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Origins of Containment

INTRODUCTION

THE COMPETITION and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union has given shape and impetus to international politics since World War II. Why did the United States adopt Cold War policies in the early postwar period? A coherent, rational answer to this question is important both for comprehending the present and designing policies to meet the future.

In 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt assured the Foreign Policy Association that "the very fact that we are now at work on the organization of the peace proves that the great nations are committed to trust in each other." Roosevelt's "grand design" for the postwar order was premised on the collective enforcement of the peace by the great regional powers—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China. As part of these plans, Roosevelt firmly believed that the Soviet Union could be persuaded to assume the burdens and responsibilities of a great power for maintaining world order. For the most part, the American people and the bureaucracy shared FDR's optimism about the postwar world. In November 1944, a public opinion poll showed that 44 percent of the American people believed that Russia could be trusted to cooperate with the United States; 35 percent thought not; and 11 percent did not know. Though initially skeptical about the possibilities for enduring collaboration with a revolutionary regime, State Department officials also became infected with enthusiasm for FDR's vision. Nor did the Joint Chiefs of Staff cast a shadow over the appealing scenario by pointing out that the Soviet Union was the most likely candidate for America's postwar adversary. Anticipating no conflict with the Soviet Union or other European powers, the Joint Chiefs did not even consider locating permanent bases in Europe. Besides, FDR believed that the American people would not countenance continued responsibility for preserving peace and internal stability in Europe after the war. Similarly, State Department officials viewed the Northern Tier countries as a part of the British sphere of influence and pursued a policy of noninvolvement in the traditional British-Soviet rivalry in the region. When Harry S Truman assumed the presidency in April 1945, his public pledge to continue Roosevelt's policies issued from private conviction as well as political expediency.

Yet, in the Truman Doctrine speech of March 1947, President Tru-

man initiated a radical innovation in American foreign policy.¹ Henceforth, the United States would contain further expansion of the burgeoning, battering Soviet Union. As Truman and other officials recognized, this heroic and unselfish endeavor would require American intervention in European political affairs. It would require replacing Great Britain as the dominant sea power in the Mediterranean. Harry Truman no longer believed that there was any point in trying to please the Soviets or get along with them. The American public agreed. The Soviet Union was the spearhead of totalitarianism, engaged in an attempt to subvert and destroy free nations.

Thus, within a short period of time, the American conception of the Soviet Union as a difficult but trustworthy ally was superseded by the image of a totalitarian state bent on unlimited expansion through subversion and conquest. Was the American acceptance of Cold War beliefs the cause, concomitant, or consequence of the adoption of the containment policy?

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF AMERICAN COLD WAR POLICIES

In considering this question, among others, Cold War historiography has followed a familiar iterative cycle. Foreign policy officials present the administration's preferred interpretation of foreign policy events and crises in the form of official or "white paper"-style histories. Popular, impassioned, and often partisan contemporary attacks on the administration's foreign policy provoke a counter response from historians who defend the official interpretation, using a few archival sources. A subsequent, more scholarly and professional wave of revisionism sweeps in. And finally, after the passage of time an eclectic synthesis of different interpretations emerges.² The alternative historical interpretations reflect differing phases of scholarship, research bases, ideology, normative judgments about U.S. policy, causal factors, and environments. In addition, the competing historical explanations are based on different models of man—images of human behavior and decisionmaking.

Cold War historiography differs slightly from this pattern in that the first revisionist accounts appeared at the dawn of the Cold War,

¹ But see John Lewis Gaddis, "Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?" *Foreign Affairs* 52 (January 1974): 386-402. Gaddis argues that it was the Korean War, not the Truman Doctrine, that marked the beginning of the U.S. commitment to contain communism everywhere.

² Warren F. Kimball, "The Cold War Warmed Over," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 1119-36.

before official histories could present a defense of the administration's foreign policy. From 1946 to 1950, disillusionment with the failure of the postwar world to live up to the grand ideals of the Atlantic Charter and the Four Freedoms sparked a revisionist response on the right wing of the ideological spectrum. Conservative critics such as Chester Wilmot, James Burnham, and W. H. Chamberlin reasoned that Soviet expansionism had been encouraged by American officials' wishful thinking, ignorance, and unreasoning desire to obtain Soviet cooperation in the postwar world. At each of the wartime conferences, so they said, U.S. officials handed over to Stalin territorial concessions unwarranted by the military balance of power or any objective need for Soviet military collaboration. Naive, idealistic, Roosevelt fought the war with Germany to an unconditional surrender without considering the political repercussions of allowing the Red Army to "liberate" Eastern and Central Europe. At the Yalta Conference in 1945, President Roosevelt eagerly appeased Stalin to win his personal trust and cooperation. He callously betrayed the hopes of tens of millions of Eastern Europeans for freedom, and handed over German and Chinese territories to Stalin, violating the Atlantic Charter principle of self-determination. Truman and his advisers were duped and deceived by the Soviets at the Potsdam Conference. President Truman and Byrnes created fourteen million German refugees by turning over German territory to Poland, and failed to secure Stalin's adherence to the free elections promised in the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe. Throughout 1946, Truman and his advisers continued to vacillate and waver, responding to each instance of Soviet aggression without any overall design, because as politicians they were more concerned with winning the next election than with the long-term consequences of an unfavorable shift in the balance of forces.

Burnham, who later wrote a column for *National Review* under the title of "The Protracted Conflict," was an embittered ex-communist and former follower of Trotsky. He devoted the rest of his career to educating "liberals" about the menace of communism.³ The conservative revisionists used memoirs of governmental participants, but of course drew their own conclusions about motive, intent, and consequence. For the right-wing revisionists, failed or misconceived policies must have been caused by character flaws of American leaders; this

³ John P. Diggins, "Four Theories in Search of a Reality: James Burnham, Soviet Communism and the Cold War," *American Political Science Review* 70 (June 1976): 492-508.

premise reflected their implicit assumption that behavior can only be attributed to the actor's conscious intent and his personality traits.⁴

In the late 1940s, a time of trouble and increasing tension under the stress of the Czechoslovak coup, the Berlin blockade, and the fall of China, liberals began to question the official account of the origins of the Cold War, as presented in press conferences, speeches, and State Department pamphlets. British nuclear physicist P.M.S. Blackett reasoned that since Japan was already suing for peace in July 1945, and the American invasion of Kyushu was not scheduled until November 1945, Truman's decision to drop the bomb in August was prompted not by the official aim of saving American lives, but by the desire to end the war in the Pacific as quickly as possible, to preclude Soviet intervention and a struggle for postwar control of Japan. Thus, Blackett writes, "we conclude that the dropping of the atomic bombs was not so much the last military act of the second world war, as the first act of the cold diplomatic war with Russia now in progress."⁵ Blackett attributes Truman's initiation of the Cold War to his desire to gain a decisive power advantage over the Soviet Union, which was a manifestation of the principles of *Machtpolitik*. In other words, Blackett assumes that Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb was rationally calculated and indicative of the president's darker, Machiavellian motives. Later, to alleviate their guilt and remorse, American military and political officials rationalized that the use of the atomic bomb had been a normal act of state policy. If so, then the next "logical" conclusion was that the Soviets would, if they were able, also use the atomic bomb—against the United States.⁶

Another left-liberal revisionist scholar, D. F. Fleming, also argued that Truman had deliberately begun the Cold War, beginning with his famous tongue-lashing delivered to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov on April 23, 1945. Truman, he said, began mulling over the containment policy as early as September 1945, when the Soviets refused to make concessions in Eastern Europe at the London Conference. He deliberately delayed introducing the new policy to the American public, however, until an opportune moment arose to spring the Truman Doctrine on a hostile Congress. Fleming attributes this funda-

mental shift in America's role to the president's personality. Truman reversed FDR's policy of Soviet-American cooperation because he was ignorant, parochial, pugnacious, and prone to rely on the advice of militaristic Cold Warrior Admiral Leahy.⁷ In making inferences about Truman's motives, Fleming relied almost exclusively on contemporary journalists' critiques of Truman's foreign policy and the sometimes unreliable Truman *Memoirs*. In addition, Fleming uncritically used public statements by U.S. and Soviet officials as if they were undistorted reflections of individual beliefs and intentions. Because of the naiveté of his analysis and his injudicious use of source materials, Fleming's work is no longer cited, nor does it appear in most bibliographies of Cold War histories.

Realist scholars have contributed a more enduring strand of Cold War revisionism. As early as the 1940s, Hans J. Morgenthau and Walter Lippmann viewed the Cold War dispassionately as a great power struggle for hegemony. This is not to say that Realist analysts were not critical of what they perceived as the anomalies and fallacies of American policy. In 1947, for example, Lippmann argued that it was the presence of the Red Army in the heart of Europe which threatened western security, not the ideology of Karl Marx. Therefore, instead of trying to contain the ill-defined, amorphous threat of communism, United States policy should be directed toward removing the Red Army from Europe through a political settlement with the Soviet Union and restoration of the balance of power.

Writers such as Morgenthau, George Kennan, Norman Graebner, and Louis Halle subsequently developed a psychological explanation for what they perceived as the conceptual weakness of American foreign policy. Most Realists started with the arguable proposition that Stalin's ambitions bore more resemblance to those of Peter the Great than to the ideas of Trotsky. In other words, the principal danger to Western security was Russian imperialism, not world revolution. Nevertheless, the American people misperceived the East-West conflict as a struggle between good and evil, between differing systems of political morality, between two alternative ways of life. Why? According to Realist historians, the American people were shocked and disappointed by the failure of the postwar world to live up to the utopian expectations aroused by Roosevelt's rhetoric about the replacement of great power competition with cooperation, the Four Freedoms, and so on. In particular, the American people were outraged by Stalin's

⁴ Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1952); W. H. Chamberlain, *America's Second Crusade* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1950); James Burnham, *Struggle for the World* (New York: John Day, 1947); Paul Seabury, "Cold War Origins," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3 (1968): 169-82.

⁵ P.M.S. Blackett, *Fear, War, and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), p. 139.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-43.

⁷ D. F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917-1960*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), vol. 1.

refusal to hold free elections in Eastern Europe, in flagrant violation of agreements signed at the Yalta Conference. Nevertheless, the fate of Eastern Europe had been determined long before, when the U.S. government based its military policy on efficiency instead of political considerations, when American forces invaded the Continent through Western Europe instead of the Balkans. Unwilling to admit intellectual error or to acknowledge our naiveté and self-deception, the American people succumbed to the easy lure of viewing the Soviet Union as the source of evil. To rationalize our shame and humiliation at being duped once again, "Uncle Joe" was replaced in the popular mind by the "red devil," and the Soviet Union was used as a scapegoat for the postwar ills to which our political failures had given birth.

According to the Realist historians, the officials of the Truman administration were not so naive about the imperatives of power politics as to allow themselves to escape from unpleasant realities through moralistic thinking. But the administration cynically fanned the moralistic strain in American public opinion by depicting a modest request for an appropriation to provide aid to Greece and Turkey as part of a struggle between totalitarianism and democracy, between good and evil. They did this even though they knew that U.S. economic assistance was part of the American assumption of Britain's former responsibility for preventing Soviet penetration into the eastern Mediterranean and preserving the European balance of power. The Realists view American policymakers as rational, sober individuals with a valid understanding of the requirements of international power situation, who act contrary to U.S. national interests because they are swayed by social or domestic political pressures. Truman got his appropriation, but the American people were left with an unworkable, dangerous policy. The tragedy, according to Morgenthau, was that this misrepresentation of the containment policy to Congress was probably unnecessary. The Truman administration mistakenly identified a reactionary, Southern-dominated Senate with public opinion, and underestimated the public's native intelligence. They lost their chance to educate the American people and create support for a policy on the basis of real understanding.

Except for Kennan, who could draw on his own papers and memoranda, the Realists worked without the insights or ambiguities of archival sources. Nor were documents essential to their interpretation, which derived from recurring historical patterns in American foreign policy.⁸

⁸ Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1947); Hans J.

It was not until the mid-fifties that Herbert Feis and Joseph Jones published historical narratives reflecting policymakers' own interpretation of the events leading up to the development of the containment policy. Feis, clearly the "official" historian of the Cold War, produced a solid recital of diplomatic negotiations based on privileged access to official archives and the private papers of Harry S. Truman and Averell Harriman. Feis was a special consultant to three secretaries of war and economic adviser to Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Although Feis generally avoids interpretation or analysis, the careful reader may piece together the orthodox explanation for American Cold War policy: there was little that Roosevelt could have done to alter the shape of the postwar world, given Stalin's stubborn resolve to consume Eastern Europe for use as a buffer zone and base for further expansion of communism. The American people would not have approved the use of troops to push the Soviets back to their prewar frontiers. Between 1945 and 1947, wearying diplomatic stalemate, the fraying of the postwar accords, and Russian probes into Iran and Turkey finally awakened the American people to the totalitarian menace. Official historians accept the view of man as a seeker after reassuring consistency, trying to avoid unpleasant realities if possible, until the burden of evidence can no longer be sloughed off or ignored.⁹

But, official historians could not bank the flow of revisionism. William Appleman Williams stimulated a new strand of interpretation that articulated a more coherent theoretical interpretation of American foreign policy, and in support was able to draw on published documents and private papers as they became open.

Williams drew on Charles Beard for a general theory of economic causation. Although democratic socialism was his first ideological preference, Williams acknowledged that this vision was incompatible with the American people's long-standing infatuation with private property. Consequently, he looked to the past for an alternative model for a

Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951), pp. 76-78, 105-106, 108-12, 231-37; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs (1925-1950)* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967; Bantam Books, 1969); Norman A. Graebner, *Cold War Diplomacy: American Foreign Policy, 1945-60* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962); Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Martin F. Herz, *Beginnings of the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

⁹ Herbert Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); idem, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960); Joseph M. Jones, *The Fifteen Weeks (February 21-June 5, 1947)* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955); Christopher Lasch, "The Cold War Revisited and Re-Visioned," *New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 1968, pp. 27ff.

more humane, equitable, and peaceful society. According to Williams, the American founding fathers were mercantilists. Enlightened gentry, they used state power to create a territorial and commercial empire not for selfish commercial interests, but for the good of the community as a whole. American mercantilists sought a favorable balance of trade through protectionism and promotion of exports. Their overriding concern was to prevent economic surpluses and unemployment that could endanger domestic stability and democracy. The only flaw in the American mercantilist strategy, as Williams perceives it, was their emphasis on economic expansion as a substitute for social reform. When the frontier appeared to be closed in the 1890s, American leaders redirected their energies from continental expansion to establishment of a commercial empire based on free trade. The new outlook was actualized in the war against Spain and Hay's Open Door Notes, which called on other nations to respect the principle of equal commercial opportunity in China. The open door policy embodied the strategy of creating an "informal empire" based on free trade. Ultimately, American leaders' drive for access and control over foreign markets and raw materials explains our participation in both world wars, the so-called containment policy, and continuing interventions abroad.

Williams simply denies that the American image of the Soviet Union softened or blurred, even while the two countries were cooperating to defeat Hitler: "There is little evidence to support the oft-asserted claim that Americans changed their basic attitude toward the Soviet Union during the war." From the moment he took office, President Truman resolved to exploit America's economic supremacy to establish the open door throughout the globe, even within the Soviet security zone in Eastern Europe. The Truman Doctrine in March 1947 was, he argued, merely the "ideological manifesto" of the traditional open door strategy, the political rationalization for America's program of acquiring new overseas markets and sources of raw materials.¹⁰

In the 1960s, the Vietnam War, race riots, and the War on Poverty led to a breakdown of the liberal consensus and a search for the origins of American imperialism and the absence of a domestic socialist tradition.¹¹ Williams' causal connection between intervention abroad and domestic conservatism at home was compelling for many young historians: Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, Gar Alperovitz, Robert J. Smith, Barton Bernstein, Thomas Paterson.

¹⁰ William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Delta Book, 1972), pp. 229-30, 238-40, 243-44, 257-58, 269-70.

¹¹ Barton J. Bernstein and Allen J. Matusow, *Twentieth-Century American: Recent Interpretations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), pp. 346-47.

William Appleman Williams is not, as some have charged, an economic determinist, for he accords an important causal role to ideas. Williams reasons that to explain foreign policy, one must reconstruct reality the way policymakers saw it at the time and interpret the prevailing circumstances through their world view. His sociological interpretation relies heavily on an evidentiary base of trade and unemployment statistics and economic policy statements by commercial and government leaders. In addition, Williams and his followers have used memoirs written at the height of domestic anticommunist hysteria by Truman, Byrnes, and others as "evidence" that U.S. policymakers distrusted the Soviets from the beginning. Several of Williams' followers go to great pains to point out that American Cold War policies did not simply spring from simple, crude economic motives; other important causal factors included an ideology that depicted world peace and prosperity as dependent on expanding trade, a desire to avoid the "mistakes" of the past, the illusion of American omnipotence, and Harry S Truman's pugnacious personality. As Lloyd Gardner observes, "what men think about the 'system' and what it needs to function well at a given time is often as important as its supposed determinants. Indeed, what men think about helps to determine the 'system.'"¹²

The tool by which Williams tries to analyze policymakers' perceptions is Mannheim's conception of *Weltanschauung* or ideology, defined as "definition of the world and how it works." Thus, Williams presents a cognitive explanation of American foreign policy. Williams emphasizes that because American leaders' world view distorted their perception of reality, one does not need to resort to the "psychology of the irrational" to explain their errors and miscalculations. Similarly, many social psychologists now reject the assumption running through experimental research as late as the 1950s and 1960s that human biases and errors necessarily can be traced to the intrusion of unconscious motives, drives, emotions, or ego-defenses. Instead, people are sometimes deceived by the simplifying and filtering operations of human cognitive processes, which put information into a manageable, usable format.

Williams also agrees with Mannheim's thesis that ideology is rooted in a particular social structure and milieu. But Williams does not adhere to the materialist conception of knowledge, whereby ideas are the superstructure of social relations of production. That ideas do not sim-

¹² Thomas G. Paterson, *Soviet-American Confrontation: Postwar Reconstruction and the Origins of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 262-63; Lloyd C. Gardner, "Truman Era Foreign Policy: Recent Historical Trends," *The Truman Period as a Research Field: A Reappraisal*, 1972, ed. Richard S. Kirkendall (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), pp. 69-70.

ply reflect socioeconomic conditions is evidenced by the existence of many men who have undergone similar experiences yet have conflicting beliefs, and men who have contrasting backgrounds yet entertain similar opinions. Williams holds to the view now shared by most psychologists that individual beliefs are the residue of the interaction between a person's conceptual apparatus and the environment.¹³

Unlike many orthodox historians, open door revisionists have not been content with narration, but have sought explanation by postulating covering laws. They have tackled the difficult question of the relationship between ideals and interests, beliefs and action, ideology and strategic doctrine. Still, according to social science theory, there are several important deficiencies in their methodology. First, the concept of open door ideology or *Weltanschauung* is not defined or used systematically. Neither Williams nor his followers have synthesized the separate belief components of the ideology into a unified construct. Instead, elements of the ideology other than the concern for overseas expansion shift with individual and historical era. This makes the thesis difficult to test. Williams and his followers often use ideology as a catch-all to refer to beliefs, ideals, or conceptions that disguise reality, concealing from official policymakers their true interests in renouncing empire. It need not be pointed out that error and miscalculation reside in many sources other than ideology.

Second, Williams does not provide any rules or guidelines for inferring when a particular statement may be categorized as an example of the open door ideology. Without a priori criteria, there is a danger that the analyst will only see features of a discourse that seem to exemplify the ideology. Of course, there is always the risk of imposing the scholar's own ideological bias when trying to recapture from a collection of documents the perspective and beliefs of an individual from a different historical era. But the analyst should guard against the distorting effects of any conceptual apparatus by also considering alternative hypotheses. Several reviewers have criticized Williams and his students for ignoring evidence that American policymakers might have been motivated by balance of power concerns, security interests, or fear.¹⁴

Third, Williams argues that policymakers are rational and calculating in their efforts to obtain access for American products and investments overseas. He denies by implication the possibility that Truman and his

¹³ William Appleman Williams, "Fire in the Ashes of Scientific History," *William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (April 1962): 275, 278.

¹⁴ See Richard A. Melanson, "The Social and Political Thought of William Appleman Williams," *Western Political Quarterly* 31 (1978): 404.

advisers were simply "muddling through," responding as best they could to discrete events or diverse pressures without any overall strategy or consciousness of purpose. The assumption that policymakers consciously direct their actions to achieve larger goals is called into question by social psychological experiments showing that people frequently behave contrary to their professed beliefs; their convictions are often internally contradictory; and on many important issues they have no stable preconceived notions whatsoever.

Fourth, as presently defined, the open door ideology is indeterminate in its predictions. For example, from 1943 to 1947, prominent advocates of trade with Russia and the open door policy also favored accommodating the Soviets by providing them, for example, with a generous postwar loan or sharing American scientific information on atomic energy. These advocates of economic and scientific interchange with the Russians included Donald Nelson, Eric Johnston, Henry Stimson, and Henry Wallace.¹⁵ Other enthusiasts for establishing a multilateral trading system include people whom Williams describes as categorically anti-Soviet: Averell Harriman, William Clayton, Harry Truman, and James Byrnes. Clearly, variables other than the open door ideology are needed to explain the shift in American perceptions and policies.

Other radical historians have applied a more orthodox, class-based, neomarxist analysis to American Cold War diplomacy.¹⁶ For Kolko and Magdoff, United States political aims for the postwar world reflected the structural requirements of the capitalist system. Recognizing the need for assured access to foreign markets and raw materials, American leaders sought to create an international economic system that would allow businessmen to trade, operate, and profit without restriction anywhere in the world. Because American access to foreign sources of profits would be jeopardized by nationalist revolutions and communist subversion, the United States intervened throughout the globe against leftist movements and propped up conservative capitalist elites.¹⁷

¹⁵ Williams, *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, pp. 217-18, 245, 255; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Cold War Revisited," *New York Review of Books*, October 25, 1979, p. 46.

¹⁶ For a Marxist historian's criticisms that Williams is an idealist who ignores the class struggle underlying imperialism, see Eugene D. Genovese, "William Appleman Williams on Marx and America," *Studies on the Left* 6 (1966): 70-86.

¹⁷ Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War* (New York: Random House, 1968); Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Harry Magdoff, *The Age of Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

Revisionist writing inevitably stimulated a countercurrent of traditional diplomatic history. Confirmationist historians—Charles Burton Marshall, Dexter Perkins, David Rees, Wilfred Knapp—though critical of some aspects of American diplomacy, generally upheld the official interpretation that the containment policy was a necessary response to Soviet expansionism.¹⁸ In other words, the circumstances in which American leaders were placed gave them no choice but to respond as they did. From 1945 to 1947, the American people were in the grip of isolationism, enthusiasm for the United Nations, the desire for normalcy, and wishful thinking about the prospects for continuing Soviet-American collaboration. (Confirmationists share the official historians' image of man as driven by internal pressures to achieve cognitive consistency, and prone to rationalize or ignore unpleasant realities by reinterpreting the facts to support an established image or belief.) But gradually hope was lost and attitudes hardened in reaction to the steady, step-by-step advance of Soviet pressure outside the sphere occupied by the Red Army, such as the establishment of a Russian puppet government in Northern Iran, demands for bases on the Turkish Straits, and the outbreak of civil war in Greece.

Thus, confirmationists describe American policy as reactive to Soviet initiatives; they implicitly accept an image of man as tossed about and pulled by the force of outside stimuli, instead of acting of his own volition to achieve strategic goals. Yet, it is questionable whether the Soviet threat to American vital interests alone forced American policymakers to adopt Cold War policies. For, as will be argued below, alternative policies were possible. And in fact, when the Truman Doctrine was promulgated, the Soviets had withdrawn their troops from northern Iran, allowed the puppet state to collapse, made no further demands on Turkey after the United States issued a warning in August 1946, and were not responsible for the outbreak of civil war in Greece.

In the 1970s, an eclectic synthetic strand has emerged, which may be called reconciliationism. Best exemplified by scholars such as John Lewis Gaddis and George Herring, these historians have selected what they consider to be the most plausible hypotheses and interpretations immanent in a broad range of historical sources. While rejecting the all-encompassing theoretical framework of the mercantilists and neo-

¹⁸ Charles Burton Marshall, *The Cold War: A Concise History* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1965); Dexter Perkins, *Diplomacy of a New Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); David Rees, *The Age of Containment: The Cold War, 1945-1968* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1967); William H. McNeill, *America, Britain, and Russia: Their Co-operation and Conflict, 1941-1946* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953; reprint New York: Johnson, 1970).

marxists, reconciliationists accept some specific arguments and interpretations. Gaddis, for example, locates the origins of American Cold War policies within a sophisticated multicausal structure. In the conclusion, Gaddis rightly points to several factors—the bipolar distribution of power, the ideal of self-determination, domestic political constraints, misreading of the “lessons of history,” fear of communism, the illusion of omnipotence fostered by American economic superiority and the atomic bomb—which influenced American policymakers. This balanced, objective synthesis of two decades of historical scholarship and wide-ranging archival sources is certainly an impressive achievement. Yet, missing from Gaddis' judicious account is any explicit causal connection between particular events or conditions and the Truman administration's desire to contain further Soviet expansion. In reading Gaddis' subtle and supple prose, we are never able to pinpoint exactly *why* American policymakers adopted a “tough” policy of refusing to make any more concessions to obtain Soviet cooperation.¹⁹ It may be that implicit in the historical narrative are generalizations that guided Gaddis' structuring of the sequence of events leading up to the American adoption of the containment policy. But since we do not know what these generalizations are, there is no way to determine whether they are scientifically sound or internally consistent.

The interweaving of interpretations continues, as the release of government documents and private papers makes possible the writing of specialized monographs. Lynn Davis and A. W. DePorte, for example, have resurrected the Realist interpretation that American policymakers were naive idealists, who sought to carry out the principles of the Atlantic Charter in a world for which these Wilsonian ideals were at best ill-suited and at worst needlessly provocative to the Soviet Union. Confirmationist Lisle Rose has tried to defend policymakers from charges that they used the implied threat of the atomic monopoly to frighten the Soviets out of Eastern Europe. Some confirmationist historians have accused neomarxists and open door revisionists of sustaining an economic interpretation of American actions through distortion of documentary evidence and wrenching quotes out of context.²⁰

¹⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). For a sustained critique of Gaddis' conclusions and underlying evidence, see Barton J. Bernstein, “Cold War Orthodoxy Restated,” *Reviews in American History* (December 1973): 453-62; Robert D. Schulzinger, “Moderation in Pursuit of Truth Is No Virtue; Extremism in Defense of Moderation is a Vice,” *American Quarterly* 27 (1975): 222-36.

²⁰ See, for example, Robert James Maddox, *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold*

In defense of the revisionists, other historians have argued that archival material is legitimately subject to differing interpretations depending on the historians' perspective.²¹ According to an influential group in the philosophy of history, historical facts are *constructed* from documentary evidence by inferences based on historians' intuitive assumptions about human nature, knowledge about the culture of a particular era, and conceptual schemes. Competing historical explanations do not necessarily reflect some misguided scholar's misreading or deliberate distortion of the evidence to create a politically "usable" past; instead, they often stem from historians' implicit and largely unsystematic use of alternative theories about the past.²² Consequently, conflicting interpretations cannot be evaluated by appealing to "facts," but by testing for the hypotheses and theoretical generalizations on which they are built.

The intuitive theories on which competing interpretations of American Cold War policies are constructed are often psychological. Underlying differing interpretations of the meaning of statements by U.S. officials are alternative naive conceptions of human decision processes, often resembling more formal empirical theories in psychology. For example, confirmationist historians argue that Truman and his advisers reluctantly changed their perception of the Soviets only when the weight of evidence of Soviet expansionist aims tipped the scales and became overwhelming. This thesis reflects the proposition, also found in consistency theories in social psychology, that people try to avoid unpleasant realities and evidence which contradicts cherished assumptions, and that their beliefs change only in response to an onslaught of inconsistent data. Open door revisionists work with the hypothesis that ideological beliefs blind individuals to reality, disguising their true interests and motives from themselves. There is a long tradition of research in psychology on the biasing effects of expectations, hopes, fears, and beliefs on our perception of the world. Realist historians, on the other hand, believe that foreign policymakers often recognize the requirements of achieving the national interest and the imperatives of preserving a balance of power, yet act contrary to their best judg-

War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Oscar Handlin, "The Failure of the Historians," *Freedom at Issue*, September-October 1975, pp. 3-6.

²¹ Kimball, "The Cold War Warmed Over"; Richard A. Melanson, "Revisionism Subdued? Robert James Maddox and the Origins of the Cold War," *Political Science Reviewer* 7 (1977): 229-71.

²² See, for example, Murray G. Murphey, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973); and Cynthia Hay, "Historical Theory and Historical Confirmation," *History and Theory* 19 (1980): 39-57.

ment because of short-term political considerations. In psychological jargon, Realists are "situationists"; they assume that people often act contrary to their beliefs and attitudes because of social pressures.

If policymakers knew why they chose a particular action, we could simply use their contemporary explanations as reflected in documents to determine which historical interpretation best approximated the truth. But in fact, people often do not know the real causes of their own actions.²³ Or they may not wish to expose their motives to the harsh judgments of political rivals or muckraking historians. Thus, psychological generalizations about the way other people typically act in similar circumstances are a useful first step toward valid understanding.

If a major source of disagreement among different strands of Cold War historiography lies in the attribution of motives, beliefs, and rationality, then one can only infer that the next stage in resolving the controversy is to apply relevant social psychological research and theory to the primary evidence. It is easier to evaluate the merits of rival psychological hypotheses when tacit assumptions are made explicit. Further, social psychological hypotheses have the important advantage over intuitive theories of human behavior of having been subjected to tests in the laboratory under controlled conditions. Diplomatic historian Ernest May has criticized Cold War historiography for failing to draw on psychological theory and evidence in its examination of ideology and perception:

Much writing about attitudes and perceptions had limited value because the authors did not pause to reflect enough on theoretical questions—e.g., the processes of attitude formation, the measurement of relative intensities of opinion, and the relationship between perceptions and behavior. Much writing about ideas and ideologies was marred by being too closely tied to simplistic theories of human behavior. Nevertheless, it is clear that the psychological aspects of international relations has become and will remain a major subject for scholarship.²⁴

The use of social psychology to explain the origins of American Cold War policies can, however, be challenged on the grounds that policy-

²³ Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84 (May 1977): 231-59.

²⁴ Ernest R. May, "The Decline of Diplomatic History," in George Athan Billias and Gerald N. Grob, *American History: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Free Press, 1971), p. 421.

makers' actions are so narrowly constrained by the logic of the situation or domestic political pressures that a focus on individual cognitive processes adds no useful knowledge and indeed is a waste of time.

"LEVELS OF ANALYSIS" PROBLEM

All the historical interpretations provide a plausible account of the development of U.S.-Soviet conflict in the postwar period. But the explanations lack specificity and determinacy. None of these interpretations adequately explains why U.S.-Soviet relations assumed the form of an acutely conflictual "zero-sum" game, in which a "gain" in one part of the world was invariably perceived as a "loss" to U.S. security interests.

To construct a better explanation of the origins of American Cold War policies, the analyst must first choose a theory at an appropriate 'level of analysis'—international system, domestic political context, or individual policymaker. The choice is not a trivial matter of individual taste, because each "level" employs different variables, highlights different aspects of reality, and provides a different explanation.

From the perspective of the international system, the Cold War seems to have been inevitable. World War II destroyed what remained of the European state system. Only the United States and Russia emerged from the conflict as great powers, territorially enlarged, undefeated, political systems intact. The two countries were destined to view each other as enemies, since the security of each could only be threatened by the other. A Soviet-American condominium was impossible once Germany was defeated, because there was no longer a common threat against which to ally. The wrenching transition from one type of international system to another merely exacerbated the potential for conflict. The destruction of Germany left a power vacuum in the heart of Europe, which the Soviets were fated to fill. When the war ended, Soviet troops occupied not only the small states of Eastern Europe but parts of Austria and Germany as well. Western Europe lay prostrate, a tempting target for further Soviet expansion. In the Mediterranean, the decline of British power opened up the oil-rich Middle East to Soviet penetration. In Africa and Asia, the disintegration of prewar colonial empires was followed by the emergence of new states, objects of competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for military bases, raw materials, markets, outlets for investment. After some hesitation, the United States formed a coalition with other Western countries to create a new equilibrium of power. Through a process of action and reaction in the early Cold War period,

the United States and the Soviet Union gradually created a stable bipolar system.

But when one examines the historical sources, these certainties evaporate. What seem to be inexorable social and historical forces appear, on closer examination, to be the result of unforeseen contingencies, personality factors, timing, chance, or an unusual confluence of causal factors. In *The Cold War as History*, Louis J. Halle begins by arguing that the Cold War was a "historical necessity," given the destruction of German power and the emergence of a vacuum on Russia's western frontier. Yet he later concedes that

When we see what actually happens in operational terms, however, in terms of armies marching, statesmen negotiating, and people voting, the whole situation appears to offer a range of possibilities incompatible with the rigidity of physical laws. Accidents seem to play their part. The mistakes of individual statesmen are seen to be significant. The respiratory ailment that impaired Roosevelt's strength in the winter of 1944-45 has its effect. Unusual human weakness or unusual human virtue appears to alter what might otherwise have been the course of events. . . .

We must beware of the absoluteness of the great abstractions represented by the metaphor of the power vacuum. We must assume a range of choice in the actual play of events.²⁵

Apart from unanswerable questions of "historical inevitability," the systemic explanation is insufficiently specified and indeterminate. In the early postwar period, systemic theory predicts Soviet-American conflict, but does not discriminate between various forms that the rivalry could have assumed. Within a bipolar structure of power, the United States and the Soviet Union could have defined their relationship in a variety of ways. For example, Roosevelt and Stalin could have signed a gentleman's agreement dividing the world into rival spheres of influence. Or, unable to agree on a solution to the "German problem," the United States and the Soviet Union might have engaged in destructive competition for the favors of a unified Germany. Conversely, the United States might have reverted to isolation from the affairs of Europe, confining itself to the Pacific and the Western hemisphere. In that event, because of the local power imbalance, Soviet dominance over Western Europe would not have been inconceivable. The United States and the Soviet Union could have adopted a "limited adversary" relationship—cooperating on some issues while competing

²⁵ Halle, *Cold War as History*, pp. 75-76.

on others. Or there could have been war. The distribution of power alone does not explain why U.S.-Soviet conflict took the form of a "zero-sum" game instead of one of these alternatives to the Cold War. The intensity of U.S.-Soviet conflict is inexplicable unless one considers the influence of the Cold War belief system.²⁶

International systems theory describes the range of outcomes of interactions between states that is possible within a given system, but it cannot explain how particular states will react to the pressures and possibilities inherent within the structure of the system.²⁷ To increase the determinacy of the explanation, then, we must move to lower levels of analysis—the domestic political context and the individual policy-maker.

Spheres of influence and U.S. isolation were precluded by the American public's aversion to power politics and newfound enchantment with Wilsonian internationalism in the aftermath of World War II. In addition, domestic political considerations played a major role in the Truman administration's deliberate cultivation of the Cold War image of the Soviet Union as an implacable adversary with whom there could be no negotiations or compromise. According to Thomas Trout, to obtain the legitimacy necessary for effective, consistent implementation of a foreign policy, the president must construct, present, and defend an image of the international system that is consistent with the action advocated. The Truman Doctrine speech depicted a global struggle between the forces of freedom and totalitarianism, creating an image that legitimized American Cold War policies.²⁸

David Apter has provided a possible theoretical explanation for the effectiveness of ideological symbols used in the Truman Doctrine

²⁶ It is apropos to note that the author of the best systemic explanation of the Cold War, A. W. DePorte, observes that other historical outcomes were entirely possible. See *Europe between the Super-Powers: The Enduring Balance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. xii. According to Max Weber, the goal of social scientific inquiry is as follows: "We wish to understand on the one hand the relationships and the cultural significance of individual events . . . and on the other the causes of their being historically so and not otherwise." See Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), p. 72.

²⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 41-59.

²⁸ B. Thomas Trout, "Rhetoric Revisited: Political Legitimation and the Cold War," *International Studies Quarterly* 19 (September 1975): 251-84. For an analytical framework using Trout's concept of "policy legitimation," see Alexander L. George, "Domestic Constraints on Regime Change in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Need for Policy Legitimation," in *Change in the International System*, ed. Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 233-59.

speech in creating a public consensus behind what was to be an onerous policy of containing communist expansion. According to Apter, the mythical elements of the ideology cement the solidarity of society and buttress the moral authority of the rulers. An ideology also creates a world image that contributes to the individual sense of identity. These two functions act in conjunction with one another to legitimize the authority of political elites.²⁹ In my study, following R. M. Christenson et al., ideology is defined as a belief system, held by a group, that "explains and justifies a preferred political order for society, either existing or proposed, and offers a strategy (processes, institutions, programs) for its attainment."³⁰ Not all belief systems qualify as ideologies, only those sets of beliefs that are consciously designed to guide collective action. Ideology furnishes a link between general ideals and more mundane, concrete actions; thus, it is extremely useful in mobilizing members of a collectivity for concerted action for common goals. But, as we shall see, ideology is less potent in motivating foreign policy. The Cold War beliefs identified in this study are idiosyncratic, limited to a historical context, and directly related to policy. Ideology comprises the grand, overarching conceptual schemes that treat such subjects as human nature, the individual's relationship to the state, epistemology, equality, and the source of political authority.³¹

Trout's interpretation is consistent with standard historical accounts which argue that President Truman felt he had no choice but to use ideological rhetoric to "scare" Congress into supporting large-scale reconstruction aid to Europe.³² Still, the requirements of policy legitimation cannot explain why U.S. policymakers internalized their own rhetoric, why they accepted and acted on major premises of the Cold War belief system. Further, an explanation based solely on domestic political considerations sidesteps the crucial question of why U.S. lead-

²⁹ David E. Apter, "Introduction: Ideology and Discontent," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 18-21.

³⁰ Reo M. Christenson et al., *Ideologies and Modern Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), p. 6; M. Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1976), pp. 14, 96-98, 120; Apter, "Ideology and Discontent," pp. 16-17; William E. Connolly, *Political Science and Ideology* (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), pp. 2-3; Willard A. Mullins, "On the Concept of Ideology in Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 66 (June 1972): 498-510; Samuel H. Barnes, "Ideology and the Organization of Conflict: On the Relationship between Political Thought and Behavior," *Journal of Politics* 28 (August 1966): 513-30; Robert Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962), pp. 14-15.

³¹ Roy C. Macridis, *Contemporary Political Ideologies: Movements and Regimes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1983), pp. 2-13.

³² See, for example, Jones, *Fifteen Weeks*.

ers decided to assume a leadership role in rebuilding the European economic system.

The “higher” levels of analysis—the international system and domestic political context—assume that U.S. policymakers’ response to Soviet behavior was determined by the objective situation. But if individual policymakers interpreted the same external circumstances differently, then the analysis must incorporate individual-level variables to explain why the United States adopted Cold War policies.³³

The actual latitude for individual decision available in the outcomes permitted by the bipolar structure of power in the international system is witnessed by the variety of solutions to the problem of managing U.S.-Soviet relations, reflecting differing interpretations of Soviet behavior, considered by U.S. policymakers. If U.S. Cold War policy were strictly determined by geopolitical position or domestic political pressure, one should not find opposing policy recommendations to meet the same objective circumstances.

It is a fundamental premise of cognitive psychology that individuals respond according to their interpretation of a stimulus, and that this interpretation does not necessarily agree with its “objective” properties. Cognitive psychologists view people as “information processors” whose behavior is largely determined by the way in which they select, code, store, and retrieve information from the environment. Consequently, a key to understanding individual variability lies in the study of cognitive processes. Still, to explain American Cold War policy entirely by individual policymakers’ cognitive processes—ignoring objective U.S.-Soviet conflicts of interest or the imperatives to conflict inherent in the nature of the international system—would be patently reductionist.

What is the solution to this dilemma? This study presents a *multi-level* explanation of the origins of American Cold War policies, using variables on the level of the international system, domestic politics, and individual policymakers’ cognitive processes. I did not attempt to integrate or synthesize the theories, but made complementary use of theoretical hypotheses at different levels of analysis to fill out and make more determinate the historical explanation. Although this approach lacks elegance and parsimony, the costs in economy are counterbalanced by the gain in explanatory power. Utilizing variables at a higher

³³ For a similar argument, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 18-21. Psychologist Walter Mischel applies the same reasoning to the task of determining the relative importance of situational vs. personality variables. See “Toward a Cognitive Social Learning Reconceptualization of Personality,” *Psychological Review* 80 (1973): 252-83.

or lower level than the unit to be explained adds to the complexity of a research design; but, as Heinz Eulau argues, “the virtue of multi-level strategy is that it enriches the explanatory power of analysis.”³⁴

Since international systemic, societal, or individual factors in isolation are themselves insufficient to explain the origins of American Cold War policies, we must examine their interaction. United States officials were complex, multifaceted human beings, with personality needs and political goals, trying to cope with a threatening international environment within constraints imposed by the nature of the U.S. political system. As psychologist William McGuire points out,

While it is true that in science we seek the simplest possible explanation, we seek this simplicity within the restriction that it be the simplest explanation which is adequate for describing the empirical situation. . . . If we are seeking to describe a pretzel-shaped reality, we must be allowed to use pretzel-shaped hypotheses.³⁵

It is in this way that we may approach the frustrating yet exciting, onerous yet irresistible task of understanding such important and consequential historical figures as Harry S Truman, James F. Byrnes, Dean Acheson, and Averell Harriman. Why did these men find it necessary to abandon all hope of a constructive, civilized relationship with the Soviet Union and embark on an altruistic if sometimes futile effort to preserve the balance of influence against the threat of Soviet gains throughout the world? The social psychological theories to be discussed furnish guideposts for our subsequent venture into the complexities of historical data.

³⁴ Heinz Eulau, “Multilevel Methods in Comparative Politics,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 21 (September/October 1977): 47-48.

³⁵ William J. McGuire, “The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change,” in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: 1969), 3:205.