Revolt of the Admirals

The Fight for Naval Aviation

In November 1943, General of the Army George C. Marshall called for post-World War II unification of the Department of War and the Department of the Navy. These proposals led to what became known as the "unification debates" and the eventual passage of the National Security Act of 1947. That Act reorganized the military, creating a unified National Military Establishment (renamed the Department of Defense shortly after), the National Security Council (NSC), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and an independent United States Air Force.

The generals of the newly formed air force propounded a new doctrine: that strategic bombing, particularly with nuclear weapons, was the sole decisive element necessary to win any future war; and was therefore the sole means necessary to deter an adversary from launching a Pearl Harbor-like surprise attack or war against the United States. To implement this doctrine, which the air force and its supporters regarded as the highest national priority, the air force proposed that it should be funded by the Congress to build a large fleet of U.S. based long-range strategic heavy bombers. The air force generals argued that this project should receive large amounts of funding, beginning with an upgraded B-36 Peacemaker intercontinental bomber.

The admirals of the navy disagreed. Pointing to the overwhelming dominance of the aircraft carrier in the Pacific Theater, they asked the United States Congress to fund a large fleet of "supercarriers" and their supporting battle groups, beginning with USS United States. The navy leadership believed that wars could not be won by strategic bombing alone, with or without the use of nuclear weapons. The navy also maintained that to decide, at the outset of any future conflict, to initiate the widespread use of nuclear weapons—attacking the major population centers of the enemy homeland—was immoral. United States was, however, designed to support 100,000-pound aircraft, which would be large enough to carry the multi-ton nuclear weapons of the day. The plans for the United States-class called for carrying fourteen heavy bombers each and enough aviation fuel for eight raids per plane, allowing a USS United States supercarrier class to drop 112 nuclear weapons before resupply became necessary. The admirals argued that
this project should receive large amounts of funding for eight of the supercarriers over a five-year period.

The first Secretary of Defense, former Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, supported the navy position and authorized construction of United States with a production run of five ships. However, he was asked to resign by President Truman following a series of budgetary disagreements on March 28, 1949, and was replaced by Louis A. Johnson, who supported Truman's budget limits and the air force's argument as superior.

On April 23—less than a month after taking office, and without consulting Congress—Johnson ordered cancellation of United States. Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan and a number of high-ranking admirals resigned in protest. A few days later, Johnson announced that the aviation assets of the United States Marine Corps would be transferred to the air force; this plan was quietly dropped in response to an uproar in Congress. The navy's aircraft carriers were roundly disliked by the air force, as they were an aviation asset which the air force could not control and which the air force planners considered obsolete in the age of nuclear weapons. Johnson, who was a staunch proponent of the new nuclear bomber force, consequently sought to limit as much as possible the navy's procurement of the new large carriers to conserve funds in the markedly reduced post-war military budget.

USS United States, pictured in drydock with her keel laid. The cancellation of USS United States and her sister ships were the major factor in the "Revolt of the Admirals"
In December 1949 Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson said, “There's no reason for having a Navy and Marine Corps. General Bradley tells me that amphibious operations are a thing of the past. We'll never have any more amphibious operations. That does away with the Marine Corps. And the Air Force can do anything the Navy can do nowadays, so that does away with the Navy.

In the interim a research group, Op-23, had begun to gather material critical of the B-36’s performance and capabilities. An "anonymous document" soon appeared, claiming that the B-36 was a "billion-dollar blunder" and alleging fraud on the part of B-36 contractors. The document stated that Johnson, who had been on the board of directors of Convair, manufacturer of the bomber, had a personal interest in its production. The situation was further exacerbated by a series of articles for popular consumption written by Rear Admiral Daniel V. Gallery for The Saturday Evening Post. The final article, "Don't Let Them Scuttle the Navy!" was so inflammatory that Johnson wanted Gallery court-martialed for gross insubordination. Gallery barely escaped court-martial, but the articles cost him his promotion to vice admiral and ultimately ended his career. The debate that caused the "Revolt" had been building for several years, but climaxed in late 1949 when many of those officers, including Chief of Naval Operations Louis E. Denfeld, were either fired or forced to resign.

Congressional hearings

In its final report, the House Armed Services Committee found no substance to the charges relating to the roles of Johnson and Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington in aircraft procurement. It held that evaluation of the B-36's worth was the responsibility of the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group, and that the services jointly should not pass judgment on weapons proposed by one service. On cancellation of the supercarrier, the committee questioned the qualifications of the army and air force chiefs of staff, who had testified in support of Johnson's decision, to determine vessels appropriate for the navy. The committee, disapproving of Johnson's "summary manner" of terminating the carrier and his failure to consult congressional committees before acting, stated that "national defense is not strictly an executive department undertaking; it involves not only the Congress but the American people as a whole speaking through their Congress. The committee can in no way condone this manner of deciding public questions."

The author of the so-called "anonymous document" turned out to be Cedric R. Worth, civilian assistant to the Under Secretary of the Navy. A House Investigating Committee recommended that Worth be fired. Following a naval court of inquiry, Worth was dismissed.

The committee expressed solid support for effective unification, but stated that "there is such a thing as seeking too much unification too fast" and observed that "there has been a navy reluctance in the interservice marriage, an over-ardent army, a somewhat exuberant air force... It may well be stated that the committee finds no unification Puritans in the Pentagon."

Finally, the committee condemned the dismissal of Admiral Denfeld. Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews fired Denfeld on October 27, 1949, explaining that he and Denfeld disagreed widely on strategic policy and unification. The House Armed Services Committee
concluded that Denfeld's removal was a reprisal because of his testimony, and a challenge to effective representative government.

Army General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the navy admirals "'fancy dans' who won't hit the line with all they have on every play unless they can call the signals" who were in "open rebellion against the civilian control." This was as much for budgetary reasons as any other; the services were then in the middle of the post-World War II drawdown (which would continue into and past the Korean War era) and each military branch believed that their future depended on securing as many missions for themselves as possible.

**Aftermath**

After the cancellation of USS United States, Congress and the navy began to contemplate the design of the next aircraft supercarrier, a process which sped up with the Korean War. The following five years of military budgets did prioritize the development and deployment of multiple air force heavy bomber designs, accumulating a combat ready force of over one thousand air force long range strategic bombers capable of supporting nuclear mission scenarios. The air force portion of the total defense budget grew, while the navy's portion shrank. The new supercarrier design bore only a cursory resemblance to United States as construction began. Then her design was immediately revised with a displacement reduction; along with the addition of an angled flight deck she bore little resemblance to the original design. Eventually, some five years later the new design became USS Forrestal.

![USS FORRESTAL CVA 59](image)

The supercarrier design has since evolved through the Enterprise class, into the Nimitz class, and will continue in the Ford-class carriers. As of 2012, the US Navy has eleven supercarriers in active service and two in the reserve fleet.
The "Revolt of the Admirals" opened the discussion, still ongoing, in the American military establishment about the role of nuclear weapons, strategic bombing, and the need for unification of military command while at the same time questioning the team roles of each service as a separate entity.

The first test of national doctrine came on 25 June 1950 when the Korean War broke out, and the national command authority decided that nuclear strategic bombing would not be used to defeat North Korea—rather, the use of conventional ground forces, supported by naval assets along with amphibious assault, would be used to engage the armed forces of North Korea. The Korean War was deemed to be a limited war. The supporters of the air force doctrine believed the manner in which it was fought was not relevant to the question of dealing with the greater threat of the Soviet Union. In fact history has demonstrated that in the nuclear age limited conflicts are the norm. The Korean War reinforced the lessons of World War II, in which carriers were a primary asset to project force in support of American foreign policy.

After the North Korean attack began, Secretary Johnson promised the navy that it would have its new aircraft "supercarrier". Air force and navy historians continue to advocate the positions held by their respective sides during the "Revolt of the Admirals".