed the East and the West in “a very peculiar situation which resemble[d],” in George Kistiakowsky's words, “two railroad trains going on separate tracks.”<sup>43</sup>

While the United States and the allies at the conference for the most part committed themselves to inspection as a technological solution to the anxieties of the arms race, Kuznetsov and other Eastern diplomats traveled to Geneva to

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41. Gibson, “Six Futile Weeks?” 66.

42. “List of Members of Delegations to the Conference,” FO 371, 132679.

43. Kistiakowsky to Killian, 20 November 1958, RG 359, White House Office of Science and Technology, box 79, folder: Disarmament – N/T Surprise Attack – Misc.

secure political ends for the Warsaw Pact. It appears that the Soviets, who had pulled out of the United Nations Disarmament Subcommittee in September 1957, hoped to make the ten-nation conference into a binding substitute where the East would have negotiating parity with the West. In the UN Disarmament Subcommittee the Soviets had been outnumbered by the four Western states.<sup>44</sup>

The first week of the Surprise Attack Conference reflected an ill-fated attempt by the two sides to hammer out a *modus operandi*. At the first session in Geneva, Kuznetsov proposed that the conference should submit practical recommendations to participating governments in its final report. The Soviet leader argued that while the conference had not been charged to make binding decisions for the various governments, the meetings should produce substantive recommendations for the respective leaderships. In one of many private meetings between the Soviet and American chairmen, Foster pointed out, contrary to Kuznetsov's arguments, that the delegates at the conference had no authority to make binding agreements. The conference, according to Foster, could only succeed if the experts focused solely on a technical study, one that avoided the political taboos of specific recommendations.<sup>45</sup>

This debate between Kuznetsov and Foster expressed itself at the conference table in the text of contradictory agendas. Bernhard Bechhoefer, in a Brookings Institution study of 1961, argued that "the conflict between the two agenda [was] so great that it is difficult to understand how they could have been drafted for the same conference." The Western agenda focused on four exclusively technical points: "the identification of the instruments of surprise attack"; "the examination of the means and techniques of observation and inspection"; "the application of inspection and observation techniques to the problem of surprise attack"; and "the examination of the general technical characteristics of reliable inspection systems." The Eastern participants, however, devoted their conference plan to clearly non-technical, but highly political issues: "the exchange of opinions on practical steps that can be taken now with a view to preventing the danger of a surprise attack and on partial disarmament measures to be carried out in conjunction with these steps"; "the consideration of the tasks of ground control posts and aerial photography"; and "the preparation of the experts' report to the governments of the countries represented at this conference, containing conclusions and recommendations on measures for prevention of a surprise attack in conjunction with certain measures regarding disarmament." Only the second point of the Eastern agenda seemed to resemble the technical approach of the West. Neither side would accept any points from the other's agenda. Consequently, and fatefully for the next five weeks, the participants

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44. Morgan to Con D. W. O'Neill, 18 November 1958, FO 371 132680; Gibson, "Six Futile Weeks?" 76. The four Western states on the UN Disarmament Subcommittee, with the Soviet Union, were the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and France.

45. Memorandum of conversation Foster, Kuznetsov, et al., 10 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11.

never adopted an official negotiating plan. The West unilaterally adopted its own agenda, and the East apparently did the same.<sup>46</sup>

In the first week the conference devoted itself to semantic arguments that represented a profound conflict of ideas, evident since Eisenhower's letter of 12 January. The two sides disagreed not only on the substance of the issues, but also on basic methodology. Without an agreed framework for discussions, "the Western governments and the Soviet bloc each presented their separate positions with little attempt to reconcile them."<sup>47</sup>

The record of the next five weeks, however, provides insight into the thinking of the participants, especially the United States. The two sides spoke at length about their goals and perceptions. The evidence indicates that the two sides listened carefully and took each other seriously. The daily meetings in Geneva continued, nevertheless, while East and West failed to respond to the substance of each side's arguments. The real drama found its voice not in the exchanges over the table, but in the subtleties and subtexts of various discussions.

The divergent historical memories of the superpowers created the basic conflict of purposes at the conference. As a consequence of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union held very different images of how the next armed conflict would be fought. Military planners in the two states worried about different weapons and borders and, ultimately, different sources of surprise attack.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950, the allies began seriously to consider the creation of a West German army, the Bundeswehr, which became a reality by the middle of the decade. Eisenhower also contemplated giving launch control of nuclear warheads, under an allied sharing scheme, to the European continental states, including West Germany.<sup>48</sup> The creation of the Bundeswehr, combined with limited discussion of nuclear sharing, apparently prompted feelings of déjà vu within the Soviet leadership. In October 1957 the Polish foreign minister, Adam Rapacki, presented a plan to the United Nations for recognition of two separate German states and an

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46. Bernhard G. Bechhoefer, *Postwar Negotiations for Arms Control* (Washington, 1961), 470. On 17 November the West added a fifth point to its agenda: "a report to governments." "Revised plan of work submitted by the Western experts," 17 November 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10. For the proposed Eastern agenda see "Draft Agenda: proposal submitted by the delegations of the USSR, Albania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania," 11 November 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10. See also Gibson, "Six Futile Weeks?" 77.

47. Bechhoefer, *Postwar Negotiations for Arms Control*, 470. Kistiakowsky expressed frustration at the presence of irreconcilable agendas. "Unless there is a shift in position of one of the two sides, no technical discussions could ever develop in this conference. Had we had the freedom which was successfully objected to, it would have been possible to fight on another ground and thus possibly accomplish something useful." Kistiakowsky to Killian, 20 November 1958, RG 359, White House Office of Science and Technology, box 79, folder: Disarmament - N/T Surprise Attack - Misc. For reference to Eisenhower's 12 January letter see note 9.

48. Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, 1991), 169-91. While the United States never provided the Western European states with authorization to fire American nuclear warheads unilaterally, Washington did give its allies control over delivery vehicles on their territory.

atom-free zone in Central Europe. The plan, which ostensibly intended to freeze the status quo in the region, was rejected by the United States. On 4 November 1958 the East proposed a revised Rapacki plan, which the West declined again.

On 10 November, in a speech at the Polish-Soviet friendship meeting that coincided with the first day of the Surprise Attack Conference, Khrushchev vowed to “normalize” Central Europe and to terminate the allied occupation of West Berlin by providing the East German government with control over ground and air access to the divided city. On 27 November, the Soviet premier threatened to give East Germany “its sovereignty on land, water, and in the air” if the allies did not negotiate an end to their occupation within six months.<sup>49</sup> In a sense, Khrushchev’s threats became the first and most critical Soviet act of the Surprise Attack Conference. The Kremlin appeared to believe that a war would ignite, in all likelihood, with a ground attack or some other provocative action from a revanchist German military, emboldened by its possession of nuclear weapons. In Geneva, the Soviets primarily sought to eliminate the weapons that would allow for a new, possibly more lethal, Operation Barbarossa. The leaders in Moscow were not as concerned about surprise as they were about German militarism.<sup>50</sup>

The Eastern representatives at the conference continuously alluded to the blitzkrieg and the “actual practice” of German wartime attacks – a phrase that represented an assertion of innate German aggressiveness. On 28 November, the day after Khrushchev’s ultimatum, the East submitted a proposal for the removal of nuclear weapons from the territory of Germany and for the establishment of an international inspection regime in the area. Moscow explicitly stated its fears of German militarism: “[The] policy adopted by the NATO powers which is directed toward stationing nuclear and rocket weapons in European states constitutes particular danger to peace in Europe. . . . [The] most serious danger to [the] peoples of European countries is [the] fact that leading NATO powers have adopted [a] policy of equipping armed forces of

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49. William Burr, “Avoiding the Slippery Slope: The Eisenhower Administration and the Berlin Crisis, November 1958–January 1959,” *Diplomatic History* 18 (Spring 1994): 177, 192; “Address by the Chairman Khrushchev,” *Documents on Germany, 1944–1985* (Washington, 1985), 542–46, 552–59.

50. R. Craig Nation, in his history of Soviet security policy, identifies the middle and late 1950s as a period of transition in Moscow’s military doctrine. Advances in the long-range striking capability, accuracy, speed, and fire power of American nuclear forces led prominent Soviet military thinkers, like Nikolai Talenskii and Vasilii Sokolovskii, to place newfound emphasis on strategic nuclear weapons (aircraft and rockets) and the importance of surprise in modern warfare. While these developments in Soviet military doctrine merit notice, the author carefully explains that until the middle of the next decade, Moscow focused its strategic worries most closely on the European continent. Immediately following the official admittance of West Germany into NATO on 9 May 1955, the author points out that Moscow created the Warsaw Pact as “the keystone of the [*sic*] Moscow’s security posture in Europe” (p. 219). “During the early 1960s the Soviets devoted most of their energy to the development of the SS-4 and SS-5 intermediate range ballistic missiles, primarily relevant to the European theater where the real focus of Soviet military strategy continued to lie” (p. 216). R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy* (Ithaca, 1992), 202–44.

the Federal Republic of Germany where *revanch* forces are increasingly raising heads and breeding militar[ily] aggressive plans with regard to neighbors." Secretary Dulles wrote to the American delegation in Geneva on that same day, stating that the East "intended to force settlement of [the] German question along lines desired by [the] Soviets."<sup>51</sup>

The two principal papers submitted by the East at the conference called for troop and weapons reductions in Central Europe and the establishment of an inspection zone in the region that ground control posts and aerial photography would enforce. The Soviet plans included other inspection zones covering parts of the United States, Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Baghdad Pact. These proposals, however, included more of the critical military points in the West than in the East. The Soviets linked all of their inspection schemes to disarmament in Central Europe. Moscow's delegates claimed, in response to American references to missile technology, that ICBMs were not critical to a discussion of surprise attack. For the East, worries of war centered on land forces. The Soviets apparently believed that World War III would not come from the sky but ultimately from the troop concentrations and nuclear warheads around the East-West border.<sup>52</sup>

For Foster, Kistiakowsky, Weyland, and the rest of America's contingent, the Pearl Harbor analogy of a nuclear "bolt from the blue" underpinned all deliberations. The Western agenda and technical papers assumed that a surprise attack would come without expectation or provocation, and that it would be an air operation (that is, missiles or long-range aircraft). In the twelve-page paper on the instruments of surprise attack, submitted by the West on 18 November, the first eleven pages outlined forms of missiles and aircraft

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51. Geneva tel. to the secretary of state, 13 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1358; Geneva tel. to the secretary of state, 4 December 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/12-458; Geneva tel. to the secretary of state, 28 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11 (emphasis in original); Department of State tel. to the American consul general in Geneva, 28 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-2858.

52. "Proposal regarding the establishment of ground control posts, the taking of aerial photographs and the putting into operation simultaneously of a number of disarmament measures to reduce the danger of surprise attack: submitted by the Delegations of Albania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," 5 December 1958, and "Proposal regarding the tasks and functions of ground control posts and aerial inspection: submitted by the delegations of Albania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, and the USSR," 12 December 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10. Trachtenberg argues that the Eisenhower administration neglected Soviet worries about nuclear weapons in Germany because "the Soviets, in diplomatic contacts, did not stress the issue nearly as much as one might have expected." Trachtenberg's references are to meetings between Khrushchev and Richard Nixon, Averell Harriman, and Llewelyn Thompson in 1959. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, 207. Trachtenberg, however, neglects the Rapacki proposals of 1957-58 and the various Eastern initiatives at the Surprise Attack Conference. In all of these cases the Eastern bloc unmistakably stressed worries of German militarism and the instabilities that nuclear weapons would create in Central Europe. The Eisenhower administration understood the Soviet position. The United States rejected the Eastern proposals because the administration desired an arrangement for superpower inspection in Central Europe and elsewhere that did not include immediate arms reductions. The Soviets would only accept superpower inspection in Central Europe if accompanied by a nuclear disarmament agreement in the region.



launched from land and sea. Only on the final page of the document did the West discuss troop-carrier aircraft, armored fighting vehicles, and mobile artillery. The Western focus on missiles and aircraft created a demand for a rigorous, ambitious inspection system that integrated ground, air, and satellite reconnaissance in covering a very large area of land. When the East argued that inspection of conventional maneuvers and preparations should be enough to prevent fears of surprise attack, the West responded that “[Soviet] bloc proposals with restriction of measures to narrow regions would leave missiles and aircraft uncovered and hence would . . . not lessen [the] danger of [a] surprise attack.” Foster argued at the conference that the great destructiveness of modern weapons allowed the aggressor to delay traditional conventional mobilization until after striking the first nuclear blow.<sup>53</sup>

A degree of structural determinism existed, then, in the conflict between the two sides at the Surprise Attack Conference. The Soviet Union was a traditional land power, and it had less than two decades earlier suffered a devastating and nearly fatal ground attack. For the second time in less than thirty years, German divisions roared through the East. The Soviets feared they would have to fight a third war along these lines. This time, however, armed conflict would include unthinkable weapons of mass destruction.

America and Britain, on the other hand, were never primarily land powers but maritime states, surrounded by splendid ocean buffers. Both had fought World War II largely at sea and in the air, with far fewer commitments of ground troops than the Soviet Union. Consequently, when the Americans and the British thought about a next war, missiles and long-range aircraft seemed more menacing than battalions in Central Europe. Strategic thinkers in the United States rarely uttered apocalyptic words about a “conventional force gap,” though one certainly existed throughout the entire Cold War. Instead, many of the Americans in Geneva, like William C. Foster, worried about a “bomber gap” and a “missile gap” before the first meetings of the conference. Fundamentally, the salient ideological differences between the East and the West at the Surprise Attack Conference had little to do with capitalism and communism, and much more to do with geography and memories of the preceding wars.

The actions of the Eastern representatives in Geneva revealed close attention to the unfolding events in Berlin, in particular the crisis triggered by Khrushchev’s threats in November. Surprisingly, except for Dulles’s one oblique warning of Soviet pressures for settling the German question (28 November), concerns about the crisis do not appear in any of the declassified records of internal American and British deliberations at the conference. The

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53. Holst, “Strategic Arms Control and Stability,” 274; “Explanatory document of the first point of the proposed plan of work submitted by the Western experts: a survey of the relevant technical aspects of possible instruments of surprise attack as a prerequisite for examining means of detection and systems of inspection and control,” 18 November 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10; Geneva tel. to the secretary of state, 3 December 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/12-258; Geneva tel. to the secretary of state, 4 December 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/12-358.

urgency and anxiety of a crisis environment remained conspicuously absent from allied deliberations as a whole in Geneva. Certainly the Western representatives at Le Palais des Nations did not have responsibility for their governments' affairs related to the Berlin crisis. This observation notwithstanding, the fact that Western activities at the conference appeared unfazed by the contemporary circumstances in divided Germany indicates that the crisis did not send chills throughout all elements of the allied governments. William Burr provides convincing evidence of the risks and fears raised within the Eisenhower administration by Khrushchev's ultimatum. For the allied delegates at the Surprise Attack Conference, however, worries about Berlin appeared moderate, not catastrophic. History and geography produced divergent "mental maps," to use Alan Henrikson's term, for arms control analysts representing the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup>

The divergent historical memories and objectives of the superpowers immediately created a rift in the structure of the proposals emanating from both sides of the table. The Soviets argued that the United States, in its narrow focus on measures for inspection alone, sought, in Kuznetsov's words, to act like a physician who goes through an elaborate diagnosis, makes a thorough examination of irrelevant organs, and never actually implements a cure. The East proved unwilling throughout the conference to discuss inspection unless the delegates drew an explicit linkage to disarmament measures, especially in Central Europe.<sup>55</sup>

Kuznetsov focused negotiations in Geneva on a specific issue when he raised objections to American nuclear-armed training flights near Soviet airspace. The Strategic Air Command of the United States frequently flew bombers, with nuclear warheads, from airbases in Greenland and Europe over the Arctic Circle, close to the Soviet Union. These flights provided pilots with training and supported an airborne alert and retaliatory force prepared to strike Soviet targets. In April 1958 the Soviet Union asked the UN Security Council to call for a ban on these American aircraft flights. On 17 November 1958 the Soviet delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference made a similar proposal, which argued that "such flights can become the cause of a military conflict as a result of miscalculation, wrong interpretation of the other side's intentions and even technical error." This Soviet proposal, while it rehashed an old argument, carried a great deal of propaganda weight when leaked to the press. Foster immediately responded that, because of the political nature of U.S. training flights and the untruthfulness of Soviet accusations, political leaders, not

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54. Burr, "Avoiding the Slippery Slope," 177–205. According to Alan K. Henrikson, a decision maker formulates a "mental map" when he or she "acquires, codes, stores, recalls, reorganizes, and applies, in thought or in action, information about his or her large-scale geographical environment, in part or in its entirety." Alan K. Henrikson, "Mental Maps," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, ed. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (New York, 1991), 177–92.

55. Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 14 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1458; A. E. Davidson minute to C. D. W. O'Neill, 17 November 1958, FO 371, 132679.

scientific experts, should address the issue. In fact, Eisenhower, Dulles, and Henry Cabot Lodge, the American ambassador to the United Nations, had addressed this issue in public letters and speeches.<sup>56</sup>

Foster's dismissal of the nuclear training flight issue did not counteract the propaganda advantage derived from the Soviet proposal. America refused an apparently reasonable offer. Consequently, Foster alerted the State Department that a substantive response should be issued to improve the conference record for the West. On 20 November the Western delegation drafted a statement that minimized the danger of an accidental nuclear explosion from American training flights. On 21 November Gen. Otto P. Weyland, for the first time, read a speech to the conference, concluding that the U.S. command maintained "positive control" over its nuclear-armed aircraft, and that the risk of danger from an accidental dropping or crashing was very small. The Western delegation also submitted, on 24 November, a proposal for observation and inspection of long-range aircraft. This paper sought to illustrate that greater aerial and ground surveillance of aircraft, without a change in flight patterns, would decrease the threat of surprise attack.<sup>57</sup>

The contradictions between the Soviet proposal of 17 November and the Western paper of 24 November raise questions about the seriousness of the two sides throughout the entire conference enterprise. The Soviets recycled an old proposal that the West had rejected flatly in the near past. The United States hustled during the following week not to analyze or diligently consider the Soviet initiative, but to craft a response that would steal the limelight and public favor from the East. Neither side really could have believed that the other would accept its plan with regard to American nuclear training flights.

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56. "Draft recommendation regarding the undertaking by States of an obligation not to carry out flights of their aircraft with atomic and hydrogen weapons over the territories of other States and over open seas: Proposal submitted by the Delegation of the USSR," 17 November 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10; Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 17 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1758; Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 18 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1858; Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 18 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1958.

57. Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 20 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-2058; Department of State tel. to Geneva, 21 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-2158; "Explanatory document of the third point of the proposed plan of work submitted by the Western experts: an illustrative outline of possible systems for observation and inspection of long-range aircraft," 24 November 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 10; Weyland report to Nathan Twining (chairman of the JCS), 24 November 1958, RG 59, 700.5611/11-2458. Weyland informed Twining that "[m]y evaluation is that USSR absolutely convinced of efficacy of US air power, is scared of it, and probably feels they have no adequate counter at this time." Within the context of the conference, I believe Weyland misconstrued Soviet intentions. The Soviet proposal to limit American nuclear training flights seemed more an attempt to link inspection with restrictions on nuclear weapons deployments than an expression of fear regarding U.S. air power. American air forces, of course, did threaten Soviet security, but the nuclear training flight issue stood out for the Soviets because it provided an apparently reasonable platform from which to argue for nuclear disarmament, especially in Central Europe and the Arctic Circle. I thank the anonymous reviewer from *Diplomatic History* for the last document. Contrary to the arguments of the American delegation, Scott Sagan writes that nuclear training flights in the Arctic proved very dangerous. Sagan concludes, from empirical evidence and normal accidents theory, that the risk of serious accidents on nuclear-armed aircraft was not negligible. Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety* (Princeton, 1993), 156–203.

This cynicism, while justified, should not extend to the entire conference history. Both the Americans and the Soviets displayed a serious desire to obtain some sort of success in Geneva. Eisenhower, in spite of the American distrust of neutrals, tried to enlist Indian prime minister Jawarwahal Nehru's support in pushing the Soviets to agreement at the Surprise Attack Conference. Through a letter and the American embassy in New Delhi, Eisenhower conveyed a sense that these negotiations were very important, and he asked if Nehru could quietly use his influence with the Soviets. The American president's approach to the Indian prime minister was unsolicited, and it further engaged U.S. prestige with the activities of the conference. Eisenhower apparently entertained serious hopes of crafting an arrangement for superpower inspection that would reduce fears of surprise attack for both sides. Unfortunately, the president's leadership proved intermittent, muddled, and passive throughout most of the conference. Had Eisenhower exercised consistently (from July) the same activism he displayed in contacting Nehru during the first week of December, the United States might have presented more practical and productive positions in Geneva to a more favorable audience. Eisenhower was sincere in his desire to quell the arms race, but his policies and leadership failed to reassure the Soviets, exacerbating the Kremlin's insecurity instead.<sup>58</sup>

Khrushchev's personal thoughts regarding the Surprise Attack Conference are difficult to gauge. Kuznetsov, however, appeared quite sincere. During personal meetings between Foster and his counterpart, the American chairman remarked at the frankness, seriousness, and "bewilderment" of the Soviet deputy foreign minister. Kuznetsov appeared to be anxious, at least in part for reasons of personal ambition, to return to Moscow with something to show for his efforts.<sup>59</sup>

Foster's use of the term "bewilderment," while it might underestimate the intelligence and premeditation of the two sides, does touch on the sense of unfortunate misperception at the Surprise Attack Conference. Washington and Moscow seemed to think that their respective views on armaments policy and surprise attack would prove convincing for the other side. The superpowers were not surprised; yet each was caught off-balance when its counterpart brought proposals radically different in approach to the table.

After the adjournment of the conference on 18 December, the United States and Great Britain conducted serious examinations of the allied arms control effort. Both reviewed the events in Geneva and the prospects for future talks, with an altered framework, concerning surprise attack. The leadership of the

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58. New Delhi tel. to secretary of state, 2 December 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/12-158. Immerman provides the same criticism of Eisenhower's nuclear strategy in general. Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist," 341-42.

59. Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 18 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-1858; Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 22 November 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/11-2258. During a recent research trip to Moscow, I did not uncover any documentary evidence in the former Soviet Communist party archives regarding Khrushchev's feelings about the Surprise Attack Conference.

two nations realized that the gap between Western and Eastern objectives would sentence any continuation of the conference to further futility and frustration. In February 1959, when British prime minister Harold Macmillan visited the Soviet Union, Premier Khrushchev also displayed “no enthusiasm” for resuming the conference.<sup>60</sup> Apparently, West and East had found one point of agreement – the closure of the Surprise Attack Conference interlude.

The closure of this interlude, however, marked only the beginning of decades dominated by arms control arcana. The United States and all of the representatives from the West and the East had very little experience with negotiations concerning nuclear weapons before 1958. This new, certainly inexact, science began with the meetings of the UN Disarmament Subcommittee during 1956 and 1957. The nuclear test ban deliberations and the Surprise Attack Conference of 1958 proved much more specific than their few predecessors. In this sense, one can say that the two sides were still “feeling each other out” when they met at Le Palais des Nations.

Participants and observers familiar with the meetings in Geneva realized that the West could not cajole the Soviets into quickly and painlessly lifting the shroud of secrecy around the Russian landmass. While prominent statements to this effect were rare before the conference, they abounded after the meetings came to a close. In December 1958 William C. Foster wrote Secretary of State Dulles, “it seems to me that we have a great opportunity to move forward discussions with the U.S.S.R. if we first think through more thoroughly the things which we are able to trade off with them against their present asset of secrecy, which they treasure highly, and their present belief in the advantage which their missile development gives to them.”<sup>61</sup>

The meetings with the Soviets also had a distinct intellectual impact on the U.S. delegation. While the West proved unbending at the negotiating table, many Americans in Geneva began, at least partially in response to Soviet arguments, to rethink the Eisenhower administration’s approach to the dilem-

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60. Gibson, “Six Futile Weeks?” 99–100, 108.

61. William C. Foster to John Foster Dulles, 23 December 1958, Foster Papers, box 11, folder: 1. Foster expressed this same point to the Senate Subcommittee on Disarmament. “Testimony by Ambassador William C. Foster before the Senate Subcommittee on Disarmament [Extracts], January 30, 1959,” *Documents on Disarmament, 1945–1959*, 1359. Jerome Wiesner and Lawrence Weiler made statements similar to Foster’s. Wiesner wrote that “inspection and observation systems alone most decidedly detract more from the actual security of the Warsaw Pact powers than from that of NATO powers because of the greater dependence that the Warsaw members have placed upon secrecy. Consequently, the Western group was in the position of advocating only those plans which would have involved much greater security concessions by the Warsaw powers than by us.” See Wiesner, *Where Science and Politics Meet*, 185. Wiesner originally prepared this chapter of the book as an unpublished report on the Surprise Attack Conference in the winter of 1959. Lawrence Weiler told a representative from the British embassy in Washington that any system of inspection and control was liable to work to the “relative disadvantage” of the Soviet Union because of its closed society. See Gibson, “Six Futile Weeks?” 106–7; letter to author from Lawrence Weiler, 13 October 1993. Jerome Kahan writes that the Surprise Attack Conference provided the West with a better understanding of Soviet views toward secrecy. Jerome Kahan, *Security in the Nuclear Age* (Washington, 1975), 61–62.

mas of surprise attack and arms control in general. The Eastern objections to the Western emphasis on inspections lacked technical sophistication, but they did carry the force of military and strategic logic.

The Soviets held to the incontrovertible argument that, ultimately, the steadily increasing nuclear stockpiles, not secrecy, would precipitate a nuclear holocaust. Foster, Kistiakowsky, Wiesner, and many of the other members in the U.S. delegation became convinced that the Soviets were, in some ways, right. Accurate warning of an ICBM attack would prove difficult to obtain, especially as the speed and mobility of missiles advanced. Missile-launching submarines, like those designed for the American Polaris program, would be nearly impossible to track.<sup>62</sup> In a world with high superpower tensions and rapid weapons developments, an unrestrained arms race would prove difficult to manage – even with better strategic intelligence.

Upon returning to Washington, Kistiakowsky and Wiesner forcefully argued, as they had not before, that inspection had a great liability – it could increase the accuracy and lethality of an opponent's first strike. James Killian, who did not attend the conference but received a detailed briefing from the returning delegation, concurred with this argument. Apparently, many Americans associated with the Surprise Attack Conference internalized the Soviet claim that inspection would increase tensions and eliminate the deterrence value of a mobile nuclear force. Kistiakowsky firmly made this point, especially with regard to ground inspections, when he met with President Eisenhower on 12 January 1959. "Dr. Kistiakowsky said that, as the Geneva meetings on Surprise Attack went along, he became more and more impressed with the hazards to the United States of a system of inspection against surprise attack. While we tabled papers asserting the value of such a system, privately he had growing concern about it. Such a system would reveal detailed information on our deployments, our readiness, and the protective strengths and arrangements for our striking forces. If the system failed to give us warning, it would have given great net advantage to the Soviets. This advantage becomes especially great with ballistic missiles and supersonic aircraft."<sup>63</sup> Simply stated, Kistiakowsky

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62. On 12 January 1959, George Kistiakowsky told Eisenhower that the United States could not monitor submarines effectively. "Memorandum of Conference with the President, January 12, 1959," 14 January 1959, Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary Series, box 38, Administration Subseries, folder: Staff Notes, January 1959 (2). On 14 January 1959, Kistiakowsky told a meeting of Herter, Killian, Gray, and Farley that inspection would eliminate the deterrent value of mobile missile-carrying submarines. Memorandum of conversation, 14 January 1959, RG 59, 600.0012/1-14-59. Wiesner made similar points in 1959 and later years. Wiesner, *Where Science and Politics Meet*, 197, 219–20.

63. "Memorandum of Conference with the President, January 12, 1959," 14 January 1959, Ann Whitman File, DDE Diary Series, Administration Subseries, box 38, folder: Staff Notes, January 1959 (2). On 14 January, Kistiakowsky made the same report to Herter, Gray, and Farley. They also seemed receptive but noncommittal when confronted with Kistiakowsky's claim that "in the missile age such limited measures [of inspection] might well strengthen the hand of a would-be aggressor rather than reducing the chances for a successful surprise attack." Memorandum of conversation, 14 January 1959, RG 59, 600.0012/1-14-59.



and others learned from their analyses at the Surprise Attack Conference that a supposed technological solution to the arms race would open a new Pandora's box of technological threats and vulnerabilities. Eisenhower appeared receptive to Kistiakowsky's report on 12 January, but the president once again made no commitments, decisions, or authoritative statements. The White House allowed a new debate over the feasibility of inspection measures to rage within the administration.

The apparent shortcomings of Washington's position at the conference indicated to many participants, and to numerous other strategic and political analysts in the United States, that a focus on inspection without arms reductions was spurious, illogical, and ineffective at securing American interests. The sessions in Geneva displayed the overwhelmingly political nature of the arms race, for which political solutions could not be avoided. The Surprise Attack Conference destroyed the myth of a purely technological solution to the nuclear buildup. On 5 December 1958, Henry S. Villard, the U.S. representative to international organizations and the consul general to the American consulate in Geneva, sent a telegram to the State Department arguing that future talks on surprise attack must integrate political issues with technical considerations. Villard's message, which apparently represented the consensus within the U.S. delegation at Geneva, advocated "discussion of the surprise attack question . . . within a frankly political forum, presumably within the U.N. framework, at the same time that other aspects of disarmament were considered."<sup>64</sup> After the conference adjourned, this call for a synthesis of inspection proposals with disarmament measures found new support within American and British circles.<sup>65</sup>

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64. Geneva tel. to secretary of state, 5 December 1958, RG 59, 600.0012/12-558. Villard served as the liaison between the American delegation in Geneva and the State Department. He transmitted most daily reports and telegrams from Geneva to Washington.

65. William C. Foster, in his testimony to the Senate, stated that "we also have now a much more precise notion of the difficulty of separating the technical from the political in analyzing the problems of surprise attack and of the need, in pursuing technical discussions on the subject, to have agreement all around on what questions should be answered." "Testimony by Ambassador William C. Foster before the Senate Subcommittee on Disarmament [Extracts], January 30, 1959," *Documents on Disarmament, 1945-1959*, 1358. Dulles also advocated a broader approach to arms control in a draft memorandum for the president in late January 1959. The secretary of state wrote that "in such future discussions we should be prepared to engage in an expert examination of disarmament measures which might affect the surprise attack problem, and it appears desirable that a future conference allow for both political and technical discussions. Prior to a future conference, therefore, it is necessary for the United States to examine the problem in a broader framework than was used for the studies prior to the recent technical conference." "Draft Memorandum for the President. Subject: Future Preparations for Surprise Attack Safeguards Discussions," White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for Science and Technology, box 8, folder: Disarmament - Surprise Attack [July 1958-April 1959]. Hugh T. Morgan of the British Foreign Office and General Mansergh, chairman of the British delegation to the conference, argued for a linkage between inspection and arms reductions, which was certainly passed on to Washington. On 29 December 1958, Morgan wrote that the conference "was really a political conference and the Western team was no match for Kuznetsov. Our procedures were far too rigid, and the lack of a real Western policy reduced all our utterances to the lowest common factor

Many of the individuals associated with the American delegation to the Surprise Attack Conference carried the lessons of their experience into future administrations and arms control efforts. William C. Foster became the director of the newly created Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) for Kennedy and Johnson. Jerome Wiesner served as President Kennedy's special assistant for science and technology. Henry Rowen, Sidney Graybeal, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Albert Wohlstetter, and others – all associated with American activities at the Surprise Attack Conference – played prominent roles in later strategic deliberations and negotiations.

After Eisenhower left office, the United States would never again separate in such a rigid manner inspection proposals from disarmament measures in any large, multilateral, public enterprise like the Surprise Attack Conference. American strategists realized that inspection alone would not provide a technological panacea for the nuclear terror and fiscal waste of the arms race. Eisenhower, however, did not aid this learning process. I have found no evidence that the president ever authoritatively renounced his administration's hunt for the holy technological grail that did not exist. Politicians, strategic analysts, and scientists learned to link technical and political considerations in future arms control negotiations largely *in spite of* Eisenhower.

In reading the documents from American and allied activities at the Surprise Attack Conference, the historian immediately encounters the many complexities and uncertainties surrounding arms control deliberations in the 1950s. The dynamism of technological change and the depth of political distrust threatened to make the most innocuous concessions a source of grave insecurity. While the strategic parity of the 1970s and 1980s removed many of the instabilities from disarmament talks in those decades, in the 1950s, arms control was a very risky endeavor.

Eisenhower, and many individuals within his administration, understood that the new technology of the arms race posed even greater future risks to national security if the two superpowers continued to build ever-more-threatening nuclear arsenals without any restraining agreements. The president deserves praise for this acute insight, and he can claim credit for exercising political will in appointing like-minded advisers (for example, Harold Stassen and James Killian) and in proposing international negotiations (for example, the Surprise Attack Conference). Eisenhower's support for arms control did not produce substantive superpower agreements, according to Robert A. Strong, because the frightening pace of technological challenges to national

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between the five delegations. We should be made to look very silly another time unless we have a clear policy and a much stronger political element." H. T. Morgan minute, 29 December 1958, FO 371, 132683. On 2 January 1959, Mansergh expressed a similar opinion in a letter to the British chief of the defense staff at the Ministry of Defense. Mansergh to the chief of the Defense staff, 2 January 1959, FO 371, 140429. In February 1959, Lawrence Weiler advocated an identical viewpoint in communications with the British embassy in Washington. See Gibson, "Six Futile Weeks?" 107.

security outstripped the president's cautious and gradual approach to peaceful agreement. In Strong's eyes, Eisenhower became somewhat a victim of circumstance.<sup>66</sup>

Contrary to this judgment, the former general emerges from the history of the Surprise Attack Conference more as an ambivalent, confused, and passive chief executive than the heroic victim of Strong's analysis. Eisenhower's failure to arbitrate the divisive debates within his administration and the alliance over the scope of arms control deliberations allowed Western activities to devolve to the lowest common ground—inspection proposals. Ironically, while scientists and other technical specialists counseled against the feasibility of separating inspection from disarmament, the president and fellow politicians stubbornly pursued a technological solution to the arms race. For Eisenhower, superpower inspections would serve as a first step toward disarmament measures, establishing trust between Moscow and Washington. The president refused to acknowledge, when pressed by advisers, that the Kremlin would never voluntarily give away, at the conference table, the strategic advantage it derived from its obsessive secrecy. The United States could build spy planes and satellites for unilateral reconnaissance, but Washington could not hope to forge an agreement for reciprocal superpower inspections without links to disarmament measures on Soviet terms.

Little available evidence points to Soviet desires or preparations for a mutually beneficial arms reduction agreement in the late 1950s.<sup>67</sup> One cannot condemn Eisenhower for failing to create a treaty in inhospitable circumstances, but one can criticize the president for his inability to formulate organized, logical, coordinated, and practical arms control proposals. Accepted by the Soviets or not, America could have made more productive use of its resources—and maybe contributed to future agreements—by abandoning its mistaken search for a technological solution to the arms race in the late 1950s. Eisenhower had the will to pursue arms control, but he lacked the courage and the insight to broaden the transit of superpower negotiations into the political waters of disarmament.

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66. Robert A. Strong, "Eisenhower and Arms Control," in *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s*, ed. Richard A. Melanson and David Mayers (Urbana, IL, 1987), 241–63.

67. See note 7.

