Years have a peculiar way of triggering collective memories. In the Western world, for example, the mention of 1989 provokes thoughts of freedom and liberation as the wall that divided Berlin came crumbling down (in Russia today, 1989 is of course remembered differently). 1789 recalls similar images, even if the years succeeding the French Revolution did not bring about liberté, égalité, or fraternité. Some years register more than others and can become a mnemonic to signify the zeitgeist of an age—think 1968; other, less fortunate years, convey nothing at all—no one, after all, talks of 1967ers. But what if a series of significant events extends beyond the confines of a calendar year? That is when historians get creative and stretch out a year by declaring it to be “long,” making nice and tidy a periodization that is, like most history, difficult and complex. Years, whether long, short, or standard, provide shorthand for interpreting the past.

What are we to make of 1949? Culturally, in the West at least, it signifies close to nothing. Yet in terms of international politics, 1949 is a heavyweight, mostly for things going wrong. 1949 did not start off so badly for the West. In early spring, twelve nations signed the North Atlantic Treaty, signaling a long-term American military commitment to Europe; on 5 May, forty-six European nations signed the Treaty of London, which formalized the Council of Europe; and a week after that Russian President Josef Stalin ended his feckless blockade of Berlin, cementing an early victory in the Cold War. But the seasons changed, and 1949 is best remembered for several “shocks” that took place in the fall. Their rapidity in succession amplified the effects of autumn 1949—Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong’s declaration of the Communist victory in China came on 1 October 1949, a little more than a week after US President Harry S Truman announced the Soviet Union’s successful detonation of its own atomic bomb. It was a dreadful season, one in which events seemed to drive United States into a new, unprecedented direction.

John Curatola’s exceptional new book, *Autumn of our Discontent: Fall 1949 and the Crises in National Security*, details the changes to US military policy that took place in the final year of the 1940s. Diplomatic historians

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will find little new interpretively here—Curatola states that his work challenges the “accepted narrative for this period,” without citing this work or indicating how his work revises our understanding of the year (7). Still, one can appreciate the detailed description of the interservice fight between the newly established Air Force and the Navy, which is unfortunately often little more than a footnote in other political histories of 1949. Curatola masterfully welds together the best of military and diplomatic history, producing a gripping narrative, arranged by the seasons, that provides a wide context for understanding how and why the United States broke with its traditional stance of maintaining a small military posture and adopted a more assertive foreign policy.

*Autumn of our Discontent* begins with the late summer discovery that the Soviet Union had detonated an atomic bomb, nicknamed “Joe-1” in reference to the Soviet leader. It was a remarkable achievement, aided by traditional Russian engineering and scientific prowess, slave-like conditions in the uranium mines that were discovered in Czechoslovakia after the war, and a high level of espionage that allowed Soviet scientists to bypass many of the time-consuming efforts in research and development that had bedeviled the Americans in its pursuit of the bomb. As early as 1942, the Soviets had received detailed information from Communist sympathizers Klaus Fuchs, who was a German theoretical physicist, and American machinist David Greenglass. Taken together, Curatola writes, the Soviets obtained “an efficiency that was not available to the Americans… With US plans in hand, the Russians avoided many scientific dead ends” (41). With the Russians in possession of the bomb, it was a cruel end to the summer of 1949 for American policymakers.

The United States still possessed one key advantage over its Soviet rival: the ability to deliver the atomic weapon. This window would surely close soon, which brought to the forefront a new urgency of where to place precious dollars to fund the ability to project the atomic bomb. On one side there was the newly independent United States Air Force, which saw the strategic effects of the atomic bomb as the future of warfare and its ticket to justify its autonomy from the United States Army. The Navy stood on the other side, believing that it, too, could carry out the nuclear mission through its aviation fleet centered around the aircraft carrier. With military budgets having already dwindled following the Second World War, it was clear to policymakers and senior military leaders that one service would lose out.

Curatola spends the bulk of the summer chapter on the interservice rivalry between the Air Force and the Navy. The author points out that both services shared a technologically infused “vision of a future war” in which airpower would play the central role (51). That was where their similarities ended, however, as both the Air Force and Navy fought bitterly in public and private over which nuclear-capable platform to fund. For the Air Force, the B-36 “Peacemaker,” was the aircraft of choice, while the Navy wanted full appropriations for the new carrier CVA-58, the USS United States. The B-36 and USS United States were

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incredibly capable, not to mention incredibly large and expensive, programs, and the Navy was the loser in the exchange. As the summer ended, the Navy went through a crisis of confidence in American leadership and Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Louis E. Denfeld pointed his finger directly at the newly installed Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson. This was a battle that would carry over into a new season.

It was an Indian summer of sorts, as fall brought little relief to the heat of international and domestic politics. Curatola covers three seminal events in the autumn of US discontent: China’s “fall” to Mao’s Communist Party; the congressional hearings over the efficacy of the B-36 bombers; and Truman’s decision to pursue a thermonuclear bomb. In today’s era of great power competition, Mao’s victory seems to be the most historically momentous of the three. Yet in 1949, the effect was primarily domestic. After an exhaustive, if standard, account of the Truman administration’s policy toward the Chinese Civil War, Curatola shows how the debate over China, which included the infamous China White Paper that attempted to shift the blame for the Nationalist defeat away from the Democratic Party, fed into the politically charged world of US domestic anticommunism. “The ‘loss of China’ helped underpin the unfortunate events of the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy witch hunts of the early 1950s,” Curatola writes, “when everyone was under suspicion” (131).

The changing of seasons did little to quell the Navy’s suspicions of the Air Force. As in the previous chapter, Curatola describes the internecine debate between the Navy and the Air Force over the utility of the B-36 and the practice of strategic bombing. Over the course of a few weeks, a parade of high-ranking naval officers went before a House Committee chaired by Democrat Carl Vinson and took the Air Force and the civilian military leadership to task. Vice Admiral Arthur W. Radford lambasted strategic bombing, claiming that the Air Force promised “cheap and easy victory,” when “sound military men” did not believe what the airmen were promising (142). CNO Denfeld sided with the Navy and politely took shots at Secretary Johnson, a man who was not known for thick skin. This was not simply the questioning of a platform—it was the questioning of the soundness of Air Force doctrine and strategy (not to mention Secretary Johnson’s wisdom). General Omar N. Bradley, who at the time was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later said that Denfeld had, “allowed his admirals to run amok. It was utterly disgraceful.” The Navy lost the battle and Denfeld lost his job, but as Curatola notes the “most important result of the October hearings was not the discourse between the two rival services and their respective leadership but the questions raised concerning the nation’s military strategy” (159).

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The most contentious question dealt with American nuclear strategy. Air Force strategists based their war plans on an abundance of nuclear weapons that would provide the United States with the ability to strike multiple targets deep within the USSR. But as chair of the US Atomic Energy Commission David E. Lilienthal noted in 1947, “it was assumed we had a stockpile. We not only didn’t have a pile, we didn’t have a stock!” (87). The approved war plan, codenamed Offtackle, required a total of 292 bombs to make it through Soviet defenses to attack 104 areas. But the United States only had 200 on hand. The situation did not get much better by fall 1949, when Curatola shows how the atomic debate soon shifted to the development of a thermonuclear bomb after the Soviets detonated Joe-1. Lilienthal and a host of other influential officials opposed a decision to pursue the new weapon for scientific, military, and moral reasons. What good would a bomb that produced around 300 million tons of TNT be in a war, they questioned, other than to destroy entire cities? The debate carried over into winter, and the release of a long-awaited report on Air Force war plans by the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group did not clarify matters. In the end, Truman was more persuaded by the fact that the Soviets might be able to develop such weapons before the United States did so. “Can the Russians do it?” he asked referring to the thermonuclear bomb. When his advisors responded in the affirmative, the president responded, “we have no other choice, we'll go ahead” (214). This was the final decision that led the United States to escalate the nuclear arms race and heat up the Cold War.

*Autumn of our Discontent* reinforces the centrality of 1949 as the pivotal year in the nascent Cold War when US thinking on its global military posture transformed. Recent works, however, have challenged this interpretation, and it would have been interesting to read how Curatola positions his work within this new historiography. Stephen Wertheim has written an excellent book that makes the case that the decision to expand America’s role in the world through a heavily militarized foreign policy occurred shortly after the Nazis defeated in France in June 1940. Curatola makes the case that “events during the autumn of 1949 cultivated such thinking”; Wertheim demonstrates that this thinking was already well underway (225). Engaging with the latest historiography would have strengthened Curatola’s contribution.

Curatola might have clarified the historiographical question by stating at the outset the book’s preferred audience. The hyper focus on interservice rivalries within *Autumn of our Discontent* might suggest that the book is intended for senior military leaders and policymakers. If that is so, then a conclusion connecting debates over military strategy in the pivotal year of 1949 to the present day would have been a welcome addition. Both the United States Air Force and United States Navy are currently going through major modernization efforts where tough choices must be made on which specific platforms to fund, echoing the debates of 1949. While the level of acrimony has not reached the level of the “Revolt of the Admirals,” it would not be surprising if interservice rivalry heats up under potential budgetary constraints. What, after all, is the utility of aircraft carriers in a potential conflict in the South China Sea where Chinese long-range

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rockets have the potential to neutralize carriers? This question should raise uncomfortable questions for the Navy about the relevance of a significant portion of its fleet in a great-power conflict, and the reader would have benefitted from Curatola’s insights on the matter.

Finally, what are we to make of 1949? Autumn of our Discontent reminds us that a myriad of momentous events happened in the year. It remains unclear, however, how they all connect. How, for example, was the Communist victory in China related to the “Revolt of the Admirals” except for overlapping chronologically? To be sure, Truman’s decision to pursue the hydrogen bomb can be traced to the Soviet Union’s detonation of its own nuclear device, but it is not difficult to imagine 1949 as being not as cataclysmic as it appears. In the book, all paths lead to the adoption of NSC-68, which was drafted in 1949 but not formally adopted until months after the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950. It is easy to forget how contingent that really was. There is an alternative scenario in which Mao chose to focus his attention exclusively on the destruction of Nationalist forces on Taiwan rather than supporting Kim Il Sung’s war to reunify Korea. Without Korea—without the events of 1950—what would 1949 signify? Was the 1949 militarization of US foreign policy inevitable? Perhaps, but it only makes sense when we look past the seasons to include a detailed look at 1950. If need be, we can get creative and declare the period “the long 1949.”

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