



## How Containment Worked

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"X" Plus 25 (3)

## HOW CONTAINMENT WORKED

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by Chalmers M. Roberts

**T**he wartime alliance between Moscow and Washington was turning into cold war when George F. Kennan's containment thesis appeared in the famous "X" article, entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," in *Foreign Affairs* 25 years ago this summer. Some rationale for new policies had to be found. Containment did so.

The key to the Kennan article was its timing. His famous telegram from Moscow of February 22, 1946, analyzing the Kremlin's behavior, in Louis J. Halle's words, "came at a moment when the [State] Department, having been separated by circumstances from the wartime policy toward Russia, was floundering about, looking for new intellectual moorings." The significant addition of the "X" article, as Halle put it, "was a word and a concept." The word was containment. The concept was that postwar Russia's "expansive tendencies" could be contained by American policy and if so contained would, over time, be modified in a way that would lessen or minimize the seeming threat to the United States. The goal certainly was satisfactory whatever one's reading then was of the threat. The method, containment, seemed within both reason and the capability of a war-weary America. Containment thus charted a course for an indefinite period ahead without calling for a renewal of violence by a government and public anxious to turn to the pursuits of peace. It would protect that hard-won peace.

I would argue that containment remains to this day the principal basis of American foreign policy. Of course it has gone through both phases and evolution. But it seems to me that the Nixon Doctrine of the current

Administration rests on what the government and the public took to be the fundamentals of Kennan's thesis: keep Soviet power from running over us and our allies and friends, hoping that in time the Kremlin's revolutionary fervor would wind down and the Soviet Union would turn into a normal great power in its relationship with the United States. The Nixon principle of moving from "an era of confrontation" to "an era of negotiation" must assume that kind of relationship.

In his *Memoirs* 20 years after the "X" article, Kennan wrote that "all that the X-Article was meant to convey" was this: "Stand up to them . . . , manfully but not aggressively, and give the hand of time a chance to work." In the "X" article he had written that "it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." And: ". . . it will be clearly seen that the Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence . . ." Finally: ". . . the United States has it in its power to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power. . . ."

The trouble with Kennan's prescription, as with all doctrines, was that different people read words differently. Kennan's own quarrel with the fate of containment springs from this, with what is meant by "stand up" and "manfully" and "not aggressively," to use his summation, or by "application of counter-

force" and "firm but vigilant containment," to use his original words. Such language as the latter phrases, he wrote in his *Memoirs*, "was at best ambiguous, and lent itself to misinterpretation in this respect." But it was no more so than, say, the National Security Action Memoranda of several administrations as revealed in the Pentagon Papers. Doctrinal prose always reads that way. What counts is the meat put on the bones.

What Kennan sent home from Moscow in his dispatches and the thoughts of his "X" article simply were prescient of Moscow's postwar policy. Andre Fontaine in his *History of the Cold War* concludes that "the division of Europe really dates" from the month of July 1947, the very moment Americans were absorbing the "X" article and learning who was its author. But Kennan was not alone in trying to plumb the Kremlin. The previous September 1946, a young lawyer at the White House named Clark Clifford had written for President Truman a long analysis of "American Relations with the Soviet Union" (printed in full as an appendix to Arthur Krock's *Memoirs*) along lines similar to Kennan's though lacking his insights into the Kremlin. Clifford, whose own beliefs from that day until early in 1968 stimulated the containment policy of Democratic administrations, concluded that the United States "must, as a first step toward world stabilization, seek to prevent additional Soviet aggression." Clifford had far less hope than Kennan of a breakup or mellowing of Soviet power. But he did argue that "our best chances of influencing Soviet leaders consist of making it unmistakably clear that action contrary to our conception of a decent world order will redound to the disadvantage of the Soviet regime whereas friendly and cooperative action will pay dividends. If this position can be maintained firmly enough and long enough the logic of it must permeate eventually into the Soviet system." In the March before the September when Clifford wrote those words Truman had sat on the platform in Fulton,

Missouri, as Winston Churchill spoke of an Iron Curtain descending across the continent of Europe.

All these thoughts faced the test of reality on February 24, 1947, when the British tossed to Washington the problem of Greece, the result of which was the Truman Doctrine. We know that by then Kennan's ideas (though they had not yet surfaced in the "X" article), the Clifford memorandum (likewise secret) and the Churchill warning all were in the bureaucratic mix. The State

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**G**George Kennan's "X" article had a significant impact on American public opinion. The anonymity of the signature X created mystery and added to its public attention.

The piercing directness of his analysis of the dangers to us of Soviet conduct added to its force.

The policy of the Truman Administration was of course already set and was supported on a bipartisan basis in the Congress under Senator Vandenberg's leadership.

The Truman Doctrine with aid to Greece and Turkey had already passed Congress. Secretary of State Marshall had made his historic proposal to the European nations in his Harvard address.

Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain speech, delivered at Fulton the year before, had jarred many Americans. Public opinion towards the Russians had been changing from our wartime attitude of our "Gallant Allies." The discussion aroused by the Mr. "X" article contributed to a public understanding of what Stalin was up to and gained support for President Truman's policies.

For my part I never accepted Kennan's "Containment Policy" as outlined in his article. President Truman himself, as I recall it, never used that expression in any public statement. I believed we should try to check and roll back Stalin's aggressive Communist influence wherever feasible.

This we did successfully through aid to Greece and later in Western Europe. I have no doubt Stalin expected Western Europe to fall under his sway through the growing strength of the Communist parties, particularly in France and Italy,

Department draft for the President's speech had him saying that "I believe that it should be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outright pressures. . . ." Truman scratched out "should" and inserted "must" before he delivered the address to a joint session of Congress. Aid began to flow to Greece and Turkey and in time to many other places. Soon Kennan's Policy Planning Staff was privately lamenting what it called "the damag-

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*and was only turned back by our initiative in the Marshall Plan and later by NATO.*

*On the other hand, President Truman refused to become embroiled in China in support of Chiang Kai-shek. Though fiercely criticized at the time, history now accepts the wisdom of his restraint. In addition, his Point 4 Program was a constructive move to help alleviate conditions of human misery in the underdeveloped countries in which Stalin himself told me Communism bred and thrived.*

*Two years earlier in May, 1945 at the United Nations Conference in San Francisco, I had expressed my views of dealing with Stalin in off-the-record talks with a number of editors and commentators. I said that we had to realize that Kremlin objectives and ours were irreconcilable but we would have to find ways to compose our differences in order to live without war on this small planet. The Kremlin, I explained, wanted a world of Communist dictatorships with the oracle in Moscow, whereas we believed our security and welfare were best served by governments responsive to the will of the people. Although some of those I talked with understood and agreed, others were shocked. At one meeting two men left the room, refusing, they said, to listen to any more of my warmongering.*

*My approach at the time was that we should have our guard always up, but the hand for negotiations ever extended. I still believe this. Greater and more valid opportunity for constructive agreements exists today than under Stalin."*

April 5, 1972

W. Averell Harriman

ing impression" the public had of the Truman Doctrine, that it provided a worldwide blank check. Less than three months after the Truman Doctrine came the Marshall Plan. In the public eye both were effective steps to implement containment.

But containment of what? Kennan felt Truman was too sweeping but it can be argued that the President simply was taking Kennan at his word when he had spoken of confronting Soviet power "at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful world." Truman thus spoke in a worldwide sense. Kennan later said he thought it had been understood that he meant only areas "vital to our security." But he didn't say so. Clifford didn't say so. Nor had Churchill for that matter. And nobody defined what areas were "vital to our security."

After all, the Kremlin then was Stalin and Communism was monolithic. Kennan later argued that the doctrine of containment "lost much of its rationale with the death of Stalin and with the development of the Soviet-Chinese conflict." Yet even as late as 1966, while testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kennan said that "the policy of containment certainly has relevance to China, but it is a question of what and where and what lies within our resources." Then he added: "If we had been able to do better in Vietnam, I would have been delighted and I would have thought that the effort was warranted."

Kennan provided the word and the concept for all those in Washington struggling with the same problem. He verbalized better than most. While the course already had been set, he provided both logic and justification. He initially intended to apply containment to the Soviet Union alone but if the words just quoted mean anything then it appears that he was willing to apply containment worldwide once Communism turned out to be polycentric.

When the Republicans came to power in 1953, Dulles extended containment by means

of what his opponents termed pactomania. He spoke of "international Communism" and he surrounded it with a complex of treaties covering the Sino-Soviet periphery. In the Republican platform of 1952 Dulles had written that the new Administration would "mark the end of the negative, futile, and immoral policy of 'containment' which abandons countless human beings to a despotism and Godless terrorism. . . . The policies we espouse will revive the contagious liberating influences which are inherent in freedom."

*The Republicans Continue to Contain*

Containment, to Dulles, was static; liberation would be dynamic. But when the test came with the Hungarian rebellion both Eisenhower and Dulles shrank back from liberation; they stuck to containment. Dulles went to "the brink of war" but he described the "art" of that policy as not going over the brink. Eisenhower and Dulles stood fast in two crises over Quemoy and Matsu. Mao retreated; therefore he had been contained though China was not "liberated." Dulles acceded to the "loss" of half of Vietnam though he had recommended military intervention to contain Communism in Indochina. Eisenhower visualized falling dominoes and put the United States behind an "independent" South Vietnam to contain Ho Chi Minh.

John F. Kennedy came to power proclaiming that every nation, "whether it wishes us well or ill," should know that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." The public cheered. What better verbalizing of containment had there ever been? Laos would not be allowed to fall. Berlin would be held against Nikita Khrushchev's threats. Communism—international, fragmented, polycentric or whatever—would be contained. There was no more talk of liberation, especially after the Bay of Pigs.



General Maxwell Taylor was sent off to Saigon to determine, as Kennedy put it in his letter of instructions, how best “eventually to contain and eliminate the threat” to the independence of South Vietnam. Taylor reported back to the President that the United States was “facing a problem of major proportions in deciding how to cope with a new and dangerous technique for bypassing our traditional political and military defenses”—in short, a breach in containment.

Lyndon Johnson carried on lest the containment line be so breached that the United States, as he was wont to put it, end up defending the beaches at Honolulu. Dean Rusk worried out loud about the future with its “billion Chinese . . . armed with nuclear weapons with no certainty about what their attitude toward the rest of Asia will be.” The

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“**T**here is evidence that only shortly before his death did President Franklin D. Roosevelt realize the ghastly error of his conception of Stalin’s U.S.S.R. as a cooperative postwar ally. But as late as February 1946, when the new and uninformed President Truman was still trying to base U.S.-Russian policy on what he supposed to be his predecessor’s, Stalin delivered the speech which was a declaration of total and unending world war to destroy the capitalistic system. Even then the Truman Administration was slow to abandon the dream of postwar cooperation with the U.S.S.R. until it received, a few days later, a realistic analysis of Stalin’s meaning from George F. Kennan, U.S. Counselor of Embassy in Moscow. James Forrestal, then Secretary of the Navy, showed me his copy of the analysis, and with evident pleasure because it conformed to his own—and then minority Administration—view of what to expect of the postwar policy of the U.S.S.R.

When I read the Mr. “X” article in Foreign Affairs its similarities with the Kennan paper of 1946 were so striking that I had no doubt of its authorship, a deduction which Forrestal confirmed when I told him of it, a deduction I then published as a fact.

loss of Vietnam, said Rusk, would mean that Peking's "primitive, militant doctrine of world revolution" would not stop there. "I should think," he concluded, "they would simply move the problem to the next country and the next and the next." Containment of Communism in Vietnam where it was viewed as Moscow and Peking-directed was the only answer because "these are appetites and ambitions that grow upon feeding."

Truman had given up on negotiating with the Russians. All they understand, he remarked, is "an iron fist." Eisenhower tried the summit path but concluded that the new Kremlin leaders sought the permanent division of Europe, at the least. In 1955 Dulles rejected an overture from Peking; he wanted only to contain not to deal with China. Kennedy met with Khrushchev only to face

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*The effect of the 1946 analysis was more important than the Foreign Affairs presentation because the latter articulated a policy which the 1946 telegram had helped set in motion.*

*For the analysis was the basic source of what became the U.S. policy of "containment" that eventually took concrete form in the Truman Doctrine—the Greek-Turkish aid legislation, the North Atlantic Alliance and NATO, Point Four and the Marshall Plan. And, though the Doctrine was executed beyond its purpose, and Kennan's intent, by U.S. military intervention in areas outside its immediate security interest, the February 1946 Kennan analysis—which his subsequent Mr. "X" article in the July 1947 issue of Foreign Affairs Quarterly expanded into an informal White Paper—provided the official ground for the reversal of U.S. policy toward the U.S.S.R. from appeasement to containment. But more importantly, as aforesaid it effected an Administration and popular consensus on the policy reversal that Forrestal, Harriman, and Clifford in particular had sought from the time Stalin's U.S.S.R. showed its true world design at the organization of the United Nations at San Francisco in 1945."*

April 17, 1972

Arthur Krock

what he took to be a Berlin ultimatum. Jointly they peered over the brink in Cuba. After that Kennedy denied a desire for a "Pax Americana" and he came to terms with Moscow on the limited test ban treaty. The Kremlin's power at least had been contained in the missile crisis; perhaps the treaty would contain the arms race. The void that followed Kennedy's assassination, as General Taylor saw it, was "particularly noticeable in foreign policy, where old slogans in support of the containment of Communism and the principles of the Truman Doctrine are no longer sufficient to rally public support for actions entailing public sacrifice." Kennan had never spoken of such sacrifices.

Eisenhower's efforts at summitry, Kennedy's American University speech, and Johnson's efforts to begin the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) all represented realizations that containment had to mean more than just the "adroit and vigilant application of counter-force" in a military and/or economic sense. It meant the acceptance of at least the rudiments of Kennan's own belief that diplomacy should be the primary tool.

In due course Richard Nixon came to the White House. The man who was to be his chief foreign policy advisor, Henry A. Kissinger, had proclaimed in his 1957 book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, that "the basic requirement for American security is a doctrine which will enable us to act purposefully in the face of the challenges which will inevitably confront us." And: "In any conflict the side which is animated by faith in victory has a decided advantage over an opponent who wishes above all to preserve the status quo." Once in power Kissinger the conceptualist and Nixon the old Cold Warrior combined to move from "an era of confrontation" to one of "negotiation." The United States would not be "a pitiful helpless giant" but it would lower its worldwide profile, if only because the American public demanded it by now. Superiority in arms would give way to sufficiency, if only because

the money was running out. How to tie together such changes in an understandable bundle? By a doctrine, of course. Americans, both the public and its government, have a craving for doctrines. This is especially true for those who care about and pay attention to the nation's foreign policy. The President thus had no qualms about calling it the Nixon Doctrine.

The real problem was to find a new method of containment of Communism, now so clearly fragmented especially between Moscow and Peking, commensurate with a lessened American commitment abroad. The nuclear umbrella for allies and friends, dating from the Truman era, would continue. But friends and allies should provide the shock troops and appeal to the United States henceforth only in extremes. Washington would judge whether it would be in our national interest to become involved directly.

One may view the Nixon-Kissinger policy simply as the product of necessity. It is essentially a new form of the old containment policy, a new method of attaining the old end, in Kennan's words "stand up to them . . . , manfully but not aggressively, and give the hand of time a chance to work." Nixon and Kissinger have not assumed that lions lie down with lambs. They simply are trying a new way, or rather reviving a very old way, to keep the lions contained so they cannot eat the lamb.

### *Did it Work?*

Has containment worked? In Europe there is more stability than at any time since World War II, assuming Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* is not upset by the politics of Bonn. Berlin is defused. In Asia a new live-and-let-live arrangement is already visible although its form remains shadowy. In the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America containment in the Truman Doctrine sense has been breached. But the development of national Communisms, or more precisely of national Socialisms, in such places as Chile, a number

of Arab nations, and some of the African countries has done no irreparable harm to American vital interests. Only in Indochina has it been impossible thus far for the Nixon Administration to disengage without accepting a major defeat of the old containment doctrine—therefore the effort to lessen the importance of Indochina by a rapprochement with Peking and a new design in Asia.

In terms of raw power this is still a bipolar world. In terms of influence, economic and political, it has become *at least* five-polar. Containment has succeeded in preventing a bipolar clash and it has aided in the development of the five-polar world by providing shields for both Western Europe and Japan. America has grown introspective but not isolationist in the old sense of the years between the world wars. We may be unsure just where our frontiers lie. We have had it as the world's policeman. But we have not opted out of the world. In sum Nixon has been conducting a rather orderly retreat in this disorderly world, based on his revamped version of the containment doctrine.

Of course, containment did get out of hand. It did so because the United States did not soon enough understand the reality of the post-Stalin developments within the Communist orbit. We did not as a nation perceive the peculiar circumstances of Ho Chi Minh's brand of Communism and of such other versions as Castro's. Pursuing containment to the extreme did lead to disaster in Vietnam and to major repercussions at home. We know the cost on both counts has been extreme but we cannot yet determine the consequences.

Looking back over 25 years it seems to me that the underlying concept of containment has worked. Containment began as a post-World War II policy. In the generation since, the initial concept has run its course. The initial post-World War II American dominance was unhealthy; today's balance of power is more rational. The excesses of pursuit of containment, peaking in Indo-

china, have driven the United States to a new posture, of necessity.

Changes in policy tend to be cyclical and generational. I suspect that even if there had been no Vietnam that the United States by now, give or take a few years, would have been re-examining its policies. But because there was Vietnam Nixon has had to attempt to ease the United States into a new world relationship. Some who challenge him for the Presidency this year favor quicker and more drastic change. But no one likely to be elected President this November is going to alter the basic thesis of containment.

I don't venture to guess how containment will appear on its 50th anniversary. But on this 25th birthday George Kennan, for all his qualms about what succeeding administrations did to distort his word and his concept, can draw more comfort than he may wish to concede from the role he played in providing for so long the "intellectual moorings" of American policy.

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*“George Kennan’s containment article was a description of what was happening anyway. He did not cause it. . . . George reminded me of an old horse my father used to have that would pull our buggy around. We’d go over an old clapboard bridge and the horse would just stop to turn around to see the noise he was making. Of course, when he stopped, so would the noise. Then he would go on faster . . . and more noise, of course . . . stop, turn around again, and so forth until he got across the bridge, never realizing what the stir was about. The “X” article was a perfectly fine article. Then Walter Lippmann decided that he didn’t like it. Well, it was as if God had looked over at George’s shoulder and said, ‘George, you shouldn’t have written such a bad article.’ They thought that containment applied everywhere, but it was nothing of the kind.”*

March 26, 1970

Dean Acheson