

[seminar paper – not for quotation]

SELLING NSC-68:
MOBILIZATION, PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE KOREAN WAR
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In the spring of 1950, as the special working party charged with producing a reassessment of U.S. national security policy circulated a plan that would dramatically increase defense spending, the problem of how to sell such a lavish program to the American public dominated everyone's thinking. "Cohesion in our democracy is basic to U.S. security," insisted one consultant, "and the government was going to need assistance in getting public support for the national effort which would be called for." This would be far from easy, however, for America's democratic process—the very thing that set it apart from its enemies—was also a potential weakness. "I fear that the U.S. public would rapidly tire of such effort," lamented Edward R. Barrett, the assistant secretary of state for public affairs. "In the absence of real and continuing crises, a dictatorship can unquestionably outlast a democracy in a conventional armament race."¹

How could this problem be overcome? In the large historiography on NSC-68 it is often claimed that the Truman administration deliberately devised an excessively simplistic and exaggerated information campaign, employing arguments that were "clearer than truth." Historians have long argued that from the Truman Doctrine onwards, the president and his advisers believed they could best drum up popular support for their Cold War policies by "scaring the hell out of America," by using overheated rhetoric that locked U.S. policy into an "ideological straightjacket," perhaps even by engendering a "war scare" to "deceive the nation."² With respect to NSC-68, such arguments have been given greater force by two pieces of evidence that are aired in almost every historical account. One is the suggestion made by Barrett in March 1950 that it would be necessary to initiate a "psychological scare campaign." The other is Dean Acheson's famous claim in his memoirs that "the task of a public officer seeking to explain or gain support for a major policy is not that of the writer of a doctoral thesis. Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home the point."³ Emphasizing these two comments, historians have frequently argued that its authors sought to sell NSC-68 "in dramatic, even exaggerated terms," devising an information campaign that sought to "bludgeon" the minds of both top officials and the mass public.⁴

¹ *FRUS, 1950*, 1: 170-72, 191, 225-26. See also NSC-68 reprinted in Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC-68* (Boston, 1993), 43, 54.

² See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York, 1972); Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York, 1985); Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948* (New York, 1993).

³ *FRUS, 1950*, 1: 226; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York, 1969), 374-75. See also George Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (New York, 1967), 495.

⁴ See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, 1982), 108; Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton, 1996), 125-27, 180-1; Michael J. Hogan, *Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of*

On its own, however, even this rhetoric would not have been sufficient to spark and sustain support for such a large defense buildup. As Acheson noted in one discussion on how to sell NSC-68, “speeches alone would not do it, that people read and heard what was said and then turned their attention to other matters.” What was vital was an incident, a crisis in one of the many flashpoints of the Cold War. Seen in this light, the start of the Korean War on June 24, 1950, was a godsend. In the literature, historians have certainly been quick to posit a clear and simple relationship between NSC-68 and Korea, arguing that the sudden and brazen nature of the North Korean attack validated NSC-68’s alarming diagnosis of the communist threat, swept away the doubts of avowed budget balancers like Harry Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and created a fertile domestic environment for the administration’s “clearer-than-truth” rhetoric.⁵

Yet while these arguments crop up in almost every historical account, no one has undertaken a systematic assessment of the Truman administration’s efforts to sell NSC-68. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, a full understanding of the intricacies of these efforts reveals that the government was not always in the vanguard of the political debate on mobilization, scaring the public into supporting its goals with overheated rhetoric. Nor did Korea have an altogether uncomplicated effect on the whole selling process. Finally, a detailed analysis also sheds light on a number of specific claims that have often been made. Was it the case, for example, that the State Department began its PR campaign in the spring, and that “during the summer of 1950 ... Acheson stumped the country repetitively proclaiming the premises of NSC-68”? To what extent was the substance of the document revealed during this time? And why, if it did form the core of so much official rhetoric, did NSC-68 remain completely declassified for another quarter century?⁶

1. The Audience: The State Department & Public Opinion, January-June 1950

There can be no doubt that senior members of the Truman administration had a highly jaundiced view of American public opinion, convinced that when it came to foreign policy the domestic mood was often ignorant and volatile. This necessarily placed a great premium on forceful, dynamic leadership. As Acheson commented shortly after leaving office, “almost 80 percent of your time, if you

the National Security State, 1945-1954 (Cambridge, 1998), 300-1; Nancy E. Bernhard, “Clearer Than Truth: Public Affairs Television and the State Department’s Domestic Information Campaigns,” *DH*, 21 (1997): 561-63; idem, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (Cambridge, 1999), 83-86; Scott Lucas, *Freedom’s War: The U.S. Crusade against the Soviet Union, 1945-1956* (Manchester, 1999).

⁵ Paul Y. Hammond, “NSC-68: Prologue to Rearmament,” in Warner R. Schilling, et al, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York, 1962), 370; Gaddis, *Strategies*, 109; Robert Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 24 (1980): 563; Paul G. Pierpaoli, *Truman and Korea: The Political Culture of the Early Cold War* (Columbia MO, 1999), 29-30. Some historians have even speculated that Acheson invited the North Korean attack in order to rally support for NSC-68, or at least encouraged Truman to intervene for this reason. See Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract* (Princeton, 1990), 2: 431-35; Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 68-69, 115-16.

⁶ Rosenberg, “Commentary,” in May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, 162; Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 125-26; Bernhard, “Clearer Than Truth,” 562-63. In most accounts, the brief focus is on the State Department’s efforts in the spring of 1950.

are on a policy job, is management of your domestic ability to have a policy.”⁷ Of particular importance was crafting exactly the right message, because only certain types of arguments and phrases would resonate with such an audience. But this did not simply mean that the Truman administration always sought to “bludgeon” the ignorant popular mind into submission. Far from it: psychological scare campaigns, although an important part of the administration’s armory, had to be used sparingly. They ought to be employed only on those occasions when domestic apathy warranted such shock treatment—and even then there remained distinct limits to how far the administration could go.

The basic reason for this was simple. Inside the foreign-policy establishment there was a widely held conviction that the public’s ignorance about foreign-policy issues, rather than always leading to apathy, often resulted in volatile oscillations, as the popular mood shifted rapidly between complacency and hysteria, withdrawal and engagement. This, at least, appeared to be the lesson taught by the American experience in both world wars, when the public had initially been reluctant to get involved in the fighting, but once roused had been determined to crush the enemy, only to descend swiftly back into its old lethargy as soon as the fighting was over.⁸ It was also the common conclusion of a recent bout of highly influential social-science literature, as academics like Thomas A. Bailey, Martin Kriesberg, and Gabriel A. Almond exploited the growing volume of polling data to try to ascertain the basic nature of American opinion. By 1950, their central conclusion had been fully digested by officials in the State Department’s Office of Public Affairs (PA), and it gave intellectual credence to the notion that the popular mood was highly unstable, often characterized by “sudden shifts of interest or preference.” As Almond succinctly put it, “the superficiality and instability of public attitudes toward foreign affairs creates the danger of under- and over-reaction to changes in the world political situation.”⁹

Because the popular mood was highly susceptible to such violent mood swings, leaders had tread carefully, tailoring their message to suit current conditions. On occasion, this might well entail overselling, perhaps even exaggerating the importance of an international incident, in order to jolt the populace out of its torpor. But at the same time, clear dangers lurked in going too far in this direction, for such activity might also create an overreaction, perhaps even sparking a widespread popular hysteria. As a result, the goal of any

⁷ Thomas G. Paterson, “Presidential Foreign Policy, Public Opinion, and Congress: The Truman Years,” *DH*, 3 (1979): 1-18; Walter LaFeber, “American Policymakers, Public Opinion, and the Outbreak of the Cold War, 1945-50,” Nagai Yonosuke and Akira Iriye, ed., *The Origins of the Cold War in Asia* (Tokyo, 1977), 49, 60; Nancy Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust: Chinese-American Relations and the Recognition Controversy, 1949-1950* (New York, 1983), 159.

⁸ For public and private comments by senior officials in this vein, see Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (Columbia, MO, 1980), 98-99, 134; *Department of State Bulletin* [hereafter *DSB*], 23 (1950): 208, 799.

⁹ Gabriel A. Almond, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1950), 86; Martin Kriesberg, “Public Opinion: Dark Areas of Ignorance,” in Lester Markel, ed., *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* (New York, 1949), 49-64. On the social-science debate, see Ole R. Holsti, “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus,” *International Studies Quarterly*, 36 (1992), 441-43. On the State Department’s awareness of, and connections with, these authors, see, for instance, Francis H. Russell to Gabriel Almond, August 29, 1950, entry 1530, box 1, RG 59, NA; “Some Notes on Popular Knowledge Concerning Current Foreign Affairs,” January 22, 1951, entry 568N, box 20, RG 59.

information campaign was to generate interest in times of apathy, but without creating a panic when the mood swiftly began to shift.

In the spring of 1950, with the drafting of NSC-68 nearly complete, the likelihood that the public would oscillate between complacency and hysteria was not merely an abstract concern. The document itself was the work of a State-Defense working group, with Paul Nitze and the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (PPS) taking the lead. Its central conclusions were stark: rejecting isolation and appeasement on the grounds that they would simply encourage Soviet aggression, and preventive war because it would be "morally corrosive," NSC-68 recommended "a more rapid buildup of political, economic, and military strength" to be undertaken with the utmost speed.

Some historians have seen NSC-68's discussion of alternatives as a classic bureaucratic ploy. By setting up "straw options" like preventive war and appeasement, they contend, the working party's goal was to make its recommendation of a large defense buildup more palatable to economizers like Truman and Johnson, who remained publicly committed to a defense budget of \$13 billion.¹⁰ Yet such an interpretation neglects the administration's perception of the domestic environment. At the time of drafting, the mood in Washington was tense and uneasy. As PA reported to senior officials, the recent Soviet a-bomb test, together with Truman's decision to respond by building a hydrogen bomb, and "concern over communist seizure of China," had led to the public airing of a variety of conflicting proposals from calls for immediate disarmament and a proposed Truman-Stalin summit on the one hand, to a preventive strike against the USSR on the other. In this context, far from being "straw options," the alternatives discussed in NSC-68 symbolized the extremes that the American public might be tempted to adopt as it oscillated back and forth between apathy and panic.¹¹

Complacency was a particular concern in the spring. In this frame of mind, State Department officials feared, Americans might become more susceptible to the Soviet Union's peace propaganda, which started to grow in intensity from March with the Stockholm Peace Petition. They might also misjudge Senator Brien McMahon's proposal that the U.S. begin to advocate disarmament in order to free up more funds for a global economic aid program. Although McMahon intended this as a tool to counter Soviet propaganda, the State Department fretted that a complacent public, which had "a false sense of security," might take such ideas seriously.¹² To counter this, it might well be necessary to "whip up sentiment," launching a vigorous campaign that emphasized the danger posed by the USSR. As Acheson mused on one occasion, the administration might even have to resort to exploiting the next international incident that the communists seemed likely to spark in, say, Berlin, Austria, or Formosa in order to raise the public temperature. At the very least, Acheson believed the time was ripe to go public with some of NSC-68's central conclusions, and between April and June he

¹⁰ Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC-68 and the Soviet Threat," *IS*, 4 (1979): 141-47; Rosenberg, "Commentary," in May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, 162.

¹¹ Francis H. Russell to Mr. Rusk and Mr. Nitze, February 6, 1950, Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations: Subject File, lot 55D650, entry 1539, box 3, RG 59.

¹² Elsey, "memorandum concerning the president's address to the UN," November 10, 1950, speech file, box 47, Elsey Papers. NSC-68 also worried that "there are indications of a let-down of U.S. efforts" at this time. See May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy*, 50.

made a series of speeches to prepare the way for a more intensive mobilization effort, stressing that civilization was under threat from a monolithic and powerful communist bloc controlled directly from the Kremlin.¹³

Yet, even in the first half of 1950, this was only one aspect of the State Department's thinking. In the wake of the Hiss trial, the Fuchs' spy case, and McCarthy's first claims that the State Department was infested with communists, senior officials were also intermittently worried that Americans were panicky rather than complacent, perhaps even anxious to support radical ideas bordering on preventive war. Thus, in January Acheson listened angrily to a group of senators who claimed that their constituents were frequently writing in "with statements like 'why don't we get into this thing now and get it over with before the time is too late.'" This "attitude was growing by leaps and bounds in his state," one legislator stressed, "and ... he was compelled to take note of it."¹⁴ Of course, staunch anticommunist opinion makers like James Burnham and George Eliot had been bandying around such ideas for the past few years.¹⁵ But now that prominent legislators were starting to talk about the popularity of a preventive strike, PA tried to monitor how deep this sentiment ran. Unfortunately, there was little hard polling data on the specific subject, but one survey did suggest that 22 percent expected war with the Soviets in one year, while a further 57 percent thought war would come within five years. Although this did not necessarily translate into mass support for a preventive war, the word from Capitol Hill was that the popular mood remained ominously militant. "May I say that talks with a number of congressmen in the last few days, who have told me about their mail," Barrett told senior State Department officials on March 6, "underscores my belief that there is increasing public pressure, which could become dangerous, for some sort of bold action."¹⁶

This notion that pressure for bold action might be dangerous rather than helpful underpinned State Department discussions during the late spring, as officials gathered to discuss the possible implementation of NSC-68. Although the document itself had tersely and dismissively rejected the whole concept of a preventive strike, it had alluded to the possibility of the Soviet Union becoming strong enough to risk war with the U.S. by 1954. Because of this, there was much debate over whether the purpose of U.S. policy was to mobilize in readiness for such a war in four years time or "to prepare for something less." The fragile consensus that emerged was that NSC-68 "did not call for complete preparation for war, but primarily for a posture of defense sufficient to enable the U.S. to deter a Soviet attack, and to achieve U.S. objectives short of war."

Given the unstable nature of the American popular mood, however, together with recent hints that preventive war might become popular, such a fine distinction could easily be lost on the U.S. public. As Adrian Fisher, the State Department's legal advisor, pointed out in a meeting on June 6, "by indicating the necessity of building up forces you automatically create a frame of mind which

¹³ *FRUS, 1950*, 1: 206-9, 225; *DSB*, 22 (1950): 673-75, 1038-39. See also Carlton Savage to Nitze, May 2, 1950, PPS, Working Papers: NSC-68, lot 64D563, entry 1563, box 54, RG 59.

¹⁴ *FRUS, 1950*, 1: 140-41.

¹⁵ Russell D. Buhite and Wm. Christopher Hamel, "War for Peace: The Question of an American Preventive War against the Soviet Union, 1945-1955," *DH*, 14 (1990): 374-75. See also Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York, 1980), 318-19.

¹⁶ *FRUS, 1950*, 185-87.

considers that war is immediate and this in turn makes it impossible to achieve our objective which is preventing war.” James E. Webb, the number two man in the Department, fully agreed “that this sort of thing must be headed off—that it required firm leadership to sort out the things which are important to be done....” It was particularly essential to reject proposals from the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), which focused on civilian defense measures to be adopted *after* a war had started, because if the assumption took hold that “we are fighting a war tomorrow,” then “the inevitable result will be to make this assumption come true.”¹⁷

At the very top of the State Department, there was a real determination to stop this type of thinking from taking a firm root. In private, Acheson and the drafters of NSC-68 had no doubt that the U.S. was now engaged in a “real war” with the Soviets. In their speeches, however, they went out of their way to warn the public that “by thinking that war is inevitable ... we will make it so.” What was required, Acheson stressed, was not scare tactics, but efforts to appeal to “coolness” and “steady nerves.” “Restraint and self-discipline,” the secretary of state was to emphasize time and again,

can help us to avoid some of the dangers which lie along our course. One of the dangers, in particular, is avoidable. If we keep before us that our purpose in building military power is to enable us to settle our differences by peaceful means, then we shall avoid the terrible error of talking and acting as though the end of our effort is war. The purpose of our effort is the exact opposite. But foolish talk about preventive war, or the inevitability of war, will help to make war inevitable. It does not need to be so at all.¹⁸

2. Mobilizing For A Police Action, June-September 1950

Although a good deal of time and effort was spent during the spring thinking about how best to sell NSC-68, at this point State Department’s activity was very much focused on paving the way for the *eventual* public acceptance of a defense buildup, for there was not yet a bureaucratic consensus on if and when to proceed. At first glance, the outbreak of the Korean War on June 24 suddenly transformed the policymaking landscape, pushing even committed economizers like Truman and Johnson in the direction of an expanded military mobilization. Yet during the summer, the wheels of the national security machinery were only cranked slowly into action. Thus, it was not until July 27 that the president gave his formal endorsement to NSC-68, while detailed programming and pricing would not be ready before end of September. In the interim, any PR campaign would have to remain very much in the realm of preparing the public for what was to come. Historians have generally assumed that the start of the Korean War was ideally suited to this purpose. Was this the case?

In some respects Korean certainly helped. During the spring and early summer, the few efforts to lay the public groundwork for NSC-68 had been undertaken by the State Department. In July, however, the Pentagon suddenly had a very real incentive to identify itself with a large arms buildup. This was particularly true for Louis Johnson, the administration’s most public budget balancer, who had already been under relentless attack from the Alsop brothers on

¹⁷ *FRUS, 1950*, 1: 312-13, 323-24. For excerpts on the NSC paper discussed at these meetings, “Differences in Planning Assumptions in NSC-68,” see *FRUS, 1951*, 1: 26-27.

¹⁸ *DSB*, 23 (1950): 378, 615.

the grounds that his misguided notions of economy had left the U.S. military dangerously exposed at a time of heightened peril. Now, as U.S. forces in Korea were forced back in a series of month-long retreats, America's patent lack of preparedness became a dominant political issue. It was given added force by the absence of direct censorship in the Korean theater, which enabled war correspondents to inform readers back home of the severe equipment shortages. The State Department was perfectly happy with this, believing that "the real impact of the Korean situation should be permitted to fall upon the American people to alert them to the seriousness of the situation."¹⁹ Johnson was less enthusiastic, however, for he quickly became the central scapegoat in the preparedness debate, with even some Democrats attacking his "penny-pinching methods" and calling for his resignation. But Johnson was unwilling to force MacArthur to clamp down on war correspondents. Instead, he shrewdly tried to take cover behind NSC-68, telling the House Armed Forces subcommittee that as early as April he had informed them that a major national security review had just recommended a significant increase in the defense budget.²⁰

Letting the public—and the Pentagon—experience the full force of the Korean defeats therefore served an obvious purpose. But for many officials in the State Department and White House, this did not mean that the administration ought to accompany the unfolding events with aggressive, "clearer-than-truth" rhetoric, in order to drive home the need for mobilization. Quite the contrary: in the wake of the Korean crisis, such behavior was now deemed to be far too dangerous. For one thing, many officials worried that any overt taunting of Stalin might provoke the Soviets into another act of aggression. For another, excessive utterances might simply engender a popular panic, fuelling demands for radical and bold action against the USSR now. "We must exercise a high degree of self-discipline under the present situation," one State Department official therefore remarked to a friendly congressman on July 6, "and should carefully consider any measures likely to cause hysteria." "This is a situation where it is very important not to have our words run ahead of what we do," Acheson reiterated to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a couple of weeks later. "If you talk a lot bigger than what you are going to do, you may get some trouble. This is a very touchy situation."²¹

This determination to adopt a subdued public posture in the opening stages of the Korean War manifested itself in a variety of ways, each of which precluded any serious attempt to lay the foundations for public support of NSC-68. In the first place, there was to be no concerted and coordinated campaign to publicize U.S. policy. Indeed, Truman was reluctant to take to the airwaves at all in the first few weeks of the crisis, and was particularly opposed making a personal appearance before Congress lest this contribute to a "war psychosis." The president also tried to keep a lid on the public appearances made by Johnson and

¹⁹ Erasmus H. Kloman, "Notes on Public Relations Working Group Meeting," July 11, 1950, entry 1531, box 1, RG 59.

²⁰ Dept. of Army to CINCFE, July 14, 1950, RG-9: B.113, F. "WARWX, July 12-20, 1950," MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Library; Louis Johnson, "Statement," July 25, 1950, PSF (Speech File): Misc. Speeches, Johnson folder, box 43, Truman Papers, HSTL.

²¹ Alexis Johnson, "Interview with Representative Kruse," July 6, 1950, Subject File, Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations, entry 1539, lot 55D650, box 2, RG 59; "Statement by the Secretary of State," July 24, 1950, *Reviews of the World Situation*, 321.

other leading figures in the Pentagon, while Acheson was told to ration his public appearances, particularly avoiding any speaking engagements that were blatantly party political in nature.²²

As well as muzzling subordinates, the president also took enormous care over the few comments that the administration did release to the public. Back in the spring, Acheson had made a few speeches in which he had lifted phrases directly from NSC-68, depicting the world in bipolar terms, as a simple conflict between freedom and slavery, and picturing the communist world as a monolithic bloc in which the Kremlin called all the shots. After the start of the Korean War, however, official pronouncements were suddenly “calm and factual” in tone, with every effort made to avoid connecting the USSR directly with the North Korean attack. Thus, the president’s press statements conspicuously dropped the phrase “centrally directed communist imperialism.”²³ And any official who broke ranks from this line was now swiftly reigned in and disciplined—as Edward Barrett found out to his cost. At the very start of the crisis, Barrett told one reporter that the North Koreans had no autonomy and were utterly dependent on Moscow; their relationship, in his vivid phrase, was like that between “Walt Disney and Donald Duck.” Very quickly, however, Barrett received an urgent telegram from his superiors. “Pipe down,” came the terse instruction.²⁴

Nor was there any great effort to publicize the central recommendations of NSC-68. Acheson’s recent statements “in which he repeatedly called for strengthening the defense of the U.S. and other free nations against communism” were collected together as a way of “setting the record straight.” But there was to be no public revelation of the need to launch a massive defense program “with the utmost speed,” no hint that the effort would have to be sustained over a period of four or more years, and no indication of the likely overall size of the ultimate program. When the State Department did circulate an Information Guidance sheet to officials, all it contained was vague platitudes about the free world having “both the resources and the will effectively to resist the act and threat of aggression.” It was hardly stirring or radical stuff.²⁵

The one possible exception to all this was the president’s package for waging the Korean War that was discussed and finalized during the first weeks of July. In private, Truman now agreed with Acheson that we “must ask for money, and if it is a question of asking for too little or too much, ... [we] should ask for too much.” But he also remained cautious. Indeed, rather than using this as an obvious first step in the direction of massive mobilization, Truman’s attention was fixed firmly on Korea, where MacArthur’s request for eight divisions threatened to place an unbearable strain on the current ten-division army.²⁶ But while

²² *FRUS, 1950, 7*: 161; Eban Ayers diary, June 25 and 29, 1950, 1950, box 20, Ayers Papers, HSTL; Truman, *Public Papers, 1950*, 518; Battle, “memorandum for S/S,” July 12, 1950, Acheson Papers, box 66, HSTL; “Notes on Cabinet Meetings,” July 8, 1950, White House File, box 1, Mathew Connolly Papers, HSTL.

²³ *FRUS, 1950, 7*: 158, 169-70, 186-87.

²⁴ Edward R. Barrett, *Truth Is Our Weapon* (New York, 1953), 157; Barrett, OH, HSTL.

²⁵ Hardy to Brown, “Collected Statements of the Secretary on Necessity of Strength,” August 9, 1950, entry 1530, box 10, RG 59; PA, “Information Objectives for the Rest of 1950,” Information Memorandum No.92, August 16, 1950, entry 1374, box 2, RG 59.

²⁶ Acheson, memorandum of conversation, July 14 1950, box 66, Acheson Papers; James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The JCS and National Policy, 1950-1951. Volume 3: The Korean War*, (Washington DC, 1998), 76-84. Ultimately, MacArthur was given 6 ½ divisions to fight the war in Korea.

recognizing the obvious need to increase troop levels both to fight in Korea and to maintain a viable reserve in the U.S., the president nevertheless wanted to avoid “putting any more money than necessary in the hands of the military.” He also rejected the demands of those in NSRB for more sweeping and mandatory controls, believing that this current limited war “might fit into an expanding economy in which a judicious application of fiscal and monetary policy would contain inflationary pressures.”²⁷

Truman unveiled his limited package to the public on July 19, in a speech delivered to a radio and television audience that was estimated at around 130 million. Placing the Korean conflict in a global context, the president explained that the communist invasion was likely to be only the first in a series of “sneak” attacks. But apart from a few generalities about the “need to build up our own Army, Navy, and Air Force over and above what is needed in Korea,” he refused to issue any concrete hints that a large and sustained defense buildup over the next four years was in the offing. And even his request for \$10 billion in supplemental appropriations was basically a “stopgap measure,” formulated in response to the Korean emergency rather than being related to “larger national security considerations.”²⁸

Above all, officials remained determined to avoid any word or deed that might create the impression America was being placed on a war footing. This became clear when John Foster Dulles, the administration’s token bipartisan representative, proposed making a speech to ratchet up support for a larger and more sustained preparedness program. Swiftly and firmly disabusing him of the whole idea, Barrett stressed that “the mobilization for which he [the president] is asking is for the purpose of replacing the wastage in Korea and generally improving the defense of the U.S. It does not constitute full war mobilization. He therefore feels that in the passage cited it would be desirable not to relate the measures now being taken to the expectation of general war.”²⁹

3. Backlash: Republicans and Mobilization, Aug.-Sep. 1950

Although the administration therefore had good reasons for adopting a low-key public posture, its PR strategy soon had a number of unintended—even ironic—consequences. The first was that by failing to launch a vigorous, “clearer-than-truth” campaign the administration had effectively presented the Republicans with a clear opportunity to take the offensive. Of course, the GOP was already looking for any stick with which to beat the administration, its leaders convinced not only that the “me-too” strategy pursued by Dewey and Vandenberg had led to the electoral defeat in 1948 but also that Truman’s and Acheson’s abject neglect of Asia was responsible for the current mess in Korea. But had the administration

²⁷ “Preparation of President’s Message to Congress on Korea, July 19, 1950,” box 71, Elsey Papers; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal* (New York, 1973), 415; Pierpaoli, *Truman and Korea*, 33.

²⁸ Ayers, memorandum for the president, July 20, 1950, PSF (Speech File): Public Reaction to Speeches, box 42, HSTL; Truman, *Public Papers, 1950*, 536-41; Doris M. Condit, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense: The Test of War, 1950-1953* (Washington DC, 1988), 227.

²⁹ W.J. McWilliam to John Foster Dulles, July 20, 1950, Correspondence File, Edward R. Barrett folder, box 47, John Foster Dulles Papers, Princeton University (hereafter PU). In this effort, the administration was helped by certain editors who also believed “that a tendency toward hysteria was one of our graver national weaknesses” and thus refused to commission alarmist articles on subjects like civil defense. See Martin Sommers (of the *Saturday Evening Post*) to Stewart Alsop, July 18, 1950, Special Correspondence folder, box 27, Alsop Papers, LC.

adopted a more dynamic and forceful information campaign at the very start of this crisis, drawing the battle lines starkly, indicting the Soviet Union, and placing Korea squarely in the context of the opening round of World War III, then this would have made it far more difficult for the GOP to oppose the government. Indeed, the public pressure would have been much greater for everyone to forget past differences and focus on the global struggle ahead. The parameters of political debate would have thus been narrowed, the possibilities of dissent curtailed.³⁰ As it was, even in the current “police action” GOP leaders initially moved somewhat cautiously, with diehard opponents like Robert A. Taft going out of their way to stress that “Republicans should give every possible support to the conduct of the war.”³¹ Yet, at the same time, the GOP leadership also glimpsed an obvious opening to go on the offensive. Simply put, a limited conflict gave them the scope to offer the government only limited support. After all, there had been no declaration of war, no calls for total preparedness; there had not even been any fierce fire-eating language coming from the White House, compelling everyone toward unity at a moment of dire peril.³²

A second irony was that NSC-68’s diagnosis of both the threat and the solution now seemed to be far more in tune with the popular mood than the rather lackluster PR efforts the administration had thus far engaged in. Indeed, when one of the first ever focus groups was assembled in New York City to watch Truman’s July 19 speech, the pollsters’ central conclusion was that “the president was not in advance of the national mood.... If anything, the public would evidently have gone along with somewhat stronger language regarding communism.”³³ More traditional surveys also found that the government’s partial mobilization program lagged well behind the popular mood. “The main criticism of the administration’s actions since June 25,” one report noted in August, “is that the actions are inadequate and that mobilization should be faster and greater in magnitude.” According to Gallup, 53 percent of respondents believed that plans should be worked out “NOW for the total mobilization of all U.S. citizens—that is, in case of another war, every able-bodied person would be told what war work he would have to do, where he would work, and what wages he would get.” If support for such regimentation was surprising in itself, Gallup also found that 70 percent would endorse higher taxes to fund a larger military. “Rarely has the Institute in its fifteen years of measuring public opinion,” Gallup concluded, “found such

³⁰ This was the thrust of Henry Cabot Lodge’s position, when he called for “an all-out preparedness effort that would know no party line”; see Albright, “Lodge Closes Rift on Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, August 16, 1950. It was also what Acheson had in mind when, on other occasions, his inclination was to say: “politics stops at the seaboard, and anybody who denies that postulate is ‘a son of a bitch and a crook and not a true patriot’”; see Acheson, OH, HSTL.

³¹ Taft to LeVander, August 11, 1950, War (Korean) Folder, box 924, Taft Papers, LC.

³² A point made by Senator Capehart. See *Defense Production Act of 1950: Hearings before the Committee on Banking and Currency, U.S. Senate* (Washington DC, 1950), 135.

³³ Schwerin Research Corporation, “Public Reaction to President Truman’s Korea Speech, July 19, 1950.” White House aides were generally unimpressed by this new type of survey. “How do they know the degree of interest that people had in the speech?” asked one. “Did they have electrodes on their heads?” David E. Bell, memorandum for Mr. Connelly, August 10, 1950. Both in PSF (Speech File): Public Reaction to Speeches, box 42, HSTL.

heavy majorities expressing a willingness to pay more taxes for any public purpose.”³⁴

In Congress, many legislators were quick to line up behind such a popular cause. Even before Truman unveiled his own package, there had been demands from leaders of both parties “for round-the-clock armaments production and full mobilization on the home front.” As the debate got underway, there was little opposition to the president’s request for more than \$10 billion in supplemental appropriations for the military.³⁵ But Congress soon heard from respected and influential figures like Bernard Baruch, who advocated total and immediate economic mobilization, while James Patterson, an instrumental figure in the rearmament program during World War II, called for up to a quarter of the nation’s resources to be diverted toward defense. For the GOP leadership, this was a tricky issue, because Taft and his conservative followers believed that a wide-ranging mobilization would be tantamount to giving Truman “arbitrary and dictatorial control over the entire economy.”³⁶ But the Taft wing quickly found it difficult to hold the party to this line, and by July 31 fifteen internationalist House Republicans (including Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford) had issued a statement declaring that Korea “has exposed the fact that a tragic diplomatic and military inadequacy exists” and calling for “complete mobilization.” The very next day, Congress as a whole seemed ready to follow their lead. “Sentiment for all-out mobilization [is] sweeping through both houses of Congress,” one close observer noted. “Administration forces virtually conceded that the president’s limited program would be expanded.”³⁷

With the administration working hard to try to regain a measure of control over Congress, the main tangible result of this spasm on the Hill was a section in the final Defense Production Act that gave Truman the power to institute standby economic controls—something the administration did not deem necessary.³⁸ But at the same time, all this obvious evidence that the government’s stance lagged behind the popular mood also emboldened the Republican members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, after close consultation with their colleagues, to make a more sustained attack on Truman’s entire foreign policy. Releasing a White Paper on August 13, which was clearly the first shot in the upcoming midterm election campaign, they charged the president and Acheson with being blind to the “true aims and methods of the rulers of Soviet Russia,” constantly underestimating the dangers of Asian communism, and failing “vigorously to build strong American armed forces.” “These are the facts which must be faced,” the White Paper concluded. “The American people will not now excuse those responsible for these blunders.”³⁹

³⁴ Gallup, “Public Would Rather Risk War Than Permit Red Expansion,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 1950; Patterson to Russell, “Published Views on Current Temper of American People,” September 19, 1950, entry 568N, box 20, RG 59.

³⁵ Dalmas H. Nelson, “The Omnibus Appropriations Act of 1950,” *Journal of Politics*, 15 (1953): 280-81.

³⁶ James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican* (Boston, 1972), 454-55; Taft, “The Economic Situation Produced by the Korean Crisis,” July 24, 1950, box 628, Taft Papers, LC.

³⁷ “15 Republicans Urge Standby Control Setup,” *Washington Post*, July 31, 1950.

³⁸ Pierpaoli, *Truman and Korea*, 35-36.

³⁹ “Text of GOP Senators’ Statement Charging Foreign Policy Bungling in Europe, Asia,” *NYT*, August 14, 1950; Smith diary, August 11, 15, 1950, Alexander Smith Papers, PU; Meeting, August 9, 1950, Republican Conference Minority Policy Committee Minutes, 81st Congress, box 3, RG 46, NA/CLA; David

This highly partisan attack sent shock waves through the administration. “It is not ordinarily within the province of this staff to recommend approaches to be taken in domestic political problems,” Nitze wrote Webb on August 14, “yet the grave implications of the [GOP] statement as it affects the future conduct of U.S. policy, particularly the far-reaching program envisaged in NSC-68, cannot be overlooked.” After all, NSC-68 clearly assumed the maintenance of “national solidarity in support of the major undertakings in American foreign policy and security.” The Republicans, however, seemed to be more bent on attacking the administration at each and every opportunity. But what could be done? Nitze himself recommended that the administration ignore the GOP attack, because a forceful rebuttal would merely do further “injury to the bipartisan principle in the critical months ahead.” Others agreed. At a strategy lunch on August 15, officials from the White House, State Department, and Pentagon recommended that Truman adopt an air of studied disdain. “It was decided that the president’s statement should be very brief,” one of them recorded. “He should attempt to minimize the statement by the Republican minority and should do nothing which would be viewed as an effort to break up the bipartisan policy.”⁴⁰

Yet such official reticence only served to reinforce the growing impression that the administration’s whole Cold War strategy was distinctly lackluster. Indeed, from the perspective of the White House and State Department, there may have been good grounds for refusing to engage in public polemics, from concerns that a forceful rebuttal would further undermine bipartisanship to fears that a more vigorous and stark presentation of the danger would precipitate demands for more radical action. But a third irony was that this low-key public posture now started to exacerbate the very ills that officials were trying to avoid.

This became abundantly clear on the subject of preventive war. Far from dampening down demands for bold action, during July and August the government’s subdued PR efforts were actually starting to fuel them. Thus, in the middle of August a delegation of leading legislators from both parties descended on the State Department. Believing that the administration’s public statements had patently failed to bring “a new measure of hope to the American people,” they warned of “a growing disposition on the part of the American people to support the concept of preventive war. This growing attitude is aired in fear,” they stressed, “and will continue to grow in volume unless some bold alternative course of action is presented by the government.” This insight soon proved correct. In private, John M. Vorys, the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, now told the State Department that “war with the Soviet Union is inevitable. Perhaps our thinking should now concentrate not on how to avoid it but how best to win it.” On the radio, Harold Stassen was more specific, declaring that another communist assault anywhere in the world ought to mean that “war will come to Moscow, to the Urals, to the Ukraine.” Congress itself had to “take the leadership and issue this warning,” added Stassen, a likely contender

R. Kepley, *Collapse of the Middle Way: Senate Republicans and the Bipartisan Foreign Policy, 1948-1952* (New York, 1988), 95-97.

⁴⁰ Nitze to Webb, August 14, 1950, PPS Files, Consultants Folder, lot 64D563, entry 1568, box 8, RG 59; Tannenwald, diary, August 15, 1950, box 1, Theodore Tannenwald Papers, HSTL; McFall, “Material for Answer to Republicans,” August 15, 1950, Subject File, Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations, entry 1539, lot 55D650, box 1, RG 59.

for the GOP's 1952 presidential nomination, "because the Truman administration had been almost unbelievably confused and inefficient."⁴¹

In this environment, about the last thing the State Department wanted was any official encouragement of the notion that war was inevitable or that the U.S. should seek to provoke a showdown in the near future. Unfortunately, however, officials in Foggy Bottom had very little control over the actions of the central policymaker in the Pentagon. Indeed, by the summer the State and Defense Departments were themselves like two warring powers. Relations between Acheson and Johnson had completely broken down, and, despite a few forlorn attempts to build bridges, State Department officials were often forced to rely on scraps of information, sometimes even hearsay and gossip, to discern what the defense secretary was up to.⁴² Piecing this together, it soon became clear that Johnson was grasping every opportunity—in private, off-the-record comments to journalists and legislators—to shift the blame for America's poor showing in Korea, not just by badmouthing Acheson but also by depicting himself as the administration's leading hawk and a proponent of ideas that clearly bordered on preventive war.⁴³ On August 25, Johnson's sentiments finally came to the surface, when Francis P. Matthews, the U.S. secretary of the navy, publicly declared that America had to be prepared to launch a preventive war. Although there was no direct evidence linking Johnson to this speech, word in press circles and the Washington cocktail circuit was that "Matthews' speech was, of course, inspired by Johnson."⁴⁴

Coming on the same day that MacArthur released his famous letter on Taiwan to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Matthews' speech sparked a growing awareness that the administration's current public posture was now having perilous consequences. After all, far from fostering bipartisanship, it had provided Republicans with both an opportunity and motive to take the offensive. Far from dampening down demands for radical measures, notions like preventive war were now being discussed more widely. And, not least, all the controversy surrounding Johnson and Matthews was creating an image of policy confusion, even incompetence. Four years before, a very public dispute over foreign policy between two leading officials, Henry A. Wallace and James F. Byrnes, had foreshadowed a disastrous defeat for the Democrats in the 1946 midterm elections. Now, countless journalists hastened to emphasize the obvious parallel, while Taft, never one to let a good opportunity pass by, charged that the administration "has so many conflicts within itself, it's like a man with no brains who is unable to develop a consistent course of action."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Marshall, memorandum of conversation with Vorys, July 15, 1950, entry 1539, lot 55D650, box 2, RG 59; "North Atlantic Union and Related Matters," August 14, 1940, memoranda of conversations, box 67, Acheson Papers; *NYT*, August 16, 1950. See also Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954," *IS*, 13 (1988/89): 20-21.

⁴² See State-Defense Relations, PPS Files, lot 64D563, entry 1568, box 12, RG 59.

⁴³ Alsop to Sommers, August 5, 1950, Special Correspondence folder, box 27, Alsop Papers; Arthur Krock, memoranda, July 1950, Works and Memoranda Book II, box 1, Arthur Krock Papers, PU.

⁴⁴ Matthews, "Aggressors for Peace Speech," August 25, 1950, Francis P. Matthews Papers, HSTL; *NYT*, September 1, 1950; Alsop to Hibbs, August 31, 1950, Special Correspondence folder, box 27, Alsop Papers. The State Department made a vain attempt to get Johnson to renounce in public the notion "that war is inevitable"; see Walter K. Schwinn to Francis Russell, August 29, 1950, entry 1530, box 5, RG 59.

⁴⁵ Truman, *Public Papers, 1950*, 621. It was symbolic of the trajectory of thinking in Washington that Wallace's speech in 1946 had attacked the administration from a dovish, anti-Cold War stance, while the Johnson-Matthews' assault was from a hawkish, preventive war position.

Deeply worried by such criticisms, at the start of September Truman made a series of efforts to try to gain control over the public debate. For one thing, he moved to replace Johnson with General George C. Marshall, a man with vast experience in the problems of mobilization, and someone who had already developed a close working relationship with Acheson. For another, Truman also made two fireside chats in the space of just over a week in an attempt to clarify U.S. policy. In these, he vigorously denied that America sought a preventive war, and also stressed the need to “direct a large share” of America’s “productive power to defense purposes.” Yet, even now, the president’s overall tone was still subdued—more a detailed statement intended to undo all the confusion of recent weeks, than a rousing call to arms.⁴⁶

4. Preventing a “Let Down”: The Impact of Victory, Sept.-Nov. 1950

It was not until the end of September that the administration’s basic PR stance changed perceptibly. The central reason was simple. If the Korean invasion and the defeats of July and August had sparked very real fears that the public was prone to hysteria, then the sweeping victories after Inchon provoked a new set of concerns that the mood might descend back into lethargy and apathy.⁴⁷ Yet this is not to say that the prospect of a “let down” “encouraged” the administration to engage in a series of risky policies, from crossing the 38th parallel to ignoring warnings about a possible Chinese intervention, in the hope that a prolonged war might save the rearmament program. To be sure, on hearing MacArthur’s prediction that the war would be over by Christmas, the new defense secretary reputedly said this was “troublesome” because a “too precipitate end to the war would not permit us to have a full understanding of the problems we face ahead of us.”⁴⁸ But the administration’s basic reaction to this prospect was to contemplate a sustained and intensive information campaign to sell NSC-68, with the timetable governed by the prospect not only that the war would soon be over but also that the 82nd Congress would assemble for the first time early in the New Year.

Paving the way, Commerce Secretary Charles Sawyer delivered the opening blast on September 24, stressing that home front mobilization must continue even after victory in Korea. It would be “extremely naïve, even stupid,” he warned, “to assume that, if this episode is closed in our favor, we can forget the whole thing.” In the next few days, Marshall, Bradley, and Truman all followed suit. “We face a grueling period of hard work, self-denial, and danger,” declared the new defense secretary on September 27. “I ask you to bear in mind that if the fighting in Korea should cease tomorrow, our increased responsibility would still be with us.” “The greatest danger,” stressed Bradley the same day, is that once the fighting is over “this nation will let down its guard.”⁴⁹ With Truman endorsing

⁴⁶ Ibid., 609-14. A few weeks later, the president’s chief speechwriter explained that the “primary requirement” for such presidential speeches “is accuracy, not style.” See Charles S. Murphy to Truman, September 13, 1950, PSF (General): Murphy, box 131, Truman Papers.

⁴⁷ For private discussions about how to deal with a “let down,” see Delia Kuhn to Mr. Phillips and Mr. Micocci, October 3, 1950 entry 1530, box 5, RG 59; Meeting of PA Committee on National Security, Atomic Energy, and Politico-Military Affairs, October 11, 1950, entry 1530, box 6, RG 59.

⁴⁸ Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus*, 175-78; Frank Pace, OH, HSTL.

⁴⁹ “Controls to Stay, Sawyer Declares,” *NYT*, September 24, 1950; John G. Norris, “U.S. Must Keep Up Its Forces Sent to Europe, Bradley Says,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 1950; Edward R. Folliard, “Truman Hits Possible Cut in Arms Plan,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 1950. See also Acheson, meeting with the president, October 9, 1950, box 67, Acheson Papers.

Bradley in a press conference, at least one close observer believed that “these warnings are not independent, but are part of a consolidated White House plan.” For the first time, there was certainly a clear determination to reveal more of the conclusions contained in NSC-68. As Marshall now told members of the Business Advisory Council, the country had to prepare for a production program of at least four years that might cost in the region of \$55 billion.⁵⁰

In stressing the importance of sustaining the effort after Inchon, the administration was helped by the fact that the Defense Production Act finally passed on September 9. In the next two months, officials therefore had plenty of opportunity to announce all the partial mobilization steps that were now being taken, from the fact that steel production would increase by 9.4 million tons in the next two years, to the new “DO” priority symbol being placed on all industrial orders placed by the Defense Department.⁵¹ It also helped that moves toward a Western European defense arrangement were taking shape, with Acheson and Marshall both meeting with their European counterparts to discuss ways of developing an integrated force, while the State Department now moved swiftly to publicize how important MDAP, its military assistance program, was to America’s overall Cold War effort.⁵²

Yet obvious problems persisted. One was the State Department’s fear that the president himself might be prone to a “let down” in the post-Inchon euphoria. At a key NSC meeting on September 29, Truman’s old hostility to a large buildup certainly seemed to come back to the fore, for he now stressed that NSC-68 programs “must be of a size to insure public support.” No one was quite sure “whether this augured reductions.” But in the Pentagon, the new team assembled by Marshall was soon expressing its determination to base NSC-68 on secure long-term foundations rather than the “anxieties of the moment,” which in the current environment meant scaling down the total five-year estimate from \$260 billion to \$190.6 billion, while also cutting \$9 billion off another supplemental appropriations package planned for the current fiscal year. To Acheson, this was disturbing enough.⁵³ Then in mid-October, he also got wind of the fact that the president intended to become an enthusiastic cheerleader for Senator McMahon’s disarmament plan in a speech to be delivered before the UN at the end of the month. Swiftly intervening by raising “numerous and noisy objections,” Acheson finally persuaded the president to limit his discussion on disarmament to a few paragraphs, while “the McMahon idea that money saved from an armaments race could be spent on a super point four program was boiled down to a few skimpy

⁵⁰ Alfred Friendly, “Leaders Fear U.S. May Ease Arms Effort,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1950; Charles E. Egan, “Marshall Reveals a Defense Program of 4 Years or More,” *NYT*, November 6, 1950. At a New York conference on September 28, James Conant, who was privy to NSC-68, now emphasized that 1952-54 was the period of maximum danger. See James Hershberg, *James B. Conant* (New York, 1993), 501.

⁵¹ Clayton Knowles, “Military Will Get Industry Priority by U.S. Order Today,” *NYT*, October 2, 1950; Egan, “Business Satisfied as U.S. Orders Set Defense Priority,” *NYT*, October 3, 1950. On the implementation of the Act, see Pierpaoli, *Truman and Korea*, 37-41.

⁵² PA, “Accelerating the MDAP,” Information Memorandum No.97, September 29, 1950, entry 1374, box 2, RG 59. In private, officials were worried that French opposition to German involvement might create domestic difficulties, especially in Congress. In public, however, these differences with the French were generally glossed over, and even after the lack of agreement in the talks at the end of October Marshall expressed confidence that French opposition could soon be overcome. *FRUS, 1950*, 3: 377, 429-30.

⁵³ Minutes of the 63rd Meeting of the NSC, September 29, 1950, NSC Papers, box 3, RG 273, NA; Marshall to Nitze, October 3, 1950, PPS, Working Papers: NSC-68, lot 64D563, entry 1563, RG 59; Condit, *The Test of War*, 231-33, 235-37; Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 308-10.

sentences.”⁵⁴ At a time when the State Department wanted to lay the groundwork for selling a large defense buildup, it was a narrow escape.

Another problem was Congress, particularly after the Republicans made substantial gains in November’s midterm elections. Although the Democrats continued to hold nominal majorities in both houses, the State Department recognized that in practical terms the administration would now face a more hostile audience on the Hill. According to one PPS survey, when the 82nd Congress assembled in January, 24 senators would be outright supporters, 48 would be well disposed but selective in support, and 24 would be irreconcilables. In the House it would be even worse, with 50 members likely to be outright supporters, 130 generally well disposed but also “inclined to tight scrutiny of amounts of money,” another 130 highly selective in support, and 125 intransigent opponents. Such a make-up would clearly necessitate a charm offensive on the Hill, bringing in members from both sides of the aisle for consultations. It would also require working with influential Republicans like Eugene D. Millikin in the Senate and Vorys in the House, because although both were advocates of radical ideas bordering on preventive war, they were at least more sympathetic to the administration’s perspective than isolationists like Taft and Wherry.⁵⁵

Putting pressure on Congress would also entail a more intensive information campaign aimed at the mass public. After the key NSC meeting on September 29, the State Department set about this task. Proud of his handiwork, Nitze wanted NSC-68 to be “made public with the minimum of necessary deletions and editing, rather than a popular rewrite which would necessarily talk down to the public.” “While public opinion may be uninformed on certain subjects, including some of the main considerations discussed in NSC-68,” Nitze stressed, “the American public has all the intelligence necessary to make the right decisions, provided all the considerations are put before it and opportunity is given for full debate.”⁵⁶

PA’s response offered some interesting insights into its perception of the domestic audience. On the one hand, officials in the Division agreed that the administration had to be candid and upfront. “This is not a one shot affair like a particular bill to be put through Congress,” Schuyler Foster stressed. “It will last over five years and the information program will want to be designed with that fact in mind.” “It would make a very favorable impression on the American public,” a memorandum drafted in PA therefore concluded, “if the presentation of this program were regarded as an effort by the government to state all of the facts. The American people should not only ‘know what the score is’ but should *feel* that they what the score is. This does not mean that an effort should be made to scare or shock the American people. It does mean that they should be convinced of the frankness of the government in presenting the situation.”

⁵⁴ Elsey, “memorandum concerning the president’s address to the UN,” November 10, 1950, speech file, box 47, Elsey Papers. For an earlier attempt to defuse Truman’s enthusiasm for talking publicly about disarmament, see Acheson, memorandum of conversation with the president, September 11, 1950, box 67, Acheson Papers.

⁵⁵ Marshall to Nitze, “Legislative Prospect,” November 15, 1950, PPS Files: Congressional Folder, lot 64D563, entry 1568, box 8, RG 59; Handwritten notes of PPS Meetings, November 14, 1950, lot 64D563, entry 1563, box 78, RG 59.

⁵⁶ Nitze to Acheson, October 9, 1950, PPS Files: Working Papers, NSC-68, lot 64D563, entry 1563, box 54, RG 59.

Yet PA also saw drawbacks in releasing NSC-68 in its entirety. Interestingly, this was not because NSC-68 contained too much exaggerated prose that would “scare and shock” the public. Quite the opposite: PA believed that NSC-68 was “too sophisticated for public use in its present form. It takes for granted too much knowledge on the part of the reader.” Because it had been drafted before the Korean crisis, it also contained numerous passages that were clearly out of date. In a review completed in November, PA was adamant about this: “The NSC-68 series is too complex for public use without a convenient summary and a more direct statement of problems and conclusions.” It was also “overly technical”—“much of the language and treatment in these papers has the narrow currency of one group of experts speaking to another group of experts... Its end result is a cold, sophisticated document.”⁵⁷

By the end of November, such criticism had been taken on board and planning was proceeding apace. As MacArthur launched his “end the war” offensive in Korea, the administration decided to begin the task of publicizing NSC-68 in the New Year. An information campaign at this juncture would be especially vital, given the prospect of an unruly Congress and a public prone to a “let down” once the troops returned from Korea. In such an environment, the president’s state of the union address would provide the launching pad, followed by a concerted effort by prominent public and private figures, and perhaps even a pamphlet outlining NSC-68’s “less sophisticated points”—probably chapters four and seven, on the underlying conflict and the risks to the U.S., as well as Annex eight on the “Strategy of Freedom.”⁵⁸ At lunchtime on November 27, Acheson met with Truman to finalize these ideas. The two men went through the various suggestions for placing NSC-68 at the forefront of public debate, including a “Citizens Committee, the making of statements for them ... foreshadowing NSC-68, an advisory group, etc.” Finally convinced of the wisdom of this course, the president “thought that the administration should take a vigorous fighting attitude in support of our foreign policy” and agreed that all the State Department’s ideas “were wise and suggested that we go ahead developing these as rapidly as possible.”⁵⁹

5. The Winter Crisis, Dec. 1950-Mar. 1951

What seemed like a good idea on November 27, however, suddenly appeared hopelessly out of date 24 hours later, when Washington finally got word of the massive Chinese intervention in Korea. Unlike June, when the dominant instinct among officials had been to try to keep the home front cool, now no one attempted to hide the seriousness of this turn of events. On the contrary, with UN forces being flung into headlong retreat, Acheson believed that the administration had to “take dramatic measures to reverse the business-as-usual tendencies in the country.” In complete agreement, Truman moved swiftly to discard the NSC-68

⁵⁷ Foster to Russell, October 10, 1950, entry 568N, box 20, RG 59. PA, “Memorandum on Public Information Concerning NSC-68,” October 18, 1950; Russell to J.M. Flanagan, “Memorandum on Release of NSC-68 as a Public Document,” November 28, 1950; both in entry 1530, box 6, RG 59.

⁵⁸ Minutes, Undersecretaries Meeting, November 17, 1950, PA, Subject Files Relating to National Security, lot 62D385, entry 1270, box 57, RG 59; Russell to Flanagan, “Memorandum on Release of NSC-68”; Barrett to Nitze, November 15, 1950; Russell to Barrett, November 16, 1950; notes of conversation between Russell and Elsey, November 21, 1950; all in State of the Union folder, entry 1530, box 11, RG 59.

⁵⁹ Memorandum of conversation with the president, November 27, 1950, box 67, Acheson Papers.

timetable that had so recently been worked out. Thus, rather than wait for the new Congress to convene, within days the president had successfully got the lame-duck session to appropriate an additional \$18 billion, taking the total defense spending for the year to \$42 billion. Rather than unveiling the package in his state of the union address, on December 15 Truman delivered a fireside chat in which he not only called for an immediate expansion of the armed forces to 3.5 million but also declared a state of emergency in the hope that this would “have great psychological effects on the American people.” And, above all, rather than striving to complete the defense buildup in the four years originally envisaged in NSC-68, the whole process was now to be drastically expedited. “So far as procurement goes,” Marshall told a senior congressional delegation, “we are going to try to procure by 1952 what we had planned to procure by 1954.”⁶⁰

In stark contrast to the summer, for a brief period officials also sought to ratchet up the rhetoric. Developments in Korea, Acheson now declared, have created “a situation of unparalleled danger. No one can guarantee that war will not come.” “We are not in a world war,” Marshall stressed, “but we are in a period of the greatest tension and [are] facing the possibility of such a catastrophe.” Meanwhile, the president was even candid about who he believed the real culprit to be. “Our homes, our nation, all the things we believe in, are in great danger” the president told the public in his December 15 fireside chat on. “This danger has been created by the rulers of the Soviet Union.”⁶¹

Such statements were intended to give a clear lead at a time when PA feared that public opinion “is in a very serious condition. In the absence of strong, positive leadership in Washington,” Barrett warned, “the situation is ripe for mountebanks of various sorts to move in and fill the void.”⁶² In December, this was no idle warning. In the space of a few weeks, Herbert Hoover and Joseph Kennedy both made prominent speeches calling on the U.S. to withdraw its defensive perimeter to the Western Hemisphere. In Congress, the Republican leadership was so emboldened by its gains in the recent midterm elections that the likes of Taft and Wherry were openly questioning the administration’s determination to send U.S. troops to Europe. Taft even told reporters that he had “no great confidence” in the judgment of America’s military leadership. In a barbed assault that cut to the very heart of the administration’s entire PR strategy, Taft charged that there is “a kind of wavering between panic and reassurance that goes right on up to the Pentagon.”⁶³

In this fervid environment, senior officials fretted that the omens for NSC-68 were not terribly good. To be sure, Congress had swiftly voted all the money the administration had recently asked for, and there had even been familiar complaints that officials were “not moving fast enough.” Truman had also

⁶⁰ Handwritten notes of PPS Meetings, December 12, 1950, lot 64D563, entry 1563, box 78, RG 59 “Notes for the Secretary,” December 2, 1950, Acheson Papers, box 67, HSTL; Meeting of the president with congressional leaders, December 13, 1950, Subject File, Elsey Papers, box 73, HSTL. Despite all the scholarly focus on the “garrison state,” Truman’s two major speeches in this period contained no attempt to reassure the public on this score, except for one brief sentence: “remember that we are building our defenses in the democratic way, and not by the iron rule of dictatorship. Truman, *Public Papers, 1950*, 745.

⁶¹ Walton H. Waggoner, “Acheson Declares War Risk Is Grave”; “Marshall Warns Nation Is Facing Long Period of Partial Mobilization”; both in *NYT*, November 30, 1950; “Long Tension Ahead for U.S., Marshall Says,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 1950; Truman, *Public Papers, 1950*, 741.

⁶² *FRUS, 1950*, 1:423.

⁶³ “Taft Lacks ‘Great Confidence’ in U.S. Military,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 1950.

established the machinery to launch a more intensive mobilization effort, appointing Charles E. Wilson to head the Office of Defense Mobilization.⁶⁴ But in the Pentagon officials worried that panicky sections of congressional and mass opinion might now push the military into a massive mobilization that would be too swift and ultimately unsustainable. On the other hand, with issues like universal military training (UMT) and whether or not to send U.S. troops to Europe still pending, and with so many “mountebanks” jockeying to take America in a more isolationist direction, it also seemed possible that key components of NSC-68 might yet come unstuck. Determined to navigate a steady course between these two extremes, both the State and Defense Departments recognized that an intensive information campaign remained vitally important.

Yet the crisis mood, far from being an unbridled boon, actually placed significant obstacles in the way of such a campaign. Part of the problem was the State Department’s growing ineffectiveness as a mouthpiece for administration policy. By the winter, Joe McCarthy’s charges that the Department was full of communists were clearly hitting the mark, with a recent poll finding that 64 percent of respondents believed that at least some of its officials were disloyal.⁶⁵ By now, Acheson was also the principal target of sustained Republican assaults, which only mounted in intensity after November when he publicly likened the prospect of the GOP’s proposed reexamination of U.S. foreign policy to “the farmer who tears up the crops every morning,” or “the man who doesn’t know whether he really loves his wife.” A month later, at the very height of the new crisis in Korea, Republican members of Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of a party resolution calling on Acheson to resign. The president defiantly refused to be intimidated by this action, telling reporters on more than one occasion that Acheson would definitely stay. But the secretary of state was now a deeply polarizing figure—his public appearances, far from providing a chance sell policy, often became the perfect opportunity for Republicans to launch all measure of assaults against the administration. By January, the situation was so bad that the State Department decided it was prudent to limit Acheson’s speech schedule. He must not become “the principle [*sic*] antagonist of opposition spokesmen in the ‘great debate,’” the Department’s Working Group on Public Relations concluded. “...The Secretary should not take so prominent a place in the current public discussions as to revive antagonism to him as a personality.”⁶⁶

This state of affairs naturally worried PR officials in the State Department. But what could be done? Increasingly unable to make their case directly to the public, Acheson and his colleagues resorted to a tried and tested method: getting others to do the work for you. On December 12, the Committee on the Present Danger released its inaugural statement, calling for increased military spending, greater economic controls, and universal military service. Containing many of the prominent figures who had played a significant role in generating support for preparedness in 1940-1941, the CPD was only formed after discussions with

⁶⁴ Pierpaoli, *Truman and Korea*, 44-45, 49.

⁶⁵ PA, “Public Confidence in Government Officials Handling Foreign Policy,” January 9, 1951, entry 568N, box 20, RG 59.

⁶⁶ DSB, 23 (1950), 839-40; Working Group on Public Relations, “Summary of Meeting,” January 18, 1951, Entry 1531, box 1, RG 59.

senior officials at the Pentagon, and it remained in close contact with the administration in the months to come.⁶⁷

Throughout the winter crisis, Marshall also took up a good deal of the slack, testifying before various congressional committees on no less than eight occasions between the end of November and the middle of February, while his deputy made eighteen separate appearances. Meanwhile, the State Department was not entirely mute. Its officials held a series of off-the-record meetings with reporters, columnists, and broadcasters, with Acheson alone talking privately to journalists on a host of occasions during December and January.⁶⁸

In many respects this was the resurrection of the old team that had helped to garner support for the Marshall Plan: the revered general, ably supported by a cast of leading private citizens. Recently, historians have also made much of the Truman administration's general propensity to rely on informal "state-private networks" to sell its policies. Indeed, Robert Griffith, Michael Wala, Scott Lucas, and Nancy Bernhard have all explored the relationships the Truman administration developed with pressure groups, nongovernmental organizations, and the media, pointing to various motives, from a desire to avoid the taint of excessive official propagandizing to the ideological belief that freedom required private enterprise to carry the publicity burden.⁶⁹ Yet though these calculations may have been important at other times, in the winter of 1950-51 the State Department's main reason for intensifying its behind-the-scenes relationship with such individuals and institutions was more straightforward: because direct public statements by Acheson were apt to result in another round of bipartisan wrangling, officials deemed an indirect approach to be about the only way left to get their arguments across.

Unfortunately, however, when it came to NSC-68 the White House no longer agreed. On the contrary, shaken by the direction of the war, and fearful lest the enemy glean important information from these indiscreet background briefings, at the start of January the president was ready to order a clamp down. As he angrily told the NSC, "public disclosure of classified information regarding this government's national security policies and plans in these critical times has become so flagrant in recent weeks that I feel compelled to bring this matter to your attention at this meeting." Truman was particularly concerned about "recent disclosures in the press and radio of highly classified atomic energy information and top-secret data contained in the NSC-68 series." In the current crisis, he now deemed the divulgence of such material to be completely unacceptable. As a result, when officials talked to reporters they would have to be far more careful about revealing any of the details of NSC-68. The president's intervention also put a swift end to all the plans drafted in November to publish extracts from the document. Not for another 25 years would its specifics become known.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Tracy S. Vorhees, "The Committee on the Present Danger," April 1968, Vorhees Papers, Rutgers University; Hershberg, *Conant*, 491-514; Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis* (Boston, 1983), 51-114; Wells, "Sounding the Tocsin," 141-48.

⁶⁸ Ervine J. Button, Memorandum for Major George, February 15, 1951, box 197, folder 6, Marshall Papers, VMI.

⁶⁹ Robert Griffith, "The Selling of America: The Advertising Council and American Politics, 1942-1960," *Business History Review*, 57 (1983):388-412; Michael Wala, "Selling the Marshall Plan at Home: The Committee for the Marshall Plan to Aid European Recovery," *DH*, 10 (1986):247-65; Lucas, *Freedom's War*.

⁷⁰ Minutes of the 77th Meeting of the NSC, January 4, 1951, NSC Papers, box 3, RG 273; Schwinn to John Ferguson, January 5, 1951, PA, Records Relating to NSC, lot 62D367, entry 1392, box 3, RG 59.

Truman's determination to keep a tight rein on what his officials disclosed came at a particularly torrid moment. As UN forces continued their long retreat down the Korean peninsula, the domestic mood was particularly complex and confusing. Coexisting uneasily beside the signs of re-emergent isolationism were familiar indications that many influential spokesmen were again attracted by radical panaceas. Indeed, some legislators were now calling for tough action against the Chinese, from issuing an ultimatum if Beijing refused ceasefire terms to the launching of a guerrilla war on the Chinese mainland. More worryingly, rumors were also floating around Washington that a new preventive war pressure group was about to be organized, headed by the ex-communist Frieda Utley and supported by figures like Father Edmund A. Walsh, who had just provided the moral justification for such a radical course in a *Washington Sunday Star* article. In this frenzied environment, the State Department even heard a rumor that the CPD was in favor of radical action. As one journalist told a PPS official, in public CPD leaders like James Conant and Vannevar Bush might be staunch opponents of preventive war. But behind the scenes, they were part of a group that "was convinced that time was *not* on our side and that this country should in 1951 force the issue with the Soviet Union. The conclusion was that the U.S. should use its atomic superiority against the Soviet Union this year."⁷¹

With Symington at the NSRB circulating NSC-100, which called for the U.S. to adopt a more vigorous Cold War posture, and with some senior air force officials privately telling reporters that by July the U.S. would have enough atomic bombs to "flatten" the USSR in 30 days, top policymakers deemed it vital once more to try to cool down the home front, eschewing in particular any comments that might raise the specter of an inevitable third world war.⁷² As Marshall put it, the country had to move ahead with its mobilization program "with determination, but also with patience and calm deliberation." Meanwhile, Acheson now used his background briefings to deny that officials had a "date toward which were aiming our military buildup.... He did not believe war was inevitable," Acheson hastened to add, and "he did not feel that any secretary of state should ever base his policy on the assumption that all our energies should be directed toward preparing ourselves for war at a given date."⁷³

Such restraint made sense when Americans seemed prone to panic. Typically, however, senior officials were soon lamenting the public's susceptibility to violent mood swings, particularly in February and March as UN forces under General Mathew Ridgway halted the Chinese advance and recaptured Seoul. In Marshall's opinion, this turn of events, while welcome, also placed significant components of NSC-68 under threat. As he explained to reporters in March, "whenever you win a victory overseas, you get in trouble back here." Back in November and December, he complained,

⁷¹ Marshall to Nitze, January 25, 1951; Robert P. Joyce to Nitze, "NSC-100," January 24, 1951; both in PPS Files, Working Papers: War Aims, lot 64D563, entry 1563, box 73, RG 59. Walsh, "Is It Immoral to Strike First If Attack is Imminent?" *Washington Sunday Star*, December 24, 1950. Even liberal Democrats like Paul Douglas now expressed more radical sentiments. See *Time*, December 18, 1950, 20-21. There was no evidence that CPD leaders did support a preventive war; see Hershberg, *Conant*, 506, 531-33.

⁷² *FRUS*, 1951, 1, 7-18; Alsop to Sommers, December 15, 1950, Special Correspondence, box 27, Alsop Papers.

⁷³ Jay Walz, "U.S. Can Hit Back," *NYT*, January 1, 1951; Acheson, meeting with Ed Milne, Paul Martin, and Al Warner, January 18, 1951, memoranda of conversations, box 82, Acheson Papers.

there was very severe criticism and very general criticism and general feeling that what we were asking for here from the Defense Department was far too little. We had some proponents of as many as a 100 divisions. We had many for full mobilization. Just what was meant by that wasn't exactly specified. We had very emphatic representations that we must ask for more in the way of materiel. There was a general feeling of the majority of the people with whom we came into contact, publicly and on the Hill, that we were not seeing the problem in its enormity and danger and, therefore, not asking for enough. As I think I've said to you before, I thought that certainly by 1952, if the misfortune of full war hadn't descended upon us, that there'd be a change of public opinion and we'd have a hard time with appropriations. I thought possibly we might even get it in September, but I never dreamed that we'd get it in February.⁷⁴

The one saving grace was that Congress had enacted all the necessary appropriations and economic controls before the mood had begun to swing. The main casualty, however, was UMT, which in the new environment of early spring was only enacted with crippling amendments.

Conclusion

A few months later, PA conducted an opinion survey of popular attitudes toward "the national objectives set forth in NSC-68," and found the public "appears by all reliable objective criteria to be favorably disposed." Indeed, 83 percent wanted to continue the current levels of high spending on rearmament, 52 percent supported economic assistance to allies, and 57 percent favored sending U.S. troops to Europe.⁷⁵ Such an endorsement ought not to have come as a major surprise, for despite all the vicissitudes of the Korean War polling data had demonstrated remarkably consistent levels of support for the main recommendations of NSC-68 throughout the past year. Since July 1950, for instance, popular approval for sending military supplies to Europe had never dipped below 70 percent. In September, as officials started to worry about a "let down," surveys had even found that 72 percent supported steps to build up an army of Japanese soldiers, while Truman's announcement that he approved of "substantial increases" in U.S. troop strength in Western Europe was "widely supported."⁷⁶

Yet such data had not played a prominent role in all the administration's fretting about how best to sell NSC-68. Instead, officials had principally tackled this problem on the basis of a set of shared assumptions about how their domestic audience behaved in periods of crisis—assumptions that suggested that the popular mood was prone to violent oscillations, and that the task of leadership was thus to respond to the frequent peaks and troughs. This basic rejection of polls was not due simply to the specific fact that Truman and many of his top advisers were highly suspicious of such data, especially after all the main polling agencies had erroneously predicted the president's defeat in 1948. It was also due to the more general consideration that on many questions decision makers do not find polls to be all that useful. Polls, after all, reveal only what the public is currently thinking about a particular issue. What decision makers often require, however, is an assessment of how the public will react in the future, especially if the

⁷⁴ Minutes of Marshall's Press Conference, March 27, 1951, box 206, folder 58, Marshall Papers.

⁷⁵ Schwinn, "Domestic Public Opinion and the Achievement of National Objectives," June 5, 1951, PA: Policy Guidance and Coordination, lot 62D385, entry 1270, box 57, RG 59.

⁷⁶ PA, "Monthly Survey of American Opinion on International Affairs," September 1950 and April 1951, entry 568L, box 12, RG 59.

environment changes dramatically. Thus, while historians all too frequently resort to raw polling data to recreate a particular domestic environment, decision makers at the time often tend to view the public through the prism of particular assumptions, which may only partially be based on any hard intelligence about the state of the home front.

Yet this is not to say that officials had no grounds for believing that the public was prone to mood swings. During 1950 and early 1951, they received a lot of pertinent information from Capitol Hill, where a number of legislators warned that their constituency mail was running overwhelmingly in favor of ideas bordering on preventive war. Such intelligence was hard to ignore for a variety of reasons. Most basically, the main elements of NSC-68 would have to be passed by Congress, and senior officials fretted that legislators might be so sensitive to their constituency mailbag that, when they were not mired in apathy and a lack of interest for foreign affairs, they might instead be prone to over-reaction.⁷⁷

Although a number of historians have alluded to the existence of militant sentiments inside the U.S. during this period, in the literature the whole concept of preventive war is often viewed as an irrelevance (a “straw option” contained in NSC-68) or a curiosity (an idea without sufficient support to be implemented). At the time, however, senior officials were not so confident. In periods of acute crisis, they were particularly concerned that the demand for a preemptive strike might grow still further, particularly given that influential legislators and certain sections of the Defense establishment—what one State Department memorandum referred to as “uncomprehending and impatient elements within both the administration and the Senate”⁷⁸—seemed inclined to push for a radical course whenever the going got rough. In retrospect, such fears might appear excessive. But at the time, they cast a significant shadow over the administration’s actions, pushing officials toward a series of attempts to try to keep the home front cool.

Indeed, preventive war sentiment was one of the central reasons why the Truman administration’s efforts to lead were often subdued and low key. Particularly during periods of military defeat in the summer of 1950 and the winter of 1951, officials deemed it vital to make sustained efforts to head-off a potential hysteria and panic. In these months, there was to be no “psychological scare campaign,” no “clearer-than-truth” rhetoric. In stark contrast to conventional wisdom, which places the Truman administration in the vanguard of the public debate, dragging an apathetic public toward mobilization with scare-mongering speeches, officials at the time often saw themselves trying to navigate a steady central course between the perils of isolation on the one hand and preventive war on the other. In their view, this was a far from easy task. In fact, even though Congress swiftly provided all the appropriations that were requested in July and December, officials constantly worried that the unstable mood would undermine their efforts to sustain a long-term mobilization. Moreover, because their subdued information campaign often lagged behind the public’s demands for swifter and

⁷⁷ Another assumption that underpinned the administration’s thinking was that Congress was like a “mirror,” which closely reflected its constituents’ views. Or, as Acheson less elegantly put it, “I say the Congress is too damn representative. It’s just as stupid as the people are; just as uneducated, just as dumb, just as selfish.” Acheson, OH.

⁷⁸ Horace H. Smith to McFall, August 23, 1950; Ambassador Jessup, Discussion with Senator Pepper, August 24, 1950; both in Subject File of Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, lot 55D650, entry 1539, box 1, RG 59.

more vigorous action, officials also left themselves open to the political charge that they failed to recognize the extent of the danger facing the country. At a time when the implementation of NSC-68 was more than doubling the size of America's armed forces, as well as leading to a staggering 262 percent increase in defense appropriations, this may have been a curious charge. But ultimately, it was to prove one of the central consequences of the Truman administration's deliberate rejection of a psychological scare campaign.