Overtly, the 1949 "rebellion" pitted the flush-deck supercarrier against the B-36 bomber, but the real struggle was about roles and missions.

BY HERMAN S. WOLK

FORTY years ago, one of the most spectacular public interservice clashes in American military history boiled over and in effect set the framework for the discussion of strategic issues for decades. Although the so-called "Revolt of the Admirals" in 1949 primarily pitted the US Navy against the fledgling United States Air Force, the roots of this titanic struggle can be traced back to the period between the world wars.

Following Brig. Gen. William (Billy) Mitchell's destruction of warships off the Virginia capes in 1922 in a planned demonstration of the power of land-based aviation, the Navy began building a carrier fleet that would project its power to places far from America's shores. The Navy, in the 1920s and 1930s, attempted to restrict

Secretary of Defense James Forrestal presides at a March 25, 1949, meeting of service leaders amid the historic bombers-vs.-carriers clash between the Air Force and the Navy. Clockwise from left: Acting Secretary of the Navy W. J. Kenney, Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall, Secretary Forrestal, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Omar Bradley, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Louis Denfield, and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg.

REVOLT OF THE ADMIRALS

development of the Army's land-based aviation and tried to limit the range that Army aircraft could patrol off the coast. Also, between the wars, the Army Air Corps evolved a strategic bombing concept that would be the foundation for its bombing doctrine on the eve of the nation's entry into World War II. The development of the Air Corps concept and the building of its forces were helped by the evolution of advanced bomber aircraft—the B-17 first flew in 1935—and the creation in March 1935 of the General Headquarters (GHQ) Air Force under Brig. Gen. Frank M. Andrews.

World War II demonstrated the effectiveness of the Navy's fast carrier forces in the Pacific theater. The Army Air Forces (AAF), built and led by Gen. Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, projected its power on a global scale. Japan's surrender in 1945 without being invaded vindicated Arnold's contention that land-based strategic airpower could play a decisive role in modern warfare.

Generals Arnold and Carl A. (Tooey) Spaatz, Commanding General of the United States Army Strategic Air Forces, underscored the destructive power of the B-29 conventional bombing campaign against Japan. Arnold emphasized that the dropping of the atomic bombs in August 1945 "did not cause the defeat of Japan, however large a part they may have played in assisting the Japanese decision to surrender." Japan capitulated, noted General Arnold, "because air attacks, both actual and potential, had made possible the destruction of their capability and will for further resistance. . . . These . . . attacks . . . had as a primary objective the defeat of Japan without invasion."

Arnold's Advice on the A-Bomb

In the summer of 1945, Arnold was so convinced that Japan could be knocked out by the B-29 hammer blows prior to the scheduled invasion of the home islands in November 1945 that he recommended to President Harry S. Truman at the Potsdam conference in July that the atomic bomb not be dropped, the only member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to do so. Strangely, in the years since the end of the war, given the controversy over dropping the bomb, Arnold's opinion and advice have received comparatively little attention. After the war, the AAF commander remained sensitive to the issue of the atomic bomb. He wrote Spaatz: "I am afraid that from now on there will be certain people who will forget the part we have played." Critics were already writing that strategic bombing had proved excessively costly in relation to the results achieved.

The war laid the foundation for future interservice confrontations. The leadership of the Navy stressed self-sufficiency and argued that the Navy needed everything it had asked for in terms of personnel, equipment, and weapons to carry out its mission, including long-range reconnaissance, antisubmarine warfare, and support of amphibious operations. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who replaced Gen. George C. Marshall as Army Chief of Staff in November 1945, argued that the nation could not afford this naval self-sufficiency. The major lesson of World War II, Eisenhower emphasized to Congress during postwar unification hearings, was the crucial importance of unified command and unified theater actions, the mutual dependence of the services. The idea of separate ground, sea, and air operations, Eisenhower said, "was gone forever."

The Army Air Forces came out of the war determined to achieve independence and to claim a preeminent role in the defense establishment. The basis of this postwar drive was the demonstrated wartime effectiveness of the AAF's strategic air forces. The precedent was the formation of Twentieth Air Force in April 1944, under direct command of Arnold in Washington, as executive agent of the Joint Chiefs. In June 1945, Maj. Gen. Laurence S. Kuter, Deputy Commanding General, AAF, Pacific Ocean Areas, stressed to Arnold the importance of the Strategic Air Forces to the drive for independence. Twentieth Air Force became the predecessor of the postwar Strategic Air Command, which in December 1946 was in effect made a JCS specified command under the Unified Command Plan signed by President Truman.

Navy Opposition to Unification

The Navy, led by Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, opposed unification legislation and the creation of a separate Air Force. Fearful of losing its aviation arm and perhaps the Marines, the Navy held that carrier-based aviation could best ensure the country's security. The AAF and the War Department, under Eisenhower, countered that the national security could best be ensured by unification and the formation of the United States Air Force.

The immediate result of the defense unification battle during 1945–47 was a compromise. The National Security Act of 1947, which brought USAF into being, created a National Military Establishment consisting of Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force (each headed by a civilian Secretary) under the civilian Secretary of Defense. None of the services was completely satisfied with this legislation. Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, AAF's Deputy Commander, noted that the legislation legitimized

Secretary Symington, center, and General Vandenberg, right, were central figures in the interservice clash that culminated in the "revolt of the admirals." Here, in 1948, they salute retiring Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Carl (Tooey) Spaatz.

four military air forces, a fact that some in the AAF were quite upset about, including the retired General Arnold.

The Navy attempted to have service roles and missions written into the Act, but lost on this issue. Eisenhower had successfully countered the Navy's position by emphasizing that in legislation of this kind, one sticks to general principles rather than specific points of contention. The National Security Act created a federated military establishment that featured coordination as opposed to administration, a point that would subsequently be stressed by the first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington. According to one observer, the Army and the Air Force saw the Act as a first step, the Navy considered it a holding action, and President Truman thought it a necessary compromise.

The Act left unresolved the crucial question of roles and missions. Although the 1947 Act was undoubtedly the best that could be agreed on at the time—and Truman insisted that the Navy get behind it—it set the stage for a monumental struggle between the Air Force and the Navy.

Judge Robert P. Patterson, who succeeded Henry Stimson as Secretary of War, was Truman's choice to be the first Secretary of Defense. However, Patterson declined, citing the need to return to private life for financial reasons. The President then appointed Forrestal, despite the Navy Secretary's intense opposition to the creation of the Air Force.

Before the National Military Establishment had operated for long, a major problem became evident to Secretary of the Air Force Symington and to General Spaatz, first Air Force Chief of Staff. Forrestal had staffed the Office of the Secretary of Defense almost entirely with naval personnel. He had simply moved his people from the Navy Department to OSD. W. Barton Leach, a professor at the Harvard Law School (formerly Chief of the AAF Operations Analysis Division and in 1947 a colonel in the Air Force Reserve) who was an advisor to Symington, noted:

"These civilian officials are not prejudiced against the Air Force, nor are they unwilling to learn. But an instinctive understanding of Air Force problems is not in their blood . . . . When the chips are down, it too often happens that the Air Force gets the short end of these very important decisions. . . .

"For the most part, OSD has been staffed with able men. But ability is not enough. A Supreme Court comprising the nine ablest lawyers in the country would not be acceptable if it turned out that all nine came from Wall Street firms."

The Real Issue: The Strategic Atomic Mission

The real issue between the Air Force and the Navy in 1947–48 was responsibility for the strategic atomic mission, the key to the prime share of the defense budget. Symington was well aware that the Air Force would have "to prevent Navy encroachment on the Air Force responsibility for strategic bombing operations." The Navy's postwar leadership was dominated by aviators who were determined to build forces capable of delivering the atomic bomb.

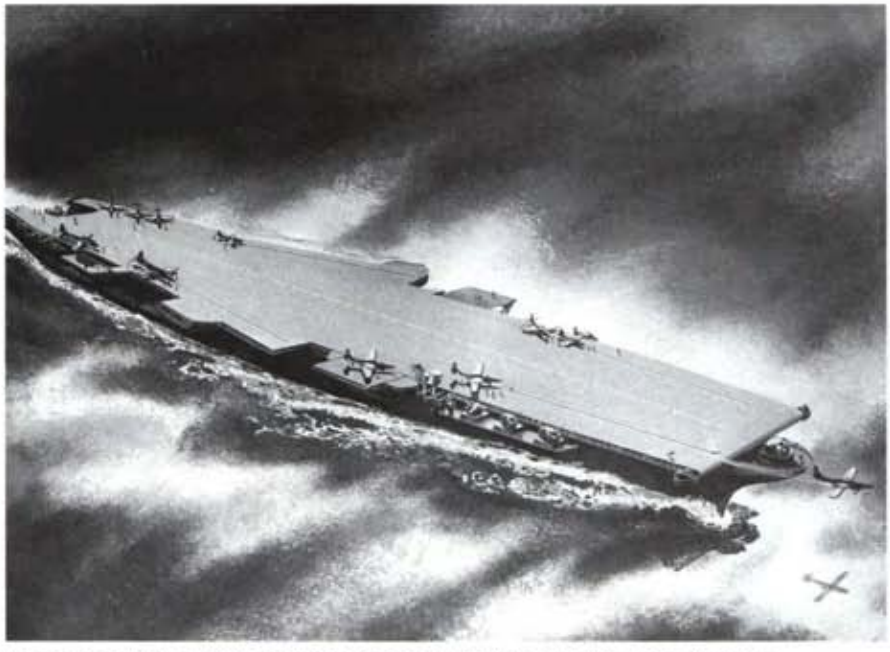
In early 1948, President Truman's Air Policy Commission, headed by Thomas K. Finletter (who would succeed Symington in 1950), and the Congressional Aviation Policy Board supported the seventy-group Air Force objective. The Finletter group predicted that the Soviet Union would develop an atomic capability by January 1953. These reports, however, failed to address roles and missions, and the Navy charged that the Finletter report ignored naval aviation. Forrestal himself continued to advocate what he termed "balanced forces" as opposed to the seventy-group Air Force.

Meanwhile, Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan announced in early February 1948 that the Navy planned to build a flush-deck supercarrier. Although Sullivan insisted the Navy had no intention of usurping the strategic mission, Symington and Spaatz thought that the Navy was in the process of building a strategic air force with the planned supercarrier and its long-range patrol bombers.

With interservice acrimony increasing, Forrestal convened the Joint Chiefs for two major roles-and-missions conclaves during 1948. In March, at a Key West, Fla., meeting held, according to Forrestal, to decide "who does what with what weapons," the JCS agreed that strategic bombing was the Air Force's responsibility. The Navy could develop its own essential weapons, but not a strategic air force. A new executive order signed by Truman confirmed this agreement.

However, the budget policy of the Truman Administration remained basically an almost three-way split among the services. Forrestal's balanced-force concept remained intact. And though in April 1948 the House Appropriations Committee voted an $822 million supplemental appropriation to be used toward achieving the Air Force's seventy-group force objective, the Administration refused to spend it.

The second roles-and-missions conference, held at Newport, R. I., in August 1948, saw Forrestal and the Joint Chiefs in agreement that USAF would have primary responsibility for strategic bombing, but during war



An artist's drawing of the 65,000-ton carrier that was scrubbed in a Defense Department decision to assign naval airpower a secondary role and build up the Air Force's bomber force instead. This stirred up fierce Navy opposition to USAF's fledgling B-36 bomber and caused the admirals to dig in their heels.

Vice Adm. Arthur Radford, commander of the Pacific Fleet, testifies against the B-36 at a 1949 congressional hearing. He called the bomber "a bad gamble."

would be supplemented by the use of naval forces. The agreement stated that "the service having the primary function must determine the requirements, but . . . must take into account the contributions which may be made by forces from other services." The JCS also decided that the Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project would report to Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg (who had succeeded Spaatz as Air Force Chief of Staff), in effect giving the Air Force operational control of the atomic bomb, something it had long desired.

These high-level conferences solved little and confirmed the weakness of Forrestal's position. The irony was that the AAF and the War Department, during 1946–47, fought for legislation to structure a strong OSD while Forrestal and the Navy succeeded in arguing the case for a military establishment that was essentially a federation headed by a coordinator as Secretary of Defense.

USAF pressed ahead in the building of its atomic deterrent force. The Berlin blockade had stunned the world in 1948, and in October, General Vandenberg directed Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay to head the Strategic Air Command, replacing Gen. George C. Kenney. Vandenberg, with the backing of Symington and LeMay, supported production of the B-36 long-range strategic bomber. In December 1948, Vandenberg and top Air Force commanders met at Maxwell AFB, Ala., and decided that the structuring of SAC's atomic force should be their highest priority.

Throwing Meat to the Lions

Thus, the confluence of events at home and abroad increased the pressure on the services to claim high-priority missions and to gain a larger share of the military budget. Much greater pressure was about to build. In January 1949, Truman held the Fiscal 1950 defense budget to a $14 billion ceiling—an almost equal split among the services that in effect limited the Air Force to forty-eight groups. Symington, visibly upset and aware that the seventy-group goal again would not be met, declared the Administration's action to be the equivalent of throwing meat to the lions and having them fight over it.

The pressure also told on Forrestal, who, exhausted and frustrated, became erratic and indecisive. Some observers described Forrestal as suffering from "battle fatigue." Truman asked for his resignation in March 1949. The former Navy Secretary was replaced by Louis Johnson, a former Assistant Secretary of War who had been Truman's fund-raiser for the 1948 Presidential campaign. Forrestal was subsequently hospitalized at the Bethesda Naval Hospital, where in May 1949 he took his own life.

Secretary Johnson took office at the end of March 1949 and immediately went into action. Believing that construction of the flush-deck supercarrier was unnecessary, wasteful of funds, and a duplication of the Air Force's mission, he polled the Joint Chiefs (Adm. Louis E. Denfeld was the lone vote for construction) and then obtained Truman's approval to stop construction. Gen. Omar Bradley, Army Chief of Staff, and Air Force Chief Vandenberg believed that the function of the supercarrier was actually a primary function of the Air Force and that the use of carrier aircraft against land targets should be limited. Naval air should be used as a reinforcement to USAF action and not for sustained operations against land objectives. Also opposed to construction were General Eisenhower (then President of Columbia University and an advisor to Truman) and the chairmen of the Armed Services Committees of both the House and Senate.

An irate Secretary of the Navy Sullivan immediately resigned. He wrote Johnson that this action "represented the first attempt ever made in this country to prevent

The B-36 in flight, oblivious to the political storm. The bomber's opponents charged that it was a "billion-dollar blunder" and that the Air Force was rewarding the B-36 contractor, Consolidated Vultee, for past favors rendered. Led by Secretary Symington and General Vandenberg, USAF refuted the charges and persuasively argued that the B-36 would be essential to strategic bombing, a concept that had been proved out in World War II and a mission that the JCS had assigned exclusively to USAF after the war.

the development of a power weapon. The conviction that this will result in a renewed effort to abolish the Marine Corps and to transfer all naval and Marine aviation elsewhere adds to my anxiety." The battle had been joined.

Organized under the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations (Administration), a research group, Op-23, headed by Capt. Arleigh A. Burke, a crack destroyer commander during the war and a future CNO, began to gather material critical of the B-36's performance and capabilities. In April and May 1949, rumors of fraud surfaced in connection with B-36 contracts. Secretary of Defense Johnson once had been a member of the board of directors of Consolidated Vultee, manufacturer of the bomber. Also, an "anonymous document" circulated in Washington, claiming that the B-36 was a "billion-dollar blunder" and that Johnson and Symington had a personal interest in its production because they owed favors to Floyd Odlum, whose company manufactured the plane.

As press coverage critical of the B-36 and the Air Force increased in May, it was divulged that the author of the so-called "anonymous document" was Cedric R. Worth, civilian assistant to Under Secretary of the Navy Dan A. Kimball. Subsequently, a Navy court of inquiry determined that Worth, a former commander in the Naval Reserve and a professional writer, had been aided by Cmdr. Thomas D. Davies, assistant head of Op-23. Glenn L. Martin, an aircraft manufacturer who had recently lost a contract when funds were diverted to the B-36, provided information to Worth. After Congressman James E. Van Zandt (R-Pa.) of the House Armed Services Committee called for a special panel to investigate charges against Johnson and Symington, the House authorized the Armed Services Committee to conduct a comprehensive investigation of the B-36 matter as well as the decision to cancel the supercarrier and the overall issue of roles and missions.

These charges and the attendant congressional hearings received national attention and a great deal of coverage in the press. The hearings were held in two parts: During August 9–25, 1949, the House Armed Services Committee deliberated over the B-36, and in October, twelve days of hearings were conducted on "Unification and Strategy."

Secretary Symington, his integrity impugned and perceiving a direct threat against the fledgling Air Force, called on USAF Reserve Col. W. Barton Leach of the Harvard Law School to organize and plan the Air Force case for the B-36 hearings. Leach put together a team to analyze all statements against the Air Force and to answer these charges.

"Not One Iota, Not One Scintilla . . ."

With Chairman Carl Vinson of Georgia presiding, the House committee found no evidence to substantiate the charges and cleared all USAF officials. The committee recommended that Cedric Worth be fired. There was "not one iota, not one scintilla of evidence," emphasized Vinson, "that would support charges that collusion, fraud, corruption, influence, or favoritism played any part whatsoever in the procurement of the B-36 bomber." Following a naval court of inquiry, Worth was dismissed. Although Commander Davies of Op-23 admitted helping Worth, the court found that the Op-23 personnel had not realized that Worth intended to disseminate the material.

The unification and strategy hearings in October were the most spectacular and comprehensive postwar public investigation of the subject of roles and missions. For the Navy, Secretary Francis P. Matthews, Sullivan's successor, Vice Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Capt. Arleigh Burke, and Adm. Louis E. Denfeld, CNO, were among those who testified. They claimed that the B-36 was an inferior plane that could not accomplish the strategic

bombing mission against the Soviet Union, that the entire concept of strategic bombing was unsound, and that the decision not to construct the supercarrier weakened the Navy and was itself a threat to the national security.

Radford termed the B-36 a "bad gamble" and indicted what he called the "atomic blitz," the land-based strategic deterrent. Burke trumpeted that carrier aviation was more versatile than land-based airpower, and Denfeld declared himself "gravely concerned" about the Navy's ability to carry out its mission without such a weapon as the supercarrier.

The heart of the Air Force testimony came from Secretary Symington, who proved to be a masterful witness. In clear, factual testimony, he refuted the B-36 charges and emphasized that the concept of strategic bombing had been approved by the Joint Chiefs and assigned to the Air Force. The attacks against USAF, declared Symington, "imperiled the security of the United States. It was bad enough to have given a possible aggressor technical and operating details of our newest and latest equipment. . . . It is far worse to have opened up to him in such detail the military doctrines of how this country would be defended." The B-36 intercontinental bomber, noted Symington, was under attack by naval officials because it was seen as a threat to the Navy. These attacks had always increased when the military budget was under consideration.

Air Force Chief of Staff Vandenberg basically reiterated Symington's points. He stressed the effectiveness of strategic bombing in World War II and stated that the B-36 could accomplish its mission. As for the supercarrier, Vandenberg noted: "I accept the military capability of this ship as stated by the Chief of Naval Operations. My opposition to building it comes from the fact that I can see no necessity for a ship with those capabilities in any strategic plan against the one possible enemy."

Army Gen. Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, clinched the case against the Navy. Given the Soviet threat, distinguished by preponderant land forces, Bradley said that the JCS had given first priority to the Air Force's strategic nuclear deterrent. The United States could not attempt to match the USSR in ground forces. He supported production of the B-36 bomber. However, the B-36 was not really the issue. The Navy, he observed, was terribly upset over the supercarrier decision. The Navy was in "open rebellion against the civilian control." Naval officials exposed themselves as " 'fancy dans' who won't hit the line with all they have on every play unless they can call the signals." The Navy, said Chairman Bradley, refused "in spirit as well as deed" to accept unification.

The fact, of course, was that Forrestal and the Navy had opposed unification. The great irony was that Secretary of Defense Forrestal, eventually the man in the middle, subsequently recanted his opposition to the 1947 Act, admitted it was a weak piece of legislation, and ended by strongly advocating the August 1949 amendments to the National Security Act. These amendments strengthened the Office of the Secretary of Defense and downgraded the authority of the service Secretaries. As for the weakness of the 1947 Act, Symington had observed: "Ninety percent of the military problems could be licked if only someone would make a decision."

Adm. Arleigh Burke, later to be CNO, spoke out against the B-36 as a captain in 1949 on the grounds that it was an inferior aircraft, that it would not be capable of accomplishing the strategic bombing mission, and that the mission itself was unsound.

The great roles-and-missions uproar of the late 1940s could perhaps be seen as a step forward in that it had the effect of lancing the Navy's boil and removing at least temporarily the poison from its system. The debate had exposed a basic disagreement over strategy, weapons, and how to fight future wars.

Secretary Symington subsequently resigned, frustrated over the Air Force's inability to reach seventy groups under the limits of the Truman Administration's budget ceiling. The outbreak in June 1950 of the Korean War, however, busted the budget, and the Air Force was authorized a great increase in forces. Once again, external events intervened, and in a real sense Symington's advocacy of the need for air strength and preparedness had been vindicated.

The United States was not going to build a large Army and Navy immediately after World War II. The most effective force to fit the country's need after the great war was the Strategic Air Force. Despite the Navy's argument to the contrary, land-based strategic airpower was about to assume paramountcy during peacetime in the nation's defense phalanx, a situation unprecedented in American history.

The forty years that have passed since these events have demonstrated the persistence and importance of the lessons derived from this great debate: the need for clarity of roles and missions, the importance of the far reach of land-based airpower, and the necessity of strength and vigilance to the nation's well-being. ■

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