

National Security Strategy: Sword and Shield, 1945-1950

Professor Branislav L. Slantchev

January 1, 2014

Overview Having seen the preferences of the two principal players, we now turn to some of the most dramatic events of the late 1940s. We focus on the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan (the two halves of the same walnut). We then analyze in some depth the Berlin Crisis of 1948-49, the strategies pursued, and its consequences. Last, we study the Year of Shocks (1949) in which China went red, and the Soviets acquired nuclear capability. The American strategy in response to these events was formulated by the National Security Council and formalized in the famous document NSC-69, whose provisions we examine.

1 Defense and Rebuilding of Europe

As we saw last time, Truman's administration adopted containment as the official over-arching strategic goal of the U.S. The Cold War was about to begin. The Russians had issued their own declaration when on Feb. 9, 1946 Stalin announced that the Marxist-Leninist dogma of "uneven capitalist development" was still valid and therefore war among the capitalist states was inevitable. The USSR had to prepare for sacrifices like the ones of the 1930s: again the production of consumer goods would have to be sacrificed for military production and fast-paced economic development. This meant no peace internally—the Soviet Union had to prepare for defense.

On March 5 the same year Churchill gave a famous speech at Fulton, Missouri. The title was "The Sinews of Peace" and in it he proposed that the Anglo-Americans, outside of the UN and with the support of nuclear weapons, would create a united Europe that would withstand Soviet pressure by incorporating all European nations. Stalin attacked the speech as racist (which it was) and as it being "a set-up for war, a call to war with the Soviet Union" (which it was not).

The Soviets reacted within weeks after Churchill's speech. After they concluded that Washington had no interest in loaning them the \$1 billion they were asking, the Soviets refused to participate in the IMF and the IBRD, ending any hope to use economic persuasion to ease the tensions. Still, the US had not yet formally developed its own view. This would not happen until March 12, 1947, with Truman's dramatic speech before Congress.

To understand the impetus behind the Truman Doctrine we need to take a brief look at the events preceding declaration. I already talked about the crisis in Turkey, but there was another, potentially more explosive problem in Turkey's western neighbor—Greece.

As the Soviets began their new Five Year plan, the pressure on Europe eased a little. As officials in the State Department knew very well, the Soviet Union was undergoing serious economic difficulties, which made aggressive international attitudes extremely unlikely. Stalin cut the Red Army from 12 million in 1945 to a little over 3 million in 1947 (the US had about 1.5 million, down from wartime strength of 10 million, but the US had the nuclear monopoly as well). Even the hawkish Acheson thought that the Soviets wouldn't wage war against the US unless they were "absolutely out of their minds." The administration turned East, to the problems brewing in the former European colonies. The British Empire's two most important dependencies, India and Egypt, shook the empire with drives for independence. The French began their 8-year long futile war to regain Indochina, the Middle East was in turmoil because of the influx of tens of thousands of Jews who wanted a homeland in Palestine, a British mandate.

1.1 Prelude: The Greek Civil War

On February 21, 1947, Britain notified the US that she couldn't keep her commitments for economic aid to Greece and Turkey. The empire was crumbling and this didn't come as a surprise to the Americans.

The British had failed to regain control of Greece despite three years of fighting. Greece was torn by a civil war: the monarchical conservative group supported by Britain was fighting the communist National Liberation Front supported by Yugoslavia's Tito. Note that it wasn't Stalin who supported the communists. Tito was doing it because he was hoping to annex parts of Greece. Tito's nationalist tendencies soon brought him into open conflict with Stalin who tried to assassinate him several times (unsuccessfully).

The US, however, didn't care about the finer distinctions and the important differences among the Communists. Barely 6 days after Britain abdicated responsibility, Acheson gathered members of Congress to outline the government's plan of action. The penny-pinching Senators remained skeptical until Acheson wanted to link aid to Greece and Turkey with the global fight against Communism. This was his "Rotten Apple" theory (the danger was akin to "apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one") which later came to be known as the Domino Theory.

According to this theory, if the US allowed Greece and Turkey to fall to communism, then communism will spread to Iran, India, and Africa because the Soviet Union will be emboldened to support revolutionary movements around the world and countries everywhere will realize they could not depend on the US for help.

The Senators were shaken. Arthur Vandenberg (chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) advised Truman that the message to Congress had to include Acheson's theory so Truman could "scare hell" out of the American people and get the support he wanted.

1.2 Sword: The Truman Doctrine

On March 12, 1947 Truman "scared hell" out of the American people in a speech before a joint session of Congress. He divided the world in two: one where the majority freely expressed its will, and another—where an armed minority forcibly imposed its will on the majority. Truman believed "that it must be the policy of the US to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures." That is, the US should pledge to aid economically and militarily any country that claimed to be fighting Communism (although the communists were never explicitly mentioned by name in the speech, everyone, including the communists, knew who Truman had in mind). This was to be an epic fight between Good and Evil. Truman asked for \$400 million for military and economic aid. But Truman never limited the struggle to that region.

Perhaps surprisingly, Kennan objected to the military assistance to Turkey, the

obvious problem being the lack of communists there. He was joined by Secretary of State Marshall and another Soviet expert, Charles Bohlen, in arguing against the vehement anti-Communist rhetoric. Too late he had come to realize that the emphasis on ideology (which his own vision limited to the Soviets) could be used with great effect in the US. Acheson overruled the objections by noting that without the ideological emphasis on Communist danger Congress would never approve the doctrine.

So there weren't any communists in Turkey, and the communists in Greece were involved in an internal civil war. In fact, the Greek government had become so brutal in their repressions that the US had to warn it that the tactics were damaging Truman's case about "freedom" and all that.

By mid-May Congress passed Truman's request marking the beginning of the shift of foreign policy formulation power from Capitol Hill to the White House. Truman's popularity surged. The President had shown how the fear of Communism at home can be usefully exploited by the administration.

In Greece, the involvement went badly at first. In late 1947, the US contemplated sending 2 divisions to save the situation. However, in early 1948 Tito cut his aid and turned to strengthening his domestic position. Deprived of aid, the communists quickly lost ground and the nationalists triumphed. The civil war had nearly caused the US to get involved in something like Vietnam, but the Greek case convinced American policy-makers that they could prop conservative governments at little cost.

1.3 Shield: The Marshall Plan

The second half of the Truman Doctrine (first was military aid to regimes) was economic assistance to rebuild Europe. The Europeans weren't doing very well: their economies were sinking instead of recovering, their trade deficit with the US was increasing and they were running out of dollars to pay for American goods. The patient was dying while the US and Russia squabbled over control.

On June 5, 1947, George Marshall delivered a speech at Harvard, which became the basis of the so-called Marshall Plan to save Europe. He proposed that the US should assist the Europeans with money while they themselves set up a program for reconstruction. Most importantly, the Plan urged the Europeans to take the initiative. It would not be the US reconstituting Europe! This now was in the great American tradition: enlightened self-interest dictated that help be given to Europe; however, the Americans did not presume to know what was best for the Europeans—they knew better.

On June 13, the British Foreign Minister (Bevin) traveled to Paris to talk to the French counterpart (Bidault). By that time the Soviets had declared the Plan a "Truman Doctrine with dollars." Fearful that without Soviet counterweight France would be compelled to join the Western camp on wholly Anglo-Saxon terms, Bidault

decided to invite the Soviets to the talks.

The Russian line immediately moderated and Molotov arrived in Paris on June 26 with 89 economic experts and clerks. The Russians were seriously considering the Plan. However, Molotov's moves were torpedoed by the Europeans. The Russians wanted each country to establish its own recovery program and opposed revival of Germany without new controls to ensure it would not return as a threat. The demands were rejected or watered down. Molotov quit the conference and within a week the Soviets announced a "Molotov Plan" for the reconstruction of Eastern Europe. The Soviet satellites were forbidden from joining the Marshall Plan.

The US administration breathed a sigh of relief: had the Russians agreed to participate, it was doubtful that Congress, whipped into anti-Communist frenzy by Truman, would agree to finance the Plan. As it was, even now the penny-pinchers dallied. The Europeans had requested \$17 billion over a period of 4 years.¹ The additional difficulty presented itself in the rebuilding of Germany.

In late 1947 the British and the Americans overrode French opposition and merged economically their sectors of Germany. By mid 1947, the US had rebuilt the German economy so fast that the French asked it to slow down or the government would fall. However, the US continued arguing that German development would be tied to a general program and offered the French vast sums of money for their support.

The Europeans set up the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC, which later evolved into the OECD, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) with 16 members (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey), West Germany joined later. The only problem was that Congress was not exactly itching to send billions of dollars to Europe.

2 The Iron Curtain Descends

The problem was Soviet quiescence. Since the Iranian and Turkish crises of 1947, USSR was quiet in foreign affairs. However, the Paris Conference convinced the Russians that the Marshall Plan was intended to restore Germany and Japan on the old pre-1941 basis provided they "become subordinate to interests of American capital." The Soviets reacted by tightening the bloc through a series of bilateral trade agreements and then, in January 1947, by the creation of Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), which was a centralized agency for providing economic aid. Also, upon his return from Paris, Molotov announced the creation of the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform), which provided the instrument

¹According to <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>, the economy cost of \$17 in 1947 in 2011 is \$1,050. In other words, the 2011 equivalent of this amount exceeds 1 trillion. The 2011 budget had revenues of 2.3 trillion and expenditures of \$3.6 trillion (http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BUDGET-_2013-_BUD/pdf/BUDGET-_2013-_BUD-_29.pdf).

of Soviet control of communists in member states (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Italy, France). In August, the Soviets purged left-wing anticommunists in Hungary and rigged the elections: all anticommunist opposition disappeared.

American officials knew what was causing these sharp reactions. Marshall told the cabinet in November 1947: “The advance of Communism has been stemmed and the Russians have been compelled to make a reevaluation of their position.” America appeared to be winning the Cold War that had only barely begun. The economy was also doing fine and by early 1948, Truman faced a major diplomatic and political defeat—it was unlikely that given the circumstances Congress would approve the Marshall Plan.

2.1 The Fall of Czechoslovakia

And then the fall of Czechoslovakia saved Truman much like the Korean War would do two years later. The Czechs had signed a pact with Stalin in 1943 that obligated their country to become part of the Soviet bloc. When the Red Army arrived, it was welcomed as a liberating force and in the 1946 parliamentary elections, the communists won 38% of the vote (largest of any party). Stalin did not move to consolidate his grip because it did not appear to be necessary. However, President Edvard Beneš and Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk resisted communist control. They were quite successful: by late 1947 the Czechs began to be lured by promises of Western aid and started to pull away from the Soviets. Stalin decided to act.

After returning from a visit to Moscow, Klement Gottwald, the Czech Communist Party leader, demanded elimination of independent parties and in February 1948 Soviet armies camped on the border as he formed a new government. The communists assumed full control on February 25; Beneš surrendered and Masaryk committed suicide (or, by some accounts, was suicided) on March 10. Czechoslovakia had fallen.

Everyone remembered the last time it had happened: 1938. The events in Hungary in 1947 and then Czechoslovakia made it easy to draw parallels between the pre-war and current situations. Truman believed he was facing the same problem France and Britain had with Hitler in 1938-39. Unless the Russians were checked, their expansion would continue. The Americans were scared: on March 14 (about 2 weeks after the Prague coup d’etat), the Senate overwhelmingly endorsed the Marshall Plan.

On April 3, Congress passed the Foreign Assistance Act that instituted the European Recovery Program (ERP) and authorized spending \$13 billion. The program worked marvelously and ended 6 months early (Dec. 31, 1951) after total transfers of \$13.3 billion.

1947 also saw another important change in US policy: on Sept. 2, the Rio Treaty the US tied itself with all American states except Canada. It provided that an attack

on any American nation would be considered an attack upon all. The US had begun the era of entangling alliances.

2.2 Expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform

While the Berlin Crisis (to which we turn next) was occurring in 1948, Stalin was facing his own version of the Domino Theory. The Yugoslav dictator Tito was a successful guerilla leader during World War II which he spent fighting the Nazis. As a partisan, his power rested on mass popular support (unlike the elite group support that Stalin had increasingly come to rely upon in the other satellites). To maintain his popular support, Tito had to appeal to nationalism (even in the Soviet Union after years of bloody purges communism did not enjoy mass appeal). Tito's faith in communism had never been questioned but neither was his nationalism. When Stalin demanded Yugoslavia's full compliance with the new economic and mutual assistance pacts, Tito refused.

Stalin could not believe it—his authority was challenged within the bloc itself, just at the time when the West moved toward exploiting the status quo in Germany. If Tito were allowed to rebel, then what would be next? Stalin tried to engineer a coup, but the Yugoslav secret police proved better than the Russian. Tito survived. Stalin then convened a special meeting of the Cominform and had Yugoslavia expelled from the organization. Bloody purges in Eastern Europe exterminated potential Titos.

At this point the US should have seen the communist bloc for what it really was—not a hostile monolith, but a mosaic, whose pieces did not fit together well and that could be treated differently, even separated from each other. In particular, the US should have been alerted to the fact that when nationalism clashed with communism, the latter lost. Yugoslavia remained both communist and outside of the Soviet sphere of control. Later, when China went Red, Yugoslavia's neighbor Albania, which was also communist, aligned itself with China and in opposition to the USSR. There were cracks and splits in the Communist bloc even before it could form.

3 The Berlin Blockade, 1948-49

This serious crisis was provoked by the Soviets when they attempted to prevent the creation of the West German state by the three Western allies.² The Berlin Blockade foreshadowed future crises over this city that for many constituted the symbol of the Cold War. The Soviets lost badly in this confrontation, which also led to the immediate creation of NATO. Because of its importance, we shall explore

²Much of the historical background for this section comes from Arnold Offner's *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* and *Airbridge to Berlin: The Berlin Crisis of 1948, Its Origins and Aftermath* by D.M. Giangreco and Robert E. Griffin.

this crisis in a bit more depth, focusing on the tactics used by both sides to gain bargaining leverage.

3.1 The Setting

In September 1947, US and Britain created “Bizonia”—a military province—by combing their zones in Germany. The French joined thereafter and the province became “Trizonia.” The occupational forces wanted to stabilize the economy by introducing a common currency that would halt inflation. The Soviets refused, perhaps hoping that recession would fuel communist uprisings in Germany. More importantly, the measures to increase German industrial production and foreign trade would significantly cut into Russian reparations. But the Western powers were concerned that these reparations were detrimental to recovery and were creating problems in Berlin. The Anglo-American policy meant the division of Germany, a move that the Soviets opposed.

The city of Berlin lay 110 miles inside the Soviet occupation zone and access to it was limited to one highway, one air corridor, and two railroads. As early as 1947, Truman was warned that the Soviets could easily create “administrative” or military problems with access in an attempt to force the Western powers to withdraw and abandon the city. The U.S. governor General Lucius Clay was also certain that the currency reform would spark a real crisis although he doubted that the Soviets would stop food supplies to Berlin for fear of antagonizing the population. But why were the Western powers bent on staying in Berlin?

Lucius Clay (American Military Governor of Germany): “There is no practicability in maintaining our position in Berlin and it must not be evaluated on that basis. . . We are convinced that our remaining in Berlin is essential to our prestige in Germany in Europe. Whether for good or bad, it has become a symbol of the American intent.” He added for good measure that “If we mean to hold the continent against communism, we must not budge,” and on another occasion ominously warned that the Soviets “cannot drive us out by an action short of war as far as we are concerned.”

Ernest Bevin (British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs): The Allies would maintain their position in Berlin because there is “no alternative between that and surrender, and none of us can accept surrender.”

Robert Murphy (American Diplomat, to the State Department): retreat from Berlin “would be the Munich of 1948,” and American position in Europe would be “gravely weakened, like a cat on a sloping roof.” Equating the Berlin Crisis with the Munich crisis of 1938 was echoed in *The New York Herald Tribune*.

Winston Churchill: if the West yields to the Russian attempts to kick them out of Berlin, it would “destroy the best chance which is now open to us of escaping a third World War.”

Harold MacMillan (Leader of British Conservative Party): “We must . . . face the risk of war. . . The alternative policy — to shrink from the issue — involves not merely the risk but almost the certainty of war.”

What did the Russians think about all this? Stalin had remarked in February 1948 that “the West will make Western Germany their own, and we shall turn Eastern Germany into our own state.” This agreed completely with the American opinion which preferred a divided Germany to a territory in limbo that would be constantly threatened by Soviet expansion. On March 30, the National Security Council (NSC) proposed its “world-wide counter-offensive” to prevent the USSR from expanding further. The report (NSC-7) recommended maintenance of nuclear superiority, and commitment to military action should the Soviets attack any of the Western powers.

Stalin’s main concern was to prevent the formation of a Western Germany integrated into the Western bloc, which he perceived as being directed against the USSR and its clients in Eastern Europe. If he could not achieve this goal, the USSR would have to close off the Western border of its occupational zone and begin the construction of defenses. This, of course, meant cutting off Western access to West Berlin. Hence, if things moved toward permanent division of Germany, the Soviets would have to secure Berlin. Stalin told the East German communists that they would need to make a joint effort and “perhaps we can kick [the Americans] out.”

3.2 The Slow Escalation

When the Allies announced in late January 1948 they were going to meet in London without the Russians (in violation of the Potsdam accords), the Soviets began halting American and British trains en route to Berlin. The Allies met nevertheless and agreed (March 6) to take steps to bring Western Germany into their camp, especially through its inclusion into ERP.

At first, the Russians stopped trains under the pretext of checking passengers. General Clay reacted by putting armed guards on the trains to stop them from entering. The Soviets backed down and began delaying the trains instead. However, on April 1 they reverted to boarding after Clay refused to tell them the details of the London Program.

Clay now wanted to increase the number of armed guards and give them orders to shoot, but the cautious government was determined not to escalate the conflict at this time. He was ordered not to increase guards and not to shoot unless fired upon. The very next day, the Russians stopped three trains. One was permitted to continue after agreeing to inspection. The other two had to turn back after refusing to allow it. The “mini-blockade” had begun.

Clay then canceled all military trains and began a “mini-airlift” to supply the 20,000 American forces in Berlin by air. He also wanted to force a military convoy through a Soviet checkpoint, but was refused permission because the Soviets could keep the convoy from advancing by blowing up bridges instead of attacking it directly.

But the escalation was too risky even for the Russians, and by mid April, the mini-blockade was over. The French committed to Trizonia and in Italy the conservatives, helped by covert activities of the State Department and the CIA, won the elections beating the communists decisively. The Western bloc began consolidating.

3.3 The Crisis Erupts in Force

On June 17, the French finally ratified the London Protocol, paving the way to the creation of a separate West German government. On the next day, the exasperated government of Trizonia introduced the new currency in their zone although not in Berlin.

The Soviets responded by demanding to search all convoys to West Berlin through Soviet territory. The Western powers had never negotiated passage rights and now the Soviets rejected the argument that the use of land routes during the last 3 years had established a precedent. They also branded the Trizonian action illegal, and threatened to introduce their own currency in their zone including Berlin. Without consulting his superiors, Clay directly challenged the Russians on June 23 by issuing new currency for West Berlin. He believed that the Soviets were not prepared to risk war, and decided to call their bluff should they blockade the city.

On the 24th, the Russians denounced the London Program and proposed four-power talks to create a unified Germany without any occupying troops. To underscore the seriousness of their demands, they cut off all surface traffic to West Berlin, and reduced the supply of food and electricity from their zone.

Clay, who was forbidden from escalating the conflict, considered his options. “Surrender” in form of some compromise over the currency issue or the creation of a unified Germany he was determined not to admit. But he could not run the military convoys. The last remaining alternative was to attempt an airlift. Nobody was certain that it would work: supplying over 2 million inhabitants by air alone seemed a daunting task. It was also unclear whether Berliners would remain firm once they go cold and hungry, as they inevitably would. And if they do stand firm, would they persist in it long enough to make the strategy work?

After consulting with the Germans, Clay resolved to try the airlift although no one believed it could last for more than a few weeks. Still, it seemed wise to give diplomacy a chance to work, and this would delay open confrontation potentially just long enough. The first planes began arriving in Berlin on the 26th. The worst crisis (after the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962) began, and for several weeks between the end of June and late July 1948, the world was close to another world war.

3.4 The Airlift

The official American decision came on the 28th. Without consulting anyone except a few cabinet members, Truman decided that with respect to Berlin, “there was no discussion on that point, we are going to stay; period.” The US began a massive airlift of supplies which delivered about 13,000 tons daily to the besieged West Berliners. The airlift lasted 324 days, involved 270,000 flights, and transported over 2 million tons of supplies. Berlin became a symbol of Western resolve.

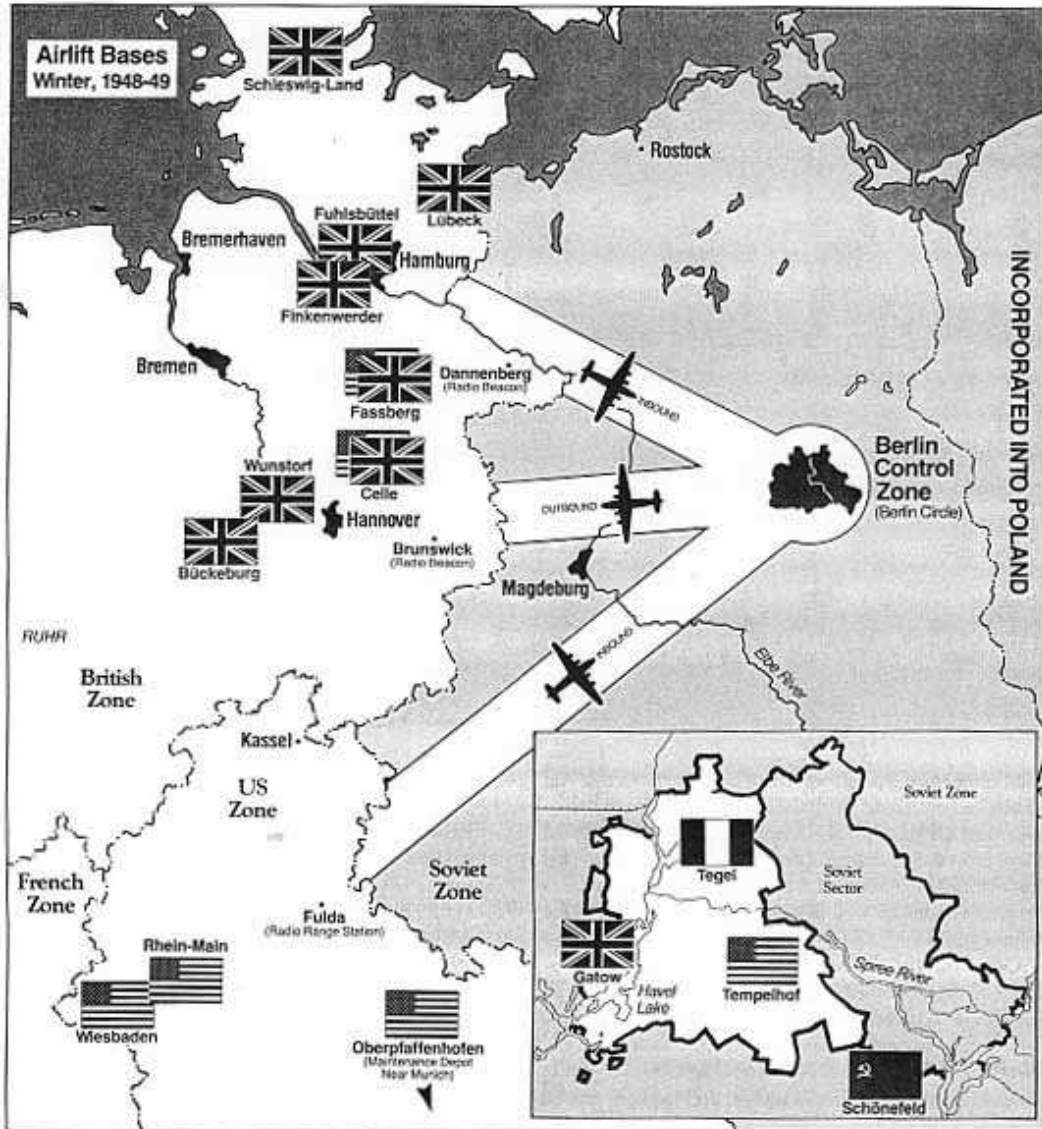


Figure 1: The Berlin Airlift.

On July 6, the Western powers delivered protest notes to the Soviet Union. They emphasized that the West will not be coerced by threats and pressure to abandon its interests. They offered to negotiate on the condition that the blockade be lifted prior to that. Clay requested, and was again denied, approval for the armed convoy. On the 14th, the Soviets responded to the notes by blaming the West for the situation and rejecting any conditions preliminary to negotiations of the whole German issue. The day after, the NSC approved the dispatch of B-29 bombers to England. These planes were capable of delivering nuclear weapons (although this shipment, unknown to most, did not actually include atomic bombs), and the implications could not have been ignored by the USSR.

On the 19th, Truman decided that the U.S. would hold out at Berlin even at the risk of war. Marshall announced this at a press conference, emphasizing that “We will not be coerced or intimidated in any way.” By the 22nd, the U.S. was fully committed to the airlift. Clay reported that thus far the airlift had exceeded expectations, and requested additional transports to handle the need for coal. Truman ordered full support for the project on the grounds that “the airlift involves less risks than armed convoys.”

Although enthusiastic, the airlift had its problems. The spectacular success of an average of 600 daily flights bringing over 2,500 tons of supplies still fell drastically short of the estimated necessary minimum of 4,500 tons. Doubts remained that even the present level would be maintained in the fog and rain of autumn and winter. The Soviets were obviously waiting to see that as well. It soon became clear that the Soviets would not lift the blockade before the onset of bad weather, and the West geared up to continue the airlift for an indefinite period.

The organization improved and the tonnage of supplies delivered daily steadily climbed until November, when bad weather finally made itself felt. The winter elections (December 5) in which the Soviet zone did not participate formalized the rupture initiated in the summer by bringing to power a decidedly pro-Western government. The Soviets had already installed a sham city government in their own sector.

But it did not help them. By January, it had become obvious that the airlift worked and the blockade did not. The Berliners had gotten through the worst of the winter and had re-affirmed their commitment to the Western cause in the elections. The economic reforms were starting to bear fruit and the flow of resources from the Marshall Plan was being felt.

In addition, the Western counter-blockade that cut off steel, chemicals and manufactured goods from Western Europe to the USSR and Eastern Europe, had begun affecting the Eastern bloc rather painfully. On January 31, 1949 Stalin announced that the Soviet Union was prepared to lift the blockade if the West agreed to postpone the creation of a separate West German state but added that even this condition could be removed if the West agreed to lift their counter-blockade simultaneously.

It took three months to sort out whether Stalin was serious. During this time, the

airlift continued unabated and the tonnage delivered steadily increased. The West even staged a demonstration of its impressive organization when on Easter Sunday (April 16) it initiated the 24-hour "Easter Parade." During this period, 1,398 flights delivered 13,000 tons of coal (that's almost one flight every minute). The system worked and could handle almost 2,800 flights at three airports within a 20 mile radius of each other. This they could do with no injuries or accidents.

The U.S. however realized that the airlift could not continue indefinitely even though it would enable the city to survive. It was decided that the advantage should be exploited to find a peaceful resolution. It was uncertain whether Stalin's speech was intended to send a signal, and the diplomats began secret talks through back channels that would enable them to clarify positions and avoid responsibility if the talks collapsed. The West agreed to discuss only the simultaneous lifting of the blockades, nothing about the formation of the West German state. Agreement was finally reached and announced on May 5, 1949. The two blockades would be lifted in a week. The Soviet Union had lost, Germany would be divided.

3.5 Analysis of Strategies

From Western perspective, Berlin was militarily indefensible. If the Russians decided to take it by force, nobody could really stop the Red Army. By 1948, demobilization had left a volunteer force of about 60,000 Americans in Europe, most of whom were support personnel. Against them, the Russians had up to 400,000 troops with air support. However, the U.S. had the atomic bomb.

One argument would be that because of the untenable military position in Berlin, the West should abandon it and retreat voluntarily before it is coerced to do so. The Soviets did not have to resort to military force to compel withdrawal because the Western powers did not have the resources to supply the city should access to it get blocked. All the Russians had to do was cut off access, stay back and wait. As the citizens began starving, the West would be compelled to retreat in order to save them. That's because the only way to prevent capitulation would be through forcing entry, which would bring on a direct military confrontation. Given Soviet superiority, the expected outcome would be even worse for the West.

This argument employs a direct look-forward and reason-backward logic. Continuing with a policy unpalatable to the Soviets would cause them to take actions to safeguard their interests. Instead of overt threats (which would be costly and may force the West into a defensive position that would make war likely), the Soviets were expected to relinquish the initiative for armed conflict by cutting off access to the city. This they could achieve by simply blocking the land route. Supply by air was deemed impossible to sustain, and therefore keeping the land routes open was essential.

If the land route was blocked effectively, the only way to breach it would be with direct military action. But an attack on their forces, would oblige the Russians to

respond giving them the added advantage of appearing to be on the defensive. Once shooting began, the weakness of the West would be exposed and it would be forced to capitulate. . . or use the bomb, both very difficult and unpleasant choices to make. All of this could be avoided by withdrawing voluntarily.

But, as we have seen, withdrawal from West Berlin was tantamount to surrender for many. What would the alternatives be? The above argument assumed that if challenged directly, the Soviets would fight. This risk is precisely why Clay was not allowed to run the blockade with an armed convoy despite his claims that the Soviets were bluffing and would not actually use force. As we know from the escalation game, calling a bluff would work if the challenger is weak but it would lead to war if the challenger is tough. The governments of the U.S. and Britain judged the probability on which Clay was betting (the Soviets being unresolved) too low, and correspondingly the danger of war from a tough strategy to be too high.

The Soviets attempted to put pressure on the Western powers while simultaneously avoiding risking war as much as possible, two contradictory goals. For this to work, they had to (a) ensure that the people of Berlin were suffering enough and delay was getting costlier by the day, (b) ensure that prolonging the blockade would be exceedingly costly to the West

But because they were unwilling to run a higher risk of war and antagonize the German population, the Russians did not impose a blockade as tightly as they should have. They did not starve the Berliners but permitted the transport of supplies from their zone, the emergence of gray markets, and even allowed West Berliners to purchase food with West marks (the new currency!) from special shops in the Soviet zone. They undermined the very basis of their own coercive strategy by making it less costly to the West to prolong the standoff.

Although the airlift was costly in itself (and at the outset was believed nearly impossible logistically), the Soviets did not make it excessively so. They could have sharply curtailed its usefulness by strangling the city, but as we have seen, they wanted very much to avoid that. The other way would be to challenge the Airlift itself.

How could the Soviets thwart supply by air? The only way to prevent a plane from landing in Berlin was to shoot it down, a clearly hostile action that would inevitably provoke a drastic response. The Russians needed a threat that was not so big that it became incredible. One tactic is to use threats that leave something to chance. That is, do something that does not quite bring the plane down directly on purpose but increases the risk that it will not reach its destination.

The Russians had chosen precisely such a tactic during the mini-blockade. They began “buzzing” their own fighter planes through the air corridor. This increased both the risk of collision and the risk of going down while attempting to avoid collision. They were threatening the West not with bringing down their planes but with an increased risk of that happening should they continue flying.

The risk was not negligible. In April, a British transport plane crashed after getting “buzzed” by a Soviet fighter (which also crashed), killing everyone on board. The British reacted by sending escort fighters to accompany the transports and protect them by shooting down any object that appears to be threatening their safety.

This turned the tables on the Russians because the British now simply flew with the transports and only a Soviet action that endangered the transports would be met with a counter-action for safety purposes. The next step would have to be escalatory — retaliation for the downing of a Soviet plane — and it would be up to the Soviets. The situation thus came back full circle with the Russians finding themselves saddled with the unpalatable choice of starting the purposeful shooting.

The Russians abandoned the strategy, and, what is even more important, they never returned to it during the Airlift. Not a single plane was downed even though the Russians could have easily shot down the transport aircraft. They were too afraid to risk open war, and it appears that the entire Western strategy was predicated on that fear.

After the initial brinkmanship component of the crisis was over by the end of July with the decision not to risk open hostilities with an armed convoy, the “game” settled into a war of obstinacy and endurance. Who was more committed to his strategy? Were the Soviets really intent on letting the citizens of Berlin to starve? After all, they did backtrack in April when their mini-blockade bluff was called.

But now they were broadcasting to the Germans rumors and reports purporting to demonstrate the imminent withdrawal of the Western powers (along with scarcely veiled threats to their collaborators). The Berliners could see their own precarious position all too well. Would the West hold out? Will it be willing to pay the cost even if the Germans did? (The cost included the fuel, the supplies, lives lost in crashes — total of about 80 — among others). Even if they wanted to, would the airlift prevent mass starvation and freezing over the winter? Although the tonnage initially increased, it began to decline in November when the weather got worse. If the airlift did not work, would the Western powers be prepared to risk war for the sake of the city? Which side was sending a credible signal?

As we know, one way to make signals credible is by making them costly to the sender. Only seriously committed senders would then be willing to incur these costs. The Airlift had precisely this effect, which was anticipated by many. It unequivocally demonstrated Western resolve to keep West Berlin. The Germans believed it when they saw the thousands of planes carrying their food and coal. The Russians believed it when they saw that unless they shot down the planes, the Airlift would keep the city alive. Again they were saddled with the choice to start a military confrontation. But they balked at the prospect. The Russians did not want a war, and were not prepared to risk one. They were so cautious that they did not attempt the buzzing tactic although it would have been quite effective in the dense skies over Berlin. (They had either learned the lesson that this tactic could be countered or else the chance of collision was so high that the threat did not really

leave much to chance.)

The Berlin Crisis of 1948-49 shows several of the strategies we have discussed in action. The most common was the relinquishment of initiative. Each side attempted to maneuver the other in a position where the opponent would have to make the last clear step to war. The militant propositions for action advanced by people like Clay were consistently rejected in favor of such strategies. When saddled with the last clear opportunity to avoid conflict, the Russians resorted to threats that left something to chance and began buzzing fighters through the air corridor. This did generate risk, but the West found a way to neutralize the tactic by shifting the onus of decision back to the Soviets.

Both sides engaged simultaneously in compellence with their respective blockades. Although the Soviets enjoyed an initial advantage because they did not have to worry about supplying an entire city through the air, they squandered it by failing to tighten the blockade early on. The only remaining way to signal resolve was through costly action, and the airlift was so expensive that it clearly demonstrated the commitment of the West to stay in Berlin, not to mention the fact that it unequivocally revealed the West's capability to mount successfully such a complex and costly operation. The Russians repeatedly choosing to take the less aggressive course of action rather than escalating and running higher risks also revealed that they lacked the resolve to press matters at the risk of general war with the U.S. In this sense, the airlift also worked as a screening device. Uncertainty over resolve was widespread and only began to dissipate when the actions revealed enough information.

4 Israel's War of Independence

On May 14, 1948 came another crucially important event—Israel proclaimed its independence. The British, harassed by Jewish terrorism, had turned over their mandate of Palestine to the UN. The UN came up with a partition plan that would establish a Jewish state surrounded by Arab neighbors. The Plan was quite unworkable because the borders it envisioned Israel to have were indefensible. This was important because the Arab states of Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia had opposed the creation of a Jewish state in their midst and had pledged to destroy it the moment it was created.

They made good on their promise. The day Ben-Gurion announced the creation of Israel, the Arab states attacked from all sides. To its ultimate grief, the Arab population of the newly constituted states placed its faith in the strength of Arab armies and refused to cooperate with the Israelis.

Within minutes of the proclamation, Truman recognized the new state. Domestic considerations were pivotal as there was no Arab vote in the US, but there was a considerable Jewish vote. Still, Israel's early friend was Soviet Russia. Stalin

ordered the Czechs to supply Israel with arms, which they promptly did.

The Arabs were defeated. Not only did they fail to strangle the new nation, but the war saw the enlargement of Israel and the creation of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The Israelis had won the right to exist with their blood but the war also created the refugee problems: 800,000 Jews were expelled from the Arab states, and about as many Arabs were displaced from Palestine. Whereas the new state of Israel absorbed the Jewish refugees, the Arab refugees were distributed among camps in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip, which the Egyptians had managed to keep. The Palestinians were told by the Arab states that they would soon return and were not allowed to build a life in their new homes. Instead of integrating these people, the Arab states kept them apart, nursing their grievances against Israel, making them a potent tool for future war—the armistices signed in 1948-49 did not recognize Israel's right to exist.

As turbulent as it was, 1948 paled in comparison to 1949, the “year of shocks,” which saw the triumph of communism in China and the explosion of the first Soviet nuclear device. The US would soon find itself losing the superiority it had enjoyed in the first years of the Cold War.

5 1949: The Year of Shocks

We examined the military and economic implementations of containment. The first was the Truman Doctrine, which pledged US support to states fighting either internal or external aggression by armed (read “communist”) minorities. The second tool was the Marshall Plan, which provided for US assistance for the European (Western) recovery. Truman claimed that the two policies were “two halves of the same walnut.” However, as we saw, this was not true. While the Truman Doctrine was based on ideology, was unlimited, expansive, and aggressive, the Marshall Plan was in the great American tradition of fostering goodwill among partners while simultaneously pursuing US interests.

The events of 1948 seemed to indicate that the US was winning the “cold war” (a phrase, by the way, popularized by journalist Walter Lippman). Stalin was experiencing problems within his own bloc—Tito's defection from the Soviet camp. The realization that the USSR was losing the initiative (if it ever had possessed it) also caused the Soviets to tighten their control of Eastern Europe—there were signs that, encouraged by the policies of the Western powers, states like Hungary and Czechoslovakia might attempt to slip out of the Soviet sphere. The Communists thus first took complete control in Hungary, and then, in January and February 1948—the Prague coup d'état produced the fall of Czechoslovakia. The last non-communist government in the Soviet sphere fell as the country disappeared behind the iron curtain.

5.1 Defense of Europe and Soviet A-Bomb

In March of 1948, the Western European states signed the Brussels Treaty pledging mutual defense against the USSR. This was a strange treaty: the West was afraid of something the Soviet Union was not looking to do, and at the same time they were dealing with the eventuality in a way that would not work. In other words, they were guarding against a non-existent threat by donning protection that did not help.

The Soviets, as concluded by the US study of late 1948, were exhausted. In the two years since this analysis they had begun the long and painful process of reconstruction but were nowhere near full recovery. In fact, as late as 1950 their productive capacity (economic and military) was pitifully far behind that of the US, even when all satellites were thrown into the equation. The Soviet Union was not receiving the generous help the US was giving West Germany and that it was about to give the rest of Western Europe. It not only had to cope on its own, it had to finance the recovery of the states in its orbit—this turned out to be quite expensive. The satellites ended up costing the commissars an arm and a leg, possibly far more than any political benefit the Soviet Union managed to derive from them. At any rate, in 1948, the Soviet Union was as unprepared for an attack on Western Europe as it was two years earlier and as it would be for quite some time in the future. It is also not clear that the Soviet Union had any aggressive designs after the war. However, the Western allies were afraid nonetheless, probably because they did not realize this.

The West tried to protect itself with the mutual defense treaty. Now, while it was true that the Soviet Union was not prepared for a major war, it could easily overrun Western Europe provided the US did not become involved. This is an important qualification. The Soviet Union had sufficient conventional forces to reach the Atlantic, perhaps even taking the UK on the way. The Europeans were thus justly apprehensive insofar as they had reasons to doubt the sincerity of American commitment to their defense. The Brussels Treaty was empty because even combined the Western Europeans could not stop the Soviet Union. Thus, one of the goals of US administrations has always been to reassure the European allies through various means that the American commitment to defense of Western Europe was credible. The Europeans, however, had good reasons to doubt it. And so did the Russians. The telling test came in July of 1948 when the Soviets blockaded West Berlin.

As we saw last time, the Berlin Airlift was the first proof that the US was not going to bail out on Europe even when faced with Soviet resistance. West Berlin became a symbol of that commitment, a symbol that had to be reaffirmed through a series of crises erupting over the fate of this besieged city. Having realized that the US was serious and that its demonstration of resolve was hurting their cause, the Soviets backed down and lifted the blockade in May of 1949.

However, it did not happen before the creation of another important signal of serious American commitment to Europe: the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) in April (ratified by the Senate in mid-July). Article 5 was the most important: it stated that “an armed attack against one or more [of the Pact members] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all,” and that in the event of such attack, all signatories pledged to help, even with armed force. 12 nations signed the original treaty: US, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Great Britain, along with Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (the Benelux countries).³

It is interesting to note several points about the ratification of the treaty in the US. The Senate hearings went well at first as Acheson quelled fears by promising that the administration was not going to follow NATO with a “Mediterranean Pact, and then a Pacific Pact, and so forth,” which is, of course, precisely what the administration did! NATO’s ostensible purpose was to create a “preponderance of power” for the West so that the West could deal with the Russians from a position of strength (the main point repeated over and over again by NSC-68, as we shall see).

Now, in 1948 and early 1949, the US still had the nuclear power monopoly and estimated to hold it for at least 5 more years, possibly 10. This meant preponderance, which implied NATO added very little. What was then the pact’s military importance? Given the enormous Russian advantage in conventional strength in Europe, what was the administration planning to do with NATO that it could not do with the nukes alone? Perhaps increase the number of US troops on the continent? That is, send a substantial number of US troops to build up Europe’s conventional defenses? Knowing full well that admitting to such a plan would immediately torpedo the ratification, Acheson answered with, as he said, “a clear and absolute ‘no’” (which turned out to be a lie, as usual).

Perhaps then the administration was thinking of rearming the Germans? Acheson was also “clear that the disarmament and demilitarization of Germany must be complete and absolute.” This was another lie: the US quickly found it necessary to rearm the Germans.

It wasn’t until Acheson hit on the issue of credibility of US commitment to Europe that the significance of the Pact was accepted in the Senate. Acheson argued that while the military importance of NATO is remote, its creation strengthens the political ties between the US and Western Europe. As he commented later, “Unity in Europe requires the continuing association and support of the United States. Without it, free Europe would split apart.” The Senate concurred. Still, the bill authorizing spending \$1.5 billion for European military aid encountered tough opposition in the House which lasted until September 28, exactly six days after Truman announced that the Soviets had exploded their first nuclear device, which they had done on August 29, 1949. The West was shocked and scared: according to estimates, the Soviets were not supposed to achieve nuclear capability for at least another 5 years.

³Article 5 was not invoked until after 9/11, when the alliance declared the terrorist attacks on the US attacks on each member state.

The explanation was mundane: Soviet spies in the Manhattan Project and a deliberate effort to duplicate the proven American design rather spend the time on their own, offer better, plans.

The Allied response to the Berlin blockade and the defection of Tito had convinced Stalin that the hardline policy that (1) viewed US economic power as organizer of the West into a political and economic bloc hostile to communism, and that (2) advocated confrontation with that bloc, was perhaps misguided, or at the very least it was not producing good results. In the great old tradition of tolerance of diversity, Andrei Zhdanov (the leading proponent of the hardline idea) died in July 1948, and soon a bloody purge separated his followers from their lives. Georgy Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev, both of whom were moderate and insisted on solving the internal economic problems, were elevated in the communist hierarchy of power.

Even after the success of the nuclear test moved the Soviet Union into the ranks of atomic powers, the top Soviet officials disagreed over what this meant for Soviet Union's military posture. Malenkov in particular delivered a speech of November 6, in which he hinted that because of the possession of nuclear weapons and the success of communist revolution in China, the dreaded "capitalist encirclement" was crumbling. He stressed the unity of the Russian people (hence the lack of need for the extensive security apparatus to ensure domestic control) and the security of Russian borders (hence no need for an extensive military machine). Malenkov challenged the West to "peaceful competition with socialism," clearly hoping that such a policy shift would allow the USSR to ease internal discipline and shift production from military to consumer products. It was not to be. Not believing these developments to be anything more than crude propaganda, the US adopted a more hostile and candidly militant foreign policy, described in the rather scary document NSC-68.

Before we examine this document, however, it is necessary to mention briefly another very important event which, in addition to the Soviet acquisition of nuclear capability, dictated to a large extent its content.

5.2 China Goes Red

Recall that in China, the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek supported by the US were fighting Mao Tse-tung's communists. Despite enormous amounts of aid, the Nationalist government was losing ground quickly due to what the Chief of the American advisory group in China characterized as the "world's worst leadership and many other morale destroying factors" that had led to "a complete loss of will to fight." In other words, the Nationalists were losing because they were inept, incompetent, and corrupt, which cost them the support of the population first and eventually the support of their troops as well. By February 1949, over half of Nationalist troops were lost, mostly by defection. 80% of US equipment had gone

to the communists and Mao crossed the Yangtze to begin the final sweep across Southern China.

Truman moved to cut the aid to the Nationalists: it had become obvious that nothing short of a full-blown land invasion by the US could save Chiang from defeat. This, of course, was a course of action no American government would contemplate. In response to the vocal and wealthy China lobby which charged Truman with selling out China to communism (a ridiculous charge that only incredibly ignorant and remarkably arrogant people could make), Acheson issued a very long White Paper (over 1000 pages), in which he argued convincingly that “the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States.” Although Acheson felt compelled to add some strong language to threaten with military response any attempts of China to “lend” itself to the arms of the Soviet Russian imperialism (whatever that might mean), the China Lobby attacked the document as a “whitewash of a wishful, do-nothing policy.”

It is worth noting that the decision whether to recognize the communist government of China could have gone either way. In the middle of the summer, when Mao’s success seemed beyond doubt, the communists asked to talk to US representatives clearly hoping for some sort of diplomatic relations with the US, possibly to counter the need to otherwise rely completely on the USSR (whose leader, it will be recalled, had cut a lucrative deal with Chiang at Mao’s expense). Truman and Acheson almost agreed as State Department officials urged that the US ambassador to China (Leighton Stuart) be sent to Mao. However, as both Truman and Acheson believed that Mao had pledged to follow Stalin, they concluded that recognition of Red China would have grave political consequences for Truman. On October 12, Acheson announced that the US would not recognize the new Chinese regime (of October 9). This was a turning point and the chance for some accommodation with China was lost. Red China would be pushed toward the USSR not so much by the commonality of their governing ideologies as by the American insistence on treating them as one.

On January 12, 1950, Acheson delivered another important speech before the National Press Club in Washington. Quite perceptively, he identified the tension between communism and nationalism. (At the time, Stalin and Mao were engaged in a quite unseemly “fraternal” peddling, where Mao was trying to wrest from the Soviets the concessions they had gotten from Chiang while Stalin was trying to detach Inner Mongolia and Manchuria from Mao’s new state). Acheson noted the Soviet attempts to control Mongolia and Manchuria and called the “single most significant, most important fact” in Asia. This would prove to Mao that the Russians wished to dominate, not help and that the US could position itself as the champion of all those Chinese who seek “their own national independence.” It was in this context that Acheson defined the infamous “defense perimeter” of the US to run from the Aleutians to Japan, to the Ryukyus (Okinawa), down to the Philippines. Contrary to popular opinion, which blames the speech as an inadvertent green-

light for the North Korean invasion of South Korea five months later, Acheson was also careful to note that both in Japan and Korea the US had special interests and economic responsibilities.⁴ Also, he was careful to warn that an attack west of the defensive perimeter (e.g. in Korea) would meet the resistance of the “entire civilized world under the charter of the United Nations” (which is essentially what happened).

6 NSC-68

Also in January 1950, Truman announced the decision to proceed with the development of the hydrogen bomb (the Super), a weapon that is hundreds of times more destructive than the atomic bombs. Also during this month, Truman authorized a grand review of national security policy, which would eventually produce NSC-68. The President’s authorization of the Super was in response to the frantic search for response to the Soviet nukes. The authorization of the strategy study was in response to charges that the administration was reactive and was making vital decisions piecemeal without a clear overall strategy.

In early 1950, the NSC went to work on a highly classified document that would soon become known as NSC-68. Truman examined the study in April but did not authorize its implementation until September, several months after the outbreak of the Korean War. It is fascinating to read how the authors of NSC-68, especially Paul Nitze and his patron Acheson, used bureaucratic politics and the security clearance requirements to selectively permit access to the working drafts of the document and how they built support for it while systematically excluding opposing views until they had created such a strong consensus in favor of NSC-68 that even important figures like Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson and President Truman, neither of whom particularly liked it, found themselves compelled to endorse it. Kennan, by the way, bitterly opposed NSC-68 but to no avail—Acheson had first “promoted” him to a post from which Kennan couldn’t influence the document, and then Kennan quit altogether.

The document began with two fundamental assumptions: (1) the global balance of power has drastically and fundamentally changed—the world was becoming increasingly polarized in two centers—the USSR and the US; and (2) “the Soviet Union, unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.” From these two assumptions the authors conclude that the Soviets will seek “to retain and solidify their absolute power, first in the Soviet Union, and second

⁴This would not be the last time something an American diplomat did not say would be used to blame the U.S. and excuse a blatant aggression. April Glaspie, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, was accused of having approved Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 because she did not explicitly tell Hussein that America would resist that invasion. As we shall see, this, like blaming the defense perimeter speech for the Korean War, is bunk.

in the areas now under their control.” Then comes the crucial overall conclusion that such policies imply that Soviet efforts be inevitably directed “toward the domination of the Eurasian land mass.” The rest of the document flows smoothly from these premises.

However, these premises were suspect. We have already discussed the problem with the second assumption—the fanatic faith. Even the authors of NSC-68 repeatedly acknowledge Kennan’s original analysis: communist doctrine is just a convenient tool for the purposes of the Kremlin. However, unlike Kennan, NSC-68 attributed a grand militarily aggressive design to Moscow.

More bluntly, the belief that communism will eventually triumph does not automatically mean that the Soviet Union would seek world domination. Indeed, the emergence of Red China showed that communism can spread without increasing the extent of Soviet domination. Kennan correctly noted this and while he can be blamed for overlooking bargaining opportunities, the authors of NSC-68 must take the blame for being extremely poor students of communist doctrine. As many Soviet specialists feared, the simple view of NSC-68 could (and did) make US policies too rigid and militaristic.

Once the flawed premises were adopted, however, the document marched inexorably to its inevitable conclusions: the US must impose order around the globe for the “absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable.” In order to achieve this singularly monumental task, the US had to increase its military power and thereby deter “an attack upon us” while we went around rearranging the world so that “our free society can flourish.” There was to be no negotiation until clear preponderance of power was achieved, but there could be limited wars fought “to compel the acceptance of terms consistent with our objectives.” To obtain these worthy objectives, the NSC-68 recommended:

1. No negotiations until US acquires force strong enough to compel the Kremlin to “change its policies drastically”;
2. Development and stockpiling of hydrogen bombs;
3. Rapid buildup of conventional forces for limited war;
4. Increase in taxes to pay for all the new toys;
5. A cut in other, less vital, government programs, even if they are “desirable;”
6. Mobilization of American society, complete with government-created “consensus” on the necessity of “sacrifice” and “unity.”
7. Undermining the Soviet state by making “the Russian people our allies in this enterprise.”

Between the scary implications of (6) and the clearly ridiculous wishful thinking of (7), NSC-68 presented a view no longer satisfied with containment. The goal now was to roll back Communism. But Americans were in no mood to pay for such a fantastic program. The Soviet Union was quiet, even the Secretary of Defense fought NSC-68 arguing it would bankrupt the country. For a while it looked like NSC-68's version of the world and the policies it implied would pass into the archive without much effect on the U.S. government, much to the despair of its supporters. However, their opportunity arrived on June 25, when, as Acheson declared, "Korea came along and saved us."

7 McCarthy and the Anti-Communist Witch-hunts

So, 1949 was the year of shocks—in August the Soviets had exploded their first nuclear weapon and in October Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The Americans suddenly felt on the losing side: they had lost the nuclear power monopoly and they had "lost" the world's most populous country to communism. Either communism was unstoppable or . . .

People began to wonder. How come the experts predicted the Soviet Union would not be able to develop the bomb so quickly? How could the experts err by at least five years? The experts, we must recall, were the truly outstanding scientists at the time. They knew what it would take the Soviet Union to develop the nuke from scratch. So, people thought, if the experts were correct, then somehow the Soviet Union must have overcome its disadvantage. This is only possible if they were able to steal the knowledge—therefore, we should blame treason and look for Soviet spies. (As it turns out, the USSR did maintain a fairly extensive and pretty good network of spies in the U.S.)

Or take China. How come the Nationalists lost? The US had been helping them for so long, they rode out the war with Japan, then some peasants were able to overcome regular troops? Impossible—it must have been the case that the US had not really been helping them. Therefore, we should look for Communists amid the State Department personnel.

The astonishment and inability to accept the simple truth about China combined and produced what fear invariably produces: suspicion and more fear. In July 1948, as the nation was trying to assimilate the Czech coup and the Berlin blockade, Whittaker Chambers, a self-confessed former Communist Party member, told the House un-American Activities Committee that the State Department had been infiltrated by communists a decade before. Specifically, he named Alger Hiss of being an agent. Hiss had been very good friends with Dean Acheson, who supported the former Harvard Law School graduate strongly (and perhaps foolishly). Hiss slapped Chambers with a libel suit and appeared to be gaining the upper hand when the new congressman from California by the name of Richard Nixon, decided to pursue the

case until Hiss was convicted. After one hung jury, Hiss was convicted on charges of perjury on January 21, 1950. For many Americans this was now proof and they had a ready explanation of why the US was losing the Cold War.

On February 9, 1950 the junior senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy (R), announced he had proof that the State Department was riddled with Communists (205 of them to be precise). The paper he waved (but didn't let anyone read) would turn out to be a complete fraud. As other senators tried to pinpoint what he really knew, McCarthy pulled down the figure of Communists from 205 to 57 (February 10) back to 81 (February 20), and when pressed by a special Senate committee, the numbers went down to 10, then back up to 116, and finally to 1 (a specialist at JHU). When asked to turn over the documents with the proof for this one guy, McCarthy charged the executive with keeping evidence locked up. The committee dismissed McCarthy as a fraud.

However, in the resulting uproar, Truman and Acheson had to defend themselves against charges of being soft on communism—the chickens had finally come home to roost. After having so successfully persuaded America about the grave peril of Communist threat in order to get approval for his Doctrine and the programs it implied, Truman now ironically had to explain why he was not standing up to the Russians. The Democrats were justifiably puzzled: there was hardly anything more aggressive they could have done short of going to war.

As the administration defended itself, McCarthy found more support. The government strengthened and extended its loyalty investigations. Everyone seemed to be checking everyone else for possible Communist sympathies. The few voices opposed to McCarthy decried not his aims but his tactics—they just wanted to protect the innocent while ferreting out the guilty. Many careers were ruined on even a hint of leftist tendencies. Even Hollywood suffered: directors and actors with liberal proclivities were blacklisted and not given work. The studios imposed on themselves codes of conduct to mollify the government.

McCarthy ran all over the place, accusing people left and right of being communists. It wasn't until he ran afoul of the military that he was silenced. He did this to himself: he accused army men with impeccable credentials and proven anti-communist records of harboring communist sympathies. He was compelled to recant; and then he faded from the scene to die a lonely alcoholic.

It is worth noting that McCarthy had not been known for his anti-communist views before 1950. He stumbled across the issue when he was searching for a way to come ahead in another election in Wisconsin. During a conversation with his campaign advisers he saw the Hiss headlines and realized this was an explosive issue, so he decided to seize it.

Even after being dismissed as a fraud by the Senate committee, McCarthy didn't quit. In July 1950, he wrote the President that the congressional program for Korea "had been sabotaged," he pointed at George Marshall (of all people!). Marshall was the former army chief of staff, principal architect of the victories over Germany and

Japan, secretary of state, and was at that time the secretary of defense. According to McCarthy, Marshall was also a part of a “conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.” This was analogous to charging George Washington with spying for the British!

Still, from 1950 until 1954, McCarthy was on the top. He was constantly in the news, a center of controversy and (what’s even scarier) fully half of Americans supported his tactics (21% undecided). But his tactics were those of medieval witch-hunts: some were guilty until proven innocent, others were guilty by association. A simple word from the Senator could end a man’s career and speaking out against his tactics was equivalent to putting a red star with the hammer and sickle on one’s forehead.

There was a great deal of anti-intellectualism in his campaigns. Truman himself was guilty of that by promoting the conspiratorial view of Soviet activity and creating quite repugnant loyalty programs. In 1949-50 Attorney General McGrath crossed the country protesting against professors of dubious political beliefs who infected impressionable student minds with all sorts of subversive anti-American ideas. In September 1950, Congress demonstrated its loyalty by passing the McCarran Internal Security Bill, which required communists and their supporters to register with the attorney general. However, the Smith Act of 1940 prohibited membership in any group that advocated violent overthrow of the government. If the Supreme Court ruled the Communist Party such a group, then all those registering under the new bill would automatically become criminals. It would be understandable if people did not exactly crowd the registrar’s to sign up. Truman vetoed the Bill and the House overrode him within an hour. The Senate took longer—one full day. In November, the Republicans picked up 28 seats in the House and 5 in the Senate.

Back to our friendly Senator. In May 1954, McCarthy finally went too far. In heavily televised hearings, he randomly flung accusations at Army officers. But the Army defended its own. President Eisenhower weighed-in in its support as well. Over 36 days, a string of witnesses exposed the Senator’s lies, and finally the Chief attorney for the Army stood up in front of the cameras, faced the senator, who was sitting in his chair—head bowed down—and said, “Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness... You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?” The Senator’s witch-hunting career was over. He was condemned by the Senate on December 2, 1954 for “conduct contrary to Senatorial traditions,” and he died on May 2, 1957. He did not succeed in having a single individual convicted of Communism in an actual court. He did ruin many.