In 1984, asked what “Massive Retaliation” meant, Curtis LeMay said there were “as many answers to that question as there are people around.” He thought it meant nothing more than what had been U.S. policy all along: have “overwhelming strength so that nobody would dare attack us.”\textsuperscript{1} This simple statement of deterrence was not, though, how John Foster Dulles presented it at the time. Coming on the heels of the Korean War, Dulles’s Council on Foreign Relations speech in January 1954 was associated with an attempt to differentiate the New Look from its predecessors’. The war showed, Dulles’s said, that “a potential aggressor, who is glutted with manpower, might be tempted to attack in confidence that resistance would be confined to manpower.” The way to “deter aggression is for the free community to be willing to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing.” The United States should “depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and places of our own choosing.” The word was “instantly” not massively, and Dulles’s later clarification in \textit{Foreign Affairs} even suggested that a thermonuclear spasm was “not the kind of power that could most usefully be evoked under all circumstances.” The United States would not turn “every local war into a world war.” Even so, Dulles was both criticized for his inflexibility and lauded for stating what was self-evident.\textsuperscript{2}

Sympathetic historians see Dulles’s prevarications as an effort to raise Soviet uncertainty.\textsuperscript{3} But the range of meanings attributed to Massive Retaliation suggests nuclear power played on a variety of possibilities,
that what is important is not Dulles’s real intentions, but their affective capacities. Dulles may have known what he wanted to say—this is unclear from his papers—but the effect on NATO, domestic audiences, and adversaries alike meant Massive Retaliation was understood and presented differently. It was not, therefore, simply an attempt to grapple with the uncertainties of the thermonuclear age: it was also an expression of cultural uneasiness about the American nation, and Dulles’s vaguely theological efforts to replace containment.

We associate Massive Retaliation mainly with Dulles’s internationalism but it embodied, among other things, strategic interests tied to an embattled culture of neo-isolationism. Glenn Snyder claimed as much in his early study of the New Look. But he could not explain why an otherwise internationalist foreign policy included these countertendencies. Eisenhower ran in 1952 to keep the Republican Party from falling into the hands of the isolationists and retain—with some adjustments of course—the heart of Truman’s internationalism. His gestures to conservatives were just that, were they not? Yet, the ties to isolationism were tighter when we look carefully at the symbols, metaphors, and history-driven logic of those especially drawn to Massive Retaliation. However contradictory and short-lived Massive Retaliation may have been, it was run through with threads that gratified the rising tide of neo-isolationism. Consider, for starters, public reaction to the foreign policies of Truman and Eisenhower. Truman’s decision to send 4 divisions to NATO triggered a Great Debate over its strategic logic and Truman’s constitutional authority. The strategy also pandered to the laziness of the Europeans, endangering the constitution and the American taxpayer. In contrast, when Dulles claimed the United States might automatically initiate a nuclear war—a position that usurped congressional prerogative with more drama and finality than the troop decision—criticism was limited to a few liberals, such as Adlai Stevenson and Chester Bowles, defense intellectuals like William Kaufmann, and disgruntled army officers who resented the air bias it implied. We can describe how some Americans favored ground forces while others preferred nuclear power, but we have no obvious tools explaining why these corresponded with ideological loyalties.

One answer lies in Eisenhower’s military prestige, and his command of the Republicans, who had been the main source of partisan resistance to liberal internationalism. A deeper answer rests with the way some Americans understood the strategic dilemmas facing the United States in the mid-1950s so as to see nuclear retaliation as a natural representation