

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

Project Solarium

Less than three months after becoming President, Eisenhower met with his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, in the Solarium Room of the White House. There was much to discuss. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had recently died, the Korean War was still going on, and the tension between East and West was again escalating in a divided Berlin.

At that time the United States' strategy for an uncertain future had been framed by the Truman administration along the lines proposed by George F. Kennan, which called for the military containment of Soviet expansion and the exercise of economic and political pressure to eventually defeat communism. An alternative strategy, fathered by Paul H. Nitze, advocated a primarily military strategy to wrest the Soviet satellite nations from communist domination. Dulles leaned more towards the Nitze policy and Eisenhower replied, "It's the minds and hearts of men that must be won."



The stakes were very high since both the Soviet Union and the United States were beginning to stockpile an array of nuclear weapons. By the end of his meeting with Dulles in the solarium room, Eisenhower was convinced that a specific long-term policy must be developed for the guidance of his entire national security apparatus. Differences of opinion within his administration should be thoroughly explored, and then a specific strategic policy put forward for all to follow.

The president decided to conduct project solarium during a meeting with Secretary of State Dulles during which it became clear that the cold war strategy options needed much more intensive consideration.

Eisenhower had long believed that the best way to formulate national policy in a democracy was to gather the best qualified people with opposing views and carefully listen to them debate each other on the issue. When he had been President of Columbia University, he founded the American Assembly to do just that and the results had proven the worth of such a procedure.

He chose three seasoned strategic advisors, Vice Admiral Richard Conolly, Air Force Major General James McCormack and George Kennan and asked them to each put together a ten-person team consisting of specialists from the State Department, the military services and other national security agencies. In what would later be called Project Solarium, each team was assigned a specific strategy to study and propose;

- Team A was given the strategy to argue maintaining enough American military force to help its allies to build-up their forces and to deter further Soviet expansion without initiating a general war.
- Team B was tasked to argue that a line should be drawn across Europe and the Soviet Union told that any attempt to expand communist dominance beyond that line would constitute an act of war against the allies.
- Team C was to propose a vigorous attempt to roll back the Soviet empire, by military force if necessary, and liberate all its satellite nations.

After six weeks of working at the National War College the teams, armed with maps, charts, and estimates, convened at the White House to present the case for each of their strategies. The meeting was chaired by President Eisenhower and included the military chiefs of staff, the National Security Council, the military service secretaries, and various other national security advisors. The three presentations and question and answer sessions lasted all day. There was no attempt to gain consensus. Each team presented and supported its own position.

Knowing the benefits of listening to disagreement, Eisenhower asked few questions and took no notes throughout the debate. When the three presentations and discussions finished, Ike gave a forty-minute talk during which he summarized each of the three arguments. At the end he stated his reasons for adopting the essentials of Team A's proposal and emphasizing that, in the absence of a direct attack on the United States, America would not go to war in Europe or elsewhere except as an ally of affected free nations.

Andrew J. Goodpaster, whose role on Eisenhower's White House Staff would be comparable to today's National Security Advisor, attended the Project Solarium meetings and would go on to advise the next eight presidents. From 1994 through 1998 Goodpaster was with the Atlantic Council of the United States. Kenneth Weisbrode, a member of the staff at the Council, relates Goodpaster telling him that after the White House Project Solarium debate George Kennan told him that Eisenhower's summary of the findings "demonstrated the President's intellectual ascendancy over every man in the room." Goodpaster asked: "Does that include you, George?" Kennan replied: "Yes it does, because only the President has proven himself able to grasp the full range of political and military aspects of the policies under consideration."

For the 1950's and the three decades to follow, the American policy of Soviet containment, nuclear deterrence, and political pressure would continue until the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Eisenhower had predicted that it would take a long time, be very expensive, and would sometimes entail frightful risks.

He was correct in his prediction and right in saying at the time, "The only way to win World War III is to prevent it."

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