National Security Panics:  
Overestimating Threats to National Security

by

Jane Kellett Cramer

B.A., English  
Oberlin College, Oberlin Ohio, 1986

Submitted to the Department of Political Science  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science  
at the  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

February 2002

©2002 Jane Kellett Cramer. All Rights Reserved.

The Author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and distribute publicly paper and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part.

Signature of Author: ____________________________

Department of Political Science
January 11, 2002

Certified by: ______

Stephen Van Evera  
Associate Professor of Political Science  
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: ____________________________

Thomas J. Christensen  
Associate Professor of Political Science  
Chairman, Graduate Program Committee
National Security Panics: 
Overestimating Threats to National Security

by

Jane Kellett Cramer

Submitted to the Department of Political Science on January 11, 2002
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

ABSTRACT

Three times in this century the US public has panicked with fear because of
exaggerations of external threats to the nation. These panics peaked in 1950, 1960, and
1980. Why did the U.S. markedly exaggerate the Soviet threat at these times?
These periods of widespread public fear were "defining moments" when the US
created confrontational and militarized containment policies. These panics ratcheted up
the arms race tremendously between the US and the Soviet Union, and arguably these
panics led to unnecessary confrontations and crises.

In this study I test leading explanations of these cases—eight hypotheses drawn
from three different perspectives. The Rational Perspective argues insufficient
information and uncertainty about present and future capabilities and intentions causes
overestimations. The Psychological Perspective argues cognitive errors could cause these
overestimations (attribution theory and schema theory/analogue reasoning, tested here).
The Domestic Politics Perspective argues oversell, logrolling, electoral politics and/or
militarism causes public overestimations.

Domestic Politics best explains the national misperceptions examined. In each
case, the sources of the specific misperceptions examined were clearly rooted in domestic
politics (1950: oversell and militarism; 1960 and 1980: electoral politics and militarism.)

Uncertainty about the threat was found to be a significant contributing factor in
1950 (but not the source/elites did not unintentionally overestimate when the
misperceptions first formed). Uncertainty was found to be a significant "permissive
condition" for the misperceptions of 1960—but uncertainty was highest just after Sputnik
in 1957, and sharply decreased by 1960, yet public fear increased and peaked in 1960.
There was no significant uncertainty in the 1980 panic—uncertainty is not a necessary
condition for panic.

Psychological hypotheses were not detected playing a role in causing these panics.
Leaders private deliberations were examined and did not exhibit the patterns of reasoning
predicted by these theories (e.g. leaders were aware of provoking the threat).

National misperceptions guide policy and shape many leaders' beliefs through
"blowback" and psychological post hoc rationalization. These large, important
misperceptions are rooted in domestic politics, while international relations scholars focus
on psychological and rational reasons for misperceptions. The study of misperceptions in international relations needs to be re-oriented.

Thesis Supervisor: Stephen Van Evera

Title: Associate Professor of Political Science
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many people thanks for guiding me and supporting me throughout this project. While others often have horror stories about their thesis adviser, I truly and sincerely only have nice things to say about mine. Steve Van Evera was a great thesis adviser. He inspired the topic, patiently waded through messy drafts, and constantly encouraged me to persist even when the “enemies of knowledge” were pulling me away from my desk. George Rathjens has been a wonderful mentor and friend since I interviewed with him when applying to MIT. He has gone to great lengths to support me in this project, and has always given generously of his time and ideas. I am very grateful. Barry Posen has also generously helped me with this project from the start. He has given many useful comments, and has always been kindly accommodating of my needs. Carl Kaysen has provided useful comments and feedback about panics, and has provided inspiring guidance throughout my grad school years.

My colleagues at MIT have helped me tremendously by discussing panics regularly, reading drafts, and patiently listening to presentations. My office companions, Dave Mendeloff, P.R. Goldstone, and Taylor Seybolt have sat in the trenches with me and always had a joke or a rant to keep the day entertaining. Goldstone, in particular, has patiently described my project back to me whenever I started to get confused. Jim Walsh, Inger Weibust, Dan Lindley and Eric Heginbotham have been especially supportive throughout as well. Many others deserve my gratitude, including: Nick Beldecos, Dave Burbach, Steve Clinkenbeard, Andrea Gabbitas, Kelly Greenhill, Yinan He, Jonathan Ladinsky, Kevin Leppman, Jenny Lind, Daryl Press, Laura Reed, Mike Shirer, Brian Taylor, Trevor Thrall, Chris Twomey, Chikako Ucki, Sharon Wiener, and JB Zimmerman.

I have received generous support from the MIT Security Studies Program, and I have appreciated the atmosphere they have provided for doing research at the Center for International Relations at MIT. It is an inspiring place and I always missed it when I went away. In particular, I would like to thank George Lewis, Ted Postol and Harvey Sapolsky for their support and scholarly inspiration during my graduate career. This project has also received generous support from MacArthur Foundation Fellowships.

I have received very helpful research assistance from Karen Peters-Van Essen and Michael Nguyen at the University of Oregon. My colleagues at the University of Oregon, especially Lars Skalnes, have been very supportive during the final stages of this project.

I also need to thank Phil and Mary Holman for their generosity and encouragement when they invited me to stay in their home and had meals waiting when
I would return from researching at the National Archives in Washington. In Cambridge I received kind support from Ann Kearsley, Martha Kearsley, Bing Broderick, Edith Aherne, Roy Shulman, Sarah Shulman and Tom Garrett. Claudia Canale-Parola, Matt Blumenfeld, and Jen Metzger have enduring this project from beginning to end and helped make it endurable. My deepest gratitude goes to my incredible friend Jill Shulman. She has supported me in this project from the very beginning, and has for years provided me and my family a home in Cambridge whenever we need one for weeks on end, and everything else, no matter what.

My late grandparents, Therese and Cy Kellett, were wonderfully supportive of my graduate career and are greatly missed. My family, particularly Joan Burns, Marylou and Jimmy Sughrue, Cy and Joanne Kellett, Rita and Steve Prevoznik and Jerry and Lynn Kellett and their families have made Massachusetts a nice place to live. Also Bill Kellett, Emily Knowles-Kellett, John Kellett, Pamela Tenner-Kellett and Paul Kellett have helped me in ways too numerous to mention.

My parents, John and Christine Kellett, have provided generous financial support for this project, valuable editing and comments on drafts, and frequent stimulating discussions. The wisdom and emotional support they have generously given has sustained me.

Finally, my husband Tom and my two beautiful girls, Phacelia and Melica, have endured the most. Tom has edited, formatted and assisted in every way he could. The three of them have been the most patient with this project. This thesis is dedicated to them.
National Security Panics: 
Overestimating Threats to National Security

CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 3
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................ 5

Introduction: Overview of Dissertation .............................................................. 9

Chapter 1
The Mechanics of Panics .................................................................................. 29

Chapter 2
Hypotheses of the Causes of Panics ................................................................. 75

Chapter 3
Insufficient Information, Psychology, and the 1950 Panic .................................. 160

Chapter 4
Domestic Politics and the Panic of 1950 ............................................................ 219

Chapter 5
The Missile Gap and the Panic of 1960 ............................................................. 284

Chapter 6
Consequences and Costs of Threat Exaggeration .......................................... 372

Chapter 7
Panics: Theoretical and Policy Implications .................................................. 398

Selected Bibliography ......................................................................................... 415
TABLES AND DIAGRAMS

Table 1. Five Debates Concerning U. S. Cold War Panics .......................... 14

Table 2. Findings for Causes of National Security Panics .......................... 20

Table 3. Hypotheses of the Causes of National Misperceptions ...................... 45

Table 4. Hypotheses of National Security Panics ..................................... 77

Table 5. U.S. and Soviet ICBMs, 1959-1965 .......................................... 300

Table 6. Projection of a Missile Gap.................................................. 306

Table 7. Soviet and U.S. Strategic Nuclear Delivery Forces, January-February 1961 ................................................................. 326

Table 8. Findings for Causes of National Security Panics ......................... 401

Diagram 1. H1: Elites Misperceive Capabilities ....................................... 81

Diagram 2. H2: Elites Misperceive Intentions .......................................... 86

Diagram 3. H3: Attribution Theory: Elites make attribution errors .............. 111


Diagram 5. H5: Oversell ........................................................................ 131

Diagram 6. H6: Logrolling ..................................................................... 141

Diagram 7. H7: Electoral Politics ............................................................ 147

Diagram 8. H8: Military Inflates the Threat ............................................. 155

.
INTRODUCTION:

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

We deceive ourselves if we think that we shall finally arrive at a point where these convulsions shall cease.
--F.W. Hirst, The Six Panics, 1913

Three times in this century the U.S. public dramatically convulsed with fear because of exaggerations of external threats. These moments of intense public fear occurred during the Cold War, with public fear highest in 1950, 1960 and 1980. Why did the U.S. markedly exaggerate the Soviet threat at these times?

This dissertation seeks to explain these national misperceptions. Many people argue that these misperceptions were understandable, and justifiable because they were caused by insufficient information about the capabilities and/or the intentions of the Soviet Union—leaders and the public misperceived the threat because there was not enough

---


2 Many scholars recognize these "peaks of fear" or "periods of peril," for example see Alan Wolfe, The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat: Domestic Sources of the Cold War Consensus (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Robert H. Johnson, Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Anne Hessing Cahn, Killing Detente: The Right Attacks the CIA (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Penn State University Press, 1998) With the benefit of hindsight, it has become clear that the U.S. exaggerated the threat posed by the Soviet Union—but note, what is known to be an exaggeration with hindsight could be based on a reasonable estimation of the threat at the time—it is only known to be an overestimation, and thus an exaggeration of the threat, with the benefit of hindsight. This slightly controversial assertion—that the threat was thought by the public to be larger than it actually was—is fully analyzed and supported in the case studies.
information available at the time to dispel their fears about possible Soviet capabilities and intentions. Another proposed explanation for these misperceptions is that U.S. leaders' perceptions suffered from psychological biases; leaders unwittingly exaggerated the threats they faced because of common psychological tendencies. Still others argue that the U.S. military, or the military-industrial complex, managed to exaggerate the threat in order to justify larger military budgets. Another common argument is that political elites exaggerated the threat to enhance their own power or win elections, or that political elites were induced by the structure of the domestic political process to "oversell" their preferred policies in order to have those policies adequately adopted and sufficiently enacted. These are the explanations I assess.

The first panic examined here happened early in the Cold War with public fears focused on the possibility of the Soviet Red Army sweeping across Europe and the spread of "monolithic communism" in Asia and across the globe. These fears among the public peaked in 1950 shortly after the U.S. "lost" China and the Soviets detonated their first atomic bomb—at the time of NSC 68 and the beginning of the Korean War. To understand the sources of these misperceptions, I investigate the entire period of 1946-1951.

The second public panic concerned renewed feelings that the U.S. was falling behind the Soviets in the arms race in the late 1950s and would be dangerously behind by the early 1960s. Public fear rose sharply after the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in October 1957 and the unofficial release of the gloomy Gaither Report in December of that year which painted a dire picture of the U.S.'s ability to effectively deter a Russian
strategic strike and called for an astronomical $44 billion increase in defense spending over several years—at a time when the total defense budget was only $40 billion. Fears of a "missile gap" making possible a surprise attack by the Soviets became intense among the public and numerous political elites. Many civilians built private fallout shelters and debated whether it was ethically permissible to shoot your neighbors if they tried to break into your bomb shelter during a nuclear war. Public fears concerning a possible "missile gap" peaked in 1960. To understand the sources of this panic I investigate the entire period of 1955-1961.

The third public panic began in the late 1970s, with the public coming to believe the U.S. was significantly falling behind in the arms race once again. Fears mounted about a "window of vulnerability" that was going to open in the early 1980s when U.S. land-based missiles would become vulnerable to increasingly accurate Soviet multiple warhead missiles. After U.S. hostages were taken in Iran and Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in 1979, public fears increased, reaching an apex in 1980. I investigate the period of 1974-1981 to understand the sources of this panic.

I argue these periods of widespread intense fear were defining moments for U.S. foreign relations and defense policy; at these times the U.S. created its confrontational and militarized containment policies. These policies were slowly moderated and transformed between periods of panic, but were renewed, and significantly ratcheted up when a new panic developed. To the extent that the U.S. overreacted to the threats it faced, these "national security panics" were unnecessarily costly and dangerous.³ It is clear these

³ My critics will make two arguments: 1) the U.S. did not exaggerate the threats it
periods led to increased tensions, and possibly unnecessary confrontations and crises, and thus were highly dangerous overreactions because they could have led to war.\textsuperscript{4} At the very least, these periods helped lead the U.S. to miss opportunities to end or mitigate the Cold War.\textsuperscript{5}

While I focus this study on investigating the causes of these panics, I also discuss the consequences of these national misperceptions. Many scholars and analysts find that the consequences of overestimating are "only" monetary, and thus acceptable compared to the possibility of facing defeat in war. First, I argue that the monetary consequences are very important if large amounts of scarce resources are used to address threats that are truly much smaller or are wholly non-existent—lives are lost and many people seriously suffer from real unmet needs (such as unavailable medical care) when resources are squandered.\textsuperscript{6} A much less appreciated consequence of overestimation, and perhaps a faced; 2) U.S. reactions to the threats it faced were not excessive. I examine both of these contentions within this thesis. First, rather than simply asserting that exaggeration existed, I define the public misperceptions of each period, and investigate what we know with the benefit of hindsight about the relative capabilities of the U.S. and USSR with reference to each public misperception in question. I demonstrate how we can see with the benefit of hindsight that Soviet capabilities were exaggerated relative to U.S. capabilities by each misperception. It follows that if U.S. actions were premised upon exaggerations of the threats to national security, these actions were most likely excessive relative to the actual threat.


\textsuperscript{6} One interesting aspect of panics that I have found is that panics are usually partially rooted in increased uncertainty, but what the public comes to worry about is very different from what the actual threat at the time was—so resources are squandered on meeting more or less non-existent or tangential threats rather than addressing the real threat directly. As a result of misplaced public fears, there is a serious mismatch.
much more important problem, is that overreactions to threats appear to increase the threat and danger the U.S. was attempting to address and avoid. There is strong evidence that the U.S. overwhelmingly led and escalated the arms race in these periods. It appears that the U.S. pushed the Soviets to respond to U.S. military capabilities at these times, and thus perhaps created “self-fulfilling prophecies” — created bigger threats to contend with than would have developed if the U.S. had not exaggerated the threat and thus not overreacted to the actual threat as it did. This realization should help to undermine the common belief that it is somehow “prudent” to overestimate rather than to underestimate threats. It needs to be more widely appreciated that it is not “playing it safe” to overestimate threats; estimating threats is a two-sided problem and errors in either direction are costly and dangerous.

These panic periods have been widely recognized and examined by scholars, however five broad debates about these cases persist in the literature that need to be disaggregated and addressed to begin to explain these important periods (see Table 1 on the following page). The first, most basic, debate centers on whether or not there was an overestimation of the threat in these periods. The second debate concerns whether or not elites overestimated the threat unintentionally, in their private deliberations, and if so, by how much did they overestimate? The third debate concerns whether or not elites exaggerated the threat to the public or not, and if so, by how much? The fourth and fifth debates focus on explaining why elites overestimated the threat. If elites overestimated the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Was there a Panic?</th>
<th>Sources and Size of different overestimations.</th>
<th>Explanations of Overestimations.</th>
<th>Three Perspectives: Explanations for Overestimations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate #1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Rational Perspective:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there an overestimation of the threat by the Public in these periods?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders unintentionally overestimate the threat because of uncertainties about current or future capabilities or intentions of an adversary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate #2:</strong></td>
<td>Did elites overestimate the threat unintentionally, in their private deliberations, in these periods? If so, how much?</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Psychological Perspective:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders make common cognitive errors when they interpret the threat posed by another state. Hence, leaders may unintentionally overestimate the threat posed by another state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate #3:</strong></td>
<td>Did elites exaggerate the threat to the public in these periods? If so, how much?</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Domestic Politics Perspective:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leaders distort and manipulate the threat for domestic political reasons. Leaders might be motivated by the “national interest” – exaggerating the threat to mobilize the public and Congress. Or leaders might be motivated by their own interests in gaining power, or by other parochial interests. Leaders might exaggerate the threat because of organizational interests in larger budgets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate #4:</strong></td>
<td>If elites unintentionally overestimated the threat – why did they do so?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate #5:</strong></td>
<td>If elites intentionally exaggerated the threat to the public – why did they do so?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
threat unintentionally and in their private assessments—why did they do so? If elites
exaggerated the threat to the public—why did they do so? Framing these debates
separately is essential for understanding in what ways scholars disagree about the
explanations of these cases.

The first debate is the most basic, but there is still some significant disagreement
about whether or not there was overestimation of the threat in one or more of these
periods. I begin each case study by establishing that there was overestimation of the
threat at the time, widely believed by the public, in each of these cases. I establish this
basic contention—that there were misperceptions by the public in each of these periods—by
comparing what the public believed at the time with what the elite believed at the time,
with what the actual threat at the time was as known with the benefit of hindsight.

---

7 For example, the first panic of 1950 is the most controversial—many scholars argue
there was no real overestimation at the time—while the panic of 1980 is the least
controversial with most scholars readily concurring with the finding that the Soviet
threat was unquestionably exaggerated in this period.

8 I recognize that one of the most important and confusing arguments—very widely
contended—is that what appear to be misperceptions with hindsight are really incidents
of when the public got justifiably scared because of a possible future danger, but then
the country successfully acted to avert that danger, so no danger materialized. I agree
with this basic argument—if public fears centered on a possible future danger, and this
danger was then averted, then I would find that no misperception occurred. However,
I find actual large misperceptions in these cases and they take three forms: 1) the public
feared a “current threat” at the time that did not then exist (as opposed to fearing a
future threat); 2) the public feared a possible future threat that was actually impossible
(e.g., the public believed the Soviets could launch a successful disarming first strike in
the future when, in fact, this would remain impossible—or at least not be made
significantly more possible by the capabilities the public was fearing); 3) the public
feared a possible future threat that was possible theoretically, but was much, much less
likely than the public believed, while there was sufficient information available at the
time to determine how unlikely the threat was. In this last case, elites either
psychologically misperceived the available information, or elites at the time were well
aware of how unlikely the threat was, but there is evidence to show that the elites
The second and third broad debates explore the basic sources and sizes of the overestimations of the threat. The second debate concerns whether or not elites overestimated the threat unintentionally and in private, and if so, by how much? The third debate explores the question: Did elites exaggerate the threat to the public, and if so, by how much? These debates recognize that there are two possible sources of public misperceptions—unintentional elite overestimations and intentional elite exaggerations. It is quite possible that both sources of overestimation could occur together to cause panic—elites could overestimate the threat privately, and then these elites could decide they need to exaggerate the threat to the public in order to mobilize the public to adequately respond to the threat they perceived. This leads to the question: How much of the panic is caused by unintentional elite overestimations and how much is caused by intentional elite exaggerations? This study examines these questions by determining what the elite perceived at the time, as compared to the actual threat at the time as known with hindsight, and then comparing these private elite assessments with how the elites presented the threat to the public at the time.

The fourth and fifth broad debates about these cases focus on why these overestimations occurred. The fourth debate asks: If the elite did misperceive the threat in private, why did it do so? And the fifth debate asks: If the elite exaggerated the threat to the public, why did it do so? There are two basic perspectives on why elites would unintentionally overestimate the threat. First, the “Rational Perspective” argues that elites overestimated the threat in these periods because there was insufficient information about intentionally misled the public about the probability of the threat.
the current or future capabilities of the adversary. Second, the “Psychological Perspective” argues that elites misperceived the threat for psychological reasons—leaders made cognitive errors as they perceived the threat and this led to the misperceptions in these cases.

A third perspective, the “Domestic Politics Perspective,” explains why elites would intentionally exaggerate the threat to the public. For example, it has been argued that leaders have exaggerated the threat in the “national interest,”—believing it was the right thing to do for the country—in order to mobilize the public and Congress to support an adequate defense policy. Others have contended that leaders have exaggerated the threat to gain power—in order to win elections—or for other parochial interests. Many observers argue that the military is a prime source of threat inflation, as leaders of the military exaggerate the threat for organizational reasons—to increase organizational budgets.

In this study, I derive eight hypotheses explaining the sources of public overestimations of the threat from these three perspectives. These eight hypotheses are the central focus of this study as they make it possible to systematically explain these cases. Each hypothesis offers a specific explanation for the overestimations of the threat I examine. By logically specifying how each hypothesis works, and then deriving predictions of what should be seen in each case if that hypothesis explained the case, I can then test each hypothesis against each case to see if it explains the case, or even partially explains the case. I test these hypotheses using process tracing and the congruence procedure. Overall, I examine these hypotheses in what Imre Lakatos has termed a
“three-cornered fight.” Instead of just a “two-cornered fight” where a hypothesis is tested against the null hypothesis of having no causal relationship, my examination includes both tests against the null hypothesis and theory-against-theory tests. The end result is that this investigation yields findings about both the absolute and the relative explanatory power of each of the hypotheses in these cases, and these results yield full explanations of these cases and help to resolve the broad debates framed above about these cases.9

The results of this study lead to the conclusion that a major re-orientation of the study of misperceptions in international relations is in order. I argue this is necessary because scholars of international relations have focused upon unintentional overestimations of the threat as the most important sources of misperceptions between states. I argue that the extremely important national misperceptions of theses cases—the long-term policy-guiding misperceptions developing in these periods—were not primarily the products of unintentional overestimations, but rather the products of intentional elite myth-making. These national misperceptions—that came to be widely believed by many elites—were created because of domestic political struggles.10 I do find that “uncertainty” about the

---

9 As I explain in the next chapter, for each case I describe “portraits” of the threat of what the public believed, the threat with the benefit of hindsight, and the threat according to what information was available at the time. After determining these “portraits,” I do process tracing, using the eight hypotheses I develop to guide evaluations of who knew what when, etc. with respect to these portraits. The combination of these steps fully addresses the broad debates outlined above, as it tests the hypotheses.

10 I discuss below how elites often come to believe in these intentional exaggerations. One explanation is that what many have termed “blowback” which is where elites, even of the same coalition as the myth-makers, are misled by the elites who intentionally created the exaggerations. Psychologists also offer a number of reasons why leaders come to believe in their own earlier rhetoric and these explanations are discussed below.
threat played an important role in these cases, but it was not the primary source of any of the misperceptions. I find no evidence to support the psychological "cognitive error" hypotheses I examine. I turn now to a discussion of my specific findings for these cases which can only be highlighted here. A full explanation of my hypotheses and findings are in the following chapters, but I provide a brief description of the eight hypotheses I test and my basic findings in Table 2 to help guide the following summary.

The national misperceptions of the first case, 1947-1950, can clearly be traced to intentional exaggerations of the threat by the Truman administration and by the military. The Truman administration took the lead in 1947 with its efforts to sell the Truman Doctrine—these findings strongly support the "oversell" hypothesis tested here. Some evidence which demonstrates intentional exaggeration (among abundant evidence in this case) is that leaders within the executive branch at times lamented exaggerating the threat after 1947—they discussed how they needed to correct public perceptions, (but they never made an effort to do so). More "oversell" from within the administration occurred in 1948 with leaders efforts to secure passage of the Marshall Plan that provided aid to war torn Europe. Another, even greater exaggeration of the threat happened in 1950 in the form of the influential document known as NSC 68. The perceptions of the threat contained in that document were officially adopted and later apparently believed by many elites, even though these perceptions were intentionally exaggerated "to bludgeon the mass mind" of the elites within top government, as Secretary of State Acheson later admitted, to secure backing of a greatly expanded defense effort.
### Table 2. Findings for Causes of National Security Panics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weak -- 1948 significant/contributing -- 1950</td>
<td>significant/permisive very weak -- 1960</td>
<td>not significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: <strong>Intentions:</strong> Leaders unintentionally misperceive the current or future intentions of an adversary and overestimate the threat.</td>
<td>weak -- 1948 moderate -- 1950</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>not significant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Psychological Attribution Error:</strong> Leaders overestimate an adversary’s intentions as more aggressive than they are because they unintentionally fail to recognize how they have provoked the adversary’s actions.</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: <strong>Psychological Misuse of Analogies:</strong> Leaders make the “cognitive error” of misapplying an analogy to their current situation and this causes leaders to unintentionally overestimate the threat.</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: <strong>Oversell:</strong> The Executive Branch exaggerates the threat to mobilize the public and Congress to pass policies in the national interest.</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6: <strong>Logrolling:</strong> Groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion form a logrolled coalition and exaggerate the threat.</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7: <strong>Electoral Politics:</strong> Elites outside of power exaggerate the threat in order to better accuse those in power of not being “tough” against a threat. In a campaign, partisan political rhetoric may further exaggerate the threat.</td>
<td>weak/moderate</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8: <strong>Militarism:</strong> If the military determines that its budget is inadequate or might be cut, it will likely work to inflate the threat.</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The military played a central role in exaggerating the threats of this period, especially in 1948. The administration could not have created the crisis—known as the "War Scare of 1948"—without the help of the military. Central to this crisis was a telegram by General Lucius Clay, U.S. military governor in Germany, which said that he feared a possible imminent war. Clay later admitted that the telegram was dispatched to be used in private sessions in Congress for budgetary purposes. Armed with this telegram, and the stir it created, many military leaders went before Congress and greatly exaggerated the threat that March. The dual efforts of the military exaggerating the threat to increase military budgets, along with the Truman administration exaggerating the threat to sell the Marshall Plan, led to increased public fears that were elaborated upon in 1950.

In 1948 leaders were not overestimating the threat because of uncertainty about the capabilities or the intentions of the Soviets. In fact, the private records of the administration and the military both demonstrate that there was no belief among these leaders that there was an increased danger of war at this time. Leaders showed no signs of real concerns as they routinely discussed minor changes in the designs of military uniforms in their regularly meetings—no emergency planning of any kind—while a threat of war was supposedly imminent! Leaders also repeatedly described the Soviets as behaving defensively and retrenching, while they argued the West was gaining the initiative.

In 1950, after the Soviets detonated an atomic bomb, there was increased uncertainty about the threat that stirred debate among the leaders. Many leaders, including Truman, argued that there was no major increased security threat—at least not
enough for Truman to want to increase the defense budget. A political struggle to define the threat happened within the administration, and the leaders backing NSC 68 prevailed, even cornering Truman. I argue that “uncertainty” about the threat played an important contributing role at this point. Uncertainty did not play a direct role as a source of the national misperceptions because the misperceptions of this time were the same ones created in 1947 and 1948, just newly exaggerated. The press was filled with images of a Soviet Red Army ready to invade Western Europe, and images of the threat of “monolithic communism” spreading in Asia and across the globe. These were not the threats the Truman administration discussed privately. By using the pre-existing, ready-made threats from the earlier scare campaigns, the elites ended up in the position of needing to devise policies to address these exaggerated threats, rather than focusing solely on the threats they actually perceived stemming from the increased uncertainty of 1950. The national misperceptions of this period did increase when uncertainty increased, but they were not rooted in uncertainty, and this ultimately led to a significant mismatch between the security threats perceived by the elite and the policies adopted by the state to address security threats.

I also examine the private deliberations of the decision makers to see if their reasoning patterns demonstrate patterns consistent with the psychological hypotheses I examine. One of the hypotheses predicts that leaders should see the adversary as more aggressive than he is because they fail to recognize in what ways they have provoked the adversary. I do not find significant support for this proposition because I find key leaders often well-aware of how they provoked Soviet behavior, how they see the Soviets as
acting defensively and not aggressively in key periods, and leaders often worried about how they might provoke the Soviets in the future. Another psychological hypothesis argues leaders might misapply analogies from the “last war” or other shared formative experience, such as likening “Stalin to Hitler.” I find that leaders often used the “Hitler analogy” in public to help exaggerate the threat, while in private they used many different analogies thoughtfully (and not reflexively or unquestioningly, as psychologists would argue), and they often reflected on the ways Stalin was not like Hitler. Overall, psychological theories did not describe any widespread patterns or the reasoning patterns of key decision makers.

Domestic politics was also the root cause of the public misperceptions of 1960. In this case, uncertainty about Soviet intentions and capabilities peaked just after the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957—creating a “permissive condition” for misperceptions to take root. For a brief period, leaders were quite uncertain about possible Soviet capabilities. However, most leaders within the Eisenhower administration maintained throughout the period that the uncertainty was not dangerous—that U.S. retaliatory capability was assured—so fearing a possible “missile gap” was unnecessary. Significantly, uncertainty sharply decreased in 1958 and continued to further decrease in 1959 and 1960, while public fear increased in this period and peaked in 1960. If uncertainty about a possible missile gap was the cause of the public fear of this period, public fear should have decreased as uncertainty decreased. By 1960 it became much more certain that a dangerous missile gap was not emerging. It became so certain that even though President Kennedy campaigned on a platform that argued Eisenhower was
neglecting a dangerous and imminent missile gap, Kennedy’s newly appointed Secretary of Defense let it slip that there was no missile gap shortly after Kennedy’s inauguration in January 1961.

Instead of uncertainty causing the public fears of a “missile gap,” these fears can clearly be traced to exaggerations of the threat by Democrats looking to discredit the Republican administration (particularly Senators who were presidential hopefuls), and to exaggerations by the Air Force (particularly interests tied to the Atlas missile program that was very likely to be reduced or cancelled if the “missile gap” was not believed). The Democrats and the Air Force had the information they needed to recognize that a dangerous missile gap was not imminent. Instead, these leaders used convoluted arguments to maintain their case for a missile gap, often clearly working to confuse rather than to clarify the public debate.

Psychological hypotheses have a difficult time explaining this case when perceptions of the threat are as sharply defined by party lines and strong organizational interests among the leaders as they are in this case. Exaggerations of the threat were most extreme among the Democratic presidential hopefuls (and not all of them), and the Air Force (primarily the Strategic Air Command that stood to gain a lot, and the Atlas missile manufacturers and commanders) while the other military services and the Eisenhower administration disagreed with the overestimation of the threat of a missile gap. Psychological hypotheses predict that errors in overestimation will be random and probably widespread. I examine the reasoning of those who did believe in a missile gap,
and their private deliberations do not reveal evidence to support the psychological hypotheses I assess.

In the 1980 case, there was no significant, directly relevant, increase in uncertainty during the period. Instead, public fears of a "window of vulnerability" can be traced to intentional propaganda campaigns by elites wanting to take back the White House. Most notably, the flagship and sustained propaganda efforts of the Committee on the Present Danger stand out as helping to create the public misperception of a dangerous "window of vulnerability."

Overall, intentional elite myth-making explains the sources of the important national misperceptions. The lack of increased "uncertainty" in the 1980 case makes it reasonable to argue that "uncertainty" is not a necessary condition for public panics. However, increases in "uncertainty" in the other two cases do significantly contribute to the growth of public misperceptions. Increased uncertainty played the role of a possible "permissive condition" for misperceptions to grow in 1957, or a "contributing factor" lending plausibility to exaggerations of the threat in 1950.

Surprisingly, the widely favored theories from the "Psychological Perspective" do not explain the national misperceptions of these cases. I consistently found that leaders reasoning patterns were idiosyncratic—there were no widespread patterns to explain leaders reasoning about the threat—and errors among the elite were often off-setting in that some elites overestimated the threat while others underestimated. Cognitive error explanations failed to describe overestimations by key decision makers as well.
A main reason psychological theories have been favored by political scientists is because these explanations appear to be able to explain systematic biases at times when leaders seem to have sufficient information to make more accurate estimates of the threats they faced, yet the leaders misperceive the threats apparently unintentionally. Scholars want to be able to explain the apparent phenomenon of “sincere belief” in overestimations clearly not explained by insufficient information and uncertainty. I argue that there are other ways to explain leaders’ beliefs in the overestimations of these periods (e.g. "blowback" and *post hoc rationalization* to bring beliefs in line with actions to reduce psychological or emotional discomfort), and that “cognitive error” explanations do not satisfactorily resolve the puzzle of how and why many leaders sincerely believe in the exaggerated threats of these periods.

I find that the national misperceptions of these periods are firmly rooted in domestic politics—these misperceptions are primarily the products of intentional elite myth-making. These findings suggest that a major re-orientation of the study of misperceptions by political scientists is in order. The need for this re-orientation is well supported by an informal survey of introductory texts focused on the study of international relations and world politics. Most of these texts explain the problem of misperceptions in international relations as a problem of either insufficient information or a problem of psychological biases. I argue these two explanations are not sufficient. This study

---

suggests that these two perspectives on the causes of misperceptions fail to explain the most important causes of some extremely important misperceptions in international relations.

The realization that propaganda created the central misperceptions of these periods is not only theoretically significant. This realization is practically important because if these types of national misperceptions are dangerous, as I contend they are, they are also possibly controllable. Misperceptions caused by insufficient information and uncertainties are most likely unavoidable at times and difficult, if not impossible, to solve.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, misperceptions based on psychological biases appear to be highly unavoidable. But I find that these two types of almost intractable problems do not seem to be the root causes of these major national misperceptions. Elite myth-making during domestic political struggles appears to be the root cause of these misperceptions, and this type of problem, in theory, can be reduced if not corrected.

Specifically, in chapter one I discuss the history of “national security panics,” important definitions for this study, and why it is important to recognize and study the \textit{national misperceptions} of these periods. I also introduce the hypotheses I will examine

and how other scholars have found these hypotheses to be important, and I discuss how others have analyzed these periods. Finally I describe my approach and methods.

In chapter two I present the hypotheses I use to examine the cases. I explain why I selected these hypotheses, precisely how these hypotheses purport to explain the formation of national misperceptions, and what predictions each hypothesis makes—what should we see in the cases to confirm or deny the validity of the hypothesis. In chapter three I focus on the hypotheses concerning unintentional, individual overestimations of the threat in the 1950 case. In chapter four I examine the domestic political explanations for overestimations of the threat in the 1950 case, and sum up the findings of this case. Chapter five presents a full examination, using all of the hypotheses, of the "missile gap" case of 1955-1961. In chapter six, I discuss possible consequences of these panics, and in chapter seven I briefly discuss the panic of 1980 and the overall findings and conclusions of this study.
CHAPTER 1

THE MECHANICS OF PANICS

"The alarm on this occasion, as in the case of the previous panic of 1851, was excited at the very time when it happened to have the least foundation; which might appear strange, did we not know that panic is not the product of reason but passion, and that it is quite as likely to occur under one state of circumstances as another."

--Richard Cobden, *The Three Panics*, 1886

In this chapter I describe the phenomenon of panics and explain how I go about studying them. I first discuss the history of national security panics. In 1862, the British economist and statesman Richard Cobden identified and explained three periods in Britain of intense public fear of an invasion by France in a monograph entitled "The Three Panics." These episodes were in many ways very similar to the Cold War periods examined here, and I test some of Cobden's theories on the causes of panics in this study.

After discussing the history of panics, I turn to specifically outlining some important definitions for this study of panics. I also explain why it is important to study panics by beginning with defining the important *national misperceptions* of these periods and working back from these, rather than beginning with focusing on key decision makers and their perceptions within these periods, as most studies of perceptions do. I argue that most studies of misperceptions in international relations "miss the forest for the trees!"—they end up not being able to adequately explain the big phenomenon of *national misperceptions* (the forest) because they are too heavily
focused on individuals (the trees). I then turn to discussing the literature on these periods and I introduce the hypotheses I examine and explain how they are derived from this literature. I conclude with a discussion of the methods I use to study these panics.

Richard Cobden and the British Panics

National security panics were first described as such by Richard Cobden in his 1862 treatise "The Three Panics." He discusses three British panics about a possible French invasion. Cobden's study is of great interest here not only because it demonstrates that panics have occurred historically, but also because it presents theories on the causes of the British panics which I investigate as causes for the U.S. panics of a century later. Cobden's main theories are that the British panics were caused by elite propaganda of "interested parties," namely politicians involved in partisan struggles and military leaders arguing for more resources for their organizations. He claims that these powerful interests easily use the press. He further contends that these "panic-mongers" can only successfully launch a "panic" that will get results at times of economic prosperity. He stresses that it is essential that the elites are able to manipulate information concerning the threat; if the public had access to "secret and important" information the elites could never get away with panic-mongering.

---

Cobden describes the first panic, 1847-48, as being caused by deteriorating political relations with France, but more importantly by the unauthorized publication of a letter of the Duke of Wellington on Britain's National Defenses. The Duke, the greatest military authority in Britain, proclaimed in his letter that Britain was in grave danger of a possible surprise invasion from France. Cobden explains that the Duke was absolutely wrong, and possibly making such claims because of being enfeebled by old age. However, other leaders and the press echoed the Duke's claims, with military leaders "patriotically" concurring and no one questioning the authority of the Duke. Cobden describes those who are inciting the panic as "not wholly disinterested parties" including Pigou, a gunpowder maker. The panic ended abruptly for two reasons. First because of the sudden abdication of Louis Philippe of France, "the dread Monarch who was to have invaded and conquered England," fled to England!\textsuperscript{14} Second, there was a downturn in England's economy because of turmoil on the Continent which created domestic problems for the budget within England--"commercial depression and gloom"--making increased military expenditures seem impossible.

Cobden describes the second invasion panic of 1851-53 as being caused by the events of the death of the Duke of Wellington combined with the rise to power of Louis Napoleon in France. The biography of the Duke of Wellington, including extensive recounting of his military exploits against France, filled the public journals at the same time as a new Empire in France led by a Bonaparte was voted in. These events, along

\textsuperscript{14} Hirst describes Louis Philippe in these terms as he recounts Cobden's analysis of these panics. F. W. Hirst, \textit{The Six Panics and Other Essays} (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1913) p.10.
with the fact that Britain was more prosperous, set the stage for the acceptance of pamphlets by military and naval officers proclaiming imminent danger of surprise attack. Somewhat mysteriously, politicians who had said defense was adequate introduced bills to the Parliament for greatly increased defense expenditures. The Admiralty pretended "secret and important" intelligence that could not be communicated to the House of Commons, but they expected the House to vote for increases in the military budgets anyhow, based upon their trust of the Executive. Large increases in defense expenditures passed, primarily because of arguments that Britain was not prepared for a large surprise attack, which Cobden argues was not only unlikely but even impossible. Cobden claims the alarmist pamphlets would have not been so influential if they had not been echoed by the press "in the interests of certain political parties," especially in the *Times*, portrayed as the truth based upon unnamed "reliable sources."

According to Cobden, this panic ended because by the spring of 1853:

> The nation had grown rich and prosperous with rapidity beyond all precedent. . . History shows that such a condition of things is fruitful in national follies and crimes, of which war is but the greatest.  

So because times were good, "it seemed only a question upon whom we should expend our exuberant forces—whether on France or some other enemy." Ironically, Britain turned an unexpected direction at that time and soon *allied with France* against Russia in the Crimean War!

---

According to Cobden, the third panic of 1859-1861 was another case where the public was duped about a threat of an invasion by France primarily by the directors of the military and navy, especially in this case by retired military men sounding the alarm. Helping the alarmists was the fact that there was poor intelligence, including rumors about French preparations for an invasion. Cobden points out that this panic "was excited at the very time when it happened to have the least foundation." Cobden exposes point by point how the alarmists carefully crafted their arguments to make Britain's navy appear weaker than it was as compared to the French navy, even though the British were clearly much stronger. Because normal comparisons would reveal Britain's superiority, "very ingenious and perfectly original" modes of comparison were adopted. In short, Cobden found that the most important causes of these panics were the lies told by interested parties, and these lies became popular beliefs because it was a time of relatively greater prosperity.

F.W. Hirst wrote a follow-up to Cobden's essay in 1913 entitled The Six Panics. Hirst credited Cobden with stopping panics for about 22 years, from 1862-1884, when they had been occurring every 3-6 years. Hirst claimed that Cobden shamed the alarmists with his essay on how they self-interestedly provoked panics. Hirst reviews the first three panics described by Cobden, and then claims the panics began again in 1884, with another in 1909, and the sixth in the spring of 1913. Hirst, following in Cobden's footsteps, describes in detail how these panics were also contrived by various "conspirators" and

---

16 As quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Ibid., p. 630.
17 Ibid, p. 634.
18 Hirst, The Six Panics and Other Essays
other interested parties. However, the sixth panic Hirst describes was a “panic” about Germany secretly surveying British coasts at night with Zeppelins. Hirst argues that the reports of airship sightings were a hoax to justify British spending on airships. Hirst failed to recognize that Germany was a real threat in 1913 as they launched a war in 1914, which brings up the question of how to tell a “panic” from a real threat of war? With hindsight, we can see that Hirst clearly did not have the information he needed to make a correct perception.

**Definitions for the Study of National Security Panics**

*What is a national security panic?*

A national security panic is a time when the public markedly exaggerates external threats to the nation, and consequently takes excessive actions to secure safety. I use the word "panic" as defined: “A sudden and excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety.”¹⁹ Panics are periods of *public fear* based on misperceptions of external threats to the state hence they are times of *national misperceptions*. The misperceptions of a panic are overestimations of the threats the state faces, not underestimations of threats.²⁰

---


²⁰ I am only studying overestimations here. I believe the underlying causes of large national overestimations are very different from the causes of underestimations, and thus overestimation needs to be treated separately. Charles Kupchan argues that overestimations and underestimations can be understood by the same common theory. He includes in his study the 1950 case of overestimation I examine here. I explain below why I find his impressive study useful, but problematic. For his arguments, see
Periods of national security panic are especially important incidences of overestimations of threats because of their magnitude and because the widespread belief in the overestimation leads to significant policies and actions based on those misperceptions.

This in no way is meant to suggest that there are not many other types of overestimations of threats, because there are. Overestimations could vary as to group affected, magnitude or duration. For example, there are overestimations where only the elite believes in the overestimation of the threat—"elite panics"—as opposed to the "public panics" studied here. In fact F.W. Hirst describes the fourth British panic as exactly this kind:

...but Mr. Stead and his fellow-conspirators managed to produce a feeling of nervous disquietude in high society, and although the results were small in comparison with later performances, the year 1884 deserves attention as the beginning of a most disastrous expansion in naval armaments, in which the provocative impulse has too often been furnished by Great Britain.\footnote{21}

I would argue that "feeling[s] of nervous disquietude in high society"—what I term "elite panics," are common and come in many different sizes. Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders have briefly feared the "Japan threat," the "Drug threat," the "Rogue threat," and the "China threat"—among others. While observers may disagree about which of these threats has the most substance and which has the least, I believe it is safe to say that each of these threats had a "peak period" when it was highly exaggerated among elites in some quarters. The process by which different threats emerge as the current fad among elites deserves more study.

\footnote{21} Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire.*

\footnote{21} Hirst, *The Six Panics and Other Essays,* p.42.
There are certainly also public overestimations of threats of lesser magnitude, perhaps they could be termed "pint-size panics," but these are more difficult to detect and measure against the "background noise" of various different perceptions within a state. Additionally, there are overestimations that last a long time--"chronic fears"--as opposed to panics that are marked by relatively abrupt changes in public opinion.22

For this study, I use the word "panic" only to refer to periods when there was a large increase in public fear of a foreign threat, marked by a relatively abrupt change in public opinion.23 I have purposefully focused on periods when there was a significant change in perception because the causes of the change should be more evident at these times than at times of small or gradual change in perception. Logically, identifying the causes of large, abrupt changes in national perceptions should be more tractable than seeking to uncover the causes of long-term or low-grade misperceptions, however the

---

22 Robert H. Johnson argues that the U.S. suffered general exaggerated fears of a threat from a "loss of control" in the Third World during the Cold War, and this could be seen as a "chronic fear," see Robert H. Johnson, Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp.131-154. Some scholars view the entire Cold War as a single case of a continuous "chronic fear" after 1950. While I agree that U.S. perceptions were generally overestimating the threat to some degree, I find that to view the entire 39 year period as one episode is to miss significant periods of retrenchment and major points where things could have gone very differently—I explain my view further below. For works that see the Cold War as a single case, and thus essentially a "chronic fear," see Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Kupchan, The Vulnerability of Empire.

23 These panic periods have "abrupt" changes in public opinion polls indicating increased fear where an "abrupt" change is one that occurred at a rate of 10% points or more per year. This definition along with evidence to show abrupt changes in these periods is found in Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 53, 199-205, 283.
findings of this study should be at least partially relevant to the study of other types of overestimations.

Perceptions of threat:

A national security panic is based on a perception of threat by the public. Perceptions of threat necessarily include two components: both an estimation of another state's capability to do harm, and an estimation of its intent to do harm. For example, even though a small state such as Iran may despise the United States, the U.S. does not feel very threatened by that state because it does not have the capability to do great harm to the U.S. However, if Iran got nuclear weapons, the U.S. would perceive a much greater threat from Iran because Iran would then have both the intent and the capability to harm the U.S.²⁴ It is essential to recognize that a threat is based on capabilities and intentions because many debates about threats hinge on these concepts. Did public fears increase in these periods because Soviet capabilities were growing or did the public misperceive the threat because it believed Soviet capabilities were significantly changing when in fact they were not? Was there great uncertainty in these periods because Soviet intentions were indecipherable? Leading scholars have argued that the U.S. greatly overestimated the intentions of the Soviet Union, the U.S. could have done much better, and if the U.S. had done better it could have avoided large overestimations of Soviet

capabilities at times of increased uncertainty because it would have been able to limit worst-case analyses by a more accurate estimate of Soviet intentions. Estimates of intentions are notoriously difficult to determine accurately with a high degree of confidence. Estimates of capabilities are often much more tractable, especially when it requires major long-term changes to significantly alter relative capabilities. The interplay between estimates of intentions and estimates of capabilities is discussed further below, and is a critical piece of the puzzle for determining if overestimations in these periods were reasonably based on uncertainty, or intentionally exaggerated by key decision makers.

What is a Misperception?

For purposes of this study, a misperception has occurred if it can be demonstrated with the benefit of hindsight that a perception of an observation (of an event, person or other state) was incorrect at a particular time. Many scholars would disagree with this definition. Frequently it is argued that if a perception is consistent with the information available at the time in question, even if known to be incorrect with hindsight, then no misperception occurred. However, one important possible explanation for the national

25 For example, see Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary.
26 Jervis points out that one popular approach to studying misperceptions, which he finds valuable, is instead of asking "Was this perception correct?" it is valid to ask, "How was it derived from the information available?" He argues, "This approach seeks to explain both accurate and inaccurate perceptions by the same general theory." While this approach allows comparison between domestic political explanations and psychological explanations for perceptions, it does not allow a comparison of the problems of insufficient information. See Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 7.
misperceptions I am trying to explain here is that *insufficient information* caused these misperceptions. Defining a misperception as any incorrect assessment of the threat, as known with hindsight, allows for the possibility that the overestimation in question was caused by insufficient information or misinterpretation of sufficient information. These two possible sources of misperceptions are competing explanations for the overestimations in question here.

Some scholars argue that “perception” is only a useful intervening variable when the fit between “reality” and leaders’ *individual* responses is problematic.27 These scholars want to narrowly argue that if individual leaders perceived the threats correctly at the time, no misperception took place even if the state proceeded to act imprudently. These scholars want to draw a sharp distinction between misperceptions and domestic politics. However, I find that individual misinterpretation of information is one explanation for the overestimations of the threat in question here, and domestic politics is a competing explanation for these overestimations. In fact I find that scholars heatedly, and I would argue often needlessly, part ways too drastically on this question: they either “go native” and start defending the leaders as sincere good leaders doing their best or they go cynical and accuse almost all of the leaders of self-interested behavior.28 I argue it is also possible that both of these possible sources of

---


28 John Lewis Gaddis’ extensive writings on the Cold War are full of these tensions. In 1982, he wrote there was an emerging post-revisionist synthesis that “leaders
misperceptions contributed to the creation of the public misperceptions in question here, and it is important to see to what extent each source contributed.

*The Importance of starting from National Misperceptions* -- "Don’t Miss the Forest for the Trees!"

I approach the problem of misperceptions in international relations from a different direction than other scholars. I begin each case study by defining the large public misperceptions that I want to explain, rather than focusing exclusively upon the perceptions of key decision makers during key periods to understand important misperceptions in international relations. I argue that it is important to examine national misperceptions as identifiable phenomena, rather than examining individual misperceptions and trying to somehow sum them up to understand misperceptions in international relations. The problem with focusing upon individuals and working up is that you lose the innumerable interactions between individuals that combine to create the national perceptions, and you likely lose the interaction effects between different sources of misperceptions. I argue that focusing on particular individuals is very likely to miss being able to fully explain national perceptions because national perceptions form across time

---

exaggerated the threat for political purposes”, however, most of his subsequent work has been struggling to be more understanding of the constraints the leaders faced. He has placed more and more emphasis on the fact that the leaders faced Stalin, who had to be completely horrifying, so he argues that there must have been great uncertainty and the leaders were truly scared. Compare John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 7 (1983), with John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
among many individuals. In short, you can end up "missing the forest for the trees" because you cannot see and understand the big phenomenon of the widespread national misperception (the forest) because you have focused on individuals (the trees.)

For example, one prominent study of Truman’s perceptions at the time of the outbreak of the Korean War describes Truman’s reasoning in great detail, based on his personal accounts.\(^29\) This study finds that Truman’s personal experiences and own preferred analogies led Truman, in June of 1950, to interpret the North Korean attack on South Korea as a highly aggressive move—and to see this move as convincing evidence of a threat of “monolithic communism” that needed to be confronted. Because this study focuses on Truman at a key period, it does not examine the context Truman was operating in, and it does not recognize other sources of this perception outside of Truman.

At the time of the attack, Truman was facing strong political opposition from Republicans in Congress, and growing McCarthyism, both pressuring him to take a firm stand against communism in Asia. He had also recently been confronted by the fact that most members of his own administration had been organized to sign onto a policy document calling for a much larger definition of the threat than the one he had been advocating. If the North Koreans had attacked in January of 1950, when Truman was still strongly committed to holding defense budgets down, would Truman have perceived the attack differently and found a way to argue that South Korea was not within the U.S.’s defensive perimeter as the administration was announcing publicly at the time? In this study I closely examine both Truman’s individual patterns of reasoning and the political

\(^{29}\) May, "Lessons" of the Past.
context within which he was operating, in an effort to determine how much each of these possible sources of misperception contributed to the creation of the national misperceptions of the time.

I recognize there is great danger in trying to argue that a nation shared a particular misperception. It is extremely difficult to show that an individual had a particular misperception at a particular time, let alone that a large group of people shared a particular misperception. However, national misperceptions are a widely discussed phenomenon in international relations because opinions within states exist, and when opinion shifts, the state usually changes its policies and actions in accord with the opinion shift. This is particularly true for democracies. Public opinion polls are a useful measure of opinion shifts, but they often provide an incomplete record. I have chosen to examine periods where the national misperceptions I focus upon have been widely recognized by historians so that arguments about whether the national misperceptions existed or not are fewer.

In sum, a national security panic is a period when there was a large overestimation(s) of the threat (known with hindsight), accompanied by a dramatic increase in public fear (widespread public belief in the overestimation), leading to substantial increases in military spending and/or other acts to secure safety. This study of national security panics is a study of the sources of national misperceptions—perceptions widely believed by the public. Many scholars have loosely discussed national misperceptions when they make such statements as, "Britain greatly overestimated the threat posed by France," or "Germany greatly underestimated the potential threat of the
U.S." It is necessary to understand the sources of these national misperceptions because these perceptions ultimately determine the parameters of policy for the state, especially in a democracy.\(^{30}\) I unpack the concept of a *national misperception* by beginning with what the public believed, then work back to determine the sources of those public perceptions. It is this focus on the public perceptions, as opposed to individual perceptions, that can guide a careful evaluation of whether it is insufficient information, psychology or domestic politics that is most important for these misperceptions, and in what way these factors interact in the collective perception process. In the next section, I discuss the literature that addresses the causes of these panics and I explain the hypotheses I draw from this literature.

**Literature and Hypotheses on the Causes of Panics**

These important panic episodes of 1950, 1960 and 1980—"periods of peril"—within the Cold War have received considerable attention.\(^{31}\) Yet, there is still remarkable disagreement about the sources of the misperceptions of these periods. From historical

---

\(^{30}\) Many scholars argue that what the public believes is very important in almost all states, since all but the most repressive governments rule by consent of some form. For how government policy and public opinion interact and track together, see Bruce Russett, "Democracy, Public Opinion, and Nuclear Weapons," in *Behavior, Society and Nuclear War*, Philip E. Tetlock et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 174-208.

\(^{31}\) Robert Johnson uses this terminology, "period of peril" (based on wording in NSC-68) to describe these periods as times when the U.S. feared that very soon, because of soon-to-be Soviet acquisition of a new technological military advantage and because the Soviets were assumed to have very ambitious and threatening international goals, the U.S. was in a very dangerous period, where it had to respond quickly or face a grave vulnerability. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After*, pp. 111-127.
accounts and scholarly analyses I have compiled eight leading hypotheses from three different perspectives—the rational perspective, the psychological perspective and the domestic politics perspective. Now I will explain these perspectives, and the literature they are drawn from, and briefly introduce the hypotheses that I use to examine the cases (see the chart of hypotheses on the following page—I fully explain these hypotheses in the next chapter). I then discuss other important studies of these periods, explaining the major contributions and shortcomings of these studies.

**Rational Responses to Uncertainty Explain Panics**

Traditional orthodox views of the Cold War, as well as a number of recent accounts “returning to orthodoxy”, take the view that the U.S. was responding more or less rationally to the Soviet threat. These accounts maintain that overestimations of the threat that are apparent with hindsight are understandable as by-products of the difficulty

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rational Perspective:</th>
<th>\textbf{H1: Uncertain Capabilities:} Leaders misperceive the capabilities of an adversary and sometimes overestimate the threat posed by that adversary. Based on these misperceptions, they lead the public to panic.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States keep secrets and attempt to deceive each other – making it difficult for each to determine the strategy, doctrine, readiness, tactics, technological capabilities of each other. It is difficult for leaders to understand the domestic politics or preferences of another state. It is impossible to predict future political goals/leadership of a state. Leaders and public misperceive threats together and panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textbf{H2: Uncertain Intentions:} Leaders misperceive the intentions of an adversary and sometimes overestimate the threat posed by that adversary. Based on this misperception they lead the public to panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textbf{H3: Attribution Theory:} Leaders tend to excuse their own state’s provocative behavior as being necessary because their circumstances require them to defend themselves and they reason that the behavior of their adversary is due to that state’s aggressive intent. This common tendency of failing to fully recognize the ways in which the adversary has been provoked and is behaving defensively compels the leaders to overestimate the threat posed by the adversary and to lead the public to panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Perspective:</td>
<td>\textbf{H4: Schema Theory:} Leaders tend to use analogies from recent events or the “last war” to interpret their current situation. Use of a false analogy leads them to misperceive the behavior of others. This can lead leaders to overestimate the threat posed by another state and lead the public to panic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders make common cognitive errors when they interpret the threat posed by another state. These errors lead to misperceptions, which the leaders share with the public. The leaders and public misperceive the threat together and panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textbf{H5: Oversell:} The Executive Branch exaggerates the threat in order to create an atmosphere of crisis and unify the country behind the executive so that the administration’s preferred policies are passed by Congress and implemented. The public panics because of the exaggerated threat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Politics Perspective:</td>
<td>\textbf{H6: Logrolling:} Groups that derive parochial benefits from expansionist foreign policies form a logrolled coalition and work to exaggerate the threat so that the state sponsors expansionist policies. The public panics because of the exaggerated threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders distort and manipulate the threat for domestic political reasons or because of organizational motives. Leaders misinform the public and the public panics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textbf{H7: Electoral Politics:} Elites outside of power sometimes accuse the leaders in office of not being “tough” enough against the threat. If the threat becomes a campaign issue, the rhetoric of partisan politics can combine to exaggerate the threat, which causes a public panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textbf{H8: Military Inflates the Threat:} When the military, or an individual branch of the military, determines that its budget is threatened or inadequate, it is likely that it will work to inflate the threat. If the military successfully influences the elite’s threat assessment process, or the public debate, the exaggerated threat can cause the public to panic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This chart is a synoptic version of these hypotheses; each is stated fully and accurately in the next chapter.
of estimating current, and especially future Soviet capabilities and intentions. These views are roughly in accord with the traditional realist view of international relations that maintains that states respond to the international distribution of power. This view recognizes that the problem of overestimating threats is endemic to international relations because states need to use worst-case analyses when they plan. Therefore, when uncertainty is high, worst-case analyses can be extreme, yet reasonable from an objective third party viewpoint. Thus, these “panic periods” are considered periods of great uncertainty, when rational planners had to use worst-case analyses to plan for the threat. When the worst-case did not materialize, as we can see with hindsight, it appears the

---

33 See for example Halle’s description of the “missile gap” period. Halle argues that Russia had triumphed in the arms race by 1958, and Khrushchev had established himself as the clear leader, so Moscow was ready to pursue a dynamic foreign policy. “Russia, the experts agreed, was already so far ahead of the United States in the development of ICBMs that it was now too late to avoid a period in which it would enjoy decisive superiority. During this period, which would begin about 1961, Moscow would be irresistibly tempted to destroy the power of the United States by a surprise attack that disarmed it at one stroke.” Halle states that this view was based on “the assumption that the Russians would realize the missile production of which they were thought capable.” For Halle, it was a perilous time because of the reasonable uncertainties surrounding the “delicate balance of terror.” Halle, The Cold War as History, pp. 343-353.


35 Explaining the many dangers associated with worst-case analyses, see Raymond L. Garthoff, "On Estimating and Imputing Intentions," International Security 2, no. 3 (1977-1978), pp. 22-32. Beyond the problems of worst-case analysis, some scholars argue the problem of overestimating threats seems to be much more common than underestimating, at least in part because leaders generally believe it is better to overestimate than to underestimate threats and because leaders fail to recognize the many dangers associated with overestimation. See Knorr, "Threat Perception," p. 116, passim.
threat was greatly exaggerated, when in fact leaders were doing the best they could according to the information available at the time. This study examines two hypotheses from this perspective. The first contends that the national misperceptions can be traced to problems with *assessing the capabilities* of the Soviets (H1). The second hypothesis argues the misperceptions were caused by problems associated with *imputing the intentions* of the Soviets (H2).

**Psychological Explanations for Panics**

Other scholars argue that the threat was exaggerated more than can be accounted for by uncertainty alone. However, it appears historically that leaders were *unknowingly* exaggerating the threat. This leads many scholars to conclude that psychological explanations are needed to explain leaders' observed propensities to exaggerate threats, especially at times of great uncertainty. A number of psychological explanations for overestimating threats have been suggested. Two of the most widely discussed cognitive errors are investigated here as explanations for the national misperceptions of these cases.

The first psychological hypothesis considered here was made prominent for the study of international relations by Robert Jervis' seminal work *Perception and Misperception in International Relations.*³⁶ In this study Jervis offers two general types of

---

propositions about misperceptions. First, he proposes that there are valid generalizations about how decision-makers psychologically perceive others’ behavior and form judgments about their intentions. Second, he also puts forward propositions about why people in the same situations behave differently. The first cognitive error investigated here, the “attribution error” (H3), is one of his first type of propositions. Jervis argues that people generally attribute other actors’ intentions to their personality because that is easier than understanding how they were responding to their circumstances, while at the same time people generally attribute their own actions to their surroundings because that is more salient than thinking about their own personality.37 This leads people generally and therefore possibly states to reason “they acted that way because they are evil, while our actions were in response to their actions!” This hypothesis predicts that entire states might overestimate a threat because of this common tendency. Logically, this would explain a large national misperception only if this is a strong tendency—that is that many decision makers, or at least key decision makers, tend to do this regularly, repeatedly (could be compounding error) or intensely.


This idea, that people share common tendencies and reason in similar ways, is directly opposed to the second type of proposition Jervis investigates. These latter propositions emphasize peoples’ differences and explain why people in the same circumstances behave differently. Jervis recognizes the contradictions between these propositions. He cautions repeatedly that one cannot simply extrapolate from individual errors to group errors. He offers a few possible explanations for why groups may exhibit the same tendencies as individuals, for example an entire generation may share the same experience and thus perhaps apply the same analogy. But while he recognizes the difficulties of explaining group misperceptions with explanations of individual biases he never resolves this conundrum, rather he repeatedly discusses national misperceptions as if they can easily be explained by these individual level explanations. In this study I closely examine Jervis’ oft-cited notion of a common tendency for people to make attribution errors.

Another widely believed explanation for misperceptions is examined here as the second psychological hypothesis. It is based on the idea that people learn particular “lessons of the past”, and then misapply these lessons—in short, there is an observed tendency to misuse analogies. Historical accounts show that leaders use lots of analogies

38 For example, an entire generation shared the trauma of World War II, and so it is possible the entire generation may be wary—scared and recognizing that aggressive dictators like Hitler do come to power. Jervis calls this a "generational effect." Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, pp. 253-257.

39 See for example Gaddis, We Now Know, pp.20-24.

40 Misusing analogies is also a cognitive error type explanation. For the most comprehensive study of this tendency, see Khong, Analogies At War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965; Arguing misusing analogies is
when reasoning about foreign affairs, and so it is reasoned that it is highly likely that they commonly misuse analogies in a reflexive way. However, for the misuse of analogies to explain a national misperception requires that key leaders or an entire generation misapplied the same analogy in the same way. Did the generation that lived through World War II generally liken Stalin to Hitler, and thereby assume that Stalin was preparing his army to sweep across Europe?

Deborah Welch Larson’s *Origins of Containment* carefully analyzes the private reasoning of four key decision makers of the Truman Administration to test to see which psychological theories out of the five which she examines (including the two examined here), best explains the perceptions of each of those leaders. This detailed study uncovers fascinating and convincing material about the leaders’ private thoughts and intellectual journeys toward adopting a strong containment policy. Larson points out that each leader had his own favorite analogies, life experiences and intellectual proclivities (e.g., open or closed minded, user of "snap judgments" or contemplative reasoner, etc.), and that these idiosyncratic tendencies guided each leader toward the policies he ultimately chose. Larson posits that the leaders had a range of possible ways to view the U.S.-Soviet rivalry: 1) a “gentleman’s agreement” with “spheres of influence”; 2) competition for alliance with a reunified Germany against the other superpower; 3) isolation within the Western hemisphere and the Pacific with Soviet domination in Europe; 4) limited

---

common and that in the 1950 case examined here that Truman leaned on particular “lessons of the past”, see Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Analyzing leaders cognitive tendencies most thoroughly at the beginning of the Cold War (including both attribution errors and analogies), see Larson, *Origins of Containment* 50
adversary—cooperating on some issues, competing on others; 5) zero-sum game; 6) war.\textsuperscript{41} Ultimately, she finds that each leader came to believe that the U.S.-Soviet relationship was a "zero-sum game" at different times for different reasons.

Larson writes: "The change in U.S. policymakers' beliefs was gradual and ragged. There was no neat turning point. One by one, U.S. officials abandoned the principal assumptions underlying FDR's 'grand design,' . . ."\textsuperscript{42} For example, President Truman likened Stalin to a political boss Truman trusted earlier in his political career, so this image kept him trusting Stalin to keep his word for much longer than the other leaders in his administration. Secretary of State James Byrnes, on the other hand, was most affected by his difficult firsthand experiences with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, so he came to distrust the Soviets at a much earlier time. Larson's detailed analysis is impressive and revealing, but her overall conclusions do not fit her findings. Larson reasons that because each leader made the decision that U.S.-Soviet relations were zero-sum at different times, then their reasoning cannot be explained by the imperatives of the international environment or domestic politics. However, it seems clear that if each leader had his own experiences and his own individual biases, then if left to his own reasoning without external pressure, each would come to a different set of conclusions--probably very different conclusions. Instead, it seems that something in the process of group decision making--in the process of forming the national perceptions--something happened that brought these leaders' opinions closer together than they would otherwise have been if left

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., pp. 328-329.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 341.
to decide individually. Larson amply demonstrates the leaders’ idiosyncratic reasoning, and from that the logical conclusion is not for all of them to come up with the exact same choice of policy, but for each, or at least some, to have a different response. Because all of the leaders end up in the same place, individual level psychological explanations appear unimportant.

Without mentioning it, Larson has rejected Jervis’ notions of a common tendency such as attribution error or a "generational effect" supporting the use of a shared analogy or any other explanation for why leaders might come to the same conclusion in the same way via psychological biases. Instead she uses psychological hypotheses to explain differences among leaders, presenting overwhelming evidence of idiosyncratic reasoning. However inadvertently, her analysis radically exposes the weaknesses of cognitive error type psychological explanations for national misperceptions.

This does not mean that psychological explanations are irrelevant to national misperceptions; they might be important. There are several ways they might work to explain a great deal. In addition to cognitive errors, psychologists contend that people are prone to have “motivational biases”. Some types of motivational bias that might be especially relevant here are proposed to be caused by stress from increased uncertainty. For example, when uncertainty increases (especially suddenly, like after a shocking event) it could lead to anxiety that could cause defensive avoidance, premature cognitive closure or generate “basic fear.”43 It is argued that there are numerous possible motivational

---

43 These hypotheses will be discussed much more in the next chapter. See Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Lebow, *Between Peace and War*;
biases and they are common. These explanations encounter some of the same types of problems as cognitive errors when explaining national perceptions in that they predict individual idiosyncratic behavior. Further, these biases are not even predicted to be consistent within an individual, so they are very difficult to test. Individuals are expected to react to stress one way at one time, and differently the next time, or even the next day. In addition to explaining responding to uncertainty, motivational bias can also explain why a decision maker came to believe in a decision she had made for political expediency, or to further her career within an organization. It is argued that people are motivated to believe in what they are doing—to rationalize their actions—in order to maintain emotional well-being and reduce stress. Because these theories can explain so much, including all types of inconsistency as well as consistency, they are very difficult to test. I do not explicitly test them here, but I do believe they could explain a great deal. I fully discuss the strong arguments supporting them, and I explain how they are a likely component of panics, but not the most fundamental cause of panics.\footnote{Richard Ned Lebow also argued these theories probably have broad explanatory power because their explanations are compelling, and he decided they are complementary to other theories. I similarly find these hypotheses are likely to help explain a great deal, but while they are complementary, they are clearly secondary to domestic political explanations for the national misperceptions of these cases because leaders’ views can be predicted by their political needs, and if psychological explanations were primary you would see differences among leaders’ preferences based on their idiosyncratic emotional profiles rather than common political preferences. See Lebow, \textit{Between Peace and War}, pp. 222-228.}
Domestic Political Explanations for Panics

The four hypotheses discussed so far posit that the leaders believe in the national misperceptions of these panics—the leaders panic alongside the public. In stark contrast to that broad perspective, many others have argued that the elites purposefully misled the public during these periods. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro emphasize that they suspect elite manipulation of public opinion during these periods in *The Rational Public*. In this massive study of trends in American public opinion over fifty years (1935-1990), Page and Shapiro argue that collective public opinion is predominantly rational in that its preferences are real (not meaningless, random "nonattitudes"), generally stable (with few large "mood swings" or fluctuations), coherent, sensible (in terms of underlying values and available information), and that public opinion changes in understandable and even predictable ways. However limiting this broad finding, they make the important caveat that there are several cases of abrupt changes of public opinion in foreign policy that stand out from their thesis of public rationality. They argue there are six cases that appear to be possible irrational or unwarranted "mood swings" by the public. The three panics here are three of the six cases of abrupt change they point to—the three cases concerned with broad national security threats. Page and Shapiro attempt to explain these cases by

---

45 Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*
46 Ibid., chapter 1.
47 The other three cases they discuss as possible unwarranted dramatic "mood swings" by the public are: 1) the beginning of World War II where the public swung from wanting/expecting peace to demanding war after Pearl Harbor. Page and Shapiro reason that the public should have been anticipating war more based on what was actually happening in the international arena since it appears that FDR and his top leadership were expecting war, and were even possibly provoking it—it appears FDR misled the public
arguing that foreign policy has several features that could account for these abrupt changes of public opinion including common values among the public, the occurrence of dramatic events, and centralized information. Common values among the public could account for large swings in unison, especially in response to dramatic, shocking events, which are common in the international arena. However, Page and Shapiro emphasize that events are highly ambiguous, and are only meaningful to the public because of how they are interpreted by elites. Because critical information about foreign policy is highly centralized, particularly with control in the Executive Branch, Page and Shapiro speculate that it is likely that in these cases, opinion was manipulated by elites through efforts to suppress the truth or to disseminate misleading information. Page and Shapiro do not test their argument about these cases, but they do provide extensive public opinion data to show that something irregular happened in these cases, and they suggest their explanation needs further investigation.

about actual relations with Japan; 2) Similarly, President Johnson’s handling of the Tonkin Gulf incident where Johnson claimed there had been “unprovoked attacks” on U.S. ships by the North Vietnamese led U.S. public opinion to shift dramatically to support involvement in Vietnam, while this appears to be an unwarranted shift relative to the actual incidents. 3) Soviet shooting down of the Korean jet KAL007 as a spy plane in 1983 similarly inflamed public opinion—opinion abruptly swung against the Soviets at a time when public support for a nuclear freeze and other cooperative actions had been high. This abrupt shift appears irrational relative to the actual significance of the incident, however it appears the public was swayed by President Reagan strongly condemning the incident as an “act of barbarism”—it appears President Reagan successfully used this event to defeat the arms control initiatives he opposed. Ibid., p. 283, 367-369.

For an interesting discussion of the role of events in public opinion formation, see Ibid., pp.343-345.

Many other scholars of public opinion have noticed these periods, for example see Rodger A. Payne, "Public Opinion and Foreign Threats: Eisenhower's Response to Sputnik," Armed Forces & Society 21, no. 1 (1994), pp. 89-112; Bruce Russett and
Many other scholars have argued that public opinion was manipulated in these cases. Some of the best evidence for this type of explanation is provided by numerous individual case studies tracing elite propaganda campaigns.\textsuperscript{50} There are also many broad historian accounts of these periods that generally support an elite manipulation of public opinion explanation, but these accounts tend to combine multiple conflicting arguments about the sources of public misperceptions without systematically discerning each explanations real contribution.\textsuperscript{51} My contribution to this extensive literature on the Cold War and on these cases in particular is an attempt to organize and test the most plausible and popular hypotheses this literature has to offer. I rely heavily on this rich literature as I analyze these cases. From these various accounts, four leading domestic political explanations emerge. These hypotheses primarily differ according to which elites exaggerate the threat, but they also explain possible motives for why the elites would


exaggerate the threat. One of the most popular explanations for the 1950 panic was that the Executive Branch exaggerated the threat—oversold the threat—in order to counter anticipated congressional resistance to its preferred policies (H5).\textsuperscript{52} Another explanation for the 1947-1950 case is that groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion join together to form a logrolled coalition and exaggerate threats to security in order to justify their preferred expansionist policies (H6).\textsuperscript{53} Other scholars point to elites outside of power exaggerating the threat, especially in the 1960 and 1980 cases, in order to win the struggle of electoral politics (H7).\textsuperscript{54} Another widely believed hypothesis emphasizes the role of the military in exaggerating the threat in order to justify higher defense budgets (H8).\textsuperscript{55}

It is clear that most scholars find it necessary to combine several of these eight hypotheses to create a complete picture of the causes of the misperceptions of these periods. While I agree that a full explanation requires combining several hypotheses, it is clearly necessary to separately evaluate each of these explanations to adequately assess them before recombining them, or else they can seemingly be combined in any number of ways, giving preference to a favored explanation without first appreciating its absolute and

\textsuperscript{52} Most specifically, see Theodore J. Lowi, \textit{The End of Liberalism: the Second Republic of the United States}, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979); and Kofsky, \textit{Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948}.


\textsuperscript{55} Bottome, \textit{The Missile Gap}; Wolfe, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat}; Kofsky, \textit{Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948}.  

57
relative explanatory power. Several comprehensive studies have done just this; dissected the various sources of these national misperceptions, and then recombined these explanations by assertion, without first fully evaluating each explanations amount of explanatory power. It is worth examining the most important of these studies here because they specify the dynamics of the separate hypotheses, and propose possible synthetic explanations of the panics. First I examine in detail two works that study the same three panic periods I address; these works search for explanations of why misperceptions recur. Then I address two works that look for the causes of overestimation at the beginning of the Cold War, and then treat the overestimations of the rest of the Cold War as a result of that period.  

*Divergent Explanations of these Periods: Four Studies*

Alan Wolfe's *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat* identifies these panic periods and proposes a handful of domestic political forces that seem to combine to create the misperceptions of these periods. Wolfe argues that U.S. perceptions of the Soviet threat had little to do with external circumstances such as whether or not the Soviets were being more aggressive or threatening. Instead, he argues that there are five domestic political patterns that influence threat perception. The first is a pattern of party politics such that the Soviet threat has always been more exaggerated under Democratic presidents than

---

56 The four works I examine in detail are: Wolfe, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat*; Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*; Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*

57 Wolfe, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat*. 

58
under Republican presidents. He finds that when right-wing conservatives attack Democrats, the Democrats need to move to the center by being more anti-communist because left-wing support is too weak to counterbalance the attack. The Democrats go to the center, or even become very hawkish on foreign policy in order to maintain their power and to be able to pass their ambitious domestic programs. The more ambitious a president is domestically, the more he finds it necessary to shore up support by having a strong foreign policy.  

The second pattern Wolfe identifies overlaps with the first. Presidents with ambitious policy agendas must fortify their power to meet congressional challenges. To overcome problems of the "separation of powers," presidents are most able to strengthen their position and be "activist" presidents if there is a large threat to address—a threat that demands both bold action and national unity.  

The third pattern Wolfe finds is that the Soviet threat seems to become inflated at times when inter-service rivalry among the branches of the military is most intense. Interservice rivalry intensifies when control of the White House changes, because the different

58 While provocative, this is not a consistent pattern. Wolfe notes that this pattern changed under President Reagan. Even though the Soviet threat became exaggerated under Carter, Reagan continued and increased these perceptions because he wanted to enhance his power because he had an ambitious domestic agenda to undo the welfare state. Until this time it was Democrats who wanted a strong presidency to carry out ambitious domestic goals. See pp. 53-54. Further, this pattern does not match the record perfectly because the second panic began under Eisenhower, as Wolfe notes. Wolfe reasons that Eisenhower resisted it, as only a Republican could, and Democrats worked to prove they were "tough", which is basically consistent with the pattern he describes. This pattern is partially captured by the "electoral politics" (H7) examined below.

59 Notice that this second pattern is very similar to one I discuss (H5) and test below which Theodore Lowi called "policy oversell."
political parties tend to favor different branches of the military, and thus the relative shares of the military budget that each branch is allocated shifts when a different party enters the White House. The branches that stand to lose "discover" the Soviet threat and argue to expand the military budget overall.\textsuperscript{60}

The fourth pattern Wolfe observes is that the Soviet threat becomes inflated when existing foreign policy coalitions fall into disarray and new coalitions seek to push foreign policy in a new direction.\textsuperscript{61} The fifth pattern Wolfe notices is that the first stirrings of a new wave of anti-Soviet perceptions originate in recessionary times or times when a recession seems imminent, often among people who believe that a good macroeconomic strategy for economic growth is increased defense spending. Wolfe argues that the anti-Soviet perceptions and the increased military spending do not seem to take place until after the recession, or after the threat of recession passes. Further, Democrats who promise benefits to those on the lower end of the economic scale increase defense spending because they hope it leads to overall expansion. It is also a politically safe way of expanding the budget because it does not redistribute income as would welfare programs and therefore does not provoke opposition from business people and conservatives.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} This pattern is examined below as the hypothesis "The Military Inflates the Threat" (H8).

\textsuperscript{61} Notice that this theory is a more general, loosely defined version of a theory that has been formalized by Jack Snyder about coalition "logrolling" which I discuss further below. Snyder, \textit{Myths of Empire}.

\textsuperscript{62} The idea that panics are counter-recessionary is directly contrary to Cobden's notion that panics occur only when the economic situation is rosy. My own view is that panics happen to over-expansionist great powers that are ascending or at the top of their powers, as opposed to declining great powers, but more specific connections to more short-term economic conditions do not seem to fit a definite pattern. It may be that in 60
Wolfe quickly and loosely lays out these highly provocative theories, without testing them in any way. Two of his theories match the historical record poorly, but the other three patterns he notices are examined and tested here. Additionally, Wolfe’s analysis is ahistorical; it theoretically treats all actors as self-interested political manipulators without consideration for the ample evidence that many individuals appeared to have acted in good faith.

A sharply contrasting explanation of these panic periods is Robert H. Johnson’s *Improbable Dangers.* Unlike Wolfe, Johnson argues that panics happen when there are increases in uncertainty in both the international realm and in domestic politics. For Johnson, the first two panics were a partial response to the U.S. losing its nuclear monopoly, and then later its nuclear superiority. The third panic was a response to many international uncertainties: fears of Soviet adventurism, the rise of the Third World, the feeling that the U.S. was losing control in the world after Vietnam, the oil price shocks, and inflation. Additionally Johnson finds that domestic politics interplay with international events. Thus in the first panic, Truman was responding to international uncertainty but he also needed to oversell the threat because of domestic political resistance to his foreign

the era before government deficit spending, a more definite pattern, such as the one observed by Cobden, could be determined. This is an empirical question requiring further research. Wolfe sees this pattern because elites frequently argued that higher defense spending would be good for the country, but I think this motivation is secondary and elites can argue that it is good to spend more on defense in both good times and bad. Broadly concurring in the finding that rising powers are over-expansionist, see Paul Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*; Gilpin, “War and Change in World Politics”; Snyder, *Myths of Empire*; and Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire.*

63 Johnson, *Improbable Dangers.*
policies. In the end, Truman had to accept an overexpansionist coalition that included containment in Asia to insure that he could maintain containment in Europe. For Johnson, the second panic was born domestically out of inter-service rivalry and electoral politics, but was heightened by the international uncertainty surrounding the loss of U.S. nuclear superiority. The third panic was stirred by a broader conservative movement in the U.S., led by the Committee on the Present Danger, which articulated and amplified the fears of the time and ultimately helped bring Ronald Reagan to power.

These powerful international and domestic conditions are only part of Johnson's explanation. Johnson's main focus is on how ideas and basic psychological tendencies interact with these other forces to exaggerate the threat. First of all, leaders shared a realpolitik view of the world, which included a number of ideas that stress insecurity over security in ways that distort reality. Even more fundamental, and perhaps why leaders stress insecurity over security, is the human propensity to fear the unknown and to fear the loss of order and control. Threats to order and control often generate "basic fear" or "exaggerated" fears because they are vague and diffuse, thus they create a general anxiety that cannot be contained. Johnson finds that "basic fear" is the psychological source of exaggerated views of threats, and whenever the U.S. faces greater uncertainty, especially when it is both domestic and international uncertainty, fears can mount because of "basic fear" and become increasingly exaggerated. For Johnson, this potent combination of ingredients leads to "periods of peril" or panics.

Johnson's analysis centers on "basic fear" as the underlying cause of panic—it is the basic reason for a propensity to exaggerate threats. A panic also requires an increase
in uncertainty in both the international and domestic realms as the immediate causes of panic. Johnson in no way attempts to prove or test his analysis. In essence he has combined almost all proposed reasons for threat exaggeration, with a highly original explanation of and emphasis on "basic fear". His analysis, while very interesting, demonstrates the need for a careful assessment and weighing of the numerous competing explanations. Is international uncertainty more or less important than the controversies of domestic politics? How central are psychological factors?

Now I turn to discuss two important studies that examine the sources of the misperceptions in the 1950 case, but then treat the rest of the Cold War as a single case of overestimation resulting from the initial overestimation at the beginning of the period. The first study is Jack Snyder's *Myths of Empire*. Snyder investigates why it has been so common for great powers in the industrial age to overestimate threats and consequently to overexpand, and why some states have been inclined toward extreme overexpansion. He finds that elites that have parochial interests in expansion purvey strategic myths to justify expansion. He writes, "Overexpansion is indeed a product of the political and propagandistic activities of imperialist groups."[^64] False beliefs in insecurity occur because groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion, or derive benefits from the domestic political climate brought about by intense international competition, come together to form a coalition through logrolling and they publicly sell their expansionist preferences by exaggerating the threats to the state. Snyder argues that both economic sectors and

[^64]: Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 17. Snyder includes the military as one of the parochial groups interested in overexpansion, so this theory has overlap with the hypothesis examined here on militarism (H8).
bureaucratic organizations possibly have concentrated interests in expansion. Such groups could be commercial elites who have invested heavily abroad and/or the military and its allies in industry whose interests are served by larger military budgets.

These compact interest groups overcome their political weakness by joining together in a coalition. The coalition is formed through the process of a logroll where the different groups each support each other's preferred policies in exchange for support for their own interests being supported in full. The trade-offs necessary to form a coherent policy are not made, instead all of the preferred policies are rolled together to maintain the coalition. In order to sell the incoherent policy—the overexpansionist policy—the coalition propagandizes the state with "myths" that exaggerate the state's insecurity. These "myths" include notions that exaggerate the benefits of expansion while underrating its costs. For example, the "myths" include the idea of the "domino theory" where gains, even in the seemingly inconsequential periphery, are very valuable because they are highly cumulative—helping to lead to further gains—while losses are costly as they can weaken the empire and eventually lead to the collapse of the core as the opponent successfully achieves cumulative gains. Interestingly, Snyder has a substantial list of strategic myths that he demonstrates have been powerful arguments for expansion in the domestic political dialogues of industrialized great powers.65 Exactly parallel to the present study, Snyder examines three possible sources of these myths: created as rational responses to anarchy

65 These include the Domino Theory, the belief in Offensive advantage (the best defense is a good offense), and "Paper Tigers and Bandwagons" (the belief that threats make others compliant). See Ibid., pp. 2-6.
(uncertainty), or as the result of cognitive errors (misleading mental shortcuts), or as the result of domestic politics.

Snyder stresses that it is the process by which leaders form effective coalitions through logrolling that causes the overexpansion.⁶⁶ He finds that overexpansion occurs because of the “compounding of separate imperial programs”; each different group within the coalition would behave more rationally singularly, but when they come together they fail to make tradeoffs between their preferred programs. Additionally, Snyder points out that parochial groups are able to purvey myths about security because they have huge propaganda advantages due to monopolies of information. Further, an important dynamic of his model is that many later state leaders come to believe in the propaganda through “blowback”.⁶⁷

Snyder’s analysis is very valuable, but it has three important shortcomings. First, Snyder uses his model to describe five cases in five different countries, and while it seems his emphasis on the coalition process of logrolling is justified by other cases, it does not match the 1950 United States case very well. He argues that Truman needed to adopt overexpansionist policies in 1950 in order to manage a coalition between “Europe-first internationalists” in the Democratic Party and “Asia-first nationalists” in the Republican Party. However, the evidence suggests that Truman was not acting in 1950 to form or manage such a coalition—he could get bipartisan support for his programs without having

---

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 31-55.

⁶⁷ Elites inadvertently socialize successor elite generations because they fail to explain the instrumental origins of the strategic myths. Ibid., pp. 41-43.
to rely on the Asia-first nationalists.\textsuperscript{68} Instead, it appears Truman was responding to
pressure to act consistent with his own earlier rhetoric of stopping Communism. It is true
that he included aid to China in order to better defend his preferred policies, but there
were no significant parochial interests favoring overexpansion in Asia, but rather
Republican politicians trying to embarrass Truman in terms of Truman’s earlier political
rhetoric.\textsuperscript{69} Partisan politics and policy oversell explains Truman’s behavior better than
coalition logrolling. In short, Truman had choices and did not stumble unwittingly into
overexpansion as a by-product of a coalition, nor was he forced into overexpansion by the
necessity of creating a coalition.\textsuperscript{70} This is an important distinction. Snyder’s explanation
argues that the structure of domestic politics is the most important variable. My argument
points to controlling earlier propaganda through breaking up the monopoly on information
leaders have in the realm of foreign and security policy.

The second shortcoming of Snyder’s analysis that I repair is his treatment of the
Cold War as a single case. He argues that U.S. overexpansion after 1950 was established
by the propaganda efforts of the original instrumental actors, and later actors are
socialized to believe the imperial myths, and are not aware of the original instrumental
purpose of the myths. This argument does not give enough credit to later actors, many of
whom quite clearly recognized the very real problems of overexpansion that each

\textsuperscript{68} For this argument, see Kupchan, \textit{The Vulnerability of Empire}, p. 479.

\textsuperscript{69} Thomas J. Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic

\textsuperscript{70} Snyder has these several ways coalition building and logrolling could lead to
overexpansion.
emerging panic presented. Not all later leaders were victims of blowback, and there were some very real "missed opportunities" that leaders at the time were aware of and that were missed because of renewed propaganda efforts. The Cold War was an on-going struggle that had real highs and lows of fear, it lasted decades, and it was not a struggle that had been decided in 1950.

The third problem with Snyder's overall portrayal of the creation of the misperceptions is his description of the "parochial interests" behind overexpansion. Snyder stresses the process of forming a coalition between a variety of state and nonstate actors; he emphasizes that it is not state leaders primarily taking the lead as the source of strategic myths. His description may fit his European cases well, but it does not describe the U.S. case in 1950 well. Snyder includes the idea that the myths might be promoted by state leaders who benefit from the domestic political climate brought about by intense international competition that is similar to the findings here, but this is not his central emphasis. He emphasizes the role of imperialist groups who "hijack" the state for the benefit of their parochial interests, and this has little support in the 1950 case. In the U.S., the situation is clearly one where state leaders did take the lead, using the inspiring, exaggerated and politically mobilizing arguments provided by the competing military

---

71 Interestingly, his description matches Cobden's description of the British panics fairly well, in that Cobden mentions private interests such as weapons manufacturers as playing a significant role.

72 There is some support for private interests, especially the airplane industry playing a large role in 1948. However, the evidence does not reveal parochial interests working through the Truman Administration, or that Truman was forming a logrolled coalition with these interests; to the contrary, Truman successfully restrained these interests to a large degree. See chapter 4 below.
services, with parochial economic interests in actual expansion less important than
domestic political struggles and perceived strategic requirements. Overall, Snyder’s
delineation of the “myths” commonly used to exaggerate threats is path breaking, and I
fully concur in his finding that the common tendency of great powers to overestimate
threats is a result of elite myth-making and propaganda. The motives behind the myth-
making, and the dynamics of how and why exaggerations of the threat grow are important
to fully understand in order to devise optimal methods for controlling panics.

Another important study that merits attention in detail is Charles Kupchan’s The
Vulnerability of Empire. Like Snyder, Kupchan looks at numerous cases from different
countries and different time periods and tries to explain why states pursue self-defeating
policies, including overreacting (based on overestimating threats) and underreacting (based
on underestimating threats.) Kupchan attempts to explain both types of behavior by the
same general theory. His impressive investigation leads him to argue that states pursue
self-defeating policies when they respond to “high vulnerability”. Periods of high
vulnerability induce overreaction leading to overexpansion in rising states, and
underreaction leading to strategic exposure in declining powers. Leaders of both types of
states come to understand the problems with their strategies, but during the periods of high
vulnerability they have shaped a new consensus, a new “strategic culture,” and the elites
are constrained by this strategic culture and are unable to adjust their policies.

Snyder only explains overestimating, and argues that it is much more common
than underestimating. I agree with Snyder that it is more common, and add that you
cannot explain overestimating and underestimating by the same general theory. See
below.
Kupchan also investigates competing hypotheses for adjustment failure that are similar to hypotheses for misperceptions I investigate here. He includes hypotheses concerning: 1) assessment failure, 2) psychological distortion, miscalculation and cognitive constraints, 3) economic interest groups, 4) domestic politics and 5) the power of the military. Like Snyder, he examines the early Cold War period and argues that the "strategic culture" created by the elites at that time led to U.S. overexpansion throughout the Cold War. In essence, the Cold War is one single case of overexpansion.

Kupchan's analysis has two major problems. The first is his argument that rising states are responding to "high vulnerability", when in fact his own analysis and deductive logic point to the conclusion that rising states' elites create the illusion of "high vulnerability" in order to take advantage of the fact that they are rising states and want to expand their power. Kupchan argues that perceptions of high vulnerability lead to overreactions: "An extraordinary strategic environment produces extraordinary policies." However his reasoning merits scrutiny:

First, in rising powers, concern about resolve induces elites to believe in the need to practice compellence rather than deterrence. Second, efforts to bolster reputation lead to competitive policies in the core as well as the periphery. These differences are the result of the following considerations.

---

74 Because he is examining "adjustment failure" rather than perceptions per se, his hypothesis on "assessment failure" includes both rational explanations for assessment failure and psychological reasons for assessment failure. Then he reasons they could fail to assess the threat properly, or they might assess it properly, but fail to adjust properly because of psychological distortion, miscalculation or cognitive constraints. This breakdown muddies explanations of the specific perceptions involved, but it includes an explanation for exaggerating threats, so it is similar to the present study. See Kupchan, The Vulnerability of Empire, pp.31-54.

75 Ibid., p. 86.
Rising states, as newcomers to the top echelon of the international hierarchy, must build reputation and earn prestige by challenging the existing order. Demonstrations of resolve therefore entail compellent strategies that alter the status quo, not just deterrent strategies that preserve the status quo. In addition, elites in rising powers try to demonstrate resolve and bolster reputation not to deter attacks against their state, but to undermine and fragment the coalition seeking to block their state’s ascendance. Demonstrating resolve and bolstering reputation are intended first and foremost to intimidate and cause splits among those states seeking to preserve the status quo. The goal is not to prevent other powers from taking specific actions, but to coerce these powers into acquiescing to the challenger’s demands. This objective can be achieved only through compellence.

Elites in rising powers adopt competitive policies in the core as well as in the periphery...  

This description of the motives and actions of rising states stresses that rising states are behaving aggressively—using *compellent strategies to undermine the status quo*. Rising states have demands that others need to acquiesce to. This description of rising states belies Kupchan’s thesis that rising states are *responding to vulnerability*. It is a compelling explanation of why we might see overexpansion among rising powers, but it leaves little room for the reasoning that these states are responding to vulnerability rather than taking advantage of their increasing power. Kupchan’s analysis of the 1950 case essentially reveals this contradiction. He finds elites are behaving prudently, with a clear ordering of strategic priorities, until 1950. And then after the Soviets acquire the atomic bomb there is the perception of high vulnerability. Yet he also argues that the earlier efforts of the Truman Administration to alter public attitudes had by 1950 entrapped elites in “a domestic political milieu that contributed to

76 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
the formulation of a new and overly competitive brand of containment.”77 It does not make sense that the elites are overreacting to external threats and also forced to overreact by the domestic political situation they created. It leaves one wondering, how important was the external threat of “high vulnerability” that led to the overreaction, and how much was it the domestic political situation? If it is a rising state expanding its power, is the “high vulnerability” a threat or an opportunity?

The second problem Kupchan’s analysis has is that he overstates the effects of “strategic culture”; as I argued above, the Cold War is not a single case, but rather there were a number of important opportunities to retrench and not overexpand, and these opportunities were recognized and pursued by important elites, although eventually overtaken by new elite propaganda campaigns. I agree that later elites are significantly affected by earlier propaganda, and the institutionalization of the perception of overestimation has significant repercussions. However, it is overstating the case to argue “the images propagated by top elites so infuse the decision-making community and the content of the political debate that the policies consistent with strategic pragmatism do not even receive serious consideration.”78 I will demonstrate below that the Cold War was not a single case of overextension, and that Eisenhower gave very serious support and consideration to much more strategically pragmatic views than those that ultimately triumphed, and détente was much more strategically pragmatic than the views that ultimately triumphed in 1980, and the effort to overtake

77 Ibid., p. 458.
78 Ibid., p. 95.
the strategically pragmatic views was considerable and not the default decision as Kupchan's vision of a controlling “strategic culture” would imply.

**Methods and Approach**

From the above discussion, it is clear that major disagreements about the sources of the national misperceptions of these periods remains. In this study I have collected the most popular and most plausible explanations for the causes of these panics. I have fully developed these hypotheses by specifying how each hypothesis must logically operate to best explain these cases of panic. Then I have derived specific predictions from these hypotheses of what should happen in each case to confirm the hypothesis, and what evidence would disconfirm the hypothesis. I have then examined the cases using process tracing to determine which of these hypotheses are useful for best explaining the case. To do this process tracing I have relied on the research of many historians, and I have checked their evaluations against many of the original documents in the archives.

I argue that a methodical approach to these cases helps to dispel confusion and isolate disagreements about what happened in these periods. To systematically examine these cases I have developed four “portraits” of each case. The first portrait, “The Public Threat”, determines what the public perceptions of the threat were at the time. In this portrait I identify the key public misperceptions of the period and describe the evidence supporting this determination. The second portrait I develop is “The Real Threat with the Benefit of Hindsight”. Here I determine what we know about what the
actual Soviet threat was at the time with the benefit of hindsight. The difference between the first portrait and the second portrait determines what the absolute size of the national misperceptions at the time was. How far off were public perceptions at the time from what the actual threat at the time was?

The third portrait determines the “The Threat at the Time”. What was known about the threat at the time? According to the best available information at the time, what was the threat? The difference between this portrait of what was known at the time, and “The Real Threat with the benefit of Hindsight” determines the role of insufficient information and uncertainty. Was there good enough information, known with enough certainty, to have prevented the public misperceptions? Or was information incomplete and uncertain, so this is what caused the misperceptions?

Finally, the fourth portrait is “The Elite Threat”. Here I do process tracing using the eight hypotheses and the predictions I derive from them to guide my analysis. I investigate what key elites, and key groups of elites believed, to determine who knew what when in the decision making process. This examination determines if the elites made psychological errors that account for the misperceptions in the public—did the leaders believe what the public believed even though they had available to them sufficient information to have not misperceived the threat so gravely? Or are there identifiable groups that knowingly worked to exaggerate the threat? To what extent do the problems of insufficient information, psychological biases and domestic politics interact with each other?
I proceed by defining the hypotheses, how they operate and predictions derived from them in chapter two. I explore the 1947-1950 case and the individual level hypothesis, which all predict the leaders panic along with the public, in chapter three. In chapter four I examine the domestic politics hypothesis against the 1947-1950 case. In chapter five I investigate the “missile gap” panic using all of the hypotheses. In chapter six I explore some very important consequences of panics. In chapter seven, I discuss theoretical and policy implications of this study.
CHAPTER 2

HYPOTHESES OF THE CAUSES OF PANICS

In this chapter I develop eight hypotheses on the causes of panics. These hypotheses have been collected from the vast literature on these panic periods and represent all of the most plausible or most popular explanations of the sources of the misperceptions that cause panics. First I will briefly describe all of the hypotheses. Then I discuss each hypothesis separately, specifying how it operates, and what observations we should make in the cases to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis as an explanation for the national misperceptions that cause the panic.

The first two hypotheses (H1 & H2) come from the rational perspective and contend that national misperceptions are rooted in the difficulties in determining another states' capabilities and intentions. Specifically, a large perceived change in the capabilities or intentions of an adversary increases uncertainty and leads elites to cautiously prepare for the future using worst-case analyses. The use of worst-case analyses is justified by the increased uncertainty, but with hindsight it is clear that an overestimation of the threat occurred during this period.

The third and fourth hypotheses (H3 & H4) are from the psychological perspective. Both of these hypotheses maintain that national misperceptions are rooted in the inadvertent cognitive errors that all people are prone to. One cognitive error that could lead to national misperceptions is the observed common tendency that leaders and people tend to excuse their own state's provocative behavior because they see it as a
defensive response to their environment, while they reason that similar behavior by the adversary proves the adversary’s aggressive intentions. They reason this way because they fail to fully recognize the ways in which the adversary was provoked by their own behavior. A second common cognitive error is that leaders tend to use analogies from recent events or the “last war” to interpret their circumstances, rather than searching for appropriate analogies, or analyzing a situation based on its actual merits. The misuse of analogies could lead leaders to misperceive another state, and possibly overestimate another state. If the leaders overestimate, and then share their misperceptions with the public, this could lead the nation to panic. Both of these cognitive errors are likely to happen reflexively in response to a perceived major change in the international environment, as the leaders attempt to assess the significance of the change.

The above four hypotheses are all “honest broker” hypotheses at the individual level of analysis. All of them argue that leaders are trying to perceive the threat as well as they can, and convey their perceptions directly to the public. These explanations find that leaders behave as “honest brokers” for the public when trying to understand the threat, but large misperceptions happen due to unavoidable problems in the individual-level perception process.

The next four hypotheses (H5-H8) argue that national misperceptions are caused by elite propaganda. These hypotheses maintain that elites actually perceive the threat fairly well, but they distort and manipulate the threat for domestic political reasons. H5 blames the Executive Branch for distorting the threat. It argues that leaders of the Executive Branch exaggerate the threat in order to create an atmosphere of crisis—a panic-
| H1: | The more difficult it is to measure and predict an observed state's current and future capabilities, the greater the likelihood that the observing state will overestimate the observed state's capabilities and panic. |
| H2: | The more difficult it is for a state to predict an adversary's intentions, the greater the state's tendency to overestimate those intentions and panic. |
| H3: | The more observers reason that they acted according to their situations while they believe others acted according to their dispositions, especially discounting their own influence on the actors they observe, the more they will tend to perceive the actions of the others to be more purposive and/or less provoked than they actually were, hence the more the observer will tend to impute less conditionally hostile intentions to the observed actor, and thus tend to overestimate the threats posed by the actor and panic. |
| H4: | If many observing decision makers' or key decision makers' stored schemas are threatening (e.g. include images of highly aggressive adversaries, frequent unprovoked aggression, bandwagoning, etc.), the more likely it is for these decision makers to "match" these threatening schemas to their observations of events or others' behavior, hence the more likely it is for decision makers to overestimate the threats they face and panic. |
| H5: | The more the Executive Branch feels the need to pass a new, more demanding foreign policy because it anticipates or meets resistance to its preferred policies in Congress or fears the government bureaucracy will fail to implement its policies, the more likely it is that the executive branch will "oversell" or exaggerate the threat to create an atmosphere of crisis in order to unify the public and the elite. The greater the atmosphere of crisis, the more likely it is for the state to panic. |
| H6: | Groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion, from military preparations associated with expansion, or from the domestic political climate brought about by intense international competition, are likely to join together by forming a coalition which combines their narrow interests into a logroll—each giving each other support on the issues they care about most without making trade-offs. The more such groups successfully form a logrolled coalition that is able to "hijack" the state apparatus, the more likely it is that they will successfully exaggerate the state's insecurity to gain support for their preferred policies, hence the more likely it is that the exaggerations of the threat purveyed by the coalition will create the national misperceptions that lead to panic. |
| H7: | The more elites outside of power accuse elites in power of not being tough enough against the external threat (reasoning that the threat is bigger than the elites in power admit), the more likely it is that the campaign rhetoric of partisan politics will escalate and create national misperceptions that cause panic. |
| H8: | The more the military, or an individual branch of the military, determines that its budget is threatened or inadequate, the more likely it is that it will work to inflate the threat by influencing the threat assessment process within the government, or by influencing the public debate, because successful threat inflation results in increasing spending on the military. The more the military is successful in inflating the threat, the more likely it is to cause the national misperceptions which cause panic. |

* This is the full and accurate wording of these hypotheses.
-because in a crisis the country rallies behind the Executive Branch, this leads to passage of the administration's preferred policies and insures those policies are then adequately implemented. Alternatively, H6 argues that the threat becomes exaggerated when groups who derive parochial benefits from expansion come together to form a logrolled coalition. These groups work together to exaggerate the threat so that the state sponsors expansionist policies and the public panics because of their propaganda. H7 blames elites outside of power for exaggerating the threat. Leaders of the party outside the White House accuse those in power of not being "tough" enough against the threat. These elites use the threat as a campaign issue and the rhetoric of partisan politics combines to further exaggerate the threat and cause panic. The final hypothesis (H8) argues that the military is responsible for exaggerating the threat for organizational reasons. In particular, when the military, or an individual branch of the military, determines that its budget is inadequate or threatened it is likely to exaggerate the threat in order to justify higher defense spending. The military’s exaggerations of the threat cause the public to panic. If any of these four domestic political hypotheses work to explain panics, we should see elites perceiving the threat fairly accurately (as judged with the benefit of hindsight), but then we see the specified group of elites purposefully decide to exaggerate the threat to the public, and their propaganda efforts lead to the national misperceptions that cause the panic.

Now I turn to precisely describing how each of these hypotheses is supposed to work, and what predicted observable evidence we should see in the cases to confirm or disconfirm each hypothesis.
I. The Rational Perspective: Uncertainty about Capabilities and Intentions cause

Panic:

The first two hypotheses come from the perspective of traditional social science theory, which adopts a rational view of decision makers. Here, leaders are assumed to process information in a relatively straightforward, unbiased and honest manner in order to determine the most accurate perceptions for the state and thus find the best policy alternatives for the state.\(^79\) This view recognizes that decision makers are acting under conditions of great uncertainty— the international system is difficult to accurately perceive and it changes over time—and these uncertain conditions make misperceptions unavoidable at times. The first major difficulty is estimating the adversary’s current and future capabilities.

\(^{79}\) Some scholars would argue that rational choice models assume only substantive, not procedural rationality. It should be noted that this argument is irrelevant here because I am not using the model to be the best approximation of the overall set of outcomes. Instead, in this study I begin with special cases of the dependent variable—panics—and ask, what caused these phenomena? A panic is not an optimal outcome, since it is a major misperception and not in the absolute best interest of the state. A rational process could lead to faulty decisions if there is too little information available to make an optimal decision. This study is interested in finding out if the process was essentially rational, or biased in other recognizable ways. See Chaim Kaufmann for a strong argument that rational models which assume maximization of preferences do imply unbiased assessments throughout the process; Chaim Kaufmann, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives: A Method of Testing Psychological Explanations of Decision Making," *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (1994), p. 559.
time of great uncertainty. Because of misperceptions of the adversary’s capabilities, the leaders lead the public to panic.\textsuperscript{80}

This first hypothesis (H1) contends that the main sources of misperceptions are the problems associated with knowing the adversary’s current and future capabilities. Politicians need to form perceptions based on insufficient information. A major impediment to assessing the current capabilities of another state is the fact that states enshroud their military capabilities in secrecy. This is especially true for a state’s most important capabilities because any state, for purely defensive reasons alone, would not want other states to be able to easily counter their capabilities; thus, they often attempt to keep secret whatever information they can about their military hardware and tactics. In fact, states often practice deception about their capabilities—intentionally misleading observing states.

To accurately assess the potential for harm a state poses, it is necessary to measure not merely forces, but also the capabilities the state has for achieving various missions.\textsuperscript{81} What state of readiness are its forces in? How do they train? An observing state also needs to estimate how its adversary’s capabilities will be used; it needs to try to determine the strategy and battlefield tactics of its adversary. This problem is constantly evolving as

\textsuperscript{80} Stated more formally: H1: \textit{The more difficult it is to measure and predict an observed state’s current and future capabilities, the greater the likelihood that the observing state will overestimate the observed state’s capabilities and panic.}

H1: Elites Misperceive Capabilities

- Shocking event reveals: change in technology or change in intentions
- Elites attempt to make a new estimate of the capabilities of the adversary
  - Secrecy or deception by the adversary misleads elites
  - Insufficient human or technological intelligence capabilities mislead elites
  - Elites unable to adequately analyze complex factors of adversary’s capability, such as strategy, doctrine, readiness, tactics, hardware, or technology
- Elites misperceive the capabilities of the adversary and overestimate the threat
- The Elite and the Public Panic together
military technology changes and states must try to discern how new military technologies will interact on the battlefield.

Further, because a state cannot be certain it knows the capabilities of its adversary, it needs also to estimate what level of certainty it has about what it knows—is it 95% certain or only 60% certain about its estimates? Essentially, a state needs to estimate how much it does not know—a very difficult job. These fundamental uncertainties are multiplied by the fact that inevitably there are conflicting analyses by various experts within a state, leaving the decision makers with the formidable task of deciding which analyses are most accurate.

Based on estimates of an adversary’s current capabilities, an observing state must also attempt to predict what capabilities an adversary will build in the future. Estimates of a state’s ability to produce capabilities in the future can be significantly guided by knowledge of what the state has been able to achieve in the past, but this is only a rough guide because technological and leadership changes can dramatically alter a state’s course of action. There is always great uncertainty associated with predictions about the future. Will a state build a massive fleet of bombers or will it attempt to build missiles instead? How much effort will it devote to each project?

Because leaders want to “play it safe” and not leave their state exposed to grave danger, they must use worst-case analyses when planning. As Secretary of Defense McNamara once noted, “A strategic planner must be conservative in his calculations; that is, he must prepare for the worst plausible case and not be content to hope and prepare for
the most probable.” Worst case analyses point out what might happen in the case where the adversary did its absolute best to defeat the state. The planner must ask: “How would our state’s defenses hold up?” Many scholars argue that using worst-case analyses often builds some overestimation of the threat into planning as a routine matter of course.\(^3\) Using worst-case analyses can lead to grave overestimations during times of great uncertainty. When a major technological change happens, or the leadership of an adversary changes, states have more difficulty predicting the future so they compensate by trying to be ready for the worst-case, even if it is not a probable case, because they are less certain about what is a probable case.\(^4\)

It has often been pointed out that using worst-case analyses appropriately is a difficult business.\(^5\) Planners must always attach a probability assessment to the worst-

---


\(^3\) This idea of “playing it safe” is captured by the security dilemma, where even status quo powers can end up worse off by making defensive moves to insure their security. See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978) pp. 186-214.

\(^4\) Notice this explanation argues that leaders tend to regularly overestimate actual threats in planning by trying to hedge against the worst-case rather than the most probable case.

case analysis; they must estimate: "How likely is this worst-case?" Then they need to inform decision makers about the worst-case including how likely it is, and how well the state’s defenses would hold up, so that the decision makers can determine what risks the state should take. Most often, a state cannot plan to address all risks—so the leaders need to analyze the costs and benefits of addressing different risks.

One major problem with using worst-case analyses is that the probability assessment often becomes detached, and the worst-case becomes confused with the likely case. If the probability assessment becomes detached during the process of estimating and debating the threat, and the worst-case becomes confused with the likely case, then this would explain an overestimate at the time that was not based on insufficient information, but on the political process of debating the threat.

A second problem associated with using worst-case analyses is that while planners need to consider the worst-case, it is also recognized that state’s cannot always build defenses to handle all worst-case situations because this can actually make the state worse off—it can harm the state economically long term, and it can make the worst-case more likely by provoking an arms race with the adversary. Both of these dangers are widely recognized and plague planners as they attempt to "play it safe" without actually making things worse.

The problems associated with determining an adversary's current capabilities are all theoretically surmountable; intelligence could improve to the point where current

---

capabilities are known with great confidence. Predicting an adversary's future capabilities is more difficult, and largely premised on the second major difficulty with assessments: estimating the intentions of the adversary.

\textit{H2: Because of difficulties of imputing and predicting intentions, leaders inadvertently overestimate the threat posed by the adversary—most likely because of the need to use a worst-case analysis at a time of great uncertainty. Because of misperceptions of the adversary's intentions, the leaders lead the public to panic.\textsuperscript{87}}

The second hypothesis (H2) contends that misperceptions primarily stem from the problems associated with inferring an adversary's intentions.\textsuperscript{88} No matter how good intelligence sources are this problem cannot be fully resolved because it deals with predicting the future: "What does my adversary intend to do next week, next year, and in five to ten years?" Many analysts argue that determining intentions is the fundamental problem for assessments of other states because all conclusions are highly tentative—contingent on rapidly changing conditions—and subtle differences of interpretation of

\textsuperscript{87} Stated more formally: \textit{H2: The more difficult it is for a state to predict an adversary's intentions, the greater the state's tendency to overestimate those intentions and panic.}

\textsuperscript{88} Intentions are defined as those actions a state would take under given circumstances. This definition and a useful discussion of intentions can be found in Jervis, \textit{Perception and Misperception in International Politics}, pp. 48-54.
H2: Elites Misperceive Intentions

- Shocking event reveals: change in technology or change in intentions
- Elites attempt to make a new estimate of the intentions of the adversary
  - Secrecy or deception by the adversary misleads elites
  - Uncertain future international conditions make predictions difficult
  - Complicated domestic political conditions within adversary’s state make predictions difficult
  - Cultural differences between states interfere with predictions of intentions
  - Inaccurate probability estimates for future scenarios mislead elites
- Elites misperceive the intentions of the adversary and overestimate the threat
- The Elite and the Public Panic together
intentions can have major impacts on policy. At the most basic level, intentions determine if another state is considered a loyal ally, aggressive opponent, neutral bystander, opportunistic scavenger or of some other character. Beyond basic character of another state, deciding the intentions of a state gives full meaning to its actions and force posture. The same capabilities take on very different meanings by determining if an adversary has limited aims or unlimited, expansionist intentions. Is it highly expansionist, or only opportunistic? Is it easily deterred or unrelentingly aggressive? Is it sensitive to costs or is it willing to take risks at possibly high cost? These judgments can be very difficult to make, but they are essential for determining an appropriate reaction and policy.

Not only must a state attempt to discern an adversary’s current plans and intentions, but it must also take into account that the adversary may not know its own intentions. The adversary might not have definite plans for future contingencies, and even if it does at one point, the international situation may change unpredictably, and/or the leadership within its government may change, or the domestic political mood might shift, leading to a change in plans.

In spite of the volatilities of the international political environment, all states are forced to try to infer the intentions of other states from the other states' current and projected force postures and capabilities, their past behavior, their stated objectives and

---

from the current and projected international situation. This highly contingent practice is complicated by the enormous cultural differences between most states. It is also difficult for states to fully understand the domestic politics of other states, which is often a source of conflicting signals and messages. Additionally, states not only try to keep their capabilities secret, but they also often try to keep secret their current plans and intentions.

The problems of determining capabilities (H1) and intentions (H2) are tightly interrelated. Determining the certainty of an estimate of a state’s capabilities depends on judgments about how much that state is actively working to deceive, which judgment is in turn based on the state’s intentions. If it is perceived that an adversary is highly aggressive and expansionist, it is often then assumed to be working very hard to deceive others about its capabilities. On the other hand, states use what is known about capabilities to bound estimates of intentions. Intentions only matter to the extent that capabilities to realize those intentions exist. Even if a state is highly aggressive, it is only a threat if it can carry out its aggressive plans. If it is weak, its unrealistic plans matter little.

---

90 Even though these two problems are interrelated, perhaps possibly two parts of the same problem, it is useful to try to separate them into two hypotheses for two reasons: 1) it would be nice to know how formidable each problem is, and 2) the two problems have somewhat different solutions. Improved intelligence has greatly reduced many of the problems of determining an adversary’s capabilities—is it still a big problem? Can it be resolved? Is the problem of determining an adversary’s intentions so intractable that large misperceptions are unavoidable at times? Could better analysis have been done? See Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat*, pp. 10-11.
Planners must consider worst-case analyses when thinking about intentions as well as capabilities. For capabilities planners ask "What is the worst the adversary is capable of doing?" and for intentions planners ask, "What is the worst the adversary intends to do?" These different questions can possibly bound each other. Capabilities determine what the adversary is actually able to carry out, and intentions define the parameters of what the adversary will likely be capable of doing in the future. Again, worst-case scenarios need to be considered, but they also need to have a probability estimate attached so that planners can decide which risks they want to head off and which they want to accept in order to avoid making things worse economically or strategically by planning for highly unlikely worst-cases.

The rational perspective argues there is always opacity between states; it is always difficult to determine an adversary's capabilities and intentions with certainty. How, therefore, does this perspective explain the sharp change in the dependent variable of a panic? The central explanation offered is that there are sudden changes in the *level of uncertainty*. The international arena is volatile; uncertainty increases dramatically after "shocking events." Among states, changes are constantly occurring as governments

---

91 I use the phrase of "shocking event" for any major, unexpected action by a state-actor on the international scene. Others use terms such as "important," "major," "unexpected," or "spectacular" to describe the events that appear to change the international situation and jolt perceptions. Sometimes it is the accumulation of reinforcing events in close sequence and not a single event that seems to signify important changes in the international situation. The importance of these events has been widely debated: see Sophia Peterson, "Events, Mass Opinion, and Elite Attitudes," in *Communication in International Politics*, ed. Richard L. Merritt (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 252-271; Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After*, pp. 37-45; Karl Deutsch and Richard L. Merritt, "Effects of Events on National and International
change and technology changes. For planning purposes, states are forced to make estimates about the future based on the past. When a sudden change happens, indicated by a "shocking event", states can no longer extrapolate about the future based on the past because conditions have changed dramatically, hence uncertainty has increased. Increases in uncertainty force states to alter the probability estimates associated with all estimates of the future, and this often includes making worst-case scenarios more probable.

Essentially, the rational perspective argues there is an action-reaction process. When a shocking event occurs (e.g., an unexpected action by the adversary like the explosion of an atomic bomb, the launching of Sputnik, or the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union), what a state considered certain about the capabilities and/or the intentions of the adversary is suddenly called into question. All past estimates of what was known or was considered likely in the future need to be called into question since what just happened was not predicted--planners must ask themselves what else they are failing to predict. A shocking event might reveal unknown present capabilities or unpredicted intentions.\(^{92}\) New assessments need to be made, and it is likely that worst-case analyses are reconsidered and re-worked and new, perhaps larger, probability estimates are attached to them. Uncertainty will then stay at a high level until the shock wears off and

---


\(^{92}\) A panic does not necessarily follow all "shocking events." A panic follows only those events that induce incorrect or mishandled estimates about an adversary, leading to major misperceptions that cause widespread public fear.

90
the event—and the intentions behind the event—are understood and incorporated into planning.

In sum, the rational perspective locates the sources of misperceptions between states in the high costs of accurate information between states and the difficulty of predicting the future intentions of other states. When shocking events take place, the uncertain international environment becomes even more uncertain. Long-held assumptions and estimates are called into question. States are prone to overestimate at this time because they have insufficient information to make accurate estimates. In fact, large misperceptions can happen as states attach larger probabilities to worst-case scenarios because of increased uncertainty.

*Predictions of H1 & H2—how increased uncertainty about capabilities and intentions causes panics:*

Above I have presented how these hypotheses explain where national misperceptions come from. What should we see happening in the cases if these hypotheses are true? What predictions do these hypotheses make about the cases?

There are three types of predictions these hypotheses make. The first are *timing predictions* that are general to both hypotheses. These predictions reflect the rational perspective's view of the threat perception process as part of a logical action-reaction process between states; hence we should see events or re-analyses followed by logical reactions in direct response to those events or re-analyses. The second types of predictions are *assessment process predictions*. These predictions contend that the
assessment process should reflect reasonable standards of rationality throughout.

Specifically, what should we see and what should we not see happening in the assessment process? The last kinds of predictions are consistency between public and private predictions. These predictions point out how the elite need to be interacting with the public in a rational, straightforward manner, and so we should see the elite have the same misperceptions as the public, and panic along with the public.

*General Timing Predictions:*

Timing predictions maintain that certain events should occur, and they should occur in a particular order or sequence. First, there should be an increase in uncertainty, probably caused or brought to widespread attention by the occurrence of a shocking event(s). An increase in uncertainty is caused by significant, newly revealed capabilities or intentions of the adversary as indicated by the shocking event(s). The shocking event(s) is not necessary; it is possible that a re-analysis of the adversary's capabilities or behavior could cause a significant increase in uncertainty. Second, leaders should respond to the event(s) or re-analysis logically, interpret it rationally according to the information available at the time, and this interpretation should include the key misperceptions that the leaders share with the public. Third, the public panics, along with the elite, in response to the event(s) or re-analysis and the new interpretation of the situation.

If, for example, the elite begin to panic before an event takes place, this calls into question the significance of the event. However, the event could still be significant, if, for example, it served to widely confirm a suspicion. We should not see the elite panic about
something different from the public. This would call into question the assumption of rational, straightforward leadership by the elite. Further, we should not see the public panic about something to which the event does not pertain. This would call into question the relevance of the event, and thus the relevance of the increase in uncertainty it supposedly created. If the event was not relevant, it would not prove that the misperceptions were not caused by an increase in uncertainty, but if the misperceptions are not a logical, rational result of the increase in uncertainty, it is a strong indicator that something else important has happened to cause the panic. All parts of the sequence should fit together in the correct logical order, and with hindsight we should see that the decision makers either had insufficient information and/or made a rational analytical error about the capabilities or intentions of the adversary, and these problems caused the key misperceptions that the elite shared with the public and created the panic.

Assessment Process Predictions:

Overall, with the benefit of hindsight, and from the vantage point of a third party observer at the time, we should see that the resulting overestimation(s) of the capabilities or intentions of the adversary appear logical and reasonable based upon the information available at the time. This means that it is clear that the estimate of the adversary's capabilities or intentions were inaccurate, but there was insufficient information available at the time to make a more accurate estimates. Or, alternatively, the leaders made an accurate assessment of the adversary's capabilities and intentions but they did not know how certain they could be of the information they had, so the key misperceptions involved
what the adversary was *possibly* capable of or intending to do in the future. We should see that when better information became available, or when the errors in the analysis were realized, the misperceptions were corrected. The leaders did not purposefully construe or purvey a misperception(s) in spite of good evidence to show the perception false. Clearly, individuals do rationally make random errors, but they should be receptive to correction of their mistakes. Further, if estimating the capabilities of the adversary is the most important source of misperception, it should be found that if intelligence collection capabilities significantly improved in one case as compared to another, or across a case, the problem of overestimating should be reduced proportionately in the case with better intelligence, or within the case as it improved. Under rationality, assessments should respond to both availability of information and quality of information.

We should not see leaders mishandle information or purposefully make errors. For example, leaders should not underestimate their own state's capabilities or selectively point to strengths of the adversary that appear frightening superficially but are meaningless when analyzed in the context of the entire strategic picture; leaders need to consider full net assessments instead of partial "bean counts".\(^9\) Strong evidence to suggest purposeful mishandling of assessments would be if groups with a recognizable self-interest clearly

\(^9\) A "bean count" is when you compare separately one weapons system with another, for example how many intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) do the Soviets have compared to how many ICBMs the U.S. has. This is a meaningless comparison in and of itself in terms of how safe the U.S. or the Soviets are. Analysts need to do a full net assessment including bombers, short-range missiles, and submarines, etc. to determine vulnerability or ability to deter. See Gervasi, *The Myth of Soviet Military Supremacy*. 94
resisted rational discourse, or appeared to be striving to purvey the threat inaccurately in a self-serving manner, and were not reasonably open to new information that refuted their views. Additionally, we should see the leaders call for strategies and/or weapons that solve the capabilities or intentions problems they have perceived and feared. We should not see the leaders frame the problem in one way and then provide solutions (e.g. weapons systems, strategies) relevant to a different problem. Further, worst-case analyses of capabilities or intentions should be debated with an appropriate probability estimate attached. If the leaders mishandle an estimate, they should do so inadvertently rather than purposefully. Evidence to suggest that leaders mishandled a worst-case analysis would be if they had an obvious political motive to do so, and/or did so selectively, in public but not in private, or in certain forums for particular audiences, while failing to do so elsewhere.

_Predictions concerning consistency between leaders’ public and private behavior:_

If the rational perspective explains the overestimations that lead to panics, then we should see that the leaders panic along with the public, sharing the same fears as the public. It is well known that leaders always need to keep some information secret to protect intelligence sources and methods and to keep the adversary from easily countering their own capabilities. However, the information made available to the public should be a balanced, reasonable reflection of what the leaders know and believe. The leaders should not distort the image of the adversary, or attempt to "convince" the public of something that they do not believe themselves. If evidence is available, examination of both the private correspondence of the leaders and their closed discussions should reveal that they
believed what they were saying publicly about the threat. Leaders can strongly advocate a view, but they do so without misleading exaggerations, and they do so in private as well as in public. For example, leaders should not distort the image of the adversary by selectively releasing information. Finally, the most important overestimates of the adversary's capabilities and intentions that are central to the misperceptions in the public should be the same misperceptions that are central to the leaders in private.

II. The Psychological Perspective: Cognitive Errors Cause Panics

Political scientists have looked to the workings and limitations of the human brain and used psychological theories to explain the causes of misperceptions in international politics. They have done this because they have noticed that insufficient information does not seem to fully explain the large number of seemingly systematic errors in perception that have occurred historically. They point out that human beings psychologically process information in certain ways that can at times lead to misperceptions. Broadly, there are two types of psychological theories that explain biases of human perceptions: cognitive theories and motivational theories. Cognitive theories point to reflexive shortcuts in reasoning as an important source of misperception. Motivational theories point to personal motivations—psychological and emotional needs—as a source of misperception. I will first fully explain the differences between these two important types of psychological theories. Then I will explain why I choose to test only two leading cognitive hypotheses.
and why the two hypotheses I focus on merit testing in particular. I will then fully
develop the two hypotheses I test, explaining specifically how they are supposed to operate
to cause the misperceptions that cause panics. Finally, I derive predictions from each
hypothesis that delineate the evidence that will confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis as an
explanation for the cases.

Cognitive v. Motivational Theories:

Cognitive theories see human beings as creatures with limited cognitive capacities. Humans are described as "cognitive misers," "satisficers," or people with "bounded rationality" because they have been shown in laboratory tests to need to rely upon
simplifying mechanisms to process the massive amount of information they encounter in
their daily lives. Generally, people rely upon two broad types of "intuitive implements"
to help them make sense of the world around them, and these strategies of interpretation
usually result in accurate perceptions but can also lead to errors. One type of implement
is the "judgmental heuristic," which reduces complex inferential tasks to simple
judgmental operations. For example, people often use informal methods of statistical
inference--"rules of thumb"--when interpreting information. One observed "rule of
thumb" is that people tend to reason from the most vivid or salient information available
to form judgments such as firsthand knowledge or recent experiences, while neglecting

---

other important, available information such as scholarly analyses just because this information is less vivid and salient.

A second type of intuitive implement is the "knowledge structure," which allows the individual to quickly define and interpret the data of physical and social life. Because adults do not approach stimuli for the first time, they are able to label and categorize objects and events rapidly by processing them through pre-existing systems of schematized and abstracted knowledge. People interpret new information using quick associations like, "this man is mean like my old neighbor, Bob, because he looks stern and says very little just like Bob does." This process also defines a set of expectations about objects and events and suggests appropriate responses to them. Both of these mental shortcuts, "judgmental heuristics" and "knowledge structures", introduce biases to information processing and are seen to be major causes of misperceptions for cognitive theorists.

The second school of psychology emphasizes the importance of motivation as a source of perceptual distortion. Motivational theories see humans as having a strong need to maintain images of the self or of the environment conducive to their emotional well-being. For example, anxious or fearful thinking will often lead to "selectivity." An anxious person will often select certain elements of his environment to pay attention to, either to falsely prove he was justified in his fears or to find false reassurances that his fears were misplaced. Or a person's interests in reputation or career success might

---

95 Nisbett and Ross, *Human Inference*, pp. 6-7.
96 Widely recognized hypotheses of each type are tested here.
97 This example is from Harold Lieff, as quoted in Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 107.
98
motivate a person to see what he or she wishes to see, as when a person avoids recognizing the likelihood of failure on important personal goals or avoids recognizing responsibility for such failure.\textsuperscript{98}

Cognitive and motivational theories have important differences. Cognitive theories focus on what are called "cold" cognitions, which include subconscious, rule driven, and thoughtless operations of information processing. These unmotivated biases are the products of the complexity of the environment, combined with the inherent limitations of cognitive capabilities, and the strategies used to overcome them. They result from the way human brains are "hard wired" to process information. Awareness of unmotivated biases may lead to attempts to avoid them; however, because they are embedded in objective cognitive limitations, such attempts are likely to fail.\textsuperscript{99} Motivational or "hot" processes of cognition include conscious or intuitive operations. These biases arise from emotions, personal motives, and needs and have ego-defensive functions. Even when made aware of motivational biases people are not likely to attempt to correct them because of the psychological discomforts correction may entail—although if they attempt to avoid

\textsuperscript{98} Chaim Kaufmann discusses "motivated defensive avoidance" giving these examples, see Kaufmann, "Out of the Lab and into the Archives", pp. 562-63.

\textsuperscript{99} Most scholars are pessimistic about correcting cognitive biases because people have a lot of faith in their own theories, perceptions and understandings, and therefore stick with their judgments unless very clear, unambiguous evidence is available to demonstrate their errors, see Khong, Analogies At War, pp. 256-258. Some scholars believe decision makers can learn strategies to minimize cognitive errors, although some major errors are inevitable, see Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, pp. 409-424; Nisbett and Ross, Human Inference, pp. 254, 280-293.
them, they might be successful since motivational biases are not grounded in inherent, objective limitations of cognitive capabilities.\textsuperscript{100}

Most scholars find these types of theories to be complementary because they often explain different misperceptions.\textsuperscript{101} However these two types of psychological explanations often compete to explain the same misperceptions so debates about their relative importance have continued for decades. For example, attribution theory, which will be tested below from the cognitive perspective, finds that people tend to attribute their own behavior to situational causes, reasoning that they were compelled by circumstances to behave as they did, while they tend to attribute others' behavior to dispositional causes, reasoning that others behaved as they did because of their character or personality. From the cognitive perspective, this tendency occurs because the perceiver is using "cold' cognitive shortcuts of inference, where she attributes causality from whatever captures her attention or is most salient. Thus the observer is focused upon her own circumstances and it is easiest to reason that those circumstances compelled her actions rather than to look inward to search her own personality for a reason for action. Additionally, she would


\textsuperscript{101} Nisbett and Ross discuss the history of the debate between hot and cold cognitions, and argue that cold cognitions are probably more important, but the interplay between the two types is important too. See Nisbett and Ross, \textit{Human Inference}, pp. 228-249. Also finding them complementary are Harold H. Kelley and John L. Michela, "Attribution Theory and Research," \textit{Annual Review of Psychology} 31 (1980), pp. 473-474, passim; Jervis, \textit{Perception and Misperception}, p. 5, passim; Vertzberger, \textit{The World in Their Minds}, p. 111; Lebow, \textit{Between Peace and War}, pp. 224, 228.
usually not know much about the history or circumstances of another so it is easiest for her to reason that the other actor's personality determined his actions.\textsuperscript{102} From the motivational perspective, the perceiver displays this same tendency but for self-serving reasons. An observer will tend to justify her own behavior by claiming circumstances compelled her actions, and then blame the behavior of the other on his character. In this way, the observer need not admit that another's actions were a justified response to her actions, and this denial of responsibility preserves her emotional well-being by avoiding blame. People generally want to see themselves as not intentionally doing wrong or causing others to act badly.\textsuperscript{103} Both cognitive and motivational theories explain behavior that has the same situational/dispositional-reasoning pattern. However, the reason for this pattern is disputed.

To distinguish between cognitive and motivational views, the question to ask is, does the observer display this type of reasoning constantly, or at least consistently with respect to a particular perception, or only when it suits his or her interests? Cognitive theories do not maintain that an observer would make this type of faulty inference constantly, but cognitive theories gain in explanatory power if they have isolated a systematic, thoughtless process that does operate often, and not just occasionally. Most important for the cognitive perspective, an actor needs to consistently make the same biased inference from the beginning point of making a particular inference. The perceiver


is reasoning in a faulty manner unknowingly, not tailoring his or her perceptions at
different times to suit his or her interests. For example, if an observer likens Stalin to
Hitler, he or she must always see Stalin as similar to Hitler, and not one day believe Stalin
is a nice guy, the next day decide Stalin is like Hitler, and then the next day decide he is a
nice guy again. Cognitive biases are reflexively applied, and then difficult to alter.
Motivational theories do not claim actors are consistent--in fact they contend that actors
are most likely inconsistent--and actors display motivational biases when they need to in
order to maintain their emotional well-being or protect their interests. A motivated
perceiver might appear to be consistent, but does not need to be consistent.

In this study I test only cognitive hypotheses from the psychological perspective,
for two reasons. First, cognitive hypotheses make testable claims. Cognitive tendencies
are supposed to be widespread, fairly systematic, and consistent within an individual
across time in relation to a particular perception; this makes them fairly predictable,
observable and analyzable. In contrast, motivational biases have been viewed as prevalent
but completely unpredictable--even intractable analytically--since psychological needs and
personality traits of individuals are difficult to directly observe, infer or validate.104
Because cognitive theorists claim that cognitive processes can be observed as patterns in
reasoning and unknowable motives do not need to be established, strong, clear predictions
can be derived and the theories can be systematically tested.

104 For arguments of why cognitive theories are more testable and parsimonious see
Khong, Analogies At War, pp. 225-226; Larson, Origins of Containment, pp. 344-345;
Nisbett and Ross, Human Inference, pp. 12-13, chapter 10. For an argument that
cannot be invalidated and claims that "basic fear" caused stress and anxiety, which in
turn caused these panics, see Johnson, Improbable Dangers.
Second, for the most part, motivational theories supplement, but are only secondary to domestic political explanations. Motivational theories describe why people who perceived or acted based on their self-interests believed in what they were doing, or came to believe in what they were doing after the fact to maintain their psychological and emotional comfort. For example, motivational theorists argue that people will decide to act or perceive in certain ways because of their ideologies, personal political interests, class interests, institutional interests, career interests, party interests, emotional interests or any other possible motivating interests.\(^{105}\) Recall, motivated actors are semi-conscious, or even fully conscious that their acts and perceptions are biased in favor of their interests, but they do not correct for any bias because it is emotionally and psychologically more comfortable to believe or rationalize that what you are doing/perceiving is the right thing to do rather than to correct it. It is extremely useful to have an explanation for why it is widely observed that people sincerely believe in what they are doing when they bias their perceptions or actions in favor of their interests, and to recognize that people are not being cynically self-serving when they act out their interests. However, it is more accurate to categorize the reasons for their misperceptions as driven by domestic politics rather than psychology, and it is also more useful to do so. Logically, it seems tractable to constrain domestic political interests that are able to act to exaggerate the threat by countering them

\(^{105}\) As Chaim Kaufmann explains there are at least four major categories of interests that may engender motivated bias by political decision makers: 1) conceptions of the national interest; 2) class, institutional, party or factional interests; 3) personal political interests such as reputation or career success, and 4) emotional needs such as stress or guilt avoidance. See Kaufmann, “Out of the Lab and into the Archives,” p. 563.
with political process reform, such as reducing their monopoly on information, while it seems intractable to alter individual psychological propensities.

There is one broad category of motivational theories that is not at all addressed by the domestic political theories addressed below.\textsuperscript{106} This is the category of personal emotions as the source of bias, such as stress or guilt avoidance. While it seems obvious that stress, fear, love or guilt avoidance clouds personal perceptions, it also seems impossible to predict when or how these influences would operate. The only evidence for these is either unreliable self-reports of actors, indefinite reports by firsthand observers (an observer would be trying to discern something they could not possibly be sure of, e.g. "he was under great stress and it clouded his judgment") or possibly a process of elimination where a bias is observed and all other potential sources of bias are ruled out, so the observer is left to conclude that the actor was emotionally motivated. There are no predictable patterns of behavior to observe, and behavior is most likely inconsistent. Because well-developed hypotheses with testable predictions are unavailable for emotion-based motivations, I do not test for these sources of bias here. However, I do not think this represents a large problem for the study of panics because, as many scholars have argued, personal emotions are most influential when a small group is making a decision under severe time constraints, as in a crisis. These emotion-based biases are often corrected by larger groups, or corrected over time by the leaders themselves if they are

\textsuperscript{106} I am in no way suggesting that three domestic political hypotheses discussed below capture all of the possible motivational biases that might influence national misperceptions. However, the domestic political hypotheses examined here do represent the most widely discussed explanations of political and organizational motivations that account for the national misperceptions of these panics.
operating without time constraints. The misperceptions that cause the panics considered here are national misperceptions—present in very large groups—and they develop over months to years rather than days, so the influence of personal emotion-type motivations should be minimal as a cause of these national security panics.

In conclusion, in this study I test two leading cognitive hypotheses as causes of panics from the psychological perspective. These two hypotheses come from larger theories called “attribution theory” and “schema theory”. I have selected these two hypotheses because other scholars have argued that these particular biases are often responsible for overestimation of threats. Moreover, other scholars have found these theories to be leading theories; others have tested them and found them to be robust.

Next I develop these two hypotheses, specifying in detail how they are supposed to

---

107 Nisbett and Ross, *Human Inference*, pp. 254, 291; Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, pp. 42-43 especially fn 16; Vertzberger catalogues all of the many dysfunctions to which small groups are susceptible, and then argues that large groups also have perception problems, but that these are more often political/factional and organizational. He mentions that large groups will tend to correct motivational biases in particular (p.223). However, he argues that time could correct some problems, but that time is usually a misperception multiplier after misperceptions are in place because actors tend to persevere in their perceptions. See Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds*, pp. 192-259, 347.

108 Most importantly, see Jervis who explains that people tend to overestimate threats by others generally because they discount others’ cooperative/unthreatening behavior (this was compelled by the observer’s influence), and infer too much from their uncooperative/threatening behavior (this bad behavior is a reflection of their character). Second, Jervis explains how pre-existing beliefs/schemas commonly lead to overestimation if the perceiver already has another actor categorized as an adversary. Then, incoming information is sorted and categorized to re-affirm that pre-existing view, discounting discrepant information, and likely leading to overestimation. See Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, pp. 143-202, 217-282, 343-355.

109 For tests of these theories see Larson, *Origins of Containment*; Khong, *Analogies At War*; Kaufmann, “Out of the Lab and into the Archives”.
operate to cause panics. I also derive specific predictions of what we should see and what we should not see in the cases if these biases are causing the panics.

**H3: Attribution Theory, the "fundamental attribution error", and how shortcuts in causal inference can lead to overestimations of threats, and to panics:**

Attribution theory is not a single theory; it is the study of how people attribute causation. The general hypothesis of "attribution theory" is that people interpret their observations of behavior and events by reasoning back to the causes of those observations. They formulate causal explanations about their observations and their inferred explanations shape their responses to those observations.\(^{110}\) For example, when a teacher notices a student is absent from class, she might either reason that the student is a diligent student so he must be sick or that the student is an irresponsible student so he must be skipping class. Her reasoning would be about the event of the student’s absence, and she would be judging if this was unique or atypical behavior that must have been compelled by the student’s circumstances (he was sick), or if it is typical behavior for that student and hence reflects the internal disposition of the student (he was skipping). The teacher would then respond with understanding or anger according to her perception of the situation.\(^{111}\)

---

\(^{110}\) Larson, *Origins of Containment*, pp. 34-42. Larson explains that some of the studies under the rubric of "attribution theory" compete with each other and it should be emphasized that there is no consensus among attribution theorists on the description of the cognitive processes, the information used or the outcomes.

\(^{111}\) Specifically, "attribution theory" is the study of how people formulate their perceptions by determining causation, and "attributional theory" is the study of how
Attribution theorists see people as "naive scientists," or problem solvers. People are engaged in a quest for meaning, and are relatively open-minded in their search for truth. They attempt to explain the events and people around them, making predictions about the future. Attribution theorists seek to discover the principles of "naive epistemology", the rules and procedures laymen use in gathering and interpreting data, as opposed to those associated with the model of scientific epistemology.\(^{112}\) In relation to foreign policy, Deborah Larson contends: "Attribution theory might be very useful for understanding foreign policymaking; because it is impossible for policymakers to satisfy the requirements of the scientific model in their attempts to explain and interpret international events, they must resort to principles of 'naive epistemology' in making judgments about other states."\(^{113}\)

There are several hypotheses from the general attribution theory perspective that could explain why observers might overestimate the threat posed by another.\(^{114}\) Perhaps

\(^{112}\) Nisbett and Ross, *Human Inference*, pp. 3-8, passim.

\(^{113}\) Larson, *Origins of Containment*, p. 35.

\(^{114}\) The two hypotheses I discuss are the ones that have been used by others to explain the tendency to overestimate threats. There are other possible tendencies that could be explored. See Kelley and Michela, "Attribution Theory and Research"; As noted above, there is no consensus among attribution theorists about what the most important cognitive processes are.
the most famous and widely discussed is "the fundamental attribution error". This hypothesis contends that observers tend to reason that their own behavior is determined by the demands and opportunities of their situation, but they see other people's actions as being caused by their dispositions. Attribution theorists credit this common dispositional/situational tendency to the fact that observers use the information that captures their attention or is most salient to them when they form their causal explanations. To reason this way is a shortcut of statistical inference. Actors focus on their environments and the situational cues to which they must respond, and thus these cues are most salient when they try to reason about why they did what they did. When observing others, the other actor sticks out against the background, so it is most salient to reason he or she behaved in such a way because of who he or she is.

---


116 Antaki explains that there are both informational and perceptual differences between the observer and actor, and these are probably more important than the motivation that could be involved. Informational differences are that the actor knows more about the history, motives or intentions of the actor's actions than the observer usually does. The perceptual differences are the differences in the scene confronting the actors and observers, where for the observer the behavior is figural against the ground situation, and for the actor, the situational cues are figural and seem to elicit behavior. See Antaki, "A Brief Introduction to Attribution and Attributional Theories," p. 9; Larson, Origins of Containment, pp. 37-38.
This hypothesis predicts that observers will overestimate the threat of others because of the tendency of an observer to reason like this: "I had to build arms for defense because I face threats, but my adversary builds weapons because he or she is aggressive." Or the observer's reasoning might be: "I had to 'stand tough' because I was forced to by the circumstances; my adversary would not compromise, and/or made threats because he or she is expansionist." Observers tend not to recognize how much others are responding to their situation, and this includes the common error of observers not recognizing their own influence on others.\textsuperscript{117} For example, this hypothesis would argue that U.S. leaders believed that they decided to build weapons and defend their interests because they felt threatened by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but they failed to recognize that the Soviets took similar measures because they felt threatened; instead U.S. leaders argued that the Soviets were inherently aggressive and belligerent when they built weapons.

So far this hypothesis predicts overestimation in general, or incrementally. It could predict a panic, through a spiral of action-reaction where leaders felt they kept responding to the adversaries' moves, and the adversary kept initiating hostile moves. However, there is another widely discussed attribution hypothesis that could supplement this tendency, or even supersede this tendency, that could explain the dramatic increase in the overestimation of the threat that constitutes a panic. Attribution theorists contend that observers pay more attention to, and draw more inferences from unexpected behavior.

\textsuperscript{117} Jervis explains how this common tendency can feed spirals of misperceptions because these misperceptions aggravate the security dilemma, where each side will act defensively (e.g. acquire arms), but fail to see how the other side could misinterpret that action as aggressive rather than defensive. See Jervis, \textit{Perception and Misperception in International Politics}, pp. 351-355.
rather than expected behavior. This leads observers to generally overestimate rather than underestimate threats from other actors. This happens because an observer is often attempting to influence an actor he or she is observing (e.g. an adversary) to be cooperative or “good”, and thus when the adversary acts cooperatively, it is expected behavior and therefore discounted, because that was how the observer was trying to get the adversary to behave. However, when the adversary acts uncooperatively or “bad”, it is unexpected behavior and thus counted more heavily. “Bad” behavior is seen as more important because it is unexpected, and more inferences are drawn from this “bad” behavior.\footnote{Harold H. Kelley, "Attribution Theory in Social Psychology," in \textit{Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1967}, ed. David Levine (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 194; Jervis, \textit{Perception and Misperception in International Politics}, pp. 35-38; Kelley and Michela, "Attribution Theory and Research," p.465. Kelley and Michela cite G.D. Reeder and M.B. Brewer for developing this hypothesis in G. D. Reeder and M. B. Brewer, "A Schematic Model of Dispositional Attribution in Interpersonal Perception," \textit{Psychological Review} 86 (1979), pp. 61-79.} These observations lead to the following two-part hypothesis:

\textbf{H3: The more leaders reason that they acted according to their situations (provoked by the adversary) while they believe the adversary acted according to its disposition, especially discounting the leaders' own state's influence on the adversary, the more the leaders will tend to perceive the actions of the adversary to be more aggressive and less provoked than they actually were. Hence the more the leaders will tend to impute less conditionally hostile intentions to the adversary, and thus tend to overestimate the threats posed by the adversary.}

\textbf{Additionally, overestimation of the adversary may become extreme after an unexpected “shocking event”. This happens because people draw more inferences from unexpected behavior (behavior contrary to their attempted influence). The overestimation of the threat causes the}
H3: Attribution Theory: Elites make attribution errors

Shocking event reveals: change in technology or change in intentions

Elites attempt to make a new estimate of the adversary

Elites attribute their own behavior to their circumstances and their adversary's behavior to her disposition; this leads elites to see adversary's behavior as more "unprovoked" than it actually is

When elites perceive shocking events, they pay attention to unexpected "bad" behavior, while discounting expected "good" behavior of the adversary

Elites misperceive the adversary and overestimate the threat

The Elite and the Public Panic together
leaders to panic along with the public. 119

This psychological hypothesis is an individual-level theory, meaning it explains the way individuals might reason. In order for this attribution hypothesis, or any psychological theory, to explain national misperceptions, the psychological tendency needs either to be widespread—many leaders, or even all people, reason in the same way and form the same perceptions—or at least key decision makers need to reason in this way. It is possible that key leaders could convince others of their perceptions because of their authority and/or because they hold a monopoly on the information that might be used to disconfirm their misperceptions. In this study, I will investigate whether or not key leaders reasoned in this way, because if they fail to reason in this way, then these tendencies are not widespread enough or strong enough to cause the national misperceptions in question.120

119 Stated formally: H3: The more observers reason that they acted according to their situations while they believe others acted according to their dispositions, especially discounting their own influence on the actors they observe, the more they will tend to perceive the actions of the others to be more purposive and/or less provoked than they actually were, hence the more the observer will tend to impute less conditionally hostile intentions to the actors, and thus tend to overestimate the threats posed by the actors they are observing. Additionally, the more observers infer an actor's intentions from the actor's unexpected behavior, and the more an observer overly discounts the actor's expected behavior, the more likely it is for the observers to attribute more extreme motives and intentions to the actor, overestimate the threat posed by the actor, and panic.

120 To focus on the key leaders is the shorter hurdle for this hypothesis. It could be argued that the public broadly reasons in this way and forces the key leaders to go along with its perceptions. However, if we do not see these as strong tendencies among the leaders as well, it is difficult to claim they are strong tendencies among people generally, since leaders are people too.
Next I derive predictions from these attribution hypotheses that should describe the cases if these hypotheses explain the causes of panics. Like the predictions from the rational perspective, there are three types of predictions: timing predictions, assessment process predictions, and predictions concerning consistency between leaders’ private and public behavior.

*Timing Predictions:*

Attribution theory predicts an action-reaction process. Leaders should be seen to be reasoning back from the adversary’s behavior or from “shocking events” pertaining to the adversary. Leaders should display a dispositional/situational-reasoning pattern when they formulate their perceptions about the adversary. They should fail to recognize how they provoked the adversary, and argue that their own actions were in response to their situation. They should argue that the adversary’s actions were unprovoked and caused by the character and disposition of the adversary.

Leaders might also ignore, or not fully pay attention to the adversary’s cooperative behavior, while they excessively infer hostile motives from unexpected uncooperative behavior. Leaders should reason in these ways reflexively, and consistently in response to the behavior or events.

*Assessment Process Predictions:*

Attribution theory predicts that the leaders behave as “naïve scientists”, and thus are relatively open in their search for the causes of behavior or events and are not
committed to a particular position in advance. We should see them openly searching for the causes and explanations of the behavior of the adversary. We should see them using attribution-type reasoning from the beginning of forming their perceptions of particular behavior or events, and then consistently apply this reasoning and persevering in their perceptions across time. We should see leaders across political dividing lines making the same (or similar) attributions. We should not see these patterns as particular to one political group, and not others.

*Predictions Concerning Consistency Between Leaders’ Private and Public Behavior:*

Attribution theory predicts that leaders’ reasoning and perceptions revealed by their private documents are mutually consistent with their public statements. For example, we should see leaders reasoning in private that their behavior is in response to their circumstances—they should feel that they are being provoked by the adversary. While they should fail to recognize in what ways they are provoking the adversary; they reason the adversary is initiating the conflict because of hostile intentions. Leaders should then share these perceptions with the public. We should not see leaders reasoning privately that they realize they have provoked the adversary, while telling the public that the adversary is unprovoked and overly hostile. It is important that the leaders’ biased causal attributions are the key misperceptions the leaders share with the public and are the central causes of the panic.

Ultimately, the strongest case for the influence of attribution theory would be if leaders had enough information available at the time to make correct perceptions, but
abundant evidence reveals that they persisted in reasoning in the ways predicted by the attribution hypotheses, and these patterns of reasoning led to the significant misperceptions that were central to the national panics. A less strong case, but still a significant finding for attribution theory, would be if it was found that the leaders had only highly ambiguous information, but they interpreted this information in the ways predicted by attribution theory, and these patterns of interpretation led to the important misperceptions of the panics. If little to no evidence is found to support the contention that leaders reasoned in the ways predicted by attribution theory, and/or if their attributionally biased reasoning is not directly at the root of the national misperceptions of the panics, then the importance of attribution-type reasoning for national misperceptions will be seriously cast in doubt.

**H4: Schema Theory, Analogies and how “snap judgments” and matching images from memory can lead to misperceptions, possibly overestimations of threats, and to panics:**

Scholars have often pointed out that leaders frequently use history and their experiences when formulating perceptions and foreign policy. Some observers maintain that leaders invoke history as justification for policies they have decided they prefer for other reasons.\(^{121}\) While others maintain that decision makers use history as a guide while formulating perceptions and policy. Scholars who argue

that leaders use history as a guide often point out that leaders tend to use history poorly because they do not know history well. They note that leaders (like all people) hold stereotyped images of historical events rather than nuanced views of historical periods, thus they use history too simply, rather than teasing out the complex lessons of history. Psychologists take a somewhat different view. They contend that it is not that leaders do not know history per se, but that people in general make common inferential errors when they apply what they know to new situations.

Psychologists have found that people's understanding of the rapid flow of continuing social events around them often depends upon their general knowledge and past experience of objects, people, events, and their characteristic relationships. Humans do not always follow the quasi-scientific process postulated by attribution theory of conducting an open-minded search for truth. Instead, people sometimes make "snap judgments" on the basis of minimal information. A person does this through a "matching" process of comparing what he is experiencing to past incidents stored in memory. Many psychologists have studied how people tend to access and use knowledge through matching, and this approach to the study of perception formation has been formalized into "schema theory".

A schema is a knowledge structure of an abstract and generic concept stored in memory. It may refer to objects, situations, events, or sequences of events or personae. Schema theory views people as "categorizers" or "labelers," sifting through sensory data, sorting out what is important and developing a collection of categories into which experiences can be conveniently classified. For example, the schema for bird would have

---

variables for size, color, beak shape, and so on. In memory, an image of a prototypical bird is stored, against which specific examples are compared.123

Schemas come in various forms including scripts, metaphors and personae. Scripts are essentially stories; they are "knowledge structures" that represent sequences of events in well-known situations.124 Scripts may be particularly important for foreign policy decision making because they can be used to understand current events by matching them to past sequences of events. Most famously, historical analogies can be used as scripts. Yuen Foong Khong has investigated the use of analogies in foreign policy decision-making in his study Analogies at War.125 In this work, Khong carefully specifies the operation of analogical reasoning, supporting and illuminating his arguments with

123 Larson, Origins of Containment, pp. 50-51; Khong, Analogies At War, p. 28.

124 Different types of scripts include episodic scripts for single experiences, and categorical scripts which are more abstract and are formed by generalizing from similar experiences: "Dictators are aggressive adversaries." A third type of script is the hypothetical script which not only groups similar experiences but also differentiates contrasting experiences and includes conditional and inferential concepts and abstract rules that distinguish different possible categorical scripts. When a script is not readily available, decision makers use metaphors to understand their situation: "Bargaining with the Soviets is like playing poker." They also use stereotyped schemas of personae to understand people: "Saddam Hussein is a dictator like Hitler." For more discussion of all of these possibly relevant concepts, see Robert P. Abelson, "Script Processing in Attitude Formation and Decision Making," in Cognition and Social Behavior, ed. J. S. Carroll, J. W. Payne (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1976), pp. 33-45; Larson, Origins of Containment, pp. 54-55; Vertzberger, The World in Their Minds, p. 158.

125 I have relied heavily upon this excellent study--Khong boldly attempts to carefully explain how schemas actually work, while other studies are vague and skip over problems with the theory. See Khong, Analogies At War. In my study of panics, schema theory is one of nine hypotheses being tested, so where Khong tested one case where analogies were known to be present, this study picks cases of known misperceptions and searches to see if schemas/analogies (which are supposed to be very common) have anything to do with the misperceptions of the cases--both the absolute and relative power of schema theory will be examined. Another study that found schema theory to be important in the first case I examine here is Larson, Origins of Containment.
schema theory. He recognizes that analogies are sometimes used simply to justify or advocate positions, but he argues that analogical reasoning does often cognitively influence leaders as well. Analogical reasoning often helps decision makers diagnose situations and arrive at inferences.

Khong very carefully specifies how to determine if an analogy is being used simply to justify a position, or if it is actually being used to diagnose a situation and determine responses to behavior or events. Khong points out that for the use of analogies to be meaningful as cognitive tools, analogies must affect the decision outcome. Specifically, Khong claims analogies perform six tasks: 1) analogies help define the nature of the situation confronting the policymaker; 2) analogies help assess the stakes involved; 3) analogies provide prescriptions; 4) analogies help predict chances of success among alternative options; 5) analogies help evaluate moral rightness and 6) analogies warn about dangers associated with different options. Khong’s point is that for an analogy to be considered an important cognitive tool, the analogy must be used by the decision maker because if the analogy is simply invoked after the decision has been made for other

126 Technically, analogies and schemas are not exactly the same; analogies are specific and concrete while schemas are abstract and generic concepts. The two structures are not easy to separate in practice because users shift between the two knowledge structures and levels of abstraction with ease. Scholars have not seen fit to strictly distinguish between the two, and thus they have been used interchangeably. See Khong, Analogy At War, pp. 25-26. Analogies, because they are used the same way as scripts and are basically interchangeable with scripts, will be referred to as schemas in this study as is common practice.

127 These six tasks make up Khong’s "Analogue Explanation Framework" used to make the process of analogical reasoning comprehensible in its entirety; an analogy does not have to be used for all of these tasks, but the more an analogy is used, the more it "matters." See Ibid., p. 10 and chapt. 2.
reasons, and the analogy does not affect the decision outcome, it does not "matter" in
terms of forming perceptions.

Additionally, Khong claims in accordance with schema theory that there are
identifiable and systematic biases associated with analogical reasoning that can lead to
misperceptions. Most importantly, as psychologists have demonstrated through
experiments, analogies are accessed based more on superficial similarity and recency
rather than for any real analogical value.\textsuperscript{128} For foreign policy decision making in
particular, Khong argues analogies are accessed based on superficial similarity, recency
and on whether they happened when the decision maker was "coming of age". Analogies
are drawn more readily between events with surface commonalities than between
dissimilar, but perhaps more relevant events (e.g., conflicts in the same part of the world
with lots of refugees might be more easily compared than conflicts of different regions
with more complex and central issues in common). Any event happening within the
decision maker's lifetime will be more "recent" or available to a decision maker than an
event that the decision maker did not actually live through. Of special importance for
recency seem to be events that occurred during the decision maker's formative years
(approximately ages 20-35) because that is when people are most impressionable on
matters of international politics.\textsuperscript{129} All of these factors have been shown to be important

\textsuperscript{128} Psychologists discuss these notions as parts of the "representativeness heuristic"
for similarities, and the "availability heuristic" for recency, see Nisbett and Ross,

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., pp. 212-219; Jervis first proposed the idea that "coming of age" matters.
He argues it also produces a "generational effect" where all those people who
experienced the same major events as young people will share the same strong
for accessing analogies, but little is known about precisely how they operate, in what combination, and when.

Misperceptions occur because analogies are accessed suboptimally, but they also occur because analogies are applied in ways that allow simplistic and mistaken conclusions to be formed. For example, using an analogy allows the perceiver to go beyond the information given (inferring from the analogy). But if the observer uses a false analogy (only superficially similar) or if the observer draws more parallels than what the analogy is directly analogous to, faulty conclusions result. Further, using analogies allows a "top-down" or "theory-driven" process of analysis, rather than a data driven process, which is a short cut in inference that can lead to errors. Finally, analogical reasoning can lead to the phenomenon of perseverance, where a decision maker clings to his preferred analogy because after an analogy or schema is invoked a decision maker tends to make incoming information fit into the applied schema.¹³⁰

It should be emphasized that inferential short cuts such as these are most often successful for daily decision-making, even if not leading to wholly accurate perceptions. They are often necessary for daily coping because of the massive amount of information that needs to be handled constantly. People rely on these tactics of reasoning because they

generally work. However, it is possible that people rely too heavily on these reasoning tactics. These tendencies have the potential to lead to important misperceptions.

How can schemas cause the national misperceptions that lead to panic? Analogies or scripts may contain readily available, important formative lessons that a generation of decision makers learned. Such lessons could teach that adversaries are extremely aggressive, they win quickly through surprise, and states need to be ever vigilant. If these types of lessons were learned, leaders would probably be predisposed toward overestimation of threats. Or, instead of a generation sharing a formative lesson, key decision makers may apply overly threatening analogies or schemas from their personal experiences to new events or observations of an adversary, and these key leaders may convince others of their perceptions. If any threatening analogy or schema (script, metaphor or personae) is misapplied to an event or action by an adversary, and this perception is widely shared, it could lead to one or more important national misperceptions and cause the public to panic. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

**H4: Leaders tend to use analogies (or other schemas) from recent events or formative experiences to analyze and interpret their current situation. If the leaders misapply an analogy or schema, it could lead them to misperceive the events or behavior of others that they are trying to understand. This could cause leaders to overestimate the threats they face and to lead the public to panic.**

---

131 Stated more formally: H4: *If many observing decision makers’ or key decision makers’ stored schemas are threatening (e.g. include images of aggressive adversaries, frequent unprovoked aggression, etc.) the more likely it is for these decision makers to “match” these threatening schemas to their observations of events or others’ behavior, hence the more likely it is for decision makers to overestimate the threats they face and lead the public to panic.*
H4: Schema Theory: Elites misapply schemas

1. Shocking event reveals: change in technology or change in intentions
2. Elites attempt to make a new estimate of the adversary
3. Key leaders misapply a threatening stored schema(s) to an observation of the adversary’s behavior or an event
4. A generation of leaders misapplies a threatening stored schema(s) to their observations of the adversary’s behavior or of an event
5. Elites misperceive the adversary and overestimate the threat
6. The Elite and the Public Panic together
This hypothesis actually predicts underestimation as easily as it predicts overestimation. In fact, this hypothesis in a way argues that leaders should across time go back and forth between overestimating and underestimating. They should do this as one generation learns the lesson of “be ever vigilant”, and they apply it and it works (or doesn’t), but they keep applying it until it doesn’t work. Then when it doesn’t work, that teaches a new generation the lesson “there are dangers in being ever vigilant”, so they apply that lesson (the lesson to underestimate threats), until that doesn’t work. And when it doesn’t work that teaches the next generation “to be ever vigilant” again, etc. This cycle of over-applying the most recent lessons could be a way to understand panics. The cases will be examined to determine if at least key leaders form their perceptions in the way this hypothesis propose. Following are the predictions this hypothesis makes, including timing predictions, assessment process predictions and predictions concerning consistency between leaders’ private and public behavior.

*Timing Predictions:*

The record should show that either key decision makers or a generation of leaders form their perceptions by applying a shared schema(s) to their observations of events or behavior of the adversary. This hypothesis proposes an action-reaction process, in which a schema(s) is applied to the raw data of the incoming information of the event or behavior before a decision is made of how to analyze or react to the data. We should not see that the analogy or schema was applied after the analysis of the data to justify a view or advocate a position. Schemas should be applied reflexively, as
"snap judgments", and then inferences should be drawn from them. For groups of decision makers, the strongest case is to show that an analogy or schema mattered by demonstrating that it was much on the minds of decision makers when they observed an event or behavior. It was applied to observations before the decision was made of how to understand and respond to the observations. The analogy or schema was used at important junctures of the policy process, and the lesson(s) it provided were consistent with the particular policy options chosen.\textsuperscript{132} In short, the perceptions formed using the analogy or schema were reflexive, and consistently adhered to across time.

*Assessment Process Predictions:*

The evidence should show that decision makers do not draw selectively on an analogy/schema. At issue here is that some analogies may teach several lessons. For example, "the lessons of Korea" could be that aggressors need to be stopped or that a country should avoid land wars in Asia. Leaders should not in one instance draw one lesson from an analogy, and in another instance use the analogy to teach an opposite lesson. Some scholars go so far as to argue that the same analogy must teach the same lessons to all decision makers.\textsuperscript{133} I find this criterion too strict; schema theory supports the

\textsuperscript{132} Khong, *Analyses At War*, p.64.

\textsuperscript{133} Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 278-279. It is possible that this is a reasonable criterion. For example, does schema theory predict that leaders across political dividing lines should share the same generational lessons? Schema theory would certainly be a stronger theory if it could make such an argument because if it does not it begins to look like a motivational theory rather than a "cold" cognitive process. However, it does predict consistency within an individual across time, so it is significantly different from a motivational theory in that way. There are disagreements among scholars as to whether or not all leaders have to draw the same lessons, however 124
criterion that an analogy must be used consistently for the same lesson by an individual
decision maker. The lesson should be a concept applied reflexively, and consistently
across time. It is most important that a decision maker is consistent (drawing the same
lesson, in the same way) with respect to the same perception. Further, the
conclusions or lessons from the schema should be specific; the more specific, and the
more they are congruent with the decision maker's perceptions, the stronger the case that
the schema mattered.

Very importantly, a decision maker(s) should not use conflicting schemas to
support the same perception. If there is evidence to show this is the case, this would
weaken the importance of a particular schema, if not provide evidence that the decision
maker arrived at his or her perceptions for other reasons. More evidence to support the
importance of a particular schema would be to find that an individual decision maker,
who experienced a particular formative experience, used that experience in the form of
a schema consistently and often throughout his or her career. If a decision maker finds
one answer to a problem at one point in his or her life (e.g., wants to appease
aggressors in several instances) and then later draws on formative lessons (e.g., later
wants to stop all aggressors because of "the lessons of Munich" because that was an
important event early in his or her career), how important can the formative lesson
have been if it did not guide judgment consistently? It is possible the formative lesson
was important but was not applicable in every situation. However, if other leaders used
that lesson in the situations where the decision maker in question chose not to use that
most scholars do not argue that they do.
formative lesson, it is difficult to claim that later such a "formative lesson" was really important for that particular leader who failed to use it when others did.

Predictions Concerning Consistency Between Leaders' Private and Public Behavior:

Schema theory argues that leaders misperceive the threat, and then share their misperceptions with the public. Hence we should see the leaders and the public panic together. For individual decision makers, the strongest case for the importance of a schema is to show that the schema or analogy was much on the mind of the individual, and the individual reasoned from it, and reasoned from it consistently and this is demonstrated by private and public documents or speeches. Hence, decision makers' publicly expressed perceptions should be mutually consistent with their privately expressed perceptions. If leaders are cognitively misperceiving an adversary, this should be revealed consistently across time from the first time they form a particular perception in both their public and private records. Finally, to cause panic, the leaders' schema-derived perceptions should be the key misperceptions of the panic; they should be the misperceptions that matter to the public and cause the panic.

III. The Domestic Politics Perspective: Elite Propaganda Campaigns Cause Panics

---

134 This perspective is essentially the same as the one Stephen Van Evera labels the “cozenology paradigm” from the word “cozen” which means “to trick or deceive”. Van Evera explains that many misperceptions are rooted in communicated falsehoods; this paradigm includes all theories about "the world's propagandists, spin-doctors and professional obfuscators." See Van Evera, Causes of War, draft, p. 26.
The domestic politics perspective argues that the national misperceptions that cause panics are not rooted in individual misperceptions, but rather in elite propaganda campaigns. The following four hypotheses differ according to which group of elites is primarily responsible for the propaganda campaign. The “oversell” hypothesis (H5) proposes that the Executive Branch is responsible for exaggerating the threat and causing panics. The “logrolling” hypothesis (H6) argues that groups that derive parochial benefits from expansionist foreign policies come together to form logrolled coalitions and work to exaggerate the threat to the public so the state sponsors expansionist policies—these groups’ exaggerations cause the public to panic. The electoral politics hypothesis (H7) blames elites outside of power for promoting exaggerated views of the threat. The militarism hypothesis (H8) contends that the military is responsible for exaggerating the threat and causing panics. These hypotheses not only point to different actors, but also suggest a number of different motives for why the elites would exaggerate the threat.

Many people resist or reject these types of theories as too cynical—as “conspiracy theories”. However, these theories are a lot more complex than that. First of all, the motives proposed range from “acting in the best interest of the country” to purposeful self-serving deception, and there are a number of other possible motives in between. Second, these theories also recognize that many actors are not consciously acting in a self-serving manner; psychologically people often come to believe that what they do for political or organizational reasons is also the right thing to do—even when it is plain to outside observers that they are furthering their more narrow agenda primarily. What is
valuable about the domestic politics perspective is that it has located the primary sources of the national misperceptions that cause panics then those misperceptions can be addressed and mitigated by political means. Primarily this view would propose that elites were able to manipulate the threat because of a monopoly of information about national security issues relative to the public, if not relative to other elites. The primary way to stop such manipulation would be to eliminate, or mitigate, the elites monopoly of information. However, there are a number of other considerations that make this solution complicated, and perhaps not a complete answer to the problems involved. For example, if elites needed to exaggerate threats to get an adequate policy adopted by the Congress and the people, then to take away their power to do this might leave the country worse off. These considerations will be discussed at length in the conclusion. Now I turn to describing the leading domestic political hypotheses, and specifying the predictions of each.

H5: The Executive Branch “Oversells” the Threat and Causes Panics:

The most popular domestic political explanation for the panic of 1950 is Theodore Lowi’s theory of "oversell."135 This theory claims that the Executive

Branch very deliberately exaggerated the threat. This is not a cynical theory; it argues the Truman Administration was *compelled* to do so. Lowi finds that American liberalism and its system of a "separation of powers" is so decentralized that it is incapable of making coherent, responsible decisions in foreign policy during peacetime. This has become especially problematic since World War II when the U.S. began taking on an active international role. Lowi laments, "Somehow a President must try to make a ministry out of what is at best a coalition." 136 Lowi maintains that when there is a crisis, the U.S. makes foreign policy very rationally because power becomes centralized in the presidency. But when there is no crisis, there is time for disagreement, and the fragmented system is incapable of making an optimal or even coherent decision (every decision is a compromise), and then it is incapable of carrying out a decision once made (it reverses course and behaves generally inconsistently). Thus presidents have been *forced* to "oversell" threats and remedies to those threats to gain support for necessary policies and to insure those policies are carried out. Lowi writes:

[Overselling the threat] is essentially the attempt to create the moral equivalent of war. It is the conversion of interactions into incidents, incidents into challenges, challenges into threats and threats into crises for the purpose of imposing temporary and artificial cohesion upon the members of the foreign policy establishment. It is the escalation of meanings. . . . For modern presidents, this tactic has become necessary, compelling and regular whether there is a true crisis or not. 137

---

The bottom line is that the leaders knew they were exaggerating the threat, but they were not doing it out of self-interest. The leaders were trying to pass policies in the best interest of the nation. They were faced with a fragmented, intractable system. The Executive Branch exaggerated the threat to unify the elite and to mobilize the public. Lowi points out that there may be no formal conspiracy among the members of the administration. He believes the need for oversell is so apparent to them that they might reflexively misrepresent the justifications for their preferred policies to the Congress and the public. However, it is also possible that the leaders do openly plan among themselves to oversell the threat. This explanation leads to the following hypothesis:

**H5: The more the Executive Branch feels the need to pass a new, more demanding foreign policy, and the more it anticipates or meets resistance to its preferred policies in Congress or fears the government bureaucracy will fail to implement its policies, the more likely it is that the Executive Branch will "oversell" or exaggerate the threat in order to create an atmosphere of crisis and thereby unify the public and the elite, hence the more likely it is for the state to panic.**

The theory implies that the need for oversell should arise when new, more demanding foreign policies are deemed necessary by the president and his advisers. If this happens at a time when the president faces increased resistance from Congress, the need for oversell may be acute in order for the president to overcome the opposition. A consequence of oversell is that once the Executive Branch has oversold a policy, the leaders are then locked in to living up to their rhetoric. Lowi comments, "No policy has escaped injury to itself and to national interests and international stability in the years since
H5: Oversell

The Executive Branch deems it necessary to pass a new, more demanding set of foreign policies → The Executive Branch anticipates or meets resistance to its preferred policies and/or fears its policies will not be fully implemented in a → The Executive Branch intentionally oversells the threat → The Public Panics

The Executive Branch intentionally othersells the threat
American statesmen have felt the need to oversell policies in order to avoid coming up with a partial decision. Among the dangers of oversell Lowi lists are the problems of creating misleading expectations and fears among allies and adversaries. Perhaps most important is that the exaggerated rhetoric limits the president's future diplomatic flexibility at a later point when he would like the crisis to be over. The president may wish a crisis on at will, but he cannot wish it off.

What does it mean that the president cannot “wish off” the crisis he has created and he loses his future diplomatic flexibility? For Lowi, creating a crisis later constrains the president; the president is forced to respond to the crisis. Other scholars agree that the president created the crisis to pass certain policies that were deemed necessary, but argue that the president should then respond to the crisis only insofar as it is the right thing for the country. They argue that the president is not forced to do more, but it is politically self-serving to continue to behave as if the crisis is real; it serves to maintain the popularity of the administration but does not serve the country well. Others argue that the president needs to respond to the crisis as if it is real in order to maintain valuable core policies, and is forced to add on policies of others that fit under the mobilizing, but misleading rhetoric, because to deny the other policies would mean jeopardizing the core...

\[138\] Ibid., p. 143.

These variations are significant in that they determine whether the president is a victim or villain, perhaps an impossible decision to make ultimately.

A variant tactic of oversell theory is what I call "otherselling" or "bait and switch" where elites sell an inflated threat in order to justify a particular defense program, but then use the resources they mobilize to address other problems. The reason for this could be, for example, that the elite feel the actual strategy they believe they must pursue is too complicated or too dangerous to explain to the average voter or Congress. It may simply be easier to get larger defense expenditures through threat inflation rather than through complicated explanations. Again, the elite are most likely acting in the "best interest" of the country, but they may be acting on behalf of cynical private interests, or they may believe their personal interests are coinciding with the national interests.\textsuperscript{141} This tactic could be used in all of the following domestic political hypotheses (H6, H7 & H8) as well.

Overall, Lowi finds that oversell was used often in the Cold War and not just in the first panic being studied here. Lowi argues all of the Presidents used it, including Eisenhower using oversell to hype Sputnik for "for a variety of issues in the arms race on into the 1960's."\textsuperscript{142} Lowi finds oversell by the Executive Branch is the main reason

\textsuperscript{140} This may be what Lowi has in mind as well, but he does not spell it out. One account along these lines is Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries}.

\textsuperscript{141} Among many others, Kaplan argues that the threat and the strategies pursued to meet the threat were different from what was debated in public, see Fred M. Kaplan, \textit{Dubious Specter: a Skeptical Look at the Soviet Nuclear Threat} (Washington D.C.: The Institute for Policy Studies, 1980).

\textsuperscript{142} Lowi, \textit{The End of Liberalism}, p. 145.
for threat exaggeration during the Cold War. The first panic (developing 1947-1950) is the time many other scholars have agreed oversell clearly took place. To test this popular contention for all of the panics studied here, the case studies will be examined to see if the following predictions are true.

*Timing Predictions:*

Supporting evidence would be if the record shows that before the panic, the Executive Branch deems it necessary to pass a new more demanding set of foreign policies, and anticipates considerable resistance to their new plans from the Congress, the government bureaucracy and/or the public. Similar circumstantial evidence would be if the administration changed its interpretation of the threat dramatically when it met resistance in Congress or among the public to its preferred policies even though the actions of the adversary did not change or seem to warrant the new interpretation of the threat. Likewise, the administration could interpret a "shocking event" for the public as more significant or different from how the leaders interpret the event in private consultation—then this interpretation of the event is likely evidence of intentional threat inflation. In short, evidence to show the administration anticipated resistance to their preferred policies, and this led to a political strategy of threat inflation to overcome the resistance, would help confirm this hypothesis.
Assessment process predictions:

This hypothesis predicts that the threat the administration presents in public is inconsistent with, and exaggerates the threat the administration believes is actual as determined by the intelligence available at the time. This may be evidenced by the fact that the administration has logical inconsistencies within arguments, omissions of relevant facts or convoluted reasoning in their presentation of the threat to the public, especially as compared to how they understand the threat among themselves in private. Further supporting circumstantial evidence of purposeful exaggeration would be if those who join the administration in their exaggerated interpretation of the threat are political allies, and those opposed are political foes—this indicates that errors of interpretation of the threat are not random, and may be intentional.

Predictions Concerning Consistency Between Leaders’ Public and Private Behavior:

The best evidence for oversell would be if the record shows that the Executive Branch formally discusses among themselves the need to exaggerate the threat, perhaps strategizing about how to present the threat to Congress and/or to the public. However, it is not necessary that they do this. This might include discussing misrepresenting, or exaggerating the threat to Congress, or in public speeches and/or launching a public relations campaign to oversell the threat. It may be that private beliefs and public statements are simply not mutually consistent—public statements either oversell or othersell the threat as compared to private statements about the threat—this too corroborates this hypothesis. It may be that members of the administration admit to their actions and/or
motives only after the fact—in later private documents or memoirs, which are less reliable generally, but admissions of this type would not be self-serving but incriminating so need not be completely discounted, thus this would be useful evidence to confirm this hypothesis.

**H6: Logrolling of Parochial Interests in Expansion Causes Panics:**

Logrolling is another possible explanation for why and how elites exaggerate the threat. This hypothesis has been developed by Jack Snyder in *Myths of Empire* where he explores how and why great powers of the industrialized age tend to overexpand.\(^{143}\) He finds that the main reason for overexpansion is that states overestimate their enemies and underestimate their security, and then try to gain security through expansion. False beliefs in insecurity occur because groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion, or derive benefits from the domestic political climate brought about by intense international competition come together to form a coalition through logrolling and they publicly sell their expansionist preferences by exaggerating the threats to the state. He writes, "Overexpansion is indeed a product of the political and propagandistic activities of imperialist groups."\(^{144}\) Both economic sectors and bureaucratic organizations possibly

\(^{143}\) Snyder, *Myths of Empire*. Snyder maintains overexpanding is counterproductive aggressive behavior and it can take two forms: "self-encirclement" and "imperial overextension." For his definition and measurement of these terms, see pp. 60-61.

\(^{144}\) Ibid., p. 17. Snyder includes the military as one of the parochial groups interested in overexpansion, so this theory has a lot of overlap with the last theory below on militarism (H9). In fact this theory (the use of "myths" etc.) was largely derived from Van Evera's theory of militarism which will be presented in full below, but Snyder has chosen to prominently feature private economic interests as a major player in threat
have concentrated interests in expansion. Such groups could be commercial elites who have invested heavily abroad and/or the military and its allies in industry whose interests are served by larger military budgets.

These compact interest groups overcome their political weakness by joining together in a coalition. The coalition is formed through the process of a logroll where the different groups each support each other's preferred policies in exchange for support for their own. The trade-offs necessary to form a coherent policy are not made, instead all of the preferred policies are rolled together to maintain the coalition.

In order to sell the incoherent policy—the overexpansionist policy—the coalition propagandizes the state with "myths" that exaggerate the state's insecurity. These "myths" include notions that exaggerate the benefits of expansion while underrating its costs. For example, the "myths" include the idea of the "domino theory" where gains, even in the seemingly inconsequential periphery, are very valuable because they are highly cumulative—helping to lead to further gains—while losses are costly as they can weaken the empire and eventually lead to the collapse of the core as the opponent successfully achieves cumulative gains. Another myth (in that it is rarely true) is that the offense has the advantage so the best defense is through a good offense. A third common imperial myth is that threats make other states cooperative and compliant—states will bandwagon with the strongest, most threatening state instead of balancing against the threat. Another

---

inflation for expansion—such groups have been widely blamed historically, so I am testing this theory to determine what evidence there is for their participation in threat inflation in particular. Are they instigators? Bankrollers? Or are they simply cooperative? Or not even present?
myth is that the adversary is often described as an implacable foe posing an immense threat, yet if this challenge is met with aggressive countermeasures, the foe will collapse like a "paper tiger."  

The groups that form the coalition usually have advantages over anti-imperialist groups within the state, such as taxpayers. The imperialists groups are compact, so they can organize more easily, and they benefit greatly from the expansion so they are highly motivated, while those opposed are less motivated because the costs are spread across the entire state. The compact pro-imperialist groups often have information advantages because they are directly involved in the far away areas of imperial concern and they are familiar with the policies being sold, while the more diffuse anti-imperial interest groups need to rely upon them for information about local conditions and cost-benefit calculations bearing on the strength of the opponent or the effectiveness of various policies. Finally, these imperialist groups are often elites with close ties to the state; they are often powerful wealthy elites who move easily in and out of power, and are socially acquainted with each other.

The narrow imperialist interests overcome their weakness first by joining a logrolled coalition, and then by "hijacking" the state by having their representatives come to power, or by forcing the politicians in power to need to work with them or lose power. They are then able to capture the propaganda resources of the state and spread their self-serving "myths" through credible channels of communication to the rest of the state.

\[145\] Ibid., pp. 2-7.

\[146\] Ibid., pp. 32-39.
Politicians of the coalition are then "coalition managers" who are dependent upon
the success of the coalition for their own personal success. In contrast with the hypothesis
of oversell, where politicians inflate the threat in the best interest of the country--
especially to better defend national interests--here the elites are not selling a policy in the
best interest of the country but are knowingly building a coalition of various parochial
interests through logrolling. The political elites want overexpansionist policies because it
is the coalition that brought them to power, and/or it is the coalition that will maintain
their power. The politicians are "beholden" to the special interests of the coalition. It is
certain that some of the elites involved, at least at the beginning of the coalition building
process are quite cynical, but there may also be quite a few "true believers"--members of
the coalition who believe the myths being propagated. In particular, Snyder hypothesizes
that the first generation of elites who get the policies they want through purveying strategic
myths of the state's insecurity are probably often intentionally threat inflating, but leaders
who follow them and are trained and socialized on these imperial myths often have come
to unquestioningly believe these myths. This is the phenomenon of "blowback," and it
would help to explain a larger number of "true believers" of overestimation in later
panics, if such is the case.\footnote{147}

These arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

\textit{H6: Groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion, from military
preparations associated with expansion, or from the domestic political
climate brought about by intense international competition, are likely to
join together by forming a coalition which combines their narrow}

\footnote{147} Stephen Van Evera named this phenomenon, Ibid., p. 41.
interests into a logroll—each giving each other support on the issues they care about most. The more such groups successfully form a logrolled coalition, and are able to "hijack" the state apparatus, the more likely it is that they will successfully exaggerate the state’s insecurity to gain support for their preferred policies, hence the more likely it is that the exaggerations of the threat purveyed by the coalition will create the national misperceptions that lead to panic.

Snyder argues that this problem of coalition logrolling is more severe the more highly cartelized a society is, and societies seem to be more highly cartelized if they are "late industrializers." Conversely this problem is less severe in mature democracies with political power more dispersed throughout the system, which is how early industrializers evolved. Robust democratic processes allow anti-imperial interests a strong voice in moderating imperial interests, thus Snyder shows how Britain and the United States suffered from less self-defeating overexpansion than did Germany and Japan. In the case of the United States, Snyder is ultimately explaining the U.S. overexpansion in Korea and Vietnam. However, his coalition logrolling explanation focuses upon the development of "Cold War Globalism" which emerged with full force a few months before the outbreak of war in Korea and thus is the first panic examined here. His finding will be investigated, but overall, the logrolling theory is a general theory about narrow self-interested groups using tactics of purveying myths of insecurity and overestimation to capture national
H6: Logrolling

Groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion join together in a logrolled coalition →

Because of the logroll, the coalition becomes powerful enough to capture the state, including harnessing its propaganda resources →

The state's leadership is then the coalition's managers, who exaggerate the threat in order to rationalize the coalition's preferred policies →

The public panics →

The coalition intentionally othersells the threat
policy, hence I test it here to see if it explains the national misperceptions of panics.\textsuperscript{148}

\textit{Timing Predictions of Logrolling:}

The record may show that before a panic, disparate groups with parochial interests in expansion come together to form a logrolled coalition, and together these groups promote/back state leaders who are also “coalition managers”. These state leaders exaggerate the threat in order to justify the coalition’s preferred expansionist foreign policies. This coalition may come together as the panic grows.

\textit{Assessment Process Predictions:}

It may be clear from examining the threat assessment process, that the threat the coalition is backing is inconsistent with, and exaggerates the threat as determined by intelligence at the time. Further, if leaders of the coalition do not present a balanced or consistent image of the threat relative to what they know from intelligence available at the time, or if they clearly use exaggerated rhetoric, or change arguments between audiences or across time, or use contradictory arguments to support an inflated threat then it is likely that the threat inflation is intentional, as opposed to being caused by insufficient information. For example, if coalition leaders purvey the

\textsuperscript{148} Snyder tested his coalition logrolling explanation against cases from five different countries across time, including the first panic examined here. He found that it did explain the first panic here. However, a number of scholars have disagreed with his interpretation of the U.S. case. I do careful process tracing to see if his explanation does explain the case, and if it explains the later cases of large national misperceptions. Is there evidence to support the popular notion that private commercial interests initiate and back threat inflation to justify expansionist foreign policies? For disagreement with Snyder’s argument, see for example, [Kupchan, 1994 #68].
myths that Snyder identified such as a "paper tiger" image of the adversary, this would constitute an inconsistent image of the threat (enemy is both dangerous and weak).

It may be clear that state leaders who promote an exaggerated version of the threat have powerful backers (and these are members of the coalition) with parochial interests in expansion. Establishing evidence of motive for the actors, by linking actors to powerful economic interests in expansion, is crucial evidence for this hypothesis. However, powerful members of this coalition may be government bureaucracies, most importantly the military. This bureaucracy has clear organizational interests in wealth, growth, autonomy and prestige, all furthered by expansionist foreign policies. The military may use its power within the state to promote the interests of the coalition.

The record may reveal that the members of the coalition, in their effort to capture state policy by exaggerating the threat, recognize that they lack credibility when they argue for policies that disproportionately benefit them. Hence, there may be direct evidence of concealed actions by members of the coalition or coalition managers (e.g. discrete, unattributed public relations campaigns). Evidence of concealed actions or concealed connections of the actors to the coalition demonstrates that the actor was aware that he/she would be less effective or discredited if all relevant information was public, thus such evidence strongly supports the contention that the actor had an intention to deceive.

*Predictions Concerning Consistency between Leaders’ Public and Private Behavior:*

The private documents of political leaders of the coalition or of coalition participants may reveal their understanding of and participation in this logrolled coalition. For example, leaders
might express their dismay about having to promote and defend an incoherent policy—they may
wish they could make trade-offs so that it would be easier to sell to the public—but they might also
express how they are incapable of making trade-offs because of political necessity, not because of
national security needs. Additionally, strong evidence to show intentional threat inflation would
be if private documents revealed that coalition leaders purposefully interpreted a "shocking event"
for the public as more significant than they actually believed it to be.

**H7: The Competition of Electoral Politics causes Panics:**

Alan Wolfe argues that the observable periodic rise of the Soviet threat was partly
attributable to the struggle of electoral politics.\(^{149}\) The pattern he generally sees is one where
Democrats in power are challenged by the right for not being anti-communist enough, and
because the left in America is so weak, Democratic presidents find it necessary to move to the
right—even to be more anti-communist than their critics—in order to preserve their power and
defend their ambitious domestic programs. Wolfe recognizes that the problem with this general
formulation is that it does not quite fit the empirical reality.

As he observes, the second panic, based largely on the "missile gap," really began before
Kennedy was elected, and Kennedy helped to promote the missile gap during the election
campaign.\(^{150}\) Wolfe repairs his theory in this case by arguing that Kennedy had to be tough
against the "missile gap" during the election or else fail to win the election because he would be

\(^{149}\) Wolfe, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat*, pp. 41-54; Also noticing this phenomenon
and explaining it somewhat differently is Samuel P. Huntington, *The Common Defense* (New

subject to criticism of being too soft on Communism as a Democrat. It is also possible that
Kennedy promoted the "missile gap" thesis opportunistically—winning points as he forced
Eisenhower to be more hawkish—and not because of political pressure.

The Carter-Reagan struggle in 1980 also led to an escalation of rhetoric. It appears that
the rhetoric of the campaign inflated the threat—the threat became a "political football"—where
each side vowed to be tougher against some aspect of the threat, and accused the other side of not
recognizing how very big some other aspect of the threat actually was. As Huntington notes,
the elites outside of power get to take the initiative. Outside elites make the argument: "The
threat is bigger than the administration says, the U.S. is weaker than they recognize, elect us
because we will keep you safer than the current administration!" Somehow, it does not pay for
the elites in power to deny the charge—they fear looking "soft". The administration responds by
concurring that the threat is large—they may take immediate actions and then claim they are being
responsible. But the charge comes back again from the elites outside, "they admitted they were
not doing enough, they are still not doing enough." And so it goes, ratcheting up the threat.

These observations lead to the following hypothesis:

_H7: The more elites outside of power accuse elites in power of not being tough
enough against the external threat (reasoning that the threat is bigger than the
elites in power admit), the more likely it is that the campaign rhetoric of electoral
politics will escalate and create national misperceptions that cause panic._

---

151 Electoral campaigns are important for oversimplifying and exaggerating the enemy in

If this theory explains national misperceptions, it will be necessary to investigate further into the conditions that make this theory operate. Clearly, every presidential campaign does not have a panic associated with it, but several panics have campaigns seemingly associated with them. If this is significant, the key national misperceptions must be traced to the campaign. It would be best to know why these misperceptions were promoted at the time and not four years earlier or later. Are incumbents only vulnerable if they have reduced or strongly limited the defense budget? Does increased uncertainty about the adversary make the threat a relevant issue (increased uncertainty comes from periods of rapid changes in technology or changes in the adversary’s behavior perhaps indicating changed intentions)? Another problem with this hypothesis is that it does not explain why this conduct would pay—why is it powerful politically to inflate the threat? Why is it not possible for politicians to argue “the threat is smaller than they say—they want to waste billions of your tax dollars—vote for me and I’ll safely reduce your taxes!” Further, why does the public come to believe in the campaign rhetoric? It could be argued that the public should be more skeptical and that campaign rhetoric should not have a significant impact on perceptions. In this study this theory will be tested to find if
H7: Electoral Politics

In order to make the current administration appear inadequate, elites outside of power accuse elites in power of not being tough enough against the threat.

The threat is inflated by elites outside of power reasoning it is bigger than current administration admits.

Possibly: The administration agrees to avoid appearing “soft” and elites outside of power ratchet the threat up further with every concession.

The Public Panics
campaign rhetoric does cause the national misperceptions of panic, and these questions will be pondered in light of the evidence of the cases.

_Timing Predictions of Electoral Politics:_

For this hypothesis to be true, it must be found that the images central to a political campaign are also those national misperceptions central to the panic. Elites out of power should use the external threat as a major issue in the campaign. The rhetoric about the threat should be an exaggeration of the threat. The threat inflation, or at least the publics fear, should increase over the course of the campaign, so that public fear is greatest near the time of the election. Supporting evidence would be if the public panic subsides after the election, however I argue that panics create real tensions (self-fulfilling prophecies), so fears over international tensions might not subside after the campaign.

_Assessment Process Predictions:_

Evidence supporting this hypothesis would be if elites in power, while assessing the threat, argue that the threat is less than what they need to argue publicly because they need to avoid looking “soft” on the threat in the face of political pressure, and before an upcoming election. If the intelligence available to the elites contradicts their public portrayal of the threat, then these elites are participating in intentional threat inflation.

Circumstantial evidence supporting this hypothesis would be if candidates (presidential hopefuls) were the ones presenting the most exaggerated views of the threat. Further evidence would be if these candidates do not present a balanced or consistent
image of the threat, if they clearly use exaggerated rhetoric, or change arguments between audiences across time, especially if those arguments contradict each other and yet support an inflated threat, or if they use strained logic to promote an inflated version of the threat over a more logical interpretation of the threat, then it is likely that the threat inflation is intentional. If candidates have access to intelligence that contradicts their inflated version of the threat, but they persist in exaggerating the threat, this would clearly demonstrate purposeful threat inflation. Possibly, candidates might interpret a "shocking event" for the public as more significant than it actually is—their interpretation might be illogical, or overly dramatic—then this interpretation of the event is likely evidence of intentional threat inflation.

Additionally, supporting evidence for this hypothesis would be if the political parties are sharply divided over what the precise size and shape of the threat is. The threat should be a partisan issue, and errors in interpretation among intentional threat inflators or their followers are not random.

Further, for this hypothesis to fully explain the national misperceptions of panic, the political leaders out of power, perhaps along with the leaders in power, need to be the authors of the images of the misperceptions. For example, excellent evidence would be if it could be found that the challenging elites purposefully contrived the image they espoused themselves—they inflated the threat—for purposes of making the incumbents appear weak. If the elites use inflated images generated by other sources, then these leaders are only partially responsible for the national misperceptions (e.g. if they purvey the myths of a logrolled coalition, or of the military).
Predictions Concerning Consistency between Leaders' Private and Public Behavior:

There may be a clear record in private documents that threat inflation was an intentional campaign strategy. This may be revealed by elites outside of power, or admitted by incumbents that they have been forced to inflate the threat in order to avoid looking “soft”.

H8: Militarism: The Military inflates the threat and causes Panics:

Organization theory makes clear the military’s organizational interests in threat inflation. The military is interested in size, wealth, autonomy and prestige just like other organizations that are large, functionally specialized bureaucracies.\(^{153}\) Promotion of size, wealth, autonomy and prestige maintains a healthy organization from the viewpoint of its members. If an organization is large—growing—and wealthy, members have greatly enhanced job security. If an organization enjoys autonomy (decides its own missions) then members have control over their own job descriptions. If an organization enjoys prestige then members are respected—they are the “experts” and people listen to them. The organization theory observes that the military almost always argues for bigger budgets because bigger budgets help to maximize all of these goals. However, if obtaining larger budgets means sacrificing autonomy, often an organization such as the military will sacrifice wealth for autonomy. But in general, larger budgets mean more wealth, more

autonomy and increased size, hence militaries have very strong organizational incentives to argue for larger budgets.

The best way to justify a larger military budget is to argue that there exists a larger military threat than that being planned for currently. To say that militaries exaggerate threats does not mean that militaries press for war, or even prefer war. In fact, military leaders favor preparedness but generally do not feel prepared. Hence military advice is often cautious and restraining.\(^{154}\) Additionally, to say that the military argues for larger budgets, does not mean that its members are cynical. Just as school administrators and teachers see the need for more educational funds and argue for those programs without due consideration for other needs, military officials rightfully argue that they do not have adequate funds to absolutely insure security--because the threat is unknowable at least in part, thus no one can ever be sure security is guaranteed. Perceiving threats from their own perspective is one reason why military personnel may see and contend that threats are larger than an objective third party might find. This is one reason military threat perception may differ from outsider's perceptions, but this difference would result in mere advocacy for larger defense budgets. A more serious charge is that the military engages in intentional threat inflation--purposefully misleading leaders and the public--when it communicates its assessments of the threat.

Misleading could be done for the perceived good of the nation--"they just don't understand, it's for their own good"--or for the perceived good of the organization.

Military leaders have often resented and resisted civilian control of the military because civilians are not trained to understand military matters; civilians do not have military expertise so they are often deemed unqualified to pass judgment on military decisions. Further, militaries are often attacked by civilian peace movements, so antagonism and distrust by civilians also causes militaries to seek independence from civilian oversight. However, it is also possible that members of the organization come to see the health of the organization as in the nation's best interest: "A strong Navy is good for the country." All of these motives are possible, and it is likely that all of them exist to some degree within the organization. Determining which motive(s) is most important is not the goal of this study; determining if the military is an important source of national misperceptions is the goal.

The military has plenty of motive to inflate threats, but does it have the capability? Two possible pathways of influence are available to the military and both will be investigated. The first is that the military has direct influence in the national threat perception process by being a major actor in the intelligence collection and estimating process. Each of the services has an independent service agency for intelligence collection, and since 1961 the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) has worked to consolidate the intelligence activities of the services at the Washington level. These military service intelligence agencies have a large monopoly on the information in their issue areas. Each military service has great control over determining secrecy for national security and hence few outsiders have access to the information necessary to assess what the bureaucracy keeps as secret. From this classified information, the military can often
make large claims about what is true or possible in their area of expertise. Military matters are not only kept secret, but they are also technically complex so civilians largely need to rely on military experts for important analyses that determine relative capabilities.

The military is a major contributor to the process of making national estimates about the threat, but its views are recognized as biased. Its contributions are considered necessary and valuable because of its expertise and the information it controls, but its input is also viewed with skepticism. A former member of the Board of National Estimates commented, "In military matters the CIA has superior competence. One cannot expect honest and objective intelligence from the military intelligence components." A goal of this study will be to determine if, in spite of its recognized biases, the military is still able to inflate the threat by its influence within the threat assessment process.

The second pathway the military has to influence national perceptions is through influencing the public debate. This pathway of military influence assumes the existence of a "military-industrial complex" (MIC) which is a collection of the common interests of the professional military, participants in the defense industry, government officials whose interests are tied to military expenditures, and members of Congress whose districts benefit from military spending, all working together to protect and advance their mutual interests in larger defense budgets. The military has a well-known, huge public

---

155 As quoted in Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat*, p. 36.

relations operation, often called a "propaganda machine." Additionally, military contractors do extensive public relations work and are free to fund lobbyists in Washington among other political and persuasive activities.

The military has the motive to inflate the threat, many resources at its disposal, and a significant monopoly over the information in its issue areas, however it and the MIC lack credibility. Their opinions are suspect because they have a well-known interest in larger budgets. Although the military is known to be biased, it is also respected by civilians for its expertise, so it is not ignored. These observations lead to the hypothesis of militarism that argues that the military uses both direct and indirect means to influence national perceptions and policy.

H8: The more the military, or an individual branch of the military, determines that its budget is threatened or inadequate, the more likely it is that it will work to inflate the threat by influencing the threat assessment process within the government, or by influencing the public debate, because successful threat inflation results in increasing spending on the military. The more the military is successful in inflating the threat, the more likely it is to cause the national misperceptions that cause panic.

The military has motive, capability, and appropriately discrete tactics for biasing threat assessments, so what happens to cause panics occasionally and not all of the time? Three possibilities are suggested by the literature. Cobden suggests that the military takes action to increase its budget at times when the economy is doing well, because these are

154
H8: Military Inflates the Threat

The Military, or an individual service, determines its budget is threatened or inadequate, or that the economy can afford a larger budget.

Military, with the MIC, works to exaggerate the threat among the public and the Congress so that increases in the military budget are justified.

Military inflates the threat within the threat assessment process within the government.

Military othersells the threat in the public or to the civilian leaders.

The Public Panics.
the times civilians will not resist. Conversely, instead of acting opportunistically, others have suggested that the military responds to antagonism—it redoubles its efforts to increase the overall military budget anytime the budget has been lowered or held constant for a significant period. Thirdly, the military is not a single organization in the U.S., but rather it is four separate services, and some scholars argue that interservice rivalry is the main source of military dissatisfaction. When funds are shifted from one service to another, the slighted service(s) responds by promoting inflated threats as rationales for its programs over the programs of others. All three of these possible reasons will be investigated.

*General Predictions of Militarism:*

Incontrovertible evidence for the military as the source of the national misperceptions that cause panic would be to find evidence of a plan by military personnel to inflate the threat because the economy was in good shape thus an opportunity existed for larger budgets, or because defense budgets had been lowered or stagnant for some time, or because of interservice rivalry battles. The threat might be inflated to raise a particular service’s budget or the overall budget. If such a plan is uncovered, it would be necessary to show that the inflated threat the military purveyed became the national misperceptions of the panic. Private documents or retrospective admissions of such a plan to inflate the threat, to launch a propaganda campaign or to inflate the threat within the

---

assessment process, with evidence that the plan went forward, would strongly confirm this hypothesis.

Direct evidence of a plan will most likely be concealed, so the next best evidence would be to determine who purveyed the misperceptions that caused the panic, and then to look for links to the military that might motivate these actors. Some of these actors may have direct interests, e.g. employed by the military or by the MIC, but there might also be some "true believers"—friends of the military—convinced that the military’s interests or arguments or a particular service’s interests or arguments, are infallible and in the best interests of the country.

Evidence of a propaganda campaign may be a flood of reports in the press, especially reports ambiguously credited to "experts" or reports where military leaders ask for the public’s trust based on "secret information." If, with hindsight, it can be shown that the "secret information" was non-existent, or the threat was not as large as the experts portrayed and most likely knew at the time, this evidence would be confirming that threat inflation was most likely intentional at the time. Other evidence that the military attempted to conceal its actions as they relate to purveying an assessment of the threat would indicate intentional threat inflation. Or evidence to show that threat purveyors attempted to hide their connections to the military could be interpreted as confirming intentional threat inflation.

If the military, in the threat assessment process, or in the public debate, acts in ways to blur or confuse estimates, for example, by "leaking" partial information that can
be easily misinterpreted, or stressing partial, irrelevant comparisons such as "bean counts" that are militarily meaningless or misleading in terms of the overall assessment of the threat, then it is likely that it is engaging in intentional threat inflation. Further, if military personnel do not present a balanced or consistent image of the threat, if they use clearly exaggerated rhetoric, or change arguments between audiences or across time, and especially if those arguments contradict each other or use strained logic but each argument supports an inflated threat, then it is likely that the threat inflation is intentional.

*Timing Predictions of Militarism:*

If the panic occurs when the state's economy was doing well, thus an opportunity exists for larger military budgets, this would help corroborate this possible reason for a panic. Or if a panic occurs after the defense budget has been reduced, or held stagnant for some time, this would corroborate this possible motive for a panic. Or if the panic occurs at a time of intense interservice rivalry, this factor might account for the timing of the panic, and would help to confirm this hypothesis.

*Assessment Process Predictions:*

If there is evidence with hindsight that the threat the military portrayed in the intelligence process was not consistent with the evidence available to them at the time, but rather an exaggerated version of the threat as supported by the evidence at the time, then intentional threat inflation is likely. Of course, the military's inflated version must be
believed by other leaders and passed on to the public, or "leaked" to the public, and then the military's inflated version must be the basis of the key misperceptions of the panic.

Threat assessments by the military can be scrutinized with hindsight to see if the military assessments created more uncertainty by being less detailed than they could have been, withholding or suppressing important information, in self-serving ways. Increased uncertainty allows the military to argue for more extreme worst-case analyses (more scenarios are possible). If this occurred, it must be shown that this influence in the threat assessment process created misperceptions leading to national misperceptions and panic. Another tactic the military can employ to intentionally inflate the threat in the assessment process is to understate its own capabilities. The military has a near monopoly on the information about what precise capabilities it has. Again the significance of this for the national misperceptions must be established.

If several of the services that receive the smaller shares of the defense budget line up to back a version of the threat that would reduce the leading service's budget, and/or the leading service backs the version of the threat that best supports its budget, then it is likely that some or all of the services' assessments are biased by their service interests.

Overall, it is to be expected that the military, in carrying out its duties in the threat perception process, should do an intellectual search for the truth about the threat. If it can be shown with hindsight that the military failed to conduct a real search for the truth, then the military at least gets some blame for intentional threat inflation.
CHAPTER 3

INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION, PSYCHOLOGY AND THE 1950 PANIC

"The full power which resides within the American people will be evoked only through the traditional democratic process: This process requires, firstly, that sufficient information regarding the basic political, economic, and military elements of the present situation be made publicly available so that an intelligent popular opinion may be formed ..."

- NSC 68, 1950

Public perceptions of the Soviet Union dramatically changed between 1945 and 1950. The public went from expecting to cooperate with the Soviet Union in 1945 and 1946 to believing that World War III with the Soviet Union was possibly imminent in the spring of 1948 or had even begun in Korea in 1950. In 1950, in addition to worrying about the "Red Juggernaut" possibly sweeping across Europe, the public feared the spread of "monolithic communism"—polls showed that stopping the "world spread of Communism" was of paramount importance. These public fears largely shaped U.S. foreign policy; the Truman Administration launched a massive military build-up in 1950, militarizing U.S. containment policy, including fighting Communism in Asia largely because of these public fears.

In this chapter I first provide historical background to this case and provide a year-by-year examination of public opinion during the panic period. After reviewing the history of these public perceptions, I examine what we know today about the actual threat at the time. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the Soviets never

160
prepared their conventional forces to launch a possible surprise attack in Europe.

Supporting this retrospective view is the fact that the Soviets did not quickly build up
their nuclear delivery capability in order to back-up a possible conventional attack. It is
also clear that world communism was not “monolithic.” Most important, the “loss”
of China to Communism was not a huge strategic loss to the U.S. because China was
not a “puppet” of Soviet imperialism.

After examining what we know with the benefit of hindsight, I turn to
examining what the U.S. leaders knew and believed at the time. Did insufficient
information about Soviet capabilities or intentions lead to these public misperceptions?
Did leaders commonly make “attribution errors” that led them to infer overly hostile
intentions from Soviet behavior because they failed to recognize how they provoked
Soviet behavior? Did leaders misapply analogies that led them to overestimate the
threat posed by the Soviets—possibly likening Stalin to Hitler? These four hypotheses
have in common the notion that the leaders misperceived the threat at the time and
unknowingly led the public to panic. I examine the best evidence for each of these
hypotheses to determine to what extent each hypothesis might help to explain the case.
Overall, I find that even though there was considerable uncertainty about the Soviet
threat, the leaders did not actually believe in the public misperceptions of the time, so
these theories do not satisfactorily explain these public misperceptions.

---

160 Refuting this claim, see Douglas J. Macdonald, “Communist Bloc Expansion in the
Specifically, I examine how much uncertainty there was about Soviet capabilities and intentions in 1948 when the public first panicked about a possible imminent invasion of Western Europe by the Soviets, and I find among the elite there was no real belief that this was a possible threat at the time at all, so there was no real uncertainty causing this public misperception. In 1950, there was increased uncertainty about Soviet capabilities and intentions generally because U.S. leaders did not know how the new Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb would change things. However, the leaders’ real concerns about the Soviet threat do not match the public misperceptions of the time: most leaders did not believe in the imminent threat of war or in “monolithic communism”. Strengthening this argument is the rare evidence of key leaders admitting to exaggerating the threat at the time, and admitting that they had to pursue policies they did not wholly believe in because of public perceptions.

Did leaders make significant attribution errors that helped cause these misperceptions? Did leaders infer overly hostile intentions from Soviet behavior because they failed to recognize how they may have provoked the Soviets? In 1948, although the leaders argued publicly that the Soviets were unprovoked and hostile when they invaded Czechoslovakia, in private leaders reasoned the Soviet move into Czechoslovakia was defensive—the Soviets were consolidating their power in response to successful western initiatives, namely the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan proposal. Similarly in 1950, U.S. leaders both understood that “monolithic communism” was not a fact and was not likely to develop or persist because of nationalism. Further, they understood that its development depended very much on
U.S. behavior; U.S. leaders wanted to avoid provoking “monolithic communism” by supporting the Nationalists in China. The 1950 misperception of fearing “monolithic communism” was not caused by “attribution error” type reasoning. Further, U.S. leaders did not infer from the Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb and the invasion of Korea that these events signified more hostile Soviet intentions; rather, these events allowed leaders to justify policies they had already been planning and preferred for other reasons.

Did leaders misapply historical analogies and cause the misperceptions of the period? This is a "most likely" test for this hypothesis derived from "schema theory" because all of the leaders had the "recent" experience of Hitler and many of them experienced their formative years in the 1930's. The historical analogy of likening Stalin to Hitler was very commonly mentioned in this period, and yet on close inspection it is clear that this analogy was not invoked consistently, or used to define the threat—the analogy did not “matter” for perceiving the threat and decision making. Instead, it is clear the analogy was used as justification for decisions and policies determined for other reasons.

In sum, none of these four hypotheses explains the large national perceptions of this period. In the next chapter, I examine the four domestic political explanations for these national misperceptions, and find that the oversell hypothesis (H5) and the militarism hypothesis (H8) do explain these misperceptions with the electoral politics hypothesis (H7) contributing to a full explanation, while the logrolling hypothesis (H6) does not match the evidence.
Again, I proceed by explaining historical background and the public misperceptions, and then I compare these misperceptions with the actual threat as known with hindsight. Then I examine what leaders knew about the capabilities and intentions of the Soviets at the time, and in what way uncertainty perhaps contributed to the national misperceptions. Finally, I examine the attribution error hypothesis, and the schema theory hypothesis as explanations of the national misperceptions of this period.

**History and Public Perceptions of the National Security Panic of 1947-1951:**

The national security panic of 1947-1951 had two peaks of public fear. The first peak occurred in the spring of 1948 when the public feared the imminent threat of war—often called the "war scare of 1948." Images of an imminent threat of the Red Army sweeping across Europe came out in the press and this led to shoring up the defense budget and to quick passage of the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan). The second and greater peak of public fear began mounting in early 1950, but crested only after war broke out in Korea in the summer of 1950. This time the public worried primarily about the threat of "monolithic communism" spreading in Asia and across the globe. This public fear partly accounted for the defense budget rising from $13.7 billion

---

in fiscal year 1950 to $52.8 billion in fiscal year 1953.162 How did public perceptions change so dramatically in the span of just five years?

At the end of World War II, the American public looked forward to cooperating with their ally "Uncle Joe" Stalin at the United Nations. However, feelings of trust and friendship for the Soviets were not profound in the wake of the anti-communism that had flourished within the United States before the war. The U.S. had resisted recognizing the Bolshevik regime in Moscow from the time it took power in November 1917 until Franklin D. Roosevelt relented and recognized the Russian communist government in 1933 in hopes of increasing trade ties to help end the Great Depression. During the 16 years of non-recognized there were periodic "red scares" in the U.S. These anti-communist scares were manifestations of a general fear of radicalism, fueled by interests opposed to organized labor, which only subsided as the capitalist world became mired in the Great Depression. These hysterical reactions were aimed at internal subversion but would not have taken the form that they did without the looming presence of the Russian Revolution.163

In the midst of the depression in the thirties, some Americans looked to the apparently successful communist Russian Revolution as a great experiment with vital lessons for the U.S. However, as more and more Americans came to learn about the

---

162 Fiscal Year 1950 goes from July 1, 1949 to June 30, 1950. These figures are for outlays in current dollars. Budget authority underwent an even more dramatic change, rising from $16.5 billion in 1950 to $67.5 billion in 1952. See Office of Management and Budget, "Budget Baselines, Historical Data, and Alternatives for the Future", (1993).

purges going on in Russia, many came to see Stalin as the head of a repressive bureaucratic collectivism that could be compared with Fascist Italy or National Socialist Germany. These "totalitarian" states were increasingly unpopular in the U.S., with anti-Soviet feeling strongest at the time of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, when the totalitarian states agreed not to fight each other.

After Hitler turned his armies against Russia in June 1941, Americans slowly began to warm again toward the Soviets. Lend-lease was extended to Russia without controversy in October 1941. Helped by wartime propaganda, ideological issues receded for Americans as the two nations worked together to defeat Hitler. Trust between the two nations reached a high point in November 1943 when 70% of Americans with opinions said Russia could be trusted to cooperate with the U.S.\textsuperscript{164} The tide turned somewhat as the U.S. and Russia disagreed about the future of Poland in 1944 and early 1945, but still 69% of Americans expected cooperation after Yalta in May of 1945.\textsuperscript{165}

The Cold War began soon thereafter. Stalin made a speech in February 1946 stressing the incompatibility of capitalism and communism. That same month, George Kennan sent a "long telegram" from Moscow warning of Soviet expansionism, subversion and commitment to spread communism across the globe. In March, Winston Churchill spoke in Fulton, Missouri about how an "iron curtain" had descended across the continent so there was now a need for an Anglo-American military alliance to stop the Soviet's totalitarian expansion. The Truman Administration came to quickly distrust the Soviets in

\textsuperscript{164} Page and Shapiro, \textit{The Rational Public}, p.199.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., p.200.
1946 as the Soviets worked to consolidate their hold on Eastern Europe, threatened Turkey and refused to leave Iran and Manchuria as Stalin had indicated they would.\textsuperscript{166}

The U.S. public was not as quick to begin to distrust the Soviet Union. While it was widely believed that Churchill's speech was a public expression of what the Truman Administration thought privately, the Truman Administration tried to keep its distance from his message. The administration knew that it was not a popular message, and this was demonstrated by the fact that protestors met Churchill at his next public address in the U.S. with pickets chanting "Winnie, Winnie, go away, UNO is here to stay!" and "Don't be a ninny for imperialist Winnie!"\textsuperscript{167} Although expectations of cooperation dipped as low as only 35\% expecting cooperation in early 1946, more than 50\% of the public expected cooperation with the Soviets by the end of that year.\textsuperscript{168} Moreover, although suspicions of the Soviets increased among the public, willingness to pay for programs overseas largely evaporated. Republicans won a majority in both houses of Congress in November of 1946 for the first time since the beginning of the New Deal. They ran on a platform of 20 percent tax reductions, calling for retrenchment and lower budgets.\textsuperscript{169} Public optimism about cooperating with the Soviets continued into early 1947 when State Department

\textsuperscript{166} Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, p. 103. For an interesting account of how the Truman Administration came to distrust Stalin see Eduard Mark, "The War Scare of 1946 and Its Consequences," \textit{Diplomatic History} 21, no. 3 (1997), pp. 383-415.

\textsuperscript{167} Gaddis, \textit{The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947}, p. 309.

\textsuperscript{168} Page and Shapiro, \textit{The Rational Public}, p. 200; Gaddis, \textit{The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947}, p. 289.

\textsuperscript{169} Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries}, pp.40-41.
analysts of public opinion reported "Satisfaction with Big Three cooperation has increased, reversing a trend in progress since September 1945." 170

Public attitudes began to change after Truman delivered his Truman Doctrine speech on March 12, 1947. In this speech Truman asked Congress for $400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey. Truman's appeal for aid had been carefully crafted because it was well known that the U.S. public and the Congress were not in a receptive mood.171 Truman characterized the international situation as one of crisis explaining that many free people were gravely threatened by the forces of terror and oppression. He declared that it must be the policy of the U.S. to support the free people of the world in their struggle to resist subjugation by "armed minorities or outside pressures."172 The debate in Congress over aid to Greece and Turkey was protracted, but the Senate approved the Administration's plans on April 22 and the House approved them on May 9th.

Truman did not need to convince the public to be concerned with international affairs because the public was concerned, he only needed to convince them to pay for foreign aid. The public never reverted to isolationism after World War II as it had after World War I and as the Truman Administration feared it would. A consistent 65%-70% of the public preferred taking an "active part" over "staying out" of world affairs between 1945 and 1955.173 However, it did not start becoming acceptable to the public to pay for

---

172 Ibid., p. 272.
international programs until after the Truman Doctrine was put forward and promoted. A big change in public opinion occurred at this juncture as reflected by the public’s expectations of war. When asked: "Do you expect the United States to fight another war within the next ten years?" only 28% of the public expected a war in November 1946, but a full 48% expected a war in April 1947. This fear of war increased among the public until March 1948 when 67% expected war within the next ten years. Then expectations lessened through the remainder of 1948 and all of 1949 (as low as 47% in August 1949), until the public’s expectations began to increase again in early 1950. In April 1950, again 67% expected war in the next ten years, and by July 1950, 80% of respondents expected world war within the next ten years.174

The public mood had changed after the Truman Doctrine speech, but not enough to support all of the programs the administration believed to be necessary. The Truman Administration knew that aid to Greece and Turkey was only the beginning of what would be needed for Europe. After several months of deliberation, Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced the concept of the European Recovery Program (ERP) on June 5, 1947 at commencement ceremonies at Harvard University. This formal announcement of what was to be called the Marshall Plan was an invitation to the European nations to begin drawing up a program of what they would need and how it would be administered. The administration asked for interim aid to Europe of $597 million in the fall of 1947 to help

---

174 The word "world" was added after the outbreak of war in Korea, although it had been assumed in the earlier polls after just fighting World War II. For this compilation of polls see Ibid., p. 52.
the desperate Europeans make it through the winter while the ERP was being designed. Interim aid of $522 million was granted over significant opposition in Congress.\textsuperscript{175}

A legislative proposal for Marshall Plan aid was submitted to Congress on December 19, 1947. The Administration wanted Congress to authorize a four-year total of $17 billion in aid. The Administration understood that this amount of aid was unprecedented and was already waging an intense campaign to promote the ERP to insure U.S. national security. Congress began considering the ERP in January 1948. Truman's cabinet officers testified to Congress that if Europe became communist the American way of life would be imperiled, therefore passage of aid to Europe to fortify them against Communism was the number-one priority for U.S. national security.

Although the administration had labored for six months to secure passage of the Marshall Plan, there was no certainty that Congress would approve it. Events in Europe helped to shepherd it through Congress. At the end of February, the democratic coalition government in Czechoslovakia fell to communists. The Czech coup sent shock waves through the West because it was a case of successful internal subversion of a democracy. This subversion helped make it urgent that European aid be passed before the Italian elections in April or else Italy might fall to communists in a similar manner. At the same time, the Soviet Union pressured Finland to commit to a treaty of friendship and mutual alliance. This gave the impression in the West that another country, in addition to

\textsuperscript{175} Susan M. Hartmann, \textit{Truman and the 80th Congress} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971), pp. 116-120.
Czechoslovakia, was falling to Communism. On March 5, General Lucius D. Clay, U.S. military governor in Germany, sent a telegram to General Stephen J. Chamberlin stating:

For many months, based on logical analysis, I have felt and held that war was unlikely for at least ten years. Within the last few weeks, I have felt a subtle change in Soviet attitude which I cannot define but which now gives me a feeling that it may come with dramatic suddenness. I cannot support this change in my own thinking with any data or outward evidence in relationships other than to describe it as a feeling of new tenseness in every Soviet individual with whom we have official relations. 176

This telegram was classified "eyes only" but the word spread around Washington quickly. It was even reported in Newsweek: "On Monday [March 8], Defense Secretary James Forrestal told a closed meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee that American military authorities in Germany had abandoned their belief that the world was safe from war for at least ten years."177 Through the month of March and until mid-April, the U.S. media was filled with images of a possible imminent war with the Soviet Union in which the Red Army would quickly and easily sweep across Europe.178

176 Kofsky, Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948, p. 104.
178 A typical presentation is "Russia's Edge in Men and Arms," US News and World Report, April 2 1948: the first paragraph reads: "Russia, at this stage, is the world's No. 1 military power. Russia's armies and air forces are in a position to pour across Europe and into Asia almost at will." cited by Matthew A. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraise," International Security 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982/1983), pp. 283-284n.; Also see
Not only was the media reporting that the U.S. was unprepared for war, but also that the situation was tense and the U.S. needed to act urgently. At the peak of concern, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress and *The New York Times* read: "TENSE CAPITAL AWAITS TRUMAN SPEECH," while *The Washington Post* ran a headline on the announcement: "TRUMAN TO ADDRESS CONGRESS TOMORROW AS CRISIS MOUNTS." After Marshall addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee the same day, his statements prompted the headline in the *Washington Times Herald*:

"MARSHALL FEARS WAR MOVE BY COMMIES."\(^{179}\)

The supposed imminent threat of war provoked a reaction from the public. Polls indicated that the public's expectations of war within ten years rose 19%, from 48% in April 1947 to 67% expecting war in March 1948 as explained above. Another poll asked:

"As you hear and read about Russia these days, do you believe Russia is trying to build herself up to be the ruling power of the world, or is Russia just building up protection against being attacked in another war?" This poll had increased 18% since July of 1946 so that 76% believed that Russia was trying to build up to be the ruling power of the world. Another indication of concern was that 68% of Americans felt that foreign affairs was the "most important problem facing the U.S. today" in March 1948, which was a

---

W. Stuart Symington, Secretary of the Air Force, "We've Scuttled our [sic] Air Defenses," *American Magazine*, February 1948, p. 50. Symington argued: "No longer are we the leading air power of the world, in quantity, we have slipped behind the Soviet Union. . . . There is no doubt that Russia is going all-out for air power. The Russians are reported to be producing aircraft at the rate of 75,000 to 100,000 a year."


172
22% increase of Americans most concerned with foreign affairs than at any other time recorded since November 1941.¹⁸⁰

The tension among the American public eased quickly after ERP passed Congress, and then moreso after the communists were defeated in the elections in Italy. Fears of immediate war eased, but the international scene remained tense. Problems in Berlin had increased since late March, then on June 18, 1948 the Berlin crisis began in earnest. In response to Western initiatives to fortify West Germany and pull it securely into the Western sphere, Russians claimed that Berlin was within their sector of Germany and blockaded land access to Berlin. The West responded with an airlift to Berlin. The airlift continued 24 hours a day for over ten months, until the blockade was lifted on May 12, 1949. The crisis strained U.S.-Soviet relations, but Americans generally felt that they had the upper hand in the tense struggle to consolidate spheres of influence. European aid was fortifying the West, and American leaders continued to take risks to promote their ambitious foreign policies because they did not fear deliberate aggression by the Soviet Union in the immediate future.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ For polls in this paragraph, see Niemi, Mueller, and Smith, *Trends in Public Opinion, pp. 52, 60 and 39 respectively*. The question about the "most important problem" was asked regularly since the beginning of 1945, but had only been asked several times during the war. This poll does indicate the level of concern with foreign affairs relative to other issues at the time, but for a good discussion of its merits and demerits, see Tom W. Smith, "America's Most Important Problem--A Trend Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44 (1980).

¹⁸¹ U.S. leaders were not behaving completely cautiously; they clearly did not fear that the Soviets could be easily provoked or would win easily if they were provoked. This is amply demonstrated by their pursuit of "rollback" through covert activities in Eastern Europe. However, the leaders were restrained from pushing too much in Eastern Europe because they did fear that the total loss of Eastern Europe could provoke the Soviets. See
Truman won a surprise re-election in November, along with helping to restore both houses of Congress to the Democrats. He began 1949 proud of his foreign policy, reaffirming his goal in his inaugural address of struggling against the "false philosophy of Communism."\textsuperscript{182} The Berlin blockade was lifted in May as a precondition for a conference on the settlement of Germany. The Russians wanted to negotiate the future of Germany, but the U.S. bargained from a position of strength and insisted that U.S. troops stay in West Germany, West Germany must participate in the ERP, and the Soviet Union would not get reparations, control the Ruhr or influence the level of German industry. Under these conditions, the Soviet Union was not going to leave East Germany. The division of Germany solidified as the West formed a High Commission for Germany and established the Federal Republic of Germany.

The State Department took other initiatives in Europe. It got the North Atlantic Treaty ratified by the Senate that promised to treat an attack on Western Europe as an attack on the U.S. U.S. officials also proposed to Congress to give $1.4 billion in military aid to Europe in the form of the Military Assistance Program (MAP). While the U.S. leadership made progress in Europe, problems in China worsened.

The Truman Administration was convinced early in 1949 that sending aid to the Chinese Nationalists who were fighting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a waste

because the Nationalists were inept and corrupt.\textsuperscript{183} It was also counter-productive to send aid to the Nationalists because it would alienate the CCP further, reinforcing their alliance with the Soviets. The Administration made some gestures toward trying to sever ties with the Nationalists and pry the CCP away from the Soviets, but as the Nationalists began to fall, Congressional pressure mounted to support the Nationalists. The administration worked to resist aiding the Nationalists militarily. In late fall Congress passed and the administration accepted a $75 million discretionary fund for use in the area of China. Officials who wanted to give up on the Chinese Nationalists did not want to abandon Asia; they were intent on helping the rest of Northeast and Southeast Asia resist Communism.

The U.S. economy began to contract in early 1949 and by the summer Truman's budget director was predicting $3-$5 billion deficit in fiscal year 1950 with $6-$8 billion deficits in 1951 and 1952. Truman agreed with the majority of his advisers that domestic spending was already at a minimum, foreign aid programs overseas were essential, and there was no immediate danger of war, hence it seemed that the obvious place to reduce expenditures was to cut the military budget. Truman decided this despite the fall of China, which was clearly in progress, because he believed that considerable progress had been made toward improving military preparedness and the overall balance of power had shifted in favor of the U.S. Truman decided to adopt a $13.5 billion ceiling for the 1950 defense budget, with $13 billion proposed for 1951.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{183} In fact Marshall had returned from China with these feelings about the Nationalists in 1946. Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries}, p. 59.

\textsuperscript{184} Budget figures of this paragraph are from Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, p. 304.
In September 1949 U.S. intelligence sources concluded that the Soviets had detonated an atomic device. Truman hesitated before making the announcement on September 22 because he feared it would profoundly disturb the people of the U.S. and Western Europe. After a few days of adjustment, the public reaction was mild with only 5% of Americans saying that the control of atomic weapons was the most important problem facing the U.S.\(^{185}\) However, Secretary of State Acheson's Military Assistance Program for Europe had been before the Congress for two months and was adopted in short order after the announcement of a Soviet atomic explosion.

On October 1, 1949 Mao Tse-tung, leader of the Chinese Communist Party announced the creation of the People's Republic of China. This signified the "fall" of mainland China to the communists. This development had been expected for a long time but was finally complete. The threat of Communism spreading across Asia intensified when China recognized the government of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam on January 8, 1950 and the Kremlin followed suit three weeks later. Recriminations for the "loss" of China and for failing to defend Taiwan began to surface in the Congress.

Secretary of State Acheson successfully defended the State Department's policies at first. But the situation continued to heat up with the conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury. Acheson had defended Hiss and then Hiss had been found guilty of lying to Congress and trying to conceal his alleged communist past and his theft of documents. A few weeks later the British arrested Klaus Fuchs for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets. Fuchs was a scientist who knew most of the atomic secrets because he had helped to work

\(^{185}\) Ibid., p. 326.
out many of the most difficult atomic problems. Republicans now attacked the
administration for its toleration of Communists in government.

On February 9, Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin, made a
speech in Wheeling, West Virginia attacking Acheson for harboring 205 Communists in
the Department of State. McCarthy continued making accusations and the Democrats
began an investigation of his charges in the second week of March. Republicans rallied
around McCarthy, and bipartisanship on foreign policy deteriorated.

Ever since the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb, which had come earlier than
many officials expected, the administration had been scrambling to figure out what Soviet
atomic capability meant for U.S. national security planning. One of the main issues
debated was whether the U.S. needed to pursue development of a thermonuclear weapon.
At the end of January 1950, Truman decided to go ahead with development of the
hydrogen bomb, and at the same time ordered the National Security Council to conduct a
study to analyze the combined implications of the communist victory in China, the Soviet
atomic bomb, and the American decision to construct a thermonuclear weapon. For two
months a special study group of State and Defense Department personnel worked under
the direction Paul Nitze, the director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department.
The National Security Council paper, entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for
National Security," known as "NSC 68," went to President Truman on April 7, 1950.
President Truman resisted the implications of this report that described the U.S. as being
in a dire situation and called for an immediate massive buildup of U.S. forces. President
Truman's response was to direct "that this report be handled with special security
precautions in accordance with the President's desire that no publicity be given this report or its contents without his approval." (italics in the original) President Truman still hoped to hold defense spending to $13 billion so he asked for comments on this report from agency heads who were interested in controlling military spending, namely the secretary of the treasury, the director of the Bureau of the Budget, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers and the administrator of foreign economic aid. The president was not convinced by the report, because in early May, the President said publicly that he wanted to reduce military spending even more.\footnote{187}

Acheson and Nitze had lobbied many members of the government bureaucracy to sign off on NSC 68 so it was widely approved within the administration. Although it was a "top secret" document, arguments from NSC 68 began appearing in the press. Ernest K. Lindley of Newsweek discussed one of NSC 68’s central themes when he reported that because of the pace of military modernization in the Soviet Union and the West, the years 1952 to 1954 would be "a period of maximum danger" for the West.\footnote{188}

Truman faced a bureaucracy united behind the idea that the U.S. needed to pursue a rapid military buildup. Congress and the public were not only convinced by McCarthyites that Truman’s administration was not doing enough to fend off communist subversion, they also worried about communism abroad. One poll found that 89% of the public in April 1950 considered "stopping the world spread of Communism" to be "very


\footnote{188} Ernest K. Lindley, "Washington Tides," *Newsweek*, May 15 1950, p. 27.
important.189 Another big change was that Americans were becoming more willing to pay for defense. Only 23% of Americans thought defense spending was "too low" in March 1950, by May 1950 a full 63% thought defense spending should be increased.190

On June 25, 1950 North Korean troops invaded South Korea. The U.S. quickly moved to oppose this "communist aggression." The Truman Administration came to believe that Stalin was testing the West and might be preparing to move against Western Europe. The U.S. quickly made plans to strengthen its defenses around the globe. On September 30, 1950 Truman adopted NSC 68 as national policy and U.S. defense spending tripled rapidly. The public panic crested late that year. In December 1950, 83% of Americans expected a world war within 10 years, up from 67% in April. In November 1950, 84% of Americans believed Russia was trying to build herself up to be the ruling power of the world. The public was very afraid in 1950 of a possible imminent war with the Soviet Union and of "monolithic communism" spreading throughout the world. Next I turn to examining these threats with the benefit of hindsight.

*The Actual Threat with the Benefit of Hindsight:*

We know with the benefit of hindsight that the Soviet armed forces rapidly demobilized after World War II; they demobilized a force of 11.6 million men down to 2.87 million men by mid-1948.191 This meant that the Red Army had approximately 1.8

---


191 Phillip A. Karber and Jerald A. Combs, "The United States, NATO, and the
million men in it in 1948. After mid-1948 the Soviets began to build up their armed forces again, to a force of 5.76 million men in 1955, with an Army of approximately 3.6 million men by then.\footnote{Ibid., p. 412.} Until mid-1948, the Red Army was clearly standing down and not preparing for war. For example, three of the four mechanized armies deployed with Soviet forces in East Germany were "cadred", meaning they were manned at the level of 10\% to one-third of their wartime strength, rather than the expected 70\% to full-strength.\footnote{Karber and Combs maintain that a cadred division has approximately one-third of its strength, see Ibid., p. 413; Enthoven and Smith maintain cadred divisions are at roughly 10\% of their strength with far from 100\% of their equipment, see Enthoven and Smith, \textit{How Much is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969}, p. 136.} Forward deploying cadred divisions was a clear sign that the Soviet offensive was not prepared for war.

In late 1947 the Soviets began reorganizing some of their forces from peacetime policing to active military training, and after the beginning of the Berlin blockade in June of 1948, these efforts increased substantially.\footnote{Karber and Combs, "The United States, NATO and the Soviet Threat," p. 414.} While the Soviets began improving their forces in 1948, and this effort continued steadily until 1955, it is clear that the Soviets never prepared their forces for an actual invasion of Western Europe—they were never close to actually being ready to sweep across Europe.\footnote{Finding that Stalin was not prepared to risk a military confrontation in this period, see Gaddis, \textit{We Now Know}, p. 48.}

There is considerable debate about how ready Soviet forces ever actually got for war, and how much U.S. planners overestimated or purposefully exaggerated Soviet

strength. However, one clear point is that if the Soviets had wanted an ability to launch an invasion of Europe, they should have made an all-out effort to build nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, as U.S. leaders predicted they would. But with hindsight, it is clear that the Soviets did not make the effort, and instead built a much more modest nuclear capability, so that by 1960 the Soviets still only had 135 long-range bombers capable of reaching the U.S., and their long-range bomber force never exceeded 200. By contrast, in 1956 the U.S. had 340 bombers with intercontinental range, and 1, 560 medium range bombers with forward bases near the Soviet Union and with in flight refueling capability. In sum, the Soviets maintained a considerable conventional force, capable of threatening Western Europe in response to a U.S. attack, but throughout the 1950s they never built the nuclear capability necessary to deter U.S. nuclear forces in order to make a conventional invasion with impunity. This demonstrates that the Soviets not only never had the capabilities the U.S. feared, but they also never acted as if they intended to build the feared capabilities because at no time did they make an all-out effort to achieve superiority.

H1 & H2: Insufficient Information about Capabilities and Intentions Caused the National


Misperceptions and Panic:

Did the U.S. fear the Soviets because it lacked sufficient information to be sure the Soviets did not have the capabilities and intentions to launch an imminent invasion? Did U.S. leaders sincerely fear the spread of monolithic communism? In this section I examine what information U.S. elites had at the time, and thus to what extent U.S. leaders shared the misperceptions of the public. These findings determine the extent to which “uncertainty” about Soviet capabilities and intentions caused the national misperceptions of the period.

I find that in 1948, U.S. elites overestimated Soviet capabilities to some degree, but they did not believe the Soviets had the capability or the intention to launch an invasion of Western Europe. At this point, U.S. leaders did not believe in the misperceptions the public had, instead, as will be shown in the next chapter under H5 (the oversell hypothesis), U.S. leaders worked to create the public misperceptions in order to mobilize the public and the Congress to pass the Marshall Plan.

The situation in 1950 is much more difficult to sort out. At this point there were sharp disagreements among U.S. leaders as to what Soviet capabilities were, and even more disagreements about what Soviet intentions were. Some U.S. leaders argued that U.S. power had been increasing relative to the Soviets by the end of 1949, and Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb and the “fall” of China did not alter in any fundamental way the international position of the U.S. Other leaders argued that the U.S. needed to do a lot more than it had been doing because its position was suddenly more perilous.
First of all, it is clear that no leaders within the Truman Administration actually feared “monolithic communism” in 1950, and in fact they were still hoping to somehow work toward normalizing relations with China in order to draw the CCP away from Moscow. U.S. leaders understood that the Chinese Communists were primarily nationalists, and were not going to be taking orders from Moscow. U.S. leaders did not fear the spread of communism generally, but rather their main concern was with the power of Soviet imperialism. Truman Administration leaders were at this point going along with Republican pressure to oppose communism in China in order to insure passage of their preferred programs to increase assistance to Europe. Republicans were pressing the administration to oppose communism in China in order to embarrass the administration, rather than from a sincere fear of communism. The Republicans had this opportunity because the administration had attempted to be inconsistent when it had argued that the U.S. needed to oppose communism everywhere (in the Truman Doctrine) and then the administration tried to turn around and not actually work to prevent the spread of communism in China.\footnote{For an incredibly detailed account of the Truman Administration’s preferred policies toward China, and why they had to abandon them, see Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries}, pp. 77-137.} Overall, the fear of “monolithic communism” that the public had was not shared by the leadership and was created by partisan politics.

Did U.S. leaders fear an imminent Soviet invasion of Europe? There are some analysts who argue that some U.S. leaders genuinely feared that the Soviets could launch a massive invasion in 1950, and that Soviet power was increasing rapidly.\footnote{Karber and Combs imply that some leaders took the possibility of invasion...} Allegedly,
these leaders feared that without a major U.S. buildup, the U.S. nuclear arsenal would be stalemated by 1952-1954 by a rapidly built up Soviet atomic capability, and thus the U.S. could not then prevent a Soviet conventional invasion of Europe. Other analysts point out that these fears were greatly exaggerated in order to justify a buildup that was desired for other reasons.\textsuperscript{200} These analysts point out that an all-out Soviet invasion was not truly a concern because even if the Soviets could score some initial successes, Soviet ability to wage a long war was much less than U.S. ability. Even the economic numbers in NSC 68 clearly testified to this reality. The need for a U.S. buildup was to maintain U.S. superiority—to avoid parity—so that the Soviets could not make marginal gains in the periphery and so that the U.S. could maintain the initiative and pursue a containment policy which was at that time defined by NSC 68 as a “policy of calculated and gradual coercion”.\textsuperscript{201} This means that the policy these leaders were interested in was not

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{200} Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}.

\textsuperscript{201} From NSC 68 as reprinted in May, ed., \textit{American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68}, p. 41.
maintaining a defense of the West, but maintaining a policy of superiority, indeed NSC 68 argued “This Government therefore cannot afford in the face of the totalitarian challenge to operate on a narrow margin of strength. A democracy can compensate for its natural vulnerability only if it maintains clearly superior overall power in its most inclusive sense.” Overall, these analysts argue that U.S. policy was sold to the public as an immediate defense against an imminent possible invasion, when in fact leaders did not fear such an attack but were actually pursuing a highly ambitious policy of protecting everywhere from communism—communism would not be allowed to spread anywhere. This was a globalist strategy of Pax Americana, including the even more ambitious goal of attempting to “rollback” the Soviets however possible, while also maintaining enough superiority to launch preventive war if it became “necessary”.

I find that the evidence overwhelmingly supports the latter view. It appears that even though some U.S. leaders argued that a Soviet invasion was possible at the time, there is ample evidence to show this was not their genuine concern. First of all, most leaders did not share the view that the Soviets posed a highly aggressive, imminent threat. Many leaders within the administration had to be politically lobbied (and even politically cornered) to sign on to this view. In fact, it appears that when leaders agreed to sign on to this view it was because of its political utility (it would help to preserve desired programs) and not because it actually represented a new, realistic understanding of the Soviet threat. Second, the main advocates of this view, especially Secretary of State Acheson and to some extent Paul Nitze, the head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff and the

202 Ibid., p. 43.
principal author of NSC 68, have admitted in retrospect that they exaggerated the threat.

Third, it is difficult to examine the information available at the time and see how any
logical and rational leader would believe that a Soviet attack was at all imminent. This
was clearly articulated in threat assessments through mid-1949, and then the threat
assessments become much more pessimistic—but also much more vague. This makes it
appear that there was a lobbying effort within the threat assessment process that was not
based on a full appreciation of the available evidence. Further, numerous unrealistic
relative assessments were often put forward at this time, that indicate that some leaders
were intentionally misleading, rather than openly and fairly assessing the threat. I will
explain each of these points below.

The First Peak of Public Fear: The War Scare of 1948

In March and April of 1948, the public feared the possibility of imminent war.

The public feared that the Soviets had the ready capability to sweep across Europe with
175 divisions and also that the Soviets possibly intended to do so. These public beliefs are
in sharp contrast with what the leaders believed at the time.203 Policymakers and
intelligence analysts seemed to agree at the time that Soviet armies did have the capability
to initially overrun much of Europe, but that Stalin and the other Soviet leaders had no

---

203 As Evangelista points out, the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated the Soviets had 175
"line divisions" which could be assumed to be full-strength and combat ready, when in
fact most were not. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraise," pp.284-285.
However, Karber and Combs argue that U.S. intelligence fully appreciated the fact that
many Soviet divisions were cadred and that the Soviets were not at all prepared for war
at this time. Karber and Combs, "The United States, NATO and the Soviet Threat,"
pp. 402, 413.

186
intention of doing so. They believed the Soviets had expansionist intentions but realized that they could not win a war against the United States and they were not preparing to launch one.\textsuperscript{204}

Army, Navy, State Department and CIA reports discussed the large standing force of the Soviets but emphasized Soviet economic weaknesses, vulnerable petroleum industry, transportation bottlenecks and unreliable allies. They believed that the Soviets were producing planes at a high rate, but their aviation technology was not formidable. U.S. leaders knew that Soviet planes lacked the capacity to strike long range at the United States and return to the Soviet Union. The Soviets did not have any forward bases, and they had inadequate supplies of aviation gas to sustain a significant war effort. Most importantly, the Soviets did not have the atomic bomb and it was believed that they would not develop it before mid-1950.\textsuperscript{205}

U.S. leaders felt confident in U.S. power. They believed that war could erupt but it would be because of miscalculation. The U.S. was demobilizing up until this point, but so was the Soviet Union. U.S. leaders believed Western forces were much smaller than the estimated 4 million Soviet forces (which were actually 2.8 million at this point), but the U.S. had atomic weapons and the means to deliver them.\textsuperscript{206} Most of all, the U.S. was

\textsuperscript{204} Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, pp. 218-219.


\textsuperscript{206} U.S. had approximately 50 atomic bombs in 1948, along with 30 B-29s that could deliver them. David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy," in \textit{The National Security: Its Theory and Practice, 1945-1960}, ed. Norman A. Graebner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 131-132. Mostly the U.S. was relying on its belief that the Soviets were devastated after World War II, and it was estimated that it would take them 10-15 years to rebuild.
relying on the conviction that the Soviets were not planning for a war in the near future, so the U.S. strategy was to build up U.S. and Western economic power as the real base of power for any problems in the future.

Although U.S. leaders felt quite sure the Soviets would not launch a war, they were still afraid of Soviet imperialism. The real threat was Soviet subversion of Western Europe. U.S. officials did not fear the fact that the Soviets were consolidating their power in Eastern Europe. Many U.S. officials had anticipated this and they saw it as a defensive move in response to the Marshall Plan and other U.S. initiatives. However, U.S. leaders believed the Soviets had designs on areas beyond their established sphere if the opportunity arose. The Soviets had threatened Iran and Turkey, and were possibly indirectly aiding the communists in Greece.

U.S. officials were most concerned about Italy at this time. The State Department and the CIA were working in Italy and among Italian-Americans to raise support against the Communists in Italy. The CIA was funding democratic parties, distributing leaflets and buying ads in newspapers. The State Department organized a massive information campaign against the Communists emphasizing the magnitude of U.S. aid and the generosity of the Marshall Plan. U.S. leaders feared that if Italian Communists won, they would look to Moscow, and other European countries, France especially, would be endangered by increased Communist pressures.

---

See Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, pp. 1-3; 209-211.

207 Evidence for this point will be fully presented in the next chapter in the discussion of H5, the Oversell hypothesis.
With the benefit of hindsight, it appears that U.S. leadership understood the actual threat at the time fairly well. Russian did pose a threat of subversion as Russian archives have recently confirmed. At the end of World War II Stalin did have the contradictory ambitions of spreading Soviet influence and getting along with the allies. He continuously directed and worked to promote international communism. Stalin was somewhat dissatisfied with the post war settlement, but was not planning to wage war. U.S. leaders understood Stalin was a fairly aggressive, but only opportunistic, expansionist, and his primary concern was with maintaining his regime. This view seems to be well within the range of how Stalin is viewed today.

U.S. leaders did overestimate the capabilities of the Soviets somewhat at this time, but this did not lead them to fear imminent war. Public fears of a possible imminent Soviet invasion were created on purpose by leaders within the Truman Administration in order to gain public and Congressional support for the Marshall Plan.\textsuperscript{208} This public misperception primed the public—it made an imminent threat of war seem highly possible in 1950, especially since the Soviets had by then exploded an atomic bomb and Communism had won in China.

\textbf{1950 Assessments and NSC 68}

In 1950, the public believed the U.S. was losing the Cold War and they greatly feared the world spread of “monolithic communism”. They believed the Soviets had

\hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{208} Making this argument most carefully, see Kofsky, \textit{Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948}; Concurring that fears were at least partially manufactured, see Gaddis, \textit{We Now Know}, p. 47.
awesome conventional capabilities ready to attack and now that the Soviets had acquired the atomic bomb they might be emboldened to attack at any time. The fear of imminent war increased sharply in the spring of 1950. When the Korean War broke out in June, 57% of the public believed that the U.S. was already in World War III.

In early 1950, administration officials did not fear “monolithic communism”. They believed that the Soviets and the Chinese would not be allied for long because Chinese nationalism would not tolerate Soviet domination. The Truman Administration had long hoped to implement a “wedge strategy”, a strategy of increasing U.S. good relations with the Chinese Communists in order to draw the Chinese away from the Soviets. Administration officials fully believed this strategy would not be that difficult to implement because it would be in the interests of the Chinese as well. However, Secretary of State Acheson ultimately decided in late 1949 and early 1950 that it would be impossible politically to implement this strategy. Republicans in the Congress were using the issue of China to embarrass the administration. Republicans were pointing out that while the Truman Administration had earlier proclaimed that it wanted to stop the spread of communism, it had actually gone “soft” on communism because it had done very little to oppose the communist takeover of China. These accusations of having “lost” China, forced the administration to forego its preferred policy of recognizing the new CCP government in China, and improving economic relations with them, and ultimately forced the administration to intervene in the Chinese civil war and protect Taiwan.209 Overall,

U.S. official views diverged completely from public perceptions on the issue of fearing “monolithic communism”.

Did U.S. leaders believe there was an imminent threat of war from the Soviet army in 1950? The record shows that some U.S. officials argued there was a real possibility of an imminent threat of Soviet conventional attack on Western Europe in the spring of 1950. In late 1949 there was new evidence that the Soviets had decided to keep the 1947 draft cohort of men an extra year rather than discharging them after two years as was usual, and since they would continue to draft men as usual, this would mean the Soviet army would be potentially one-third larger. This led the Joint Chiefs, in February 1950, to warn the American government that the Soviets could then invade Europe from a standing start—no mobilization needed!\textsuperscript{210} Although this and other rumors of increased Soviet military preparedness circulated in the government, officially leaders rejected the notion that the Soviets would launch an all-out attack. Even NSC 68 argued, “For the moment our atomic retaliatory capability is probably adequate to deter the Kremlin from a deliberate direct military attack against ourselves or other free peoples.”\textsuperscript{211} However, the entire tone of the document was that the current time was a time of peril and crisis, because the Soviets would be emboldened by their acquisition of an atomic bomb, and would be able to prevail by launching a surprise attack in four or five years if the U.S. did not substantially increase its military efforts.

\textsuperscript{210} Karber and Combs, "The United States, NATO and the Soviet Threat," p. 415.

\textsuperscript{211} NSC 68, reprinted in May, ed., American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68, p. 55.
Many leaders did not share these fears. Truman resisted the findings of NSC 68 and wanted to continue keeping defense budgets at the planned $13.5 billion level. In January 1950, Truman contended that national security was doing well, he told Congress the “greatest danger has receded” in that Europe and the Mediterranean had been bolstered against the communist menace.\(^\text{212}\) In early 1950, George Kennan, the former head of the Policy Planning Staff, worked to deflate the arguments of NSC 68 and the growing consensus of an escalating Soviet menace. He asserted, “There is little justification for the impression that the ‘cold war’, by virtue of events outside of our control, has suddenly taken some drastic turn to our disadvantage”.\(^\text{213}\) Many of the top officials of the State Department had strong disagreements with NSC 68, and the general finding that the threat of the Soviets was imminent, or required a major response. Charles E. Bohlen objected strongly to the contention that “the fundamental design of the Kremlin is the domination of the world.” He argued that this implied the Soviets would run great risks, and that war was inevitable, when he thought it was more accurate to argue that the fundamental design of the Soviets was to maintain their regime, and extend it to the degree possible without serious risk to the internal regime.\(^\text{214}\) Bohlen did not see immediate danger.


\(^{213}\) George F. Kennan, "draft memorandum to Secretary of State, February 17, 1950," (FRUS. I: 1950), pp.160-167. Kennan communicated these views orally to Acheson, and left the draft memorandum for the information of the Policy Planning Staff; Wells, "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat," p. 128.

\(^{214}\) Ibid., p. 136.
In April of 1950, the CIA circulated a draft estimate arguing that acquisition of nuclear capability was likely to lead to little change in Soviet behavior. This estimate did not recognize any increase in the likelihood of a Soviet attack. It stated, "the primary aggressive instrument of Soviet foreign policy is the international Communist apparatus, acting through subversion and revolution, rather than military conquest by the Soviet armed forces."\(^{215}\) This draft met vehement opposition from other agencies, namely the State Department, the Army, and the Air Force. The final draft of the CIA estimate ended up strongly reflecting these more pessimistic views of the Soviet threat.\(^ {216}\)

Overall, there were strongly divergent views of the Soviet threat in early 1950. More pessimistic views were ultimately adopted by the administration, but beyond the authors of these views, (Secretary of State Acheson and Paul Nitze, with strong support from some members of the services), other leaders had to be convinced of viewing the Soviets as an immediate threat. Before the outbreak of war in Korea, most of the leaders within the administration came to believe the government should implement the findings of NSC 68, but this would not require a significant increase in spending.\(^ {217}\) Many of the leaders, including Secretary of Defense Johnson and President Truman, very reluctantly signed on to the pessimistic views of the Soviets. They only signed on after they were politically cornered, in the sense that everyone else in the administration had agreed to


\(^ {216}\) Ibid., p. 467.

support these views, so they could not risk political isolation by resisting the rest of the bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{218}

In sum, while some leaders may have actually perceived an imminent threat from the Soviets at this time, it is striking that so many other top leaders perceived \textit{no such threat}—many wanted to do \textit{nothing} significantly different from what was planned—no increase in funding for military preparations—while others were arguing for massive increases. It would seem that if there was an imminent threat, more leaders would be aware of it and they would want to address it in some way, maybe not massively, but they would not be arguing to do \textit{nothing}. In fact the view at the time of number of leaders within the administration was not that there was an immediate threat, but that Acheson and Nitze had taken up the long-standing arguments of the military for more funding, when the civilians had been working to resist the military’s demands for high levels of funding until this point. For example, officials of the Budget Bureau were convinced that NSC 68 and related documents had been “hurriedly and unilaterally developed by the services.”\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{218} May explains the bureaucratic coup that was NSC 68. He argues that when Secretary Johnson was first briefed on NSC 68, he blew up and stormed out of the meeting because he knew he had been undermined. After Johnson’s initial anger, he cooled off and realized he could not challenge the professional qualifications of all of his underlings that Acheson and Nitze had worked with to write the paper. Moreover, Acheson and Nitze had also gotten the support of all the civilian service secretaries and service chiefs of staff. Johnson was hemmed in and added his signature. Thus when President Truman received the document, it had a very wide base of support, thus May writes “the history [of NSC 68] certainly provides an example of how officialdom can force a president to follow policies that are against his inclinations.” See, May, ed., \textit{American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68}, pp. 9-15.

\textsuperscript{219} Hogan, \textit{A Cross of Iron}, p. 308.
In stark contrast to the view that the West was in immediate danger, was the fact that some high level officials, especially some from within the Air Force, were arguing that the U.S. should launch a preventive war at that time while the U.S. still had \textit{superiority}.\footnote{Trachtenberg, "A "Wasting Asset"," pp. 10-11.} Historian Marc Trachtenberg argues that “outsiders” argued for preventive war, while “insiders” were aware of American vulnerability at this time. However, the U.S. had at least 250 aircraft capable of delivering atomic bombs to targets within the Soviet Union, and over 500 bombs in its arsenal in 1950.\footnote{Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 136.} Trachtenberg points out that the Harmon and Hull reports of 1949 and 1950 had made it clear that the a U.S. “atomic blitz” could not destroy the war-making power of the Soviet Union, and that actually the U.S. war making power was vulnerable at the time because it depended on highly vulnerable British air bases.\footnote{Trachtenberg, "A "Wasting Asset"," pp. 21-22.} However, it is a very long step between arguing that the U.S. could not quickly and easily wipe out the Soviet Union in an \textit{atomic blitz}, and arguing that the West is weak and vulnerable. Clearly, the Soviets with no real atomic power in 1950 feared the U.S.’s capability, and were rationally deterred from invading Western Europe. In fact NSC 68 argued that the Soviets would not want a war for another four to five years—not before they had built up their nuclear capability. It is interesting to note that those who argued that the U.S. could not knock out the Soviet’s war-making capability with approximately 250 atomic bombs (assuming 50% penetrated air defenses), also argued that the U.S. might be knocked out of a war by approximately
100 Soviet bombs delivered on target in 1954.\textsuperscript{223} One needs to wonder why the U.S. is so easily defeated while the Soviets can withstand more than two and half times as much destruction, and keep on fighting.\textsuperscript{224}

In the end, the best evidence that leaders with a pessimistic view were exaggerating the threat in order to mobilize the U.S. is the fact that later on key leaders acknowledged that they did so in later memoirs and statements. Most famously, Secretary of State Acheson, the most central and important figure in the debate over the nature of

\textsuperscript{223} Trachtenberg argues that the fear was that 100 Soviet atomic bombs could destroy the U.S.'s "superiority in economic potential"—preventing the U.S. from "developing a general military superiority in a war of long duration." This reasoning seems to defy logic—why would the Soviets be able to destroy U.S. superiority with 100 bombs while the U.S. could not do at least proportional damage with well over 250 bombs on target by 1954? Trachtenberg reports this as if it was sound reasoning. This author finds this to be strained and illogical reasoning. See Ibid., p.12.

\textsuperscript{224} In fact this type of reasoning, where the West was weak while the Soviets were considered incredibly powerful, was extremely common in military assessments of the Soviet threat. For example, in November of 1948 the American and British Joint Intelligence committees (the intelligence units of the armed services, under the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and British chiefs of staff) prepared an estimate of Soviet capabilities to launch an invasion on Europe. The estimate said that the Soviets could indeed bring 175 divisions to full strength in M+5, which means within five days after announcing mobilization. And then, the Soviets could also provide 125-145 clone divisions (reserve divisions matching the acting divisions) in M+30. With this force the Soviets could send 50 divisions against Western Europe, followed by at least 50 more, and conquer Europe to the Pyrenees within two months. At the same time the Soviets would have enough force to also conquer Italy, Scandinavia, the Balkans, and much of the rest of Eurasia, although not all simultaneously. The British were willing to go along with this estimate with some reservations for further planning purposes, but they insisted that "the scale and rate of progress of the various campaigns is probably an over-estimate." While "little purpose would be served in re-examining them," they wanted it "made quite clear to all concerned in the use of the Appreciation that it does not take any account of Allied counteraction and represents the maximum possible physical capabilities of the Soviet Union." The U.S. Joint intelligence Committee insisted that it had given consideration to allied counteraction and the Soviets were capable of the campaigns outlined. Karber and Combs, "The United States, NATO and the Soviet Threat," p. 411.
the threat, acknowledged in his memoirs, "The purpose of NSC 68 was to so bludgeon the mass mind of 'top government' that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out." And he explained "If we made our points clearer than truth, we did not differ from most other educators and could hardly do otherwise . . ."225 Acheson's admissions of exaggeration are direct—he saw the need to exaggerate the threat in order to achieve political goals. Paul Nitze has also made statements that contradict what he argued at the time, indicating that maybe to have argued that at the time would clearly have been an exaggeration. For example, when writing about NSC 68 in 1980, Nitze wrote, "It is untrue to claim that we thought the Russians were about to attack."226 However, at the time he frequently made arguments that indicated that the threat of a Russian attack was possibly imminent. He argued in 1950, "We must avoid becoming involved in general hostilities with the USSR in our present position of military weakness if this is at all possible without sacrificing our self-respect and without endangering our survival."227 The Americans, he argued, were crossing a "danger zone"—a "window" of American vulnerability had opened up.

Nitze has also argued that he was unaware that of the 175 Soviet divisions the Soviets supposedly had ready to launch an attack, one third were at full strength, one third were at partial strength, and the final third were cadred.228 Nitze assumed in NSC 68, as the intelligence community asserted at the time, that all were at full strength. What is odd

226 Ibid., p. 105.
227 Trachtenberg, "A "Wasting Asset"," p. 15.
about this is that the intelligence community had been aware in 1948 and 1949 that quite a number of Soviet divisions were not at full strength, but, it appears, qualifications of these divisions were dropped from intelligence assessments.\footnote{Evangelista argues qualifications were not present in 1948, see Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraise," pp. 284-285. Karber and Combs argue that the intelligence community was well aware of the fact that not all divisions were fully manned (but they argue that the Soviets were manned all divisions at 70%), however they are not clear about how well this was reported to civilians. See Karber and Combs, "The United States, NATO and the Soviet Threat," pp. 404-412.} One has to wonder why the Director of the Policy Planning Staff was not asking probing questions about Soviet readiness. George Kennan, the former director of the Policy Planning Staff consistently argued that the U.S. used highly inflated estimates of Russian conventional strength.\footnote{George F. Kennan, \textit{Memoirs, 1925-1950} (Boston: Atlantic Little, Brown, 1967), p. 501; Dismissing Kennan's ideas, see Jerald A. Combs, "The Compromise That Never Was: George Kennan, Paul Nitze, and the Issue of Conventional Deterrence in Europe, 1949-1952," \textit{Diplomatic History} 15, no. 3 (Summer 1991).} It appears that Nitze was not a skeptic, trying to figure out the truth about Soviet capabilities, but an advocate of a massive U.S. buildup using what arguments were available to make the policy case he preferred.

I have argued that Truman Administration leaders did not actually believe in the public misperceptions at the time. There was great "uncertainty" at the time about how the Soviets would behave in the future as they acquired a nuclear weapons capability. Many American leaders wanted to maintain U.S. preponderance as a way to head off any Soviet advances against the West. U.S. leaders did not believe the spread of communism in Asia presented a significant threat, but they ended up opposing communism everywhere
because they had created public fears about “imminent threats” from the Soviets and from the spread of “monolithic communism”.

**H3: The Attribution Theory and the Panic of 1950**

Did leaders perceive the Soviets as highly aggressive, and overestimate the threat from the Soviet Union, because they made “attribution errors” while reasoning about Soviet behavior? Recall, psychologists have found that there is a common tendency for people to reason that they act according to their own situation. People tend to believe that they were *compelled by their circumstances* to act as they do—they think they are *responding* and fail to see how they are *provoking*. People tend to observe others and reason that others act according to their personalities or dispositions. People reason this way because they pay the most attention to what is most salient to them. In fact, the less a person understands another person’s situation, the more that person reasons the other has acted according to their personality or disposition.

Did leaders reason in this way, causing the national misperceptions of 1948 and 1950? Specifically, did leaders fail to understand the situational reasons for why the Soviets behaved as they did? Did leaders interpret defensive moves as aggressive? Did leaders fail to recognize the ways they might have provoked the Soviet Union? And did leaders believe they were responding to aggressive, unprovoked Soviet behavior—inferring overly hostile intentions from “shocking events” or behavior because they failed
to see in what way they provoked the behavior? Did these tendencies cause the leaders to misperceive the threat? Were U.S. leaders' misperceptions the same misperceptions the public held—did the leaders and the public panic together?

The War Scare of 1948

In 1948 the public panicked because of a perceived threat of imminent war. It appeared to the public that the Soviets were expansionist, swallowing up Czechoslovakia and Finland, with probable plans to take control of Italy, either through having Communists win in the Italian elections or, according to former Secretary of State Byrnes, possibly invading Italy before the elections to avoid the embarrassment of defeat.231

I explain at length below that the leaders of the Truman Administration did not actually believe the threat of war in 1948. They actually believed the Soviet Union was not prepared for war in 1948, and would not intentionally start a war. However, the leaders did want the U.S. to respond to the threat of Soviet imperialism. Can this hypothesis explain some part of the leaders' perceptions of threat?

It does not appear from the record that the leaders tended to reason in this way at this time much at all. In fact, at the time of the Czechoslovakian coup the leaders of the U.S. were agreed that the Soviets were behaving defensively. They did not see the coup as an aggressive move. They had predicted that the Soviets would move to consolidate their hold on Eastern Europe in response to the announcement of the Truman Doctrine and

the Marshall Plan. Hence the leaders were highly aware of the ways in which they had 
provoked Soviet behavior.

The leaders often worried about provoking the Soviets. At the time that Truman 
addressed Congress on March 17, 1948 about the "critical situation in Europe," the 
leaders within the administration forcefully debated what Truman should say. Secretary of 
State Marshall was very concerned about provoking the Soviets. Marshall favored a low-
key, matter-of-fact approach to the speech. Charles Bohlen transmitted Marshall's 
concern about the speech: "he wants a weak message, drop intemperate language . . . 
simple, businesslike, no 'ringing phrases'--nothing warlike, or belligerent. Don't 
denounce, just state the facts."\textsuperscript{232} However, Truman's political advisers wanted the 
message to be a 'get tough' speech to enhance Truman's image for the elections in 
November. George Elsey discussed the strategy for Truman in a memo to Clark Clifford: 
". . . The strongest possible speech for the President would be one on Russian relations . . 
. The President could deliver a Russian speech better than a speech on any other subject. 
His best delivery has been on occasions when he has been 'mad.' . . . His poorest 
deliveries have been when he is merely for 'good things.'\textsuperscript{233} Truman ended up taking the 
advice of his political advisers. Marshall warned that he might "pull the trigger" with his 
speech. No one was unaware of the problem of provoking the Soviets, but other 
considerations overrode that concern.

\textsuperscript{232} Yergin, \textit{Shattered Peace}, p. 353. 
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., p. 352.
Overall, in the spring of 1948, leaders were concerned with economic and political chaos within Western Europe, but they felt that they had taken the initiative in setting up the Marshall Plan, they were not simply responding to their environment defensively. They also felt that the Russians were in retreat, consolidating their power in Eastern Europe, responding to their initiative. Finally, they were very concerned about provoking the Soviets as they took the initiative. They were aware of the possibility and discussed it regularly. The "fundamental attribution error" does not seem to describe the perception patterns of the leaders in this period.

1950 and NSC 68

The situation in 1950 was quite different. In April 1950, 89% of the public considered "stopping the world spread of communism" to be "very important." When the Korean War broke out in June, the fear of monolithic communism spreading across the globe seemed to be confirmed for the public and the administration together. There were very few who questioned the interpretation of the Korean War as the first move of a highly aggressive Soviet campaign for world domination. The Soviets had the atomic bomb, they had won China, and if they were not stopped in Korea, they would be emboldened to go further. It was imperative to realize that the very independence of the nation might be at stake. In addition to defending Korea, one of the first responses must be to protect Formosa from further Communist aggression. Did the U.S. arrive at this extreme view of the Soviet Union and Communism because leaders fell prey to the fundamental attribution error?

202
NSC 68 reads like a textbook example of the fundamental attribution error. The Kremlin is completely aggressive, bent on world domination, due to its disposition. The U.S. has done nothing to provoke Soviet behavior, in fact, it argued, if the U.S. showed signs of weakness it would encourage Soviet aggression. Were the officials who wrote this and adopted it cognitively biased by the fundamental attribution error?

The Truman Administration had decided in 1949 that the fall of China, which they had anticipated for a long time, was not a tremendous strategic loss per se, and not unprovoked aggression, but rather a civil war, and the Chinese Communists were primarily a nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{234} Secretary of State Acheson told senators in an early 1950 off-the-record comment, “The very basic objectives of Moscow are hostile to the very basic objectives of China”.\textsuperscript{235} Acheson and most of the rest of the Truman Administration were looking for ways to avoid provoking the Chinese. They were very aware that their behavior could determine to what extent the CCP sided with Moscow. One interesting observation is that U.S. leaders probably underestimated Chinese leaders hostile intentions toward the U.S. in this period. U.S. leaders thought that the Communists, if not provoked by the U.S., would probably want good relations with the U.S. because Russia was their historical enemy. In fact, the Chinese Communists were ideologically drawn toward the Soviets at this time, and distrusted the U.S. as imperialists, and felt that they “leaned” toward Moscow of their own initiative, and not because the

\textsuperscript{234} Gaddis, \textit{We Now Know}, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{235} Ibid., p. 62.
U.S. failed to extend good relations toward them.\textsuperscript{236} In any event, U.S. leaders did not believe they were only responding to events, instead they discussed how to regain the initiative in Asia after the Soviet's recent successes.\textsuperscript{237} U.S. leaders did not make "attribution errors" when reasoning about China.

While NSC 68 describes the Soviets as highly aggressive, it is not a defensive document.\textsuperscript{238} U.S. leaders, in this most pessimistic statement of Soviet intentions, do not reason that they are merely responding, but rather they are arguing to take the initiative by means of "an affirmative program intended to wrest the initiative from the Soviet Union."\textsuperscript{239} Further, leaders at this time worried very much about possibly provoking a preventive war by the Soviet Union. They believed it was a dangerous period because it would be to the Soviet's advantage to strike before the U.S. built up its strength—the U.S. might provoke war by launching a buildup.\textsuperscript{240} Finally, American leaders did not reason from events the way attribution theorists maintain. Different leaders interpreted the Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb differently. Some thought it was important militarily, while others believed the struggle between the U.S. and the Soviets was more political and ideological, and that militarily neither side was highly aggressive, so the atomic bomb did not alter the situation fundamentally. Over the course of several months, a political consensus was formed around proceeding to adopt a new view of the Soviets in NSC 68.

\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., pp. 62-66.
\textsuperscript{237} Christensen, \textit{Useful Adversaries}, pp. 122-127.
\textsuperscript{238} Trachtenberg, "A "Wasting Asset"," pp. 11-18.
\textsuperscript{239} NSC 68 in May, ed., \textit{American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68}, pp. 80-81.
\textsuperscript{240} Trachtenberg, "A "Wasting Asset"," pp. 15-16.
It was not a matter of reflexively reasoning that Soviet intentions had become more hostile, but rather a political bargaining process that built a winning coalition behind that view. When the Korean War broke out, this previously agreed view was confirmed. Perhaps some leaders reflexively reasoned from the outbreak of the Korean War that the Soviets were more hostile than previously assumed. However, there were many differences of opinion as to how to respond—leaders continued to reason in their own idiosyncratic ways. It quickly became abundantly clear that a strong response in Korea would help insure political support for all of the initiatives the leaders had wanted to take before the War erupted. The Korean War gave the Truman Administration the opportunity to wrest the initiative in foreign policy from the Republicans.

Overall, leaders often worried about how their actions could provoke the threat, and did not reason they were only behaving defensively—they viewed themselves as taking the initiative. Further, leaders responded differently to “shocking events”—they each had idiosyncratic patterns of reasoning—and only through a hard-fought political process did they determine their collective interpretations of events, Soviet behavior and Soviet intentions.

**H4: Schema Theory and the Panic of 1950**

Did U.S. leaders misapply analogies that led to the misperceptions of this period? Specifically, did leaders make “snap” judgments about new situations based upon their past experiences. Psychologists explain that this is one of a number of shortcuts in
reasoning that people tend to rely on. Psychologists recognize that individuals have many experiences to draw upon when picking the analogies they invoke, however they tend to rely heavily upon those analogies drawn from their most recent experiences or their "formative" experiences—important events that took place when they were first deciding how the world works, approximately between the ages of 20-35.241

These ideas are intuitively reasonable explanations of the misperceptions of this case. Historians have argued that the leaders in the Truman Administration had recently lived through World War II, so the image of Hitler bent on world domination was both the most recent war or "last war" and the mistakes of appeasing Hitler in the 1930's were formative experiences for many of these decision makers.242 The image of Hitler was reinforced by the image of Japan and Italy, leading to the idea that there are many highly aggressive adversaries in the world and that appeasement does not work.243

Historical analogies were frequently invoked by leaders of this period as in all periods. However, it has been pointed out that sometimes analogies help people form their ideas about the world, and sometimes analogies are used as rationalizations and powerful rhetorical explanations of the world. Recall how I explained that Khong developed the idea that analogies have to be used to make the decision if we are to argue

241 May, "Lessons" of the Past, pp. 84-85; Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, pp. 253-257, 266-271; Khong also found these ideas useful for explaining analogies shared by groups, Khong, Analogies At War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965, pp. 212-219.

242 It has often been noticed that leaders plan for the "last war," see Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics, pp. 266-270.

243 Many historians have argued this loosely, however making the case specifically is May, "Lessons" of the Past, pp. 19-86.
that the analogy *mattered* in forming the perceptions of the leader(s). Specifically, Khong pointed out that analogies can perform six tasks: 1) analogies help define the nature of the situation confronting the policy maker; 2) analogies help assess the stakes involved; 3) analogies provide prescriptions; 4) analogies help predict chances of success among alternative options; 5) analogies help evaluate moral rightness and 6) analogies warn about dangers associated with different options.244 An analogy does not have to be used for all of these tasks, but the more an analogy is used, the more it "matters." Further, for an analogy to be used when making a perception, it must be invoked at the beginning of when a perception was formed, not invoked later as a rationalization of a decision made for other reasons. An analogy must also be adhered to; a decision maker cannot find the analogy true for a while and then consider that the opposite might be true a little later. If a leader vacillates in his or her interpretation of an adversary or event, it indicates that the analogy invoked only occasionally was just one of many possible interpretations of the adversary or event which the leader considered, rather than evidence that the leader made a "snap" judgment based on the analogy. If a leader goes back and forth between judgments, and the leader's reasoning was more complex than making a "snap" judgment, it does not mean that the leader's judgment was correct, it just was not based simply on the analogy at hand.

244 These six tasks make up Khong's "Analogical Explanation Framework" used to make the process of analogical reasoning comprehensible in its entirety. See Khong, *Analogies At War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, p. 10 and chapt. 2.
Leaders invoked analogies to Hitler and the late 1930's often during the peak periods of panic in 1948 and 1950. However, the historical record clearly indicates that these analogies were used as powerful rhetoric to the public and not relied upon among the elites as they formed their decisions. It is clear that the leaders' reasoning and perceptions were much more complex than a process of analogical reasoning would suggest. For this hypothesis to explain *national misperceptions*, either key decision makers would have to reason in this way, or a large group of decision makers would have to reason in this way (e.g. an entire generation might be obsessed with Hitler). Neither of these possibilities appears to describe this case. First I will discuss some of the evidence that demonstrates that analogies to Hitler and the late 1930's do not accurately account for the perceptions of the leaders in 1948 and 1950. This evidence proves that when the leaders invoked these analogies in their public statements in a manner to exaggerate the threat, the leaders were using the analogies as rationalizations for decisions they had made for other reasons. I then discuss several ways this "most likely" case helps to prove that this hypothesis, and psychological theories generally, are very unlikely to account for *national misperceptions*.

*Analogies in 1948*

In the spring of 1948 analogies to Hitler and the late 1930's were rife in pronouncements by officials and in the press. The communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet demands on Finland were easily interpreted as reminiscent of Hitler invading Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the Soviets attacking Finland in the Winter War.245

Totalitarianism seemed to be "on the march" again as it was before World War II. The 
*Washington Post* ran a front-page map of Europe with the area under Soviet domination 
shaded. Arrows pointed to Italy, France, Finland and Austria with the caption: "Russia 
Moves Westward--Where Next?"²⁴⁶

The administration contributed to this interpretation of recent events as being 
analogous to Hitler in the 1930’s and it said nothing to disabuse the public and the press of 
this interpretation. Most prominently, Secretary of State Marshall invoked the analogy of 
Stalin to Hitler three times in public. The first time he was testifying before the Senate 
Armed Services Committee on March 17 just hours after the President had given a speech 
about the "critical nature of the situation in Europe." Marshall stated: "It is said that 
history never repeats itself. Yet if these free people one by one are subjugated to police 
state control even the blind may see in that subjugation of liberty a deadly parallel."²⁴⁷ 
Marshall invoked the analogy two more times on a speaking tour in California on March 
19th and 20th. Marshall declared that one "aspect of the situation is the duplication in 
Europe of the high-handed and calculated procedure of the Nazi regime." He added: "I 
find the present situation disturbingly similar to that with which I labored as Chief of 
Staff. I watched the Nazi Government take control of one country after another until 
finally Poland was invaded in a direct military operation."²⁴⁸ The front-page headline of

²⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

In private, Marshall did not believe the interpretation of events he was espousing publicly. Marshall had received a paper from George Kennan, the head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, on November 6, 1947 which predicted that the Soviets would have to consolidate their power throughout Eastern Europe in response to the U.S. policy of containment and the U.S.’s initiation of the Marshall Plan. In particular, the Soviets would need to clamp down on Czechoslovakia for *defensive* reasons. Marshall read this paper and repeated its message almost verbatim in a briefing to the Cabinet that day, and continued to adhere to this understanding even in February of 1948. He telegraphed the U.S. ambassador in France on February 24, just as the coup in Czechoslovakia began:

> In so far as international affairs are concerned, a seizure of power by the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia would not materially alter in this respect the situation which has existed in the last three years. Czechoslovakia has faithfully followed the Soviet policy in the United Nations and elsewhere and the establishment of a communist regime would merely crystallize and confirm for the future previous Czech policy.

It does appear that Marshall was genuinely concerned at this time that countries of Western Europe might be subverted by communism from within, such as the threat of Communists winning the Italian elections. He also seemed to worry that the Czech coup might have "repercussions" among the indigenous communist movements in Western

---


Europe. However, he did not believe that Stalin was "on the move" as Hitler was in the late 1930's. He perceived Stalin's moves as defensive. In fact there is no indication that anyone in the administration disagreed with the CIA's March 10 report: "We do not believe . . . that this event [the Czech coup] reflects any sudden increase in Soviet capabilities, more aggressive intentions, or any change in current Soviet policy or tactics.

Marshall invoked the analogy of Stalin to Hitler helping to create the public perception that Stalin was threatening the peace as Hitler had threatened the peace in the late 1930's. He did not believe this interpretation of these events, and quickly moved to quash the "war scare" as soon as passage of the Marshall Plan was assured in Congress—he left Washington in a supposed time of crisis for a six week meeting in Bogota. There is no substantial evidence that sincere belief in and use of the analogy of Stalin to Hitler among key decision makers or a group of decision makers was a major factor in creating the public perceptions of 1948.

*Anallogies in 1950*

Truman explains in his memoirs that his decision to intervene in Korea immediately after the North Koreans attacked South Korea in June 1950 was largely based on analogies to the 1930's:

I had time to think aboard the plane. In my generation, this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each

---

time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier . . . If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on a second world war. 252

In addition to recalling the 1930’s, Truman invoked a second analogy from very recent experience: "This [Korea] is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough now there won't be any next step." 253 These analogies were the opposite sides of the same coin. The first suggests that failing to stand firm leads to more aggression, the second teaches that standing firm stops aggression. Truman invoked numerous other analogies around this time including citing lessons from Britain and France in 1917, and analogies comparing failing to support the League of Nations with failing to support the UN in 1950. 254

It seems clear that Truman looked to the past to make sense of his current circumstances, but he did not use a single analogy in a sustained manner as Khong outlines including defining the nature of the situation, assessing the stakes, providing prescriptions, predicting chances of success among alternative options, evaluating moral rightness, or warning about dangers of different options. Instead, it appears that Truman used analogies in the sense of the "grab bag" of history, where he picked a number of different analogies each with the purpose of reconfirming his decision that he made for other reasons. He used analogies to rationalize his decision, not to make his decision.

253 Ibid., p. 71.
254 Ibid., pp. 71, 81.
There are two other reasons why it is unlikely that Truman's decision in Korea was determined by his using an analogy to the 1930's. May makes the argument that Truman and the other leaders were not fixated on the analogy with the 1930's during their earlier plans for Korea when they had decided Korea was not worth fighting for in 1949 and early 1950. However, when war broke out, May believes a "snap" judgment occurred and previous perceptions did not hold: "Because of the earlier studies and decisions, evaluating Korea as of negligible importance and concluding that warfare there should be avoided, the 1950 decision provides a particularly vivid illustration of the potency of beliefs about history. When events in the peninsula were perceived as analogous to certain events in the recent past, an axiom derived from the analogies came into play, and all previous calculations lost their force."255 There are two problems with this argument. One is that if the analogy to the 1930's was "formative" it should have been on the minds of the leaders constantly as they made their decisions all along throughout the late 1940's.256 The leaders frequently weighed the costs and benefits of resisting aggression, and they did not always assume that they had to always resist aggression, as the analogy to the late 1930's suggested. The leaders had directly discussed a North Korean invasion of South Korea and had reluctantly decided it probably was not worth defending South Korea.

The second problem of arguing that Truman reversed course on Korea in a "snap" judgment immediately after the attack because of an analogy is that it does not appear that

255 Ibid., p.83.
256 Jack Snyder makes this argument. See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 277-278.
there was a "snap" judgment. The Truman Administration decided Korea was probably not worth defending in 1949, and Acheson had indicated this in his defense perimeter speech in January 1950.\textsuperscript{257} However, subsequently, Acheson and Paul Nitze, the director of the Policy Planning Staff, had written and widely circulated NSC 68. This document was a radical departure from the earlier positions. It maintained that the Soviet Union was likely to wage "piecemeal aggression" against others, counting on the U.S. not to launch an atomic war in their defense. If the U.S. allowed this to happen, it would discover one day that it had "sacrificed positions of vital interest" that would lead to the U.S. eventually falling back to isolation in the Western Hemisphere, and then eventually forced into capitulation or a defensive war.\textsuperscript{258} Truman had received this document on April 7, and although he agreed with its general analysis, he resisted its full implications because he thought the U.S. could not afford the defense effort it envisioned.

Truman was not in a position to resist NSC 68 for long. Acheson and Nitze had maneuvered to unite the bureaucracy behind this document before Truman had ever seen it. Truman’s foreign policy was under severe attack by McCarthyites in Congress as well, so he needed to prove he was not soft on communism with bold new initiatives. The invasion of Korea probably confirmed NSC 68 and gave him the opportunity to reassert his leadership on foreign policy. He did not make a "snap" judgment to defend Korea in June 1950; he had wanted to go in the direction of promoting NSC 68 earlier and was

\textsuperscript{257} American officials always hedged this position. They planned to give Korea military aid and to support the UN in maintaining Korea’s independence.

looking for an opportunity to make a strong stand against communism to regain his lost
momentum on foreign policy, and Korea gave him just such an opportunity.

The Disconnect Between Psychological Hypotheses and National Misperceptions:

The perceptions of 1948 and 1950 are probably a "most likely" case for this
hypothesis to explain national misperceptions. All of the leaders and the nation had just
lived through the "lessons" of the 1930's and World War II. These were dramatic events
that had made a great impression upon many people, so there should have been a
maximum likelihood that these events could account for national misperceptions.
However, among the decision makers, the reasoning about the threat posed by the Soviet
Union was much more complex than reasoning from a single analogy, or even from the
shared experience of the 1930's. Reasoning was more complex within each individual,
and the national perceptions were formed by the inputs of many individuals, so no single
analogy held sway over the entire national perception.

For example, the complexity of each individual's perception process is aptly
captured by Deborah Welch Larson's account of how Truman and his advisers formed
their views of the Soviet Union after World War II. She carefully examines the
different pathways several key decision makers took as they decided to contain the
Soviets. She finds that all of the decision makers arrived at the decision that it was a zero-
sum game between the U.S. and the USSR shortly after Truman announced the Truman
Doctrine in 1947. However, she finds that schema theory was important for Truman,

\[^{259}\] Larson, Origins of Containment.
insofar as he likened Stalin to "Boss Pendergast," a political boss Truman had worked for during his formative years in Missouri politics—Truman was not likening Stalin to Hitler.\(^\text{260}\) Truman instead perceived Stalin, between 1945-1947, as a man who was corrupt in some ways, but kept his word overall. Larson convincingly argues that schemas were not important for Acheson, he was not prone to “snap” judgments, but rather he had other psychological tendencies guiding his reasoning. According to Larson, Ambassador to Moscow Averell Harriman, did use an “episodic script” (a type of schema) when he likened Soviet expansionism to Nazism. However, even though he invoked this schema, he somehow reasoned that the U.S. could still draw the Soviets into a constructive, cooperative relationship with a “carrot and stick” policy—these are not the conclusions most people would draw from such an analogy.\(^\text{261}\) The conclusion I see from this detailed and convincing description of various leaders’ reasoning patterns is that if each individual has such idiosyncratic "schemas" (or no schemas, but some other reasoning pattern) controlling their perceptions, it is difficult to see how these biased perceptions translate, or somehow sum, into national misperceptions.

This points to another problem with schema theory for predicting national overestimation. According to schema theory, there is no inherent reason why people should overestimate more than they underestimate based on schemas. In fact, the longer there is peace, the more people’s most recent and formative experiences should be about peace and trust. However, in 1945-1947, perhaps Hitler loomed large in the minds of all,

\(^{260}\) Ibid., p. 158-180.  
\(^{261}\) Ibid., p. 334.
but why was it likely for people to liken Stalin to Hitler more than likening Stalin to the recent experience of "Uncle Joe" Stalin. Why would people tend to choose the same analogy? In fact they do not, as Truman likening Stalin to Boss Pendergast demonstrates. These observations indicate the complexity of individuals even during this "most likely" case. I would argue, that instead of all people making similar "snap" judgments, at most, it seems likely that the lessons of the 1930's predisposed the public to readily accept the use of these analogies as powerful political rhetoric.

Conclusions:

In this chapter I have shown how the public perceived an imminent threat of war in 1948, and again in 1950 they feared a possible Soviet invasion of Europe, and they feared the spread of "monolithic communism" in Asia. I have argued that U.S. leaders did not panic about these misperceptions. There was considerable uncertainty at the time, especially about future Soviet capabilities and intentions. Would the Soviets quickly build up their nuclear war capability, and would this then allow them to make gains against the West in the future? Leaders did not fear an immediate threat of invasion, and the public belief of "monolithic communism" actually forced the administration to pursue policies it did not prefer. The uncertainty of the time does not account for the public misperceptions, and yet the public misperceptions ended up guiding policy. I have also shown how the psychological hypotheses drawn from attribution theory and schema theory do not explain the public misperceptions. The leaders and the public did not panic together about the same misperceptions. Instead, I
turn in the following chapter to demonstrating how U.S. leaders created these public misperceptions for domestic political reasons.
Chapter 4

Domestic Politics and The Panic of 1950

“It naturally followed, since the greatest military authority had proclaimed the country in danger, that it should be the fashion for civilians in high places to echo the cry of alarm.” –Richard Cobden, The Three Panics

Did U.S. leaders create the national misperceptions of 1947-1950 and cause the public to panic? In this chapter I begin by explaining the extensive evidence for the oversell hypothesis (H5) as the major explanation for the misperceptions of this period. First, the Truman administration found it necessary to exaggerate the threat in 1947 to sell the Truman Doctrine and make sure they got sufficient aid for Greece and Turkey passed by Congress. Again in the spring of 1948, the Truman administration found it necessary to exaggerate the immediate threat to Europe—causing a war scare—in order to insure full passage of the Marshall Plan. Finally, I argue that in the spring of 1950, Secretary of State Acheson with the assistance of Paul Nitze and NSC 68, again successfully exaggerated the immediate threat to Europe to the administration and the public (and more importantly exaggerated the direct military challenge posed by the Soviets) in order to gain acceptance of their preferred strategy. These leaders espoused globalist strategies and pessimistic views of the Communist threat, and were greatly assisted in their efforts by the Soviet invasion of Korea. If they had not instigated the interpretation of Soviet intentions as “bent on world domination” before the North
Korean invasion of South Korea, the invasion could easily have been interpreted as a
civil war, or at least not an all-important loss (not within the U.S.'s “defensive
perimeter”), having little bearing on U.S. credibility. Instead it was interpreted as a
direct challenge to the U.S., confirming the idea that the U.S. needed to massively
build up its military strength to stop Communist aggression everywhere.

What role did the military play in helping to create these misperceptions? The
militarism hypothesis (H8) suggests two paths for military influence: inflating threats to
the Congress and public, and inflating threats within the threat assessment process. In
this case, in 1948, the role of the military in inflating the threat to the Congress and the
public is clear. General Lucius D. Clay's telegram from Germany was instrumental in
helping to create the war scare of 1948—he was arguably “the greatest military
authority” proclaiming danger allowing the civilians in high places to then “echo the
cry of alarm”. Without the military’s exaggerations of the threat in 1948, the
administration could never have succeeded in creating the war scare to pass the
Marshall Plan. However instrumental the military was in 1948, they did not play a
significant role in 1947 when the first exaggerations of the threat took place, and they
did not play a lead role in 1950. It does appear that the military inflated the threat in
the threat assessment process throughout the period—this is debated, but the evidence is
substantial. The impact this had on public perceptions is difficult to determine. In the
early part of the period, the Truman administration seemed to understand the military’s
propensity to exaggerate, so this exaggeration did not have much effect—Truman
demobilized after World War II and kept defense budgets fairly low. The Truman
220
administration changed rather dramatically in 1949 and 1950, and the new leaders who came to power accepted the military's depiction of the threat. One could argue that the military gets credit for providing the script to the civilians in 1950, or one could argue that the civilians were quite capable of exaggerating the threat on their own for political purposes. In any event, Acheson and Nitze received lots of support from the services in their efforts to change the Truman administration's assessment of the threat and initiatives in foreign affairs.

The electoral politics hypothesis (H7) plays an important role in this case. The oversell hypothesis argues the executive branch exaggerates the threat in order to get its preferred policies passed through the Congress and implemented. It could be argued that because Truman oversold the Truman Doctrine as a plan to protect "free peoples everywhere" then he was later entrapped by his rhetoric. On the other hand, the Republicans in Congress were the ones who insisted on stopping communism in Asia, and they did it for partisan reasons rather than because they believed it was good strategic policy. Forcing Truman to oppose communism in Asia began in 1948, and intensified in 1950. The struggle of partisan politics determined the full shape of Truman's foreign policy by forcing Truman to stand tough against the Chinese when his administration preferred to figure out a way to recognize the new Communist government in China and work toward lessening tensions with China. The struggle of partisan politics, with the Republicans playing the lead role, explains the growth and persistence of the public fear of "monolithic communism".
The logrolling hypothesis (H6) does not quite fit this case. The main problem is that the hypothesis argues that a coalition forms based on groups with parochial interests in expansion. The Republicans in Congress, who backed the expansionist goal of opposing the spread of Communism in Asia, had no real interests in expansion in Asia, but were really just using the issue to try to win the struggle of partisan politics. This is a very important observation, because it means that foreign policy in this case was a “political football” and not driven by private interests. Additionally, the Truman administration’s interests in expansionist policies in Europe seem to be driven by real security concerns, and domestic political considerations, more than parochial interests. Based on these considerations, the hypothesis does not fit the case as well as other hypotheses.

In my conclusions I concur with Jack Snyder in finding, “Competing for preeminence in shaping the postwar order, internationalists, nationalists, and bureaucrats all found that inflating the Soviet threat was a good way to argue for their particular programs.”262 The exaggerations these groups purveyed ended up shaping national perceptions throughout the Cold War. I do not argue that these exaggerations fully determined the way the Soviets would be viewed for the next four decades—that gives no credit to quite a number of people who viewed the Soviet threat differently, and it fails to recognize significant periods when alternative views gained acceptance. However the “pump was primed” in this period—the view of an overwhelming military

threat was established. Further, a precedent of threat exaggeration within domestic politics was established and pioneering techniques in threat inflation were invented, later to be boldly repeated to astonishing effect.

**H5: Oversell and the Panic of 1950**

Was that the Executive Branch responsible for purposely inflating the threat and hence causing the nation to panic? Did the administration determine that the public and/or the Congress would not be receptive to its new policies, and then decide to inflate the threat to create an atmosphere of crisis in order to unify the public and the elite behind the Executive Branch? According to Theodore J. Lowi, this political tactic of using threat inflation not only works well to promote uncompromised foreign policies but it is also necessary, because without it the government of the US is so divided in peacetime that it cannot make or implement important decisions. Lowi argues that the government functions well in times of crisis because there is no time for deliberations, disagreement and compromise; the country unifies behind the decisions of the "formal officeholders" of the administration.263 In peacetime, when there is no immediate crisis but ambitious policies are required, the leaders exaggerate the threat to create a crisis to pass policies for what they believe are the "best interests" of the country.

---

There is abundant evidence to show that this hypothesis explains a large amount of the threat inflation of the panic of 1947-1951. At three separate junctures the administration launched campaigns that exaggerated the threat to promote the policies they felt were essential. These campaigns created a crisis atmosphere that made it "urgent" and "necessary" for Congress to adopt the President's proposals with little deliberation--making dissent irresponsible if not unpatriotic.

The first crisis that began the panic period was the one of March 1947. Truman wanted to secure passage of a foreign aid program for Greece and Turkey, but felt it was necessary to couch his request for aid in apocalyptic, globalist terms because he felt that that was the only way he could convince the public and Congress that aid was absolutely necessary. A second Administration campaign was the March crisis of 1948 designed to insure the timely and full passage of the European Recovery Program. The Administration helped create the illusion that war was possibly imminent if Congress failed to respond with immediate, full support of the Administration's proposed program. In 1950 the third campaign began within the Administration, spurred on by NSC 68 which exaggerated the threat in order to justify an enormous military buildup. In early 1950 some within the Administration would have preferred to emphasize economic containment as much as military containment, and all of the Administration would have liked to differentiate between Communists--containing Soviet imperialism and accommodating Chinese Communists in order to split the Sino-Soviet alliance. Domestic pressures led by Republicans and intensified by McCarthyism forced the Administration into an "all-or-
nothing" situation—contain Communism everywhere or lose support for foreign policy
initiatives and thus end up with a dangerously inadequate policy.

The key evidence to demonstrate "oversell" in each of these episodes follows. For
each period I show: 1) the Administration had ambitious new plans; 2) the Administration
recognized it would meet significant opposition to its ambitious plans; and 3) the
Administration consciously exaggerated the threat in order to pass its preferred policies.
In sum, the Truman administration took the lead in this period in inflating the threat
because it felt the need to "oversell" its policies to insure that they would be passed by
Congress and fully implemented.

March 1947—The Truman Doctrine

On February 21, 1947 the British government informed the US that it could no
longer give financial assistance to Greece and Turkey. The US had been depending on the
British to take primary responsibility for policing the Mediterranean against internal
disorder and possible communist probes, but now the British were saying they no longer
had the resources to meet these obligations. The Truman administration understood
immediately that this meant the US would have to take up the mantle of world leadership
if Communism was to be resisted. The Democratic Administration also realized that the
new 80th Congress was led by Republicans who had just been elected based on promises
to the American people of a 20% tax cut. Truman had asked this Congress on January
10th for an already lean overall budget of $37.7 billion for the fiscal year starting on July
first. The House of Representatives attempted to cut this budget by $6 billion, but the
Senate ultimately preserved more of Truman's requests, gaining approval for $34.7 billion. The Administration knew that it would face strong opposition in Congress if it requested a large foreign aid package, and it also knew that this request would just be the beginning of what would be needed. As Joseph Jones, a member of the State Department's Office of Public Affairs and the main speech writer of the Truman Doctrine speech recounts: "The problem was not what should be done, but how to get authorizing legislation through Congress."\(^{265}\)

On February 27, Truman summoned congressional leaders to the White House to discuss plans for aiding Greece and Turkey. Secretary of State Marshall began the briefing by explaining the need for aid in unemotional terms. Joseph Jones later recalled: "In fact he conveyed the overall impression that aid should be extended to Greece on grounds of loyalty and humanitarianism, and to Turkey to strengthen the British position in the Middle East."\(^{266}\) The Congressmen began grumbling about how this was "trivial" and a matter of "pulling British chestnuts out of the fire," when Under Secretary of State Acheson asked to speak. Acheson's rhetoric was apocalyptic and emotional. His historic speech has been paraphrased:

> The situation, he declared to the doubting congressmen, was unparalleled since ancient history. Not since Athens and Sparta, not since Rome and Carthage, had the world been so polarized between two great powers. The

---


\(^{266}\) Ibid., p. 139.
US and the USSR were divided by "an unbridgeable ideological chasm." The choice was between "democracy and individual liberty" and "dictatorship and absolute conformity." What is more, the Soviets were "aggressive and expanding." If Greece fell, "like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one," Iran, Asia Minor, Egypt, then even Italy and France would fall prey. Before long, two-thirds of the world's population and three-quarters of its surface would be Red. This was not an issue of "pulling British chestnuts out of the fire," but of preserving the security of the US, of Democracy itself.  

The congressmen were stunned and silent when he finished speaking. Acheson recalls that Republican Senator Vandenberg said solemnly: "Mr. President, if you say that to the Congress and to the country, I will support you, and I believe that most of the members will do the same." Loy Henderson recalls Vandenberg being more blunt: "Mr. President, the only way you are ever going to get this is to make a speech and scare the hell out of the country."

The speech Truman made was carefully crafted. It sought to use anti-Communism to galvanize Congressional and public support, but it carefully avoided mentioning Russia because direct hostility toward the Soviet Union would offend liberal Democrats. Each line was carefully worked over by State Department staff and reviewed by all of the leaders in the Administration with an eye toward gaining approval by the public and in

---


Congress. Some members of the Administration disagreed with framing a request for aid to Greece and Turkey in the unequivocal and stark terms being devised. George Kennan, who was then teaching at the National War College in Washington but had considerable prestige in the State Department for his "Long Telegram" outlining containment in February 1946, reviewed the speech and was "extremely unhappy" with the tone and ideological content of the message, as well as unhappy with the aid proposed. He was in favor of economic aid to Greece, but hoped military aid to Greece would be kept small, and he opposed all aid to Turkey. He thought the message was so provocative that the Russians might even declare war. White House aide George Elsey also found the message too provocative and thought that there had been "no overt action in the immediate past by the USSR which serves as an adequate pretext for the 'All-out' speech." Elsey was afraid that a presidential message of this type could derail the upcoming Moscow Council of Foreign Ministers. Secretary Marshall and Charles Bohlen who were on their way to Moscow concurred that "there was too much flamboyant anti-Communism in the speech." Truman and Acheson were adamant however that the Senate would not approve the program without broad emphasis on the idea of "holding the line" against Communist aggression.


272 Ibid., p. 155.


274 Ibid., p. 123.
The rhetoric of the famous Truman Doctrine speech is well known. Truman declared that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." The choice was between supporting freedom and democracy or allowing terror and oppression by totalitarian regimes. He warned: "Should we fail to aid Greece and Turkey in this fateful hour, the effect will be far reaching to the West as well as to the East." If the US failed to aid Greece and Turkey it could lead to an "unspeakable tragedy" that would be "disastrous not only for them but for the world."275

The rhetoric of the speech, and of many of the subsequent speeches and messages of the Administration in support of aid to Greece and Turkey, exaggerated the threat at the time in two important ways. First, it exaggerated the nature of the threat the leaders perceived. The Administration had no intention of waging an all-out ideological war against Communism or totalitarianism everywhere or in assisting all "free peoples to work out their own destiny in their own way." The US leaders were interested in the more circumspect goal of strategically containing Soviet imperialism. Second, the crisis was not as "urgent" as they indicated. In fact it may not have been very urgent at all.

The records of the Administration show that it was not truly interested in stopping Communism or totalitarianism everywhere. The real reason the Administration wanted to give aid to Greece and Turkey was because they did not want the Soviets to have access to the Eastern Mediterranean or to control the Straits controlled by Turkey or to be in a

position to gain access to Middle Eastern oil. The strategic stakes were considerable. The Administration knew that the Communists in Greece were not being supported by the Kremlin but they feared they would be controlled by the Kremlin eventually if they came to power. The Communists of Greece were not threatening just because they were Communists—they were threatening because they were Communists that might be controlled by Moscow and aid Soviet imperialism.\textsuperscript{276} At the same time, the Administration was increasingly unwilling to oppose the Communists in China because the costs were too high, the strategic loss was not great enough to pay those costs, and they hoped that the nationalistic Communists of China would be independent of Moscow.\textsuperscript{277} Hence Communism \textit{per se} was not the main threat, Soviet imperialism was.

Additionally, taking the side of the Greek royalists in the Greek civil war was supporting "terror and oppression" and not the best method of assisting "free peoples to

\textsuperscript{276} The leaders knew there was no direct support from the Soviet Union for the rebels in Greece, and that the Soviets were not working to foment trouble. In fact, there was evidence that the Soviets were staying out because Bulgaria, the Balkan country indisputably under Soviet control, was showing marked restraint by withholding aid from the rebels. However, US leaders knew that the rebels were being aided by the Balkan countries, especially by Yugoslavia, and they did not know that Tito was acting independently. Melvyn P. Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 126, 143. Small, weak communists in strategic locations that Moscow could control were a threat.

work out their own destiny in their own way." The Tsaldaris regime of Greece had been less popular than the rebels at the end of the German occupation in 1944, but then the imperialist British had come in to prop up the royalists. Since then, with the help of the British, the regime had solidified substantial support by violently repressing the opposition parties and practicing gross violations of civil liberties.\textsuperscript{278} Truman admitted this to some extent, but to claim he was supporting democracy and the will of the people and opposing oppression was inaccurate.

It became abundantly clear that the Administration had no intention of supporting all "free peoples of the world" to work out their own destiny when Administration officials began testifying before Congress. Before Congress, the Administration tried to emphasize that it was only Greece and Turkey that they intended to aid for emergency economic reasons—to withstand pressures—and this did not mean they were going to aid other countries with economic problems. They claimed there was no current plan to aid other countries even though the State Department was beginning to make plans to give aid to other parts of Europe as they spoke. When questioned as to why they were encouraging the Nationalists in China to cooperate with the Chinese Communists instead of resisting Communism there as the Truman Doctrine called for, Acheson answered that they were giving substantial aid to the Nationalists and they were not encouraging them to cooperate with the Communists. The truth was that the Administration was giving aid, but they were also encouraging the Nationalists to cooperate with the Communists.

Acheson further argued that the threat to the Nationalists was not imminent. He was questioned further as to whether they planned to oppose Communism in China if the threat became imminent. Acheson said he could not comment on a hypothetical situation.\footnote{Richard M. Freeland, \textit{The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Internal Security 1946-1948} (New York: New York University Press, 1985), pp. 102-114.}

The truth was that many in the State Department, including Secretary of State Marshall, felt that aid to the Nationalists was a waste of resources and they had no plans to oppose the Communists unless a \textit{viable} non-Communist group emerged—it appeared to the administration that the Nationalists could not win. The Administration found it useful to ask for its policies in grand, highly charged ideological terms, but it didn’t want to scare Congress away from supporting its policies because they would be too expensive, nor did the Administration want to be held to upholding a grand policy of opposing Communism everywhere.

Truman’s claim that the situation was "urgent" was only partially true at best. The Administration knew that the situation in Turkey was not urgent, but Britain was ending support there on March 31st, concurrently with Greece, and the two problems seemed interrelated to the Administration, so to include them in a package with Greece made some sense.\footnote{As Acheson worked on the draft legislation, he found it difficult to justify aid to Turkey. It did not have civil unrest or instability and it was not under any real pressure from the Kremlin. The US wanted to fortify it militarily. Leffler, \textit{A Preponderance of Power}, p. 143-144.} It appears that the situation in Greece was not as "urgent" as the Administration claimed either. It is well known that the situation had been deteriorating for some time...
but US leaders had resisted getting entangled with the corrupt government in Greece.

Officials in Washington began changing their minds as they began to anticipate British withdrawal throughout the fall of 1946. However, the Administration knew it would be difficult to get Congressional approval and they were biding their time. The State Department was discussing the need for a bill for economic and military aid to Greece just before the British notes arrived. The immediate British withdrawal most certainly accelerated the decision making process within the Administration, and it appears that British withdrawal gave them the rationale for why it was "urgent" to act.

US officials knew the situation was worsening and the British notes were no real surprise, thus there is no reason why it suddenly became urgent to act, except that they had possibly let the clock run down and they realized finally that the situation was dire. Acheson testified repeatedly before Congress to the fact that it was an emergency:

The cessation of outside aid to Greece means immediate crisis. Unless help is forthcoming from some other quarter, Greece's economy will quickly collapse, very possibly carrying away with it the authority of the government and its power to maintain order.

Undersecretary of State Clayton also repeated the message that it was urgent: "...Greece has certain critical, urgent needs for financial economic assistance, that this program is expected to meet those needs ..." Acheson estimated in March that Greece would be able to buy necessary imports for about one month, after that--without outside help--

---


283 Ibid., p. 108.
paralysis of its government and its economic life would result. As it turned out, Congress passed the Greco-Turkish aid bill on May 22, 1947, one month after the predicted economic collapse of Greece. Four days after its approval, the US notified Greece, then waited three weeks for Greece to reply. In June and July the State Department organized a permanent committee to expedite aid to Greece and Turkey. In August, a small amount of military aid was delivered to Greece, but it was not until October that the first economic aid reached Greece, and yet Greece had not economically collapsed a full six months after the predicted point of collapse.\footnote{284} Perhaps the "reassurance" that aid was on the way was all that was necessary to keep Greece from collapsing, but it is more likely that the "urgency" of the situation was exaggerated extensively for political reasons. In fact it is probably true that the Administration waited until it seemed urgent before they asked for aid, because they knew their request would be rejected by Congress. But then only by

\footnote{284} Freeland makes these arguments about "urgency" point by point. See Ibid., pp. 91-94. However, Freeland argues that the urgency of the situation was \textit{completely} manufactured for political reasons. He believes the Administration had enough warning that there was no real urgency. I think that it is more likely that the Administration probably believed the situation was urgent to some extent because of the British withdrawal for two reasons: 1) it makes sense that they would wait until they \textit{had} to act because they are busy, that is the only time people make up their minds finally in Washington is when it becomes necessary to do so--they wanted to aid Greece and Turkey earlier, the British notes gave them the impetus and/or excuse to make the case; 2) these leaders readily admitted in retrospect to their political strategies, such as arguing a broad program of "anti-Communism" in order to win Congress, hence it is unlikely that they consciously stressed the urgency of the crisis without believing it to a large extent because they probably would have admitted doing so. I see no indication in the record that they did not believe it was urgent. However, I do believe that they instinctively exaggerated the urgency--set the nearest deadline that is justifiable--to curtail debate of the matter and to avoid compromise, or else they would have acted to get the aid to Greece faster after it was passed. Acheson and Clark Clifford, major architects of the Truman Doctrine speech, were well known for their political savvy, and thus exaggeration of urgency to "railroad" it through Congress would come naturally.
stressing the urgency of the request were they able to ensure passage of the request expeditiously and without compromise.

The Administration's strategy of exaggerating the nature and the urgency of the threat worked. Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg pressured the Senate to pass the bill: "To repudiate the President of the United States at such an hour could display divisive weakness which might involve far greater jeopardy than a sturdy display of united strength. We are not free to ignore the price of noncompliance." The Senate easily passed the bill on April 22 by a vote of 67 to 23. Vandenberg's prestige and authority had contributed greatly to the senate's approval, and once the Senate had endorsed it, the House was under great pressure to pass it as well. Congressman Francis Case of South Dakota explained to Truman the pressure on the House: "The situation was regarded as an accomplished fact. You had spoken to the world. The Senate had acted. At least 75 members, I judge, would have voted against final passage, myself included, had it not been that we thought it would be like pulling the rug out from under you or Secretary of State Marshall." The House voted 287 to 107 to pass the bill on May 9, 1947. Congress had rallied behind the Executive Branch in a crisis.

It is clear that the urgency of the crisis helped to cut short deliberations and therefore stifle dissent. It is also evident that a global struggle against Communism and totalitarianism allowed for a dramatic threat of "good versus evil" that was readily

---


286 Ibid., p. 64.
understood, perhaps more easily understood than a struggle with Soviet imperialism, but 
was the added drama worth the trouble caused by not telling the truth? Joseph Jones 
explained that the Administration had two other reasons for not emphasizing the strategic 
reasons for their foreign aid proposals. One was that it was the officials' judgment that 
the American people were not accustomed to thinking in strategic-military terms in times 
of peace and this might have alarmed them "to the point of defeating the proposed 
action." The second reason was that sending military aid to a country on the border of 
the Soviet Union could be seen as "provocative" or as "encirclement" so it was best to 
play that aspect down to avoid Soviet reaction and to avoid having it used in Soviet 
propaganda. Jones does not supply the most powerful reason for adopting broad 
anticommunist rhetoric over more truthful strictly strategic rationales: anticommunism 
worked well with the public. Public opinion analysts had many polls to prove how 
powerful the theme of anticommunism was--the American public already had strong 
anticommunists sentiments and Truman tapped into them. Truman's advisers understood 
many of the dangers of adopting the "universalist" rhetoric, and they had their misgivings, 
but they consistently employed this rhetoric when it suited their purposes.

---

287 I confess, I do not understand how it would alarm them so much they would do 
nothing--this does not make sense to me. I only repeat how Jones explains it here because 
his account is very close to being the official account of why they did what they did--he 
seems to be reporting what happened according to how they discussed it at the time.


289 Christensen argues that the Truman administration adopted anticommunist rhetoric 
reluctantly, but ended up using it when they were desperate. It seems more accurate to 
say that there were some who were reluctant within the administration (e.g. Marshall, 
Kennan) and others who were quite willing to employ this rhetoric (e.g. Forrestal, 236
The administration even demonstrated its "consistency" and "sincerity" by pursuing anticommmunist internal security programs. Immediately after the Truman Doctrine speech, Truman announced a plan to protect the American government from subversives. His action was part of his new global battle against communism. Truman's administration had been under attack by rightwing Republicans for not maintaining adequate security against subversives in the government. Truman had resisted these attacks, but in order to pass his foreign aid bill through a Republican Congress, he was going to have to take action to prove that he was "serious" about anticommmunism or they would probably not appropriate the funds for his programs. Instead of minimally complying with the rightwing rhetoric against subversives, Truman practically embraced the program because it served his purposes in three ways: 1) it co-opted what was a movement against him; 2) it raised awareness for his campaign of the threat of communism abroad; 3) and it helped to crush dissent of those who wanted to be conciliatory or accommodating toward Russia--they were labeled un-American or communist sympathizers, which some of them were.\(^{290}\)

Harriman, Attorney General Clark, and leaning this way were Truman and Acheson). The administration did not want to have a public break with Russia before the elections in 1946 because it would have been unpopular and it would have divided the Democrats. The Russians had been conciliatory since the elections. This was the administration's public break with the Soviets and anticommmunism was increasingly embraced by the administration as a powerful weapon after this point. The administration understood that this rhetoric could haunt them, and they tried to use it judiciously it seems, but they used it often to rally the support they needed and to label the opposition as "unpatriotic" if not "traitorous" after this point. See Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, pp. 52-53; See also Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, pp. 135-150.

\(^{290}\) Ibid., pp. 115-150. Freeland has been justifiably criticized for downplaying US strategic interests and arguing that the US leaders were mostly motivated by economic
The administration's tactics for ensuring passage of foreign aid to Greece and Turkey worked well, however this measure was only one small step toward the administration's goal of assuming world leadership as had been outlined by the Truman Doctrine. The administration would use the tactics of exaggerating the nature and urgency of the threat again over the next several years—each time it needed to pass ambitious programs that faced strong opposition. These tactics worked well to create a favorable "climate of opinion," but the threat inflation they created snowballed with other sources of threat inflation and created a national security panic beyond their control.

_The "War Scare" of March 1948_

In the spring of 1948 the Truman administration pushed Congress to pass the European Recovery Program (ERP)—the Marshall Plan. In order to gain approval of this massive foreign aid package, the administration exaggerated the significance of events in Europe and exaggerated the likelihood of imminent war. To exaggerate the threat of imminent war, the administration got some very important help from the military. These

imperialism, which they were not. However, Freeland has also been criticized for this argument. However, he carefully presents an overwhelming amount of evidence about how Truman was pushed by the new Republican Congress into pursuing anticommunism at home, as well as Truman's eager and advantageous promotion of anticommunist feelings within the US which is invaluable for understanding Truman's political tactics. He does not argue that Truman was primarily responsible for anticommunism and McCarthyism, nor does he argue that the Soviets did not pose a real and significant threat. Truman clearly fanned the flames of McCarthyism, rather than stemming the tide. For critiques of this see John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," _Diplomatic History_ 7 (Summer 1983), p. 179; Alonzo L. Hamby, _Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 401, 507.
exaggerations created a public mood that pressured Congress to act to pass the administration's preferred policies to contend with the imminent threat. Congress passed the ERP as the administration wanted. But the crisis escalated beyond the administration's control because military leaders joined in the threat inflation with a vengeance and convinced Congress to fund a military buildup the administration had neither requested nor thought prudent. Truman worked to rein in his military leaders and ultimately refused to spend some of the money Congress had appropriated to the air force. In this section I review in detail the civilian leaders' role in the spring crisis, and I review the military's role under the militarism hypothesis (H8).

Secretary of State Marshall proposed the outline of a massive reconstruction program for Europe on June 5, 1947 at Harvard commencement ceremonies. The ERP took shape over the course of the next seven months. This was the centerpiece of Truman's foreign policy plans. In the autumn and winter of 1947 and 1948, the civilian leaders of the Truman administration were most concerned with economic aid to Europe and opposed to any increase in the military budget. The administration did not want to jeopardize its ambitious foreign aid programs nor did it want to divert congressional attention away from the proposed aid appropriations. Truman also wanted to restrain the rapidly growing federal budget.

Truman and his advisers agreed that they were planning for peace not for war. This meant that they were working to improve the economy of the United States and of the Western world, and they were not preparing for any short-term threat of war. They were willing to risk being somewhat unprepared for what they considered was a small chance of
accidental war occurring with the Soviet Union because they believed the Soviets were not preparing for war either. They had a monopoly on nuclear weapons and this gave them substantial confidence that the Soviets would be cautious.

The proposal for the Marshall Plan was submitted to Congress on December 19, but Congress began consideration in January 1948. Within the administration "nearly all agreed that an intense effort would be required to convince a reluctant Congress and public that heavy expenditures would be needed." Truman asked Congress to authorize $6.8 billion for the first fifteen months, and for $17 billion total over four years. He also asked that Congress approve the proposal by April 1, 1948 because that was when interim aid to Europe would run out. More importantly, Italy was holding national elections on April 18 and the Italian elections were going to be the biggest showdown between communists and non-communists in Western Europe. Because communism was strongest in Italy, it would be a big victory for American aims in the political Cold War if the Italian Communists were soundly defeated. Truman and Marshall wanted to hold out aid as an incentive to Italian voters to support the non-communists.

Congressional hearings began in the Senate on January 8 and in the House on January 11th. The administration was ready; they had speaking tours arranged for top officials, and impressive reports submitted to Congress. They had even organized a semi-official organization to lobby Congress called "The Committee for the Marshall Plan"

made up of prominent businessmen and government officials. The administration primarily argued that Soviet and communist policies were responsible for the problems in Europe and ERP was designed to address this situation. They wanted to emphasize that ERP was for US national security—to keep Europe from going communist—and not some kind of economic charity.

The administration faced a number of problems with this line of argumentation. First, the congressmen were not in a receptive mood because it was an election year and the Republican controlled Congress did not want to hand Truman a big foreign policy victory when they hoped to take the White House in the fall. Second, many of the Congressmen felt that they had been forced to accept foreign aid the previous spring based on overdrawn claims about the communist threat and they did not want to be manipulated again. In fact soon after the officials began testifying they were warned by some of the Senators that they should not be too heavy handed because it was the "technique of the propagandist" and would not be appreciated. After the warning, official testimony was notably toned down.

Arguing that the foreign aid was needed to counter the Soviet threat was difficult in another respect. The Marshall Plan assumed continued good relations with the Soviet

292 Ibid., p. 149.

293 Freeland, The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism, p. 256; The administration was in a difficult spot. They knew that anti-communism was the best argument to use because they had many opinion polls that demonstrated this. They had also been told in the fall by an influential fact-finding mission led by Congressman Christian Herter that Europeans seemed so well fed that aid was not needed on the basis of charity. Since aid could potentially hurt the US economy, it was the communist threat alone that justified the aid. Christensen, Useful Adversaries, p. 57.
Union. It recognized that many of the raw materials that Western Europe would require needed to come from Eastern Europe, and its goals depended upon a general expansion of trade between the two regions. Secretary Marshall admitted that a basic assumption of the ERP was to improve relations with the Soviet Union and its satellites. The administration came under considerable pressure for this policy amidst the ensuing crisis. It was very awkward for the administration to have to answer why the US continued to trade with the USSR even though they posed an imminent threat to Western Europe.\(^\text{294}\)

The administration turned toward trying to say that the program was for US economic reasons too. However, congressmen argued against them that it would cause inflation and the US would be required to lower trade barriers, which they did not want to do. The administration answered that it would not cause inflation, but this was unconvincing because the evidence pointed in both directions. The administration also attempted to argue that ERP did not require them to lower trade barriers, but it was known that the administration favored lowering trade barriers, and ERP favored lower barriers in principle, so this was unconvincing too.

Administration officials failed to make a clear compelling case for ERP and passage of the full package in a timely fashion looked unlikely at the end of January. Senator Vandenberg went to work as Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He successfully arranged a number of compromises that helped gain the proposal acceptance in the Senate. Instead of getting an initial installment of $6.8 billion for fifteen months, the administration would get $5.3 billion for twelve months. This

\(^{294}\) Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, p. 258

242
preserved the full amount of the request, and the Senate would agree in principle to giving the rest of the four-year aid package, but it would be subject to annual approval. Many Senators did not want the State Department to oversee the administration of the aid, so it was agreed that a new agency, the Economic Cooperation Administration directed by an "outside businessman" would be created. Because of Vandenberg's skillful guidance, the committee gave the bill unanimous support by mid-February.

The House Foreign Affairs Committee presented the biggest hurdle for passage of the Marshall Plan. It began drafting its version of the aid proposal in early March. Not only did it appear as if the House would reduce the aid package to $4.5 billion or less for the first year, Representatives also seemed intent on slowing down passage by including ERP in an omnibus foreign aid bill that included aid to China, another installment of Greco-Turkish aid and other smaller proposals. If all of these aid proposals had to be debated before passage of the ERP, then it would be highly unlikely for ERP to be passed before April 1st, and it could be delayed until June.

Secretary Marshall went to Capitol Hill on March 8 to request that ERP be considered as a single measure. The Republican leadership denied his request saying it would jeopardize passage of ERP. Marshall's request was even put to a vote in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and it was voted down on March 11--the Committee insisted on including ERP in the omnibus bill. The future of ERP was in question.

The administration had been testifying before Congress about the dangers of communism in Europe, but their arguments had not been persuasive and urgent enough to insure passage of ERP. They had made it clear that they were concerned about the
elections in Italy, but this had not made a significant impression on leading Republican Representatives. Several events had taken place at the end of February that Administration officials decided they needed to capitalize upon to insure timely passage of ERP.

On February 25, a coup in Czechoslovakia began in which the democratic coalition government fell to communists. Also at the end of February, the Soviet Union pressured Finland to commit to a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance. The administration began portraying these events as possible indications that the Soviets were on the move, that Western Europe was under increased pressure from the Soviet Union, which was the opposite of what the administration discussed and concluded privately.

Both Czechoslovakia and Finland had long been considered part of the Soviet sphere by the Truman administration. The events of February had been fully anticipated by the administration. In the fall of 1947, after the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, successful passage of aid to Greece and Turkey, and then with the organization of ERP, the administration decided that it had regained the initiative in Europe and the Soviet Union and the communists throughout Europe were on the defensive. On

The administration appears to have been very sincerely concerned about the elections in Italy, but probably because of their other hyperbole this failed to impress enough Congressmen in the House. For a dire description of the situation in Italy, see ORE 47/1, "the Current Situation in Italy" 16 February 1948, in CIA Cold War Records: The CIA Under Harry Truman (Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, CIA, 1994), pp. 181-190.
November 6, 1947, Secretary Marshall, in the course of a top-secret briefing, told the Cabinet:

The halt in the communist advance is forcing Moscow to consolidate its hold on Eastern Europe. It will probably have to clamp down completely on Czechoslovakia, for a relatively free Czechoslovakia could become a threatening salient in Moscow's political position ... As long as communist political power was advancing in Europe, it was advantageous to allow to the Czechs the outer appearance of freedom. In this way, Czechoslovakia was able to serve as bait for nations further west. Now that there is a danger of the political movement proceeding in the other direction, the Russians can no longer afford this luxury. Czechoslovakia could too easily become a means of entry of really democratic forces into Eastern Europe in general. The sweeping away of democratic institutions and the consolidation of communist power in Czechoslovakia will add a formidable new element to the underground anti-communist political forces in the Soviet satellite area. For this reason, the Russians proceed to this step reluctantly. It is a purely defensive move.\textsuperscript{296}

This view was widely reiterated in administration documents. Therefore not only did the administration anticipate the fall of Czechoslovakia, but it also viewed it as a purely defensive move on the part of the Soviets. This view was maintained after the events of February 1948. Based on information available "as of March 6, 1948," the CIA continued to take a benign view of the situation in Czechoslovakia and Finland:

We do not believe ... that this event reflects any sudden increase in Soviet capabilities, more aggressive intentions, or any change in Soviet policy or tactics, ... The Kremlin for some time has had the capability of consolidating its position in Czechoslovakia. The coup was precipitated by the stubborn resistance of the Czech moderates to continued Communist control of the police force... The Czech coup and the demands on Finland, moreover, do not preclude the possibility of Soviet efforts to effect a rapprochement with the West as outlined in CIA 5. In fact, the Kremlin would undoubtedly consider the consolidation of its position in the border states as a necessary prerequisite to any such agreement.

In Western Europe, the Communists continue to concentrate on legal means to gain their objectives rather than on violence and direct action ... The Communists could not at this time carry out a similar coup in either Italy or France, as they do not have control of the police force or the armed services.  

Further evidence that the administration was not overly concerned with the events in Czechoslovakia and Finland is that neither country was mentioned on the agenda circulated March 8 for the National Security Council meeting of March 11. Also the War Council, a meeting consisting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the three secretaries of the armed services, made no mention of either country in their minutes of "Significant Actions" taken on March 2. Also the Committee of Four Secretaries (the secretary of defense with the three service secretaries) did not discuss either country on March 5 but one item of business they did discuss was the "Wearing of Civilian Clothes by Military Personnel while on duty at Duty Stations involving essentially Office Work."  

There was an atmosphere of calm, business-as-usual at the White House and the Pentagon, but not in the press or on Capitol Hill.

There is also evidence to suggest that separately, Secretary of State Marshall and Secretary of Defense Forrestal were considering ways to capitalize on events in Europe. Secretary Marshall had received a telegram from Walter Bedell Smith, US ambassador in Moscow on March 1: "Full information on and explanation to ... Congress of significance


298 Ibid., provides all of this evidence, p. 97.
[of] recent Soviet moves in Czechoslovakia and Finland may result in speeding consideration and adoption [of] universal military training and building programs for Army, Navy and particularly Air Force."^{299} On February 29, Secretary Forrestal had spoken to President Truman who was in Key West, Florida urging him to come back in order to "dramatize the immediacy and the urgency of the situation."^{300} Forrestal gives a hint about possible collusion in the effort to heighten concern about international events when he describes a luncheon meeting of March 2 with Marshall, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Lovett, and McCloy and Souers. They were discussing promoting Universal Military Training and according to Forrestal they gave "some consideration ... to a joint effort by Marshall and myself ... , the thought being to capitalize on the present concern of the country over the events of the last week in Europe."^{301} Although the available evidence of these Secretaries plotting to create a "crisis" is scanty, the actions taken by the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense from the middle of March on demonstrate that they worked to create a crisis to force passage of their preferred legislation through Congress.^{302}

It should also be made clear that while Marshall's interest in creating a "war scare" was to insure passage of ERP and Forrestal's interest was to increase the military budget,

---

^{299} Ibid., p. 86.

^{300} Ibid., p. 86.


^{302} I review the actions of the secretary of Defense under the hypothesis about the military inflating the threat (H8).
President Truman had his own set of interests. President Truman fully backed Marshall's efforts to pass ERP, and he was resisting the Pentagon's repeated pleas for more resources, but perhaps his main interest was in getting re-elected in November. His ratings had fallen very low at this point, and it appeared that he had almost no chance of being re-elected. As early as November 1947, Truman's adviser Clark Clifford had written a long memorandum to Truman about getting re-elected: "There is considerable political advantage to the Administration in its battle with the Kremlin. ... The worse matters get, up to a fairly certain point--real danger of imminent war--the more is there a sense of crisis. In times of crisis, the American citizen tends to back up his President."^303

In early March, Truman and Clifford returned from Key West in agreement that Truman should make a major foreign policy speech to Congress. George Elsey, another adviser, noted the reasons for a speech: "Pres. must for his prestige, come up with a strong foreign speech--to demonstrate his leadership--which country needs and wants. Pres's prestige in foreign matters low now (Palestine, China)--Vandenberg and Marshall getting all credit on Marshall Plan."^304

In addition to the events in Czechoslovakia and Finland, on March 5, General Clay, the US military governor in Germany, sent a telegram to General Chamberlin stating that he felt that there had been a subtle change and war could come "with dramatic


^304 Notes on March 17, 1948 speech, Box 20, Elsey papers in Yergin, Shattered Peace, p. 352.
suddenness." This telegram was classified, and was leaked gradually to the press, so at this point in early March it was known among some Congressmen but had not created a crisis situation yet.

The House of Representatives initially rejected Marshall's request for acting on ERP expeditiously on March 9. It was time for Marshall to make the situation more urgent. On March 10, the non-communist Czechoslovakian Foreign Minister Jan Masaryck either committed suicide or was murdered. Marshall held a press conference immediately. He announced that the world situation had suddenly become "very, very serious" and that Czechoslovakia had fallen under a "reign of terror." He added: "It is regrettable that passions are aroused to the degree that has occurred."\(^{305}\) Marshall permitted quotation after carefully and slowly checking the stenographic record of what he had said. The next day the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted down his request for considering ERP singly. That afternoon, Truman held a press conference appealing for promptly carrying out ERP and stating that his faith in world peace had been "somewhat shaken."\(^{306}\) Also on March 11, Secretary Marshall gave an address at the National Cathedral in Washington: "The world is in the midst of a great crisis, influenced by propaganda, misunderstanding, anger and fear."\(^{307}\) He urged passage of ERP.

On March 13, former Secretary of State Byrnes gave an address at the Citadel in South Carolina at the urging of Secretary Forrestal. He presented the most dire view of


\(^{307}\) Ibid., p. 270.
the situation thus far. He told his audience: "There is nothing to justify the hope that with the complete absorption of Czechoslovakia and Finland the Soviets will be satisfied." He referred to Soviet ambitions in Greece, Turkey, France and Italy. He suggested that the Communists could not win in Italy, and that: "If the Soviets intend to act in Italy as they have in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, we can expect them to move whenever they reach the conclusion that the Communists cannot win ... they will not wait until the elections to disclose that the Communists are in the minority." He called for rapid passage of ERP and a program of national rearmament. He warned "that the United States may have to meet an international crisis only four or five weeks from now." He concluded "[There] is no important difference in the direct methods of Hitler in 1938 and the indirect methods of Stalin in 1948." 308 Byrnes' suggestion of a possible clash between the US and the USSR was widely reported, including being reported on the front page of the Washington Post and The New York Times.

On Sunday March 14, James Reston wrote in The New York Times that the "The mood of the capital this weekend is exceedingly somber." He noted that the "Executive branch of the Government, in an effort to gain Congressional support of its policies, has been talking a good deal about war lately. ... We legislate, in short, in an atmosphere of crisis." 309 That Sunday morning the Senate voted 69 to 7 to give the administration the full $5.3 billion for the first year of ERP.

308 Ibid., p. 270; Kofsky, Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948, p. 128.

309 Ibid., p. 130; Freeland, The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism, p. 274.
In the afternoon on March 15 the White House announced that the President would address a joint session of Congress on March 17th on the "grave foreign situation." Also on the 15th, Marshall testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on behalf of an extension of aid to Greece and Turkey, stating that "the hour is far more fateful than it was one year ago ... Totalitarian control has been tightened in ... [the] countries of Eastern Europe ... Other European peoples face a similar threat of being drawn against their will into the communist orbit." On that same Monday, the House Foreign Affairs Committee defeated a Democratic motion, 13 to 7, to bring ERP to an immediate floor vote and it voted to continue considering ERP in the omnibus bill. However, the next day the situation changed.

On Tuesday March 16, the House Republican Steering Committee "advanced the timetable" for consideration of ERP and "called for House passage of an omnibus measure Easter week." This was a breakthrough for the administration because it showed a willingness in the House to act.

On March 17, Truman addressed Congress:

The situation in the world today is not primarily the result of natural difficulties which follow a great war. It is chiefly due to the fact that one nation has not only refused to cooperate in the establishment of a just and honorable peace, but--even worse--has actively sought to prevent it ...Since the close of hostilities, the Soviet Union and its agents have destroyed the independence and democratic character of a whole series of nations in Eastern and Central Europe. It is this ruthless course of action, and the clear design to extend it to the remaining free nations of Europe, that have brought about the critical situation of Europe today. The tragic death of the Republic of Czechoslovakia has sent a shock-wave through the civilized world... We have reached a point at which the position of the United States

---

310 Ibid., p. 271.
should be made unmistakably clear... There are times in world history when it is far wiser to act than to hesitate. There is some risk involved in action--there always is. But there is far more risk in failure to act.  

Truman expressed American interest in a Western military alliance, the first stage of which had been signed as the Brussels Pact earlier that day. Truman requested three things: passage of the Marshall Plan, enactment of universal military training, and restoration of selective service.

On the same day, shortly after the President's speech, Marshall addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee, asking for universal military training. He discussed the "disintegrating trend" in Europe of nations falling to communism. He concluded with an analogy to Hitler: "It is said that history never repeats itself. Yet if these free people are one by one subjugated to police state controls even the blind may see a deadly parallel."  

The next day the Senate Armed Services Committee heard from the leaders of the military establishment who testified to the need for rebuilding the armed forces.

On March 18 the State Department released reports from Athens of three Soviet-supported International Brigades poised in the Balkans ready to attack across the border into Greece. On March 19th and 20th, Secretary Marshall made two speeches in California, both likened the situation in Europe to German expansion under Hitler, and both called for speedy passage of ERP. On March 21 the White House released the "United States Industrial Mobilization Plan--1947," a general plan for mobilizing the countries industries for war. On March 19 the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported

---


the omnibus foreign aid bill to the House with ERP fully intact. In the report the House committee stated that it was taking swift action on ERP to "reverse the trend of communism in Europe" and that it hoped the measure would have an influence on the elections in Italy. Over the weekend of March 20-21 it became known that Republican leaders in the House predicted that ERP would pass in exactly the form the administration requested by March 31 or shortly thereafter.\(^{313}\)

Former President Herbert Hoover, who had been advocating only giving $4 billion, urged support for the whole package on March 23. However by this time, Marshall was concerned that the war scare was getting out of control and the State Department announced that he planned to leave for Bogota for six weeks to attend the forthcoming Inter-American Conference. His absence was going to extend beyond the Italian elections. As Harold Knutsen, Republican head of the House Ways and Means Committee observed, "Things can't be very serious when Secretary of State Marshall goes to Bogota for six weeks."\(^{314}\) The House approved the bill 329 to 74 on March 31.\(^{315}\)

The war scare continued through April, but it was fueled by the Pentagon exclusively after this point. The Truman administration tried to rein in Pentagon officials. On March 25 Truman wrote Edwin G. Nourse, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, encouraging the council to hold the line on military spending: "We must be


\(^{314}\) Ibid., p. 141.

\(^{315}\) Hartmann, *Truman and the 80th Congress*, p. 164.
careful that the military does not overstep the bounds from an economic standpoint domestically. Most of them would like to go back to a war footing—that is not what we want." At this time, some Republican Congressmen trying to embarrass the administration began investigating the amount of trade between the US and the USSR and Eastern Europe. There was a considerable amount of trade, and when Truman was questioned about this on March 25, he responded: "Russia is, at present time, a friendly nation and has been buying goods from us right along." The war scare was winding down.

Truman needed to control the war scare for several reasons. The most important reason was that the administration did not want to provoke the Soviet Union. Another problem for the administration was that it wanted to focus on rebuilding Europe with foreign aid, not on rearming the US. If war was imminent it made more sense to rearm than to launch a foreign aid program. The administration knew this, and all of their discussions of the "crisis" were vague, without a definite immediate threat of war. Military officials and their supporters, such as Byrnes, discussed the imminent threat of war specifically.

Truman was also concerned about keeping the budget under control in an election year. Originally, Truman had asked Congress for $9.8 billion military budget for fiscal year 1949. After his March 17 speech, the military services pressed for several billion


more in supplemental appropriations. Truman then favored $1.5 billion in supplemental appropriations. The services kept pressing and there was support in Congress for more, so in an effort to restrain the services, Truman asked for only $3 billion on April 1. He also announced to the press that this defense fund was set on the assumption that war was "neither imminent nor inevitable." He said he wanted a peace program, not a war program. Congress raised Truman's supplemental defense appropriation to $3.2 billion.318

The Executive Branch, with the help of the military, exaggerated the threat and created the belief that war was possibly imminent in early 1948. This fabricated crisis insured the passage of the Marshall Plan with full funding before the Italian elections. The administration had gotten what it wanted, but at a price. The crisis escalated beyond the control of the administration and resulted in provoking Congress to authorize more money for defense than the Truman administration thought prudent at the time.

Additionally, the anti-communist rhetoric made Congress press the administration to curtail trade between Eastern and Western Europe. Congress also pressured the administration to accept aid to China to resist communism—the administration did not want to aid the Nationalist Chinese. The administration resisted most of this pressure at this juncture, but this episode foreshadows the way policy can escape control when based on misinformation.

1950 and NSC 68

By the spring of 1950, Truman had a new Secretary of State. Dean Acheson had replaced George Marshall in 1949, and Acheson appointed Paul Nitze to replace George Kennan as the director of the Policy Planning Staff. These changes within the administration, among a number of others, proved very important in changing the goals of the Truman administration.\(^{319}\) Marshall and Kennan had worked to rein in defense budgets, and feared over-militarizing the "Soviet threat". They viewed the threat as largely a political struggle, and believed that improving the economy within the West was the way to prevail. President Truman was also dedicated to keeping the defense budget limited to the level of $13 billion in the spring of 1950 in order to promote economic welfare, and as explained in the previous chapter, many other members within his administration supported his program as well. In fact most members of the administration did not believe that the Soviet explosion of an atomic device or the "loss" of China warranted a major increase in defense spending.

Secretary of State Acheson, and Paul Nitze, many members of the Defense Department and some others within the administration were more concerned about the military situation. The division within the administration was evidenced by the fact that the leadership was divided over whether or not the U.S. should develop the "super"—the

\(^{319}\) James Webb left the Bureau of the Budget—he had been a strong economizer working to keep the defense budget down. Additionally, Dean Rusk became assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, and he was a strong advocate of anti-communism and for higher defense budgets. Leon Keyserling came to dominate the Council of Economic Advisers, and his views that budget deficits could grow the economy were critical to the NSC 68 programs. On important changes within the administration, see Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 276-278, 291-296.
hydrogen bomb. By the end of January, President Truman decided to go ahead with the development of the hydrogen bomb, and also to undertake a major review of U.S. strategic programs. This review produced the document NSC 68.

Also during this time it seemed that the Republicans in Congress were gaining the upper hand against the administration in the press, especially with their attacks on Acheson. In late 1949 a State Department white paper explained Communist success in China as due to shortcomings in the Chinese Nationalist Regime, and that lack of U.S. support had been of little consequence. This had drawn right-wing criticism on Acheson and the State Department that the U.S. had “lost China” because Communists and fellow travelers in the U.S. government had blocked support for the Nationalists. In January 1950, a federal jury found former State Department official Alger Hiss guilty of perjury—the charge was that he had lied under oath about being a Soviet spy in the 1930’s. At a press conference, Acheson said Hiss was an old friend and he would not turn his back on him. This gave more ammunition to Acheson’s critics. In February 1950, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin made headlines by claiming to have proof that the State Department harbored large numbers of “card-carrying Communists.” The heat was on, there was tremendous opposition in Congress to anything the administration proposed, as it was not clear Truman’s modest proposals for defense spending would pass the Congress. Acheson believed it was time for the administration to take the initiative.

Acheson and Nitze shared the view that the U.S. needed to build up its military capabilities in order to meet the increasing Soviet challenge. Their main fear was that now that the Soviets had acquired an atomic capability, it would not be long before the
Soviets had the capability to deter U.S. atomic capability. They feared that the Soviets might well become more aggressive at that point since the West lacked a large conventional capability to deter the Soviet’s conventional capability. To write NSC 68, Acheson and Nitze gathered together a committee of like-minded officials, including supporters in the State and Defense departments, but they did not include any officials who were intent on keeping the defense budget to Truman’s preferred $13 billion level.\textsuperscript{320} They wrote NSC 68 in February and March of 1950. The document included no budget estimates for its proposals because Acheson wanted to avoid controversy during the drafting of the document.\textsuperscript{321} During this time they presented the document to individuals within the administration to hear their criticisms and get them to sign on. Acheson and Nitze organized the bureaucratic coup explained in the previous chapter, where they cornered Secretary of Defense Johnson, and got him to sign on, and then presented the document to Truman on April 7, 1950 with tremendous support already lined up. It would have been very difficult for the President to reject the document outright when the administration faced such hostile opposition in Congress. The word would have leaked that the President wanted to do nothing while facing a united bureaucracy warning that the nation and the entire free world risked enslavement by the hostile Communists bent on world domination.

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., p. 295; Ernest R. May, ed., \textit{American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68} (Boston: Bedford Books of St Martin’s Press, 1993), pp. 7-17.

\textsuperscript{321} Acheson, \textit{Present at the Creation}, p. 374.
Not only did Acheson and Nitze “bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’” into resolute action as Acheson later admitted, they also recognized that they needed to “educate” the public. NSC 68 discussed the need to educate the public about the threat. In drafting meetings the committee discussed how to present their report so as to secure support in Congress and from the general public. Robert Lovett told the drafting committee that the documents conclusions should be stated “simply, clearly, and in … ‘Hemingway sentences,’” and he argued “If we can sell every useless article known to man in large quantities, we should be able to sell our very fine story in large quantities.”

Edward W. Barrett, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, planned how to proceed with the public relations campaign, stating that it was important to have “at least the broad proposals for action well in hand before the psychological ‘scare campaign’ is started.”

Acheson went public in a number of speeches and appearances before Congressional committees in the spring of 1950, conveying the essence and tone of NSC 68 by arguing the U.S. needed to defend “the free world” and “We believe that all people in the world are entitled to as much freedom, to develop in their own way, as we want ourselves.”

Acheson, who had developed the Truman Doctrine speech, launched a new crusade to inspire America to act in the face of danger.

---


323 Ibid., p. 108.

324 Ibid., p. 108.
There had been steady criticism in the press of Truman's defense budget since it was proposed in the fall of 1949, continuing through the spring of 1950. Very steady and acerbic were the attacks by Joseph and Stewart Alsop with such headlines as "More American Disarmament" and "Retreat from Reality". Additionally, in May 1950, leaks of NSC 68 began appearing in the press. For example, Ernest K. Lindley of Newsweek wrote about one of the central themes of NSC 68—that because of the relative pace of military modernization the years 1952 to 1954 would be a "period of maximum danger." The public and the Congress were fully exposed to the themes of NSC 68 before the June 25 invasion of South Korea.

The real political fight over the budget required by NSC 68 was just about to take place when North Korea launched its attack on South Korea. This attack confirmed the findings of NSC 68 for many people, including Truman. One likely reason NSC 68 was so readily and fully adopted by the Truman administration after the attack on Korea was not only that the groundwork had been laid, and people believed, but also that the entire administration realized that the panic had grown like a snowball, with political momentum, since 1947. Truman had introduced the ideological crusade against communism in 1947, and added the military fear of a possible imminent invasion in 1948, and now the Republicans were using McCarthyism to attack the Administration for being

325 The Alsops did not let up, especially attacking Secretary of Defense Johnson. These articles appeared in the Washington Post, December 19, 1949, and February 15, 1950. For lengthy list of press attacks on Truman's defense budget, see Hogan, A Cross of Iron, pp. 286-287.


260
soft on communism in Asia. These fears combined so strongly that for Truman to regain the initiative he had to fully take the lead—get on top of the snowball in order to avoid being crushed by it. By June 1950, U.S. perceptions had been fundamentally shifted within the administration and among the public. Communism posed a major urgent military challenge to the free world, and it had to be stopped everywhere.

H8: Militarism and the Panic of 1950:

Does militarism explain the misperceptions of this period? Did the military help to inflate the threat to the public or in the threat assessment process? I find that the military was a very strong source for the public misperceptions of 1948. Without the military’s efforts to create the war scare of 1948, the administration probably would have never been able to sell the Marshall Plan to Congress. Congress was very resistant that spring because they did not want to hand Truman a major foreign policy victory right before the presidential elections. The military’s participation in the war scare led to a full victory for the Marshall Plan, and a $3.2 billion supplemental appropriation for defense that Truman had not wanted earlier in the year, and resisted each step of the way. Truman ultimately refused to spend all of the money Congress had appropriated for defense.

The military did not play a leading public role in the more intense panic of 1950. At the beginning of the year it appeared that the services were going to accept Truman’s defense budget ceiling of $13 billion, and not make their usual end-run to
Congress for additional funds. Or so they said—it would have been incredible if they had not. However, the services did not need to take the lead at this point. The State Department was arguing for far more resources for them than they had imagined possible. The services clearly worked to support the Acheson and Nitze effort however they could.

Did the military inflate estimates of the threat within the threat assessment process? I argue that the military did inflate the threat in the assessment process, but it is difficult to determine how important this was. It seems as though from the end of World War II until mid-1949, civilian elites understood the military’s propensity to exaggerate the threat in order to justify higher budgets—budgets they deemed necessary considering the large number of commitments they were expected to fulfill. Truman administration leaders seem to completely discount the ominous assessments coming from the military about possible Soviet capabilities. But then there was a change within the administration. Acheson and Nitze replaced leaders who had worked to keep down military budgets. Acheson and Nitze sincerely believed the U.S. needed bigger military budgets. At this point, I would argue that it is likely that these leaders used the military’s dire assessments to help advocate for the budgets they deemed necessary. Most likely they were aware that these estimates were exaggerations of the threat to some degree (although they probably thought others were underestimating the threat), but they acted as if these were reasonable assessments—arguing, “how were we to know better?” In sum, I find that the military’s exaggerated estimates are useful political scripts for elites within the decision making process.
The Military and the War Scare of 1948:

The military made the passage of the Marshall Plan possible in the spring of 1948. Congress was in no mood to pass Truman’s foreign aid package, and congressional leaders even warned officials not to be “propagandists” in their presentation of the situation before Congress. The administration most likely could not have created a crisis by itself. The military, in the interests of their own budgets and not for the Marshall Plan, joined forces with the State Department in the effort to create a crisis to push the Congress to appropriate funds for both the military and the Marshall Plan. The combined effort worked. The “crisis” was recognized to have been a fake and was investigated at the end of 1948, and it was found that an “irresponsible intelligence report”, also called “military intelligence bungling”, was to blame “at the time when Congress was being asked to vote more funds for the Army and Navy.”327

Historian Frank Kofsky provides an incredibly detailed account of the events and actions of key figures in this crisis. The most important evidence for the hypothesis in question here, is how the very influential “Clay Telegram” was a fraud, solicited by higher military authorities for use before Congress. Most likely this telegram was solicited by Secretary of Defense James Forrestal and Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall, who Kofsky argues probably worked together to create the crisis.328 It appears they were working on stirring up a crisis independent of the State

327 Kofsky, Harry Truman and the War Scare of 1948, p. 110.

328 Kofsky puts together a large amount of convincing circumstantial evidence to
Department, and before Forrestal met with Secretary of State Marshall and apparently coordinated efforts on March 2, as discussed above. The Clay telegram was solicited directly by Lieutenant General Stephen J. Chamberlin, director of army intelligence, and he received it on March 5, 1948 as an "eyes only" telegram. Recall, the telegram came from Clay in Germany, reporting on his feeling that he could not define or support with "data or outward evidence" that war might come with "dramatic suddenness".

A biographer of Clay's pointed out that on the same day that he sent that telegram, Clay sent another to Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. of Massachusetts that read: "I believe American personnel are as secure here [in Berlin] as they would be at home ... Probably no occupation force ever lived under as secure conditions and with greater freedom from serious incidents than do the American forces in Germany." When asked by his biographer to explain the discrepancy between these two messages, Clay replied:

General Chamberlin came to see me in Berlin in late February [1948] ... He told me that the Army was having trouble getting the draft reinstalled, and they needed a strong message from me that they could use in congressional testimony. So I wrote out this cable. I sent it directly to Chamberlin and told him to use it as he saw fit. I assumed they would use it in closed session [of various congressional committees.] I certainly had no idea they would make it public. If I had, I would not have sent it. ... Shortly afterwards I remember that [Under Secretary of the Army] Bill Draper asked

---

Kofsky provides evidence of them meeting at key times (with no record of what was said), but then separate underlings appear to have the same instructions afterward to solicit the telegram from Clay, etc. See Ibid., pp. 107-109.

329 Ibid., p. 106.
me in a teleconference to give him a statement he could use before the House Appropriations Committee. I told him I had already sent one to Chamberlin.\textsuperscript{330}

Upon receipt of the telegram, Chamberlin presented the telegram to Army intelligence and they reexamined available information bearing upon possible Soviet intentions, and reviewed their estimates, and concluded that their was no new evidence and their estimates remained the same, "the Soviets will continue their expansionist policy taking care to avoid war."\textsuperscript{331} Chamberlin also held a meeting at his Army Intelligence Division at which "all interested agencies were present," meaning the CIA, State, Army, Navy and Air Force were present. A summary of the meeting records that General Chamberlin expressed his views as to the danger of war "but these views were not concurred in by other agencies except possibly Air Force although this is not certain." The CIA promptly convened a second meeting, probably to reconcile Chamberlin’s "pessimistic views of the situation" and from this they prepared a brief estimate sent to the President on March 16 stating "there was no likely danger of war within 60 days." All agencies except the Air Force agreed there was no likely war through the end of 1948, but the Air Force dissented because they reasoned that there was no way to predict the "Oriental Russian mind" beyond 60 days.\textsuperscript{332}

Chamberlin’s pessimistic views were rejected by all of his counterparts in other agencies, and his staff, and it even appears that he concurred in his staff’s findings

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., p. 106.

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., p. 114.

\textsuperscript{332} Ibid., p. 116.
rejecting these views, but he did not give up the cause. He abandoned the effort of having the CIA or other intelligence agencies support his analysis. Instead, it was his responsibility to prepare an intelligence summary to be incorporated into the army’s presentation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday March 18. He wrote his own eight page single spaced “Estimate of the World Situation” on March 14. It was a war-scare *magnum opus*. It discussed the “World Military Imbalance” and read “The Soviet Army is virtually on a war footing,” capable of expanding to “320 line divisions within 30 days.” It discussed the Soviet’s intensive training, improved weapons, rapid progress in development of long-range air force, expanding submarine fleet, etc. all enhancing Soviet offensive power. He also discussed how these Soviet forces could be supported in their offensive by 1,200,000 satellite forces. He also discussed “Increasing International Tension”, and how the “overwhelming Soviet military strength” could advance with no opposition. He had another section on “War Increasingly Possible” which included that “war will become increasingly probable.” He recommended reinstating selective service, undertaking “industrial mobilization” and providing for our own rearmament and assisting in the rearming of friendly states.  

Chamberlin’s “Estimate” appears to have been put to good use by Army Chief of Staff Omar Bradley before the Senate. It also appears that Secretary of Defense Forrestal used this estimate in some of his testimony, as did others. Other factions of

---

333 Ibid., p. 113.

334 Ibid., pp. 119-122.
the military also joined in the war scare. Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan testified that “recently submarines not belonging to any nation west of the ‘iron curtain’ have been sighted off our shore.” It was pointed out in the Wall Street Journal that there was no nation but Russia behind the iron curtain known to have a submarine fleet. The secretary added that he was “not prepared to evaluate the significance of these sightings.” But he added, “However, we all recall that an early step of the Germans in 1917 and 1941 was to deploy submarines off our coast.”

Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington did his part as well. To the public and press he argued, “we are not at peace,” and “Threat of the Red army and the Red air force hangs like a cloud on the horizon.” To the House Armed Services Committee he testified, “the Russians are building as fast as they can the greatest air force in the world, ... about 12 times the number of planes that we are. It would seem ... if they want to reach a decision with this country, that they want to reach it in the air. If that is true, what we ought to do is build an adequate air force ourselves.” The intelligence to support these statements was flimsy. Symington’s staff would not specify what types of planes the Soviets were producing—apparently one third were commercial, another third were “trainers” and the rest were combat aircraft—but all estimates of production were tentative. Other intelligence at the time, which the Air Force concurred in, noted that among the “weaknesses” of the U.S.S.R. were the facts that the Soviets had not designed or constructed a very heavy bomber, or any long-range bombers. Additionally, they were behind in electronics, technical know-how to operate strategic long-range air forces of

---

335 Ibid., pp. 144-145.
the kind the West used in World War II, they also lacked modern production techniques, and they lacked a sufficient number of well-qualified development and production personnel. Further, they lacked modern air bases suitable for the operation of heavy bombers and jet aircraft. The finding was that they could not launch an overseas or sustained airborne attack against the U.S. This meant that the U.S. would gain air supremacy in a future war, and be able to build up its forces without having to sustain attacks on its industry, while simultaneously being able to steadily weaken the Soviet’s industry. These more reassuring pieces of intelligence were not mentioned by Symington.336

The war scare continued with inflated testimonies before the Congress and the press for over a month. According to historian Michael Hogan, the services tried to “make the most of the war scare” by seeking the “utmost expansion” of their budgets.337 The military succeeded, against Truman’s strong resistance, to get a supplemental defense appropriation of $3.2 billion passed through Congress. While the military played a key role in this war scare, it had not played a role in 1947, and would only play a supporting role in 1950. However, this war scare was crucial for setting the stage that the Soviet forces were formidable and possibly ready to attack. By 1950, this threat was even easier to conjure up once the base had been established. The Soviet explosion of an atomic device did not immediately scare the public, but with a little “educating” the threat was easily made imminent once again.

336 Ibid., pp. 152-156.

337 Hogan, A Cross of Iron, p. 103.
Military in the threat assessment process:

It seems almost self-evident after reviewing the above behavior that the military was in the practice of inflating estimates whenever it could in order to justify larger budgets. There is no doubt that to maintain credibility the military did concur in reasonably detailed and accurate assessments of the Soviets which included listing their "weaknesses" as described just above. However, it seems that it was a well-known fact around Washington that the services were prone to exaggeration. This view arises from the fact that Truman had struggled with gaining control of the services through unification and basically lost. The military became the "third" position in Washington after the Democrats and Republicans--at least the National Military Establishment rivaled the State Department in the field of foreign policy, and continually challenged civilian authority when it came to the defense budget.  

One way the military inflated the threat would be through vague or partial assessments. As discussed in chapter three, it appears the Army had some fairly accurate intelligence to demonstrate that the Soviet Army did not have 175 line divisions at full strength as implied in intelligence reports in 1950, but according to Nitze it was not known by civilian authorities that these divisions were not full strength. The exaggerations of the military are difficult to pin down because each

---


339 See Phillip A. Karber and Jerald A. Combs, "The United States, NATO, and the
service was assessing the threat according to its preferred worst-case scenario of a future war. This means that the Army pointed out all the ways the West was not prepared to handle every conventional contingency, and the Air Force pointed out all the possible ways the West was not meeting every possible air war contingency, and likewise for the Navy. Truman continuously asked the services to coordinate their war plans and strategic guidelines, but interservice rivalry constantly prevented them from doing so. By having separate assessments of the threat and interservice rivalry, the civilians could figure out to some extent the ways the different branches were exaggerating. For example, when Symington met with success in front of Congress by exaggerating the Soviet air threat, Secretary of Defense Forrestal went to the Senate Armed Services Committee and reported that the CIA had determined that one third of the planes Symington had implied the Soviets were producing for their air force were commercial planes, etc, and that estimates of production rates were not solid, and that these were pessimistic estimates of production rates. Forrestal wanted large forces, but he wanted “balanced” forces and the Air Force met with too much success in Congress.  

The Truman administration and the CIA had continuously concluded that there was no indication that the Soviets would deliberately start a war—until the spring of 1950. At that point, the State Department had changed leadership, and with the help of

---


the services, they attacked the CIA draft estimate that found “possession of the atomic
bomb has not yet produced any apparent change in Soviet policy or tactics, and
probably will not do so at least through 1950.” The criticisms powerfully changed the
final draft. It found, “Soviet possession of atomic bombs increases the possibility that
the USSR will be able to weaken seriously the power position of the United States
without resorting to direct military action.” The report also stated, “the possibility of
direct military conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States is increased as a
result of Soviet possession of atomic weapons.” The possibility of a direct imminent
threat was allowed. What this turn about signified was a change from the
administration discounting military estimates as bureaucratically biased to embracing
military estimates as correct. I argue that the civilians adopted the military’s
exaggerated assessments of the threat because it allowed them to pursue the policies
they preferred. They were not “tricked” by the military, as Acheson’s later
acknowledgments of knowing exaggeration testifies. These leaders used readily
available “scripts” provided by the military, and they used the support of the services,
to argue for programs that they believed served the country, and helped them maintain
the “initiative” in domestic politics.

Overall, the military was a crucial and powerful ally for the administration in
1948 as it openly and publicly exaggerated the threat to the Congress and public. In
1950, the military played an important supporting role. The military, as it more or less

341 Emphasis added. Charles A. Kupchan, The Vulnerability of Empire (Ithaca and
constantly had, provided ‘scripts’ of inflated threat assessments that were readily available for the State Department to use when it changed from being skeptical of military estimates to embracing them.

**H7: Electoral Politics and the Panic of 1950:**

Did the struggle of electoral politics produce rhetoric that exaggerated the threat and caused the public to panic? This hypothesis possibly adds to the explanation of oversell, but at most only provides added emphasis to the role of the Republicans in this case, and does not identify an unidentified source of misperceptions. However, this hypothesis does highlight the role of the Republicans as the main force behind the misperception of “monolithic communism.” The public would have allowed the Truman administration more flexibility, and possibly allowed a “wedge strategy” with recognition and relations with the Chinese Communists, if the Republicans had not tried to use the issue of being “soft on communism” to partisan advantage. Partisan politics also explains some of Truman’s exaggerations better in the sense that he was at times more concerned with re-election than in passing the best policies in the interests of the state.

The oversell hypothesis argues that the executive branch exaggerates the threat in order to create a crisis so that its preferred policies pass Congress and get implemented. According to Lowi, the dangers of oversell are that it creates misleading expectations and limits the president’s future flexibility because politicians are often constrained to act in accordance with their rhetoric. Lowi’s description of oversell provides an explanation for the public’s misperception of a threat from “monolithic communism” as rooted in

272
Truman’s exaggerations in the Truman Doctrine to assist all “free peoples to work out their own destiny in their own way.” Truman at this point began the exaggeration of the need to resist communism everywhere, when he actually preferred stopping Soviet imperialism, and not waging an ideological crusade against communism everywhere. Thus, it appears oversell correctly identifies the source of this public misperception.

The electoral politics hypothesis would be the primary explanation for a misperception that was created by elites outside of power. However, one could argue in this case that the Republicans did help to create the misperception of “monolithic communism.” Truman’s rhetoric was vague and his administration worked from very early on to limit the application of his rhetoric, but the Republicans in the Congress forced him to apply his rhetoric fully to Asia—they kept bringing up the issue of China for partisan purposes and defined the threat in Asia as dire.

1948

In early 1948, when the administration exaggerated the communist threat in order to insure the passage of the Marshall Plan, Republican Congressmen raised the issue of also resisting communism in China in order to embarrass the administration for being "soft on communism," and also to avoid "me-tooism" in an election year. The Republican Congressmen took the strong stand as even more anticommunist than the administration, increasing the exaggeration of the threat to include the whole globe. This Republican stance ultimately forced the administration to include aid to the Chinese Nationalists in
1948, which the administration deemed a waste, and which most Republicans did not sincerely support as a good strategic investment.\textsuperscript{342}

Also in 1948, while the administration’s effort to exaggerate the threat was primarily motivated to unify the country in order to pass the administration’s preferred policies, hence done in the "best interest" of the country as oversell would explain, the motives of the administration were also, at times, strongly partisan. In particular, when President Truman addressed the Congress on March 17th, his speech was a highly calculated move to improve his image for the elections in the fall. He had low ratings at the time and his political advisers decided upon the exact speech he would deliver for maximum political impact. Secretary of State Marshall tried to influence his message based on considerations of not provoking the Soviets. Other administration officials confirmed that provoking the Soviets was a serious concern, but it appears this concern was overridden for political reasons.

1950

In early 1950, partisan politics motivated extensive threat inflation as the administration was under siege. Republicans had not benefited in the 1948 elections from cooperating on bipartisan foreign policy. In 1950 they decided to attack the Democratic foreign policy with a vengeance.\textsuperscript{343} Bipartisanship disintegrated. They attacked Acheson

\textsuperscript{342} Christensen, Useful Adversaries, pp. 64-76; Pollard, Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1950, p. 151.

for the loss of China, defending Alger Hiss and then they joined McCarthy in attacking
the State Department for harboring communists. Acheson had been planning new foreign
policy initiatives since the summer and fall of 1949, including wanting to recognize the
CCP in China. By March of 1950, Acheson believed there was no possibility that
anything but the "toughest" policy would be possible because anything less would be
vehemently attacked as being "soft on communism" and ultimately defeated.

The Republicans focused on attacking Acheson for his "loss" of China, and in this
way stressed that the spread of communism to China as a major strategic loss, and stressed
that the further spread of communism in Asia should not be allowed. Because of this
pressure, the Republicans forced the administration to have a strong response to the North
Korean invasion and to intervene to protect Taiwan (Formosa) from the CCP.

In these ways, partisan politics exerted strong pressures toward threat inflation.
In 1948, the pressure of the upcoming elections in the fall made it look like the
Marshall Plan would not pass, so the administration created a war scare with the help
of the military. In 1950, after learning bipartisanship did not pay electoral dividends in
1948, the pressure of partisan politics nearly made the creation and execution of foreign
policy impossible for the administration. The administration had to create its most
threat inflated stance ever as defined by NSC 68. While the oversell hypothesis explains
the sources of the misperceptions in this case, the electoral politics hypothesis provides an
explanation for the motivations of the elites outside the executive branch. These elites
were not constraining the foreign policy of the executive branch because they came to

1981), pp. 143-146.
believe in the rhetoric of the executive branch, rather they were using the rhetoric as a weapon in partisan politics and this fight defined the foreign policy.

**H6: Logrolling in the Panic of 1950:**

Did groups that derive parochial benefits from expansion, from military preparations associated with expansion, or from the domestic political climate brought about by intense international competition, join together to form a logrolled coalition and exaggerate the threat? Jack Snyder argues that this coalition logrolling theory explains the development of Acheson and Nitze's pursuit of "Cold War Globalism" which emerged with full force a few months before the outbreak of war in Korea. In this way, he claims the theory explains the causes of the national misperceptions of this panic.

Snyder explains that in the late 1940's there were two groups vying for control of national security policy. The 'Eastern internationalist' school, epitomized by Secretary of State Acheson, wanted "deep American involvement in multilateral economic and military institutions designed to stabilize Western Europe in the face of the Soviet threat."344 This group had little interest in Asia and feared getting involved in land wars in Asia. The opposing group was the 'Middle Western nationalist' school epitomized by Republican Senator Robert Taft. This nationalist group resisted expensive economic and military aid programs for Europe, preferring to invest in rearming the US with atomic air power which they believed could sufficiently contain the global expansion of communism. Both of these groups had a fairly coherent plan for providing for national security; each plan

---

344 Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, p. 255.
separately had a healthy sense of the limits of American power and would choose to avoid overexpansion. However, these groups disagreed on US priorities and therefore they each preferred very different national security policies.

A third group was the "Pentagon Unilateralists." Snyder explains that leaders of the military were very interested in acquiring a reliable set of bases in the Far East that could be used for atomic attacks on the Soviet Union. They were also interested in whatever strong points they thought they could get sufficient resources to defend, but they did not want to spread their resources too thin, so they would argue against commitments for which resources were not forthcoming. Snyder contends that these three groups were joined together in a coalition by some coalition managers who became powerful under the banner of "Cold War Globalism."

Snyder accurately describes how the wing of the Republican party Taft spoke for, known as the "Old Guard," was not much interested in commitments to Europe or Asia. They had a reputation as "Asia-firsters" but they had no economic or traditional ties to Asia. Most of them were primarily isolationists who championed the cause of island bases for air power, and they supported some aid for the Nationalist resistance of communism in China. The main reason they favored support for the Nationalist Chinese was to embarrass the administration. The administration employed globalist rhetoric when it called for resisting "communist aggression" (as opposed to resisting Soviet imperialism) because the theme of "anticommunism" successfully sold their foreign aid programs to the

---

public. However, the administration had very little interest in resisting communism in
China because the cost was too high and the strategic stakes were too small. The
administration also believed the Chinese communists were nationalists and not puppets of
Moscow, so their victory in the Chinese civil war would not be a major victory for Soviet
imperialism. In short, administration resistance to support for the Chinese Nationalists
gave the "Asia-firsters" a chance to expose the administration as "soft on communism"
while they would be seen as thoroughly anti-communist. It also gave them a way to
undercut the administration's expensive aid programs for Europe.

Snyder's description of the case is accurate, but his theory loses its power when
one considers that the "Asia-firsters" had no real economic stake in expansionist foreign
policies.346 This fact draws into question the idea that this group derived "parochial
benefits" from joining the logrolled coalition. It is more accurate to describe them as
deriving "partisan" benefits from the fight—the issue itself was not important to them.
Deriving partisan benefits means that they are in no way acting to "capture the state" to
derive benefits from expansion, instead they have no real interest in expansion—they
would have preferred no expansion to what they got. In this sense, Truman won and they
lost.

Additionally, the "parochial benefits" of the "Eastern internationalists" are vague,
and thus unsatisfying. Snyder talks around the loose association the leaders have with the
supposed groups deriving parochial benefits by saying that the state officials do not need
direct, explicit, conspiratorial ties to the groups that derive the parochial benefits; the

346 Making a similar argument is Christensen, Useful Adversaries, pp. 70-71.

278
leaders can be "captured" and believe what they are doing is in the best interest of the state. However, this is problematic. If the leaders are unaware of the specific groups or the parochial benefits they are promoting, and think they are acting on behalf of the state, they are very far removed from the “parochial benefits”. It seems more likely that they were actually interested in the strategic “best interests” of the state and got caught in the dilemma of divided government, and then felt they were forced to exaggerate. However, Snyder’s explanation of “parochial benefits” does accurately describe the interests of the “Pentagon Unilateralists.”

Snyder does an accurate job of describing the actual politics and interests of the groups involved. However, his hypothesis does not fit his description in that it does not accurately capture the reasons for why the threat became exaggerated. His hypothesis would emphasize actual interests in expansion as the main motivation behind the overexpansion of the state. This would lead to the conclusion that to stop overexpansion, a state would need to expose these “parochial interests” in order to keep them in check. Alternatively, the explanations I have provided argue that expansion is the result of the propaganda generated largely by the domestic political process. Elites in power exaggerate the threat to pass their preferred strategy over the opposition, and elites out of power want to defeat elites in power. The Pentagon has organizational interests in bigger budgets, so are the closest to having “parochial interests” in expansion, but they would

\[347\] For a critique of Snyder’s description of how the voting blocs worked see Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire*, p. 479. However, I believe that Snyder is correct when he argues that the administration logrolled with Asia-first nationalists to get its foreign policies passed by Congress, and this is why aid to China was consistently tacked on.
prefer to stay home with their big budgets if possible. Snyder's analysis overlaps considerably with my own, but his single domestic political explanation for exaggerations of threats does not quite match the evidence in this case.

Conclusions:

In this chapter I have argued that the oversell hypothesis is the primary explanation for the national misperceptions in this case. The Executive Branch took the lead in exaggerating the threat in 1947, 1948 and 1950. At each juncture, leaders anticipated congressional resistance to their preferred strategies, so they employed rhetoric to sell their preferred policies "in the best interest of the country" that led to the public misperceptions. The military played a critical role in helping to create the war scare of 1948. Without the military's assistance, the administration most likely would not have succeeded in selling the Marshall Plan. In 1950, Acheson and Nitze took the initiative to exaggerate the threat, and they used the support of the services to win the political struggle to define the threat within the administration. These State Department leaders also used the readily available inflated estimates the services provided to support their positions.

Republican leaders, and the electoral politics hypothesis, helps to highlight the role the Republicans played in defining the communist threat in Asia as dire. However, the oversell hypothesis correctly identifies Truman as the original source of the globalist rhetoric that defined the need to fight communism everywhere. The logrolling hypothesis does not match this case because there was no coalition of groups with actual interests in
expansion. The Republicans had no real interests in Asia; they were using the issue to embarrass the administration. Further, it seems more accurate to describe the Truman administration’s main motives the way the oversell hypothesis describes them—as using rhetoric to sell policies in the “best interests of the country,” rather than as promoting “parochial interests” in expansion. However, it does appear that the Truman administration often had dual motives—promoting policies in the best interests of the country and winning domestic political struggles. Truman used strong rhetoric to increase his popularity, and the administration adopted “strong policies” in 1950 in order to defeat the criticisms that they were “soft” on communism.

The domestic political hypotheses of oversell and militarism work best to explain the sources of the national misperceptions of this case. These hypotheses fit much better than the rational and psychological hypotheses discussed in the last chapter because the leaders did not panic alongside the public—they did not share the fears the public had. The elites did not fear war in 1948 at all, and they did not fear “monolithic communism” in 1950 either. Most controversially, I argue they did not actually fear a direct conventional threat in 1950 or anytime soon thereafter. It was an uncertain time because many leaders did not know how the Soviets would behave after they built up their atomic capability, but the leaders feared Soviet advances on the periphery and not a direct confrontation. They employed the rhetoric of a direct confrontation and total losses, in order to sell a defensive strategy—when they were really interested in a highly ambitious globalist strategy that included the policy goal of “calculated and gradual coercion”.

281
Leaders recognized they were exaggerating the threat. Even after the outbreak of war in Korea, key figures in Nitze’s own Policy Planning Staff questioned the implications of the rhetoric of NSC 68 for policy formulation. One argument they put forth was that while the administration might need to “oversimplify Soviet intentions in appealing to Congress and the people for support, ... the NSC [should not] become ‘hoisted by our own petard.’” They recognized they were intentionally exaggerating the threat and they worried about the consequences of that strategy. These concerns were not new in 1950. The Policy Planning Staff under Kennan drafted a memo in May 1947, after the Truman Doctrine, warning that popular misconceptions resulting from the Truman Doctrine needed to be corrected. This memo urged that the public needed to be told that economic recovery in Europe was important independent of the communist threat; the need for foreign assistance should not be linked to an ideological confrontation. The public should not understand the policy as “a blank check to give economic and military aid to any area of the world where the communists show signs of being successful.” These concerns were recognized, and later proved prophetic.

The intentional creation of public misperceptions had important and lasting consequences. The Truman administration was constrained in 1950 to uphold its earlier globalist rhetoric, and ended up fighting a long war in Korea and intervening in the Chinese civil war. Tapping into the “military threat” in 1948 strengthened the

arguments and standing of the military bureaucracy, making the argument that the Soviets possibly posed an immediate military threat plausible. This "war scare" helped lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that it spurred somewhat higher defense spending in the U.S., and at the same time, the Soviets began to re-militarize. It is likely the Soviets were going to re-militarize to some degree in response to the Marshall Plan, and the creation of NATO, and other actions beyond the war scare and its immediate results. But the war scare strengthened all of the efforts to militarize containment by making the threat military instead of political. This was not the direction the administration preferred to go, but the powerful image of a massive Red Army ready to sweep across Europe grew more immediate and threatening to the public after 1948, and the administration ended up having to militarize containment in order to meet this looming threat.
CHAPTER 5

THE MISSILE GAP AND THE PANIC OF 1960

“For a decade after Sputnik, however, the public mood in the United States was one of support for almost anything proposed in the name of national security. During this period, the Secretary of Defense was under constant pressure to spend more money than he believed necessary. In practically every conflict between the Secretary of Defense and the Congress over spending, the Congress wanted to spend more. The Armed Services Committees were rarely challenged by the rest of the Congress. Their main theme was that the military leaders are the experts; they know best what the nation needs for national defense; any reduction from what they recommend means risking the nation’s security; and such shortfalls must be exposed and attacked as such.”

On October 4, 1957 the Soviet Union launched a 184-pound artificial satellite, Sputnik I, into space. The public reaction was immediate; the Soviet achievement caused a crisis of confidence in the United States. “Many citizens reacted by questioning the vitality of an entire way of life, expressing concern that Sputnik signaled the weakness of American science, the failure of American schools, and the complacency of American political leadership. Worst of all, they feared that the Soviet Union had gained a lead in developing long-range missiles, thereby threatening the very security of the United States in the nuclear age.” The public response has been described as “hysterical” and “panicky” but if you examine the various contemporary

---


interpretations of Sputnik in the media, it is apparent that it was not at all immediately clear what type of challenge Sputnik actually posed. Was it primarily a cultural challenge, an educational challenge, a scientific challenge or a military challenge?

Fears of the Soviet Union increased generally, but the substance and significance of those fears were hotly debated.\textsuperscript{352} The Gaither Report, a secret advisory report prepared for the President and presented to him shortly after Sputnik, helped to define the specific fear of strategic vulnerability caused by a “missile gap” when it was leaked to the press in December 1957.\textsuperscript{353} This fear eventually became the central exaggerated threat of this tense period, from the launching of Sputnik in October 1957 until February 1961, when it was leaked from the Kennedy Administration that there was no missile gap.\textsuperscript{354} Public concern about a possible “missile gap” fluctuated during this period, and public fear actually peaked in 1960, two years after the launching of Sputnik.

President Eisenhower was not shocked by the Soviet satellite launch, and he did not interpret it as having any ominous meaning. On several occasions Eisenhower tried to “allay hysteria and alarm” as when he held a press conference five days after the

\textsuperscript{352} For an excellent discussion of the contemporary public debate over the meaning of Sputnik, see Ibid., pp.xiii-17.


\textsuperscript{354} The Kennedy Administration did not officially end the “missile gap” until the fall of 1961, but on February 4, 1961 Secretary of Defense McNamara said to the press that there was “no missile gap” in a “background briefing.” The administration was immediately embarrassed and tried to deny the alleged report of “no missile gap”. They had limited success in their efforts at keeping it an open possibility.
launch and remarked: "As far as the satellite itself is concerned that does not raise my apprehensions, not one iota."\textsuperscript{355} Eisenhower's repeated efforts to convince the American public that they were secure- that their fears of a "missile gap" were exaggerated and unfounded- never wholly resonated with the public. With hindsight, it is clear that President Eisenhower was right. A "missile gap" never materialized, and the Soviets never actually attempted to hastily build enough missiles to be able to achieve, or even threaten, a disarming first strike. What caused the public fears of a "missile gap"?

In this chapter, I will focus on the two main contending explanations for the overestimation of the Soviet threat in this period: "uncertainty" versus "politics". Many scholars argue that the fears of the "missile gap" were justified at the time because they were rooted in the uncertainty of the time.\textsuperscript{356} This school of thought contends that the United States overestimated the threat because of insufficient information. This view emphasizes that intelligence reports overestimated the emerging Soviet missile capabilities at the time because there was very little "hard" evidence available. Estimates based on such a small amount of evidence ended up allowing for a wide range of "possible" future Soviet capabilities, and could therefore rationally predict very large future Soviet capabilities. This view argues that estimators were


\textsuperscript{356} Emphasizing the difficulties of estimating future capabilities during this period, see Peter J. Roman, \textit{Eisenhower and the Missile Gap} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); David L. Snead, \textit{The Gaither Committee, Eisenhowe\textvisiblespace}r, and the Cold War (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999). Stressing the difficulties of estimating Soviet intentions, see Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary}. 286
doing the best they could considering the circumstances, and that they tended to resolve their uncertainties in the direction of prudence.\textsuperscript{357} In fact, this view often argues that President Eisenhower was “gambling” in his personal estimate—that Eisenhower was predicting that the Soviets were not engaged in an effort to gain meaningful superiority over the United States, but that he was basing his estimate on his personal judgment and not on “hard” evidence.\textsuperscript{358} Thus Eisenhower was willing to take the “risk” of allowing a “missile gap”, but this was highly irresponsible because, this school argues, allowing a significant missile gap could possibly have been totally devastating.

Others argue that insufficient information does not explain the panic over a possible “missile gap”. This school recognizes that there was significant uncertainty associated with the estimates of future Soviet capabilities and thus it is understandable that the intelligence reports overestimated them at the time.\textsuperscript{359} However, they argue,


\textsuperscript{358} Bundy explains that Eisenhower claimed in his memoirs how he believed the U-2 photos provided “proof” that there was no missile gap. However, technically they added more negative evidence—almost no evidence of missile deployment—so they supported the argument against a missile gap, but they were not conclusive. A missile gap was still a real possibility despite the U-2 photos. McGeorge Bundy, \textit{Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years} (new York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 338. Arguing that Eisenhower was “gambling” when he allowed a possible missile gap, see Roy E. Licklider, "The Missile Gap Controversy," \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 85 (1970), and Stewart Alsop, "Our Gamble with Destiny," \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} 231 (1959).

\textsuperscript{359} While some overestimation was justifiable, many from this view argue that the intelligence process was at least to some degree biased by the political atmosphere and bureaucratic interests. In other words, the intelligence community was pressured to overestimate--“a reasonable third-party observer” would not concur in their findings after considering the evidence available at the time. In fact, in a recently declassified document that was produced in 1968, the CIA analyzed the causes of the “missile gap”
the overestimations of Soviet capability did not cause the public fears of the time. Instead, the public fear was caused by the repeated underestimation of relative United States capability. The Eisenhower Administration, and the intelligence community, repeatedly pointed out that a possible “missile gap” did not mean there would ever be a “deterrence gap”. This school argues that it was Democrats with future presidential ambitions and the Air Force lobbying for increased budgets who were the core promoters of the unfounded fear of a “deterrence gap”. This view argues that even if a missile gap had emerged, the United States would still have maintained significant retaliatory forces, and thus did not need to fear a missile gap as a significant military threat. The United States was secure and would remain so; fears of a disarming first strike were highly exaggerated.360

360 Many argue that the U.S. was truly afraid because it was losing its superiority, and indeed many leaders were struggling with this reality at the time. However, this broad argument fails to recognize that U.S. fears could have taken many forms, and produced many possible reactions. If the U.S. had openly discussed the problem of losing its superiority, it might have been willing to negotiate détente sooner, as many historians argue Khrushchev actually favored doing at the time. Instead, the U.S. focused on a “missile gap” which led to a massive build-up of missiles, and increased tensions with the Soviets rather than decreasing tensions. See Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary, p. 50; Adam B. Ulam, Dangerous Relations: The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1970-1982 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 30; Henry Kissinger, White House Years: 1969-1973 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 113.
Overall I find that, while uncertainty about the specifics of the Soviet threat existed, it was electoral politics and militarism that created the highly exaggerated public fears of this period. Ambitious Democrats and the Air Force attached “excessive weight” to “alarmist projections” to create the illusion of American vulnerability to a disarming first strike, and this, in turn, created unwarranted intense public fears.361 Recent scholarship has maintained that the estimating process was highly complex and genuinely confused, and thus fears of U.S. vulnerability were rational and justifiable at this time, and not a product of “bureaucratic causes”.362 However, this explanation loses sight of the fact that even the worst-case projections of U.S. vulnerability, in which less than 5% of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) bombers survive, still allow for a very significant U.S. retaliatory capability. Clearly, the debate has been thoroughly confused by the fact that the intelligence process grossly overestimated Soviet capability because of uncertainty, and this was the basis of many simplistic public analyses. In spite of this fact, what needs to be emphasized is how militarily insignificant the overestimation by the intelligence community was. Even under the most dire projections of a “missile lag”, not even a marginally realistic Soviet “window of opportunity” ever emerged. Large, if not absolutely massive, U.S. nuclear retaliation was assured. This is what Eisenhower believed and said, and his administration, at times feebly, articulated. Eisenhower did not manage the situation well, but he was not gambling when he accepted the possibility of a missile lag. He

361 Freedman, U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat, p. 68.
understood U.S. retaliatory capabilities, and he maintained these capabilities both
prudently and excessively.

I will proceed by first explaining the public misperceptions of this period. Then
I will lay out how we know, with the benefit of hindsight, that there was no missile
gap, but how there was the possibility of a missile lag, which the U.S. foreclosed. I
will then turn to analyzing the uncertainty of the time by thoroughly examining the
problems of assessing Soviet capabilities, especially possible future capabilities, in this
period (H1). Then I will investigate the problems of estimating Soviet intentions in this
period (H2). Do these hypotheses explain the public misperceptions of this period? I
will then turn to evaluating the evidence for the hypotheses of electoral politics (H7)
and militarism (H8) to see if these explain the national misperceptions of this period.
These four hypotheses are the ones debated by historians and other scholars as the main
explanations for the misperceptions of this period. I will also consider the possible
influence of attribution errors (H3) and the misapplication of schemas (H4), although
these are difficult to support when the leaders in power do not share the misperceptions
of the public. For this same reason, the oversell hypothesis (H5) that posits the
Executive Branch exaggerates the threat, is irrelevant to this case. Similarly, the
logrolling hypothesis (H6) is irrelevant here, since there were no groups coming
together to form a coalition: the Democrats exaggerated the threat without help from
other groups. Finally, I will discuss some other important supplementary explanations
for these misperceptions, including the role of the media, the importance of the event of
Sputnik, and the lack of leadership by Eisenhower.

290
Public Misperceptions

"Sputnik kicked off a media riot in the U.S.," says historian Walter McDougall, "The opening of the space age was such a sexy topic and the idea that the Russians were up there first sounded so scary that the media virtually instructed Americans to panic."\(^{363}\) However, the public dialogue was initially very confused, and much discontent centered on criticisms of American society and its allowing materialism to come before investments in education and science. Popular pundits advised Americans to give up their love affair with material goods and strive to improve education, science and the quality of national life.\(^{364}\)\(^{365}\) Other leaders expressed more general fears. An oft-quoted comment was by Republican Senator Styles Bridges, who said "The time has clearly come to be less concerned with the depth of pile on the new broadloom rug or the height of the tail fin on the car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat and tears if this country and the Free World are to survive."\(^{366}\) To be sure, there were quite a number of people focusing on the fact that the Soviet launch of a satellite into space before the U.S. launched such a rocket indicated that the Soviets had a lead in ballistic missile technology. Democrats critical of the Eisenhower Administration quickly picked up on this theme. The Eisenhower Administration responded with reassurances so the situation initially remained confused. It was not until the unofficial release of the

\(^{363}\) Dorminey, "In the Shadow of Sputnik", p. 17.

\(^{364}\) Citing Walter Lippman and Norman Cousins, see Divine, The Sputnik Challenge, p. xvi.

\(^{366}\) As quoted in Ibid., p. xvi.
Gaither Report in December of 1957 and a congressional investigation into United States military preparedness that public fears of a "missile gap" began to fully crystallize.\textsuperscript{367}

The Gaither Report was discussed in the press in November after it had been secretly presented to Eisenhower, but its contents were first substantially reported by Chalmers Roberts of \textit{The Washington Post} on December 20\textsuperscript{th}. The content of the report, compiled by a group of advisors selected by the President, was alarming. Chalmers Roberts reported:

> The still top-secret Gaither Report portrays a United States in the gravest danger in its history. It pictures the nation moving in frightening course to the status of a second-class power. It shows an America exposed to an almost immediate threat from the missile-bristling Soviet Union. It finds America's long-term prospect one of cataclysmic peril in the face of rocketing Soviet military might and of a powerful, growing Soviet economy and technology which will bring new political propaganda, and psychological assaults on freedom all around the globe. In short, the report strips away the complacency and lays bare the highly unpleasant realities in what is the first across-the-board survey of the relative postures of the United States and the Free World and of the Soviet Union and the Communist orbit. To prevent what otherwise appears to be an inevitable catastrophe, the Gaither Report urgently calls for an enormous increase in military spending—from now through 1970—and for many other costly, radical measures of first and second priority. Only through such an all-out effort, the report says, can the United States hope to close the current missile gap and to counter the world-wide Communist offensive in many fields and in many lands.\textsuperscript{368}


\textsuperscript{368} Chalmers M. Roberts, \textit{First rough draft: a journalist's journal of our times} (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 149-150.
According to the President's chosen advisors, the outlook for the United States was bleak. Eisenhower thought the report exaggerated the threat, and even though there were widespread calls to release the report to the public after it had been publicized, Eisenhower refused.

Historian accounts agree that public fears were intense in the first five to six months after Sputnik, intensified by the Gaither Report and buoyed by ongoing Congressional hearings investigating United States military preparedness. By the end of the year the public hysteria was subsiding somewhat as the Eisenhower Administration responded to many of the criticisms including increasing the defense budget by $2.75 billion. The U.S. also successfully tested an Atlas ICBM in November, and sent intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), Thor missiles, to Great Britain at the end of the year.

However, public fears increased again at the beginning of 1959 when it appeared in the media that Secretary of Defense McElroy seemed to confirm in a "secret background briefing" that the Soviets would have a 3-1 advantage in missiles over the U.S. by 1961-1962. In 1959 there were various investigative hearings conducted by numerous committees of the Congress that kept the issue in the public eye. Senator Stuart Symington led the attack against the administration's alleged complacency, arguing that he had "other information" and the administration was

---

lulling the American people into a "state of complacency not justified by the facts."\textsuperscript{370} The furor was so great that it induced President Eisenhower to address the nation to defend his programs against charges of dangerous military inadequacy. He stated that the accusation "that our defenses are presently or will some time in the future be inadequate to meet the Communist challenge" was "simply not true" and was "without foundation."\textsuperscript{371}

While 1959 was a tense and contentious year in the U.S., it also saw diplomatic breakthroughs between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, with Khrushchev visiting points in the U.S. including Camp David in September 1959, leading to a brief détente that everyone termed "the Spirit of Camp David."\textsuperscript{372} After an easing of tensions, public fear and concern increased even more than ever in 1960. There are not many public opinion polls from this period to demonstrate the ups and downs of public fear, but historians generally agree with these observations.\textsuperscript{373} Several Gallup polls demonstrate


\textsuperscript{371} \textit{The New York Times}, text of Radio-Television address to the nation, March 17, 1959. Ibid., p. 98.

\textsuperscript{372} Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary}, p. 32.

\textsuperscript{373} Page and Shapiro have collected a very comprehensive collection of U.S. public opinion polls, and they point out that few are available from this period. However, they point to this period as one of dramatic public concern about a "missile gap." Page and Shapiro, \textit{The Rational Public}, pp. 226-227. Bottome carefully walks through the ups and downs by tracing the intermittent media frenzies about the "missile gap." Bottome, \textit{The Missile Gap: A Study of the Formulation of Military and Political Policy}. Generally agreeing with Bottome, see Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary} and Bundy, \textit{Danger and Survival}. Divine is one of the few historians who imply the public hysteria was greatest right after \textit{Sputnik} instead of in 1960. However, his study covers only the year after \textit{Sputnik}. Divine, \textit{The Sputnik Challenge}. 294
an increase in fears beginning shortly after *Sputnik* in 1957 to possibly even more fear in early 1958, as historians maintain. In mid-October of 1957, 49% of Americans surveyed responded “yes” when asked if Russia was moving ahead of the U.S. “in the development of missiles and long distance rockets.” Significantly, 32% said “no,” while 19% did not know. A January 1958 poll showed that 67% of those surveyed thought that Russia was “ahead in the cold war”—this high number came shortly after the leaking of the Gaither Report, with the first Congressional hearings making major headlines at this time. Interestingly, 35% of Americans polled in November and December 1957 mistakenly believed “that the Russians could wipe out most cities in the United States in a matter of a few hours with their new rockets and missiles.”

Another Gallup poll of October 3, 1958 showed that at that time 40% thought the Soviet Union was “ahead in the field of long-range missiles” while 37% thought that the United States led. This indicates a modest easing of fears in late 1958 as historians record. In addition to these post-*Sputnik* polls, there are two sets of poll data that show increasing public fear and tensions between 1957 and 1960, with the fear greatest in 1960.

The first set of poll data concerns the public’s expectation of nuclear war in five years. Specifically, the question asked “Do you think we are likely to get into another world war in the next five years?” Only 23% thought so in 1956. That number

---


climbed to 34% in April 1957 and 33% in December 1957.\textsuperscript{376} Expectations of war in
five years fell to 24% in April 1958, 23% in June 1959, 19% in August 1959 and 18%
in October 1959. Most interestingly, expectations rose again in 1960 to 34% in May
and 47% in July (see Table 1).\textsuperscript{377} Russett et. al. who have compiled this data have also
compiled and interpolated it with other like data to see how these expectations
demonstrate changes in public fear of war across time—see figure 1. Notice in figure 1
how there is a general downward trend in fear of war from the time of the first panic
(1950) and the Korean war, with some upswings of expectations of war during the
1950s, including the introduction of missiles in 1957, but then there is a sharp increase
in 1960—always described as a very tense election year including the downing of the
U-2 plane—with public expectations of war never to exceed those of 1960 except in
1961 at the time of Berlin crisis.

The second set of poll data which shows the increasing public concern with
security threats over this period is that which shows the increasing proportion of
Americans who strongly agreed that “(t)he United States should keep soldiers overseas
where they can help countries that are against communism”: 49% agreed in the autumn

\textsuperscript{376} Notice, this does not show any post-\textit{Sputnik} increase, but it does show a general
1957 increase. This could be explained by the fact that there were significant fears of
Soviet missiles even earlier in 1957 because Khrushchev had begun boasting at this
time. However historian accounts almost universally agree that \textit{Sputnik} was shocking,
increased general fears, and was translated into the specific fear of the missile gap over
the course of several months. The most detailed account of this period is Divine, \textit{The
Sputnik Challenge},

\textsuperscript{377} Table and all data compiled in Bruce Russett et al., "Did Americans' 
Expectations of Nuclear War Reduce Their Savings?," \textit{International Studies Quarterly}
of 1956; 55% in 1958, and 63% in the autumn of 1960.\textsuperscript{378} This poll data is only indicative and clearly not definitive. This period has become known from historian accounts as the “missile gap” period, even though there are not direct public opinion polls to demonstrate the centrality of the “missile gap” misperception throughout this period. Media analyses and images tended to focus on the “missile gap” as the central security concern of this period. Political leaders centered their national security speeches on the “missile gap”, even when they spoke in broad terms of becoming a second class power or “losing prestige” because the missile category was the only category the U.S. was presumably behind in, and it was considered generally the most important category.

I will focus my analysis on trying to understand the sources of the public misperception of a “missile gap.” I am not concerned here with the most basic notion that the public believed there would be a “missile lag.” It is well known that the U.S. intelligence agencies overestimated Soviet production of missiles. It is also well known that, at the same time, the U.S. chose not to produce large numbers of first-generation liquid-fueled missiles but to instead invest heavily in second-generation, more reliable solid-fueled missiles, and that it was widely anticipated that there would be a “missile lag” period when the Soviets would have more ICBMs than the U.S. Instead of focusing on this situation, I will focus on why the public came to widely (but not universally) believe that this situation would cause a “deterrence gap”—a dangerous

\textsuperscript{378} Polls cited in Page and Shapiro, \emph{The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences}, p. 227.
period when the U.S. would be vulnerable to a Soviet disarming first strike. Further, not only was it widely believed the Soviets would have the capability to disarm the U.S., it was feared that when given a fleeting opportunity (a “window of opportunity”) it was quite possible that the Soviets intended to take advantage of this opportunity—even at considerable risk.\textsuperscript{379} In short, if the public believed that a “missile gap” meant only a “missile lag” as President Eisenhower and many others believed, then fears would not have significantly increased because the “missile lag” would have been militarily insignificant—there would be no lapse in deterrence. But because the public came to believe that a “missile gap” signified an “almost immediate threat” and possibly a “catastrophe” as the Gaither Report indicated, public fear rose—people got scared of the “missile gap” as a dangerous “deterrence gap”. Because public fears increased dramatically, many observers argue that leaders (including Eisenhower, Kennedy and possibly even Johnson) had to escalate the arms race more than they thought necessary, and that this escalation of the arms race increased tensions and misunderstandings with the Soviet Union, which most frighteningly culminated in the Cuban missile crisis.\textsuperscript{380} What caused the widespread misperceptions that a “missile gap” was a dangerous “deterrence gap”? 

\textsuperscript{379} Arguing that quite a few elites shared this public fear: “In the last half of the 1950s, the specter of a Russian surprise attack against a vulnerable America became the central threat in the eyes of the strategic community...” see Fred M. Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1983), p. 125.

\textsuperscript{380} For arguments that leaders had to respond to the public and escalate the arms race beyond their better judgments, see Payne, "Public Opinion and Foreign Threats"; Bundy, Danger and Survival; Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary. Generally arguing that fears after Sputnik had a lasting effect for a decade, see the quotation at the 298
The "Missile Gap" in Hindsight

We know with hindsight that the dreaded "missile gap" never materialized. By the end of 1960 and the end of the Eisenhower Administration, the Soviet's total arsenal of functional ICBMs consisted of only four unprotected and highly visible, first-generation SS-6 Semyorka missiles based at a single site.\(^{381}\) The U.S. had deployed six Atlas missiles on open launch pads at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California in 1959. By the end of 1960, the U.S. had deployed two squadrons of Atlas missiles, with nine missiles in each squadron. The second squadron was placed in concrete bunkers that offered some protection at Warren Air Force Base outside Cheyenne, Wyoming.\(^{382}\) Also in 1960, the U.S. deployed its first Polaris submarine with 16 missiles. So by the end of 1960, the U.S. had 18 ICBMs and 16 SLBMs, while the Soviets had 4 ICBMs.

By the end of 1962, the U.S. had deployed thirteen Atlas squadrons and six Titan squadrons. The second-generation Minuteman missiles had become operational, giving the U.S. about two hundred missiles. Additionally the U.S. had nine Polaris submarines carrying 144 missiles. The Soviets had less than 100 ICBMs at that time.


By 1965, the U.S. had 821 Minuteman and 59 Titan II ICBMs and 464 Polaris SLBMs, and the Soviets had fewer than 200 deployed ICBMs (See table below).\(^{383}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>SOVIETS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>44-47</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>880 ICBMs</td>
<td>~170 ICBMs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>464 SLBMs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that a missile gap never materialized does not mean that fearing a possible “missile gap” was a misperception. There were three main possibilities: 1) the U.S. feared a “missile gap” that posed an unavoidable danger; 2) the U.S. feared a “missile gap” that posed a possible danger—a preventable danger; or 3) the U.S. feared a possible “missile gap” that posed no real danger. The third possibility is the only case in which there would have been a misperception. If a possible “missile gap” posed a possible danger (a deterrence gap), even though a missile gap never materialized, it still would have been appropriate to fear a possible missile gap.

As it turned out, many argued the "missile gap" was inevitable, and posed an unavoidable danger. As late as 1961, Henry Kissinger in *The Necessity for Choice* argued this when he wrote: "The missile gap in the period 1961-1965 is now unavoidable" and "the vulnerability of our retaliatory force will create major opportunities for Soviet nuclear blackmail—even to the extent of threatening direct attacks on the United States."^384^ With hindsight, we know a "missile gap" was not unavoidable because it never happened—in fact a "missile gap" in reverse happened—the U.S. quickly took a commanding lead in the missile race. So to argue it was unavoidable was a misperception.

It is not clear whether the public feared an unavoidable or a preventable missile gap, so the more important remaining question is whether the public should have *feared* a "missile gap" at all—did a possible "missile gap" ever pose any real danger? If a "missile gap" did pose a real danger—a possible "deterrence gap"—then to fear a "missile gap" was not a misperception. But if there was no real possibility of a deterrence gap, then *fearing* a "missile gap" was a misperception.

In the following section I will argue that there never was a real danger of a deterrence gap, so to *fear* a "missile gap" was a misperception. I will demonstrate this argument by carefully looking at the types of uncertainties the U.S. faced, which were considerable, and then carefully looking at the worst-case scenarios these uncertainties

generated. I will argue that even with full consideration of the worst-case scenarios of the time, the U.S. was not vulnerable to a disarming first strike because it would retain a secure retaliatory force—there would be no “deterrence gap”. I will argue that Admiral Arleigh Burke was right in 1959 when he said: “The Soviet Union can not prevent our retaliatory strikes should the Kremlin leaders decide to initiate general nuclear war,” and “therefore, the probability of general nuclear war is remote, for it would be suicide for the USSR.”

H1: Uncertainty about Capabilities at the time

The fear of a “missile gap” was characterized by two different phases; concerns over uncertainty about Soviet capabilities differed between the early period and the late period of the missile gap. In the early period, shortly after the launch of Sputnik until mid-1958, the intelligence community, like the nation at large, believed that the Soviets possibly had a major lead over the U.S. in missile technology. This led to concerns about “how soon?” and “how fast?” the Soviets could deploy ICBMs. With little “hard” evidence to work with, the estimates of what the Soviets could possibly do were ominous; there was widespread fear that the Soviets could obtain a substantial ICBM capability before the United States was able to build an ICBM capability, and that the United States’ vast bomber capability would be highly vulnerable to the new Soviet missiles. By mid-1958, and increasingly thereafter, better intelligence led to a


302
downgrading of these early estimates because it became more and more clear that the Soviets were not pursuing a “crash” program. Further, Soviet testing of ICBMs stopped after April 1958 and did not resume for almost a year, so it appeared to most estimators that the Soviets were having difficulties with their program. Additionally, there was no firm evidence of any significant deployments. These findings led analysts to push back deployment dates and production rates considerably.

These downgraded estimates were of little comfort to some observers who argued during the second phase of the missile gap, from 1959 until early 1961, that the U.S. could not be certain about the specific capabilities of Soviet missiles. Could the Soviets be developing better missile technology, perhaps making more accurate and reliable first-generation missiles? These considerations led to the possibility that the Soviets would not need large numbers of missiles to achieve a disarming first strike at an early date before the U.S. had deployed many missiles. These factors, combined with increased concerns about not having adequate warning time in the face of a Soviet missile attack, led to major fears of significant U.S. vulnerability in the near future despite the fact that it was clear the Soviets were not quickly deploying a large number of missiles. First I will explain the uncertainties of these two periods in more detail including presenting typical worst-case scenarios generated during these two periods. Then I will examine whether or not the worst-case scenarios actually presented the real possibility of an actual “deterrence gap”.

---

386 No deployments were firmly detected, nor were any suspected deployment sites even thought probable or likely, beyond the deployments at testing sites. As it turned out, there were no deployments beyond the test sites—so the intelligence community did not fail to detect any actual deployments. See Gaddis, We Now Know, p. 240.
If a "deterrence gap" could have possibly developed, then "uncertainty" could logically explain the fear of a "missile gap". But if even the worst-case analyses do not point to the possibility of an actual deterrence gap, and I argue that they do not, then the threat was exaggerated beyond what can be accounted for by uncertainty, or insufficient information at the time.  

The December 1957, National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was one of the most ominous estimates produced in the entire missile gap period because it referred to the Soviets' "crash program." Late 1957 and early 1958 predictions of Soviet missile capability were the highest in terms of numbers of missiles the Soviets could possibly  

---

387 It could reasonably be argued that threats were exaggerated if a "deterrence gap" was possible, but highly unlikely. Many people have argued this by focusing on debates about Soviet intentions, and conceding that even if a deterrence gap was possible, it required the Soviets to actually work to achieve one and then to take advantage of it, all of which was so unlikely that it was a major exaggeration to plan for this contingency. I discuss this argument more below when I discuss "uncertainty about intentions". For this argument, see Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary. Critics at the time argued that Eisenhower was counting on Soviet intentions and therefore Eisenhower was "gambling" by counting on the fact that it was an unlikely possibility that the Soviets would achieve a disarming first strike capability. These critics maintained that the consequences of even possibly allowing the Soviets a disarming first strike, as they argued Eisenhower was possibly allowing, were so great that Eisenhower should plan to head off even the most highly unlikely, but possible worst-case. Alsop, "Our Gamble with Destiny," and James R. Shepley, "Life-And-Death Debate Over Missile Program," Life 46 (1959). I argue that based on capabilities alone, without having to consider the more controversial question of intentions, it can be demonstrated that U.S. capabilities were so large and sufficiently survivable that the "missile gap" never presented the possibility of a "deterrence gap". This is what the Eisenhower Administration argued, however ineffectively, and with careful analysis it appears to have been clearly the case. See Bundy, Danger and Survival; James C. Dick, "The Strategic Arms Race, 1957-1961: Who Opened the Missile Gap?", Journal of Politics 34 (1972); Divine, The Sputnik Challenge.

produce before the U.S. would catch up. The NIEs, drafted by the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) for the Office of National Estimates (ONE), represented the composite view of all the intelligence agencies including the CIA, the National Security Agency (NSA), the military service intelligence organizations, and the intelligence arms of State Department, Treasury Department, Energy Department, and the FBI.\(^{389}\) The overall view of the NIEs of this early period was that the Soviet Union could possibly have 100 operational SS-6 ICBMs by mid-1959 to mid-1960, 500 by mid-1960 to mid-1961, or at most by a year later.\(^{390}\) By mid-1958 the intelligence community was already downgrading these estimates, and by December 1958 the intelligence community had pushed the probable dates of Soviet capabilities back a year with somewhat slower production rates to 100 in mid-1960 to mid-1961 and 500 in 1962, and perhaps 1,000-1,500 for 1963.\(^{391}\)

By contrast, in mid-1958 the popular press was widely reporting Air Force estimates that went beyond the consensus view of the NIEs in terms of years estimated and provided comparisons with U.S. forces; comparing forces is something the

\(^{389}\) For excellent overviews of how the intelligence process worked at this time, see Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat*; and Prados, *The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces*.


intelligence community did not usually do.\textsuperscript{392} An oft-repeated public prediction of this period was.\textsuperscript{393}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mid-1959</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-1960</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>44-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>~200</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>1,000-1,500</td>
<td>350-450</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>1,344</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was great uncertainty surrounding these estimates that the public probably did not appreciate. The intelligence community usually declined to make specific predictions of production beyond 3 years from initial operating capability (IOC) because they felt such predictions were too unreliable to state, and when they did make such futuristic

\textsuperscript{392} As Allen Dulles, then Director of Central Intelligence, pointed out repeatedly, a "missile gap" arises from comparisons between Soviet and U.S. forces, while the intelligence community is only responsible for estimating Soviet forces. See CIA, "Intelligence Aspects of the ' Missile Gap'," p. 2.

\textsuperscript{393} Divine, \textit{The Sputnik Challenge}, p. 177; Most famously, see three articles by Joseph Alsop, \textit{The Washington Post}, July 30 1958, p. 17; Ibid., August 1; and Ibid., August 3.
predictions, seasoned analysts knew to use these predictions with caution.\textsuperscript{394} So from these various estimates we can see there was great uncertainty among the elites. There was perhaps even more uncertainty and alarm in the public because the public was not clearly informed about the highly tentative nature of these estimates, nor did the public probably understand that these predictions were made by one group, the Air Force, within a large intelligence community, and the rest of the community did not concur with these high estimates.

At this time, the Soviet ICBM under development, the SS-6 missile, was estimated to have a reliability of 40\%-60\% and an accuracy of a CEP of 5 nautical miles.\textsuperscript{395} This meant that about half of the Soviet missiles would reliably take-off, fly toward their target, and then successfully detonate once they arrived, and half of those would land within five nautical miles of the target. This made estimators predict that the Soviets would need at least four of these missiles to hit a military target (such as a SAC base) to be \textit{on average} certain of getting one missile within five nautical miles of the target. However, since planners could not be certain that one out of \textit{every} four missiles would actually make it to each target (you could have four successes at one

\textsuperscript{394} They would make broad predictions, but felt that future specific force size estimates, especially of new systems, were very unreliable after 3 years. For a discussion of how most careful analysts saw these projections as unreliable, see Prados, \textit{The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces}, p. 91; Freedman, \textit{U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat}, p. 75.

\textsuperscript{395} A CEP is a “circular error probable” or the radius of the circle in which half of the missiles will land. These estimates of accuracy and reliability were consistent in this early period, see for example NIE 11-5-58 \textit{Soviet Capabilities in Guided Missiles and Space Vehicles in Intentions and Capabilities: Estimates on Soviet Strategic Forces, 1950-1983}, ed. Donald P. Steury (Washington D.C.: History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1996), p. 67.
target, and zero successes at another), U.S. estimators agreed Soviet planners would probably want four to six missiles minimum per military target at this time.\textsuperscript{396}

A typical worst-case analysis at the time would posit that if the United States maintained its current posture of 32 SAC bases in the U.S. and 27 overseas bases, the Soviet threat to SAC, the largest segment of the U.S. retaliatory force, could become grave as early as 1960, when the Soviets achieved hundreds of missiles. For example, specifically, the U.S. would be in serious danger once the Soviets obtained approximately 350 or so missiles, allowing them to target six missiles per air base. This is just a rough estimate, because many analysts argued that overseas bases were highly vulnerable because they could be targeted with IRBMs, which the Soviets had been testing and were starting to deploy in 1958, or overseas bases could be targeted with Soviet bomber aircraft. These options made it possible that roughly only 200 ICBMs would be necessary for the Soviets to handle the SAC bases in the United States with six missiles each.\textsuperscript{397}

\textsuperscript{396} To be clear, U.S. vulnerability would be a problem when the Soviets could defeat the U.S. by launching a successful strike—a disarming first strike—against U.S. retaliatory forces. Inaccurate and unreliable missiles are perfectly fine as a retaliatory force because the goal in retaliation would be to hit cities ("soft" targets—big, easy to sufficiently hit) and the possibility of retaliation has a deterrent effect, even if less reliable. But it is difficult to launch a disarming first strike with inaccurate and unreliable missiles because a planner would want to be sure to eliminate the retaliatory capability. The first generation, liquid fueled, relatively inaccurate and unreliable missiles were believed by many to be highly questionable for a first-strike capability.

\textsuperscript{397} For numbers of bases at the time and a discussion of the comparative threat at the time see Bottome, \textit{The Missile Gap: A Study of the Formulation of Military and Political Policy}, pp. 56-59.
This type of worst-case analysis would argue that the U.S. needed to immediately begin to respond to this near-term projected "missile gap" by dispersing U.S. bombers onto more bases to create more targets the Soviets would have to hit. However, this would only be a stopgap measure, as the Soviets would soon have 1,000-2,000 missiles. According to this type of reasoning, a Soviet force of 2,000 missiles would require over 300 SAC bases to ensure some surviving long-range bombers. However, another possible measure the U.S. could take to prevent vulnerability would be to increase U.S. bomber alert so more bombers would get off the ground in a crisis because missiles might allow very little warning, if any. It was often argued that to be sure to maintain U.S. retaliatory capability the U.S. should implement airborne alert so that a significant portion of SAC bombers would be in the air at all times, and thus invulnerable to surprise attack. Finally, it was argued the U.S. should speed up its missile development so that it would not have to continue to rely on a vulnerable bomber force; the U.S. needed to build a missile force of its own as fast as it could, especially an invulnerable force hardened in silos or placed on invulnerable submarines.

Throughout 1958 and increasingly, U.S. intelligence got more information about Soviet missile capabilities based on "hard" evidence by monitoring Soviet missile testing and from U-2 flights which strongly indicated the Soviets were not deploying missiles as predicted. This better intelligence led many in the intelligence community to concur by mid-1959 with the finding that was released in NIE 11-4-59 issued in February 1960 that the Soviets might deploy 35 ICBMs in 1960, increasing to possibly
However, this NIE warned that even though the Soviet ICBM force might be smaller than previously estimated, it could possibly be equally dangerous because the Soviets might have significantly improved the reliability and accuracy of their missiles. It was estimated that the SS-6 missiles might improve by 1963 to 65%-80% reliability and reduce the CEP from 5NM to 2NM.

Projections of large Soviet forces as far in the future as 1963 were not very worrisome at this point, because the United States was by then scheduled to have possibly 144 Polaris missiles on invulnerable submarines, and 100-200 Atlas and Titan ICBMs. The central fear at this point was concern about possible delays in the Polaris program, and more specifically, the main complaint was that the U.S. was not "matching" possible Soviet missile deployments "missile-for-missile" which, critics argued, the U.S. could by increasing Atlas and Titan deployments. Criticisms focused on the fact that the Eisenhower Administration was resisting an all-out push for Atlas and Titan liquid-fueled missiles because they were five times more expensive, more dangerous to handle and therefore much less reliable than second-generation Minuteman missiles.

No one disputed that first-generation missiles were only being built as a stopgap measure until the second-generation Minuteman missiles were deployable, but anticipated deployment was not scheduled until 1963, so what would the U.S. do about SAC vulnerability until significant numbers of Minuteman missiles

---


could be deployed? The main argument of 1959 and 1960 was whether or not Eisenhower was allowing a near-term dangerous “missile gap” to emerge because he refused to deploy all of the Atlas and Titan missiles some critics argued he should to compensate for SAC vulnerability to Soviet missiles with possibly better capabilities in the future.

A typical worst-case analysis from this period was presented by the Commanding Officer of the Strategic Air Command, General Thomas S. Power, in a speech he gave to the Economic Club of New York on January 19, 1960. This speech got a lot of publicity at the time, and was investigated by the Congress in Joint Hearings in the spring of 1960. General Power stated:

"...It would take an average of three missiles in their current state of development, to give an aggressor a mathematical probability of 95 percent that he can destroy one given soft target some 5,000 miles away. This means that, with only some 300 ballistic missiles, the Soviets could virtually wipe out our entire nuclear strike capability within a span of thirty minutes."

---

400 At the beginning of 1960, the Minuteman was still scheduled to be deployed in 1963, but by mid-1960, it was realized that the Minuteman would actually be ready by 1962! This is significant because fears of a missile gap should have completely disappeared by this time since the U.S. was then on schedule to have a significant force of ICBMS and there was still no evidence of any Soviet deployments beyond the test sites. So the near-term threat had passed, and the remaining fear that Minuteman would not be ready in time to forestall a gap three years out was then settled. In spite of this, the “missile gap” issue loomed large, if less well-defined as I discuss below, in the Fall 1960 presidential elections.

Power includes in his analysis that the Soviets could have already developed (as of 1960) higher capability weapons than those the NIE overall at the time credited the Soviets with having, but the NIE allowed the Soviets could possibly have these capabilities in the next few years (by 1963). Power's analysis relied on an Air Force study. To analyze whether insufficient information or uncertainty led to the fears of this period, as presented by this type of worst-case analysis, we need to determine if it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we know this analysis to be an exaggeration of the threat and thus a misperception, or whether it could have been determined at the specific one from a year earlier is useful to compare. It was from Life magazine and it predicted the period of maximum vulnerability to be 1961-1963. It argued:

The current U.S. defense posture takes too long to react. The present SAC system is premised on the assumption that the United States will have six to eight hours of warning time of a Soviet attack, which would be the case if the Soviets used only bombers.

In that time, 700 or so SAC bombers could get off the ground, and given the state of Soviet air defenses, 350-400 B-52s and B-47s would reach their targets. Additionally, the Navy's 150 or so planes would be launched, but only about half would reach their targets on the edge of the Soviet Union and satellite areas.

Given this state of readiness, SAC bases in forward deployment must be disregarded because they can already be hit with Soviet IRBMs.

In 1960, the Soviets will also have 100 ICBMs, and a year later they will have 500 ICBMs, more than enough to take out the 43 SAC bases in the United States, which would have at best fifteen minutes of warning. Warning time at this point cannot be extended because true reconnaissance satellites cannot be in orbit until at least 1964. Airborne alert, while a possibility, has not been budgeted in 1959 by Eisenhower (despite a plan from Gen. Thomas Power), and "under the most favorable circumstances, it would be difficult to keep more than 100 bombers on air alert," meaning that only about 50 bombers would reach their targets.

See Shepley, "Life-And-Death Debate Over Missile Program".
time that this type of analysis was misleading because no real "deterrence gap" was possible.

First, it is important to point out that no one ever seriously argued that the United States was in immediate danger, the danger was always in the near future.\textsuperscript{402} The danger would arise only if the Soviets did what they were projected to possibly do—if the Soviets maximized their missile capability—and the United States "stood pat," or did very little to head off the danger, or, for some observers, if the U.S. failed to muster an all-out effort to head off the danger. Therefore a "deterrence gap" was not inevitable, but it was possible or even likely.\textsuperscript{403}

Some analysts, such as Samuel P. Huntington in 1961, have argued that the "history of military policy after 1946 is a series of prophecies of disasters which never

\textsuperscript{402} Many authors make this point; see for example Bottome, The Missile Gap: A Study of the Formulation of Military and Political Policy, pp. 54-55; Kaplan discusses how President Eisenhower was very accustomed to this type of argument, of a future critical "danger date", when the U.S. would be in grave danger and he disparaged these types of analyses, wanting to develop a defense for the long haul, and not building up "excessively under the impulse of fear." See Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, pp. 144-152, especially p. 145. It would have been very difficult to argue that the Soviets were an immediate threat because no one ever believed the Soviets actually had a significant ICBM capability while the U.S. did not. In 1960, the intelligence community did estimate that the Soviets could then have up to 35 ICBMs (the most ever credited during the period), but this was not considered a significant enough force to threaten U.S. retaliatory capability. By the end of 1961 the U.S. had satellite surveillance of the Soviet Union and knew the Soviets had not deployed any significant ICBM capability.

\textsuperscript{403} As with the Gaither Report, another famous and frightening worst-case type analysis of the period, predicting a Soviet first-strike capability was not merely possible but likely if the U.S. did not do an all-out effort to maintain its retaliatory capability, was Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror".
materialized,” but that “in each case the warning helped to avert the catastrophe.” In other words, the danger was real, and without the fear to mobilize the public, catastrophe might well have resulted. In fact, Eisenhower did add more than $2 billion over two years to his first proposed defense budget for FY1959 in order to disperse SAC bombers, build more bombers, increase bomber alert, increase funding for early warning systems and to accelerate the Atlas and Titan missile programs. While Eisenhower clearly thought it was prudent to studiously maintain U.S. retaliatory capability, he also thought that his pre-Sputnik programs had accomplished that already and most of the additional funding he eventually asked for in response to the public fear was unnecessary. He commented in late 1957: “about two-thirds of the supplementary funds are more to stabilize public opinion than to meet the real need for acceleration.” Eisenhower thought U.S. retaliatory power was secure at the time and well into the future; he did not think he was “gambling” or taking any real risks, and he believed the public fear was unwarranted. Eisenhower and his administration


406 Eisenhower had given highest priority to all of four missile programs in 1955. He was engaged in an all-out effort to meet the new Soviet missile challenge well before Sputnik. Bundy, Danger and Survival, p. 327.


408 Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, p. 147.
consistently argued, however ineffectively, that there was no real danger of a
"deterrence gap".

The main reason that Eisenhower and many other elite observers did not find
predictions of a "deterrence gap" convincing was because U.S. forces were so large
that a significant retaliatory capability was assured.\textsuperscript{409} For the Soviets to successfully
execute a disarming first strike four factors had to obtain simultaneously: 1) the Soviets
had to execute a "perfectly coordinated attack" against all U.S. forces simultaneously;
2) the Soviets had to provide no more than tactical warning (15 minutes) of this attack
to the U.S.; 3) the U.S. had to have zero or very few planes on airborne alert; and 4)
the Soviets had to be willing to accept a minimum of 10-20 million dead in their own
country, including most of their major cities leveled by megaton or multi-megaton
warheads. The difficulties associated with each of these factors were tremendous, and
all four had to happen at the same time for a first strike to be feasible. I will discuss
each factor in turn.

If the Soviets failed to launch a "perfectly coordinated attack" then a large
portion of SAC bombers or other U.S. forces would escape destruction and be able to
retaliate against the Soviet Union—the Soviet Union would fail to "disarm" the U.S.

\textsuperscript{409} An example of other elites who recognized that U.S. retaliatory capability was
sound at the time and for the foreseeable future see the report put out by non-partisan
experts at the end of 1959. \textit{The Johns Hopkins Report, 1959} argued that while it was
possible that the Soviets could achieve a comprehensive missile capability first, and
that this would make manned bombers highly vulnerable to surprise attack, they
concluded that the unprecedented level of destruction an aggressor must expect to suffer
in a thermonuclear exchange was still the principal stabilizing factor in the strategic
equation and was "likely to remain so for the decade ahead." \textit{The Johns Hopkins
How difficult would it be to launch a "perfectly coordinated attack"? In 1957 the U.S. had approximately 4,000 dispersed delivery vehicles capable of delivering a nuclear device.\textsuperscript{410} Some of these vehicles were 1,655 SAC long and medium-range bombers on 32 bases in the U.S. and 27 overseas bases. Hundreds of these vehicles were aircraft loaded with nuclear weapons on 12-14 aircraft carriers at sea. The U.S. stockpile of 1957 included 5,420 nuclear weapons, equaling 16,300MT, which meant that many of the weapons were 3-4MT weapons.\textsuperscript{411} Each bomber that escaped the disarming first strike would have a chance of eliminating a Soviet city with a 3-4 MT bomb. At the time, it was estimated that there were fewer than 200 Soviet cities with a population over 50,000 people, and only a handful of these had a population in the millions.\textsuperscript{412}

It was debated what constituted a sufficient surviving retaliatory force—enough to deter a first strike—but the answer was somewhere between ten and two hundred surviving bombers. Ten bombers could potentially kill 10-20 million people or more, but they would have to get through Soviet air defenses, which it was estimated could eliminate approximately 50% of attacking U.S. bombers.\textsuperscript{413} Most often it was argued

\textsuperscript{410} Ibid., p. 37.
\textsuperscript{411} Roman, \textit{Eisenhower and the Missile Gap}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{412} Bottome, \textit{The Missile Gap}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{413} It was suggested in the press at the time that ten bombers getting through would be sufficient, and Wohlstetter acknowledges that it might be sufficient, but he credits Soviet air defenses as perhaps good enough to possibly eliminate all of U.S. bombers retaliating. He does basically assume (vaguely) that the U.S. would be able to retaliate enough to kill 10-20 million Soviets, but this could well be an acceptable number of casualties since it would be less than what the Soviets suffered in World War II. Wohlstetter was positing this worst-case analysis in 1959 for a future time when the 316
that the most “perfectly coordinated” attack could not eliminate more than 95% of SAC bombers, which would leave approximately 82 bombers. To achieve this kind of success the Soviets had to hit all of the bases and aircraft carriers simultaneously—some as close as 500 miles and some as distant as 5,000 miles—in order to provide no additional warning to some of the bases by attacking some earlier. The Soviets needed to do this with first-generation liquid-fueled rockets that were dangerous to handle and took at least 15 minutes to load with fuel; these factors would severely complicate any countdown procedure.

Achieving a “perfectly coordinated” attack might be technically possible, but it had to happen secretly, without the U.S. having any more than tactical warning. SAC General Curtis LeMay famously dismissed the possibility of the U.S. ever having only tactical warning when it came to a bomber attack.\(^{414}\) He claimed the U.S. secretly had spy planes flying over the Soviet Union 24 hours a day collecting intelligence information, mostly communications intelligence from Soviet military radio transmissions, and that he would know well in advance—at least 6 hours, enough time

---

\(^{414}\) LeMay argued that when he saw the Soviets amassing their planes for an attack, he would launch a preemptive attack, even if it were not national policy. He said: “It’s my policy. That’s what I’m going to do.” Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, pp. 133-134.
for “strategic warning”--if the Soviets were preparing to attack. It was highly likely these same intelligence sources might notice preparations for a missile attack. It would be easier for the Soviets to secretly coordinate a missile attack than a bomber attack, because there would be no chance of seeing the Soviets amassing their planes. However, there would need to be a flurry of activity to generally prepare the missiles simultaneously, to coordinate the fueling of the missiles, and there would most likely need to be some communications about a countdown to launch the missiles so that they were all perfectly coordinated.

If the Soviets failed to achieve total surprise, by some estimates, every minute of warning could allow forty more bombers to get off the ground- five minutes of warning could mean 200 more SAC bombers in the air.415 Other studies argued that SAC needed hours to get off the ground, but that was early in this period, and this situation was being addressed before Sputnik because fears of a “bomber gap” had led to studies about SAC vulnerability. Eisenhower further increased funding for better ground alert after Sputnik.

Like Curtis LeMay, President Eisenhower also dismissed the possibility of having only tactical warning, possibly because he had faith in U.S. intelligence capabilities, but also because he believed wars do not start with a “bolt from the blue”.

415 This estimate is from a study presented to Eisenhower March 17, 1959 by Presidential science adviser James Killian and his aid, Brockway McMillan. Roman, Eisenhower and the Missile Gap, p. 55. Another study claimed that five minutes constituted the minimum that could be considered “effective” warning so that a substantial number of strike aircraft could take off and clear the blast area. See Weapons System Evaluation Group (WSEG) Report no. 35 of March 20, 1959, “Defense against Sea-launched Missile Attack”, Ibid., pp. 50-51.
He believed wars arise out of crises—times of extremely high tension—and presumably at these times the U.S. would put bombers on airborne alert to maintain an invulnerable retaliatory force.\textsuperscript{416} It could be argued that the Soviets could disguise an attack in a massive military exercise, but it should be recognized that if the Soviets ever appeared to the U.S. to be preparing a first-strike, they severely risked a pre-emptive strike. Thus they always had to be careful not to provoke the U.S. by appearing ready to launch.

Worst-case analyses that assumed the Soviets could launch a perfectly coordinated attack, without providing any warning to the U.S., also had to assume that the U.S. had not placed any significant portion of its SAC force on airborne alert. Airborne alert was the trump card the U.S. held against any rapid deployment of Soviet missiles before the U.S. was able to build up its own missile force. The possibility of putting SAC on airborne alert made the "need" for first-generation missiles as a stopgap before Polaris and Minuteman were ready a non-issue militarily—they were not needed.\textsuperscript{417} SAC could be made invulnerable, at great expense, but definitely invulnerable if the situation warranted it. Immediate airborne alert was proposed by Generals Power and Thomas D. White when they testified before Congress in the spring of 1960 and at that time they estimated it would cost $700 million for the first

\textsuperscript{416} Kaplan, \textit{The Wizards of Armageddon}, p. 151.


319
year and $1 billion for each year after that.\textsuperscript{418} The costs were high, but certainly manageable if necessary.

President Eisenhower planned for implementing airborne alert, but resisted actually implementing it not only because of high costs, but also because it increased the risk of accidental war. American bombers would be fully loaded and constantly flying toward the Soviet Union and then turning around and coming back. This would automatically increase tensions with the Soviets. Most importantly, there was no need to implement airborne alert at least until the Soviets had begun to deploy large numbers of missiles. It was estimated that lead-time for Soviet deployment of a missile would be at least twelve months from when the Soviets began constructing a launch pad, until they finished installing a missile and training a crew to operate the missile.\textsuperscript{419} This lead-time gave the U.S. time to observe deployment before the missiles would be operational. As long as the U.S. had not observed any significant deployments there was no need to implement airborne alert.

The possibility that the U.S. could rather quickly counter any Soviet missile capability, instead of somehow being “dangerously behind” because of failing to match missiles, makes the argument for a dangerous “deterrence gap” rather weak. The argument that the U.S. retaliatory force would be vulnerable to a Soviet disarming first strike in the early and late periods of the missile gap completely depends on the U.S. doing nothing—“standing pat”—and failing to implement airborne alert while it


\textsuperscript{419} Ibid., p. 1105.
watched the Soviets deploy hundreds of missiles. Further, the scenario depends on the Soviets rushing to deploy hundreds of missiles with the hope that the U.S. would not foil their plan by implementing an airborne alert. There was some fear that the Soviets could somehow secretly deploy large numbers of first-generation missiles, but most estimators agreed that first-generation missiles were large and cumbersome and would need to be deployed along the rail lines in order to be able to carry the missiles to the launch pads. The idea that the Soviets could secretly deploy large numbers of missiles was not widely believed or much discussed.

In addition to launching a “perfectly coordinated attack”, while providing no warning, and counting on the U.S. to not implement an airborne alert, the Soviets had also to be willing to accept 10–20 million casualties at a minimum after they had launched a disarming first strike. This level of casualties represented their best-case scenario. Soviet leaders could not risk giving warning to the U.S. so they could not shelter their people or evacuate their cities before they launched their attack.

According to one report issued in 1959 that analyzed SAC vulnerability in 1962, if the Soviets built what the NIEs projected they could possibly build by 1962, and under the most disadvantageous circumstances where SAC had no warning, it was projected to be

420 CIA, 'Intelligence Aspects of the 'Missile Gap'," p. 17.

421 What was argued was that the U.S. could not deploy missiles in response to observing Soviet deployments, because it took 5-6 months to design the site for the launch pad before construction would begin. It was estimated the U.S. needed 18-30 months to deploy a missile, while the Soviets could finish deploying a missile 12 months after beginning to construct a launch pad. This difference in lead-times would allow for a 6-18 month “missile gap” if the U.S. failed to begin deploying before observing Soviet deployments. See Dick, "The Strategic Arms Race, 1957-1961: Who Opened the Missile Gap?," pp. 1105-1106.
possible that less than 5% of SAC's 1,710 bombers might survive a surprise Soviet attack, and of these 71 bombers it was estimated that only 50% would be able to penetrate Soviet air defenses, which meant that only 35 SAC bombers might retaliate against the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{422} Each SAC bomber carried more explosive power than used during all of World War II. That meant that the Soviets, when carrying out this surprise attack, had to be willing, at an absolute minimum, to withstand the rough equivalent of 35 World War IIs on their homeland. That was the best they could hope for! This report concentrated on SAC vulnerability and set aside the complications and possible further destruction that might be caused by the 60 U.S. intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) that were operational in Europe after June of 1959 (with 45 more in Italy and Turkey by 1961), and the hundreds of nuclear-armed aircraft on U.S. aircraft carriers, and the Polaris missiles that would be deployed (32 in 1960, 80 in 1961, 144 in 1962), and the U.S. ICBMs that would be deployed (6 in 1959, 12 in 1960, 63 in 1961, 224 in 1962).\textsuperscript{423}

\textsuperscript{422} Citing Weapons Systems Evaluation Group (WSEG) Staff Study no.77, and explaining how dire the conditions appeared for SAC, see Roman, \textit{Eisenhower and the Missile Gap}, pp. 56-57. For a U.S. IRBM deployment, see Divine, \textit{The Sputnik Challenge}, p.193. For U.S. ICBM and SLBM deployments and IRBM numbers, see Ball, \textit{Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missile Program of the Kennedy Administration}, pp. 50-51, 90.

\textsuperscript{423} Why set these aside? Roman explains: "Little comfort could be gained from the WSEG's exclusion of U.S. ICBM and SLBM forces since the bomber force would still be by far the largest, most accurate, and destructive leg of the strategic nuclear triad in 1962." -a weak reason when these other forces would certainly complicate the Soviet's perfectly coordinated attack, if not be a sizable deterrent on their own. See Roman, \textit{Eisenhower and the Missile Gap}, p. 57.
Most worst-case analyses of the time focused on SAC vulnerability as if it were inevitable and as if SAC made up the entire U.S. retaliatory capability. SAC vulnerability only became inevitable if one set aside the possibility of airborne alert, which could have been implemented without too much difficulty. SAC was the largest part of the U.S. retaliatory force, but aircraft on U.S. carriers, IRBMs after mid-1959, small numbers of ICBMs starting in 1959, and Polaris missiles after September 1960 had to greatly complicate any Soviet plans of a disarming first strike. Some observers quickly dismissed the IRBMs and carriers because they were possibly vulnerable, but this does not allow for the fact that they would have to be included in the “perfectly coordinated attack”. Arranging to eliminate 60 IRBMs and finding and attacking 12-14 moving carriers without giving more warning to the U.S. would be a difficult proposition—greatly complicating an attack. Further, completely dismissing 32 to 80 invulnerable Polaris missiles on the basis that it is only a small force defies reality. By Wohlstetters’ own conservative calculations for U.S. destructive capabilities, 80 Polaris missiles would kill approximately 8 million people—this is not an easily dismissed force by the end of 1961.424

In sum, as McGeorge Bundy has argued, Eisenhower should have said clearly to the public: “The Soviet Union can not prevent our retaliatory strikes should the Kremlin leaders decide to initiate general nuclear war, therefore, the probability of

424 Wohlstetter calculates it would take five half-megaton warheads, Polaris or Minuteman missiles, to destroy half the population of a city of 900,000. Of course if instead of concentrating five on one city, one placed 3 per city, or hit more heavily populated cities, destruction would be greater. See Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," p. 221.
general nuclear war is remote, for it would be suicide for the USSR." It appears, that even with full consideration of the uncertainty at the time, the most dire projections of Soviet capabilities does not lead to the elimination of sufficient U.S. retaliatory capability. With no consideration of Soviet intentions, but merely by recognizing the requirements for a successful Soviet first strike: of launching a "perfectly coordinated attack", with no warning to the U.S., with no U.S. SAC forces on airborne alert, and Soviet leaders having to be willing to accept at least 10-20 million casualties with massive destruction of their own country at a minimum—if their attack worked perfectly—with much more destruction if their attack was off by five or ten minutes, allowing hundreds more SAC bombers to escape destruction. These incredible, but realistic requirements for a successful Soviet first strike make the fear of a possible "deterrence gap" seem unwarranted. Uncertainty about Soviet capabilities does not explain the fear and misperceptions of the missile gap period.

**H2: Uncertainty about Intentions at the time**

Did uncertainty about Soviet intentions cause the fear about a "missile gap"? I have just argued that because the Soviets could not possibly eliminate U.S. retaliatory capabilities, there was no rational basis for fear at the time, even without considering and grappling with the more elusive and even intractable question of intentions. However, one could argue, as many analysts have, that even if it had been possible for the Soviets to eliminate U.S. retaliatory capabilities, there was still no need to fear such

---

a possibility because the Soviets never intended to do so.\textsuperscript{426} I argue, since it was not possible, it did not matter what Soviet intentions were.\textsuperscript{427} Theoretically, it is equally valid to contend, as other analysts have, that the U.S. should have been able to formulate a more realistic picture of Soviet intentions, and then the U.S. could have avoided the persistent and often severe overestimations of the Soviet threat during this period and throughout the Cold War. In other words, instead of arguing over possible comparative capabilities, one can argue that uncertainty about intentions was not so great, so the U.S. should not have greatly overestimated the Soviet threat because the U.S. should have known the Soviets never intended to launch a disarming first-strike. I find the evidence for this argument is strong, but not absolutely convincing—once all the evidence is lined up, there is still significant room to dispute Soviet intentions.\textsuperscript{428} What evidence is there for and against this argument in this period?

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the Soviets never launched a "crash" program, or a serious concerted effort to build a disarming first strike capability in this period. Instead the Soviets built a deterrent force, as the following force comparisons for 1961 testifies:

\textsuperscript{426} Profoundly examining the problem of intentions and how the U.S. should have done better, see Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary}.

\textsuperscript{427} Unless the Soviets were suicidal, which no one considered the Soviets to be.

\textsuperscript{428} Garthoff does not dispute this, he argues, as I do, that the consequences of overestimating are great, and so leaders need to struggle with the problem of accurately assessing intentions instead of believing it is "prudent" to err on the side of overestimating intentions to the point where arms races are created and diplomacy is abandoned. See Garthoff, \textit{Assessing the Adversary}.
Table 7. Soviet and U.S. Strategic Nuclear Delivery Forces, January-February

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNITED STATES</th>
<th>USSR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12-15 Atlas ICBMs</td>
<td>4 ICBMs at one test site(^{430})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Polaris SLBMs</td>
<td>None comparable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Snark intercontinental cruise missiles</td>
<td>None comparable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Thor IRBMs based in the United Kingdom</td>
<td>500-800 MRBMs not capable of reaching the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 Jupiter IRBMs based in Italy and Turkey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600 B-52 long range bombers</td>
<td>150-200 long-range bombers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,100 B-47 medium-range bombers based in Europe</td>
<td>1,000-1,500 medium-range bombers not capable of reaching the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 carrier-based bombers</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,000 Air Force fighter-bombers</td>
<td>None capable of reaching the United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite the fact that the Soviets actually built a force structure much more modest than the U.S. force structure, the U.S. leadership, from the acceptance of NSC-68 onward—Democratic and Republican Administrations alike and the intelligence community broadly—consistently characterized the Soviets as “expansionist” to the point of being “bent on world domination”. This consistent characterization of Soviet intentions meant different things to different people. For many people, like President

---

\(^{429}\) From Ball, *Politics and Force Levels: The Strategic Missie Program of the Kennedy Administration*, p. 90.

\(^{430}\) Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 240; Freedman, *U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat*, p. 73.
Eisenhower, it meant the Soviets were opportunistic and probing, so the West had to remain vigilant. But the Soviets were not suicidal; they were not prepared to launch or even risk an all-out nuclear war because, most of all, the Soviet leaders wanted to maintain their own power.\footnote{Bundy, Danger and Survival, p. 341.}

Other leaders strongly disagreed with Eisenhower’s view of the Soviets as fundamentally cautious, and the NIEs, which attempted to be the composite view of the intelligence community, were often schizophrenic in their characterizations of the Soviets as either cautious or highly aggressive. Often NIEs throughout the 1950s reflected both views, as did NIE 11-4-54 (issued September 15, 1954) entitled “Soviet Capabilities and Probable Courses of Action through mid-1959”:

**BASIC COMMUNIST OBJECTIVES AND BELIEFS:**

14. The Communist leaders now in power in the USSR, or any that are likely to succeed them, almost certainly will continue to consider their basic objective to be the consolidation and expansion of their own power, internally and externally. In pursuing this policy most Soviet leaders probably envisage ultimately: (a) the elimination of every world power center capable of competing with the USSR; (b) the spread of Communism to all parts of the world; and (c) Soviet domination over all other Communist regimes.

15. Soviet leaders probably are also committed to the following propositions concerning the expansion of the power of the USSR:


This description includes the “cautious” idea by saying that a Soviet “basic objective” was to consolidate their power. At the same time, this NIE also argues the Soviets
want to eliminate other world power centers—indicating they might launch a disarming first strike if they could. Further, there is no room for diplomacy because the Soviets do not see peaceful co-existence as possible because they view their differences with the non-Communist world as "irreconcilable". It is impossible to determine from this NIE, like many other NIEs of this period, whether or not the Soviets are fundamentally cautious or highly aggressively expansionist.

Many leaders, including Eisenhower, were consistently skeptical of the thinking that the Soviets were highly aggressively expansionist, relying on the fact that there was no real evidence that the Soviets were embarked on a "crash" program to build missiles. They reasoned that if the Soviets were not engaged in a "crash" program then the Soviets had little hope of achieving any first-strike capabilities, and without first-strike capabilities, their power to expand was limited. Eisenhower and others were particularly skeptical of the predictions for a "missile gap" because in 1955 and 1956 the Air Force had predicted a "bomber gap" where the Soviets were expected to have twice as many bombers as SAC by 1959-1960 (600-800 bombers). By February 1957 the fears of a "bomber gap" were proven to be completely unfounded. The U.S. determined the Soviets were not engaged in a "crash" program to build bombers—the Soviets only had about 50 bombers at that point, much less than half the number that had been estimated earlier, and they were producing them less than half as fast as had

---

been predicted. For many, this earlier Air Force prediction of a “bomber gap”
discredited current Air Force predictions of a “missile gap”. However, the Air
Force argued that the Soviets could have produced bombers as they had predicted, but
were choosing to produce missiles instead. They had very little evidence to support the
argument for a “missile gap”. Still there was no proof that the Soviets were not
engaged in a “crash” program to build missiles.

The best evidence to suggest the Soviets were engaged in a “crash” program to
build missiles was the fact that the Soviets launched Sputnik before the U.S. launched a
similar rocket. Thus it appeared that the Soviets had a shocking commanding lead in
this vital area. The launching of Sputnik was not unpredicted by U.S. leaders, and it
did not mean the Soviets had a major lead (although they were briefly ahead in some
respects). The important aspect of Sputnik was that Soviet leaders tried to capitalize on
it politically; they began boasting, and making “disclosures” designed to convey the
impression that “irresistible new capabilities were now in the Soviet arsenal and
further, that the ‘correlation of force’ between East and West was irrevocably
altered.” Most importantly, Khrushchev boasted in November 1958 that “series
production” of ICBMs had begun in the Soviet Union. In 1959 he claimed that one
Soviet plant was producing 250 rockets per year, and in January 1960 he said dispersed

434 For an interesting discussion of how it was bureaucratically necessary for the
intelligence community to predict a “missile gap” to replace the “bomber gap” in order
to get the Air Force to accept that there was no “bomber gap”, and how Eisenhower
understood that this is how the predictions of a “missile gap” were invented even
though there was no other evidence to suggest a “missile gap” was developing, see

435 CIA, "Intelligence Aspects of the 'Missile Gap'," p.25.
and camouflaged launching bases existed. In general, U.S. intelligence evaluated these claims as exaggerations, but they did consider these statements to be reflections of Soviet intentions.\(^\text{436}\) However, in the public debate, not only was it difficult to suggest that the Soviets did not intend to maximize their missile-building capabilities, it was difficult to argue that they had not already done so!

One interesting episode in the debate over Soviet intentions in this period was when H. Rowan Gaither was presenting the Gaither panel’s findings to President Eisenhower in a private meeting. He argued: “The evidence is overwhelming that the U.S.S.R.’s intentions are expansionist—in the real global sense—and that her great efforts to build a military power go beyond any defensive concepts.” To support this argument he emphasized the rapid expansion of Soviet military power, particularly the nuclear stockpile, thought to number 1,500 weapons.\(^\text{437}\) Eisenhower could have pointed out that the U.S. nuclear stockpile at the time was 5,420 weapons and that this did not necessarily mean the U.S. was being aggressive rather than defensive, and preparing to launch a disarming first strike.

Overall, while there was no “hard” evidence to support the contention that the Soviets were engaged in a “crash” program to build missiles (because they were not), and even though the intelligence community rejected the idea that the Soviets were engaged in a “crash” program as the period wore on, it was difficult to argue publicly or among elites that the Soviets did not intend to maximize their capabilities in light of

\(^{436}\) Ibid., p. 26.

the fact that Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders repeatedly stated that they were doing just that. Soviet statements, even though as often conciliatory as confrontational and aggressive (Khrushchev was unpredictable diplomatically), made it very difficult to argue that Soviet intentions were clearly anything but hostile. The only way to defuse the fears of the “missile gap” would have been to stress clearly that U.S. retaliatory capability was not in jeopardy and that the Soviet leadership was not suicidal. To stress these points would have made room to defuse tensions, slow the arms race, and possibly negotiate an agreement for “peaceful co-existence”.

**H7: Electoral Politics and the Missile Gap**

Did electoral politics create the *fear* of the missile gap period? Many historians seem to agree that Democrats seized on the theme that *Sputnik* demonstrated the U.S. had fallen behind the Soviet. In order to embarrass the Eisenhower Administration, the Democrats exaggerated the significance of the event and eventually successfully exploited the *fear* this idea created to convince American voters that Eisenhower was not doing enough to maintain America’s defenses. This theme helped them regain the White House in 1960. Two broad patterns strongly support this general argument.

---

438 On Khrushchev’s erratic behavior, see Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp. 221-259.

439 While there is a range of opinion about how much the Democrats willfully exaggerated or believed what they were saying, no one denies that the Democrats used the issue at least strategically and rhetorically to make “political hay.” I believe after an examination of the actions of the leading Democratic Senators that it is clear that they exaggerated extensively, and most historians agree. For example, see Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge*; Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap*; Bundy, *Danger and*
First, Democratic candidates who were presidential hopefuls were the central advocates of the idea that the “missile gap” was dangerous—there was a neat partisan division among leaders between those who believed there was a possible deterrence gap (Democrats) and those who did not (Republicans). There was some crossover to be sure, but those who repeatedly found the situation to be most dire were generally also those who had the most to gain by embarrassing the administration.440 Second, the public panic actually increased in 1960 at the time of the election even though the uncertainty about a dangerous “missile gap” had decreased dramatically in 1958 as it became clear the Soviets were not engaged in a crash program, and even though the fear should have disappeared completely by mid-1960 when the U.S. still had no evidence of Soviet deployments, and it was clear that in the next 18 months the U.S. would deploy approximately 150 ICBMs and SLBMs.

These patterns demonstrate that misperceptions of the threat were not random errors, but politically biased interpretations of the situation. This is clearly borne out by a close observation of the behavior and statements of the Democrats who at times seem to have willfully misinterpreted the available intelligence. At other times they worked to confuse the situation rather than to clarify it, creating opportunities to stress

---

440 There was significant confusion among academics; many elites were truly scared despite their political affiliation. See Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, p. 125. However, I argue that part of the Democratic strategy was to create confusion in order to instill doubt and fear. The Senators had access to some very reassuring intelligence, and yet they made outrageous statements despite this intelligence—often using very strained reasoning to maintain the confusion and fear despite this better intelligence. The Democrats helped create confusion and fear among the elites.
frightening themes rather than working to understand and solve the whole problem. Finally, as evidence mounted that the specific problem of a "missile gap" was not materializing, they seem to have redoubled their efforts to confuse the situation in order to capitalize on the fear even though the people should have been reassured rather than further frightened at this point. I will review below some of the most egregious instances of this behavior by the leading Democratic Senators who took part in this effort, Lyndon B. Johnson, Stuart Symington and John F. Kennedy.

It needs to be pointed out again that this is not a wholly satisfying explanation for the fear of this period. Why did the public generally believe these clearly self-interested Democrats? Of course Khrushchev helped the Democrats’ arguments a great deal, and many historians argue Eisenhower simply failed to be a politician on this issue, but the argument for a "missile gap" should have been dead by 1960 and yet the Democrats were able to make it more alive than ever! Further, why would this work in some election cycles and not in others? We do not see panics associated with every presidential election—why not? What was different about 1960? Finally, why is it such a powerful argument to say: "We are weak and defenseless!" rather than to argue: "They are wasting billions of your dollars—vote for me to cut the defense budget!" Eisenhower was trying to make the latter argument during this period, but it did not serve him well. In fact, the latter argument has not made any politician successful and powerful during the Cold War. Why not? I have only incomplete ideas about the answers to these questions, and will speculate on them in the conclusions to this section. But first I will review the actions of the Democratic Senators that demonstrate
how they willfully exaggerated the threat and helped to create the public fear of the
"missile gap".

**Senator Lyndon B. Johnson:**

Ardent Cold Warriors such as Senators Henry M. Jackson of Washington and
Stuart Symington of Missouri had been charging for years that Eisenhower was not
spending enough on defense. They quickly recognized the value of *Sputnik* for making
this argument, and began capitalizing on the event immediately. But Senator Lyndon
B. Johnson of Texas positioned himself to make the first effective challenge to the
Eisenhower Administration. LBJ arranged with Senator Richard Russell of Georgia,
who was chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to have the Defense
Preparedness Subcommittee that he chaired hold hearings to investigate why the Soviets
had been the first nation into space. Symington had been calling for a sweeping
investigation by the full Armed Services Committee, but LBJ and Russell agreed that if
Symington dominated the hearings, which he would in the full Armed Services
Committee, he “would raise a lot of Hell, but it would not be in the national
interest.” Specifically, Russell and Johnson agreed that by conducting these inquiries
in Johnson’s subcommittee, Johnson would be able to contain Senator Symington, who
was a rival presidential candidate and the Democrat most likely to open up the
Democrats to charges of partisan politics. Johnson proceeded to cooperate extensively

---

with President Eisenhower to conduct the hearings in a bipartisan fashion; this cooperation was possible because of their mutual interest in wanting to contain Symington.\footnote{Ibid., p. 63-64, Bottome, \textit{The Missile Gap}, pp. 51-52.}

Senator Johnson said he wanted a “non-partisan, constructive, and patriotic” inquiry, but he also began by accepting the following basic hypotheses: 1) that the Russians were ahead of the United States in missile development; 2) that the lack of national leadership had caused the weakness; and 3) that the United States had a “record of underestimation of [Soviet] military progress.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 51-52.} Johnson also likened America’s current (1957) military position to that of America just before the attack on Pearl Harbor and said the U.S. had a long way to go to catch up with the Soviets in the missile field. In fact, the U.S. did not have a long way to go to catch up, and the U.S. was certainly not facing a surprise attack like Pearl Harbor! Overall, these hearings helped establish the “missile gap” as a “fact” rather than a partisan issue. Historians Rowland Evans and Robert Novak called these hearings a “minor masterpiece” because they successfully embarrassed the Republican Administration while being beneficial to the Democrats all the while avoiding partisan bickering.\footnote{Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, \textit{Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power} (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. 209.}

Senator Johnson was a sharp critic of the administration throughout the period, claiming the U.S. was behind and the situation was dangerous. He held annual hearings (later Joint Hearings) that gave him a forum to pound away at this issue.
regularly. One of the most important incidents happened in early 1960. The intelligence estimates had been revised downward (again) and this estimate employed a new method for calculating Soviet capabilities because better intelligence was available. Instead of calculating how many missiles the Soviets could possibly produce based on a rough calculation of their “capacity” to produce missiles, the available intelligence improved enough that the estimate was aimed at calculating how many missiles the Soviets probably could have “on their launchers” – actual missiles deployed instead of in inventory. 445 Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates did a poor job of explaining the new calculations. He stated:

Heretofore we have been giving you intelligence figures that dealt with the theoretical Soviet capability. This is the first time that we have an intelligence estimate that says, “This is what the Soviet Union probably will do.” Therefore, the great divergence, based on the figures that have been testified to in years past, narrow because we talk about a different set of comparisons—ones that we based on Soviet capabilities. This present one is an intelligence estimate on what we believe [the Soviet Union] probably will do, not what he is capable of doing. 446

Gates characterized this new type of estimate as one of “intentions”. Gates did a better job eventually, and others also did a better job making clear that the new estimates were based on more information and not on a judgment about Soviet intentions. But Gates’

poor performance was enough—the Democrats seized the opportunity to sow confusion rather than to clarify the situation.

Senator Johnson said: “The new optimistic picture presented by Secretary Gates is based upon guessing what the Soviet leaders may be thinking. The missile gap cannot be eliminated by the mere stroke of a pen.” It was absurd to think the intelligence community would actually base their estimate on guessing what the Soviets were thinking. Johnson called new joint hearings on missiles and space programs and grilled Allen Dulles and other intelligence officials. Even General Thomas Power of SAC testified that he was in agreement with the NIE. The hearings turned into a circus. The intelligence community was insisting that they were now estimating the number of launching pads, (while they did not say so, this was because they were conducting surveillance with U-2 flights and they could not find any deployments, so there must not have been that many), and that this was a better estimate because this was an estimate of the number of usable missiles the Soviets could have (rather than the number possibly in storage, which was much more difficult to guess).

The Democratic Senators insisted on a different approach. They got the intelligence officials to agree that they were not downgrading the possible number the Soviets could produce, and this the officials agreed to because they had no better information about this—the possible Soviet production capacity remained the same. So then, the Senators insisted, as Senator Johnson reasoned, it would scarcely be “safe to

---

assume the Soviets are building missiles without also building launching pads”—the estimate based on production capacity must be valid, in spite of the fact that no construction of launching pads has been observed! The tortured logic in spite of better intelligence strongly indicates a valiant effort to exaggerate the threat and an effort to sustain the issue of a “missile gap”.

**Senator Stuart Symington:**

Senator Stuart Symington was the most vocal of Eisenhower’s critics, the one who had access to the most information, and the one who made the most outrageous claims. Symington promoted the “missile gap” thesis with hyperbole from the beginning of this era and constantly throughout. Shortly after *Sputnik* he characterized the Soviet satellite as “proof of growing Communist superiority in the all-important missile field.” He persisted in arguing that the U.S. was behind despite the fact that when he was questioning Secretary of Defense McElroy during Congressional hearings in April 1958 about the missile strength of the United States compared to the Soviets, McElroy replied, “We have no positive evidence that they [Russia] are ahead of us in long-range missiles. We are conducting ourselves on the assumption that they are, but our intelligence gives us no positive evidence that they are.” The intelligence

---


450 Bottome, *The Missile Gap*, p. 79.
community was clear on this—it was possible the Soviets were ahead, but there was no
evidence to support the claim that they were ahead.

President Eisenhower attempted to allay some of Symington’s concerns by
giving him special briefings by intelligence officials. In July 1958, Allen Dulles
allowed Symington to speak with members of the CIA’s Board of National Estimates.
He was the first legislator to do so, yet this special briefing did not allay Symington’s
doubts—he was not satisfied.451 Symington had another special briefing with Dulles on
August 6, 1958. Symington had prepared his own estimates in order to contest the CIA
estimates. Symington’s primary source of information was Thomas Lanphier, who had
been Symington’s aide when he had been Secretary of the Air Force under Truman.
Lanphier apparently had close ties with Air Force intelligence. However, Lanphier was
also Vice-President of Convair Corporation, the aerospace company that was building
the Atlas missile. Convair stood to gain or lose dramatically according to any alteration
in the projection of Soviet missiles. The more acute the threat, the more quickly the
U.S. needed to deploy ICBMs, specifically the Atlas because it was the missile most
ready for deployment. However, any downgrade in the threat meant not only that
fewer missiles might be deployed, but possibly that the Atlas might be cancelled and the
U.S. would choose to deploy the far superior second-generation Minuteman missiles
instead, which were not produced by Convair.452 If Symington had been concerned
about the accuracy of his estimates, he could have considered the vested interests of his

sources and attempted to evaluate the information they provided him, rather than accepting their information and flatly rejecting any other sources of information.

At the August 6 meeting, Dulles told Symington that in total only six ICBM tests had been conducted by the Soviets and that none had been conducted since May when Sputnik III was launched. With so few tests, the CIA estimates predicted that the Soviet Union would have the capability to deploy 500 ICBMs by 1962 or maybe even 1961. Lanphier, who was accompanying Symington, contested the CIA’s claim of only six tests and said that the Soviets had actually conducted somewhere in the area of fifty-seven to eighty ICBM tests and thus were capable of deploying far more missiles far sooner than the CIA predicted. Lanphier would not reveal his sources, claiming they were still classified (as if Dulles did not have clearance!), but "sufficiently different" and "much more alarming." Dulles responded by saying that this was merely intelligence gossip and that Major General Walsh, the head of Air Force intelligence, was unable to convince the CIA to use the Air Force estimates and, consequently, he was using Symington in a bureaucratic maneuver.453 Symington rejected Dulles’ arguments and decided to take his concerns directly to Eisenhower.

On August 29, 1958, Symington met with Eisenhower. He gave Eisenhower a letter that detailed his specific concerns, primarily his disagreement with the CIA claims that there had only been six ICBM tests. Symington’s central claim used the following logic: How can the Soviets be planning five hundred ICBMs after only six

---


340
tests when in comparison, the United States is planning one hundred tests for just 64
Atlas missiles? The contention that the Soviets would put such a complex weapon into
production with so few tests does not make sense. Of course the Soviets would want to
prove the missile’s performance thoroughly before putting it into production.
Therefore, the CIA must have "heavily underrated Soviet missile development to date,
as well as planned capabilities." In other words, Symington was arguing, the U.S.
*must have missed tests*—intelligence must be underestimating Soviet development; he
did not believe the estimates for deployment could be too high. In fact, he argued, they
must be too low!

Furthermore, Symington was concerned that regardless of which estimates were
used—the CIA’s lower estimates or his higher estimates for production—the Soviets
would still have more ICBMs than the 130 that the U.S. was planning to deploy by
1962, leaving the country vulnerable to Soviet aggression. Eisenhower denied all of
Symington’s claims, although he did admit that the U.S. was behind the Soviets in
terms of missile production but only because the U.S. was waiting for smaller H-bomb
warheads before continuing.454 For Eisenhower, the possibility of fewer missiles did
not mean a deterrence gap—U.S. retaliatory capability was assured.

Dulles took Symington’s criticisms under review and in October asked the
CIA’s Guided Missile Intelligence Committee to restudy the Soviet missile program
looking for the following: 1) Were any Soviet missile tests missed? 2) Is it possible that
the Soviets had fooled the CIA with concealed tests? 3) How many tests would the

Soviets need to deploy 500 or so ICBMs by 1961-1962 and 4) Did the apparent lack of tests indicated "serious difficulty or delay in their missile program"?\textsuperscript{455}

In early December 1958 the CIA revised the NIE to resolve the conflict between the number of projected Soviet ICBMs and the actual number of tests. They resolved the conflict by revising the projected number of Soviet ICBMs down, predicting only 100 ICBMs in 1960 (one-fifth of the June NIE), three hundred by 1961 (seven hundred less than the June NIE), five hundred for 1962 (one-third of the June NIE) and anywhere between one thousand and fifteen hundred for 1963 (down from 2,000 in the June NIE). The CIA Guided Missile Intelligence Committee concluded that the CIA had not missed any tests and that the Russians were experiencing unknown difficulties.\textsuperscript{456}

On December 16 1958, Dulles briefed Symington on the December NIE. Lanphier was asked to leave first. Dulles told Symington that there had still only been six successful ICBM tests, with two failures in July and, therefore, the CIA was downgrading its estimates. There was no evidence of Soviet ICBM production, nor was there any ICBM base construction. Symington pointed out that the CIA was

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., p. 180-1; Roman, \textit{Eisenhower and the Missile Gap}, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{456} Prados, \textit{The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces}, p. 83; Freedman has an excellent discussion of how the \textit{possible} production rate of 500 missiles a year was unsupportable, and yet this was the real source of the “missile gap” controversy. If the USIB had recognized that such an all-out commitment would be extremely difficult if not impossible bureaucratically in the USSR (as the British argued), and that it would have been observable by the West, then the inflated claims that the Soviets were going to have a massive missile capability “overnight” could have been curbed. See Freedman, \textit{U.S. Intelligence and the Soviet Strategic Threat}, pp. 74-80.
suggesting that the Soviets “had been way ahead of us but were slackening up” in the ICBM race. An Air Force intelligence officer, General Walsh, who was present, pointed out that the Soviets might have "gone back to the drawing board to fix something up." After Lanphier was permitted to return, he admitted that his information about Soviet testing was "floating around the intelligence hierarchy" and that he had inflated the numbers to test the CIA. Symington argued that even accepting the new estimate of 500 Soviet missiles in 1962, the Russians would need to conduct many more tests. "It didn’t make sense," Symington argued, “to estimate so much production in a short time with so little testing.”  

Symington continued to accuse the CIA of revising the numbers to please the President’s budget constraints and he continued to voice his concern that the numbers of tests and estimated production did not logically relate to each other. Symington went public with his disagreements, and in February 1959 he claimed that the downward revision of the latest NIE was an attempt to lull the American people into a “state of complacency not justified by the facts.” Also in February of 1959 he called for immediate airborne alert for SAC bombers and predicted that the Soviet Union would have a four-to-one missile advantage within the next several years. 

In March 1959 during the joint hearings, Symington made his most dire prediction: “Now I want to make this prediction to you: In three years the Russians will

---

459 Ibid., p. 92.
prove to us that they have 3,000 ICBM's. Let that be on the record." He made this prediction after being briefed on the facts that the Soviets had conducted only six tests and that the intelligence community had no evidence of production or deployment. Symington continued in this manner to exaggerate the threat by making unwarranted claims and predictions throughout the period!

**Senator John F. Kennedy:**

Senator Kennedy used the issue of a "missile gap" very effectively to portray the Republican Administration as having allowed American defenses to erode to the point where the U.S. was a second-class power, arguing that he would get the country "moving again". He generally resisted the specific outrageous claims of Symington who argued that the Soviets would have 3,000 missiles in three years, but he nonetheless frequently argued that a *dangerous* "missile gap" was inevitable, or even that the U.S. was already, currently, dangerously behind. There was no "hard" or positive intelligence to support this view. Kennedy was informed of this repeatedly by the intelligence community, and yet he opportunistically adopted the Air Force's worst-case estimates as facts, even though they had no better intelligence information than the intelligence community at large. What the Air Force could only be claiming as *possibilities*, Kennedy portrayed as definite realities in his public speeches.

On August 14, 1958, Kennedy delivered one of his most dramatic speeches about the "missile gap" to the Senate. Kennedy stated:

---

Ibid., p. 97.
We are rapidly approaching that dangerous period which General [James] Gavin and others have called the "'gap' or the 'missile-lag' period," [and sometime between 1960 and 1964] the deterrent ratio might well shift to the Soviets so heavily . . . as to open to them a new shortcut to world domination. [The Soviets] missile power will be the shield from behind which they will slowly but surely advance—through Sputnik diplomacy, limited brushfire wars, indirect non-overt aggression, intimidation and subversion, internal revolution, increased prestige and influence, and the vicious blackmail of our allies. The periphery of the Free World will slowly be nibbled away. The balance of power will gradually shift against us.\footnote{John F. Kennedy, \textit{A Strategy of Peace}, Edited by Allan Nevins (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 34–38.}

This speech did not argue that the Soviets were gaining a deterrent capability, but that they would actually achieve a first-strike capability because that is what they would need to achieve "world domination". Eventually they would have such awesome missile power that they would be able to advance because the balance of power would be \textit{against} the U.S. This was not a \textit{possibility} as the intelligence estimates stated at the time, but a likelihood because it "might well" happen.

Kennedy was thoroughly informed that a missile gap was only a possibility but not a likelihood. In January of 1959, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Twining spent a great deal of effort explaining to the Senate Armed Services Committee that NIE projections "represent only an estimate of what the Soviets could produce and deploy," not what they would actually do. He also argued against making simple numerical comparisons between forces; he stated: "Our nuclear retaliatory forces continue to provide the United States with a margin of advantage which, if exploited effectively in conjunction with other military operations, would permit the
United States and its allies to prevail in general war. Kennedy was unconvinced, and questioned Twining extensively concerning the validity of predictions of a missile gap. Twining got exasperated and responded:

My point, as I said a minute ago, is let’s don’t pick one weapons phase in isolation and call it a gap.

For instance, we will have IRBMs in Europe—consider what we have to attack Russia with—that are better than ICBMs. Look at the 150 bombers sitting on the border, and the Matador missiles and the Navy equipment.

We are surrounding them. The only thing they can hit us with is the ICBM in the missile field, and we can hit them with all kinds of missiles.

Don’t you see the difference? Compare these things collectively. Ours is a collective defense; it is not the United States solely. We would like to beat them on ICBM numbers; maybe we won’t. But that doesn’t mean we have lost the war.463

After the hearings Kennedy publicly criticized the Eisenhower Administration for failing to recognize the gravity of the situation. In September of 1959, he indicated that he was dissatisfied that the United States was the second strongest military power in the world and went on to call the upcoming election in November 1960 the most important election in the history of the United States.464

In August and September of 1960, Kennedy went on the attack. He charged that the United States had lost its military security and declared, “the balance of power

---


is slowly shifting to the Soviet-Red China bloc." Kennedy called for a crash missile program to close the "missile gap". In response to Kennedy’s charges, Vice-President Nixon called for a halt to the talk of United States weakness and accused Kennedy of being the "spokesman of national disparagement". In October, Kennedy changed tactics and began to talk about the decline of American prestige abroad and in the minds of the American people. This argument only made sense in the context of the space and missile race. These arguments were based in the reality that the U.S. was losing its ability to easily and unambiguously defend its European allies, but the U.S. was not behind or a second-class power.

Five days after Kennedy’s inauguration, Republicans in the House of Representatives gave a series of presentations to counter Kennedy’s continuing charges that eight years of Republican rule had left the U.S. with inadequate defenses. Representative Melvin Laird gave the main presentation and stated that the U.S. had at that time:

--about 16 Atlas missiles
--two Polaris submarines with a total of 32 missiles capable of reaching Russia
--over 600 long-range B-52 jet bombers, each carrying more destructive, explosive power, than that used by all the combatants in World War II.
--nearly 1,400 B-47 medium-range jet bombers based abroad and at home with a 4,500-mile range “and distances beyond with air-to-air refueling.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{465} Ibid., p. 139.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{466} Ibid., p. 139.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{467} For an excellent analysis of this shift to the more general discussion of prestige (with the “missile gap” as background), and how this argument appears to have contributed significantly to Kennedy’s narrow victory, see Ibid., pp. 139-146.}\]
--the first of SAC's B-58 Hustlers, supersonic medium-range bombers.
--14 aircraft carriers able to launch more aircraft than the entire Soviet heavy bomber force.
--18 wings of tactical aircraft, each wing with a substantial nuclear attack capability deployed globally.
--64 IRBMs in England, capable of reaching Russia and 30 Jupiter IRBMs being deployed in Italy from which Russia can be hit.
(or well over 2,000 nuclear carrying vehicles capable of reaching Russia.)

In addition to this overwhelming reality which neither the new administration or any other Democrats disputed, I.F. Stone charges that Kennedy early on had information that demonstrated there was no missile gap but continued to scare the public as he did in his first State of the Union message on January 30 when he spoke of "an hour of national peril," implying that the country was in danger because of inadequate defenses, and went on to call for an acceleration of the ICBM and Polaris programs, and for an increase in airlift capacity for conventional forces so that they would be better able to respond at any spot around the globe. Stone's argument is greatly supported by the fact that only four days later, as discussed above, Secretary of Defense McNamara let it slip in a "background briefing" to the press that there was no missile gap, but Kennedy's Administration quickly got McNamara to deny he had said it.

---

468 I.F. Stone, "Theatre of Delusion," The New York Review of Books, (1970), p.22; The irony, as Stone explains, is that Melvin Laird who presented this to counter the alarmists who were claiming there was a dangerous missile gap, became an alarmist himself two years later, attacking Kennedy for allowing a "strategy gap"; he wrote a book called America's Strategy Gap.

469 Ibid., p. 23.
Overall it seems abundantly clear that the Democratic presidential hopefuls greatly exaggerated the threat at the time—often making the threat larger, more immediate, more dangerous and more certain than was justified to assert according to the intelligence information available at the time. To be sure, the intelligence community was “grossly overestimating”470 the Soviet ICBM prospects at the time, but the Democrats took the extreme possibilities predicted by the Air Force (and most often not the NIE’s composite view, which was scary enough) and turned these tentative Air Force estimates into probabilities and even certainties—arguing a dangerous missile gap was happening and the U.S. was second and in peril, even though they knew there was no “hard” evidence to support these contentions.

This explanation of the reasons for the public’s misperception of a missile gap is not wholly satisfying because it seems as if the public should have been more skeptical and should have viewed politicians’ dire visions as campaign rhetoric. The reality is much of the public did—there were quite a number of skeptical elites, doubting editorials and most certainly doubting factions of the public. Kennedy barely won the election, and many of the polls that demonstrate a dramatic increase in concern show a concern, but not overall an overwhelming belief, that America truly was in danger. It is difficult to gauge from this distance because there are many contemporary accounts that read as if the missile gap was a fact, it was happening, and it was a very frightening period. Other accounts are completely scornful of the alarmism. Certainly

470 This is the description the CIA uses to describe its estimates of the period in its 1968 retrospective explanation of the period. See CIA, "Intelligence Aspects of the 'Missile Gap',' p. 3.
Khrushchev's behavior was difficult to discount. Further the rapidly changing military technology—moving into the missile age—posed new questions. Were these factors enough to make 1960 sufficiently different from other Presidential elections? Perhaps. Or perhaps it was Kennedy's style that made the difference and lent credibility to the predictions of a "missile gap". If Symington had been arguing the case alone, few people would have paid as close attention. Kennedy presented show-stopping speeches that were believable and terrifying at the same time. Some historians have argued that if Eisenhower had been a better politician, and had hailed the satellite era as the dawning of a new era of peace because now we would have "open skies", he could have changed the meaning of Sputnik from frightening to reassuring. He would have had Khrushchev to contend with, but the only reason Khrushchev could get away with his boasts was because the U.S. was eager to back him up rather than refute him.

Why was the U.S. so eager and willing to believe Khrushchev? It seems to be for the same reason it is more powerful for politicians to argue, "We are weak and defenseless!" rather than to argue, "We are not weak—they just want to waste billions of your tax dollars—BEWARE!" Kennedy was a ready and willing spokesman for the Air Force because the Air Force is a powerful, highly motivated, and active lobbying constituency. If Kennedy had argued "Eisenhower is wasting billions of your tax dollars!"—who would support him? Probably quite a few unorganized taxpayers who did not believe this was their number one concern; some would care a lot but most would care only a little; and he would not have been offering any specific jobs in
Congressional districts so passions would not run too high on his side. And besides, Eisenhower could frighten the people enough to easily defeat a Kennedy push not to waste money.

Now I will turn to discussing the military’s specific power in inflating the threat in the “missile gap” period.

**H8: Militarism and the Missile Gap**

Did the military, or a particular service of the military, directly or indirectly create the national misperception of the fear of a “missile gap”? To what extent can it be argued that the national misperceptions of this period were rooted in the organizational self-interests of, in this case, the Air Force? It is the responsibility of the Air Force to help the government assess the Soviet threat, and to compare the Soviet threat with American capabilities. Can it be demonstrated that the Air Force biased the threat assessment process within the government, or that the Air Force successfully influenced the public debate through the Congress or the media directly? Can it be shown that the Air Force exaggerated the threat or did it carry out its responsibilities without letting its organizational self-interests interfere with its responsibilities?

In this section, I will show that the evidence clearly demonstrates that the Air Force did exaggerate the threat within the intelligence assessment process, to the public and the media, and to the Congress. One caveat to this finding is that the Air Force is

---

471 This is an argument for why it is a collective goods problem to oppose the military, closely akin to Snyder’s argument as discussed in chapter 2. See Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, pp. 30-59.
a large organization and we see both instances of exaggeration and instances of members of the Air Force presenting full and fair assessments to the public, media and Congress—not all members of the Air Force exaggerated all the time. However, the Air Force as a whole did inflate the threat during the threat assessment process, and members of the Air Force exaggerated the threat through leaks to the press and in testimony to Congress. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that Air Force exaggerations played a major role in creating the national misperceptions of the period.

Did the Air Force successfully misinform, or “trick”, leaders and the public into believing in an exaggerated version of the threat? It would be logical to suggest that if the Air Force at any time authoritatively argued a full and fair assessment, which at important junctures leading members did, that these more balanced assessments would have been weighted more heavily. This should be true because informed listeners, such as the Senators on the Armed Services Committee, should have known enough to be able to distinguish alarmist assessments that were obviously organizationally self-serving arguments from more balanced assessments. In other words, if the Air Force were “tricking” the Congressmen, they would have had to present a very unified, logical and coherent picture to these informed listeners, otherwise their arguments would have been discounted and even disregarded. The Air Force did not present such a cohesive front, yet its very dire predictions still seemed to carry great weight—why? It appears that Air Force arguments provide useful political ammunition, even if only superficially plausible, wholly unsupported by the evidence and even logically wanting—such arguments are readily adopted when they can be used
to political advantage. Certainly, uninformed listeners might have been “tricked”,
including elites without access to intelligence reports, but among leaders with access,
only those who sought political advantage were the ones who did not discount Air
Force projections heavily (especially by 1960).

Next, I will explain why the focus is on the Air Force in this case. Then I turn
to delineating some of the best evidence to demonstrate that the Air Force went beyond
simply offering justifiably high evaluations and actually exaggerated the threat.

First of all, why do I focus on the Air Force when it is often argued that all
branches of the military work to overestimate the threat—what was different here? In
this case, historians agree that the overriding dynamic at this time was that the Air
Force was strongly competing against the Army and Navy for its “share” of what was
perceived to be a fixed amount of money. President Eisenhower was working to
strictly enforce a defense budget ceiling of about $40 billion of which, between 1955
and 1959, the Air Force received 46 percent, the Navy and Marine Corps received 28
percent, and the Army received 23 percent.\(^{472}\) The competition was intense because
Eisenhower had significantly reduced the overall defense budget from a high under
Truman of over $50 billion; competing for resources at the $40 billion level seemed
like a hardship to all of the services.\(^{473}\) On the one hand, the Air Force had “lost” the
most under Eisenhower but that was because it had the highest budget to begin with.
On the other hand, the Air Force did very well under Eisenhower as it received the


\(^{473}\) Ibid., p. 236.
largest share of the budget because it provided the core resources to support Eisenhower’s overall strategy of “massive retaliation”.\textsuperscript{474} Throughout the military there was a strong feeling that Eisenhower’s budget ceiling was “arbitrary” and too low, but this perhaps unifying notion was secondary to the inter-service rivalry that divided the military as they competed for budget shares, with the Army and Navy often making arguments to undermine the dominant Air Force.

The Air Force’s organizational interests in a large and rapid Soviet missile threat were clear. If the Soviets were quickly building up their forces to possibly disarm the U.S., this meant the U.S. needed rapidly to build its own ICBM capability, and to increase SAC funding for more bases, more bombers, more bombers on alert (more crews) and possibly even to maintain airborne alert. Airborne alert would be doubly beneficial. It would raise morale among the pilots, who loved to fly, and it would mean SAC would get “modernized” bombers sooner, since the bombers already deployed would get worn out much sooner.\textsuperscript{475} As discussed above, the Air Force’s Atlas missile program was absolutely dependent on a near-term threat because if there were no “missile gap” the U.S. could wait for the superior, second-generation Minuteman missile instead of ever deploying first-generation missiles.\textsuperscript{476} While the Air

\textsuperscript{474} Briefly, Eisenhower’s strategy of “massive retaliation” was to rely on the threat of air power to deliver an overwhelming amount of nuclear weapons in response to an attack on the West by the Soviet Union, instead of relying, for example, on the Army to stop an attack, or some other possible strategy. See Prados, The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence Analysis and Soviet Strategic Forces, pp. 67-95.

\textsuperscript{475} Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, p. 167.

\textsuperscript{476} Which is what the Soviets did—they only ever deployed four first generation missiles.
Force stood to gain significantly from a large Soviet missile program, the other services did not. The Navy did offer a response to Soviet ICBMs in the Polaris submarine program, but because the Polaris offered absolute invulnerability, it was going to be funded by lawmakers independent of the size of the Soviet effort. The Army’s interests lay elsewhere; the Army wanted to justify acquiring resources to fight more limited wars. Thus organizationally, all services wanted a big threat, but the Air Force wanted a big ICBM threat (since its preferred bomber threat had been disproved), and the Navy and Army wanted to minimize the ICBM threat in order to make room for their preferred programs.

The NIEs of the period consistently reflected this interservice rivalry, with the Air Force always dissenting from the overall findings of the NIEs positing significantly higher estimates of the Soviet ICBM program than those of the intelligence community as a whole, and the Army and Navy most often dissenting positing lower estimates of projected Soviet missile development. In fact, it has been observed by many, as General Daniel Graham pointed out, that the CIA often took a position halfway, and sometimes even precisely halfway, between the position of the Air Force versus that of the Army and Navy.\(^\text{477}\) This finding, that the Air Force was always high and often had the clout to determine the high end of what the community would then use against the Army and Navy to calculate the middle demonstrates the Air Force had a strong influence on internal threat assessments, but it does not prove the Air Force

exaggerated the threat. Were the Air Force’s high estimates reasonable given the uncertainty at the time? Specifically, did the Air Force exaggerate the Soviet’s capabilities? And did the Air Force understate its own relative capabilities?

With hindsight, it seems that the Air Force exaggerated Soviet capabilities in a number of ways throughout the period, beginning at the time when the Air Force insisted there must be a “missile gap” when it was proved there was no “bomber gap” even though there was no hard evidence to support the contention.\(^{478}\) The Air Force’s exaggerations seem to continue with their strong resistance to the accumulating evidence against a missile gap. One noted example of resistance to evidence was their insistence on the importance of increasingly unlikely possibilities of well-disguised deployments of ICBMs and deployments, all in unlikely remote places, when they could not be found in any places already surveyed. They made the argument that without 100 percent proof, “you can’t be sure”.\(^{479}\) Other analysts who surveyed the photographic evidence with the Air Force later complained to reporters: “To the Air Force every fliespeck on a film was a missile”.\(^{480}\) Lawrence Freedman writes, “The most charitable explanation for [the Air Force’s] persistence is that the Air Force analysts had convinced themselves so thoroughly that no government with any sense would be doing anything other than building a large ICBM force [and] that this had become an article of

\(^{478}\) As mentioned above, the decision to predict the “missile gap” was a result of bureaucratic bargaining, and was not based on evidence. See Kaplan, *The Wizard of Armageddon*, pp. 155-161.

\(^{479}\) Some SAC analysts insisted the Russians were fielding ICBMs in unlikely places such as barn silos, medieval monasteries, and mysterious-looking buildings out in the middle of nowhere. Ibid., p. 167.

faith. There is no doubt, Air Force estimates severely strained a credible reading of the evidence and logic, but it could be argued the Air Force was in the business of working through worst-case analyses. The question is: did the Air Force blatantly defy the evidence and logic?

One way that it appears the Air Force did unreasonably exaggerate Soviet capabilities was in their estimation of how fast the Soviets could produce missiles. The "missile gap" arose from the difference between what the U.S. planned to produce compared with the numbers of what the Soviets could produce. One reason the gap quickly became ominous was that it was estimated that the Soviets could move very quickly to produce 500 missiles a year. According to Lawrence Freedman, this estimation was unreasonable because it had no basis in past Soviet experience or in the American experience. If estimators were basing this estimate on past Soviet experience, they should have learned from the "bomber gap" that the Soviets showed no ability to quickly put into mass production long-range delivery vehicles. If estimators were uncertain about an estimate such as this, they would crosscheck it against the American experience, and assume the Russians would face similar difficulties when trying to cope with similar tasks. The expectation for the American production was that the U.S. could produce 50 a year at first, moving to 100 a year after two years. NIE estimates were for the Soviets to be able to produce missiles from

\[481\] Ibid., p. 79.

\[482\] This argument is from Ibid., pp. 78-79.
two to five times faster than the U.S., and the Air Force produced the high-end estimates. There was no basis in evidence or logic for these production rates.

In retrospect, the entire intelligence community overestimated Soviet production capabilities—even the Army and Navy estimates were gross overestimations. However, the Air Force was the service with the expertise in this area, especially with the expertise to discuss the American experience of what was possible. They are the ones who should have been insisting that, with so little testing of the Soviet ICBMs (only six tests into the spring of 1959), it was highly unlikely the Soviets would put their SS-6 missile into full production quickly. They should also have been projecting from their own experience that the Soviets might want to build second-generation missiles instead of first-generation missiles, just as they themselves were deciding to do (and the Soviets actually did as well). It appears that the Air Force most likely downplayed the difficulties of testing, production and first-generation missiles and drove all estimates higher because all intelligence services had to rely on Air Force intelligence to a large degree for this type of analysis.

In addition to inflating the threat within the intelligence assessment process, somehow Air Force estimates were fully and frequently leaked to the press when this information was supposed to be classified. The most significant of the leaks were the series of articles written by Joseph Alsop in mid-1958 that “broke” the story of the specific intelligence projections for a “missile gap” citing unnamed Pentagon sources. These articles clearly relied on Air Force sources since these articles specifically referred to the “official” projections of the Soviets having 1,000 missiles in 1961,
1,500 in 1962, and 2,000 in 1963 which were the projections of the Air Force within
the NIE, and not the “official” estimate within the government as they were represented
to be.\textsuperscript{483} It will probably never be known if it was Alsop who chose to report these
figures this way, or if it was Alsop’s source, but this type of reporting lent more
credibility to the estimates than they would otherwise have had, and thus furthered the
Air Force’s case with the public. Most likely, Alsop could have counted on getting the
“scoop” if he faithfully reported it in the manner the source would appreciate.

Air Force leaders also took their dire predictions directly to the public, as in the
famous incident of the Commanding Officer of the Strategic Air Command, General
Power’s speech to the Economic Club of New York on January 19, 1960, discussed
above. He claimed, “with only some 300 ballistic missiles, the Soviets could virtually
wipe out our entire nuclear strike capability within a span of thirty minutes.”\textsuperscript{484} He
went on to argue that the Soviets would only need 150 ICBMs to reach U.S. bases,
because other SAC bases were within the range of Soviet IRBMs, which the Soviets
already had. This analysis by the SAC Commander was clearly an extreme
exaggeration, because he of all people should have been aware of the difficulties of
simultaneously launching first-generation missiles, as Admiral Burke explained in
testimony to Congress in response to Power’s thesis.\textsuperscript{485} Power was most disingenuous
when he concluded his foreboding statement by declaring that, in light of Premier

\textsuperscript{483} Ibid., p. 75; CIA. "Intelligence Aspects of the ‘Missile Gap’." (1968), pp. 7-9;

\textsuperscript{484} Ibid., pp. 118-119.

\textsuperscript{485} Ibid., p. 130.
Khrushchev's claim that the Soviet Union was producing 250 missiles a year in one factory, the Soviet Union could accumulate the number of missiles needed to destroy SAC before the United States had developed an adequate warning system against missile attack, and went on to call for an immediate large-scale airborne alert, production of more long-range bombers, and the development of funds for the new B-70 strategic bomber.  

Power was purposefully misleading his audience here. He was giving the impression that he believed the Soviets were already in full production of their missiles by quoting Khrushchev, while he knew full well that there was no hard evidence to support this and that the intelligence community had discounted Khrushchev's statement. He understood there was no immediate danger, as he reluctantly admitted under intense questioning before the Congress soon after his speech, because he knew the Soviets had only one ICBM base operational at the time. But by calling for immediate airborne alert, he was acting as if the danger were immediate. The NIE was allowing that it was possible for the Soviets to deploy 140-200 missiles by mid-1961, which was soon, but not immediate. This estimate was very high considering lead-times and considering the fact that there was no evidence of any construction for deployments underway yet. But Power's extreme scenario was most unjustifiable, even in light of these high estimates, because he knew that the U.S. was beginning to deploy ICBMs at the time while the Soviets were not, and that Polaris deployments were

---

486 Ibid., p. 119, 129.
487 Ibid., p. 129.
scheduled to happen later that year. Admiral Burke pointed out that Power’s scenario took no account of the fact that at the time the Soviets would supposedly gain this first-strike ability against SAC (perhaps as early as mid-1961), the U.S. would have two Polaris submarines and still retain over 200 attack aircraft on carriers (not to mention that the U.S. would also have 40-50 ICBMs deployed as well, which Power’s should have been well aware of). Even considering Power’s high estimate that the Soviets could deploy 200 missiles in the next eighteen months when they had not deployed any beyond their test site yet, the plausibility of his contention that the Soviets would consider this force sufficient to disarm the U.S. with over 75 ICBMs and SLBMs in addition to over 1,800 SAC bombers, and over 200 aircraft on carriers defies rationality. Many people were already pointing out that the missile gap was not going to be large, if it materialized at all, and Power should have been most keenly aware of this.

On numerous occasions, the Air Force made their exaggerated predictions directly to the Congress. General Power took his arguments to the Congress in the spring of 1960 and received a full hearing from sympathetic Democratic Senators. He was largely supported by Lieutenant General Bernard Schriever (in charge of the Atlas missile program), who also called for immediate airborne alert as if the danger were imminent. Other Air Force officers undercut General Power’s thesis. General Thomas White, the Air Force Chief of Staff, stated that the U.S. did not need an immediate airborne alert, but should make the preparations necessary should one ever be

488 Ibid., p. 130.
needed. General Twining, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a career Air Force officer went so far as to contend that an airborne alert “would be wasted.”

Overall, the Air Force was a major source of inflated estimates of Soviet capabilities, and a source for underestimating relative U.S. capabilities. Informed observers could often “adjust” for the Air Force’s well-known organizational bias as the CIA essentially did when it would steer the overall NIE toward a middle estimate between the Air Force and the Army and Navy. However, it seems it was difficult even for experts to fully adjust their estimates given the institutional clout and the expertise the Air Force had in this area—the Air Force was the main source of information for most of the intelligence related to missile capabilities. Greatly contributing to the power of the Air Force to influence perceptions is the fact that informed leaders who could have looked at all of the available evidence and evaluated Air Force analyses against other analyses, often opportunistically adopted Air Force arguments without critically evaluating them for organizational biases (as Senator Symington did when he adopted Lanphier’s arguments). This made the Air Force’s job of having to defend their position much easier—a major faction of their audience was eager to be convinced! The Air Force was also a source of direct information to

---

489 Ibid., p. 129.
490 Ibid., p. 129.
491 The CIA argues this point. See CIA, "Intelligence Aspects of the 'Missile Gap', ".
492 Senator Kennedy secretly let some strategists from RAND, the Air Force’s think tank, help his campaign with ideas and even with drafting some parts of his speeches. See Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, pp. 249-250.
the public, and only some of the public would have been well-informed enough to
scrutinize and evaluate Air Force information and skeptical that it might be biased for
organizational reasons. In sum, the multitude of paths of influence the Air Force had
over perceptions of the threat, combined with the official adoption of their arguments
by influential political leaders, indicates that Air Force exaggerations greatly
contributed to the creation of the national misperceptions of the fear of a “missile gap”.

**Psychology, Oversell and other explanations for the causes of the Missile Gap Panic:**

In addition to these strongly supported hypotheses of electoral politics and
militarism, do other hypotheses contribute to an explanation of the national
misperceptions of this period? In this section, I will explain why I find that it is
difficult to argue that either of the psychological hypotheses (H3 & H4) considered in
this study significantly contributes to the explanation of the fears of this period. These
hypotheses cannot be ruled out as explanations of some individuals’ thought processes,
but they do not seem to describe any widespread pattern of perceptions, and therefore
they are found to be “undetected” as significant causes of these national
misperceptions. Additionally, it is clearly impossible to make the oversell hypothesis
(H5) relevant to this case. However, other scholars have offered several other factors,
including the role of the media, the role of Sputnik, and Eisenhower’s leadership style,
as explanations for the fears of this period and I will address to what extent these were
important factors.
The attribution errors (H3) considered in this study argue that leaders should often fail to recognize in what ways they have provoked the adversary, and thus they impute overly hostile intentions to the adversary. This type of reasoning can become extreme after a "shocking event" because people tend to draw more inferences from unexpected behavior (behavior they do not believe they have provoked, or caused). The first major problem with applying this hypothesis is that the panic would have to be about a fear of more hostile intentions. Most logically, the leaders would have to reason that Sputnik indicated a new intent to attack, or coerce, the U.S. The reality was that the leaders basically agreed that the Soviets had extremely hostile intentions; the increased fear centered on whether or not they had new capabilities, although if the leaders had better evaluated their assumptions about Soviet intentions, this would have prevented the fears of the time as well. Generally, the leaders did use arguments that would roughly fit the description of the "fundamental attribution error" as when Rowan Gaither argued to Eisenhower that the Soviets were clearly expansionist because there was no defensive explanation for such a large nuclear arsenal, while not recognizing that the U.S. arsenal was over three times as large and that the U.S. was perhaps provoking the Soviets to build such a large arsenal defensively. However, Gaither was just making an already generally accepted argument that Soviet intentions were hostile. Did Sputnik make leaders reevaluate Soviet intentions and decide the Soviets were even more hostile than they previously thought?

This does not appear to be the case. The reasoning does not seem to fit a dispositional/situational pattern where it would be argued "they are even more hostile
than we thought!” combined with failing to recognize U.S. provocative behavior. Instead U.S. leaders argued that the Soviets were dangerous because they were gaining new capabilities. Even more problematic for this hypothesis is that Eisenhower and other key leaders did not agree with the national misperceptions of the time so the psychological hypothesis does not describe a generally widespread tendency to perceive the adversary in a certain way. In fact, the fear overly infected Democrats and the Air Force, so errors in perception were not randomly distributed as a psychological process would predict. Further, attribution theory contends that leaders are “naïve scientists” relatively open in their search for understanding the causes of behavior or events and are not committed to a particular position in advance—misperceptions should occur because leaders fail to recognize the ways in which they provoked an adversary’s behavior, thus they infer overly hostile intentions to the adversary. The most “open” leader was Eisenhower; he actually was convinced by others to be more “cautious” than he thought necessary at the time of Sputnik, but overall he stayed committed to his pre-Sputnik positions- as did the Democrats who displayed no openness to actually reason about the meaning of Sputnik, but rather were simply re-dedicated to themes about “inadequate defenses” they had been nurturing during the Eisenhower years before Sputnik. Hence attribution hypotheses do not seem to describe the causes of the increased national fears of the missile gap period.

The hypothesis from schema theory (H4) argues that leaders’ misperceptions occur because they misapply analogies (or other schema) to current situations. The most widespread analogy of this period was just after Sputnik when many Democratic
leaders and other critics of the administration likened the situation to Pearl Harbor. Leaders invoked the Pearl Harbor image in different ways. Senator Johnson argued that the U.S. current military situation was similar to the complacency and unreadiness before Pearl Harbor.\textsuperscript{493} Senator Symington argued that \textit{Sputnik} was a “technical Pearl Harbor” in that it was a major surprise defeat that proved the U.S. did not have supremacy.\textsuperscript{494} For an analogy to cause a misperception it cannot simply be used to justify a position, but rather it must be used to diagnose a situation and determine responses to an event. Specifically, it must help define the situation, assess stakes involved, provide prescriptions, help predict chances of success among alternative options, evaluate moral rightness, and warn about dangers associated with different options. In short, it needs to “matter” in terms of forming perceptions, and not be invoked after a perception is made for other reasons. Further, to matter for a national misperception, it needs to mean the same thing to a number of different people, and be invoked in the same way. While the Pearl Harbor image was a powerful one for leaders to invoke, it was not used in the same way by different leaders. It was not clear at the time if a “Pearl Harbor” had already happened or was about to happen. And it was not clear if the U.S. had waked up because of \textit{Sputnik}, or was still complacently needing to be wakened up before a “Pearl Harbor” happened. In short, the analogy did not specifically diagnose the situation or assess the stakes involved, or provide specific alternative options, or generally “matter” for the leaders as schema theory would.

\textsuperscript{493} Botrome, \textit{The Missile Gap}, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{494} For this example and many other different invocations of the Pearl Harbor analogy, see Divine, \textit{The Sputnik Challenge}, pp. xv-xvi, 23, 53, 65, 67, 75, 115. 366
predict. Instead, it appears to have been used for justifying political positions already
determined for other reasons. This seems clearly true in light of the fact that this
analogy was used mostly by Democrats and was not a widespread misapplied schema—a
random error of perception—as psychological errors are supposed to be. There were no
other common analogies invoked at the time so it does not appear that misapplied
schemas explain the creation of national misperceptions of the time.

The oversell hypothesis (H5) argues that the Executive Branch exaggerates
threats in order to create an atmosphere of crisis and unify the country so that the
administration’s preferred policies are passed by Congress and implemented. In this
case, this is clearly not the situation since Eisenhower did not believe there was a
reason to fear a possible “missile gap”. Eisenhower’s Administration worked to allay
public fears and resisted exaggerating the threat even though he recognized it could
have been politically useful to exaggerate the threat in some ways; he thought to do so
was not accurate and the true task was for the nation to carry the load over the long
haul and not overreact out of fear.\footnote{Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon, pp. 147, 151.}

Some historians have argued that the media played a significant role in hyping
the threat.\footnote{The media hyping the threat is pointed out by: Bottome, The Missile Gap;
Divine, The Sputnik Challenge; and Roman, Eisenhower and the Missile Gap.} The argument is that the media has an interest in a shocking story, and
thus reporters tend to misrepresent events, such as what took place in Congressional
Joint Hearings, in order to make the story shocking and exciting. One egregious
example was when Secretary of Defense McElroy testified in early 1959. He explained
how the U.S. was going to rely on SAC and the other parts of its retaliatory forces and not race the Soviets “missile for missile” if the Soviets built what they could possibly build. The next day a front-page story in the *The New York Times* began: “The Secretary of Defense testified today that the United States was voluntarily withdrawing from competition with the Soviet Union in the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles.”  

McElroy had not said the U.S. was withdrawing from competition but rather that the U.S. strategy in the competition was not necessarily to match the Soviets “missile for missile”—matching was not necessary. *The New York Times* made it sound as if the U.S. had given up. There are a number of such instances in which it appears that it was easier for the Democrats to get their newsworthy message of a “crisis” in the headlines than it was to get Eisenhower’s message of reassurance in the headlines. Overall, the media was definitely a contributing factor, but they were more of a conveyor belt than a manufacturer of misperceptions. If the Eisenhower Administration had packaged its message in a more convincing form—in more newsworthy sound bites—the media would most likely have latched on to the administration’s message more.

Some observers have argued that the event of *Sputnik* directly caused the people to panic. As I have argued above, events such as *Sputnik* can take on many possible meanings. Elites interpret events for the public. Eisenhower was very surprised by the manner in which the public came to interpret *Sputnik* If he had anticipated the “spin” others would place on *Sputnik*, he might have been better prepared to argue his

497 Ibid., p. 131.
interpretation—that *Sputnik* was good in that the Soviets set the precedent of “open skies”. The Soviets could not argue that sending up satellites violated their airspace since they had done it first. After *Sputnik* it made no sense for the Soviets to shoot down a U-2 flight, because satellites were soon going to be spying better than any U-2 ever could. *Sputnik* got its meaning over time and through a process of leaders debating what it actually meant. Eisenhower’s Administration did not do a good job arguing against the most ominous interpretations of the event.

Many historians explain the fear of the “missile gap” as largely caused by Eisenhower’s presidential leadership style.\(^498\) The argument is that Eisenhower had a keen sense of strategy and priorities, and effectively managed the government in many ways, but failed as a politician. He refused “to play politics” and assert his leadership as strongly as he could have, and thus the “missile gap” fear was allowed to grow and thrive on his watch. This is clearly a very true and important observation—if Eisenhower had been a better politician he could have defused the “missile gap”.

However, Eisenhower’s style was also only a “permissive condition”; Democrats and the Air Force had to work hard to create the confusion and fear or else there would not have been a “missile gap” panic at all.

**Conclusions:**

Democrats created the *fear* of a possible “missile gap” by opportunistically adopting the Air Force’s organizationally biased arguments to attack the defense policies of the Eisenhower Administration. There was considerable uncertainty about Soviet ICBM capabilities at the time. However this uncertainty should not have rationally led to fearing a possible missile gap because U.S. retaliatory capability was assured and, hence, there was no chance of a “deterrence gap”. Khrushchev’s diplomacy at the time caused significant confusion—even considerable uncertainty—about Soviet intentions. Why would the Soviets be trying to build ICBMs as fast as Khrushchev maintained if they did not intend to use them to gain an advantage? Why would the Soviets bother if gaining an advantage was impossible against U.S. forces? The Soviets did not attempt to build the force Khrushchev claimed; they only belatedly built a deterrence capability. But because Eisenhower decided not to call Khrushchev’s bluff, even though the intelligence community knew Khrushchev was making exaggerated claims at the time, Eisenhower had the difficult task of arguing that the U.S. was secure without specifying exactly how secure. Eisenhower could have argued the case that the U.S. was secure much better—more specifically, and more forcefully. Instead, while his administration did make the argument, they often presented the case to Congress in such a disorganized fashion that they allowed the Democrats to argue that the administration was “juggling the intelligence books” and irresponsibly “gambling” with U.S. security by possibly not matching the Soviets missile-for-missile. On close examination, these charges were unjustified and even blatant political propaganda used to incite fear to take back the White House in 1960.
The Air Force played a key role as the source of the Democrats’ arguments. The Air Force exaggerated the Soviet threat within the assessment process, but more importantly, created the “missile gap” by making misleading comparisons with U.S. forces. The Air Force argued that U.S. forces were vulnerable to a disarming first strike, when such a possibility depended upon the Soviets launching a “perfectly coordinated attack”, while giving no more than tactical warning, with no U.S. forces on airborne alert, and still accepting a minimum of 10-20 million casualties. The combination of these conditions, especially considering the U.S. could always begin an airborne alert if Soviet deployments reached a critical level, made the fear of a missile gap unwarranted. The U.S. was secure, and could easily retain the capability of remaining secure. Instead the Air Force often argued that the U.S. was in imminent danger, and that, if the U.S. failed to quickly deploy missiles, the U.S. would be in unavoidable danger. The fears created by the Air Force and the Democrats were unwarranted and these national misperceptions had important and lasting effects that I will discuss below.
CHAPTER 6

CONSEQUENCES AND COSTS OF THREAT EXAGGERATION

"Yes, we used worst-case analysis. You should always use a worst-case analysis in this business. You can't afford to be wrong. In the end, we won the Cold War, and if we won by too much, if it was overkill, so be it."

- Former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, 1993

Henry Kissinger argued during the missile gap period that "if the proposals of Generals Power and [Thomas D.] White [for an airborne alert] are accepted and prove to be wrong, we will have spent $500 million too much for a number of years. If the program of the President is adopted and he proves to be mistaken, we will have forfeited our national existence." 499

It has frequently been argued that the cost of overestimating threats is merely money, while the much more serious cost of underestimating is the tragedy of military defeat. This notion that estimating threats is a one-sided problem needs to be dispelled. It is not "prudent" to err on the side of overestimating—especially if such "prudence" actually means grossly overestimating. The costs of overestimating are large. The "merely money" side of these costs are myriad in "opportunity costs", those lost benefits that could have been bought with the money given to combat the inflated threat. Spending more on defense means giving up the opportunity to use that money for other gains, such as in housing, education, or healthcare. These losses,


372
sacrificed to enormous defense spending resulting from overestimating threats, are very real, and represent a huge potential difference to the nation over time.

Below I discuss in detail the costs of overestimating threats. To address the monetary costs of overestimating threats, I use the example of the Reagan military buildup. While the earlier buildups under Truman and Kennedy happened when both the degree of threat and the costs of the response are more open to debate, the Reagan buildup can be seen as completely unnecessary since both sides were profoundly secure, and the costs, therefore, are that much more plainly manifest, making this era a perfect example of threat overestimation costs. I will mention a number of the other consequences and costs of overestimating, including how it distorts domestic politics as well as international politics, including undermining democracy in America and causing distrust with our allies. Additionally, the world has paid enormous costs for the threat exaggerations of the Cold War, as Soviet/U.S. conflict used third world countries for real and ideological battlegrounds, too often at the expense of development and democracy in the countries.

I argue here that the most important consequence of overestimating is the problem of creating self-fulfilling prophecies—creating tensions and arms races when such dynamics could have been avoided by more accurate estimations of the threat. This last cost of overestimating is just as dangerous as the cost of underestimating, leading, sometimes, to increased tensions, crises, unwanted war, and military defeat. Because the U.S. overestimated the threat of monolithic communism it got involved in two land wars in Asia, including tragic and unnecessary defeat in Vietnam. Escalated
tensions resulting from threat overestimation are especially tragic if measured against the possible decreased tensions that might have resulted from accurate threat estimation. The Reagan buildup discussed below is an excellent example of threat inflation creating a very real threat of war with the resulting tensions and price paid standing starkly against the better world that might have been. Overestimating can undermine opportunities for diplomacy and worsen, rather than improve, relations.

**Monetary Costs: The Reagan Buildup**

*The Threat Inflated: The Reagan Administration "Window Of Vulnerability"*

In the cases of overestimation of threat in 1950 and during the missile gap, the costs of overestimation, while high and apparent in some estimations (including mine), are nevertheless subject to debate because of more uncertainty about the threat in those cases. The third case, the military buildup under Ronald Reagan, makes very obvious the consequences of the patterns of threat inflation seen in, and even inherited from, the other "periods of peril".

Under Ronald Reagan’s Administration, a massive military buildup took place in response to the trumpeted Soviet threat. The argument for the buildup had similarities with those for the buildups under Truman and Kennedy. The Soviets, bent on world domination, were said to be gaining a new nuclear weapon capability that would embolden their diplomacy, undermine the U.S. deterrent, and possibly bring on
a Soviet first strike, unless the U.S. acted to close the "window of vulnerability".\textsuperscript{501} Johnson makes a compelling argument that in the circumstances, the U.S. should have recognized that the Soviets had at least as much reason to fear a U.S. first strike, that second strike deterrence was assured by either side, and that the Soviet technological advance was probably as vastly over-rated as had been the Soviet nuclear capability in 1950 and the Soviet missile count in 1961.\textsuperscript{502} Nevertheless, Reagan undertook a massive military buildup as a response to the threat from the evil empire.

\textit{Merely Money: Costs Of The Reagan Military Buildup}

The largest increase in the defense budget was early in the Reagan Administration. Preceded by an increased Carter budget of $160 billion, the Reagan buildup added $32.6 billion in real growth for fiscal year 1981. The result was a 12.5 percent real growth in the military budget for 1981 followed by a 12 percent growth in 1982.\textsuperscript{503}

The Reagan Administration requested a $1.5 trillion dollar defense program for fiscal years 1982-1986 of which Congress generously approved $1.3 trillion and the size of the defense budget doubled, rising by 50 percent between 1980-1985.\textsuperscript{504} More


\textsuperscript{502} Ibid., pp. 120-123


precisely, the defense budget outlays from 1981-1985 totaled 1.346 billion in 1990 dollars.\textsuperscript{505} The result is that in the first five years, Reagan increased the budget some 54.7 percent in real dollars.

To put these figures into context, the “rapid buildup of weapons systems in the first half of the 1980s was greater than the peak pace of military production at the height of the Vietnam War.”\textsuperscript{506} By the end of fiscal year 1985, estimated national defense outlays were highest since the Vietnam War in 1969.\textsuperscript{507} “The outlays in FY 1986 exceeded in constant dollars those of any military budget since 1946, except for two peak years during the Korean (FY 1953) and Vietnam (FY 1968-69) wars.” Moreover, “Never before in the postwar era had military budget authority or outlays increased for more than three years running.”\textsuperscript{508}

The cumulative total of the Reagan buildup from 1978 was $1,271 billion, or $760 billion dollars when adjusted for inflation.\textsuperscript{509} Much of the money (see the next section) went toward nuclear weapons, which acquisitions were practically negated by the Mutually Assured Destruction posed by already existent weapons.

\textsuperscript{505} Wirls, \textit{Buildup}, p. 207. The most substantial portion of the buildup occurred in the first four years of the Reagan Administration.

\textsuperscript{506} Weidenbaum, \textit{Small Wars, Big Defense}, p. 7.


\textsuperscript{508} Wirls, \textit{Buildup}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{509} Ibid., p. 224.
Where Merely Money Went: The Strategic Focus

Reagan undertook a significant weapons modernization program, with a more extensive one planned to begin in 1988 that was supposed to be more expensive than the first.\textsuperscript{510} Strategic nuclear forces received the majority of the growth and rose by 182 percent in real terms.\textsuperscript{511} The result of this shift in doctrine was a substantial increase in R&D and procurement, which is highly capital intensive, and actual spending on strategic programs more than doubled from about 13 billion in 1981 to $28 billion in 1985. Further, one of the military goals of the Reagan Administration was to increase the size of the nuclear stockpile by some 13% between 1983-1988.\textsuperscript{512} Despite failing to achieve this objective, U.S. strategic nuclear forces grew by 2,400 warheads during the Reagan Administration.\textsuperscript{513}

The emphasis on strategic nuclear forces was particularly expensive. During his first term, Reagan funded only 6.4 percent more missiles, but in constant dollars, paid 91.2 percent more than Carter had.\textsuperscript{514} Many of these systems were more expensive than originally planned and suffered technological problems as well. During 1987 a


\textsuperscript{511} Kaufman, A Reasonable Defense, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{512} Although at the beginning of 1987, the nuclear stockpile was 3% lower than when Reagan came into office, which was inadvertently revealed in congressional hearings. "SIPRI Yearbook: World Armaments and Disarmament," (New York: Humanities Press, 1988), p. 24.

\textsuperscript{513} Ibid., p. 24.

\textsuperscript{514} Kaufman, A Reasonable Defense, p. 42.
number of nuclear weapons systems, mostly the MX, B-1B bomber and ACM, were strongly criticized for technological problems and/or cost over-runs.\textsuperscript{515} The MX, for example, cost $30 billion dollars for 100 missiles with 1,000 warheads, but were so vulnerable that no more than 5 missiles and 50 warheads could survive an attack.\textsuperscript{516}

Reagan also increased the Pentagon’s ‘black budget’, undisclosed spending for secret weapons, by a substantial 300 percent. Wirls indicates that the black budget increase went from 5.5 billion in 1981 to more than $22 billion in 1987 and included close to 20 percent of the military R&D funding. Given Congress’ “respect for this secrecy”, little scrutiny was given to these programs. The programs, then, are very difficult to monitor and thus very difficult to keep in budgetary check.\textsuperscript{517}

By 1985, the Reagan Administration was facing increasing resistance to further massive military buildups. The response was an announcement of the SDI presidential directive, which in a span of two years went from a low-key program to one of the highest funded defense programs. In the 1985 fiscal year defense budget, strategic defense spending rose quickly with the five-year and $26 billion dollar program. In the two decades prior to Reagan’s SDI announcement, the U.S. spent, on average, $1.3 billion dollars per year on missile defense programs. Thus, SDI represented significant


\textsuperscript{517} Wirls, \textit{Buildup}, pp. 40-44.
change in both degree of spending and type, given the fact the missile defense had been off the agenda since 1972.\textsuperscript{518}

\textit{Opportunity Costs: Where Merely Money Might Have Gone}

The cost implications of the Reagan buildup are substantial. First, in order to pay for an increase in defense spending while still allowing for a tax cut, social spending suffered the most cuts. For fiscal year 1982, Reagan worked out with Congress a $35 billion dollar cut in hundreds of domestic programs, including HUD (35.8 billion to 14.7 billion in 1987) and job-training and employment programs (10.3 billion to 4.6 billion in 1984). Stricter requirements were made for Medicare and AFDC qualification, educational programs were reduced, and energy-supply and conservation programs were reduced significantly. Essentially, from fiscal year 1981 through 1987, real term defense outlays increased 45 percent while discretionary spending on domestic programs was reduced by 21 percent.\textsuperscript{519}

Even with cuts in domestic programs, increases in defense spending still led to substantially increased deficit spending and sent the United States’ debt soaring.

Despite these attempts at massive cuts in domestic spending, massive deficits were the nearly inevitable consequence...The budget deficit skyrocketed from $78.9 billion in 1981, to $127.9 billion in 1982, to $207.8 billion in 1983, eventually doubling the total federal debt by 1986

\textsuperscript{518} Ibid., pp. 40, 136. Wirfs argues that domestic political pressure forced Reagan to decide on the announcement of SDI.

\textsuperscript{519} Ibid., p. 54.
(to $2,130 billion from $1,003.9 billion in 1981). As a result, interests payments paid by the federal government increased from $52.5 billion in 1980 to $136 billion in 1986.\textsuperscript{520}

The Reagan Administration was unable to control the federal deficits, (which were significantly larger than originally estimated), and the rising costs of interest payments on the federal debt more than offset any savings in domestic programs cuts.\textsuperscript{521} The overall result was that:

The effect of the Reagan military buildup is, of course, not confined merely to a diversion of resources from civilian to military uses but also has a dynamic impact on economic growth, employment, inflation, and the international competitiveness of the U.S. economy. The short-term negative implications for growth come from the disruptive effects of the military expansions on the administrations own economic strategy. The deficit financing of an enormous military buildup with reliance on monetary policies to control the resulting inflationary pressure led to record high interest rates, sluggish growth, and then deep economic recession. For the first time military Keynesianism failed, at least initially, to stimulate business expansion as it did during the Korean, Kennedy, and Vietnam buildups.\textsuperscript{522}

Another cost inflicted by the Reagan buildup is that military expenditures are distinct from other types of public spending. Mosley argues that,

Military expenditure is an economic burden for a nation’s economy. Such expenditures represent a government allocation of national resources for a military product that flows neither into consumption, which increased the general standard of living, nor into investment, which benefits society’s future productive capacity. Military expenditures are both economically unproductive and socially wasteful.

\textsuperscript{520} Ibid., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{521} Mosley, \textit{The Arms Race}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{522} Ibid., p. 155.
Indeed, military goods and services are unique in that this output leaves the economic cycle almost entirely.\textsuperscript{523}

While the U.S. has not borne catastrophic consequences in allocating a substantial portion of the GNP to military spending, it has done little to improve the quality of life for its citizens, creating an opportunity cost. Thus, while “the U.S. standard of living has not declined in absolute terms as a result of high military expenditures, it has foregone rather significant increases in the standard of living and quality of life.”\textsuperscript{524}

Ironically, despite Reagan’s rhetoric of public disdain of big government and governmental intervention in the private sector, Reagan increased both through his military programs.\textsuperscript{525} “…the military priorities of the Reagan Administration mean the dramatic expansion of a sector of the economy that is essentially statist in terms of federal government employment and federal government purchases of goods and services.”\textsuperscript{526} Further, the Reagan ‘interventionist government’ was largely the result of the rise of the arms economy.”\textsuperscript{527}

The Reagan buildup also created a significant growth in unexpended budget authority from the previous year’s defense budget. The implication of this is that by

\textsuperscript{523} Ibid., pp. 18-20. Mosley explicitly states that his book argues that in economic terms, military spending does not contribute to either production or social consumption. He does not deal with whether military expenditures are wisely or necessarily spent. Ibid., 19. Moreover, he qualifies his argument that primarily procurements do not benefit the economy and that there are spin-offs of R&D for the civilian economy.

\textsuperscript{524} Ibid., p. 32.

\textsuperscript{525} Ibid., p. 51. If one considers further government involvement to be a distortion of American politics, then this is a further ramification of such.

\textsuperscript{526} Mosley, \textit{The Arms Race}, p. 151.

\textsuperscript{527} Ibid., p. 14.
1985, the Defense Department had $240 billion dollars to spend (even if there were no further budget appropriations) and Congress had essentially lost control of a large portion of defense and national defense outlays.\textsuperscript{528} Thus, the “Reagan programs expanded the portion of the military budgets devoted to multiple-year procurement contracts, creating an enormous backlog of budget authority that would come due as outlays in future years. Such obligations add to the ‘uncontrollable’ part of the military budget.”\textsuperscript{529}

The overall result of the Reagan buildup, despite eventual waning support of Congress and the American public, was that the administration “raised the American military commitment to a new and very expensive plateau.” The large increases in defense spending created a new level of military spending that served as a political ‘floor’ rather than a ‘ceiling’ on defense spending. Politicians did not advocate significant reductions, as anything below existing levels would be seen as weakness and neglect. Moreover, given the political power of national security concerns, not only did Reagan to transfer spending from domestic to defense programs, but such levels of spending for defense programs were ensured as long as the Soviet threat remained credible. Thus, “[t]he close to $300 billion annual military budget had become the new standard; anything less would be considered unilateral disarmament.” The costs

\textsuperscript{528} Kaufman, \textit{A Reasonable Defense}, p. 28-29.
\textsuperscript{529} Wirfs, \textit{Buildup}, p. 46.

382
stemming from the “window of vulnerability” were to be visited on the American public for years to come.  

**Costs To The Third World**

It is difficult to find a country unaffected by the Cold War. Over and over, third world countries were used by the U.S. and the Soviets as literal and political battlegrounds. Johnson discusses the cases of Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan, and Central America, effectively arguing that threat exaggeration led to unnecessary action in each case.  

In these countries, setbacks to development and much and continuing human suffering was the consequence.

In Vietnam, the most resonant example for Americans, the costs of what is widely agreed to have been an unnecessary war were huge. Over 970,000 North and South Vietnamese were killed, with conservative figures of 110,357 killed in action, 499,026 wounded and 415,000 civilian casualties. Moreover, the country suffered devastating losses by having a war fought on its territory as well as the social and economic strains that several hundred thousand U.S. troops placed on the country. The cost of living increased 170 percent in two years in the city (mostly from refugee 

---

530 Ibid., pp. 54, 207.
531 Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, chapter 8
532 Tucker, “Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War,” p. 64. The numbers vary greatly, particularly those referring to civilian losses. However, these are very low estimates.
533 There were severe environmental costs from fighting, carpet bombing and defoliation to name a few causes.
influxes). Corruption was greatly intensified as Americans made cold drinks, laundry, and prostitution big business and virtually eliminated any level of self-reliance in South Vietnam. In political terms, while ostensibly the U.S. was committed to concepts of self-determination, it seriously violated the same by intervening in Vietnam. Johnson notes that, “[i]f the United States sometimes seemed to be destroying Vietnam in order to save it, it also violated Vietnamese self-determination in its efforts to preserve it.”

Chile is also representative of the price third world countries paid for the Cold War. In 1970, Salvador Allende was elected as a Marxist president of Chile. Given U.S. predilections for viewing any apparent communist gains as a threat, Kissinger viewed the election of Allende as being linked to Soviet challenges in Jordan, Vietnam and Cuba. As Johnson argues, “The combination of a preoccupation with the nuclear threat and the tendency to see almost every contest in a bipolar context gave universal significance to every conflict involving the Soviets and made the demonstration of credibility a never-ending task.”

The U.S. response to the election of Allende was to provide aid and covert action in efforts to destabilize the Allende government. While there is controversy over the effectiveness of U.S. efforts, after a three-year period, U.S. backed Pinochet led a military coup (and Allende allegedly committed suicide) and effectively took control of the government.

---

535 Ibid., pp. 265-266.
537 Ibid., p. 143.
538 Ibid., p. 143.
384
The costs of U.S. intervention in Chile were enormous (not so much for the U.S. although it did cost tens of millions of dollars to fund covert activities). Pinochet effectively shut down any type of democratic government and proceeded to eliminate any political rivals in a brutal regime that lasted decades. Moreover, U.S. intervention was a direct challenge to the election of Allende and a contradiction to the supposed freedom that the U.S. was supposed to be supporting. In retrospect, third world gains in the ideological struggle with the Soviets are far outweighed the costs in money, lives, lost U.S. credibility, and potential democratic freedoms.

**Security Costs: Heightened Threats Due To Overestimation**

Many scholars have argued that if not for the overestimations in NSC-68, the Cold War need not have been as tense and militarized as it was. The Soviets never fully joined the arms race in the 1950s; they built weapons to maintain their deterrence but at a much more modest and slower pace than the U.S. constantly anticipated. The U.S. viewed the Soviets as highly expansionist and wanting to “eliminate other centers of power”. Because the U.S. saw the Soviets as possibly being able to gain a first-strike capability, the U.S. waged a very lopsided arms race (allowing the U.S. to hold on to military superiority possibly as late as the early 1960s, depending on how much “collateral damage” the U.S. would be willing to risk.)\textsuperscript{539} The Soviets apparently never

\textsuperscript{539} Informed observers would argue that the race against a possible “first-strike” was “declaratory policy” for public consumption, in reality leaders were maintaining U.S. superiority. For a discussion of “declaratory” versus “actual” policy, see
saw the opportunity to defeat the U.S. that the U.S. constantly feared or perhaps they never even wanted to wage an all-out war against the U.S. Reflecting on the end of that period, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin once told Henry Kissinger that “Great opportunities had been lost in Soviet-American affairs, especially between 1959-1963.” It seems that if not for the escalatory rhetoric of President Kennedy and the “missile gap”, the U.S. might have been able to diplomatically arrange détente in the early 1960s, and could possibly have avoided the Cuban Missile Crisis and the involvement in Vietnam.

The defeat of détente in the 1970s was an unnecessary tragedy. Many people thought at the time that the Cold War was over. But back it came with new claims of possible Soviet military superiority in the near future. At this point in time, both sides had enormous numbers of nuclear weapons—survivable nuclear weapons—and the proposition that the Soviets would attempt a disarming first-strike defied imagination. This very proposition thrived, however absurd, and this basically unfounded assumption that the Soviets were planning a first strike may even have led to the rejection of more modest and accurate assessments of Soviet capabilities. Threat exaggeration fed on itself, disallowing saner analysis and policy, something that had gone on in earlier “periods of peril”. What is less well-known is how this return of the Cold War raised tensions in the Soviet Union—there was an action-reaction problem—to


the point where the Soviets suffered a severe war scare that could have led to an accidental nuclear war.

Below I discuss this war scare because it is shocking evidence of the serious dangers of overestimating threats. President Reagan's rhetoric terrified the Soviets at a time when both great powers should have felt extremely secure because of their secure second-strike capabilities. Defenders of the Reagan buildup, echoing defenders of earlier buildups, have argued that it was a terrific jobs program for the U.S. At the same time, however, many of these defenders argue that Reagan's buildup drove the Soviet Union to financial collapse. How can it be that an arms race is good for the U.S. but bad for the Soviet Union? This sort of illogical double standard regarding the Soviets was at its worst when U.S. cold warriors, while exaggerating the threat of a Soviet nuclear first strike, were surprised to find that the Soviets (seeing the same, if not more fearful, preparations from the U.S.) were equally or more terrified of a U.S. first strike.

*The Soviet War Scare: Near War Due To Threat Overestimation*

*Phase I Summary*

The Soviet War Scare was a period of time in which the top Soviet leadership of the USSR apparently had very real fears that there was a significant chance the United States might launch a surprise first-strike nuclear attack. There is some debate about

---

542 Stone discusses how this logic of an arms race keeping them poor while making us rich has been around for a long time, see Stone, "Theatre of Delusion," , pp. 20-21.
precisely when the war scare began, and there seems to be a good deal of speculation regarding Soviet actions and intentions since there are presumably few archival materials available for study. Most of the evidence from the Soviet Union appears to be anecdotal or reliant on personal sources from former Soviet officials. One source, East German spymaster, Markus Wolf, notes that the Soviet War Scare started during the Carter Administration and the “Soviets barely concealed panic” regarding the $157 billion U.S. defense program. Moreover, during the Carter Administration there was the decision to schedule deployment of Pershing II and Tomahawk missiles to West Germany in 1983, as well as the initiation of PD-59 which shifted U.S. strategy from one of assured destruction and towards the selective use of nuclear weapons.

KGB/British agent Gordievsky indicates that the Soviet War Scare started in May 1981 with the initiation of RYAN (a Russian acronym for nuclear missile attack) based on ‘Reaganite rhetoric and Soviet paranoia’. 543

Despite disagreement over the date, the first phase of the war scare is attributed to two primary factors: Soviet perceptions of the ‘correlation of forces’ shifting against them, and the continued military buildup undertaken by Reagan. 544

First, the Soviets

543 Ben B. Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance: The Soviet War Scare and U.S.-Soviet Relations," in Mysteries of the Cold War, ed. Stephen J. Cimbala (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1999), pp. 90-92. There is debate over whether or not the war scare was part of Soviet tactics or whether there was genuine fear. The CIA monograph indicates that genuine fear seems to be closer to the truth. Additionally, the monograph indicates that while the Soviets seemed to be genuinely afraid of a surprise nuclear attack, they also exploited this fear for domestic political purposes of motivating the Soviet population.

544 A third factor implicated is that Andropov had just come to power in the Soviet Union and was considered to be more alarmist and was the first leader since Stalin to
were concerned with the "correlation of world forces" in which they saw their overall power declining relative to the United States. Part of this pessimistic, long-range assessment was based on the developing quagmires the Soviets were engaged in during the early 1980's in areas such as Angola, Afghanistan, and Cuba, areas that had previously been seen as Soviet gains in the 1970's. Additionally, the Soviets were concerned with the technological and economic lead the United States was beginning to take. Fears regarding these trends were further exacerbated by Reagan's policies towards the USSR.

The second major factor contributing to Soviet concerns of an increased threat of surprise nuclear war was the new Reagan Administration's tough stance towards the Soviets. Reagan adopted PD-59, which: effectively made a first-strike against the Soviet Union a stronger option; undertook one of the largest peacetime military buildups; undertook psychological warfare missions (PSYOPs); and ultimately made plans for SDI.

---


545 Ibid., p. 4.

546 While Reagan's buildup served to exacerbate fears, Carter's $157 billion dollar investment in MX and Trident missiles and nuclear submarines were also a concern since the Soviets did not believe that they could match such acquisitions. Ibid., p. 15.

547 Richelson, 1983,pg125 in Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 92. While Arbatov, a civilian defense expert, argued that the Soviets had sufficient forces to deter such a strike by the U.S., the Soviet military alarmists saw the directive as an effort by the United States to gain superiority. Ibid.
In particular, the PSYOP operations may have been a significant factor initially causing Soviet fear, although Reagan’s election rhetoric, soon translated into a military buildup, was an important factor as well. 548 What was particularly unsettling for the Soviets is the PSYOP operations were conducted close to the Soviet Union and ferreted out information regarding the capabilities of Soviet early warning systems and thwarted the ability for the Soviets to read U.S. naval communications. The result of these operations was to highlight vulnerabilities in Soviet surveillance and early warning systems. 549 The ‘intention’ of these missions was to deter the Soviets from provocative action and to respond in kind to Soviet exercises that had increased in complexity and size in the preceding years. 550

Given their concerns of vulnerability, the Soviet leadership focused on whether the United States might initiate a surprise nuclear attack against the Soviet Union. 551 This factor, combined with concerns regarding the correlation of forces, caused a reaction from the Politburo in which it “issued what amounted to a full-scale hurricane alert” for what should have been a long-range “storm warning”. 552 Thus, in response to the changing strategic environment, RYAN was established by the Soviet leadership

548 The PSYOPs operations were started in 1980. There are indications that at the beginning of the Reagan Administration the Soviets hoped that Reagan would back off of his election platform of increased defense and pursue détente.


550 Ibid., p. 10.

551 Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance" p. 90.

as an intelligence collection effort to "monitor indications and provide early warning of U.S. war preparations". 553

Still, while the Soviets were concerned with U.S. intentions given the vulnerabilities revealed by the PSYOPs, the Intelligence Community as a whole in the U.S. saw the Soviet fear as being abnormal and did not necessarily establish a link between the psychological warfare missions and RYAN. 554 However, they did note that the Soviets had gone further than their normal criticisms of such activities (which had precedence during earlier decades) to include the concerns of surprise nuclear attack. 555

Despite pressures from the U.S., the Soviets managed to stay moderate through 1982 and the first phase of the war scare was concealed from the Soviet public and other states. As Haig noted, "The Soviets stayed very, very moderate, very, very responsible during the first three years of this administration. I was mind-boggled with their patience." 556 However, this position substantially changed in 1983.

553 Ibid., p. 5.

554 It wasn't until the second phase of the war scare that top-level U.S. officials began to understand the extent of the Soviet fear. Ultimately, Soviet fear was believed to be genuine even if exaggerated. Ibid., 30.

555 The Soviets are seen as being particularly concerned about a surprise attack based on the previous history of Barbarossa in which the "ignored warning and surprise attack have never been forgotten in Moscow". Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum: The 1983 Soviet War Scare," p. 28. Additionally, Barbarossa seems to have been an impetus to understand information regarding a U.S. surprise attack in the 'worst-case' analysis context to avoid making the same mistake again.

556 Siebenmoren, "Staatssicherheit der DDR," 155, in Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 98.
Phase II

The second phase of the war scare in 1983 was much more public and began on February 17, 1983 when RYAN was given a high degree of urgency for monitoring preparations for a surprise nuclear attack. This urgency was reflected in the three priorities given to RYAN: monitoring civilian-military installations, recruiting agents at such installations, and monitor communications networks and systems.557

The Soviets newly heightened fears were directly attributed to the “impending deployment of U.S. Pershing II intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in West Germany”, which were highly accurate and their flight time was less than six minutes.558 RYAN was thus to give the Soviets advance warning if the U.S. was going to launch a nuclear strike – and give the Soviets time to launch a preemptive strike of their own.559 The Soviet military establishment for the most part seemed to believe that the U.S. plans were based on preemptive strikes in situations in which there was “suspicion” or the “opening phase of war”, similar to Soviet justifications.560


558 The CIA monograph indicated that the time was 6 minutes, the book chapter indicated that it was 10-12 minutes. Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 95.

559 This time around, with the KGB suffering “declining effectiveness”, the Soviet’s utilized East German Intelligence – the HVA, which apparently provided up to 80% of the Warsaw Pact’s intelligence. Thus, the files kept by the HVA became a major source of information regarding Soviet fears. The intelligence services were also to keep track of the Tomahawk cruise missiles. Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum," p. 15-16.

560 Kokoshin, 1998 in Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 91. This point also highlights the danger of assuming that the war scare was a propaganda tactic compared to genuine fear of a first-strike attack by the U.S. Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum," p. 32.

392
Knowledge of the war scare among the top Soviet leadership became public a few days after Reagan announced SDI on March 23, 1983 - which apparently caught the Soviets by surprise. Andropov, in a highly unusual move, responded directly to Reagan by arguing that Reagan was preparing for launching a nuclear war to win.\textsuperscript{561} While Andropov had been warned not to overreact by his advisors, but he accused Reagan of “deliberately lying” about Soviet military power in order to justify the SDI program.\textsuperscript{562} Moreover, this was the first time since 1953 that the Soviet nation was warned its state that the world was on the brink of nuclear war, indicating that there was substantial fear of nuclear war.

\textit{KAL Flight 007}

On September 1, 1983, Flight 007 KAL was shot down by the Soviets and the United States responded with strong rhetoric denouncing the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{563} The Soviets responded that the tragedy was the fault of the U.S. given the intelligence missions, even though in the end the truth seemed to lie somewhere between the two extremes. The Soviet forces had been under considerable stress given the Fleet exercises the U.S. had been carrying out in the Pacific and most indications are that the shooting down of the airliner was an accident.\textsuperscript{564}

\textsuperscript{561} The remarks were “unprecedented” in that they revealed details about U.S. and USSR nuclear arsenals. Ibid., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{562} Ibid., p. 18.

\textsuperscript{563} Ibid., p. 19.

\textsuperscript{564} Ibid., p. 22.
This incident set off one of the tensest periods in the Soviet War Scare. On the Soviet side, the West's reaction confirmed their worst fears about U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union. The Soviets argued that Reagan used the KAL incident to justify pushing through Congress additional defense spending and the new MX missile, and saw the incident as arranged by the United States.\textsuperscript{565}

An additional problem in the Soviet Union is that "the net effect of the crisis was to close off whatever debate was still going on within the Soviet leadership over U.S. intentions."\textsuperscript{566} Following this incident, a "full-scale war scare" spread in the Soviet Union. The Soviet leaders were blamed for spreading the war scare to its citizens by increasing rhetorical attacks on the U.S., holding peace classes and rallies, and civilian defense drills to name a few examples. Further, the panic was contagious and East Germans constructed bunkers for wartime use by the mid-80's.\textsuperscript{567} RYAN has also been charged with exaggerating threats in order maintain morale and loyalty with its allies.\textsuperscript{568} Finally, there are also implications that the KGB 'demanded' the threats that were supplied by its agents who had incentives to maintain their careers.\textsuperscript{569}

\textsuperscript{565} Ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{566} Ibid., p. 24.
\textsuperscript{567} Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 98.
\textsuperscript{569} Andrew and Gordievsky, 1991, pg 69. Ibid., p. 99. There is also the suggestion that the "high command and the KGB had a mutual bureaucratic interest in exaggerating the Western threat". More sinister is the idea that the threat was exaggerated to justify to Soviet allies their own aggression. Heuser, 1993, pg 451 in Ibid., p. 99.

394
The war scare “almost got out of hand” until it was reigned-in in April of 1984 by Andropov’s successor Chernenko.\(^{570}\) While some argue these actions were the result of propaganda, this public exposure was different than past mobilization efforts and brought forth almost sacred imagery of World War II, indicating the Soviets thought the threat was real.\(^{571}\) Apparently though, the Kremlin also shared concerns of war with the Soviet people to justify an increase in military spending despite repeated promises of a better standard of living.\(^{572}\)

**ABLE ARCHER 83**

Further exacerbating the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States was the ABLE ARCHER 83 exercise, which arguably pushed the USSR and the U.S. the closest to nuclear war since 1962. While this exercise had been conducted in the past, this particular exercise was notably different in two respects. First, the exercise involved high-level officials giving it greater publicity and second, it included a “practice drill that took NATO forces through a full-scale simulated release of nuclear weapons.” The Soviets interpreted the exercise as U.S. forces going on alert in Europe.

\(^{570}\) Apparently reigning in the war scare started in 1984, and after period of time reassuring the Soviet people that the USSR could deter and defend, in 1985, Gorbachev and the new relationship with the West quickly subsided the scare. Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum", p. 28. There is evidence that many in the Soviet establishment wanted ‘younger’ leaders to succeed hardliners, and Gromyko helped Gorbachev remove two of the most powerful Soviet hardliners in order to start harnessing the military establishment and industrial complex when he came into power. Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance", p. 95.

\(^{571}\) Fischer, "A Cold War Conundrum," p. 27.

\(^{572}\) Ibid., p. 28.
and there were concerns that a countdown to war had begun. At this juncture, Gordievsky reports cabling the West before things got too far out of hand. Essentially, given the tensions and rhetoric in the past few months combined with the ABLE ARCHER 83 exercise nuclear war had “come frighteningly close – certainly closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crises of 1962.”

There are three points of consensus over the controversial ABLE ARCHER story: 1) The U.S. and Soviet Union came very close to war given Soviet overreaction; 2) Only Gordievsky’s warning to the West kept things from getting out of hand; and 3) this was the first time that Reagan really realized that the Kremlin feared a surprise nuclear attack by the United States. Thatcher reinforced to Reagan the gravity of his rhetoric and actions and publicly urged a policy shift, although whether such a move was made to put pressure on the Soviets to stop “exploiting the situation” or because the analysis was true remains a question.

Still, despite the fact that the Soviets put their fighter aircraft with nuclear weapons on alert and the “volume and urgency” of Soviet communications increased, senior level Soviet officials denied that the upper levels of the Soviet ministry knew about ABLE ARCHER 83, indicating that the event was more of an issue for the United States than the USSR. Moreover, the leaders of the U.S. and the USSR were privately engaged in dialogue during 1983. Finally, while nuclear war may have been more likely since the Cuban missile crisis, the CIA monograph concludes that the

---

573 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
574 Ibid., pp. 25-26.
575 Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 100.
situation was significantly less threatening since U.S. nuclear forces were not on full alert as they had been during Cuban missile crises.\textsuperscript{576} Additionally, the Soviets are credited with the fact that despite the war scare, they "were not jumping to unwarranted or unverified conclusions about possible U.S. attack."\textsuperscript{577}

Still, anecdotal evidence indicates that the war scare may have lasted into the mid-80's. Horner notes that to Soviet officials, well fortified with vodka in 1985, began to discuss the need to "press the nuclear button" before the U.S. could gain superiority in every field.\textsuperscript{578} Finally, RYAN was not officially dismantled until November of 1991 and there are three potential reasons for this: 1) the Soviets still saw a threat; 2) bureaucratic inertia; and 3) Gorbachev did not think it was politically wise to call it off.\textsuperscript{579}

In sum, the consequences of panics due to threat inflation are substantial and often severe. The costs are extreme; monetarily, in lost opportunities for progress in non-military areas, in the damaged mindset of the populace, in degradation of the environment, and in a heavy toll on developing states. Most ominously, the panicked reaction to exaggerated threats can lead to actual security crises that make the threats all too real.

\textsuperscript{577} Fischer, "Intelligence and Disaster Avoidance," p. 100.
\textsuperscript{578} Ibid., p. 94.
\textsuperscript{579} Ibid., p. 101.
CHAPTER 7

PANICS: THEORETICAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

"It is all-important that the governing classes and the leading statesmen, who are trustees for the nation and for the public funds, should feel ashamed of the public hoax which has now been practiced upon them so often. If this little book serves to supply them with a defensive armour against the arrows of future panic-mongers, I shall be very well satisfied." - F.W. Hirst, *The Six Panics*, 1913

The study of panics has both historical and ongoing relevance. In this chapter, I first discuss the ongoing relevance of the study of panics. I then discuss the theoretical implications of this study for understanding misperceptions in international relations. The study of panics is also an investigation of public opinion formation, and this thesis affirms some of the suspicions of leading scholars of public opinion research. Third, this dissertation contributes to the study of why great powers tend to overexpand, and I will discuss how this study points to important avenues of future research in this direction. Finally, I discuss possible policy implications of this research, namely—if elites had less of a monopoly over information in the area of national security, would this help cure panics? Is this possible? Is it desirable? Is better independent civilian analysis even more important? Are panics better than the possible alternative of no coherent foreign policy?

*Panics: Past, Present, and Future?*

398
Richard Cobden and F.W. Hirst investigated panics in Britain in the last century. The present study examined the first two U.S. Cold War panics of 1947-1950 and 1957-1960. I have shown that the domestic political hypotheses of oversell and militarism primarily explained the first Cold War panic. I have also shown that the electoral politics and militarism hypotheses explained the "missile gap" panic of 1957-1960. As I mentioned at the beginning of this study, there was a third major Cold War panic that peaked in 1980.

This panic happened at a time of "least foundation" as Richard Cobden would describe it. This panic clearly grew out of a public relations campaign launched by a private group, the Committee on the Present Danger, in 1976.\(^{580}\) This group was organized to raise the alarm over what was considered an "ominous Soviet military buildup" and adverse trends in the global military balance. Nothing could have been more absurd in an age of such complete overkill by both military superpowers that no half logical worst-case scenarios were ever put forward (many completely illogical scenarios were advanced). This did not matter. The group argued, "Our country is in a period of danger, and the danger is increasing...If we continue to drift, we shall become second best to the Soviet Union in overall military strength... [We] could find ourselves isolated in a hostile world, facing unremitting pressures of Soviet policy backed by an overwhelming preponderance of power." After the Soviets invaded

Afghanistan in 1979, the committee argued, “The tides are once again rushing the world toward general war.” War might be avoided but “the time is growing short.” Why a Soviet invasion of a small country on its border would signify an increase of a likelihood of general war is not apparent. These ominous warnings created a fear among the public that helped bring Ronald Reagan to power.

This third Cold War panic confirms the electoral politics hypothesis in that elites outside of power definitely exaggerated the threat in order to win the presidential campaign of 1980. This panic also confirms the militarism hypothesis at least as far as the fact that a number of prominent retired military figures worked with the Committee on the Present Danger, and the Committee on the Present Danger used inflated threat assessments provided by the military. There is some evidence to suggest the military may have helped to organize the Committee’s efforts in the first place, but this merits further investigation. The overall findings on the hypotheses of these panics are summarized in the chart on the following page.

Are panics a relic of the Cold War? While it certainly helps the salability of a threat if a plausible opponent is available, threat-mongering has not been abandoned since the end of the Cold War. At the very beginning of the Cold War, quite a few people suggested that Japan was going to be the next enemy, and then Japan suffered an economic downturn, and disappeared from the threat radar. After that, it was suggested that the next threat would emanate from clashing cultures, and particularly

---

### Table 8. Findings for Causes of National Security Panics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>H1: Capabilities</strong></td>
<td>weak - 1948</td>
<td>significant/permitive-1957</td>
<td>not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>significant/contributing - 1950</td>
<td>weak-1960</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H2: Intentions</strong></td>
<td>weak - 1948</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moderate - 1950</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H3: Attribution Theory</strong></td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispositional/situational error</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H4: Schema Theory</strong></td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
<td>undetected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analogical reasoning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H5: Oversell</strong></td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H6: Logrolling</strong></td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
<td>non-existent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H7: Electoral Politics</strong></td>
<td>weak/moderate</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H8: Militarism</strong></td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from Islamic fundamentalism. The threat of China was raised in the early 1990s, and then put on the back burner until just recently. China appears to be a favorite threat for many in the Bush administration. The most prominent threat of the past decade has been the threat from “rogue nations”.

The rogue threat has not caused a large panic, but its promotion does have a number of similarities with the panics discussed in this study. Similar to NSC 68, the Gaither Report and the Team B report of the mid 1970s, the rogue threat was greatly advanced by a threat assessment conducted to undermine the CIA’s assessment of the threat. The Rumsfeld Report issued in 1998 found that a threat from a rogue state with an ICBM was possible within five years (no probability assessment attached). The CIA had estimated that a rogue nation was not likely to get an ICBM capability for 10-15 years, and that most likely rogue states would not choose to attack the U.S. with an ICBM. Instead, the CIA argued, rogues would be more likely to choose covert means of deployment for a nuclear bomb or other weapon of mass destruction in order to avoid devastating retaliation. The Rumsfeld Report’s more dire predictions were seemingly confirmed when North Korea launched a test missile that was more advanced than what the CIA had predicted North Korea capable of. A small elite panic ensued, with the U.S. leadership rededicating itself to the immensely expensive task of building national missile defenses.

A close examination of the proponents’ real goals for national missile defense (NMD) reveals further similarities to past panics. The leaders that want an NMD argue most often to the public that an NMD provides a defense against the threat from “rogue
states", and no state should be threatened by the U.S.'s benign intentions of defending itself. However, they have also argued that they need an NMD system to preserve America's "freedom of action". They do not explain this often or completely, but the idea is to preserve the U.S.'s coercive power. The bottom line is that an NMD system will never work well against just any unknown adversary as a wait-and-see defense, because a dedicated opponent could easily overcome the system by attacking it or overwhelming it with countermeasures, or go around it with alternative means of delivery. But an NMD could possibly be handy in the situation where the following four criteria are met simultaneously: 1) against a weaker power with limited nuclear capability, 2) that was going to be deterred anyway (since NMD will probably be only 80% effective according to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld), 3) that the U.S. wanted to coerce conventionally, but 4) the American public might hesitate to coerce because of the possibility of a nuclear missile retaliation. This is a highly unlikely situation, so NMD is mostly desired by weapons manufacturers. However, there are some leaders who would do whatever they can to preserve the U.S.'s coercive power, which is definitely eroding somewhat in an age of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In short, the pattern of threat mongering continues, and panics of various shapes and sizes are certain to happen in the future.

*Theoretical Implications for Misperceptions in International Relations:*

The study of misperceptions in international relations has been dominated by scholarship on psychological biases. I argue that psychological biases are relatively
unimportant in the study of international relations. Psychological biases do matter when individuals matter in decision-making. Individuals matter most in crises—when decisions are made with few people under time constraints. However, framing and constraining even crisis decision-making, and shaping all other decisions made across time by a large number of people are national perceptions. National perceptions are determined by shared information.

For example, it was clear in the 1950s case that the U.S.’s national perceptions took a sharp turn toward being much more pessimistic about the Soviet threat and the need to oppose communism everywhere with the introduction and acceptance of NSC 68. Most leaders in the Truman administration disagreed with the document in significant ways, but they ended up being convinced it was the right way to talk about the threat in order to mobilize the public and Congress, or convince the President, or to stay in power and not be isolated. Dissenting views were out-shouted and marginalized. Later events were interpreted as confirming the new outlook, even though alternative explanations were available, especially when it appeared this was a winning political program. A new national perception was created and institutionalized. It was not a matter of leaders observing Soviet behavior and all reasoning in the same manner that the Soviets were overly hostile and the U.S. did nothing to provoke it. Additionally it was not that all (or many) leaders actually reasoned Stalin was like Hitler. They each exhibited individual tendencies and came to different conclusions. Their final opinions were then shaped and pressured by the political climate they faced and their colleagues’ argumentation and pressure. In the
cases studied here, important national misperceptions were created by elite propaganda campaigns.

It does appear, as psychologists have frequently observed, that people actually come to believe in the perceptions they choose to espouse for political or self-serving reasons. People may do this to reduce psychological discomfort. Alternatively, political leaders might argue they believed in what they did, even if they did not believe in it, just to maintain their reputation. However, it is likely that politicians are often like everyone else, and come to actually believe they acted the way they did because they believed in it. As has been said, “If you get on your knees and pray, soon you will believe.”582 Creating misperceptions to win a political campaign can actually have very far-reaching effects.

The recognition that national misperceptions exist and need to be studied as real group misperceptions, and as the product of shared information—propaganda campaigns—leads to a major reorientation of the study of misperceptions in international relations. Often people have argued that states have been guided by their culture or ideology, but these ideas are broad and appear almost immutable. Instead, I think American ideology could have taken many forms. It could have produced a Kennan-style political-focused containment policy, or the highly militarized containment policy it produced (or some other). American ideology was indeterminate. Instead the

582 I believe Nietzsche wrote this. Clearly, Nietzsche understood national misperceptions profoundly. He also wrote, “Insanity is the exception in individuals. In groups, parties, people, and times, it is the rule.” And he also wrote, “How good bad music and bad reason sound when we march against an enemy.”
containment policy that resulted was a product of oversell—the result of divided
government, and the product of the political strength of the military bureaucracy,
combined with the U.S. rules on “secrecy” in the realm of national security.

In this study, I have focused on misperceptions of national security. It is likely
that national misperceptions are particularly likely in this area because elites have a
monopoly of information, and the public knows less about this issue area than about
domestic issues which are a bigger part of their daily lives. Other types of national
misperceptions are likely as well, such as U.S. views on trade issues, or global
warming, for example.

Theoretically, I have studied national misperceptions using theories from
domestic politics. These theories need much more development because they are not
wholly satisfying. For example, I have argued that the civilians have taken the lead in
these panics, but they have used the inflated threat assessments provided by the military
services for organizationally self-serving reasons. I argue that the politicians generally
use these “scripts” because they serve their political purposes, and not because they are
“tricked”. I am convinced this is true because the civilians often persist in their
inflated estimates, and work to obscure the facts and deliberately confuse the public
when they are confronted with evidence that refutes their preferred exaggerated
argument.\(^{583}\) However, a better understanding of the relationship between the civilians
and the military needs to be found. How much power does the military have? To what

\(^{583}\) Recall Senator Symington’s behavior during the missile gap period when DCI
Dulles attempted repeatedly to brief him on the available intelligence. See chapter 5.
extent are civilians tricked? Jack Snyder pointed out "myths" that developed to actually substantially trick the state across time—these are a monumental finding.\textsuperscript{584} I find there are multiple domestic political sources for misperceptions and myths, and more work needs to be done to understand these forces and their relative power.

\textit{Panics and Public Opinion formation:}

Page and Shapiro argue that these panic periods are important periods of abrupt opinion change that led to major shifts in U.S. foreign policy, with far-reaching consequences.\textsuperscript{585} They focus on trends in public opinion through the study of public opinion polls, and argue that more work needs to be done in the study of opinion formation—opening the "black box" of how public opinion is created. This study furthers that agenda. I confirm their arguments that they believed opinion was misled and manipulated in these periods.

These scholars have helped lead a new emerging consensus among public opinion scholars that finds the public "rationally" responds to events and changing circumstances, \textit{as interpreted by elites and the media}, thus the public basically exerts a "rational" influence on foreign policy. Previously, scholars and leaders had argued it was necessary to insulate foreign policy from the public because the public was subject to irrational "moods". The finding that the public is "rational" could be very important

\textsuperscript{584} Snyder, \textit{Myths of Empire}

\textsuperscript{585} Page and Shapiro, \textit{The Rational Public}, pp. 366-369.
for democratic theory. However, the finding is meaningless if public opinion is
systematically manipulated by elites as they interpret events.

I find that public opinion was indeed highly manipulated during these important
periods—these “defining moments” for U.S. foreign policy. Hence the finding that the
public is “rational” can hardly be lauded as a victory in the functioning of democracy.
However, it is important to point out that I also find that public opinion was not
“simply manipulated” by elites. My study has shown that while elites instigate
misperceptions to mobilize public opinion, as Truman did in his Truman Doctrine
speech, elites may successfully manipulate opinion in the short term of a few months,
but they cannot control opinion in the longer term of even a few years. In these panic
cases, public opinion became constraining, and other elites were empowered by the
misperceptions. The military’s influence increased when the threat was exaggerated,
and the Republicans were given opportunities to use the administration’s rhetoric
against it. Ultimately, public opinion shaped Truman’s policies in ways he could have
never anticipated when he began manipulating opinion.

It needs to be recognized that opinion manipulation is most likely a many-
layered phenomenon. In this study I have clearly shown the top layer of how political
leaders manipulate opinion. I have incompletely shown that the military has several
ways it can manipulate both the public and other elites. More work needs to be done to
investigate all the ways the military, and other special interests, can manipulate elites.
Political leaders are often mouthpieces for special interests, but how does this work? It
is not often well-documented because it is a self-concealing phenomenon. Special

408
interests often go to great lengths to hide their influence. Understanding the extent that public leaders actually represent special interests, instead of their public constituency, would teach us a great deal about the state of U.S. democracy.

Another important question for public opinion formation that needs to be investigated is: why does the public continuously believe these inflated estimates? One would expect the public to be more skeptical than it proves to be. Does the public need better education in foreign policy? Or does the public need more reliable information—some way not to rely solely on government representatives for information?

Panics and Great Power Overexpansion:

Charles Kupchan has argued that when rising powers perceive increased vulnerability, they tend to overreact and overexpand.\textsuperscript{586} I have shown that in 1950, (the case Kupchan examines), and also in 1960, actual U.S. vulnerability was not as extreme or uncertain as is widely perceived, nor were these periods perceived by many elites at the time as periods of extreme vulnerability. I would argue that because elites created public perceptions of extreme vulnerability, this has had a lasting effect on how these periods are perceived. I acknowledge that there were vast disagreements among the elites at the time. However, it is striking that some elites argued that the U.S. had clear superiority at the time, while others argued the opposite extreme—the U.S. was in immediate danger.

\textsuperscript{586} Kupchan, \textit{The Vulnerability of Empire.}
I believe it is important to note that the actual goals of those who argue that the
U.S. was in danger were very expansive. These leaders would argue that the Soviet
threat was able to immediately overrun Europe, while they also argued that they
preferred a policy of protecting all free peoples everywhere and gradually coercing the
Soviets, and maintaining absolute superiority. The best strategy for getting the U.S. to
build up an overwhelming coercive force is to argue the U.S. is in immediate danger
and needs defense. This argument gets even the most isolationist factions to support the
defense of the homeland.

I admit that the most difficult period to assess is 1950. With hindsight it appears
reasonable to worry what Stalin might do once he had built up his atomic capability.
However, what is striking to me is how many leaders were not very scared! The vast
majority of Truman's cabinet was not scared enough to actually raise the defense
budget. The Republicans in Congress were not actually scared—they might have
reduced Truman's budget. With hindsight we know how very weak the Soviets actually
were, and we know that they never did build up their power to threaten Europe.
Acheson and Nitze came up with the rhetoric and political strategy that redefined the
situation. When war broke out in Korea, and it was interpreted as confirming their
analysis, perceptions hardened behind that analysis.

That analysis was from the perspective of a globalist strategy. If high U.S.
vulnerability includes an attack on anybody anywhere, then U.S. vulnerability was
high. But it is small wonder why it is common for all great powers to overexpand, if
all great powers expand their vulnerability to include attacks on any people anywhere.
In this study I have demonstrated that the U.S. did not primarily react to increased vulnerability, or increased “uncertainty”. Most likely the U.S. could have maintained its security with the defense budget it had, or one not much bigger. Instead, the U.S. expanded its goals. It decided its way of life was in danger if any non-communist people anywhere were threatened or attacked. One could argue this was a good and generous policy, or it could be seen as an imperialist policy (most likely the perspective would vary greatly between people from South Korea and Taiwan and those from Nicaragua or the Congo). Independent of the morality of the policy, it needs to be recognized that seeing “vulnerability” was optional—a matter of definition and goals. This helps to explain why great powers see vulnerability even though they are the most powerful states in the system, and the most secure by any more usual definition.

Policy Implications:
The most apparent way to help control the national misperceptions that cause panics would be to reduce elites’ monopoly on information in the realm of “national security”. This is not simple, but most likely it is quite possible. Leaders argue that to protect “sources and methods” of intelligence, a high level of secrecy needs to be maintained. However, the level of secrecy a government needs to maintain is highly dependent on what security policies it adopts. If the U.S. chooses an open and defensive posture it can reduce requirements for secrecy as compared to choosing a coercive posture, which requires more arms racing and more secrecy.
It may not be necessary to reduce actual secrecy in foreign policy. It appears that the information available at the time probably would have been sufficient to recognize U.S. security. Perhaps more important than information availability is strengthening independent civilian analysis. The military’s ability to control the assessment process is probably a much more significant factor than the quantity of information available. Independent civilian analysis is much better than it was at the beginning of the Cold War (the fact that it significantly exists at all is new since then). Independent analysis is not as large or well-funded as it needs to be in order to compete with the military’s public relations abilities in the competition for public perceptions.

Many people argue that leaders’ abilities to manipulate the threat are essential. The argument runs that in peacetime, the U.S. government is divided and weak. It is incapable of making an adequate decision and carrying it out. The U.S. would tend to underfund security, except for the fact that the President can occasionally create crises and make up for the times in between when the U.S. underestimates the threats it faces. This may be real a problem. I am not convinced that the U.S. has dangerously, or even significantly, underestimated threats anytime since 1945. People cite instances of imprecise estimation to prove the U.S. underestimated. For example, arguments for underestimation include that the U.S. did not expect the Soviet’s to explode an atomic device before mid-1950 when the Soviets exploded one in the fall of 1949. Likewise, the U.S. did not fully expect that the Soviets would launch Sputnik when they did, but they did expect it within months. These estimates were highly accurate compared to the overestimates in late 1957 that the Soviets would have 2,000 ICBMs in just over five years. The main problem with arguing that U.S. leaders need to be able to create panics
in order to make up for underestimation, is the fact that panics are fundamentally
undemocratic. To legislate through misleading the public is an affront to democracy. If
the system does not function without the need to mislead, then the system needs to be
fixed so it can function, with leaders openly and honestly debating the national security
needs of the nation.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Washington Post, February 27 1948, 1.


CIA. "Intelligence Aspects of the "Missile Gap"," 1968.


"Peace: War Fears Grip Capital and Nation." Newsweek, March 22 1948, 23.


Russett, Bruce, and Donald R. Deluca. "'Don't Tread On Me': Public Opinion and Foreign Policy in the Eighties." *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (1981).


Spanier, John W. American Foreign Policy since World War II. New York: Preger, 1960.


Van Evera, Stephen. "Causes of War". Draft copy of manuscript.


