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Malenkov's H-Bomb

If the Soviet Union actually has mastered production of the hydrogen bomb, as Premier Malenkov claims, it is a severe jar to the comfortable debate over the H-bomb policy within the Eisenhower Administration. Of course, it is possible that Malenkov's assertion before the Supreme Soviet was propaganda designed to bolster public confidence during the internal struggle for power. The announcement is curious, coinciding as it does with the denunciations of Beria; for in addition to his secret police duties the deposed Beria supposedly was in charge of the Soviet atomic energy program.

But the last time a Russian official made a similar announcement—when Foreign Minister Molotov disclosed obliquely in November, 1947, that the Western monopoly of the atom bomb had ceased to exist—the Russian boast turned out not to be a bluff. In the absence of the actual explosion of a Soviet hydrogen weapon, it no doubt will be difficult if not impossible for American authorities to check Malenkov's statement with any precision. But we should have learned by now the price of overconfidence; and in the absence of proof as to how far the Russians have gone with the H-bomb, our defense policy must now be based on the assumption that they have it.

This assumption confronts the Administration, the American people, and indeed the whole Western world with the necessity for momentous decisions. It is no secret that this country exploded a thermonuclear device—the forerunner of a hydrogen bomb—in the Pacific last fall. The explosion was phenomenally successful; the force has been estimated as equivalent to that from three to five million tons of TNT as compared with 20 thousand tons for the atomic bomb detonated at Hiroshima. But the Soviet announcement has ended abruptly any confidence in American monopoly even for the brief period of a year. What it has done is to lessen or destroy the American bargaining position, as well as to compress drastically the time in which the Administration must evolve an H-bomb policy.

Malenkov's claim does not necessarily mean that the Russians have a refined hydrogen weapon. But the eruptions in the satellites are a misleading index to Soviet military strength. American scientists have a profound respect for Russian scientific innovation and adaptation—as evidenced in the atom stockpile, the MIG fighter plane, the newly observed jet bombers and a Soviet all-weather fighter. Russia has the long-range bombers necessary to carry an H-bomb attack to this country; her growing submarine fleet may afford another means of delivery of hydrogen weapons.

Even in the absence of specific information, then, it is possible to list in general terms the alternatives forced upon us. One is to think to our air and sea defenses as we have never thought before, in terms of national survival. For there is now an absolute premium on the first strike. If a few hydrogen bombs—in the absence of effective interception—could literally flatten every important center in the country, the fact that we might be able to retaliate in mutual annihilation of the Soviet Union would be little consolation.

To make an effective air defense would require an approach radically different from that we are now pursuing. The probable interception rate of enemy planes, under current conditions, is estimated at 10 percent or less. Project Lincoln and the Kelly report have held out the promise of a workable air defense, by making use of certain new technological advances—but at the cost of many billions of dollars. Adoption of such a program would mean the jettisoning of every current idea regarding the budget and the imposition at the very least of many new and unpredictable burdens on the economy.

The other alternative, however remote, is a really foolproof system of world disarmament, with rigid inspection everywhere. Obviously this is the preferable way if it is attainable. But disarmament would require far more earnestness than has been put into the stillborn efforts so far, and far more strenuous endeavors to reach realistic accommodation with the Soviet viewpoint. In this connection the Administration may now want to reconsider its opposition to a top-level meeting of heads of state. Events may now warrant such a conference in the hope of obtaining some common denominator of agreement.

Possibly it will be necessary to work along both lines simultaneously. The approach must be one of pragmatism rather than of panic. But the situation calls for leadership of the highest order. Now is the time for the Administration to discard its inhibitions and give the people the fullest information about the hydrogen bomb. For Americans have the courage to face the facts. The one thing that would be inexcusable would be a policy of drift in the hope that this evil specter of destruction will somehow blow away.