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MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Percival Brundage
Director of the Budget

ONE (3)

1. Your memorandum of 5 November 1956 touches squarely upon one of the more difficult technical problems of writing estimates - namely, the vocabulary we use to describe differing degrees of probability or likelihood and the matter of possibility.

2. Let me begin with the latter. Habitually we think of the "possible" as the whole range of probabilities which lie between certainty and impossibility. (The attached chart illustrates this graphically.) When we say such and such a thing is "possible" we are not quoting odds on the degree of likelihood as to its happening or not happening. We are not dealing with any particular degree of probability. We mean merely to say to the reader: "Here is a matter of utmost importance which can happen. We have no way of being more precise or of giving you odds on the degree of likelihood or probability of its occurrence. We do feel, however, that it is possible. By so saying we are raising a warning flag."

3. In many matters we can be more precise with respect to the odds which favor the recurrence or non-occurrence of something. In other words we can do more than say it is "possible". We feel that we can in these cases quote probabilities. Because of the imprecisions inherent in estimating the future, we confine ourselves, by and large, to about five principal categories of likelihood or probability. These you will see on the attached chart. As you will note, when we are quite sure that something will happen we use the expressions "it is almost certain that", "it is highly likely that", "it is highly probable that". When we estimate that the chances are somewhat less than the above we use the words "likely" or "probable". And so on.

4. We have been alert to the confusion which may result from putting modifiers before expressions of "possibility". We make a

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point of trying to avoid expressions like "there is a serious possibility that" or "it is distinctly possible that". We feel that this kind of modifier is not only unnecessary but that it tends to make the word "possible" take on the duties of the word "probable".

5. Similarly, we would avoid using "possibility" in the way your memorandum suggests. In paragraph 18 of SMIR 12-2-56, the thing that we are estimating will probably increase is the odds favoring war by miscalculation. In our estimate we are saying something different from your quotation from 5602/1.

6. If any of your people would like to discuss this matter further, Dr. Sherman Kent, Chairman of our Board of National Estimates, would be glad to meet with them.

ALLEN W. BELLES
Director

attachment

O/NE:SKent (drafted 15 Nov 56)

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