Despite Eisenhower’s overwhelming victory in the presidential election in November 1956, the Democrats continued to dominate Congress. Then, during his second term, the president lost key officials who had helped to formulate or had supported his New Look doctrine. Gruenther’s decision to retire at the end of November 1956 was in Eisenhower’s words ‘a shocker’. Humphrey, who Eisenhower had described as ‘mentally qualified for the Presidency’, resigned in May 1957, followed by Wilson, who resigned after the Sputnik shock in October 1957. Despite all his shortcomings Wilson had pressed forward with reductions in defence expenditures to meet the requirements of the New Look. Humphrey’s successor, Robert B. Anderson (a former secretary of the navy and deputy defense secretary) would also be conscientious in his efforts to keep down defence expenditures, while John McElroy, Wilson’s replacement, tried to ameliorate inter-service rivalry, albeit with little success. Radford, an ardent promoter of the New Look, retired in August 1957. His successor, General Twining, was an equally enthusiastic supporter of the New Look, as was Sherman Adams, Eisenhower’s White House chief of staff. However, the latter was accused of accepting gifts in return for political favours and was forced to resign in September 1958, just before the midterm Congressional elections.

When Foster Dulles resigned in April 1959, Christian Herter became the new secretary of state. Herter, crippled with arthritis, had been under-secretary of state after 1957 and subsequently acting secretary of state during Dulles’s mortal illness in 1959. Herter was Dulles’s, not Eisenhower’s, choice for the post. The new secretary of state was regarded by foreign leaders as being more flexible than Dulles, but Herter never achieved the close relationship with Eisenhower which Dulles had enjoyed. When Foster Dulles died of cancer in May 1959, Eisenhower described the secretary of state’s funeral as ‘an event of almost unspeakable sadness’.

During the president’s second term, Khrushchev resorted to a more aggressive foreign and strategic policy. This was partly the result of domestic pressures – the need to rally party and military support – but also because he was anxious to assert the Soviet Union’s role as a global superpower co-equal with the United States. During and after 1957 the Soviets
embarked on a series of initiatives to achieve this goal: the launching of the first earth satellite in October 1957, Khrushchev's 27 November 1958 ultimatum on Berlin, and the 'spirit of Camp David' accord in September 1959. In 1960 Khrushchev angrily withdrew from the Paris summit conference after the Soviet air force shot down an American U-2 reconnaissance plane on 1 May. In addition the Eisenhower administration was presented with a number of supposedly Communist or Communist-inspired (but usually nationalist) threats in the third world – in Indonesia, Venezuela, Lebanon, and the second Taiwan offshore crisis in 1958, and in Cuba, Congo, and Laos between 1959 and 1960.

On the domestic front, the eruption of the civil rights issue at Little Rock, Arkansas, in October 1957 raised serious doubts about the strength of Eisenhower's resolve. A recession hit the country in late 1957 and lasted into 1959. America's national security programme became more expensive. Finally, attacks on Eisenhower's New Look policy and especially on his massive nuclear retaliation strategy became more vehement during the second term. As far as the president was concerned, nothing that happened during his second term shook his confidence in the New Look strategy, although he was alarmed by the unexpected rise in the costs of the various nuclear weapons systems which were in the process of development after 1955.

This chapter will deal with the heated debates within the administration between the second half of 1955 until the eve of Sputnik, about the role of nuclear weapons, about the future conduct of war, and over the concept of limited warfare. These debates focused attention on the increasingly complex political and diplomatic implications of nuclear weapons for American strategy. Equally important, these debates also revealed a certain logic behind Eisenhower's strategic thinking, which became, however, less and less comprehensible to his subordinates.

1. A 'SUFFICIENT' DETERRENCE

The president stated at an NSC meeting on 4 August 1955 that with the advent of long-range ballistic missiles: 'if the Russians can fire 1000 [ballistic missiles] a day at us and we can fire 1000 a day at them, then he personally would want to take off for the Argentine'. Eisenhower believed that only 'a few of these missiles' needed to be developed as 'a threat ... but not 1000 or more'. On another occasion, the president confessed that 'it was so difficult at this time to foresee the type of war which the United States might be obliged to fight in future'. He told the National Security