

Chapter 10

Years of Decision

The following conversation might have taken place any time between 1946 and 1992. Each person in this debate represents a different approach to dealing with the Soviet Union. In this chapter, you will learn more about the thinking of leaders who argued these different positions concerning US/USSR relations. You will also have the opportunity to decide which approach you would like to use in response to each of five different challenges from the Soviets between 1946 and 1950.

The United States has got to learn to live with the Soviet Union. The United States can't act like the world's police force, getting involved in Europe and mainland Asia, where we have no business in the first place. Let's recognize the USSR's defensive needs and look for ways of building trust and cooperation between our two countries.

Wait a minute! Unless the United States takes the lead in the battle against communism, the Soviets are going to take over the world. The only language those commies understand is force. What you have to do is draw the line. Then tell them if they cross it, they are going to get hit with everything we've got! We need a strategy that does more than stop the spread of Soviet domination. Our goal should be to roll back the Soviet empire and free captive people from communism.

You're right! You can't trust the Soviet Union. As long as they can get away with it, those Soviets will try to take over more countries. But we don't want to start World War III either. What America should do is stand up to the USSR by helping countries resist communism. Don't give the Soviets any easy victories, and they'll eventually stop trying to rule the world.

Sphere of Influence and/or Isolation

Before Pearl Harbor, most Americans wanted their country to maintain the foreign policy it had followed for most of its 160 years. After World War II, many wanted to return to the traditional isolationist policies practiced before the war. This would have meant keeping out of Europe's affairs. In turn, European countries would be expected to stay out of North and South America. After World War II, this line of thinking was expressed by Roosevelt's former Vice-President, Henry Wallace. Wallace, believed there were a number of different power centers or spheres of influence in the world. For real peace, he argued, the US must:

...recognize that we have no more business in the political affairs of Eastern Europe than the USSR has in the political affairs of Latin America. We may not like what the Soviets do in Eastern Europe. Communist land reform, industrial expropriation [government take-over of businesses], and suppression of basic liberties offends the majority of Americans. But whether we like it or not, the Soviets will try to socialize their sphere of influence, just as we try to democratize ours.

We must realize that we are reckoning with a force which cannot be handled successfully by a "get tough with the USSR" policy. "Getting tough" never brought about real and lasting peace – whether with schoolyard bullies or businessmen, or world powers. The tougher we get, the tougher the Soviets will get. What we need to do is find issues on which we and the Soviets can cooperate.

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*Then we can negotiate agreements on these issues and thus build up a peace based on trust and mutual interest.*¹⁸

Containment

George Kennan, who served as ambassador to the Soviet Union, became one of America's most respected diplomats and Cold War strategists. Kennan's position was that Soviet leaders were not like Hitler. They were not impatient and reckless. They did, indeed, believe in their system, and they thought that the world's nations would eventually have communist governments. However, the Soviets could be stopped as long as the United States remained patient, did not back them into a corner where they had to fight, and applied constant but firm counter-pressure to contain them:

[I]t is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. This will be done by the adroit [skillful] and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy. The Soviet threat cannot be charmed or talked out of existence.



**President Eisenhower
with
Secretary of State Dulles**

It is important to note, however, that such a policy [containment] has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward 'toughness.' While the Kremlin is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige...It can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield.

*[But] the United States has it within its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate and will promote tendencies...[to] the gradual mellowing of Soviet power. This eventually will bring Soviet leadership to adjust itself in one way or another to the logic of that [U.S.-produced] state of affairs.*¹⁹

Massive Retaliation and Liberation

As Secretary of State under President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles became the spokesman for the retaliation and liberation school of thought. Dulles believed we could never stop the Soviets from expanding by just waiting to see where they would attack next. Instead, the United States should take the offensive by liberating people and using the threat of nuclear war to stop Soviet expansion:

["W]e shall never have a secure peace or a happy world so long as the Soviet communism dominates one-third of all peoples that there are, and is in the process of trying at least to extend its rule to many others.

¹⁸ Quoted in Richard J. Walton, *The Price of Vision, The Diary of Henry A. Wallace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).2..

¹⁹ Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, ed., *Great Issues in American History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), Volume II, p.422-423, 427.

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[A] policy which only aims at containing Russia where it now is, is in itself an unsound policy; but it is a policy which is bound to fail because a purely defensive policy never wins against an aggressive policy. If our only policy is to stay where we are, we will be driven back. It is only by keeping alive the hope of liberation, by taking advantage of that wherever opportunity arises, that we will end this peril which threatens the world.

*We need a security system for ourselves and other free nations, a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost. Local defense will always be important. But there is no local defense which will contain the mighty land power of the Communist world. Local defense must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power [the atom bomb]. A potential aggressor must know that he cannot always choose battle conditions that will suit him. Otherwise he might be tempted to attack in places where we are weak.*²⁰

Five Crises

As we have seen, the philosophies of sphere of influence/isolation, containment, and liberation/massive retaliation, were advocated by various statesmen in the late 1940s and early 1950's and each still has its followers today. In the next few pages, you will read of five different situations faced by President Truman during this period. The reader should consider which of the three approaches to the Soviet Union is the best way to resolve each of these crises.

War-Torn Europe

Two years after World War II ended, Europe had not begun to recover from the most destructive war in its history. Cities had been systematically destroyed, block by block. Where apartment houses once stood, rubble lay as far as the eye could see. There were no police, no fire departments, no running water, no sewers, no schools, and no operating factories. People fainted on the streets from hunger and froze to death in their homes. Some burned their own furniture for temporary relief from the cold. This was the situation everywhere in Europe: in Berlin, Rome, and London as well as in dozens of smaller cities, hundreds of towns, and thousands of villages.

To many it seemed that Europe would not recover. With no money to re-open factories, repair railroads, pave streets, replace residences, rebuild bridges, or to feed and clothe Europe's suffering millions the future held little hope.

These economic hardships also created great political difficulty. People on the verge of starvation could easily be tempted to support major economic changes. In France and Italy, for instance, somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of all voters were willing to vote for communist parties that made seductive promises to improve their lives, making it a distinct possibility that the communists would win the next election in Italy.

Proposed solutions:

a. State US concern and willingness to lend money.

²⁰Adapted from Hofstadter, pp. 439

- b. Warn the Soviets that the United States would not allow a communist government to come to power in France or Italy and would take strong measures to restore democratic rule.
- c. Spend somewhere between \$130 and \$180 billion (2000 dollars) to put the countries of Western and Central Europe (including Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary) back on their feet so they could support themselves.

Military Pressure on Greece and Turkey

For many decades, Britain had considered Greece and Turkey to be in its sphere of influence, but in 1947 the British told the United States they could no longer afford to protect either of these countries. In Greece, communist-led guerrillas (with help from non-communists) were waging a civil war to overthrow the pro-British but corrupt and repressive Greek monarchy. This time, the Greek communist party was receiving help from the Soviet Union. The USSR sent in supplies by way of Yugoslavia. Without outside help, the King of Greece and his government could not defeat the revolt.

Meanwhile, the USSR was putting pressure on Turkey for an agreement that would place control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles waterways in Soviet hands. Control over these choke points between the Aegean and Black Seas would give the Soviet navy free access to the Mediterranean. In addition, the Soviets wanted Turkey to grant them provinces in East Turkey that had once belonged to the Russian Empire.

Proposed solutions:

- a. Inform the Soviets that the United States frowns on their expansion into Greece and Turkey, but make no warnings and take no hostile actions.
- b. Threaten the USSR with military retaliation (from US B-29s that could carry nuclear bombs) if the Soviets tried to attack Turkey.
- c. Give Greece and Turkey \$9 billion (2000 dollars) worth of economic and military assistance so that they could defend themselves and remain independent of the Soviets.

Coup in Czechoslovakia

For three years after World War II, the Czechoslovakian government of Eduard Benes was undermined by the Soviet Union whose Red Army had driven the Germans out of the country. In February 1948, communists in the coalition Czech government threatened a coup d'état or seizure of the government to force Benes to turn the government over to them. An important resister against this coup, the son of Czechoslovakia's founder, Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk was found dead in the street under his third floor office window on March 10. Few American experts on Eastern Europe believed the police report that Masaryk had committed suicide.

Proposed solutions:

- a. Send a formal note of protest to the Soviet Union.

- b. Give assistance to anti-communist guerrillas in Czechoslovakia, and tell the Soviets they had three months to withdraw all of their troops from that country, or face nuclear destruction.
- c. Support other non-communist governments in Central Europe to strengthen them against similar tactics.

Berlin Blockade

The USSR announced that, starting April 1, 1948, it would carefully inspect all goods shipped through its occupation zone to West Berlin. In practice, this meant that the Soviets would make it impossible for the United States, Britain, and France to trade freely with Berlin. The British, French, and American occupation zones of Berlin would then become completely dependent economically on Soviet-occupied East Germany.

In taking action on April 1, the Soviets were not breaking a signed agreement. In the discussions of the future of Germany during the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, the Soviet Union only gave oral consent for free access to Allied sectors of Berlin. The Soviets never made a written commitment to allow passage through their zone in East Germany to Berlin.

By July 1948, the Soviets had totally stopped rail and road traffic for the 110 miles between Berlin and the West. The Berlin blockade was the latest in a series of provocative Soviet actions. The Soviets had earlier taken goods worth many billion dollars out of East Germany as partial payment of \$10 billion they had been promised at Yalta. They also demanded reparations from the zones of their former allies. Furthermore, in response to a currency reform in the western zones, the Soviets flooded their zone with paper currency, causing inflation throughout Germany. The Soviets suspected that Britain, France, and the United States were working together ever more closely to create an independent West Germany. The blockade was, in part, an attempt to prevent further cooperation among the Western democracies.

Proposed solutions

- a. Allow unification of East Germany with Berlin, and unify British, French, and American occupation zones into West Germany.
- b. Use US tanks with air support to lead convoys into Berlin from West Germany; threaten to use nuclear weapons if the Soviets try to stop allied support for Berlin.
- c. Fly over the blockade and supply West Berlin by air until the Soviets open the routes to West Berlin again.

Soviet Military Presence in Europe

Shortly after World War II ended, the United States brought 90 percent of its troops home from Europe, leaving slightly more than 300,000 on the continent. In contrast, the Soviets maintained 4,000,000 Red Army soldiers under arms, none very far from Western Europe. Pro-Soviet satellite countries in East Europe had 1,000,000 soldiers - compared to 860,000 troops in West Europe. In addition, large parts of the

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British and French armies were in Asia, trying to hold on to their colonies. These soldiers would not be available in time to defend their homelands in case of a Soviet attack. Unless one counted the US absolute superiority in nuclear weapons, the military balance in Europe had shifted to favor the USSR.

Up until 1949, US defensive strategy relied mainly on its possession of nuclear arms, but the Soviets exploded their first nuclear device in August that year. US strategy, henceforth, could no longer be based on America's sole possession of atomic weapons.

Proposed solutions:

- a. Call for the countries of Western Europe to play a larger role in defending themselves. Make no commitment to come to their defense.
- b. Continue surrounding the Soviet Union with bases for US bombers equipped for nuclear weapons, and remind the Soviets of US supremacy in this regard.
- c. Strengthen US conventional (non-nuclear) forces in Europe, and ask Britain, France, and other Western European nations to increase their military strength.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly tell the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|---|
| a. Henry Wallace | e. liberation | i. adroit and vigilant application of counter-force |
| b. land reform | f. massive retaliation | j. gradual mellowing' |
| c. "school yard bullies" | g. George Kennan | k. five major crises |
| d. John Foster Dulles | h. containment | |

2. State which of the three policies sounds most sensible to you. Give reasons to support your opinion.

3. Carefully read at least two of the five crises and prepare a report covering:

- the relevant facts of the case
- a proposed solution and reasons you reject it
- proposed solution and reasons you accept it