

Massive Retaliation And The Specter Of Salvation: Religious Imagery, Nationalism And Dulles's Nuclear Strategy, 1952-1954

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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a way of understanding the impact that symbolic, or abstract, structures can have on a state's foreign policy interests. It is not based on an idealist theory that ideas alone form interests, but argues that ideas and interests must be mutually constitutive. For example, the providential message embedded in mid-19th century "Manifest Destiny" acquired its power to motivate because the unfettered material expansion of the United States gave credibility to the claim that American expansion was a "natural" expression of higher law, rather than a deliberate act of policy.¹ This paper examines this sort of mutual constitution in an even narrower setting: the way Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's religious ideas generated a corresponding definition of strategic interest that led to the nuclear doctrine known as "Massive Retaliation."

The literature on American nuclear strategy in the 1950s rarely studies the ideational or culturally subjective factors that made certain strategic choices seem more logical or natural than others. But I have argued elsewhere that Massive Retaliation built on, and reinforced, certain nationalistic tendencies cultivated by neo-isolationist cultures of American society. Indeed, the social disposition of conservative nationalists, with their embedded hostility toward the enlarged federal state of the New Deal, their suspicion that such a state harboured treasonous radicals, and their belief that a foreign policy of internationalism was a means of expanding that state at home, led them to support the unilateralism of Massive Retaliation. This paper focuses more directly on Dulles, the man who gave the doctrine its public face and conceptual unity. Dulles was, of course, a conservative internationalist, so it cannot be argued that he fully embraced the neo-isolationist disposition. Yet he was sensitive to it, and shared much of its critique of Truman's liberal internationalism. In fact, he saw himself as something of a bridge between the neo-isolationist and internationalist wings of the Republican Party. And here, his religious ideas generated a vision of America's interest and place in the world that embraced both Wilsonian collective security and a

¹ See Norman Graebner, *Manifest destiny* (New York, 1968). The paper borrows its approach to religion, culture and social power from a number of different works. Especially useful have been E. Doyle McCarthy, *Knowledge as culture: the new sociology of knowledge* (London, 1996); Bennett M. Berger, *An essay on culture: symbolic structure and social structure* (Berkeley, 1995); Fritz Ringer, "The intellectual field, intellectual history, and the sociology of knowledge," in *Theory, method, and practice in social and cultural history*, Peter Karsten and John Modell, eds. (New York, 1992), 106-114; David Swartz, *Culture and power: the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago, 1997); Diana Crane, ed., *The sociology of culture: emerging theoretical perspectives* (Oxford, 1994).

strategic doctrine of uncompromising nationalism. Exploring the way his religious beliefs framed his understanding of American and world history, we not only see Massive Retaliation in a deliberately cultural light, but we begin to see how religion as a cultural form expresses itself in the hard world of international relations generally.

Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was known world-wide for his dramatic pronouncements on the evils of communism and the moral superiority of Western capitalism, liberalism and Christianity. Yet most Dulles scholars confirm that his legal and diplomatic training made him more pragmatic than dogmatic in practice.² Although raised in a devout Presbyterian family (his father was a minister), Dulles decided early on that the ministry was not for him; his formal participation in the church came later in life, and his political views seemed, at times, decidedly secular. The recent resuscitation of Dulles's reputation by diplomatic historians has in some part been a function of now being able to downplay his ideological zeal, seeing a pragmatic, if occasionally moralistic, statesman who often sounded a good deal more moderate than some of his administration colleagues.

Yet if we examine the content of Dulles's foreign policy the disconnection between religion and statecraft becomes less tenable. This is not to revive an image of Dulles as a dogmatist, but rather to argue that his religious beliefs provided his conceptions of history, a teleology, that permeated the secular statecraft in which he was engaged. Indeed, it figured prominently, I argue, in the construction of a new strategic doctrine in the first years of the Eisenhower administration. The doctrine, announced at the beginning of 1954, was known as Massive Retaliation, and it was based on a critique of what Dulles and most Republicans viewed as the passivity and costliness of Truman's containment. It proposed that the United States rely on its technological advantage in nuclear weapons to threaten the Soviet Union wherever communism challenged western security. The promise of "instant retaliation" directly against the source of world evil, Dulles believed, would prevent costly limited wars (such as Korea), and might even bring a resolution of the Cold War by withering Soviet will.³

Dulles would later argue that Massive Retaliation was not meant to signify America's intention to turn all wars into nuclear ones; and his supporters in the military believed that Massive Retaliation was simply a case of having "overwhelming strength so that nobody would dare attack us."⁴ But since the new doctrine was advanced as a critique of the Korean War policy of the Truman administration, its central preoccupation was, in fact, the credibility of extended deterrence over the territory of the Western coalition, in other words, making sure the entire "Free World" could be shielded by American nuclear power. This was, of course, a much more difficult proposition in so far as extended nuclear deterrence rested in making threats that

² Like Eisenhower, Dulles has experienced a revival in his reputation since the opening of key files in the Eisenhower Library. See, for example, Richard Immerman, ed., *John Foster Dulles and the diplomacy of the Cold War* (Princeton 1990); Ronald Pruessen, *John Foster Dulles: the road to power* (New York, 1982); and Frederick Marks, *Power and peace: the diplomacy of John Foster Dulles* (Westport, 1993).

³ On Massive Retaliation and the Eisenhower New Look that spawned it, see especially, Glenn Snyder, "The 'New Look' of 1953," in *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets*, Warner Schilling, Paul Hammond, and Glen Snyder, eds. (New York, 1966); Samuel Wells, Jr., "The Origins of Massive Retaliation," *Political Science Quarterly*, 96:1 (Spring 1981): 31-52; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: a critical appraisal of American postwar national security policy* (New York, 1982), chs. 5 and 6; Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New Look National Security Policy, 1953-1961* (New York, 1996); Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace*; and Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York, 1998).

⁴ Curtis LeMay quoted in Richard Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, eds., "U.S. strategic air power, 1948-1962: excerpts from an interview with generals Curtis LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton," *International Security*, 12:4 (Spring 1988), 89.

inherently endangered the allies one was trying to protect. Moreover, credibility rested on the ability to convince the Soviet Union that even under such conditions, none of the allies could veto the nuclear threat in the interests of their self-preservation. In this sense, the logic of Massive Retaliation rested on a considerable degree of Western unity around the concept, not simply the unilateral protection of American territory. This is important, as I will show, because of the degree to which Dulles's strategic thought assumed a precisely overlapping interest between the singular protection of the United States and the collective protection of "western civilization."

Studies of Massive Retaliation have focused on the Eisenhower administration's search for a more cost-effective means of projecting American power in the world because Eisenhower believed that the Cold War could last for a long time and, as a fiscal conservative, he wanted to reduce defense expenditures. The doctrine is usually described as a rational response to environmental conditions (a new era of thermonuclear competition with the Soviets) and domestic concerns (the fear that a long Cold War could lead to the regimentation of American society). What is less often examined are the subjective preferences some Americans had for Massive Retaliation over the more costly "balanced forces" of containment. The possibility that strategic choices are culturally determined should not be surprising given the vast literature in military history and strategic studies that asserts the existence of national strategic cultures.⁵ Yet the idea has rarely been used to understand specific strategic doctrines. In the case of Massive Retaliation, it is clear, though, that debates over American nuclear strategy reflected the concerns and interests of different constituencies. Consider that Truman's decision to send an additional four divisions to Europe during the Korean War generated a debilitating Great Debate in the Senate over presidential power. Yet Massive Retaliation's claim that the United States would automatically initiate a nuclear war in response to communist transgressions not necessarily against the United States itself—a position that usurped Congressional power more dramatically than Truman's troop decision—met with muted resistance. There was a reason why many Americans found the imposing threat of nuclear war more comforting than the prospect of a limited conventional war in a far off land. This alone, however, is not very convincing proof of a cultural disposition toward nuclear strategy, since other countries, notably Great Britain, had similar anxieties about conventional commitments and were also leaning toward a nuclear posture.⁶ Yet, a close examination of the reasons given for that disposition is suggestive of a culturally based preference.

The immediate difference, of course, between the public reaction to the troop decision and Massive Retaliation stems in part from Eisenhower's position of authority astride the internationalist and neo-isolationist branches of the Republican Party, which had been the main source of criticism of Truman's containment policy. But it also draws on the way a large number of Americans believed that Massive Retaliation was a more "natural" representation of American strategic interests because it was more consistent with the desire to maintain autonomy over the exercise of American power, and more consistent with what supporters perceived to be America's

⁵ See, for example, Russell Weigley, *The American way of war: a history of United States military strategy and policy* (New York, 1973); Colin Gray, "National styles in strategy: the American example," *International Security*, 6:2 (Fall 1981); and Carnes Lord, "American strategic culture," *Comparative Strategy*, 5:3 (1985). For a critique of this literature and an attempt to construct a more rigorous theory of strategic culture, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture," *International Security*, 19:4 (Spring 1995): 32-64.

⁶ N.J. Wheeler and Ian Clark, *The British origins of nuclear strategy, 1945-1955* (Oxford, 1989).

values. What needs, then, to be examined, is this normative disposition toward particular types of political power, to see the extent that material choices are grounded in ideational worldviews.⁷

For Dulles, this examination poses some obstacles. It was not uncommon at the time to argue that Dulles's lack of a critical philosophy meant his moralism was often separated from his actions, leading simply to a self-righteousness in doing what he had chosen to do for other reasons.⁸ The issue of a new strategy hinged not simply on a sense of America's natural strategic preference for defense through technology and autonomy; his strategic vision was rooted in a moral critique of containment that made Massive Retaliation a logical strategic choice. The argument is not that Dulles's religiosity was an environmental or ambient feature of his foreign policy ideas; it is that his religious beliefs, like culture generally, served to give meaning to questions of material power and interest that were part to the Cold War. As Clifford Geertz has argued, religious beliefs do not so much describe the social order, as they shape it.⁹

COLD WAR RELIGION: THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF ANTI-COMMUNISM

The 1950s witnessed a dramatic revival in American "religiosity," as both church participation and expectations of public piety reached a 20th century high. Most historians of American foreign relations, grounded in a disciplinary culture of Great Power "geopolitics," have not made much of this revival or its impact on American foreign policy, except to suggest that it may have reinforced existing anti-communist convictions.¹⁰ Yet the Eisenhower administration was uniquely committed to furthering the religious faith of the nation. Indeed, the president saw himself as the "spiritual leader of our times," elected, as he told Billy Graham, to "lead America in a religious revival."¹¹ Eisenhower also, of course, made the rather odd pronouncement that the American system needed to be founded on a "deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is!"¹² But this functional need for religion underlines the importance of understanding the cultural pressures that made unity under God such a shibboleth of 1950s politics.

The reasons for this revival have been much debated. Some have cited the emerging arms race and the prospect of mass extinction; others the bureaucratization of American life; others the

⁷ I have argued elsewhere that the ideational worldview that favoured Massive Retaliation grew from a particular political-economy and its corresponding sense of social order. The material and ideational are really were mutually constitutive. In this respect, foreign policy is the environmental expression of internal organizing principles; the means by which different domestic constituents seek to order the world that they would regard as being most congenial to their interests *within* the state. In the case of the Cold War, the fight over foreign policy also fell along the same lines as the fight over the persistence of the New Deal state; that is, neo-isolationists wanted a foreign policy that limited the power of the state—perhaps in the tradition of Democratic-Republican policy in the 19th century. See "Massive Retaliation and the culture of neo-isolationism," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, June 1998, College Park, Maryland.

⁸ See especially William Lee Miller, *Piety along the Potomac: notes on politics and morals in the Fifties* (Boston, 1964), 169; and the comments of Rev. John MacKay, interview, January 9, 1965, John Foster Dulles Oral History Project, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey. MacKay believed that as Secretary of State Dulles strayed from his commitments made while Chair of the Commission to Study the Bases for a Just and Durable Peace. He suggests that his moralism was had become a rationalization for more nationalistic ideas.

⁹ Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system," in *The interpretation of cultures* (New York, 1973), 119.

¹⁰ On this omission, see Seth Jacobs, "'Our system demands the Supreme Being,'" paper presented at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, June 1999, Princeton, New Jersey.

¹¹ "Leader" quoted in Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties: the way we* (New York, 1977), 90, "revival" in Stephen Whitfield, *The culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1991, 1996), 90.

¹² Quoted in James T. Patterson, *Grand expectations: the United States, 1945-1974* (New York, 1996), 329.

very climate of the Cold War and the pressure such conflict placed on the need for a sense of belonging to a clearly defined American culture.¹³ It seems certainly true that the late 1940s intensified America's adjustment to world power, an adjustment the United States had been grappling with through the first half of the century. Postwar liberal critics have sometimes attributed the rise of virulent, religious anti-communism (one expression of which was McCarthyism) to precisely the search for a more traditional American way of life; in other words, an irrational, atavistic reaction to a modernized condition of American life.¹⁴ The Cold War, in general, evoked a search for return to social orthodoxy in a period of dramatic reorientation of American institutions. The persistence of the New Deal state challenge some beliefs about the relationship of the individual to the state, while the instability of the postwar world placed demands on the United States to further alter its engagement with the world. This "boundary crisis," to borrow Kai Erikson's expression, may have heightened the need for a reassertion of moral order.¹⁵

Amongst conservatives, this search was heightened by the close identification of the New Deal state and its institutions with the rise of communism abroad. That is, conservatives held that America's insecurity in the world was at least in part attributable to complicity and bankruptcy of New Deal liberals.¹⁶ The conservative critique of Truman's foreign policy derived much of its power from its ability to overlay these internal and external fields, linking historic political animosities within the United States to the new, less easily comprehensible sense of global responsibility that the end of the war brought. Conservatives, from Robert Taft to Douglas MacArthur, Joseph McCarthy to John Bricker, linked liberal internationalism to the rise of threatening liberal causes at home: welfare, centralization of federal power, desegregation, and economic regulation.¹⁷

¹³ On the religiosity of the 1950s in general, see James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the suburbs: the religion of the American dream and its critics* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1994); A. Roy Eckardt, *The surge of piety in America: an appraisal* (New York, 1958); and Robert Wuthnow, *The restructuring of American religion: society and faith since World War II* (Princeton, 1988).

¹⁴ In 1955 Talcott Parsons wrote that McCarthyism could best be explained as an "acute symptom of the strains which accompany a major change in the situation and structure of American society," strains that derive "primarily from conflicts between the demands imposed by the new situation and the inertia of those elements of our social structure which are most resistant to the necessary changes." Parson, "Social strains in America," in Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (New York, 1964), 221-29. See also Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American life* (New York, 1962), 221-29; Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Rabb, *The politics of unreason: right-wing extremism in American life* (New York, 1962), 209-47.

¹⁵ I borrow this idea, discussed in a slightly different context from Sonya Rose, "Cultural analysis and moral discourses: episodes, continuities, and transformations," in *Beyond the cultural turn: new directions in the study of society and culture*, Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds. (Berkeley, 1999), 218-219; Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans* (New York, 1966), 68-69. The 1920s would offer one of the best examples of the search for an "authentic" Americanism, but Cold War America was equally anxious to define itself clearly. In 1956, John Kouwenhoven wrote in *Harper's Magazine* that the 1950s had seen an increase in the interest Americans had in knowing and defining themselves. "Magazines here and abroad provide a steady flow of articles by journalists, historians, sociologists, and philosophers who want to explain America to itself, or to themselves, or to others." See "What's American About America?" *Harper's Magazine*, (July 1956): 25-33.

¹⁶ On the relationship between the liberal threat at home and foreign policy, see Alexander DeConde, "On Twentieth-Century Isolationism," in *Isolation and Security*, Alexander DeConde, ed. (Durham, N.C., 1957); Ray Allen Billington, "The Origins of Middle Western Isolationism," *Political Science Quarterly*, 55 (March 1945): 44-64. Billington's argument is challenged in William Carleton, "Isolationism and the Middle West," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 33 (December 1946): 377-90. See also Wayne Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln, 1983), and Selig Adler, *The Isolationist Impulse: Its Twentieth Century Reaction* (New York, 1957).

¹⁷ See, for example, Whitfield, *The culture of the Cold War*, ch. 4. On Taft, see James T. Patterson, "Alternatives to globalism: Robert A. Taft and American foreign policy, 1939-1945," *The Historian*, 36:4 (August 1974); Geoffrey Matthews, "Robert A. Taft, The Constitution and American Foreign Policy, 1939-53," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 17 (1982): 507-22; Russell Kirk and James McClellan, *The political principles of Robert A. Taft* (New York, 1967); Richard Grimmett, "Who were the

The restoration of America's religious values was thus a vital part of the Cold War, precisely because, for conservatives, the internal and external enemies were linked and, of course, because the external enemy espoused atheism. But, as such, the revival was mostly conservative. The "American way of life" could not be a complacent liberal tolerance, if it allowed godlessness to grow at home and abroad. Billy Graham, who emerged as the leader of Protestant revivalism in the 1950s, made the connection blunt: communism was the work of Satan himself. Therefore, "only as millions of Americans turn to Jesus Christ at this hour and accept him as Savior, can this nation possibly be spared the onslaught of a demon-possessed communism."¹⁸ What underpinned this otherwise understandable hostility toward communism, however, was a moral critique of modern American liberal culture itself. As Richard Wrightman Fox has argued, liberal Protestantism had been secularizing since at least the 1920s, leaving a whole range of "spiritual" understandings to conservatives.¹⁹ In an age of intense uncertainty, the pull of religion, with its ability to satisfy a yearning for a coherent, unifying "cause," drew America toward its more conservative, revivalist form, and, as Daniel Bell once wrote about ideology, sought in turn to convert "ideas into social levers."²⁰

Because liberal internationalism appeared to erode American sovereignty, revivalism was inseparable as well from renewed American nationalism. Throughout American history, outbursts of patriotism attempted to equate "Americanism" with Christianity, specifically Protestantism. These periods, for example during the First World War and in the 1920s, directed much of their ire against American hyphenates and immigrants who seemed to threaten social cohesion.²¹ In the 1950s, the connection between America's authentic political culture and its godliness was revived, asserting, as Justice William Douglas did in 1952, that Americans were a "religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme being."²²

The United States was perhaps unique among western states in making this claim in the mid-20th century, but it was not new for Americans by any means. Indeed, American nationalism was, from the outset, invested with Puritan notions of separateness and exceptionalism. As Anders Stephanson has argued, the providentialism of Puritan thought grafted itself to the secular republicanism of the revolution and served as a continual guide to civic virtue in American politics. The secular equivalent of Protestant destinarianism was the notion that the United States was itself a "great 'experiment' for the benefit of mankind as a whole."²³ Moreover, Americans did not find it hard to imagine that the unfoldment of the continental empire, with such ease, was an indication of God's covenant with the "New Israel." But in a covenant, Americans had to

Senate Isolationists?" *Pacific Review of History*, 42:4 (November 1973): 479-98; MacArthur decried the centralization of power under the Truman administration, arguing that the "seductive murmurs" of "internationalism and collective security" that were part of the liberal agenda wanted to make patriotism "outmoded." Social conservatives, such as he, on the other hand, stood for "nothing but Americanism." Quoted in D. Clayton James, *The years of MacArthur*, vol. III: *triumph and disaster, 1945-1964* (Boston, 1985), 646, 665. On Bricker, see Duane Tananbaum, "The Bricker Amendment controversy: its origins and Eisenhower's role," *Diplomatic History*, 9:1 (winter 1985), and his later book, *The Bricker Amendment Controversy: A Test of Eisenhower's Political Leadership* (Ithaca, 1988); and Gary W. Reichard, "Eisenhower and the Bricker Amendment," *Prologue*, 6:2 (Summer 1974), 90.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 81.

¹⁹ Fox, "Experience and explanation," in Harry Stout and D.G. Hart, eds., *New directions in American religious history* (New York, 1997), 403-409.

²⁰ Daniel Bell, *The end of ideology* (Cambridge, MA, 1960, 1988), 400.

²¹ See, for example, Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To die for: the paradox of American patriotism* (Princeton, 1999), 237.

²² Quoted in Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 87.

²³ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest destiny: American expansion and the empire of right* (New York, 1995), 5

watch that their behaviour worked to fulfill the destiny of human history. To Protestants, the Bible was, as Stephanson phrased it, “an epistemic code of revelation” by which historical events could be interpreted, and Americans who could understand the world this way would be able to act in concert with history toward a final Christian end. In this respect, political and social choices are also, fundamentally, moral ones.²⁴

Of course not all Americans cleaved so closely to Puritan destinarianism. But there is little doubt it provided a sense of structure and meaning to American nationalism for many Protestants. More importantly, the idea of covenant and exceptionalism made many Americans sensitive to signs of spiritual decay at home. For some it provided the key to understanding the bewildering collapse of world stability and the rise of communism throughout the world.²⁵ As hard as it was for liberals to understand, many Americans came to believe that America’s global problems stemmed from a breach with the covenant that protected American liberty through history. Accordingly, a considerable part of the solution lay at home, in a dramatic moral revival rather than engagement with the world on the world’s terms. In August 1954, Herbert Hoover told an audience in West Branch, Iowa, that the growth of Executive power through international agreements had not only “shrunk or freedoms by crushing taxes, huge defense costs, inflation, and compulsory military service,” but had correspondingly created the conditions of appeasement abroad that led to the “surrender at Yalta” and the loss of China.²⁶ Conservatives had a concept of international order but it was one deeply intertwined with the moral health of America.

This exceptionalist worldview made it difficult, of course, to conceive of the world as an international community. The Korean War brought this into sharper focus by equating the frustrations of limited war with the principles of collective security, of by that was meant either the United Nations or NATO. Conservatives saw America’s timidity in Korea as an extension of the withering appeasement of Yalta, as a symptom of excessive deference to America’s less virtuous allies. They complained that the UN was a “communist monstrosity,” that it was a “ridiculous farce to call them [NATO members] our Allies,” and that the war had proven that liberal internationalists had subordinated America’s real interests to the “hoary power politics” of the Europeans.²⁷

The answer for many conservative Americans was a defiant unilateralism. Their reasoning, however, was rooted in an uncompromisingly religious sense of moral certainty about the role the United States was to play in the world. “The Lord hates compromising with the devil,” wrote one Taftite from Indiana. “So, it seems to me that if I were President Eisenhower, I would either immediately bring all our boys home from all over the world or I would tell the American people, England, France, etc. that we are going to win.” Similarly, the Los Angeles-based American Patrol’s *Patrol News* wrote that this solitary course would ultimately separate the innocent from

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-10.

²⁵ Justus Doenecke, *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (London, 1979), 181-82; Norman Graebner, *The New Isolationism: A Study in Politics and Foreign Policy Since 1950* (New York, 1956), 27-28; Richard Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security, 1946-1948* (New York, 1971), 336-37.

²⁶ Herbert Hoover, “Protection of Freedom,” address at West Branch, Iowa, August 10, 1954, in *Addresses upon the American road, 1950-1955* (Stanford, 1955), 78-79.

²⁷ Letter, Paul Flory to Robert Taft, June 6, 1953; letter Curt Berger to Taft, May 5, 1953; letter, John T. Parkerson to Taft, July 3, 1953; letter, Mrs. A.L. Summe to Taft, May 5, 1953, box 1221, Foreign Policy File, 1953, Taft Papers, Library of Congress. Congressman Walter Judd once claimed that Truman’s State Department “was an outpost of the British Foreign Office,” especially under “Mr. Acheson and the Rhodes Scholarship boys.” Walter Judd interview, December 11, 1965, John Foster Dulles Oral History Project, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

the guilty in a sinful world. “[O]nly a firm hand and a hard and fast course in our foreign relations, with justice meted out for all, is the only policy we should pursue.”²⁸

Because of the need to act alone in a sinful world,—because, in other words, of the claim that the United States embodied a morally higher political culture—conservatives reached first to the indisputable symbol of American technological superiority and autonomy, the atomic bomb, as their strategic saviour. Douglas Hill, an Ohio conservative, summed up the strategic logic that neo-isolationism generated.

What to do now? The answer is do something, either fight or quit. Slowly bleeding to death is no good. For my part I am an isolationist. Don’t butt into other nations’ affairs and stay so strong they wouldn’t dare touch you. For a pittance of the money we have wasted, this could have been done If Russia is the mastermind in Korea and Russia won’t cooperate in the UN and that is what we insist upon, let’s hit Russia before we can’t stand up due to defending every misfit nation on earth The only partial argument the fighters have is we might get bombed, let’s keep it away from us.²⁹

This strategic disposition pointed in two directions simultaneously, although they were not inherently contradictory. On the one hand, neo-isolationists leaned toward preventive war, or at least a willingness to prefer a nuclear war with Russia over a bewildering stalemate with the forces of communism. On the other hand, there was a utopian strain, convinced that a sufficiently powerful America would deter any attack against it, thus obviating the choice between nuclear and limited war. Hill’s belief was echoed throughout the community. “Like Arthur Godfrey, we need to make our country so strong with airplanes that the enemy will fear to attack us,” a Taftite from Indiana wrote. E.D. Anderson, the Chairman of the Republican Party of Webb County, Texas agreed. “Things are changing too fast, to figure on a Damned thing, but [let us] make ourselves so strong that no Nation or Combination of Nations will dare to start anything.”³⁰ Even MacArthur vacillated between the absolutism of using whatever force was necessary to “win” in Korea and a utopian hope that nuclear weapons might make war irrelevant and real security finally possible.³¹

All of this, of course, is necessary to show the ways in which strategic dispositions are grounded in complex networks of social and ideological values. Eisenhower came to power in 1953, of course, to temper the neo-isolationist tendencies in the conservative wing of the GOP. Both he and Dulles were committed to the idea of collective security to a degree that frustrated neo-isolationists. Yet, campaign rhetoric aside, the Eisenhower administration embraced much of the conservative critique of liberal internationalism, namely the impact that sustained defence spending could have on American institutions. In this sense, as we will see, the Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy cut in two contradictory directions: one the one hand, it supported the

²⁸ Letter, Mrs. A.L. Summe to Taft, May 5, 1953; Charles Randolph Tyson, editor, *Patrol News: Tyson’s Timely Topics*, American Patrol, June 25, 1953, box 1221, Foreign Policy File, 1953, Taft Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹ Letter, Mrs. R.N. Childs to Taft, n.d. [circa 1953]; Douglas Hill to Taft, April 30, 1953, box 1221, Foreign Policy file, 1953, Taft Papers, LC. Poll results show varying degrees of support for neo-isolationist positions during the Korean War. The war itself became increasingly unpopular but a majority continued to support it. As the *results* of the war came to be known, however, a majority of Americans stated that it had probably been a “mistake” to get involved. At the same time, support for foreign aid to NATO diminished. See H. Schuyler Foster, *Activism Replaces Isolationism: U.S. Public Attitudes, 1940-1975* (Washington, 1983), 103-29

³⁰ Letter, Mrs. A.L. Summe to Taft, May 5, 1953, box 1223; E.D. Anderson to Taft, July 6, 1953, box 1222, Foreign Policy file, 1953, Taft Papers, LC.

³¹ James, *The Years of MacArthur*, 666; William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964* (Boston, 1978), 693.

idea of directing a western coalition of states against the Soviet threat. But on the other, it sought strategic means to defend the coalition that were dispositionally unilateral. The reconciliation of these ideas depended, on Dulles part, on a theory of history and progress that was unapologetically grounded in Christian beliefs.

“THERE IS A MORAL LAW”: DULLES’S THEORY OF HISTORY, RELIGION AND FOREIGN POLICY

John Foster Dulles never made a secret of his Christian faith nor of the way he thought it indispensable to the proper conduct of foreign policy. Moral principles, which he always equated with religious belief, “can be brought boldly and unashamedly into the arena of world affairs,” he wrote in 1952. “There is a moral law which, no less than physical law, undergirds our world. It is relevant to the corporate life of men and the ordering of society. It can be drawn upon—indeed must be drawn upon—if mankind is to escape chaos and recurrent war.”³² Those who knew him well testified to the consistency between his public rhetoric and his private convictions.³³ Indeed, a reading of the Dulles papers from the early 1940s on reveals an almost tedious reliance on a few key organizing ideas that linked Christianity to what Dulles believed was needed in American political life and foreign policy. His core religious convictions about international order, historical movement, morality and politics, drew profoundly from a simplified version of Protestant destinarianism. Religion, per se, may not have been always present in his thought (although it was more than in any other Secretary of State), but he organized his conception of history and morality on a religious basis.

It is somewhat harder, of course, to determine the extent that Dulles’s Christianized world view conditioned specific foreign policy and strategic choices. He was not a military strategist and took only a passing interest in the details of military power. Accordingly, there was considerable adjustment between the realities of military force for which he, as Secretary of State, was partially responsible, and the somewhat abstract world order he hoped to fashion. Nonetheless, this adjustment was toward the gravitational pull of his religious ideas; he reconciled himself to the exercise of military power, but he selected the means he believed were most congenial to his existing religious Weltanschauung. This is not to argue that prescribing to Protestant destinarian ideas logically produces a proclivity for nuclear weapons; rather, there emerges, to paraphrase Weber, an “elective affinity” between Dulles’s religious ideas and his strategic preferences.³⁴

Dulles’s expositions on American foreign policy were always framed in a providential view of American history. He argued consistently, from the early 1940s on, that the basis for America’s strength, indeed for the strength of all nations, was religious faith. The founders of the United States, he believed, had “deep religious convictions” that were inseparable from their devotion to human freedom. Indeed, a religious conception of man, he insisted, was “the only premise from which political freedom surely follows.” That being said, the faith of the American founders was inherently expansive and generous, a gift to be shared with the world so that tyranny and despotism everywhere could be eliminated. In this sense, Dulles drew on Puritan providentialism in arguing repeatedly that the United States was “a great experiment in human freedom” which imbued Americans with a clear sense of world mission.³⁵ More importantly, he insisted it was this

³² Dulles, “How my faith helped me in a decisive hour,” *The Christian Century*, March 19, 1952.

³³ See Ole Holsti, *Enemies in politics* (Chicago, 1967), 28. I am grateful to Seth Jacobs for this source.

³⁴ Weber quoted in Bell, *End of ideology*, 398.

³⁵ “Our spiritual heritage,” Address at *New York Herald Tribune* Forum, October 21, 1947, in Henry P. Van Dusen, ed., *The spiritual legacy of John Foster Dulles* (New York, 1960), 64-66; see also, “A righteous faith,” *Life*, December 28, 1942.

spiritual foundation and its sense of outward mission that provided the United States with its physical security in the 19th century:

We didn't get security out of our material strength, which during the last century was nothing to boast of. We did get security out of the moral quality that our people had put into their effort. What they did was known throughout the world as the "Great American Experiment" and no leaders in other countries, however hostile and ambitious, could have brought their people to try to crush out that experiment because it carried with it the hopes and aspirations of all the peoples of the world.

Yet in the 20th century, with the exception of Woodrow Wilson's lofty efforts, the United States "showed a steady exhaustion of our spiritual springs." This too, Dulles believed, was part of a "typical cycle" of Christian history, the paradoxical consequence of American spiritual successes. "It was said by Christ that material things would be added unto those who seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. But when that happens, then comes the great trial. For, as Christ warned, those material things can readily become the rust that corrodes men's souls."³⁶ As with the 19th century idea of Manifest Destiny, the material power of the United States was thought to be a function of God's reward for spiritual purity and mission to the world.

In this sense, too, the notion of trial is based on covenantal beliefs about God's relationship with the American people as agents of progress. Consequently, the loss of righteousness led inevitably to decadence and, more critically, foreign dangers. Dulles believed that the isolationism of the 1920s and 1930s was a direct function of this decay in spiritual values, and the subsequent retraction of America's sense of mission to the world. America believed it could no longer "absorb" the world's needy, nor "expand," out into the world, and so shut its doors, closing off "our political orbit." The rise of totalitarian, or "materialist," forces in the world was causally related to this retraction of spiritual authority. In a sense, Dulles offered a spiritual frontier thesis in so far as he believed that America's constant moral expansion into the world was both the source and index of its spirituality. The failure to convert principles into "creative," (one of Dulles's favourite words) and concrete action caused the world to collapse. "It is no mere accident," he argued, "that we have had to fight two great wars in quick succession We had become rich and materially powerful, but we were no longer a life giving society. Doing nothing, we endangered all."³⁷

In this sense, too, Dulles grafted together ideas from Henri Bergson—to whom he was exposed during a year at the Sorbonne—and Arnold Toynbee, to assert that civilizations need periodically to renew their spiritual well-springs through dynamic action. Vitality, action, and creativity were central to the exercise and growth of faith since Jesus "did not teach a purely contemplative religion." Quoting Toynbee, he told his hometown church in 1953 that "practice unsupported by belief is a wasting asset."³⁸ As such, one of Dulles's constant preoccupations, as

³⁶ "The American vision," address at the opening of the churches' National Mission on World Order, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, October 18, 1943, in *The spiritual legacy*, 58-60; "The importance of spiritual resources," address, Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, January 27, 1950, John Foster Dulles Papers (henceforth JFDP), Selected Correspondence, Box 47, Captive Peoples File (1950), Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

³⁷ "The American vision," *ibid.*; similar ideas are expressed in a number of Dulles's speeches. See also "Foreign policy and the national welfare," address before the National Farm Institute, Des Moines, Iowa, February 16, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 59, "Containment" Policy File (1952).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61. Toynbee quote in address delivered at the Interdenominational Community Service celebrating the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church, Watertown, New York, October 11, 1953, in *ibid.*, 223. See also

he considered how America could “regain” its soul after the retreat into materialism, was the restoration of that dynamic sense of mission that had, for so long, guarded American security.

“THE GREAT MORAL OFFENSIVE”: MASSIVE RETALIATION AND DULLES’S CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

While Dulles’s optimism varied through the 1940s and 1950s, he remained committed to these central organizing concepts.³⁹ They formed the basis of his critique of the Truman administration’s policy of “containment.”⁴⁰ Although it was a policy of some ambiguity, containment was understood by Dulles to mean the development of a military “Maginot Line” around the Soviet Union, in concert with a network of allies, to whom the United States would pledge its defence. Over time, it was thought, the frustration of being hemmed in and unable to expand would produce a mellower or altogether withered Soviet Union. By 1951, however, containment had also become linked to the limited war in Korea.

Dulles’s objections to containment were grounded in his theory of American history. It was, he insisted, a posture based on “static defensive forces,” altogether “too passive” and ill-suited to American traditions. It abandoned millions of people behind the Iron Curtain, preventing them from imbuing the spiritual faith Americans had to offer. “The American people cannot be callously indifferent to the piteous plight of those who are being subjected to mass terrorism. That is the moral reason why containment is not good enough.”⁴¹ He told George Kennan, containment’s nominal architect, that the “past dynamism of our nation has genuinely stemmed from a profound faith in such concepts as justice and righteousness and from the sense that our nation had a mission to promote these ideals.” The Truman administration’s policy was an abandonment of that tradition: containment was “not healthy” because it was “nonmoral diplomacy.”⁴²

Dulles’s letter to Kennan was based on a campaign speech he gave days earlier in St. Louis, in which he argued that the American people “do not feel happy to be identified with foreign policies which run counter to what we have been taught in our churches and synagogues and in our classes on American history.” He repeated his sweeping vision of American history, in which ultimate security stemmed from adherence to a Christian faith that had to be brought out to the world, making the tide of despotism recede. A policy that abandoned those values was not

Ronald Pruessen, *John Foster Dulles: the road to power* (New York, 1982), 306; Richard Immerman, “Introduction,” and Ronald Pruessen, “John Foster Dulles and the predicaments of power,” in Immerman, ed., *John Foster Dulles and the diplomacy of the Cold War* (Princeton, 1990), 5, 23.

³⁹ He served, of course, for eight years as Chairman of the Federal Council of Churches Commission on a Just and Durable Peace (1940–48), during which time he worked closely with a number of leading theologians on the very question of how to relate Christianity to the reconstruction of the international system after the Second World War.

⁴⁰ Interestingly enough containment has been generally attributed to George Kennan, another deeply religious foreign policymaker with whom Dulles found himself at odds. Kennan advocated what John Lewis Gaddis has called a “particularist” policy that tolerated a degree of ideological diversity in the world as long as the balance of global power was maintained. When he suggested to Dulles that the United States should not use its own moral systems as a template by which judge other states, Dulles disagreed. He insisted there were “certain basic moral concepts which peoples and nations can and do comprehend, and to which it is legitimate to appeal as providing some common standard of international conduct.” Letter, Dulles to Kennan, October 29, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 61, George Kennan File (1952); see also Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American national security policy* (New York, 1982).

⁴¹ “Our foreign policy—is containment enough?” address at the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, October 8, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 59, “Containment” Policy File (1952).

⁴² “Where are we?” address at the American Association for the United Nations, December 29, 1950, New York, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 48, Eisenhower File (1950), emphasis added; letter, Dulles to Kennan, October 2, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 61, George Kennan File (1952).

only nonmoral, but it could not, by definition, generate real security for the United States. The public's growing hostility to the Yalta agreements, the fall of China, and the Korean War was proof of its moral uneasiness, its sense of the incongruity between containment and American values.⁴³

Finally, and similarly, Dulles characterized containment as "materialistic," a foreign policy that believed military or economic strength alone was the source of a nation's security. He wrote to Robert Taft in January 1950 that he hoped the Republicans would somehow seize the chance "to develop a moral theme which seems to me the necessary antidote to the materialistic theme which seems to me to dominate the [Truman] Administration." A few months earlier, in Watertown, New York, he insisted that an over-reliance on military might was corrosive to the need for greater spirituality.

Today our nation is relying greatly on material and military might. That is dangerous. A nation that possesses a great military establishment is apt to be influenced by the counsel of persons who believe in the inevitability of war or who believe that good ends can be gained by violent means. Our present policy skirts, dangerously, the road to war. Our leaders take that risk because they feel that there is no adequate alternative But moral power does not derive from any act of Congress. It depends on relations of a people to their God. It is the churches to which we must look to develop the resources for the great moral offensive that is required to make human rights secure and to win a just and lasting peace.⁴⁴

Dulles was not opposed to military power, but he believed it had to accompany the development of spiritual power in order not to corrupt and endanger international peace. Even as Secretary of State he quoted Alfred Thayer Mahan in claiming that the main role of military power "is to give moral ideas the time to take root. Where moral ideas already are well rooted, there is little occasion for much military or police force."⁴⁵ Accordingly, the answer to America's security problems was a dramatic return to historical orthodoxy:

There is no doubt but that our nation has quickly moved from what seemed to be supreme security won in World War II into what is no great danger Some conclude that because of this peril we should cut loose from the great principles which historically animated our people and enabled them to guide our nation through past perils. That is a counsel of panic. This is above all time to adhere loyally to those enduring principles upon which our nation was founded. This is a time, not to change our faith, but to renew it.⁴⁶

In the run to the 1952 election, Dulles's foreign policy pronouncements for the most part spoke only of these principles. Concrete proposals were in short supply, although it was implied, of course, that part of the "dynamism" needed to restore spiritual hope to the world would be

⁴³ "Principle versus expediency in foreign policy," address to the Missouri Bar Association, St. Louis, September 26, 1952, *Spiritual legacy*, 124-25.

⁴⁴ "Faith in our fathers," address at the First Presbyterian Church, Watertown, New York, August 28, 1949, *ibid.*, 11-12.

⁴⁵ "Morals and power," address at the graduation exercises of the Naval War College, June 16, 1953, *ibid.*, 81.

⁴⁶ "Principle versus expediency in foreign policy," 127.

found in a commitment to liberate the “captive peoples” living under communism.⁴⁷ But how to do so without risking war in a thermonuclear age? How, indeed, would the United States convert its renewed spiritual vigor into action when action was fraught with such dangers? This was the central dilemma facing Eisenhower’s “New Look” foreign policy and, in turn, Dulles’s search for a strategic posture to replace containment.

As early as 1950, just after the outbreak of the Korean War, Dulles advanced a rudimentary version of Massive, or more accurately “instant,” Retaliation in which he argued that the U.S. ought to rely more explicitly on its atomic superiority and less on its conventional forces. His point then and later, was that such a posture of strength offered the “ultimate deterrent” to war of any kind, limited or otherwise.⁴⁸ He promoted this idea more forcefully in his 1952 article in *Life* magazine, “A policy of boldness.” Consistent with his view that the United States could only maintain its spiritual vigour through expansion, he dismissed isolationism as a form of appeasement. He then spoke of “truths” that would offer salvation from the “negative policies” of containment. One of these was the Bergsonian idea that “the dynamic prevails over the static; the active over the passive.”⁴⁹ This was a persistent theme in his foreign policy writings and one that had formed the basis of his attack on containment. It, too, was rooted in a Christian ethic. He had written ten years earlier in *Life* that “action is a thing that, itself, is good. It is out of action that there is born a sense of creative power and purpose. Every individual, every nation, must make an effort to find opportunities where faith can be converted into action.”⁵⁰ American power in the mid-20th century, he affirmed, was itself an expression of “being born with a sense of destiny and mission,” a consequence of creative, spiritual energy.

A second truth was that American power was fundamentally “moral and intellectual rather than military or material.” American ideas “projected abroad” were “more explosive than dynamite.” Finally, Dulles iterated a starkly Manichean view of history as the unfoldment of divine law, a law that would indeed mete judgment on the world.

There is a moral or natural law not made by man which determines right and wrong and in the long run only those who conform to that law will escape disaster. This law has been trampled by the Soviet rulers, and for that violation they can and should be made to pay. This will happen when we ourselves keep faith with the law in our practical decisions of policy.

⁴⁷ This was the theme of perhaps his most famous campaign publication. See Dulles, “A policy of boldness,” *Life*, 32 (May 19, 1952).

⁴⁸ “Where are we?” address at the American Association for the United Nations, December 29, 1950, New York, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 48, Eisenhower File (1950). Dulles claimed that he originated the “thesis of deterrent retaliatory power in connection with my work on the Japanese Peace Treaty.” He argued then, in February 1951, that America’s allies could be strengthened to prevent what was then called “indirect aggression”,—meaning, political subversion, coups d’état, or “trumped up” civil wars—but direct aggression from the Soviet Union or China could be countered by the “deterrent of our retaliatory striking power.” This position, he told *New York Times* columnist James Reston, had the approval of Truman and the Defense Department at the time. See letter, Dulles to Reston, December 13, 1954, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 80, Deterrent Strategy File (1954). He did give a speech in December 1950, however, in which he insisted that the only “effective defense” was “the capacity to counter-attack” with atomic weapons. See “Where are we?” *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Dulles, “A policy of boldness,” *Life*, 32 (May 19, 1952), 151-52.

⁵⁰ “A righteous faith,” *Life* (December 28, 1942) cited in *Spiritual legacy*, 55.

From this Dulles repeated his plea for a strategic doctrine that emphasized having the capacity to “retaliate instantly against open aggression . . . by means of our own choosing.”⁵¹

It is not immediately evident to the world how Dulles’s general themes of dynamism and morality led to this enthusiasm for the exercise of nuclear retaliatory power. Indeed, some critics charged that Massive Retaliation violated the very faith in moral and spiritual power he had long advocated. In 1946, he had signed his name to a Federal Council of Churches statement that advocated atomic restraint as the “way of Christian statesmanship.”⁵² But this moral queasiness at the end of the war afflicted a number of people—Herbert Hoover, for example—who would later recant and favour nuclear power over the alternatives that would emerge in the late 1940s. In 1946, there was still a possibility of atomic cooperation under the UN. Under the conditions of the late 1940s, however, and within the logic of Dulles’s system of belief, Massive Retaliation was, in fact, consistent with his desire for a moral revival in the West. How so? Strategy is about ranking preferences for the use of military power. When forced to choose between the “negative policy of ‘containment’ and ‘stalemate,’” and the dynamic opportunities offered by nuclear deterrence, Dulles’s preference was determined by his historical, Christian ontology.

First, for Dulles, Massive Retaliation actually de-emphasized the military establishment by promising a reduction in defence spending and the size of the armed forces. Paradoxically, Dulles thought that maintaining the capacity for nuclear retaliation was less politically intrusive in American culture than maintaining balanced forces. By advocating a simple doctrine of “absolute deterrence,” Dulles hoped the materialism of American strategy would be minimized, allowing the West to advance its spiritual and moral ideas as the basis of its foreign policy.

Second, the ultimate security of nuclear deterrence offered the best chance for a dynamic policy designed to rollback totalitarianism. Dulles was preoccupied with finding ways to retract Soviet power so as to shift momentum from East to West; he believed only a decisive military strategy would offer the security necessary to begin such a process. Massive Retaliation, he argued, allowed the United States to determine the means and places by which it responded to the Soviet threat, rather than being defensively reactive to Soviet dynamism.⁵³ By restoring this sense of initiative to the West, the United States once again becomes an agent of historical change. In 1942, when Dulles wrote of the dynamic triumphing over the static, he feared the dynamic appeal of totalitarianism over the static decadence of the western democracies; in 1952, he wanted to believe that Massive Retaliation would shift that advantage back to the forces of spiritual and moral progress. Under the security of the ultimate deterrent, the west would be able to pursue the liberation of the “captive peoples” of Eastern Europe without risk of war. Massive Retaliation enabled the United States to maintain its commitment to peace, while rededicating itself to “the universal cause of human liberty and just government.”⁵⁴

Finally, Dulles argued that in a single gesture, Massive Retaliation offered protection to the entire western community, unifying the forces of civilization under the umbrella of American power. He argued in early 1952 that “striking power, if effective to protect one nation, can protect others without added cost. If, for example, the United States has enough striking power so that the Soviet leaders do not want to bring it into play by attacking Alaska, they would equally

⁵¹ “A policy of boldness,” 154.

⁵² Rev. John MacKay, interview, January 9, 1965, John Foster Dulles Oral History Project, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton, New Jersey. FCC statement quoted in Paul Boyer, *By the bomb’s early light: American thought and culture at the dawn of the atomic age* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 200.

⁵³ See Dulles, “Policy for security and peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, 32:3 (April 1954), 358-59

⁵⁴ “A policy of boldness,” 160.

not want to bring it into play by an attack upon Norway or Turkey or Japan.”⁵⁵ This was only technically true, of course, if these foreign states were legally bound to the United States in a way as to make an attack on them a *casus belli* for the United States. Yet even NATO’s Washington Treaty recoiled from making such a commitment. Accordingly, Dulles asserted that Massive Retaliation provided the conditions for Western political unity central to the restoration of American dynamism. Yet his logic was dependent upon a “symbolic universe” that worked almost entirely to privilege and universalize American values.⁵⁶ Since the Soviets were inherently “immoral,” he told Congress, it followed that there had not been war or atomic blackmail by Moscow solely because of American atomic power. The weakness of his logic, of course, adheres to nuclear deterrence itself. Nuclear strategy is abstract and hypothetical; it is incapable of being pragmatically tested. The inability to test for alternative explanations (for lack of Soviet aggression) meant that the more socially supported claim had greater validity. In other words, deterrence “worked” because the Soviets were by nature aggressive and the Americans by nature peaceful. The claim of deterrence as a legitimate basis for security can only be made certain if other normative assumptions are made about who the Soviets and Americans are. Dulles’s religious universe and the theory of American history it generated, conditioned him to embrace the logic of deterrence.⁵⁷

CONCLUSIONS: MASSIVE RETALIATION AND THE “ETHIC OF ULTIMATE ENDS”?

Perhaps because of the deeply embedded religious logic behind it, Dulles’s Massive Retaliation caused a great deal of public confusion after he announced it to the world in January 1954.⁵⁸ Its congruence, moreover, with emerging Air Force doctrines of pre-emption, suggested

⁵⁵ “Foreign policy and the national welfare,” address before the National Farm Institute, Des Moines, Iowa, February 16, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 59, “Containment” Policy File (1952).

⁵⁶ A “symbolic universe” refers simply to all subjectively real meanings in the world, that is, realities other than those of everyday life. A symbolic universe constitutes a society’s sense of history and an individual’s sense of biography, as well as the order in which a given society exists. The “self-evident” character of a given social institution cannot be affirmed through individual experience, but is passed on through the individual’s inclusion in an existing, socially constructed, world of meaning. See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: a treatise on the sociology of knowledge* (New York, 1966), 123-37.

⁵⁷ “Question and answer with John Vorys,” House Committee on Foreign Affairs, n.d., JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Deterrent Strategy File (1954). The idea that symbolic universes acquire legitimacy through social order rather than adherence to objective reality draws on Berger and Luckmann, *The social construction of reality*. The only correspondent with Dulles who pointed out that nuclear deterrence was a dialectical process by which the West’s deterrent capability could be construed by the Soviets as a offensive capability, thus possibly inviting a Soviet attack in the name of pre-emption, was Quincy Wright. See letter, Wright to Dulles, January 28, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 66, Quincy Wright File (1952).

⁵⁸ Dulles, “The evolution of foreign policy,” US Department of State Bulletin, January 25, 1954, 107-110. For the contemporary debate, see Paul Peeters, *Massive Retaliation: the policy and its critics* (Chicago, 1959); E. Raymond Platig, “The ‘New Look’ raises old problems,” *The Review of Politics*, 17:1 (January 1955), 111-35; William F. Knowland, “The ‘Instant Retaliation’ policy defended,” *New York Times Magazine*, March 21, 1954, E2; and Chester Bowles, “A plea for another Great Debate,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 28, 1954, 11; William Kaufmann, ed., *Military policy and national security* (Princeton, 1956); Samuel Wells, Jr., “The origins of Massive Retaliation,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 96 (spring 1981): 31-52; and Campbell Craig, *Destroying the village: Eisenhower and thermonuclear war* (New York, 1998). Craig argues that Dulles was ironically the most persistent inside critic of sole reliance on nuclear weapons. The oral history accounts from the John Foster Dulles papers also offer a considerable range of views as to what Dulles meant. Most believe he did not advocate sole reliance on nuclear weapons, but at the same time many blame him for not clarifying the inherent ambiguities of his ideas. See the recollections of Robert Bowie, Arleigh Burke, John Hughes, Thomas Finletter, Andrew Goodpaster, Curtis LeMay, Lauris Norstad, and Matthew Ridgway, Oral History Project, Dulles Papers, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

that Dulles was an advocate of an offensive military posture.⁵⁹ My argument here, by revealing the ideational foundations for Dulles's commitment to nuclear deterrence, suggests otherwise. Nonetheless, the wider appeal of the doctrine amongst conservatives and air power advocates suggests that such distinctions may not, in the end, matter. Air power theories came to predominate neo-isolationist thought because of the way they dovetailed with the need to separate the United States from other states, a surrogate form of the effortless security once provided by the oceans. In an interdependent world, air power was somehow strategically antiseptic; but the need for cleanliness was a function of the neo-isolationist Zeitgeist.

More ominously, the rhetorical emphasis on initiative that Dulles found so seductive, easily slipped toward a desire for a final military showdown with the Soviets as a way of "resolving" the Cold War before the Soviets acquired nuclear parity. Here, in the way Massive Retaliation was supported and found receptive audiences throughout America, is where nuclear strategy veered closest to the unstable spirit of atomic millennialism. Since 1945, prophecy writers had latched on atomic energy as the means by which the world might end.⁶⁰ Dulles had never shown much interest in serving the march of history that way; he attributed difficulties facing the world to America's moral decline which he hoped a nuclear strategy would help reverse. Yet Massive Retaliation, to be psychologically effective, depended on making nuclear weapons morally acceptable. Dulles lamented that the Soviets had managed to convince many in the West that using nuclear weapons was unethical at a time when the conviction to use them was the only means of preserving peace and regaining the initiative.⁶¹ In this sense, Dulles's courtship of nuclear weapons forced him to accept the logic of a final showdown which, by the last years of his life, he considered impossible to reconcile with good statesmanship. Instead, the Eisenhower administration oscillated between blunt contemplation of nuclear holocaust, and a utopian hope that some scheme could be found to ban nuclear weapons altogether.

The ethic of ultimate ends expressed itself throughout the era of Massive Retaliation, especially amongst those in the military charged with using the weapons. Strategic Air Command's Curtis LeMay favoured using nuclear weapons in Asia if the Korean truce were broken because it satisfied a frustrated need to act: "In these 'poker games,' such as Korea and Indo-china," LeMay mused in 1954, "we . . . have never raised the ante—we have always just called the bet. We ought to try raising sometime."⁶² Eisenhower's Air Force Chief, Nathan Twining, devoted much of his 1966 book *Neither Liberty nor Safety* to attacking the idea of limited war. The "passive" policy of containment offered no "ultimate resolution of our conflict with the Sino-Soviet bloc," which was a failure to "face up totally to the challenge." What was needed was "containment plus"—the plus being "initiative"—in which Washington ought to have said: "The United States does not intend to initiate military conflict, but it will have to begin it if the USSR and Communist China persist in their attempts to enslave more of the free world. The United States will be ready to fight." More significantly, Twining considered his strategy as "typically American." So why had it not been adopted? "Possibly it never developed

⁵⁹ On the emergence of offensive strategic thought in the military in the early 1950s, see Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the missile age* (Princeton, 1959), 248-50; Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'wasting asset': American strategy and the shifting nuclear balance, 1949-1954," in *History and strategy* (Princeton, 1991), 132-46; Tami Davis Biddle, "Handling the Soviet threat: 'Project Control' and the debate on American strategy in the early Cold War years," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 12 (September 1989).

⁶⁰ Paul Boyer, *When time shall be no more: prophecy belief in modern American culture* (Cambridge, 1992), 115-122.

⁶¹ John Lewis Gaddis, "The unexpected John Foster Dulles: nuclear weapons, communism, and the Russians," in Immerman, ed., *John Foster Dulles and the diplomacy of the Cold War*, 49-56.

⁶² Quoted in Richard Rhodes, "The General and World War III," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1995, 53-54.

because the American public at large never had a voice in the matter.”⁶³ Thus, by Twining’s culturally-informed historical logic, America’s natural inclinations had been smothered by defensive and possibly treasonous elites in Washington, who allowed strategy to be emasculated by political expediency. Dulles, of course, had argued the very same thing.

Yet Dulles and Eisenhower both rejected preventive war, and Dulles found himself in the National Security Council vigorously urging restraint and caution against the military which had taken the message of Massive Retaliation to mean something different, something more material.⁶⁴ The difference was partly that Dulles also had to acknowledge that his Massive Retaliation speech had severely strained the western alliance. The allies did not, as he had hoped, interpret his doctrine as a defence of the West’s spiritual values, but as a retreat of American power behind the walls of a nuclear “Fortress America.”⁶⁵

But the main difference between Dulles and the more unilateralist elements in the military, and amongst neo-isolationists, was that Dulles’s moral foundation for Massive Retaliation was intended to assert the primacy of the spiritual over the material. Such a distinction was not easy to maintain during a thermonuclear arms race. Instead, the doctrine came to be seen as a self-righteous justification for a policy scarcely more ethical than the brute exercise of military power by any state. Its wide cultural appeal, however, rested on its claim to moral purpose and its elevation of the United States to a position as leader of a historical world mission. J. Howard Williams of the Baptist General Convention in Texas wrote approvingly to Dulles after his Life article appeared, echoing words that Dulles had repeated for years:

I thank God for you Through the years I have read and known of you and your efforts as a Christian statesman and my admiration is all but boundless. Your basic concepts are Christian and your concept of world strategy with immediate measures used as a means to attain a long range goal must and I have faith to believe shall find acceptance with our own and other peoples of the world.
. . . . this nation was born in a spiritual revival in which liberty was appraised and evaluated in such terms as to lead men to know it was indispensable to the well being of mankind. It was for this reason that Patrick Henry could say he preferred it to life itself. Since this concept was the outgrowth of Christian principles, . . . I think the Church can serve today

⁶³ General Nathan Twining, *Neither Liberty nor Safety: A Hard Look at U.S. Military Policy and Strategy* (New York, 1966), 55, 59-68.

⁶⁴ “Talk of atomic attack,” he told the NSC in August 1954, “tended to create ‘peace-at-any-price people’ and might lead to an increase in appeasement sentiment in various countries.” By the end of the year, he conceded that “experience indicated that it was not easy to go very much beyond the point that this administration had reached in translating a dynamic policy into courses of action.” Memorandum of NSC Meeting, August 5, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1952-1954*, II, pt. 1, 706; Memorandum of Discussion at the 204th Meeting of the NSC, December 21, 1954, *ibid.*, 833. On Dulles’s pragmatism and rejection of the arguments for military aggression, see also John Lewis Gaddis, “The Unexpected John Foster Dulles,” in Immerman, ed., *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War*, 52; and Russell D. Buhite and Wm. Christopher Hamel, “War for Peace: The Question of an American Preventive War against the Soviet Union, 1945-1955,” *Diplomatic History*, 14:3 (summer 1990): 367-84.

⁶⁵ Partly this was a function of other aspects of the Eisenhower New Look, namely, the idea that the United States should concentrate more on the defense of “continental” North America and that it should consider withdrawing many of its conventional forces from the “periphery” in order to create a “mobile strategic reserve” in the US. These were favoured most by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. See NSC 162, Review of Basic National Security Policy, September 30, 1953, *FRUS: 1952-1954*, II, pt. 1, 508-09; NSC 162/2, Basic National Security Policy, October 30, 1953, *ibid.*; Memorandum of Discussion at the 165th Meeting of the NSC, October 7, 1953, *ibid.*, 515-34; Memorandum, Robert Cutler to Dulles, September 3, 1953, *ibid.*, 456; telegram, Hughes to Dulles, October 28, 1953, *FRUS: 1952-1954*, V, pt. 1, 447-48; memorandum of Discussion at the 174th Meeting of the NSC, December 10, 1953, *ibid.*, 449-54; and Saki Dockrill, “Cooperation and Suspicion: Alliance Diplomacy for the Security of Western Europe, 1953-1954,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 5:1 (March 1994), 154-57.

to reselling [sic] our own and other people on its God-given nature and its indispensable necessity to the welfare of the world.⁶⁶

Without the appeal to a Christian teleology, based on a belief that the United States embodied the hopes of the progress of the world, Massive Retaliation would not have been the preference of Dulles or his supporters. For a brief while, nuclear weapons seemed to offer some Americans a rare opportunity for the revival of the fundamental spiritual value of destiny and mission that America had lost. At the same time, however, without its religious rationale, the doctrine descended easily into a mere posture of destabilizing nuclear competition.

⁶⁶ Letter, Williams to Dulles, May 19, 1952, JFDP, Selected Correspondence, Box 57, Article by John Foster Dulles: 'A New Foreign Policy, A Policy of Boldness,' File (1952).