

that American conventional forces were rapidly demobilizing, refused to surrender its atomic deterrent without adequate international controls and continued to develop its nuclear arsenal. In an atmosphere of mutual suspicion the Cold War set in.

The Debate Over Domestic Legislation

While the international situation grew more ominous due to deteriorating relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, a domestic debate was taking place over the permanent management of America's nuclear program. The terms of the debate were framed by the Interim Committee in July 1945 when it wrote draft legislation proposing a peacetime organization with responsibilities very similar to those of the Manhattan Project. The draft legislation provided for a strong military presence on a nine-member board of commissioners and strongly advocated the federal government's continued dominance in nuclear research and development.

The May-Johnson Bill

The Interim Committee's draft legislation reached President Truman via the State Department shortly after the armistice. After affected federal agencies approved, Truman advocated speedy passage of the congressional version of the bill, the May-Johnson bill, on October 3, 1945. Groves, Bush, and Conant testified at hearings in the House of Representatives that the sweeping powers granted the proposed commission were necessary and that only government control of atomic power could prevent its misuse. Although Lawrence, Fermi, and Oppenheimer (with some misgivings) regarded the bill as acceptable, many of the scientists at the Met Lab and at Oak Ridge complained that the bill was objectionable because it was designed to maintain military control over nuclear research, a situation that had been tolerable during the war but was unacceptable during peacetime when free scientific interchange should be resumed. Particularly onerous to the scientific opponents were the proposed penalties for security violations contained in the May-Johnson bill—ten years in prison and a \$100,000 fine. Organized scientific opposition in Washington slowed the bill's progress, and Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan held it up in the Senate through a parliamentary maneuver.

The McMahon Bill

As support for the May-Johnson bill eroded in

late 1945, President Truman withdrew his support. Vandenberg's attempt to establish a joint House-Senate special committee failed, but Brien McMahon of Connecticut successfully created and became chair of the Senate's Special Committee on Atomic Energy. Daily hearings took place until December 20, when McMahon introduced a substitute to the May-Johnson bill. Hearings on the new McMahon bill began in January. Groves opposed McMahon's bill, citing weak security provisions, the low military presence, and the stipulation that commission members be full-time (Groves thought that more eminent commissioners could be obtained if work was part-time). Groves also objected to the bill's provision that atomic weapons be held in civilian rather than military custody. Nevertheless, the Senate approved the McMahon bill on June 1, 1946, and the House approved it on July 20, with a subsequent conference committee eliminating most substantive amendments. The sometimes bitter debate between those who advocated continued military stewardship of America's atomic arsenal and those who saw continued military control as inimical to American traditions ended in victory for supporters of civilian authority. President Truman signed the McMahon Act, known officially as the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, on August 1. The bill called for the transfer of authority from the United States Army to the United States Atomic Energy Commission, a five-member civilian board serving full-time and assisted by a general advisory committee and a military liaison committee.⁶⁶ The Atomic Energy Act entrusted the Atomic Energy Commission with the government monopoly in the field of atomic research and development previously held by its wartime predecessor.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The Manhattan Project, its wartime mission completed, gave way to the civilian Atomic Energy Commission. How well the Atomic Energy Commission would be able to manage the nuclear arsenal in a Cold War environment and whether it could successfully develop the peaceful uses of atomic energy, only time would tell. What was clear as the Atomic Energy Commission took over at the beginning of 1947 was that the success of the Manhattan Project had helped cement the bond between basic scientific research and national security. Science had gone to war and contributed mightily to the outcome. The challenge confronting American policy makers in the postwar years was to enlist the forces of science in the battle to defend the peace.