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A REPORT
TO THE
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

by

THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

on

UNITED STATES POLICY ON ATOMIC WARFARE

September 10, 1948

WASHINGTON

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By: George W. Downs
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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NOTE BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

to the

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

on

UNITED STATES POLICY ON ATOMIC WARFARE
References: NSC Actions Nos. 51, 62 and 75

The enclosed report on the above subject, prepared by the National Security Council Staff with the advice and assistance of representatives of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, and of the National Security Resources Board and the Central Intelligence Agency, as directed by the Council at its 12th Meeting (NSC Action No. 62), is circulated herewith for consideration by the National Security Council at its next meeting.

SIDNEY W. SOUERS
Executive Secretary

Distribution:

- The Secretary of State
- The Secretary of Defense
- The Secretary of the Army
- The Secretary of the Navy
- The Secretary of the Air Force
- The Chairman, National Security Resources Board

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REPORT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

on

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THE PROBLEM

1. To determine the advisability of formulating, at this time, policies regarding the use of atomic weapons.

ANALYSIS

2. The decision to employ atomic weapons is a decision of highest policy. The circumstances prevailing when war is joined cannot be wholly forecast with any greater certainty than can the arrival of war. It appears imprudent either to prescribe or to prohibit beforehand the use of any particular weapons when the character of future conflict is subject only to imperfect prediction. In this circumstance, a prescription preceding diagnosis could invite disaster.

3. If war itself cannot be prevented, it appears futile to hope or to suggest that the imposition of limitations on the use of certain military weapons can prevent their use in war.

4. The United States has nothing presently to gain, commensurable with the risk of raising the question, in either a well-defined or an equivocal decision that atomic weapons would be used in the event of war. An advance decision that atomic weapons will be used, if necessary, would presumably be of some use to the military planners. Such a decision does not appear essential, however,

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since the military can and will, in its absence, plan to exploit every capability in the form of men, materials, resources and science this country has to offer.

5. In this matter, public opinion must be recognized as a factor of considerable importance. Deliberation or decision on a subject of this significance, even if clearly affirmative, might have the effect of placing before the American people a moral question of vital security significance at a time when the full security impact of the question had not become apparent. If this decision is to be made by the American people, it should be made in the circumstances of an actual emergency when the principal factors involved are in the forefront of public consideration.

6. Foreign opinion likewise demands consideration. Official discussion respecting the use of atomic weapons would reach the Soviets, who should in fact never be given the slightest reason to believe that the U. S. would even consider not to use atomic weapons against them if necessary. It might take no more than a suggestion of such consideration, perhaps magnified into a doubt, were it planted in the minds of responsible Soviet officials, to provoke exactly that Soviet aggression which it is fundamentally U. S. policy to avert.

7. If Western Europe is to enjoy any feeling of security at the present time, without which there can be no European economic recovery and little hope for a future peaceful and stable world, it is in large degree because the atomic bomb, under American trusteeship, offers the present major counterbalance to the ever-present

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threat of the Soviet military power. This was recognized by the then Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, who, in an address before the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 1946, acknowledged, with the applause of the Assembly, that: "In the recent past, the concern of peace-loving nations has not been that America maintained excessive armaments. The concern has been that America failed to maintain adequate armaments to guard the peace. It was our military weakness, not our military strength, that encouraged Axis aggression." Were the United States to decide against, or publicly debate the issue of the use of the atomic bomb on moral grounds, this country might gain the praise of the world's radical fringe and would certainly receive the applause of the Soviet bloc, but the United States would be thoroughly condemned by every sound citizen in Western Europe, whose enfeebled security this country would obviously be threatening.

8. Furthermore, consideration must be given to whether any public unilateral decision respecting the use of atomic weapons should be made when the international control of atomic energy is subject to debate within the United Nations. In the "General Conclusions and Recommendations" of the Third Report of the Atomic Energy Commission to the Security Council,¹ dated 17 May 1948, it is stated:

1. Document AEC/31.

"The new pattern of international cooperation and the new standards of openness in the dealings of one country with another that are indispensable in the field of atomic energy might, in practice, pave the way for international cooperation in broader fields, for the control of other weapons of mass destruction, and even for the elimination of war itself as an instrument of national policy.

"However, in the field of atomic energy, the majority of the Commission has been unable to secure the agreement of the Soviet Union to even those elements of effective control considered essential from the technical point of view, let alone their acceptance of the nature and extent of participation in the world community required of all nations in this field by the first and second reports of the Atomic Energy Commission. As a result, the Commission has been forced to recognize that agreement on effective measures for the control of atomic energy is itself dependent on cooperation in broader fields of policy."² (The Commission concluded that no useful purpose can be served by carrying on negotiations at the Commission level.)

9. International cooperation in "broader fields of policy" has been woefully and dangerously lacking on the part of the Soviet Union and its satellites. Any attempt now or in the future, under these circumstances, to prohibit or negatively to qualify the employment of atomic bombs could result catastrophically. The measure of success achieved by the United States in collaboration with other nations in the establishment of an effective system of international control of atomic energy should directly determine the measure of control the United States will impose upon itself in the employment of atomic weapons. Until international agreement can be reached on an acceptable plan to control atomic energy (only the Soviet Union, Poland and the Ukrainian S.S.R. have blocked the attainment of this goal), it is dangerously delusive to consider

2. Underlining supplied for emphasis.

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the self-imposition of any unilateral qualifications of the use of atomic weapons.

10. The United States has offered, along with all other nations, to eliminate atomic weapons from national armaments if and when a fully effective, enforceable system of international control is put into effect. In the meantime United States policy should ensure that no commitment be made in the absence of an established and acceptable system of international control of atomic energy which would deny this country the right to employ such weapons in the event of actual hostilities. The actual decision to employ weapons should be made by the Chief Executive and in the light of prevailing circumstances.

11. The time and circumstances under which atomic weapons might be employed are incapable of accurate determination prior to the evident imminence of hostilities. The type and character of targets against which atomic weapons might be used is primarily a function of military selection in the preparation and planning of grand strategy. In this case, however, there is the additional requirement for blending a political with a military responsibility in order to assure that the conduct of war, to the maximum extent practicable, advances the fundamental and lasting aims of U. S. policy.

CONCLUSIONS

12. It is recognized that, in the event of hostilities, the National Military Establishment must be ready to utilize promptly and effectively all appropriate means available, including atomic

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weapons, in the interest of national security and must therefore plan accordingly.

13. The decision as to the employment of atomic weapons in the event of war is to be made by the Chief Executive when he considers such decision to be required.

14. In the light of the foregoing, no action should be taken at the present time:

a. To obtain a decision either to use or not to use atomic weapons in any possible future conflict;

b. To obtain a decision as to the time and circumstances under which atomic weapons might or might not be employed.