Less than one second. That’s how long it took for the world to be turned upside down. The sound of an explosion louder than anyone had ever heard filled the air, and a mushroom cloud rose to the sky. Then, silence. The dropping of the first atomic bomb was an event that will be remembered forever. Never before had anyone been able to create a weapon that could create such destruction in such short time. As Robert Oppenheimer, the lead scientist in the production of the atomic bomb, said after witnessing its detonation:

We knew the world would not be the same. Few people laughed, few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The detonation of the atomic bomb may have lasted less than one second, but the impact it had on the United States government has lasted far longer.

The effects of the atomic bomb can be seen in the government’s actions after World War II, specifically from 1945-1950. The government’s policy of the complete control of atomic science, which was necessary during the war, continued after the conclusion of World War II. In addition, as a result of possessing the atomic bomb, the United States sought new ways to demonstrate its power and to establish its world dominance. Finally, despite the power the United States gained from the bomb, the government was driven by fear of what would happen if an enemy country, such as the Soviet Union, was able to obtain a nuclear weapon. This fear led the government to establish new programs and policies to protect national security, which became what is known today as the National Security State. In these ways, the effects of the atomic bomb went far beyond the impact of the initial explosion.

Though the Manhattan Project, the government initiative to create the atomic bomb, gave the government control over atomic science, this policy of government control remained long after the project had concluded. The government needed to take control of the Manhattan Project in order to create an atomic bomb before the Germans created a bomb of their own. The project was put under military control and, soon after, General Leslie R. Groves was assigned to be the head of the project. In addition to the fact that atomic science was now in government control, Groves had the power to decide everything from who was able to work on the project to what materials were to be used in the atomic bomb.[[2]](#footnote-2) With such powerful measures, the United States could essentially determine the course of how the use of atomic energy progressed in the country.

With the war over, the government needed to decide what its role would be in the future of the atomic program. After the war, Groves intended to keep the bomb in the custody of the military and the government. After several attempts at passing bills that would determine where nuclear power would be kept, the McMahon Bill was passed in 1946. The bill set up a civilian agency with commissioners to the run the American atomic program. President Truman supported this bill adamantly because it gave the executive branch control over the bomb.[[3]](#footnote-3) By passing this bill, the government was able to maintain the same policy of atomic energy control that it had established during the Manhattan Project.

One could argue that the government has had a longstanding involvement in science and that the continuing control of atomic research was not a new government policy. The government had funded numerous scientific projects in the past, including projects such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in 1932.[[4]](#footnote-4) This shows that government involvement in science was not a new concept introduced after World War II. However, the degree of government control and involvement in research on atomic energy was unique. For years, physicists conducted research unobstructed by national borders.[[5]](#footnote-5) Information and research on atomic energy flowed freely from country to country. People were judged on their knowledge instead of their nationality. In fact, the Manhattan Project was aided by the United Kingdom and Canada. This changed in 1946 when Congress passed the Atomic Energy Act, which banned sharing atomic technology with all foreign powers. With a strong grip on atomic science nationally and an isolationist strategy on sharing information internationally, the United States was limiting and controlling what progress could be made with atomic energy. When discussing atomic progress after the bomb was built, Robert Oppenheimer said, “I’m a little scared of what we built…[But] a scientist cannot hold back progress because he fears what the world will do with his discoveries.”[[6]](#footnote-6) However, the government was doing what Oppenheimer said should not be done – holding back progress. This is what changed with the introduction of the atomic bomb; government dominance of science this complete had never been seen during peacetime in the past.

The power created by the bomb was evident to the United States, but the government wanted to make sure that other countries realized that the United States was going to become the strongest country in the world because of this new power. After the war, officials proposed a plan known as Operation Crossroads. The goal of Operation Crossroads was to test the effects of the atomic bomb on naval vessels. While this testing would provide information on how the United States would need to adjust its military to account for nuclear weaponry, the testing did something far more important.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Unlike the first atomic bomb test during the Manhattan Project, this testing was not done in private. In fact, a massive publicity effort was made to let the rest of the world know what was happening. Press boarded media ships on the days of testing, live radio feeds were broadcast, and lecture tours spread around the world. The United States government also invited diplomats from foreign nations to attend the event. Ten nations accepted, including the Soviet Union.[[8]](#footnote-8) Testing was a way for the United States to flex its muscles. By flaunting this immense power, the United States was asserting its dominance as the premier global power. Other countries would see the power that the bomb held, and they would realize that there was no other option but to allow the United States to claim the top spot in the world. Other nations would realize that they could not compete with the United States because they did not possess anything nearly as strong as the atomic bomb. The bomb was a great military advantage, but at the same time, it was an excellent tool that the government used to its advantage in international affairs.

With an assertion of their nuclear dominance made, the United States wanted to be able to regulate atomic power internationally so they could cement their control of nuclear power. To do this, the United States attempted to change nuclear foreign policy to give itself control of nuclear energy, even outside of American borders. The United States realized that they could not stop other countries from obtaining nuclear power altogether, but they could try to control what other countries could do with this power. This idea controlled a large amount of American atomic policy in the years after the war.

The United States made numerous attempts to adjust international atomic regulations, although these were routinely denied by the Soviet Union, which had emerged as the United States’ strongest rival for world power after World War II. The Baruch Plan was an example of this. The plan was proposed by the United States, and delivered at a meeting of the United Nations Atomic Energy Council. The plan called for stopping the manufacturing of atomic weapons. It also called for dismantling all existing bombs once an adequate system for control of atomic energy could be agreed upon. Agreements such as this allowed the United States to maintain an atomic monopoly.[[9]](#footnote-9) Other countries were not allowed to create bombs, but the United States was able to keep their weapons until an “adequate system” was created. The United States attempted to pass several bills like this, each time with a similar goal of attempting to maintain nuclear dominance.

The Soviets saw the Baruch Plan as way for the United States to maintain indefinite control of atomic weaponry.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Soviet Union promptly rejected the bill, but they responded with a counterproposal. The proposal was similar to the American proposal except it required all existing stockpiles of bombs to be destroyed within three months. The United States immediately rejected the proposal, as it would cause them to give up their nuclear monopoly.[[11]](#footnote-11) Any proposal where the United States was not able to control regulation of atomic energy meant a loss of power for the United States. Though the United States never succeeded in passing a bill to regulate atomic energy, its persistence in attempting to regulate showed how important maintaining control of atomic energy was to the government.

Although these actions indicate that the United States intended to use the atomic bomb to establish its dominance, it can also be argued that the United States had been seeking to become the dominant world power for a long time, and this was just an example. However, previously, the United States had attempted to establish dominance through economic strength and military power. These were strategies that other nations in the world could also use to compete with the United States. The bomb presented something different. The potential for world destruction gave the bomb a power so great that the country that controlled it was virtually assured world dominance. The United State realized this, and they shaped their strategy for achieving dominance around the bomb. While the goal of becoming powerful in world affairs was not new, the strategy for achieving the goal was.

At the conclusion of World War II, the power of the bomb was still relatively unknown. It was unknown what the full capabilities of the bomb were, but it was also unknown what would happen if this power fell into enemy hands. After the war, when discussing the future of the United States, radio commentator Edward R. Murrow said the following: “Seldom if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear with such a realization that survival is not assured.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In particular, the unknown atomic destiny of the Soviet Union was what caused much of this fear. There was a fear of what would happen to the United States if the Soviets were able to obtain their own atomic bomb. American security was in jeopardy. This fear is what drove many of the United States’ policies from 1945-1950. It led to an increased level of information monitoring by the government and a stricter security policy in the country. These changes gave rise to what historians describe today as the National Security State.

One manifestation of the National Security State was concern about threats from abroad. This meant that the United needed to create a way to monitor actions in other countries. The Marshall Plan provided a way to achieve this. The Marshall Plan was created as a proposed recovery plan for the Continent of Europe after World War II. The plan could stabilize the global economic situation and guarantee future American markets.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, the impact of this project went far beyond this. American administrators of the funding were placed around Europe. The locations where they were placed could be used as listening posts, because many of these locations had covert operatives.[[14]](#footnote-14) The United States could monitor what was happening in and around Europe. It could keep tabs on the Soviet Union without a largely public effort. If a development was made in the Soviet nuclear program that the United States found threatening, the United States would be much more likely to know about it if they had an established presence near Soviet territory.

The fear of espionage related to the bomb led to many of the changes described by the National Security State. In 1945 and 1946, low level government employees were caught sharing data with the Soviet Union.[[15]](#footnote-15) In response, the Army began conducting surveillance in many areas of the government. At this point, the government was wary of the leaking of information, but nothing significant had occurred yet. It was clear that further action needed to be taken to stop information from leaking.

Further reports of the Soviet Union helped justify this fear. Diplomat George Kennan sent an urgent telegram from Moscow in which he alerted the United States to the Soviet threat. He warned that Soviet Union felt it was “necessary that the internal harmony of our society be broken… the international authority of our state be broken.”[[16]](#footnote-16) He alerted the president of internal Communist subversion in places like unions and youth leagues. The Communist threat could be anywhere. Kennan said that the Communist threat was not yet strong enough to meet the United States head on, but that we should be wary. The idea of a secret force that could leak information frightened many high-ranking officials.[[17]](#footnote-17) Officials were worried that information on the atomic bomb would be released to the Soviets.

The government needed a way to make sure pertinent information was not leaked. The solution to their problem was a spy program. This idea was proposed by many, including Leslie Groves, as a way of countering Soviet access to nuclear material and information.[[18]](#footnote-18) The fear of the Soviets obtaining the bomb was so great that it led to the establishment of the first peacetime spy agency in the United States. [[19]](#footnote-19) The protection of atomic information was important enough that the government felt it was necessary to create a spy agency, as well as other groups that would monitor information.

One of the major strategies for protecting information was setting up intelligence groups to monitor the flow of information. Truman set up an intelligence group, the Central Intelligence Group, after the reports of Soviet espionage.[[20]](#footnote-20) Truman did not receive congressional authority to establish the Central Intelligence Group. He also gave a secret fund of $15 million dollars to his new agency.[[21]](#footnote-21) The issue of atomic information leakage was important enough to Truman that he felt that walking the line between legal and illegal was acceptable.

Some of the most important changes to security came through the military. These changes established massive new agencies that gave the government significantly greater power. The National Security Act was passed on September 18, 1947. Military intelligence was now centralized in a new office known as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA.)[[22]](#footnote-22) With the National Security Act, the CIA was also allowed to conduct covert activities and gather information. It could influence economic or military conditions internationally as long as the president found the action, “necessary to support identifiable policy objectives of the United States and is important to the national security of the United States.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These limits were routinely ignored. It has been shown that the CIA’s international actions in the years following World War II were responsible for overthrowing many potential communist governments as a way to weaken the power of the Soviet Union.[[24]](#footnote-24) The CIA was allowed to break laws as long as it was justified in stopping the spread of the enemy. If the Soviet threat was allowed to spread, it could infiltrate the United States and take information we did not want to release.

The National Security Act also created the National Security Council to give advice on national and international security matters. The National Security Council issued a series of reports on the current state of affairs on issues such as international threats. The changing tone of reports produced by the National Security Council shows the effect the bomb had on the mindset of the government. A November 23, 1948 report (NSC 20) discussed what would need to be done if war with the Soviet Union broke out. The document states that as the situation stands, the Soviet Union could not hope to defeat the United States in war, but they could still attack other European countries.[[25]](#footnote-25) The tone of this document is serious, but there is no real sense of urgency. The Soviets did not yet have control of an atomic bomb, so the priority of the American government was still to stop the spread of Soviet power in order to prevent the Soviets from obtaining nuclear arms.

A year later, the situation had changed substantially. On August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union dropped the atomic bomb RSD-1 at Semipalatinsk, Kazakh, SSR. The threat the United States had feared was now realized. The greatest power known to man was now in the hands of the enemy. For the government, this meant a shift to a more radical strategy to combat the massive Soviet threat.

The National Security Council put the most extreme measures forward in a report on April 12, 1950 (NSC 68.) The report stated that within a few years, the Soviets could hope to defeat the United States in war.[[26]](#footnote-26) This shows the importance that the United States placed on the atomic bomb. This was the first report that stated that the Soviets could defeat the United States. The fear that the government had held for years was now realized.

Because the government feared that the Soviets could strike anytime NSC 68 called for an increase of the military budget from $13.5 million to $50 million annually.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition, the document called for the production of more nuclear arms. NSC 68 further went on to say that the United States could not adopt a purely defensive policy with respect to using nuclear weapons:

It has been suggested that we announce that we will not use atomic weapons except in retaliation against prior use of such weapons by an aggressor… in our present situation of relative unpreparedness in conventional weapons, such a declaration would be interpreted by the U.S.S.R. as an admission of great weakness… we cannot make such a declaration in good faith until we are confident that we will be in a position of obtaining our objectives without war.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The increase in military spending and a more aggressive policy for using nuclear weapons were direct reactions to the power of the bomb and the fear of a Soviet attack. Prior to the Soviet Union obtaining the bomb, the United States did not see the Soviets as a direct threat. This changed as soon as the Soviets developed a bomb. Once the Soviets had a bomb of their own, the United States felt that they had to adopt a more aggressive military policy.

The fear of the atomic bomb was the main justification for these new policies of national security, but it can be argued that the fear of Communism was what led to these changes. The idea that Communist spies were everywhere, and that they intended to cause revolution in the United States, could have certainly brought about a sense of fear. However, United States government was not actually afraid of the Communist country as a whole, but the idea of what a rogue nation could do with the bomb. Any country in conflict with the United States that had the ability to create at atomic bomb would have received the same treatment. The Communist form of government was an obvious way to differentiate the Soviet Union from the United States and demonstrate why the Soviet Union was a threat. Communism was merely a convenient target to distract from the real fear, Soviet control of the bomb.

The atomic bomb had a profound impact on the United States government in the years after World War II. The bomb was a major driver of changes the government implemented during this time. A policy of scientific control that was used during the creation of the bomb was continued after the War had ended because the government wanted to make sure it had control over this new powerful science. The control that was exhibited was unprecedented during peacetime. The United States wanted to use the new power it had gained with the bomb to establish itself as the most powerful country in the world. The government used demonstrations of the bomb to foreign nations to cement the image of American power in the minds of foreign nations. The government also proposed new policies for international regulation of atomic energy that would ensure the continuing atomic dominance of the United States. Despite the ways the United States used the bomb to exert its power on the world, it was afraid of the power the bomb held in the hands of an enemy. This fear drove them to develop espionage programs and policies that would increase military strength. In these ways, the legacy of the atomic bomb continued to mold government actions.

Just as fear drove government actions after 1945, the same influence is seen in the present day. After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, massive changes were made to security in the country. Security was overhauled in places like airports to defend against future terrorist attacks. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security was created as a way to combat the terrorist threat. As they did after World War II when security was heightened and new agencies like the CIA were created, nearly 60 years later, the American government is still responding to fear in the same way.

The five years after the war set precedents for the United States that are visible even today. Over time, the CIA diversified much more than initially anticipated, as it was not required to follow strict guidelines. Its original task of gathering information was forgotten. The National Security Agency (NSA) was created as a way to monitor the information that was originally supposed to be watched by the CIA. It was not to engage in covert activity. But like the CIA, the NSA overstepped its original purposes. Recent reports have shown that the NSA has been illegally wiretapping and gaining personal information. As the CIA was allowed to do before, because the fear of the bomb was so great, the NSA was given greater privileges in response to the fear of terrorism.

The atomic bomb can be seen as a game changer for the United States during the period after World War II because it represented both great power and a great threat. The United States needed to be prepared for what they would do if they were attacked by a nuclear weapon. If this were to happen, war would break out immediately. The bomb had the power to begin a war. Once the Soviet Union had obtained the bomb, the United States had to be ready to wage war at all times. As British Writer George Orwell wrote in the book *1984*, “War is Peace.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Measures that were previously considered appropriate during wartime were now considered acceptable during peacetime. The atomic bomb changed what was considered normal peacetime policy. The norm for the American government was now a permanent state of preparation for war.

1. *The Decision to Drop the Bomb*, produced by Fred Freed (1965; NBC White Paper), Television. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rebecca Larsen, Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb (New York: F. Watts, 1988,) 47- 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Delgado, The Atomic Bomb, From Manhattan Project to the Cold War (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009,) 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee,” < http://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Larsen, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cold War Reference Library, “Oppenheimer, J. Robert,” <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX3410800097&v=2.1&u=mlin\_m\_nnorth&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=75e1052cfd9d06f0e865133d1383c123> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Delgado, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jim Baggott, The First War of Physics: The Secret History of the Atom Bomb: 1939-1949 (New York, Pegasus, 2011), 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Delgado, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gary Wills, Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State (New York: Penguin, 2010,) 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Delgado, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. George Kennan, Memoirs, 1925 - 1950 (New York: Random House, 1983,) 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wills, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Delgado, 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Wills, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. United States Select Committee on Intelligence, “National Security Act of 1947,” < http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/nsaact1947.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wills, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. National Security Council, “’U.S. Objectives with Respect to the USSR to Counter Soviet Threats to U.S. Security,’ NSC 20/4, 23 November 1948,” < https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/coldwar/nsc20-4.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. National Security Council, “’A Report to the National Security Council - NSC 68’, April 12, 1950. President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers” < http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. George Orwell, 1984: a Novel (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)