



"Atoms for Peace" Was Actually a "Threat to Peace" – AEC Official in 1955

Soviet diplomat Alexei Roshchin and Arms Control and Disarmament Agency director William C. Foster. Both played key roles in the negotiation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Undated photo, circa 1967-1968, in collection of William C. Foster; courtesy of the Foster family.

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Edited by William Burr

For more information, contact:

202-994-7000 or nsarchiv@gwu.edu

Major New Publication: *U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy, 1954-1968: From Atoms for Peace to the NPT*

Documents from Eisenhower, JFK, LBJ Presidencies Provide Crucial History on Indian, Chinese, Israeli, and Other States' Nuclear Programs

Latest Collection in the Digital National Security Archive series published by ProQuest

Washington, D.C., July 16, 2019 – The latest addition to the award-winning publications series The Digital National Security Archive provides a trove of important historical documentation on global nuclear proliferation, including numerous new details and

insights into the clandestine programs of India, China, Israel, and other would-be nuclear states.

U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy, 1954-1968: From Atoms for Peace to the NPT, compiled and edited by National Security Archive nuclear expert William Burr, explores a crucial period in the nuclear era when many of the problems and challenges facing today's nonproliferation regime began to emerge.

The new collection, totaling over 2,300 documents and 12,645 pages and distributed by the academic publisher ProQuest, fills significant research gaps for historians and offers a variety of document-based cases to help inform public debate as well as government decision-making about curbing the spread of nuclear weapons.

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During the early 1960s, U.S. intelligence experts expected that China would develop and test a nuclear device in the not-too-distant future. By mid-1964, U.S. intelligence had detected signs of technical preparations for a test and by late September 1964, State Department intelligence analyst Allen S. Whiting believed that recent "indications" suggested that one was imminent. He prepared a memo sent to Secretary of State Dean Rusk predicting a test on 1 October 1964, China's National Day. Whiting was off by a few weeks – the test took place on 16 October – but his analysis informed Rusk's decision to announce that a test was forthcoming.

Whiting's estimate was declassified in 2018 and is included in the Digital National Security Archive's latest collection the collection documents major developments in U.S. nonproliferation policy during the presidencies of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Today's E-book includes Whiting's estimates and other interesting examples published in the collection, including:

- *A State Department memorandum from 1955 recounting a statement by an Atomic Energy Commission official that the U.S. Atoms for Peace program paradoxically would involve a "threat to peace" because of the "expanded knowledge of nuclear power reactors and plutonium separation."*
- *A memorandum of conversation from June 1963 during which Secretary of State Rusk objected to the idea of an independent Western European nuclear force because of the danger that it could trigger nuclear war: "The Secretary said that if a European nuclear deterrent means that 5 percent of the West's total nuclear power can decide regarding the use of 95 percent of the West's nuclear power (i.e., U.S. power), Europe should recognize that this was just not a possibility, The U.S. would not stand for it."*
- *A closely held "No Distribution" telegram from September 1967 describing the drafting by U.S. and Soviet officials of the latest version of Nonproliferation Treaty Article III on safeguards. The draft was widely understood as a "Soviet draft," but the chief U.S. negotiator, William C. Foster, explained: "obviously we helped."*

The Digital National Security Archive's latest collection covers an especially significant period in the history of the nuclear age, when the spread of nuclear capabilities and the emergence of new nuclear powers produced concern in the U.S. government and elsewhere that nuclear proliferation could threaten international stability. Through the Atoms for Peace program and the creation of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Washington had hoped to steer the development of nuclear power so that it would be used for such peaceful purposes as electric power generation. But the emergence of new nuclear powers showed how difficult it was to curb proliferation.

U.S. support for the creation of the IAEA's safeguards system reflected the conviction that formal mechanisms were important to prevent the diversion of nuclear resources into weapons programs. The new digital collection documents the creation of the IAEA and the first iteration of the safeguards system that the NPT would make obligatory for signatories.

U.S. Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy, 1954-1968 documents developing U.S. knowledge and concern about emergent nuclear powers. Among the developments were India's acquisition of a virtually unsafeguarded reactor from Canada and China's efforts, with initial assistance from the Soviet Union, to develop technology for a weapons program. Also included in the set are documents concerning France's drive toward a weapons capability and the discovery of French-Israeli cooperation to build a nuclear reactor in the Negev Desert. While West Germany was far from interested in a weapons capability, Washington's concern that it eventually might develop an interest informed proposals for a multilateral force to give Germany a nuclear role without actually transferring weapons to its control.

Also documented is the U.S. reaction to China's first nuclear test in October 1964, which deepened interest in an international nonproliferation agreement. Within a few years the U.S. and the Soviet Union were closely associated in negotiating a treaty because of shared interests in nonproliferation. Yet, agreement was delayed because Moscow argued that the proposed MLF was a form of nuclear proliferation; it was not until mid-1966 that the U.S. government broke the stalemate by jettisoning the MLF. Moscow and Washington agreed to treaty language that ruled out the "transfer" of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapons states. That represented a Soviet concession because the new language validated U.S. nuclear weapon stockpile arrangements with NATO countries, including West Germany, which Moscow had criticized in the past.

All of these developments are covered in the new DNSA collection, along with other significant topics such as the step-by-step negotiation of the NPT, including the treaty articles on safeguards and disarmament. The protracted negotiations over Article III on safeguards reflected disagreement over the relationship between the safeguards systems of the IAEA and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), in particular whether "self-inspection" by the latter would be permissible under the NPT. The dogged efforts by U.S. negotiators to persuade the Soviets to accept EURATOM safeguards is a running theme in the documents on the NPT talks.

Among other topics covered in the collection are:

- Dwight D. Eisenhower's proposal for a fissile material production cut-off, seen as a method to prevent nuclear proliferation and supported by successive administrations.
- John F. Kennedy's initial search for a nuclear nonproliferation agreement, beginning during the 1961 Berlin Crisis and continuing into 1963.
- U.S. policy toward the negotiation of the Latin American Nuclear Free Zone.
- Efforts to control the dissemination of sensitive nuclear technology, including the gas centrifuge, beginning with U.S. government attempts to prevent Brazil from purchasing a gas centrifuge from West Germany in 1954 and later to establish secrecy for improved gas centrifuge technology during the 1960s.
- Subsequent developments in gas centrifuge diplomacy, including initial policy toward Western European cooperative projects for the commercial use of the gas centrifuge to produce low-enriched reactor fuel.

Documents



[Document 01](#)

[Memorandum for File by P\[hilip\] J. Farley, Office of Special Assistant to Secretary of State for Atomic Energy, "Control of Peacetime Uses of Nuclear Energy," 7 October 1955, Secret](#)

1955-10-07

During a discussion with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles on the peaceful uses of atomic energy, Philip Farley mentioned that the U.S., the Soviet Union, and other countries had been discussing the importance of controls over nuclear reactor operations and Washington and Moscow's "common interest in seeing that other countries did not obtain nuclear weapons." That same day, Farley met with Harold Knapp of the Atomic Energy Commission who, like Farley's boss, Gerard C. Smith, had been working on a study of controls over the export of fissionable materials for overseas nuclear reactors.

The next day, Knapp read Smith's paper and Farley read Knapp's paper which made the point that the "principle threat to peace" was not so much from the export of fissionable materials but from an effect of the U.S. Atoms for Peace program: the "expanded knowledge of nuclear power reactors and plutonium separation." That meant that any "reasonably advanced" industrial country could "learn from the open literature how to build a plutonium separation plant capable of separating 20 KG a year for about half-million dollars." "Accordingly, the threat of weapons capability in other countries like the Netherlands, Israel, Argentina and many others is not remote."



Document 02

Memorandum for [Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy] Gerard C. Smith from Max Isenberg, U.S. Embassy Paris, 20 December 1956, Secret

1956-12-20

Max Isenberg, then serving as the Paris embassy's special attaché for atomic energy, reported to Smith about the French government's intent to produce nuclear weapons. Isenberg had received a de-briefing from Ambassador C. Douglas Dillon of his conversation with the French Radical politician Maurice Bourgès-Manoury, then serving as defense minister. One part of the discussion was closely held and not fully discussed in the embassy's telegraphic report. This was when Bourgès confided to Dillon that "a new unanimity [exists] among virtually all significant political elements on the issue of going ahead with production of nuclear weapons." The observation, "made in a casual way, was intended as a notice of France's arrival at a firm position on this most important issue."



Document 03

U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Intelligence Information Brief, "Disarmament Negotiations: The Fourth Country Problem: France," No., 139, 13 May 1959, Secret

1959-05-13

Technical information from U.S. firms supplying the French with specialized equipment provided U.S. intelligence with an inkling of French atomic test plans. The French had given up plans to test a sixty-kiloton device and instead test one in the megaton range. The test was to be in the Sahara although a site in the Indian Ocean was under consideration. Moreover, the "French have ordered enough equipment to make complete diagnostic measurements in approximately a five-shot series," whose explosive yields could be between 100 tons and a megaton. France "is expected to have sufficient plutonium to manufacture devices for two tests by July 1959."

Although the intelligence report was "unevaluated," INR must have seen it as reliable enough to make its contents worth disseminating. France's first nuclear test was in January 1960.



Document 04

State Department telegram 441 to U.S. Embassies Tel Aviv, Paris, and London, 9 December 1960, Secret, with memoranda and control sheet attached

1960-12-09

This "eyes only" message reported on a meeting with Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harman, at which Secretary of State Christian Herter said that the Department had "been

very disturbed” by information about an Israeli nuclear reactor project. Initially, Herter told Harman, that the Department had learned from U.S. embassy Tel Aviv telegram 486 of plans to announce the construction of a research reactor south of Beersheba.^[1] Yet, photographs of the site that Herter showed Harman indicated that the “over-all scope of installation, diameter containment building and capacity power lines [are] far in excess research reactor requirements and could serve reactor of 10 times size that mentioned [in telegram] 486.” According to Herter, the reactor could “produce sufficient plutonium annually [to] make several atomic bombs.”

Herter said that he hoped that the account of Embtel 486 was accurate because if the Israelis did have a larger nuclear project in mind, “Knowledge of potential nuclear weapons capacity would have very disturbing impact on Middle East and US interests as well as those [of] Israeli themselves.” In reply, Ambassador Harman “disclaimed knowledge of facts and stated he would report US concern and questions to his Government.”



[Document 05](#)

[U.S. Consul General Bombay Despatch 484 to Department of State, “Possible Indian Desire for Nuclear Weapons Development,” 20 February 1961, Confidential](#)

1961-02-20

A conversation with Homi Nusserwanji Sethna, a senior official in India’s Atomic Energy Establishment (he later presided over India’s first nuclear test in May 1974) demonstrated the spreading knowledge of plutonium production. Sethna privately rebutted a statement by Homi Bhabha, the chairman of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission, that India could produce a bomb in two years. Sethna argued that India “was not interested in producing a nuclear weapon,” but wanted to use nuclear energy for electric power generation. As an example, the nuclear reactor at Tarapur would be operating at a high burnup rate – about 3,000 megawatt days (MWD) per ton – suitable for producing electric power, but not for weapons grade plutonium. If India wanted the latter, Sethna explained, “the average burnup of uranium fuel should not exceed 600-800 MWD/ton; this would triple the cost of producing energy from the power plant and is simply out of the question.”

According to the reporting officer, Sidney Sober, with the spread of technology enabling some non-nuclear countries to join the “nuclear club,” it is “reasonable to assume that responsible Indian officials have at least contemplated if not planned or possibly inaugurated some effort at nuclear weapons development.”



[Document 06](#)

[The President's European Trip, June 1963, Summary Record of Conversation, "Tour D'Horizon," 28 June 1963, Top Secret](#)

1963-06-28

During President Kennedy's last European trip, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk met with top British officials, headed by Foreign Secretary Lord Home and Defense Minister Peter Thorneycroft, for discussion of alliance nuclear issues, mainly the proposed Multilateral Force. British parliamentary opposition to the MLF as a West German "stepping-stone" to a national nuclear capability indicated that the proposal would not get far, although Bundy worried that the Germans would "be dangerous if left out of the party." According to Rusk, the "alternative was MRBMs [medium-range ballistic missiles] in Germany in German hands."

The MLF would involve a yet-to-be-determined U.S. role in nuclear launch decisions. Rusk was plainly uncomfortable with proposals for a European combination, e.g., Anglo-French, that did not involve a U.S. role. "The Secretary said that if a European nuclear deterrent means that 5 percent of the West's total nuclear power can decide regarding the use of 95 percent of the West's nuclear power (i.e., U.S. power), Europe should recognize that this was just not a possibility, The. U.S. would not stand for it." [2]



[Document 07](#)

[Thomas Hughes-INR to Secretary of State, Intelligence Note, "Possible Early Chicom Nuclear Test," 25 September 1964, Secret](#)

1964-09-25

Drafted by INR China expert Allen S. Whiting (his initials are on the last page), this note on the PRC's nuclear activities cited "indications ... that increase the possibility of an early test." [3] One such indication was that "Chinese officials recently told a Mali official that Peiping would announce its bomb on this October 1, their national day." Moreover, the previous May Foreign Minister Chen Yi had taken an optimistic position about China's nuclear capabilities, declaring that "China had reached the necessary industrial level and that it is not very difficult to perform nuclear experiments."

According to the note, a test on National Day would "raise morale" by making U.S. escalation of conflict in Southeast Asia "less ominous," make the 15th anniversary of the People's Republic a "truly memorable event," while giving "the forthcoming National People's Congress (probably November) and a possibly forthcoming Party Congress (now three years overdue) some meat on which to chew."

The actual test was a few weeks later than Whiting predicted, on 16 October, but he was so sure that one was imminent that he persuaded Secretary of State Rusk to approve an announcement that Beijing was about to stage a test.



Document 08

Note dictated by the Secretary on the President's Views on Nonproliferation, as Set Forth in the Recent Camp David Meeting," 3 October 1966, Secret

1966-10-03

Progress made by U.S. and Soviet negotiators in reaching agreement on the no-transfer language of Articles I and II of the NPT required high-level consultation with President Lyndon Johnson. During a meeting at Camp David, Secretary of State Rusk transcribed a Johnson statement that illuminated his thinking at that point. In keeping with the no-transfer concept, Johnson declared that "responsibility for firing U.S. nuclear weapons rests with the President of the U.S." He further acknowledged that there was no great pressure for quick action on "alliance nuclear arrangements," implying that the MLF had low priority. Suggesting continuing concern over West Germany, Johnson mentioned a future need for "treaty arrangements" to "restrain certain allies and preserve the alliance."



Document 09

Memorandum of Conversation, "Italian Proposal for Modification of Withdrawal Provision in the NPT," 5 July 1967, Secret

1967-07-05

A discussion with Italian diplomat Rinaldo Petrigani demonstrates the limits of the NPT in resolving the dilemmas raised by "Atoms for Peace" in the 1950s. In response to Italy's proposal for more liberal procedures for withdrawal from the NPT, ACDA official Robert H. Kranich deemed it "premature" to consider terms of withdrawal until the negotiations had advanced further. Moreover, ACDA saw the proposal as "inadvisable" because "it would tend effectively to limit the duration of the treaty to five years," thus removing the "stable basis" needed for committing the signatories to nonproliferation. Further, a five year withdrawal option could enable signatories to initiate "preliminary preparations to develop or acquire nuclear weapons even while the treaty is still operative, and then withdraw at the earliest opportunity."

Petrigani questioned the last point because he thought that the safeguards provisions worked against such preparations. Kranich explained that was not the case: the NPT would not "prohibit preparations for manufacture of nuclear weapons," such as the stockpiling of plutonium. As for safeguards, they could only prevent the diversion of nuclear materials, but they "cannot detect or prevent preparations for manufacture of weapons unless and until there is such diversion."

Petrignani “indicated that he had never before quite understood the ‘eight months [pregnant](#)’ argument, but that he now did.”



Document 10

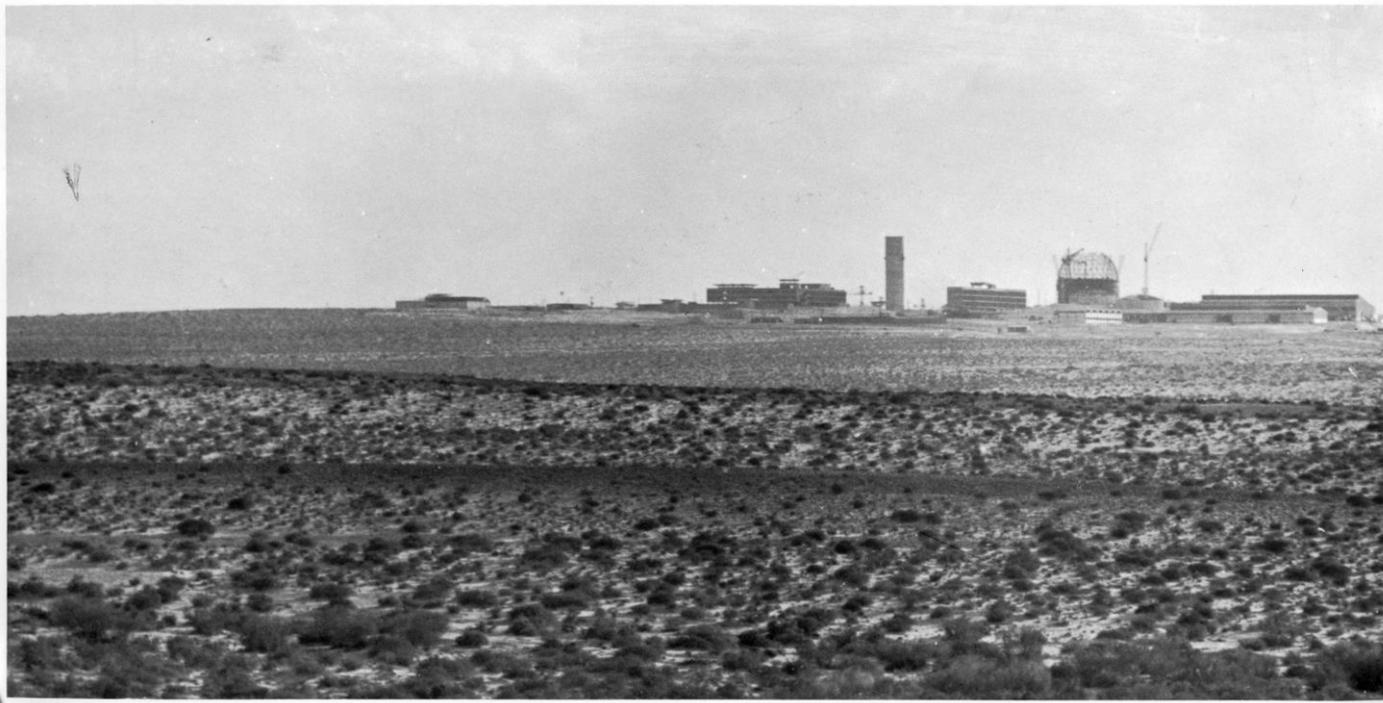
U.S. Mission to Geneva telegram 782 to State Department, 11 September 1967, with memorandum to Secretary of State Rusk from Executive Secretary Benjamin Read, Secret

1967-09-11

In this Nodis (no distribution) “literally eyes only” message to Secretary Rusk that only a handful of people saw, ACDA Director William C. Foster provided the backstory of the negotiation of NPT Article III on safeguards, one of the treaty’s most controversial articles. The key problem was convincing the Soviets that it would be permissible for member states of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) to negotiate collectively with the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure that the community’s own safeguards arrangements were compatible with NPT standards. While antagonistic to EURATOM, the Soviets agreed to accept U.S. ideas about principles designed to ensure IAEA oversight. When the U.S. and Soviet negotiators concurred on a draft of Article III in early September 1967, the U.S. consented to characterize it in Washington as a “Soviet draft”, while the Soviets agreed to describe it in Moscow as a “U.S. draft.” Foster informed Rusk that it was, in fact, a “Soviet delegation draft, but obviously we helped.” While the latest draft moved the process forward, it took months before Moscow and Washington, in consultation with EURATOM, agreed to final language for Article III.



Trombay, the site of India's first reactor (Aspara) and a plutonium reprocessing facility, as photographed by a KH-7/GAMBIT satellite on February 19, 1966.



This was one of a number of photographs of construction work at the Israeli reactor site in the Negev Desert that U.S. and British military attachés took during the last months of 1960. Secretary of State Christian Herter used a photo like this during a tense meeting with Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harman in December 1960 (see Document 4).

Notes

[1]. Telegram 486 has been released in excised form, on the Digital National Security Archive. The relevant text is as follows: “Ben-Gurion' s announcement will also mention new 10 to 20 megawatt natural uranium and heavy water nuclear reactor to go critical in about a year and a half. Reactor reportedly exclusively of Israeli design, with some French equipment; and to be used for research in desert plants, drought resistant seeds, short-life isotopes and radio biological research not now possible at present 1-5,000 kilowatt reactor.” See Digital National Security Archive, Nuclear Nonproliferation, NP00710.

[2]. Rusk was likely influenced by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s statement in his 1962 Ann Arbor speech that “we would find it intolerable to contemplate having only part of the strategic force launched in isolation from our main striking power”. See Matthew Jones, “Prelude to the Skybold Crisis: The Kennedy Administration’s Approach to British and French Strategic Nuclear Policies in 1962,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 21 (2019), at 78.

[3]. Jonathan Pollack and David Shambaugh, “Allen Seuss Whiting, 1922-2018,” *The China Quarterly*, 236 (2018): 917-929.

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