March 16 marks the 50th anniversary of Defense Secretary Thomas S. Gates Jr.’s notable testimony to the Senate Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee attempting to dismiss a much ballyhooed “missile gap” with respect to the Soviet Union. Secretary Gates bluntly asserted that the United States had and would maintain nuclear destructive power several times greater than that of the Soviets. Many refused to believe him, fueling one of the most contentious and powerful issues of the 1960 presidential campaign. The controversy offers a useful case study concerning the difficulties of constructing strategic intelligence, the dangers of politicizing a defense issue and the potential for overreaction when a threat is wrongly perceived.

Underlying Cold War angst exploded to near panic in 1957 when the Soviets launched the diminutive Sputnik 1 satellite into planetary orbit. The United States was en route to such an accomplishment, but the Soviets beat us to it. Critics soon raged at American unpreparedness, the defense budget, the American educational system and national lassitude amid a culture of indulgence. If the Soviets had one multistage missile capable of putting such a payload into orbit, they might well have dozens capable of launching nuclear weapons across transoceanic distances.

The U.S. Air Force asserted that the Soviets almost certainly had hundreds of such intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), citing Soviet macroeconomic capabilities and the vast swatches of Siberia wherein they were probably hidden. The Air Force’s alarm happily coincided with a determined push to expand the Air Force budget.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was happy enough to let inflated views of his country’s capabilities stand. If rivals thought the Soviet Union could turn out ICBMs like sausages, so much the better. Soviet ICBM development made a virtue of necessity. American bases surrounding the Soviet Union put it within easy range of bombers and medium-range missiles. The Soviets had no such easy access into the American heartland. Only an ICBM had much hope of penetrating layers of American defenses at transoceanic ranges.

How many ICBMs did the Soviets actually have at the time? The answer seems to be fewer than five. They also had perhaps 100 nuclear-capable bombers capable of ranging the United States, although these were poorly based and hugely vulnerable to interception. In comparison, the United States had 600 nuclear-capable bombers with access to bases well forward, and perhaps 150 nuclear-capable medium-range missiles within range of Soviet cities. One text asserts that the United States had a stockpile of 5,500 nuclear munitions, whereas the Soviets had 600. President Dwight D. Eisenhower mused that the United States had more to fear from atmospheric fallout from its own weapons than from Soviet nuclear strikes.

How did the missile gap come to be so overblown? Part of the explanation is an understandable tendency to assume the worst when facing a dangerous opponent. Whatever their capabilities to strike at North America, the Soviets could inflict huge damages on American interests in Europe and Asia. They were secretive and opaque, and altogether willing to exploit the mystique of their own prowess. American fears and Soviet opportunism complemented each other.

American fears also played to domestic politics. For years the Republicans had painted the Democrats as “soft” on defense, as having “lost” China, as outmaneuvered by the Soviets and, perhaps, as a little “pink.” Republican President Eisenhower’s New Look, however, had dramatically tightened the defense budget. Now the Democrats chose to point out military softness of another sort. Republican austerity, as the story line went, had gutted conven-
tional forces and then allowed the nuclear forces upon which their strategy depended to fall behind as well. No one pursued this critique more capably than presidential candidate John F. Kennedy. Defense reform was a crucial plank in his campaign for the White House. In this, he was abetted by corporations and agencies most likely to benefit from the reforms being proposed. This undoubtedly contributed to President Eisenhower’s dark comments concerning a “military-industrial complex” as he left office.

Secretary Gates’ testimony occurred within the context of these charged and partisan political circumstances. It is no surprise that some interpreted his motives and reliability differently from others.

The consequences of the Sputnik launch and the perceived missile gap extended beyond the politics of the 1960 presidential campaign. Some were salutary. Few would argue, for example, with the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which substantially enriched the study of mathematics and science from elementary school through college. A bit of paranoia accompanied this educational advance: Americans of a certain age may remember rehearsing for nuclear attack in grade school, backyard fallout shelters and doomsday scenarios. The Soviets may have become a little paranoid, too. Rhetoric so far exceeded reality that some of them thought we were fabricating the case for a preemptive strike. Indeed, the Cuban Missile Crisis can be interpreted as a Soviet attempt to partially redress their huge strategic imbalance before it was too late.

Ironically, the man who ultimately killed the myth of a missile gap was President Kennedy’s methodical Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara. This left the President a little red-faced, but he was already President. Developing good strategic intelligence is hard to do. It becomes even harder when information is refracted through the prism of domestic politics and vested interests. Bad intelligence ripples through the psyches of decision makers and the public alike. It can—and often does—lead to bad decisions and unintended consequences.

With respect to the U.S. Army, the institutional shake-up to resolve a problem that did not exist took it out of space for a generation. The Army had pioneered in missile development, building the first reliable multistage rockets and prototypes of the missiles that actually took us into space. The inspiring ethos was that of engineers, artillerymen and the Manhattan Project, solving ever greater technical problems to achieve ever greater range and accuracy. Orbital flight was on the horizon, as were space stations and a trip to the moon. The missile program benefited immensely from German scientists the Army had policed up after World War II, and from a stable of other remarkable scientists and technicians who had joined the effort over time. One wonders what might have happened, and how much sooner, if these programs had been left on track. A late-1950s defense shuffle divided Army space programs between a newly organized civilian National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Air Force. Inevitably, time and traction were lost in making the switch, along with a great deal of money. NASA ultimately matured into a good idea, but one might reasonably debate whether strategic missiles are better off in a military service dominated by pilots. The Soviets, for example, arrived at a different solution.

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