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Downward Spiral during the Truman–Stalin Years, 1945–1953

Beginning with post-Yalta acrimony over the fate of Eastern Europe in March and April 1945, Soviet relations with America and Britain deteriorated gradually and fitfully during 1945, and then more sharply and steadily after the turn of the year. Occasionally productive negotiations between the two sides continued in the Council of Foreign Ministers from the fall of 1945 until early 1947, when mutual distrust undermined any effort at compromise. For the next five years, the Cold War—as the Soviet–American rivalry soon became known—dominated international politics amid fears that it would erupt into a "hot war."

Especially in 1945, President Harry Truman (who took office when Roosevelt died on April 12), Secretary of State James Byrnes, and other US officials wanted to work with Soviet leaders to build a peaceful, cooperative postwar world order. Indeed, Truman and Byrnes negotiated diligently for more than two weeks at the final wartime summit conference in Potsdam, Germany, in July–August 1945, and Byrnes held many meetings with top Soviet officials during the rest of 1945 and 1946 in order to try to work out a mutually acceptable, durable peace. But, as Soviet documents released since 1990 have made clear, the ever

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suspicious, self-centered Joseph Stalin blocked his foreign minister's efforts to reach agreement on the disarmament of Germany and other issues. "Stalin … couldn't accept that his allies meant what they said about postwar goodwill," historian Robert Dallek noted in 2010. "He could not imagine a world without conflict … The [postwar] era would not be a time for continued collaboration with the West but a new struggle between capitalism and communism, which Stalin was preparing to meet by seizing all the advantages he could."[1] It is now evident that, because of Stalin's rigid ways of thinking and acting, western efforts to resolve key issues through negotiations were basically futile.

A modest Midwesterner with no more than a high-school education and no political ambitions beyond being a US senator, President Truman lacked FDR's self-confidence, public-speaking skills, and knowledge of and experience in foreign relations. Truman's intemperate comments about other people, both in private meetings and in letters, appear to reflect deep-seated insecurities. He often referred to critics as "prima donnas," for example, and commented that the Russian negotiators at the Potsdam Conference were "pig-headed." But he largely made up for his shortcomings by choosing capable, far-sighted associates—notably Secretaries of State James Byrnes (1945–1947), George Marshall (1947–1949), and Dean Acheson (1949–1953)—and then by following their advice on specific issues. One of many praiseworthy lower-ranking officials during these years was George Kennan, a brilliant analyst of the Soviet government and its foreign policies.

Issues in the Emerging Cold War

Of the major issues in dispute, none was more bitter than that of Eastern Europe, which Stalin believed had been settled in his favor in negotiations before and during the Yalta Conference. Perhaps partly to compensate for the insecurity he felt upon assuming office, Truman strongly criticized Soviet actions in Poland in a meeting with Foreign Minister Molotov on April 23.

But then, realizing that Stalin intended to dominate postwar Poland no matter what western leaders thought, Truman quietly recognized the Russian-dominated Polish government in June. A believer in Woodrow Wilson's ideal of national self-determination, Truman tried numerous tactics, including a proposal for the internationalization of the Danube River and hard bargaining over peace treaties for Rumania and Bulgaria that was intended to weaken Russian influence in the region. These efforts had little if any effect.

In the early postwar period Stalin did not insist on completely subservient governments in all of the Eastern European nations; Hungary was relatively independent internally until 1947, and Czechoslovakia until 1948. But, because he viewed Eastern Europe as vital to Russia's security, the Soviet leader was determined to prevent any nation in the region from developing close economic or military ties with the West. By the late 1940s, handpicked leaders were installed by means of political purges and show trials of dissidents, until most of Eastern Europe, including all six countries that would join the Soviet Union to form the Warsaw Pact, were fully subservient to Stalin.

Besides Eastern Europe, another frequently acrimonious issue involved policy toward defeated Germany. This was actually an even more important issue in the Cold War than the fate of Eastern Europe, historian Steven Casey commented in 2014, because "German power was the key to Europe."[2] During the war, official US thinking on this issue had been confused and contradictory, wavering between a desire to impose a harsh peace that would end once and for all the threat of German militarism and a desire to rehabilitate Germany as the cornerstone of future European prosperity. Russia, having suffered the most at the hands of Germany, was determined to keep it as weak as possible, partly by forcing it to pay substantial reparations in order to help rebuild Soviet industry. The Soviet leaders' deep fears of a possible German revival contributed to their determination to maintain a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

At Yalta Stalin got Roosevelt to agree, as a basis for negotiations, that Germany would have to pay $20 billion in reparations,

half of it to Russia. At the Potsdam Conference (Truman and Clement Atlee now leading the US and British delegations, respectively), Stalin pressed his demand for $10 billion in reparations, to be collected primarily in Germany's industrialized western zones. But Truman and Byrnes, convinced of the need to rebuild German industry and fearful that US aid dollars in effect would be used to pay for reparations from the western occupation zones, refused to agree to a dollar figure on reparations for Russia and suggested that the Soviets remove whatever equipment they could locate from their own zone in the east. Russian leaders complained that their western counterparts had repudiated the spirit of Yalta and had shown insensitivity to Russia's legitimate needs for recovery. The failure at Potsdam to develop a common policy on Germany contributed to the gradual evolution of two Germanys, one allied with the West and one with the Soviet state.

A third issue that produced tensions, especially in 1946 and 1947, related to three nations in southeastern Europe and western Asia: Greece, Turkey, and Iran. This was a region of traditional British–Russian rivalry and America was becoming increasingly involved, as it assumed the role of the economically weakened Britain. Due to their internal instability, their increasing importance as sources of oil, and their proximity to important trade routes in the Middle East, these countries offered an inviting target for machinations among the great powers. Russia had long wanted a guaranteed outlet through the Dardanelles strait to the Mediterranean, and national minorities in the mountainous regions in eastern Turkey and northern Iran were susceptible to Soviet influence. Moreover, Stalin did not see why the West should claim exclusive rights to Iran's huge oil reserves. Finally, despite Stalin's acceptance of Britain's dominant position in Greece, the right-wing Greek government was engaged in a bitter guerrilla war against communist-led opponents supplied by Yugoslavia and other communist nations to the north.

In the view of some western leftists, Stalin callously abandoned the Greek rebels in exchange for British concessions in Eastern Europe. While Greece was in fact an example of Stalin's

emphasis on pursuing Russia's self-interest rather than always supporting communist-led revolutionary movements abroad, the rebels were still able to mount a strong campaign against the British-backed government.

The first public Cold War crisis occurred in March 1946, in relation to Iran. When the Iranian government refused to grant Russia an oil concession equal to that given to Britain, the Soviets supported a revolt in northern Iran, and, contrary to a previous Big Three agreement, refused to withdraw their troops on March 2. (Britain and Russia had jointly occupied Iran during the war in order to ensure that the oil-rich nation did not fall into German hands.)

Byrnes, whom Truman privately and others publicly had labeled as "soft" on Russia, now moved forcefully to demonstrate his resolve. On March 5 he sent a message to Moscow demanding the removal of Soviet troops from Iran, informed the press of his strong stand even before receiving a reply, and encouraged Iran to take the issue to the UN Security Council. After hearing of alleged Russian troop movements, Byrnes angrily told an associate: "Now we'll give it to them with both barrels."

Even though the Soviets declared in late March that their army was leaving Iran, Byrnes refused to remove the issue from the agenda of the UN Security Council. A week later, Russia and Iran announced an agreement on Soviet troop withdrawal, coupled with oil concessions for Russia. After the Russian troops were withdrawn, Iran, with US support, reneged on the oil agreement and settled back into the western sphere of influence.

Fourth, economic issues other than those relating specifically to Germany and Iran separated Russia and the West. Needing to rebuild their economy and at the same time arguing that they could help prevent unemployment in the United States after the war, in January 1945 the Soviets requested a $6 billion loan at low interest. The request stirred debate within the administration, but Russia received no answer at either Yalta or Potsdam. In August the Soviets requested a $1 billion loan from the Export–Import Bank, but the State Department stalled on the issue, finally telling the Russians in February 1946 that the loan request

was "one of a number of outstanding economic questions" between the two nations. By then relations had cooled so markedly that the administration almost certainly could not have obtained congressional approval for a loan even if it had asked for one. Russia, for its part, chose not to join the two US-dominated organizations designed to ensure postwar prosperity, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Stalin thus had decided that there would not be one cooperative world economy, as western leaders had hoped, but rather two competing ones.

A fifth issue that harmed US–Soviet relations was social instability and the related rise of the political left throughout Europe in the early postwar years. The devastation caused by the war, combined with the leading role of communist and socialist parties in opposing right-wing dictators like Hitler and Spain's Francisco Franco, led to the growing influence of left-wing parties in much of Western and Southern Europe. Russia was not responsible for the social instability and contributed only modestly to the rise of the left, but US leaders feared that the Soviets might benefit from these trends and that such key western countries as France and Italy might end up with governments dominated by communists with close ties to Moscow.

Another important issue was US–Soviet rivalry in East Asia, especially in regard to Japan and China. At Yalta, Roosevelt and Churchill had acceded to Stalin's demands for territorial concessions from Japan—notably the Kurile Islands and the southern half of Sakhalin Island—but Russia never achieved an effective voice in the occupation of Japan. "I was determined that the Japanese occupation would not follow in the footsteps of our German experience," Truman recalled. "I did not want divided control or separate zones." Soviet leaders negotiated vigorously in the early postwar period to try to increase their influence on Japan's reconstruction, but to no avail. Although American unilateralism in postwar Japan angered Stalin, there was little he could do about it short of starting a war.

Under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, America dominated Japan, transforming the former enemy into a close and increasingly prosperous ally. Over Soviet objections, the United

States and fifty other nations signed a peace treaty with Japan in September 1951; and in a separate security treaty the United States ensured that its armed forces and weapons could continue to be deployed there. As Edwin O. Reischauer, an eminent scholar of Japanese history, noted in 1950: "Our position there is not very different from that of Russia in the smaller countries of Eastern Europe, however dissimilar our motives may be."

US policy was not as successful in China, and this is to put it mildly. Truman and most other US officials wanted China to continue to be America's ally, but they recognized that Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government was corrupt and might not be able to win the long-standing Civil War with the communists, led by Mao Zedong. Partly for its own reasons and partly because of pressure from Republicans, the Truman administration briefly sent fifty thousand US troops to North China in 1945 to assist Chiang's forces in keeping Japanese-held land from being occupied by the Chinese communists, and continued to send substantial military and economic aid to Chiang's government through 1948. At the same time, especially during General George Marshall's mission to China in 1946, US leaders urged Chiang to negotiate a compromise settlement with Mao. Sporadic negotiations between the two sides failed, and by 1948 the communists clearly were winning the civil war.

Frustrated by America's "failure" in China, conservative critics blamed Roosevelt for "selling out" China at Yalta and demanded that Truman take stronger measures to try to prevent a nationalist Chinese defeat, but in 1948 and 1949 Truman refused to send US troops to China. While some Americans blamed Russia for Chiang's difficulties, Stalin had given only modest aid to Mao and indeed was ambivalent about whether he even wanted the Chinese communists to win the Civil War. The reality was that the Chinese themselves—not America or Russia—would decide their nation's future.

The last major issue was policy about atomic energy. America and Britain had worked together closely during the war to develop the atomic bomb. As noted earlier, Roosevelt decided not to tell the Soviets about the project. Truman mentioned the new

weapon to Stalin in a brief conversation at Potsdam in July 1945—but only after the first bomb was tested in New Mexico.

Upon hearing the news of the successful blast at the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, which killed roughly eighty thousand people, Truman remarked to an associate that "this is the greatest thing in history." In a radio address explaining the significance of what had happened, the president reported deceptively that Hiroshima, an important Japanese army base, had been destroyed. A few days after a second atomic bomb obliterated Nagasaki on August 9, Japan surrendered and the war in the Pacific came to an end. America's use of atomic weapons appeared to have been vindicated.

Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on densely populated Japanese cities without explicit warning was controversial within the government and the scientific community at the time and has been debated vigorously by historians and political scientists ever since. Careful studies of the issue by J. Samuel Walker and other scholars have concluded that Truman did not use the weapons primarily to intimidate Russia, as some writers had charged; rather the decision resulted more from the momentum of bureaucratic decision-making on the subject and from the assumption that any weapon available should be used to convince the "fanatical Japs" that continuing the war was futile, thereby avoiding a costly invasion of Japan. By 1945 few high US officials had moral scruples about bombing civilians.

Given his almost pathological distrust, Stalin was highly apprehensive about America's possession of atomic weapons. Germany, with its technological superiority, had come close to defeating Russia earlier in the war, and now the Soviet Union, despite its great victory, faced even greater insecurity. In mid-August a concerned Stalin told a high-level meeting in the Kremlin: "A single demand of you, comrades: provide us with atomic weapons in the shortest possible time. You know that Hiroshima has shaken the whole world. The equilibrium has been destroyed. Provide the bomb. It will remove a great danger from us."

As historians Vladimir O. Pechatnov and C. Earl Edmondson have shown, the hardening of Soviet policy, evident at the foreign

ministers' meeting in September and in other actions that fall, was related in part to the intense anxiety apparent in Moscow after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[3] After meeting with people close to the Soviet leadership, Averell Harriman, the US ambassador in Moscow, wrote to Secretary of State Byrnes in November that the sudden appearance of the bomb "must have revived their own feeling of insecurity." Harriman noted that "the Russian people have been aroused to feel that they must again face an antagonistic world. American imperialism is included as a threat to Russia."

Given the enormous complexity of the issues involved in atomic energy and the deepening Cold War atmosphere, it was highly unlikely that America and Russia would have been able to agree in 1946 on international control of atomic energy and hence would have prevented an atomic arms race. Nevertheless, the Truman administration made an effort, however flawed, in that direction. A carefully drafted study, directed by Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Tennessee Valley Authority Director David Lilienthal, was completed in March. Their report proposed that an international "Atomic Development Authority" be established, with control over all aspects of nuclear energy. On-site inspections would be necessary to make international control workable.

While this proposal was fair, at least from the US viewpoint, the Soviets would almost certainly have rejected it because of Stalin's determination to build a nuclear arsenal for his nation so as to ensure military equality with America. But the US negotiator, Bernard Baruch, never gave the Acheson–Lilienthal proposal a chance. Instead he made changes to it that strongly favored the United States, and then told his Soviet counterparts that they would have to accept his entire proposal or get nothing. Not surprisingly, the Russians rejected the proposal, denouncing it as a disguise for a permanent US atomic monopoly. America, in turn, rejected Russia's one-sided proposal that existing stocks of nuclear weapons be destroyed. Both nations thus continued their substantial nuclear programs, which led to the first successful Soviet test in 1949 and, in the early 1950s, to the decision by each government to develop the vastly more destructive hydrogen bombs.

The nuclear arms race quickly became a central feature of the Cold War, distinguishing the US–Soviet rivalry from other conflicts between great powers in the past. Nuclear weapons both set limits to the struggle—that is, helped to keep it cold—and intensified it in many ways, not least through fear, in each country, that the other might try to obliterate it in a surprise attack. Even at those times when there were relatively few other major issues in dispute, the threat of nuclear destruction loomed like a thunderhead over US–Soviet relations.

These seven major issues—and other, lesser ones, such as the status of Korea—tended to separate Russia from America and Britain early on in the postwar period. All of these issues posed genuine dilemmas for both sides; they were not merely pretexts for animosity. The issues grew out of World War II, and many of them were likely to cause problems in the postwar world even if Stalin had been a less suspicious, more conciliatory leader. Indeed Stalin and western leaders deserve credit for maintaining at least the semblance of peace in Europe for more than a generation after World War II. Their behavior in Asia had more tragic consequences.

Images and Domestic Politics Harm Relations

The political culture in both America and Russia contributed to the rapid arrival of the Cold War. Numerous popular images harmful to US–Soviet relations flourished in the late 1940s. Perhaps the most important ones were, on the US side, the Munich analogy and the myth of American virtue and, on the Russian side, the myth of inevitable capitalist–imperialist hostility, which contributed to an obsessive fear of Russia's own weakness, and the view that only the Soviets could ensure their own security. Within a year of the war what has been called "mirror-image" official viewpoints began to develop: Russia (or, as seen from Moscow, America), with its threats and growing armaments, was pushing the world toward war. The belief that US leaders were preparing their nation for war with Russia was a

central theme of the Novikov Telegram, the first draft of which was written in September 1946 by Nikolai Novikov, the Soviet ambassador to the United States.

The Munich Conference of 1938, at which the British and French caved in to Hitler's demand for western Czechoslovakia in the hope of maintaining peace, was a powerful symbol, to many Americans, of the dangers of appeasing an unscrupulous dictator. Ernest R. May and other historians have noted how deeply this analogy affected the thinking of leading American policymakers after the war and how many of them tended to view Stalin as another Hitter bent on world domination. This was also the thinking of literally thousands of editorialists, radio commentators, politicians, business and labor leaders, clergy, and others who influenced popular opinion on foreign policy issues.

Stalin was often ruthless in defense of what he perceived to be Soviet interests in the areas he controlled. But, as his pullback from Iran in 1946 should have suggested, he was also cautious and did not initiate war, as Hitler did. The Munich analogy not only clouded US perceptions of world affairs; it also infuriated the Russians, who viewed comparison with the hated Nazis as an almost unspeakable obscenity.

The other image vital to understanding American attitudes and behavior was the myth of unusual virtue and superiority to other nations—what historian Theodore H. von Laue has called "unconscious ethnocentric arrogance." This was simply the view, strongly reinforced by the nation's involvement in World War II, that America was the hope of the world, both through its wondrous internal institutions and through its selfless commitment to world peace, justice, and prosperity. A public opinion survey in the summer of 1946 found that only 15 percent of all Americans were satisfied with the current state of international relations and that most of the rest blamed Britain and especially Russia for their discontent. "Their own country, on the other hand, seemed to them to be trying steadfastly to achieve justice and harmony," the public opinion analysts concluded. "It was, if anything, too generous with its material goods, and too lenient toward those governments which place obstacles in the road toward these goals."

Counterparts: George Kennan and Nikolai Novikov

Counterpart 1.1 George F. Kennan, 1947.
Source: Harris & Ewing, photographer, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA.

In the winter of 1946, State Department officials in Washington were surprised and disappointed that Stalin's government did not seem to want to work with America toward building a peaceful, prosperous world order. They sent a cable to the US embassy in Moscow seeking an explanation.

The response was an eight thousand-word "long telegram" written by George Kennan, the deputy chief of the US embassy in Moscow. Kennan blamed Soviet intransigence on the "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity," on "the importance of dogma in Soviet affairs," and especially on the fact that Stalin's government was "committed fanatically to the belief that with the US there can be no permanent modus vivendi."[4] Blinded by their rigid

Counterpart 1.2 Nikolai Novikov.
Source: ITAR-TASS/TopFoto.

ideology, Soviet officials used factual information only "to bolster an outlook already preconceived."[5] Thus western leaders could expect that, at least in the short term, negotiating with Soviet leaders was futile.

Many years later, as the Cold War was ending in 1990, the Soviet government released a lengthy "telegram" to Moscow that the Russian ambassador to the United States, Nikolai Novikov, dispatched in September 1946. Scholars call it "the Novikov Telegram." The first sentence provides an excellent summary of the view from the other side: "The foreign policy of the United States, which reflects the imperialist tendencies of American monopolistic capital, is characterized in the postwar period by a striving for world supremacy."[6] Among the many examples of aggressive US policies that he cited, Novikov accused America of "creating obstacles to the process of democratization" in Eastern Europe—that is, of trying to prevent communist parties from seizing power there.[7] The US, he concluded, was already preparing for war against Russia, "which in the eyes of American imperialists is the main obstacle in the path of the United States to world domination."[8]

If Kennan had had access to this secret cable, it is likely that he would have interpreted it as a confirmation of his analysis of Soviet foreign policy in the "long telegram."

We now know from Novikov's reminiscences that he initially wrote a draft that, as historian Vladislav M. Zubok has noted, was "much milder and not confrontational."[9] But Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov "kept redrafting it, and in the end it became more [like a] 'Molotov Telegram' than Novikov's analysis."[10] Thus Molotov, more aware than lesser officials of Stalin's hard-line stance on US–Soviet relations, ensured that the telegram reflected the Soviet dictator's perspective. In contrast, the words and ideas in Kennan's much more famous and influential "long telegram" were entirely his own.

As Stalin was allegedly following in Hitler's footsteps, so Truman, many Americans thought, was bringing to fruition the noble ideals of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Even those Americans who did not like Truman's policies still envisaged their nation as the world's virtuous leader. Critics as diverse as Henry Wallace, the former vice president, and Robert Taft, a conservative senator (R., Ohio), for example, agreed with Truman that America had a unique and noble destiny. This proposition, while accepted with reservations by many West Europeans grateful for American assistance against the Nazis and in postwar recovery, was obviously not considered self-evident in Moscow.

In increasingly virulent official statements in leading newspapers like *Pravda* (*Truth*) and elsewhere, the Russians, too, trumpeted the superiority of their system and its eventual triumph over decadent capitalism. At the same time they insisted that the West was preparing to attack the Soviets in order to destroy their way of life. This second image more accurately reflected their feelings of insecurity, their technological inferiority in the military and other sectors, and their growing isolation in world affairs. Their isolation, in turn, was intensified by their own vitriolic

propaganda, their frequent rudeness and deviousness in diplomatic gatherings, their brutal suppression of dissent in Eastern Europe, and their highly publicized spying in the West. While in the Soviets' view these measures may have been necessary to ensure their security, they may well have lessened Russia's actual security by inspiring alliances against it.

The harmful images became intertwined with domestic politics as American and Russian societies shifted toward the Cold War. Because of Stalin's virtually complete control, Russia did not have a domestic politics in the western sense. But there was a strong public desire for greater freedom and for more consumer goods, now that Nazi Germany had been defeated. Today's liberated Russian historians acknowledge that many ordinary Russians wanted improved relations with the West, including increased trade. None of these desires was to be realized, however: Stalin called for further sacrifices to deter possible western threats and unleashed his secret police to clamp down on the independent thought and expression that had been permitted, within limits, to improve morale during the war.

In America jockeying for political advantage never stops, not even in wartime. Once the popular Roosevelt was dead and the war over, Republicans saw an opportunity to gain control of Congress in the 1946 elections and to take the presidency two years later. On domestic issues, they could run against the federal government and labor unions, both of which had become larger and more powerful during the Roosevelt years. They could also run against the open influence of the Moscow-controlled American Communist Party in labor unions and against its largely secret infiltration of other institutions, including the federal government. On foreign policy issues, the Republicans could denounce Truman's "weakness" in dealing with "communism"—unless the administration clearly stood up to both the Soviet Union and domestic communists.

While there were limits to what Truman could do to deflect the Republican challenge on domestic issues, he could stand up to the Soviets—a policy shift urged on him in the fall of 1945 by his White House Chief of Staff, Admiral William Leahy, and by the two leading senators on the Foreign Relations Committee, Democrat Tom Connally of Texas and Republican Arthur Vandenberg of

Michigan. Vandenberg, whose state contained a large number of Polish Americans and even more anticommunist Republicans, was adamant that Russia should be firmly opposed on all fronts.

Truman never revealed just what effect domestic politics had on his decision, in early January 1946, to stop "babying the Soviets"—as he put it in a memorandum he intended to read to Byrnes. But Truman was very much aware of growing congressional criticism of Byrnes's continuing efforts to make deals with Soviet leaders and of congressional efforts to assert authority on particular foreign policy issues, now that the war was over. While Byrnes was allowed to continue to negotiate with Russia, Truman told him to take an anti-Soviet stand in his public statements. In this case, Truman almost certainly was affected by strong pressures from Congress to take a harder line toward the Soviet Union.

In the midterm election of November 1946, Americans of East European descent, angry about communist gains in their former homelands and disappointed with the administration's performance on domestic issues, deserted the Democrats in droves to help the Republicans gain control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1928. Especially after this election, it was only natural that President Truman would work hard to turn the widespread anticommunist sentiment to his own political advantage. Indeed, if Truman had not taken a strong public stand against Soviet expansionism and domestic communists during the two years after the 1946 election, it is hard to imagine that he could have won the presidential election in 1948.

Containment and Countercontainment, 1947–1949

The events that signaled the enunciation of a definite US policy of "containment" of communism occurred in rapid-fire succession, in a crisis-laden atmosphere, from February through July of 1947. The spark that set off the chain reaction inside the government was a British message to the State Department delivered on February 21, stating that, because of internal economic

difficulties, Britain would have to stop giving military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey as of March 31. Top officials—already concerned about Western Europe's economic problems, exacerbated as these had been by severe winter weather—quickly agreed that America would need to assume Britain's role in order to prevent the spread of Soviet influence in the region. The problem was to convince an economy-minded, Republican-controlled Congress to make prompt and substantial commitments to these countries.

In a meeting with congressional leaders at the White House on February 27, Truman, newly installed Secretary of State George Marshall, and other officials presented their case. When Marshall's low-key presentation failed to sway the congressmen, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson asked to speak. The influence of the democracies in world affairs had been declining ever since the end of the war, Acheson declared, while Russia had been expanding its influence. If Greece or Turkey now fell under Russia's sway, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East would be open to Soviet penetration. Moreover, Soviet ideology was implacably hostile to the West, and the division of the world was more profound than at any time since the ancient rivalry between Rome and Carthage. Failure to act thus would create a grave threat to American security. "Mr. President," Senator Vandenberg said when Acheson had finished, "if you will say that to the Congress and the country, I will support you and I believe that most of its members will do the same."

On March 12, before a joint session of Congress and a nationwide radio audience, Truman did just that. The president did refer to the situation in Greece and Turkey, and he did ask for $400 million in aid for the two nations. But in the best-known part of the speech he sweepingly divided the world into two and, in what became known as the Truman Doctrine, pledged American assistance to the "free peoples":

> At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one.

> One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.
>
> The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of political freedoms.
>
> I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.[11]

As Henry Wallace and some other commentators pointed out afterward, the governments America would be supporting in Greece and Turkey were a far cry from the ideal represented in Truman's speech. Even some within the administration, such as Kennan, considered the apparent commitments in the speech too imprecise and far-reaching. But Truman's approval rating in public opinion polls increased from 49 percent in January to 60 percent in late March, and the percentage of Americans who viewed foreign policy issues as the most important ones facing the nation shot up from 22 percent in December to 54 percent in March. Despite grumbling from some in Congress who believed that they had no choice but to approve the aid measure now that the president had staked US prestige on it, the Senate approved the expenditure by a vote of 67 to 23 in late April, and the House concurred in early May by 287 to 107, with solid Republican as well as Democratic majorities in favor. As the Cold War was in full swing for the following fifteen years, both Democratic and Republican presidents could count on strong congressional support, especially when military spending was involved.

In a commencement address at Harvard University on June 5, Secretary of State Marshall made a general offer of economic aid to Europe in order to facilitate "the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist." Without such favorable conditions, Marshall knew, communist parties might come to power in Western Europe, especially in France and Italy.

This offer led to the development of the Marshall Plan and the eventual expenditure of more than $12 billion in economic aid, which proved invaluable in restoring the economies of Western Europe and earned the enduring gratitude of millions of citizens of the nations involved. Not entirely altruistic, the Marshall Plan led to large orders by aid recipients for machine tools and other products manufactured in America and to greatly increased US investment in Europe. Unwilling to accept the strings inevitably attached to a program supervised partly by Americans, Russia declined to participate and forced its satellites to do likewise.

The final highlight of this period of intense activism in American foreign relations was the appearance, in the July issue of the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, of an article entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" and written by "X" (soon identified as Kennan). In an administration that was short on experienced and knowledgeable students of Soviet behavior, the articulate, scholarly Kennan emerged as the leading US government expert on Russia. Called home from Russia in 1946 and installed by May 1947 as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, Kennan provided theoretical underpinnings for American policy in the early postwar period.

Given the Cold War atmosphere, it is not surprising that most of his colleagues paid more attention to his scathing indictments of the Soviet system and its tendency toward expansionism than they did to his calls for restraint and balance in American policy. The "X" article, which first used the word "containment" to describe US policy toward Russia, focused on the evils of Soviet communism and urged "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," to be achieved in part through the "application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points."[12]

What did containment mean in practice between 1947 and 1949? Contrary to the warlike language of Truman's speech to Congress, before 1950 it did not mean a global anticommunist crusade but rather a more limited one, in which distinctions were made between vital and peripheral interests. While the Truman administration recognized the tendency of even the most

carefully conceived policy to bend with events, five overarching trends seem clear:

1 major economic and military commitments abroad, centered in Europe and more limited elsewhere than they would become after early 1950. Within Europe, the greatest emphasis was given to increasing the strength of the western zones in Germany, which in May 1949 became the Federal Republic of Germany;
2 the limiting of defense spending to what Truman believed the nation could afford (about $12–14 billion per year, which constituted about one third of the federal government's budget), leading to an emphasis in military planning on nuclear weapons—still a US monopoly—to deter possible Soviet attacks;
3 open support for any communist nation willing to break with Moscow (e.g., Tito's Yugoslavia), and covert support (e.g., through activities of the Central Intelligence Agency, established in July 1947) for opponents of Stalin in Eastern Europe;
4 an unwillingness to send massive US aid to forestall a communist victory in the civil war in China, despite pleas from right-wing Republicans and others to "save Chiang";
5 an unwillingness to undertake new negotiations with Russia to explore possible areas of compromise in regard to major European issues (e.g., Germany).

While most of these themes of US strategic thinking in the late 1940s are fairly self-explanatory, the last one requires elucidation. Because high US officials normally did not test seriously the occasional Soviet offers of negotiations on major issues between 1947 and 1953, it is difficult to judge the Russian leaders' sincerity. In the spring of 1947, for example, Stalin gave a friendly interview to Governor Harold Stassen of Minnesota and, in the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow, had Molotov suggest renewed bargaining on Germany. But western leaders were suspicious of Soviet intentions—a suspicion enhanced by Foreign Minister Molotov's frigid personality and his persistent

rejection of US proposals—and Marshall reported upon returning to Washington that no progress had been made on major issues.

After the failure of the Moscow talks, there was little serious negotiating on major East–West issues during the remainder of the Truman–Stalin years. Largely because of their repressive actions in Eastern Europe (including the eastern zone of Germany), Soviet officials deserve most of the blame for the tensions during these years. But it is also true that Marshall and his successor, Acheson, interested as they were in denouncing Soviet behavior and in creating "situations of strength" prior to serious negotiations, contributed to the ominous breakdown of East–West diplomacy after 1947. "There is only one language they understand, force," Truman remarked to an associate in 1949. As historian Alonzo L. Hamby has noted: "The president and his subordinates celebrated American superiority, engaged in self-righteous stubbornness toward the Soviet Union, and clothed even their most constructive proposals in the garments of American mission and destiny."[13]

In the late 1940s Stalin demonstrated that hard-nosed containment was a game two could play. Denouncing the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan as capitalist offensives against his regime, the Soviet dictator took steps that, from his viewpoint, contained the West. The noncommunist, elected Hungarian leader Ferenc Nagy was removed from office in May 1947; the Cominform—which included the French and Italian Communist Parties as well as those of Russia and six East European ones—was established in September 1947 to tighten Moscow's control over the international communist movement; and, in a move that shocked western opinion, Soviet collaborators overthrew the elected Czechoslovak government in February 1948. Czech leaders had made the mistake of agreeing to accept aid under the Marshall Plan, a move quickly squelched by Moscow but that nevertheless had proved their "unreliability." Both the mysterious death in early March of Czech Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, a friend of the West, and the widely doubted explanation that he had committed suicide by jumping out of a window symbolized for many the brutality of Stalinism.

The Berlin crisis of 1948–1949 provided another example of the reciprocal nature of containment. Just as the Marshall Plan appears to have played a part in precipitating the events in Czechoslovakia, so Allied steps toward organizing a separate West German state and introducing a new currency for West Germany apparently led the Soviets to impose, in late June 1948, a complete blockade of all surface routes through eastern Germany to West Berlin, which since the war had remained an enclave under the three western powers' control inside East Germany. An outpost of relative economic prosperity and political freedom more than one hundred miles inside the Soviet sphere, West Berlin was, as Nikita Khrushchev later put it, a "bone in the throat" of Russia. Fearing above all else a strong and rearmed West Germany, Stalin apparently believed that the blockade would force the West to negotiate with Russia a settlement of the German issue as a whole.

If that was indeed Stalin's reasoning, he made a serious miscalculation, for by this time Truman was obviously not going to accommodate Russia—especially not under duress, during an uphill presidential campaign. The president responded with a massive and continuing airlift of supplies to the more than two million West Berliners and to the Allied personnel stationed there. Although tensions frequently ran high, neither side wanted war: Stalin kept channels for negotiation open, and Truman did not force the issue of western surface access rights to Berlin. After negotiations in Moscow failed during the summer, the tendency in Washington was to forget about negotiating with Russia and to step up by planning for a formal western military alliance, which was established in April 1949 as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and for a West German state, which was led by the staunchly anticommunist Konrad Adenauer.

It is important to note that the initiative for NATO came from Western Europe, not from the United States. In 1948 Britain and four other nearby nations formed the Brussels Pact, which was to provide for their common defense; the leaders of these nations then strongly urged the formation of a transatlantic alliance—NATO—designed to include additional European nations plus the United States and Canada. Because Western European nations

played leading roles in establishing the NATO and, earlier, in deciding how Marshall Aid funds were to be dispersed, it is hard to dispute Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad's contention that America's economic and military power in postwar Western Europe constituted an "empire by invitation." Stalin's empire in Eastern Europe, in contrast, occurred largely by what Lundestad calls "imposition."[14]

Their blockade having failed either to isolate Berlin or to change western policy elsewhere in Germany, the Soviets signaled in early 1949 their interest in ending this dangerous stalemate. Because normal diplomatic channels were disrupted, on January 30 Stalin used his reply to a question posed by journalist Kingsbury Smith to suggest the possibility of fruitful negotiations. Then America took the initiative and secret discussions took place in February and March between the deputy US representative to the UN Security Council, Philip C. Jessup, and his Soviet counterpart, Jacob Malik. After significant Soviet concessions, on May 5 an announcement was made that the blockade would be lifted on May 12 and that a Council of Foreign Ministers meeting to focus on German issues would convene in Paris on May 23. Although the United Nations had failed in the years since 1945 to live up to the hopes of its founders, it nevertheless proved its worth as the locus for delicate and important international negotiations.

When Secretary of State Acheson returned to Washington after the completion of the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting, he was, according to *Time*'s lead story in its issue of July 4, 1949, "pleased but not complacent." According to Acheson, since 1947 "the position of the West has grown greatly in strength, and that … of the Soviet Union in regard to the struggle for the soul of Europe has changed from the offensive to the defensive." In his statement concerning the meeting, Truman emphasized that Britain, France, and the United States had shown great unity in dealing with Russia.

From their viewpoint, Truman and Acheson had reason to be pleased with overall developments in Europe since those hectic days when the Truman Doctrine was being formulated, in early 1947. Buoyed by substantial US support, the Greek government had gradually defeated the insurgency, and both Greece and Turkey

had become members of the western alliance. Austria, although still occupied by Russian as well as by western troops, clearly was tilting toward the West. The Marshall Plan had strengthened the economies of most West European nations, including France and Italy, whose Communist Parties had failed in their bid for power. Compared with eastern Germany, the western zones were already an economic and political showcase, and Berlin had become a symbol of the West's determination to stand up to Russia.

Even in Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia's Tito had broken with Stalin in 1948, and Tito was showing definite signs of being able to maintain his independent course, in part thanks to US economic aid. Covert CIA activities were underway on a substantial scale in Eastern Europe, and Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were beaming the West's propaganda behind the Iron Curtain. More seriously, political repression and economic difficulties were sapping the vitality of East European nations. In a Europe caught between containment and countercontainment, the West was more than holding its own.

Significantly, the *Time* article, which had begun by praising Acheson's work in Europe, ended by denouncing the administration's policy in Asia. After reporting that twenty-one senators had criticized "the bankrupt US policy toward China," the influential magazine concluded: "Time, and the Russian tide, were working against the western nations in Asia. What had to be done had to be done fast." Much to the dismay of *Time* and of many Americans, the communists finally won the Chinese Civil War that fall, and Chiang fled to the island of Taiwan. And, to the surprise and dismay of administration officials, Russia exploded its first atomic bomb that September. Like some earlier shooting wars, the Cold War was getting nastier and less manageable with each passing month.

The Most Dangerous Phase, 1950–1952

Of all the years between the end of World War II and the end of the communist system in Eastern Europe in 1989, 1950 stands out as the most fateful one in terms of America's stance in the

Cold War. Before the year ended, the United States had more than tripled its defense budget, was openly aiding Chiang on Taiwan and the French in Indochina, was fighting North Korean and Chinese troops in Korea, had committed itself to the rearmament of West Germany and to the stationing of more than four divisions of its own troops in Western Europe, was moving rapidly to develop the hydrogen bomb, and was negotiating for new military bases in Spain and elsewhere.

In testimony about NATO on April 27, 1949, Acheson had assured concerned senators that "the disarmament and demilitarization of Germany must be complete and absolute," that America did not plan to send a large number of troops to defend Europe, that the administration was not contemplating security agreements with nations outside the North Atlantic region, and that membership in NATO did not imply acceptance of European colonialism in Africa and Asia. Partly as the result of opportunities and dangers created by the Korean War, by the end of 1950 the administration reneged on all of these assurances.

The early 1950s were the most dangerous phase of the Cold War not because of the Korean War in itself, but rather because of what the Korean War confirmed: namely that both sides, prisoners by now to the Cold War tendencies to miscalculate and to think the worst of each other's intentions, were prone to tragic errors of policy. The period was highly dangerous also because, in the wake of the communist victory in China in October 1949, neither America nor Russia had a clearly formulated policy concerning Asia, as events quickly confirmed. Whereas both sides' vital interests in Europe had been largely delineated by the summer of 1949, neither side was able, even in the early 1950s, to develop a coherent, workable strategy toward Asia. If ever there was an experience that demonstrates the dangers of blocking the channels of effective communication and of proceeding on the basis of ideology, dubious assumptions, and domestic pressures, this period offered such an experience.

Many of the errors of US policy during the last years of the Truman administration appear, at least in general terms, in National Security Council Paper Number 68 (NSC-68), one of the

most significant documents of the Cold War. Prepared under the leadership of Paul Nitze, Kennan's hawkish replacement as head of the Policy Planning Staff, the secret NSC-68 called for a US-led offensive against Soviet influence in the world. Viewing communism as monolithic, the policy report called for a firm response to communist aggression anywhere and in whatever form it might appear. It also suggested that America should work to remove Russian power from Eastern Europe, a policy proposal that soon came to be known as "rollback" or "liberation."

"The assault on free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere," the report noted ominously. Responding to the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb, NSC-68 argued that "the Soviet Union is developing the military capacity to support its design for world domination" and asserted that it might be able to launch a powerful attack against the West by 1954. To meet the communist threat, the report urged a vast increase in US defense spending, stepped-up covert activities, and other actions to increase the nation's power and that of its allies. Expenditures on national security increased dramatically, and only partly because of the Korean War.

Although NSC-68 was completed in April 1950, Truman did not approve it until September, three months after the outbreak of war in Korea. By then its hard-line conclusions appeared highly plausible, especially to those who viewed the Korean War as just one step in the Kremlin's "design for world domination." Most historians today view NSC-68 as alarmist in its description of Soviet intentions and mistaken in its assumption of a monolithic communist bloc. NSC-68 also exaggerated the Soviet military threat to the West.

Even before the Korean War, the administration was moving away from Kennan's original emphasis on containment of Russia to NSC-68's emphasis on opposing communism wherever it might appear, even if it was associated with an indigenous revolutionary movement against a repressive or colonial government. In so doing, US officials were making two errors of policy, one in regard to China and the other in regard to Vietnam. In China the

administration was moving toward the decision, cemented in stone by the Korean War, to continue to treat Chiang's regime on Taiwan as the sole government of China, even after this regime had lost control of every Chinese province except Taiwan, and to have no relations with Mao's government on the mainland, which actually ruled the overwhelming majority of Chinese.

Refusing to establish diplomatic ties with China largely because its government was communist was inconsistent: America maintained diplomatic relations with the most powerful communist nation, Russia, and with its satellite nations in Eastern Europe. But the decision with regard to China was understandable in the tense conditions of late 1949 and early 1950. Because Truman disliked China's new regime and did not want to show any signs of weakness in standing up to communism, he believed that recognition should come only when the new Chinese leaders demonstrated that they wanted good relations with the US. Yet China's new leader, Mao, was moving in the opposite direction: seeking improved relations with Stalin and proclaiming his commitment to the communist cause, he went to Moscow in the winter of 1949–1950 to look for friendship with, and aid from, Russia. The Chinese also arrested an American official and seized buildings that had housed the US consulate in Beijing (Peking). Mao's unfriendly actions and anti-American rhetoric made it clear that, if they were to recognize his government, US leaders would have to decide that it was in their own long-term interest to do so. Instead the administration mirrored hostility: by 1951 Truman was referring to the Chinese government as "that cutthroat organization" and "a bunch of murderers" whom he would never recognize.

Whereas in the administration's policy toward China the key issue was whether it could accept the communist victory in the Civil War and gradually encourage China's traditional nationalistic rivalry with Russia, in its policy toward Vietnam the dilemma was whether to support French colonialism or a type of Asian nationalism closely linked with communism. In India and Indonesia, where the anticolonial movement had been led by noncommunists, the choice had been easy; but not so in Vietnam.

Vietnam's drive for independence from France was led by Ho Chi Minh, a communist trained in Moscow in the 1920s, whereas France played a pivotal role in Acheson's plans for a united, militarily strong Western Europe. Moreover, US officials feared the possible expansion of Mao's influence in Asia and believed that a capitalist Southeast Asia—an underdeveloped area that could provide markets and serve as a source of raw materials—was needed to ensure economic growth in Western Europe and Japan.

On a visit to Paris in May 1950, Acheson acceded to France's long-standing request for military and economic aid in Indochina. "The United States Government," Acheson declared in his fateful announcement that marked the first step in the ever-increasing US involvement in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s, "convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism, considers the situation such as to warrant its according economic aid and military equipment to the Associated States [French-sponsored puppet governments in Indochina] and to France."

Even more than in its China policy, the administration was permitting its obsession with the evils of communism to cloud its thinking. Although he was a fervent communist, Ho was also a strong nationalist determined not to become subservient to Moscow or Beijing. "It is better to sniff French dung for a while than eat China's all our life," he once observed in a comment reflecting Vietnam's traditional hatred of Chinese domination. The administration's error lay not in failing to support Ho, which hardly could have been expected in the anticommunist atmosphere of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but in attaching itself to French colonialism, which was highly unpopular throughout Asia. As historian George C. Herring has concluded: "Regardless of his ideology, Ho by 1950 had captured the standard of Vietnamese nationalism, and by supporting France … the United States was attaching itself to a losing cause."[15]

In fairness to Truman and his advisers, it should be noted that the decision to aid the French in Vietnam did not appear to be momentous at the time and that the decision to continue to support Chiang evolved only gradually, more slowly than many

domestic critics of the administration would have liked. Indeed, the "loss" of China unleashed an often vicious barrage of criticism against the administration for its alleged foreign policy failures. The bipartisanship that had dominated foreign policy decisions in Congress, from the passage of the aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947 through the acceptance of US participation in NATO in the summer of 1949, was at a low ebb. The Democrats were losing the Cold War, critics like Congressman Richard Nixon (R., CA) and Senator Kenneth Wherry (R., NE) charged. The administration was doing too much in Europe and too little in Asia, Senator Robert Taft (R., OH) insisted, and it was spending far too much money for the meager results it had been achieving. Apparently such charges were having an impact: America was falling behind in the Cold War, a plurality of respondents told the pollsters, and Russia was winning.

For better or worse, accusations by leaders of the opposition party that the administration in office was losing the Cold War were a recurring feature of American political rhetoric from 1949 through 1980. What was different in this highly dangerous phase of the Cold War was that, in addition, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R., WI) and others were charging that high US officials were traitors to their country, that at least some of the major foreign policy developments of the late 1940s resulted from disloyalty to America.

This reckless attack, which others started well before McCarthy discovered the publicity to be gained from it, was given credence by the arrest and conviction of several people on charges of spying on the US atomic energy program. It gained momentum with the allegation in 1948 that Alger Hiss, an official in the State Department under Roosevelt, had been a Soviet spy during the 1930s—a charge that documents released from Soviet archives in the 1990s proved to be accurate. The charges and countercharges relating to the Hiss case made headlines throughout 1949, and on January 21, 1950 Hiss was convicted of perjury in connection with testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee. On February 9 McCarthy made the first of his sensational, never substantiated charges that there were large numbers of communists in the State Department.

The sharp attacks on Truman's foreign policy and on the loyalty of high officials (including Acheson and Secretary of Defense Marshall) helped to keep the administration on the defensive during the remainder of Truman's term. Seeing political gain, responsible Republican leaders refused to criticize McCarthy and the others who were trafficking in innuendo and fear, and the president's sharp criticisms of McCarthy tended to be dismissed as self-serving. The anticommunist hysteria and the denunciation of the nation's leaders placed Truman in a no-win situation: no matter how strongly he opposed Stalin, Mao, Ho, and the other "communist devils," he could never do enough to satisfy his critics.

The vocal right-wing critics of the administration were especially vehement in their denunciations of Acheson, whose resignation or firing was demanded repeatedly after the communist victory in China, and again after the outbreak of the Korean War. In his National Press Club address in January 1950, Acheson had reiterated the administration's position that the American "defensive perimeter" ran from Alaska to Japan and then south to the Ryukyu Islands and the Philippines. Those friends of the West living on the mainland of Asia would need to depend first upon their own efforts and then "upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations."

After Russian-backed communist North Korea began its invasion of US–backed capitalist South Korea on June 25, Acheson's critics were quick to blame him for the attack, on the grounds that he had given North Korea the green light by not including South Korea within America's line of defense. Acheson, a lawyer before becoming a statesman, sought to defend himself by citing his reference to UN commitments and by noting that America had taken the lead, through the UN, in coming to South Korea's defense.

Why did the North Koreans attack? The main reason was the desire of the North Korean government, led by Kim Il Sung, to unify Korea under its leadership. The US–Soviet decision to divide Korea temporarily at the 38th parallel at the end of World War II was purely arbitrary, and both the North Koreans and the South Koreans, under Syngman Rhee, wanted to unite the country.

Indeed their troops had skirmished repeatedly during the late 1940s in the area near the 38th parallel.

By early 1950 Kim had decided that he wanted to try to conquer South Korea and sought support from Stalin and Mao. Fresh from his own victory in China, Mao encouraged Kim's plans; but Stalin hesitated, fearing US intervention to save Rhee. Finally, after about fifty telegrams and a visit from Kim, Stalin gave his consent in April—but only if Mao also approved. "If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger," Stalin told Kim. "You have to ask Mao for all the help." When Kim visited Beijing in May to ask for China's support, Mao was reluctant at first, citing the danger of US intervention. Partly because Kim portrayed Stalin as more optimistic about the chances for success than in fact he was, Mao eventually approved Kim's plan.

Stalin had put Mao in a tough spot. If he said yes, he might well have to send Chinese soldiers to fight the Americans in Korea, thus putting aside his highest priority: defeating Chiang Kai-shek and establishing his own rule on Taiwan. If he said no, he would appear to be going against the wishes of the leader of the communist movement, Stalin, as well as upsetting Kim and raising doubts about his commitment to leading the revolutionary movement in Asia. A personal motive may also have influenced Mao: if Chinese troops did end up fighting US forces in Korea, the proud, ambitious leader would get credit among other communists for his courage in "fighting imperialism."

Records of Stalin's meetings with Kim suggest that the Soviet leader approved the invasion—and provided Soviet advisers to plan it and military equipment to make it possible—for several reasons. He believed that Mao's victory in China and the Soviet atomic bomb had improved the "international environment." He also told Kim that information coming from the United States suggested that America would not send troops to defend Rhee.

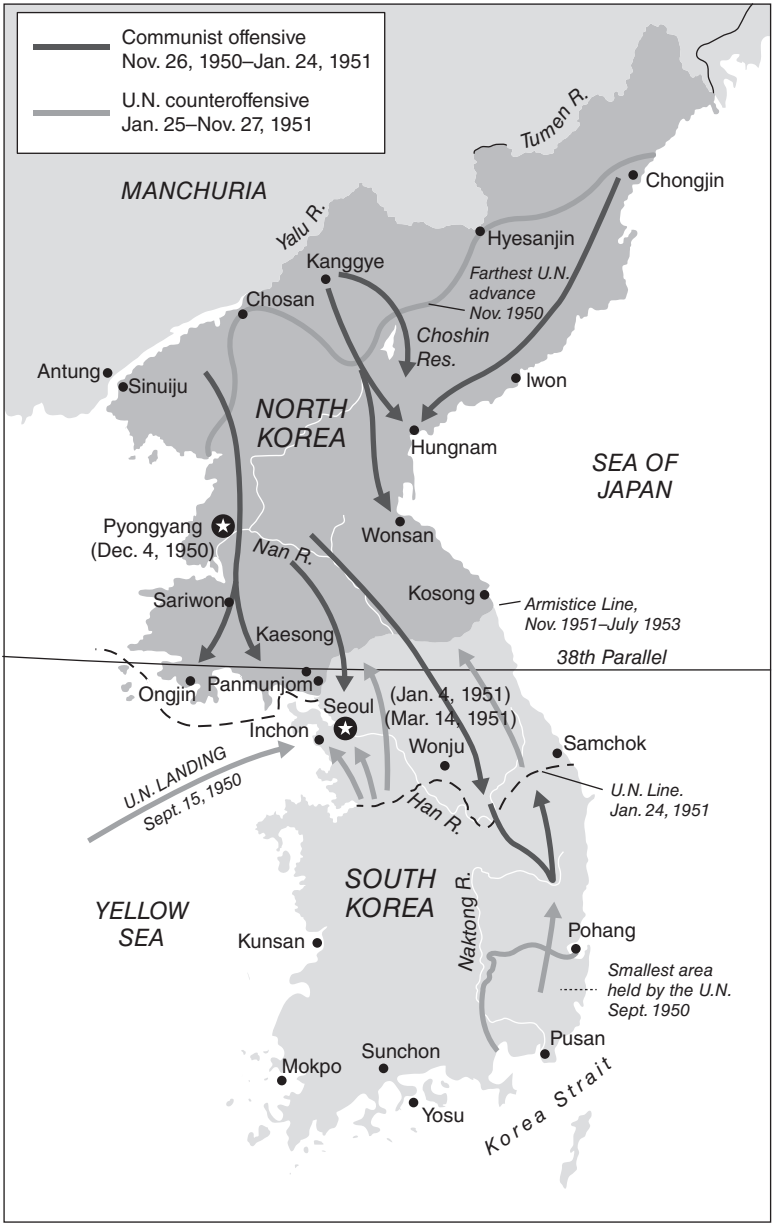
Although Stalin had spies in Washington who had access to secret US documents suggesting that America would not defend South Korea, he did not need spies to know that the United States had withdrawn its forces from South Korea in mid-1949 and had placed that nation outside its defense perimeter in early 1950.

In retrospect, both of these US moves look like first-class blunders, especially considering that thirty-three thousand Americans and an estimated two million Koreans and Chinese died in the conflict.

And why did the Truman administration respond so decisively to a situation that might well have been viewed as a civil war between Koreans? The main reason was Truman's belief that America's credibility as the leader of the noncommunist world was being tested. "If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war," Truman later remembered thinking as he rushed back to Washington to plan the US response. "It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on South Korea could be stopped."

Truman, who vividly recalled the 1930s and was sensitive to the attacks on the administration for its "weakness" in Asia, never hesitated to act forcefully in this situation. Indeed, if any communist leaders genuinely thought that he would do otherwise, they were sadly misinformed about both the president and the political climate in which he operated. Truman received strong support for military action from his cabinet, leaders of both parties in Congress, the press, and public opinion polls. He also received a lucky break when, due to Russia's continued boycott of the UN Security Council for its failure to seat Mao's government, the administration was able to conduct its military operations against North Korea under UN auspices.

Just as the Soviets and the Chinese would have been pleased to have Korea united under Kim, so leading US officials, refusing to recognize the North Korean government, had desired the unification of Korea as a pro-western nation. Thus the administration did not stick for long to its original public objective in the Korean War—driving the North Koreans out of South Korea and restoring the 38th parallel as the boundary between the two sides. Instead, under pressure from the US commander, General Douglas MacArthur, and some officials in Washington, the administration had decided by September to destroy the North Korean army and to unite the peninsula under South Korean leadership. Allied and



Map 1.1 Map of Korea.

South Korean forces gained the upper hand in the fighting. Areas held by North Korean forces were hit repeatedly by devastating US bombing raids and artillery and naval fire, all of which resulted in heavy military and civilian casualties in both parts of Korea. After a bold amphibious landing at Inchon in mid-September, which turned the North Koreans' flank and forced them to withdraw from the south, the situation began to look favorable for America and its allies. Exploiting this advantage by unifying Korea was irresistible: it promised a major Cold War victory and popular acclaim at home.

Whereas the North Koreans and the Soviets had miscalculated in June, by early autumn it was the Americans who were overplaying their hand. Ignoring suggestions for a ceasefire at the 38th parallel and disregarding repeated warnings by the Chinese that they would join the fighting if the Americans came too close to their territory, the primarily American UN forces invaded North Korea in late September and October and bombed bridges on the Yalu River between North Korea and China. Contemptuous of the Chinese communists and friendly to Chiang, MacArthur assured Truman on October 15 that the Chinese would not risk becoming involved in the Korean conflict. When large numbers of Chinese soldiers crossed the Yalu River and then attacked effectively, the Americans, who had seemed close to total victory in Korea, were forced to fall back rapidly toward the 38th parallel.

Several scholars have shown that the Chinese became involved in the war primarily because of pressure from Stalin, who urged Mao on October 1 to send "volunteers" because "the situation of our Korean friends is getting desperate." A week later Stalin promised to supply the Chinese with air cover for their troops and with other types of military assistance. In addition, Mao and other Chinese leaders feared that US control of all of Korea would lead to attacks on China designed ultimately to overthrow their government. As Mao stated in a Politburo meeting on August 4: "If the US imperialists won the war, they would become more arrogant and would threaten us. We should not fail to assist the Koreans."

As Marxist–Leninists, Chinese leaders believed that the "imperialists" would not be satisfied until they had destroyed every communist government; thus they felt they had to intervene to deter further American "aggression" in Asia. Ironically, the original US goal, too, had been defensive: to prevent the further spread of communism. "In retrospect," historian Shu Guang Zhang has noted, "we can see that neither state had the aggressive intentions that the other so consistently attributed to it."[16]

After the large-scale Chinese intervention, MacArthur asked for permission to carry out massive air strikes against China; but officials in Washington, wishing to avoid a wider and more dangerous war, denied his request and ordered him to concentrate on stabilizing the UN position near the 38th parallel. When, in the spring of 1951, MacArthur publicly implied that Truman was an appeaser, the president, backed strongly by the joint chiefs of staff, fired him on April 11. Still viewing Russia as enemy number one and the defense of Western Europe as the top priority, General Omar Bradley, the chairman of the joint chiefs, told Congress that an all-out war in Asia would be "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." In a relatively brief period the administration had gone from containment to liberation and then back to containment.

As the outspoken MacArthur was gradually fading from public view and the front in Korea was stabilized by late spring, US officials in Washington and East Asia, in Acheson's words, "found themselves united on political objectives, strategy, and tactics for the first time since the war had started." In other words, the administration was ready to try to negotiate a settlement. Following the pattern of the Berlin negotiations of 1949, Kennan met secretly with Malik twice in early June and learned that the Soviets wanted to end the hostilities. After Malik publicly affirmed Russia's interest in a peaceful solution on June 23, the administration moved rapidly to make contact with the Chinese and North Korean commanders, and formal negotiations began on July 10. Although an armistice agreement was not signed until July 1953 (partly due to Stalin's actual reluctance to

negotiate seriously and to Truman's refusal to return Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war against their will), the overall intensity of the fighting subsided.

In the absence of a peace agreement, Truman's popularity—which had taken a nosedive after the Chinese intervention dashed any hopes for an early victory—never again reached its level of July 1950. Republicans, smelling victory in 1952, jumped at inconsistencies in US policy in Asia and played on the popular feeling that all that America was getting from its involvement in Korea was casualties, inflation, and higher taxes. In a Gallup poll in October 1951, 56 percent responded that Korea was a "useless war."

Yet the public strongly approved of the keystones of America's Cold War stance: hostility toward Russia and mainland China, large defense expenditures, production of hydrogen bombs, rearmament of Germany, a strong American military presence in Europe, US bases in Japan, and support for Chiang. Truman might not have been able to win an election for dogcatcher in 1951 and 1952, but his vision of America as the assertive leader of the "free world"—the vision of NSC-68—was more solidly embedded in public thinking than ever before.

The depth to which US–Soviet relations had dropped was illustrated by Kennan's experience in 1952 as ambassador to Russia. Kennan was sent to Moscow without instructions from his own government. Accordingly, he did not seek an appointment with Stalin, for, "being effectively without instructions, I had nothing to say to him." At the same time, Kennan was shocked by the "viciousness and intensity" of the anti-American propaganda that spewed forth daily from the Russian news media. The US embassy was bugged, and he felt like a prisoner in his official residence. Although he knew that Soviet charges against America were greatly exaggerated, he did believe that US military activities in Europe and the Mediterranean were at times unnecessarily provocative: "I began to ask myself whether … we had not contributed, and were not continuing to contribute—by the overmilitarization of our policies and statements—to a belief in Moscow that it was war we were after."

While traveling through Germany that September, Kennan carelessly stated that living under police-state conditions in Moscow reminded him of living in Berlin in the early 1940s. Infuriated by Kennan's comparison between Russia and Nazi Germany, the Soviet government refused to let him reenter the country, thus ending his brief tour as ambassador. In doing this, ironically, it closed the door on one of the very few high-level US officials of that era who could see both sides in the Cold War.

Conclusion

An analogy from nature that is often applied to the study of history is the one about the forest and the trees. Some historians, it is said, "can't see the forest for the trees"—that is, they are unable to perceive the overall significance of events because they are so busy looking at details. Others who can't see the trees for the forest make generalizations readily but often ignore specific facts that might force them to modify their broad conclusions.

At the level of the "trees," there is much to praise—and a good deal to criticize—in the behavior of America, Russia, and their various allies. The United States, for example, can be praised for its leading role, through the Marshall Plan, in the revitalization of Western Europe. Its leadership helped the nations in the region achieve both prosperity and lasting democracy. America also deserves praise for taking the lead in setting up—and providing major funding for—the international institutions that have contributed to widespread prosperity (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and several others), peacemaking, human rights, and a heightened concern for the less fortunate throughout the world. The Russians can be praised for carefully avoiding the use of their military forces in large-scale combat against Americans not only in Europe but also when their ally, North Korea, faced imminent defeat during the Korean War.

Among other things, one can criticize the harshness with which Stalin's henchmen operated in Eastern Europe, or America's break

with its earlier commitment to anticolonialism when it openly supported the French in Indochina from 1950 on. Stalin's and Mao's approval of Kim Il Sung's plan to invade South Korea had truly tragic consequences. Not only was there horrendous loss of life and destruction of property, but US officials concluded, for years afterward, that communist leaders would use any available means to expand the territory they controlled. America's success in a limited war in Korea led many officials in the 1960s think that the United States could win a limited war in Vietnam as well. One can also regret the rigidity and self-righteousness that infected both the US and the Soviet governments between 1945 and 1953—a noxious fever that recurred frequently for some thirty-five years after Truman and Stalin left the stage.

At the level of the "forest," an effort to be even-handed in reaching conclusions can easily obscure deeper truths. The deepest truth about the Cold War is that it was, as Truman said in his famous speech of March 1947, a struggle between "two ways of life," one based on the goal (however imperfectly realized at times) of individual liberty and democracy, and the other on the persistent reality of "terror and oppression." According to Vaclav Havel, a Czech dissident who became president of his country after it broke free from Russia in 1989, Soviet-style communism was "a genuinely totalitarian system" that "permeated every aspect of life and deformed everything it touched, including all the natural ways people had evolved of living together."

Viewed in this light, US policymakers were wise to oppose the spread of totalitarian communism and to hope that this fundamentally flawed form of social organization, once contained, would eventually die out and be replaced by political and economic institutions that permitted the free flowering of human potential, in all its richness and diversity. That Truman and his successors made mistakes in implementing their anticommunist policies, especially in Asia, cannot be doubted. But the overall direction of their policy—committing US leadership and resources to stem the tide of communism and to encourage freedom, democracy, and economic growth throughout the noncommunist world—was admirable indeed.

Notes

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6 Jensen, *Origins*, p. 3.
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10 Email from Zubok.
11 Levering et al., *Debating the Origins*, p. 82.
12 [George F. Kennan] "X", "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), pp. 575, 576.
13 Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), pp. 353–354.
14 See Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952," *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (1986): 263–277.
15 George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th edn. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 22.
16 I have not been able to locate the source for this quotation, which first appeared in an earlier edition. But a similar quotation, also relating to the Korean War, appears in Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese–American Confrontations, 1949–1958* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 117: "Each [nation] misunderstood the other's intentions. Each mistook the other for an aggressor."