



The Cold War

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Note

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*I am not a historian, so don't look for dispassionate recording of the Cold War in what follows. I was of course an eyewitness to bits and pieces of the whole period we call the Cold War—but don't look for fragmentary anecdotes which would not do justice to the serious purpose of this symposium. What I will try to do is something in between—an essay about this fascinating almost-half-century—not just what happened, but why, and especially why it came out the way it did. I was fortunate to work, during the 1960s, with a superlative writer named Thomas W. Wilson, Jr. Shortly before we joined forces in the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs, Tom had almost finished a vignette of history, which was published in 1962. *Cold War and Common Sense*, he called it—and indeed his book is not only readable history but full of common sense, about matters which were most uncommon and often nonsensical. Especially for those parts of the story that I didn't myself see unfolding, I have leaned heavily, with posthumous thanks, on his version of the whos and whats and whys. You will find in this text several unattributed quotes; those are passages lifted directly from Tom Wilson's writing...*

I.

When did the Cold War start? The answer is classic irony in the somber shadow of today's headlines. For it started when the President of the United States decided to protect Iran from our wartime ally, the Soviet Union.

The wartime allies had used Iran—with the Soviets occupying northern Iran and the British and American forces occupying the south—as a back-door Allied supply line to the Red Army. At their Teheran Conference in 1943 all the allies had agreed to clear out of Iran within six months of an armistice in Europe.

The Western allies withdrew before that deadline, which was March 6, 1946. The Soviets did not. Indeed, in early March one Red Army column started south from Azerbaijan toward the Persian capital, Teheran, and another swung west toward Iraq and Turkey. Iran, Britain and the U.S. complained to Moscow; when that didn't work, the case was appealed to the UN Security Council. Since the Soviets had a veto there, that couldn't work either.

So—it's still March 1946—Harry Truman decided (after consulting only with his Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes) to send Stalin secretly what he describes in his memoirs as an "ultimatum." He threatened to deploy U.S. naval and ground forces in the Persian Gulf if the Soviets didn't pull the Red Army out of Iran. Before the end of March Andrei Gromyko announced that Soviet troops would leave Iran, and before long they actually left.

During that same spring, it became clear that the Soviets wouldn't abide by the Potsdam agreement that Germany should be treated as an economic unit. The Western allies—Britain, France, and the U.S.—started to consolidate the non-Soviet zones, thus ratifying the de facto division of Germany.

That summer, another crisis brewed. The Soviets proposed to put an end to the international supervision of the Dardanelles and establish Soviet bases in Turkey. Twenty-five divisions of the Red Army were maneuvering near the Turkish border to show they meant it.

This time President Truman did consult his Cabinet officers and the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and summed up their consensus with Trumanesque informality: "We might as well find out now, rather than five or ten years from now, whether the Russians are determined to take over the world." Faced with resistance from Turkey and tough U.S. and British diplomacy backed by the aircraft carrier Franklin D. Roosevelt's "courtesy calls" in the Mediterranean, Stalin "stayed his hand" in Turkey—but tightened the screws on Greece.

The climax came when the Greek government, controlling only a "shrunken area" around Athens, appealed for international help. Almost at the same moment, in February 1947, the British government delivered to Washington a formal note saying that it could no longer afford to help either Greece or Turkey beyond the end of March. Also in February, a rigged election put Communists in power in Poland—and another piece of Allied postwar planning, the Yalta agreement, was snuffed out by Soviet non-compliance.

In American politics the stars were not aligned for a strong reaction to all this. Americans were delighted the war was over, welcomed the wholesale demobilization of troops, They were looking for some normalcy, maybe even some prosperity. They were certainly far from ready for another kind of war. In November 1946, U.S. voters had put Republicans in charge of both houses of Congress. Senator Robert Taft, "Mr. Republican" in those days, was focused, he said, on "straightening out our domestic affairs."

Yet in March 1947, with the indispensable help of a senior Republican, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, President Truman laid it on the line in a historic address to a joint session of Congress. He called for massive help to both Greece and Turkey—which was authorized and funded by overwhelming majorities in both the Senate and the House in less than two months.

The great confrontation we came to call the Cold War had quite suddenly become the next stage of world history. What began in Iran in 1946 lasted for 45 years, until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

II.

Four months after the Truman Doctrine speech, a Commencement address by Secretary of State George C. Marshall added another theme to the symphony of Western cooperation. Marshall was already famous as the general manager of America's largest and most successful war, and more recently renowned—though unsuccessful—as mediator in China's civil conflict. He had just come back from weeks of fruitless haggling at a Moscow conference of foreign ministers. On the flight home, he had witnessed the hopelessness of Europe soon to be described by Winston Churchill as “a rubble-heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground of pestilence and hate.”

The Marshall speech was not in itself a cold war maneuver. “Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos.” In this humanitarian tone of voice, General-now-Secretary George Marshall launched the United States and its European allies on the most ambitious, riskiest, and arguably the most successful peacemaking adventure in American history.

The Marshall Plan was a brilliant series of improvisations on a deceptively simple theme: Europe needed help, and only America could supply it. Precisely because it wasn't a cold war move, it turned out to be a key to the cold war's outcome. It was even open to the Eastern Europeans; but once the Soviet foreign minister Molotov attended a first planning session in Paris, the Kremlin pulled its satellites out of what looked, from Moscow, like a dangerous opportunity to cooperate.

Measured by the cost of failure, let alone the standards of modern war, the Marshall Plan was not expensive. Its first-year (1948) cost, five billion dollars, did provide something like five percent of Western Europe's GNP. But the total amount of transatlantic aid, \$13 billion in its four years, was a fraction of defense spending and a marginal blip on Europe's own recovery effort—though hugely important because it lifted Europe's spirits and helped fill Europe's dollar gap.

The priceless ingredient was of course immeasurable: reassurance and hope from across the Atlantic Ocean, for Europeans who were losing hope fast as the Soviets mounted an impressive political effort on the quite rational assumption that Americans, weary of Europe's wars and anxious to get back to creating America, would stay out of Europe's next crisis. The Marshall Plan provided above all a source of dynamism-in-action to reverse a growing hopelessness in Europe.

Without the Marshall Plan, Western Europe was endangered by “poverty, desperation, and chaos”; and Communist parties backed by the Soviet Union were poised to pick up the pieces. With the Marshall Plan, the Western Europeans were able to jump-start their economic recovery from World War II; to commence a bold if baffling effort to build a European Union; and to create an inclusive framework within which a new Germany could be both strong and safe. And then, the Europeans were able to face east with such comparative prosperity and panache that their Eastern European neighbors in time decided to join the Western future—and the Soviet Union itself eventually dissolved.

But meanwhile, the Marshall Plan provoked a wide range of Soviet efforts to sabotage it. Tom Wilson the historian watched this at close hand, and eloquently describes it: “Every medium of propaganda which the Communists controlled was used to the hilt. Communist posters plastered the walls of the cities. Handbills were passed out to the workers leaving their factories. News sheets appeared on the walls of remote villages. Counterpropaganda was torn down or painted red by Communist crews in the streets by night. The radio programs from Eastern Europe kept up a drumfire of anti-Marshall Plan messages...

“Rocks were thrown through the screens of motion-picture theaters showing newsreels of Marshall Plan projects. Riots were staged at U.S. information exhibits. Bundles of U.S.-sponsored newspapers were thrown into rivers from trains crossing bridges by night. The Communists spent seven times as much for propaganda as the United States spent for the Marshall Plan information service.

“Against these odds, the U.S. services worked overtime and well. The best film crews that could be assembled turned out news clips, film magazines, and documentaries at prodigious rates...” Some of you have seen excellent examples of this good work in the “Selling Democracy” screenings shown by Sandra Schulberg at the National Archives this week.

We Americans also derived from the Marshall Plan benefits that are as hard to quantify as they were obvious to see and to feel. We were associated with a dependable group of European allies in a troublesome postwar world. We helped build a large and congenial market in which to buy and sell. We helped create a political attractant that lured Eastern Europe away from totalitarian rule, and withered Soviet Communism on the vine. And we generated, besides, the good feeling among Americans that we could do something right—something that we hadn’t known how to do.

A young historian—David Reynolds, too young to have lived through it but very perceptive about its place in history—summed up the Marshall Plan this way: “Between 1948 and 1951, the United States pumped about \$13 billion into Western Europe. Between 1948 and Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet Union extracted some \$14 billion from Eastern Europe. These statistics are crude but telling. They deserve a place in any history of postwar Europe.”

Helmut Schmidt of Germany said it all in one sentence: “The high probability of failure was averted thanks to leaders who did not act according to plan, but instead relied on their moral and national visions as well as their common sense.”

III.

Even before the Marshall Plan got under way, the transatlantic allies had put together a military alliance designed to persuade the Soviet Union that military militancy would not pay. The architects of history’s greatest peacetime alliance were acting out one sentence of a speech by a Soviet Foreign Minister to the U.N. General Assembly two decades later, in 1968. “History takes revenge for forgetfulness,” Andrei Gromyko declared with unintended irony, “if somebody deliberately forgets the significance of European affairs or neglects them.”

The North Atlantic Alliance was signed in 1947. Six decades later, despite pressures, threats, ultimatums, provocations, and crises, there has been no war among, or armed attack on, the members of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Anyone with a smattering of modern European history can appreciate how extraordinary and unprecedented a piece of good news this is.

Something must have been done right. The early stress on a massive program of economic recovery; the psychological and economic lift of the Common Market; the curiously credible threat of strategic nuclear retaliation for tactical transgressions; the symbolic integration of NATO armies; the willingness of wartime allies to make an ally of West Germany without awaiting a final peace settlement; the long and ultimately successful search for an Atlantic “nuclear sharing” arrangement; the West’s espousal of a policy broad enough (and ambiguous enough) to accommodate both defense and détente; the willingness to bring in additional members—each of these policies played its part. But shining through the military half-measures and the tepid ministerial communiqués was a moral solidarity that somehow made more out of what was objectively not enough.

The real deterrent to Soviet ambitions was this: by and large, with occasional and temporary exceptions which fortunately turned out not to be critical, the Atlantic allies stuck together.

The glue that has held the allies together is a large, complex, and dynamic bargain—partly an understanding among the Europeans, but most importantly a deal between them and the United States of America. The specifics of the bargain, and the comparative burdens to be shared, keep changing. But the constant is that there has to be a bargain.

The Treaty form of the deal is “We’ll help defend you if you’ll help defend us.” But despite Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s legally correct allusion to the Bering Straits as the “Western flank” of NATO, most Americans think of NATO the way most Europeans do, as essentially an arrangement to ensure the defense of Western Europe. The price of mutual help is self-help: “We Americans will help you Europeans, if you will (a) help defend yourselves, and (b) get on with building a united Europe.”

The transatlantic bargain, kept alive by continuous consultation, kept 7,000 U.S. nuclear weapons and some 300,000 U.S. troops in Europe for the long generation we call the Cold War. Whether that was enough for defense we fortunately never had to discover. It did turn out, in the end, to be enough for détente.

IV.

The Cold War was called cold because the featured heavyweights, the Soviet Union and the United States, were nominally “at peace.” But they engaged in circling each other, jabbing at each other, testing each others’ supposed weaknesses in every part of the world, in the Byzantine politics of the United Nations, and in a couple of dozen other international organizations. We don’t have all day for a complete inventory, but it may be useful to provide some examples of the variety of “preliminary bouts.”

One early bout was in divided Berlin, where the Soviets had a natural advantage: Berlin was completely surrounded by East Germany. In 1948 they suspended all road and rail traffic between Berlin and West Germany. In response the Truman administration decided to supply Berlin entirely by airlift. This extraordinary operation, run by Air Force General Curtis LeMay, came to be known as the LeMay Coal and Feed Company. It “flew in corridors only twenty miles wide, at staggered altitudes, in all weather, twenty-four hours a day, sometimes harassed by Soviet fighter planes, and landing at airports only four minutes from each other. ...At its peak, an incredible 1,398 trips brought 13,000 tons of supplies into Berlin within a twenty-four hour period... More than ten months after it began, and more than 250,000 flights later, the Berlin airlift came to an end... The Western Allies were still in Berlin [and] the cold war was still cold.”

But the world seemed to be heating up fast. In 1949 the Soviet Union tested an atomic explosion. In 1950 the North Koreans rolled south across the 38th parallel in their Russian-made tanks. Under a UN mandate, the U.S., South Korea and more than a dozen other countries resisted; three years later the dividing line in the Korean peninsula was about where it had been before. But casualties on both sides had been enormous. And the resulting arms race engaged all the NATO allies—the U.S. itself moved to “a state of semimobilization, jumping its military budget from \$18 to \$35 billion.” Before long, the United States was formally allied with forty-two nations in military pacts around the world.

Josef Stalin had pushed as hard as he could. Harry Truman, with plenty of help from others, had pushed back just as hard. After seven years of not-quite-war, “the result was a stalemate.” But the Soviet Union was still in control of whatever the Red Army had controlled at the end of World War II.

In 1953 General Eisenhower, whose last military job had been Supreme Commander at NATO, became President of the United States—and two months later Stalin died. The Soviets achieved an H-bomb, which meant that deterrence had become mutual. And Nikita Khrushchev began to emerge as a new kind of Soviet leader—just as pushy, occasionally more reckless, but also more inclined to play the peace-and-coexistence card, and much more confident that the Soviet economy could compete with Western capitalism and attract support around the world with economic and technical aid “without strings.” Later he more dramatically cut ties with the earlier régime by denouncing the “cult of personality” and the “absolutely insufferable character” of Stalin. But he continued to dramatize his own personality at every turn.

The notion of “rolling back” Communists from Eastern Europe, floated in 1953 by President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, was itself rolled back when the Soviets reacted harshly to a Hungarian government that wanted to defect from the Warsaw Pact. In the midst of a crisis with its own allies about Suez, the United States helped thousands of Hungarian refugees, but did nothing to help those who stayed in Hungary to face the Soviet tanks.

Americans had been competing with the Soviets around the globe, but were shocked when Moscow launched the first earth-circling Sputniks into space. Once again the U.S.

government pushed the money button, to increase appropriations both for military and space technology.

Back on earth the U.S. was reaching out with a series of overseas visits by President Eisenhower; he was received by “tumultuous welcoming crowds” in four continents. The climax of this personal diplomacy was to be a Summit Conference with the Soviet Union in Paris. But shortly before that conference Khrushchev “startled the world with an angry but triumphant announcement: an American pilot had been shot down near Sverdlovsk, deep in the heart of the Soviet Union. The pilot was an employee of the CIA—in one of the high-flying U-2s that had been making overflights of the U.S.S.R. for some years past.”

Khrushchev did come to Paris, but the Summit Conference “was over before it officially started when Khrushchev delivered a personal attack on President Eisenhower which probably has no precedent in diplomatic history.” He cancelled the invitation to the American President to make a state visit to the Soviet Union. And “to rub it in, he held a press conference in Paris at which his violence and vituperation came so close to hysteria that he threw away most of the enormous propaganda asset that the American spy in the sky had placed in his hands.”

By 1960, despite the theatrics both in Soviet behavior and in American politics, the Cold War was still a stalemate.

The next protagonist on this moving stage was a new American president, John F. Kennedy. I will skip lightly over his first meeting with the Soviet leader, who still had not returned to his earlier theme of peaceful coexistence, and the United Nations session at which Khrushchev belabored the UN Secretary General and made UN history by banging his shoe on the podium. The next confrontation, a critical moment in the Cold War, was of course the Cuba Missile Crisis.

To this day it’s not clear why Nikita Khrushchev and his colleagues in Moscow thought it would be useful to plant nuclear missiles on an island 90 miles from Florida. They added nothing to the strategic nuclear threat. America had no missile defense; every U.S. city was already infinitely vulnerable to nuclear missiles launched from deep in the Russian land mass. So the Cuba missiles were nothing but an in-your-face ploy. Any U.S. president would have had to react strongly when it was revealed.

President Kennedy had a psychological advantage when the missiles were discovered by another of those useful U-2 “spies in the sky.” He was experienced enough by then to react in a way that put the ball in Khrushchev’s court, by arranging an instant Hemispheric “quarantine” of Cuba and making the Soviet missiles public in a sudden drama conducted in the UN Security Council by his UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, who showed in his televised presentation photos of the missile sites—before the slow-moving Soviet bureaucracy had instructions to admit that the missiles were there.

Khrushchev was evidently alarmed that this might really lead to war; he wrote an anguished personal message to Kennedy. That was followed by a harder-line message obviously written by others. But the President decided to reply only to the first letter, which left the way open

for the only sensible deal—the Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba, and the U.S. wouldn't invade Cuba (which, absent the missiles, we weren't about to do anyway).

The missiles duly departed, and after several months of negotiation the issue was, if not “settled” exactly, swept under a complicated diplomatic rug. In the years that followed, there was still plenty of pushing and shoving between the heavyweights, here and there around the world. But nothing else in the Cold War was remotely comparable to the Cuba Missile Crisis as a proximate threat to civilization.

V.

During the 45 years of the Cold War, many in the West doubted, as Alexis de Tocqueville had doubted a century and a half earlier, that democracies could “regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles.” But as things turned out, the vigor and attractiveness of life in the democratic, market-oriented West got through to those in the Communist, planned-economy East, who were deferring their gratification because their leaders told them it was necessary for socialism. Close readers of de Tocqueville might have predicted this outcome from his long-ago insight—not in his best-known work, *Democracy in America*, but in a speech he made later on. “Democracy and socialism,” he said, “have nothing in common but one word: equality. But notice the difference: While democracy seeks equality in liberty, socialism seeks equality in restraint and servitude.”

Both the Soviet and Chinese strategies of “reform from within” were revolutions promoted—and, their leaders hoped, managed—from the top. The difference was that Deng Xiaoping thought he could have economic reforms, even the openness to “let the market decide,” while maintaining a monopoly of political power in one party dominated by a tight little group of lifetime associates, friends, and relations.

At first Mikhail Gorbachev was rhetorically clear that politics had to go hand in hand with economics. During those ticklish days of May 1989, when he visited his Chinese peers in Beijing and found himself the darling of the students demonstrating for democracy, he put the matter bluntly to the élite assembled in the Great Hall. Soviet experience, he said, has shown that “economic reform will not work unless supported by a radical transformation of the political system.”

The milling Chinese just outside, in and around Tiananmen Square, were not permitted to hear Gorbachev's speech. They soon learned all about it from the radar effect of the electronic media. Stories filed with foreign news services were quickly played back to the students in the square by modern information technologies, producing the world's first fax revolution. But the demonstrators' educated intuition had already enabled them to reach a quick verdict: top-down reform will never go far enough fast enough to match the rising expectations it creates.

Leakage of information was a two-way boulevard. It didn't take long for street-demonstration fever to bounce halfway around the world to Central and Eastern Europe. Although political change has moved swiftly in other times and places, it is hard to think of a historical moment with a comparable rate of acceleration. One observer said that, in 1989,

the ouster of a Communist party took roughly 10 years in Poland, ten months in Hungary, ten weeks in East Germany, ten days in Czechoslovakia, and ten hours in Romania. Real history doesn't come in such neat packages, but the remark helps remind us of that cascade of political surprises that filled our television screens in the autumn of 1989 and again in the autumn of 1991, when the Soviet Union itself fell apart and its republics started trying to pick up the pieces.

What is increasingly clear in retrospect is how much the tumbleweed of political change was blown across language barriers, national frontiers, and political obstacles by information technology. Telephones and fax machines, radio and television, orbiting satellites, and computers hitched to telecommunications supplemented, reinforced, and intensified the oldest and most trusted of communication systems, word of mouth. As in Beijing, so in Europe's "Soviet bloc," it was not the miserably poor but feisty and frustrated educated people who set the parade in motion—once Gorbachev's Kremlin made clear that the lid was off and bubbles would not be prevented from rising. Suddenly, the label Communist became as poisonous in public as it had long been in private. One after another, each in its own style but mostly with little violence, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe discovered to their surprise that they were pounding on unlocked doors. They started pouring through, and before long some found themselves on the Western side of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate.

The abrupt turn of events was widely seen as a victory for "containment." George Kennan, the diplomat and historian who in 1947 proposed the "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansionist tendencies," later said the NATO military shield was not the main agent of change but rather the fact that the industrial democracies were so clearly outperforming the Soviet Union: "the realization upon the part of many intelligent people in the Soviet Union that the whole system was going downhill, that it was no longer competitive, that the capitalist countries were going far beyond it." From that judgment flowed in quick succession the turnaround in the Soviet Union, its jettisoning of Marxist economics, its tolerance for the breakaways in Eastern Europe, the flood of migrants from East Germany, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the surprisingly bloodless breakup of the Soviet Union.

Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who became Czechoslovakia's president, was asked on U.S. public television in February 1990 how he felt as a dramatist about the theatrics of 1989. It was, he replied with unrehearsed elegance, a "drama so thrilling and tragic and absurd that no earthing could have written it."

The central lesson from that time in our lives seems clear enough: the people, not their leaders, were doing the leading. Well-known names, presidents and prime ministers of the world's military powers and economic powerhouses, stared at the nightly news with ill-concealed astonishment. The people-power cavorting on the world stage after the summer of 1989 had remarkably little to do with the customary measures of power—weapons, armies, gross economic product. More than anything else, the power of ideas was in play.

The impatient mobs were moved not by distant visions of Utopia but by spreading information about neighbors who were obviously getting more goods and services, more

fairness in their distribution, and firmer guarantees of human rights than their own bosses and planners seemed able to deliver.

What caught up with the Communist leaders in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was what went on in the democracies of Western Europe and North America. They observed that people in the West chose both their leaders and their lifestyles and therefore seemed to be better fed and clothed, more affluent, and despite all their problems, happier. The news of this contrast readily leaked eastward—by word-of-mouth stories of travelers, by the written word, by telephone and facsimile, and especially by radio and television.

For Eastern Europeans in the 1980s, TV was an envy-thy-neighbor machine that bred intolerance of corruption and foot-dragging by longtime leaders, who couldn't liberalize their policies fast enough to escape the viewers' wrath. Most of the leaders tried, in the end, to change their spots. But the protesters, seeing unaccustomed light at the end of the tunnel, condemned the very leaders whose sudden conversion made that vision visible.

So leadership changed, rising from the roiling streets. Women and men of all kinds and colors and modes of speech were suddenly sticking up for themselves, by the hundreds of thousands on one public square after another, by the millions when they got a chance to vote their own destiny. Their "established" leaders were behind them, way behind them, hurrying in breathless pretense that the new-style parades would still need old-style drum majors. Meanwhile new leaders emerged, increasingly women as well as men, mostly educated people—journalists, writers, professors, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, civil servants, even some professional politicians—pushed into formal positions of power by the volcanic rumblings of the newly articulate crowds.

It was not the end of history. But it was the end of the Cold War.