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CHRONOLOGY OF TWO-YEAR DISPUTE ON "MISSILE GAP"

The dispute over the military "missile gap" has surged back and forth from Capitol Hill to the White House, the Pentagon and the campaign stump for two years.

The "gap" debate began -- as far as it is possible to fix a time -- with a not-for-attribution background briefing held for reporters in January, 1959, by former Secretary of Defense Neil H. McElroy. Ironically it was revived last Monday by the same device -- a background session for newsmen widely reported to have been held by the present Defense Secretary, Robert S. McNamara.

Following is a chronology of major statements and events relating to the "gap":

January 16, 1959. Secretary McElroy gave a secret briefing to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and was reported by Joseph Alsop, the columnist, to have told the committee that the Soviet Union would have a missile superiority of 100 intercontinental ballistics missiles by 1960. Mr. Alsop contended the edge will be 300.

January 22, 1959. At a news conference, Mr. McElroy called estimates that the Soviet Union would have 300 ICBM's by 1960 "exaggerated." He contended that there was no "positive evidence" the Soviet Union had an ICBM in a state of combat readiness.

January 23, 1959. Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Missouri, argued that present plans would provide less than 25 percent of the number of ICBM's in the Soviet Union.

January 28, 1959. Soviet Premier Khrushchev reported that the Soviet Union had begun mass production of ICBM's.

January 29, 1959. Secretary McElroy testified that the United States had no intention of matching the Soviet Union "missile for missile" in the ICBM field. Instead, it would maintain superiority in over-all striking power, he said.

February 4, 1959. President Eisenhower told reporters, "We do not believe there is a relative increase in their (the Russians) capacity."

May 4, 1959. Secretary McElroy reported "steady advances" in ICBM programs. The Senate Preparedness subcommittee blamed the "missile gap" controversy on faulty intelligence estimates of Soviet strength.

June 27, 1959. Secretary McElroy said both the United States and the Soviet Union were behind schedule in the race to perfect an operational ICBM.

July 27, 1959. Secretary McElroy indicated in a television interview that the Soviet Union might have won the race for the first operational ICBM.

July 29, 1959. President Eisenhower told his news conference the United States was speedily closing the ICBM gap, and pointed out that the Soviet Union had begun its missile program nine years before the United States.

September 1, 1959. Atlas ICBM missile declared operational.

December 1, 1959. Secretary McElroy said that the Soviet Union might well forge ahead of the United States in ICBM's by 1963. Both countries had about ten combat-ready ICBM's, but the United States did not intend to make heavy investments in "first generation" Atlas missiles, he said.

January 19, 1960. Newly appointed Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates, Jr., conceded that the Russians probably had a greater number of ICBM's, but insisted in Senate testimony there was no "deterrent gap."

January 26, 1960. Senator Richard B. Russell, Democrat of Georgia and Chairman of the Armed Forces Committee, said the United States was "woefully behind" in missiles.

February 1, 1960. Secretary Gates said that the United States would begin overtaking the Soviet missile lead in 1962. Until then, the Russians will have "moderately more" missiles in production and in operation, but United States strength in other weapons overshadows any missile gap, he added.

August 26, 1960. Senator John F. Kennedy, in a campaign speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Detroit, charged that "the missile lag looms larger and larger ahead." Mr. Kennedy's criticism rejected Administration contentions that a "missile gap" did not mean a "deterrent gap."

September 7, 1960. Campaigning in Seattle, Mr. Kennedy called for acceleration of the Polaris, Minuteman and other missile programs, and "a complete re-evaluation of national defense organization."

September 12, 1960. In a speech in San Diego, Mr. Kennedy said the danger of Soviet missile attack would grow as the Russians increased the missile lead.

September 14, 1960. In New York, Mr. Kennedy saw a need for "crash programs to provide ourselves with the ultimate weapons which will eventually close the missile gap"

September 24, 1960. Secretary Gates said that contentions that the United States was a second rate military power "are simply not supported by the facts." The nation's capacity was "infinite," he said, adding, "I think it is time we took some pride in our accomplishments."

January 25, 1961. The House Republican Policy Committee reported Russia had thirty-five operational ICBM's and 200 long-range bombers, while the United States had sixteen operational Atlas missiles, thirty-two Polaris missiles in readiness aboard nuclear-powered submarines, and 600 long-range bombers.

February 6, 1961. Defense Secretary McNamara reportedly told an off-the-record press briefing there was no missile gap.

February 7, 1961. White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger called this information "incorrect," whatever its source.

February 8, 1961. President Kennedy said studies were still under way to determine if there was a gap. He said he hoped the reports would show there was none.