Chapter 2

Robert Sprague’s “Adequate Defense”

Robert C. Sprague was a significant figure in American continental defense efforts during the Eisenhower administration. No one, however, including Sprague, probably anticipated the scope and extent of his involvement when he began the assignment. Soon after first considering initiatives to protect the United States from a surprise Soviet bomber attack, the Massachusetts engineer and industrialist learned about the possibility of nuclear antiaircraft weapons, helped to bring them to the attention of senior policy-makers, and assisted in securing a place for these arms in the American arsenal. Robert Sprague was certain that the defense measures he urged were appropriate, necessary, and urgent. Government leaders agreed.

Sprague, known as “RC,” was chief executive of the Sprague Electric Company, which he founded in 1926 to manufacture electronic devices. This sort of work was a family vocation. His father, Frank J. Sprague, had built a sizeable similarly named corporation that designed the nation’s first electric streetcar system, in Richmond, Virginia, in 1888, before merging with Edison General Electric a few years later. The younger Sprague graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1921 and subsequently received engineering degrees from the Naval Postgraduate School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He decided to forsake a career in the seagoing service, turned to business even before resigning his commission, and later patented a device that improved radio sound quality. Sprague’s corporation, based in North Adams, Massachusetts, became a large and successful producer of specialized electrical components, many of which had military applications. The company even provided parts for the first atomic bombs, although it was probably unaware of the use of the electrical condensers it sold to the Army Corps of Engineers’ Manhattan District.
By 1953, Sprague was a Republican of some stature. A few weeks before the presidential inauguration, Dwight D. Eisenhower selected him to become the Air Force’s Under Secretary, the service’s second-highest civilian spot. Sprague withdrew his name in early February when there was some doubt about the prospect of his confirmation because of controversy in the Senate about Pentagon officials with ties to defense contractors. Shortly thereafter, one source also maintains that Sprague was influential in getting the Air Force to select a proposal advanced by MIT researchers, rather than a competing University of Michigan effort, to develop the computerized system to identify and track air traffic for continental defense purposes. Eventually deployed under the peculiar moniker “Semi-Automatic Ground Environment,” SAGE offered tremendous economic advantages and spin-off technologies to the jurisdictions in which it was developed, circumstances certainly understood by proponents.

Through these or other activities, Sprague enjoyed a rapport with the Bay State’s senior senator, Republican Leverett Saltonstall. When the August 1953 Soviet thermonuclear detonation sparked public angst in the United States, information about the administration’s continental defense deliberations and budgetary limitations was leaked to the press. Senate Democrats took exception to Eisenhower’s defense strategy, either because they genuinely disagreed or sought to score partisan points. In October, when Ike warned an Atlantic City gathering of churchwomen that the security of American homes had “almost totally disappeared before the long-range bomber and the destructive power of a single bomb,” Tennessee Democratic senator Estes Kefauver chided the president for not promising enhanced protection. A member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Kefauver asked a panel, chaired by Saltonstall, to investigate. In an effort to undercut what he likely saw as partisan criticism and upstage Kefauver, Saltonstall ordered the committee’s preparedness subcommittee to study American continental defenses. The Massachusetts senator announced that Sprague had agreed to direct this “highly technical” review, and stated that Sprague’s background made him “uniquely qualified” for this work. “I have great confidence in his ability, energy, and thoroughness,” stated Saltonstall, “and I know he will do a fine job.”

Between mid-October and mid-February, Sprague received briefings from military and CIA representatives and others, amid his ongoing corporate responsibilities. He also met with Eisenhower’s trusted special assistant for national security affairs, Robert “Bobby” Cutler, a Boston Brahmin lawyer, novelist, Army reserve general, and