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NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN KENNEDY'S FOREIGN POLICY

PHILIP NASH

WHEN PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY spoke at Los Alamos, New Mexico, in December 1962, he attributed U.S. success in containing communism to the nation's army, navy, and "strategic Air Force." The president's oblique reference to nuclear weapons, before an audience that derived its livelihood from nuclear weapons design, typified his claims that he had reduced the country's reliance on its nuclear arsenal. Such claims were justified, since nuclear weapons played a limited role in Kennedy's foreign policy.¹

Primary evidence regarding official discussion of nuclear weapons in the Kennedy administration is scarce. For now, scholars have to depend largely on published sources and on the fallible memories of Kennedy's advisers, who have helped write the history they made. Conclusions about the role of nuclear weapons in Kennedy's foreign policy must therefore be tentative. This study, however, offers a needed synthesis of available documentation and recent scholarship.

Kennedy's foreign policy strategy was based on Flexible Response, a term coined by General Maxwell Taylor. Taylor, who served Kennedy as an adviser and later as chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), defined Flexible Response as "a capability to react across the entire spectrum of possible challenge, for coping with anything from general atomic war to infiltrations and aggressions such as threaten Laos and Berlin." Within the conceptual

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¹ John Kennedy, "Remarks at the High School Football Stadium, Los Alamos, New Mexico," 7 December 1962, *Public Papers of the Presidents 1962*, 855-56 (hereafter cited as PPP).

framework of Flexible Response, nuclear weapons played a lesser role than they did under Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower.²

Like all U.S. deterrent strategies, however, Flexible Response relied to some extent on nuclear weapons. Thus, Kennedy quickly embarked on a large strategic buildup. One of Kennedy's first major defense decisions was the acceleration and expansion of the Polaris and Minuteman missile programs. His decision to build roughly 1,700 strategic nuclear missiles amounted to more than a 50 percent increase over the 1,100 projected by Eisenhower's last defense budget. The number of strategic nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal grew under Kennedy from 3,000 in April 1961 to 5,000 by July 1964—a 66 percent increase, although much of this was "in the pipeline" before Kennedy took office.³

Traditional worst-case thinking was a factor in Kennedy's buildup. The U.S.–Soviet "missile gap," which had figured prominently in the 1960 presidential campaign, gradually faded in 1961 as improved U.S. intelligence techniques revealed how small the Soviet nuclear arsenal was. However, there was no guarantee that a genuine gap would not develop. In his notes for a 1962 talk to the National Security Council (NSC), Kennedy stated, "[t]o be honest, we would probably be safe with less—but we believe in an ample safety factor." Also, pressure for a U.S. buildup from both Congress and the military was formidable. Kennedy maintained that congressional demand for "more nuclear weapons is pretty strong. I don't think such sentiment can be rationally defended, but there it is." Such innovations in nuclear strategy as the concepts of "counterforce" and "damage limitation" also helped propel the buildup. Other considerations had a marginal influence, such as Kennedy's belief in "negotiation from strength," the difficulty of disavowing his missile-gap rhetoric in the 1960 campaign, and perhaps even the need to create jobs.⁴

² Maxwell Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York, 1959), 6.

³ JFK, "Special Message to the Congress on the Defense Budget," 28 March 1961, PPP 1961, 229–240; Desmond Ball, *Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missile Program of the Kennedy Administration* (Berkeley, 1980), 43–46, 116; Cyrus Vance to Lyndon Johnson, "Military Strength Increases Since Fiscal Year 1961," 3 October 1964, *Declassified Documents Reference System* (hereafter cited as *DDRS*) 1978, #350A, Schedule A.

⁴ JFK, "Outline for Talk to National Security Council, January 18, 1962" (drafted by Bundy), 17 January 1962, *DDRS* 1991, #3578, 2–3; Idem, "Special Message to the Congress on the Defense Budget," 234; Idem, "The President's News Conference of February 7, 1962," PPP 1962, 127; David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Greenwich, Conn., 1972), 91; Ball, *Politics and Force Levels*, 240–252; Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, 1991), 257.

At the same time, however, the administration attempted to stabilize the arms race. In 1961, Kennedy was reluctant to order the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing after Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev did so. Two years later Kennedy vigorously pursued and achieved a limited test ban (a comprehensive ban remained his goal throughout the negotiations). He ordered improvements in the invulnerability, command, and control of U.S. strategic forces as well as the placement of electronic locks on strategic weapons to prevent unauthorized use; the administration then leaked this technology to the Soviets. He cooperated with the USSR in establishing a reconnaissance satellite regime and installed the Moscow-Washington "Hot Line" in 1963. Kennedy may sometimes have been alarmist, hasty, arbitrary about precise force levels, and too responsive to domestic pressure. But he was no militarist, and he did not build up U.S. nuclear forces primarily for diplomatic ends.⁵

Under Kennedy, moreover, nuclear weapons declined in importance among national security resources, in keeping with Flexible Response. The administration sought to avoid a reliance on nuclear weapons by placing more emphasis on developing conventional capabilities—especially airlift, sealift, and tactical air forces—and unconventional capabilities, such as the Special Forces, as an alternative to "humiliation" or "all-out nuclear action." With his Alliance for Progress in Latin America and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Kennedy also sought to rely more than Eisenhower had on foreign aid, propaganda, allies, and arms control.⁶

Kennedy's desire to reduce the U.S. nuclear dependence was probably reinforced by his personal abhorrence of nuclear weapons. The president's numerous public statements stressed the unfathomable devastation a nuclear war would bring. Even when superpower tensions had relaxed markedly in late 1963, he spoke of the "300 million Americans, Russians, and Europeans" who would be "wiped out by a nuclear exchange" and

⁵ *National Security Council Record of Actions*, No. 2468, "Instructions for Harriman Mission," 9 July 1963, National Security Files (hereafter cited as NSF): NSC Meetings, 1963, #515, 7/9/63, Box 314, John F. Kennedy Library (hereafter cited as JFKL), 1; Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York, 1991), 306–307, 364; Edward Klein and Robert Littell, "Shh! Let's Tell The Russians," *Newsweek*, 5 May 1969, 46–47; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York, 1987), 201–206.

⁶ JFK, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis," 25 July 1961, PPP 1961, 535. See also "Annual Budget Message to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1963," 18 January 1962, PPP 1962, 28; "Commencement Address at American University in Washington," 10 June 1963, PPP 1963, 462.

wondered if the survivors could "endure the fire, poison, chaos, and catastrophe." Privately, the president showed similar concern. After a briefing on the effects of nuclear weapons, Kennedy observed to Dean Rusk, "And we call ourselves the human race." In a 1961 letter, Kennedy wrote that "the prospect of a nuclear exchange is so terrible that I conceive that it would be preferable to be among the dead than among the quick." When touring a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base, the president reportedly turned pale and asked, "Why do we need one of these?" when shown a 20-megaton bomb.⁷

Kennedy and his advisers promoted Flexible Response largely because they believed that the Soviet threat was assuming the form they had predicted in their critique of Eisenhower's national security policy. Two weeks before Kennedy's inauguration, Khrushchev declared his country's support for "wars of national liberation" in the third world. The president circulated Khrushchev's speech and an accompanying analysis among his top appointees with instructions to "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest." Although the Soviets would challenge the United States over the next three years in more direct ways, persistent, indirect Soviet involvement in such places as Laos and Vietnam strengthened the administration's confidence in the validity of Flexible Response.⁸

Adherence to the doctrine appears repeatedly in the fundamental documents of Kennedy's national security policy. The first formal manifestation of the Kennedy policy was a 1961 report on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), produced under the guidance of former secretary of state Dean Acheson and soon accepted by the president as official U.S. policy. It contained a detailed endorsement of Flexible Response for the European theater. Although its nuclear sections remain classified, it

⁷ JFK, "Address at the University of Maine," 19 October 1963, PPP 1963, 797; Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), 246–247; Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1983), 198; Halberstam, *Best and the Brightest*, 298.

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Reappraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982), 208; Stewart Alsop, "Kennedy's Grand Strategy," *Saturday Evening Post*, 31 March 1962, 12; McNamara testimony, "World Military Situation and Its Relation to United States Foreign Policy," 8 February 1962, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, Historical Series 14, 87th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, 1986), 162.

recommended that “[f]irst priority should be given to preparing for the more likely contingencies, i.e., those short of nuclear or massive non-nuclear attack.”⁹

The commitment to Flexible Response appears even more explicitly in the administration’s “Basic National Security Policy” (BNSP). After secretary of defense Robert McNamara decided to revise the last of Eisenhower’s BNSPs, work on a new version began in the spring of 1961 under the coordination of assistant secretary Paul Nitze. An early draft emphatically affirmed Flexible Response, emphasizing the importance of non-nuclear forces, especially in opposing large-scale aggression, and the need for a variety of nuclear options in the event of nuclear war.¹⁰

The major BNSP now open to scrutiny was issued in March of the following year. An interdepartmental effort led by State Department officials, it called for “an ability and readiness to use force” to “deter and deal with” all forms of Communist aggression and pressure, from nuclear attack to limited incursions and psychological coercion. The “special imperatives of a nuclear-missile age” demanded a policy that minimized the likelihood that nuclear weapons would be used. The U.S. losses expected in a nuclear exchange required “non-nuclear defense alternatives,” tactical and strategic nuclear forces “both as deterrent and for combat,” means of “limiting civil damage,” and arms control.¹¹

In the spring of 1963, disagreement over the BNSP lingered between its civilian drafters and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but McNamara refused to resolve them because “he didn’t believe there was anything to be gained

⁹ JFK to Acheson, 24 April 1961, Acheson Papers, Post Administration Files, State Dept. and White House Advisor, April–June 1961, Box 85, Harry Truman Library; “A Review of North Atlantic Problems for the Future,” March 1961, DDRS 1981, #502A, 4.

¹⁰ McNamara, “Memorandum for the Secretaries of the Military Departments,” 1 March 1961, President’s Office Files (hereafter cited as POF): Departments and Agencies, Defense, 1/61–3/61, Box 77, JFKL, attachment 1; Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York, 1987), 147; Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision—A Memoir* (New York, 1989), 251; Ball, *Politics and Force Levels*, 189–190.

¹¹ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 200; S/P draft, “Basic National Security Policy” (BNSP), 26 March 1962, Vice Presidential-Security, Box 7, Lyndon Johnson Library, 23–24, 35–37, 217. See also OASD/ISA, “Basic National Security Policy,” 25 March 1963, DDRS 1963, #215, 15.

by the formulation of such a document." McNamara was merely expressing Kennedy's attitude toward BNSP; refusing to let such a formal statement tie his hands, the president never approved any BNSP as formal policy. Thus his desire for flexibility dictated both the substance and the form of policy making. BNSP, periodically revised but never approved, reflected the administration's thoughts about nuclear weapons, but did not necessarily dictate how the administration would rely on them in its foreign policy.¹²

The president was not always steadfast in his commitment to Flexible Response. At a December 1962 meeting he doubted the effectiveness of conventional forces along the Iron Curtain, suggesting that "any incursion across this line would in fact lead promptly to nuclear warfare, and for that reason the nuclear deterrent would be effective." Aside from this remarkable lapse, however, the theoretical role of nuclear weapons in U.S. foreign policy remained almost unchanged throughout Kennedy's tenure. In an address he was to have delivered the day he died, Kennedy reiterated, "Overwhelming nuclear strength cannot stop a guerrilla war." In his view, the successful outcome of recent international crises had been based on a "strength composed of many different elements, ranging from the most massive deterrents to the most subtle influences." By assigning roughly equal emphasis to strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, conventional forces, and reliance on allies and propaganda, Kennedy reaffirmed the reduced role for nuclear weapons spelled out in Flexible Response.¹³

In practice, the administration largely attained its stated goal of denuclearizing foreign policy. Because he never actually used nuclear weapons, Kennedy's reliance on them can only be understood as their considered or threatened use in major international crises. In Laos, Berlin, and Cuba—the three most serious crises by Kennedy's own reckoning—there is

¹² Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 252; Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), 175–176; McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 354; Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 508; Ball, *Politics and Force Levels*, 190.

¹³ "Last Conversation with the President before NATO meeting of December 1962," 10 December 1962, NSF: Meetings and Memoranda, Meetings with the President, General, 6/62–12/62, Box 317a, JFKL, 3; JFK, "Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas," 22 November 1963, PPP 1963, 891–894.

little evidence that the Kennedy administration intentionally relied to any significant extent on nuclear weapons.¹⁴

This assessment of deliberate use does not suggest the effect U.S. nuclear weapons had on Soviet behavior. The impact of Kennedy's daunting nuclear buildup on the Soviet Union was probably substantial, either provoking the Soviets to launch their own buildup in 1961 or confirming the need to accelerate a nuclear expansion they had already initiated. The Kennedy administration was not oblivious to the diplomatic implications of enhanced strategic might or of preserved strategic superiority. Kennedy and his subordinates periodically explained that U.S. strategic superiority (in the context of Flexible Response) was the surest way to halt Soviet aggression. Yet it is clear that Kennedy intended U.S. superiority only to deter the Soviets, not to "compel" or coerce them.¹⁵

Kennedy's reliance on his expanded nuclear stockpile can best be judged by examining the superpower crises he faced. The first was the potential fall of Laos to the Communist Pathet Lao. In the spring of 1961, as Kennedy considered dispatching U.S. troops to forestall a Pathet Lao victory, the JCS sought permission to use nuclear weapons should the Chinese answer a U.S. intervention with one of their own. If the United States went into Laos, army chief of staff George Decker argued, it "should go in to win, and that means Hanoi, China, and maybe even using nuclear bombs." The JCS did not want to send troops into Laos, but if ordered to do so, they refused to be hampered by limits on the forces committed.¹⁶

Civilian officials considered the use of nuclear weapons a remote possibility. A State-Defense draft plan recommended that if the cease-fire talks then underway broke down and the Pathet Lao resumed its offensive,

¹⁴ JFK, "Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty," 26 July 1963, PPP 1963, 603.

¹⁵ Raymond Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, 1989), 133-34, 241n; Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 235; JFK, "Outline for Talk to NSC," 3; "Remarks by Secretary McNamara, NATO Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962," in Marc Trachtenberg, ed., *The Development of American Strategic Thought: Basic Documents from the Eisenhower and Kennedy Periods, Including the Basic National Security Policy Papers from 1953 to 1959* (New York, 1988), 567, 571, 574.

¹⁶ Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 64-65.

forces of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), including U.S. troops, should intervene. In case of Chinese intervention, it argued, there "would be issues whether to attack targets in South China and whether to initiate use of nuclear weapons."¹⁷

The State Department probed possible chains of events with caution, however, recommending that SEATO ground forces introduced into Laos "have no mission or objective of approaching or menacing the frontier area between Laos, North Viet-Nam, and Communist China." The administration clearly hoped to avoid provoking Chinese or North Vietnamese intervention that might precipitate a nuclear conflict. If atomic weapons were used in Laos, Kennedy asked, "where would it stop, how many other Communist movements would we have to attack, what kind of world would it be?" In late April 1961 Kennedy did not rule out intervention, but he and his advisers felt it best to avoid risking a wider conflagration. He does not appear to have come close to sending troops into Laos in 1961, probably because such a move might lead to nuclear use. The president instead deployed the Seventh Fleet to the South China Sea and warned the Soviets and Chinese that the United States would intervene with ground troops if necessary. The apparent success of this move confirmed Kennedy's faith in Flexible Response.¹⁸

The crisis resumed when the Pathet Lao broke the cease fire and attacked the U.S.-backed royalist forces in 1962. Again the military, joined at one point by defense secretary McNamara, opposed the insertion of only limited forces into Laos and demanded, if force were employed, that it be on a large scale. "What the United States would do if the Chinese

¹⁷ William Bundy and Alexis Johnson to JFK, "Plan for Possible Intervention in Laos," 2d revised draft, 4 May 1961, NSF: Countries-Laos, General, 5/1/61-5/8/61, Box 130, JFKL, 6.

¹⁸ Rusk to JFK, "Laos," 1 May 1961, POF: Countries-Laos, Security, State Dept. Memo on Courses of Action, 4/30/61, Box 121, JFKL, 3; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), 642-643, 645-646; RFK, memorandum, 1 June 1961, in Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York, 1978), 757-758; Idem, interview by John B. Martin, 1 March 1964, in Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy in His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (New York, 1988), 247-248; Bundy, "Memorandum of Meeting on Laos," 26 April 1961, POF: Countries-Laos, Security, 4/21/61-4/30/61, Box 121, JFKL, 2; Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 333-334; Charles Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere: American Policy Toward Laos since 1954* (Boston, 1972), 152-154.

Communists intervened was not spelled out," State Department official Roger Hilsman remembered, "but the general impression was that the recommendation would be to retaliate on the mainland with nuclear weapons."¹⁹

Kennedy ordered the nuclear-armed Seventh Fleet to the Gulf of Siam, but then reconsidered his move. He told Hilsman, "[Y]ou and Mac Bundy talk it over between you, and *you and he decide whether to stop the Fleet or send the Fleet*, and let me know what you decide!!!" Kennedy's delegation of such authority raises questions about the "misuse of . . . power in the nuclear age." But his action was apparently one of carelessness, not deliberate atomic diplomacy. Kennedy eventually sent several thousand troops, in addition to the Seventh Fleet, into neighboring Thailand, not Laos itself. Although this was a more drastic application of force than previously, it was accompanied by less talk of nuclear weapons, Hilsman's account notwithstanding. At a meeting soon after the crisis had passed, top officials discussed military contingencies in some detail without broaching the subject of nuclear weapons.²⁰

Berlin—in Khrushchev's words "the testicles of the West"—was the center of a far greater crisis in 1961. At the Vienna Summit in June, Khrushchev had warned Kennedy that if the German question were not resolved within six months, he would sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany, thus forcing NATO to choose between abandonment of West Berlin and war with the USSR. Kennedy was determined to uphold the western commitment to Berlin. In doing so, the administration made nuclear threats, but it relied more heavily on non-nuclear actions.

After rejecting a recommendation that he declare a national emergency, Kennedy announced the U.S. response in July. He acknowledged the accelerated nuclear buildup he had launched several months earlier, but he outlined a primarily conventional military program to facilitate a reliance on Flexible Response, requesting an increase in personnel and non-nuclear

¹⁹ Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1967), 147.

²⁰ Roger Hilsman, "Memorandum to Hilsman," 11 May 1962, reprinted in Stephen Pelz, "When Do I Have Time to Think? John F. Kennedy, Roger Hilsman, and the Laotian Crisis of 1962," *Diplomatic History* 3 (Spring 1979): 224 [emphasis and exclamation points added, probably by Hilsman], 224n; Memorandum of Conversation, "Contingency Planning for Laos," 2 June 1962, Hilsman Papers, Countries-Laos, 6/62, Box 2, JFKL.

weapons, a tripling of draft calls, and the activation of reserve units. Most significantly, these military preparations were part of a strategy that encompassed negotiations; talks with Moscow were never ruled out during the crisis.²¹

Kennedy's announcement reflected the administration's genuine fear of war over Berlin. U.S. policy did not assume that "the president might choose to launch a nuclear attack," one study notes, but "that a nuclear war was something that might well *happen*." Thus when the Berlin Wall went up in August, increased civil-defense efforts and conventional force contributions by NATO allies were sought, instead of more provocative action. Kennedy carelessly unleashed in Berlin the bellicose General Lucius Clay, who as local commander caused the only direct U.S.–Soviet armored face-off in history. Yet Kennedy also circumvented Clay by working behind the scenes with the Soviets, perhaps offering to negotiate on Berlin to defuse the standoff.²²

Officials considered how nuclear weapons might be used if it became necessary. National Security Council adviser McGeorge Bundy wrote Kennedy that the existing nuclear warplan seemed "dangerously rigid," and if left unchanged "may leave you very little choice as to how you face the moment of thermonuclear truth." Bundy suggested that Kennedy discuss revision of the warplan with McNamara. Mid-level civilian officials also planned a preemptive nuclear strike on the Soviet Union and a possible "nuclear warning shot." However, top advisers rejected them, and Kennedy almost certainly did as well.²³

²¹ JFK, "Report on Berlin," 534–538; JFK to Rusk, "Berlin Political Planning," 21 August 1961, in Edward Claflin, ed., *JFK Wants to Know: Memos from the President's Office, 1961–1963* (New York, 1991), 102–104; Bundy to JFK, "(1) Berlin Negotiations and (2) Possible Reprisals," 14 August 1961, NSF: Countries-Germany, Berlin, General, 8/11/61–8/15/61, Box 82, JFKL; Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, 1991), 226.

²² Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, 218 [emphasis his]; JFK to McNamara, 14 August 1961, and Idem, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 70, 15 August 1961, in Claflin, *JFK Wants to Know*, 93, 96; John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York, 1989), 158–61; Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, 333–335; Raymond Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected," *Foreign Policy* 84 (1991): 142–156.

²³ Bundy, "Covering note on Henry Kissinger's memo on Berlin," 7 July 1961, NSF: Countries-Germany, Berlin, General, Kissinger Report 7/7/61, Box 81, JFKL; Carl Kaysen to Bundy, 3 July 1961, *ibid.*, Kissinger Report 7/1/61–7/6/61, Box 81, JFKL; Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 298–304; Herken, *Counsels of War*, 158–161; Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, 225–226n.

In October, Kennedy did approve a plan outlining four successive phases of NATO response to an interruption of access to Berlin: diplomacy, mobilization, conventional military action, and ultimately use of nuclear weapons. His approval of the document suggests that he conceived of exhausting the first three options and waging nuclear war in defense of Berlin. Yet this was nothing new; Kennedy had always been aware that, even under Flexible Response, his responsibilities might include the use of nuclear weapons. It is also possible that the plan was partly meant for Soviet consumption through the use of espionage channels, making it a threat of sorts, but not a literal representation of U.S. policy.²⁴

Kennedy did issue nuclear threats through top advisers. But his clearest public message on nuclear weapons during the Berlin crisis was delicately framed. Encouraged by intelligence estimates in the latter half of 1961, the president decided to debunk the missile gap myth to stop Khrushchev's nuclear saber rattling, to reassure NATO allies, and to calm the U.S. public. To deliver the statement he chose McNamara's deputy Roswell Gilpatric, an official high enough in rank to give the statement credibility, but low enough that the Soviets would not interpret it as a threat. With Gilpatric's announcement, the administration unambiguously declared U.S. strategic superiority, but not the country's willingness to fight a nuclear war and bear its costs. The administration also drew attention to its conventional military efforts. Gilpatric's statement and the policy Kennedy outlined in July suggest that the administration was reluctant to brandish U.S. nuclear superiority or to make it the focal point of its Berlin policy.²⁵

Kennedy's third and probably most dangerous crisis was the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Here again Kennedy and the National Security Council's Executive Committee (ExCom) relied surprisingly little on nuclear weapons. As with Berlin, they generally exhibited a cautiousness that contrasted sharply with the enormous and by then openly confirmed U.S. nuclear advantage.²⁶

²⁴ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, 203; JFK to Lauris Norstad, 20 October 1961, attachment, DDRS 1993, #1033; Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, 282–283.

²⁵ Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 163; Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 381–82; Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, 328–29; McNamara testimony, "World Military Situation," 148; Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C., 1987), 102–104, 106; Roswell Gilpatric, "Present Defense Policies and Program," 21 October 1961, *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 1 December 1961, 101.

²⁶ At the time U.S. strategic weapons outnumbered the Soviets' 14 to 1. Vance to LBJ, 3 October 1964, Schedule A; Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 208.

When Kennedy did rely on nuclear weapons, however, Flexible Response gave way to Eisenhower's Massive Retaliation. "To the extent that nuclear weapons entered into the discussion at all," one observer argues, "their image hardly matched that associated with theories of controlled and limited options." Kennedy abandoned Flexible Response in his carefully crafted television address, stating that the United States would "regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba . . . as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union." Under pressure, Kennedy reached first for his crude nuclear cudgel, not his refined multilevel strategy.²⁷

Apart from Kennedy's speech, however, there is little evidence that ExCom deliberately used nuclear weapons for deterrence. Among top officials, only JCS chair Taylor invoked U.S. nuclear superiority. "We have the strategic advantage in our general war capabilities," Taylor wrote McNamara. "This is no time to run scared." More subtly, McNamara recommended a SAC alert to "deter" a Soviet military response to the U.S. air attack on Cuba then under consideration. Such evidence suggests that ExCom members were at least aware of U.S. strategic superiority. Far more revealing, however, is the dearth of official public or private references indicating that ExCom was encouraged by the U.S. atomic edge. In private conversations administration officials said little about U.S. superiority, and were unimpressed by it when they did. "What difference does it make?" Kennedy asked after the Cuban deployment. "They've got enough to blow us up already." At the peak of a crisis the president clearly feared that an armed clash would escalate uncontrollably. He told his brother, "It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth step—and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so."²⁸

²⁷ Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon*, 305–306; George Quester, *Nuclear Diplomacy: The First Twenty-Five Years* (New York, 1970), 246–247; Gerard Clarfield and William Wiecek, *Nuclear America: Military and Civilian Nuclear Power in the United States, 1940–1980* (New York, 1984), 256–257; "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba," 22 October 1962, PPP 1962, 808.

²⁸ Taylor to McNamara, "Nuclear-Free or Missile-Free Zones," 26 October 1962, DDRS Retrospective Collection, #243C, 2; *Presidential Recordings*, Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, "Off-the-Record-Meeting on Cuba," 16 October 1962, evening, POF, JFKL, 10, 15, 27; *Presidential Recordings*, Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, 27 October 1962, POF, JFKL, 19, 24, 25, 27, 28; RFK, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1969), 98.

These concerns produced caution, evident in Kennedy's use of a naval blockade rather than an air strike; in U.S. concessions, such as the pledge not to invade Cuba, and the secret trade for U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey; in doubts that Robert Kennedy actually issued the ultimatum he described in his memoirs; in the lack of ExCom support for an air strike; and in discussion of alternatives such as tightening the blockade. ExCom's restraint, when coupled with its near-silence on the strategic balance, suggests that it was neither emboldened by nor determined to rely on superior U.S. nuclear power. In fact, Kennedy claimed that the "major lesson" of the crisis was not the importance of nuclear might, but the need for "sufficient time to consider alternative courses of action."²⁹

Nuclear weapons played an even smaller role in other areas of U.S. foreign relations. There is no evidence the United States threatened or considered their use in the Congo crisis, in Africa in general, or in other regions of the world. Yet nuclear power did play a political role in U.S. foreign relations. In Kennedy's efforts "to bind up the northern half of the Free World more closely," he saw nuclear weapons as useful tools for solidifying the Atlantic alliance. This was most evident in U.S. attempts to establish the Multilateral Force (MLF), but also in the 1961 decision to proceed with deployment of the obsolete Jupiter missiles in Turkey in order to appease the Turks and to avoid appearing weak to the Soviets. Nuclear weapons could also produce political fissures in relations with other countries, most notably Great Britain, Japan, and Canada.³⁰

But nuclear weapons were never the sole nor even the primary focus of bilateral ties. Apart from Atlanticists in the State Department, the administration never enthusiastically pushed the MLF. From the beginning Kennedy attached a host of conditions to the project's development, and it

²⁹ Herken, *Counsels of War*, 166; Philip Nash, "Nuisance of Decision: Jupiter Missiles and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 14 (1991): 10-18; Bruce Allyn, et al., eds., "Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989," CSIA Occasional Paper No. 9 (Lanham, Md., 1992), 86, 92-93; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes*, ed. and trans. Jerrold Schechter (Boston, 1990), 177; *Recordings*, 27 October 1962, 26, 27, 28, 73; David Welch and James Blight, "The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis: An Introduction to the ExCom Transcripts," *International Security* 12 (1987/88): 21-22; "Remarks of President Kennedy to the National Security Council," 22 January 1963, *DDRS* 1986, #2274, 1.

³⁰ Rostow to JFK, "The Problem We Face," 21 April 1961, *DDRS* 1985, #2889, 1; BNSP 1962, 117-164; BNSP 1963, 36; Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 220-223; Nash, "Nuisance of Decision," 3-6.

remained only one element in his "Grand Design" for Europe. His efforts to promote European integration, to reduce tariffs, and to persuade the major NATO allies to beef up their conventional forces were more important.³¹

Nuclear weapons figured chiefly in the context of nonproliferation in the Middle East and in Latin America, which the administration considered designating a nuclear-free zone in 1962. Nuclear proliferation was Kennedy's main justification for the limited nuclear test ban, the centerpiece of his foreign policy in 1963. His greatest proliferation concern was the People's Republic of China. The president, according to foreign policy adviser Walt Rostow, considered China's acquisition of nuclear technology "the most significant and worst event of the 1960s." According to one study, the administration "not only seriously discussed but actively pursued the possibility of joint military action *with the Soviets*" to destroy the Chinese atomic bomb production complex. Although McGeorge Bundy discounts this as "talk, not serious planning or real intent," it remains striking testimony to the depth of White House fears.³²

The administration was more restrained during the Taiwan Straits mini-crisis of 1962. As Taiwan's leader Chiang Kai-shek made preparations to invade the mainland, Kennedy refused to support or encourage him. Although this crisis was far less serious than the ones faced in 1954–55 and 1958, it is still noteworthy that the administration, while enjoying absolute strategic superiority over the pre-nuclear People's Republic, still labored to prevent Chiang from precipitating a more dangerous crisis.³³

³¹ Frank Costigliola, "The Pursuit of Atlantic Community: Nuclear Arms, Dollars, and Berlin," in Thomas Paterson, ed., *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963* (New York, 1989); JFK, "Address Before the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa," 17 May 1961, PPP 1961, 385.

³² Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy Toward the Arab States and Israel: Analysis and Documents* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 54–55, 116–120; Thomas Paterson, "Fixation with Cuba: The Bay of Pigs, Missile Crisis, and Covert War against Castro," in Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 151; Glenn Seaborg, with Benjamin Loeb, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban* (Berkeley, 1981), 171, 193–194, 198–199; Walt Rostow, interview by Richard Neustadt, 25 April 1964, Oral History Program, JFKL, 63; Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991), 230; Gordon Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford, 1990), 229 [emphasis in original], 228–52; Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 532.

³³ Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 224–227; Leonard Gordon, "United States Opposition to the Use of Force in the Taiwan Strait, 1954–1962," *Journal of American History* 72 (1985): 654–658; James Fetzer, "Clinging to Containment: China Policy," in Paterson, *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 189–190.

Vietnam was one of Kennedy's most serious foreign policy problems, especially in the fall of 1961, when the collapse of the U.S. client regime in Saigon seemed imminent. Some advisers proposed sending in thousands of U.S. troops. However, there is almost no evidence that top policymakers considered or threatened the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

The JCS kept open the possibility of a nuclear response if China intervened after a SEATO deployment to South Vietnam. At the Department of Defense, deputy assistant secretary William Bundy wrote McNamara that "one possible omission" from a draft memo for the president was "the issue of nuclear weapons as part of a punitive action." Bundy outlined "Scenario Z" as the last of three "bad scenarios": "Moscow comes to the aid of Hanoi and Peiping, supplying all necessary equipment (including a limited supply of air-deliverable nuclear weapons to retaliate in kind against U.S. use) so that the outcome is a stalemate in which great destruction is wreaked on the whole area." Bundy's report suggests that officials envisioned using nuclear weapons against the Soviets and Chinese in Vietnam; it may even imply that they imagined confining a nuclear exchange to a particular region. But Bundy acknowledged that the "chances of the Soviets bringing about" a nuclear confrontation "do not appear great in the short run."³⁴

Even tentative ruminations such as these do not appear to have taken place widely or at higher levels. The Taylor Mission report, recommending a large-scale dispatch of troops, discussed contingencies that officials hoped to meet "without the use of nuclear weapons" and an expansion of reserve forces only "up to the nuclear threshold." The U.S. military undoubtedly had contingency plans providing for nuclear use, and talk of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam became more serious as U.S. involvement escalated later under President Lyndon Johnson. But Kennedy's policy on Vietnam, like that in other regions, allowed no significant role for nuclear weapons.³⁵

Kennedy's foreign policy was not flawless, nor even very successful, if its results are compared with its objectives. Flexible Response, although it

³⁴ Lyman Lemnitzer to McNamara, "Concept of Use of SEATO Forces in South Vietnam," 9 October 1961, NSF: Countries-Vietnam, 10/4/61-10/9/61, Box 194, JFKL, Appendix A, 7-8; William Bundy, cover memo, 5 November 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vietnam 1961*, 1:538n; Idem, draft paper, "Reflections on the Possible Outcomes of U.S. Intervention in South Vietnam," 7 November 1961, *ibid.*, 553-54.

³⁵ Taylor to JFK, 3 November 1961, attachment 2, "Evaluation and Conclusions," *ibid.*, 502-503, 491.

reduced U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons, misfired on occasion. Success in the Cuban missile crisis was one of the doctrine's products, but so, in part, was the Vietnam debacle. Kennedy's nuclear buildup was excessive, despite Flexible Response, the demise of the missile gap, and his success at staving off demands for an even larger arsenal. The buildup cost a great deal of money, increased the potential destruction of a nuclear war, and needlessly stoked the arms race.³⁶

Still, caution appears to have been the most salient characteristic of Kennedy's nuclear policy. The evidence now accessible suggests that Kennedy's reliance on non-nuclear assets overshadowed his reliance on nuclear weapons, just as his nuclear restraint eclipsed any nuclear recklessness. His caution is not surprising in light of the national security strategy he pursued and the personal concerns he harbored about nuclear weapons. But it is notable in view of the alarm with which Washington and most Americans viewed the Soviet threat; the frequency and intensity of the international crises Kennedy faced; and the widely acknowledged supremacy of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Given this mix of threat, crisis, and strategic superiority, the limited role nuclear weapons played in Kennedy's foreign policy is striking.

³⁶ For a critique of Kennedy's foreign policy, see Paterson's introduction in *Kennedy's Quest for Victory*, 3–23.