

achieve this through a novel organization.<sup>51</sup> The Nuclear Planning Group's real inventor may have been John McNaughton; Denis Healey, the Labor defense minister of Great Britain; or Harlan Cleveland, U.S. ambassador to NATO. Many have claimed to be the father of the idea, but the actuality was brought into being thanks to McNamara's drive to effect literal outcomes fast. He said later: "Whenever I want to be really efficient, I get a building about half the size that anybody wants and say that's what we're going to build Ford cars in or that's what we're going to have for the Navy or whatever it may be. Well, we followed the same procedure [in NATO]. . . . Now, this sounds childish, but it isn't childish. There's a very direct inverse relationship between the number of participants and the degree or extent of accomplishment"<sup>52</sup>

Normal meetings of NATO defense ministers were formal affairs, comprising the defense ministers, the professional military, and their staffs and interpreters. They were large and politically diverse gatherings that dwelt mainly on procedure.

McNamara persuaded the allies to set up three working committees, of which one, Working Committee III, would have the sensitive job of planning for nuclear forces. He insisted that a small number of prominent allies be members of this select group. After March 1966, when France announced it was withdrawing from NATO's military command, McNamara could set the group's nuclear agenda.<sup>53</sup>

He ordered a special five-sided table built. He established rules: Only the minister could sit at the table; only the minister could speak. Now McNamara had a small, controlled forum in which he could lead the allies over time to his own views of the nuclear problem.

It was a sign of some maturity, for in 1962 he had tried to convert them by preaching from the podiums at Athens and Ann Arbor. Now he used his considerable personal skills with a small group — and his power, for he had his finger on the nuclear trigger, and, except for the British, they did not.

McNamara remembers that at the first meeting around the table, he asked for an agenda and got "dead silence." Then he said, "Well, you've all been talking about whose finger is on the trigger. Let's make that the first agenda item!" They said, "Oh my God no," he recalls, because each country "wanted only the U.S. and its *own* finger on the trigger." He then proposed the first item to be "a discussion of a plan for initiating the use of nuclear weapons." He

assigned the West German defense minister, Kai-Uwe von Hassel, this job. When von Hassel protested that he knew nothing about it, McNamara said, "That's why we have established this committee. You can learn." McNamara told him he could have any expert he needed, and von Hassel went to work.<sup>54</sup>

The actual discussions are still classified, but McNamara's points concerning the uselessness of nuclear weapons to defend NATO are shown in his now-released presidential memorandum on European tactical nuclear forces. It asked what the general who commanded all NATO forces in Europe, who was always an American, would do once the huge enemy force invaded the West.

Although SACEUR has an airborne command post . . . the rest of his command structure would remain in jeopardy during a theater-wide nuclear war. Consequently, we must anticipate that control of the nuclear battle would become *directionless* in very short order [italics added]. . . .

Since SACEUR has no major reserves, except for forces from the United States which would have to be brought in through ports and airfields that might already have been destroyed, his front would collapse rapidly.

The alternatives? McNamara's memo noted that NATO's official policy denied "the feasibility of nonnuclear war." The French had "no concept of limited war" to defend Europe. The British favored a "brief conventional delaying action" that, if it failed to block the enemy, should be followed by "selective use of a few nuclear weapons . . . as a necessary link to general nuclear war." The Germans wanted "prompt use of tactical nuclear weapons" to stop the loss of territory at the border.<sup>55</sup>

And McNamara the teacher went to work. One staffer remembers a discussion in which McNamara ran through the basic scenario with map and pointer. Here is the enemy blitzkrieg driving across the Central Front; it quickly penetrates the NATO line, McNamara said, moving the pointer, from here to here.<sup>56</sup> To contain these enemy armored divisions, NATO approves the smallest nuclear strike it can make. We detonate a 20-kiloton weapon, targeted to minimize civilian casualties . . . here. McNamara's pointer came to a rest.

"My God," cried out von Hassel. "That's my district." He leapt from his seat and rushed to the map to read the labels more clearly. The teacher's lessons were being learned.

The confidential discussions in the Nuclear Planning Group were one of the key factors in getting NATO to adopt flexible response in the military committee in May 1967, and by the respective governments in December that year.<sup>57</sup> So useful was the NPG that the group lives on today as the critical working forum for discussions of the most divisive issues. It is a tribute to McNamara's insight and persistence — and to the moment, for historically the Europeans realized that nuclear weapons were not the be-all and end-all of nationhood — that flexible response has remained NATO policy ever since. The issue that dominated European politics for a decade was largely laid to rest, freeing the continent to focus on the issues that still define nationhood and community in Europe today: trade, technology, finance.

McNamara's record in Europe — his early insight into the dangers of nuclear weapons and forceful drive to cement an agreed safer policy with NATO — seemed to fit his image of restraint. Certainly this image helped him in later years, as conventional wisdom on both sides of the Atlantic came to view nuclear weapons with far more skepticism than was prevalent in the 1960s.

But McNamara's real role is more complex and even contradicts the image of nuclear restraint. First, he did not succeed in getting the allies to adopt flexible response as he defined it originally in his Athens and Ann Arbor speeches of 1962. What he sought was a strong enough non-nuclear defense of NATO to contain an enemy non-nuclear attack to thrust on the Kremlin the terrible decision to use nuclear weapons first. But the NATO allies balked from the large conventional-force buildup this policy required: Britain in the middle 1960s was trying to draw down its Army of the Rhine, and Bonn was leveling its defense budget. They argued, moreover, that if the war was going to go nuclear, a massive conventional defense would become irrelevant soon anyway. So why build it? Thus the text adopted in 1967 allowed only enough conventional buildup to delay the resort to nuclear defense. McNamara admitted in a private memo to the president in January 1968, "There are some situations (which are highly unlikely) where if deterrence failed we would have to initiate use of nuclear weapons. After years of effort this is the most ambitious strategy we have been able to convince our Allies to accept."<sup>58</sup>

There was also the contradiction between McNamara's stated admission that they would have to resort to nuclear weapons, given the inadequacies of non-nuclear forces in place at the time, and his pri-