

**History 282 US Diplomatic  
Discussion Transcript for October 20, 2020  
Containment Diplomacy**

**Main Reading: Chapter 14 (first half), Herring**

Herring's discussion of the early years of the Cold War directly raises the question of who really was to blame for the deterioration of the US-Soviet alliance from WWII. Herring presents all sides of most questions, but he clearly views US actions during the post-war period as often rooted in misplaced paranoia, sometimes only exacerbated by domestic political considerations. Nonetheless, the key intellectual architect of the original containment policy, George Kennan, was deeply familiar with the Soviets and also practically immune from domestic US politics. Yet, he, too was urgently concerned about Stalin's post-war maneuvers.

Here is a selection of student comments:

**POST-WAR CONTEXT**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The United States actually came out of the war significantly wealthier and stronger. The GDP tripled between 1939 and 1945 and the military strength significantly improved on a global scale. Washington DC became the world capital of finance and diplomacy. The United States was the global economic power without a doubt after the war, and the military dominated the skies, the land, and the seas. In comparison to many of the United States' rivals being negatively impacted by the war, the United States came out of the war in a positive light, having just achieved victory over both Germany and Japan, bolstering atomic weapons, having control of the strongest military in the world, and being the world's wealthiest nations."

**BLAMING THE AMERICANS**

STUDENT COMMENT: "The U.S.S.R was not the threat that the Western powers made it out to be. The United States tricked its people into believing that the Soviets were the enemy. The misinformation was so deep and influential that even today it is still utilized. Through fear mongering, figures like Gen. George C. Marshall claimed "... was concerned with the peace of the entire world (Herring, 598)." This created a black and white situation, where things were either right or wrong. The right was anti-communist, and everyone else was wrong. This polarizing stance between the former allies was created before the war ended. The administration's labeling of the Soviets as the new enemy greatly contributed to this divide. The administration heavily scrutinized the Soviets and labeled many of their actions in a negative way. Though quick to pick up on negative events, opponents of the Soviets "ignored," some of the cases where the Soviets had followed its agreements and "acted in a conciliatory manner (Herring, 601)."

STUDENT COMMENT: "A recurring theme in this chapter that I had not previously considered was the oversimplification of Stalin's motives during the Cold War Era by the Truman administration and U.S. officials. The Truman administration seemed to believe that Stalin's leadership style was merciless and "pathological" (according to Kennan as discussed by Herring), and that behind every action he took, there was an underlying

motive for expansion and thus global hegemony (p.604)...Secretary of Commerce, Henry Wallace, was the remaining official in the executive branch who disagreed with the “get-tough” approach and pushed for negotiation with Stalin. He believed that many times, the U.S. provoked certain reactions from an insecure nation and that taking a hard line would only make the Soviets do the same. He had a falling out with Truman over how to engage with the Soviets and was fired in late 1946. In George Kennan’s Long Telegram, he spoke about dangerous Soviet behavior and bad intentions. Herring wrote that this “helped destroy what little remained of American eagerness to understand its onetime ally and negotiate differences,” (p. 604). Although one can never know for sure, after reading Herring I now wonder if it is possible that the Cold War could have been prevented had the U.S. not refused to listen to differing opinions- like those of Wallace.”

### **BLAMING THE SOVIETS**

STUDENT COMMENT: “In my opinion, George Kennan’s work was fundamental to stop the cold war from becoming a hot one. What Kennan did, in his famous “Long Telegram” from Moscow in February 1946 and through a briefly anonymous article in Foreign Affairs in 1947 was to lay out a third path between the extremes of war and appeasement – containment (Herring, 605). If the US and its allies could be patient and contain Soviet expansionism without war or appeasement over a sufficiently long period, it would lead to a settlement with the Soviet Union or even to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Kennan foresaw internal contradictions within the Soviet system that would probably cause it to fall apart, and I was amazed that this foresight came from his admiration for traditional Russian literature and culture (Herring, 604). In his view, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution had not fundamentally changed the national character; and it was that character that would eventually reassert itself to overthrow or subvert the Soviet system. An expert on Russians, Kennan had no sympathy for, or interest in, Marxism, and he clearly had no illusions about Stalin able to compete with the United States (Herring, 604). Kennan made clear that Marxist theology did not require launching wars against capitalist countries; in fact, Stalin only needed a hostile world in order to legitimize his autocratic rule, and by that, Western strength could easily deter military conflicts.”

### **CONTAINMENT POLICY**

STUDENT COMMENT: The policy of containment adopted by the Truman administration during the Cold War aimed at preventing communist governments such as the Soviet Union (USSR), from expanding its influence. The United States pursued this doctrine aggressively in the latter years of the 1940s in areas such as Greece and Turkey. Through providing economic and military aid to countries, the U.S. hoped to contain communist influence and reduce the threat of rising communist governments. A main example from Herring is U.S. intervention in the Greek Civil War, when the United States offered military assistance as well as \$400 million to help suppress a rebel uprising that was backed by the USSR and other communist states. The United States also financially backed the Christian Conservative party in Italy during their 1948

election in a successful effort to quell pro-Communist sentiment and establish a government more favorable to the United States.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “Containment strategies were initially characterized by economic and military aid, such as the Truman Doctrine, under which the U.S. intervened in the Greek Civil War to prevent a left-wing insurgency (616). In 1947, the focus turned to European economic recovery via the Marshall Plan (617), as well as the promotion of American culture, as exemplified by the movement in France of “Coca-colonization” (620). A combination of these containment strategies was central to U.S. involvement in Germany – note that, even if the U.S. did not necessarily promote American culture during the Berlin Blockade, American presence certainly fostered a positive image of the country.”

### **BERLIN AIRLIFT**

STUDENT COMMENT: “The U.S. did more than just provide economic and military aid. Upon the ending of the Second World War, Germany was split up into allied occupation zones with the United States and France occupying West Germany and the Soviets occupying the east. In 1948, The United States announced a plan for a uniform currency throughout West Germany, a crucial step to unifying the country which Stalin hoped to do under Soviet rule. The USSR did not approve of this action by the United States and thus blocked off access to East Germany “by highway, rail, and water” (624). Not wishing to withdraw from Germany, the United States “flew 250 missions a day around the clock, moving an average 2,500 tons of food, fuel, raw materials, and finished goods daily into Berlin to feed and heat two million people and maintain some semblance of a functioning economy” (624) for eleven months. These actions by the United States earned praise from Germany and promoted beliefs and actions by the United States and other Western nations while simultaneously making the Soviet Union, and subsequently Communism, look cruel and ineffective. This helped contain pro-Communist sentiment in the country, acting as an ultimate example of the U.S. containment policy. Many changes in Germany and throughout European and world politics came out of the Berlin Blockade. Herring mentions that it “sealed the division of Europe that would mark the Cold War” (625), as well as giving the United States, along with its Western allies, a chance to rebuild and unify Western Germany. Herring also says that the blockade “helped bring about the most radical U.S. step of the early postwar era, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (625). NATO called for collective security between the U.S., Canada, and several Western European nations including Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. Herring describes the creation of NATO as “an alliance designed in the words of NATO’s first secretary general, Lord Ismay, to ‘keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down’” (626), and was yet another example of the United States’ effort to contain and combat Communism at the time.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “The Soviets took issue with the U.S. attempts to salvage the Germany economy by establishing a common currency and in response instigated the ‘Berlin Blockade’ in July 1948. While the U.S. believed that the Soviet actions in the Berlin Blockade were not meant to cause a war, they could not afford the slight it could

have on U.S. allies. Therefore, in order to combat the blockade while artfully avoiding direct conflict leading to a war, the U.S. initiated the greatest airlift of supplies. The airlift enabled the Americans to drop off much needed supplies such as food and fuel, "At the height of the blockade, planes landed every forty-five seconds" (Herring 624). However, aside from the life-sustaining necessities the airlift provided, it also demonstrated unwavering U.S. support of not only the Germans but also their European allies and again proved U.S. military logistics capability. The Berlin Blockade and Airlift ended in May 1949 and lasted just under a year, the resilience of the U.S. air force throughout the duration of the crisis officially showed the end the avoidance of entanglement alliances, as they perpetuated their support for the Germans and future NATO alliance."