

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Most Powerful Engine Of Cold War Argument: The Munich Analogy



The ubiquity of the Munich Analogy in Cold War argument is easily demonstrated. It is used by commentators of all political persuasions except perhaps Communists, and the conventional wisdom is that it swept all before it. In this paper I want to inspect a rare occurrence: an event where the analogy was effectively attacked, and the attackers

won a significant engagement, even though they lost the war.

The event to which I refer was the construction by the Truman Administration of a so-called blueprint for the Cold War, NSC 68, which was not just a single document but a series of constantly-revised documents best known for the version delivered to Truman in April 1950, not declassified until 1975.

The conventional wisdom has it that NSC 68 was a consensus product adopted with no great opposition. My contention is that it was not only bitterly disputed, but that the dispute was not fully resolved, so that the final document in the NSC 68 series, delivered to the Eisenhower Administration in January 1953, was a confused amalgam incorporating watered-down versions of both adversaries. The principals in the long-drawn-out drama of the NSC 68 series were: (1) for the alarmist position, depending on the Munich Analogy (that the Soviet Union was programmed to destroy the United States) Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze. (2) For the moderate position (that Stalin was not Hitler, that the Soviet Union did not want war but would expand wherever it found a soft spot) George Kennan and Charles 'Chip' Bohlen.

To those who boggle at my classification of Dean Acheson as an alarmist, or of Kennan as a moderate, let me assure you that these depictions are warranted. Acheson was pilloried by McCarthyites, hence many casual observers assume him to have been at least somewhat lukewarm about the Cold War. This is an error. As for Kennan, those who know him only as the anti-Soviet author of the "X" article, be assured that in the trenches of State Department warfare, Kennan fought against militarization of containment and did not believe the USSR was programmed to take over the world.

Use of analogies in public affairs argument is often attacked as irrational. Ernest May, in *Lessons of the Past*, believes use of some analogies causes many bad decisions. (May 1973). Since there is no scientific way of determining parallelism in two situations being analogized, the critic is dependent upon narrative/descriptive judgment, which judgment can never achieve the mechanical certainty of the syllogism.

One must begin an analysis of the application of the Munich analogy to Cold War argument by inspecting what happened at Munich, and why it was significant. Mine of course will be a bare-bones explanation; Telford Taylor's landmark book of 1,084 pages is definitive enough, but Taylor qualifies everything. (Taylor 1975). I can only hope that my simplifications are not misleading.

At the Munich Conference of 29 September 1938, Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain and Daladier settled the fate of the Czechoslovak Republic. Hitler had been agitating for cession of the Sudetenland, a border area at that time in Czechoslovakia but largely inhabited by ethnic Germans. It appeared to the British and French, who were guarantors of Czech independence, that if Hitler did not get the Sudetenland by agreement with the Western powers he would go to war. The British and French gave in, and Chamberlain returned to London claiming that he had gotten "peace in our time." Since all the Czech defenses were in the Sudeten area, Hitler simply moved in when he was ready and absorbed all of Czechoslovakia. The falsity of Hitler's promise that the Sudetenland would satisfy Germany's territorial ambitions soon proved false; the partition of Poland and World War II soon followed.

Most historians dealing with Munich believe that "giving in" to Hitler, or appeasement as it is called, was wrong. The well-armed Czechs had been ready and willing to fight; had they done so, they would have taken many a German Wehrmacht division out of action, making Hitler's conquest of the rest of Europe more difficult. This is a controversial judgment, but Hitler's plan for world conquest is not denied by anyone, and giving Hitler the Sudetenland did not appease his appetite one bit. A fair statement of the lesson of Munich might be "Appeasing aggressive dictators is useless; it only postpones the inevitable."

I move now to 1950. Soviet Russia had replaced Nazi Germany as a threat to the Western democracies. There were constant crises, in Iran, in Greece, in the Balkans, in Poland and the Soviet Satellites, in Berlin. These crises led to the Truman Doctrine (aid to Greece and Turkey), the Berlin Airlift, constant efforts to

establish democratic influence in Eastern Europe, the Marshall Plan, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Hostility toward the USSR increased steadily. In 1949, two events raised American anxiety to a high level: the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb before expected, and Mao Tse-tung's Communists defeated the Chinese Nationalists and established the People's Republic of China. The American response to these events was immediate. On 31 January 1950 Truman ordered the Atomic Energy Commission to pursue development of a hydrogen bomb to be 1,000 times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and he ordered the Secretaries of State and Defense to "undertake a reexamination of our objectives in peace and war and of the effect of these objectives on our strategic plans, in the light of the probable fission bomb capability and possible thermonuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union." (FRUS 1950 I:141). This was the mandate for what eventually became the NSC 68 series of documents calling for vastly increased military strength to contain and ultimately overthrow the Soviet Government.

As of 1 January 1950, George Kennan, who had headed the State Department Policy Planning Staff for two and a half years, yielded that position to Paul Nitze. Kennan's motivation for leaving was primarily the increasing militancy of the Administration. Kennan had strongly opposed developing a new generation of nuclear weapons; had opposed American plans to incorporate Germany in a military alliance; opposed the universalistic language of the Truman Doctrine speech; opposed continued American pretense that the rump Chinese Nationalist Government on Taiwan was the government of China; opposed American support of French determination to reassert colonial rule in Vietnam. In the vernacular, Kennan was a dove.

Even though Kennan gave up the Policy Planning Staff post, he retained the position of Counselor to the Department, a prestigious title that generally gave him access to Acheson. Before leaving on a tour of the much-neglected Latin American area in February, 1950,

Kennan wrote his version of a reexamination of American objectives and strategy. This was an eight-page memorandum dated 17 February, addressed to Acheson, though it never reached him. This document shows clearly .

The most significant aspect of Kennan's demarche is the absence of any variant of the Munich Analogy. He recognized the profound hostility of the Soviet Union to those countries it could not control, but there was no Hitlerian program for military conquest. The danger from Russia was political, and while in occasional

instances (Korea would be one) American arms would be necessary to convince the Soviets not to expand their empire, the basic American task Kennan phrased this way: *Because the Russian attack, ideologically speaking, was a global one, challenging the ultimate validity of the entire non-communist outlook on life, predicting its failure, and playing on the force of that prediction as a main device in the conduct of the cold war, it could be countered only by a movement on our part equally comprehensive, designed to prove the validity of liberal institutions, to confound the predictions of their failure, to prove that a society not beholden to Russian communism could still “work”. In this way, the task of combating communism became as broad as the whole great range of our responsibilities as a world power, and came to embrace all those things which would have had to be done anyway - even in the absence of a communist threat - to assure the preservation and advance of civilization. That Moscow might be refuted, it was necessary that something else should succeed. (FRUS 1950 I:160-67). After that overview, Kennan dealt with the contemporary development that seemed to many to validate the Munich Analogy:

There is little justification for the impression that the “cold war”, by virtue of events outside of our control, has suddenly taken some drastic turn to our disadvantage.

Recent events in the Far East have been the culmination of processes which have long been apparent. The implications of these processes were correctly analyzed, and their results reasonably accurately predicted, long ago by our advisors in this field. . . Mao’s protracted stay in Moscow is good evidence that our own experts were right not only in their analysis of the weakness of the [Chinese] National Government but also in their conviction that the Russians would have difficulty establishing the same sort of relationship with a successful Chinese Communist movement that they have established with some of their Eastern European satellites. [These Soviet difficulties] are not only *not* of our making but would actually be apt to be weakened by any attempts on our part to intervene directly.

. . .

The demonstration of an “atomic capability” on the part of the USSR likewise adds no new fundamental element to the picture. . . The idea of their threatening people with the H-bomb and bidding them “sign on the dotted line or else” is thus far solely of our own manufacture.

These, and other themes in Kennan’s valedictory were all directed to subvert the idea that Stalin was another Hitler, that the Soviets had a timetable for world

conquest, and that attempts to accommodate to their legitimate demands, such as the continued prohibition of German rearmament, were not appeasement. Because this Kennan agenda was so calm and unexciting, it does not appear in Cold War discourse. The Left, particularly, remembers only Kennan's attempt to convince Americans in the afterglow of World War II that Russia was not a democracy playing by our rules. Not one of Kennan's detractors can produce a policy agenda articulated in 1950 showing the foresight and realism of this 17 February memorandum.

While Kennan was writing this memorandum and traveling in Latin America, the task Truman assigned to the secretaries of State and Defense of examining our objectives and strategy was delegated to Paul Nitze, Kennan's successor as head of the DOS Policy Planning Staff. Nitze was a hard liner, a Cold Warrior par excellence, one of those who interpreted Stalin's election eve speech in 1946 as a declaration of war against the United States. Nitze had headed the United States Strategic Bombing Survey's analyses of the air war in Japan, and come up with two unusual conclusions, one wholly fraudulent, the other highly suspect. The most consequential conclusion to come from Nitze's pen was the claim that on the basis of "all the facts," the Japanese would have surrendered probably by 1 October 1945 even without the atom bombs, Russian entry in the war, or an invasion. When the USSBS documents became available on microfilm at the National Archives in early 1990, researchers found that Nitze had no facts at all for such a conclusion; the Japanese officials whose testimony he claimed to have based this conclusion on unanimously agreed that Japan would have fought on indefinitely without the atom and Soviet entry. (Newman 1995).

Nitze's other questionable conclusion bears on the efficacy of nuclear weapons also. Nothing happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki that could not have been achieved by a fleet of 210 B-29s dropping conventional explosives. "For instance, in Nagasaki, the railroads were back in operation forty-eight hours after the attack. Most of the rolling stock in the city had been destroyed, but the tracks suffered relatively minor damage." (Nitze 1989:42). As to people, even elementary shelter protected them from blast and radiation. Thus for Nitze, the Bomb was not the Absolute Weapon, just another big explosive.

Deprecating the atom did not mean Nitze was indifferent to the American nuclear arsenal; we should have any weapon, better and in greater quantity than the Soviet Union, and we should be prepared to use it to preempt a Soviet ground attack that could overrun Western Europe. Kennan thought a "no first use" pledge

was the most essential and basic principle of our nuclear policy; Nitze thought such a pledge would signal our allies and enemies that we were not serious about opposing Soviet expansion. Toward the end of the Truman Administration, when Nitze was under heavy attack from moderates (especially Charles "Chip" Bohlen) for painting the Soviet Union as a Hitlerite juggernaut dedicated to conquering the world, Nitze rather lamely claimed that he had never said Stalin had a "timetable" for conquest. (FRUS 1951 I:174). It is true that the word "timetable" does not appear in the Nitze-dominated output of the committee working on NSC 68 and its successors, but a fair reading of their scenarios for Armageddon shows a belief in inexorable Soviet aggression, which must be opposed by overwhelming counter-force everywhere.

Nitze's committee to reexamine American strategy worked through February and March 1950, presenting a document entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security" to the President as NSC 68 on 7 April. The table of contents of this scare-mongering document gives an overview of how Nitze and crew saw the world. There was a "Present World Crisis," "The Fundamental Purpose of the United States" was in "Underlying Conflict" with "The Fundamental Design of the Kremlin." "Soviet Intentions and Capabilities" were compared with "U.S. Intentions and Capabilities," and as to possible courses of action, there were four: "Continuation of Current Policies" which were wholly inadequate to stop the Soviet Juggernaut; "Isolation," which was beneath contempt; "War," which we might need to instigate, and the preferred course, "A Rapid Buildup of Political, Economic, and Military Strength in the Free World." (NSC 68 1993).

In the 1990s, it is easy to ridicule the overheated language in Nitze's document, but it is so extreme that even in 1950 clear-headed observers in the government knew and said that it was alarmist beyond reason. What else is one to say of rhetoric like this: "The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself.

They are issues which will not await our deliberations." Poor Nitze; he found himself still deliberating, three years later, how to convince a recalcitrant government to prepare immediately for the deluge. Sacred American texts were appealed to in this first version of NSC 68: the "more perfect union" can actually now be had, with a "firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our Fortunes, and our Sacred Honor."

Harry Truman, convinced as he was that the Soviet Union was a threat to the

United States, was not taken in by this doomsday talk. He did not adopt NSC 68; he chose to bury it with studies. On 12 April he wrote James Lay, Executive Secretary of NSC, "I have decided to refer the report to the National Security Council for consideration, with the request that the National Security Council provide me with further information on the implications of the conclusions contained therein. I am particularly anxious that the Council give me a clearer indication of the programs which are envisaged in the Report, including estimates of the probable costs of such programs." (FRUS 1950 I:235).

Truman was acutely aware of the inflationary pressures that developed after wars; he was conscious of the massive American debt from WWII, and he was determined to balance the federal budget. The corporations that had grown fat on defense contracts were to be put on a lean diet. Defense expenditures for 1945 had been 38% of gross national product; by 1949, Truman had them down to 5.1%, and for 1950, 4.6%. (Gaddis 1982:23). In 1949 he appointed Louis Johnson Secretary of Defense largely because Johnson saw a tight-fisted budget as an asset to his expected run for the presidency. On 4 May, 1950, *a month after* receiving NSC 68, Truman told a press conference "The defense budget next year will be smaller than it is this year." The gluttonous monster later christened "Military-Industrial Complex" by Dwight Eisenhower was in spring 1950 nowhere in sight.

So in April 1950 the first version of NSC 68 was without presidential approval, without appropriation requests for its ambitious "rapid buildup of strength," a sitting duck likely to be nibbled to death by congressional committees and executive department budget balancers.

Had there been no Korean War; had Stalin not acceded, however reluctantly, to Kim Il-sung's determination to take over South Korea; NSC 68 would never have gotten beyond the stage of a bad Halloween spook. All during the process of writing and rewriting, critical comments were plentiful and cogent; important officials such as Bohlen, Llewellyn Thompson, Philip Jessup, several Bureau of the Budget officials, Willard Thorp, and a half-dozen lower-level people panned it. A draft of an annex purporting to set forth "A Strategy of freedom" brought scathing criticism from American diplomatic officials on duty in Europe. The prize must go to William F. Schaub of the Budget Bureau, who pointed out the hypocrisy of calling the American-led camp a group of democracies, morally superior to the Soviet collection of authoritarians. The Indochinese were not in a democracy, nor were the Filipinos. (FRUS 1950 I).

In most organizations, such dissent would demand powerful rebuttal. In academia, such a devastating attack on a dissertation would send the candidate back to the drawing boards. In business, a board of directors hearing so profound a list of deficiencies would have taken a charge against profits and brought in a new manager. But this was government; Nitze was the boss' favorite. Secrecy was tight. There were no immediate changes, but the problems eventually overtook Nitze's rhetoric.

Korea convinced many doubters that the Soviet Union would resort to arms to whittle away at non-Communist areas. Nitze's group continued to reexamine U.S. objectives and strategies, moving from NSC 68 to NSC 114 to NSC 135. In 1951, Acheson brought Chip Bohlen home from Paris, to be Department Counselor. In this capacity, Bohlen gradually took over from Nitze leadership in updating the national security policy. One of Bohlen's first steps was a letter to Nitze 28 July 1951 complaining that the current version of NSC 68 perpetuated the old view of the Soviet Union as "a mechanical chess player, engaged in the execution of a design fully prepared in advance with the ultimate goal of world domination. The phrase 'world domination' is a misleading truth and tends to become related to the phenomenon of Hitler . . . a false assumption of Soviet intention in this field may lead to a very radical conclusion which is found in paragraph seven. This paragraph states flatly that if this alleged aim of the Kremlin, i.e., to disrupt Western armament, cannot be done by the soft method, then there is a strong possibility that the Soviets will resort to preventive war."(FRUS 1951 I:107). From then on to the end of the Truman administration, Bohlen fought Nitze to a draw, so that the final drafts of the NSC 68 series, now numbered NSC 135, waffled on the matter of Soviet intentions and hence on the applicability of the Munich syndrome. For the final draft, Bohlen and Nitze worked out language that both could live with, since both points of view were included, however contradictory. This draft was one that Kennan could probably have lived with.

The conventional view, one supported by Nitze himself, is that NSC 68 sailed through all obstacles after Korea and heavily influenced American policy toward the Soviet at least until the time of détente. Much of this is false; the original did not "sail through"; Nitze himself acknowledged at the time what he now denies in his memoirs. On 14 July, 1952, Nitze wrote his superior, Deputy Undersecretary Matthews, complaining about the latest drafts:

1. I believe the new papers [NSC 135] tend to underestimate the risks which this country faces.

2. I believe they tend to underestimate U.S. capabilities.
3. I believe they hold forth inadequate goals for U.S. policy.
4. I believe they offer an inadequate strategy.
5. I believe they give inadequate, unclear, or mistaken guidance to those who must prepare specific national security programs.(FRUS 1952-1954 II:58-59).

In addition, Nitze wrote, "one of the difficulties is that they are internally inconsistent and that it is not entirely clear what they are trying to say." Two and a half years of battle, and Nitze himself thinks his efforts have been in vain.

That is not how the conventional wisdom has it. According to Steven L. Rearden, Nitze's hagiographer, Nitze's "creative and enduring accomplishment" in producing NSC 68 was unique: "Never again would Nitze - or anyone else for that matter - be in such a key position to guide the development of a study that had as dramatic an impact on the nation's destiny."(Rearden 1984:33-34). We cannot know what influence NSC 68 - in its original, pistol-whipping exuberance - had on U.S. policy. Had it not been for Korea, the answer would be "none."

But NSC 68's apocalyptic view of the Soviet challenge served anti-Soviet hard-liners much as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion serve anti-Semites. The analogy with Hitler and his plan for world conquest dominated men's minds, even as its purveyors lost the argumentative struggle within the government.

Kennan and Bohlen were voices of reason, out-shouted for a while by fanatics, but they saw the situation clearly and say it whole. Acheson and Nitze, peering through their Chicken Little lenses, saw only what they took to be the beginning of the Soviet plan to take over the world.

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