On March 1, 1954, the United States tested the world’s first hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. More awesome than scientists anticipated, it proved to be 750 times more powerful than the A-bomb dropped at Hiroshima. Radioactive debris from the blast spread across 7,000 square miles of the Pacific, including inhabited islands, and enveloped a small Japanese fishing boat, *Fukuryu Maru* (the *Lucky Dragon*) that was some ninety miles east of Bikini at the time. Radioactive ash rained down on the fishermen. Some lost their appetites and grew nauseous. Their skin turned darker, and sores broke out on their fingers and necks, which had been most exposed to the radiation. When the boat got back to Japan two weeks later, twenty-three of the crew were said to be suffering from radiation sickness. Fishermen on other Japanese boats returned to port and also complained of contamination. An outcry arose, peaking six months later when Aikichi Kuboyama, a *Lucky Dragon* fisherman, died. American authorities said he had been felled by hepatitis acquired from a blood transfusion, but his organs revealed pronounced effects of radiation. Admiral Lewis Strauss, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, stated that the fishermen had belonged to a “Red spy outfit.”¹

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was conducting its own atomic experiments. On September 14, 1954, military leaders exploded a Hiroshima-sized atomic bomb in the air above 45,000 Red Army troops and thousands of civilians near the village of Totskoye. This was in the Ural Mountains, 600 miles southeast of Moscow and within 100 miles of a million people. The test, which was not disclosed until 1991, aimed at ascertaining whether troops (who were advised that the blast was an “imitation” atomic explosion) could continue to fight under such conditions. Films of the event revealed that some of the soldiers, who were less than two miles from blast center, indeed managed to struggle through maneuvers amid the smoke and dust and 115-degree heat. But many wore little or no protective clothing, and their exposure to radiation was enormous. A documentary concerning the episode later concluded that a number of soldiers and villagers fell sick, went blind, or developed cancer and other illnesses attributed to the radiation.²

These two events were among the most shocking of the early Cold War years. But they were hardly unique. The United States exploded at least 203 nuclear weapons in the Pacific and in Nevada between 1946 and 1961 and another ninety-six in 1962, exposing an estimated 200,000 civilian and military personnel to some degree of radiation. The Russians, the French, and the British also conducted tests. Americans near the Nevada sites were rocked and startled by the blasts and flashes of light from the explosions. Thousands of people employed in clean-up operations, as well as “downwinders” in the Pacific and in western states, claimed to suffer from the effects of radioactivity as a result of the tests.³

Whether scientists, politicians, and military leaders in the 1940s and early 1950s should have done more to warn the world about radiation remains a debated issue years later. Some scientists at the time were worried, not only about dangerous fallout from the tests but also about hundreds of experiments in which radiation was deliberately released into the environment and in which human beings were unknowingly dosed or injected with radioactive substances in order to learn more about bodily

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reactions. One such scientist, in 1950, warned the AEC that such experiments had "a little of the Buchenwald touch." By the mid-1950s many people were growing alarmed by what they heard and read. News items reported the presence of radioactive substances in the soil and in foods and predicted that leukemia, birth defects, possibly even horrible mutations might develop from explosions that had occurred far, far away.

Leading Eisenhower administration officials tended publicly to ignore or to dismiss such alarming reports. The evidence of danger, they said, was sketchy and debated by scientists. Many experts then believed that radioactive substances had beneficial potential: X-ray machines commonly measured foot sizes in shoe stores. Atomic testing and other kinds of experimentation, they added, were essential to national security and medical research. It is now clear, however, that these experts underestimated the dangers from the experiments. It is also clear that officials in charge of atomic testing knowingly exposed human beings to nuclear fallout. The AEC staged a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign on behalf of the peace-related blessings of atomic power, and Ike himself activated America's first commercial nuclear power plant in 1955. The AEC attempted to suppress evidence of long-range fallout problems as they became more evident by the mid-1950s.

Those officials who were kept apprised of what the weapons could do, however, nonetheless grew nervous. Eisenhower was one. Following a briefing in 1955 on the outcome of a hypothetical atomic war with the Russians, he estimated privately that the Soviet Union (which lagged in medical care, most of whom would be unable to get it. He observed, "It would literally be a business of digging ourselves out of the ashes, starting again.

This was indeed an unthinkable prospect—the most horrifying of the many calamities that would befall the world if the Cold War could not be contained now that the major protagonists were amassing stockpiles of thermonuclear weapons. Dealing with this new world, which was considerably more frightening than the one that had confronted political leaders in the 1940s, was the most awesome task facing the Eisenhower administration. Ike’s performance in the areas of foreign and defense policy could determine the fate of the earth.

Eisenhower’s early actions in these respects seemed likely to intensify the Cold War. Repeating the tough anti-Communist messages of his election campaign, he devoted much of his inaugural address to denouncing Communism. “Freedom,” he said, “is pitted against slavery; lightness against dark.” In his State of the Union message he added that the United States would “never acquiesce in the enslavement of any people.” When Stalin died in early March, Ike made little effort to develop better diplomatic contacts with the new Soviet leadership. His neglect, which was studied, may have been unfortunate, for the new Soviet premier, Georgi Malenkov, seemed eager for contacts.

Much later, when historians looked at once classified documents, it became clear that Eisenhower was wiser and subtler than his moralistic rhetoric suggested. He recognized, for instance, that world Communism was not monolithic, that the Soviet Union had severe internal problems, that Communist ideology was not the driving force behind Russian behavior, and that Soviet leaders did not intend to start a war. Conflicts between the Russians and the Chinese, he understood, were serious. Tensions with both nations must be reduced.

Eisenhower occasionally expressed these feelings to trusted aides, such as Emmet Hughes. “We are in an armaments race,” he lamented in March 1953. “Where will it lead us? At worst, to atomic warfare. At best, to robbing every people and nation on earth of the fruits of their own toil.” A month later he spoke out for a limit on arms and for international control of atomic energy. In December 1953 he delivered an “Atoms for Peace” speech to the UN. It called on the nuclear powers—the United States, the USSR, and the UK—to turn over some of their fissionable materials to an international agency.

These efforts, however, were sporadic and not followed through.


5. At Indian Point, New York, on the Hudson River.


Some, such as Atoms for Peace, were at least in part propagandistic—the proposal would have weakened the Soviet Union more than the United States, which was ahead in nuclear development—and were ignored by the USSR. Eisenhower tended instead to sustain the harsh, sometimes nearly Manichean rhetoric of the campaign and of his inaugural address, especially in the first two years of his administration.

Eisenhower talked tough for many reasons. One was to reassure anti-Communist allies abroad of America’s unbending resolve to stay the course. To have done otherwise, he thought, would have weakened support for NATO, which was then seeking to build up military forces and to embrace West Germany. Eisenhower also had to deal with hard-liners at home, McCarthy among them, who were stronger than ever before in Congress. Influential politicians on Capitol Hill worried not only about Soviet activity but also about maintaining the defense contracts that had become vital to the economic health of their districts during the Korean War. Many of the influential senators of the 1950s—GOP leaders William Knowland of California and Everett Dirksen of Illinois, Georgia Democrat Richard Russell (a power on the Armed Services Committee), Lyndon Johnson of Texas—ardently supported high levels of defense spending and firm foreign policy. So did important businessmen and many labor union leaders. The more than $350 billion in military spending during the Eisenhower era bolstered a host of corporations and defense workers in the country.

Above all, Eisenhower talked tough because neither he nor anyone else could be sure of Soviet or Chinese intentions. The Korean War, after all, was still killing American soldiers in July 1953. A month later the Soviets exploded their first thermonuclear device (not a bomb). In 1954 and 1955 high-level advisory committees, including the National Security Council, apprised the President of what they thought were significant increases in Soviet nuclear power. The Soviets, one such report warned in early 1955, then had the capacity to deliver a “knockout” attack on the United States. Though Ike knew that America had far superior nuclear resources, he could not afford to let his guard down in such circumstances. Like all American Presidents in the Cold War era, he had to take seriously an obviously powerful adversary. In doing so he frequently felt obliged to issue dire warnings about the dangers.

The President, like most Americans after years of Cold War hostility, in fact reflected a consensus that the Soviets were unbending and that signs of softness in dealing with them were tantamount to “appeasement.” Most liberals and conservatives agreed on these apparently unchanging facts of the world order. They also believed that the United States, the world’s greatest democracy, had a mission to promote democratic ideals throughout the world. For these reasons, too, Eisenhower did little, especially at first, to try to soften Cold War tensions. So while he possessed a subtler and more sophisticated knowledge of world affairs than many contemporaries, he seldom exposed his awareness to the public. He could have done more than he did during his presidency to educate the American people about the dangers of the fast-moving nuclear arms race. Eisenhower’s top appointments in the fields of foreign and defense policy reflected his anti-Soviet priorities. One of these was Admiral Arthur Radford, who replaced General Bradley as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in May 1953. Radford was a favorite of Republican conservatives, who never forgave Bradley for opposing MacArthur in 1951. A strong advocate of atomic weapons development, Radford (and other leading military advisers in the 1950s) brought a larger naval-air emphasis, especially the use of aircraft carriers, to military planning. Radford proved a ready advocate of the use of force abroad, mainly in Asia. On five occasions in the next two years (three concerning Indochina, two concerning the Nationalist-held islands of Quemoy and Matsu off the Chinese mainland) Radford pressed for American attacks, possibly including the use of nuclear weapons. Ike overruled him all five times.

Charles E. Wilson, the President’s choice for Defense Secretary, was another strong Cold Warrior. Wilson appealed to the President because he had been head of General Motors, the nation’s largest defense contractor. Ike hoped Wilson could bring businesslike economies to the Pentagon and control the interservice rivalries that still plagued defense planning. In his confirmation hearings, however, Wilson denied that he would have a conflict of interest, even though he owned $2.5 million in GM stock and had $600,000 due him in deferred compensation. Wilson further proclaimed at the hearings that “what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa”—a comment that opponents twisted to “what was good for General Motors was good for the country.”

Wilson was confirmed but did not manage to control the services. (This


was never easy.) Moreover, he lost influence within the administration, in part because he could not curb his tongue. Perhaps his most memorable faux pas took place during the 1954 election campaigns, when he opposed further government aid to the unemployed by blurting, “I’ve always liked bird dogs better than kennel-fed dogs myself—you know, one who’ll get out and hunt for food rather than sit on his fanny and yell.”\footnote{Ambrose, Eisenhower, 375. Ambrose notes that bird dogs do not hunt for food.} Well before then, however, government associates found him far too blunt for his own good. At a Cabinet meeting one aide listened to Wilson, then scribbled a note to another, “From now on I’m buying nothing but Plymouths.” It was said that Wilson while at GM had invented the automatic transmission so that he would always be free to drive with one foot in his mouth.\footnote{Hughes, Ordeal, 77; Marquis Childs, Witness to Power (New York), 177. The scribbler was Jerry Persons, the recipient Hughes. The quip about Wilson and automatic transmission is attributed to various journalists, usually James Reston.}

Eisenhower’s most important appointee, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, seemed at first to be a sound, indeed almost inevitable choice for the position. Dulles was the grandson of John Foster, President Benjamin Harrison’s Secretary of State, and the nephew of Robert Lansing, who had held the post under Woodrow Wilson. Dulles had been personally concerned with international relations for almost fifty years and had attended the Paris peace conference after World War I. He had then become an influential attorney in New York and was part of the Establishment network of well-placed lawyers and bankers who formulated postwar American foreign policy. In selecting Dulles, Eisenhower told his chief aide, Sherman Adams, “Foster has been in training for this job all his life.”\footnote{Hughes, Ordeal, 251; Ambrose, Eisenhower, 289.} He reminded Emmett Hughes, “There’s only one man I know who has seen more of the world and talked with more people and knows more than he does, and that’s me.”\footnote{Richard Immerman, “Eisenhower and Dulles: Who Made the Decisions?” Political Psychology, 1 (1970), 21–38; Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 160.}

From the beginning, however, Dulles became a lightning rod for criticisms of Republican foreign policies. This was in part because he seemed extraordinarily influential. Some contemporaries, indeed, were sure that Dulles was the power behind the throne and that Ike merely acquiesced in whatever Dulles devised. This was not the case: Eisenhower made all important policy decisions himself. Indeed, the President was at times bored and irritated by Dulles, who tended to be preachy in meetings. The Secretary of State, Ike said on one occasion, had “a lawyer’s mind” and tended to act like “a sort of international prosecuting attorney.”\footnote{It is true. Dulles, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was influential in national church affairs. His strong Christian faith strengthened his distaste for Communism, which he deplored as atheistic as well as unprincipled. Moreover, Dulles seemed humorless, at least on the job. Self-assured and pompous, he had a habit of looking up toward the ceiling (some critics thought toward God), hands calmly folded on his desk, while talking (critics said pontificating) at considerable length. Other critics simply described his manner as “Dull, Duller, Dulles.”} But critics of Dulles were correct in recognizing that Eisenhower relied heavily on his Secretary, who was a hard worker, knowledgeable, and wholly loyal in trying to carry out the President’s goals. For these reasons, and because Eisenhower did not always monitor his subordinates closely, Dulles enjoyed considerable leeway and initiative. He held office, enjoying the President’s confidence, until he grew ill with cancer and had to resign in April 1959. Only then did Eisenhower step forward more boldly on his own as the spokesman for American foreign policy interests.

Critics who took aim at Dulles fired off many grievances. They emphasized first of all that he was moralistic and self-righteous. This was often true. Dulles, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was influential in national church affairs. His strong Christian faith strengthened his distaste for Communism, which he deplored as atheistic as well as unprincipled. Moreover, Dulles seemed humorless, at least on the job. Self-assured and pompous, he had a habit of looking up toward the ceiling (some critics thought toward God), hands calmly folded on his desk, while talking (critics said pontificating) at considerable length. Other critics simply described his manner as “Dull, Duller, Dulles.”\footnote{What most irritated liberal opponents was Dulles’s apparently inflexible and ideological anti-Communism. This helped him to acquiesce in McCarthy-inspired efforts to purge the State Department of alleged subversives and appeasers. I. F. Stone, the liberal journalist, called him “McCarthy’s Secretary of State.” While this charge was inaccurate, the critics were mostly correct in focusing on his anti-Communist zeal, for Dulles—more than most contemporary political leaders—believed that Communist ideology (rather than strategic interests) determined Soviet behavior and that the Soviet Union therefore had a grand design. Perceiving issues in ideological terms, Dulles could be pickily legalistic when dealing with other political leaders. Some of these leaders were infuriated by his manner. Churchill said that Dulles was “the only case of a bull I know who carried his own china shop with him.” The journalist James Reston added that Dulles “doesn’t stumble into booby traps; he digs them to size, studies them carefully, and then jumps.”}

16. Hughes, Ordeal, 77; Marquis Childs, Witness to Power (New York), 177. The scribbler was Jerry Persons, the recipient Hughes. The quip about Wilson and automatic transmission is attributed to various journalists, usually James Reston.
17. Hughes, Ordeal, 251; Ambrose, Eisenhower, 289.
Analysis of Dulles’s ideas and activities by historians has slightly softened this acid portrait. Dulles was in fact politically shrewd. Anxious to escape the vilification from the GOP Right that had savaged Acheson, he worked hard at protecting his standing with conservatives in Congress, a very important consideration. It is also clear that Dulles was no more inflexible than Acheson—or than the Truman administration generally, which had initiated no serious negotiating with the Soviet Union (or China) in many years. Dulles’s style may have seemed more rigid, but the end result was much the same: more hardening of the Cold War.

These reminders are useful. Still, few contemporaries saw a flexible, subtle side to Dulles. Publicly—and in negotiations—he was mostly stern and unbending, with a harsh edge that not even Acheson had matched. Indeed, Dulles seemed an eager spokesman for a new administration that regularly denounced the Democrats for being “soft” on Communism. Like anti-Communist conservatives on the Hill, he seemed prepared to push the Cold War, already frigid, into a deep freeze from which it might never emerge.

The Central Intelligence Agency headed by Foster Dulles’s younger brother Allen was equally anti-Communist. The agency, created in 1947, had grown slowly prior to the Korean War. But it had received authorization to conduct covert operations’ as early as 1948, using it to intervene at that time in Italian politics, and it grew rapidly in the early 1950s. By 1952 its budget had risen to $82 million, its personnel to 2,812 (plus an additional 3,142 overseas “contract” personnel), and its number of foreign stations from seven to forty-seven. Under Eisenhower and Allen Dulles, a pipe-smoking bon vivant who was charming, popular with Congress, and well connected socially as well as politically, it grew into an important government agency.

The CIA had its first significant impact early in the Eisenhower years. In the summer of 1953 it led a successful coup in Iran against Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh, who had earned the enmity of British leaders by nationalizing their oil interests in 1951. The coup replaced Mossadegh with the pro-Western Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlevi, who agreed to a new charter that gave British and American oil interests 40 percent each of Iranian oil revenues. The Shah received a package of American economic aid worth $85 million. In June 1954 the CIA intervened again, this time in Guatemala in an effort to help rebels overthrow Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, the legally installed leader of the country. Arbenz Guzmán’s mistake had been to promote land reform by expropriating (with compensation) significant acreage of the American-owned United Fruit Company. Unbeknownst to the American people, CIA pilots joined in bombing raids that may have helped the coup to succeed. Eisenhower, fearing the spread of Communism in Central America, was highly pleased with the result. “My God,” he told his Cabinet, “just think what it would mean to us if Mexico went Communist.”

Because both of these coups were quickly and rather easily accomplished—and because some of the CIA’s involvement remained secret—they did not attract great attention from the American press. This was unfortunate for several reasons. First, the coups exacerbated internal divisions in these countries, with disastrous long-range consequences for the people there. Second, the coups indicated the willingness of reporters at that time uncritically to accept obfuscatory CIA cover stories: it was not until the late 1950s, when a U-2 reconnaissance plane under control of the CIA was shot down over the Soviet Union, that significant numbers of reporters began to display a healthy distrust of self-serving government handouts. Third, it was obvious that the coups involved well-placed economic interests. A thorough public discussion of these interests would have been useful in exposing the material forces that helped to drive America’s Cold War behavior. Fourth, the coups convinced the CIA and other government officials that covert actions were easily carried out. In the next few years it conducted other such actions in Japan, Indonesia, ...

26. Richard Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin, 1987); Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala (Garden City, N.Y., 1982); Stephen Ambrose, Eisenhower: The President (New York, 1984). (This is Volume 2 of Ambrose’s larger biography of Eisenhower. Other references from Ambrose on Eisenhower in this chapter refer to the previously cited one-volume version [1990]).
and the Belgian Congo. The bravado that such efforts engendered was to prove disastrous in later years.28

The coups were revealing in other ways as well. Americans who read about them seemed delighted with what they were allowed to know of CIA activity. The CIA leader in Iran, Kermit Roosevelt, TR’s grandson, was acclaimed as a hero.29 Americans seemed unconcerned that the interventions violated sovereign rights. Foster Dulles was hardly challenged when he went on radio and TV following the coup in Guatemala to call it a “new and glorious chapter for all the people of the Americas.”30

Above all, the coups indicated the power of Cold War thought and action within the Eisenhower administration. Top officials argued that Communist elements linked to Moscow were the key forces behind both Mussadeq and Arbenz Guzmán. This was not so. Though Mussadeq belatedly turned to the Iranian Communist party for help in order to bolster himself, he was fundamentally a nationalist. Arbenz Guzmán was a reformer, not a Communist. But the Dulles brothers easily convinced themselves—and many others—that Communism lay at the root of international unrest. The coups in Iran and Guatemala revealed that key figures in the Eisenhower administration, perceiving in the world in black and white, had at best a dim awareness of the appeal of nationalism and anti-colonialism throughout the world. Then and later American officials would demonstrate this profound misunderstanding.

Nothing did more to sharpen the tough-minded image of the Eisenhower administration than Foster Dulles’s pronouncement of a “massive retaliation” policy in January 1954. The “Free World,” he said, had properly tried to contain Communism with measures such as the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift, and the dispatch of troops to Korea. But these were inadequate, “emergency” reactions. Moreover, the “Free World” could not match “the mighty land power of the Communist world.” Instead, it must take the initiative and rely on “massive retaliatory power.” The nation should “depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our choosing.” This would mean “more basic security at less cost.” Dulles went on to say that warnings of such massive retaliation—nuclear weapons—had brought the Chinese to heel in Korea in 1953. The Secretary seemed to be proposing that the administration brandish nuclear weapons whenever confronted by an enemy.31

Dulles was not simply indulging in his fondness for stern and grandiloquent phrases. On the contrary, the National Security Council, which became much more important in policy-making during the Eisenhower administration, had reconsidered defense doctrine in 1953 and had approved NSC-162/2 on October 30. This document emphasized the need for a nuclear-based strategy and for cost-cutting (mainly of ground-based forces) in defense spending. Eisenhower had read Dulles’s speech in advance and had apparently penned in the key passage calling for a policy based on a “capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our own choosing.”32 “Massive retaliation” — the “New Look,” contemporaries called it—was carefully conceived administration policy.

The New Look in fact nicely complemented existing defense initiatives, which were beginning to rely heavily on the Strategic Air Command (SAC). By 1954 the SAC, still headed by the tough-talking, fiercely anti-Communist General Curtis LeMay—a kind of airborne George Patton—was replacing its propeller-driven B-36 bombers with jet-propelled B-47s. These could fly at speeds of up to 600 miles per hour and had an effective range (when refueled in the air) of nearly 6,000 miles. LeMay presided over a rapid expansion of his force between 1948 and 1955, by which time the United States had some 400 B-47s plus another 1,350 planes capable of dropping nuclear weapons on the Soviet heartland. The Soviets had perhaps one-tenth as many that could bomb the United States.33 Given this enormous edge, it seemed only logical for the Eisenhower administration to announce a policy that rested heavily on air power and atomic weapons.

Eisenhower backed massive retaliation for two other military reasons. First, it was obvious that the Soviets possessed a very large advantage in ground forces. As Dulles pointed out, there was no way that the United States could realistically hope to catch up in that domain. Second, Eisenhower knew that missiles carrying nuclear warheads were soon to become main-line military weapons. In pursuit of such weapons he qui-


etly but aggressively supported research and development of the Atlas, Polaris, and Minuteman programs, all of which were well underway by the late 1950s, and of light warheads for such missiles. America’s support of bombs and warheads was intense, resulting in growth in the number of nuclear weapons available to United States forces from around 1,500 in January 1953 to 6,000 or so six years later. This was an increase of 4,500, or 750 a year, or two or more per day. The effort, which was far greater than militarily necessary, gave the United States a wide edge in missile development by the late 1950s.34

In supporting massive retaliation Eisenhower and Dulles adopted historically familiar American approaches to defense: faith in high technology, and aversion to large standing armies in times of peace. These were politically attractive approaches. They also had several more precise goals in mind. The policy, they believed, widened American initiative by enabling quick retaliation—nuclear if necessary—on an aggressor’s own territory. The United States, for instance, could blast the Soviet Union itself instead of using troops (which were expensive to maintain and might get killed) to deter Communist trouble-making wherever it might occur—Greece and Turkey? Berlin? Korea?—throughout the world. In this sense, they thought, the new policy was both cheaper and safer than NSC-68 (1950), which had in effect called for fighting aggression wherever it occurred. Second, massive retaliation was supposed to keep an enemy guessing. Eisenhower and Dulles hoped that adversaries, like the Chinese in Korea, would think twice before defying the United States.

To Eisenhower the new doctrine promised above all to promote his vision of the good society at home. Reliance on massive retaliation would enable reductions in the size of the army, which would have been very expensive to maintain at Korean War levels, and therefore to cut costs. “More bang for the buck,” contemporaries said. The President was especially anxious to balance the budget because he feared inflation, which he was sure would badly damage the economy and widen divisions in American society. These, in turn, would weaken the standing of capitalism in the global battle against Communism.

In his skepticism about the long-run capacity of the American economy to tolerate high levels of military expenditure, Eisenhower differed substantially from bullish contemporaries—and from his successors in the White House. Holding grand expectations about the potential for American influence in the world, they felt confident that government could also promote rapid economic growth at home. They were much readier to spend generously for both defense and domestic programs. Eisenhower, too, was a Cold Warrior who wanted to lead the “Free World” against Communism. But he placed a considerably higher premium on the need for fiscal restraint, the key (he thought) to social stability. His tenacity in support of prudent financing, whether for defense or social programs, stamped a definite character on his presidency.

Eisenhower was also afraid that high levels of defense spending would give too much power to military leaders and defense contractors. The result could be a “garrison state” that distorted priorities. “Every gun that is made,” he said in 1953, “every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.”35 This did not mean that he believed in large-scale government social programs to relieve suffering; far from it, for those, too, would unbalance the budget. But he did worry that heavy spending for arms would feed what he later called the “military-industrial complex.”36

The quest to contain costs under the New Look enjoyed modest success over the next few years. Thanks mainly to partial demobilization following the Korean War, federal spending for defense decreased from $50.4 billion in fiscal 1953 to $40.3 billion in 1956 before creeping up to $46.6 billion in 1959. After 1954 it also decreased slowly as a percentage of the federal budget and as a percentage of GNP (from 14 percent of GNP at the peak of the Korean War to around 9 percent by 1961).37 All the armed services took cuts in personnel, especially the army, in which Eisenhower had spent most of his adult career. It lost 671,000 men and women between 1953 and 1959—a slashing that brought the number to 862,000 and that outraged many of Eisenhower’s old friends and colleagues. Two of these angry generals, Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor, were army chiefs of staff in the 1950s; both wrote books in retirement that

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34. Ambrose, Eisenhower, 478; William O’Neill, American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945–1960 (New York, 1986), 231–32, 272. The Soviets were first to launch successfully an artificial satellite, Sputnik, into orbit, in October 1957, but this much-noted success indicated mainly that they had the advantage in terms of thrust, a sign of their overreliance on heavy, awkward warheads. See chapter 14.

35. Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 133.


37. The percentage vis-à-vis GNP dropped a little more in the early 1960s, to around 8 percent in 1965. This reflected the considerable growth in the civilian economy in those years, not a decline in defense spending (which accelerated rapidly).
protested the reductions. The cuts prompted charges that the United States would lose the flexibility to cope with local crises—"limited wars"—throughout the world. Ike, however, was determined to control costs and to curb the influence of the military-industrial complex. Sure that air and naval power offered sufficient security (especially when missiles became operational), he successfully stood his ground. Only a general with his commanding popularity and expertise could have managed this policy without severe political damage amid the Cold War fears of the 1950s.

Opponents of massive retaliation leveled other complaints at the new policy. Some insisted correctly that it amounted to a strategy of nuclear "blackmail." Ike indeed resorted to blackmail against the People's Republic of China in standoffs over the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1955. Other critics complained that massive retaliation was saber-rattling of the most dangerous sort, that it frightened allies, and that it would accelerate the arms race. More "bang for the buck" would be matched by a Soviet response of more "rubble for the ruble." Finally, they said, the policy was simply not credible. Potential aggressors, far from being deterred, would act with impunity, confident that the United States would not dare to use nuclear weapons in the vast majority of regional conflicts. The Soviets, one critic complained, would be able to "nibble the free world to death piece by piece." Eisenhower did not bend under these criticisms; he never repudiated massive retaliation or the New Look, and he avidly supported development of missiles and nuclear power. But both he and Dulles grew sensitive to the need for careful application of the policy. Eisenhower in fact came to regret the rhetoric. He told a press conference in February 1954, "I don’t think that big and bombastic talk is the thing that makes other people fear." Later in 1954 he reminded Dulles that "when we talk about . . . massive retaliation, we mean retaliation against an act that means irrevocable war." Dulles, writing about massive retaliation in Foreign Affairs in April 1954, emphasized that it was "not the kind of power which could most usefully be evoked under all circumstances." He went on to say that he appreciated the need for other weapons.

Still, the rhetoric was incendiary, and the critics were correct in lamenting it. The policy did frighten America’s allies, and it did not help whatever chances may have existed following the death of Stalin for renewed dialogue with the Soviet Union, which thereupon rushed to catch up with the United States. Massive retaliation may in fact have played into the hands of Soviet hard-liners looking for reasons to accelerate their own weapons development. Finally, the rhetoric helped to further an already heated climate of domestic opinion. Massive retaliation did nothing to facilitate efforts at easing the Cold War in an age of thermonuclear capability.

It is nonetheless striking that most American political figures in the mid-1950s—Democrats as well as Republicans—adopted the same assumptions that moved Eisenhower and Dulles. Like Eisenhower, they talked as if they were certain of Soviet aggressiveness—even if privately they were not so sure about that. Though some of them, such as Adlai Stevenson, later sought to stop thermonuclear tests, most leaders tended to demand more, not less, defense spending—as well as a good deal more military flexibility. Amid the powerful anti-Communist consensus that dominated American life in the mid-1950s, voices for acting "tough with the Russians" all but silenced counsels of restraint.

**NOTHING MORE CLEARLY** revealed the nature of Eisenhower’s conduct of world affairs than a series of crises that threatened to run out of control between 1954 and 1956. These concerned, in order, Indochina, Quemoy and Matsu, Suez, and Hungary. In several of these cases the administration seemed to toy with the idea of American military intervention. But ultimately cautious management by Eisenhower and his advisers—and good luck—enabled the United States to control its involvement. Ike’s prudence under the test of these crises forms the nub of his enhanced reputation in later years.

In 1945 many native nationalists in Indochina had regarded the United States with admiration. President Roosevelt had periodically criticized colonialism and seemed prepared to put pressure on France, which had governed the area since the late nineteenth century, to surrender or soften its claims for repossession once the Japanese (who overran the region during the war) had been evicted. Although Roosevelt backed off from his

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39. Discussed later in this chapter.
41. Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 150.
anti-colonial rhetoric in early 1945, Ho Chi Minh, the leading nationalist from Vietnam (part of Indochina), still looked to the United States for support and inspiration. When Ho’s forces (working with an American intelligence unit) managed to take control of Hanoi in September 1945, he proclaimed Vietnamese independence in a message inspired by the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal.” Later that day United States Army officers stood with Vietnamese patriots, listening proudly to the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner” as American warplanes flew overhead.43

Ho was soon to be rudely disappointed. The French, assisted by the British, reclaimed southern Vietnam and in November 1946 shelled the northern port city of Haiphong, killing 6,000 civilians. Open warfare then broke out between the French and the Vietminh, as Ho’s forces were called. Fighting was to savage Vietnam (and often neighboring Laos and Cambodia, the other parts of Indochina) for decades thereafter.

American officials during the late 1940s did not pay the warfare much attention. Some recognized that Ho was a popular nationalist leader and that the French were corrupt and often brutal. But France was needed as an ally in the developing European struggle against Communism. Moreover, although Ho was first and foremost a nationalist, he was also a Moscow-trained Communist. Then and later this basic fact was the single most important determinant of American policy toward the region. Presidents from Truman through Nixon—from the Eisenhower administration continued this policy, increasing the aid to 75 percent of the cost of the war by early 1954, and for the same basic reasons. It was anxious to get France to join the European Defense Community (EDC), a military arm of NATO, and therefore tried not to antagonize the French government. In this way, as in many others, American policy in Southeast Asia was inextricably bound to policies in Europe and to overall Cold War strategy. Far-off Vietnam, considered relatively unimportant in itself, was both a domino and a pawn on the world chessboard.48

The French, however, were losing badly to rebel forces led by the resourceful Vo Nguyen Giap, the Vietminh commander-in-chief. Then and later the lightly armed, lightly clad Vietminh soldiers, enjoying nationalistic support from villagers, fought bravely, resourcefully, and relentlessly—incuring huge casualties—to reclaim their country. By

and what other leaders labeled “credibility.” If a local communist like Ho Chi Minh could topple the domino of Vietnam, nearby dominoes—Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, maybe even Australia, New Zealand, India, and Japan—might fall next. Such a domino effect would not only deprive the “Free World” of resources and bases; it would also demonstrate that America was a paper tiger—loud but not “credible” when a crisis arose.

For these reasons the Truman administration sided with the French, who in February 1950 established Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as semi-autonomous “free states” within a French Union. Bao Dai, the former emperor of Annam (a part of Vietnam within Indochina), was recognized by the United States and its Western allies as the puppet head of Vietnam. The USSR, China, and other Communist states recognized Ho. The United States stepped up military aid to the French in the area, especially after the outbreak of the Korean War, which seemed to prove the aggressive intent of Communism—Chinese as well as Vietnamese—throughout Asia.46 The aid amounted to 40 percent of French military costs by January 1953 and totaled $2.6 billion between 1950 and 1954.47

46. Historic animosities divided China and neighboring Vietnam, and Ho deeply distrusted Mao. The Chinese, however, did offer Ho large stocks of weapons and sanctuary during his fight with the French.
47. Stephen Ambrose, Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938 (New York, 1985), 140–45; Herring, America’s Longest War, 11–42.
contrast, the French army was poorly led. Its commanders were contemptuous of Giap and his guerrilla forces and vastly overrated the potential of their firepower. Ike dismissed the French generals as a “poor lot.” General Lawton Collins, a top American adviser, said that the United States must “put the squeeze on the French to get them off their fannies.” Nothing of that sort happened, and the French, hanging on to major cities such as Hanoi and Saigon, foolishly decided in early 1954 to fight a decisive battle at Dienbienphu, a hard-to-defend redoubt deep in rebel-held territory near the border with Laos.

By then various of Ike’s advisers were growing anxious to engage the United States in rescue of the French. One was Vice-president Nixon, who floated the idea of sending in American ground forces. Another was chief of staff Radford, who urged massive strikes, possibly with tactical nuclear weapons, from American bombers and carriers. General Nathan Twining, air force chief of staff, favored dropping “small tactical A-bombs.” The result, he said, would have been to “clean those Commies out of there and the band could play the Marseillaise and the French forces in Vietnam. The region, he said in January 1954, was a “leaky dike.” But it is “sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure wash away.” On April 7, with the French in desperate straits at Dienbienphu, he gave his version of the domino theory: “You have a row of dominos set up. You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound consequences.”

At times Eisenhower seemed tempted to involve American military forces in Vietnam. The region, he said in January 1954, was a “leaky dike.” But it is “sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure wash away.” On April 7, with the French in desperate straits at Dienbienphu, he gave his version of the domino theory: “You have a row of dominos set up. You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound consequences.”

In fact, however, his domino statement was window dressing aimed mainly at reassuring domestic hard-liners and, perhaps, to make the Chinese think twice about intervening. The President never did more than toy with the idea of air strikes or use of nuclear weapons. As a general, he knew that strikes would have little military value around Dienbienphu. “I couldn’t think of anything probably less effective,” he later explained,

50. Ibid, 30–32.
52. Herring, America’s Longest War, 29–35.

“... unless you were willing to use weapons that could have destroyed the jungles all around the area for miles and that would have probably destroyed Dienbienphu itself, and that would have been that.” Shown an NSC paper recommending use of atomic weapons, he exploded, “You boys must be crazy. We can’t use those awful things against Asians for the second time in less than ten years. My God.”

Eisenhower, moreover, had already taken steps to avoid unilateral American military involvement. He and Dulles agreed that there could be no such intervention without major French concessions, including significant movement toward Vietnamese independence. Testing British reactions, he had discovered what he already suspected: Great Britain, led by Churchill, had no stomach whatever for military engagement. Neither did army chief of staff Ridgway. American intervention, Ridgway said, could entail the drafting of 500,000 to 1,000,000 additional men and the fighting of a war in a country whose people, unlike most Koreans, passionately opposed American military presence. Ridgway ridiculed the “old delusive idea . . . that we could do things the cheap and easy way.”

With doubts like these in mind, Eisenhower shrewdly decided to consult key congressmen, knowing that they, too, were cool to American action. On April 3, four days before his domino pronouncement, the congressional leaders told him that sentiment on Capitol Hill opposed intervention. “No more Koreas,” they said, unless America’s allies, notably Britain, gave firm military commitments and unless the French agreed to speed the process of Vietnamese independence. The congressional leaders, like Ike, were virtually certain that neither the British nor the French would accept such conditions. So when France two days later asked for American air strikes, Eisenhower rejected the request, pointing out that it was “politically impossible.”

Radford and others kept up the struggle for American military action, but the die had been cast in early April: the United States had decided not to intervene. Americans would not have to go to war. On May 7, a month after the domino statement, France’s 12,000-man garrison at Dienbienphu fell in a defeat that was disastrous to French resolve and pride. France still maintained a token presence in southern Vietnam, but their
days were numbered. Ho, Giap, and the peasant-based Vietminh had won a resounding triumph against Western colonialism.57

The immediate aftermath of these historic events satisfied few of the contestants, who met at Geneva to work out a political settlement. Ho Chi Minh’s representatives demanded a united, independent country but were pressured both by the Russians, who were trying not to drive the French into the EDC, and by the Chinese, who may have worried about American intervention, into accepting less at that time than they had fought for. Representatives of the French Union and of the Vietminh instead agreed to a temporary division of Vietnam, under separate governments, near the 17th parallel. Reunification of Vietnam, it was later specified, was to take place in July 1956 following free elections that would determine a new government. Though disappointed, Ho Chi Minh accepted the results. The North, which he was to govern, included a majority of the country’s population. Southern Vietnam, by contrast, was to be governed by Bao Dai, who enjoyed French backing but virtually no popular support. It seemed certain that Ho Chi Minh, the George Washington of his country, would win elections in 1956.58

The United States publicly dissociated itself from these discussions and refused to be a party to the accords. Dulles visited Geneva but stayed only briefly, refusing to shake the hand of Chou En-lai, the Chinese foreign minister. A hostile biographer of Dulles said that he acted like a “puritan in a house of ill-repute.”59 Dulles instead departed for a whirl of diplomacy that led in September 1954 to creation of the South East Asian Treaty Organization, or SEATO. The signatories were the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand. All agreed to “meet common danger” in the region in accordance with each nation’s “constitutional principles” and to “consult” in crisis. A separate protocol designated Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam as areas which, if threatened, would “endanger” the “peace and security” of the signatories.60 As American leaders recognized, SEATO was a weak organization. The treaty envisioned no standing armed forces like those being developed under NATO, and it required only consultation, not military action. The pact failed to get the backing of key Asian nations such as India, Burma, and Indonesia.

American officials, however, emerged hopeful from these developments. The protocol to the Geneva accords, they recognized, gave them two years in which to improve the situation. Between 1954 and 1956 the CIA, following the designs of Colonel Edward Lansdale in Saigon, harassed the North by trying to destroy their printing presses, pouring contaminants into the gas tanks of buses, and distributing leaflets predicting that the North, if it won elections in 1956, would retaliate harshly against the South.

In looking ahead to 1956 the United States relied increasingly on Ngo Dinh Diem, who assumed the premiership of the South in 1954. Diem was an ardent Vietnamese nationalist who hated the French. He was also a staunch anti-Communist and devout Catholic. A self-exile after World War II, he had settled at a Maryknoll seminary in New Jersey and developed ties with influential American Catholics such as Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York, an avid foe of Communism, and Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts. These ties proved useful for cementing political support in the United States, which poured economic and military aid into the South in hopes of making Diem a viable leader.61

Sending large aid packages to Diem aroused sometimes splenetic protests from knowledgeable American officials, who considered Diem—accurately, as it turned out—a self-centered, stubborn, and power-hungry leader. Robert McClintock, the American chargé d’affaires in Saigon in 1954, branded Diem a “messiah without a message,” whose sole policy was “to ask immediate American assistance in every form.” Lawton Collins, who became American ambassador there in 1955, wanted Diem removed from office.62 Both Foster and Allen Dulles, however, backed Diem heartily, and other American officials saw no better alternative. The aid mounted.

Until mid-1955 Diem struggled to consolidate his power in Saigon. Lacking a popular base in the countryside, he also faced sharp opposition in the cities. But he proved a tough and resourceful leader, and substantial American backing gave him a strongerhold by late 1955, when a referendum ousted Bao Dai and established Diem as President of a new republic.

59. Townsend Hoopes, The Devil and John Foster Dulles (Boston, 1973), 222. The United States did not recognize the People’s Republic, the stated reason for its refusal to participate.
60. Herring, America’s Longest War, 45.
61. Ibid., 57.
62. Ibid., 50.
Diem, with American approval, then made one of the most fateful decisions of the Cold War: to reject the holding of nationwide elections in 1956. The private reason for reaching this decision (in which the Chinese and the Soviets acquiesced) was that Ho Chi Minh would easily have triumphed. The excuses given publicly by Diem were that his government had not signed the Geneva accords and that, thanks to the authoritarian control by Ho in the North, the balloting could not have been free. Nineteen fifty-six came and went without nationwide elections, and Vietnam remained divided, with unforeseen but ultimately terrible results for the Vietnamese people and for American society.

How to judge the record of the Eisenhower administration concerning events in Vietnam between 1953 and 1956? The answer is critically. The refusal to agree to elections in 1956, combined with rising repression by Diem thereafter, prompted mounting nationalist rage, civil war, increasing American aid to Saigon, and—in the 1960s—full-scale American intervention. This is not to say, as some have, that American decisions between 1954 and 1956 (and later in the Eisenhower years) made the American-Vietnamese War inevitable: United States leaders in the early 1960s could have dared to cut their losses. It is to say, however, that Ike’s decisions—which enjoyed bipartisan support at the time—were thereafter perceived by American political leaders of both parties as commitments to the protection of South Vietnam from Communism. This was a highly dangerous legacy to leave.

In 1954–56, however, virtually no one imagined that the United States would mire itself as deeply as it did in the 1960s. On the contrary, what many people were pleased about in the mid-1950s was that the United States did not intervene militarily in 1954. Given the pressures to do so—from the French, from high-ranking officials like Radford, and from others who wanted to take a stand against Communism—this was not a wholly obvious decision to have made at the time. Other, less prudent commanders-in-chief might have acted differently. That Eisenhower chose to stay out did not mean that he was smarter than later Presidents who sent in American troops: they had tougher decisions to make because the military situation in South Vietnam grew ever more desperate over time. Still, Eisenhower’s decision not to intervene militarily testified to his prudence. That he was able to do so with relatively few domestic political recriminations, at a time when McCarthyism was at full tide (the Army-McCarthy hearings did not start until April 22), revealed the respect that Washington officiadm (and the American people) had for the general’s understanding of foreign and military matters. Not becoming directly engaged militarily, in a rigid Cold War atmosphere that tempted overreaction, was to his credit.

The next major foreign policy controversy of the era arose from the bitterness following Chiang Kai-shek’s withdrawal to Taiwan in 1949. American Asia-firsters, persistently lobbied by Chiang and his American-educated wife, still insisted that the United States had “lost” China and that the Nationalists should be helped to retake the mainland. Responding to these pressures from the Right, Eisenhower had announced that the United States would remove its Seventh Fleet from the straits between Taiwan and the mainland of China. Chiang, he implied, was now “unleashed” so that he could invade the People’s Republic. This was hardly likely, given Chiang’s profound military weakness, but he did manage to bomb the mainland, using American-made warplanes. In any event the symbolism of “unleashing” was of political benefit to an administration anxious to protect itself from right-wing attacks at home.

No one was more persistent on behalf of Chiang than GOP Senate leader Knowland of California. Writing in Collier’s magazine in January 1954, Knowland left no doubt of his zeal. “We must be prepared,” he wrote, “. . . to go it alone in China if our allies desert us. . . . We must not fool ourselves into thinking we can avoid taking up arms with the Chinese Reds. If we don’t fight them in China and Formosa, we will be fighting them in San Francisco, in Seattle, in Kansas City.”65 Silly as such rhetoric sounds in retrospect—and it was indeed absurd—it came from the mouth of the Senate majority leader. If Eisenhower hoped to hold his party together in Congress, he had to play his cards carefully in dealing with Chiang Kai-shek.

So it was that a crisis of sorts arose in September 1954, when the People’s Republic responded to Chiang’s provocations by shelling the small and well-fortified Nationalist-held island groups of Quemoy and Matsu, two miles or so off the mainland.64 The Nationalists shelled back.
Radford, again reacting sharply, advised Eisenhower to place American troops on the islands and to authorize bombing raids, using tactical nuclear weapons, on the mainland. Some of these “tactical” weapons were potentially more destructive than the bombs used against Japan at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Other anti-Communist activists perceived the confrontation as a major test of American credibility. If Quemoy and Matsu fell, they said, China would proceed to assault Taiwan. As in the crisis over Dienbienphu, Eisenhower faced loud and partisan demands for decisive action.65

Eisenhower responded shrewdly. Concluding that it would be politically risky to do nothing, he reaffirmed America’s commitment to protect Taiwan and the neighboring Pescadores Islands. But he was deliberately ambiguous about Quemoy and Matsu, whose strategic value and defensibility struck him and other military experts as doubtful indeed. Instead, he arranged in December a mutual defense pact with Chiang. It formalized American commitment to Taiwan in case of enemy attack but did not include one to Quemoy and Matsu. The pact also stipulated that Chiang cease unilateral raids on the mainland.

In January 1955, however, the People’s Republic sent troops to one of the Tachen Islands, which the Nationalists controlled. Though these islands were 200 miles from Taiwan and of no strategic importance, their plight again aroused the Asia-first lobby. Ike decided to let the islands go, but he also determined to involve Congress (newly controlled by the Democrats after the 1954 off-year elections) in his response, and he asked lawmakers to grant him blanket authority, as commander-in-chief, to use military force in order to protect Taiwan, the Pescadores, and “closely related localities.”

Congress responded quickly and enthusiastically. In so doing it ceded for practical purposes some of its constitutional authority to declare war. Few events in the history of the Cold War exposed so starkly the power of anti-Communist feelings and the way that these feelings abetted the expansion of executive power. The Formosa Resolution, as it was called, was well remembered by Lyndon Johnson, Senate majority leader in 1955, who resurrected it as a precedent in his effort nine years later to expand presidential power in dealing with Vietnam.

When the People’s Republic stepped up shelling of Quemoy and Matsu in March, hawks in the administration reacted still more sharply. Radford wanted to give China a “bloody nose.” Dulles, in public remarks cleared by Ike, announced that the United States was prepared to use tactical nuclear weapons there. At a press conference the President then added, “In any combat where these things [tactical nuclear weapons] can be used on strictly military targets and for strictly military purposes, I see no reason why they shouldn’t be used, just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.”66

The threat to use nuclear weapons, even if only in a “strictly military” way, shook many people, including allies of the United States. American officials had spoken this way since the dark days of the Korean War in late 1950, at which time the mere suggestion had fanned a whirlwind of anxiety. So, too, in 1955. Who could be sure that nuclear weapons could be strictly controlled in a military situation? James Hagerty, Eisenhower’s able press secretary, was so worried that he urged his boss to say nothing more if asked about the situation at a forthcoming press conference.

The President’s response is central to the legend of his shrewdness as chief executive. “Don’t worry, Jim,” he is said to have joked to Hagerty. “If that question comes up, I’ll just confuse them.” The question did come up, and he managed to say nothing new.67 Thereafter shelling from the mainland soon abated. In mid-May it stopped, and the crisis receded. Quemoy and Matsu remained in Nationalist hands.

Then and later Eisenhower’s handling of the Quemoy-Matsu “crisis” struck many people as ill advised. Opponents of his management go beyond assailing him for rattling nuclear weapons. They insist that he and Dulles virtually touched off the crisis by encouraging Chiang’s provocative behavior—all to placate highly partisan Asia-firsters on the domestic scene. Ike, they add, then manipulated Cold War anxieties to scare the Congress into granting him unprecedented and potentially dangerous executive power. These critics say that the United States should have worked at promoting better relations with the People’s Republic, both because China was by then a well-established major power in the region and because some Chinese-American rapprochement would have widened a growing wedge between China and the USSR.68 They question, finally, whether Ike’s strong stand made much difference to the Chinese (who resumed shelling in 1958).

66. Ambrose, Eisenhower, 383–84; Brands, “Age of Vulnerability.”
There is considerable wisdom in these criticisms. Eisenhower and Dulles did little to discourage Chiang and his American partisans, even though they recognized that the Nationalist leader was fomenting trouble. To this extent they played into Cold War passions, going so far as to use the threat of nuclear attack in defense of a few strategically insignificant islands. This was massive retaliation with a vengeance. It was mainly the restraint of the Chinese that in the end prevented more serious hostilities.

Still, Eisenhower, who recognized the very limited strategic value and difficult defensibility of the islands, did manage to avoid military intervention. And to the public, who did not know about details, it seemed a well-managed business. Some later historians in fact have singled out Eisenhower’s actions as a classic example of his shrewd leadership concerning foreign affairs. In particular they cite his adept handling of Congress, which gave him a useful blank check, and his capacity for ambiguity—with his comment to Hagerty as a sort of Exhibit Number One. By getting wide discretionary authority and then threatening—or so it seemed—the enemy with nuclear weapons, Eisenhower seemed to have orchestrated things in ways that he could control. In any event, the Chinese, perhaps uncertain of Ike’s intent, finally stopped the shelling.

To Americans eager for triumphs in a dangerous Cold War, Eisenhower appeared as something of a savior, especially because he had again kept the nation out of war. His popularity rating soared to 68 percent when the confrontation was over.

At this point the Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev, by then well established at home, made a few conciliatory gestures, including the signing of a peace treaty with Austria that ended Soviet military presence there. Dulles opposed any serious negotiations with the USSR, but Eisenhower seemed eager to sit down with his adversaries. The result in July 1955 was a “summit” conference in Geneva, the first such gathering since the Potsdam conference of 1945. The “spirit of Geneva” excited hopes for a new era of “coexistence.” Russian and American delegates mingled, even in the bars, and people joked about “coexistence cocktails”—”you know, vodka and Coke.” The evangelist Billy Graham, a world-renowned figure, conducted a revival there and pronounced the virtues of summits. Moses, he reminded people, had had a summit parley and received a ten-point directive that the heads of government would do well to examine.

The most dramatic development of the conference occurred when Eisenhower set forth a proposal for “open skies.” Taking off his glasses, he spoke directly and from memory to Khrushchev to say that the United States was prepared to swap sensitive information concerning its armed forces with the Soviet Union. He further recommended regular and frequent aerial inspection of military installations in both countries. He concluded with a spirited appeal: “If I do not know how I could convince you of our sincerity in this matter and that we mean you no harm. I only wish that God would give me some means of convincing you of our sincerity and loyalty in making this proposal.”

Unfortunately for Eisenhower, God did not intervene to warm up the Russians. Khrushchev was a blunt, sometimes crude diplomatist, and he made no effort to hide his contempt for Eisenhower’s proposal. “In our eyes,” he told the President, “this is a very transparent espionage device... You could hardly expect us to take this seriously.”

Khrushchev’s reaction, while abrupt, was entirely understandable, for the open-skies idea was in part an American propaganda ploy which, having been laid on the table, Ike did little to follow up. As Eisenhower recognized, the Soviets already knew much more about American military installations—American skies were “open” to a wide range of observers—than the United States knew about Soviet sites. If Khrushchev had accepted open skies, he would have learned relatively little but would have bolstered American military intelligence. He thereby rejected the proposal, and the summit accomplished nothing of substance.

As in the standoff of Quemoy-Matsu, however, Eisenhower’s involvement in the Geneva conference worked well for him at home. Most Americans seemed pleased that he had made the effort to talk across the table with the Russians. They also applauded open skies, appreciating that the President was anxious to reduce the possibility of surprise attack. (Eisenhower, in fact, seems sincerely to have hoped that the Soviets

69. Chang, “Absence of War.”
70. Divine, Eisenhower, 65; Ambrose, Eisenhower, 385.
71. Oakley, God’s Country, 218.
73. Divine, Eisenhower, 120.
74. Ibid., 121.
would consider his idea.) And although the conference accomplished nothing, it did usher in a slight thaw in the Cold War that lasted (as it turned out) for almost five years. Again, therefore, Ike’s popularity soared, this time to an amazing 79 percent in Gallup poll of August 1955. The columnist James Reston commented, “The popularity of President Eisenhower has got beyond the bounds of reasonable calculation and will have to be put down as a national phenomenon, like baseball. The thing is no longer just a remarkable political fact but a kind of national love affair.”

A month later, while vacationing with his wife and in-laws in Denver, Eisenhower, then sixty-four, suffered a heart attack that sent him to the hospital for six weeks and forced him to recuperate carefully for a couple of months thereafter. He was fortunate, as was the United States, that no major foreign policy controversy erupted during his illness and recovery between September 1955 and February 1956. But one development did take place during this time that seemed especially promising for the future of Soviet-American relations.

That was an amazing speech that Khrushchev gave to the 1,400-odd top Soviet officials who were attending the twentieth Congress of the Communist party in Moscow in February 1956. Although the address was supposed to be secret, it soon leaked to the Russian people and to the West. Khrushchev attacked Stalin (his former boss and patron) as a paranoid tyrant who had inflicted purges, show trials, terror, forced labor camps, and mass executions on the people of his country. Khrushchev called for the de-Stalinization of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, maintained that capitalism and Communism were not incompatible, and no longer just a remarkable political fact but a kind of national love affair.”

The campaign offered few surprises. Virtually everyone was certain that Ike, still phenomenally popular, would win in a walk. But he had been ill, and that made his choice of running mate especially important. Eisenhower worried that Nixon, with whom he still had cool personal relations, would harm the GOP ticket. On two occasions, the second as late as April 1956, he offered Nixon a wide choice of Cabinet posts, specifically suggesting Defense. Nixon, however, correctly perceived the offers as a way of driving him out of the vice-presidency and refused. Eisenhower, who had no politically viable alternative, acquiesced. It was to be Ike and Dick once more.

The Democrats tried again with Stevenson, who ran this time with Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. Stevenson boldly tried to start a high-level debate about nuclear testing. But no one gave him much of a chance, and his opposition to testing commanded little backing amid the continuing anti-Communist consensus. Indeed, Stevenson struck some Democratic politicians as a poor campaigner. One was young Robert F. Kennedy, who joined the Stevenson team in the fall and who professed to be appalled. Stevenson, he recalled, had “no rapport with his audience and—no feeling for them—no comprehension of what campaigning required—no ability to make decisions. It was a terrible shock for me.” (Stevenson, equally hostile, referred to “Bobby” as the “Black Prince.”)

As election day approached the Democrats relied heavily on TV spots. This made sense, for by 1956 there were 35 million households with sets in the United States, as opposed to 19 million in 1952. Some of the Democratic spots introduced “negative” ads for the first time, usually aimed at raising doubts about Nixon, should some unnamed awful thing just happen to occur to Ike. One spot showed a shifty-looking, narrow-eyed, small man, over whom loomed the letters NIXON. The audio added, “Nervous about Nixon?”

In the last days of the campaign two of the most frightening foreign policy controversies of the postwar era interceded to command public attention. One, especially dangerous, broke out in the Middle East, where Cold War rivalries, Arab-Israeli hostilities, and Western hunger for control of oil had long heated up an inflammable mix for all concerned.

76. Oakley, God’s Country, 219; Ambrose, Eisenhower, 390–94.
77. Kefauver bested Senator John F. Kennedy for the vice-presidential nomination in a closely contested open convention vote.
including the United States. The mix grew hotter after 1954, when Gamal Abdal Nasser, a strong Arab nationalist, secured power in Egypt. Dulles tried to steer a tight course between support of Israel and of Nasser, whom he hoped to use as a buffer against a Russian presence in the oil-rich Middle East. He therefore agreed in December 1955 to lend Nasser $56 million for construction of the Aswan High Dam on the upper Nile. The dam was a key to Nasser’s dreams of breaking the poverty of his country and promoting a rise to industrialization.

In mid-1956, however, the volatile mix neared ignition. Nasser recognized the People’s Republic of China and purchased arms from Czechoslovakia in the Soviet bloc. Dulles, angry at Nasser’s flirtation with the Communist orbit, abruptly canceled his offer of the loan. In July Nasser then shocked the world by nationalizing the Suez Canal, which had been controlled until then by a mostly British- and French-owned canal company. Revenues from ships passing through, Nasser said, would finance the dam. Although Eisenhower and Dulles tried to work out a settlement in the months that followed, the Israelis, British, and French quietly resolved to fight. On October 29, with the election campaign in the United States entering its final stages, the Israelis attacked, smashed Nasser’s ill-trained forces, and began driving toward the canal. Two days later the British and the French, in what was obviously a preconceived plan worked out with the Israelis, began bombing Egyptian military installations. They then landed paratroopers with the aim of taking the canal.

News of the Israeli attack outraged Eisenhower, who stopped campaigning to take charge of the situation in Washington. Attempting at first to prevent British and French engagement, he sponsored a resolution in the UN calling on Israel to withdraw and urging other UN members to refrain from the use of force. The resolution later passed overwhelmingly, with the United States and the Soviet Union standing together against Britain and France. The British and French ignored the warning and began bombing, whereupon Nasser sank ships to block the canal. The President was especially angry with Britain and France, for they had assured him that they would not use force. When he learned of the British bombing, he was furious with Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister whom he had known well since World War II. “Bombs, by God,” he roared. “What does Anthony think he’s doing?” He telephoned Eden and gave him a tongue-lashing that reduced the Prime Minister to tears. When Ike heard that paratroopers were about to land, he exclaimed, “I think it is the biggest error of our time, outside of losing China.”

The USSR then inflamed the mix by warning that it was prepared to use military power against the Israeli-British-French forces in the region. Eisenhower — it was election day — thought that the Soviets were bluffing, but he placed American military units on world-wide alert. If the Soviets intervened, he warned, the United States would send in its own troops to resist them. This was the tensest moment of the crisis and one of the most frightening of the entire Cold War. Emmet Hughes recalled that the President told him, “If those fellows start something, we may have to hit ’em — and if necessary, with everything in the bucket.”

At this flashpoint the protagonists came to their senses. The Russians did not intervene; the combatants agreed to a cease-fire and ultimately withdrew. A possible world war had been averted. But most of the major players gained little from the crisis. Nasser had become a hero to other Arab nationalists, but his army had been humiliated, and the closing of the canal for the next few months inflicted additional economic damage on his country. The Soviet Union scored a few propaganda points by posing as protector of Arab interests but did not advance its influence in the area. The Israelis had proved they were a tough fighting force but had been prevented from delivering a body blow to their enemies. The British and the French were the biggest losers by far. Having embarked on a foolish military mission, they had been isolated and forced to withdraw. They never regained their standing in the Middle East.

The United States, too, suffered a little from the crisis. Many people blamed Dulles for provoking the affair by withdrawing his offer of a loan. For this reason, and because the United States had been friendly with Israel since 1948, most Arab nations remained cool to Washington. The crisis, moreover, temporarily damaged America’s relations with Britain and France. The weakening to Britain and France in the region, however, offered some benefit to the United States, which further expanded its increasingly globalistic reach by becoming the major Western power in the Middle East. Henceforth America was the most important guardian of Western oil interests there — a key to subsequent tensions in the region. In early 1957 Eisenhower stepped up military and economic aid to Middle


Eastern nations and made it clear that the United States would intervene if necessary to secure stability in the area.85

Most important in the short run, Eisenhower's conduct of the Suez Affair earned him considerable admiration both abroad and at home. He deserved it. The administration had stood strongly against the use of force in the region during the tense negotiations following nationalization of the canal: Britain, France, and Israel could have had no doubt that military action would prompt the sort of American reaction that it did. When they attacked anyway, Eisenhower moved quickly and firmly. If his opposition to British and French colonialism did not satisfy Arab nationalists, it was nonetheless a prompt and decisive response under difficult circumstances. And he had even faced down the Russians without getting in a war! Americans again had reasons to be proud of their President.

While the Suez crisis was raging, Eisenhower found himself suddenly confronted with another bloody milestone of the Cold War, this time in Hungary. The Soviet satellite nations of eastern Europe had long stirred restlessly under the Russian yoke, especially following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism in February. In mid-1956 riots in Poland had forced the USSR to make some concessions, and in October discontent escalated to rebellion in Hungary. At first it seemed that Soviet diplomacy would contain the trouble, but on November 4 Khrushchev sent 200,000 troops and 4,000 tanks into Budapest and other areas to crush the opposition. This was two days before the American elections. The Soviet juggernaut did a brutally thorough job, killing some 40,000 Hungarian freedom fighters and forcing the flight of more than 150,000 refugees.86

The suppression of Hungary shocked the world and badly soiled the image of Communism. Was Khrushchev's rule any better than Stalin's? Still, the Eisenhower administration took some criticism for what had happened. By promoting since 1952 the goal of "liberation" of "captive peoples," it had implied that it would actively assist anti-Communist rebels. Broadcasts by the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe further encouraged foes of Soviet oppression in east Europe. The Eisenhower administration's doctrine of "liberation" appealed to dogmatic anti-Communists and to many eastern-European-Americans. But military reality in eastern Europe, which was occupied by the powerful Red Army, meant that liberation was a sham.

Eisenhower, who had spent most of his life in the army, knew this full well. Hungary, after all, was land-locked and virtually surrounded by Communist countries, including the Soviet Union, which had no toleration for rebellions next to its borders. Ike thus rejected CIA calls for the parachuting of arms and supplies to the Hungarian freedom fighters and refused to consider the dispatch of American forces. Hungary, he observed sadly, was "as inaccessible to us as Tibet." He realized—as knowledgeable observers long had known—that America's main military resource was atomic attack, or massive retaliation. This would do more to destroy Hungary than to rescue it.87

Eisenhower supporters nonetheless managed to derive some crumbs of satisfaction from the Hungarian revolution. The President, almost everyone acknowledged, did the sensible thing (indeed, it was the only thing) by not trying to challenge the Soviets in Budapest. Eisenhower again had used his understanding of military realities to avoid overreaction that might lead to war. Most important, perhaps, it was obvious that the major villains of the piece were not Americans but Soviets. Khrushchev's behavior had again seemed to prove the validity of two fundamental tenets of American thought about world affairs: the Soviets were tyrannical, and they must be contained.88

The crises in Suez and Hungary, still unfolding on election day, probably had little effect on the voting in the United States. The results of the balloting at any rate merely confirmed what everyone already anticipated: Eisenhower won a sweeping triumph. He received 35,590,472 votes to Stevenson’s 26,022,752. This was more than 57 percent of the ballots. Stevenson actually received a million fewer votes in 1956 than he had in 1952; his margin of defeat was almost 3 million greater. Eisenhower carried every state outside the South (except Missouri) and even took five states there: Virginia, Florida, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas. The electoral college was 457 for Ike to 73 for Stevenson.

The election was mainly a personal triumph for the President. He attracted a wide range of backers to his side, including a majority of the black vote in ten northern and twelve southern cities, a development that

85. See chapter 14.
87. Diggins, Proud Decades, 302.
threatened the viability for the future of the Democratic electoral coalition. But he did not sweep his party in with him. The Democrats retained control of Congress, gaining one seat in both the House and the Senate. Eisenhower would have to confront a House in which Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 233 to 200 and a Senate where they had a majority of 49 to 47. It was the first time since 1848 that a presidential candidate had won without carrying either house of Congress with him.

Any number of things, of course, can explain a personal victory of such magnitude. Among them, many pundits thought, were the ineffective candidacy of Stevenson, as well as the economy (which was flourishing and therefore helped the incumbent). But all agreed that voters still liked Ike. And what they especially seemed to like, aside from his attractive personality, was his record in military and diplomatic affairs. The contrast between the mood in 1952, when the nation had been mired in Korea and McCarthyism, and 1956, by which time the United States had enjoyed three years of peace, was sharp and satisfying. If Ike and Dulles had missed chances to ease the tensions of the Cold War, if they had sometimes pursued provocative policies, they had nonetheless avoided serious blunders. Above all, they had managed to promote prosperity and to keep the country out of war. No wonder the voters were grateful.

GRAND EXPECTATIONS
The United States, 1945–1974

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New York  Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1996