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An Analysis of the JCAE Transcript 1950

In early 1950 at the start of the cold war with the Soviet Union, the Congressmen and Senators on the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE)[[1]](#footnote-1) received a report from the General Advisory Commission (GAC)[[2]](#footnote-2) concerning the feasibility of building a “Super” hydrogen bomb. The purpose of this meeting is to recommend to the president whether to pursue building the “Super” and if it is in the interest of the country in doing so. The main discussion is the feasibility report that was submitted by the GAC on this issue. In this report there are signed letters from prominent scientists including Robert J. Oppenheimer, the father of the fission bomb, to not build the “Super” and push for international control of atomic weapons. The senators and congressman on the JCAE did not react well to the scientists giving their opinions in a feasibility report, however it did help the JCAE reach a decision on building the “Super” and what the end goal of atomic weapons would be. There are three parts, first is the reaction of the JCAE to this letter and how surrounding circumstances with the Soviet Union led them to this reaction. Secondly, the JCAE members understanding the implications of the “Super” in the letter itself. Lastly, the end notes of the meeting and the further steps the JCAE was taking before giving a recommendation to the president and how that was impacted by the GAC report.

The reason the meeting was being held was for two reasons. The JCAE was inquiring the GAC to see if building a “Super” was even possible. In addition, the JCAE needed to give the president a recommendation on how to proceed with the “Super”. A few months before the Soviets had detonated Joe-1 and it was the start of the Cold War. In terms of national policy, the JCAE wanted to have an answer for the Soviets. The problem was that they needed to show the country and their allies they would be safe from a Soviet threat. So, building the “Super” in theory would keep America and allies safe from any threats. The letter from the GAC was understandably not very well received. The scientists did not want to build this weapon of mass destruction since it would only be used for genocide, “[the Super] goes far beyond any military objective … a weapon which in practical effect is almost one of genocide” ( Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 28). The scientists describe here their concern with the scope of destruction of this bomb. It would only be used to wipe out populations, not military bases and installations. Here they insert their opinions, saying they do not support or recommend building this bomb. Senator Hickenlooper on the JCAE complains: “[The GAC] has indulged in a discussion of morals and not the thing that they were set up to discuss…the morals of the development of the super bomb must inevitably rest with the President and the defensive responsibility of this country” ( Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 30) To the JCAE the scientists were asked to perform a simple study into how long it would take to build the “Super” and came back with a petition and recommendations on policy not to build it. The GAC was asking not to use the bomb while it was the JCAE’s task to determine the use of this bomb based on the feasibility described in this report. Senator Hickenlooper’s reaction was quite reasonable under the circumstances that the soviets could be building a super bomb at this time as well.

However, the GAC report contained statistics and estimates on the damage that a “Super” could create that validated the argument the scientists were trying to make. “[W]hose destructive power in terms of area of damage is 20 to 100 times greater than those of the present atomic bomb.” (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 24) The estimated damage of this bomb had an impact on the JCAE. They saw that if the Soviets and the US had them, it would be mutually assured destruction. These implications are what the scientists tried to argue, and it got through to the JCAE. Again, Senator Hickenlooper, “I think their personal views as to the morals are very valuable.” (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 32) The JCAE sees values in these opinions even if they do not agree with the way it was delivered. This is very interesting since the senators and congressman responded very negatively to the GAC report, however, do understand the implications and why the scientists are protesting building the bomb. After receiving this report the chairman wrote a letter to the president and when they spoke of it, the president said, “it is not an easy thing to order the development of a weapon that will kill ten million people” (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 44) The JCAE talk about this and they know from the GAC report that the decision to build this bomb would have tremendous implications.

After reading the GAC report and the letter to the president, the JCAE had to decide if they wanted to recommend building the “Super”. Instead of giving the go ahead with building the bomb, they hesitate. “In this historic and important matter, shouldn’t we tell Oppenheimer and Conant to produce themselves and give us their views?” (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 46) The chairmen want input from respected figures such as the father of the atomic bomb to see what exactly their viewpoint is, even though Oppenheimer already made his point clear in the GAC report. The JCAE is hesitant to make such a decision to build this weapon. They want all their bases covered. The JCAE goes on to mention a conversation with Edward Teller, “something was needed to be done above and beyond the technical aspects of this program, that [the scientists] wanted to make sure they were going to get into another situation where we found ourselves with the A-bomb.”( Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 49) The JCAE sees that the need for something more must be done with this bomb politically before it was used in a war. The atomic bomb was used militarily and never actually accomplished anything past the destruction of two cities. The chairmen agree that politically much more can be accomplished for international control and peace for the United States and its allies. To that they also credit the GAC report for bringing up these points. The scientists do not recommend building the bomb for these reasons and want international control on these weapons, however the JCAE sees this as a bargaining chip (Joint Committee on Atomic Energy 1950, 45) to bring to the united nations. They do ultimately proceed building the “Super”, but with GAC report in mind use this to change and enact international treaties and policies that help with world peace. This is at least how the JCAE pictures the use of this bomb to help as a deterrent rather than a weapon.

At first the JCAE had a negative response towards the GAC report since it contained many arguments not to build the bomb, not the feasibility of the bomb itself. Then went over the implications of the weapon itself and how the scientists interpret this as a weapon of genocide, so building this weapon would have major implications for the entire world. The JCAE knows that they need these scientists to build the bomb and value their opinions. The JCAE also recognizes that they do not want to repeat the previous mistakes with the atomic bomb. They proceed to talk about options as this weapon as a deterrent and a bargaining chip to force international control rather than use in war. This discussion is primarily sparked by the GAC report. Even though the “Super” was built against the GAC report recommendations, the report had its intended effect. The discussion in the JCAE meetings has led to the “Super” never actually being used. It has politically helped as a deterrent and with international control. If the scientists never wrote that letter, who knows what would have happened with the hydrogen bomb. It might have been used on a city.

Bibliography

“Transcript of an Executive Session, ‘Development of a Super Weapon," Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (9 January 1950)”.

1. Joint Committee on Atomic Energy will be referenced as JCAE. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. General Advisory Commission will be referenced as GAC. Also the report they are talking about a feasibility report on the hydrogen bomb that the GAC has had its scientists discuss and write up. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)