

---

## Containment Policy

Key U.S. foreign policy strategy during the Cold War. It is impossible to understand the origins and course of the Cold War without comprehending the policy, or doctrine, of containment. The concept can be traced back to February 1946 when George F. Kennan, deputy head of the U.S. mission in Moscow, sent an 8,000-word telegram to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. In the message—dubbed the “Long Telegram”—Kennan provided both an analysis of Soviet behavior and a diplomatic strategy to deal with Moscow. Arguing that “at the bottom of the Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is the instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,” Kennan went on to suggest that Soviet leader Josef Stalin required a hostile international environment to legitimize his autocratic rule. Kennan also asserted that the Marxist-Leninist ideology upon which Stalin had built his regime contained elements of a messianism that envisioned the spread of Soviet influence and conflict with capitalism. The only way to stop the communist contagion, Kennan opined, was to strengthen Western institutions, apply appropriate counterforce when needed, and wait for the Soviet system to either implode under its own weight or sufficiently mellow so that it could be rationally bargained with. In short, the Soviets were to be “contained.” Kennan, however, was not at all specific as to how containment was to be achieved.

Although U.S. policy toward the Soviets had already begun to take on elements of containment, Kennan’s missive struck like a lightning bolt in Washington. Indeed, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal immediately took note of the telegram and used it as further justification for his own hard-line views of the Soviet Union. Kennan returned to Washington something of a hero to anti-Soviet hawks in the Harry Truman administration and became the first director of the U.S. State Department’s policy planning staff. Kennan served in that capacity during April 1947–December 1949.

In the meantime, the containment policy continued to gain traction. The first public invocation of the strategy came in March 1947. Concerned about the communist insurgency in the Greek Civil War and instability in neighboring Turkey, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress, ostensibly to request aid money for Greece and Turkey. Clearly echoing Kennan’s Long Telegram, Truman stated in what became known as the Truman Doctrine that we must “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” The United States had now taken on the responsibility of helping any nation fighting against communism. Next came the June 1947 announcement of the Marshall Plan (of which Kennan was the chief architect). The Marshall Plan aimed at fostering European reconstruction. But it was also a program clearly aimed at containing Soviet influence and keeping it out of Western Europe. In July 1947 Kennan anonymously wrote an article for the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*. Dubbed the “X” article for its supposed anonymity, it went even further than Kennan’s earlier telegram. Using somewhat alarmist language, Kennan asserted that U.S. policy toward the Soviets must be a “patient but firm vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” The “X” article



President Harry S. Truman meets with his foreign policy advisors, 13 November 1947. Shown (*left to right*) are President Truman; Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett; George F. Kennan, director of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department; and Charles E. Bohlen, special assistant to Secretary Marshall. (Bettmann/Corbis)

gave full voice to containment, although Kennan would soon argue that policy-makers had unnecessarily militarized the idea.

In November 1948 Truman approved a top secret memo from the National Security Council (NSC-20/4) that made the containment of Soviet influence a key precept of American foreign policy. The formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 1949 further entrenched containment. But up until 1950, containment had been largely limited to economic and institutional mechanisms. The Korean War would change that forever. In April 1950 the NSC had produced what is considered one of the seminal documents of the early Cold War. The report, known as NSC-68, was a call to arms. It presented in stark terms the low level of U.S. military capabilities while playing up Soviet motives and capabilities. The NSC claimed 1954 to be the “year of maximum danger,” a time during which the USSR would possess sufficient nuclear and conventional military capacity to launch a catastrophic strike against America. The only way to avoid such a possibility was to embark on a massive rearmament program. Truman shelved the project because the political environment would not have tolerated such an expensive program.

After the Korean War began in June 1950, however, the political climate had indeed changed. In September Truman approved NSC-68, and the nation undertook a massive and permanent mobilization, allowing it to react to crises anywhere in the world. Containment was now fully militarized and would remain so (although defense budgets would wax and wane) until the end of the Cold War.

Containment not only produced a permanent and large military establishment—not to mention a constantly expanding nuclear arsenal—but also informed policymakers' thinking toward all type of foreign threats. Indeed, the domino theory, a corollary of sorts to containment, can be traced to the Truman years, although it became de rigueur under Dwight Eisenhower and his immediate successors. Concerned that communist insurgencies in Indochina would result in a domino effect in which one nation after the other would fall to communism, U.S. policymakers decided to hold the line in Vietnam. Ultimately, this thinking led to America's long and tortuous debacle in the Vietnam War. The domino theory was also applied in other areas where communist advances were feared, including Africa, the Middle East, and Central and South America.

During the 1970s, as détente between the United States and the USSR flourished and while the aftermath of Vietnam was still fresh in Americans' minds, containment appeared less attractive. During President Ronald Reagan's tenure in office (1981–1989), containment was virtually abandoned. In its place was the belief that the Soviet Union should be defeated rather than merely contained. Reagan attempted to do this by engaging the United States in a major military buildup, announcing his controversial Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and signaling his intention to employ American nuclear might against any Soviet advance. The theory behind the approach was that the United States would force the Soviets into bankruptcy by forcing them to keep up with U.S. military advances. In the end, the Soviet Union did fall, although it is inaccurate and overly simplistic to suggest that Reagan's policies alone caused the collapse. The Soviet system had within it the seeds of its own destruction. Kennan made that clear fifty years ago. And since Truman's time, every president employed all or part of containment to hasten the demise of the USSR.

PAUL G. PIERPAOLI JR.

### See also

Domino Theory; Kennan, George Frost; Korean War; Marshall Plan; National Security Council Report NSC-68; North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Origins and Formation of; Strategic Defense Initiative; Truman Doctrine; Vietnam War

### References

- Acheson, Dean. *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department*. New York: Norton, 1969.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- . *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.