

The Soviets' Nuclear Lead

We are again faced with a "missile gap" far, far worse than the gap that President John F. Kennedy feared and expected in 1960. This time, the gap is no matter of probability and prediction. It is there already, in the form of a brand new generation of far more powerful Soviet nuclear missiles, that can give the Kremlin a terrifying nuclear-strategic lead when they are fully deployed.

Yet the danger is being discounted, on the wholly illogical ground that President Kennedy's expectation of a missile gap in 1960 was proved unfounded by events. So it is worth examining what really happened the last time, in order to have a better measure of our danger now.

In brief, it was obvious that the Soviets had developed a potential intercontinental ballistic missile, as soon as they sent their first Sputnik around the world. The United States, at that period, was far behind in missile development and had only the big bombers of the Strategic Air Command. The Sputnik therefore affected the U.S. intelligence community like a stone thrown into a hornets' nest.

The first post-Sputnik intelligence estimates were based on Soviet "capabilities"—on how many intercontinental nuclear missiles the Soviets could produce if they really tried. Although the Soviet prototype was clumsy and costly, it was generally agreed that they could produce 150 of these dangerous brutes by 1961. The U.S. had no hope of matching this performance. This was the missile gap.

American strategic targets were also much, much fewer in those days, so 150 ICBMs would have been enough for a deadly first strike by the Soviets. Hence one of the eminent men who wrote the "Gaither report" on this grim subject, remarked at the time that "seeing the real facts was like staring straight into hell."

Meanwhile, however, the original intelligence estimate based on Soviet capabilities was under pressure on two fronts. On one side was the White House, where President Dwight D. Eisenhower was determined to put budget-balancing far ahead of national defense. On the other side, was the negative evidence brought back by the U-2 overflights.

Because of the U-2's range and other

limitations, there was no sure way to reconstruct all that was going on in the Soviet Union from U-2 photo reconnaissance. It was always a bit like trying to reconstruct the whole state of Connecticut from aerial photographs of prosperous suburban Greenwich. Nonetheless, the double pressure on the intelligence community soon began to alter the estimates.

By 1960, the election year, about 70 per cent of the intelligence experts were convinced that the Soviets had not gone all out, after all, to build the maximum number of first generation ICBMs. About 30 per cent meanwhile argued that there was no solid proof—as there was not—for this reassuring conviction. These men stuck to the original estimate, and President Kennedy followed them.

As it turned out, thank God, the 70 per cent were right. This was first proved after President Kennedy was elected, when the first U.S. reconnaissance satellite was sent up at the end of November 1960. Thus the President knew the Soviets did not have the means for the deadly first strike he had feared, when he heard Nikita S. Khrushchev's brutal Berlin ultimatum at Vienna. This reporter once asked the President what he would have done at Vienna if he had known Khrushchev had 150 ICBMs in his back pocket.

"Don't ask me that," he answered. "I sometimes think about it, and then I can't sleep."

So there is the story. If you consider what happened, it is a story of flabby negligence. Before the reconnaissance satellite brought its good news, in other words, President Eisenhower was never running less than a 30 per cent chance that the Soviets would gain the power to destroy this country at a stroke. There were things to do that could have greatly reduced this risk. The President neglected to do these things. For those who like running 30 per cent chances of national destruction, this negligence may be excusable. For others, the negligence must appear no less than criminal.

The present case is also rather worse. There is no material doubt in the intelligence community about the existence, the great power and the general efficiency of the new generation of

Soviet missiles. There is no real doubt, either, that these new missiles will eventually replace the ones now in the Soviet missile silos. And, finally, there is little doubt that when that time comes, the United States will have yielded to the Soviets a terrifying nuclear-strategic lead.

But now we have a national climate of such self-serving and self-delusion that no one pays serious attention. Instead, we have men like the seven members of the Senate Armed Services Committee who were positively peevish because they were told the facts.

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