

**Excerpts on "Missile Gap" from
*General Comments on Senator Kennedy's
National Security Speeches (circa 1960)***

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Excerpted from Albert Wohlstetter, "Some General Comments on Senator [John F.] Kennedy's National Security Speeches," circa 1960, available from Hoover Institution Archives, Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter Papers, Writings, Box 148, Folder 10. Courtesy of the Wohlstetter Estate.

The defense speeches are, on the whole, sound. The sense of what Mr. Kennedy has to say on national defense can be improved in detail and conceptually (for example, the analysis of the so-called missile gap), but the principal problem they present is that there are inconsistencies between the national defense speeches and the speeches on disarmament.

Discussion:

The defense speeches on the whole are sound in emphasizing:

1. That there are serious deficiencies in our national defense posture both for central war and for theater warfare. (The emphasis on conventional forces for theater is especially good as is the emphasis on a second-strike capability for central war and the mention, however brief, of the need for active and passive defense of our cities.)

2. That the expenditure of several billion dollars a year more on national defense is necessary and can be made without great sacrifice.

3. That the purpose of our military policy (that is, our national defense) is peaceful.

4. That the likelihood of concluding an arms agreement with the Russians is increased by a strengthening of our military posture — "we arm to parley."

There are some inaccuracies and unclarities in the defense speeches themselves, and in particular there are several points at which their most important insights are lost. For example,

the missile gap speech in 1958 recognizes that retaliatory power depends on not just the number of offense vehicles on both sides but also the active and passive defenses of both sides. However, other parts of this speech and other speeches suggest that the problem is one of simply a disparity in the number of vehicles and is soluble completely by an increase in the number of our Polaris and Minutemen. The name "missile gap" itself was suggested by an anticipated difference between the number of missiles in our force and the number of missiles in the Russian force in the early 60's. There are several things that are wrong with the notion of missile gap, some of which are summarized in another attachment.

The Concept of the "Missile Gap"

The phrase "missile gap" came into use to express the anticipated difference between the number of missiles anticipated for the Russian force and the number programmed for our own in the early 60's. It is evident that the more rapid growth of the Russian missile force is connected with some of our defense troubles, but nonetheless the notion of missile gap has many deficiencies for the purposes of describing what that trouble is.

1. The missile gap is the result of a direct comparison between pre-attack forces of the Soviet Union and pre-attack forces of the United States. In this case, missile forces. Similar direct comparisons of pre-attack forces figured in earlier Congressional and Administration debates, for example, an earlier flurry about an expected gap between the number of Russian heavy bombers and American heavy bombers led to an increase in our B-52 program. The Congressional critics have, especially until very recently, compared pre-attack numbers of U.S. bombers with pre-attack numbers of Russian bombers or pre-attack numbers of U.S. missiles with Russian missiles, etc. The Administration answers at first consisted in simply broadening the basis of comparison, for example, to the total of pre-attack missiles, and bombers (medium and heavy), in the U.S. force with the analogous total in the Russian force.

2. Strictly speaking, neither the critics nor the administration respondents were in point when they matched pre-attack forces to demonstrate either that there was a deficiency or that there was

not. The problem so far as deterrence is concerned is to assure retaliation which, of course, is a matter of a second-strike capability, and it is possible for the victim of aggression to have a larger pre-attack force than the aggressor and little or nothing to strike back with after the aggression. This is so if his forces are sufficiently concentrated, soft, easy to target, lacking in penetration capability, etc. And on the other hand it is possible for the reverse to be true. In fact the administration program for the 60's is inadequate to assure deterrence, but an analysis that shows this has to be subtler than a mere matching of pre-attack capabilities for both sides. The administration in this last year changed its line of response to its critics, and instead of saying that while we would have fewer missiles we would have as many or more missiles as bombers in total, it said correctly that matching is irrelevant. And it asserted that there would be no "deterrence gap." There is nothing wrong with the logic of this last argument. It is simply factually in error. To demonstrate it requires an analysis of the interactions of Russian and U.S. forces assuming various reasonable strategies for both sides and considering warning and response time, the problems of command and control, and the cumulative problems of keeping a relatively accident-safe peacetime operation of the force, [and keeping] the capabilities to survive the opening blow, to decide on the transition from peace to war, and to penetrate active and passive defenses.

The gap concept simply ignores the complexity of the problem and was open to counter by the increased sophistication of the administration's response.

3. The adjective in "*missile gap*" suggests that the problem arrived with the advent of long-range ballistic missiles, and the noun "gap" suggests that it is a transient phenomenon. This is also suggested in the first item that we have to get successfully through the gap. In fact the problem of deterrence became a difficult one before the advent of the ballistic missile and stemmed basically from the failure to *protect* our strategic force as distinct from simply increasing it. (In fact viewing it as a problem of matching pre-strike forces encourages a continuance of this bad habit.) Finally, the gap notion, in suggesting that there is a trouble period of more or less definite short duration, is excessively cheery. A "gap" would seem by definition to have something solid on the other side. Unfortunately there is not. It will take continuing ingenuity and effort in light of changing technology to get a stable deterrent. In some respects, far from getting easier in the late 60's

as some people think, deterrence, though achievable and critically important, will get harder.

4. The near side as well as the far side of the gap raises problems which are best avoided. They are of two sorts. If the vulnerability should come close enough to make it hard to remedy in time, there would be valid security and policy questions in focusing on this near border of the gap. The second problem is related. In speeches which mention the exact year [the gap is to begin], one tends successfully to put off the date at which the gap is supposed to start. So the missile gap speech of 1958 said without qualification "the gap will begin in 1960." The Investment for Peace speech delivered in 1960 qualifies this by suggesting that the matter will "become critical in 1961, 1962 or 1963." For such reasons it seems more sensible to talk about a less precisely delimited period beginning with the time our actions can take effect and continuing indefinitely to require ingenuity and effort.