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Staff Study Prepared by Representatives of the Special Committee of the National Security Council on Atomic Energy¹

[WASHINGTON,] June 11, 1952.

TOP SECRET

The Problem

1. To outline procedures whereby the President may most effectively obtain advice whenever he is called upon to decide on the use of atomic weapons.

Background

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2. The Atomic Energy Act of 1946, which vests in the Atomic Energy Commission ownership of all fissionable materials, provides that:

"... the President from time to time may direct the Commission (1) to deliver such quantities of fissionable materials or weapons to the armed forces for such use as he deems necessary in the interest of national defense...."

3. On September 10, 1948, the Executive Secretary submitted a report to the National Security Council on "United States Policy on Atomic Warfare" (NSC 30).²This report dealt with the feasibility of formulating at that time policies regarding the use of atomic weapons. The analysis stated "the United States has nothing presently to gain, commensurable with the risk of raising the question, in either a well-defined or an equivocal decision that atomic weapons should be used in the event of war." On the other hand, it was pointed out that in the absence of an established and acceptable system of international control of atomic energy, this Government should make no commitment which would deny it the right to employ such weapons in the event of actual hostilities. The report came to the following conclusions which were subsequently adopted by the National Security Council on September 16, 1948:

"12. It is recognized that, in the event of hostilities, the National Military Establishment must be ready to utilize, promptly and effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic weapons, in the interests of national security and must therefore plan accordingly.

"13. The decision as to the employment of atomic weapons in the event of war is to be made by the Chief Executive when he considers such decision to be required."

In view of the adoption of these conclusions no action was taken at that time (a) to obtain a decision either to use or not to use atomic weapons in any possible future conflict, or (b) to obtain a decision as to the time and circumstances under which atomic weapons might or might not be employed.

4. In the course of the last two years it has become established practice for atomic energy matters requiring Presidential decision, which affect the Departments of State and Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission, to be referred to the Special Committee of the National Security Council on Atomic Energy for consideration and such recommendations as it sees fit to make to the President. This procedure was underscored by letter of the President dated August 25, 1950,³which stated in part as follows:

"I am asking that the committee of the National Security Council on Atomic Energy, which consists of Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense, pass on the directives which I have to make, that affect all three of those Departments. I informed the Secretary of State of the action which had been taken, and instructed the Secretary of Defense that these actions must be considered by this Committee of the National Security Council before I shall approve any further actions. In that way everybody interested will know exactly what is going on."

The occasion for the foregoing statement arose in connection with the strategic deployment of non-nuclear components to overseas areas, a preparatory action approved by the President which did not include authority to use atomic weapons.

5. The Quebec Agreement of August 19, 1943,⁴governing collaboration among the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada in the field of atomic energy provided, among other things, that "we [the United States and the United Kingdom]⁵will not use it [the atomic bomb] against third parties without each other's consent." The Quebec Agreement was superseded by a *Modus Vivendi* adopted on January 7, 1948,⁶which specifically provided that "All agreements between the three governments or any two of them in the field of atomic energy shall be regarded as null and of no effect." Certain exceptions were made but none of them relate to the question of use of atomic weapons. The *Modus Vivendi* contains no language relating to this question. The Joint Communiqué issued at the end of the Truman-Attlee talks on December 8, 1950 stated: "The President stated that it was his hope that world conditions

would never call for the use of the atomic bomb. The President told the Prime Minister that it was also his desire to keep the Prime Minister at all times informed of developments which might bring about a change in the situation.” The Joint Communiqué issued on January, 1952 concerning the Truman–Churchill talks stated:

“Under arrangements made for the common defense, the United States has the use of certain bases in the United Kingdom. We reaffirm the understanding that the use of these bases in an emergency would be a matter for joint decision by His Majesty’s Government and the United [\[Page 976\]](#) States Government in the light of the circumstances prevailing at the time.

“We share the hope and the determination that war, with all its modern weapons, shall not again be visited on mankind. We will remain in close consultation on the developments which might increase danger to the maintenance of world peace.”

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7. During the General Assembly in the Autumn of 1950, a move by the Soviet Union to secure UN approval of a resolution which would brand the first user of atomic weapons as a war criminal was roundly defeated. As a counter to this move, the General Assembly approved, on November 17, 1950, a resolution which stated, among other things, that it was indispensable for the realization of lasting peace and security, that every nation agree “to accept effective international control of atomic energy, under the United Nations, on the basis already approved by the General Assembly, in order to make effective the prohibition of atomic weapons.” It reaffirmed that “whatever the weapons used, any aggression, whether committed openly, or by fomenting civil strife in the interests of a foreign power, or otherwise, is the gravest of all crimes against peace and security throughout the world.” It determined that it is indispensable for the realization of lasting peace and security “that joint united action be taken to meet aggression wherever it arises.”²

8. On several occasions within the past two years the President has publicly stated that he is prepared to make a decision as to the use of atomic weapons when circumstances so require. On April 6, 1949 he stated: “... if [a decision to use the atomic bomb] has to be made for the welfare of the United States, and the democracies of the world are at stake, I would not hesitate to make it again.”² On November 30, 1950 the President stated:

“Consideration of the use of any weapon is always implicit in the very possession of that weapon.

“However, it should be emphasized, that, by law, only the President can authorize the use of the atom bomb, and no such authorization has been given. If and when such authorization should be given, the military commander in the field would have charge of the tactical delivery of the weapon.”²

9. It is recognized that responsibility for advising the President as to the military desirability of the use of atomic weapons, as is the case with [\[Page 977\]](#) any other weapon in our national armory, rests with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense. Responsibility for advising the President as to the political aspects of the use of atomic weapons rests with the Secretary of State. Military considerations and political considerations are often inextricably interrelated. By law, the power to decide on the use of atomic weapons rests with the President.

10. Once a decision is made that atomic weapons should be used, the President will give the necessary directives to the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission for implementation.

11. The means whereby the President may receive promptly the advice of the Departments of State and Defense and the Atomic Energy Commission need to be identified.

Analysis

12. Unless there is an initial determination by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the use of atomic weapons in a given situation is militarily desirable, it is difficult to see how the question of such use can arise in any realistic way. In the event that pressures build up for the use of atomic weapons in other quarters, it would appear that the first question which would require answering is whether such use is militarily desirable. Accordingly, the matter should originate with, or be referred to, the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

13. In the event a recommendation for use is made to the President by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military reasons for the recommendation, and the intended employment, should be stated.

14. After a recommendation for use is made by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President will want, in addition to the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the views of the members of the Special Committee on the political, military, and technical considerations involved.

15. If time and circumstances permit, the Congress would pass and the President would approve a Joint Resolution “declaring war”, before atomic weapons were employed. In the past such resolutions have provided: (1) that the state of war between the United States and the— — —Government which has been thrust upon the United States is hereby formally declared; (2) that the President is authorized and directed to employ the entire military forces of the United States and the resources of the Government to carry on war against the— — —Government; and (3) that to bring the conflict to a successful termination “all of the resources of the country are hereby pledged by the Congress of the United States.” A resolution in these terms would clearly [\[Page 978\]](#) authorize the President to use atomic weapons and any other weapons he considered necessary to bring the conflict to a successful termination.

16. However, atomic weapons are uniquely suited for surprise and possibly decisive attacks, without warning and without formal declaration of war by the enemy. In case of a surprise attack upon the United States, it would be necessary, in the interest of national defense, to launch an immediate atomic counter-attack. In such event, the President would take action under his constitutional powers as Commander-in-Chief, consulting with appropriate leaders of the Congress at the earliest possible moment. In contingencies short of a surprise attack upon the United States, the President will doubtless want to consult appropriate Congressional leaders before making a decision.

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N.B. It is not intended that the procedures set forth in the conclusions which follow should await last-minute developments which may require immediate decision in the midst of inevitable confusion and uncertainty. It is thought that the need for decisions as to use of atomic weapons will more probably grow out of a period of increasing tensions. In such circumstances it is expected there will be time in which the President, by means of the procedures outlined below, can secure from the Departments and agencies of Government most directly concerned tentative conclusions and recommendations concerning the use of atomic weapons in the light of existing and emerging situations.

Conclusions

1. In making any decision regarding the use of atomic weapons, it is considered that the President will want, at minimum, the views of the following:
 - a. The Joint Chiefs of Staff
 - b. The Secretary of Defense
 - c. The Secretary of State
 - d. The Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission
2. Any recommendation to the President regarding the use of atomic weapons by the Armed Services should initially be made by, or be referred to, the Joint Chiefs of Staff in view of their "statutory responsibility as the principal military advisers to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense." In presenting their views the Joint Chiefs of Staff should:
 - a. Set forth the factors that were taken into account in arriving at its recommendation.
 - b. Identify, in general terms, the intended employment of the weapons.
3. Before the President makes a final decision, in order to provide him with a means for obtaining a full exposition of the factors involved from [\[Page 979\]](#) the officials listed in 1. above and in view of the statutory responsibility of the National Security Council to "advise the President with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security", a meeting of the President with the Special Committee of the National Security Council on Atomic Energy, together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, should be convened to consider any recommendation by the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding the use of atomic weapons.
4. Time permitting, consultation with Congressional leaders should take place before a decision to use atomic weapons is implemented.
5. Additional actions to be decided upon at such meeting would include the extent, nature, and timing of consultations with, notifications to, or requests for action by
 - a. Other departments and agencies of the Government (the other members of the National Security Council, the Cabinet, Civil Defense, etc).
 - b. The American people.
 - c. Other governments (especially those whose consent is required before their bases can be used by the United States for atomic strikes).
 - d. The United Nations.
6. In the event of a positive decision, the President will authorize the Secretary of Defense to use atomic weapons under such conditions as may be specified.

Recommendation

7. That this staff study be made available to the President.

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1. On Oct. 23 S. Everett Gleason, Acting Executive Secretary of the NSC, transmitted a copy of this study to President Truman. Gleason's memorandum of transmittal reads as follows: "The enclosed study, outlining procedures whereby the President may most effectively obtain advice when he is called upon to decide on the use of atomic weapons, the conclusions of which have been approved by the Special Committee of the National Security Council on Atomic Energy, is submitted herewith for your consideration." (Truman Library, PSF-Subject file, "NSC Atomic, Atomic Weapons—Procedures on Use")↵
 2. For text, see [Foreign Relations, 1948, vol. 1, Part 2, pp. 624–628](#).↵
 3. See footnote 5, *supra*.↵
 4. For text, see [Foreign Relations, The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, pp. 1117–1119](#).↵
 5. Brackets throughout this document appear in the source text.↵
 6. See footnote 3, [p. 847](#).↵
 7. For text of the Soviet draft resolution, Oct. 23, 1950, see [Documents on Disarmament, 1945–1959, vol. I, pp. 248–250](#). For text of General Assembly Resolution 380(V): Peace Through Deeds, Nov. 17, 1950, see *ibid.*, pp. 260–261. Related documentation is included in material on proposals for

strengthening the United Nations against aggression, in *Foreign Relations, 1950*, vol. II, pp. 303 ff.[↵]

8. For the full text of the address, see *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1949*, p. 197.[↵]

9. For the text of the press release quoted here, see *ibid.*, 1950, p. 727, footnote 3.[↵]

