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Throughout the late 1940s, Soviet actions tended to confirm the Truman administration's worst fears. Two events, in 1949, however, greatly shaped the direction of the U.S. defense effort: the Kremlin's explosion of its first atomic bomb on August 29, and the Chinese communists' completion of the conquest of the mainland in October. On April 7, 1950, President Harry Truman received from the National Security Council (NSC) a report entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security." It suggested that four possible courses of action were open to the United States: (a) continuation of current policies, with current and currently projected programs for carrying out these policies; (b) isolation; (c) preventive war; or (d) a rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength in the free world. On January 31, 1950, several months after the United States' atomic monopoly had been broken and in line with the President's decision to determine the technical feasibility of a thermonuclear weapons, Truman directed Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson "to undertake a re-examination of our objectives in peace and war and of the effect of these objectives on strategic plans, in light of the probable fission capability and possible thermonuclear capability of the Soviet Union."[1]91 Moreover, the terms of reference continued, "It must be considered whether a decision to proceed with a program directed toward feasibility prejudges the more fundamental decision (a) as to whether, in the event, that a test of a thermonuclear weapon proves successful, such weapons should be stockpiled, or (b) if stockpiled, the conditions under which they might be used in war."[2]

[1] Richard Dean Burns and Joseph M. Siracusa, *A Global History of the Nuclear Arms Race: Weapons Strategy and Politics*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), I, 91.

[2] Ibid.

Truman, acutely sensitive to the potential pressure to produce and stockpile such weapons in the event that tests proved affirmative, regarded the question of "use policy" in the broadest possible terms. Specifically, the president noted, "The question of our policy can be adequately assessed only as a part of a of a general re-examination of this country's strategic plans and its objectives in peace and war,"[3]92 a position that also took into consideration the incipient arms race with the USSR as well as related social, psychological, and political questions.[4] None could doubt the gravity of the exercise. "The outcome, concluded, Truman, "would have a crucial bearing on the further questions as to whether there should be revision in the nature of agreements, including the international control of atomic energy, which we have been seeking to reach with the USSR."[5] The final joint State-Defense report, submitted to the White House on April 7, henceforth became known as Policy Paper Number 68 of the National Security Council—NSC 68.

Since then, and well beyond its ultimate declassification in early 1975, NSC 68 has continued to attract the attention of historians, political scientists, and scholarly commentators of every political persuasion. The net effect has been the elevation of NSC 68 to a position of landmark significance in the annals of modern U.S. foreign and defense policy, even though there was by no means consensus on what that significance was supposed to be. It is now the turn of veteran academic Ken Young, a professor of public policy at King's College, London, who rightly points out that opposition to George W. Bush's "war on terror," especially likening NSC 68 to Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy statement, has "injected new life into the debate about the significance of NSC 68" (3-4). Providing a critical rereading of NSC 68, Young's "article first revisits the origins of NSC 68 to review, on the basis of sources that have become more recently available, the impulses that drove the project"; "discusses the historiographical disputes about whether the NSC 68 exercise should be interpreted as a response to a mounting Soviet threat or as a cover for a push to economic hegemony"; and, finally, devotes attention "to the still-contested issue of whether the report that emerged represented continuity with past policy or a sharp departure" (4).

After a brief discussion providing the historical context of the document, Young surveys the historiography of NSC 68, with a particular focus on issues of language, beginning with what critics see as the overblown rhetorical style of Paul H. Nitze, Director of the State

Department's Policy Planning Staff, compared with, presumably, the more measured style of his predecessor ,George F. Kennan, and then moves on to responsibility of the Cold War. This is a particularly valuable section of the article, as it covers a lot of territory, concluding

[3] Ibid., 92

[4] The "Terms of Reference" were framed by the report's principal author, Paul H. Nitze. Interview with Paul H. Nitze, Center for National Security Research, Arlington, Virginia, April 29, 1977.

[5] Burns and Siracusa, *A Global History of the Nuclear Arms Race*, I, 92.

with an analysis of the revisionist argument that domestic political and economic considerations were the key drivers of rearmament. (These comments will be especially useful to graduate students in need of a quick fix.) More senior scholars will find more rewarding Young's treatment of Nitze's subsequent thoughts on NSC 68. Nitze's insistence, many years later, that NSC "'wasn't too black and white for those days'"(8) should remind us of the fundamental assumptions and attitudes of the Cold War climate of opinion, which informed the basic intellectual outlook of an entire generation of diplomats, policymakers, and politicians. Even contemporary critics such as Herbert Feis, former State Department official,who regarded the document as "the most ponderous expression of elementary ideas not very coherently expressed,"[6] never doubted the gravity of the situation.

In the section, titled "Continuity or Major Departure?," Young argues that for the defenders of NSC 68, the document represented continuity with the policy of George F. Kennan, whereas, for critics, it marked a sharp departure, amounting to "'the confrontational turn in U.S. foreign policy'" (12). The departure alluded to is the NSC 20 series, the intellectual basis of NSC 68 which was prompted by Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, in July 1948. The second paper, NSC 20/2 series, submitted to the National Security Council by Kennan's Policy planning Staff on August 25, 1948, analysed the various factors militating for and against the likelihood of immediate and direct Soviet military action. The document also examined how Soviet intentions were apt to be influenced by Moscow's successful development of an atomic capability. Young takes the reader though these bureaucratic shoals with great skill. All that I would add here is Kennan's observation that the Soviets "may actually prove to be more tractable in negotiations when they have gained some measure of disposal over the weapon, and no longer feel they are negotiating at so great a disadvantage." Nitze wasn't buying a word of it. "When it calculates," wrote Nitze of the Soviet Union, "that it has sufficient atomic capability to make a surprise attack on us, nullifying our atomic superiority and creating a military situation decisively in its favour, the Kremlin might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth."[7] Taking a page out of Pierreponte B. Noyes's prophetic story of a great civilization destroyed by atomic weapons that was published in 1927 and apparently devoured by Nitze while at Harvard, Nitze contended that the very existence of two superpowers was inherently destabilizing. "The existence of two large superpowers in such a relationship," observed Ronald Reagan's future arms control negotiator, , "might well act, therefore, not as a deterrent," as generally thought, "but as an incitement to war."[8] Put another way, Nitze had come to fear Soviet fear.

[6] Ibid., 95.

[7] Ibid., 104.

[8] Interview with Nitze, Arlington, Virginia, April 29, 1977.

The balance of the article deals with budgetary considerations, the timing of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, and the nuclear stakes of that conflict. It should be remembered that the concluding recommendation of NSC 68, for "a rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength in the free world," did not come with a price tag, and that without the North Korean invasion of South Korea, in 1950, together with the onslaught of Chinese volunteers in September, it probably would not have come at all. As for the "Super," the decision to proceed with the development of a thermonuclear weapons, the correct answer to the president's question, "Can the Russians do it?" was clearly the affirmative one he was given. If there were any doubts that Stalin came to appreciate the potential of the bomb to alter international politics, it is clear from his orders to Soviet security chief Lavrenti Beria and the Soviet Union's leading atomic scientist Igor Kurchatov to spare no resources in ramping up the Soviet bomb program on a "Russian scale."[9]

In disentangling the story of NSC 68, Young arrives at a number of thoughtful conclusions. For one thing, he observes, "The significance of NSC 68 is not that it proposed a new view of the U.S. national security interest but that it privileged Nitze's bleaker, more immediate but ultimately more apocalyptic assessment of the Soviet threat (32). For another, "On the record[,] Nitze, whose memory was sharp, accurate and consistent, generally emerges with greater credibility than Kennan and most of his contemporaries in this respect. Nitze's claim of continuity with Kennan's own position, however, was disingenuous" (32). The first image, essentially defensive, stressed the inherent unsustainablility of the Soviet regime; the second, dominant in NSC 68, reflected the debate on preventive war and called into being a preponderant power, in the face of a distant global war.

NSC 68 fits the pattern of American Cold War thought in every respect. It paints a dire picture of the USSR and the necessity for victory in the Cold War inasmuch as the U.S. and the USSR could not coexist with any success. Either one or the other would be destroyed. Then, like all hard-line statements, it assumes an easy victory. Just as Acheson and Nitze thought their 'toughness' would produce an eventual Soviet collapse, so this document assumed the same—that the United States could, through containment without threatening Soviet prestige bring about the demise of the Soviet system, hopefully, even with the help of the Russian people themselves. In this sense, NSC 68 resembles a more utopian rather than realistic document. In any case, we are indebted to Professor Young for "rereading," one of the most interesting documents of the Cold War. His article will become standard reading in the field.

Joseph M. Siracusa is Professor of Human Security and International Diplomacy at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of *Nuclear Weapons: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008); *America and the Cold War, 1941-1991: A Realist Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Praeger, 2010), with

[9] See Joseph M. Siracusa, *Nuclear Weapons: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48-49.

Norman A. Graebner and Richard Dean Burns; and *A Global History of the Nuclear Arms Race: Weapons, Strategy, and Politics*, 2 vols. (Praeger, 2013), with Richard Dean Burns. His interests include Cold War diplomacy, presidential politics, and the history of nuclear weapons.

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