



NSC 68: America's Cold War Blueprint

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Framing Question

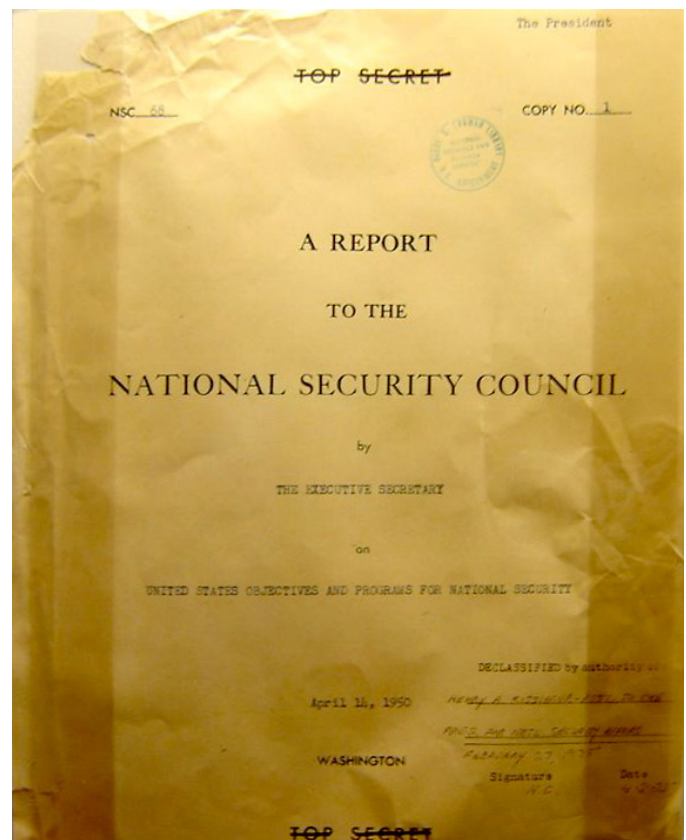
Why did the United States believe it had a responsibility to engage the Soviet Union in a cold war, and why was that war a global conflict?

Understanding

Between the end of World War II and 1950 American policy makers debated how to interpret the Soviet Union's takeover of countries in eastern Europe and what to do about it. Eventually, they concluded that the Soviet Union sought to eliminate freedom throughout the globe and bring nation after nation under its rule. They decided that the United States, as the world's chief proponent of democracy, should stop Soviet expansion and defend freedom wherever it was threatened for moral reasons and to ensure world peace through American strength and dominance.

Text

["A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, April 14, 1950"](#) (excerpts)



Background

Even during World War II, when the United States and the Soviet Union were allied against Nazi Germany, relations between the two nations were characterized by tension and distrust. When peace came in 1945, relations did not improve. In fact, they grew worse.

The former allies disagreed on many issues, but the chief source of conflict was the question of what to do about defeated Germany and Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. The Soviets demanded that Germany make huge payments to repair the damage it did to their country. To insure that it would never attack them again, they insisted that Germany — which had been divided into American, British, French, and Soviet occupation zones — be stripped

of its ability to make war. Moreover, since Russia had experienced two devastating wars in thirty years, losing close to forty million people, the Soviets wanted to establish a buffer zone of Soviet-controlled friendly governments around them to ensure that no land attack would ever threaten Russia again. The United States and its allies, on the other hand, were more interested in rebuilding Germany than in extracting reparations, and they demanded independent governments throughout Eastern Europe.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

The Soviets pursued an expansionist policy that, by 1948, had brought Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia under its sway. The “iron curtain” that separated the free nations of Western Europe from the Soviet-occupied states of the East was firmly in place.

In the five years after World War II policy makers in Washington debated Soviet intentions and the possibility of achieving peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. A 1946 report to President Truman prepared by advisors Clark Clifford and George Elsey concluded that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power, not only in pursuit of world domination but utterly convinced that it could not coexist with the United States. Nonetheless, its authors recommended that the United States try to persuade the Soviets that America had no aggressive intentions toward them and that the two countries could, in fact, coexist peacefully.

This foreign policy debate took place within an atmosphere of growing alarm over a Communist threat at home that was partly generated by President Truman himself with the 1947 Loyalty-Security Program, which required government employees to sign loyalty oaths and cast suspicion upon “leftists,” citizens who held ideas perceived to be Communist inspired. State and local governments followed suit with similar programs of their own. The Taft-Hartley Act made it a crime for a union to have an officer who was a member of the Communist Party, and the Attorney General created a list of alleged Communist front organizations. Hollywood contributed to the atmosphere by denying work to actors, writers, directors, and others who professed “leftist” leanings. By 1949 the Congress was holding well-publicized hearings about Communists in government, and the following year Sen. Joseph McCarthy, after whom this period is named, began his notorious inquests.

Two events beyond America’s shores heightened the nation’s fears: the Soviet’s detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949 and, in 1950, Communist North Korea’s invasion of South Korea, an American ally.

In 1950, with Communist paranoia rising at home and the Soviet threat growing abroad, President Truman decided to bring the five-year debate over what to do about the Soviet Union to its culmination. He directed the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense to “undertake a reexamination of our objectives in peace and war.” Their conclusions went to the National Security Council, the President’s leading foreign policy advisors, and on April 14, 1950, the Council presented him with a top secret report, NSC 68.

The report endorsed a policy of containment, first proposed by diplomat George Kennan in 1947. Kennan argued that Soviet leaders acted out of weakness. They engaged in expansionist behavior to draw their people’s attention away from their nation’s serious internal problems. He recommended that the United States use political, diplomatic, cultural, economic, and military means to “contain” the Soviet Union, that is, block it from dominating other countries and spreading its influence, chiefly in Europe. If the United States could stop Soviet expansion and deny Soviet leaders this source of distraction, Kennan maintained, the Soviet Union would, in one way or another, collapse.

IV. THE UNDERLYING CONFLICT IN THE REALM OF IDEAS AND VALUES BETWEEN THE U. S. PURPOSE AND THE KREMLIN DESIGN

A. Nature of conflict:

The Kremlin regards the United States as the only major threat to the achievement of its fundamental design. There is a basic conflict between the idea of freedom under a government of laws, and the idea of slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin, which has come to a crisis with the polarization of power described in Section I, and the exclusive possession of atomic weapons by the two antagonists. The idea of freedom, moreover, is peculiarly and intolerably subversive of the idea of slavery. But the converse is not true. The implacable purpose of the slave state to eliminate the challenge of freedom has placed the two great powers at opposite poles. It is this fact which gives the present polarization of power the quality of crisis.

The free society values the individual as an end in himself, requiring of him only that measure of self discipline and self restraint which make the rights of each individual compatible with the rights of every other individual. The freedom of the individual has as its counterpart, therefore, the negative responsibility of the individual not to exercise his freedom in ways inconsistent with the freedom of other individuals and the positive responsibility to make constructive use of his freedom in the building of a just society.

From this idea of freedom with responsibility derives the marvelous diversity, the deep tolerance, the lawfulness of the free society. This is the explanation of the strength of free men. It constitutes the integrity and the vitality of a free and democratic system. The free society attempts to create and maintain an environment in which every individual has the opportunity to realize his creative powers. It also explains why the free society tolerates those within it who would use their freedom to destroy it. By the same token, in relations between nations, the prime reliance of the free society is on the strength and appeal of its idea, and it feels no compulsion sooner or later to bring all societies into conformity with it.

For the free society does not fear, it welcomes, diversity. It derives its strength from its hospitality even to antipathetic ideas. It is a market for free trade in ideas, secure in its faith that free men will take the best ideas, and grow to a fuller and better realization of their powers in exercising their choice.

While NSC 68 embraced Kennan’s recommendation, it emphasized containment should seek to check the Soviets throughout the world, not mainly in Europe, and that it should rely primarily on military power.

What is most important to understand about NSC 68 today are its four fundamental premises, which guided American foreign policy throughout the Cold War and are evident in our policy even now:

- 1. America's vital interests are global.** A vital interest is an interest essential for life. Many countries had previously declared that their interests were international, but the United States was the first in history to declare that its vital interests spanned the globe. Before NSC 68 the primary purpose of our military had been to defend the homeland, the ultimate vital interest. After 1950 homeland defense became one among many interests deemed equally vital.
- 2. A defeat anywhere is a defeat everywhere.** The containment of Communism had to be worldwide, because American vital interests were global, and the Soviet assault on them was global. Thus a defeat in Vietnam was the same as a defeat in the Middle East, Guatemala, or San Francisco.
- 3. Communism is the same the world over.** Communist parties around the world may characterize themselves as independent, nationalistic and local, but they are fundamentally the same, and all take orders from Moscow.
- 4. The world is sharply divided between the Communist world and the free world.** There is no place for neutral countries. If a country is not with us, it is against us. That meant that a gain for the Soviets was a loss for us, and vice-versa. The Cold War thus became a conflict that would not allow for compromise and cooperation.

Exploring key passages in NSC 68, this lesson concentrates on Part IV, "The Underlying Conflict in the Realm of Ideas and Values between the U.S. Purpose and the Kremlin Design." As its less-than-catchy title suggests, this section states the rationale by which this country justified its actions during the Cold War, from stationing tanks and troops in Europe to opposing socialist revolutions in Latin America and Africa to waging a long, costly, and divisive war in Southeast Asia.

[Activity: Vocabulary](#)

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



Text Analysis

From Part II: Fundamental Purpose of the United States

The fundamental purpose of the United States is laid down in the Preamble to the Constitution: "...to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic [Tranquility](#), provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our [Posterity](#)." In essence, the fundamental purpose is to assure the [integrity](#) and [vitality](#) of our free society, which is founded upon the dignity and worth of the individual.

Three realities emerge as a consequence of this purpose: Our determination to maintain the essential elements of individual freedom, as set forth in the Constitution and Bill of Rights; our determination to create conditions under which our free and democratic system can live and prosper; and our determination to fight if necessary to defend our way of life, for which as in the Declaration of Independence, "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

1. Why would the authors of NSC 68 cite the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence at the very beginning of the document?

2. What is the effect of the repetition of the word "determination"?

[Activity: Connotation as Argument](#)

Explore the authors' attempts to make readers emotionally sympathetic to their side by using the unstated ideas, associations, and feelings that certain words arouse.



From Part III: Fundamental Design of the Kremlin

The fundamental design of those who control the Soviet Union and the international communist movement is to retain and solidify their absolute power, first in the Soviet Union and second in the areas now under their control. In the minds of the Soviet leaders, however, achievement of this design requires the dynamic extension of their authority and the ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority.

The design, therefore, calls for the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin. To that end Soviet efforts are now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian land mass. The United States, as the principal center of power in the non-Soviet world and the bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion, is the principal enemy whose integrity and vitality must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another if the Kremlin is to achieve its fundamental design.

3. How does the first paragraph of this section reflect the American view that Communism is the same the world over?

4. The first interactive exercise in this lesson explored the way in which the connotations of the verbs in Parts II and III of NSC 68 define the societies of the United States and the Soviet Union. However, we encounter connotation as argument even before we get to the verbs. We see it in the very titles of the sections. What does the word “purpose” connote? What does the word “design” connote?

5. Why would the authors of NSC 68 assign a “purpose” to the United States and a “design” to the Soviet Union?

6. Why do the authors use “the United States” in the title of Part II and “the Kremlin” in the title of Part III?

From Part IV: The Underlying Conflict in the Realm of Ideas and Values Between the US Purpose and the Kremlin Design (excerpts)

A. Nature of Conflict

The Kremlin regards the United States as the only major threat to the achievement of its fundamental design.

There is a basic conflict between idea of freedom under a government of laws, and the idea of slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin.... The idea of freedom, moreover, is peculiarly and intolerably subversive of the idea of slavery. But the converse is not true. The implacable purpose of the slave state to eliminate the challenge of freedom has placed the two great powers at opposite poles. It is this fact which gives the present polarization of power the quality of crisis.

...

The idea of freedom is the most contagious idea in history, more contagious than the idea of submission to authority. For the breadth of freedom cannot be tolerated in a society which has come under the domination of an individual or group of individuals with a will

Activity: Possible Courses of Action

Explore the arguments used against three possible courses of action considered by policy makers.



to absolute power. Where the despot holds absolute power — the absolute power of the absolutely powerful will — all other wills must be subjugated in an act of willing submission, a degradation willed by the individual upon himself under the compulsion of a perverted faith. It is the first article of this faith that he finds and can only find the meaning of his existence in serving the ends of the system. The system becomes God, and submission to the will of God becomes submission to the will of the system. It is not enough to yield outwardly to the system — even Gandhian non-violence is not acceptable — for the spirit of resistance and the devotion to a higher authority might then remain, and the individual would not be wholly submissive.

...

The antipathy of slavery to freedom explains the iron curtain, the isolation, the autarchy of the society whose end is absolute power. The existence and persistence of the idea of freedom is a permanent and continuous threat to the foundation of the slave society; and it therefore regards as intolerable the long continued existence of freedom in the world. What is new, what makes the continuing crisis, is the polarization of power which now inescapably confronts the slave society with the free.

The assault on free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.

...

Thus unwillingly our free society finds itself mortally challenged by the Soviet system. No other value system is so wholly irreconcilable with ours, so implacable in its purpose to destroy ours, so capable of turning to its own uses the most dangerous and divisive trends in our own society, no other so skillfully and powerfully evokes the elements of irrationality in human nature everywhere, and no other has the support of a great and growing center of military power.

7. How do the authors of NSC 68 characterize the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union?

8. How do they characterize the Soviet Union?

9. “The idea of freedom... is peculiarly and intolerably subversive of the idea of slavery. But the converse is not true.” The Cold War was fundamentally a war of ideas, and that sentence states what the authors of NSC 68 took to be the logical relationship between the two ideas that confronted each other. It is key to understanding NSC 68 and, indeed, the Cold War itself. Select the statement that best expresses its meaning. **A)** Freedom always threatens slavery, but slavery does not always threaten freedom. **B)** Slavery always threatens freedom, but freedom does not always threaten slavery.

10. Based on your answer to question 9, what does the logical relationship between the ideas of freedom and slavery mean for relations between the United States and the Soviet Union?

11. The idea of contagion, the ability to spread something from person to person, is critical to the logic of the Cold War. How does the contagious nature of the idea of freedom threaten the Soviet Union?

12. According to NSC 68, how have the leaders of the Soviet Union brought about the submission of their people?

13. What do the authors mean by “Gandhian non-violence”?

14. Why would the leaders of the Soviet Union need to isolate their people behind an “iron curtain”?

15. Why is the “assault on free institutions” worldwide?

16. What does the worldwide “assault on free institutions” mean for the United States?

17. Why do the authors of NSC 68 say that the US is “unwillingly” challenged by the Soviet system?

18. How does the Soviet system pose an internal threat to the United States?

19. Why does the final paragraph of this section make an effective conclusion to the argument of NSC 68?

Activity: Containment

Recommend specific actions to meet the goal and objectives of the US containment policy.



Glossary

tranquility: peace

posterity: descendants (future generations)

integrity: honor (and virtue)

vitality: liveliness (energy and life)

retain: keep

solidify: cement (make permanent)

dynamic: energetic and active

subversion: overthrow

apparatus: organization (sometimes referring to equipment)

subservient: submissive

bulwark: barricade

oligarchy: small ruling group

subversive: destructive

converse: opposite

contagious: easy to spread

implacable: unstoppable

polarization: division of opposing groups

breadth: vitality and life

despot: ruler

subjugated: enslaved

degradation: humiliating act

submission: yielding

antipathy: opposition or aversion

autarchy: absolute authority

irreconcilable: unable to live in harmony

Text

- "A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68", April 12, 1950. President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers.
https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf