

# The X Article—25 Years Later

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The cold war is dead and the autopsies have begun. It lasted nearly a quarter of a century, or twice as long as Hitler's thousand-year Reich. It left scarcely any nation of the earth untouched—and even extended into outer space—as America and Russia struggled over a world they thought must belong either to one or to the other. Caught in the grip of the equally powerful ideologies of communism and anti-communism, and in a consuming aspiration of world leadership, the two superpowers sought security in the elusive quest for military supremacy.

Their weapons, of course, brought them neither security nor supremacy, and as the passion of their ideology began to fade so did their pretensions. They discovered not only that the world could not, but that it need not, be divided between them. They learned that allies were entangling, client regimes treacherous, and most of the Third World politically irrelevant. That realization stemmed from the Sino-Soviet split, the Cuban missile crisis, the quarrel with De Gaulle, the nuclear stalemate and the debacle of Vietnam. Under the impact of these events the peculiar combination of global rivalry, ideological passion and a balance of terror that was the hallmark of the cold war gradually lost its virulence. At a time when the President of the United States renders homage to the Communist rulers of China by traveling to their court in Peking, and when Washington seeks Moscow's help in the onerous and increasingly tiresome burden of developing the impoverished states of the Third World, it is obvious that the old faith has eroded and the old vocabulary is obsolete.

The political contest, to be sure, continues. But neither America nor Russia any longer has illusions about organizing the world or, for that matter, even

controlling their recalcitrant allies. They remain competitors but increasingly complementary adversaries hemmed in by rising powers—China, Japan, a uniting Europe—with very contrary ambitions of their own. The cold war has been superseded, not by peace but by competition and shifting balance. "Things are getting back," in the words used by the Tory statesman George Canning a century and a half ago, "to a wholesome state again: every nation for itself and God for us all."

It may not be a wholesome state, but the parallels with the nineteenth century are becoming clear, as such terms as balance of power and spheres of influence are returning to the diplomatic lexicon. Metternich's game of political balance in Europe is now being played on a global scale, but the number of players has been increased, and the combinations among them are myriad.

If the passing of the cold war has not brought peace, neither has it resulted in a decent burial of conflict. Before those old passions can finally be put to rest they must, like a love affair gone sour, be examined, analyzed, and probed. We were too deeply, too emotionally involved in the struggle with Russia to dismiss it lightly now that it has changed form or to pretend that it was all a terrible mistake.

The cold war was neither accidental nor inevitable. It took the form it did because of attitudes held and positions taken by both superpowers. They reacted in tandem, each feeding the other's anxieties, each confirming by its actions the worst apprehensions of the other.

For the most part there has been a consensus among American and West European historians that the cold war was almost entirely the fault of the Russians and that the United States responded to Soviet provocations slowly and reluctantly. Only when Moscow's threat to Western Europe became overwhelming, it has been argued, did Washington rouse itself from daydreams of postwar cooperation

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with the Russians and embark upon a crash program of self-defense. The Kremlin's concern, as George Kennan wrote in 1947, was "to make sure that it has filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power." Others, expanding upon this interpretation, urged that the United States must intervene throughout the world, "to support," in the ambiguous and troublesome phrase of the Truman Doctrine, "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."

Until quite recently very few historians have challenged this consensus and those who did often found themselves dismissed as naive, if not worse. The time was not ripe for a dispassionate assessment of the cold war, and the path-breaking works of such historians as D. F. Fleming and William A. Williams were neglected for years. The tide has now turned, as there has been a recent wave of "revisionist" studies calling into question not only America's conduct of the cold war but the motivations of her leaders and their ambitions in the postwar world.

Some of the more radical interpretations maintain that there never was a Soviet military threat to Western Europe and that Western political leaders knew it. The charge is that they deliberately manipulated American public opinion by creating a war scare in order to pursue policies designed to force the Soviet Union out of Eastern Europe and restore anti-Communist governments to those border states. Even the Marshall Plan, these critics argue, was in no sense philanthropy but was designed to prevent another Depression in the United States by providing Europeans with the means to buy American goods. Like the Truman Doctrine that was its handmaiden—in President Truman's words, the "two halves of the same walnut"—it was sold to an unsophisticated Congress and to the people under the catch-all label of anti-communism.

In this light the creation of a separate West German state and its rearmament, the formation of NATO and the blueprint for global interventionism that was the Truman Doctrine were deliberate efforts to deny the Soviet Union its hard-won sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and to "contain" it through a vise of anti-Communist states around its periphery. Rather than being defensive, American policy would thus appear, in its preoccupation with communism, actively hostile to the reasonable security interests of the Soviet Union. The cold war, therefore, was at least as much a result of American policies as of Soviet actions.

This revisionist interpretation, needless to say, is far from becoming the new orthodoxy and is under sharp attack from historians committed to a more conventional view of cold war politics. But what is significant is that the debate is now in full swing and every aspect of the cold war is being subjected to reinterpretation. In this effort, historians are naturally

turning to the critical period from 1945 to 1947 when the wartime allies became bitter adversaries and when the policies were laid down that were to determine the course of the cold war for two decades.

Historians do not agree on when the cold war actually began. Some trace it as far back as 1917 at the time of the Bolshevik revolution, when the Western powers tried to topple the Soviet regime. But the cold war as we know it was rooted in the early postwar period. Among the key elements in its formation were the State Department's mysterious "misplacing" of a Soviet request for a \$6 billion reconstruction loan in January, 1945, Truman's dispute with Stalin at Potsdam over the meaning of the Yalta accords on Eastern Europe, the bellicose speech by Secretary of State James Byrnes at Stuttgart in May, 1946, Churchill's "iron curtain" speech at Fulton, Missouri, in March of that year, the showdown in Iran that winter and spring, and the impasse over the international control of atomic energy.

By 1946 the tide against cooperation with the Russians was clearly turning. It was reflected in the statements of public officials, in the hardening of attitudes, in recommendations for the re-industrialization and eventual rearmament of Germany and in the growing belief, dramatically expressed by former ambassador William C. Bullitt, that "the final aim of Russia is world conquest." President Truman had already shown his suspicion of Soviet ambitions, a suspicion reinforced by Averell Harriman, his ambassador to Moscow, and Navy Secretary James Forrestal.

While serving in Moscow, Harriman had been greatly impressed by a foreign service officer assigned to the embassy, George Kennan. After years of relative obscurity within the hierarchy of the State Department, Kennan found a receptive listener in Harriman, one who shared his antipathy to Soviet behavior and his fear that Washington was not alert to the dangers of Russian expansionism. In February, 1946, Kennan sent an 8,000-word message to the State Department in which he analyzed Soviet behavior and outlined the course which he believed the West should follow.

The long telegram, as that message is generally known, came at a crucial moment when official opinion was shifting, but the lines had not yet been drawn. It served to crystallize attitudes and to provide an intellectual justification for positions that were still not freely voiced or commonly held. Within a short time Kennan's analysis became the new orthodoxy, with its warning that the Soviet Union represented "a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure." Commenting on the language of the

telegram some twenty years later, Kennan confessed that “much of it reads exactly like one of those primers put out by alarmed congressional committees or by the Daughters of the American Revolution, designed to arouse the citizenry to the dangers of the Communist conspiracy.”

If the tone seemed exaggerated to Kennan two decades later, it very much captured the mood of the times. It assured him access to Forrestal, for whom the following year he wrote a private paper analyzing Soviet power and its implications for U.S. policy. The paper was warmly received, widely distributed among policy-makers, and ultimately appeared in the July, 1947, issue of the quarterly journal *Foreign Affairs*, the unofficial voice of the foreign policy establishment. Entitled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” the article was signed simply by “X,” precisely because it was being presented as official policy, but its authorship soon became generally known.

The effect of the X article was electrifying. It articulated in the most eloquent and lucid terms for the general public the new policy of confrontation with Russia that, under the rubric of “containment,” had become the diplomacy of the Truman Administration. It was not that Kennan formulated these policies, for they were under discussion before his article was written and they later took forms of which he strongly disapproved. But his gifted pen provided the intellectual rationalization for them at a time when the wartime spirit of cooperation with Soviet Russia had not yet been publicly buried. The acclaim for the article was immediate and overwhelming. From an unknown and relatively minor government official, George Kennan became an international figure, the father of the containment doctrine.

Though the acclaim was widespread, it was not universal. The sharpest, and for Kennan the most disturbing, criticism came not from the far Left but from a political analyst noted for his unsentimental approach to foreign policy, his privileged access to the highest government officials and what many considered to be a marked political conservatism. Shortly after publication of the X article Walter Lippmann, the uncrowned dean of American journalists, whose internationally syndicated column was required reading in the foreign office of every major country, launched a full-scale broadside against Kennan’s containment policy.

Lippmann’s criticism rested on two major grounds: that the X article presented a faulty explanation of Soviet behavior, and that its recommendations for American policy were a potentially disastrous “strategic monstrosity.” In other words, he rejected virtually every aspect of Kennan’s thesis and the prescriptions which flowed from it. Whereas Kennan emphasized Marxist ideology as the prime determinant of Soviet actions (the “innate antagonism between

capitalism and Socialism,” “the infallibility of the Kremlin”), Lippmann demonstrated from Russian history that the determination to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was a Czarist ambition long before it was taken over by the Soviets.

The main thrust of Lippmann’s attack, however, was directed at Kennan’s prescription for dealing with the Soviet Union: the containment doctrine. The essence of the policy was Kennan’s recommendation that the Kremlin’s expansionist tendencies must be matched by the “adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points.” The scenario raised by Kennan’s analysis was of perpetual crises at various points around the world as Moscow probed for weak points in the West’s defensive armor.

While Kennan did not specifically prescribe military force, it was generally assumed that this is what he meant, and at the time neither he nor any responsible government official denied this. Coming hot on the heels of the Truman Doctrine of March, 1947—which promised military aid to Greece and Turkey and support for “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation”—the containment doctrine sounded to Lippmann like a blueprint for global American intervention. Further, he knew something which was not then apparent to many of his readers: that the paper written for Forrestal in February, 1947, from which the X article was drawn, had served as the intellectual justification for the Truman Doctrine, even though Kennan himself, as he wrote many years later, was disturbed by the Doctrine’s presentation in “terms more grandiose and more sweeping than anything that I, at least, had ever envisaged.”

What particularly troubled Lippmann about containment was not its opposition to Russian expansionist tendencies, for he was as determined as Kennan to keep Western Europe out of Soviet hands, but the methods it would inevitably employ. He argued that containing the Russians “at every point where they show signs of encroaching” could be implemented, if at all, “only by recruiting, subsidizing and supporting a heterogeneous array of satellites, clients, dependents and puppets.” Unlike our major allies in Europe, many of these client states were run by dictators and oligarchies, and thus were inherently unstable whether or not the Russians took any active interest in them. Simply holding these states together, he warned, would require “continual and complicated intervention by the United States,” while the Russians could easily defeat such a policy simply by stimulating the disarray of these regimes.

The end of that road, Lippmann predicted, would be to make American diplomacy the instrument of its client states. These regimes would involve us in

crises over their own survival and force us into situations where we would "have either to disown our puppets, which would be tantamount to appeasement and defeat and the loss of face, or must support them at an incalculable cost on an unintended, unforeseen, and perhaps undesirable issue." The result in either case would be to let our clients determine our diplomacy and to concentrate on the peripheral areas at the expense of our vital interests in Western Europe.

Lippmann argued that the real focus of the quarrel between America and Russia was not on the fringe areas of the Soviet empire, in Asia, but in the heart of Germany, where the two armies confronted one another. As an alternative to containment, which he considered strategically irrelevant at best, he urged a political settlement in Central Europe. Such a settlement, based on the withdrawal of both the Russian and the American armies, would settle the major cause of conflict in Europe and remove it as an area of contention between the superpowers. The withdrawal of the Red Army, he wrote, and not acrimonious disputes over the real meaning of the Yalta Declaration on Eastern Europe, would be "the acid test of Soviet conduct and purpose." Stressing negotiation rather than confrontation, Lippmann was especially disturbed by what he termed Kennan's "disbelief in the possibility of a settlement."

Lippmann, who had prepared the ground for the Marshall Plan in early 1947 in one of his columns, drew a sharp distinction between the economic aid program to Western Europe, which he enthusiastically supported, and the Truman Doctrine, whose interventionist language and open-ended commitments would, he believed, "mean inexorably an unending intervention in all the countries that are supposed to 'contain' the Soviet Union." While the bleak picture he painted seemed exaggerated to many at the time, it was soon confirmed by the policies that found their culmination in the war in Vietnam.

The tempest Lippmann predicted now seems obvious and even unavoidable. But in 1947, when the Truman Doctrine was being hailed as an act of statesmanship and the X article applauded by conservatives and liberals alike, Walter Lippmann stood virtually alone among political analysts in citing the specious reasoning and the dangerous precedents inherent in the new policies being formulated in Washington. His warning was ignored by those who believed that the American monopoly of the atomic bomb would force the Soviets to relinquish their hold on Eastern Europe, and that the pressure of containment "at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points" would, in Kennan's words, "promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power." We are today living with the consequences of that mistake.

George Kennan cannot, of course, be held responsible for the excesses of the containment policy, or

of the Truman Doctrine, whose language he deplored. He was seriously grieved, as he wrote many years later, by Lippmann's criticisms of the X article, and regretted his own failure to make clear that he meant "not the containment by military means of a military threat, but the political containment of a political threat." Unfortunately, if this distinction was clear in Kennan's mind, it was not clear to most readers of the X article, including Walter Lippmann, and Kennan at the time did not attempt to clarify his meaning—even after Lippmann's critique.

Later, as we know, Kennan—freed from the confines of the State Department—endorsed the essential points of the Lippmann argument: concentration of attention on Western Europe as the crucial area of American concern, opposition to bringing West Germany into an anti-Soviet alliance, and support for the mutual withdrawal of Russian and American forces from Central Europe, together with the establishment of a nuclear-free zone. The father of containment later disavowed the doctrine he sired and declared that it had no relevance to the vastly transformed world of national varieties of communism and Sino-Russian rivalry.

In the end, it is not a question of demonstrating how Lippmann was right and Kennan wrong. Rather it is a matter of understanding why, in a moment of supreme military strength and political self-confidence following a triumphant war, the United States embarked upon a policy of global interventionism. One need not accept the revisionist contention that U.S. foreign policy in the early postwar period sought to use the Marshall Plan to stave off a Depression at home, the atomic bomb to force the Soviets out of Eastern Europe, and the Truman Doctrine to achieve the "break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power" that Kennan's doctrine held out. Yet there is something inadequate in the conventional explanation that the postwar interventionist policies were designed solely to contain the Soviet military threat—a threat which even the author of the containment policy maintains never existed.

Only now, a quarter century after the X article and the final repudiation of the containment policy by President Nixon's journey to Moscow and by Willy Brandt's exercise in *Ostpolitik*, are we able to look back at the origins of the cold war with some degree of detachment. What we are discovering about the attitudes and the policies of those who forged our foreign policy during those critical years reinforces what we have recently learned about the origins and prosecution of the Vietnam war: the deception, the self-fulfilling prophecies, the manipulation of public opinion, the insulation from differing viewpoints, the bureaucratization of policy, the reliance on military power to achieve unattainable political ends.

There is not only a moral but a warning in this. As we witness the embrace of Nixon and Brezhnev we may indeed ask, what was the cold war about?