



Planning for Preventive War, 1945–1950

By GIAN P. GENTILE

Nagasaki, August 1945.
U.S. Air Force History Office

A striking premise underpins war plans developed between 1945 and 1950. Planners (and probably most other Americans) believed that a conflict with the Soviet Union would be total. As the head of the Joint Strategic Plans Group, George Lincoln, observed: “It must be understood that another war will be the equivalent of an Armageddon and that we must count on the use of atomic weapons. . . . This point is an essential basis for U.S. planning.”¹ It was accepted that the Nation would mount a strategic bombing campaign using atomic weapons against key targets. Destroying the means to make war was seen as leading to the collapse of enemy will.

This approach was not new. During the interwar years strategists such as Giulio Douhet and

Billy Mitchell outlined the optimum targets and objectives of strategic air campaigns. Although historians may debate the extent of their influence on planning during World War II, airpower was commonly seen as a distinct and perhaps decisive form of modern combat.

In the aftermath of World War II planners did not see atomic weapons as revolutionary. They thought of strategic bombing, conventional and atomic, as a method of attack against enemy war-making capacity that could lead to the breakdown of enemy will. This concept helped shape military strategy in the late 1940s and was based on war-winning, not war-detering.

Thinking the Unthinkable

Airpower theorists suggested that for strategic bombing to be successful it would be highly advantageous to attack first. As one general put it, “If you want to prevent getting hit, hit.”² Since there was no complete defense against strategic bombers, it was logical to destroy the bombers

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General Billy Mitchell.

and their support facilities before they were used against the United States. The notion of preventive war—striking an enemy when it appeared to threaten the Nation with a strategic air attack—became widespread. Yet since that meant attacking first, which went against a powerful American ideal of never throwing the first blow, leaders were often cryptic in advocating preventive war against the Soviet Union. Still the concept existed and influenced postwar planning.

In October 1945 the Joint Chiefs approved a report on the impact of the atomic bomb on postwar organization and strategy. The United States would use the bomb as a strategic weapon against concentrated industrial areas and “centers of population with a view to forcing an enemy state to yield through terror and disintegration of national morale.”³ This report simply endorsed the traditional concept of strategic airpower as a means of destroy-

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ing enemy war-making capacity. However, perhaps because of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they gave equal weight to the bomb as a weapon of terror, which could force an enemy to surrender by directly attacking its will to resist.

JCS reflected conflicting views toward atomic weapons and strategic airpower that many of the ensuing analyses and war plans would manifest. Was the bomb delivered by strategic bombers in a way that destroyed enemy war-making capacity or collapsed its morale? While equal weight seemed to be given to both, the dominant theme in postwar plans was to treat strategic airpower and the bomb first and foremost as a means to destroy the industrial base—an operational instrument of war, not a deterrent weapon of terror.

Military leaders after August 1945 downplayed the notion that the bomb made conventional land and naval forces and missions obsolete. This was more than a parochial effort to prop up the services at a time when military reductions were anticipated. It rested on a basic notion of the way industrialized nations made war in the 20th century. The Armed Forces would be needed in a total war. Roles and missions would be modified, but the basic wartime structure would remain.

Combat experience in World War II shaped the concepts contained in Pincher, the first plan produced for hostilities against the Soviet Union.⁴

Drawing on lessons learned, the plan called for advanced bases in Britain, Egypt, and India for the Air Force to launch an immediate strategic air offensive. The Navy would again play a key role by securing the sea lines of communications to the bases and blockading Soviet naval forces and shipping. While the Navy and Air Force carried out these operations the Nation would mobilize to invade the Soviet Union. Even though a ground invasion was critical to Pincher planning, emphasis was on a quick, powerful atomic air offensive that might obviate its need.

In four draft plans produced between April and June 1946, the primary task “was a prompt strategic air offensive” that would “destroy the Soviet war-making capacity.” The bomb would be critical because the United States in 1946 held sole ownership of atomic weapons, which produced a distinct advantage. War would be total. To destroy the Soviet will to resist would require first destroying the effectiveness of the Soviet war machine.

Just as the overall concept of Pincher drew on the experience of World War II, so did target selection. Industries devoted to transport, petroleum, tanks, ball bearings, and other military needs were generally the same types of targets attacked in Germany and Japan. The plan also recognized that attacking such industries could require area bombing of cities. Although the Joint Chiefs never officially approved Pincher’s warfighting concepts, its premise survived in subsequent plans.

In November 1947 the chiefs approved war plan Broiler. Like its predecessor it relied on an early atomic campaign and advanced bases to launch an air offensive. But where Pincher had assumed that massive force requirements would be met, Broiler reflected the reduced resources available in 1948.

The Broiler target lists still emphasized industrial systems. The plan did acknowledge that atomic attacks on urban industries would kill many civilians and destroy political control centers. Suffering by the civilian population was seen as a bonus. The primary objective was destruction of Soviet war-making capacity.

A number of factors shaped the overall approach in the plans. There was a political need to maintain unity against Soviet aggression among friendly European nations. Planners thus moved away from the Pincher concept of withdrawing from Europe and by 1948 adopted a new approach: American and British forces conducting a fighting retreat would attempt to hold the Soviets at the Rhine. Detonation of the first Soviet atomic device in 1949 also had an impact. The Joint Chiefs became increasingly focused on blunting Moscow’s ability to occupy Western Europe and to attack the United States

with atomic weapons. Whatever the influence, the key concept in war plans and studies at this time was a quick, devastating strategic air attack, relying heavily on atomic bombs, to destroy industrial infrastructure. No external threat, international event, domestic issue, or amount of interservice rivalry over budget allocations would change this approach.

In 1948, in the Crankshaft war plan, the Joint Chiefs made important modifications. With regard to taking the war to the Soviet Union, Crankshaft demonstrated remarkable continuity with Broiler and Pincher. It called for “an air offensive against vital strategic elements of the Soviet war-making capacity.”

Crankshaft envisioned using strategic bombers to attack critical elements such as command and control facilities, industrial parks, petroleum refineries, submarine docks, transport systems, aircraft factories, foundries, and power plants. The plan recognized that many of these sites were in built-up areas. Like Broiler, Crankshaft considered directly targeting morale by killing civilians in cities. At one point it even acknowledged that “it may become advisable to abandon the concept of destruction of the enemy’s physical means to wage war in favor of a concept involving destruction of his will through massive attack [on the Soviet] people.” But the planners withdrew, calling for a better understanding of the link between attacking people and breaking their will.

The Joint Chiefs released the Harmon Report in 1949, which analyzed the probable effects of atomic bombs on seventy Soviet cities. It concluded that the United States could launch such an offensive; but while it would destroy 30 to 40 percent of Soviet industry, it would not appreciably affect public will. In fact it could “validate Soviet propaganda against the United States, unify the people, and increase their will to fight.” The study concluded that the most tangible benefit of the offensive was speed: it “would constitute the only means of rapidly inflicting shock and serious damage to vital elements of the Soviet war-making capacity.”⁵ Striking first and hard could be a credible warfighting concept.

Deterrence or Warfighting?

According to early postwar studies the Soviets had a considerable conventional advantage over American, British, and French forces and could easily overrun major portions of Western Europe. But the studies showed that they would avoid a major conflict with the United States for several years. If war did occur it would be due to Soviet miscalculation of the risks.

Russell Weigley found that the emerging concept of deterrence in postwar strategic thought was based on a massive atomic capability to retaliate against the Soviets using strategic airpower. He argued that the use of *combats* to deter an attack on the United States had always been part of military policy, but that prior to 1945 that idea was secondary to using the Armed Forces to achieve national objectives. It was not until after August 1945 that, because of the revolutionary nature of atomic weapons, war deterrence was adopted as military policy.⁶

American war planning, however, does not support this assessment. Planners continued to place primary importance on fighting and winning wars. If atomic capabilities could deter war, all the better. But the priority was still on using the preponderance of strategic airpower to destroy Soviet war-making capability.

Some leaders theorized that due to technological advancements the incredible destruction of total war could come without warning like the attack on Pearl Harbor. That might be prevented by anticipating enemy intentions to attack the United States and initiating massive preemptive action. Adopting that policy would not deter war but rather win it by launching a surprise attack.

Admiral Ralph Ofstie, a director on the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey and a senior board member for Operation Crossroads (atomic tests at the Bikini Islands in 1946), had no problem with “knock[ing] hell out of Moscow with atomic bombs.” America should also use the weapons on other urban and industrial areas. In a classified memo to the Navy General Board, Ofstie hinted at a willingness to launch a surprise bacteriological attack if there was evidence of the Soviet intention to attack the Nation with biological weapons.⁷ In the same memo, he strongly advocated a heavily nuclear preventive war.

Offense as Defense

Preventive war such as that suggested by Ofstie raised some troubling questions. Were threats declaring the defeat of capitalism justification for launching war? Once the Soviet Union exploded the bomb, would a preventive attack be warranted because the United States could be attacked with atomic weapons? Such uncertainties, along with the ideal that America should not throw the first punch, meant preventive war never became official policy.

Yet in selected fora and under certain conditions key military and political leaders advocated preventive war. General Orvil Anderson, primary

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B-29s at North Field
on Guam, 1945.

author of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey report, provided a glowing assessment of the strategic air campaign against Japan and concluded with some signposts for the future. The report argued that because of the changed nature of war, “an overt act of war has been committed by an enemy when that enemy builds a military force intended for our eventual destruction, and that destruction of that force before it can be launched or employed is defensive action and not aggression.”⁸ This phraseology is revealing because it places offensive action under the mantle of defense. War is won by preventing, not deterring, an enemy from striking first.

As the commandant of the Air War College beginning in 1947, Anderson often lectured on

airpower strategy. He argued that a strategic bombing attack on the United States would mostly reach its targets, then posited that the only defense would be to take the offensive by destroying the capacity that produced enemy airpower. Thus what appeared to be offensive action against enemy targets was in fact defensive because it prevented attack on the United States. This line of thinking allowed Anderson in a 1950 interview to recommend a preventive war against the Soviet Union.

The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenberg, relieved Anderson from his post for publicly stating views that openly challenged the official policy of containing—not rolling back—the Soviet Union and terrified the American people. Simply put, he crossed the line.

Other officers made similar arguments in *Air Quarterly Review*. In an article published in 1947



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Hiroshima.

the Joint Chiefs sought to guide industrial mobilization in case of war

the author argued for using strategic bombers to conduct one-way missions over the Soviet Union. He added that the United States could not rely on defensive measures to prevent an atomic attack on itself. “The complexion of atomic war reemphasizes the old cliché that the best defense is a good offense and alters it somewhat: the best defense is the *first* offense in force.” Writing a year later, Colonel Matthew Deichelmann spelled out

his case for preventive war and national survival. He believed that the public should be “enlightened” about the security problems of the atomic age. An informed

public would give the National Command Authorities the “power to take action in the furtherance of the command defense.” And that action would be preventive against an enemy that was preparing to attack the United States.⁹

Many military leaders believed that if the Soviets opted for war they would certainly launch a preventive attack using strategic airpower (probably with atomic bombs) on American cities. One could characterize such thinking as reverse-preventive war. Applying the notion of preventive war to the military policy of the Soviet Union allowed airmen to endorse a force in being to respond to such a strike or launch a preventive attack of its own.

Advocates of preventive war—or reverse-preventive war—were not limited to the military.

Just prior to Anderson’s public remarks, Secretary of the Navy Francis Matthews also stridently advocated such a policy. In a speech at the Boston Navy Yard in August 1950, he argued that the Nation “should get ready to ward off any possible attack and, reversing the traditional attitude of a democracy, we should boldly proclaim our undeniable objective to be a world at peace.” Yet for the United States to establish world peace it would have to declare its willingness and intention “to pay any price, even the price of instituting a war to compel cooperation for peace.”

Reorienting Policy

In a February 1947 memorandum, the Joint Chiefs sought to guide industrial mobilization in case of war. They expressed great concern over the Soviet ability to launch a surprise attack that would preclude the Nation’s ability to expand “war-making industry and training.” If the warning period was not sufficient to allow for industrial buildup, the memo argued:

It would be of the greatest importance that the United States recognize early that a war is practically at hand, that the war will involve vital American interests, that early U.S. entry will yield important military advantages, and may in fact be essential to the prevention of military domination of the world by the USSR.¹⁰

Demonstrating the same concern, Lieutenant General Albert Wedemeyer, the director of plans and operations on the Army Staff, spoke at the National War College in January 1947 about the urgent need to understand that the Soviet Union would have atomic weapons within a few years and could launch a surprise attack, inflicting a catastrophic defeat.

At the time the general made his speech he was a member of the board for the evaluation of the Bikini Island tests. The Operation Crossroads evaluation team was headed by the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Karl Compton, and included General Joseph Stilwell, Admiral Ofstie, and Admiral D.S. Parsons as special advisors among other military officers.

The board released its final report in December 1947. It found that the atomic bomb, when employed in conjunction with other weapons of mass destruction including biological and chemical arms, would “depopulate vast areas of the earth’s surface, leaving only vestigial remnants of man’s material works.” Because an enemy that possessed such weaponry could launch a surprise attack the report stated that America needed to revise its

traditional attitudes toward what constitutes acts of aggression so that our Armed Forces may plan and operate in accordance with the realities of atomic warfare. Our attitude of national defense must provide for

A-26s over Barksdale AFB, 1947.



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*the employment of every practical means to prevent surprise attack. Offensive measures will be the only generally effective means of defense, and the United States must be prepared to employ them before a potential enemy can inflict significant damage upon us.*¹¹

Reviewing the report's findings, the Joint Chiefs agreed the President should consider reorienting national military strategy to allow for an offensive strike against the Soviet Union to prevent defeat in total war.

Indeed, when the Joint Chiefs forwarded the Crossroads Report to the White House, they bracketed the paragraphs concerning preventive war so the President could carefully consider this proposed crucial shift in policy. They acknowledged in a cover letter that a substantial turn toward preventive war was a political decision the commander in chief had to make.¹² Yet the chiefs made no attempt to discredit a proposed shift. Secretary of Defense James Forrestal attached a covering letter pointing out that bracketed portions related to enacting legislation to redefine aggression and incipient attack and make it a

Presidential duty, after consultation with the Cabinet, to order atomic retaliation to prevent or hinder an atomic attack on the United States. By using the term *retaliation* the Secretary hedged on fully advocating a policy shift toward preventive war. Yet it was implicit that America was already at war and thus retaliation was synonymous with prevention—that is, launching a surprise attack to “frustrate an atomic energy attack” on the United States.

Truman noted in his memoirs that many in the military advocated preventive war; but it was foolish to theorize “that war can be stopped by war. You don’t ‘prevent’ anything by war except peace.” According to the former President, the Nation clearly did “not believe in aggression or in preventive war.”¹³

Like others who came after him, Truman tried to superimpose the framework of deterrence that evolved after 1950 on the period 1945–50. This understandable but flawed approach distorts the way political and military leaders and defense analysts thought about bombing and war during that time. They did not fundamentally base military policy on deterrence but on winning a war by

destroying Soviet war-making capacity. This concept of preventive war, although troubling, comfortably fit the logic of airpower theory expressed by Anderson, Wedemeyer, and Matthews.

Renowned postwar strategist Bernard Brodie wrote to Anderson shortly after the general's relief as commandant of the Air War College that the incident had presented the general's view on preventive war to the Nation "in a much more forceful and commanding way . . . than would otherwise have been possible."¹⁴ Perhaps Brodie understood better than anyone else the dilemma posed by atomic weapons for U.S. security and the logic of public statements made by Anderson. Reflecting on the first decade and a half of the nuclear age, Brodie indicated in his classic study, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, that at least prior to 1950, when the Soviet Union started to establish a substantial nuclear stockpile, preventive war was a "live issue . . . among a very small but earnest minority of American citizens."¹⁵ Some U.S. political and military leaders believed that the next struggle would truly be a total war, and a preventive attack to destroy Soviet war-making capacity perfectly suited their vision of future conflict. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Memorandum from George Lincoln to Alfred Wedemeyer, dated April 16, 1947 (see GAL file, box 5, April 1947 folder, War Department files, George A. Lincoln Papers), Special Collections, United States Military Academy, West Point.

² Interview with Orvil Anderson, September 24–25, 1943 (file 168-7006-2), Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Over-All Effect of Atomic Bomb on Warfare and Military Organization, October 30, 1945" in *America's Plans for War Against the Soviet Union, 1945–1950*, volume 1, edited by David A. Rosenberg and Steven T. Ross (New York: Garland Publishers, 1989), p. 4. The most thorough account of the war plans written between 1945 and 1950 is Stephen T. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945–1950* (Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 1996). Also see David A. Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71.

⁴ Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), p. 137, and Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946–1976* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans: Combat Studies Institute, 1979), p. 6.

⁵ Report by the Ad Hoc Committee, "Evaluation of Effect on Soviet War Effort Resulting from the Strategic Air Offensive, 12 May 1949," in Rosenberg and Ross, *America's Plans for War*, volume 11, pp. 6–8, 41; also see George A. Lincoln, "Relation of Atomic Power to Post-war Strategy," December 1946, Lincoln Papers; and "The Theory of Atomic Bombing," June 16, 1947 (box 197, record group 341), Headquarters, U.S. Air Force, National Archives; Ross, *War Plans*, pp. 6–7; Joint Staff Planners, "Concept of Operation Pincher, 4 March 1946," in Rosenberg and Ross, *America's Plans for War*, volume 2, p. 1.

⁶ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), pp. 366–77.

⁷ Memo from Ofstie to Chairman, General Board, "General Board Serial 315," April 8, 1948 (box 3, Ralph A. Ofstie Papers), Naval Historical Center, Washington.

⁸ U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, Military Analysis Division, *Air Campaigns of the Pacific War* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947), p. 69; also see Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Overall Effect of Atomic Bomb on Warfare and Military Organization, October 30, 1945," in Rosenberg and Ross, *America's Plans for War*, volume 1, p. 5.

⁹ Dale O. Smith, "One-Way Combat," *Air University Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 1947), p. 5; Matthew K. Deichmann, "Editorial," *Air University Quarterly Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, (Fall 1948), p. 68.

¹⁰ "Strategic Guidance for Industrial Mobilization Planning, 13 February 1947," p. 17, in Rosenberg and Ross, *America's Plans for War*, volume 5.

¹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, "The Final Report of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Evaluation Board for Operation Crossroads, 29 December 1947," in Rosenberg and Ross, *America's Plans for War*, volume 9, pp. 110–11.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 97–115.

¹³ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: 1946–1952, Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Smithmark, 1954), pp. 359, 383.

¹⁴ Bernard Brodie to Orvil Anderson, September 2, 1950 (file 168.7006-3, Anderson Papers), Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

¹⁵ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 227–28.