

**NSC-68 recognized the massive changes in the postwar world and set the stage for a new kind of peacetime force.**

# The **Blueprint** for Cold War Defense

**By Herman S. Wolk**

**T**HE years between the end of World War II in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 produced a series of startling international events that forced great responsibility upon the Air Force and resulted, 50 years ago, in a full-scale reassessment of US national security policy. The result of this review was a classified National Security Council document known as NSC-68. It had not been implemented when war broke out in Korea. Indeed, it had not yet even been formally approved. However, NSC-68 marked a milestone in military planning and set the stage for what was to become an enormous US military buildup to counter Communist aggression worldwide.

The creation of Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe and the blockade of Berlin by the Soviet Union in 1948 led to a decision (NSC-20) by President Harry S. Truman to emphasize atomic strategic deterrence. The same events also led to the April 1949 formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Air Force, meanwhile, also reacted to European events. In October 1948, the Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, and the USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, dispatched Lt. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay to Offutt AFB, Neb. LeMay's mission: Revitalize Strategic Air Command and establish it as the major instrument of deterrence and a pillar of US foreign policy.

In 1949, two more stunning international developments convinced officials that the US had an urgent need to review its national security policy.

## **“Secretary of Economy”**

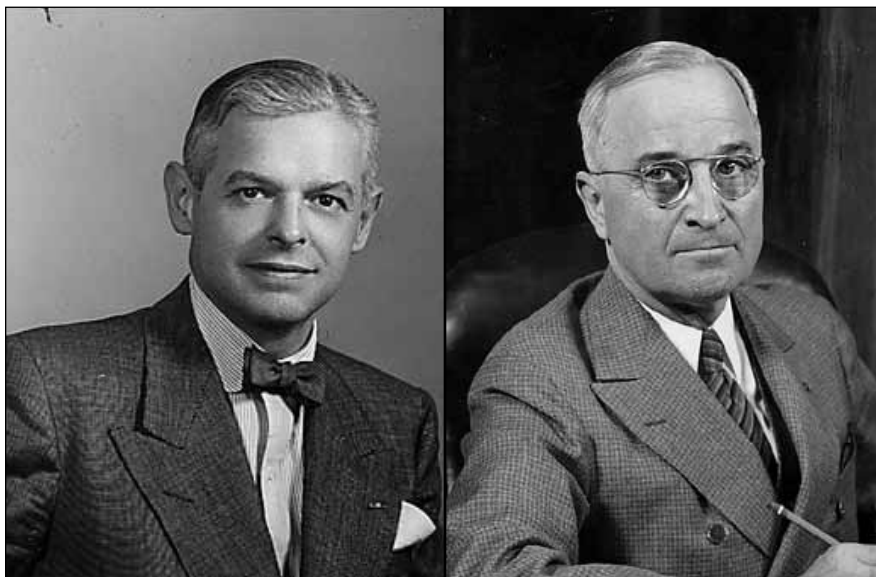
In September 1949, the US discovered that the Soviet Union had in August exploded an atomic device; American scientific and military experts had predicted that the Soviets would not have this capability before 1952 and probably later. Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson for a while preferred to believe—despite confirming air samples—that the Soviets had not really tested an atomic device at all. He argued that perhaps an accidental laboratory explosion had occurred. (Johnson, known to many as “Secretary of Economy,” had deeply slashed defense budgets.) Truman, however, accepted as fact that the Soviet Union now possessed an atomic capacity. The American monopoly was history. Publicly, the Administration's response was low key, but it realized that international politics would never be the same.

Secondly, in October 1949, Mao Zedong's Chinese Communists conquered the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek and established the People's Republic of China on the Asian mainland. Suddenly, Communist forces were in control of the most populous nation on Earth, one that had until recently been an American ally.

These two events set off alarms throughout the American national security establishment, triggering a reassessment of security policy and military force structure. Symington, for his part, had become deeply concerned—not panicky but convinced that “business as usual” was not an option. He strongly pushed for a review of the nation's security posture, and he knew what policies should be changed.

The Administration's tight-fisted approach to defense funding had kept the Air Force's force structure at no more than 48 groups, well below the 70 groups Symington thought necessary. Moreover, the Soviet atomic explosion had convinced him of the necessity of increased defense spending. The Soviet possession of an atomic bomb, said Symington, resulted in “an entirely new and revolutionary factor in strategic planning, which has never before faced US military planners.” That factor, according to the Air Force leader: “The US is no longer secure.”

Symington argued that, in light of events, it had now become “fundamen-



*The Soviet Union's explosion of an atomic device and the establishment of Communist China pushed President Truman (right) into asking for a national security review. Paul Nitze (left) led the effort, which resulted in NSC-68.*

tal” that the United States maintain superiority in strategic atomic forces. Should the balance shift in favor of the Soviet Union, “disaster could be imminent,” he warned.

In late 1949, Symington told Johnson, “It was the judgment of everyone in the government that a reconsideration of military plans and programs should be the result of sober reflection” but that there was “an equal danger” that Washington “may assume a business-as-usual course of inaction.” Symington made it clear that, in his view, the US buildup “will have to

be accelerated,” because the Soviets had demonstrated that their technical capacity “is much greater than our most pessimistic experts had previously believed.”

The Air Force Secretary noted that, should Russia develop the “relatively simple and completely proven process of air refueling,” Moscow would have the capacity “to launch atomic attacks against the United States.” Thus, the current “increase in groups and modernization of equipment is inadequate in the light of Soviet capabilities,” said Symington. The United States required a retaliatory force in a state of instant readiness that could survive an initial atomic attack. “These times,” noted Symington, “demand the same resolute determination ... that this country displayed in war.”

### “Minimum ... Air Force Necessary”

Symington emphasized that, after World War II, Gens. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Carl A. “Tooe” Spaatz, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, as well as the President's Air Policy Commission, had gone on record as saying that 70 air groups was “the minimum peacetime Air Force necessary for American security,” and, on the basis of the present program, “we will have only 48 groups in 1955, and only 29 of these will be equipped with modern planes.” Consequently, Symington argued that



*Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington (left) and USAF Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg (right) had already begun revitalizing Strategic Air Command, and now Symington continued to urge an accelerated US military buildup.*



**Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson (assistant Secretary of War at the time of this photo) tried to hold the line on a \$13 billion defense budget figure that he had promised Truman.**

the new situation required a broad, comprehensive review by US planners of the implications of the Soviet possession of the atomic bomb.

Truman still wanted to hold down defense spending, reduce wartime debt, and strengthen the postwar economy. Nonetheless, these alarming events of late 1949, along with increasing Soviet intransigence in Europe, convinced Administration officials that US military power might now be able to protect American interests in Europe and elsewhere. Congress took action and passed the Mutual Defense Assistance Act basically in the form that Truman had requested. Moreover, the President asked for a review of national security policy.

Adm. Sidney W. Souers, executive secretary of the National Security Council, proposed that the NSC prepare a report to chart American security objectives in peacetime and in the event of war. On Jan. 5, 1950, the NSC directed preparation of a report “assessing and appraising the objectives, commitments, and risks of the United States ... in relation to our actual and potential military power.”

Shortly before, Truman had established a so-called “special committee” of the NSC comprising Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and Atomic Energy Commission Chairman David E. Lilienthal. The panel was to examine whether or not the

US should develop a hydrogen bomb. Although Johnson opposed a study centered solely on the H-bomb, he agreed to it on the insistence of Acheson and Lilienthal. The special committee recommended that the AEC should determine the technical feasibility of the thermonuclear weapon. On Jan. 31, 1950, Truman ordered development of the H-bomb and a study of its foreign policy and strategic implications.

Truman’s decision, in effect, nullified the Jan. 5 NSC directive and gave the task of formulating a major strategic report to a 10-member ad hoc State-

Defense Policy Review Group. Paul H. Nitze, successor to George F. Kennan as director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, played the leading part in developing the report, which was to become NSC-68.

Nitze had been a member of the US Strategic Bombing Survey at the end of World War II and was deeply concerned with the need to build up the American strategic deterrent force. Department of Defense representatives on the review group were retired Army Maj. Gen. James H. Burns, Johnson’s military assistant, and Air Force Maj. Gen. Truman H. Landon of the Joint Strategic Survey Committee, representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

### **Tricky Dealings With DoD**

Acheson and Johnson had joint responsibility to carry out Truman’s directive. The State-DoD review group experienced tough sledding in early 1950, primarily because Johnson thought that Acheson and the armed services were determined to bust his \$13 billion defense budget. “Dealing with DoD in those days was tricky,” Nitze explained. “Johnson had promised Truman that he would hold the defense budget to \$13 billion, a figure that was becoming more unrealistic with each passing day.”

Johnson went so far as to issue a directive that all contacts between the State Department and the military services had to go through his office, a



**Also in 1949, an NSC committee of Johnson, the Atomic Energy Commission’s David Lilienthal, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson—shown here (left) with British Ambassador Oliver Franks—considered development of a hydrogen bomb.**



practice that everyone knew to be totally unworkable. Roswell L. Gilpatric, undersecretary of the Air Force, 1951–53, noted in retrospect: “The manner in which Louis Johnson operated was not conducive to getting cooperation and support from the services. You don’t accomplish much if you beat the services over the head and make a public spectacle of overruling them.”

The report prepared by the State–Defense review group described the world as a place divided into free and totalitarian nations. It painted a grim picture, noting that, should a major war break out, the Soviet Union’s forces could roll over most of Western Europe, charge toward the oil-producing lands of the Middle East, launch attacks against Britain, and unleash atomic strikes against targets in North America. The report noted that, according to the CIA, the Soviet Union by mid-1954 would have 200 atomic bombs available for combat. It recommended that the United States take steps “as rapidly as possible” to increase its conventional strength and also accelerate production of atomic weapons.

Overall, the NSC-68 document called for “a substantial and rapid” buildup “to support a firm policy intended to check and roll back the Kremlin’s drive for world domination.” However, from a “military point of view, the actual and potential capabilities of the United States, given a continuation of current and projected programs, will become less and less effective as a war deterrent,” said NSC-68.

The NSC report deliberately avoided addressing the issue of cost, although the review group’s best estimate indicated annual funding of about \$40 billion (in 1950 dollars) was a proper goal. To have grappled with the funding issue, however, potentially would have damaged acceptance of the report. Acheson emphasized that the omission of the cost factor “was not an oversight” and that the objective of the paper was to “bludgeon the mass mind of top government.”

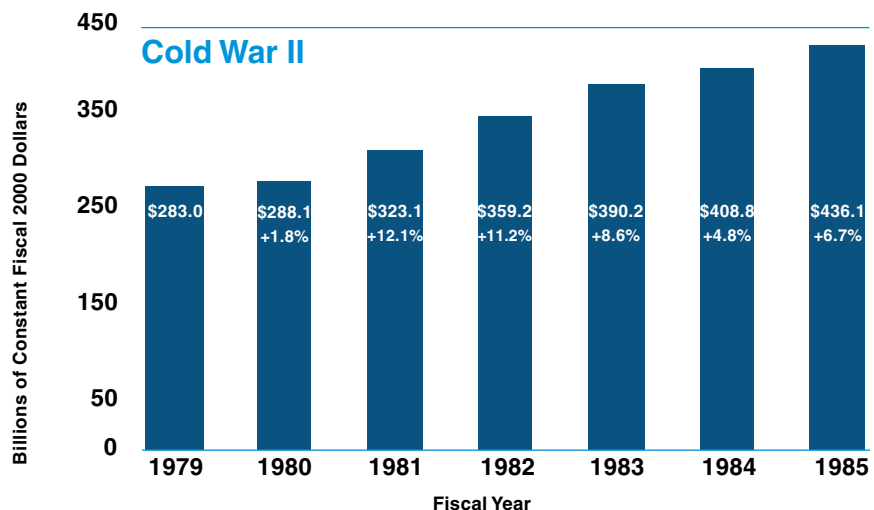
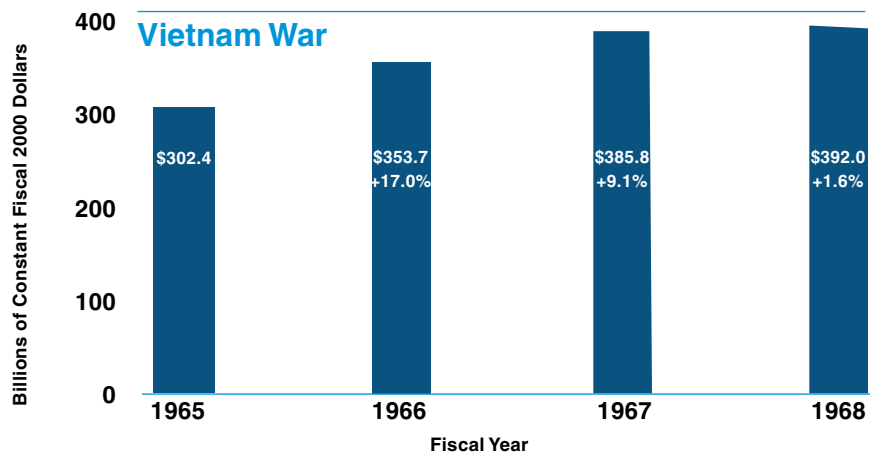
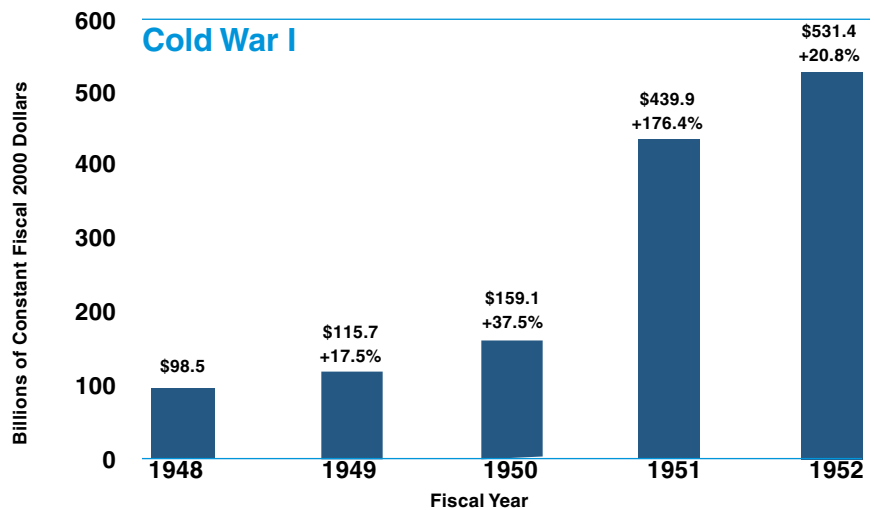
### The Five Major Tasks

The authors of NSC-68 pointed to five major tasks for the military: defend the Western Hemisphere, protect the mobilization base, conduct offensive operations to destroy “vital elements

## First Big Buildup

*Early Cold War events—Soviet-inspired coups in Eastern Europe, the Berlin blockade, Soviet atomic tests, the Communist takeover of China, and North Korea’s invasion of the South—triggered a massive US military buildup shaped and guided by NSC-68. Defense budgets surged from \$98.5 billion to \$531.4 billion—a 540 percent increase—in four years and then started back down. (All figures in Fiscal 2000 dollars.)*

*Presented for comparison are figures for the nation’s two other great postwar military expansions, the Vietnam buildup of the 1960s and the Reagan buildup of the 1980s. Neither can match the first in peak spending or percentage increases.*



Source: Office of Management and Budget

## The NSC-68 War Forecast, 1950

“Should a major war occur in 1950, the Soviet Union and its satellites are considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be in a sufficiently advanced state of preparation immediately to undertake and carry out the following campaigns:

- a. To overrun Western Europe, with the possible exception of the Iberian and Scandinavian peninsulas; to drive toward the oil-bearing areas of the Near and Middle East; and to consolidate Communist gains in the Far East;
- b. To launch air attacks against the British Isles and air and sea attacks against the lines of communications of the Western powers in the Atlantic and Pacific;
- c. To attack selected targets with atomic weapons, now including the likelihood of such attacks against targets in Alaska, Canada, and the United States. ...

“After the Soviet Union completed its initial campaigns and consolidated its positions in Western European area, it could simultaneously conduct:

- a. Full-scale air and limited sea operations against the British Isles;
- b. Invasions of the Iberian and Scandinavian peninsulas;
- c. Further operations in the Near and Middle East, continued air operations against the North American continent, and air and sea operations against Atlantic and Pacific lines of communication; and
- d. Diversionsary attacks in other areas ...

“If war should begin in 1950, the United States and its allies will have the military capability of conducting defensive operations to provide a reasonable measure of protection to the Western Hemisphere, bases in the Western Pacific, and essential military lines of communication; and an inadequate measure of protection to vital military bases in the United Kingdom and in the Near and Middle East. We will have the capability of conducting powerful offensive air operations against vital elements of the Soviet war-making capacity.”

### Estimating the Soviet Stockpile

The authors of NSC-68 were greatly concerned at the prospect that the Kremlin would amass significant numbers of atomic weapons in an unexpectedly short period of time. The key portion of NSC-68 reads as follows:

“Central Intelligence Agency intelligence estimates, concurred in by State, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Atomic Energy Commission, assign to the Soviet Union a production capability giving it a fission bomb stockpile within the following ranges:

By mid-1950, **10–20**

By mid-1951, **25–45**

By mid-1952, **45–90**

By mid-1953, **70–135**

By mid-1954, **200”**

of the Soviet war-making capacity” and to blunt the enemy’s offensives, protect bases and lines of communication, and provide aid to allied powers. The report concluded that a major buildup provided “the only means short of war which eventually may force the Kremlin ... to negotiate acceptable agreements on issues of major importance.”

The Joint Chiefs endorsed the report, and, on April 7, 1950, the Secretaries of Defense and State forwarded it to Truman, who on April 12 sent it to the National Security Council for additional study. Truman wanted more specifics: “I am especially anxious that the council give me a clearer indication of programs that are envisioned in the report, including estimates of the probable cost.” This last comment by the President may well have reflected Bureau of the Budget opinion that NSC-68 exaggerated the Soviet threat and oversimplified military solutions to the problem. In addition, Truman directed that the Council of Economic Advisers review the report. “I will not,” he emphasized, “buy a pig in a poke.”

Symington welcomed NSC-68. “The report is strong,” he observed to Johnson, “and we believe that, under current

world conditions, this country has gone too far in disarmament.” The Air Force Secretary was aware that the report had “serious and far-reaching consequences,” but Symington recommended that it be supported and, moreover, acted upon. He had been disappointed that increased funding had not materialized for more air groups following detection of the Soviet atomic explosion. His frustration had increased in early 1950, and he decided to leave his Secretary’s post, informing Truman that he could no longer remain responsible for an underfunded and underequipped Air Force. In April 1950, prior to the outbreak of war in Korea, Symington left and accepted the chairmanship of the National Security Resources Board.

Truman meanwhile, was concerned about the report’s conclusions. In April, Pentagon chief Johnson asked Congress for an additional \$300 million in authorizations for aircraft procurement. In early May 1950, the House increased the Pentagon budget authority for Fiscal 1951 (which was to start on July 1, 1950) by more than \$383 million. Subsequently, a Senate appropriations subcommittee proposed additional increases to raise the \$13 billion defense budget to \$15.6 billion. (All of the figures are in then-year dollars.) The Administration’s stringent economy drive was showing signs of cracking.

Still, Truman stalled on NSC-68. His delay reflected a desire to give the Bureau of the Budget more time to assess cost estimates.

### The Final Push

It took massive Communist military aggression to force a rapid, large-scale military buildup of the type envisioned by the NSC report. On June 25, North Korean Communist forces poured across the 38th parallel in a naked attempt to conquer its free neighbor to the south. The Truman Administration determined that the Communists had to be confronted and stopped in Korea, that a failure to do so would lead to more aggression, perhaps in Europe. As Truman put it: “Each time that the democracies failed to act, it encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead.”

Soon came an end to the tight postwar defense budgets. In a sense, Truman’s actions vindicated the call by NSC-68

for a sustained buildup of both conventional and nuclear forces. This leaves unanswered the speculative question of whether or not a major increase in defense spending would have occurred without the Korean conflict. What seems probable is that Truman would have supported an increase based upon NSC-68 but not the huge buildup that eventually came about as a result of the war. Overall, however, the evolution of NSC-68 marked a milestone in postwar defense planning because it set a kind of benchmark between economy and military force structure and between short- and long-term national interests.

In September 1950—three months after the North Korean attack—Truman finally approved NSC-68. The Administration was forced to reorder its priorities. The Korean War shattered the historic American policy of relying upon a small peacetime military establishment and led to adoption of a defense budget of more than \$50 billion, as well as a 95-wing Air Force by mid-1952. Overall, defense appropriations increased from \$14.2 billion for Fiscal 1950 to \$47.3 billion for Fiscal 1951 and to \$59.9 billion for Fiscal 1952. (See p. 67 for constant-dollar comparison.)

NSC-68 formed a bridge between Truman's post-World War II retrenchment policy and the buildup necessitated by the Korean War. It in effect corroborated the charge that the Truman-Johnson defense budget bore little or no relationship to requirements, and a major result of this fact was the forced resignation of Johnson in September 1950. The conflict in Korea was exactly the kind of war ("piecemeal aggression") anticipated by NSC-68.

The immense increase in the defense budget over the several fiscal years after the outbreak of war followed the path charted by NSC-68. And the world sketched by this report—presented in the grimmest colors—provided a conceptual and practical framework for the decades-long post-Korea Cold War. The US-Soviet confrontation heated up. The era of nuclear deterrence dawned. Eventually, with the arrival of the Eisenhower Administration in 1953 and its "new look" military policy, Strategic Air Command under LeMay would become the linchpin of the nation's Cold War, anti-Soviet foreign policy. ■

## From NSC-68: A New and Darker View of the World

"The Soviet Union ... is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world."

■  
"The United States, as the principal center of power in the non-Soviet world and the bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion, is the principal enemy whose integrity and vitality must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another."

■  
"The United States now possesses the greatest military potential of any single nation in the world. The military weaknesses of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, however, include its numerical inferiority in forces in being and in total manpower. Coupled with the inferiority of forces in being, the United States also lacks tenable positions from which to employ its forces in event of war and munitions power in being and readily available."

■  
"The possession of atomic weapons at each of the opposite poles of power, and the inability (for different reasons) of either side to place any trust in the other, puts a premium on a surprise attack against us."

■  
"The United States now has an atomic capability ... estimated to be adequate ... to deliver a serious blow against the war-making capacity of the USSR. It is doubted whether such a blow ... would cause the USSR to sue for terms or prevent Soviet forces from occupying Western Europe."

■  
"In time the atomic capability of the USSR can be expected to grow to a point where, given surprise and no more effective opposition than we now have programmed, the possibility of a decisive initial attack cannot be excluded."

■  
"When it calculates that it has a sufficient atomic capability to make a surprise attack on us, ... the Kremlin might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth. The existence of two large atomic capabilities in such a relationship might well act, therefore, not as a deterrent, but as an incitement to war."

■  
"The United States now faces the contingency that, within the next four or five years, the Soviet Union will possess the military capability of delivering a surprise atomic attack of such weight that the United States must have substantially increased general air, ground, and sea strength, atomic capabilities, and air and civilian defenses to deter war and to provide reasonable assurance, in the event of war, that it could survive the initial blow and go on to the eventual attainment of its objectives."

■  
"We must organize and enlist the energies and resources of the Free World. ... Without such a cooperative effort, led by the United States, we will have to make gradual withdrawals under pressure until we discover one day that we have sacrificed positions of vital interest."

■  
"The shadow of Soviet force falls darkly on Western Europe and Asia and supports a policy of encroachment. The Free World lacks adequate means—in the form of forces in being—to thwart such expansion locally. The United States will therefore be confronted more frequently with the dilemma of reacting totally to a limited extension of Soviet control or of not reacting at all. ..."

■  
"The military advantages of landing the first blow become increasingly important with modern weapons, and this is a fact which requires us to be on the alert in order to strike with our full weight as soon as we are attacked and, if possible, before the Soviet blow is actually delivered."

■  
"The United States is currently devoting about [6] percent of its gross national product (\$255 billion in 1949) to military expenditures. ... In an emergency the United States could devote upward of 50 percent of its gross national product to these purposes. ..."

■  
"A further increase in the number and power of our atomic weapons is necessary in order to assure the effectiveness of any US retaliatory blow. ... Greatly increased general air, ground, and sea strength and increased air defense and civilian defense programs would also be necessary to provide reasonable assurance that the Free World could survive an initial surprise atomic attack of the weight which it is estimated the USSR will be capable of delivering by 1954."

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