In the old days, the US Navy was referred to as the nation’s “first line of defense.” Times, technologies, and military realities have changed. But the Navy, stubbornly hanging onto the past, continues to block necessary action toward armed forces unification that would strengthen...
MURRAY GREEN

for Common Defense. The JCS was recast to eliminate a Chief of Staff, or Chairman, as one of its members, and the Council of Common Defense was enlarged to include the Secretaries of Army, Navy, and Air Force.

Even this softened bill never came to the Senate floor because Sen. David I. Walsh once again thought that would be a good time to begin another series of hearings to which he called the same witnesses. Most took Secretary Forrestal’s tone of expressing generalized support for the President’s objectives, then asserting that the bill did not appear to meet them. The hearings concluded on July 11, 1946. The committee submitted no report. With Chairman Carl Vinson safely in control of his House Naval Affairs Committee, and Congress pressing for early adjournment in an election year, the bill never reached the floor of either House for a vote.

The disputants gave it another try at a White House meeting in September 1946. But the gathering dissolved into disagreement on the Army-Air Force desire for a strong Secretary of Common Defense versus the Navy’s preference for a “Deputy to the President” whose powers would be limited “to providing a source of decision” on missions, composition of forces, finances, resolution of disputes. This was Forrestal’s conception. More than that, the Navy insisted that the “Deputy to the President” should stay out of the administration of each military department.

Patterson’s irritation at what he regarded as obfuscation and delay by the Navy led him to write an angry article for the New York Times Magazine in which he described the opponents of unification as “reactionaries.” He ridiculed those who raised the specter, incongruous as it might seem, of a civilian Defense Secretary on a white horse who was serving at the pleasure of a civilian President. Even if a situation of a weak President and a headstrong Secretary of Common Defense developed, Patterson presupposed, “Congress will always be in the driver’s seat.”

The unification picture changed on November 5, 1946, when the Republican Party won a landslide victory in gaining control of Congress. The groundwork for unification action appeared to be set with the Legislative Reorganization Act which, beginning in the Eightieth Congress, merged the House and Senate Military and Naval Affairs Committees, numbering four, into the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, numbering two.

Both sides courted Sen. Robert A. Taft, “Mr. Republican,” without whose active support no controversial legislation could pass the Senate. A few days after election, the Ohio Senator expressed the belief that it would be possible to reduce the total federal budget from $35 billion in fiscal 1947 to $25 billion by fiscal 1949.

Naturally, he responded favorably to Patterson’s letter stating that “large savings” in defense expenditure would be brought about by unification, Senator Taft wanted to know how much. Patterson asked Symington. It was “extremely important,” he indicated, that an estimate of savings be prepared to convince Senator Taft, and presumably other doubtful congressmen. Eugene Zuckert, now Air Force Secretary, and Barton Leach, Symington’s advisers, cautioned against giving Senator Taft specific figures. Patterson pressed the matter, reminding Symington that War Department testimony about savings to be had in unification would be challenged unless some figures could be produced.

By February 1947, an estimate of five percent savings was compiled with the footnote notation that they did not include Navy data. In refusing to supply the requested data, Vice Adm. Forrest Sherman stated that some of the Army proposals were “incompatible with naval operational requirements.” He wrote that it was “most important that we stand together against any effort to make economy the sole criterion, when combat effectiveness may be in jeopardy.”

Secretary Forrestal lunched with Senator Taft on December 12, one day after the Patterson-Taft conference. Knowing the Senator’s strong enthusiasm for airpower, Forrestal delicately suggested that Taft might try to appreciate the Navy viewpoint. He charged “the top command of the Army had no true appreciation of seapower.” His missionary work evidently did not pay off. A year later, he was to tell Sen. Chan Gurney: “We have got to do a lot of spadework with Bob Taft and all these boys that are leading the country down the wild lanes” (presumably of more airpower).

Behind the scenes, in November and December 1946, Symington and General Norstad were meeting with Admirals Radford and Sherman in Forrestal’s Georgetown home. They wrestled with two remaining substantive issues: (1) the power of a Secretary of Common Defense, and (2) roles and missions for the services, especially land-based airpower.

The Navy conferees would not accept Symington’s proposal that the Secretary of Common Defense should have the power to hire and fire the individual service secretaries, although Forrestal came around to agree that the Defense Secretary should have a large hand in their selection to begin with. Agreement was reached upon his role as “coordinator” with a “sharply limited” staff “to make certain that he could not undertake any detailed administration.”

On the knotty issue of land-based seapower, Forrestal told Symington that “no sensible person in the Navy ever entertained any idea about the creation of a strategic air force in the Navy.” By the same token, he said, the Navy had very strong fears of the Army’s desire to grab the naval air arm and get control of all aviation under the Army Air Forces.

Admiral Radford irked Symington and Norstad by asking what foundation there was for air leaders to believe that there was a place in any war of the future for a strategic air force. Radford said it was “extremely dubious” (in Forrestal’s diary recollection) whether big bombers could be used effectively against any country unless they
had fighter cover. He cited Schweinfurt and Regensburg where "American losses were so high that the whole question of air attack on Germany hung in the balance."

Symington told Forrestal the Navy's delaying tactics would have less success in the new Congress. Forrestal conceded that the Army's "tactical position" before the new Congress was more favorable, although he said its logic was still faulty. Symington's economy arguments still ranked Forrestal. In November 1946 the Assistant Air Secretary had made some speeches which received national attention. He called the lip servants of unification students of the "let's-get-together-on-the-little-things" school. They agree that the services should buy aspirin tablets together, he said, but each should be free to buy separately its ships, planes, tanks, hospitals, and airports. Forrestal rejoined with a comment that the AAF during the war had insisted on creating its own hospitals, engineer forces, medical corps, etc., instead of using the facilities of others.

Between the lines of recrimination, Forrestal now seemed ready to compromise the major issues, although he was less prepared to give Symington credit for helping to attain that compromise.

The President called another White House meeting early in January 1947, and Forrestal and Patterson agreed to agree on a unification bill. They brought to President Truman a paper which he signed and made public on January 16, 1947. These points were to provide the basis of a bill:

1. Three separate administrative departments: Army, Navy, Air Force;
2. A single Secretary of National Defense to coordinate the three departments and to direct over-all policy. Each service secretary was to be guaranteed access to the President;
3. A small executive staff for the Secretary of National Defense to consist of from fifteen to twenty-five "$10,000-a-year men";
4. The JCS was to be constituted substantially as it existed;
5. A Joint Staff under the JCS of about the existing size (one hundred officers) but better organized;
6. A War Council consisting of the Secretary of National Defense as Chairman with power of decision, plus the three service secretaries and the three military chiefs;
7. Roles and missions were to be excluded from the legislation. They would be spelled out by a presidential Executive Order concurrent with the signing of the bill. The Executive Order would provide for continuance of the Marine Corps and the safeguarding of naval aviation, including its ASW and naval reconnaissance missions.

This decision was based on the thought that legislating roles and missions would build rigidity into functions that would take another act of Congress to change. Military missions should be highly responsive to the dynamics of warfare, and could be made to do so by the stroke of a presidential pen. This agreement was central to the acceptance of the compromise by Symington and Norstad.

The January 16 letter committed the Army and Navy to a specific unification concept. Privately, Navy support was not so generous. Admiral Nimitz, as Commander in Chief, Pacific, during the war, had unreservedly supported unification. Upon his return to Washington to take up the duties of CNO, he had a change of heart.

The day before the President's letter was released, despite any obligation he may have felt to back his Commander in Chief, Admiral Nimitz addressed a closed-door "Amphibious Conference" at the Navy Building on Constitution Avenue in Washington. The Admiral told his all-Navy-Marine Corps audience that any future war that he could foresee, "certainly for the next fifteen or twenty years," would involve amphibious operations. They were not to fret for the future of the Navy or its component parts. "We stand for the idea that the Navy is an integrated team in which land, sea, undersea, and air forces are very essential," he said. "No one part can get along without the other. And you can rest assured we're not going to let any part of it escape from the team—they'll all be there."

At a White House press briefing the next day, Patterson called the President's plan "sound and workable," Forrestal "gave his blessing," and Eisenhower recalled past efforts to get together on a merger. "Now that one has been worked out," he declared, "I will support it with all that I have, and it is a distinctive step forward."

General agreement having been reached by the disputants, it devolved upon the legislative experts to come up with a specific bill incorporating the agreed-upon features. With Truman aide Clark Clifford directing these efforts, a product was wrought. On February 27, 1947, President Truman sent to Congress a draft bill entitled "National Security Act of 1947." It was introduced in the House as H.R. 2319, in the Senate as S. 758.

On March 4, 1947, the JCS approved a directive of instruction to all Joint Staff personnel to be guided by the spirit of the joint Patterson-Forsrat letter and the proposed Executive Order. Two days later, Generals Lauris Norstad and O. P. Weyland came to agreement with Vice Admiral Sherman on the one remaining issue between them. Each submitted to his Chief a proposed letter expressing their mutual understanding that the Navy would have primary control over naval reconnaissance, ASW, and the protection of shipping. An Air Staff directive signed by Gen. Ira C. Eaker ordered all AAF commands to construe the proposed Executive Order as giving the Navy primary responsibility for these missions. It marked a major official concession by the AAF to the Forrestal position on these points.

On March 21, 1947, Eisenhower and Spaatz signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" jointly expressing their common desire to grant strong powers to a Secretary of Defense "who will be concerned solely with the security of the country and not with a special interest or self-seeking of any particular individual or service... . . . Heretofore, we have felt that the Navy opposed placing such trust and confidence in the Secretary and preferred that all of the things in which the Navy was presently interested should be protected by provisions of the law itself."

That this memorandum was bipartite and not tripartite was made clear on March 25 when Eisenhower testified on S. 758. Connecticut's Sen. Raymond Baldwin asked him if he would object to the substitution of the phrase "general supervision" instead of the word "direction" in the definition of the duties of the Secretary of Defense. Senator Baldwin said he raised the point in order "to avoid any possibility" that the Secretary of Defense "shall in any way become Commander in Chief... . which, under the Constitution, is delegated entirely to the President."

General Eisenhower said he would indeed object to the substitution. If he were given the job to supervise anything he said he would want the whole authority to do so. Notwithstanding, the word substitution was made.

The Eisenhower testimony kicked off the hearings. So far as the Navy was concerned, he just about propelled the legislation out of bounds. His strong support for the bill was expected, but his regrets that it did not call for a single Chief of Staff were not. He hoped it would come (Continued on page 59)
about in the future, “Naval opinion,” Forrestal wrote in his Diaries, “was thrown into a state of alarm.”

At an April 15 meeting with Maryland Sen. Millard Tydings, Forrestal allowed himself to be persuaded to permit congressional protagonists of naval aviation and the Marine Corps to insert protective clauses in the legislation. Forrestal’s repudiation of his pledge to President Truman and to Robert Patterson found him making this apology in his Diaries: “I said this did not conform with the policy of the Administration and that I myself did not think they were necessary although I would have to confess I was somewhat shaken by the recurring evidence of the Army’s intransigence in regard to the chain-of-command concept (when, as a matter of fact, during this war they had not been able to issue a single order to MacArthur—and they couldn’t now). If this rationalization called for reply, it could be noted that the MacArthur situation existed before Forrestal had voluntarily entered into the agreement.

When the other principals testified in April 1947 there was no doubt that the naval witnesses had lost what little enthusiasm they had generated in support of unification. It is not necessary to examine their testimony at length. The topic sentences of the major prepared testimony will suffice to reflect the witnesses’ views:

**Army-AAF**

**Secretary Patterson:** “I give my unqualified support to the bill. . . .”

**Undersecretary Royall:** “Both officially and personally, I favor enactment of Senate Bill S. 758. . . .”

**Assistant Secretary of War Symington:** “It is with pleasure that the Air Force presents to you its whole-hearted concurrence in the bill. . . .” (Mr. Zuckert substituted for Symington, who was ill.)

**Navy-Marine Corps**

**Mr. Eberstadt:** “Having already expressed my views at considerable length . . . I will limit my statement to observations on the bill which is before you. . . .”

**Admiral King:** “Mr. Chairman . . . I appear before you today to comment on S. 758. . . .”

**Admiral Nimitz:** “The bill which you now have under consideration represents the efforts of the services. I believe it will work. It cannot be considered perfect from the Navy point of view. . . .”

**General Vandegrift:** “I desire to discuss certain features of the pending measure. I have never approved of the principle of unification.”

Angry words were privately exchanged when Marine Corps Generals Vandegrift and Edson told the Senate Committee that Marine Corps roles and missions ought to be written into the legislation. Clark Clifford phoned Forrestal to complain of this violation of the verbal agreement. According to the Forrestal Diaries, the Navy Secretary “intimated” that the testimony of Eisenhower and Royall “reawakened all the Navy’s fears.” A showdown luncheon on April 18 produced a deadlock. Almost every Navy-Marine Corps witness, including Admiral Sherman who had personally negotiated the original compromise, either testified that he would not object to including a statement of roles, missions, or functions in the law, or specifically urged upon the committee such protective clauses in the legislation.

On the other hand, Army and AAF witnesses opposed writing any roles and missions into the law. They said it would tend to freeze organization and strategy. They urged the committee to provide only for the existence of naval aviation and the Marine Corps, with specific assigned missions to be left for the President, the Commander in Chief of the armed forces.

As we know, the congressional friends of the Navy wrote such strong and detailed protection into the law that Admiral King, over the years perhaps the most consistent opponent of any hint of unification, “was now ready to endorse the Senate Bill,” according to Forrestal.

Looking back at these hectic events of a decade earlier, President Eisenhower told a press conference in May 1957 of his “preaching and praying” for unification which “I thought we could bring . . . about. Well, I encountered a very fierce opposition,” he said. As a result, unification “never did take place quite in the form that I thought it should be.” Symington and Spaatz were also deeply disappointed. At this late date, they were faced with the alternative of dropping the fight for a stronger bill until the next session, or accepting the weak compromise which still contained provisions for a coequal Air Force. They decided on the bird in hand.

President Truman first offered the job of Secretary of Defense to Patterson who turned it down because of financial hardship. Forrestal accepted. The President also suggested that it would be a good idea if Forrestal would move his headquarters over to the Pentagon from the Navy Building. The President hoped that propinquity would help bring the services together.

On July 26, 1947, President Truman signed the bill, the National Security Act of 1947, into Public Law 253. He also signed the concurrent Executive Order 9977, which included a statement of the service roles and missions. However, the National Military Establishment (later renamed Department of Defense) that came into being on September 17, 1947, was, to speak in Churchillian phrase, an end of the beginning rather than a beginning of the end, of interservice controversy.

Shortly thereafter new battle cries sounded forth. The issue this time was consolidation within the framework of the reorganization act and the Executive Order.

Military air transport was an obvious choice as “pilot” unification project because the services performed by the Air Transport Command and the Naval Air Transport Services were almost identical. ATC and NATS had built up huge organizations during the war. According to a pro-consolidation report: “ATC and NATS both operate a transcontinental air route from New York to San Francisco through the southern part of the United States. However, these routes do not utilize the same stops, although the air routes are identical.”

In the San Francisco area, the report noted, ATC used Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base, and NATS used Moffett Field a few miles away. Each agency maintained separate maintenance, spare parts, and supplies for identical aircraft which they called by different names—C-47 vs. R3D and C-54 vs. R4D, for example.

Beginning in October 1947, Air Secretary Symington and Navy Secretary John L. Sullivan held a series of inconclusive hearings which broke up on their disagreement over a merger which Symington desired under Air Force auspices. Symington cited the presidential Executive Order, which made no specific provision for the Navy to run a complete transport operation in competition with the Air Force. Sullivan quoted the reorganization act, which vaguely stipulated that naval aviation should include “air transport essential for naval operations.” On December 16, 1947, (Continued on following page)
Sullivan wrote Symington that the Navy would be sole judge of the essentiality of its air transport. He said he did not consider this provision of the Executive Order binding upon the Navy because it was not in consonance with the National Security Act.

In 1948, as we know, there was in fact a merger of NATS and ATC. MATS today is one of the most important and successful examples of unification.

In other ways, that first year of "unification" drove Secretary Forrestal nearly to distraction. The many disputes persuaded him to suggest what he termed "minor changes" in the naval functions as stated in the Executive Order to incorporate into a new Executive Order.

"... The Navy interprets the law to permit it to develop any type of weapon and to base its plans and requirements on the utilization of any weapon. The Navy contends that it is complying with the law in disregarding the Executive Order on this point because the law and the Executive Order give to the Air Force, exclusively, certain missions. The fact that such a basic difference of interpretation exists indicates the necessity for immediate clarification..."

Secretary Forrestal's quest for interservice "peace" led him to call a subsequent conference at Key West, Fla., which, in turn, needed clarification at a conference at Newport, R. I. In the end, Forrestal agreed to, and even supported, demands for strengthening his own powers as Defense Secretary. One local Washington newspaper put his dilemma in headline form: "Forrestal Bumps into Mine He Sowed."

A week after his second Administration began in January 1949, President Truman decided that Forrestal could not handle the job any more and called in Louis Johnson. On March 28, 1949, the day he retired, Forrestal went farther in the direction of a strong central authority than he had gone before. In a letter to Senator Tydings, the new Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Forrestal admitted that certain inconsistencies and weaknesses in the original law had not been foreseen. He judged himself to blame, remarking that two years earlier he had supported an objection similar to current arguments that the proposed amendments would give the Secretary of Defense too much power. Forrestal wrote:

"I am also convinced that a failure to endow this official with sufficient authority to control effectively the conduct of our military affairs will force upon us far greater security risks than will be the case if singleness of control and responsibility are achieved."

Forrestal's former supporters had already discounted him as a sick man. Ferdinand Eberstadt denounced the proposed amendments to establish a Chairman of the JCS as an "extremely dangerous" concentration of power in the hands of one military man. He said a wrong decision could be a fatal one. Later he told the House Armed Services Committee that Section III of the proposed amendment was "a shotgun, not a rifle approach" to the problem of strengthening the powers of the Secretary of Defense.

So it went. The amendments to the National Security Act which became effective in August 1949 were diluted to accommodate the objections of opponents to any change. When the new law, in turn, was found inadequate to the job at hand, it was revised, first by Reorganization Plan #6 of 1953, and second 1958's Reorganization Act. In December 1960, the Symington Committee found that these reforms did not go far enough to ensure the national defense structure that will be required to get us safely through the '60s.

As we look back upon the struggle for unification to date, the focus seems clear. The Navy did not then, nor does it now, accept any disagreement with its vision of itself as "the nation's first line of defense." In 1948-47, with the help of strong supporters in key congressional positions, the Navy methodically set about taking much of the substance out of the bill which all had agreed was to become the core of the National Security Act. When the bill passed in 1947, it only enjoined the services to get together, but forbade them to merge, and was unclear as to where one mission ended and another began.

Navy Secretary Forrestal, who became the first Secretary of Defense, had loyally argued the Navy's case before the bill became law. When it did, he was torn between his previous affiliations and his desire to administer fairly what he himself was to call an organizational "monstrosity." The impossibility of his task and his sensitivity to personal criticism drove James Forrestal out of office and possibly to his death.

The essential problems which troubled Forrestal continue to bother us a dozen years after he left public office. There is a basic conflict within our military establishment. One system would provide careful checks and balances to permit one point of view to cancel out another. In a respect, it represents an ideal transfer of the form of our political democracy to the military sphere. The other system would require single responsibility and complete authority. It rejects the idea that the officer in charge can or should take a vote of his platoon leaders before a decision is made to "go over the top."

We have not yet been able, except under the duress of war, to settle the argument between need for a complete authority and diffused patterns of peacetime control. In the peacetime of another era now past, established organizations had the weight of tradition and strength of vested interest to throw against any proposal for change. In the "peaceetime" of 1961, we no longer can afford this luxury. We are engaged in a struggle for survival in which we must fully utilize our resources and armed strength.

And, today, our entire nation—educational system, economy, traditions, spiritual values, industrial potential, diplomatic competence, armed forces—make up our "first line of defense."—END

The author, Murray Green, is a civilian aide at Headquar ters USAF. This is his fifth article in AIR FORCE/SPACE DIGEST. Most recent previous contribution was an authoritative piece on French missilary in October '60. The first installment of this analysis of unification appeared in the June issue of this magazine. Dr. Green holds B.S. and M.S. degrees from the City College of New York and a Ph.D. from American University, Washington, D. C., in history and international relations. A Reserve major in Air Force intelligence, he served as a naval officer aboard an aircraft carrier in the Pacific in the second World War.