DIPLOMATS AND STRATEGISTS CONFRONT THE BOMB

The atomic bomb profoundly affected all realms of American life, including postwar U.S. diplomacy and military strategizing. While my own research focused on the bomb's cultural impact, I also quite naturally followed and periodically commented on the scholarly literature relating to these other areas. Beginning in the mid-1960s, a number of diplomatic historians, including Gar Alperovitz, Barton J. Bernstein, and Martin J. Sherwin, had probed the larger diplomatic context of President Truman's A-bomb decision and the bomb's influence on U.S. foreign relations during and after the war. Another historian working in this vein was Fraser J. Harbutt of Emory University, who published his findings in a fascinating 1986 book, *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War*. My review of Harbutt's work (considerably expanded here) appeared in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in May 1987.

Following the review, the second part of this chapter discusses how Defense Department brass and Pentagon strategists incorporated the atomic bomb into their early postwar thinking. As I explored the bomb's cultural effects, and as others studied early atomic-age diplomacy, still other scholars were probing post-Hiroshima developments in military strategy—and reporting scary findings. One who did so, drawing on a rich and largely untapped body of official archival material, was Gregg Herken, whose 1980 book *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War,*
1945–1950 I discuss in the concluding pages of this chapter. Adapted from an essay written in 1981 and published in the September 1982 issue of Reviews in American History, this represents my earliest published work on the nuclear theme. I wrote it as my own research in this area was just beginning, and as the early-1980s wave of nuclear fear and activism was taking shape.

While the American people of the early postwar years had responded to the nuclear reality in the various ways described in chapters 1 through 3, and as President Truman, David Lilienthal, and others had offered their upbeat pronouncements about the peacetime uses of atomic energy, military strategists deep in the Pentagon had been devising secret nuclear-war plans. Though "hypothetical," these apocalyptic scenarios, unearthed by Herken and others, make clear that the threat of nuclear holocaust was no mere bugaboo invented by antinuclear alarmists. It was real, and even (or perhaps especially) when clothed in the impersonal, technostrategic language of the war planners, it was nightmarish.

THE BOMB IN POSTWAR DIPLOMACY

How did the Cold War begin? As though trapped in a dull, reiterative dream, we play the tape over and over, straining to decipher the garbled cacophony of voices. If one could only discern precisely when things began to go wrong, we seem to hope, perhaps the tangled skein of U.S.-Soviet relations could be unraveled, and we could start afresh.

Diplomatic historians, sharing this interest not only as citizens but as scholars, have long sought to pinpoint the exact moment at which the Cold War started. In terms of U.S. policy, some have focused on the Truman Doctrine of March 1947, committing U.S. resources to shoring up anti-Communist forces in Greece and Turkey. Others designate George Kennan's famous "long cable" of February 22, 1946, outlining the doctrine of containment.
In *The Iron Curtain: Churchill, America, and the Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Fraser J. Harbutt, a diplomatic historian at Emory University, argues for a still earlier date, which he cites with great exactitude: the evening of February 10, 1946, when President Truman and former Prime Minister Winston Churchill met at the White House to discuss a speech Churchill would soon deliver at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. The origins of the speech had seemed innocuous enough. In August 1945, Westminster’s president had written a letter inviting Britain’s heroic but recently defeated wartime prime minister to deliver a speech. To the letter, President Truman had added a friendly note that said: “This is a fine old college out in my state. If you’ll come out and make them a speech I’ll take you out and introduce you.” Churchill accepted, and the planning that would produce a key Cold War pronouncement proceeded apace. The symbolic importance of Churchill’s celebrated “Iron Curtain” speech on March 5, 1946, at Westminster College has, of course, long been recognized. But Harbutt argues for its immediate tactical importance as well, focusing on that fateful February meeting at the White House.

Stated thus baldly, his thesis may suggest sensationalism, but *The Iron Curtain* builds its case painstakingly and, in my view, compellingly. Indeed, the author does not actually get to the Fulton speech until chapter 7. After two introductory chapters tracing Churchill’s long-standing visceral hatred of the Soviet Union—“Bolshevism is not a policy, it is a disease”—and his equally long interest in forging a “special relationship” between Britain and the United States, Harbutt devotes the next 230-odd pages to a detailed account of the shifting relations between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, from the Tehran Conference of late 1943 through the Iran crisis of early 1946, brought on by Soviet moves in that arena. This account is based on an awesome array of published work and archival material, including the papers of the British cabinet, foreign office, and prime minister.

Building on this solid evidentiary base, Harbutt constructs his careful version of the evolving relationship of the wartime Big Three. If the general contours of the story are familiar, the work’s richness of detail and tripartite perspective should assure it a respectful reception as a valuable contribution to historical scholarship.
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Toward the end of World War II and in the immediate postwar era, Harbutt argues, Washington distanced itself from imperialist England and sought a bilateral accommodation with Moscow over such matters as the United Nations, sometimes at the expense of British interests. This policy seemed plausible, he notes, since U.S. and Soviet strategic interests did not conflict in any obvious way. British and Soviet interests, by contrast, clashed directly in Poland and in the so-called northern tier of Britain's sphere of influence: Greece, Turkey, and Iran. Between 1943 and 1946, Harbutt contends, prior to the familiar Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, came an earlier "Cold War" in which the British and the Soviets struggled to define their postwar spheres, while the United States remained a bystander. Unlike historians who see a consistent anti-Soviet thrust to U.S. policy from Hiroshima onward, Harbutt finds a general pattern of passivity and detachment through the end of 1945.

The heart of Harbutt's book deals with the transformation of this Anglo-Soviet "Cold War" into the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. In this process, Harbutt ascribes a central but complex role to Churchill. By February 1946, he argues, Truman was increasingly uncomfortable with the Roosevelt policy of accommodating the Soviets. Yet reversing that policy posed delicate problems. U.S. public opinion, reflecting the mood of the wartime alliance, remained vaguely pro-Soviet, while those who had been close to Roosevelt, for example, Henry Wallace and Eleanor Roosevelt, staunchly upheld the conciliatory approach. Furthermore, among those urging a harsher policy were some of Truman's bitterest congressional opponents, including Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan. Whatever his personal inclinations, Truman did not wish to be perceived as adopting a get-tough policy merely in response to Republican pressure.

At this point, Truman's and Churchill's interests neatly converged. Churchill had long believed that close Anglo-American ties were essential, not only to fight Bolshevism but also to shore up British geopolitical interests as Great Britain's power waned. Dismayed by the two countries' postwar divergence on Soviet policy (and chafing to resume his accustomed place in the limelight), Churchill early in 1946 undertook a U.S. tour. Disappointed in his hope of addressing Congress, he quickly ac-
cepted the invitation to speak at Westminster College on March 5. Tru-
man, recognizing the advantages of having the British leader serve as
point man for the policy shift he had already decided to implement,
quickly announced plans to attend the speech and introduce Churchill,
assuring maximum publicity for the event.

Harbutt presents a careful and illuminating analysis of this seminal
address, which Churchill explicitly compared to his speeches of the
1930s warning a complacent England of the Nazi threat. Not only did
Churchill invoke (without attribution) the Nazi propagandist Joseph
Goebbels's memorable image of an “iron curtain” descending over Eu-
rope; he also described a Manichean world divided between the forces of
good—variously described as “Christian civilization” and “the English-
speaking peoples”—and the forces of evil: the Communist empire cen-
tered in Moscow and bent on world domination. Only a closely linked
United States and Great Britain, Churchill proclaimed, could resist the
menace. Harbutt also notes a key omission: Not once did the British
leader invoke the name of Roosevelt, architect of the accommodationist
policy Churchill was intent on discrediting.

With persuasive evidence, Harbutt dismisses Truman's subsequent
claim that he had not anticipated the impact of the speech and had at-
tended only as a matter of courtesy. Not only did Truman ostentatiously
applaud the most militant anti-Soviet passages, but strong circumstantial
evidence suggests a high degree of covert advance coordination.
Churchill discussed the speech in detail with Truman on February 10,
with Secretary of State James F. Byrnes and Bernard Baruch on February
17, and with Byrnes and Admiral William Leahy, Truman's chief of staff,
on March 3.

Harbutt also offers strong evidence for a “sudden reorientation” in
Washington's Soviet policy immediately after Fulton as accommoda-
tionism gave way to “firmness”—the diplomatic buzzword of 1946. This
shift included an officially orchestrated anti-Soviet media campaign. Un-
like the earlier Anglo-Soviet “Cold War,” with its sources in tangible
geopolitical rivalries, he argues, the Americanized Cold War was rooted
much more in ideological abstractions and generalized conceptions of a
global struggle for supremacy.

The new policy was sealed, Harbutt concludes, by a serious Soviet
miscalculation that produced the Iranian crisis of February to May 1946, mentioned above. Failing to grasp the rapidity with which an Anglo-American and anti-Soviet front was forming, Stalin sought to extend the Soviet role in Iran, a traditional cockpit of Anglo-Soviet rivalry. He kept Soviet troops in northern Iran beyond the date set by a wartime agreement and fostered separatist movements in the Iranian provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. In collaboration with London and a sometimes reluctant Tehran, Washington utilized the U.N. Security Council as the forum for a highly public display of the new get-tough policy toward the Soviets, triggering the first of Andrei Gromyko's famous walkouts.

The Iron Curtain is traditional diplomatic history. The focus is overwhelmingly on the maneuvering of statesmen and diplomats, with little attention to the broader political, economic, military, or cultural factors that influence foreign policy. In stressing the aura of cooperation that briefly characterized Washington's Soviet policy during the war, Harbutt underplays the deep strand of anti-Soviet feeling in the United States going back to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, expressed in such outbursts of official hysteria as the "Red Raids" of January 1920. As Truman knew it would, Churchill's rhetoric at Fulton aroused a powerful answering echo from deep in the American psyche. But if this is traditional history, it is traditional history of a very high order. Harbutt's judicious and well-written account of the fateful international realignment of 1946 will surely influence profoundly our understanding of this critical period.

Confirming the conclusions reached by other diplomatic historians, The Iron Curtain also underscores the centrality of the atomic bomb in shaping the early postwar relations of erstwhile wartime allies. Allusions to the bomb recur like a Wagnerian leitmotiv throughout Harbutt's account. During the war, the United States had concealed the Manhattan Project from one ally—the Soviet Union—while fully sharing atomic information with another: Great Britain. (Soviet espionage, of course, had circumvented this attempt at secrecy, giving Moscow's leaders at least some knowledge of the bomb project.) In talks with Churchill at Hyde Park, New York, in September 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt had
pledged that this full and exclusive sharing of atomic information with the British would continue after the war. One of London's key postwar objectives, then, was to preserve this aspect of a special bilateral relationship with the Americans.

For a time, however, this goal seemed in jeopardy. For a few brief months in late 1945 and early 1946, in a fleeting interlude of internationalist enthusiasm, the Truman administration embraced the so-called Acheson-Lilienthal plan for international control of atomic energy under the monitoring of the United Nations Atomic Energy Committee (UNAEC). A joint U.S.-British-Canadian declaration of November 1945 officially endorsed the international control principle, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin embraced this objective at a conference in Moscow in December.

In reality, however, the Truman administration, encouraged by the British, was rapidly backing away from its commitment to international control as 1945 ended. A key signal came in late February 1946, when Truman appointed Bernard Baruch, a vain and pompous anti-Communist hard-liner, as the U.S. delegate to UNAEC, with responsibility to conduct negotiations with the Soviets on the international-control plan. As partisans of the Acheson-Lilienthal plan wrung their hands, the British rejoiced. The Baruch appointment, Churchill wrote his successor, Clement Attlee, "is of the utmost importance to us and . . . in my opinion an effective assurance that these matters will be handled in a way friendly to us." (President Truman's authorization of the 1946 Bikini atomic tests in the midst of negotiations with the Soviets over international control provided further evidence of the new exclusivity and militarization of U.S. atomic policy.)

Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech, with its multiple goals, must be seen against the backdrop of these rapidly evolving atomic realities. On the one hand, of course, Churchill crafted the speech with an eye to posterity, articulating an overarching spiritual and strategic rationale for a long-term Anglo-American struggle against a godless, anti-Christian Communist power. In Churchill's view, as he would later write in Triumph and Tragedy, the final volume of his magisterial history of World War II, postwar America "stood on the scene of victory, master of world
fortunes, but without a true and coherent design.” Never inhibited by excessive modesty, Churchill saw himself as the person who would provide that design.

But beyond these cosmic objectives, the Fulton speech’s immediate goal was to shore up the Anglo-American wartime alliance, and specifically to assure the continuation of a bilateral approach to atomic energy that would freeze out the Soviet Union. As we have seen, Churchill’s objective was not so much to change U.S. policy as to provide a cover for Truman to signal publicly an already-decided-upon shift from international control to Western exclusiveness in the atomic sphere.

Indeed, from the moment Truman had received news of the successful Alamogordo test while sparring with Stalin at the Potsdam conference, the idealistic vision of international control had clashed with the conviction that the atomic bomb would be America’s winning weapon not only in the war with Japan but in the postwar era as well. As Harbutt shrewdly observes, the success of the Manhattan Project had, “perhaps inevitably, created in Truman and [Secretary of State James E.] Byrnes a sense of enhanced confidence if not omnipotence.” In this spirit, and despite Washington’s official endorsement of international control, Byrnes came to the London Conference of Foreign Ministers in September 1945 with the goal of using America’s atomic monopoly to promote U.S. diplomatic objectives. The effort failed, however, as Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov brazenly joked about the atomic bomb and ridiculed Byrnes’s efforts to turn the bomb to Washington’s diplomatic advantage.

In this context of a profoundly ambivalent and rapidly shifting U.S. atomic policy, Churchill in his Iron Curtain speech launched a slashing attack on international control of atomic energy as “wrong and imprudent.” It would be “criminal madness,” he went on, to “cast [the secret of the atom] adrift in this still agitated and ununited world.” Truman (who, as we have seen, had carefully reviewed the text of the speech with Churchill) heartily applauded this passage—a fact duly noted by journalists, who were observing his reactions carefully. Although international control ostensibly remained U.S. policy, the shift toward Western exclusiveness had been clearly signaled.

The Soviets, of course, were hardly innocent bystanders as the
Anglo-American hard line on nuclear issues unfolded. Not only did they miscalculate badly in Iran; on February 9, 1946, Joseph Stalin (preparing his people for a harsh new Five-Year Plan) had declared communism and capitalism incompatible. A few days before, on February 3, Washington columnist Drew Pearson had broken the news of a Soviet atomic spy ring in Canada. All this, combined with the earlier failure of the London Conference, fatally weakened the hand of the internationalist group in Washington who sought postwar cooperation with the Soviets on atomic-energy control and other issues, and vastly strengthened the hand of the advocates of firmness.

In late April 1946, with U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorating almost by the day, Truman met with Gromyko in Washington and gave him such a tongue-lashing that (according to Truman) the Soviet diplomat sputtered: "I have never been talked to like that in my life." (To which Truman allegedly replied: "Carry out your agreements and you won't get talked to like that.") The Cold War's temperature quickly plummeted to subzero levels.

By early spring 1946, in short, whatever opportunities might have existed to shape a different postwar atomic history had evaporated, and the stage was set for a decades-long nuclear arms race with the Soviets. Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain speech—certainly one of the most important public utterances of the twentieth century—both marked the moment of transition and helped bring it about.

THE BOMB IN POSTWAR MILITARY STRATEGY

Pincher, Broiler, Grabber, Sizzle. If, like most Americans with a general knowledge of U.S. history, you find these words less familiar than, say, Loco Foco, Mugwump, or Flapper, this fact in itself is a revealing comment on the gingerly way historians have approached the central global reality of our age: the nuclear arms race. For these are the names of a succession of U.S. war plans drawn up between 1945 and 1950. There were others, with equally catchy tags: Fleetwood, Offtackle, Dropshot, Trojan, Charioteer. Each plan assumed that in the event of war the Soviet Union would be obliterated in a massive atomic blitz lasting only a few
days. In this ultimate holocaust, death from the skies would rain down on a substantial portion of the earth's population.

In *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945–1950* (New York: Knopf, 1980), Gregg Herken sets out to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of these matters. The book explores how the United States in the early postwar years handled what statesmen liked to call the nation's "solemn trust"—the burden of being the creators and, as yet, sole possessors of instruments of unprecedented mass destruction.

The book begins with the diplomacy of the immediate post-Hiroshima period. At the London and Moscow conferences of late 1945, Herken suggests, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes tried two diametrically opposed strategies for gaining diplomatic advantage from America's nuclear monopoly, but to no avail; "They don't scare," Byrnes concluded. "We shall have atomic energy and many other things too," declared Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov that November, warning the United States against pushing its temporary strategic advantage. At Moscow, Byrnes substituted the carrot for the stick, holding out the prospect of nuclear cooperation with the Soviets. For a time it seemed possible, but back in Washington, Byrnes's position was eroding. Led by Admiral William Leahy, President Truman's palace guard denounced Byrnes and his "communistically inclined" State Department advisers. The Moscow agreement, charged Senator Arthur Vandenberg, was "one more typical American 'give-away.'" Preoccupied by political problems at home and abroad, Truman turned on his secretary of state; "I'm tired of babying the Soviets," he declared in January 1946. From then until his retirement in 1947, the pliant Byrnes faithfully followed the new "get tough with Russia" policy. The effort to develop atomic policy in collaboration with the Soviets was abandoned, and monopoly and exclusion became the hallmarks of U.S. nuclear strategy.

Turning to the struggle over civilian versus military control of the atom, Herken shows that the 1946 defeat of the May-Johnson bill (providing for military control) and the passage of the McMahon Act (creating the Atomic Energy Commission under a civilian head) was hardly a clear-cut victory for civilian control. In fact, he argues, the military got much of what it wanted in the McMahon Act. Here, as throughout the book, Herken stresses the central role of General Leslie R. Groves, war-
time director of the Manhattan Project and a linchpin in postwar nuclear affairs. The national furor over the Soviet spy ring uncovered in Canada in 1946, he suggests, was largely orchestrated by Groves to discredit the supporters of civilian control and international cooperation in managing the atom.

This same period saw the rise and collapse of the move for U.N. control of the atom—a move rooted in Byrnes's desire to clip Groves's wings and bring nuclear policy within the purview of the State Department. In January 1946, Byrnes named a committee under Dean Acheson to draft a plan for international control of the atom. Aided by a board of scientific advisers, chaired by David Lilienthal and including J. Robert Oppenheimer, Acheson's committee drew up its proposals. But then Truman appointed Bernard Baruch to the U.N.'s Atomic Energy Commission and—in the view of the Acheson-Lilienthal-Oppenheimer group—all was lost. Working closely with Groves, Baruch and his coterie of advisers (mainly businessmen and right-wing ideologues obsessed with the Soviet menace) scuttled the Acheson-Lilienthal plan. Abandoning any serious effort for international control, Baruch concentrated on scoring propaganda points against the Soviets and laying the groundwork for a perpetuation of America's nuclear monopoly. Despite the grandiloquence of Baruch's famous June 1946 U.N. speech ("We are here to make a choice between the quick and the dead"), the "Baruch Plan" was from the first, Herken persuasively argues, more propaganda than substance, more a nuclear ultimatum than a genuine bargaining proposal. The collapse of the U.N. negotiations in late 1946 despite last-minute Soviet efforts to keep them going merely confirmed the Truman administration's de facto policy of nuclear monopoly.

The long final section of *The Winning Weapon*, tracing the evolution of American military planning from Hiroshima to about 1950, offers a chilling insight into what passed for strategic thinking a generation ago. Under the various code names mentioned earlier, these plans consisted of little but doomsday scenarios for the obliteration of Russia in a massive nuclear spasm. Some explicitly envisioned the mass killing of civilians as an instrument of psychological warfare; in others, civilian deaths on a scale of millions was simply implicit. (As Herken notes, this was a natural outgrowth of the terror bombing of civilians introduced by the
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Germans—and perfected by the British and Americans—in World War II.) Fleetwood (1948) projected eight atomic bombs for Moscow, seven for Leningrad, and so forth. Such an assault, the authors judiciously speculated, "could well lead to Soviet capitulation." In Dropshot (1949), the destruction of Moscow and Leningrad was held off until the beginning of the war's second week, the planners having evidently grasped that if Moscow were wiped out in the first wave of attack, there would be no one around to surrender.

Herken is especially good on the way interservice rivalries, especially the air force's frustrations over its second-class status, shaped nuclear strategy. The annual interservice budget squabbles, he shows, were a crucial propellant of the strategic planning process. The same rivalries also contributed to what little criticism of underlying strategic assumptions was voiced in these years. Increasingly disgruntled over growing air force dominance, the navy began to question the morality of the air-atomic strategy. With some justice, the air force sarcastically retorted that, to the admirals, an immoral weapon was one they couldn't use.

The occasional glimpses of the nuclear-war planner as moral philosopher are diverting. In 1949, for example, the Joint Chiefs of Staff brushed aside all ethical objections to the H-bomb. Since, "in the larger sense, it is war itself which is immoral," they reasoned, it is "folly to argue whether one weapon is more immoral than another." With casual nonchalance, the generals dismissed many centuries of Christian doctrine about the just war that drew precisely such distinctions.

Strategists consistently refused to rule out the unrestrained use of nuclear weapons, the possibility of an American first strike, or even "preventive" nuclear war. The Russians, insisted the authors of NSC 30 (1948), should "never be given the slightest reason to believe the U.S. would even consider not to use atomic weapons against them if necessary." (Along with their readiness to blow up the world, another count against these planners is their atrocious prose style.)

What emerges starkly in these pages is the degradation of the strategic planning process in the years of America's nuclear monopoly. Herken fully documents the Joint Chiefs' "habit of demanding all the traffic would bear from the AEC's bomb factories." As the nuclear arsenal grew, war plans were revised accordingly. In 1946, for example, Pincher pro-
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jected the obliteration of twenty Soviet cities; by 1948, Fleetwood had upped the ante to seventy-seven cities. In 1950 a demoralized David Lilienthal, retiring as head of AEC, confessed that his agency had become “nothing more than a major contractor to the Department of Defense.”

The Soviet nuclear test of September 1949 abruptly ended this first cycle of U.S. nuclear-war planning. But rather than reassessing underlying premises, the administration set off in quest of yet another “winning weapon” that would reestablish U.S. nuclear supremacy: the hydrogen bomb, or “hell bomb,” as journalists dubbed it. Herken reviews the H-bomb decision process, including the deeply apprehensive eighty-page memo drafted by George Kennan—a memo Dean Acheson withheld from Truman. With NSC 68 (1950) providing its underlying strategic framework (and with Czechoslovakia and Korea as part of its background), the nuclear arms race entered a new and even more lethal stage. James B. Conant wrote Lilienthal that he had the feeling of watching the same rotten movie a second time.

Herken’s most original contribution is clearly the section on military strategy. No other historian has covered this subject so thoroughly or so well. But throughout, Herken deepens our understanding of the inner diplomatic and strategic history of these years, drawing as he does not only on memoirs and the published record, but on interviews and a rich lode of recently declassified government documents, especially in the Modern Military Branch of the National Archives.

The Winning Weapon’s compelling power lies in its portrayal of an entire government in the grip of incredible hubris. With rare exceptions, Herken’s large cast of characters clings firmly to the delusion that America’s nuclear monopoly will continue into the indefinite future. Their confidence on this score reminds one of Herbert Hoover’s glowing descriptions of the nation’s economic prospects early in 1929. To the moment of his retirement in 1948, General Groves never stopped insisting that a Soviet bomb was fifteen or twenty years in the future. At his last press conference he told reporters he was “not a bit worried” about a Russian bomb. This massive miscalculation in high places did not rest on the vulgar notion that there was a single “atomic secret” locked in a safe somewhere. Rather it reflected the grossly exaggerated belief in the general superiority of American know-how and ability to organize
large-scale technical projects—a belief that was rudely shattered in 1949 (and then again in 1957, with Sputnik).

It is tempting to read The Winning Weapon as a morality play pitting the farsighted and virtuous against the myopic and malevolent. In the rush to exploit the bomb, a few men, like Lilienthal, Kennan, Stimson, and Marshall, do stand out for their moral concern and more reflective cast of mind. For others, like Groves, Leahy, Forrestal, air force secretary Stuart Symington, and army secretary Kenneth Royall, the old propaganda tag “warmonger” seems nothing but the simple truth. The nuclear saber-rattling of these real-life Dr. Strangeloves can still chill the blood, although some of these pronouncements, dating as they do from the era before nuclear-war planners discovered computers and game theory, are almost quaint in their bluster. As for the fatuous Bernard Baruch—FDR’s “Great Poohbah”—the less said the better.

But ultimately this is a story less of obtuse or evil individuals than of an entire generation unable to grasp a dramatically changed reality. With few exceptions, these statesmen and strategists tried to force that new reality into comfortably familiar conceptual categories. The atomic bomb was a “weapon”; it could be used to “wage war”; it could help us achieve our “national objectives.” Few grasped that the bomb had created its own categories, and that new metaphors were required to comprehend its meaning: a spreading plague, perhaps, or a metastasizing cancer.

What The Winning Weapon really portrays is a monumental failure of the imagination. As the seeds of potential world holocaust germinated and took root, it was business as usual in Washington—and no doubt in Moscow as well. The old ideological rivalries among the various military services and government departments all went on as before, with the atomic bomb simply another piece on the chessboard. Most power holders did not notice as we took our first slow, lazy turns around the far outer edges of the maelstrom, simply because their minds were on other matters.

As in so many other ways, President Truman stands as a kind of Everyman for his generation, straining to bend his mind around awesome new realities, yet continually slipping back into old ways of thinking. When Royall blustered that it “doesn’t make any sense” not to use the bomb against Russia, Truman (as we saw in chap. 3) shot back: “You
have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon." Yet, in other moods, the same man could cockily assure a senator that no one should doubt his readiness to drop the bomb again "if necessary," and—in private notes written for his own purposes—toy with the idea of issuing a nuclear ultimatum to Russia during the frustrating days of the Korean War.

The underlying source of Truman's confused groping is suggested in a terse and anguished entry David Lilienthal made in his diary in 1947: "The fences are gone. And it was we, the civilized, who have pushed standardless conduct to its ultimate."