

## **America and the Cold War: Containment or Hegemony?**

Alexia McCleary

During World War II, the Allied Powers included Great Britain, Free France, and China, along with the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Because of the previous civil relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, it may come as a shock to learn that the two countries were facing a war against one another, just shortly after the end of World War II, when the United States was characterized as:

The most powerful nation on the earth. It alone possessed the atomic bomb. It alone possessed a navy that could project power across the oceans and an air force that could reach across the continents. The U.S. was also the richest nation in the world. It possessed two-thirds of the world's gold reserves and three-fourths of its invested capital. ("Cold War and Global Hegemony")

To the American people, the Cold War was commonly represented as one of containment, with the United States attempting to fight and prevent the spread of communism throughout the world. However, the United States was ultimately attempting to dominate the international scene and saw the Soviet Union as a threat to the sense of hegemony that they were trying to achieve. The United States had everything needed to establish a state of hegemony; they had money, power, population, and representation in multiple countries. The scholarly consensus now reflects the belief that "Stalin had no master plan to spread revolution or conquer the world. He was determined to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe where his communist minions would rule" ("Cold War and Global Hegemony"). With this information and other recent scholarly research in mind, it is the belief that the Cold War was born out of the United States' desire to achieve hegemony and not out of the desire to contain the spread of communism, though containment did play a role in the reasoning behind the Cold War.

The concept of hegemony is a bit more complex than the notion that one group is in charge of multiple other groups. According to sociologist Nicki Lisa Cole, "Cultural hegemony refers to domination or rule maintained through ideological means. It is usually achieved through social institutions, which allow those in power to strongly influence the values, norms, ideas, expectations, worldview, and behavior of the rest of society" (2020). Cole believes hegemony to be successful because it takes the worldview of the ruling class and makes it seem as though it is designed to benefit everyone, not just one group or individual. Regarding the Cold War, the United States attempted to show the Soviet Union in a negative light, as a country where most people do not benefit from the systems put in place. At the same time, the United States was showcasing itself as the opposite, as a country of possibility and freedom, think "the land of the free and the home of the brave" or the ever-popular "American dream".

Containment, which differs drastically from hegemony, "was the first major policy during the Cold War and used numerous strategies to prevent the spread of

communism abroad" ("The History of American Foreign Policy"). Containment was a middle ground between the era of peace, known as *détente*, and the withdrawal of forces, known as rollback. Containment was used in response to the Soviet Union's attempt to spread communist influence to Eastern Europe, as well as parts of Asia, of Africa, and of Latin America. Containment is often associated with President Harry S. Truman's policies. Though Truman is the most notable president to use containment policies, many other presidents, including Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon all had experiences with attempted containment as well.

The start of the Cold War can be traced to a 1945 meeting in Potsdam, Germany. The meeting consisted of Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Britain, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Premier, and Harry Truman, the United States president. During this meeting, there were notable disagreements between the Allied Powers, which inevitably would lead to a cold war occurring after World War II concluded. Perhaps the most notable differences were the economic and political systems that the United States and the Soviet Union had in place and wanted to spread throughout the areas that their soldiers occupied. According to what is now known as the 'Long Telegram', sent to Washington D.C. in 1946 by George Kennan, a Russian-based U.S. foreign service officer, "Stalin needed to believe in a triumph of communism over capitalism to legitimize his bloody dictatorship. He would do everything possible to undermine the major Western powers, but would not risk major war" ("The Start of the Cold War"). This message, and the observations of Kennan, would eventually lead to containment, formalized by the Truman Doctrine in 1947, when "Truman supplied aid to Greece and Turkey and set in motion a worldwide fight against Soviet Communism" ("The Start of the Cold War"). In this instance, Truman's providing aid to Greece and Turkey can be applied to the sense of hegemony because it makes the United States appear as a country that is helping people around the world instead of working against them in their time of need, with Truman declaring, "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Truman). By saying this in the Truman Doctrine, addressed to Congress, President Truman ensured that his message would be heard by everyone and that it would be clearly understood. He showed what he wanted to show to the people.

Any hope of avoiding the Cold War disappeared with the Marshall Plan, also known as the European Recovery Program, launched by U.S. Army General and Secretary of State George C. Marshall. Following World War II, Western Europe was destroyed and in desperate need of recovery--in more ways than one. Multiple industries within Europe were struggling and there was no solution in sight, "Much of Europe was on the brink of famine as agricultural production had been disrupted by war. Transportation infrastructure was in shambles. The only major power in the world that was not significantly damaged was the United States", meaning that the United States was more than likely the only country in the world that could successfully provide aid to those in need around Europe ("The Marshall Plan"). The Marshall Plan provided loans and assistance to countries in need of help recovering from the aftermath of World War II. The plan "exemplified 'empire by invitation,' an interpretive framework that emphasized that American economic assistance and political influence were welcomed by the western European governments and the

majority of public opinion" ("Cold War Evolution"). The Marshall Plan was able to successfully assist in aiding European economic recovery, as well as put the United States on the pedestal as the world leader, advancing the idea of American hegemony. The Soviet Union feared the success of the Marshall Plan. During the initial stages of planning for the Marshall Plan, the Soviet Union was part of the discussion. During this time:

"Stalin and his foreign minister, V.I. Molotov, understood all too clearly that they would be left, by design, on the outside looking in. With American economic clout dwarfing that of the devastated Soviet Union, Stalin and Molotov understood that the Marshall Plan posed a grave threat to the budding 'people's democracies' of East-Central Europe." ("Cold War Evolution")

The Soviet Union saw the Marshall Plan as an existential threat to the success of communism. They felt as though it would only make it more difficult to persuade other countries and populations of people to be on their side in the inevitable and looming Cold War.

Before the Cold War, officials from the United States and Britain were usually fairly eager to work with the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin included. President Truman once wrote in a letter to his wife, "I like Stalin... He is straightforward. Knows what he wants and will compromise when he can't get it" ("Cold War and Global Hegemony"). W. Averell Harriman, the U.S. ambassador to Moscow even said that he believed working with Stalin more often would make many difficulties amongst the countries easier to overcome.

In order to fully understand American fears and the development of the Cold War, scholars have begun examining postwar American and Soviet diplomacy. Scholars characterize the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as one of freedom versus totalitarianism, as well as belonging to the international economic and political conditions of the twentieth century. According to AP Central, "After World War II... U.S. leaders assumed the role of hegemon, or leader, of the international economy and container of Soviet power" ("Cold War and Global Hegemony"). The United States' ability to assume the role of hegemon was not just dependent on its economic or political power, but also on "the appeal of its ideology, the vitality of its institutions, and the attractiveness of its culture of mass consumption" ("Cold War and Global Hegemony"). The United States was presented, on a global level, as something to aspire to be. With many other countries destroyed following World War II, the fact that the United States was still as strong as ever was a very attractive quality and only furthered the idea of hegemony.

Following the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War, the Soviet Union wasn't very strong. In fact, they were rather weak. Much like many other European countries at the time, mass casualties as a result of World War II greatly weakened the Soviet Union. Though leaders around the world knew that Stalin did not want war, the Soviet Union, weak as it was, was still feared by other countries and leaders. Many leaders were worried that Stalin would capitalize on the state of affairs following the end of World War II. Because of this fear, "Truman acted in the

international arena... he feared Stalin would exploit conditions to aggrandize Soviet power" (Leffler 70). On top of the fear of Stalin exploiting global conditions, many people feared that the United States' capitalist economy would not be able to flourish outside of times of war, where its track record was less than stellar:

"Its performance during their lifetimes had bred worldwide economic depression, social malaise, political instability, and personal disillusionment. Throughout Europe and Asia, people blamed capitalism for the repetitive cycles of boom and bust and for military conflagrations that brought ruin and despair." ("Cold War and Global Hegemony").

In Czechoslovakia, specifically, many people even believed capitalism was obsolete and no longer a viable economic system. The post-World War II world was seen in black and white, as a crisis in capitalism or the superiority of socialism.

Because of the weak economy of the Soviet Union, the United States was able to further instill a sense of hegemony: "The Soviets – who had suffered far more devastation, both human and material, in World War II than the United States (or any other country) – sought loans, grants, and reparations to rebuild" ("Cold War Evolution"). The United States, during World War II, had promised a postwar loan to help with the recovery effort in the Soviet Union but never made the loan, claiming political issues as the reason for not helping. This was economic leverage that the United States was able to hold over the Soviet Union--another way to instill hegemony.

According to a Kennedy-era public opinion poll, Americans believed the United States was getting stronger over time and could still achieve a Cold War victory, "When asked if an agreement with the Soviet Union was possible, 49 percent of Americans polled said yes; 37 percent said no" (Leffler 186). In addition to the belief of the American people, many members of the State and Defense departments were on a similar page. They, however, believed that a combination of détente and containment would be the key to the United States' success during the Cold War. Some even believed that détente was just a sophisticated form of containment, "encouraging the Soviets to put down their guard, relax, accept (it was hoped) the unification of Germany, and honor the national sovereignty and independence of the East European nations" (Leffler 191). In a perfect world, détente would have been enough to control Cold War tensions, but unfortunately, it was not.

The inability to control Cold War tensions can be linked to the existence of hot wars, or conflicts related to the Cold War; most notably, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The invasion of South Korea by North Korea was the first military action of the Cold War. The Korean War lasted three years with the United States supporting South Korea and the Soviet Union supporting North Korea. Similar to the war in Korea, the Vietnam War was fought between a split Vietnam made up of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The Vietnam War lasted nearly twenty years with South Vietnam being supported by the United States and North Vietnam being supported by the Soviet Union.

When President Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, he wanted to run an administration that took a different approach to the Cold War:

Rather than Kissinger's affinity for balances of power, or Kennedy's invocation of strength, or Truman's quest for containment, Carter aimed to restore faith in an 'old dream – the dream of human liberty'... The passion for freedom is on the rise... Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. (Leffler 263)

Out of this idea, and following the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, the "Carter Doctrine was born, containment revived, and the Cold War resurrected" from a period of détente (Leffler 336).

By the time President George H.W. Bush took office in 1989, he knew that something had to be done and a new strategy had to be presented in an attempt to end the Cold War once and for all:

We are approaching the conclusion of a historic postwar struggle between two visions: one of tyranny and conflict and one of democracy and freedom.... Our goal is bold, more ambitious than any of my predecessors could have thought possible.... It is time to move beyond containment to a new policy for the 1990s – one that recognizes the full scope of change taking place around the world and in the Soviet Union itself. (Leffler 426)

The United States also had a goal that would attempt to transition the Soviet Union into a democratic capitalist country, "The Cold War could end, Bush was saying, if the Kremlin accept and integrated itself into a democratic capitalist world order" (Leffler 426). Essentially, the Bush administration was saying that the Cold War could end if the Soviet Union surrendered and assimilated to the American way of economics and politics, a true example of the push toward hegemony. The Bush administration ultimately "looked beyond containment, embraced Western European economic integration, and envisioned a Europe whole and free" (Leffler 428).

In 1948, to put an end to the Cold War, George F. Kennan, the creator of containment, noted that a few things had to be done by the Soviet Union:

The Cold War was over because Gorbachev previously had withdrawn Soviet troops from Afghanistan, de-ideologized international politics, ceased competing in many third world trouble spots, accepted free-market ideas and democratic political reforms at home, and permitted the overthrow of communist governments in Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union no longer had the capacity or will to compete ideologically or militarily for the soul of mankind. (Leffler 448)

Though it took many decades for these requirements to take place, by 1991, they ultimately had taken place. This would lead to the dissolving of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991. The country, founded in 1922, lasted nearly 69 years before its eventual and somewhat forced collapse.

Throughout the many decades of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union never came to physical blows. The two countries remained in a constant state of readiness and fear. Faced with many conflicts, both with each other and with proxy countries, the United States and the Soviet Union simply could not come to an agreement that would put an end to the war. Through economic recovery plans, promises that were not kept, and the fear of losing control [from both sides], containment was eventually achieved by the United States. Additionally, hegemony made a slight achievement, though it could be argued it was due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The United States made a consistent and persistent argument throughout the Cold War era that containment was the goal and hegemony had nothing to do with their actions. Though it seemed as though containment was the main goal of the United States throughout the Cold War, one could argue that hegemony was the goal that the United States didn't want to admit.

### Works Cited

- "Cold War and Global Hegemony, 1945-1991: AP Central – The College Board." *AP Central*, 10 Sept. 2018, [apcentral.collegeboard.org/series/america-on-the-world-stage/cold-war-and-global-hegemony-1945-1991](https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/series/america-on-the-world-stage/cold-war-and-global-hegemony-1945-1991).
- "Cold War Evolution and Interpretations - American Financial Hegemony." *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation*, [www.americanforeignrelations.com/A-D/Cold-War-Evolution-and-Interpretations-American-financial-hegemony.html](https://www.americanforeignrelations.com/A-D/Cold-War-Evolution-and-Interpretations-American-financial-hegemony.html).
- Cole, Nicki Lisa, Ph.D. "What Is Cultural Hegemony?" *ThoughtCo*, Aug. 28, 2020, [thoughtco.com/cultural-hegemony-3026121](https://www.thoughtco.com/cultural-hegemony-3026121).
- "The History of American Foreign Policy." *Lumen Learning*, [courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-politicalscience/chapter/the-history-of-american-foreign-policy/](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/boundless-politicalscience/chapter/the-history-of-american-foreign-policy/).
- Leffler, Melvyn P. *For the Soul of Mankind: the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. Hill and Wang, 2008.
- "The Marshall Plan." *George C. Marshall Foundation*, [www.marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/](https://www.marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/).
- "The Start of the Cold War." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/nuremberg-cold-war/](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/nuremberg-cold-war/).
- Truman, Harry S. "Truman Doctrine." *Avalon Project - Truman Doctrine*, Yale Law School, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).