

Eisenhower Pushes Operation Candor

By Stewart Alsop



THERE is a simple, deeply significant reason why President Eisenhower has courageously decided that it is time to trust the people with the hard facts of the national situation. The background story of "Operation Candor"—the admirable plan for a series of candid reports to the Nation by the President and Administration leaders—goes back to midsummer.

At this time a speech on the threat to this country of the growing Soviet air-atomic power had been prepared, on an experimental basis, for the President. Eisenhower had been strongly urged to make a frank statement on this subject by some of his advisers—and he had been as strongly urged not to by others. Without making up his mind one way or the other, the President asked that such a speech be drafted for him, so that he could see how it would look on paper.

He took the draft with him on his vacation, and began working it over in longhand, as is his custom, covering about a third of it with revisions and interlineations. But he still had not decided to go ahead with the speech. Then, on August 12, came the news of the explosion of the Soviet hydrogen bomb.

This event deeply moved and impressed the President. As detailed analyses of the air samples of the Soviet hydrogen test became available, moreover, he became more and more impressed by the terrible significance of the event. Here a certain caution is necessary, since certain secret technical matters are involved.

YET IT can be said that these analyses had a simple, nontechnical meaning which was all too clear to the President. For they dispelled, once and for all, any lingering notion that the Soviet physicists and weapons specialists were inferior imitators. They also exploded the hopeful theory that the Russians would never have made progress in the nuclear art had it not been for Fuchs, Pontecorvo, and the little band of traitors. The Soviet hydrogen test proved, in short, that the Soviet specialists are brilliant experimenters in their own right.

The more he thought about these facts, the more President Eisenhower became convinced that the people had a right to understand the danger which confronted the Nation, and that he had a duty to help them understand. He sent the speech he had been writing back to the White House, with instructions to "carry on from there." Subsequently, he approved plans for extending "Operation Candor" into a whole series of reports on one aspect or another of the national peril, by other Administration leaders as well as himself.

The series on "The Safety of the Republic" which has grown out of this presidential decision is still strongly opposed by powerful quarters within the Administration. The opposition comes largely from the economizers, who fear that there will be a bad political reaction if the Administration cuts defense expenditures while the people are being told the truth. "Operation Candor" may therefore be fudged in the end, or even abandoned. But the facts which so deeply impressed the President remain.

Many people (including former President Truman) have taken comfort from the thought that the intelligence services were overestimating Soviet capabilities. The Pentagon particularly, these people argue, tend to inflate estimates of Soviet power, in order to justify its own huge expenditures. Unfortunately, the facts have in every case proven that the intelligence has greatly underestimated Soviet capabilities.

WHEN the first Soviet jet fighter appeared in the Russian skies in the late forties, our air specialists comforted themselves with the thought that this was probably only a "propaganda prototype," and that at any rate the Soviets could not achieve mass production of this type of aircraft. Their eyes were opened in Korea, where the Russians gave the Chinese enough MIG 15s to outnumber our own jet fighter force by seven to one, while maintaining a crushing air superiority in Europe.

The first Soviet atomic bomb, tested years before the intelligence experts had forecast, was another unpleasant eye-opener, and there have been others. Now comes the Soviet hydrogen bomb, which was not only tested before the intelligence expected, but which is also deeply disquieting for the technical reasons referred to above.

Surely it is now time to realize that we are in a race for simple survival, and that our competitors in the race are technically our equals and in some respects perhaps our superiors. The race will surely be lost if we continue to entertain the elusion that our rivals are ignoramuses tied to "an oxcart economy," and incapable of original experiments.

Editor's note: Joseph Alsop is flying to the Far East, and will shortly be reporting on the situation in Asia.

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