Atomic Cowboys:
The Reality of Truman's Nuclear Monopoly

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The success of the Manhattan Project at the Trinity Test utterly transformed the post-war battlefield overnight. While the United States (US) emerged with a monopoly on nuclear weapons in 1945, challenges at the organizational, logistical, and doctrinal levels ensured that the monopoly was short-lived. Prior to the drafting of NSC-68 and the initiation of the US intervention in Korea in 1950, America's atomic capabilities existed largely as a paper tiger, with little means to utilize the nuclear advantage it possessed.[1] The Strategic Air Command (SAC), established in 1946, carried the burden of delivering nuclear weapons and struggled to develop a clear doctrine on how the few available nuclear weapons would be used in a hypothetical war with the Soviet Union. While leaders such as President Harry Truman and Secretary of Defense James Forrestal continued to grapple with the role and utility of nuclear weapons in a postwar world, they faced the even more difficult question of how to manage an arms race that was quickly escalating with the Soviet Union's successful detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949.[2] This essay argues that there was a clear disconnect between the expectations of policy makers and war planners over the realities that the US nuclear program could bring to the table.

The conclusion of the Second World War found the

1 NSC-68 was an influential policy paper that was presented to and approved by President Truman in April of 1950. It urged Truman to increase military spending to counter the growing threat of communism abroad. See Henry Kissinger, "National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) U.S. Objectives and Programs for National Security," *Public Intelligence* (Washington, April 14, 1950): 9.

2 Gordon P. Saville, "America's Air Defense: Radar Will Play an Important Part in Spotting Any Aggressor Aircraft," *National Defense Industrial Association* 34, no. 177 (1949): 174.

European continent reduced to ruins. The United Kingdom (UK) was on the verge of a financial crisis, and the Soviet Union was grappling with a massive reconstruction effort. This left the US as the undisputed world power of the period, which had not only emerged from the war relatively unscathed, but now possessed a weapon no one else did—the atomic bomb. US leadership was eager to show the world that it had something special. In the postwar environment, it quickly became clear that Truman's relationship with Stalin would involve far greater skepticism than Roosevelt's. In September 1945, during a meeting of foreign ministers from the US, the Soviet Union, and the UK, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes reportedly told Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov, "[i]f you don't cut all this stalling and let us get down to work, I am going to pull an atomic bomb out of my hip pocket and let you have it."[3] Seemingly bold—if not outright dangerous—statements like this were not out of the ordinary and dutifully represented the 'wild west' mentality that many in the Truman administration possessed at the time.[4]

The invention of the atomic bomb and growing tension with the Soviet Union signaled to the Army Air Forces that maintaining a peacetime strategic bombing force was necessary for national survival.[5] In response, the US formed the Strategic Air Command in March 1946 with the purpose of providing a dedicated command for long-range bombing missions. General George C. Kenney, who served as an air commander in the South Pacific during the Second World War, was chosen to lead the new air command, and equipment, personnel, and bases from the now defunct Continental Air Forces were trans-

3 "Manhattan Project: Nuclear Proliferation, 1949-Present," Osti.gov, 2001, https://www.osti.gov/opennet/manhattan-project-history/Events/events.htm.

4 See John Lewis Gaddis, "The insecurities of victory: the United States and the perception of the Soviet threat after World War II," In Michael James Lacey ed., *The Truman Presidency* (New York: Cambridge University Press; 1989), 235-272.

5 Carl Spaatz, "Evolution of Air Power: Our Urgent Need for an Air Force Second to None," *Military Affairs* 11, no. 1 (1947): 15.

ferred to SAC's control.[6] In the early years, SAC struggled to transition into a peacetime deterrent posture, and its uncoordinated nature reflected poorly upon Kenney. By 1947, postwar demobilization had left SAC at half strength in manpower with only twenty-two atomic capable B-29s available.[7] Furthermore, SAC had no access to atomic weapons or their assembly, both of which the Atomic Energy Commission kept closely guarded. Air Force leadership, unsatisfied with the poor state of SAC and its lack of readiness, quickly replaced Kenny in October 1948 with General Curtis LeMay.[8] General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Air Force Chief of Staff, specifically requested LeMay for this role.[9] LeMay's mission was to transform SAC into a force that could fight the day that war broke out. He began by firing all the high-level officers in SAC, citing that "[w]e don't have time to distinguish between the unfortunate and the incompetent."[10] These officers were replaced primarily by combat veterans who had worked alongside LeMay in the South Pacific. While LeMay's assumption of command was instrumental in SAC's success as an organization, it would take several years to reach the level of proficiency for which it became known.

As the US entered the atomic age, the question of how to realistically counter the Soviet threat was becoming more difficult to answer. Demobilization heavily impacted every level of US's combat capabilities. By 1947, the new US Air Force had been reduced from 230 groups to a mere 55, with only two of those groups labeled as operationally effective.[11] As the military experienced massive downsizing, Truman introduced a series of

6 Herman S. Wolk, "The Genius of George Kenney," *Air Force Magazine* 85, no. 4 (April 2002): 71.

7 Phillip S. Meilinger, *The Formation and Early Years of the Strategic Air Command, 1946–1957: Why the SAC Was Formed* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 339-341.

8 The Army Air Forces became the U.S. Air Force with the National Security Act of 1947.

9 Samuel F. Wells, "Curtis Lemay Builds the Strategic Air Command," In *Fearing the Worst: How Korea Transformed the Cold War*, Columbia University Press, 2020, 331.

10 Quoted in Wells, "Curtis Lemay Builds the Strategic Air Command," 331.

11 John M. Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow: The Strategic Air Command and American War Plans at the Dawn of the Atomic Age, 1945-1950* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016). 13.

budget cuts alongside it. The planned military budget for 1946 dropped from $70 billion to $49 billion, with plans to reduce the following year's budget to a mere $15 billion.[12] Increasingly expensive weapon systems worsened the budget restrictions. The Air Force suffered the worst, as some post-war jet bombers cost more than ten times as much as their wartime counterparts. Fighter aircraft costs soared as well. While the P-51 Mustang had cost only $54,000 per unit, its replacement—the F-89 Scorpion—carried a hefty price tag of $855,000.[13]

In May 1948, planning for FY50's (Fiscal Year 50) budget began with President Truman announcing a unified military budget that would not exceed $15 billion.[14] Truman's even distribution of funds between the different branches of the military frustrated the Air Force's leadership. As Army and Navy leaders criticized the newly founded Air Force as a resource vacuum, Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington complained that additional funds were wasted on other branches and viewed the strategic bombing fleet as the most worth of the limited resources available. In July 1948, he stated that "the only consideration which could keep the Soviet Union from making this attempt [to attack] is the fear of a retaliatory atomic attack by the Air Force against the Soviet Union."[15] Secretary Forrestal, alongside many others in the administration, argued that existing tensions with the USSR required an increase in defense spending. However, Truman was determined to prepare for peace, and the disconnect between fiscal policy and atomic strategy widened.

At President Truman's orders in mid-July 1948, Secretary Forrestal directed the armed forces to determine their respec-

12 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 26.

13 Steven Reardon, *The Formative Years: History of the Secretary of Defense Volume 1* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1984), 310.

14 Fiscal year 50 refers to the year 1950, and a unified budget means that the $15 billion figure would be divided somewhat evenly among every branch of the military. Samuel Williamson and Steven Reardon, *The Origins of U.S. Nuclear Strategy, 1945-1953* (New York: Palgrave, 1993), 312.

15 Memorandum from Stuart Symington to Louis Johnson, September 8, 1949, B File, President's Secretary's File, Truman Presidential Library.

tive budgets by the end of the month. Pressed for time and still with no unanimous atomic warfare policy, the services submitted their proposals to the president, which reached a combined total of $29 billion, nearly twice what Truman had allotted.[16] In August, Forrestal appointed a Budgetary Advisory Committee (BAC) in an attempt to reduce the military's budget proposal.[17] While the services worked together to determine their costs, they found that $23.6 billion was required just to maintain their existing capabilities with inflation.[18]

In October 1948, the BAC met again to reduce the $23.6 billion figure further. However, this opened the door to interservice rivalries, with the Army and Air Force both protesting the Navy's aircraft carrier requirements. Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Louis Denfeld responded to the attack by stating that "the unpleasant fact remains that the Navy has honest and sincere misgivings as to the ability of the Air Force [to] successfully deliver the [atomic] weapon by means of unescorted missions flown by present day bombers deep into enemy territory in the face of strong Soviet air defenses, and drop it on targets whose locations are not accurately known." While seemingly harsh, this statement was not far from the truth regarding the Air Force's strategic bombing capabilities.[19]

On October 5, 1948, Forrestal briefed Truman on the problems that the BAC was facing. Despite aggressive Soviet action across the Eastern Bloc, Truman was unwilling to increase the FY50 budget, as he feared the appearance of rearmament would provoke the Soviets into war.[20] On January 10, 1949, Truman submitted his figure to Congress with a defense budget

16 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 30-31.
17 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 32.
18 Reardon, *The Formative Years*, 343.
19 Quoted in Ibid., 344.
20 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 33.

of $14.24 billion.[21] Luckily for the Air Force, however, Congress saw things differently than Truman, and by April 1949, changes to the budget expanded the Air Force from 48 groups to 58.[22] While this was still far below the seventy-group figure requested, it showed that the atomic air wing had some congressional support.

During the debate over FY50, Secretary Forrestal had requested that the State Department outline its security goals and objectives to establish a basis for the proposed budget.[23] On November 23, 1948, the National Security Council did just that, publishing NSC 20/4, which identified the Soviet Union as the primary threat to the US and insisted that the Soviet Union's ultimate goal was global domination and the expansion of communism. Additionally, it was estimated that by 1955, the Soviet military would have full nuclear, biological, and chemical capabilities that could match those of the Western world. However, NSC 20/4 also proposed that the Soviet Union was not actively seeking conflict and that, if war were to occur, it would likely result from a miscalculation. The authors of NSC 20/4 warned against overexpansion of the federal budget, which did little to support Forrestal in his budgetary battle with Truman.[24]

As post-war budgetary constraints remained a significant issue until the approval of NSC-68, US leadership struggled throughout the late 1940s to develop a coherent national strategy for the use of atomic weapons. Many postwar planners envisioned using atomic bombs in a similar fashion to the strategic bombing campaigns in the Second World War. However, these plans were nearly impossible to execute given the weakened state of the now demobilized armed forces. The plans raised

21 Kenneth Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy Vol. II 1947*-1949 (Washington, D.C.: Office of Joint History, 1996), 135.

22 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 35.

23 Ibid., 93.

24 "U.S. Nuclear Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security," NSC 20/4, November 23, 1948, in Etzold and Gaddis, *Containment*, 210-211.

more questions than answers about how to conduct the nuclear weapons program going forward, and they left the planners divided on its use. The US was eager to show its dominance on the postwar global stage but was hard-pressed to realistically deploy its limited atomic arsenal.[25]

One of the first major attempts to determine nuclear doctrine was the establishment of the Spaatz Board in July 1946. Founded by Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces Carl A. Spaatz, the board worked alongside the newly established Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to determine how atomic weapons could be integrated into Air Force capabilities. Spaatz Board members argued that atomic weapons did not alter the nature of strategic air power but simply provided additional weapons to be used similarly to conventional bombs.[26] Board members were resistant to any change of Air Force doctrine and initially failed to appreciate the unique capabilities of their atomic weapons.[27] However, they did accurately predict that long-range strategic bombers would continue to play an important role in future conflicts. By 1947, the Air Force began developing comprehensive lists of industrial targets and suggested that they could hypothetically "kill a nation" by conducting decisive conventional and nuclear strikes on key points throughout an opposing country.[28] This included targeting governmental controls, which would, in the eyes of the Air Force, prevent mobilization and win a potential war in a matter of days.[29]

By 1946, Army Air Forces leaders had already begun drawing up elaborate target maps and compiling lists of bombing sites, dubbing the latter the "Bombing Encyclopedia

25 Williamson and Reardon, *Origins*, 32.

26 Edward Kaplan, *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction* (Cornell University Press, 2015), 15.

27 Ibid., 18.

28 Carl Spaatz, "Air Power in the Atomic Age," *Collier's*, 8 December 1945, Speeches and Article File, Box 268, Spaatz Papers.

29 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 17.

of the World."[30] By 1947, this list contained more than 5,000 potential nuclear and conventional targets, with 4,000 being industrial targets in the Soviet Union.[31] However, a severe lack of intelligence available to war planners meant that many of these targets were either no longer worthy of attack, or simply impossible to locate. Bomber crews would be given target folders containing information and photographs on their assigned target. However, until overhead photography was made available, the information in these folders was outdated and often inaccurate, severely limiting the Air Force's ability to strike or even locate its targets.[32]

It was becoming increasingly clear that the success of an American strategic bombing campaign against the Soviet Union would require an intelligence effort on a scale that had never been attempted.[33] The culmination of this was Project Wringer. In 1946, Project Wringer initiated a massive effort to interview former soldiers in Germany, Austria, and Japan who had fought against the Soviet Union in World War Two. While much of the data collected was incomplete or outdated, it would serve as the centerpiece for Air Force and SAC intelligence until the availability of reliable aerial reconnaissance.[34] Until mid-1948, reconnaissance efforts outside of Project Wringer would be conducted on a local basis without a strategic mission, lacking a centralized effort to collect and coordinate intelligence. Furthermore, the US did not have espionage agents inside the Soviet Union before 1949.[35]

The Pincher series was one of the first war plans to utilize

30 Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 107.

31 Ibid.

32 John Farquhar, *A Need to Know: The Role of Air Force Reconnaissance in War-Planning, 1945-1953* (Maxwell AFB, AL: 2004), 53.

33 Ibid., 58.

34 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 127.

35 Ibid., 97-98.

this information.[36] In October 1946, the Army Air Forces submitted plans designed to halt the Soviet war effort through strategic bombing. This plan primarily revolved around the targeting of oil production, with planners determining that sixty-seven percent of Soviet oil production was concentrated in just seventeen cities.[37] These cities were designated as priority atomic targets, set to be destroyed as soon as possible in a potential war. Pincher was innovative in that it directly addressed the growing threat of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe that US leadership faced. However, the existence of the Pincher plan was not indicative of SAC's ability to execute it, and Air Force General Frank Everest acknowledged that "there would not be enough planes at any time in the near future for operations from all the bases indicated on the charts in the paper."[38] The ongoing intelligence gaps made Pincher even more unrealistic, with genuine concerns arising as to whether or not bomber crews would even be able to locate their targets. The Air Force, recognizing their inadequate intelligence regarding Soviet military targets, stated that the current iteration of Pincher would be provisional until new information was made available.[39]

Target maps and war plans continued to be developed into 1947, with the number of required atomic bombs ranging from eight to fifty.[40] In July, the Air Force introduced a new plan known as Broiler. Broiler proved to be a major step forward in Air Force planning, with the deliberate use of atomic weapons in area bombing being outlined as the main course of the operation.[41] Broiler was far more specific than previous plans; it

36 The Pincher series refers to a set of war plans that would be continually developed throughout the following years. The specific subplan being addressed is "Makefast," which is directed towards the Air Force.

37 David Alan Rosenberg, "American Atomic Strategy and Hydrogen Bomb Decision," *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 1 (June 1979), 64.

38 Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 30.

39 Pincher would be updated as intelligence improved, with the Air Force's 'Makefast' plan being replaced with 'Earshot' in February 1947. Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 101-102.

40 Walter S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: US Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996), 148; Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod, *To Win a Nuclear War: The Pentagon's Secret War Plans* (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 34.

41 Previous war plans had only implied the use of atomic weapons.

explicitly called for the bombing of cities and listed the number of atomic bombs that would be used.[42] The plan's target list included thirty-four atomic bombs to be dropped on twenty-four cities, seven of which would hit Moscow. If the first barrage was not enough to halt the Soviet war industry, it was assumed that the US would have enough atomic bombs to simply repeat the same attack pattern as necessary.[43] Many in Air Force leadership expressed moral concerns over using atomic weapons on cities and not exclusively military targets.[44] In response, Spaatz argued that the role of air power was not to destroy cities, but to destroy the source of the enemy's strength. In practice, this would culminate in the bombing of cities containing important industrial targets and other vital resources.[45]

Broiler still suffered many of the same limitations as Pincher. The AEC had been granted all responsibility for nuclear materials, research, and development, and closely guarded these secrets from even high-ranking government officials. Consequently, few military officers had any idea about the capabilities of nuclear weapons, and those tasked with planning the bombing campaign were left in the dark until the end of 1947.[46] With little access to information regarding atomic bomb stores, Broiler's planners anticipated a minimum of 100 bombs to be available. However, by June 1948, the AEC's inventory barely numbered fifty.[47] Overall, atomic bomb production was nowhere close to the needs of war planners. While production would ramp up by the 1950's, early target lists did not reflect the actual number of bombs available. Even though the atomic bomb was viewed as the primary weapon of any future aerial offensive, war planners were forced to grapple with the fact that conventional munitions

42 William Borgiasz, *The Strategic Air Command* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 1996), 112.
43 Steven Ross, *American War Plans 1945-1950* (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 56.
44 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow,* 106.
45 Ibid.
46 Eden, *Whole World on Fire*, 110.
47 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 107.

would still have to be used in overwhelming numbers to achieve their goals.[48] Broiler was further plagued with severe delivery limitations. The plan was introduced by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Fall of 1947, nearly two years before atomic-carrying versions of the B-36 Peacemaker entered service. The new B-50 Superfortress was also not yet available, meaning that the older Superfortress model, the B-29, would be responsible for all deliveries of atomic weapons despite lacking adequate range.[49] Quietly, Air Force leaders acknowledged that for some of Broiler's targets to be hit, B-29 crews would be forced to perform one-way missions.[50]

In March 1948, the Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up a new plan, Halfmoon, to replace Broiler and Pincher in response to the Berlin Crisis. Halfmoon reflected the ongoing US interest in defending Western Europe, proposing absolute cooperation with Canadian and British forces against the Soviet Union. [51] Halfmoon was an emergency plan and thus shared many similarities with Broiler.[52] The United States understood that the Soviet Union—despite post-war downsizing—still maintained a superior ground force to that of Western nations. By 1948, the Soviet Union fielded 175 Red Army divisions alongside 75 Eastern European divisions against less than 20 European and US divisions.[53] As a result, the US would try to avoid major ground combat operations against Soviet forces, instead shifting focus to the strategic bombing of Soviet industry.[54] Expecting a Soviet push into Western Europe, US forces planned to conduct a fighting withdrawal to the Rhine River. From there,

48 Ross, *American War Plans*, 3.

49 The B-50 was a four-engine medium bomber introduced in 1948 to replace the B-29. The B-50 was faster, had a longer range, and could carry more payload than the B-29.

50 Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force*, 109.

51 Reardon, *The Formative Years*, 465.

52 Ross, *American War Plans*, 90.

53 Matthew A. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," *International Security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 110.

54 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 100.

SAC would initiate a maximum effort atomic strike against the Soviet war-making industry, flying sorties out of bases in England, Cairo, and Okinawa. Halfmoon's air element planned to hit 210 industrial targets, destroying seventy-two percent of Soviet oil production in the first seventy atomic drops alone. The atomic bombings would be followed by an intense conventional bombing campaign targeting transportation networks and power plants.[55]

Once again, war planners faced the question of how to execute the plans they had designed. Atomic bombs were stored in the US and would have to be disassembled to be safely transported to the intended operating bases. This presented numerous issues as a large portion of the military's cargo fleet was already occupied with the Berlin Airlift.[56] Additionally, in the Cairo-Suez region, there was only a single runway over 7,000 feet suitable for the B-29. Even then, there were questions as to whether that runway would be adequate when the aircraft was fully loaded carrying an MK III atomic bomb. Air bases in the UK suffered similar concerns, with the few 6,000-foot runways available labeled as "inadequate for the B-29 and marginal for the B-50."[57] As attractive as Halfmoon was to war planners, it did not make up for the fact that SAC entirely lacked the capability to hit the numerous targets listed. To put it simply, US leadership was lucky that the Soviets did not force their hand.

As the 1940s ended, American war plans became more realistic regarding the state of the atomic stockpile. In January 1949, the Air Force introduced a new war plan known as Trojan, which called for 147 atomic bombs to be dropped on seventy cities across the USSR, primarily targeting petroleum industries. The primary difference between Trojan and earlier plans such as Broiler is that by 1949, a total of 170 bombs were available

55 Ibid., 111-112.
56 Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force*, 211.
57 Quoted in Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 115.

for deployment, and by June 1950, that stockpile had risen to 292.[58] Additionally, the Harmon Report estimated that current Air Force intelligence was sufficient to strike the thirty most important cities listed in Trojan, and that intelligence on the remaining forty cities could be gathered within the first two weeks of the war's outbreak.[59] Using statistical deviation, the Harmon Report further determined that thirty to forty percent of Soviet industry would be destroyed in the aerial offensive, although this number was deemed to be overly conservative by the Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JCS).[60]

Throughout 1949, a new plan called Offtackle was devised to replace Trojan. Offtackle would work to demolish the Soviet war-making industry by dropping a total of 220 atomic bombs on 104 cities in just the first stage of the conflict. To accomplish this, a fleet of over 600 bombers comprised of B-29s, B-50s, and B-36s would be employed, with B-50s being the most numerous.[61] The opening phase of Offtackle called for around 6,000 sorties to be flown, with nearly all the atomic strikes taking place in the first month of the operation to maximize psychological effect.[62] The growing number of atomic bombs in inventory and the 1948 addition of the long-range B-36 to SAC's bomber fleet meant that Air Force capabilities were beginning to meet the ambitious requirements that planners had set forth. In Offtackle, the B-36s would operate from either continental airbases or from airbases in Alaska, depending on the season. When conducting strikes against the Soviet Union, they would fly over the Arctic, hit their targets in the Soviet Union, and then land on a secondary airfield in Cairo. Using heavily modified B-29s, recently converted into aerial refueling platforms (KB-

58 Rosenberg, "American Atomic Strategy," 26; Robert Laughlin, "Declassified Stockpile Data 1945 to 1994," Stanford.edu, 2025.

59 Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 37; Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 124.

60 The Harmon Report was a study initiated by the U.S. Government in May 1949 to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategic air offensive. Ibid., 38.

61 Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 163; Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 39.

62 Ibid., 161.

29s), medium bombers such as the B-29 and B-50 would be able to reach similar targets to the B-36 as well.[63]

However, by late 1948, Secretary Forrestal was beginning to express doubts about SAC's ability to deliver the atomic bomb.[64] The Air Force's JCS 1952/1—which had evaluated the viability of Halfmoon and Trojan—struggled to admit that the poor intelligence situation would significantly hinder aerial bombing operations.[65] Doubts from Forrestal, combined with increasing pressure from the Navy, led to the establishment of the Weapons System Evaluation Group (WSEG) in December.[66] Forrestal's concerns shifted towards Offtackle, and by January 1950, the plan was being investigated by the WSEG. By February, the team had found that the scale of Offtackle was almost entirely infeasible. SAC could support only one-third of the sorties that Offtackle required, and even that would be possible only if SAC was given airlift priority over other branches.[67]

Additionally, concerns over the number of available B-29 and B-50 airframes existed, with Offtackle assuming that at least 1,800 stored B-29s would be available.[68] However, a severe lack of spare parts had tormented the Air Force into the 1950's, with B-29s in storage being disassembled just to maintain the bombers in active service. During 1949, only forty-four percent of the aircraft in SAC's fleet were combat-ready.[69] Even worse, the situation that plagued Trojan and Broiler had not been resolved, and most of the existing airbases in the UK

63 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 120.

64 Ibid.

65 JCS 1952/1 "Evaluation of the Current Strategic Air Offensive Plans," in *Containment, Documents on American Policy and Strategy 1945-1950*, eds. Thomas H. Etzold and John L. Gaddis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 357-360.

66 Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 38, 39.

67 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 121.

68 Briefing Strategic Air Command Commanders Conference, Ramey Air Force Base, April 1950. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 341, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Vice Chief of Staff Executive Service Division, File 1950-1953, Box 1, George Washington University National Security Archive. 15.

69 Ibid., 163-164.

would be unable to support medium bomber missions. These airbases were few and far between, entirely lacking integrated air defense (IAD), making them vulnerable to Soviet strikes that could nullify Offtackle before it began.[70] Despite these severe underlying problems, Offtackle was approved in February 1950, becoming the emergency war plan for the US until mid-1951.

Even if SAC had been able to address the numerous logistical and doctrinal issues that each of its pre-NSC-68 plans faced, the question of penetrating Soviet air defense remained. SAC's information crisis meant that little was known about Soviet air defense capabilities. It was believed that the Soviet Union possessed as many as 15,000 anti-aircraft guns; however, US planners had no way to determine the competence or readiness of their crews.[71] As late as 1950, SAC still had no ability to escort its bombers on long-range missions. The F-84 fighter aircraft was intended to fill this role, but it lacked sufficient fuel tank capacity. While the Offtackle plan was never put into service, the cost of using unsupported bomber formations in the jet age would soon be realized in the Korean War. By the end of 1949, the Soviet Union had produced over 3,600 MiG-15 jet fighters, which could easily fly high enough and fast enough to intercept bombers like the B-29.[72] As historian Mark O'Neill argues, "[t]he appearance of the MiG-15 and the ground control radar that vectored it to its target was nearly as great a surprise as the Soviet atomic bomb had been a year earlier. The cannon-equipped Soviet jet could fly higher and faster than even the F-86 and proved very effective at destroying the lumbering U.S. B-29."[73] In Offtackle's case, the WSEG estimated that SAC would lose half of its bomber force during a daylight raid, or

70 Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 39.

71 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 110.

72 Kaplan, *To Kill Nations*, 69.

73 Quoted in Mark O'Neill, "Soviet Involvement in the Korean War: A New View from the Soviet-Era Archives," *OAH Magazine of History* 14, no. 3 (2000): 22.

one-third during a night bombing to Soviet air defense efforts.[74]

The Soviet detonation of their own atomic bomb in August 1949 signaled a significant change in the US position on the world stage. By January 1950, Truman had initiated development of the hydrogen bomb and reexamined its defense policy soon after. This reexamination led to the drafting of NSC-68, paving the way for US rearmament and subsequent increases in military budget.[75] In 1953, the total military budget reached $48 billion, with $21 billion being allocated to the Air Force alone.[76] By 1954, SAC had transformed into a highly capable fighting force, with aircrews constantly engaged in training under the leadership of Curtis LeMay. Throughout the Korean War, the B-36 was produced in increasing numbers, finally replacing the aging B-29s and B-50s. In 1951, SAC received its first jet bomber in the form of the B-47, and by 1952, Convair had received the contract to build the world's first supersonic jet bomber, the B-58 Hustler.[77]

In the immediate post-war years, atomic bomb production was nowhere close to the needs of war planners, and early target lists did not reflect the actual number of bombs available. However, atomic bomb production ramped up by 1949, making plans like Trojan and Offtackle more feasible. As US war planners continuously revised their atomic bombing strategies, they were hampered by intelligence shortfalls, budgetary constraints, and logistical difficulties that made their task virtually impossible. The rapid evolution of nuclear policy and strategy in the late 1940s laid the foundation not only for deterrence theory but also for the US's overall Cold War position. The emergence of NSC-68, along with the lessons learned from the early attempts at nuclear war planning, helped refine the US

74 Ibid., 39.
75 Curatola, *Bigger Bombs for a Brighter Tomorrow*, 176.
76 Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force*, 446.
77 Ibid., 178.

approach to atomic strategy with respect to Soviet nuclear proliferation.

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