

Office Memorandum • UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

TO : Mr. Tolson

DATE: 2/15/49

FROM : E. B. Nichols

SUBJECT:

- Mr. Tolson
- Mr. E. A. Tamm
- Mr. Clegg
- Mr. Glavin
- Mr. Ladd
- Mr. Nichols
- Mr. Rosen
- Mr. Tracy
- Mr. Carson
- Mr. Egan
- Mr. Gurnea
- Mr. Harbo
- Mr. Hendon
- Mr. Pennington
- Mr. Quinn Tamm
- Tele. Room
- Mr. Nease

Amde ✓

Recently Brien McMahon gave me a copy of a speech that he made in Detroit on January 31, the burden of which is that McMahon is not certain but believes this government should consider making public the number of atomic bombs available. McMahon told me that this premise was predicated upon the fact that the Navy admirals were asking for billions, the Army is asking for billions, and he feels that we are pouring money down a rat hole and that, as a Senator, he will have to give an accounting along with others.

Attachment

W. R.



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ADDRESS BY SENATOR BRIEN McMAHON
BEFORE THE ECONOMIC CLUB OF DETROIT
MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 1949

I do not believe in unnecessary walls or fences around public property. All my instincts and training as a freedom-loving American cause me to resent "Verboten" signs in the public domain. Only the overriding interests of national security can justify a democratic government having any secrets from its own people. But even then the area of secrecy must be absolutely limited to the necessities of security. "Hush" is a powerful word. It is an insidious word because, unless checked, it has an ivy-like tendency to grow and cover ever more and more territory. This is the nature of the beast itself; it has nothing to do with the desires of the men who operate under it.

I can think of no better place than before this thoughtful audience to discuss a problem which has weighed heavily on my mind for many months. This problem, I believe, may well cause the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy more anxious concern than any other. I cannot suggest an answer to the problem, for I have not yet arrived at a conclusion myself. I only know that the issue is tremendously important both from the viewpoint of democratic government and from the viewpoint of national defense.

I refer to the question of whether or not the American people and the world should be told how many atomic bombs and atomic weapons we possess and how fast we are producing them.

Make no mistake. I am not talking about the design of an atomic bomb or the way it is made or how it works. No patriotic American would so much as dream of permitting that information to be made public.

By the same token, no patriotic American would so much as dream of permitting the exact design of a B-36 very heavy bomber to be made public. But the number of B-36's we are building today has in fact been disclosed in the newspapers.

Those of you who are familiar with my record as a Senator know that I believe we live in an era of danger - an era in which national safety yields precedence to no other consideration. The Act which I had the honor of sponsoring, for the domestic control of atomic energy, subjects our entire policy in this field "to the paramount objective of securing the common defense and security."

Perhaps our military needs absolutely dictate that atomic production figures be kept secret.

But if such is the case - as it may be - we are taking a calculated risk. We are risking the tested, traditional principles of free and constitutional government. In my opinion we must be sure that the risk really is calculated, that we take the risk with our eyes open.

The Constitution of the United States vests in Congress the power "to provide for the common defense," "to raise and support armies," "to provide and maintain a navy," and "to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces." In other words, it is the solemn duty and responsibility of the people's Congressional representatives to arrange for our military security.

But in the case of atomic energy, Congress has purchased a defense package sight unseen. Congress has only a most general idea of what the atomic package contains.

This package may be equivalent to a huge army or a huge navy; or it may be equivalent only to a small army or a small navy. Congress, whose Constitutional business it is to raise armies and navies, does not know which. So far as atomic energy is concerned, Congress simply lacks sufficient knowledge upon which to discharge its own Constitutional duties.

Do we possess five bombs, or fifty bombs, or five hundred bombs? Are we strong or weak in the field of atomic weapons? Only the Atomic Energy Commissioners, high-ranking military men, and a few others know the correct answer to these vital questions. Though I have been a member of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy since its inception, and though I have just been elected its chairman, I do not myself know how many bombs we possess or how rapidly we are making new ones.

The American people, who elect and ultimately control Congress, have entered the atomic energy business. They have invested more than three thousand million dollars on atomic weapons. What returns are the American people receiving from this huge defense investment? What have the gigantic plants at Hanford and Oak Ridge accomplished? The American people do not know, and the Congress does not know.

Here is an extraordinary state of affairs.

Of course, I hardly need say that the split atom is itself extraordinary -- so extraordinary as perhaps to justify the iron veil of secrecy which covers production figures. But let me mention several more of the paradoxes which this secrecy creates in our democratic society.

The 1949 defense budget calls for the expenditure of fifteen billion, six hundred million dollars on the armed forces. It may be that even this staggering sum is too small. I favor spending whatever amount is necessary to bring reasonable security.

But regardless of the sum decided upon, can we accept it on blind faith? How can Congress and the American people judge American defense needs unless they know the size of our atomic stockpile? Perhaps, if that stockpile is large, we do not need to spend as much as we had supposed. On the other hand, if that stockpile is small, we may need to spend more than we had supposed.

Today we are like a general who must train his troops without knowing how many rounds of ammunition they will be issued.

When we debate the necessity of a 65,000-ton aircraft carrier or a 70-group air force or universal military training, I fear that we quite literally do not know what we are talking about. We do not know how many atomic weapons we possess, and therefore, I fear that we lack perspective to pass upon any major defense issue.

Consider, too, the question of taxes. It may be that we must raise additional taxes in order to provide the funds needed for our army, navy, and air force. But this step might not impress us as necessary if we knew for a fact that we are strong in atomic weapons. Do we dare either raise taxes or leave them where they stand -- without knowledge of the atomic production figures upon which these decisions may hinge?

The problem of reconciling democratic government with the secrecy which covers bomb production comes to a head in the Joint Committee of which I am Chairman. The law of the land requires this Committee to "make continuing studies of the activities of the Atomic Energy Commission and of problems relating to the development, use, and control of atomic energy." The law of the land further states that the Atomic Energy Commission "shall keep the Joint Committee fully and currently informed with respect to the Commission's activities."

We all know that the Commission devotes itself, in large measure, to making weapons. If weapons is the heart of its activity, how can the Senators and Representatives on my Committee decide whether the Commission is doing a good job -- unless they know how many weapons have actually been produced? How can my Committee serve as the eyes and ears of Congress and the American people, as the law intends, so long as atomic production data are kept hidden?

How can the public decide whether I am doing a good job in helping to keep tabs on the Commission -- unless they know the number of atomic weapons being manufactured? How can the Commissioners themselves, able and patriotic as I believe them to be, reach sound decisions without the benefit of advice, comment, and criticism from the public? And how can the public praise or condemn without knowing the key production facts on which to base a judgment?

Consider still another aspect of the existing secrecy. We have gone before the United Nations and earnestly proposed an effective plan for the international control of atomic energy. Our diplomats ask that every country yield sufficient sovereignty so that one and all may be safe from the awful threat of surprise atomic attack. We hold that the alternative to atomic peace may be annihilation.

But how can we expect mankind to believe us unless all the world knows that atomic weapons are capable of being produced in quantity? Perhaps the world thinks that we only possess a handful of bombs. Perhaps the world thinks that

if we only possess a few bombs, no other country could make more than a few bombs. Perhaps the world concludes that the peril may not be so great after all.

Are we not obligated to tell mankind just what this elemental force means -- in terms of production facts and figures?

Then, too, you and I are naturally curious to know whether we and our children live in mortal danger from atomic weapons. If, with our tremendous project, we only produce the merest trickle of bombs, we might reasonably hope and expect that no other country could produce a greater number. But if our output is large, then we must fear that the output of other countries may also become large some day. How can we begin to estimate the potential capacity of foreign powers unless we know our own capacity?

It is interesting to note that concealment of atomic production rates is secrecy of a scope which has never been attempted before during peacetime in the United States.

The most valuable type of secret is the fact that a weapon exists at all. If a potential enemy does not even suspect that a certain weapon has come into being, he may never try to make a like weapon himself. But we have already lost this kind of secret as regards the atomic bomb. The entire world knows that the bomb does exist.

A less valuable class of secret is the specifications and the exact design of a weapon. Of course, as regards the specifications and exact design of the atomic bomb, I need not repeat that we must unquestionably preserve the most complete and absolute secrecy.

But the number of bombs we possess is not even distantly connected with the accepted and time-honored secret categories. Concealment of production figures extends secrecy over a vast and unprecedented area.

Jim Parker's Industrial Advisory Committee was asked to write a report on business and the atom. His Committee faced the problem of disclosure as it affects a democratic economic system. After a year of hard thinking the Industrial Advisory Committee came out with the conclusion that more information should be revealed.

I am raising the problem of disclosure as it affects a democratic political system. I have not yet formed an opinion, as I say, whether this problem should be answered in the same way as Jim Parker's group answered a somewhat similar problem.

But if the Industrial Advisory Committee felt that businessmen have been denied the knowledge necessary to encourage their entry into the atomic energy field, consider how the poor Congressmen feel. How can Congressmen who lack essential information make wise decisions regarding defense and taxes and foreign policy?

But so far, I have only tried to present a few thoughts on one side of the case. Do not think for a moment that the opposite side of the case is weak.

If bomb production data were made public, for instance, other nations would gain a clearer idea of the money, men, and resources which they must pour into their own atomic projects in order to rival our American progress.

If the world knew how many bombs we possess, the world would also gain valuable insight into our over-all military strength, our potentialities, and capabilities. Likewise, if the catastrophe of another war should ever overtake us, the enemy would know how much atomic punishment to anticipate from us. A known quantity, no matter how terrible, would be psychologically and militarily easier for the enemy to face than an unknown quantity.

It could be argued that until and unless a bomb stockpile of such prodigious proportions is achieved as to be capable of destroying every resource of any possible opponent, no divulgement should be made. Persons holding this view might claim that divulgement of any lesser number would encourage a state bent on aggression.

But there is an opposing possibility to be considered. Perhaps our rivals underestimate the destructive power of the atomic weapons we possess. Perhaps they will miscalculate and precipitate a disastrous war believing us to be weak in the atomic energy field, when actually we are strong. Perhaps if we disclosed the facts, we would prevent a disastrous war started because of the aggressor's mistaken estimate as to our atomic status.

I might add that we publicly debated the wisdom of a 70-group air force -- data of great value to foreign powers. The world knows that we possess around 20 aircraft carriers ready for active service and that about 1,400,000 Americans serve in our armed forces. The world knows that we plan building a new 65,000-ton carrier and that we expect to own about 90 B-36's by the end of 1950. All this information has great value to foreign powers.

But neither the world nor the American people knows how many atomic weapons we possess.

Of course you may say, "The Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy should be informed of production data, but the information should not be circulated outside this Committee." If you made such an argument, I might reply as follows:

True, the Joint Committee is indisputably entitled to know bomb figures under the law. But how would it materially help the Committee members to have the information unless they could use it in reporting to Congress as a whole and to the people?

If the information means that we need smaller armed forces or bigger armed forces; if the information means that we can afford to leave taxes as they are or that we must raise taxes; if the information means any of these things, could Congress as a whole and could the American people rely solely on the judgment of the few Committee members entrusted with production figures?

Take the two distinguished Senators from your own state of Michigan as an example. Senator Vandenberg is a member of the Joint Committee; Senator Ferguson is not a member. Do you think that Senator Ferguson would be justified in voting to raise or lower taxes, to increase or decrease the size of our armed forces, or to censure or praise the Atomic Energy Commission -- do you think that Senator Ferguson would be justified in doing these things purely on the say-so of Senator Vandenberg who is a member of the Joint Committee? Would not Senator Ferguson be obligated to arrive at an independent judgment of his own? If so, how could he arrive at such a judgment unless he also knew atomic production data?

Furthermore, if we assume that this information must be kept a supreme secret, should even the eighteen members of the Joint Committee ask to be told? I am proud to say that, to date, there never has been a security leak from the Committee. But obviously the chance that production figures would become publicly known increases with each additional individual who is given the facts.

This much we do know -- the question propounded here goes to the very heart of our democratic system of government. It goes to the very heart of national defense and to the future security and existence of the United States.

There is a natural inclination in all of us, in Congress as well as out, to shy away from the implications of this problem. No individual willingly assumes the responsibility which it entails. But no matter how awesome the responsibility, we are not justified in evading it.

The experience of a century and a half has demonstrated that our system of free government functions best when the maximum degree of information is made available to our people. In fact, free and candid discussion of vexing problems is the bedrock of democracy and it may be our surest safeguard for peace.

At least, we know that the question will never be solved by ignoring it. If a policy of drift and evasion brings the world to the brink of ultimate disaster, we should condemn such a policy as reckless folly and the American people may rightly hold responsible its representatives in Congress for neglect of a fundamental duty.

I can only end this discussion at the place it began -- by saying that I have not yet arrived at a conclusion in my own mind. In the final analysis, the American Congress and the American people will settle the issue. May they decide wisely and well. They could hardly face a more momentous decision.

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