

The American YAWPⁱ

Chapter 25: The Cold War, Introduction

I. Introduction

1-Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union—erstwhile allies—sour soon after World War II. On February 22, 1946, less than a year after the end of the war, the chargé d'affaires (a diplomatic temporary official) of the U.S. embassy in Moscow, George Kennan sent a famously lengthy telegram—literally referred to as the Long Telegram—to the State Department denouncing the Soviet Union. “World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue,” he wrote, and “the steady advance of uneasy Russian nationalism . . . in [the] new guise of international Marxism . . . is more dangerous and insidious than ever before.” There could be no cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, Kennan wrote. Instead, the Soviets had to be “contained.” Less than two weeks later, on March 5, former British prime minister Winston Churchill visited President Harry Truman in his home state of Missouri and declared that Europe had been cut in half, divided by an “iron curtain” that had “descended across the Continent.” Aggressive anti-Soviet sentiment seized the American government and soon the American people.

2-The Cold War was a global political and ideological struggle between capitalist and communist countries, particularly between the two surviving superpowers of the postwar world: the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). “Cold” because it was never a “hot,” direct shooting war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the generations-long, multifaceted rivalry nevertheless bent the world to its whims. Tensions ran highest, perhaps, during the first Cold War, which lasted from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, after which followed a period of relaxed tensions and increased communication and cooperation, known by the French term *détente*, until the second Cold War interceded from roughly 1979 until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War reshaped the world and the generations of Americans that lived under its shadow.

II. Political, Economic, and Military Dimensions

3-The Cold War grew out of a failure to achieve a durable settlement among leaders from the Big Three Allies—the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—as they met at Yalta in Russian Crimea and at Potsdam in occupied Germany to shape the postwar order....At the Potsdam Conference, held on the outskirts of Berlin from mid-July to early August, the Allies debated the fate of Soviet-occupied Poland. Toward the end of the meeting, the American delegation received word that Manhattan Project scientists had successfully tested an atomic bomb. On July 24, when Truman told Stalin about this “new weapon of unusual destructive force,” the Soviet leader simply nodded his acknowledgment and said that he hoped the Americans would make “good use” of it.

4-On the eve of American involvement in World War II, on August 14, 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill had issued a joint declaration of goals for postwar peace, known as the Atlantic Charter. An adaptation of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the Atlantic Charter established the creation of the United Nations. The Soviet Union was among the fifty charter UN member-states and was given one of five seats—alongside the United States, Britain, France, and China—on the select Security Council. The Atlantic Charter also set in motion the planning for a reorganized global economy. The July 1944 UN Financial and Monetary Conference, more popularly known as the Bretton Woods Conference, created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the forerunner of the World Bank, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The Bretton Woods system was bolstered in 1947 with the addition of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), forerunner of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Soviets rejected it all.

4-Many officials on both sides knew that the Soviet-American relationship would dissolve into renewed hostility at the end of the war, and events proved them right. In 1946 alone, the Soviet Union refused to cede parts of occupied Iran, a Soviet defector betrayed a Soviet spy who had worked on the Manhattan Project, and the United States refused Soviet calls to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. In a 1947 article for *Foreign Affairs*—written under the pseudonym “Mr. X”—George Kennan warned that Americans should “continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner,” since Stalin harbored “no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds.” He urged U.S. leaders to pursue “a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians.”

5-Truman, on March 12, 1947, announced \$400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey, where “terrorist activities . . . led by Communists” jeopardized “democratic” governance. With Britain “reducing or liquidating its commitments in several parts of the world, including Greece,” it fell on the United States, Truman said, “to support free peoples . . . resisting attempted subjugation by . . . outside pressures.” The so-called Truman Doctrine became a cornerstone of the American policy of containment.

· Yawp \yôp\ n: 1: a raucous noise 2: rough vigorous language. From Walt Whitman in 1855, “I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”