The Missile Gap Myth and Its Progeny

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Public misperceptions in 1959 and 1960 that the Soviet Union had opened up a dangerous and growing lead over the United States in the deployment of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) had fateful consequences beyond influencing an exceedingly close presidential election. What was then labeled “the missile gap” also helped establish patterns in the nuclear arms race that persisted throughout the Cold War and beyond.

For the U.S. public, the missile gap burst forth spectacularly toward the end of the 1950s as a result of two developments in 1957. The first was the successful flight test of the Soviet SS-6 ICBM in August and the Soviet Union's launch several weeks later of the world's first artificial satellite, Sputnik, by the same rocket type. Both launches represented Soviet technological achievements not yet matched by the United States. Sputnik, visible in the night sky over the United States, was the more dramatic symbol of Soviet progress, but the ICBM test that preceded it had the more ominous and immediate security implications.

The second development was the secret completion in November and public discussion shortly thereafter of a presidentially commissioned review of U.S. nuclear policies by an outside and predominantly civilian committee, chaired by Horace Rowan Gaither. The Gaither Report, as it was called, warned that the Soviet Union could have a “significant” ICBM capability by the end of 1959, making the Strategic Air Command’s bomber fleet vulnerable to surprise attack “during a period of lessened world tension.” [1] Although classified top secret, some of the report’s conclusions, including its alarmist view of Soviet ICBM capabilities, were leaked to the press.

The shock of being bested in space by the United States’ superpower rival and the prediction by an independent, blue-ribbon commission of future Soviet strategic advances set the stage for the appearance of the missile gap. A sense of alarm spread, along with a narrative that the Eisenhower administration had been complacent in the face of an acute military threat. Influenced by a combination of inadequate information and partisan political motives, Democratic politicians cultivated the notion that the aging incumbent had been asleep at the switch and that a new team was needed to reinvigorate government and restore U.S. nuclear superiority.

In one sense, the Gaither Report’s findings and the January 1959 joint Senate hearings on missile and space activities merely led to a necessary and overdue adjustment in the U.S. psyche as a new and unpleasant reality of the nuclear age sank in: The United States had become profoundly vulnerable to foreign attack. However, the press and politicians outside the White House made little effort to discuss root causes or to put the report in perspective. Press characterizations were even less restrained than the language of the report itself. For example, The Washington Post provided its influential readership this description of the report’s contents: “[The report] pictures the Nation moving in frightening course to the status of a second-class power. It shows an America exposed to an almost immediate threat from the missile-bristling Soviet Union. It finds America’s long-term prospect one of cataclysmic peril in the face of rocketing Soviet military might.” [2]

Hyping Sputnik and the Gaither Report was very much in the political interests of Democratic contenders for the presidency in 1960. Judging from what is now known about the missile numbers, Senator John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.) consistently mischaracterized the strategic trend lines. For example, in an October 1960 appearance on NBC’s Meet the Press, the Democratic nominee said,
“The Soviet Union made the great breakthrough in space and in missiles, and, therefore, they are going to be ahead of us in those very decisive weapons of war in the early 1960s.”[3]

In other cases, Kennedy could gain advantage merely by describing the new reality objectively because of its unpleasant shock value to the U.S. public, which was only beginning to absorb the full implications of living in the nuclear age. Thus, he could say without hyperbole in his Senate floor remarks of February 29, 1960, “For the first time since the War of 1812, foreign enemy forces potentially had become a direct and unmistakable threat to the continental United States, to our homes and to our people.”[4]

The fault in Kennedy’s argument was not so much the inaccurate characterization of the Soviet missile numbers, for the intelligence community had provided him with estimates it later revised downward on the basis of subsequent intelligence collection and analysis. A more serious flaw was that he implied that a new administration somehow could alter the fundamental reality of U.S. nuclear vulnerability, which was not the case. Moreover, his focus on simple side-by-side numerical comparisons was misplaced; the more important question was whether the U.S. ability to threaten devastating nuclear retaliation was really in jeopardy.

Congressional hearings provided an ideal platform for amplifying the general theme that the United States was falling behind in the missile race and that numerical inferiority in nuclear missiles would be a game-changer. During January 1959 hearings, Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), who was also to be a candidate in the following year’s Democratic presidential primary, pounced on Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy’s stated unwillingness “to try to match the Soviets missile for missile”: “Then as I understand it your position is that we are voluntarily passing over to the Russians production superiority in the ICBM missile field because we believe that our capacity to retaliate with other weapons is sufficient to permit them that advantage despite the great damage that we know we would suffer if they instigated an attack?”[5]

CIA projections of Soviet ICBM numbers had been falling from initial estimates in late 1957 of 100 by 1960. By early 1960, the CIA was predicting 36 by the end of the year, based on an “orderly” production rate, reaching 100 by mid-1961. The Air Force intelligence estimate for 1960, which was 500 in late 1957, remained higher than that of the CIA throughout this period.[6] The first Soviet ICBM actually went on “combat duty” in January 1960,[7] and only two had been deployed by the end of the year.[8] The first U.S. ICBM, the Atlas D, had achieved operational capability in September 1959.[9]

Soon after the Kennedy administration took office, the missile gap started officially to evanesce. In a February 1961 press backgrounder on U.S. defense programs, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara admitted that there were “no signs of a Soviet crash effort to build ICBMs” and concluded that “there is no missile gap today.”[10] By the end of 1961, it was clear and acknowledged officially that the United States, not the Soviet Union, held the lead in ICBMs and in most other categories of nuclear weapons as well.

It is impossible to know how much a more accurate U.S. assessment of the strategic balance in 1960 would have altered history. With the benefit of half a century’s hindsight, however, it is worth reflecting on the factors contributing to this monumental error and on the ways the public can be alert in avoiding serious threat inflation in the future.

Possible Versus Probable

During the missile gap debate, as with many threat debates since, there was confusion about the numbers being compared. For the most part, the missile gap misperception grew from an “apples and oranges” comparison. The intelligence community projected how many missiles the Soviets could deploy in the future, not how many they would be likely to deploy. This number was only an estimate, less certain than the number planned for U.S. forces over the same time frame. Moreover,
the projection for Soviet forces represented a worst-case estimate.

Only in January 1960 did the Department of Defense introduce into its estimates the notion of a probable rather than a possible outcome. In House Appropriations Committee hearings, Defense Secretary Thomas Gates emphasized the change: “Heretofore we have been giving you intelligence figures that dealt with theoretical Soviet capability. This is the first time that we have an intelligence estimate that says, ‘This is what the Soviet Union probably will do.’”[12] Even so, the growing potential gap forecast for the early 1960s described a circumstance in which all Soviet missile production resources would be focused on maximizing the number of deployed ICBMs. As it turned out, Moscow switched its focus to developing a newer type of ICBM, the SS-7, contributing to a slower rise in ICBM numbers. It also diverted significant resources from ICBMs into the production of SS-4 medium-range and SS-5 intermediate-range ballistic missiles. These shorter-range missiles could not reach the United States while based in the Soviet Union. Indeed, the later Soviet decision to base SS-4s in Cuba secretly was made in part to redress the overall strategic imbalance that Moscow accurately perceived as the Kennedy administration came into office.

The next decades of the Cold War featured many instances of U.S. actions premised on the worst-case interpretation of future Soviet force deployments. However prudent the inclusion of such estimates in executive branch strategic planning efforts, they regularly were interpreted by congressional overseers and the public at large as predictions of what was likely to happen. Throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, the United States overestimated Soviet antiballistic missile (ABM) capabilities. Fears in the 1960s that the strategic missile defense system protecting Moscow was the harbinger of a nationwide network turned out to be unfounded. The Reagan-era depictions of Soviet progress in developing exotic directed-energy weapons proved greatly exaggerated.[13]

The virulent impact of worst-case analysis continued into the post-Cold War era. The Rumsfeld Commission’s 1998 report on the foreign ballistic missile threat concluded that several emerging missile states could develop and deploy ICBMs within five years. The 1999 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the ballistic missile threat was less alarmist than Rumsfeld’s report and included “most likely” as well as “could” projections, but it still gave pride of place to the worst case, as evidenced in the first two bullets of the NIE’s Iran section:

• “Iran could test an ICBM that could deliver a several-hundred kilogram payload to many parts of the United States in the latter half of the next decade, using Russian technology and assistance.”

• “Iran could pursue a Taepo Dong-type ICBM and could test a Taepo Dong-1 or Taepo Dong-2-type ICBM, possibly with North Korean assistance, in the next few years.”[14]

Iran did not test either Taepo Dong system “in the next few years” and still has not tested an ICBM although “the latter half of the next decade” has come and gone. Furthermore, 13 years after the Rumsfeld Commission’s clarion call, no additional state has acquired ICBMs. Each of these predictions played a role in justifying a massive U.S. strategic missile defense effort and U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The financial costs have far exceeded $100 billion, and the opportunity costs for reducing strategic offensive arms have been considerable.[15]

Source Bias

When estimates provide a range of possibilities—entirely reasonable from an analytical standpoint—the highest (or lowest) numbers in the range can be emphasized for political reasons. Postmortems on the missile gap myth note that Air Force projections of future Soviet ICBM levels were consistently higher than those of the other services and that Kennedy “chose to believe the Air Force numbers rather than the information he received from Eisenhower administration officials in both open and closed hearings.”[16] It is difficult to reach definitive conclusions about the motives of the Air Force or of the Democratic presidential candidates who relied on Air Force estimates. Nevertheless, the Air Force derived institutional benefits from rendering inflated Soviet missile threat estimates, and the Democrats derived political benefits from relying on them. The synergism between these two fueled the public perception of a gap, which turned out to be bogus.
It is the nature of the intelligence assessment process that those rendering the expert judgments are often the commercial or bureaucratic entities that benefit from the most alarming projections being accepted as reality. To obtain the “best” technical assessments of foreign missile defense capabilities, the government often hires firms that could be the recipients of contracts to develop offensive countermeasures or to establish a parallel program of U.S. defensive interceptors. Technical assessments of foreign submarine capabilities logically might be performed by the makers of U.S. sonars or torpedoes. This does not mean these projections should be dismissed or that good alternative sources are available, but it does mean that source bias needs to be considered.

An additional source bias in the case of the missile gap and in many subsequent threat assessments is so obvious that it is often overlooked. Potential enemies usually have an incentive to exaggerate their capabilities. After the launch of Sputnik, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev bragged that his country’s factories “were turning out missiles like sausages” and greatly exaggerated the size and operational capabilities of the Soviet ICBM force.[17] Asked at the time by his son why he was doing so, he explained that “the number of missiles we had wasn’t so important…. The important thing was that Americans believed in our power.”[18] That potential U.S. opponents from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to Ali Khamenei’s Iran want to exaggerate their capabilities is logical, but the U.S. bias in considering such governments’ claims is to assume they are masking hidden capabilities.

Misunderstanding the Numbers

President Dwight Eisenhower commissioned the Gaither Report because he wanted a second opinion on options for improving early warning of a Soviet attack and, in the event of such an attack, reducing the vulnerability of the civilian population. Eisenhower and two consecutive defense secretaries in the latter half of his second term displayed a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the nuclear balance of terror than many of his critics who raised the alarm of an impending missile gap. U-2 reconnaissance flights over Russia were collecting information that undermined some of the worst-case projections. U.S. programs to build and deploy ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles were well underway. However, the president and other senior officials failed in effectively conveying the strategic realities of the nuclear age to the public. “Their attempts to dismiss the Sputnik launch as a ‘scientific bauble,’ intended to be reassuring, were seen in many quarters as an indication of presidential complacency (or worse).”[19] Eisenhower’s unwillingness to divulge the U-2 information “led to the impression that his reassurances were based on nothing at all.”[20] When Eisenhower’s defense secretaries sought to explain to Congress that missile-for-missile comparisons alone conveyed a misleading impression about the U.S.-Soviet balance, they were interpreted as admissions that the U.S. administration “had conceded a crucial strategic advantage to its adversary.”[21]

The tendency for politicians to simplify the complicated logic of nuclear issues for partisan purposes did not end with the disappearance of the original missile gap. At the very time when the U.S. lead in strategic warheads was widening dramatically as a result of accuracy improvements and the equipping of ICBMs with multiple, independently targetable re-entry vehicles, an opposite impression was being conveyed by arms control critics. Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson (D-Wash.), one of his party’s leading voices on defense issues, compared the size of U.S. and Russian ICBMs to the linemen of two competing football teams, implying that missile size was the only important metric of capability. As the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) yielded progress in capping the growth of strategic arsenals, SALT opponents made effective use of desktop ICBM models displaying U.S. (white) missile types and much larger Soviet (black) missile types side by side. The not-so-subtle message was that SALT had failed to prevent a new and ominous missile gap from arising. The impact was visceral; intellectual explanations of the significance of superior U.S. accuracy and warhead numbers and the invulnerability of U.S. ballistic missile submarines often fell on deaf ears.

Conclusion

It is tempting to dismiss the missile gap as a quaint artifact from an earlier time, an interesting historical example of the negative effect election politics can have on assessing threats. However, it also should be recognized as a phenomenon that has arisen repeatedly since the “cataclysmic peril” of the first missile gap quickly evaporated 50 years ago. During the three remaining decades of the Cold War, the United States often sought to close strategic gaps that the Soviet Union was perceived
to be opening, only to discover much later that Moscow had been struggling mightily merely to catch up with the technological advances and superior resources of the United States. The rise and fall of the missile gap myth is a cautionary tale, which should continue to inform efforts to achieve more realistic and sober appraisals of the threats faced today.

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ENDNOTES


20. Ibid., p. 3.

21. Ibid.

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