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MEMORANDUM

11-19-49
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TO: Hans Speier
FROM: Joseph Goldsen
SUBJECT: WAR SCARES AND COOL HEADS
COPIES TO: Staff and F. R. Collbohm (Washington Office)

1. Before Mr. Collbohm left Santa Monica yesterday, he asked me to put on paper a suggestion I made at a recent special Staff Conference. He wants you to discuss it with him when he arrives in Washington; he will tell you why.

2. As Soviet atomic capabilities increase there will be an increase in the frequency and intensity of war fears in the United States. It will be more difficult to discount war fears as "bluffs" and to sort out the significant likelihoods of war from the apparent rises in the cold-war temperature.

3. The planned calm which greeted Truman's announcement of September 23 is beginning to give way to a rising sense of danger. The first important public expression of imminence of attack was made by David Lilienthal in his plea to the NSRB for action on civil defense planning, as reported in The New York Times, November 18, 1949. The current issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists accuses the military services and federal officials of buck-passing the defense problem.

4. Up to now "war scare" tactics have been used by several government departments to gain Congressional and other support for appropriations and other legislation. If such tactics are used from now on, they will be interpreted less readily as a cry of "wolf, wolf"; but will generate increased non-military challenges about how and on what to spend the money. War scares, real or staged, will generate demands for more "defense" against atomic bombs aimed at continental U.S.

5. The question of best defense is moved out of the special technical domain of the military services and becomes an issue in public controversy. Even if the best defense (from a scientific standpoint) is a good offense, there will be strong reasons for diverting substantial resources to "defense."

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6. In these circumstances it becomes especially important that some groups -- such as the Air Force -- keep cool and not get sucked into following a line of least public resistance. In short, it is more necessary than ever to increase the accuracy of estimates of the probability of war.

7. Let us assume that the Russians are masters of the game of keeping us guessing about war probability. One objective of their recent peace offensive might have been to reduce U.S. military expenditures and to relax U.S. "interventionist" actions in Europe and Asia. They have had only partial success (e.g., China) but did not defeat the ECA extension, the North Atlantic Pact, Military Aid Program, and Military Appropriations Act.

8. Along came Truman's announcement. Soviet spokesmen have tried to fit this news into their peace offensive strategy; they have not used the incident to heighten the tension. Why? It could be that they are determined to avoid a shooting war for a considerable period ahead (which I believe is actually the case). At the same time they would like to see the capitalist world weakened for the "eventual" fight. They can now see England being banged against the economic rocks; they can see U.S. disillusionment over the long range accomplishments of the Marshall Plan; and they might see a way to lure the U.S. into an uproar over distribution of its defense dollar. The Navy-Air Force controversy is further kindling.

9. Some military officers might rely to an unfortunate extent on Vishinsky as an intelligence source. When he says "were it necessary" for Russia to stock-pile atomic bombs, "we should have as many as these as we should need -- no more and no less" -- someone might take him literally and without regard for the whole context.

10. Taking him literally might mean an ill-considered junking of present allocation plans and a stampede for defensive preparations against an imminent atomic attack that has a very low probability of happening. The Politburo may be resigned to the prospect of heavy U.S. military appropriations, but be highly satisfied with the way the appropriations are expended. The internal confusion which will arise in the U.S. after several false-alarms will add to the Politburo's satisfaction.

11. Certainly the Air Force, the JCS and the National Security Council contain many cross-checking safeguards and influences against the panic-prone. But the stakes are too high to take complete comfort in the probability that "reason" will prevail.

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12. When the Air Staff becomes convinced or disturbingly divided about a "crisis," it might welcome the reassurance obtained when an outside yet trusted source looks at the problem. The Air Force has such a source and resource in RAND.

13. When a "scare" comes up, the Air Staff might get (or be given) the idea of having RAND make an independent evaluation of the situation. A RAND task force -- a truly mixed team -- could, in a short period of time, look at the data on which the Air Staff bases its sense of crisis. Since RAND would not be out to "show up" anyone, the Air Staff might feel free to share its confidences with us and let us look at the evidence and judgments on which they are proceeding. Within a short time, certainly no more than a few weeks, RAND could present an analysis of Air Staff's Estimate of the Situation.

14. Such a service would be fulfilling RAND's contractual obligations in a most important sense. It would expose RAND to a more realistic "feel" for Air Force thinking. The need for this exposure is becoming increasingly clear as we grapple with our own problems of planning research programs.

Joe Goldsen
Joseph M. Goldsen

JMG/vg

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