On April 12, 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. His vice president, Harry S. Truman, assumed the leadership of the United States of America. He had been in office only a few months, and knew little about his predecessor’s diplomacy and strategy. He felt “like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen” on him. “Pray for me now,” he whispered to friendly reporters the next day.¹

Challenges and aspirations

Truman presided over the greatest military and economic power the world had ever known. War production had lifted the United States out of the Great Depression and had inaugurated an era of unimagined prosperity. Gross national product increased by 60 percent during the war, total earnings by 50 percent. Despite social unrest, labor agitation, racial conflict, and teenage vandalism, Americans had more discretionary income than ever before. Simultaneously, the US government had built up the greatest war machine in human history. By the end of 1942, the United States was producing more arms than all the Axis states combined, and, in 1943, it made almost three times more armaments than did the Soviet Union. In 1945, the United States had two-thirds of the world’s gold reserves, three-fourths of its invested capital, half of its shipping vessels, and half of its manufacturing capacity. Its GNP was three times that of the Soviet Union and more than five times that of Britain. It was also nearing completion of the atomic bomb, a technological and production feat of huge costs and proportions.

Yet Truman and his advisers did not feel secure. They feared that the United States would again sink into depression. They understood that

wartime government demand had boosted production, and they wondered what would replace it at the war’s end. They were convinced that they needed an open world trading environment to sustain demand. High tariffs, quotas, and exchange restrictions had sundered the global trading system during the 1930s as had the trading blocs established by the Nazis, the Japanese, and even the British. Now, as the war approached an end, the appeal of national planning and statist controls to many people in Europe and Asia, coupled with the popularity of social-welfare programs, posed new challenges to the world’s foremost champion of free enterprise, private property, and individual rights.

The desire for an open world trading system merged economic, ideological, and geostrategic lessons of the interwar era. The greatest military lesson of the late 1930s and the early 1940s was that potential adversaries must never again be allowed to gain control of the resources of Europe and Asia through economic practices, political subversion, or military aggression. The acquisition of such resources allowed potential foes to augment their fighting capabilities, encouraged them to spread their influence to the Western hemisphere, tempted them to wage war against the United States, and enabled them to fight a protracted struggle. The United States, said Roosevelt in 1940, must not become “a lone island in a world dominated by the philosophy of force.”

Truman’s task, therefore, and that of his advisers, as World War II came to a close, was to use American power to forge an international environment conducive to the American way of life. The new president believed that the United States was God’s country, the city on a hill, the exemplar of a superior civilization based on personal freedoms, private property, entrepreneurial opportunity, and limited government. He grasped that this way of life had been endangered by the rise of German Nazism and Japanese militarism. The isolationist policies of the interwar years had been a grave error, allowing time for hostile adversaries to gain control of the preponderant resources of Europe and Asia. Hence, Truman wanted to follow Roosevelt’s policies. He wanted to forge a new world order based on nonaggression, self-determination, equal access to raw materials, nondiscriminatory trade, and participation in an international organization.

2 Samuel I. Rosenman (ed.), The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940 (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 261.
3 Truman’s address to the UN Forum, January 17, 1944, in Appendix to the Congressional Record, vol. 90, pt. 8 (78th Cong., 2nd sess.), A265–66.
What this meant in terms of actual strategy, however, was a mystery to Truman and his advisers in the spring of 1945. What this meant in terms of the future of the great wartime coalition was no clearer to them. The new president wanted to get along with the leaders of the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. But he had no great reverence for Winston Churchill, Britain’s wartime leader, nor any special antipathy toward Iosif Stalin, the Soviet Union’s Communist dictator. He expected them both to defer to American leadership. Compromises, Truman knew, he would have to make. But American power and American righteousness, in his view, placed the United States in a special position. When he talked about concessions, he meant that he expected to get his way 85 percent of the time.4

Once Germany surrendered in May 1945, Truman faced two overriding foreign-policy questions: how to bring about the end of the war with Japan and how to deal with Stalin and the Soviet Union. These questions themselves were interrelated. Stalin had promised Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan within three months of Germany’s surrender. Should he do so, Soviet troops would engage large numbers of Japanese divisions on the Asian mainland, thereby reducing American casualties. In return, Roosevelt had promised Stalin that he could gain control of Manchurian ports and railroads and other Far East territories, such as Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands that Japan had seized after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. In his desire to nurture postwar collaboration with the Soviet Union, this deal made sense to Roosevelt, especially if Stalin recognized the Chinese Nationalists and withheld aid from the Chinese Communists, which the Soviet leader promised he would do.

But Truman’s advisers and friends were deeply divided about how the United States should deal with Stalin, and their attitudes shaped the recommendations they gave to the new president. Some advisers, such as W. Averell Harriman, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union, Admiral William Leahy, the president’s chief military aide, Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, and Under Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew, wanted the president to take a hard line against the Soviet Union. They feared the growth of Soviet power as troops marched toward Berlin through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the eastern parts of Germany. They were disgusted by Stalin’s imprisonment and murder of selective non-Communist leaders, especially in Poland, and they objected to the provisional governments he was establishing throughout Eastern Europe. Other advisers and friends, such as Secretary of

War Henry L. Stimson, Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt’s envoy to Stalin, Henry A. Wallace, the secretary of commerce and former vice president, and Joseph C. Davies, the former US ambassador to Moscow, encouraged Truman to tolerate Stalin’s transgressions, understand his security imperatives, and craft acceptable compromises.

As he pondered what to do, Truman was greatly affected by the rapid development and successful secret testing of the atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert in mid-July 1945. Only a few of his closest advisers knew about this new technological wonder that promised to have such a huge impact on the configuration of power in the postwar world. But for some of those who did know about it, such as James F. Byrnes, Truman’s newly selected secretary of state, the atomic weapon offered the leverage to shape the peace according to American desires. The atomic bomb, Byrnes said, “had given us great power, and … in the last analysis, it would control.”

Truman was inclined initially to think along similar lines. When he elliptically told Stalin at the Potsdam Conference about the powerful new weapon that the United States had just tested, Truman was thinking that it would serve as his trump card to get Stalin to be more amenable about the composition of the provisional governments in Eastern Europe and the occupation of Germany. The president did not decide to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to shape the diplomacy of the postwar world, but he certainly believed that it would enhance US power and augment his ability to elicit concessions from the Soviets. He even dared to hope that the atomic bomb might force the Japanese to surrender before the Soviets declared war on Tokyo and seized the territories promised them at Yalta. “Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in,” Truman jotted in his diary. “I am sure they will when Manhattan [the atomic bomb] appears over their homeland.”

Yet neither Truman nor Byrnes, the man Truman now relied on more than any other person, wanted a showdown or a cold war with Stalin. After meeting him at Potsdam, Truman wrote his wife, “I like Stalin. He is straightforward. Knows what he wants and will compromise when he can’t get it.”

But dealing with Stalin, in Truman’s view, meant that the Soviet dictator would need to comply with American thinking about the

configuration of the postwar international order, however vague and inchoate that thinking was. In broad terms, Truman laid out his conception in his Navy Day speech of October 27, 1945. The president championed self-determination and national sovereignty. He ridiculed territorial changes that were forced upon peoples against their will. He championed open trade, freedom of the seas, unrestricted access to raw materials, and international economic cooperation. He embraced pan-Americanism and the United Nations. He said the United States would hold the atomic bomb as a “sacred trust” for all mankind. He made clear in a variety of speeches and statements that he was not averse to negotiating agreements governing the control of atomic energy, but he emphasized that he would not relinquish the United States’ superior power.\footnote{Address, October 27, 1945, \textit{Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1945} (hereafter \textit{PPP: Truman}, with year) (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 431–38.}

But after Japan officially surrendered in September 1945, the United States quickly demobilized its armed forces. The air force struggled tenaciously to become an independent entity, and the army and the navy fought one another.

bitterly over roles, missions, and a shrinking military budget. Secretary of State Byrnes did little to assuage the sensibilities of colleagues either in his own department or the military services as he moved quickly to gain control of the nation’s foreign policy. Truman’s initial instinct was to allow Byrnes to shape the nation’s diplomacy, but the president realized very quickly that his secretary of state was offending powerful legislators without achieving any notable diplomatic successes. American foreign policy seemed to be floundering, engendering the contempt of potential adversaries in the Kremlin without garnering much sympathy from potential friends in London, Paris, and elsewhere.

At the end of 1945, Truman grew frustrated with the performance of his secretary of state and embittered by the actions of the Soviet Union. He wanted a tougher policy. He ridiculed the “police states” that the Kremlin was forming in Bulgaria and Romania and condemned the Soviets’ refusal to withdraw their troops from Iran. “There isn’t any doubt in my mind,” Truman wrote, “that Russia intends an invasion of Turkey and the seizure of the Black Sea Straits to the Mediterranean … I do not think we should play compromise any longer … I’m tired of babying the Soviets.”

What this meant in terms of policy and strategy was far from clear. The expansion of Soviet power needed to be contained, but neither George F. Kennan’s “long telegram” from the US Embassy in Moscow in February 1946 nor Winston Churchill’s “iron curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, in March provided the specificity that was needed to design a concrete strategy or a set of priorities. Kennan’s message and Churchill’s address simplified the myriad problems of the postwar world in terms of a threat from another totalitarian power intent on unlimited expansion. “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic,” Churchill warned, “an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” Not only were Soviet occupation authorities imprisoning potential foes and supporting their local minions in Eastern Europe, but Communist Parties beyond the reach of Soviet armies in Western and Southern Europe were angling to win power legally or to seize it illegally. With “Christian civilization” endangered, the former British prime minister recommended that Anglo-Saxons unite to withstand the new totalitarian specter.

9 Ferrell, Off the Record, 79–80.
Kennan’s telegram was widely circulated throughout US policymaking circles because his analysis accorded with Truman’s instincts and the thinking of many of his advisers. Stalin’s view of the world, wrote Kennan, was “neurotic,” based as it was on a “traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity.” Kremlin leaders conjured up a hostile, evil world. They sought to foment disunity in Western Europe, promote dissension among capitalist nations, and erode links to the colonial dependencies of Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Portugal. “We have here,” Kennan concluded, “a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with [the] United States there can be no permanent modus vivendi.” Yet Kennan was not pessimistic about the future. Soviet expansion could be contained. Soviet leaders were “impervious to logic of reason,” but “highly sensitive to logic of force … If situations are properly handled there need be no prestige-engaging showdowns.”

Embracing containment

Truman and his advisers embraced the idea of containment, but they had little idea of how to apply it. They did toughen their rhetoric. They told Stalin to pull his troops out of northern Iran, as he was obligated to do. Several months later, in July and August 1946, they rebuffed the Kremlin’s overtures to renegotiate Soviet rights and expand Soviet privileges in the Turkish straits. Truman’s military planners began to design war plans should US efforts to contain Soviet power peacefully falter and should war erupt as a result of miscalculation.

But Truman and his aides did not expect war. Their war plans were rudimentary and their military expenditures paltry. They were determined to contain the further expansion of Soviet power and Communist influence, but they still labored with Soviet diplomats to finish the peace treaties regarding Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Finland, and Italy. Nor had they relinquished hope that they might agree with the Kremlin on a German settlement. In Japan, they had won Stalin’s grudging acceptance of US control of the postwar occupation. In China, General George C. Marshall, the renowned wartime leader of the US Army, was seeking to mediate a resolution to the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists while Soviet troops were pulling out of Manchuria. The Kremlin looked like a formidable adversary and the specter of Communist power loomed large, but Truman

had not forsaken hope that Stalin would exercise self-discipline and accept the postwar status quo.

But the American perception of threat grew. This had less to do with fears of premeditated Soviet aggression than with worries about postwar social, economic, and political conditions in Western Europe and in the occupied parts of Germany and Japan. As the war came to an end in the spring of 1945, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy visited Europe and reported back to Truman and Stimson: “There is complete economic, social and political collapse going on in Central Europe, the extent of which is unparalleled in history.” The situation in Germany, he stressed, “was worse than anything that ever happened in the world.” Stimson had expected the chaos, he wrote in his diary, “but the details of it were appalling.” There will be “pestilence and famine in Central Europe next winter,” he wrote President Truman on May 16, 1945. “This is likely to be followed by political revolution and communist infiltration.”

Assistant Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson, soon to become the president’s most trusted adviser, spoke even more apocalyptically when he testified before a Senate committee in July 1945. “There is a situation in the world,” Acheson emphasized, “very clearly illustrated in Europe, and also true in the Far East, which threatens the very foundations, the whole fabric of world organization which we have known in our lifetime and which our fathers and forefathers knew.” In liberated Europe, Acheson explained, “you find that the railway systems have ceased to operate; that power systems have ceased to operate; the financial systems are destroyed. Ownership of property is in terrific confusion. Management of property is in confusion.” Not since the eighth century, Acheson maintained, when the Muslims had split the world in two, had conditions been so frightening. The industrial and social life of Europe “had come to a complete and total standstill.”

A year later conditions seemed no more auspicious, and they worsened even more during the winter of 1946–47. Heavy snows and frigid temperatures exacerbated a terrible coal shortage, forcing factories to close and spreading unemployment, hunger, and despair. Famine stalked the zones of Germany

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12 Memo for the President, by J. McCloy, April 26, 1945, box 178, President’s Secretary’s File (PSF), Harry S. Truman Papers (Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO); Stimson to Truman, May 16, 1945, box 157, ibid.; Stimson Diary, April 19, 1945, Henry L. Stimson Papers (Sterling Library, Yale University).

occupied by American and British troops. Germans were living on 1,200 calories a day. Without additional food, US Army officials warned, they would lose “the great struggle … to prevent [Germany] going communistic.” Writing from Rome at about the same time US ambassador James C. Dunn warned: “All the indications we receive … show that the Communists are consistently gaining ground and that our policy to assist the development of a free and democratic Italy is losing ground.” When Under Secretary of State William L. Clayton returned from his own trip to Europe in May 1947, he wrote that he had underestimated the problems besetting the economy of the Old World: “Europe is steadily deteriorating … Millions of people in the cities are slowly starving … Without further and substantial aid from the United States, economic, social, and political disintegration will overwhelm Europe.”

Truman was alarmed. Financial stringencies forced British officials to curtail their presence in Greece, Turkey, and the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the shortage of dollars in European treasuries meant that European governments could no longer afford to purchase the coal and grain they desperately needed to keep their factories running and their peoples fed. These governments hoarded their gold and dollar reserves, imposed quotas on imports, and regulated the flow of trade. The international economy was becoming more and more constricted. Communists were finding more and more opportunities to capitalize on domestic turmoil and internal unrest. In countries such as France and Italy, they were capturing more than a third of the vote and competing actively for control of legislative assemblies.

Yet it was not easy for Truman to determine what should be done. In November 1946, the Republicans won a smashing victory in the congressional elections. They blamed the administration for high prices and high taxes. They promised the American people that they would cut deficits, end the work stoppages, bring down taxes, and curb inflation. They assailed Truman for his incompetence, and clamored for smaller and more effective government. Yet to deal with the worldwide crisis that loomed in front of him, Truman had to send more aid abroad, boost US military capabilities, and postpone tax reductions. Should he do so, he knew, he would ignite a political firestorm.

Should he not do so, and should Communism spread, he would also be vilified for his indifference to the red menace. Although Truman’s conservative critics were not eager to bear the burden of containing Communism abroad, they were intent on exposing domestic subversives and destroying the New Deal at home.

Truman faced grave decisions. In March 1947, he decided to ask Congress for $400 million for assistance to Greece and Turkey. In what became known as the Truman Doctrine, he told senators and congressmen that “At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternate ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one … Collapse of free institutions and loss of independence would be disastrous not only for them but for the world … Should we fail to aid Greece and Turkey in this fateful hour, the effect will be far reaching.”

The stark language was purposeful. “There must be no hedging in this speech,” Truman insisted. “If we were to turn our back on the world, areas such as Greece, weakened and divided as a result of the war, would fall into the Soviet orbit without much effort on the part of the Russians. The success of Russia in such areas and our avowed lack of interest would lead to the growth of domestic communist parties in such European countries as France and Italy, where there were already significant threats. Inaction … could only result in handing to the Russians vast areas of the globe now denied to them.”

Truman’s anti-Communist rhetoric resonated deeply in the American polity. Religious fundamentalists, segregationists, anti-union businessmen, patriotic organizations, and conservative politicians had been red-baiting for years, shrilly warning the American people that their basic institutions and core values were endangered by Communists, atheists, racial integrationists, and New Dealers. How could these right-wing critics be concerned with Communists at home yet do nothing about the expansion of Soviet power around the globe? Truman’s rhetoric locked many Republicans and Southern Democrats into supporting an internationalist foreign policy.

The Truman Doctrine identified Greece and Turkey for aid, and the president implied that he might ask Congress for additional funds for other areas of the globe threatened by internal subversion or external aggression. But it was not clear where the United States should focus its attention. Truman asked General Marshall, arguably the most revered man in the

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country, to become his secretary of state and to sort out priorities. Marshall established a Policy Planning Staff and placed it under the direction of the nation’s foremost Kremlinologist, George F. Kennan. Kennan and his subordinates immediately began writing a series of brilliant policy papers that helped to define priorities. Gradually, a strategy emerged, not simply for containing Soviet power, but also, eventually, for winning the Cold War.

**Setting priorities**

The overriding priority was to keep the power centers of Europe and Asia outside the Soviet orbit and linked to the United States. Western Europe, the western zones in Germany, and Japan had to be revived economically. They had to become self-supporting, capable of earning dollars to pay for their required imports. Otherwise, they might be lured into the Soviet orbit, or Communist Parties and their supporters might win power legally or seize it illegally. For the moment, Japan was firmly in the grasp of US occupation authorities under General Douglas MacArthur. Attention, therefore, was focused on Western Europe. The greatest peril to the United States, said Kennan, was the prospect that the manpower and resources of the Soviet Union might be united with the technical skills and advanced industries of Western Europe.17

On June 5, 1947, in a commencement address at Harvard University, Secretary of State Marshall announced the administration’s readiness to provide substantial assistance for a European Recovery Program (ERP). The purpose of the program was to revive the world economy and nurture “the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.”18 The place to begin, almost everyone in the Truman administration agreed, was in the coal-producing areas of the Ruhr and the Rhine Valleys.19

Truman’s advisers believed that they should focus on economic initiatives rather than military rearmament. The principal Soviet threat was not military; it was political and psychological. The Soviets would not risk war; they were too weak. “I was conscious,” Kennan wrote, “of the weakness of the Russian

17 One of the clearest statements of Kennan’s strategic thinking was his speech, “Contemporary Problems of Foreign Policy,” September 17, 1948, box 17, George F. Kennan Papers, Seely G. Mudd Library (Princeton University, Princeton, NJ); see also Acheson’s speech, May 8, 1947, Department of State Bulletin (DSB), 16 (May 18, 1947), 991–94.
19 Meeting of the Secretaries of State, War, and Navy, July 3, 1947, box 3, Safe File, Patterson Papers, RG 107, NA.
position, of the slenderness of the means with which they operated, of the ease with which they could be held and pushed back.”

20 So long as the United States could “outproduce the world,” control the seas, “and strike inland with the atomic bomb,” Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal said, the United States could “assume certain risks otherwise unacceptable.”

21 The initiative had to be seized because the nation’s vital interests seemed imperiled. If Communist Parties capitalized on the economic disarray or if economic autarchy grew, the Soviet Union would be able to advance its power and reach. The disappearance of the “free community of Europe,” Marshall warned Congress, “would be a tragedy for the world. It would impose incalculable burdens on this country and force serious readjustments in our traditional way of life. One of our greatest freedoms – freedom of choice in both domestic and foreign affairs – would be drastically curtailed.”

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4. George Marshall (left) and Dean Acheson.

The international environment was fraught with risk, and US officials knew they needed to act. No task was more important than reviving western Germany, establishing self-governing institutions there, and preserving its alignment with the United States. “Without a revival of German production,” Marshall emphasized, “there can be no revival of Europe’s economy.” But reviving the power of Germany posed dangers of its own. Kennan succinctly stated the challenge: “We have to nurse our recent enemies, the Germans, back to economic strength without instigating them to renewed aggression or making them the masters of our recent allies.” This was a task of immense complexity. But it could not be evaded. With the help of old allies such as France and Britain and with the help of ex-enemies such as the west Germans, Kennan declared, “we have to maneuver this Russian bear back into his cage and keep him there where he belongs.”

US officials were not surprised when Stalin forbade the participation of Czechoslovakia and Poland in the ERP, formed the Cominform, tightened the Soviet grip on Eastern Europe, and orchestrated a campaign of riots and demonstrations against the Marshall Plan throughout Western Europe. These were logical developments, Kennan explained. “Subject to a squeeze play,” the Communists were making a final effort to thwart the ERP before it became a reality. But the United States could not be deflected from its purpose. Western Germany, Marshall insisted, must participate in the Recovery Program. Its potential power had to be coopted and integrated into a Western alliance system; that goal was now more important than reaching agreement with the Kremlin. No arrangements would be countenanced, he said, that “would leave [western Germany] defenseless against communist penetration.”

A great showdown was approaching as Truman and his advisers pressed Congress in early 1948 to appropriate the money to support the Marshall Plan. In February, Stalin orchestrated a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia. American officials were stunned by Stalin’s audacity, but did not think that it altered the prevailing balance of power. What they did fear was its demonstration effect on the European neighborhood. The ease with which Czech

23 Marshall speech, November 18, 1947, DSB, 17 (November 30, 1947), 1028.
25 For Soviet policies, see Vladimir O. Pechatnov’s and Norman Naimark’s chapters in this volume.
26 Kennan to Robert Lovett, October 6, 1947, box 33, Records of the Policy Planning Staff, RG 59, NA.
Communists seized power in Prague might empower their counterparts in Rome and Paris and demoralize their adversaries. The Czech coup spurred a Republican Congress to pass the legislation to implement the Marshall Plan, notwithstanding its adverse impact on the budget, tax cuts, and the inflationary outlook. The Czech coup also catalyzed a full-scale covert effort by the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency to ensure the defeat of the Italian Communists in the April 1948 elections.

Germany, however, remained the focal point of the emerging Cold War. Truman, Marshall, and their subordinates were determined to reform the currency, merge the French zone of occupation with the British and American zones, and form a provisional German government that would be amenable to the wishes of Western occupational authorities yet command the support of the people in the western zones. Stalin warned that if the United States, Britain, and France proceeded with their plans, the Soviets would interdict traffic from the western zones of Germany to the western parts of Berlin. The French were terrified that British–American initiatives might trigger a war that nobody wanted. The French, moreover, were scared of revived German power. They demanded more extensive controls over the Ruhr and more constraints on German trade. Most of all, they wanted security guarantees against the immediate prospect of Soviet retaliation and the protracted specter of German aggression.28

Washington would not back away from its commitment to rebuild and coopt West German power. When the Soviets blockaded Berlin at the end of June 1948, the United States responded with an airlift of supplies to Berlin. If the Soviets had interfered with the airlift, hostilities could have erupted. But US officials did not expect war. “It is our view,” wrote General Lucius Clay, the head of the US military government in Germany, “that [the Soviets] are bluffing and that their hand can and should be called now. They are definitely afraid of our air might.”29 The Soviets might have overwhelming superiority in numbers of conventional troops and weapons, US analysts concluded, but their transport system was in disarray and their petroleum industry was underdeveloped. Their economy was still in shambles and their people were demoralized. Their satellites in Eastern Europe were unreliable. They had no real navy, no strategic air power, and no atomic bomb. Stalin might feel provoked by US initiatives in the western zones, but he would not go to

28 For policies in Germany, see Hans-Peter Schwarz’s chapter in this volume.
war. “The present tension in Berlin,” Marshall told his Cabinet colleagues, “is brought about by loss of Russian face in Italy, France, Finland … It is caused by Russian desperation in face of success of ERP.”

What the United States most needed to do was to reassure its allies that their security and interests would not be endangered by the ongoing initiatives in western Germany. The French desperately wanted guarantees of their own security. The Americans said their troops would remain in Germany for the indefinite future. Washington would also provide military assistance to the French, and US military planners were authorized to coordinate war plans. But this did not suffice to allay anxieties in Paris, and the French continued to find ways to obstruct the formation of a west German government and to interfere with US plans for handling reparations and rebuilding German industry.

British foreign minister Ernest Bevin kept pressing the Americans to sign an Atlantic pact that would guarantee the security of France. When Truman was reelected in November 1948 and asked Dean Acheson to become his secretary of state, Acheson embraced the security treaty as the best means of reconciling the legitimate fears of the French with west Germans’ aspirations to recover their sovereignty and solve their economic woes. A treaty, Acheson told wavering US senators, “would give France greater sense of security against Germany as well as the Soviet Union and would materially help in the realistic consideration of the problem of Germany.” He wanted to integrate western Germany into Western Europe, and bind a united Western Europe to the United States. He and President Truman were not eager to abandon 150 years of political isolation. But strategic obligations were the price Americans had to pay to consummate their economic and political goals. The North Atlantic Treaty was the capstone of a grand strategy that envisioned the cooption of the newly formed Federal Republic of Germany (or West Germany) into a healthy Atlantic community led by the United States and committed to the values of democratic capitalism.

Simultaneously, in 1948–49, US officials focused their attention on Japan. “Any world balance of power,” Kennan stressed, “means first and foremost a balance on the Eurasian land mass. This balance is unthinkable as long as Germany and Japan remain power vacuums.” Conditions inside Japan had to

30 Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting, July 23, 1948, box 1, Matthew J. Connelly Papers, Truman Library.
31 For developments in Western Europe, see William I. Hitchcock’s chapter in this volume.
33 Kennan, “Where We Are Today,” December 21, 1948, box 17, Kennan Papers.
be ameliorated so that the Japanese would want to remain aligned with the United States over the long run. Once the occupation ended and Japan regained its autonomy, poor economic conditions might play into the hands of Japanese leftists or might impel a Japanese government to seek accommodation with the Soviet Union or with China, now rapidly falling under the control of the Communists. “Japs,” wrote Secretary of State Acheson, “will either move toward sound friendly relations with non-commie countries or into association with commie system in Asia.”

US officials throughout 1949 and early 1950 focused attention on resuscitating the Japanese economy. They became convinced that the Japanese could not recover economically and would not stay tied to the West unless they were assured of markets and raw materials in Southeast Asia. According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, US security in the Far East hinged “upon finding and securing an area to complement Japan as did Manchuria and Korea prior to World War II.”

Forging a grand strategy

The grand strategy of the Truman administration focused on binding the industrial core areas of Western Europe and Northeast Asia to the United States. But officials increasingly realized that success in these core areas depended on containment in the underdeveloped periphery. Just as Western Europe depended on access to the petroleum of the Middle East and the natural resources of former and current colonial possessions in Asia and Africa, so, too, did Japan’s rehabilitation depend on supplanting its former ties with Manchuria, North China, and Korea with new markets and raw materials in Southeast Asia.

When Mao Zedong consolidated Communist power on the Chinese mainland and when Congress allocated new funds to thwart the spread of Communist influence in the area around China, US Army and State Department officials agreed that they should use the money to fight Communists and revolutionary nationalists in Southeast Asia. Stalin’s pact with Mao in January 1950 and his recognition of Ho Chi Minh’s government in Indochina appeared portentous. Acheson deemed Ho a mortal enemy of the

36 For the Chinese Civil War, see Niu Jun’s chapter in this volume.
United States. Although the secretary of state knew that Ho had the support of the majority of the Vietnamese people, the United States established formal diplomatic ties with Bao Dai, the French-backed puppet emperor. Linking the United States to the remnants of French colonialism was not something that Truman and Acheson wanted to do, but they felt they had little choice given the trend of events. “From our viewpoint,” Acheson said in May 1950, “the Soviet Union possesses [a] position of domination in China which it is using to threaten Indochina, push in Malaya, stir up trouble in the Philippines, and now to start trouble in Indonesia.”

Acheson’s perception of threat in the periphery was greatly influenced by the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in August 1949. Heretofore, US officials had believed the Soviets would back down should a grave confrontation occur. The Berlin crisis appeared to confirm the veracity of this assumption. Now, with the atomic bomb, the Soviet penchant for risk-taking might increase. Stalin might even become bolder if the Soviets developed a hydrogen bomb, potentially many hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic weapons the United States possessed. The “blackmail” potential of the hydrogen bomb, US officials concluded, was “tremendous.” Should the Soviets develop it, the Americans might hesitate to take the steps necessary to rebuild and integrate West Germany, sign a peace treaty with Japan, or contain Mao’s attempts to support Ho’s Communists in Vietnam. In other words, atomic and hydrogen weapons were critical for the shadows they cast in peacetime. Truman resolved that the United States should develop its own hydrogen bomb, and requested a study of the nation’s goals and strategy in view of the Kremlin’s new capabilities.

George Kennan opposed the growing stress on strategic weaponry, but his influence waned as Acheson gathered stature and asked Paul Nitze to take charge of the Policy Planning Staff. Nitze conducted the comprehensive reexamination of US strategy that the president had requested. In the most renowned strategic paper of the Cold War, NSC 68, Nitze reiterated many of the axioms that had guided US policy in the first years of the Cold War. The Soviet Union, he wrote, was animated by a “new fanatical faith, antithetical to our own.” The Kremlin, he claimed, wanted to impose its “absolute authority over the rest of the world.” Nitze, like Kennan, did not anticipate that Stalin would engage in overt aggression. But he did think that the Kremlin would

use its growing military prowess and atomic arsenal to neutralize US diplomatic initiatives. This was portentous when Washington still faced formidable challenges. It had to negotiate a peace treaty with Japan, link West Germany to NATO, preserve stability in the Middle East, and thwart the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. To move ahead on these matters, Nitze emphasized, the United States had to have “an adequate military shield.” “Without superior aggregate military strength,” he argued in NSC 68, “a policy of containment – which is in effect a policy of calculated and gradual coercion – is no more than a policy of bluff.”

The goals of US strategy, as outlined in NSC 68, were not different than those Kennan had stated in the document he penned eighteen months before, NSC 20/4. In both documents, the aim was not containment. US goals were far more ambitious: “to reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations” and “to bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the government in power in Russia, to conform with the purposes and principles set forth in the UN charter.” What distinguished NSC 68 was its stark delineation of threat and its pronounced stress on rearmament. “Only if we had overwhelming atomic superiority and obtained command of the air might the USSR be deterred from employing its atomic weapons as we progressed toward the fulfillment of our objectives,” Nitze wrote in NSC 68.

President Truman embraced the strategy of NSC 68 in May 1950, but hesitated to say how much it would cost. He knew it would stir a contentious debate at home when he was already being vilified for his failures in China and for his alleged indifference to internal espionage. Conservative critics, led by Republican senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, assailed the president for losing China and harboring Communists inside his administration. Actually, Truman, Marshall, Acheson, and Kennan had weighed intervention in China carefully and calculated that direct military intervention would be too costly and unlikely to succeed. They had no illusions about Mao, but in their view China was too poor, too fractious, and too unstable to add materially to Soviet strength. Hence, they had eschewed intervention, but had not abandoned their global struggle against Communism.

40 Ibid., 287–89, 268.
Acheson’s chief concern in Asia was not the loss of China. He was concerned that Mao would aid Ho in Indochina, thereby endangering Japan’s access to the markets and resources of Southeast Asia. In a famous speech in January 1950 to the National Press Club, Acheson talked about the United States’ strategic perimeter and stressed the importance of retaining Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. He did not include South Korea, Indochina, and Southeast Asia. But he was not indifferent to their fate. The strategic perimeter encompassed the areas that were deemed essential to wage war. Yet Acheson was far more interested with winning the peace and achieving preponderant power without war. As for the funds that Congress allocated in early 1950 for the containment of Communism in Asia, Acheson wanted to use them in Indochina, South Korea, and Southeast Asia rather than Formosa.

Waging limited war, gaining global predominance

When the North Koreans attacked South Korea at the end of June 1950, Truman and Acheson immediately deployed US troops to defeat the aggression and asked the United Nations for its support. US officials were surprised by the invasion, but had no doubt that it was orchestrated in the Kremlin. Truman and Acheson believed that it was a test case of their will. If the United States did not respond, American credibility would be shattered and more important friends and prospective allies, such as the Japanese and West Germans, would lose faith in US power. Certainly, if they did not respond, Republican critics at home would condemn them for their timidity in the face of aggression.

The North Korean attack confirmed the suspicions of Truman, Acheson, and Nitze that the Soviets were becoming bolder as they gained strategic might.41 The United States, therefore, not only had to thwart the attack, but also needed to reestablish the aura of military superiority that was deemed critical for the success of their diplomacy and their strategic vision. Truman asked Congress for funds not simply to wage the war in Korea but to support the concepts enumerated in NSC 68. The aim was to contain and roll back Soviet power without risking all-out war.

Truman, Acheson, and their advisers were convinced that the Kremlin, while bolder, still did not seek conflict with the United States. Hence when General Douglas MacArthur launched a successful invasion at Inchon and drove North Korean troops back to the thirty-eighth parallel that had divided

41 For the Korean War, see William Stueck’s chapter in this volume.
North and South Korea, Truman decided that the United States and its allies should cross the prewar border, liberate North Korea, and unite the peninsula as part of the free world. Betting that the Chinese and the Soviets would not intervene because they would not risk hostilities with the United States, they allowed MacArthur to move to the Yalu River on the Chinese–Korean border. The impending defeat of their North Korean friends and the specter of a hostile United States on their very border triggered the intervention of the Chinese Communists in November 1950.

The escalatory spiral profoundly worried officials in Washington. They still did not think Stalin would intervene directly, but their confidence was shaken. They wanted to dissuade Stalin from even thinking about initiating hostilities in Europe. They were determined to build superior power and capitalize upon it. Truman deployed four US Army divisions to Western Europe and helped transform the North Atlantic Treaty into a viable defensive organization. The president also approved gigantic new defense expenditures. During fiscal years 1951 and 1952, Truman planned to spend the staggering sum of about $140 billion to pay for national security programs. Compared to June 1950, by mid-1952, the US Army would have 1,353,000 troops rather than 655,000; the navy would have 397 major combatant vessels rather than 238; the air force would have 95 wings rather than 48. Since only $3–$5 billion per year was being spent in Korea, the vast majority of the money was allocated to cast the shadows necessary to support US diplomacy.

Now was the time, Acheson and Nitze were convinced, to take the initiatives that were fraught with risk, but that were essential to preserve long-term strategic predominance. They authorized plans to rearm and link West Germany to NATO. When the French reacted with consternation, US officials embraced a French plan to establish a European Defense Community that would include German troops, but no German general staff. The overarching design of the Truman administration was to lock West Germany and Japan into permanent association with a Western alliance system spearheaded by the United States. To do this, additional risks had to be taken to cede more sovereignty to the West Germans and the Japanese in return for their promises to stay aligned with the West and to allow the United States to use their territories to enhance its strategic reach. The Kremlin remonstrated against these actions, but Truman, Acheson, and Nitze gambled that Stalin would avert war. “It was felt,” said Nitze, “that the risk of provocation had to be taken, otherwise we were deterred before we started.”

42 Memorandum of conversation, by R. Gordon Arneson, June 14, 1951, FRUS, 1951, vol. 1, 847.
At the same time, Truman, Acheson, Nitze, and their associates did not forget the importance of the periphery in relation to the industrial core areas of Eurasia. The United States increased its strategic reach in the eastern Mediterranean and Southeast Asia. The United States championed the incorporation of Greece and Turkey into NATO. It established the ANZUS alliance with Australia and New Zealand. It worked with Britain, Turkey, Egypt, and others to design a Middle East Command. It provided vast sums of money to support French efforts to defeat Ho Chi Minh’s Communist forces in Indochina. Acheson and Nitze did not want US policymakers to be self-deterred in the future as they felt themselves to have been in Korea when they hesitated to attack China directly lest they trigger the intervention of the Soviet Union. In the future, Nitze emphasized, the United States “must be willing to face the danger of war with the Soviet Union.” In the future, Acheson emphasized, freedom of choice must remain “with us, not the Russians.”

From an inchoate beginning, Harry Truman and his advisers had transformed the strategic posture of the United States in the postwar world. Their overriding priority was to prevent a totalitarian adversary from conquering or assimilating the resources of Europe and Asia and using them to wage war against the United States, as the Axis powers had done during World War II. Even if the United States were not attacked, as it had been at Pearl Harbor, the United States could not be indifferent to Soviet aggression or Communist subversion. “If communism is allowed to absorb the free nations,” President Truman explained, “we would be isolated from our sources of supply and detached from our friends. Then we would have to take defense measures which might really bankrupt our economy, and change our way of life so that we wouldn’t recognize it as American any longer. That’s the very thing we’re trying to keep from happening.”

The strategy evolved from vague talk about an open world and an international organization to more concrete ideas about the need to rebuild western Germany, reconstruct Western Europe, and rejuvenate Japan. Reviving former enemies, however, posed dangers. Although the Truman administration accepted unprecedented strategic commitments, these military guarantees could not assure success. West Germany, Western Europe, and Japan could not prosper and could not be secure if the periphery gravitated into the hands

of revolutionary nationalists and Communists. Risk-taking in the Third World in places such as Indochina, Iran, and the Middle East was the price US officials felt they had to pay for the successful rehabilitation and integration of Northeast Asia, Northwest Europe, and North America into a thriving capitalist community based on democratic values.

The strategy of the Truman administration was never limited to deterrence and containment. The strategy was to wage a cold war and win it. “I suppose,” said Truman in his “farewell address” on January 15, 1953, “that history will remember my term in office as the years when the ‘cold war’ began to overshadow our lives. I have had hardly a day in office that has not been dominated by this all-embracing struggle – this conflict between those who love freedom and those who would lead the world back into slavery and darkness. And always in the background there has been the atomic bomb. But when history says that my term of office saw the beginning of the cold war, it will also say that in those 8 years we have set the course that we can win it.”

Victory was Kennan’s goal from the outset. Both in the “Long Telegram” and in his even more famous X article in Foreign Affairs, he stressed that prudence, perseverance, and determination would allow the West to triumph, provided it successfully nurtured its own institutions and values. In the strategy papers that he authored and that his successors wrote, the overall objective of US policy was more than containment. The aim was to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union and induce a basic change in the Kremlin’s approach to international affairs. Truman articulated this notion well in his last “state of the union” message. If “the communist rulers understand they cannot win by war, and if we frustrate their attempts to win by subversion, it is not too much to expect” that they might change their “character, moderate [their] aims, become more realistic and less implacable, and recede from the cold war they began.” The strategy, as it evolved over the decades, had its strengths and weaknesses, but it prevailed.

45 Farewell address, January 15, 1953, ibid., 1199.
46 Annual message, January 7, 1953, ibid., 1127.
1. Soviet territorial expansion at the end of World War II.