Washington

‘Massive Atomic Retaliation’ and the Constitution

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Jan. 16—The moods of Washington change as quickly as a child’s, and the Communists would be well advised to note the mood of the present Congress.

It is different, in an extraordinary way. Not so many months ago the Republicans were challenging the right of the President to send troops into Korea without the consent of Congress.

More than that, even after the Senate approved of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Republicans and quite a few Democrats staged a major protest against the authority of the President to implement that treaty by sending garrison troops to Europe.

Yet in the last few days both President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles have announced a “new strategy,” potentially graver than anything ever proposed by any United States Government, and this has not produced a single important comment on Capitol Hill.

Beyond the Truman Doctrine

The President and the Secretary of State did not say, as President Truman had said in the Truman Doctrine, that the United States must be prepared to oppose Communist aggression wherever it occurred. They went beyond that. They said that the United States must be free to retaliate “instantly,” not necessarily against the Communist troops in the field but anywhere we chose with any weapons we chose.

In other words they told Moscow and Peiping, as clearly as Governments ever say these things, that, in the event of another proxy or bushfire war in Korea, Indo-China, Iran or anywhere else, the United States might retaliate instantly with atomic weapons against the U. S. S. R. or Red China.

This was not, like the Truman Doctrine, a mere paragraph out of a speech. It was a decision by the President and the National Security Council which determined the size and disposition of the armed services of the United States, and which will inevitably affect the type of weapons to be developed, the future of NATO and the E. D. C. and the strategy to be employed in the event of another Korean-type war.

“The way to deter aggression,” said Mr. Dulles in New York last Tuesday, “is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.”

Letters to

Backing Our Diplomats

Forces of Conformity Seen as Danger to Effective Foreign Service

The signers of the following letter are present or past holders of ambassadorial or other diplomatic posts.

To THE EDITOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES:

Since the time when the United States assumed a significant place in international affairs, at the turn of the century, the Foreign Service has been an organization of growing importance. Today it would be impossible to exaggerate that importance, whether it is considered from the angle of the constructive influence of the United States in world affairs or from the more selfish angle of our national security.

It is to the official representatives of the United States abroad that foreign Governments and peoples have the right to look with confidence for the most authentic interpretation of American values and the American point of view, and it is upon these same representatives that the President, the Secretary of State and others engaged in formulating our foreign policy must rely for accurate information concerning persons and events abroad.

At present these demands upon the Foreign Service are more exacting than ever before; not only because the events to be reported on have become more complex, more difficult of analysis, but also—and primarily—because the emotional climate at home has made objective reporting unusually difficult.

Quality of Evidence

Recently the Foreign Service has been subjected to a series of attacks from outside sources which have questioned the loyalty and the moral standards of its members. With rare exceptions the justification for these attacks has been so flimsy as to have no standing in a court of law or in the mind of any individual capable of differentiating repeated accusation from even a reasonable presumption of guilt. Nevertheless these attacks have had sinister results.

The conclusion has become inescapable, for instance, that a Foreign Service officer who reports on persons and events to the very best of his ability and who makes recommendations which at the time he conscientiously believes to be in the interest of the United States may subsequently find his loyalty and integrity challenged and may even be forced out of the service and discredited forever as a private citizen after many years of distinguished service.
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"The way to deter aggression," said Mr. Dulles in New York last Tuesday, "is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing."

He made clear that the United States was not going to disperse its strength all around the world or follow the policy of hitting the octopus wherever its tentacles lashed out along the periphery of the Red Empire. Instead, Mr. Dulles indicated, our power and our policy were to be directed upon a counter-blow, how could he seek the assurance of the Kremlin and risking a sudden atomic attack against the China mainland? Would the President do it on his own? And if he decided against taking personal responsibility for the counter-blow, how could he seek the consent of the Congress without alerting the Kremlin and risking a sudden atomic blow upon the United States?

A year ago these questions would have been asked here without a moment's delay, but what was the reaction in Washington to Mr. Dulles' speech? There was no reaction. Nobody said a word, and this wasn't because the Congress has reconciled itself to the growing power of the White House.

On the contrary, Mr. Dulles made his speech precisely at the moment when the Congress was in the midst of a frontal attack on the President's treaty-making powers through the so-called Brecker Amendment. A powerful group of Senators in the President's own party were trying to strip him of certain legal authority to make treaties with foreign Powers, but not a soul complained about his "new strategy" of sudden atomic retaliation.

Who Would Pull the Trigger?

This raises some fundamental questions. Suppose the Chinese moved into Indo-China in sufficient mass to tip the balance there against the French. Who would give the order to trigger an atomic attack against the China mainland?

Or suppose the Red Army moved into Azerbaijan, in Iran, as they did once before. Who would order the "massive retaliatory power" of the United States Strategic Command to hit the Kremlin?

Would the President do it on his own? And if he decided against taking personal responsibility for the counter-blow, how could he seek the consent of the Congress without alerting the Kremlin and risking a sudden atomic blow upon the United States?

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Before military planning could be changed,” Mr. Dulles said, “the President and his advisers, 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. ** * 

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“The fundamental issue in the great debate,” said the late Senator Taft in his book (A Foreign Policy for Americans, P. 21-23), “was, and is, whether the President shall decide when the United States shall go to war or whether the people of the United States themselves shall make that decision. ** * ”

“The matter was brought to an issue by the intervention of the President in the Korean war without even telling Congress what he was doing for several weeks. ** * I do not think that the American people have ever faced a more serious constitutional issue.”

The mood, however, has now changed, and so has the party in power. Any policy directed against the Communists is a good policy just so it is tough (and comparatively inexpensive).