An Analysis of Orthodox and Revisionist Historiography of America’s Containment Policy, 1947-50--Warren Ferguson

    Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the United States developed a policy for containing the Soviet Union in the East and preventing the spread of communism worldwide. This policy of containment highlighted the need to halt the spread of communism both domestically and abroad and is a critical element of American history because it effectively defined the Western World's foreign policy towards the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. It is hard to locate one factor precipitating the start of the Cold War, because multiple events, including the Soviet infiltration of the Manhattan Project, Igor Gouzenko’s defection to the West in 1945 with numerous state secrets, and the implementation of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 all contributed, at least in part, to the growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States. However, by the start of the Korean War in 1950, it was clear the former wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union was gone, replaced by an antagonistic relationship. Due to the complex nature of the origins of the Cold War, the American strategy of “containment” in relation to the Soviet Union and communism in general is also complex as its development was influenced by multiple factors. The question has thus arisen, what ultimately influenced the development and implementation of the United States’ containment policy in relation to the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1950?

    In the years following the development and implementation of the containment strategy by the United States, there was a popularly held belief among many Americans, including some noteworthy historians, that the Soviet Union was bent on aggression and subversion of democratic ideals. This popular opinion influenced the writing of many western orthodox historians during this time period including Thomas A. Bailey[[1]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn1) and Herbert Feis,[[2]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn2) who argue that American policy was designed during this time solely to protect against the belligerence of the Soviet Union. On the other side of the historical debate, many revisionists, often writing in the 1960s and 1970s from the new left, depict American foreign policy as little more than economic imperialism. William Appleman Williams[[3]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn3) and Joyce and Gabriel Kolko[[4]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn4) each argue, in their respective works, that American actions were designed to increase the American sphere of influence at the expense of others. It is noteworthy that revisionists have developed a number of different, often conflicting interpretations on the development of containment. So, for the sake of brevity and precision, only a representative sampling has been included in this paper. It is the intention of this paper to assess the relative validity of these two opposing interpretations through the evaluation of three major American foreign policies developed during the period of 1947-1950 including; the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NSC-68. Ultimately, it will be concluded that the orthodox perspective over-emphasizes and exaggerates the threat of the Soviet Union, the revisionists’ dismissal of the perceived Soviet threat as a valid influence fails to accurately account for certain key details. Ultimately, it was the misperception of the Soviet threat that drove the development of containment.

**The Truman Doctrine**

    The Truman Doctrine, created in response to a developing political crisis in Greece and Turkey in 1947, was a significant step in the development of the American strategy of containment. In February 1945 at the Yalta Conference, the Soviet Union agreed, among other things, that Poland was to have fair, free elections following the war,[[5]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn5) and that Poland’s government was to be “reorganized on a broader democratic basis.”[[6]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn6) Throughout 1946 and 1947, significant political reform, from the perspective of the United States, in Poland did not occur and instead a pro-Soviet government was installed. This influenced George Kennan, the American Ambassador to Moscow, to write what became known as the “Long Telegram,” to Washington on February 22nd 1946. In this document, he declared that “where individual governments stand in the path of Soviet purposes pressure will be brought for their removal from office” and he made the explicit reference to Turkey as an example.[[7]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn7) Throughout 1946 and 1947, there were several warnings that the Greek government might collapse, from financial instability and an internal uprising of nationalist and communist forces.[[8]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn8) Therefore, on February 21st 1947, Secretary of State George C. Marshall instructed Dean Acheson, a policy planner, and Marshall's successor, to start preparing possible measures to handle the developing situation in Greece.[[9]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn9) After the British government passed on its financial obligations to the United States in late February 1947, President Harry Truman made a speech in Congress, on March 12th 1947, where he outlined what was to become the “Truman Doctrine.”[[10]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn10) Specifically, he asked Congress for $400 million for aid in Greece and Turkey and asserted 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.”[[11]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn11) This financial aid to Greece, and the precedent it set, would become integral to the American strategy of containment.

    The origin and development of the Truman Doctrine, the foundation of containment, has evoked much historical debate, as opinions differ as to its ultimate motivation and intention. Examining the influences on the Truman Doctrine, orthodox historians largely concur with Thomas Bailey’s argument that “by mid-march, 1945-one month before the President's death, the Soviets were clearly taking over Poland and Romania as satellites in violation of their solemn pledges at Yalta.”[[12]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn12) Noteworthy is that, in his Long Telegram, Kennan wrote that the “USSR still lives in antagonistic capitalist encirclement with which in the long run there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence.”[[13]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn13) Given this evidence, in conjunction with the apparent Soviet aggression and duplicity at Yalta (from the perspective of the United States), it can be understood how the American Government used Kennan’s Long Telegram not only to explain past Soviet behaviour but also to predict it in the future.[[14]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn14)

    Unsurprisingly, many western, orthodox historians adopt language in their writing which mirrors the language used in Kennan’s Long Telegram. Herbert Feis, one such historian, argues that “it was vital to American security that the communists be thwarted in Greece and Turkey.”[[15]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn15)Bailey builds on this argument when he claims that, “forewarned and alerted, the United States undertook to revamp its foreign policies and bolster its defenses.”[[16]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn16) From this perspective, it can be argued that the Truman Doctrine, and the precedent it set for containing the spread of communism, was the result of the Soviet Union's aggression and belligerence in supporting the spread of communism. Substantiating this conclusion, a report by the Balkan Commission of Investigation to the Security Council of the United Nations on May 27th 1947 can be referenced, in which it was claimed that Greece’s communist neighbors were providing economic and military support to communist rebels in Northern Greece.[[17]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn17) Given the important shift in policy caused by the Truman Doctrine, it can thus be argued, from the orthodox perspective, that the containment strategy employed throughout the Cold War was developed in response to Soviet aggression.

    On the other side of the historiographical debate, western revisionist historians often see the Truman Doctrine as little more than an attempt to expand the American sphere of influence abroad. William Appleman Williams, a noted new left revisionist historian, argues that “American policy can without much exaggeration be described as an effort to establish the open door policy once and for all.”[[18]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn18) In short, this suggests that the actions of the United States, including the development of the containment strategy, had little to do with Russia itself: they were meant solely to enlarge the American sphere of influence. Joyce and Gabriel Kolko, two other historians writing from the revisionist perspective, expand on this idea by alleging that “the carefully planned sense of surprise, the contrived sudden emergency, were all intended to minimize opposition and obtain speed [in the passage of the bill].”[[19]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn19) They point to the instructions Marshall gave Acheson on February 21st, 1947 as evidence that the crisis in Greece was not only expected, but that the American government was counting on it to expand their own influence overseas.[[20]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn20)

    Moreover, while orthodox historians often point to Kennan's Telegram as inspiration for the Truman Doctrine, it is noteworthy that Kennan disavowed himself from his Long Telegram a few years after it was written, as he no longer supported its conclusions.[[20]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36#fn20) In his memoirs, Kennan even compares the telegram to “one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees.”[[22]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn22) Therefore, it is also worthy of mention that some historians, including Walter Lafeber, suggest that the Soviet Union simply interpreted the conditions set down at Yalta differently than the West.[[23]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn23) From the Soviet Union’s perspective, they were deserving of both land reparations and a buffer of neutral countries between themselves and the rest of Europe (although this ended up not coming to pass).[[24]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn24) If this argument is accepted, it can be claimed that Soviet actions were not as belligerent as some orthodox historians point out and that, overall, the Truman Doctrine, and the containment policy it set in motion, were designed primarily to expand the American sphere of influence.

    When considering the Truman Doctrine, both the orthodox and revisionist perspectives offer valid points which must both be considered. Although the agreements set forth at Yalta were somewhat ill defined, orthodox historians advance a strong argument when they claim Stalin's actions in Poland were aggressive. With that being said, it is possible, as Lafeber suggests, that the Soviet actions in Poland were misinterpreted and exaggerated by the West. With this in mind, Kennan’s Long Telegram is critical to understanding America’s policy of containment because it appears to have significantly influenced the Truman Doctrine. In support of this point, John Gaddis, a post-revisionist historian, claims that the Long Telegram was used in the United States as “the single most influential explanation of postwar Soviet behavior.”[[25]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn25) Kennan's admission, that his Long Telegram significantly over-exaggerated the Soviet Union’s threat to the United States, does suggest that American foreign policy was founded on a false perception. Therefore, Williams’ argument that the Truman Doctrine was designed solely as an expansionistic initiative must not be dismissed. With that being said, Gaddis argues that the “Soviet Union had no intention of cooperating with the West.”[[26]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn26) Given his access to Soviet archives during the 1980s and 1990s, his position appears to hold greater value than the Kolkos’ or Williams’ as he had a better understanding of the motivations of the Soviet Union at the time. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Truman Doctrine, and thus the American policy of containment, was founded, at least in part, on the misperception of reality and the exaggeration of Russian aggression.
 **The Marshall Plan**

    The Marshall Plan, introduced by Secretary of State George C. Marshall on June 5th, 1947, is also significant in the study of American foreign policy. It was an inclusive economic aid program meant to restore Europe’s shattered economy following the devastation of World War Two. In late 1947, a series of communist-led general strikes in Italy and France, possibly supported by the Soviet Union, emphasized the economic instability of Europe, lending American public and political support to the idea of economic aid.[[27]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn27) Ultimately, Marshall proposed restoring “the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and Europe as a whole.”[[28]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn28) In late June and early July of 1947, a conference was held in Paris between Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union to discuss the terms set down by the United States for the inclusion of Germany in the proposed aid package. The Soviet Union officially withdrew from the conference, and the plan, on July 3rd, 1947, after it was made clear that German participation in the plan was a prerequisite set by the United States.[[29]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn29) It was the argument of the Soviet Union that a unified and integrated Germany was a threat to peace in Europe, an understandable apprehension following the destruction experienced by the Russians during World War Two.[[30]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn30) After the details were worked out in Europe, and after months of intense debate in the American Congress, the Marshall Plan was signed into law in the United States on April 3rd, 1948.[[31]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn31) Between 1948 and 1952, the plan allocated over $12.5 billion in American economic aid to Europe and is ostensibly responsible for the 32.5% increase in Europe’s Gross National Product during this time period.[[32]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn32) In reaction to the plan, the Soviet Union implemented its own Molotov Plan, a series of restrictive trade agreements with its neighbours, in late 1947, and made it compulsory for its satellite states.[[33]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn33)

    Discussion and disagreement over the intent of the Marshall Plan, and its role in division of Europe, has been a fixture in the historiographical debate over the origins of the Cold War, and the implementation of the American policy of containment, for 50 years. Traditionally, the arguments of orthodox historians reflect the popular belief at the time that the Marshall Plan was a genuine philanthropic gesture and that the “the Kremlin brutally slapped aside the outstretched American hand.”[[34]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn34) In light of the Soviet Union’s refusal to join the International Monetary Fund in 1945, it can be understood how some remained skeptical as to the feasibility of an economic partnership with the East.[[35]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn35) From this perspective, orthodox historians have argued that the creation of the Cominform (an organization designed to aggressively support communist activities worldwide) on July 6th, 1947 was little more than a belligerent response to the Marshall Plan.[[36]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn36) In this light, the American requirement for German participation in the Marshall Plan, a step towards a revitalized Germany, was a move meant to protect against the Soviet Union’s perceived aggression. Bailey accounts for this in his work when he suggests that “the Kremlin unwittingly helped spur the languishing Marshall Plan appropriation through Congress” as there is evidence to suggest that the Marshall Plan would not have passed had the Russians not withdrawn.[[37]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn37) From this perspective, the argument can be made that the Marshall Plan, and the containment of communism it represented, was primarily influenced by a perceived threat from the Soviet Union.

    When assessing the motivations behind the implementation of the Marshall Plan or, more specifically, the requirement for German participation in the Marshall Plan, it is necessary to analyze the actions of the Soviet Union. In 1948, the communist-led Czechoslovakian Coup resulted in the suspicious death of Jan Masaryk, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a man supportive of positive relations with the United States.[[38]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn38) This coup not only further aligned Czechoslovakia with the Soviet Union, it caused great anxiety and apprehension in the United States, as it was seen as evidence of the Soviet Union’s aggression.[[39]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn39) In light of this, and the communist-inspired strikes in France and Italy, Bailey asserts that “the American people were convinced that the Kremlin was bent on enchaining the entire globe.”[[40]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn40) There is evidence however which brings into doubt the assumption that the Czechoslovakian Coup was entirely planned and orchestrated by the Soviet Union.[[41]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn41) The Kolkos, for example, argue that the coup was a nationalist uprising and that “Washington used the Czech crisis to, distorting every facet of it to heighten the East-West tensions to extract a prompt vote from Congress on the Marshall Plan.”[[42]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn42) They further suggest that the death of Jan Masaryk is tragic yet understandable considering his history of mental illness.[[43]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36#fn43%27%20name=) In either case, it is clear the Czechoslovakian Coup in 1948, orchestrated by Moscow or not, had a significant impact on the development of American foreign policy.

    Revisionist historians have also argued that the Marshall Plan, as a centrepiece of American foreign policy, was not a response to Soviet aggression but a continuation of the “open door” policy needed to sustain America's economy. Williams argues that, in 1947, it was a strongly held belief that “America’s economic system would suffer a serious depression if it did not continue to expand overseas.”[[44]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn44) In light of the fact that Vyacheslav Molotov brought 89 economic advisors with him to Paris, the argument can be made that the Soviet Union was still open to cooperation with the West.[[45]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn45) Molotov withdrew from the Marshall Plan only after it became clear that German participation in the plan, a non-starter for the Soviets, was a stipulation of American aid. In a telegram on June 24th, 1947, Nikolai Novikov, the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, instructed Molotov to “object to attempts to use German economic resources [in the plan]”[[46]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn46) as he saw the American prerequisite of German participation as an infringement “upon the sovereignty and economic independence of European countries.”[[47]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn47) Given this, the Kolkos argue “the policy of reconstructing Western Germany in a Western European context was tantamount to a decision to divide Europe and isolate the Soviet Union.”[[48]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn48) Therefore, revisionists argue that the Molotov Plan was simply a reactionary measure designed to protect Soviet interests and not, as orthodox historians contend, a belligerent measure designed to divide Europe. From this perspective, the Marshall Plan or, more specifically, the German participation in the Marshall Plan, was a policy designed with the sole purpose of economically expanding the United States’ sphere of influence through an open door policy.

    Both the orthodox and revisionist perspectives each offer valid arguments concerning the nature of the Marshall Plan and its role in the American containment strategy. While the revisionist argument, embodied by Williams and the Kolkos in their work, does offer an interesting interpretation of the Marshall Plan as economic imperialism, their dismissal of Soviet actions as non-consequential weakens their argument. It is clear that the perceived threat of the Soviet Union in the United States, valid or not, appears to have played a large role in the Marshall Plan’s development and its passage through Congress. With that being said, certain actions of the Soviet Union, declared “hostile” by orthodox historians, were both logical and understandable. With what may have appeared to be a developing hostile bloc to their West, it is only logical to assume that Stalin, and the Soviet Union, which had lost tens of millions of citizens during the Second World War, felt threatened. Thus, the Molotov Plan can be seen as an attempt to balance the playing field. Gaddis makes an interesting point when he argues that although the Soviet Union was ultimately responsible for dividing Europe over the Marshall Plan, the United States’ offer of aid was presented in such a way as to make it completely unacceptable to the Soviet Union, leaving only one possible outcome.[[49]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn49) Given the evidence, this seems like the most comprehensive interpretation of the situation. Mutual suspicion, distrust and misperception of each other’s motives ultimately ensured the division in Europe and influenced the implementation of containment by the United States.

**NSC-68**

    Any discussion surrounding American foreign policy must account for NSC-68, a policy paper that forcefully advocated for the rearmament of the American military, in line with the United States’ containment policy.[[50]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn50) A series of international developments of note occurred in late 1949 including the successful Soviet detonation of a nuclear bomb in August and September of 1949 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949.[[51]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn51)Then, on February 14th, 1950, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China signed a treaty of friendship, effectively link China and the Soviet Union together.[[52]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn52) While these events were occurring abroad, there were also significant political developments in the United States itself. In early 1950, Alger Hiss was accused of being a communist and a spy, eventually being found guilty of perjury and sentenced to five years in prison.[[53]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn53) This conviction propagated the “red scare” in the United States which accelerated on February 9th 1950, when Senator Joseph McCarthy made his first of many infamous speeches, in which he aroused fear of communists in the federal government.[[54]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn54)

    It is under these conditions NSC-68 was drawn up by the National Security Council between January 31st, 1950 and April 14th, 1950, under the leadership of Paul Nitze, the head of the National Security Council.[[55]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn55) In NSC-68, Nitze called for the rapid rearmament of the American military to stop “the complete subversion and destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society” by the Kremlin.[[56]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn56) This conclusion, which would have required a yearly defense budget of $50 billion, met with initial resistance from Truman as he argued in his 1948 run for presidency that the defense budget should never exceed $15 billion.[[57]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn57) However, on June 25th, 1950, the North Korean Army invaded South Korea, precipitating the Korean War, in which the United States, implementing its containment strategy, got involved.[[58]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn58) The premises of NSC-68 were then accepted as fact and the total defence appropriations rose from $13.9 billion to $42.9 billion between 1950 and 1951.[[59]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn59)

    On one side of the historiographical debate, the orthodox opinion underlines the perception of threat in the United States, thereby endorsing the measures proposed by NSC-68.  In NSC-68, it was estimated by Nitze’s planning staff that the Soviet Union was sinking 13.8% of its GDP into the military compared to 6.5% in the United States in early 1950.[[60]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn60) Coupled with a report release by the CIA on February 10th, 1950 which estimated the Soviet Union would have 200 nuclear weapons by 1955, the year of “maximum danger” to the United States, it is unsurprising from the orthodox perspective that the National Security Council was alarmed.[[61]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn61) Nitze says he “regarded the Kremlin’s behavior as indicative of an aggressive and deliberate program to place the Soviet Union in the best position [to attack the United States].” It is thus interesting to note Nitze comment that “it is untrue to claim that [they] thought the Russians were about to attack.”[[62]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn62) This line of reasoning suggests that, from the orthodox perspective, NSC-68 was not founded on an irrational belief that communists were around every corner, but a desire for preparedness. Considering the international developments in late 1949, including the atomic test and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, Nitze points out that “these were all facts bearing upon the Soviet assessment of the correlation of forces which we had to consider in assessing U.S. defense priorities.”[[63]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn63) In light of this evidence, NSC-68, an essential document used to plan the containment of the Soviet Union, was influenced by the genuine threat posed by the Soviet Union, and recommended an appropriate response from the American military.

    On the other side of the historiographical debate, revisionists bring into doubt the severity of the threat of the Soviet Union and, thus, the influences of NSC-68. For example, Samuel Wells asserts that “the authors [of NSC-68] overdrew the monolithic and evil nature of the Communist bloc.”[[64]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn64) This position is supported by the fact that, of the 175 army divisions supposedly under Soviet command in 1950, a large proportion was either severely undermanned or non-existent entirely.[[65]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn65) Moreover, after the opening of the Soviet archives in the 1990s, there is much evidence to support the claim that “neither superpower played a significant role in bringing about the collapse of [the Chinese] regime” in 1949.[[66]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn66) Michael Hogan thus argues that the actions of the United States were not influenced by the direct threat of the Soviet Union but by the “myth of unpreparedness” instead.[[67]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn67) He argues that the United States was influenced to a disproportionate degree by the need to prevent another Pearl Harbor and that their foreign policy was thus stuck in the past, not the future.[[68]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn68) It is also noteworthy, as Wells argues, that “[h]ad war not intervened, there is strong evidence that no major increase in defense spending would have won administration approval.”[[69]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn69) While highlighted at the time, and in orthodox secondary historical literature, as evidence of the aggression of the Soviet Union,[[70]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn70) revisionists, often with better access to historical archives, argue that the Soviet Union did not endorse the invasion of South Korea.[[71]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn71)Therefore, Hogan summarizes the revisionist perspective when he claims that NSC-68 “portrayed the Soviet Union in the most aggressive light  possible.”[[72]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn72)From this point of view, NSC-68, the epitome of American containment, was influenced by an irrational fear of the Soviet Union, a fear not  founded in reality.

    The orthodox and revisionist interpretations of NSC-68, and the factors which influenced it, provide an interesting contrast in the historiographical debate surrounding the implementation of containment. It is fairly clear that the language used by NSC-68 was prejudiced and portrayed the Soviet Union as an evil monolith, dedicated to aggression. Evidence provided by revisionist historians not only refutes this arguably unfair representation, it suggests NSC-68 was founded on hysteria and irrationality. It is important to note, however, that the American strategy was planned based on what was available at the time in terms of intelligence on the Soviet Union. Although much of said intelligence later proved to be false, it is misleading to argue, as many revisionists have done, that the drafting of NSC-68 was founded on irrational fear. The decisions made by Nitze and the National Security Council, as subjective as they were, seemed supported, at the time, by existing evidence. Therefore, it can be concluded that it was misperception which ultimately influenced the creation of NSC-68.

    On a different line of thought, it is also interesting to note that NSC-68 was written at the same time McCarthy made his first speeches denouncing communists and Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury. It has been generally accepted that an atmosphere of hysteria existed in the United States during this time over the spread of communism and it is possible that this popular opinion significantly influenced the writing of NSC-68. This is an interesting line of inquiry which has not been thoroughly explored in this paper, but one which deserves additional attention in the future.

**Conclusion**

    The American strategy of containment, first proposed by Kennan and developed between 1947 and 1950, is a crucial element of American history as it defined American foreign policy for much of the Cold War. As a result of the numerous influences on American policy development during this time period, it is unsurprising that the development of the containment strategy has garnered much historiographical debate since its inception. Initially, orthodox historians saw containment as both a viable and appropriate method of dealing with overt communist aggression. More recently, revisionists argue that containment was instead an attempt to imperialistically expand the United States' sphere of influence by exaggerating the threat posed by communists and the Soviet Union. However, the analysis of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NSC-68 reveals that, ultimately, it was the misperception of threat, from both the United States and the Soviet Union, which precipitated the growing divide between East and West between 1947 and 1950. As a result, it can be concluded that the major influence on the development of containment in the United States was simply the misperception of the threat posed by the Soviet Union. However, as Gaddis, a post-revisionist, notes, “to deny that the alarm itself was sincere or that Americans were not alone in perceiving it, is to distort the view through the prism more than necessary.”[[73]](http://journals.stfx.ca/killick/article/view/16/36%22%20%5Cl%20%22fn73) Tension and distrust did exist on both sides of the “Iron Curtain” but, on the balance, misunderstanding and misperception intensified the antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union.

    Despite the exhaustive attention given to the American strategy of containment in western historical literature, historians frequently fail to reference the interpretations of other nations on American foreign policy. For example, few western historians appear to evaluate any of the elements discussed in this paper from a South Korean or Japanese perspective. Given the importance of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NSC-68 for each of these countries, the lack of any argument from their perspective and their interpretation of American foreign policy is conspicuous. It is generally presumed that American aid and intervention was supported by the democracies affected by the Truman Doctrine or the Marshall Plan but this presumption is usually unaddressed. This provides an interesting line of future inquiry as it raises some thought provoking questions about the United States' role in the world order. Along a similar line of thought, the perspective of the Soviet Union was not given as much attention as deserved in this essay due to the problem of translating Russian text into English. It would be interesting to examine foreign policy decisions of the Soviet Union, policies which in turn influenced the United States, from their perspective. This too would be a good line of inquiry for additional research, especially concerning the difference of opinion on American foreign policy that exists between the East and the West. While further research into this subject matter may provide additional perspective from which to examine American foreign policy between 1947 and 1950, it is clear that the containment strategy played a crucial role in the development of the world order that can be seen today.