“Who Ever Believed in the ‘Missile Gap’?:
John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security

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This article examines John F. Kennedy's references to the missile gap—a presumed strategic disparity between the Soviet Union and the United States believed to have been created by the USSR's technological achievements in the late 1950s. Kennedy's missile gap rhetoric was grounded in a political, economic, and military/strategic critique of the policies of the Eisenhower administration. This article examines Kennedy's belief in the missile gap, reveals the central role played by Joseph Alsop in propagating the missile gap myth, and considers the missile gap within the context of the Kennedy administration's national security policies.

In a meeting on December 5, 1962, President John F. Kennedy and his senior military advisers met to discuss the proposed budget for the Department of Defense for fiscal year 1964. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, anticipating criticisms of the budget, pointed to a controversy from the late 1950s based on “a myth” that “was created by . . . emotionally guided but nonetheless patriotic individuals in the Pentagon.” President Kennedy replied with self-deprecating humor, calling himself a “patriotic and misguided man” who had been “one of those who put that myth around.”


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Both men were speaking of the myth of the missile gap—a presumed imbalance between the nuclear capabilities of the Soviet Union and the United States that appeared to threaten U.S. security. Two related questions—“what did John Kennedy know about the missile gap?” and “when did he know that the missile gap was a myth?”—have stirred considerable controversy among scholars. Combining research from archival materials with a fresh look at evidence from published sources, this article demonstrates that John F. Kennedy believed that a missile gap threatened U.S. security in the late 1950s.

From late 1957 through early 1961, President Eisenhower repeatedly asserted that there was no missile gap, and that the United States’ nuclear deterrent forces were vastly superior to those possessed by the Soviets. But even as respected a figure as Eisenhower, a man with a particular acumen for judging Soviet intentions, was unable to defuse a growing sense of crisis as contradictory statements by military leaders, politicians, and prominent journalists crowded out the president’s arguments. In the words of Arnold Horelick and Myron Rush, the myth of the missile gap resulted from a sustained effort “to deceive the West regarding the pace and scope of the Soviet Union’s program for building and deploying ICBMs.” John F. Kennedy’s belief in the missile gap demonstrates the effectiveness of the Soviet Union’s campaign of deception, but it also reveals a degree of self-deception on the part of, especially, Air Force intelligence analysts, scholars, journalists, and politicians, who were inclined to believe the worst.

This article will also consider how Kennedy’s belief in a missile gap affected the formulation of national security strategy during the first year of his presidency. Convinced that a missile gap loomed over the horizon, Kennedy, first as a senator and then as a candidate for the presidency, called for closing the gap by spending much more on military forces.
defense. In the first few weeks of his presidency, in early 1961, President Kennedy was told by members of his own administration, men whom he trusted, that there was no missile gap. His secretary of defense confirmed these findings in early February 1961. Kennedy refused to declare the missile gap closed, however. Instead, the Kennedy administration pressed on with its promised defense build-up that was deemed necessary to rectify the potentially destabilizing inferiority posed by the missile gap, but which was unnecessary once the gap was proven illusory.

Senator John F. Kennedy and the Origins of the Missile Gap

In August 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world’s first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Then, on October 4, 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik, the world’s first man-made earth-orbiting satellite. With its Cold War adversary’s technological prowess on public display, the United States seemed to be marching in place—or going backward. Journalists, politicians, and military leaders began to speak of a “missile gap”—a perceived strategic deficiency brought on by the Soviet Union’s gains in the field of rockets, missiles, and nuclear weapons. The apparent decline of American nuclear weapons technology relative to that of the Soviet Union threatened the very foundation—the nuclear deterrent—of the United States’ national security strategy.

This growing perception of technological inferiority vis-à-vis the Soviets was only reinforced when a secret report detailing the anticipated shortcomings of the U.S. missile program was leaked to the media. The findings of the Security Resources Panel, initially chaired by H. Rowan Gaither and since that time known as the Gaither Committee, echoed the pessimistic attitude of the late 1950s. The panel’s report warned of “an increasing threat which may become critical in 1959 or early 1960” and went on to predict a widening disparity between the U.S. and Soviet weapons programs.6 Eisenhower disagreed with the Gaither Committee’s findings; but while the president specifically directed that the Gaither Report be kept secret, the contents were widely leaked. By December 1957, journalists were speaking openly of the “secret” report.7


John F. Kennedy was gearing up for his Senate reelection campaign when the missile gap controversy first broke, and his earliest comments demonstrate his level of concern. In early November 1957, the 40-year old senator from Massachusetts declared that “the nation was losing the satellite-missile race with the Soviet Union because of . . . complacent miscalculations, penny-pinching, budget cutbacks, incredibly confused mismanagement, and wasteful rivalries and jealousies.” A few weeks later, in a speech in Chicago, Kennedy alleged that the United States was “behind, possibly as much as several years, in . . . the development, perfection, and stockpiling of intermediate range ballistic missiles and long range ballistic missiles.”

The debate over the missile gap heated up again in the summer of 1958, and Kennedy jumped into the center of the controversy. He did not have access to classified intelligence data. He had not seen the National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 11-10-57) issued in December 1957, which predicted that the Soviets would “probably have a first operational capability with up to 10 prototype ICBMs” at “some time during the period from mid-1958 to mid-1959.” Nor would he have known that intelligence analysts were working on another estimate that would be issued a few weeks later, on August 19, 1958. This new estimate, NIE 11-5-58, would reinforce the findings of the earlier assessment, concluding, in part, that the USSR had “the technical and industrial capability . . . to have an operational capability with 100 ICBMs” some time in 1960, and perhaps 500 ICBMs “some time in 1961, or at the latest in 1962.” But even if Kennedy had known these numbers, he certainly would not have known that these estimates were based on pure speculation. The uncertainty surrounding the estimates prompted the authors of NIE 11-5-58 to stress in a footnote that the figures of 100 to 500 ICBMs were “selected arbitrarily in order to provide some measure of the Soviet capacity” and that these numbers “do not represent an estimate of probable Soviet missile strength.”

Like so many others during this time, Kennedy depended upon figures circulating in the public domain, and he assumed that the public data on the scope and pace of the Soviet missile program was accurate. Much of this information, however, overstated the nature of the threat. A handful of intelligence analysts, especially those in the Air Force, were inclined to believe the worst-case scenario: that the Soviets were engaged in a crash program to build nuclear weapons that could overwhelm the U.S. deterrent. Defense

analysts, intellectuals, journalists, and, finally, politicians, who had never been enthusiastic supporters of Eisenhower’s national security policies often adopted these worst case scenarios, and then used the bad news as a vehicle for attacking the New Look.

Kennedy’s chief source of information was nationally syndicated columnist Joseph Alsop, the Eisenhower administration’s leading missile gap critic in the media. On August 1, 1958, Alsop accused the administration of a “gross untruth concerning the national defense of the United States.” Alsop declared that President Eisenhower himself had been either “consciously misleading” the American public, or that he had been badly misinformed about the true state of the nation’s defenses. Finally, he charged the administration with “gambling the American future” on untested missile technology to close the missile gap.\(^{14}\)

Alsop’s column included a summary of projected Soviet missile strength ostensibly based on classified intelligence. Alsop’s numbers, however, did not accurately reflect the findings of the intelligence community. For example, Alsop alleged that the Soviets would have 500 ICBMs “in place” by the end of 1960, and 2,000 by the end of 1963, but the most recent intelligence estimate suggested only that the Soviets could have 500 ICBMs by the end of 1960, and made no predictions for subsequent deployment.\(^{15}\)

Around the time these criticisms appeared in print, Alsop urged Kennedy to deliver a speech concerning the missile gap. Kennedy was well acquainted with Alsop, the man an internal CIA history later dubbed “the prophet of the missile gap.”\(^{16}\) Both men lived in the fashionable Georgetown neighborhood. Kennedy frequented Alsop dinner parties and social gatherings. The senator respected Alsop’s political judgment, and he valued the favorable publicity that Alsop often steered his way. The senator respected Alsop’s political judgment, and he valued the favorable publicity that Alsop often steered his way. For his part, although few pundits doubted that Kennedy’s political ambitions extended beyond the Bay State, Joseph Alsop believed that Kennedy would be the likely Democratic nominee for president in 1960. He also believed that the missile gap would be a major issue in that campaign. Alsop was happy to provide his friend with ammunition for the ensuing rhetorical battles. But while Kennedy benefited politically from his relationship with Alsop, his dependence upon Alsop for information about the missile gap would eventually lead to problems.\(^{17}\)

On August 14, 1958, John Kennedy delivered a major speech on the floor of the Senate that drew some material from Alsop’s columns. The speech detailed the Eisenhower administration’s alleged negligence, and called for a concerted effort to close the missile gap. There was every indication, Kennedy declared, “that by 1960 the United


\(^{15}\) Ibid.; SNIE 11-10-57, “The Soviet ICBM Program,” in Steury, 64.


States will have lost . . . its superiority in nuclear striking power.” “The gap will begin in 1960,” he predicted, and he foresaw that “the years of the gap” would be a period in which “our threats to massive retaliation” and “our exercises in brink-of-war diplomacy [would] be infinitely less successful.” In light of this, Kennedy charged the president with placing “fiscal security ahead of national security,” and he warned that Eisenhower’s policies would bring “great danger within the next few years.”

Averring that he had “never been persuaded” by Eisenhower’s views that burdensome military spending might cause harm to the domestic economy, Kennedy countered “that to emphasize budgetary limitations without regard to our military position was to avoid an inconvenient effort by inviting the disaster that would destroy all budgets and conveniences.” “Surely,” Kennedy continued, “our nation’s security overrides budgetary considerations.” “Our nation could have afforded, and can afford now,” he declared, “the steps necessary to close the missile gap.”

Before this speech, Kennedy had not been a leading missile gap critic. During the summer of 1958, Missouri Senator Stuart Symington, a former secretary of the Air Force during the Truman administration and another politician with aspirations for higher office, repeatedly charged the Eisenhower administration with complacency in the face of the presumed missile gap. In the debate on the Senate floor that followed Kennedy’s missile gap speech, Symington rose to praise his call for more spending on defense in order to close the missile gap. Several Republicans, however, pressed Kennedy to define the precise size and scope of his called-for military build-up. In response to questions from Senator Homer Capehart of Indiana, Kennedy reiterated that the nation should spend more for defense, claiming that there had “been insufficient appropriations for the past 6 years, beginning in 1953.” But Kennedy refused to commit to defining a complete “military program” and he turned aside Capehart’s efforts to fix a price tag on his proposed changes to the nation’s military. When Republican Senator Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin asked Kennedy whether taxes would have to be increased to pay for these defense increases, JFK demurred, saying only, “I think the effort should be made to close the gap.” Noting that he was not a member of the Armed Services Committee and was “therefore not privy to confidential information” that was available to other senators, Kennedy openly conceded that he did not know whether press accounts of a missile gap were true; regardless of the veracity of the missile gap claims, however, Kennedy declared “we have not done enough.”

Despite the loud protestations of Capehart and other Senate Republicans, who criticized Kennedy and the Democrats for demeaning the strength of the nation’s military and “selling the United States short,” Kennedy’s speech might have escaped the attention of most observers had it not been for Joseph Alsop. Alsop celebrated Kennedy’s speech in his nationally syndicated column, writing “that every thoughtful American ought to read and ponder” Kennedy’s speech and calling it “one of the most

18. Congress, Senate, Congressional Record (14 August 1958), 17574.
19. Ibid., 17571, 17572.
20. Ibid., 17574, 17575.
21. Regarding Capehart’s objections, see ibid., 17576.
remarkable ... that this country has heard since the end of the last war." Alsop also asserted that Kennedy was not “impeded by ... access to classified information” and was therefore able to speak frankly of the need to close the gap. The columnist’s kind words and deeds were not lost on the ambitious young senator. The missile gap speech, originally Alsop’s idea, was a clear political winner and Kennedy personally thanked the prominent journalist for “your very fine columns and your original suggestion.”

Kennedy’s missile gap speech would factor prominently in the midterm elections of 1958. When the Democratic National Committee asked Kennedy to distribute copies of the speech to party leaders and public officials, Kennedy expressed hope that the materials would help prepare Democrats on subjects that would “certainly figure in political debates across the nation.” In a cover letter sent to then-Governor Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, Kennedy characterized his speech on the missile gap as an attempt “to summarize the lag in our defense preparedness over the last six years of Republican rule, and the future implications this holds for our military and foreign policies.” Although he conceded that some Republicans had objected “to such warnings being sounded on the floor of the Senate,” Kennedy was convinced that these were “facts the public [needed] to know.”

Kennedy also called attention to his missile gap speech in the pages of The Reporter magazine. “I recently spoke on the Senate floor about . . . closing the military ‘gap,’” he explained, which he characterized as a “most pressing technological problem . . . which seems certain to continue to grow during the next five years.” In light of the gap, Kennedy tacitly endorsed a new military strategy, in sharp contrast to Eisenhower’s New Look. He urged readers to focus on “other instruments of our military power, including our capacity to wage limited war and to airlift troops to trouble spots immediately.” “[O]ur ability to maintain a balanced ratio of nuclear deterrence and our ability to defy the non-nuclear threat of the Soviet Union and China, especially in the years of 1960-1964,” he asserted, “must be vigilantly analyzed and corrected in the next two years.”

Kennedy also mentioned the missile gap in his own reelection campaign. During a speech in Massachusetts he called for a “step up” in U.S. missile development in order to address the danger posed by the “missile lag.” Repeating many of the same claims that he had made on the Senate floor a month earlier, Kennedy claimed that the missile lag placed the nation “in a position of grave peril.” The Soviets were continuing to increase their power relative to that of the United States, and this shift, he warned, might “open to them a new shortcut to world domination.” Kennedy openly questioned why,

in spite of these dangers, the Eisenhower administration was still emphasizing budgets over security.26

The missile gap combined with a deep recession to provide a dynamic one-two punch against Republican candidates in the midterm elections of 1958. In a stunning victory for the opposition party, the Democrats increased their majority in the House by nearly 50 seats, and they added another 16 members in the Senate. The results of the 1958 elections made Eisenhower’s dealings with Congress even more difficult during the final two years of his presidency.27 The groundwork for the Democrats’ victory had been laid in the weeks and months after Sputnik. The missile gap was a political winner. John F. Kennedy, who easily won reelection to the Senate, knew this as well as anyone. He was poised to continue to use the issue in 1959 and beyond.

The Eisenhower Administration Attempts to Close the Missile Gap

The missile gap lingered as a political issue because intelligence analysts could not reach a consensus on the nature, scope, and pace of the Soviet Union’s missile programs. For example, NIE 11-5-58, released in August 1958, considered what the Soviets were capable of producing, and this speculative estimate formed the basis for Defense Secretary Neil H. McElroy’s claim in early 1959 that the Soviets could have a three-to-one advantage in ICBMs over the U.S. in the coming years—a substantial missile gap.28 At the same time, McElroy stressed that the vast array of weapons in the U.S. arsenal ensured that there was no “deterrent gap.” The United States could deliver far more nuclear warheads to the Soviet Union than the Soviets could to American soil. Lacking military bases in the western hemisphere, the prospective Soviet nuclear deterrent was based entirely on ICBMs. By contrast, U.S. bombers and IRBMs based in Europe directly threatened the Soviet homeland. These weapons were safer and more reliable than first-generation liquid-fueled ICBMs such as the Atlas, and they could arrive over targets in the Soviet Union far faster than ICBMs launched from the United States. Members of the Eisenhower administration repeatedly made the point that there was no deterrent gap, but these arguments were lost on many contemporary observers. The point has likewise been missed by historians who focus too narrowly on the speculative estimates of Soviet ICBM strength issued during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

However, notwithstanding the confusion over the relative significance of the ICBM race, new evidence compiled by the Eisenhower administration in late 1959 increasingly indicated that there was no missile gap, even if one restricted one’s view to a comparison of U.S. and Soviet long-range missile programs only. Throughout the missile gap

controversy, Eisenhower had always doubted pessimistic intelligence reports that concluded that the Soviets were engaged in a “crash program” to build nuclear missiles. He knew that a more promising solid-fueled alternative would soon render such first-generation weapons obsolete. A similar belief in a crash building program, he frequently pointed out, had created the illusory bomber gap in 1955.29

Eisenhower’s confidence about the relatively limited nature of the Soviet build-up was bolstered by photography from the U-2 surveillance aircraft. When photos from the U-2 program failed to locate missile construction or testing sites in large numbers, this “failure” simply confirmed the president’s own suspicions. These findings were then reflected in a set of new intelligence estimates prepared in the autumn of 1959 in which projections of Soviet ICBM strength were revised substantially downward from previous reports.30

CIA Director Allen W. Dulles presented a summary of these draft estimates (NIEs 11-4-59 and 11-8-59) to the National Security Council (NSC) for the first time on January 7, 1960.31 The new estimates reflected that intelligence analysts had found no hard evidence that the Soviets had built as many missiles as their capabilities would allow. For example, the majority opinion of the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) noted the “deliberate and orderly tempo of the Soviet ICBM test-firing program” and found this to be consistent with the Soviets’ “observed policy” of maintaining balance “between the several branches of their military.” In other words there was no—and there had been no—“crash program” to build ICBMs within the Soviet Union.32

Not all agreed with the new findings, however, and this disagreement spilled over into the public domain. Although the USIB reached consensus on the number of ICBMs in the Soviet Union’s current inventory (estimating 50 ICBMs in inventory, and 35 of these on launchers, by mid-1960), considerable differences of opinion emerged in the out years. For example, a majority of the members of the Board predicted that the Soviets would have between 450 and 560 ICBMs in their inventory, and between 350 and 450 on launchers, by mid-1963, but Air Force Major General James H. Walsh, that service’s Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, countered that there would be 800 ICBMs in the Soviet inventory, and 640 on launchers, for the same period.33

The Air Force estimate was predicated on a substantially different reading of Soviet intentions than that of a majority of the Board, a panel that included senior Army, Navy, and Air Force officers, as well as representatives from the CIA and the Departments of State and Defense. In a lengthy footnote, Walsh argued that “the Soviet rulers [were] endeavoring to attain . . . a military superiority over the United States” so as to “enable them to either force their will on the United States through threat of destruction,” or

33. Ibid., 75.
to launch an attack so that “the United States as [a] world power would cease to exist.”

Although the majority opinion of the USIB as expressed in the main body of the intelligence estimate echoed Eisenhower’s own beliefs, the Air Force’s opposing point of view soon moved from the footnotes of a classified government report to the front pages and headlines of the nation’s leading newspapers.

The distortions and inconsistencies in contemporary news stories created by the Air Force’s spirited dissent posed a unique challenge for the administration. For example, a front page story in the *Washington Post* published less than a week after the NSC meeting correctly reported that Eisenhower had agreed to expand missile programs by “about one third,” but the assessments of Soviet missile strength as quoted in the same story were still based upon the flawed “old” intelligence estimates. *Post* reporter John G. Norris stated that “some estimates” showed the Soviets with “well over 1000 ICBMs by 1963,” but even the Air Force’s most pessimistic estimates, as reported only in the footnotes of the most recent NIE, had predicted Soviet missile strength at only 800 by 1963. Less than a month later, the *New York Times* reported that there was “clear evidence that the Russians [had] superiority in intercontinental ballistic missiles,” but the most current intelligence estimates stated that there was “no direct evidence” of Soviet ICBM deployment.

The media’s selective reading—or the selective leaking—of supposedly classified intelligence estimates complicated the administration’s attempts to set the record straight on the question of the missile gap. For example, when Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates informed the members of the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 20, 1960 that the Soviet Union had far fewer missiles than had been earlier estimated, the administration’s critics pounced. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson charged Gates with adopting a “dangerous new method for estimating Soviet” missile strength, and he declared “[t]he missile gap cannot be eliminated with the stroke of a pen.” Meanwhile, Senator Symington accused the administration of deliberately manipulating the intelligence estimate to mislead the public. The missile gap, he asserted, was greater than three to one in favor of the Soviets and growing. “The intelligence books have been juggled,” Symington concluded in a written statement, “so the budget books may be balanced.”

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34. Ibid., 74, footnote 5.
Within days, Joe Alsop also attacked the administration’s latest missile gap claims by charging Eisenhower with “gambling the national future” on questionable intelligence.\(^{40}\) Alsop then went to extraordinary lengths to promulgate his ideas among Washington’s elite, and he found a receptive audience in John Kennedy. When the columnist distributed a specially prepared booklet of his most recent missile gap articles to members of Congress, he received a relatively tepid response. The one exception to this rule was Kennedy. Whereas the Alsop files contain numerous form letters perfunctorily acknowledging receipt of the pamphlet, a personal, handwritten note from the senator stands out. On February 27, 1960, Kennedy wrote, “Thank you for sending me your series of articles on The Missile Gap. I have read these as published, but will read them again with great interest. You have done a great thing for the country and I hope we may see results. Sincerely, John.”\(^{41}\)

John F. Kennedy, the Missile Gap, and the Presidential Election of 1960

Alsop’s arguments about the missile gap resonated in John F. Kennedy’s mind. Just days after receiving Alsop’s missile gap pamphlet, Kennedy delivered a scathing critique of Eisenhower’s military budget on the floor of the Senate. The speech borrowed liberally from the Alsop series, but it also repeated many of the criticisms that Kennedy had been making for some time. For example, when he formally announced his candidacy for the presidency on January 2, 1960, Kennedy proclaimed the Eisenhower administration’s most recent military budget to be too low by “a substantial margin.” Regarding the missile gap, Kennedy argued that Russia would have an important and significant “missile lead,” but he expressed hope that this would not be decisive.\(^{42}\) Kennedy repeated this theme the following day on the NBC television program “Meet the Press,” arguing that the United States was “going to be faced with a missile gap which will make the difficulties of negotiating with the Soviet Union and the Chinese in the 1960s extremely difficult.”\(^{43}\)

Kennedy’s missile gap speech of February 29, 1960 demonstrated his enthusiasm for continuing to criticize the popular president. Although Kennedy agreed with Eisenhower’s contention that the current mix of forces was “undoubtedly” far superior to that of the Soviets, he still believed that there were other areas where the United States


\(^{41}\) JFK to JWA, 27 February 1960, Box 157, “Subject Files, ‘Missile Gap’ Pamphlet File,” Alsop Papers.


was deficient. In particular, Kennedy was most concerned about the nation’s shortcomings in the field of ballistic missiles, which, he said, were “likely to take on critical dimensions in the near future.”

Kennedy admitted that “[w]e cannot be certain that the Soviets will have . . . the tremendous lead in missile striking power which they give every evidence of building—and we cannot be certain that they will use that lead to threaten or launch an attack upon the United States.” Nevertheless, he disagreed mightily with those who argued that such uncertainties provided justification for holding defense spending below a certain level. Counting himself among those who called “for a higher defense budget,” and who were accused of “taking a chance on spending money unnecessarily,” Kennedy turned this criticism around. “[T]hose who oppose these expenditures,” he declared, “are taking a chance on our very survival as a nation.”

For Kennedy, the only real question was over which “gamble” the nation should take. While it would be “easier” to gamble with survival because it saved money now, and balanced the budget now, Kennedy proposed an alternate course. “I would prefer,” he said, “that we gamble with our money—that we increase our defense budget this year—even though we have no absolute knowledge that we shall ever need it—and even though we would prefer to spend the money on other critical needs” including “schools, hospitals, parks and dams.” Predicting that the total needed to close the missile gap would be less than one percent of gross national product, Kennedy deemed this “an investment in peace that we can afford—and cannot avoid.”

Specifically, Kennedy called for increased funding for a number of missile programs in order, in his words, to “cover the current gap as best we can.” He went on:

“Whether the missile gap—*that everyone agrees now exists*—will become critical in 1961, 1962, or 1963 . . . whether the gap can be brought to a close . . . in 1964 or in 1965 or ever—on all these questions experts may sincerely differ . . . [T]he point is that we are facing a gap on which we are gambling with our survival.”

Kennedy stressed that time was short, yet he was confident that the situation that “should never have been permitted to arise” could be resolved if the nation took immediate action. He implored his fellow senators, and the nation, “If we move now, if we are willing to gamble with our money instead of our survival, we have, I am sure, the wit and resource to maintain the minimum conditions for our survival, for our alliances, and for the active pursuit of peace.” He stressed that his was not “a call for despair.” Rather, it was a call for action, “a call based upon the belief that at this moment in history our security transcends normal budgetary considerations.”

45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 1-2.
47. Ibid., 2-3 (emphasis added).
Kennedy closed by reaffirming his faith that measures to increase defense spending and boost the nation’s weapons arsenal would ultimately enable the nation to turn toward disarmament, to “an end to war,” and to “an end to these vast military departments and expenditures.” “We are taking a gamble with our money,” Kennedy reaffirmed, “But the alternative [was] to gamble with our lives.”

As had been the case in August 1958, when Kennedy first spoke about the missile gap on the floor of the Senate, the senator’s continued belief in the missile gap in early 1960 was based on newspaper accounts and information in the public domain that did not accurately reflect the uncertainty within the intelligence community over the nature of the Soviet threat. For example, whereas Kennedy confidently claimed that “everyone” believed in the missile gap, contemporary intelligence estimates were not so sure. Although some analysts had long doubted that there was a missile gap, they lacked conclusive evidence to confirm their suspicions. The ranks of the missile gap skeptics in the intelligence community grew in late 1959 and early 1960. For these individuals, anxious pessimism about the U.S. strategic position relative to the Soviet Union shifted to cautious optimism. Likewise, a number of officials within the Eisenhower administration realized by early 1960 that there was no missile gap. When these individuals attempted to make their case, however, their claims were drowned out by contradictory testimony from senior military leaders, and by misinformed voices in the media.

As he was not privy to this ongoing debate within the Eisenhower administration, John F. Kennedy would not have known any of this. Dependent as he was upon news stories, and particularly given his propensity to believe Joseph Alsop’s inflated estimates of Soviet missile strength, Kennedy could confidently declare that “[E]very objective committee of knowledgeable and unbiased observers . . . every private or public study; every objective inquiry by independent military analysts; . . . every book and article by scholars in the field,” had “stated candidly and bluntly that our defense budget is not adequate to give us the protection for our security [and] support for our diplomatic objectives.”

Kennedy went into the presidential campaign believing in the need to rectify the presumed shortcomings in the nation’s defenses. He was confident that the nation would rally to his call to do more, and, in this context, the missile gap was a significant component of Kennedy’s campaign strategy. Long before the campaign ever began, Kennedy had linked himself intellectually with those who repeatedly argued that the nation was threatened by a missile gap. His campaign staff included some of the most vocal proponents of the missile gap. Although the term “missile gap” appears only five times in

50. For example, Raymond Garthoff, working in the Office of National Estimates, explained that there was no missile gap to a Democratic Senate study group in 1959, but he could not persuade Senator Symington, who was present for the briefing, and who subsequently questioned Garthoff about his claims. Raymond Garthoff, A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2001), 64. See also Raymond Garthoff, Assessing the Adversary: Estimates by the Eisenhower Administration of Soviet Intentions and Capabilities (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 47, footnote 123.
the index to Kennedy’s campaign speeches, his repeated references to declining American prestige, of which the perceived missile gap was a crucial component, were a staple of his campaign. All available evidence suggests that Kennedy believed that a missile gap existed in 1960, and not simply that there would be a gap in the future if certain actions were not taken.

Kennedy did not close the door on competing points of view, however. He was willing, indeed anxious, to gain a greater understanding of the nature of the Soviet threat, and he actively sought information from classified sources. The Eisenhower administration granted his requests for special briefings on several occasions after Kennedy secured the Democratic presidential nomination in July 1960. The first of these briefings occurred on July 23, 1960 at the Kennedy family’s Hyannisport, Massachusetts estate. However, although CIA Director Dulles left no detailed record of what was said, any attempt to draw on the latest intelligence estimate would have revealed the deep divisions within the intelligence community over the question of the missile gap.53

NIE 11-8-60, issued on August 1, 1960, reflected even greater uncertainty than the February estimate (NIE 11-8-59), noting, for example, that the intelligence community had found “no direct evidence of the present or planned future rate of [ICBM] production.” Likewise, the authors revealed that they had not observed any “ICBM-related troop training activities,” and that they could not identify even a single operational ICBM launching site.54 If the February estimate had been correct, the Soviets would have had some 35 missiles on launchers by mid-1960. As a formerly classified study of the missile gap conceded, “with this much deployment,” it should have been “possible to find some confirming evidence.” But the U-2 program, abruptly halted after Francis Gary Powers’ ill-fated flight, never photographed even a single deployed ICBM. Similar attempts to gather hard evidence of Soviet missile development, including information from human sources and communications intercepts, also failed to confirm the existence of an operational Soviet ICBM program.55

In a confidential memorandum to Eisenhower written shortly after their Hyannisport meeting, Dulles revealed that Kennedy had a particular interest in information on the missile gap. Dulles, continuing his long-standing practice of not attempting to resolve the question of the gap, focused solely on estimates of Soviet missile production. He informed Kennedy that “the Defense Department was the competent authority” on the question of the missile gap.56 But later, when General Earle Wheeler gave Kennedy


54. The debate over what Dulles told Kennedy during this and subsequent briefings has been the focus of considerable historical debate, based entirely on hearsay and speculation. There is no documentary evidence to establish whether Dulles told Kennedy that there was, or was not, a missile gap. See John L. Helgerson, Getting to Know the President: CIA Briefings of Presidential Candidates, 1952-1992 (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1996), 22 May 1996, http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/briefing/. Chapter three specifically discusses the 1960 presidential campaign, http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/briefing/cia-6.htm.

55. Powers was supposed to photograph a suspected ICBM site at Plesetsk. Ironically, this proved to be the only site at which the first-generation Soviet ICBM, the SS-6, was ever deployed, but this was not known until mid-1961. Jackson, 111-12.

an intelligence briefing on behalf of the Defense Department, he allegedly told Kennedy that there was no missile gap, and that the source of the inflated estimates of Soviet missile production came from the CIA, not the Pentagon.57

It is understandable, therefore, if Kennedy was frustrated by the confusing signals emanating from the Eisenhower administration. The classified intelligence briefings failed to alter Kennedy’s public position on the missile gap, and there is no evidence that Kennedy gave any greater credence to Eisenhower’s assertions that there was no gap. Instead, Kennedy continued to refer to the missile gap, and the related prestige gap, until the very last days of the campaign.

Semantic differences over what Kennedy did or did not say about the missile gap obscure the true meaning of the issue within the broader context. Kennedy’s references to a missile gap—either real or impending—were addressed to the entire defense establishment, not simply missile and rocket forces. Inherent in his charge that the Eisenhower administration was not adequately providing for the nation’s defenses were two crucial assumptions: one, that “a greater effort” in national defense was both necessary and wise; and two, that an over-reliance on nuclear weapons threatened to undermine the nation’s ability to conduct wars in the future. Neither of these assumptions was considered extreme at the time.

Kennedy also questioned Eisenhower’s judgment that excessive defense spending threatened the nation’s economic security. The Democrat’s promise to spend more on defense in order to close the missile gap was intended, in part, to appeal to workers displaced by the New Look.58 In this way, Kennedy’s use of the missile gap in his presidential campaign was part of a calculated political strategy that combined both economic and strategic critiques of the policies of the Eisenhower administration. The missile gap issue worked for Democrats. And the underlying issues of which Kennedy spoke—concerns over declining U.S. prestige, and doubts about economic growth—were very real. It is not surprising, therefore, that Kennedy chose to focus on these concerns for his own political gain.59

Kennedy, McNamara, and the End of the Missile Gap

Although John Kennedy won the presidential election of 1960, his strategy of using the missile gap as a vehicle for criticizing Eisenhower’s defense policies carried risks. Less than three months after the election, John Kennedy came to appreciate these risks when, as president, he was forced to contend with the enduring myth of the missile gap—a myth that he himself had unconsciously helped to build.

Jerome Wiesner, a physicist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a member of Eisenhower’s permanent Science Advisory Committee, had direct access

57. Wheeler OH, JFKL. Cited in Reeves, President Kennedy, 58-59.
59. For a similar argument, see Ball, 22.
to some of the intelligence information circulating within the Eisenhower administration. Granted special permission to advise the Kennedy campaign, Wiesner had tried to convince Kennedy's advisers and speechwriters to downplay the missile gap.\textsuperscript{60} Then, when given an opportunity to speak with Kennedy directly in early February 1961, Wiesner explained that the missile gap was a fiction. The new president greeted the news with a single expletive “delivered more in anger than in relief.”\textsuperscript{61}

Kennedy’s reaction suggests that he knew that the truth about the missile gap would soon become evident. By February 1961, this truth was emerging on many fronts. Charles Hitch recalled that the president had telephoned him in early February, only days after the Wiesner briefing. During the conversation, Kennedy conceded that there was no missile gap. By this time, Hitch, an analyst formerly with the Rand Corporation, had come to the same conclusion. He was briefed on the missile gap when he first got to the Pentagon in January 1961. “It was perfectly apparent,” Hitch told Gregg Herken in 1981, “that there was no missile gap.”\textsuperscript{62}

Eisenhower always suspected as much. He stressed that the missile gap distorted the true nature of the strategic balance by discounting the diversity of forces at the United States’ disposal. He returned to this theme over and over again during the final months—and even until the very last days—of his presidency.\textsuperscript{63}

The incoming president remained unconvinced. Assuming that Eisenhower had “cooked the books” for political reasons to show that the United States had a nuclear advantage over the Soviet Union, Kennedy dismissed his predecessor’s repeated assertions that there was no missile gap. At base, Kennedy simply did not believe that Eisenhower and other members of the Republican administration were telling him the truth. The disagreements within the government, some of which spilled into the public domain, did nothing to discourage Kennedy from his belief that the missile gap was real.

However, when a growing number of Kennedy administration officials had had an opportunity to review new information about the missile gap, in late January and early February 1961, and when this new information raised doubts about the existence of a missile gap, Kennedy was caught in a political dilemma that was largely of his own making. Having rejected Eisenhower’s missile gap denials, and having advocated a major increase in military expenditure to close the presumed gap as a candidate, Kennedy, as president, could not simply dismiss the missile gap by declaring that the United States deterrent was, in fact, superior to that of the Soviet Union. Lacking political leverage

\textsuperscript{60} Wiesner later admitted that he was “astounded” when Eisenhower granted his request to advise the Democratic candidate. He concluded that Eisenhower wanted to provide Kennedy with an indirect conduit to information about the missile gap. Herken, 133.

\textsuperscript{61} Quoted in ibid., 140. This quote was taken from Herken’s interview with Wiesner conducted 9 February 1982, in Wiesner’s office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Wiesner recollected that the briefing took place in early February. E-mail from Greg Herken to author, dated 25 April 2000, in author’s possession (hereafter cited as Herken e-mail).

\textsuperscript{62} Herken, 148. From Herken interview with Hitch conducted 22 July 1981, at Hitch’s home in Berkeley, CA. Herken e-mail.

\textsuperscript{63} For example, in his face-to-face meetings with Kennedy during the interregnum, Eisenhower specifically argued that the Polaris submarine provided the incoming president with a nearly invincible second-strike weapon. Geoffrey Perret, \textit{Eisenhower} (New York: Random House, 1999), 600.
over a recalcitrant Congress, and confronted by military leaders—such as Air Force Generals Curtis LeMay and Thomas Power—who wanted to deploy thousands of ICBMs, Kennedy was under considerable pressure to deliver on his campaign promises to greatly expand the nation’s nuclear arsenal. This pressure persisted even after Kennedy was told the truth about the gap.

Kennedy was also interested in augmenting the nation’s non-nuclear forces. The newly elected president had profound misgivings about the efficacy of nuclear deterrence in an era of approaching nuclear parity between the two superpowers. Believing that nuclear weapons alone were not sufficient to deter Soviet adventurism in the Third World, Kennedy was committed to an expansion of limited war-fighting capabilities. Therefore, Kennedy intended to push through a supplemental military spending package that he still deemed crucial. In this context, the perception of a missile gap continued to have political value.

Kennedy’s hopes that the truth about the missile gap would remain concealed from the general public, however, were almost foiled by a misstep on the part of his newly appointed Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. A registered Republican, McNamara had cast his ballot for Kennedy in the November election.64 Beyond this, however, the secretary professed to have had minimal exposure to politics prior to his arrival in Washington in January 1961. This lack of knowledge caused problems for the new administration when McNamara met for the first time with a group of Washington reporters in the late afternoon of February 6, 1961.65

McNamara’s first assignment upon coming to Washington had been to study the missile gap. He set out on this task with typical zeal, assisted by his deputy Roswell Gilpatric, a former undersecretary of the Air Force in the Truman administration, and General James H. Walsh, the head of Air Force intelligence.66 Not surprisingly, one of the reporters’ first questions concerned the missile gap. We should not talk about missile gaps, McNamara replied, “There’s no missile gap.”67

The reporters, some of whom had dutifully promulgated the story of the gap for nearly three years, were taken aback. One pointed out that the gap was understood to include future, as well as current missile strength. Another stressed that the gap referred to the Soviets’ capability to produce missiles, not the relative strength or the destructive power of the nuclear force in being. McNamara did not budge. Instead he reiterated that there was no missile gap, regardless of the terminology used. When the reporters pointed out that this information contravened what “your party” and one of the president’s best friends (understood to be Joe Alsop) had been saying for years, McNamara said with a chuckle, “I still manage to keep most people guessing whether

65. On McNamara’s first meeting with the Washington press corps, see for example, Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 97-99; Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 58; and Bottome, 151.
66. Robert McNamara, interview by Deborah Shapley and David Alan Rosenberg, 1 May 1985, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as McNamara interview).
I’m a Republican or Democrat so I can speak with ease on this subject.” McNamara left the meeting thinking his first encounter with the Washington press corps had been a success.68

He was wrong. McNamara would have been better advised to have avoided the group, and the subject of the missile gap, completely. The president first learned of McNamara’s encounter with the newsmen when he read a front page story in the *New York Times* under the headline “Kennedy Defense Study Finds No Evidence of a ‘Missile Gap.’” Although reporter Jack Raymond had carefully avoided citing “administration” sources in the story he filed, *Times* editors had changed the lead in time for the late city edition of the paper after both the AP and UP wire stories had attributed the news to the Kennedy administration. It was this late edition of the *Times* that greeted Kennedy on the morning of February 7.

Some accounts state that Kennedy blasted McNamara over the phone, and McNamara himself claimed that he offered to resign in the wake of his gaffe.69 The experienced politician Kennedy, however, attributed McNamara’s ill-advised remarks to political naiveté, and he quickly moved to put the mistake behind them. Later that week, Kennedy informed reporters during his regularly scheduled press conference that McNamara had told him “that no study had been [completed] . . . which would lead to any conclusion . . . as to whether there is a gap or not.” Kennedy asserted, therefore, that “it would be premature to reach a judgment as to whether there is a gap or not a gap.”70

Jack Raymond, convinced that McNamara had spoken truthfully, was troubled by this reversal. Raymond noted that Gilpatric, “a former Air Force Undersecretary and a known Air Force advocate,” was present at the briefing but offered no additional information to clarify what McNamara had said. Two other Department of Defense officials present, public relations specialists Arthur Sylvester and Orville Splitt, likewise refused to intervene, saying only that the secretary’s remarks were “for background” and not “off the record,” essentially clearing the way for the information to be published, albeit on a “not for attribution” basis. Raymond concluded, therefore, that there had not been a misunderstanding or misstatement on McNamara’s part; rather, it was clear to the veteran newsman that McNamara had had access to the most up-to-date intelligence information, and this information proved that there was no missile gap.71

68. Ibid., 2.
69. Ibid.; Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 58-59; McNamara interview. McNamara later stated that the *Washington Evening Star* was the first to break the story, but the meeting occurred after the evening papers had gone to press. Robert McNamara, with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 20-21. McGeorge Bundy and Adam Yarmolinsky both consider the incident to have been an honest mistake, a consequence of McNamara’s political naiveté, and they claim that Kennedy was not seriously upset by the gaffe. McGeorge Bundy, interview by author, 10 April 1996, by phone, tape recording (hereafter cited as Bundy interview); Adam Yarmolinsky, interview by author, 23 April 1996, by phone, tape recording (hereafter cited as Yarmolinsky interview).
71. Raymond memo. Gilpatric joined the campaign in the summer of 1960, having supported Stuart Symington up to the time of the convention. One of his first assignments was the drafting of a major foreign policy speech for Kennedy; Gilpatric interview, JFKL-OH.
Notwithstanding Raymond's concerns, at least one journalist took pleasure in McNamara's plain-spoken interpretation of the information at his disposal. Publishing executive and commentator Charles J.V. Murphy candidly told his long-time friend Air Force General Lauris Norstad that "Poor McNamara [had] put his foot into it at his first off-the-record press conference." Calling the missile gap issue "the product of political fakery," Murphy concluded that McNamara had done "the country a service by disclosing his private judgment," but Murphy saw an opportunity for the Kennedy administration to use the fear of the mythical missile gap in order to reinvigorate American defenses and to reassert American leadership abroad.72

Meanwhile, Joe Alsop, whom the reporters had singled out during the McNamara meeting as a central figure behind the missile gap, issued a hasty clarification in his column that appeared on February 10. Calling the McNamara press briefing "the first bad bobble of the Kennedy Administration," Alsop suggested that the intelligence bureaucracy had fooled the new defense secretary into believing that there was no gap.73

All told, McNamara's premature exposure of the missile gap myth attracted relatively little attention and the issue quickly faded from public view. As Murphy had hoped, Kennedy pressed on with his promised defense build-up in the spring and summer of 1961, but he downplayed the significance of the missile gap in his push for more defense spending.74 Kennedy made no explicit references to the missile gap in his press conferences and in his public pronouncements during the spring and summer of 1961.

Meanwhile, more information about the missile gap trickled in from a variety of sources, including improved photographic intelligence from new reconnaissance satellites. In addition, Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, a senior officer in the Chief Intelligence Directorate (GRU), alleged that the Soviet ICBM program lagged far behind that of the United States. Penkovsky, who possessed a deep knowledge of certain aspects of the Soviet Union's military and diplomatic affairs, became the United States' leading human intelligence asset in the spring and summer of 1961. He apparently had no knowledge of the debate raging within the United States over the question of the missile gap. According to Jerrold Schecter and Peter Deriabin, the argument that the Soviets had a strategic superiority over the United States, "would have been unbelievable" to the senior Soviet defector. Penkovsky knew that Khrushchev was bluffing, and he declared that the Soviets "did not have the capability of firing even 'one or two' ICBMs." Penkovsky backed up these claims in May 1961 by handing over to the CIA three rolls of microfilm that provided a clearer picture of the Soviet missile and rocket programs.75

73. Merry, 365-70.
But while much of the conventional wisdom holds that this additional material received during the summer of 1961 proved conclusively that there was no missile gap, it is more accurate to argue that this information merely confirmed what was apparent to many within the Kennedy administration by early February 1961, and had been clear to a number of individuals within the Eisenhower administration a full year earlier, in January 1960. Although new satellite photography conclusively showed that the Soviet ICBM program lagged far behind that of the United States, it is misleading to suggest that this new information enabled the Kennedy administration to reveal the truth about the missile gap in October 1961. After all, Dwight Eisenhower did not have access to satellite photographs in 1958 or 1959 or 1960. Instead, Eisenhower took note of the fact that the U-2 program had failed to locate even a single deployed ICBM. He combined this knowledge with his own insights gained through his face-to-face meetings with Khrushchev and others, and he correctly concluded that the missile gap was pure fiction.

Kennedy came around to this view after taking his place in the Oval Office, but he postponed a public admission that he had been mistaken until geopolitical events prompted the administration to explode the missile gap myth. Following the disastrous Vienna summit in June, and the subsequent tensions over Berlin in the late summer of 1961, Kennedy resolved to affirm America’s strategic leadership by revealing the truth about the global balance of power. On October 21, 1961, before a meeting of the Business Council at Hot Springs, Virginia, Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric stated explicitly that the United States knew that the Soviets had neither a quantitative nor a qualitative superiority in nuclear missile technology. Delineating the diversity of U.S. nuclear forces, Gilpatric explained that a “sneak attack could not effectively disarm” the United States.

The message from the administration for both foreign and domestic audiences was clear—there was no missile gap. This message was repeated by Secretary of State Dean Rusk during a television interview the following day. In the same week, Robert McNamara asserted that the United States had “nuclear power several times that of the Soviet Union.” The president himself implicitly reinforced the administration’s new line on the missile gap when he declared during a press conference on November 8, 1961 that he would “not trade places with anyone in the world,” although he did not publicly declare that the missile gap had been a fiction all along.

Observers in the media were more blunt. In the lead to an analytical piece in the New York Times, reporter Hanson Baldwin said of the Kennedy administration’s latest revelations that the missile gap “which played a major part in the last Presidential campaign, was finally declared—as many had long claimed—not to be an issue at all.” By

76. This is the finding of a formerly classified CIA history of the missile gap, prepared in 1973. See Jackson, 120-21, 125, 127, 129.
this time even Joe Alsop, the self-described inventor of the missile gap, had acknowledged that the Soviets had fewer than 50 intercontinental missiles, where before he had asserted that they might have had as many as 200.81

The Long, Slow Demise of the Missile Gap

Over 18 months later, long after the public and the media had lost interest, Kennedy still harbored doubts about his use of the missile gap issue. Thinking of his own reelection bid, Kennedy wanted ready responses to those who would charge that he had manufactured the missile gap solely for political gain.82 Beginning in late 1962, Kennedy pressed for answers. He asked national security adviser McGeorge Bundy for a “history of the missile gap controversy.” Kennedy explained: “I would like to know its genesis” including “what previous government officials put forth their views and how we came to the judgment that there was a missile gap.”83 From these and subsequent questions posed to key advisers, Kennedy seems to have been genuinely interested in understanding why he had been so badly mistaken. The answer is found in a series of studies written for the president during the early spring and summer of 1963 that focused on the confusing, and often conflicting, information circulating in the public domain in the late 1950s.

For example, in a formal memorandum for the president, Robert McNamara determined “that the missile gap was based on a comparison between U.S. ICBM strength as then programmed, and reasonable, although erroneous, estimates of prospective Soviet ICBM strength which were generally accepted by responsible officials.”84 While the earlier estimates of Soviet ICBM strength had “turned out to be wrong,” McNamara hastened to add that these estimates were based on “the best intelligence information available.” Ignoring Eisenhower’s repeated denials, the secretary claimed that “the anticipated existence of a missile gap . . . was not even a matter of debate.”85

Further, McNamara believed that the “weaknesses of overall defense policy” were “equally important.” He noted that independent observers had expressed the view that the nation’s defensive posture was severely in need of strengthening. “The term ‘missile gap,’” McNamara explained, “became the symbol of what critics felt to be fundamental flaws in the then-U.S. defense policy.” Therefore, even if the missile gap in its “narrower senses” did not materialize, the “overall defense deficiencies . . . very definitely did exist” and were a concern for individuals “of all political views.”86 “Whatever may be said (in

83. Memo for Mr. Bundy, 11 February 1963, Missile Gap 2/63-5/63 Folder, NSF, D&A, Box 298, JFKL. There does not appear to have been any specific episode or event that prompted Kennedy’s renewed interest in the gap, but both McGeorge Bundy and Adam Yarmolinsky suspect that the Cuban missile crisis may have been a factor. Bundy interview; Yarmolinsky interview.
85. Ibid., 1. On Eisenhower’s attempts to refute the missile gap, see Drew, 335.
hindsight) of the reality of the ‘missile gap,’” McNamara concluded, “there is no question about the reality of the ‘defense gap’ which required vigorous action by the incoming administration to correct.”

Dissatisfied with this first attempt, Kennedy specifically asked for more information on “the immediate period when we said there was no missile gap—Dec 60-Feb 61.”

Here, Kennedy was referring to the three months between the election and the time of McNamara’s press conference. As discussed above, several individuals within the Kennedy administration, including Charles Hitch and Jerome Wiesner, had privately concluded during this period that there was no gap, and they had communicated their findings to Kennedy. Hitch claimed that Kennedy concurred with this assessment.

However, when McNamara had made public these findings in early February during the off-the-record press briefing, the White House alleged that no study on the missile gap had been completed, and that it would be “premature” to reach a judgment on the question of the gap.

Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense Adam Yarmolinsky responded to the president’s request for more information on this crucial period. While acknowledging that both administrations had now denied the existence of the missile gap, Yarmolinsky argued that the more important issue was Eisenhower’s fundamental faith in the adequacy of the United States’ defense posture. By contrast, the Kennedy administration was publicly committed to improving U.S. defenses. “Thus, although there was little difference in what Defense officials said about the missile gap before and after January 1961, there were major differences in what was done about the missile gap and the whole range of defense deficiencies which this term had come to symbolize.”

Upon closer analysis, the more relevant question concerns the alleged “defense deficiencies” that had been overstated by Senator Kennedy in the late 1950s and during the presidential campaign of 1960, and that were partially attributable to his mistaken belief in the missile gap. This belief was seriously shaken in February 1961, before the “defense deficiencies” were corrected. Faced with an opportunity to rein in the nuclear “overkill” that had begun during Eisenhower’s administration, Kennedy chose instead to spend more on nuclear weapons. He also embarked upon a program of augmenting the nuclear deterrent strategy with a conventional capability that had been reduced during the Eisenhower years.

It can be argued that these decisions to increase military spending were made with undue haste; they were not made without debate. Several within the administration...

87. Ibid., 1.
91. Desmond Ball in particular criticized the unnecessary haste of Kennedy’s defense budget preparations; see Ball, 125-26.
questioned the need for more ICBMs in early 1961 after they, too, reviewed the intelligence data first compiled during the Eisenhower administration. The intelligence estimates developed in late 1959 and early 1960, which reflected the majority opinion of those within the intelligence community, provided little basis for a continued faith in the missile gap. After January 1960, many individuals with access to classified reports had begun to question the belief that the Soviets were embarked on an enormous missile buildup. In other words, to borrow from the language of the McNamara memo, the “reasonable, although erroneous, estimates” that had counted Soviet ICBMs in the hundreds and thousands had been dismissed by some “responsible officials” a full year before John Kennedy moved into the White House.

Perhaps mindful of these inconsistencies, Kennedy continued his search for a particular interpretation of the origins and end of the missile gap that would have reflected most favorably on himself and his administration. In late March 1963, the president asked about the “status” of the missile gap study as well as an “appraisal of the military and space deficiencies which existed in January 1961.” In particular, Kennedy wanted to justify “the budget increases” that had been “required to overcome these deficiencies.” Still later, he told Bundy that he wanted “to be able to demonstrate that there was a military and intelligence lag in the previous administration that started the missile gap.”

A formal response to the president’s tasking emerged from the office of Paul Nitze, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, in late May 1963. In a report entitled “But Where Did the Missile Gap Go?,” Nitze’s assistant Lawrence McQuade judged the concern associated with the missile gap to have been justified, “a serious phenomena [sic] calling for significant shifts in our defense posture to decrease U.S. vulnerability.”

By failing to resolve this question, McQuade also failed to determine whether Kennedy’s defense spending increases proposed during the first few months of 1961 were necessary to ensure American security. McQuade argued, nonetheless, that the alarm associated with the missile gap was “amply justified” in part because of the necessity to “allow for a wide range of possibilities when there is a dearth of evidence on which to base the required estimates.” In effect, McQuade held that it was better to risk spending

92. During a meeting in February 1961 to discuss the proposed missile force, Herbert York was prepared to argue that the force could be cut in half. Bundy aide Carl Kaysen, along with science advisers Jerome Wiesner and Spurgeon Keeny, believed that the U.S. needed no more than 400 ICBMs to deter the Russians, but recommended 600 out of appreciation for the political pressures on the president. Herken, 153-55.


95. McQuade to Nitze, 22.

96. Ibid., 21 (emphasis in original).
too much money on defense than to risk national security by spending too little. This was precisely the same argument that John Kennedy had made during the late 1950s. “The phenomenon of the missile gap and its disappearance,” McQuade concluded, “were understandable and legitimate in the light of the facts as seen at the relevant time.”

While McQuade researched and wrote his report, Kennedy grew impatient; on June 3 he again asked Bundy about the report on the missile gap. Two weeks later, Paul Nitze followed up on McQuade’s report to offer his own interpretation, concluding, in part, that “Senator Kennedy’s statements on defense and the missile gap in the late 1950s were sensible and responsible.” Then, in a series of appendices, Nitze noted the many instances from the public record in which “responsible people” both inside and outside the government had expressed “concern over the U.S. lag in long-range missiles.” In short, Nitze concluded, “there is a substantial public record during the late 1950s to support a legitimate concern about the lag in the U.S. ICBM program behind that of the Soviets and a concern for the implication of such a lag on our defense posture.”

Air Force Major William Y. Smith, an adviser to both Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Maxwell Taylor and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, concurred with Nitze’s conclusions. In a memo dated June 20, 1963, Smith argued that concern about the missile gap was reasonable and justified and he stressed that there was “ample evidence on the public record . . . to substantiate why many people believed that the US was, or would be, behind the USSR in the production and deployment of ICBMs.”

Smith cited several sources of information “that would have persuaded a member of Congress in the late 1950s that a missile gap would exist.” He noted that public testimony and statements by government officials were often contradictory. Further, published works by knowledgeable defense critics, and intelligence briefings before Congress, also contributed to a belief in the missile gap. Administration denials were suspect, Smith argued, because they came from an “Executive Branch committed to hold[ing] defense expenditures to a minimum.” Therefore, he concluded, “officials of the Eisenhower Administration themselves created the environment and made the case that there was a missile gap.” Smith’s unambiguous conclusions from the above evidence reiterated what Nitze had determined just days earlier: “There were valid reasons,” Smith observed, “which led individuals to accept the existence of a missile gap in the late 1950s.”

Because Smith’s research focused on the administration’s public defense for Kennedy’s erroneous belief in the missile gap, he recommended a strategy for “developing a case to remind the public of the then available evidence.” Concerning McNamara’s

97. Ibid., 23.
98. Memorandum for Mr. Bundy, 3 June 1963, Missile Gap, 6/63-7/63, NSF, D&A, Box 298, JFKL.
100. Ibid., 3.
102. Ibid.
statements of early 1961, Smith implied that the secretary had never intended to suggest in early February 1961 that the missile gap no longer existed. Kennedy, Smith reminded the president, had said at the time that “he would reserve judgment [on the missile gap] until a study then under way had been completed.” Further, Smith contended, McNamara’s public statement in April 1961 before the House Appropriations Committee that the missile gap remained had provided the president with “some maneuver room on the issue about what the Secretary did or did not say in February.”

Smith returned to the issue of the missile gap less than three weeks later by assembling an extensive collection of public materials to bolster the Kennedy administration’s contention that the missile gap was a legitimate concern in late 1960 and early 1961. Smith was confident that the public record would “support the case that a missile gap generally was foreseen” and he advised against declassifying the CIA briefings that were given before Congress in 1959 and 1960 after he observed that Kennedy had not been present for the hearings. If the public record was ultimately deemed insufficient, however, Smith suggested that “adroit references” could be made to classified materials presented in early 1960 which “served only to confirm” doubts about the missile gap. In particular, Smith recommended that “several ‘authoritative’ scholarly articles, or even a Congressional report [be] quietly floated over the next year which would add . . . to the public record, and which . . . could confirm any figures . . . that now are available only in classified form.”

Finally, Kennedy had what he wanted. His repeated requests for a history of the missile gap that demonstrated that there was “a military and intelligence lag in the previous administration that started the missile gap” had been met. The information assembled by McNamara, Yarmolinsky, McQuade, Nitze, and Smith would have provided the president with the ammunition necessary to defend his position during the upcoming presidential campaign. The missile gap had finally been closed.

Kennedy was never able to make the case, in Paul Nitze’s words, that his “statements on defense and the missile gap in the late 1950s were sensible and responsible,” but his campaign pledge to spend more on the nation’s defenses was on his agenda on November 22, 1963. The text of a luncheon speech that Kennedy was to have delivered in Fort Worth celebrates his administration’s success in modernizing and expanding the nation’s strategic forces, and therefore provides a glimpse into Kennedy’s final thoughts on the related subject of the missile gap.

Conclusions

According to Army General Maxwell Taylor, John F. Kennedy once asked his National Security Council, “Who ever believed in the ‘missile gap’?” This evocative

103. Ibid.
question was answered over 40 years ago. In July 1963, Major William Smith concluded, simply, “The nation believed there was a missile gap and was determined to close it.” Likewise, as this article has shown, John F. Kennedy believed in the missile gap, and he was determined to close it.

Kennedy spoke often of the missile gap, beginning in late 1957. He made particularly effective use of the issue in his successful presidential campaign of 1960. Kennedy rejected President Eisenhower’s repeated claims that there was no gap. He believed that the Eisenhower administration was deliberately downplaying the risks posed by the gap. He chose instead to listen to the counsel of those who did not have access to the full range of classified data on the nature and scope of the Soviets’ missile programs. Kennedy was especially influenced by Joseph Alsop, the missile gap’s most vociferous salesman. Although Alsop held fast to his belief that Eisenhower had “gambled” the nation’s security on questionable intelligence estimates, even after these assessments were proved correct, this study has shown that Kennedy harbored doubts about his own mistaken belief in the missile gap. These doubts prompted the creation of several internal memoranda that sought to explain the origins of the gap.

In the spring and summer of 1961, the Kennedy administration proceeded with its promised defense build-up—originally designed to close the missile gap—because the president and many of his advisers believed that changes to the nation’s military were needed regardless of the missile gap. When Robert McNamara prematurely disclosed the truth about the gap in February 1961, the Kennedy administration scrambled to “correct” the impression that the United States possessed an overwhelming military superiority over the Soviet Union. They did so because the threat of a missile gap provided useful political cover for the administration against those who might oppose their defense spending increases. The president was primarily motivated, however, by his desire to avoid the embarrassment of having to admit that he had been wrong all along. He was mindful that the political environment—an environment that he helped to create—expected bold action to build up the United States’ military forces.

The missile gap was a myth. What has proved to have been a myth for historians, however, was nonetheless very real for people living in the late 1950s. Despite Eisenhower’s repeated protestations to the contrary, millions of Americans believed in the missile gap. In this respect, John Kennedy’s experience with the missile gap issue serves as a useful metaphor for the larger society. By understanding how someone as well-informed and well-connected as Kennedy came to believe in the missile gap, scholars can better understand how millions of less well-informed Americans came also to believe in the myth.

107. Smith to Bundy, 10 July 1963.