Did the Soviet Union start the Cold War?

Viewpoint. *Yes*. The Cold War was the result of the belligerence of Joseph Stalin and the insecurity it caused in the United States and the West.

Viewpoint. *No*. The primary responsibility for the Cold War derives from the hardline policies of the United States.

The questions of who "started" the Cold War has been an issue of rancorous debate among historians and policymakers for more than four decades. Most of what was written in the 1950s and 1960s about the origins of the Cold War came to be defined as "orthodox" or "traditional." In the 1960s and 1970s a new interpretation of the sources of the Cold War emerged and was dubbed "revisionist" because of its challenge to the orthodox interpretation. Shortly after the first revisionist studies appeared, and at an accelerated pace during the late 1980s and early 1990s, as archives in the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Soviet-bloc countries opened to Western scholars, a "post-revisionist" reading of the origins of the Cold War appeared.

Traditionalists put the blame for the Cold War on the Soviet Union. They argue that the Soviets' denial of free elections in Poland and Czechoslovakia, their meddling in Greece, Turkey, and Iran, their assistance to communist forces in China, and their opposition to US-sponsored post-war plans for controlling weapons and promoting economic development—such as the Baruch Plan and the Marshall Plan-caused the Truman administration to reassess its initially more conciliatory approach to the Soviet Union and adopt a harder line toward it. There are differences among traditionalists regarding the driving motivation behind Soviet conduct. Some emphasize the messianic nature of communist ideology, while others offer a combination of traditional Russian imperial impulses, and also point out that Soviet conduct was in line with historical patterns of traditional power politics.

Revisionists argue that Soviet behavior was largely defensive in nature. After the devastation of the Second World War, the Soviet leadership was interested in rebuilding its country and addressing legitimate security concerns—especially making sure that the countries of east and central Europe would no longer be used as a corridor of invasion into Russia. According to this argument, it was the United States, driven by a capitalist need for markets and raw materials, that adopted a confrontational, bullying tone toward the Soviet Union, leading to the outbreak of the Cold War.

Post revisionists reject what they regard as the dogmatic Marxism that characterized much of the revisionist reading, but they also challenge what they consider an excessive emphasis by traditionalists on the role of communist ideology in guiding Soviet foreign policy. Post revisionist analyses emphasize geopolitical considerations and strategic realities to suggest a more balanced view of responsibility for the Cold War. In their writings, however, there is a return to traditionalist themes, as they point to provocative Soviet actions and to an exceedingly bellicose Soviet rhetoric as major contributing factors in the breakdown of cooperation between the two countries and the onset of the Cold War.

No, the primary responsibility for the Cold War derives from the hardline policies of the United States.

Three main perspectives have dominated the debate on the origins of the Cold War. For traditionalists, the Cold War was caused by hostile Soviet intentions rooted in communist ideology and the need to justify internal repression. Once Soviet expansionist goals became clear in 1946 and 1947, the United States was forced into a firm containment posture that it would otherwise have avoided. The revisionists turn this argument on its head, arguing that the origins of the Cold War lie in hostile US actions from

1945 to 1947, at a point when Soviet leaders sought peace so that they could rebuild their devastated country. The reasons revisionists give for US aggression vary, but they include American efforts to promote global capitalism and American paranoia concerning US security needs. The third perspective, post revisionism, offers, a middle-ground position. Post revisionists hold that the Cold War was, above all, the tragic result of the anarchic international system. Both superpowers were driven primarily by the quest for security; yet, each saw the other as aggressive, and thus each acted to protect its respective sphere. This action fueled an unnecessary spiral of mistrust and hostility, one that persisted into the 1920s.

This essay, building on the seminal work of Melvyn Leffler in 1992, agrees with the post revisionist argument but pushes it a bit further. By 1946-1947, both superpowers were indeed caught up in a tragic spiral of distrust. Primary responsibility for the Cold War, however, lies with the United States because it was the first state to shift to hard line policies after the Second World War. AS early as mid-1945, President Harry S. Truman began to move toward a policy that later became known as "containment," despite his awareness that this policy would likely lead to a destabilizing arms race. He took this provocative action, Leffler argues, to ensure that the United States maintained its "preponderance of power" against the rising Soviet colossus. Containment strategies in 1945 thus reflected a rational geopolitics rather than greed or irrational paranoia.

Standard accounts of the Cold War usually designate 1947 as the year in which the American containment strategy was set in place. Yet, the core foundations of this containment were actually laid by August 1945 to restrict Soviet economic and military growth:

1. The surrounding of the Soviet Union with US air and naval bases in order to project military power into the Soviet heartlands;

2. the termination of US aid to the Soviets, even as aid was extended to the Chinese—an action that included resisting Soviet claims to badly needed reparations from Germany;

3. the use of the atomic bomb, which—in addition to ending the Pacific war quickly—was designed to make Moscow more accommodating in postwar relations;

4. the American effort to rebuild western Europe, which required the revitalization of the western half of Germany, a nation that had just killed more than twenty million Russians;

5. the rapid deployment of US and allied troops to Korea, China, and Manchuria to prevent communist penetration of the region;

6. the US refusal to give atomic secrets and materials to the Soviet Union;

7. the restricting of Soviet naval access to the Mediterranean and North Sea despite recognition of Soviet legal rights;

8. and the exclusion of any Soviet role in the occupation and revitalization of Japan, a nation that had fought several wars with Russia in the first half of the twentieth century.

In implementing this policy, Truman did not believe he was abandoning all chances of cooperation with the Soviet Union; a great power modus vivendi might still be worked out. Any such arrangement, however, would be on everything necessary to maintain a preponderant position. If the Soviets cooperated, so much the better. If they did not, Truman preferred a Cold War—with all its attendant risks of inadvertent escalation—to a situation in which the United States cooperated at the expense of long-

term power. Allowing the Soviet Union to achieve a dominant position would threaten US security, should Soviet intentions prove aggressive down the road.

On 2 April 1945, a top-secret report from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was forwarded to President Roosevelt; it was subsequently given to Truman. The report outlined the dilemma: Russia would emerge from the war as th strongest nation in Eurasia. Indeed, "Russia's natural resources and manpower are so great that within a relatively few years, she can be much more powerful than either Germany or Japan has ever been. In the easily foreseeable future Russia may well outrank even the United States in military potential." These fears were reinforced by similar OSS intelligence reports in May. Later that month, James F. Byrnes, who was soon to be secretary of state, summed up the feelings of Truman's inner circle. He argued that the best US strategy would be to push ahead as quickly as possible in the development of atomic weaponry to ensure that America stayed ahead of the Soviet Union, even as the United States tried to maintain good relations.

The tragic side of US policy in 1945 is that it sprang from fear of future Soviet intentions, not present ones. During the Potsdam Conference in July-August 1945, as he crystallized his containment strategy, Truman found Stalin not entirely disagreeable. In late July, he wrote in his diaries and to his wife that he liked Stalin and found him honest and straightforward. Near the end of the conference, Stalin canceled a meeting because of a cold, and Truman wrote in a diary entry that he worried about what would happen were Stalin suddenly to die. Some "demagogue on horseback" would take over the Soviet stated and destroy the fragile European peace. Byrnes expressed similar concerns throughout the fall of 1945.

Maintaining the US preponderance of power was thus considered necessary as protection against an uncertain future. Yet, US leaders also understood that the policies required to secure this preponderance could antagonize Moscow. In discussions over the spring and summer with his old friend Joseph E. Davies, a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Truman was warned repeatedly that, given their history, the Russian were extremely anxious about foreign attacks. In particular, Davies cautioned that the demonstration of atomic weaponry over Japan and the withholding of atom secrets would only undermine Soviet trust, causing a massive arms race that might lead to nuclear annihilation. Yet, by the fall of 1945, Truman's sense of prudence had led him to reject all atomic sharing. In October, an old friend, Fyke Farmer, asked him if this policy meant that the armaments race was on. The president replied in the affirmative, but added that the United States would stay ahead.

It is now generally accepted that at least part of the reason for dropping atomic bombs on Japan was to send a signal of US superiority to Moscow. IN particular, Byrnes and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson believed in the summer of 1945 that demonstrating the effectiveness of the bomb would impress Russia with American military might. Byrnes thought the atomic bomb might help to keep the Soviets from overwhelming Manchuria and northern China in August. After the mid-July atomic tests revealed the true destructive power of the bomb, Truman was much more confident that it could be employed as a diplomatic tool to restrict Soviet expansion. As he told an assistant at Potsdam, the bomb "would keep the Russians straight." This conviction made him more willing to press US demands at the conference, which could only have heightened growing Soviet suspicions.

Nothing in the foregoing argument implies that the Soviet Union was a "good" state; it was, as Truman realized, a brutal dictatorship that killed and oppressed its own citizens. Yet, out of simple geopolitical self-interest, Stalin wanted to maintain good relations with the West in 1945; he needed breathing space to rebuild his war-ravaged country. Loans from the United States, reparations from Germany, and relative peace in the near term were critical to this rebuilding process. It is thus not surprising that Truman found Stalin straightforward and businesslike at Potsdam. Yet, it is evident that after August, once the elements of Truman's containment policy were in place, Moscow became much less accommodating. Stalin pressed for early development of a Soviet atomic bomb, sought to prevent Soviet

exclusion from the occupation of Japan, and resisted any Soviet retreat from northern Iran. By 1946, Soviet rhetoric was predicting, that a clash between the two superpowers was inevitable.

In the end, of course, it is difficult to say whether, even, without the provocative US actions in 1945, the Soviets would have shifted to a policy of confrontation. Stalin and his advisers were highly suspicious, if not paranoid, lot. It is clear, however, that in terms of relative hostility of policy, the United States moved first in the escalations spiral. Although the Soviets did seek to consociate their hold in Eastern Europe, both Roosevelt and Truman in 1945 had resigned themselves to the division of Europe. Yet, the series of actions Truman undertook during the summer of 1945, could only have been seen by Moscow as an effort to project superior American power against the Soviet periphery and to main US strategic preponderance.

American policy was not immoral, only tragic. It reflected the twin problems of the fear of decline and the fear of future intentions of the rising Soviet state. In such circumstances, it was only prudent for the stronger state to move reluctantly to shore up its dominance across the board. Truman's understanding that his policies would likely bring on a Cold War spiral only heightens the sense of tragedy. He was forced to choose a policy that represented the lesser of two evils; preponderance and an increased risk of war in the short term over decline and a possible war later under less auspicious power conditions.

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