

Massive Retaliation

President Eisenhower entered office convinced the USSR was seeking to bankrupt the US by fanning local wars against US allies. After a year, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced a major shift of policy. It was unwise, he said, to “permanently commit US land forces” in Korea, Europe, and elsewhere and “become permanently committed to military expenditures so vast that they lead to ‘practical bankruptcy.’” Instead, the US would use a “deterrent of massive retaliatory power” to protect allies. He never directly mentioned nuclear weapons, but his point was made. Thus was born one of the most famous of Cold War terms—massive retaliation.

The Soviet communists are planning for what they call “an entire historical era,” and we should do the same. They seek, through many types of maneuvers, gradually to divide and weaken the free nations by overextending them in efforts which, as [Vladimir] Lenin put it, are “beyond their strength, so that they come to practical bankruptcy.”

Then, said Lenin, “our victory is assured.” Then, said [Joseph] Stalin, will be “the moment for the decisive blow.”

In the face of this strategy, measures cannot be judged adequate merely because they ward off an immediate danger. It is essential to do this, but it is also essential to do so without exhausting ourselves. When the Eisenhower Administration applied this test, we felt that some transformations were needed.

It is not sound military strategy permanently to commit US land forces to Asia to a degree that leaves us no strategic reserves. It is not sound economics, or good foreign policy, to support permanently other countries; for in the long run, that creates as much ill will as good will. Also, it is not sound to become permanently committed to military expenditures so vast that they lead to “practical bankruptcy.”

Change was imperative to assure the stamina needed for permanent security. ... We need allies and collective security. Our purpose is to make these relations more effective, less costly. This can be done by placing more reliance on deterrent power and less dependence on local defensive power. ... We want, for ourselves and the other free nations, a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost. Local defense will always be important. But there is no local defense which alone will contain the mighty landpower of the communist world.

Local defenses must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power. A potential aggressor must know that he cannot always prescribe battle conditions that suit him.



Eisenhower and Dulles in the Oval Office.

The Evolution of Foreign Policy

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles
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Otherwise, for example, a potential aggressor, who is glutted with manpower, might be tempted to attack in confidence that resistance would be confined to manpower. He might be tempted to attack in places where his superiority was decisive.

The way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.

So long as our basic policy concepts were unclear, our military leaders could not be selective in building our military power. If an enemy could pick his time and place and method of warfare—and if our policy was to remain the traditional one of meeting aggression by direct and local opposition—then we needed to be ready to fight in the Arctic and in the tropics; in Asia, the Near East, and in Europe; by sea, by land, and by air; with old weapons and with new weapons. ... Before military planning could be changed, the President and his advisors, as represented by the National

Security Council, had to take some basic policy decisions. This has been done. The basic decision was to depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our choosing.

Now the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff can shape our military establishment to fit what is our policy, instead of having to try to be ready to meet the enemy’s many choices. That permits of a selection of military means instead of a multiplication of means. As a result, it is now possible to get, and share, more basic security at less cost. ... ■