

of the objectives, the problems and the alternatives.” He was much admired for leading and stimulating the defense program in 1963; at that time journalist David Halberstam, later one of his harshest critics, wrote, “In my opinion, McNamara may well be this country’s most distinguished civil servant of the last decade.”⁸

By the summer of 1963, McNamara was bringing his revolution in the U.S. defense program, as well as his overhaul of the defense budget process, home right on schedule for John Kennedy. It seemed not to matter that he had gone well beyond Kennedy’s campaign pledge to close the missile gap, or that he had exercised the legal powers of his office almost violently, to their full extent, over two and a half years. It was not uncommon for his admirers in the press — ignoring other reporters who strongly mistrusted him — to express the opinion that McNamara “may be the greatest managerial genius of our time,” as the *Washington Star*’s Richard Fryklund wrote that August.⁹

Right off, McNamara had axed a major military role in space, the nuclear airplane, and another relic of the 1950s called Dyna Soar. He ordered an increase in the number of tactical aircraft ready to do battle over the skies of Europe by one third, since Rand’s work in the 1950s for the Air Force had shown how shorter-range tactical air power could decisively help ground forces at war — a fact that the men of SAC who dominated Air Force councils had chosen to ignore for years. Backed by systems analysis, McNamara stubbornly insisted that a new close-air-support plane be produced: This became the A-7, which grew out of the original common-fighter-bomber program that led to the TFX. But slow and low-flying close-air-support craft were anathema to the blue-yonder boys: McNamara, backed by Enthoven and his studies, could prove rationally the need for the plane and could force it into the budget. As for the kinds of mission the Air Force preferred, that of long-range bombers penetrating deep behind enemy lines (the sort of mission for which Frank Everest’s TFX was originally planned), Enthoven confessed that many, many studies could not prove this to be as decisive a factor in a future land war as the Air Force believed. Finally, Rand analysis had demonstrated the importance of airlift; McNamara ordered unpopular increases in the Air Force’s cargo planes — and a new plane, the C-5A.¹⁰ He and the Whiz Kids knocked down Air Force shibboleths left and right — not to mention the principal fight with SAC over the future bomber and missile force — in the name of rationality.

At Ford he had played on the competition among divisions; when

he left in 1960, he had proposed “managed competition” so Ford could offer a range of models and shift rapidly to meet fickle market tastes. Similarly, in his overhaul of the defense program, McNamara and his band played on competition among the armed services — to force outcomes that would not have been achieved otherwise. The Army, in 1961, had been gearing up to produce a new standard-issue rifle, the M-14.¹¹ It had been fifteen years in development, weighed nine pounds, and satisfied institutional and traditional demand for power and great accuracy, as though American GIs in the 1960s would be picking off Indians one at a time on the Great Plains. The civilians then learned of the merits of a six-pound spray-fire rifle designed by Eugene Stoner, the so-called popgun the Army Ordnance Bureau spurned. Analysis showed that this was the gun soldiers would need in real firefights. McNamara exploited competition with the Air Force and among Army factions to force wider adoption of the M-16, as the Stoner gun was renamed. It was soon in heavy demand by U.S. advisers in South Vietnam. Without civilian intervention, the troops would have had the M-14, which they literally turned in for the popgun, given the chance.

Analysis also beamed a searchlight on the need to abolish the long-standing taboo — enforced by the Air Force since 1947, to keep its monopoly on land-based air power — on the Army’s flying of fixed-wing aircraft.¹² Another imaginative liaison between the systems analysts under Enthoven and the Army group seeking at least a helicopter fleet to move troops around the theater led to tests of a new concept: After 1962, air mobility began proving its worth. In Vietnam this took shape as the Air Cavalry, which would prove vital.

Enthoven and the Rand group had had the least experience with naval problems but knew enough to question the efficiencies of giant aircraft carriers to send air power to roar over distant lands.¹³ McNamara had taken office during a historic change in the Navy, just when Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover was winning his fifteen-year battle to install nuclear power aboard submarines and major surface ships, and used the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy in Congress to overcome resistance from the Navy’s baronies.

At first Enthoven sensed Rickover was an ally; he called on the powerful, diminutive vice admiral in his office, in old temporary buildings along the Mall in Washington, and Rickover had given him the lowdown on the Navy brass, making fun of their pompous conformity. But the issue of modernizing the World War II carrier fleet

was pending, and Rickover wanted the new ships to be nuclear-powered, as the submarine fleet was. McNamara gave the green light for the first of the new, larger carriers to be started using conventional fuel; but when he and Enthoven began questioning the need to go to Rickover's four-reactor design for the next two carriers, the battle lines were drawn.¹⁴

Soon Rickover became a bitter critic of cost-effectiveness, the Whiz Kids, Enthoven, and Robert McNamara. The Navy noticed that the civilians maintained that the Polaris program was not taking funds away from carrier modernization, but it saw large amounts added to its budget for Polaris (about which it was lukewarm at best) while funds for new carriers were being deferred. McNamara claimed that his additional nuclear forces were not competing with general-purpose forces — yet they were. He claimed there was no civilian-military split within the Building — yet there was. He claimed before McClellan that the choice of General Dynamics was purely objective, based on rational grounds — yet he could not produce a single detailed calculation that he had made at the time to support this. By the summer and fall of 1963, with a showdown nearing with Rickover and the Joint Committee on the carrier question, many in the Navy had decided — and told each other — that McNamara was a liar.

But his program was coming together by the fall of 1963; he was making American missile defenses second to none. By the time all the Minuteman and Polaris missiles he had ordered entered the force, the United States would have a ten-to-one lead in ballistic missiles over the Soviets. He had axed the size of the bomber force from 1,700 to 500, but the Soviets “could put only half that number over North America,” he said in a speech in November.¹⁵ He had inherited a situation of supposed Soviet nuclear superiority, but now even “the most wishful Soviet planners” contemplating a surprise attack would have to reckon with America's ability to strike back “to destroy the attacker's society.”

Perhaps the most important contribution of analysis was the work by Enthoven's systems analysis group and by the office of International Security Affairs in demolishing the myth that Soviet and East Bloc forces numbered 175 effective divisions, compared with NATO's 26. These simple comparisons had convinced the allies over the years that the only way Western Europe could be defended was by quick resort to nuclear arms. Now, by applying other yardsticks

to the two sides, McNamara's band demonstrated that Western conventional forces could deploy at least as many resources in an extended war as the Warsaw Pact. Whereas the Communists had 4.5 million men under arms, NATO's active forces numbered 5 million; the fabled 175 divisions were thin in people and equipment, and most were not ready for war. Thus the analysts demonstrated that in a protracted, non-nuclear war, the alliance stood a fighting chance.¹⁶ These findings were publicized by Nitze and Enthoven in speeches and briefings to NATO allies, to try to break down the pro-nuclear mind-set of the time and lay the groundwork for them to formally adopt flexible response and build up their forces.

Despite all this apparent rationalism, McNamara was bounded by the preconceptions of his place and time. Apparently, it did not occur to him that his enormous buildup of strategic forces, his continued installation of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, and the improvements in the effectiveness of Army, Air Force, and Navy forces for general war could trigger fear in the Kremlin.¹⁷ Americans of the time were preoccupied with having *enough* superiority, not with whether their procurement would trigger a threatening enemy response. McNamara had lectured the Kremlin on Rand-type methods of fighting limited nuclear war at Ann Arbor even as he ordered a vastly superior U.S. nuclear arsenal. The Soviets were meant to accept American superiority as inevitable and desirable. But in fact, the men of the Kremlin reacted emotionally to these warlike signals from Washington. After 1961 Soviet leaders debated a massive nuclear buildup of their own; another response by Khrushchev was to put the missiles into Cuba, to quickly redress his condition of inferiority. So the image of rationality emanating from room 3E 880 in the Pentagon was not believed where it counted most — in Moscow.

Nonetheless, by the summer and fall of 1963, McNamara predicted the defense budget could level off in a year, for frugality and efficiency were the watchwords of his buildup. Even as he gave the services more money than Eisenhower had, he put them on a "cost reduction program" to save money through efficiencies — to the tune of \$1.1 billion out of a budget fast approaching \$49 billion.¹⁸

McNamara's goal of a cost-effective military force was the link to the Democratic party tradition of federal spending for domestic well-being that dated back to Franklin Roosevelt. McNamara and Kennedy could boast that they had built a far more powerful and