

The end of victory: prevailing in the nuclear age

Abstract

America's use of atomic weapons against Japan in 1945 helped to facilitate a quick end to World War II. But the split between former allies the United States and the Soviet Union led to a Cold War which featured a relentless competition for military superiority. Although it took Russia four years to catch the U.S. in atomic weapons, the gap was shortened to two years when it came to nuclear.

The dangerous military environment in the early 1950s required the U.S. to be able to predict the Soviet Union's response in nuclear terms. This task largely fell to a secret group with the National Security Council referred to as the Net Evaluation Subcommittee (NESC). Over the dozen years of its existence from 1953 to 1965 which the present book traces, the NESC's annual reports furnished American officials with invaluable information and contributed significantly to nuclear weapons strategy during parts of three presidential administrations.

Keywords: book review, nuclear age, atomic weapons, Edward Kaplan

Volume 5 Issue 2 - 2023

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Received: July 14, 2023 | **Published:** July 26, 2023

Introduction

Author Edward Kaplan has both academic and military experience. He earned his Ph.D. in history from the University of Calgary; he taught twice as a professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he previously earned his undergraduate degree; currently serves as Dean of the School of Strategic Landpower at the U.S. Army War College; and has previously published a book and journal articles on America's atomic age. Additionally, he held various intelligence positions for three years and was briefly part of America's multinational force in Iraq.

Content

The book's content includes an Introduction, eight chapters, and a Conclusion. In Chapter 1, Kaplan covers events from the denotation of the first atomic weapon up to the creation of the NESC. While the United States had a brief window of superiority over the Soviet Union, that period quickly shortened: whereas it took four years for the Soviets to match America's first atomic blast, it took just half that time for the Russians to catch up to America's initial nuclear detonation. A National Security Council directive approved on the last day of the

Harry Truman presidency created what was the precursor of the NESC, with orders to prepare a summary evaluation of the Soviets' capability to harm America.

Chapters 2 and 3 highlight the period from 1953 through 1956 in which United States policy revolved around winning a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. For instance, the 1953 NESC annual report concluded that America would eventually win a nuclear exchange due to the Soviets' inability to block strategic air defenses. Similarly, the 1954 NESC annual report noted the Russians' deficiency in strategic warning ability.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Kaplan explores the reasons for a shift in U.S. nuclear weapons approach in relation to the Soviet Union. Whereas previous strategy revolved around winning a nuclear conflict, the revised strategy emphasized surviving a nuclear attack. According to Kaplan, some of the reasons for this reorientation included Soviet advances in satellite technology and ballistic missiles along with improvements in bomber strength. The NESC's 1957 report concluded that fallout shelters would cut casualties and that the U.S. needed an

anti-ballistic missile system. The NESC's 1958 report added China as a target of American retaliation and was the first report to discuss ICBMs. In its final report released during the Eisenhower presidency, the NESC indicated how prevailing through a nuclear attack was possible, if difficult.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Kaplan examines circumstances surrounding another shift in U.S. nuclear weapons strategy during the ensuing John F. Kennedy's administration. First, the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba in spring 1961 shattered the mutual trust between military and civilian authorities. Second, the fact that a flexible nuclear response was seen as beneficial to the outcome of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis played a large part in that strategy replacing the massive retaliation approaches. Finally, the NESC's 1963 report found that neither nuclear preemption nor an overwhelming response would facilitate a satisfactory conclusion to hostilities.

In Chapter 8 and the Conclusion, Kaplan explains the circumstances of the NESC's demise and evaluates its impact. Essentially, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara who had been no fan of the NESC while serving President Kennedy disagreed with the findings of the NESC's 1964 report and recommended its termination, which President Lyndon B Johnson approved in March 1965.

While the NESC may have seemed out of place by the time it left the scene, its value in assessing scenarios and furnishing guidance in policy options was an integral component in the development of American nuclear weapons strategy. Ultimately, the NESC's success can be measured across history: although the number of nations possessing nuclear weapons capability grew during its active period, there were no nuclear exchanges between countries during a very hot period of the Cold War.

Comparison

Other recent books have likewise focused on U.S. nuclear weapons policy. Jeffrey Larsen and Kerry Katchner's¹ study examines the risks of nuclear weapons proliferation in the 21st Century. Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest² concentrate on the writings of four creative individuals from the 1950s whose work is seen as helping to define nuclear realism. In his 2017 book, former defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg³ relays a firsthand account of America's nuclear program in the 1960s. Fred Kaplan's⁴ work illustrates the manner by

which nuclear weapons have shaped U.S. military and foreign policy. Among the features of Andrew Futter's⁵ book is a section tracing how thinking about nuclear weapons evolved over time. Finally, where as Peter Goetz⁶ offers a technical history of nuclear weapons, Mark Wolverton⁷ presents both historical and contemporary aspects of the latter topic.

Confronting a post-nuclear apocalypse has been the subject of several recent novels, including those by Ira Tabankin,⁸ Roy Slade,⁹ and Tim Washburn.¹⁰ Conversely, E.J. Mendoza's¹¹ work provides actual directions for surviving a nuclear war.

Conclusion

Given the extremely secret nature of the NESC's meetings and output only three copies of its annual reports were ever produced author Edward Kaplan should be commended for his ability to extract these rare records, although credit likewise goes to the National Security Archives and Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library for making the files available. One ironic finding of the study is that while differences between civilian and defense personnel on nuclear weapons policy may have been expected, the level of interservice rivalry in implementing that policy was not. While the NESC appeared to meet an inglorious end in 1965, a similar group created within the Department of Defense in 1973 the Office of Net Assessment validated the NESC's contribution and legacy.

That the Net Evaluation Subcommittee "was a rational response to a specific strategic moment" (p. 249) prevented an irrational nuclear response which would have and still can end humanity.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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