The Admirals' Revolt of 1949: Lessons for Today

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"A soldier should be sworn to the patient endurance of hardships, like the ancient knights; and it is not the least of these necessary hardships to have to serve with sailors."

—Bernard Montgomery

The supercarrier/B-36 controversy of 1949 was ostensibly a struggle between the Navy and the Air Force over funding priorities. At the controversy's most basic level, the two services disagreed over the division of the defense budget. The Navy wanted the largest share of the defense dollar in order to build more aircraft carriers—specifically supercarriers—capable of launching large multi-engine aircraft. The Air Force, in turn, argued that it should receive the largest slice of the defense pie in order to expand to 70 combat groups. In the struggle that followed, Defense Secretary Louis Johnson seemingly sided with the Air Force and ordered the cancellation of the Navy's new supercarrier.

In the aftermath of the cancellation, a number of rumors circulated that cast considerable aspersions on the characters of Johnson, Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington, and Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg. These rumors alleged corruption in the procurement contract with Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Corporation for its new bomber, the B-36. Carl Vinson, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, scheduled hearings to examine the matter.

Those hearings, held in August 1949, proved conclusively that corruption was not involved in the B-36 contract, and the issue thus appeared to be settled. But the Navy insisted upon further hearings to examine the broader issues of national defense strategy and the conduct of a future war.

The result of this second round of hearings, also chaired by Carl Vinson, were less sensational, though no less important. Naval leaders disputed the overall defense strategy of the United States. They characterized contemporary war plans as being dominated by Air Force thinking that envisioned an "atomic blitz" by long-range bombers. The Navy's role in these war plans was its traditional one of coastal defense and control of the sea lanes. In the new atomic age, however, this role entailed a decidedly inferior status. The Navy wanted supercarriers so it too could participate in the atomic offensive. In other words, it did not reject the nuclear strategy, but rather demanded the right to play a greater role in that strategy. The cancellation of the supercarrier indicated to naval leaders a conspiracy to deny them such a mission. In the hearings of October they offered a new definition of naval strategy.

The Revolt of the Admirals, as the confrontation has often been called, was far more than a mere budgetary squabble. Naval leaders saw their very future at stake. In an effort to make their voice heard, they engineered a scandal to gain public awareness of their plight. Although many questioned this tactic, the Navy achieved its ultimate goal: heightened awareness of the Navy's predicament and a gradual reorientation of military strategy.

This article examines the war planning and budgetary constraints that culminated in the revolt. The incident also implies wider questions of professionalism and civilian control of the military. These last two subjects are of special interest. Although the supercarrier/B-36 controversy has been written about before, it has been addressed in considerably shaded hindsight: the Navy's mission was transformed; therefore, the seamen must have been right. This article, based largely on primary sources hitherto unused, will examine the Navy's methods and the implications of those methods.

Roles and Missions

The roots of the supercarrier/B-36 controversy reach back to the end of World War II, when demobilization and fiscal stringency caused all the services to reexamine their purposes. The term "roles and missions" raised far more than a question of doctrine—at stake was the lifeblood of the military services. The breathtakingly rapid demobilization after the war left all the

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services devastated. The Army Air Forces, for example, went from a strength of 2,253,000 on V-J Day to 303,000 at the end of May 1947. The aircraft situation was equally grim, with the number of combat-ready groups falling from 218 to *two* by December 1946.[1] To make matters worse, little order or logic was used in returning the warriors to mufti. The primary and overriding concern of the American people was to "bring the boys home." Those who had served the longest, and were therefore the most experienced, were the first to obtain discharges.

In addition, the nation was weary of wartime rationing and shortages, and President Truman knew he must dramatically curtail military spending and shift priorities to the domestic scene. Despite already disturbing events in Eastern Europe, the euphoria of peace was such that Americans could not be induced to continue tightening their belts.

In this climate, the services clamored for funds to maintain their combat capability. This period is often depicted as a time of selfish, childish parochialism orchestrated by a group of uniformed Colonel Blimps, but such an indictment is far too harsh. These men were self-confident and accomplished professionals; they had not risen to the top during the war by being passive and pliable. They sincerely believed that they were right and that the desires of their service were in the best interests of the country. It was assumed that unification of the services would clearly delineate roles and missions, but such was not the case. The National Security Act of 1947 had made only broad and vague references to these matters. The issue causing the greatest controversy was the Navy's "private air force." Army Chief of Staff General Omar Bradley and his Air Force counterpart, Hoyt Vandenberg, maintained that large Navy and Marine air forces were an unnecessary and wasteful duplication of effort, and they pushed to have them reduced.

In an effort to resolve this disagreement, Defense Secretary James Forrestal gathered his Chiefs at Key West, Florida, in March 1948 to effect a compromise. A result of these meetings was a statement of "primary" and "collateral" service functions. A primary function was one in which a particular service had a clear-cut responsibility; in a collateral function, a service supported and supplemented the service that was primary in that area.[2] Forrestal realized that overlap was inevitable—some missions simply defied neat categorization—but he tried to make it clear that a service claiming collateral responsibility for a given mission could not use such a claim as a basis for establishing an additional force requirement. In other words, when a service was preparing its budget and force composition, it would plan on the basis of its primary responsibilities; if these were adequately covered and there were forces or funds remaining, they could then be allotted to collateral functions. Who would determine if the primary responsibilities were adequately met? The JCS. If the Joint Chiefs were unable to agree, then the matter would be decided by the Secretary of Defense.[3]

At Key West the JCS assigned 12 primary functions to the Navy; unfortunately, the wording in several of them was sufficiently vague to perpetuate, not resolve, the problems. These included,

• "To establish and maintain local superiority (including air) in an area of naval operations."

• "To conduct air operations as necessary for the accomplishment of objectives in a naval campaign."

The primary functions assigned to the Air Force included,

• "To gain and maintain general air superiority."

• "To defeat enemy air forces."

• "To be responsible for strategic air warfare."

This last term was then supplied with a definition:[4]

> Strategic Air Warfare—Air combat and supporting operations designed to effect, through the systematic application of force to a selected series of vital targets, the progressive destruction and disintegration of the enemy's war-making capacity to a point where he no longer retains the ability or the will to wage war. Vital targets may include key manufacturing systems, sources of raw material, critical material, stockpiles, power systems, transportation systems, communications facilities, concentrations of uncommitted elements of enemy armed forces, key agricultural areas, and other such target systems.

But what was "an area of naval operations," and which air operations were necessary "for the accomplishment of objectives in a naval campaign"? If such air strikes were against power or transportation systems, did they then come under the aegis of strategic air warfare, and hence become assignable to the Air Force? The more that such questions were addressed and "clarified," the more muddied they became.

Although it was not included in the written text, an oral understanding between the Chiefs was somewhat tighter. Forrestal noted it in his diary. The Air Force recognized the "right of the Navy to proceed with the development of weapons the Navy considers essential to its function, but with the proviso that the Navy will not develop a separate strategic air force."[5]

This appears to have been an important decision. The Air Force was responsible for strategic bombing; the Navy could assist, but only after its primary missions were fulfilled and then under the direction of the Air Force. Unquestionably the Navy wanted the mission of strategic bombing. In December 1947 Vice Admiral David V. Gallery had written a classified memo stating that the Navy was "the branch of the National Defense destined to deliver the Atom Bomb." Gallery admitted that the next war would not be like the last. He thought this fortunate because if it were like the last, the Navy would be obsolete. No, he predicted a war dominated by atomic weapons. Gallery wanted the Navy to control those weapons.[6]

Open warfare over the issue of strategic missions broke out in 1949 when the new Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, canceled the order for the Navy's first supercarrier, the USS *United States*. This ship, whose keel had already been laid, was designed as a flush-top 65,000-ton aircraft carrier that would be capable of launching and recovering heavy, multi-engined aircraft—bombers. The Air Force consistently opposed the supercarrier as an infringement on its primary mission as defined at Key West. The resulting furor over Johnson's action led to a vicious and dangerous fight.

Mutiny Between Decks

As early as July 1947 General Vandenberg had expressed his thoughts to Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington on the proposed supercarrier. To his mind aircraft carriers were inadequate weapons because, among other reasons, the aircraft they carried had short range and poor altitude performance. Vandenberg asserted that the carriers would be so busy defending themselves against air attack that they would have little time to do anything constructive. (If the carrier was as valuable as the Navy claimed, he felt, then it would be a prime target for enemy attacks.) He maintained further that this vulnerability, coupled with the limited range of its aircraft, would relegate the carrier to attacks against relatively safe, and therefore inessential, coastal targets. Looking back to the war, he stated: "Not until the Japanese air force was pounded into impotency did our carriers dare to venture sufficiently close to the Japanese main islands or strike at shore installations." Moreover, Allied carriers had never been able to operate in the Mediterranean for fear of the *Luftwaffe*; Soviet land-based aircraft would make the ships just as vulnerable.[7] The Navy disputed such opinions and historical conclusions.

The supercarrier had been under discussion in the JCS for some time. At the Key West Conference in March 1948 Forrestal reported that he would support its development "if so decided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff."[8] Admiral Louis Denfeld, Chief of Naval Operations, ignored the qualification and joyfully announced that the JCS had approved the ship. Then the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Carl Spaatz, angrily disputed this claim, though acknowledging in a letter to Senator Chan Gurney that at Key West he had been informed the supercarrier was part of the President's defense program. When asked if such a program was acceptable to him, Spaatz replied yes, he would never presume to contradict the Commander in Chief. Spaatz maintained that such a deferral to the President's wish was not an expression of support for the carrier.[9] In May, to clear up the confusion this denial caused, Forrestal asked the JCS for a formal opinion. Denfeld and Bradley supported construction, but Vandenberg (who had recently replaced Spaatz) replied: "I have not felt, nor do I now feel, that I can give my approval to the 65,000-ton carrier project."[10]

Verbal jabs between the Navy and Air Force continued during the next few months. The Navy organized a special secret office within the Pentagon called OP-23, a planning group led by Captain Arleigh Burke, whose purpose was to carry the fight for the *United States* to Congress and the public. Burke had pleaded with Denfeld to fight for the supercarrier, claiming that if the ship was scrapped, the next step would be the transfer of all Navy and Marine air units to the Air Force. Denfeld was sufficiently swayed by such arguments to authorize OP-23. Unfortunately, he neglected to notify his civilian superiors, and when Navy Secretary John L. Sullivan discovered its existence he was irate. He ordered the OP-23 office raided and its files impounded. The naval personnel working there were arrested and held incommunicado for the next three days. The office was permanently closed,[11] but the issue remained very much alive.

Vandenberg brought in a Harvard law professor, Barton Leach, to prepare a public relations effort. One of the first fruits of this program was the stunning around-the-world flight of the B-50 "Lucky Lady II" on 2 March 1948. For the first time an aircraft had used aerial refueling to circle the globe non-stop. Vandenberg exuberantly compared the achievement to that at Kitty Hawk and Lindbergh's 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic. "Our bombers," he reported, were now "virtually invulnerable to enemy interception."[12] The implications of such a feat for a strategic air offensive were not lost on the Navy. The following month it mounted an experiment of its own: a Lockheed Neptune took off from the deck of the USS *Coral Sea*, flew 200 miles, and dropped a simulated bomb load of 10,000 pounds (the weight of an atomic weapon). Admiral Denfeld emphasized that "it is not the Navy's intention to make strategic bombing a major Navy mission. But the Navy could do that type of bombing if requested."[13] (Denfield failed to mention that the Neptune was unable to land on the carrier and had to recover at an airfield on shore.)

On 18 April 1949 the keel of the *United States* was laid amid much fanfare; it appeared that the admirals had won their fight. Secretary Forrestal, however, had resigned the month before. The pressures of his office had become too burdensome, and it was apparent to everyone, including the President, that he was becoming mentally unbalanced. In two weeks he would commit suicide. His successor was Louis Johnson, a brash, abrasive businessman and former Assistant Secretary of War who believed in controlling people with an iron fist. It was said that he had been running for president for nearly a decade and looked upon Defense as his last stepping-stone. A contemporary account said that he was "used to being sworn at. Big, two-fisted, and tough-skinned, Johnson has been hitting hard and getting his way for most of his life."[14] Upon taking office, Johnson stated he had no preconceived notions about the supercarrier, but the dissension it was causing concerned him. He asked the JCS for their written opinion once again. The Chiefs remained hopelessly divided, submitting separate recommendations.

Denfeld justified the carrier with the following arguments:

- It could operate heavier aircraft capable of carrying "the more complex armament and electronic equipment presently available."
- It could operate larger numbers of smaller aircraft.
- It could provide for more defensive armament and radar.
- It could carry more fuel for prolonged operations.
- It could carry more armor to withstand attacks.

Denfeld stated that the *United States* was a logical progression in carrier development and was not designed simply for strategic air warfare, although it would indeed be capable of such a mission if so directed.[15]

Vandenberg argued that the ship simply was not necessary, and was therefore a waste of money. The Navy maintained that it would cost $190 million; Vandenberg thought the figure more like $500 million, and even that amount was for the ship itself, without aircraft or a supporting destroyer squadron. When these extras were added together, the total would be $1.265 billion.[16] The carrier was also vulnerable to three types of attack: by air, surface vessel, and submarine. Vandenberg reckoned that the Navy was basing its plans for carrier operations on its Pacific War experience, circumstances that would not obtain in a future conflict with the Soviet Union, which had a very small surface fleet but many submarines. Since primary Navy missions were protection of sea lanes and anti-submarine operations, supercarriers were unnecessary; small escort carriers would be more efficient. Let the Air Force attend to strategic bombing.[17]

Both these responses were predictable—that of General Bradley was not. Earlier, he had approved the project; now he reversed himself with a line of reasoning similar to Vandenberg's. "The Navy's mission as agreed to by the Joint Chiefs," he declared, "was to conduct naval campaigns designed primarily to protect lines of communication leading to important sources of raw materials and to areas of projected military operations." The *United States*, however, was being programed for strategic air operations, and that task fell to the Air Force. The only conceivable enemy was Russia; the existing fleet of eight large carriers was ample to carry out the Navy's role in war. The supercarrier was too expensive.[18]

The illustrious General Dwight Eisenhower was also queried by Johnson regarding the new ship. Like Bradley, Eisenhower had originally supported construction of one prototype vessel, but again like Bradley, had changed his mind. Money was crucial, and the Navy's arguments were illogical. Eisenhower confided in his diary in January 1949 that the seamen continually claimed Air Force planes could not penetrate Soviet airspace, but for reasons inexplicable to him, carrier planes could. In April, when Johnson asked his opinion on the *United States*, Eisenhower said scrap it. Johnson then called Millard Tydings and Carl Vinson, chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, respectively, and they approved the proposed cancellation.[19]

After conferring with President Truman, Secretary Johnson sank the supercarrier. The Navy was livid; Sullivan resigned in protest. The acting Navy Secretary then asked Johnson if the money thus saved could at least be used to remodel and upgrade two conventional carriers. The Defense Secretary asked the JCS for their opinion, and the verdict was once again two to one against. Vandenberg said the proposed conversion program was simply another attempt to build carriers capable of handling bombers, and that was unacceptable. He proposed instead that the funds be used to increase the Navy's anti-submarine capability. Failing that, the money should be returned to the "national economy." Bradley concurred.[20] Even though Johnson overruled the majority and agreed to the conversion, Navy supporters were not mollified, and the hurricane warnings were sounded.

Battening Down the Hatches

The sailors felt outnumbered and surrounded, and even began referring to themselves as "the water division of Johnson's Air Force." No doubt owing to anger and frustration, anonymous individuals began circulating rumors that cast shadows on Johnson, Symington, the Air Force, and the new intercontinental bomber they supported, the B-36.

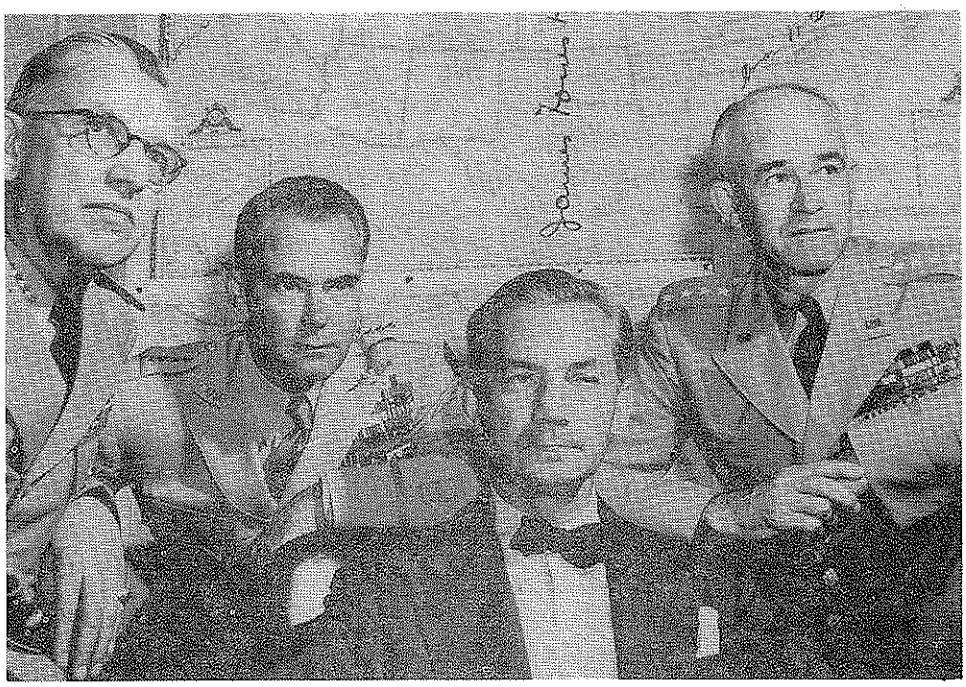
Rumors of impropriety became so frequent that Vinson decided the House Armed Services Committee should hold hearings concerning these disturbing reports. Noted military affairs columnist Hanson Baldwin, an Annapolis graduate, hinted darkly of fraudulent airplane contracts and "financial high jinks."[21]

When the hearings began, Representative James E. Van Zandt reiterated the charges of fraud and misdoings that had been circulating for weeks. Referring to an anonymous document, he stated that reports had reached him linking Symington and Johnson with Floyd Odlum, president of Consolidated-Vultee Corporation, builder of the B-36. (Johnson had been a director of that company before taking office.) It was alleged that contracts with four other aircraft companies had been unfairly canceled in order to transfer funds to larger B-36 orders. It was then suggested that plans were afoot for Symington to resign from office and head Consolidated. Van Zandt called for a full investigation.[22]

The B-36 hearings were a squalid affair. It was soon clear that Van Zandt had little more to offer in proof than his "anonymous document." The innuendo and barroom gossip that he attempted to pass as fact finally riled Symington sufficiently to dare Van Zandt to drop his congressional immunity and make his allegations public so that he could take "proper recourse."[23] Van Zandt declined the offer. A host of Air Force witnesses then took the stand, stating under oath that the B-36 had been chosen entirely on its merits as the best aircraft available, and that there had been no pressure from anyone at any

time. General Vandenberg defended his civilian superior forcefully and convincingly: it was "utterly unthinkable" and "absolutely fantastic," he maintained, that Symington would have bought planes for political motives when men's lives were at stake. Vandenberg said that General Curtis LeMay knew more about strategic bombing than any man alive, and if he said the B-36 was a good airplane, then it was. As for the Navy charge that the B-36 was a "sitting duck," the Chief replied that if so, it had a healthy sting to it.[24]

The authorship of Van Zandt's secret document was quickly becoming a crucial issue. If the charges were so demonstrably false, where did the Congressman receive the allegations, and why did he believe they were accurate? Demands were made on Chairman Vinson to reveal the anonymous accusers; the committee's counsel threatened to resign if they were not revealed. At last relenting, Vinson called Cedric Worth to the stand on 24 August. Worth was a former Hollywood scriptwriter who held a top secret clearance as an aide to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Daniel A. Kimball. When asked if he knew the author of the document, Worth responded that he had written it himself, but then admitted that he had no proof as to its accuracy. (Kimball later claimed under oath that he was not aware Worth had been up to such activities. In fact, since Kimball had been curious as to the authorship of the document, he had directed his assistant to try to find out, but his assistant had been unable to solve the mystery. His assistant was Cedric Worth.[25]) After some very hostile



MG Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Jr., Collection

The Joint Chiefs—Admiral Louis E. Denfeld, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and General Omar N. Bradley—with Secretary of Defense James Forrestal.

questioning, Worth admitted that it was all a "tragic mistake," and that he had not intended to impugn the integrity of honorable men like Secretaries Johnson and Symington.[26] *Newsweek* called this admission a "knockout blow," concluding: "If the Air Force fights with the B-36 the way it fights for it, heaven help America's enemies."[27] Hanson Baldwin wrote that the hearings were "an impressive Air Force vindication," and that its opponents had not displayed "perspicacity or judgment" in the matter.[28]

Worth's testimony brought the hearings to a halt, with the committee finding that there was not one iota of evidence to substantiate any of the charges made by Van Zandt. Within days the Navy launched a court of inquiry to determine if Worth had received assistance from members of the Navy Department in composing his fable. The account of this investigation is even more disturbing than the congressional hearings.[29] Testimony before the court of inquiry made clear that Worth had indeed had help—a great deal of it—although many who admitted passing "rank gossip" claimed they never expected it to be used.[30] It was an alarming display of insolence and insubordination to civilian authority. Still, the episode was far from over.

When Vinson recessed the hearings in August, he announced that they would reopen in October, not to investigate more charges of wrongdoing, but to examine the issues of unification, national defense, and strategy. Once the Navy's own court of inquiry began turning into a fiasco, however, Secretary Francis Matthews (Sullivan's replacement), Admiral Denfeld, and Vinson quietly decided to postpone the hearings, perhaps indefinitely. Such was not to be; certain Navy officers had a definite case to make, and although *l'Affaire Worth* was an embarrassment, it did not detract from their overall theory of the primacy of naval warfare. Consequently, a much-decorated war veteran, Captain John C. Crommelin, threw himself into the breach by releasing a classified document to the press that revealed wholesale discontent in naval ranks. He said it was "necessary to the interests of national security" that he make the report public. He wanted a public airing of the issues.[31] Barely closed wounds immediately reopened as a group of high-ranking admirals, led by Admiral Arthur Radford, jumped to Crommelin's defense. Although Denfeld was loath to wash more dirty linen publicly, Radford insisted that the October hearings be used as a platform to debate defense priorities.

. . . Two If by Sea

When Vinson's gavel fell on 5 October, most of the Navy hierarchy was primed for battle. The admirals' arguments fell into three main categories: the concept of an "atomic blitz" was a poor strategy in the event of war; the B-36 was a substandard aircraft that could not successfully carry out the blitz even if it were an acceptable strategy; and the Navy was being treated as an unequal partner in the defense establishment as evidenced by the cancellation

of the *United States*. It was the Navy's contention that the Air Force was deluding the American public with promises of a cheap victory to be won by an atomic air strike. The Navy maintained that strategic bombing would never win a war, and that reliance on it would only result in the loss of valuable time and allies.

Although the August hearings had demolished all charges of wrongdoing in the selection of the B-36, the Navy still maintained the air leviathan was technically substandard. Radford said the B-36 could easily be detected, intercepted, and destroyed by fighter aircraft then available. "I can sincerely say to you," he testified, "that I hope the enemy bombers which may attack our country in any future conflict will be no better than the B-36." What was worse, Radford maintained, the Air Force was concentrating on the bomber to such an extent—"putting all its eggs in one basket"—that other vital missions such as transport and close air support were deficient.[32]

Finally, the Navy claimed it was not an equal partner in defense because the Army and Air Force consistently united against it. The admirals claimed their budget had been cut so drastically that it threatened to reduce them to impotency. The cancellation of the supercarrier was the symbol of this discrimination. They believed the carrier would prove to be an effective and efficient weapon system, tailored to the needs of modern war. The abrupt, and in their minds arbitrary, cancellation of the ship dealt a severe blow to Navy morale of all ranks.[33]

The Air Force Association magazine referred to this performance as a "revolt against the Law of the Land." General Bradley later wrote that he was aghast. "Never in our military history," he asserted, "had there been anything comparable—not even the Billy Mitchell rebellion of the 1920s. A complete breakdown in discipline occurred. Neither Matthews nor Denfeld could control his subordinates. . . . Denfeld . . . allowed his admirals to run amok. It was utterly disgraceful." Admiral Denfeld, whom Bradley described as an "affable glad-handing Washington bureaucrat with only minimal naval combat experience and no grasp at all of large-scale land warfare," bore the brunt of Bradley's ire. Bradley charged him with complete dishonesty regarding Navy claims pertaining to American war plans. Bradley also said that the admirals had deliberately skewed data from atomic bomb tests to support their claims against the Air Force.[34]

Vandenberg then rose to defend his service against the various Navy charges. In Bradley's words, he was "icily cool and precise" and "utterly demolished" the testimony of the "crybaby [Navy] aviators." Vandenberg's testimony was dispassionate, emphasizing logic for its own sake. Contemporaries often said that he was at his best in situations of this type; as things grew hotter, he became cooler and quieter. The effect was to be devastating.

Vandenberg began by describing the organization of the Joint Chiefs, who by law were charged with formulating strategic war plans. They were

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Big, brash, and abrasive, Louis Johnson replaced Forrestal as Defense Secretary. A contemporary account said he was "used to being sworn at."

assisted in that task by a Joint Staff, composed of an equal number of officers from the three services. At that time the staff was headed by an admiral. The Joint Staff was advised by two important groups: the Research and Development Board and the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group, both led by distinguished civilian scientists. After many months of study and debate these diverse groups presented a war plan (TROJAN) that was officially approved by all members of the JCS. The claim that strategic bombing was an Air Force plan was simply not true; it was the *national* plan. The instrument of the air offensive called for in the war plan was the Strategic Air Command, under the direct control of the JCS—not the Air Force—and whose targets were selected by the JCS. The purpose of the strategic air campaign was not to win the war; only surface forces could ensure that. Rather, its purpose was to serve as an equalizer to the hordes of enemy troops that greatly outnumbered our own. Then Vandenberg inquired of the alternatives. "Is it proposed that we build and maintain a standing Army capable of meeting the masses of an enemy army on the ground in equal man-to-man, body-to-body, gun-to-gun combat?"

As for the effectiveness of the B-36, Vandenberg stated that although the airplane was not perfect, it was the best bomber of its type in the world, and it would get through. It had already flown 10,000 miles, dropped a 10,000-pound bomb (again, the weight of existing atomic devices), and returned to its base, all at an altitude of 42,000 feet. When questioned about Navy claims that it could be intercepted and destroyed, Vandenberg replied that radar and fighter aircraft were not new; the bomber would get through. When asked if escort fighters should be provided, perhaps supplied from aircraft carriers, Vandenberg responded that such aircraft had insufficient

range. Escort was desirable but not necessary. The bomber still would get through.

Concerning the issue of overemphasis on bombers to the detriment of other air arms, Vandenberg noted that of the 48 combat groups in the Air Force, only four were equipped with the B-36. If plans to expand to 70 groups were fulfilled, still only four groups would operate the B-36. When all aircraft (including the reserves) available on Mobilization-Day were counted, the B-36 amounted to only three percent of the total. Moreover, as commander of the tactical Ninth Air Force in the European Theater during World War II, Vandenberg fully realized the crucial importance of close air support.[35]

As for the *United States* and claims that the Air Force was trying to absorb Navy and Marine Corps aviation, Vandenberg stated that such was not the case. He objected to the supercarrier because the ship was not needed for the Navy's primary mission, and funds were too scarce to buy weapons not directly supportive of the nation's war plan. Perhaps the carrier was a good weapon, but was it necessary? TROJAN called for specific tasks to be accomplished by specific forces; that was what unification was supposed to be all about. The fact that Army leaders agreed with him on this issue did not suggest a conspiracy; rather, they also thought the Navy was mistaken.[36]

One is struck by the lack of vitriol in Vandenberg's statement. Considering the emotional, sometimes personal, sometimes vicious charges that had been levied against him, his secretary, and his service, Vandenberg's remarks are amazingly mild. After Cedric Worth's charges were proved fraudulent, the Chief must have realized that the tide was flowing in his direction; he could now afford to be reserved and subtle, attempting to soothe bruised egos rather than worsening the split. Revenge was a luxury not to be afforded.

Left in the Wake

Few heads rolled in the Navy as a result of the hearings. Worth resigned—although not until the following year; Vice Admirals William Blandy and Gerald Bogan were nudged into retirement; and Captain Crommelin was eventually reassigned and given a letter of reprimand. Admiral Denfeld was not so fortunate. When the "Revolt of the Admirals" began, Matthews and he had fought a losing battle to maintain order within the bulkheads. When Denfeld testified, however, he "defected" to the enemy and joined the Radford group; Matthews stood alone in condemning the actions of those in uniform, and he did not like it. Denfeld was relieved, and Matthews gave his reasons in his message to the President. The Chief of Naval Operations did not accept unification. And far worse: "A military establishment is not a political democracy. Integrity of command is indispensable at all times. There can be no twilight zone in the measure of loyalty to superiors and respect for authority existing between various official ranks."[37]

The Navy had fought unification of the armed services from the beginning, ostensibly because it was a threat to civilian control of the military—the fear of "the man on horseback." How ironic that the sailors would then deliberately slander their civilian superiors. In contrast, General Vandenberg ran a very tight ship indeed.

In the long term, the effect of the incident was small. Within two years increased defense spending occasioned by the Korean War would permit the Navy to build supercarriers, and one of the individuals most responsible for the clash, Admiral Radford, would four years later be chosen by President Eisenhower as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. For Chief of Naval Operations he chose Arleigh Burke, the former head of OP-23. In the short term, however, the affair had more significance. Observers on both sides of the Atlantic were shocked by the whole incident; one called it a display of "pettiness, inconsistency, and hatred." The London *Economist* asked: "What faith can the United States have in Chiefs of Staff who behave like children? What faith can the powers who signed the North Atlantic Treaty have when their strongest partner shows much internal weakness?"[38] Of far greater significance, relations between the services were at their nadir, and in less than a year there would be war in Korea.

In the strategic sense the Navy was eventually proved right, but for reasons they had not anticipated. There is a role for a large surface fleet in the atomic age, but not simply as another arm of the strategic air offensive. The traditional roles of power projection and close support of ground forces engaged on land are still vital. Surprisingly, naval leaders did not anticipate that this would be the case and never advocated such a role in the 1949 hearings. The atomic bomb dominated the thinking of virtually all military and civilian theorists in the years after Hiroshima. The Gallery memo opined that wars of the future would certainly be general and dominated by atomic weapons. Korea was to show the fallacy of such thinking. Conventional tactical forces were still vital, and all the services had a role in limited conflict. Korea allowed a massive buildup and modernization of America's conventional strength, a capability that was once again needed during the following decade in Vietnam.

But the revolt of 1949 spotlights a broader issue of professionalism. What was the proper role of Navy leaders when confronted with what they saw as a threat to their institutional survival? Admiral Denfeld and his colleagues were absolutely convinced they were right. A later generation of seamen felt similarly.[39] But what are the acceptable limits of professional dissent? In the years ahead serious defense budget cuts seem likely. It is also likely that weapon systems seen as vital by a service will be denied because of fiscal constraints. When that occurs, how will the service leaders react? One hopes they will operate within the constraints of the law and the military ethic. There must be no more revolts, for the next one may prove fatal.

In the aftermath of the 1949 hearings, Defense Secretary Johnson told his recalcitrant Chiefs to shake hands and forget it; he recommended that they all go golfing together. Brad, Louie, Van, and Lauris Norstad dutifully donned mufti and headed for the Burning Tree Country Club. Afterward, Johnson congratulated the victors: "My informants stated General Vandenberg sank three fantastic 50-foot chip shots, and General Norstad constantly played over his head."[40] It is reliably reported that Van and Larry won two dollars each.

NOTES

1. Alfred Goldberg, ed., *A History of the United States Air Force, 1907-1957* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Norstrand, 1957), p. 105.

2. Press release by Defense Secretary James M. Forrestal, "Results of Key West Conference," 27 March 1948, Vandenberg papers, Library of Congress (LOC), box 90.

3. Ibid., p. 8; "Air Board Meeting Notes," 4-5 May 1948, Air Force Historical Office, pp. 40-41.

4. Forrestal press release, pp. 12-21, in "Public Statements by the Secretaries of Defense, Part I: The Truman Administration" (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1980), microfilm reel 1.

5. Walter Millis and E. S. Duffield, eds. *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: Viking, 1951), p. 392.

6. Memo, Gallery to Radford, 17 December 1947, National Archives, Record Group 340, "Special File 4A."

7. Memo, Vandenberg to Symington, 9 July 1947, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52.

8. Millis and Duffield, pp. 393, 466; "Press release for Secretary Forrestal," 26 March 1948, in "Public Statements by the Secretaries of Defense," microfilm reel 1.

9. Spaatz's letter quoted in memo, Vandenberg to Forrestal, 8 February 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52.

10. Memo, Vandenberg to Forrestal, 26 May 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52.

11. Ken Jones and Hubert Kelley, Jr., *Admiral Arleigh ("31-Knot") Burke* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1962), p. 149; Vincent Davis, *The Admirals Lobby* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1967), pp. 288-89. One of the best summaries of this controversy can be found in Ronald Schaffer's *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 192-98.

12. Text of television address, 2 March 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 90. What Vandenberg did not mention was that another B-50 aircraft had made an attempt earlier that day and failed. Indeed, five different aircraft were standing by; it was hoped that at least one of them would make it all the way.

13. *The Washington Post*, 5 April 1949, p. 1.

14. Robert S. Allen and William V. Shannon, *The Truman Merry-Go-Round* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1950), p. 446. It was also speculated that Johnson, a strong fund-raiser for Truman in the 1948 election, was given the Defense job as a reward for his faithful political service.

15. Memo, Denfeld to Johnson, 22 April 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52. The flight deck of the *United States* was to be 158 feet longer and 77 feet wider than the largest existing carrier, the *Midway*. More important, the *United States* would have no large "island" above the flight deck, thus allowing aircraft with large wing spans to take off unimpeded. *Aviation Week*, 24 March 1948, p. 12.

16. "Supercarrier study," 28 March 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 97; "Air Force Knocks Out Navy's Super Carrier," *Life*, 2 May 1949, p. 47; Steven L. Reardon, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Vol. I: The Formative Years, 1947-1950* (Washington: GPO, 1984), p. 413.

17. Memo, Vandenberg to Johnson, 23 April 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52.

18. Memo, Bradley to Johnson, 22 April 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52.

19. Paul Y. Hammond, *Super Carriers and B-36 Bombers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 28. Sullivan, out of town when Johnson announced his decision, had not been notified in advance of the project's cancellation.

20. Memo, Vandenberg to Johnson, n.d., Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 52; letter, Eisenhower to Forrestal, 19 December 1948 and Eisenhower diary entry, 27 January 1949, both in Alfred Chandler and Louis Galambos, eds., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970-1986), X, 380-81, 448-49. Contrary to popular belief, the Air Force did not receive additional funds as a result of the supercarrier cancellation. Indeed, the division of the defense budget had already been

determined several months previously. The Air Force was instead questioning *how* the Navy was spending its portion of the defense budget.

21. Hanson W. Baldwin, "War Plane Orders Face Examination by Congressmen," *The New York Times*, 24 May 1949, p. 1; and "Inquiry on B-36 Bomber," 21 July 1949, p. 3. Baldwin was an Annapolis graduate, class of 1924. John K. Northrop, president of Northrop Corporation that built the RB-49—competitor of the B-36—went to his death maintaining that corruption was involved in the cancellation of his "Flying Wing" contract. A recent Ph.D. dissertation examined this matter closely, concluding that Northrop's allegations were false: the RB-49 was simply a substandard aircraft. Francis J. Baker, "The Death of the Flying Wing: The Real Reason Behind the 1949 Cancellation of Northrop Aircraft's RB-49," unpublished dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1984.

22. US Congress, House, Hearings before the Armed Services Committee, *Investigation of the B-36 Bomber Program*, 81st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1949), pp. 13-15 (Hereinafter *B-36* hearings). Van Zandt was an officer in the Naval Reserve. Forrestal noted in his diary that Johnson specifically asked him to conclude any decisions on the B-36 prior to leaving office so conflict of interest could not be charged. Millis and Duffield, p. 551; letter, Vinson to Vandenberg, 14 June 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 42.

23. *B-36* hearings, p. 242.

24. Ibid., pp. 172-79.

25. *B-36* hearings, pp. 610-11. In a statement to the press afterward, Worth described himself as a newsman, Hollywood scenario writer, naval reserve officer, and freelance writer. "Author of Letter Describes Career," *The New York Times*, 25 August 1949, p. 5.

26. *B-36* hearings, pp. 524-27, 599-600.

27. "The Air Force Scores," *Newsweek*, 22 August 1949, p. 16.

28. Hanson Baldwin, "The Unheard Opposition," *The New York Times*, 14 August 1949, p. 30.

29. Murray Green, "Stuart Symington and the B-36," unpublished dissertation, American University, 1969, gives an excellent account of the court of inquiry (chap. 13). See also "Navy Inquiry," *Aviation Week*, 19 September 1949, p. 16.

30. "'Rank Gossip' Led to Inquiry on B-36," *The New York Times*, 7 September 1949, p. 1.

31. Baldwin, who had consistently opposed unification because it threatened civilian control of the military, nevertheless thought Crommelin was "courageous." Hanson W. Baldwin, "Danger in Defense Row," *The New York Times*, 15 September 1949, p. 13. Admirals Leahy and Halsey also hailed Crommelin for having the courage of his convictions. Leahy diary, LOC, 6 October 1949; "Navy Inquiry," *Aviation Week*, 19 September 1949, p. 16.

32. US Congress, House, Hearings before the Armed Services Committee, *The National Defense Program—Unification and Strategy*, 81st Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: GPO, 1949), pp. 46-52.

33. Ibid., pp. 350-61.

34. "Shooting the Breeze," *Air Force*, October 1949, p. 4; Gen Omar Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 488, 507-10.

35. *Unification and Strategy* hearings, pp. 451-69. One of the ironic aspects of the hearings was that at the same time the Navy was accusing the Air Force of neglecting tactical air power, it was fighting against the Air Force expansion to 70 groups. Sixteen of the 22 groups in the proposed Air Force expansion were tactical units.

36. Ibid. That same day the President said in a press conference: "Nobody wants to take the air arm from the Navy. It is necessary that they have fighter protection all the time. I don't think it is necessary for the Navy to go into the heavy bomber business." Harry S. Truman, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1949* (Washington: GPO, 1964), p. 517.

37. Truman, *1949 Papers*, p. 536. Admiral Nimitz, Denfeld's predecessor, related that Matthews called him to ask for advice. Nimitz told him to relieve Denfeld. When Matthews asked how, Nimitz wrote the letter for him. E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 541.

38. Marquis W. Childs, "The Battle of the Pentagon," *Harper's Magazine*, August 1949, p. 48; "State of the Unification," *Economist*, 22 October 1949, p. 893.

39. Louis Denfeld, "Reprisal: Why I Was Fired," *Collier's*, 18 March 1950, pp. 13-15, 62-64; Paul R. Schratz, "The Admirals' Revolt," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, 112 (February 1986), 308-11.

40. Letter, Johnson to Vandenberg, 15 April 1949, Vandenberg papers, LOC, box 3. It is also reported that when the USS *Missouri* ran aground in Chesapeake Bay in January 1950, Vandenberg offered to loan the Navy a B-36 to tow it off. Lieutenant General Lauris Norstad was Vandenberg's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. He had a reputation of being a "hatchet man" and had also been the point man in organizing the Air Force response to the B-36/supercarrier issue; hence, he went along golfing to help make amends. His Navy counterpart, Vice Admiral Arthur Radford, already had returned to sea and could not make the golf date.