

 **Article REVIEW**

Hal Brands. “Rethinking Nonproliferation: LBJ, the Gilpatric Committee, and U.S. National Security Policy.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8: 2 (Spring 2006): 83-113.

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The Vietnam War has long overshadowed Lyndon Johnson’s other foreign policy and national security initiatives despite efforts of respected scholars to shed light into the darker corners of his administration. Hal Brands adds to these efforts by asking his readers to take another look at the Gilpatric Committee, an ad hoc group of former government officials and influential private citizens established in the wake of the People’s Republic of China’s first nuclear explosion in October 1964. Brands joins Thomas Schwartz and Francis Gavin in arguing that previous explorations of the committee’s work wrongly characterized it “as representing a road not taken” (84).¹ He contends that the committee’s report “provided a conceptual basis for reorientation of U.S. national security policy in the mid-1960s” (85). Brands rightly claims that the Gilpatric Committee deserves more consideration from scholars given the dramatic changes in U.S. policy it contemplated, including covert action against both the French and Chinese nuclear programs. But he errs in stating that Johnson “accepted the basic philosophy” of the report and “allowed nonproliferation and arms control planning to move ahead along lines emphasized by [former Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell] Gilpatric and his colleagues” (85).

Lyndon Johnson authorized the creation of the Gilpatric Committee, officially dubbed the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, after his national security advisor McGeorge Bundy convinced him that existing bureaucratic arrangements could not manage such a complex foreign policy issue. Brands consistently refers to Johnson’s fear of nonproliferation as providing the impetus for the task force, but he cites a Bundy conversation with Under Secretary of State George W. Ball to support his point because there is no direct evidence that Johnson took the initiative in creating the committee. The origins of the task force lay in policy differences between members of the National Security Council staff, who wanted a nonproliferation agreement, and State Department officials, who advocated the creation of a multilateral nuclear force (MLF) in Europe that would allow the Federal Republic of Germany to have a larger role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) nuclear planning and work to blunt Bonn’s desire to have nuclear weapons of its own. Bundy and his staff formulated the idea for the committee and LBJ merely assented. Election year politics may also have hastened the panel’s creation. Beset by numerous crises in the month preceding the election, particularly the ouster of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and the Chinese nuclear test, LBJ may have wanted to

¹Also see Thomas Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 53-54 and Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security* 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/2005): 100-35.

demonstrate to the American public that he had matters under control. Because the government had no shortage of groups studying the implications of the Chinese nuclear test (one observer counted no fewer than five panels studying the issue), confronting that particular problem does not seem to be the primary motivation for the creation of the task force.²

The task force met only a handful of times before presenting its report to Johnson on January 21, 1965. As Brands points out, committee members “were annoyed that Johnson scheduled the meeting for the morning after the president’s inaugural ball” (101). Gilpatric and his colleagues also faced stiff opposition from Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who thought the report’s recommendations “could result in ‘irreparable damage to the Western Alliance’” (102). Johnson seemed impatient with the committee, remarking “sardonically that it seemed like the implementation of the committee’s report would be ‘a very pleasant undertaking.’”³ The president then restricted the report to the personal use of his select arms-control advisors and ordered that no one mention that the Gilpatric committee had presented a *written* report. Atomic Energy Commissioner Glenn Seaborg later observed that the secrecy surrounding the task force’s findings kept it from being cited in subsequent policy debates. “The time and conscientious effort of distinguished private citizens and a superbly qualified government staff” had been “to a large extent wasted,” he lamented. Raymond Garthoff, a committee staff member and a State department analyst who served on all five bodies studying the implications of the Chinese explosion, concurred that “there were few identifiable concrete results” from the panel’s work. The suppression of the committee’s report left Gilpatric angry and very critical of Rusk’s unwillingness to change the priorities of U.S. foreign policy.⁴

²Roger Kelly Smith, “Origins of the Regime: Nonproliferation, National Interest, and American Decision-Making, 1943-1976,” unpub. Ph. D. diss., Georgetown University, 1990, 306-8; Memorandum from Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr, of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), December 16, 1964, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968: Arms Control and Disarmament*, (Washington, DC, 1997), 11: 151-52 (Hereafter *FRUS* with years and volume number). For the early germ of the task force idea, see Memorandum of Conversation between McGeorge Bundy and George Ball, October 20, 1964, “(General) US and Europe” folder, Papers of George Ball, Box 6, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter LBJL); Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between McGeorge Bundy and George Ball, October 29, 1964, *ibid*; National Intelligence Estimate: Prospects for a Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Over the Next Decade, October 21, 1964, “4 – Arms and Disarmament” folder, National Intelligence Estimates, National Security File (hereafter NSF), Box 1, LBJL; Memorandum from McNamara to Rusk, October 28, 1964, “DEF 19 – US-India” file, State Department Decimal File, Record Group 59, National Archives, College Park, Maryland; Memorandum for Bundy from Adam Yarmolinsky – RE: Task Force on Non-Proliferation, October 28, 1964, “Presidential Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation” folder, Subject File, NSF, Box 35, LBJL; Glenn T. Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide: Arms Control in the Johnson Years*, (Lexington, MA, 1987), 137-38; Memorandum on U.S. Government Committees Considering Implications of Chicom Nuclear Capability, December 31, 1964, Document #1090, National Security Archive, *U.S. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Policy, 1945-1991*, ed. by Virginia I. Foran (Washington, DC, 1993). Raymond Garthoff counts six bodies studying the implications of the Chinese explosion, if one adds a JCS study. See Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence*, (Washington, DC, 2001), 195.

³ Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide*, 144.

⁴ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Director, Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Chairman, Atomic Energy Commission, the

Brands argues that Seaborg and Garthoff, despite their participation in the debates surrounding nonproliferation policy, wrongly concluded that LBJ rejected the report. Instead, he contends that the president merely hesitated to move precipitously in order to avoid offending key allies, especially West Germany. But quietly and subtly, he reoriented U.S. policy to downplay Washington's support for the MLF and give greater energy to nonproliferation efforts. He points to a National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) drafted in June 1965 to support his contention that LBJ had embraced the Gilpatric Committee's basic approach to nonproliferation (105-6). Contrary evidence undercuts this conclusion. NSAM No. 355 "directed the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency [ACDA] to prepare for submission to him [the president] a proposed new program of arms control and disarmament, including a proposed program for preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons." The end product of these efforts would be a new U.S. negotiating posture for the regularly scheduled meeting of the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Conference. The memorandum also clearly stated that ACDA proposals would be subject to review by "other interested agencies." The president would then review all the material "in a timely and orderly manner in order to permit a decision by him at the appropriate time." Days after issuing NSAM No. 355, McGeorge Bundy assured the president that "in light of the fact that the Gilpatric Committee has not worked out to your satisfaction, I want to be quite sure that our next efforts in this critically important field are along lines you approve." Johnson checked the "approve" box on the bottom of the page.⁵

The policy discussion leading up to the NSAM also indicates that LBJ had not adopted the Gilpatric Committee's conclusions or even its basic philosophy. As the drafting of NSAM No. 355 began in 1965, Bundy made a point of emphasizing to the president that the review would "bring the issues up clear and clean where you can see them and hear the arguments of the different parties of interest." He also conceded to Rusk and McNamara that the Gilpatric Report appeared "unbalanced in its apparent feeling that immediate progress is possible in these areas." Bundy merely wanted a commitment from State and Defense to "reaffirm our basic support for the *principle* of non-dissemination and the *principle* of a comprehensive test ban treaty" in order to prevent "policy" from becoming "unbalanced in the other direction." Despite protests from the NSC staff not "to sweep the report under the rug," this message did not call for acceptance of the Gilpatric report, but instead looked back to the Kennedy administration's stance on both issues. Bundy may have felt the need to confirm support for both goals because Johnson as vice president had asserted that "he would rather have

Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of Central Intelligence, and the Director of Science and Technology, January 23, 1965, "McGeorge Bundy Vol. 8" folder, Memos to the President, NSF, Box 2, LBJL; Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide*, 148; Garthoff, *Journey through the Cold War*, 194; Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Eugene Rostow and George Ball, February 3, 1965, "Germany, West II" folder, Papers of George Ball, Box 4, LBJL.

⁵National Security Action Memorandum No. 355, June 28, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, 11: 216-17. Memorandum for the President, July 3, 1965, "McGeorge Bundy, Vol. 12, July 1965" folder, Memos to the President, Box 4, LBJL.

nuclear superiority than a test ban treaty” and because the State Department continued to evince hostility toward both the Gilpatric report and ACDA proposals. In April 1965, moreover, Bundy had tried to get approval of a brief version of a draft NSAM that the Gilpatric Committee had submitted along with its report, but failed. Ultimately, the nonproliferation efforts that followed the review did not embrace the Gilpatric Committee’s recommendations -- which had ironically included a warning in an early draft that “any decision to refer [nonproliferation] back to the Departments for further study would only preserve the present impasse until it will be too late to act at all.” Contrary to the committee’s recommendations a nonproliferation treaty did in fact wait until after the MLF issue faded from view in 1966. Washington also equivocated on nuclear-free zones in Latin America and Africa in order to preserve its right of transit via air and water, and rejected a vigorous effort for comprehensive test ban treaty. The committee’s suggestions regarding Israel and India also received little serious consideration – a point that Brands concedes. In the end, a nonproliferation agreement emerged as the only committee recommendation that survived to the end of the Johnson administration, and that goal was not novel, having first emerged in the Kennedy administration.⁶

The Gilpatric Committee and its deliberations do deserve greater attention from scholars and the shifts in Johnson’s approach to nonproliferation after 1966 are important. But one cannot easily contend that the first contributed to the second. Brands, however, has given us a window into the policy deliberations over nuclear weapons in late 1964 and early 1965 and demonstrates that at least some veteran Cold Warriors thought a new approach to nuclear weapons might better serve U.S. national security interests. Gilpatric had included far more innovative ideas in the first draft of the committee’s report, including the argument that Washington had to change its attitude toward nuclear weapons to make them less appealing to other powers. But no one in power proved bold enough to grasp the full importance of Gilpatric’s ideas and the committee shied away from putting their most innovative proposals in the final report. The final draft still

⁶National Security Action Memorandum No. 355, June 28, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, 11: 216-17; Memorandum for the President, July 3, 1965, “McGeorge Bundy Vol. 12 July 1965 [2 of 2]” folder, Memos to the President, NSF, Box #4, LBJL; Memorandum to the President, June 25, 1965, “McGeorge Bundy Vol. 11 June 1965 [1 of 2]” folder, Memos to the President, NSF, Box 3, LBJL; Memo to the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, March 27, 1965, “Presidential Task Force, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation” folder, Subject File, NSF, Box #35, LBJL. Emphasis in original; Memorandum for Bundy from Keeny, March 26, 1965, “Presidential Task Force Committee on Nuclear Proliferation” folder, Subject Files, NSF, Box 35, LBJL; Memorandum for Bundy from Keeny, April 12, 1965, *ibid*; Memorandum of the National Security Council Meeting, February 27, 1962, “National Security Council Meetings, 1962 – No. 497, 2/27/62” folder, Meetings and Memoranda series, NSF, Box #313, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Boston, MA (Hereafter JFKL); Memorandum from Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr., of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy), March 6, 1965, *FRUS, 1964-1968*, 11: 191-94; Memorandum for Bundy and Hornig from Keeny, April 22, 1965, “Disarmament, Committee of Principals, Vol. II [2 of 2]” folder, Subject File, NSF, Box 14, LBJL; Memorandum for Bundy from Keeny, April 12, 1965, “Presidential Task Force Committee on Nuclear Proliferation” folder, Subject File, NSF, Box 35, LBJL; Draft NSAM, April 11, 1965, *ibid*; Draft #1 – The President’s Committee on Nuclear Proliferation – A Report to the President, January 13, 1965, “President’s Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation – Meetings Materials” folder, Box 10, Roswell Gilpatric Papers, JFKL.

endorsed a nonproliferation agreement, a comprehensive test ban, and nuclear-free zones, but offered no real changes in overall U.S. nuclear policy except for a vague recommendation “that we avoid giving an exaggerated impression” of nuclear weapons’ “importance and utility.”⁷ In the end, George Perkovich’s contention that the Gilpatric Committee hedged its recommendations and in 1965 “the United States retreated from the hedged position of the Gilpatric Committee” proves a more accurate summation of Johnson’s nonproliferation policy than the one Brands provides.⁸

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⁷Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, January 21, 1965, “Major Documents, Tab 3, Complete Documents” folder, President’s Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation, Box 10, Gilpatric Papers, JFKL; Draft National Security Action Memorandum, Subject: Prevention of the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, undated, “Dr. York Proliferation Committee” folder, Committee File, NSF, Box 8-9, LBJL.

⁸George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 102-3.