

Containment

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Containment was the strategy by which the United States waged the Cold War. It had a variety of meanings at its inception, and evolved over the forty-five years of its existence. The key goals of containment were to limit the spread of Soviet power and Communist ideology. Yet containment was never a defensive strategy; it was conceived as an instrument to achieve victory in the Cold War.

At the end of World War II, President Harry S. Truman and his advisers possessed no clear strategic vision. Truman said that he wanted to get along with the Soviet Union, but he also acknowledged that cooperation meant that the United States should get its way 85 percent of the time. Truman sometimes denounced Soviet perfidy, yet he said that he yearned for peace as well and could negotiate deals with Stalin, the Soviet dictator.

In early 1946, the diplomat George F. Kennan helped to clarify the situation. Kennan was a career foreign service official, one of America's first Russian experts. Toward the end of the war, he returned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow as a chargé d'affaires. He admired Russian culture and loved Russian literature, but he abhorred Stalin and detested communism. Communism, Kennan thought, had corrupted all that was good in the Russian past. Communists simply wanted to aggrandize their power and impose their will wherever they could. When asked for his interpretation of Soviet policy in February 1946, Kennan sent an eight-thousand-word telegram to Washington, DC. Known as the "long" telegram, Kennan wrote that Soviet leaders exploited the idea of capitalist encirclement in order to justify their totalitarian rule at home. The Soviets would seek to expand everywhere. They would not negotiate in good faith. They understood only the logic of force.

Kennan's telegram was greeted with enthusiasm in Washington. His hard-line attitudes resonated with many influential career diplomats at the U.S. Department of State and many leading officials in the Pentagon. When General George F. Marshall became secretary of state in early 1947, he asked Kennan to head a new Policy Planning Staff in the Department of State.

Kennan was encouraged to disseminate his views widely. In July 1947, he wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the most prestigious journal of international relations in the United States. Titled "The Sources of Soviet Con-

duct,” Kennan’s piece argued that “the political personality of Soviet power as we know it today is the product of ideology and circumstances.” Soviet leaders were dedicated Marxists. They yearned for power and hoped to expand wherever they could. The political action of the Kremlin, wrote Kennan, “is a fluid stream which moves constantly wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power. But if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them.”

The appropriate strategy, therefore, was containment. “It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” The Soviet assault on the free institutions of the Western world, Kennan emphasized, could “be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence.”

But Kennan had in mind more than the containment of Soviet expansion. He believed that the Soviet Union was fundamentally weak, its inhabitants were “physically and spiritually tired,” and its economy vulnerable. The problems afflicting the country were endemic to the system; they could not be overcome. If the “unity and efficacy” of the party were disrupted, Kennan prophesied, “Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies.”

While this article appeared anonymously under the authorship of “X,” Kennan’s thinking shaped the nation’s strategy. In November 1948, the newly formed National Security Council approved a policy enumerating U.S. objectives with regard to the USSR. In times of peace as well as times of war, U.S. goals were:

- a. To reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations.
- b. To bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the governments in power in Russia, to conform with the purposes and principles set forth in the UN charter.

But U.S. officials in 1947 and 1948 did not have precise ideas about how to implement containment. Should

containment be applied everywhere? Should it be applied militarily? Should the United States focus on economic aid to nations seeking to reconstruct their economies? Should the United States assign priority to occupation policies, especially in Germany and Japan?

Initially, in what became known as the Truman Doctrine, the U.S. president proposed military aid to Greece and Turkey, and declared that the United States would contest totalitarian expansion everywhere. But his subordinates quickly recognized that they had to calculate priorities carefully. They decided that they should focus on economic reconstruction in Western Europe rather than military rearmament; that they should seek to erode support for Communist parties in France, Italy, and Greece; and that they should manage the revitalization of western Germany and Japan, and co-opt their future power. Containment meant that Soviet influence and Communist ideology should be contained within the areas occupied by the forces of the Soviet Union at the end of World War II.

In June 1947, the United States announced the Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe. The governments of most Western European nations were happy to receive U.S. money and participate in a reconstruction program. But they possessed deep fears about the revival of German power. In order to get the French to cooperate, the United States promised to retain its occupation forces inside Germany, and to collaborate militarily should efforts to revive Germany provoke Soviet aggression or rekindle German revanchism. In reality, the North Atlantic Treaty was signed as part of a dual containment policy against Soviet Russia and a future Germany, whose political direction and future alignment was far from certain.

The initial focus of containment was on Western Europe, western Germany, and Japan. But very quickly U.S. officials began to think that their efforts in the industrial core of Eurasia depended on containing Communist influence and Soviet power in the periphery of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Japan, for example, could not be reconstructed without preserving markets and raw materials in Southeast Asia and South Korea; the United Kingdom and Western Europe needed oil and the repatriation of investment earnings from the Middle East. Yet many of these areas were threatened by insurrectionary forces led by revolutionary nationalists subject to varying degrees of Communist influence.

Containment thus demanded tough choices about where to extend U.S. commitments. Truman administration officials realized that they did not have the resources

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to contain communism and revolutionary nationalism everywhere. They did not intervene to stop the Communist takeover of China. But after the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic device in August 1949, U.S. officials worried that Soviet leaders would be emboldened and that Communist partisans would be heartened. Truman encouraged his subordinates to rethink the nature of containment. Kennan's influence waned as most of his colleagues now favored rearmament, military alliances, and containment on the periphery. Secretary of State Dean Acheson eased Kennan out of his job and placed Paul Nitze as the head of the Policy Planning Staff.

In early 1950, Nitze composed a new strategy document, known as NSC 68. The overall objective of U.S. policy was to "foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish." To achieve this goal, the United States had to practice containment. Containment meant blocking the expansion of Soviet power, exposing the falsities of Soviet pretensions, inducing a retraction of Soviet control, and nurturing the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system. In order to achieve these goals, military rearmament was indispensable. Military capabilities, Nitze stressed, constitute the "indispensable backdrop." Containment, after all, was a "policy of calculated and gradual coercion." Without superior military power, it was no more than "a policy of bluff."

President Truman endorsed the strategy of NSC 68, but hesitated to allocate the financial resources to support it. Only after the Korean War erupted in June 1950 did he ask Congress for the money to finance the military buildup envisioned in NSC 68. Over the next three years, U.S. military spending almost tripled, reaching about \$40 to \$50 billion per year. Believing that North Korean aggression was inspired by Stalin, Truman deployed U.S. troops to Korea. At the same time, he committed the United States to contain the expansion of Chinese Communist influence.

Thereafter, containment assumed global dimensions. But debates about it became shrill. Truman's critics called for the rollback of Soviet power. They did not realize that containment envisioned rollback. They did not know that the Truman administration's version of containment already included covert action and psychological warfare throughout the world, including Communist China and Eastern Europe. These critics did not have access to NSC 68, which said that "the cold war was in fact a real war." Still, the real war envisioned in the containment strategy of the Truman administration prudently sought to avoid direct fighting with the Soviet Union lest it trigger

the full-scale Soviet invasion of Western Europe and a nuclear war.

When Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president in November 1952, he decided that the United States could not sustain the military posture envisioned by NSC 68. Eisenhower wanted to practice containment without overtaxing the economy and bankrupting the U.S. treasury. He and John Foster Dulles, his secretary of state, talked of brinkmanship and massive retaliation. Air-atomic capabilities, they knew, were cheaper than conventional forces. So were covert actions and psychological warfare. Eisenhower supported the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Guzman Arbenz in Guatemala. He believed charismatic nationalists and populist leftists would be outmaneuvered by Communist parties tied to the Kremlin. Around the world he embraced right-wing dictators, not because he liked them, but because he deemed them instrumental to containing the spread of Communist influence and Soviet power. Should any single nation fall to communism, he feared, it would have a "domino" effect on its neighbors. He believed that the United States had to continue to follow the policy of containment, but to do so shrewdly, cheaply, covertly, so that the nation did not become a garrison state.

When John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, he felt that the containment as practiced by Eisenhower was faltering. Kennedy thought Eisenhower was too conservative, too cautious. The Soviet Union, Kennedy and his advisers maintained, was gaining in power and influence. Moreover, the appeal of communism seemed greater than ever. Colonial peoples were throwing off the shackles of European rule, seeking rapid modernization, experimenting with command economies, and looking to the Soviet Union as a model of state building and rapid economic advancement.

Kennedy called on the U.S. people to practice containment with renewed vigor. Possessing a different conception of the role of government than did Eisenhower, Kennedy believed that through fiscal and monetary policy, the U.S. government could invigorate economic growth and support a bolder foreign policy. He called for an arms buildup, more flexible conventional forces, and more imaginative counterinsurgency techniques. He called for more economic aid to the emerging nations in Africa and Asia. Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress in Latin America, hoping for social and land reform as well as industrial modernization. Everywhere, around the globe, Kennedy sought to contain the march

of communism, and contain or co-opt the appeal of revolutionary nationalists. When Kennedy was assassinated, Lyndon B. Johnson intensified these efforts. To contain communism, Johnson deployed over five hundred thousand troops to Indochina and expanded the bombing of North Vietnam. Should Vietnam be “lost,” U.S. credibility would be shattered and Johnson’s domestic political enemies would be emboldened. His “Great Society” at home, Johnson thought, depended on the success of containment abroad.

Johnson’s efforts to succeed in Vietnam backfired militarily, diplomatically, and politically. Richard Nixon, a Republican, won the presidency in 1968. Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser, felt that U.S. strength was waning. They hoped that through détente with Russia and rapprochement with China they could manage the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam and maneuver the two Communist rivals to balance one another. By holding out the promise of trade and investment, Nixon and Kissinger hoped to encourage the Soviet Union to exercise self-restraint in Asia and Africa. Should self-restraint not work, Nixon and Kissinger also wanted to give military aid to reliable, strong allies in the third world, like Iran. With Congress less willing to support military action, and with skyrocketing oil prices weakening U.S. economic strength, Nixon and Kissinger maneuvered to keep containment alive through a sophisticated mix of détente, rapprochement, and military assistance.

These policies provoked much controversy in the United States. They were discredited when the president was impeached and forced to resign as a result of a domestic scandal and the attempted cover-up. For the first time since the beginning of the Cold War, Americans were deeply divided about containment. Some experts doubted whether the Soviet Union still sought world domination. Much of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East seethed with unrest, they said, not because of Soviet machinations and ambitions but because of poverty, indigenous unrest, and regional strife. When the Democrat Jimmy Carter won the presidential election in 1976, he and his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, talked about reconfiguring U.S. strategy. They dwelled more on North-South and less on East-West relations. Improving ties with Soviet Russia and Communist China seemed more important than containing them.

But such thinking ended abruptly in December 1979 when the Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan to put down an insurrection against a newly formed Communist government. The Soviets again seemed to be on

the march. Neoconservative critics of Carter and Vance had argued all through the mid-1970s that the administration was being duped by the Kremlin. These neoconservatives insisted that the Soviet Union was surpassing the United States in strategic weapons as well as conventional capabilities. They claimed that the Soviet Union was using Cuban troops as proxies to gain influence in Angola and the Horn of Africa. They charged that the United States was abandoning the strategy of containment and allowing the Soviet Union to gain preponderant power in the international system.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan used these themes to win the presidency. He condemned Carter for a policy of weakness. The Soviet Union, he declared, was an “evil empire.” The United States would have to rebuild its military power and conduct negotiations from a position of strength. Reagan deployed a new generation of intermediate range missiles to Europe. Secretly, and sometimes not so secretly, he supported anti-Communist factions in the third world, in such places as Angola and Nicaragua. Reagan quite openly supported military aid to the mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. More discreetly, he assisted Solidarity in Poland.

When a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, consolidated power and sought to reform communism through the policies of glasnost and perestroika, Reagan entered into arms control talks. Gorbachev wanted to limit arms expenditures, and instead focus more attention on revitalizing the Soviet economy and improving living conditions. He was shaken by the explosion of a nuclear reactor at a power plant in Chernobyl. Cognizant of the interdependent nature of the modern world as well as the advances in technology and communications, Gorbachev emphasized that common problems united humanity more than class conflict divided it. Such statements in 1987, 1988, and 1989 signified an entirely new orientation of the Soviet Union toward international relations. Intuiting that he was dealing with a new type of Soviet leader, Reagan dared Gorbachev to lift the iron curtain and tear down the Berlin Wall. The world was stunned when popular movements in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary overthrew Communist governments, and Gorbachev did not intervene. Nor did he intervene when East Germans demolished the wall and demanded unification with the Federal Republic. And nor did he use force to stymie the independence movements of the Baltic republics inside the Soviet Union.

Containment worked. In 1947, Kennan predicted that vigilant, determined efforts to contain the expansion of

Soviet power would eventually expose the inherent weaknesses of totalitarian communism. From the outset, U.S. officials debated how to apply containment. Their first priority was to rebuild Western Europe, Germany, and Japan, and prevent the Kremlin from fomenting Communist subversion in these countries or luring them into a Soviet orbit. Their second priority was to contain the spread of Communist influence and Soviet power into key areas of Southeast Asia and the Middle East—areas deemed essential to the health of the industrial core of Eurasia. But while debating how best to achieve these objectives, U.S. officials also hoped to find the means of luring Soviet satellites away from the Kremlin and promoting democratic change inside them. What they often disregarded was the appeal of European social democracy along with the resonance of U.S. popular culture and consumer capitalism. What they had not expected was a Soviet leader who was so intent on change, so intent on revitalizing communism inside Russia, that he would essentially abet the success of America's containment strategy. Gorbachev's reforms and his failures, along with the vibrancy of democratic consumer capitalism, allowed containment to succeed, much as Kennan had predicted it would.

See also Americanism; Anticommunism; Bipolarity; Cold War; Gorbachev, Mikhail; Kennan, George Frost; Power Politics; Second Cold War; Totalitarianism.

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