

Eisenhower Advisers Discussed Using Nuclear Weapons in China

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Senior Air Force officers proposed using 10-to-15-kiloton nuclear bombs against targets in Communist China in 1958, in the event that Beijing blockaded the Taiwan Strait, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower ruled out that option, according to a newly declassified Pentagon document.

At a Cabinet meeting in mid-August 1958, as the threat of a Chinese blockade of Taiwan was developing, Air Force Gen. Nathan F. Twining, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained "that at the outset American planes would drop 10- to 15-kiloton bombs on selected fields in the vicinity of Amoy," a coastal city on the Taiwan Strait now

called Xiamen, according to the documents.

But "the President simply did not accept the contention that nuclear weapons were as conventional as high explosives," according to the now-declassified Air Force history of the Taiwan crisis.

In releasing the official history, William Burr of George Washington University's National Security Archive said Eisenhower's decision forced Air Force leaders to think more seriously about conventional warfare instead of relying on nuclear arms.

A similar discussion is underway today as the Pentagon, under direction from Congress, examines U.S. nuclear strategy as part of the debate over whether to develop a new generation of weapons in the Reliable

Replacement Warhead program.

By mid-August 1958, Air Force commanders had deployed five Strategic Air Command B-47 bombers that "went on alert to conduct nuclear raids against the mainland [China] airfields," the history says. At that time, the commanders assumed "presidential approval [that] any communist assault upon the offshore islands would trigger immediate nuclear retaliation."

When informed that Eisenhower had insisted that first strikes be made with high explosives, Gen. Laurence S. Kuter, the Pacific Air Forces commander, described "this idea of limited response as disastrous . . . and warned that the United States should either be ready to use its most effective weapons — in his opinion nuclear bombs — or stay

out of the conflict," according to the history.

On Aug. 23, the Chinese began to fire tens of thousands of artillery shells from the mainland to Big and Little Quemoy, offshore islands held by the Taiwanese. Eisenhower approved the deployment of U.S. naval forces to escort ships resupplying Quemoy, the dispatch of an air strike force to the region and a commitment to help provide Taiwan's air defense.

By early October, the Chinese government had announced a cease-fire, and after a few months the crisis dissipated.

Kuter, the history says, later "complained that the military had failed to convince civilian authorities that American forces had to be free to use nuclear bombs at the outset of any conflict." Air Force headquarters in Washington, however, accepted that political considerations "might require that initial strikes be made with conventional ordnance."

The Air Force declined to comment on the document yesterday.