

The Origins of the Cold War

A Second Look

By [Everett Thiele](#)

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“The men who possess real power in this country have no intention of ending the Cold War.” Albert Einstein

“For years it was pretended that the threat was from the Russians, the routine pretext for violence and subversion all over the world.” Noam Chomsky

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” Winston Churchill in the “iron curtain” speech

Starting with the unilateral rejection of the ABM treaty, the current Bush Administration has taken a number of aggressive steps toward Russia. The resulting increase in tensions with Russia has caused some commentators to speak of a new Cold War. Clearly, the U.S. bears the major share of responsibility for this current situation. But, what about the “first” Cold War? How responsible was the U.S. for its origin?.

World War II ended on September 2, 1945 when the Japanese formally surrendered on board the USS Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay. Within a few years, the Cold War was underway and dominated America’s view of the world. The Soviet Union and communists in general, were portrayed as enemies so irrevocably bent on destroying our country that negotiation and peaceful co-existence were impossible.

Like most Americans living through the Cold War, I accepted this view of Communism and believed that the Cold War started because the Soviets, in their pursuit of world domination, directed an aggressive foreign policy at the U.S. But, recent analysis and newly available documents reveal quite a different picture. It was the Truman Administration that first adopted an aggressive policy toward the Soviets – a policy that relied heavily on the U.S. monopoly in atomic weapons. The Cold War was the inevitable result of Truman’s policy decisions.

Recently published correspondence shows that Franklin Roosevelt had a vision of peaceful cooperation with Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union in the postwar years. [See *My Dear Mr. Stalin: The Complete Correspondence of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph V. Stalin*, edited by Susan Butler.] This cooperative spirit prevailed at the Yalta conference, held in February 1945, and resulted in a compromise on the postwar government of Poland that was amenable to the Soviets. But, just eleven days after taking office, Harry Truman, with absolutely no experience in foreign affairs, [began the destruction of Roosevelt’s vision of peaceful cooperation](#).

“The rapport that had been established between the two leaders would quickly be aborted by FDR’s successor. In Truman’s first meeting with Molotov at the White House on April 23, the new President gave him a dressing-down over Poland. “I’ve never been talked to like that in my life,” was the stunned Molotov’s comment.”

Two and a half months later, Harry Truman traveled with his close advisor and newly appointed Secretary of State, James Byrnes, to the Potsdam conference of victorious WWII allies. On the voyage across the Atlantic they planned a strategy for tough bargaining with Stalin. The poker playing Truman thought of the atom bomb as his ace in the hole. On July 16, 1945, one day before the conference started, Truman got good news. The test of the world’s first atom bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico had been a success. [Truman was overjoyed](#). He had postponed the meeting at Potsdam twice, hoping that a successful atom bomb test result would be available when the meeting started. Now, he had his ace in the hole and could use it as leverage against Stalin.

On Aug 6, 1945, the U.S. dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. The belief that the dropping of the atom bomb on Japan was necessary to end the war with Japan, in a way that would avoid enormous U.S. casualties, has become one of the great myths of our culture. And, it is just that, a myth. Japan was, in fact, ready to surrender before the bomb was dropped and this was known by Truman. Japan’s only condition was the retention of the emperor as figure head leader of their country. [See *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, by Gar Alperovitz] At Potsdam, at Truman’s urging, the allies rejected this possibility by drafting a resolution demanding the unconditional surrender of Japan. When Japan didn’t comply, Truman with the support of Byrnes ordered the military to drop the atom bomb. It’s perhaps revealing of their true motives, that after Japan’s surrender, the Truman administration did allow Japan to keep their emperor. The atom bomb attack on Japan was really intended to send the message to Stalin that the U.S. would not be squeamish about using this horrendous new weapon. [See *We Can Be Friends: Origins of the Cold War*, by Carl Marzani.]

The military advantage conferred by the sole possession of the atom bomb was the big stick in the Truman Administration’s postwar foreign policy. They were confident in this policy because they believed that the Soviets could not develop their own atom bomb for twenty years, or so. True, scientists who had developed the bomb for the U.S. testified before Congress that the Soviets had the technical skill to develop their own bomb in three to five years. But, General Leslie Groves, the military head of the Manhattan project which developed the atom bomb, held secret meetings with key political leaders and told them that the Soviets would be stymied in their atom bomb development because the west controlled the world’s Uranium supplies. [See *A Most Deadly Illusion*, by Gregg Herken]

During the war, the United States obtained the uranium it needed for the Manhattan Project from mines in the Belgian Congo. At the time, these mines were the biggest source of uranium in the world, and Western control of them was a major part of Groves’ argument that the Soviets could not obtain the Uranium they would need to build an atom bomb. But, General Groves didn’t tell political leaders about another important source of Uranium, namely the mines at Jáchymov Czechoslovakia. The existence of these mines was well known because, some fifty years earlier, they had supplied Madam Curie with Uranium samples for her pioneering experiments in radioactivity. After WWII, the Soviets gained control of Czechoslovakia, and obtained uranium for their atom bomb project.

The first test of an atom bomb by the Soviet Union came on August 29, 1949. Truman and other U.S. leaders were shocked. Instead of taking twenty years for the Soviets to develop their own atom bomb, it took only four years. Truman's atom bomb policy was about to turn into the nightmare of the atomic arms race. When a scapegoat was needed, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg paid the price for Groves' deceit – they were executed in 1953. Although the Rosenberg case has been the source of considerable controversy, it's now known that Julius Rosenberg did, in fact spy for the Russians, but the information that he passed on to them was insignificant.

During much of the Cold War, U.S. policy relied on the threat to use nuclear weapons to maintain military superiority. But, national policy could not be expressed in such blunt terms. It first needed to be wrapped in a publicly acceptable ideology. The policy of containment filled this need and became the official version of U.S. policy toward Russia. This policy was first enunciated by George Kennan when he sent the, now famous, [Long Telegram](#) to Secretary of State, James Burns, on February 22, 1946. In this telegram, and in a subsequent article in the July, 1947 issue of [Foreign Affairs](#), Kennan identified the USSR as an enemy which must be contained by every available means. Speaking of the will of the Soviets to destroy us, Kennan wrote in the Long Telegram:

“In summary, we have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent modus vivendi that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.”

Other important steps helped establish the ideological basis for the Cold War. These included: [Winston Churchill's "iron curtain" speech](#) delivered on March 5, 1946 at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Also, in an address to a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, Truman asked for \$400 million in military and economic assistance for Turkey and Greece, arguing that, without this aid these countries would inevitably fall to communism. Known as the [Truman Doctrine](#), this address contained the first public declaration of Kennan's policy of containment.

One more important piece had to fall in place, before the Cold War could be said to be fully underway. Military spending had to be increased. By 1947, the costs of WWII had wound themselves out of the budget, and military expenditures were back to what might be called normal for a country at peace. Aircraft makers and other manufacturers who had profited handsomely from the war were not happy. They now faced much smaller earnings, or even bottom line losses. With the air force as an ally, they pressured Truman to increase military spending; arguing in part that increased military spending was needed to avoid a post-war depression. Truman responded with the “war scare” of March, 1948. As anticipated, the defense budget was increased in 1948, as were military orders for new aircraft. [See *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948: A Successful Campaign to Deceive the Nation*, by Frank Kofsky.]

After a long struggle, the Nationalist forces on mainland China finally collapsed during October, 1949. Following close on the heels of the first Russian A-bomb test, this second shock to the American people and their rulers paved the way for the excesses of McCarthyism in the early fifties, but even more significantly, because of its long term effect, the adoption of NSC 68 on April 14, 1950. [See [NSC 68: United States Objectives and](#)

[Programs for National Security](#)] NSC 68 was a formal recommendation from the National Security Council, which had been created three years earlier by the [National Security Act](#) of 1947. NSC 68 has been called the blueprint for the Cold War, but more than that it has turned out to be the blueprint for a nation permanently dominated by military activities.

NSC 68 was written by a joint State-Defense Department committee, under the supervision of Cold War super hawk, Paul Nitze. This document, which remained secret until 1977, changed Kennan's policy of containment into a policy calling for complete military domination of the Soviet Union. The [State Department website](#) summarizes NSC 68 as follows:

"NSC-68 concluded that the only plausible way to deter the Soviet Union was for President Harry Truman to support a massive build-up of both conventional and nuclear arms. ... In order to fund the substantial increase in military spending this conclusion demanded, the report suggested that the Government increase taxes and reduce other expenditures.

Initially, a number of U.S. officials strongly opposed NSC-68's recommendations. ... However, the invasion of South Korea by Soviet and Chinese-backed North Korean forces in June 1950, and continuing charges by Congressional critics that the Administration was soft on Communism, quickly settled matters in favor of the report's recommendations. NSC 68's recommendations thereby became policy and the United States Government began a massive military build-up.'

Because of NSC 68 and the Korean War, military budgets were increased dramatically in the early fifties, and would never return to anything near peaceful levels. Also, the atomic arms race got underway in earnest. As more and more atomic weapons were built by both sides, fear was always a decisive ally of those advocating war and/or more military preparations. Kennan strongly opposed NSC 68. [He realized that](#) *"an atomic arms race would be a disaster, assuming a momentum that would be unstoppable and produce dangers unrelated to the political views that launched it."* But, Paul Nitze, not Kennan, now held power in the State Department run by Dean Acheson.

The Cold War lasted until the Soviet Union collapsed in late 1989. On November 9, 1989 the East German government announced, after several weeks of civil unrest, that entering West Berlin would be permitted. Crowds of East Germans climbed onto and crossed over the Berlin wall to join West Germans on the other side in a long awaited celebration. East Germany and other Communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe quickly collapsed, until on Christmas Day 1989, Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife were condemned to death by a military court, and Romania, the last of these dictatorships, fell.

That Christmas, the people of the Western world breathed an enormous sigh of relief. We all felt a release from the sometimes repressed, but ever lurking fear of nuclear war. We dared to hope that real peace had finally arrived. However, that hope would soon be dashed. Secretary of defense Dick Cheney, Chief of Staff Colin Powell, Paul Wolfowitz, and others in the Pentagon had different plans for the post-Soviet world. [See *Dick Cheney's song of America: Drafting a plan for global dominance*, by David Armstrong in the October, 2002 issue of Harpers Magazine]

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