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Sputniks and the Soviet Threat

The impact of Sputnik

No event focused popular attention on America's vulnerabilities to attack more than the launching of the world's first artificial earth satellite, Sputnik I, by the Soviet Union on 4 October 1957. It brought home the fact that the United States no longer enjoyed invulnerability to the ravages of war. The peoples of Western Europe were familiar with the effects of aerial bombardment and were already growing accustomed to being well within the range of Soviet bombers and missiles. Before the capability to destroy the United States provided the Russians with a retaliatory option, the Western Europeans had served as a hostage. Now Americans also began to suffer the uncomfortable sensation of being candidates for annihilation in the event of total war.

The Russians had put only a limited effort into the development of a long-range bomber force, giving ICBMs a higher priority. As their ICBM programme had started earlier than that of the Americans, it was the first to produce results. When these results became evident there was widespread alarm and despondency in the US. Successful completion of the Soviet programme before the American would mean that there would be a couple of years during which the Russians could enjoy a decisive superiority. The US had embarked on a nuclear strategy to ensure an upper hand over the Soviet Union; now the position might be fundamentally reversed.

Sputnik pushed these dark thoughts to the fore. This achievement in space captured the popular imagination in a way that stark and subdued reports of monitored ICBM tests could not. Sputnik exhibited the relevant technology in an exciting and visible fashion. As important was the general shock it provided to American self-confidence. The Russians had
shown that they could match – indeed exceed – the Americans in technological sophistication. Previously the cold war had been a competition between economic systems. In the West the capitalist system had been expected to triumph because of its superior performance both in developing wealth and encouraging innovation. The communist system was viewed as being so rigid that it would not be able to meet the challenges of the modern world. *Sputnik* demonstrated that the Soviet Union could operate as a modern industrial power in its ability to mobilize and exploit scientific and engineering talent. For this reason it serves as a watershed in American attitudes on technology and the strategic balance.¹ Finally, as a surprise in itself, *Sputnik* lent credibility to the notion that the Russians could, surreptitiously, steal an unexpected lead over the United States and put her at a terrible strategic disadvantage.

**First strikes for whom?**

The Air Force continued to believe that superiority could be maintained and that wars might be won in the future with nuclear weapons. Yet surprisingly, given a strategy that depended on making nuclear power an area of comparative advantage for the West, it was the Air Force which most publicized and amplified the growth of Soviet nuclear strength. Not long after the first Soviet long-range bombers had been seen flying around Moscow, the Air Force was issuing intelligence estimates warning that the Soviet Union was liable to out-produce the United States in bombers in a couple of years. In 1957, after the first Soviet ICBM tests had been monitored, the Air Force, not alone, postulated a ‘missile gap’ in which the Soviet Union would deploy ICBMs quicker and in greater numbers than the US.²

According to the Air Force, the Soviet Union was after more than a mere parity with the United States, a matching of forces to confirm the stalemate. They sought a decisive superiority.³ Such a stress upon the capabilities of an adversary was an odd way to support a strategy based on a preponderance of military strength. One result of the ‘missile gap’ clamour of the late 1950s was, in fact, to undermine the confidence of America’s allies in the reliability of their super-power protection. But the Air Force was not proclaiming Soviet military power in a spirit of defeatism; rather it was in a spirit of ‘act now before it is too late’.

This sense of urgency was shared by those who felt that not enough was being done to protect the retaliatory forces against a Soviet surprise attack. This was, however, primarily a defensive concern, designed to ensure a continuance of nuclear stalemate as opposed to Soviet superiority.