

## John Kennedy compares US and Soviet military power, 1953

### Introduction

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On October 16, 1953, Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy spoke at an executive meeting of the American Legion at the organization's national headquarters in Indianapolis, Indiana. Addressing members of the United States' largest veterans service organization, Kennedy criticized Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower's defense policy, pointing to the weakness of the American Air Force in comparison to the Soviets'. Kennedy argued for a "defense effort more in keeping with the perils of our time" and advocated for developing "a Strategic Air Force with sufficient retaliatory powers to threaten a potential aggressor with havoc and ruin." Appealing to the crowd of veterans, Kennedy asserted that the United States should not "be satisfied with anything less than an Air Force second to none. Today we do not have it."

### Excerpt

First, that while we should not neglect our continental and civil defense systems at present, it can be assumed that an attacking force if equipped with atomic and hydrogen bombs could bring about widespread destruction and possibly speedy victory.

Secondly, we can be sure that the Soviets today are making a maximum effort to improve their capabilities, in both air power and atomic and hydrogen weapons.

Thirdly, in view of these facts it appears obvious that the United States has no alternative than to give priority to the development of a Strategic Air Force with sufficient retaliatory powers to threaten a potential aggressor with havoc and ruin.

Fourthly, I do not believe that the present program of air power expansion gives us such an Air Force. Our present effort should be judged not in comparison with what we have done in the past but rather with what the Soviets are now doing today. If we do this, we cannot help but be alarmed by our present progress.

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### Questions for Discussion

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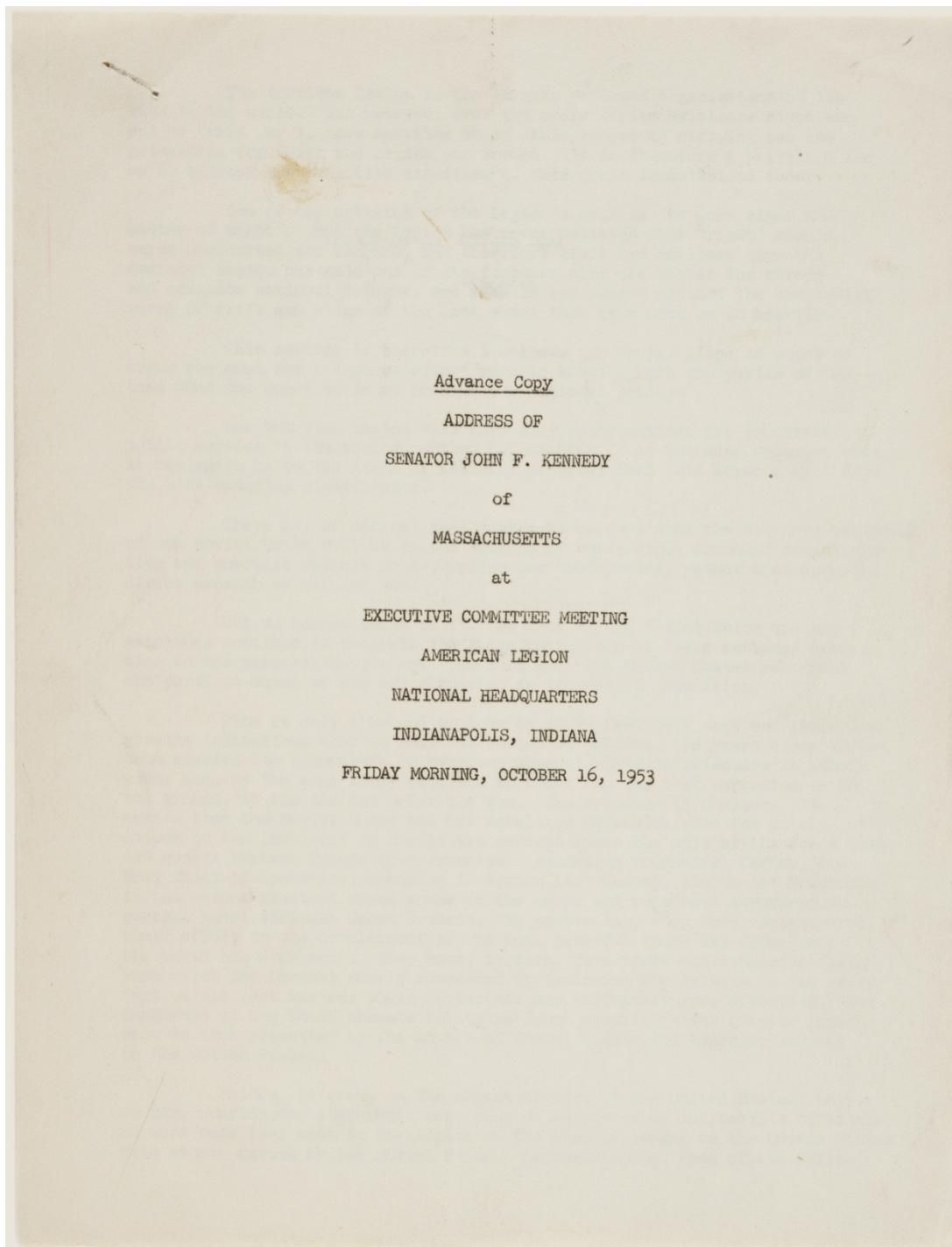
Read the document introduction and the excerpt. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Why is Kennedy concerned? Who does he blame for his concerns?
2. According to JFK, what will be the responsibility of the Air Force?
3. Some have referred to this as an expression of the theory of the “balance of terror.” What did they mean by that phrase?

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### Image

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Address of Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts at Executive Committee Meeting, ca. October 16, 1953. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC05313)



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The American Legion is the largest veterans organization of its kind in the world. Its members, over the years of its existence since the end of World War I, have compiled an enviable record in carrying out the principles for which the legion was formed. It is therefore a privilege for me to address the executive committee of this great organization today.

One of the articles of the Legion's oath is "to make right the master of might". But the Legion has never believed that "right" should march unescorted and unarmed, <sup>in a difficult and dangerous world</sup> and therefore since its earliest days the American Legion has made one of its foremost aims the battle for strong and adequate national defense, and <sup>in so doing</sup> it has fought against the successive waves of drift and slide of the last years that have cost us so heavily.

This meeting is therefore I believe the proper place in which to argue the need for a defense effort more in keeping with the perils of the time than the one that is at present our national policy.

The American Legion will have many opportunities for important public service in the coming months, but already it is becoming apparent that it may again be in the field of national security that this service will have its most enduring significance.

There is, of course, good reason to believe that the ultimate reliance of the Soviet Union will be on the weapons of subversion, economic disintegration and guerilla warfare to accomplish our destruction, rather than upon the direct assault of all out war.

But we cannot count on it. So long as the Soviet Union and her satellites continue to dedicate the large percentage of their national production to the preparation for war - so long must the United States recognize the peril to which we are now subjected in increasing quantities.

Time is only a friend so long as it is favorably used and there are growing indications that in many categories of defense, the years since Korea have enabled the communists to overcome some of their deficiencies in atomic power and, at the same time, continue to widen the gap that separates us on the ground, in the air and under the sea. The evidence is obvious. The armies that the Soviet Union and her satellites have available for an all out attack on the Continent of Europe are several times the size of the force that now guards Western Europe from invasion. According to Admiral Carney, the Navy Chief of Operation, speaking in Boston last Monday, the Soviet Union now is the second greatest naval power in the world and they have surpassed in general naval strength Great Britain. In particular, they have concentrated their effort in the development of the most powerful under sea fleet that the world has ever seen. They have, in fact, five times the submarine fleet with which the Germans nearly succeeded in isolating the British in the early days of the last war and their submarines are infinitely more effective. But dangerous as are these threats to our national security - far greater importance is that presented by the menace of Soviet atomic and hydrogen weapons to the United States.

Seldom, if ever, in the recent history of the United States, have so many conflicting statements been made on any issue by responsible officials as were made last week in Washington on the present danger to the United States from atomic attack by the Soviet Union. Arthur Fleming, head of the Office



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of Defense Mobilization, stated that "the Soviet Union is capable of delivering the most destructive weapon ever devised by man on chosen targets in the United States". Mr. Wilson, the Secretary of Defense, stated that he "would doubt a little" that the Soviets have "bombs ready to drop and airplanes to drop them". He stated further that we could only spend a little over five hundred millions of dollars without "upsetting our fundamental defense program". W. Sterling Cole, Chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, called on the other hand for an expenditure of ten billion dollars a year for air defense.

President Eisenhower attempted to resolve the conflict by saying that "the Soviets now have the capability of atomic attack on us, and such capability will increase with the passage of time". All of these statements, in spite of their being contradictory in emphasis, furnished clear evidence for all to see that the United States was about to enter the most critical period in our long history. The time is rapidly approaching when the Soviet Union will have the long range planes to carry to the United States the weapon capable of infinite destruction. And the traditional advantages that the initial attack has always given the aggressor will be multiplied a thousand-fold by the destructiveness of atomic fire power.

This dire threat to our survival poses a difficult and strategic problem. Recognizing that this threat may exist for years and that our economic resources are not unlimited, those responsible for our security must determine whether we should rely for our safety on an elaborate system of continental defense, combined with a reasonably powerful strategic air force of our own, or whether recognizing that even under optimum conditions there is only a limited security possible in a maginot line around the United States, we should concentrate all of our ability on a strategic air force containing such retaliatory powers that the Soviets will be impelled to hold their hand.

At the present time, unfortunately, we are doing neither. Our continental defenses are insecure and our Air Force has suffered heavily from successive stretch-outs.

In the fall of 1951, the joint Chiefs of Staff recognizing the decisive nature of atomic weapons broke the compromise between the three services which had made the equal distribution of funds. It was determined in view of the Soviet effort and capabilities by 1954 that a minimum goal for our security for that year would be 143 air groups. The targets for the Army and Navy meanwhile remained the same. Although the stretch-out of 1952 ordered by President Truman, which would have provided 138 wings by June 1955 lessened the impact of this decision on Air Force strength, the primacy of the air weapons was still recognized. The Truman budget of 1953 called for an expenditure of over sixteen billion dollars for air and eleven billion for Army and Navy respectively. When the smoke of congressional battle cleared last July, however, six months later, five billion had been taken from the Air Force, a billion from the Navy and over a billion added to the Army. This was a return to the balanced force concept with vengeance. This was a wring-out rather than a stretch-out of air force strength. The preliminary budgets released for next year for the Defense Department, prepared by the new Joint Chiefs of Staff, were, therefore, most disappointing. In the words of the NEW YORK TIMES, "They were seen as furthering to a large degree the return of the principle of balanced forces that existed before the Korean War." The result will be that the United States will not possess more than 115 wings by June 1954 instead of 143, not more than 120 wings by June 1955, not more than 127 by June 1956.



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I do not believe that this balanced concept takes into account the decisive nature of atomic and hydrogen weapons.

The Kelly report made at the request of the Department of Defense estimated that if a major portion of atomic bombs were properly placed, ~~an~~ attack would result in destruction of at least one-third of our industrial capacity and would kill over thirteen million of our people.

This study also warned that our capabilities to stop attacking bombers would run from a high of 20% under perfect conditions to a fraction if conditions were adverse.

These statistics were made even more sombre by a statement of Congressman Cole, this week when he warned us that "given the passage of enough time, which need not be great, and a research and production program of sufficient vigor, I fear that the Soviets may come to possess, not five or ten of these weapons, but hundreds or even thousands".

The Soviet while developing a basic well rounded military strength has concentrated since the end of World War II in building the world's largest Air Force.

The Red Air Force contains over 20,000 planes - by the summer of 1954 it has been estimated that they will have this number of jets alone, while a good portion of our present Air Force strength of 95 wings is made up of propeller driven planes or jets that are obsolete.

The Russians have a medium bomber based on our B-29 capable of flying one way missions to the United States. They are producing a heavy turbo-prop bomber comparable to the B-36. They have sufficient jet light bombers to have provided over one hundred to the Chinese Communist Air Force which, as a result of the Soviet contribution, is now the fourth largest Air Force in the world. They have numerous four jet light bombers equivalent to our B-45 stationed in Eastern Europe capable of attacking with lightning speed any point in Western Europe. They will soon produce a plane similar to our B-47 according to the Secretary of the Air Force and there are reports of a new larger bomber under development akin to our B-52. These planes, of course, are supported by thousands of MIG 15's. Even more illuminating as to relative air strength are these words from a recent article based upon a report by Robert H. Orr, who was the Fifth Air Force Chief of Combat Operation in Korea. I quote:

"During the last year of the Korean War the U. S. Fifth Air Force operated sixteen wings in support of the fighting. The Force was made up as follows: Three medium-bomber wings (All B-29's) detached from the Strategic Air Command; Two fighter-interceptor wings (F-86's); five fighter-bomber wings (F-84's and F-80's); two light-bomber wings (World War II propeller-driven B-26's); one reconnaissance wing (F-80's and B-26's); and three over-sized troop-carrier wings (using a variety of transports and cargo carriers)... at the time they were committed, these wings represented all but a small fraction of the Air Force's (Most modern) ready fighter-interceptor strength; all but two wings of its ready fighter-bomber strength; and all that the Strategic Air Command was prepared to spare from its ready resources (not including B-36's and, of course, the B-47 jets, which did not enter SAC units until last spring."



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"It has been likewise estimated that the Soviet interceptor input into the Korean War, including those lost and the 1,500 MIG's still incorporated in the CCAF, must have been on the order of 3,900 and was probably higher. That number would equip fifty-two USAF interceptor wings, or almost twice as many as were proposed for the 143 wing program".

This is a large equity in a marginal war and demonstrates clearly the extent of the over-all Soviet investment in air power.

I believe, therefore, that we are justified in making certain obvious conclusions.

First, that while we should not neglect our continental and civil defense systems at present, it can be assumed that an attacking force if equipped with atomic and hydrogen bombs could bring about widespread destruction and possibly speedy victory.

Secondly, we can be sure that the Soviets today are making a maximum effort to improve their capabilities in both air power and atomic and hydrogen weapons.

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I do not see how a country which is productively the most powerful in the world with its people enjoying the highest standard of living in our history can be satisfied with anything less than an Air Force second to none. Today we do not have it.



