
[The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48]: Comments

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Comments:

MELVYN P. LEFFLER BUILDS HIS DISCUSSION of national security policy primarily upon archival sources emanating from the Pentagon, where a good deal of thinking about future wars was obviously going on in the late 1940s. These exercises required identifying certain vital interests, analyzing potential threats to those interests, and devising appropriate strategies to deal with those threats. That all of this was taking place is not particularly remarkable: modern military establishments regularly undertake such exercises in peacetime. What is remarkable is that Professor Leffler seems to have equated this planning with Washington's overall "conception of national security."

IF ONE WERE GOING TO SET ABOUT INVESTIGATING that subject, one would of course be interested in how war planners identified interests and assessed threats, but to stop at that point would be to risk a certain myopia. Would one not also want to consider what other agencies within the government were assigned responsibilities in this area, and what their relative influence was on actual policy? Would one not also want to know what resources were available with which to defend vital interests, and on what basis were they allocated? Would one not also want to have some sense of what triggered concern about national security in the first place, and the extent to which other nations shared that concern? And would one not want to take into account the nature of the international system itself, and the extent to which it shaped the evolution of thinking about "national security"? On all of these points, Professor Leffler's analysis leaves me less than satisfied.

First, with regard to relative influence within the government, it may well be that my own recent treatment of this subject in *Strategies of Containment* gives too much emphasis to the role of George Kennan and the Policy Planning Staff. Well-meaning friends, colleagues, and students remonstrate with me regularly on this point, though to little avail. But Professor Leffler's attempt to compensate for my shortcomings by excluding not only the Policy Planning Staff but the entire State Department almost completely from his discussion of national security policy strikes me as going a bit far. It is as if one had set out to write a history of the Nixon administration's foreign policy from the viewpoint of William P. Rogers, with only an occasional mention of Henry Kissinger.

Professor Leffler would be hard-pressed, I think, to sustain the thesis that the Pentagon's recommendations on national security policy carried more weight in the

Truman White House than did those of Secretary of State George Marshall and his subordinates in the department. And yet, that is precisely the suggestion his essay conveys, whether intentionally or not. We are left, as a result, with some curious impressions. It is interesting to learn, for example, that Moscow's diplomatic demands did little to influence Washington's assessment of the Soviet threat. Students of the de-industrialization policies of Generals Clay and MacArthur (and of Kennan's memoirs) will be intrigued to find out that the Pentagon was in the vanguard of those seeking to rebuild German and Japanese industrial strength as a bulwark against the Russians. But the strangest suggestion of all is that Washington's key decision to rely on the economic rather than the military instruments of containment in the late 1940s originated in the Pentagon and not the State Department; that the real father of the Marshall Plan was not Kennan, or Dean Acheson, or Will Clayton, or even Marshall himself, but rather James Forrestal.

What Professor Leffler has confused here is the distinction between acquiescence and initiation. Of course the Defense Department and the armed services went along with the decision to emphasize an economic over a military response: given the tradition of civilian control in foreign policy, given Marshall's own immense authority and prestige, given the military's inability to suggest alternative courses of action that fit the president's budgetary restrictions, the services had no alternative other than to squabble among themselves—as they vociferously did—over how their own remaining portion of government revenues would be divided. That fact hardly justified the implication, strongly set forth in this essay, that the Pentagon was in fact determining this critical aspect of national security policy.

This brings up a second and related issue. Professor Leffler makes occasional references to the Pentagon's budgetary problems, but he gives no sense of how severe these were in the late 1940s, or to what extent they constrained strategic planning. Any organization whose budget drops from \$81 billion to \$13 billion in the course of two years—as the total military budget did between 1945 and 1947—must undertake a certain amount of retrenchment. Moreover, Leffler fails to mention at all the problems of demobilization, which had slashed available manpower during that same period from 12.1 million to 1.6 million. The essence of strategy—and, hence, of national security policy—is the matching up of interests with capabilities, the squaring of one's "wish list" with one's checkbook. Leffler has given us a good discussion of what the planners wanted, but he has almost entirely neglected the question of what they thought they could afford. Nor has he considered what these budget figures tell us about the Pentagon's overall influence within the government at that time.

A word about the atomic bomb is in order here as well, since Professor Leffler sees it—as have many others—as a substitute for the obvious shortcomings of U.S. conventional forces during this period. Leffler cites the recent work of David Rosenberg, Gregg Herken, and Harry Borowski, which has added greatly to our knowledge of the nature and size of the American atomic arsenal in the years before the Russians got the bomb. What he has not told us is that all three of those authorities go on to discuss at some length the doubts among American military

leaders themselves about whether atomic bombing alone would suffice to defeat the Russians should war come, given the high number of targets that would have had to be hit and given the relatively small number of bombs—and properly equipped bombers—available with which to hit them. The weapon may have been regarded as an awesome deterrent, but it was certainly not seen as an absolute counterweight to Soviet conventional force superiority in Europe.

A third difficulty with Professor Leffler's analysis has to do with this very question of how the Soviet threat was perceived in the first place. Leffler fails to distinguish clearly enough, in my view, between the Russian military threat to North America, which he correctly says no one took very seriously at that time, and the possibility that the Red Army might overrun Western Europe, which was something else again. Although intelligence reports discounted the probability of a deliberate attack in Europe, they by no means disregarded the possibility of hostilities beginning as the result of accident or misperception. And, given Soviet conventional force superiority at that time, the Russians would have had the capability to overrun most of Western Europe in a matter of weeks, a fact all American war plans during this period took for granted. If, as Leffler rightly argues, American planners regarded it as a vital interest to deny the combined resources of Eurasia to potentially hostile powers, then this Soviet capability had to be regarded as a threat of the first order, in view of the weaknesses of American and Western European conventional forces and the questionable utility of the atomic bomb. But Leffler gives scant attention to these deficiencies.

Significantly, Washington planners were not alone in perceiving this Soviet threat. The West Europeans took it even more seriously than the Americans did and, as a consequence, set out in 1948 to persuade the United States that its own security required the extension of credible military guarantees to cover them as well. I find it very surprising that Professor Leffler has not seen fit to make any reference at all to the role the West Europeans played in modifying American policy in this regard and only the most fleeting references to the negotiations that eventually produced the North Atlantic Treaty—a document of some importance, one might think, in the evolution of the American conception of national security.

Finally, Professor Leffler fails to set his analysis within the framework of what we know to be the nature of the international system itself. He appears to feel that he is telling us something new when he reveals that the Americans were not all that idealistic after all, that they were in fact out to promote their own interests in the world, and that, when confronted with opportunities, they took advantage of them. This seems to me analogous to not discovering sex until the age of, say, forty-two. I think we can take it for granted that Americans were not exempt from the temptations of power that have afflicted all great nations at one time or another; surely Stalin and his associates, with their own exceedingly cynical view of human nature, can hardly have expected us to behave in any other way.

The interesting question for students of the Cold War is not whether the two major antagonists sought and obtained great power but how they went about seeking it and what they did with it once they had it. How was it, for example, that the postwar expansion of American influence in the world set off so few fears

among the wide variety of people and nations affected by it, while the expansion of Soviet influence, despite the fact that it took place on a considerably smaller geographical scale, set off so many? Answering questions like this will require a greater familiarity with foreign sources and a greater facility in the techniques of comparative history than are commonly found among diplomatic historians in this country. But it is time we directed our energies to this task, and away from attacking the now thoroughly shredded straw man of American naiveté and idealism.

ONE OF GENERAL MARSHALL'S RECURRING FRUSTRATIONS during World War II involved what he liked to call "theater-itis"—the tendency of individual commanders to become so caught up in their own campaigns that they lost sight of how those fit into the larger strategy of global war. Despite the impressive amount of research that has gone into it, Professor Leffler's essay, I fear, shows the effects of a related syndrome, "archive-itis"—the tendency of historians to become so immersed in particular archives that they lose sight of that larger context into which all archival revelations must eventually be set. We can all applaud Leffler's energy in mining the documents he cites. We can anticipate that this will be the first of many contributions to Cold War studies from a scholar who has distinguished himself admirably in other areas of American diplomatic history. But may we not also express the hope that next time Professor Leffler will turn his attention to the conceptual forest as well as to the constituent trees?

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MELVYN LEFFLER'S MAIN ARGUMENT appears to be that the American conception of national security during the early Cold War was a consequence not so much of Soviet actions as of America's perceived vulnerabilities and of its resulting strategic and economic imperatives. Central to his argument, once its elements are pieced together and the rhetorical questions and qualifications in the conclusion carefully examined, is a belief that implementation of this conception was unnecessarily provocative and, hence, primarily responsible for many of the Cold War's most enduring characteristics. While thought-provoking, Leffler's argument has problems. My quarrel with his analysis focuses on four of them: (1) how valid is the conception that he delineates; (2) what factors were most important in its development; (3) what caused the action-reaction syndrome of which that conception was a part; and (4) was the conception itself primarily at fault?

THE “AMERICAN CONCEPTION OF NATIONAL SECURITY” is a troubling concept. Was it truly an “American” conception, or was it the conception of defense officials who looked at U.S.-Soviet relations from a military perspective (as was their responsibility) and attempted to meet the growing military requirements of evolving U.S. policies? The distinction between “American” and “defense” is important. Defense officials were constrained in implementing their conceptions by the Department of State, not to mention the president and Congress; as a result, they were only partially successful—and then only *after* Soviet actions (in, for example, Iran and Turkey) made such implementation possible.

Even if we assume the partial validity of the “American” conception, the problem of its origins is subject to question. In my judgment, strategic and economic imperatives *help* explain the development of national security conceptions in the early Cold War. Far more can be explained, however, including the *urgency* of strategic and economic imperatives, by Soviet actions in the Near East in the period 1944–46 and by the legitimate fears that such actions engendered. These fears emerged not only among the governments that the Soviets intended to intimidate but also within the Department of State, which was primarily responsible for U.S. policy during the early Cold War. As a consequence, Soviet actions (not just *perceptions* of Soviet actions) must be given far greater weight than Professor Leffler gives them; the international political contexts within which conceptions of national security developed, moreover, must be explored in much greater depth if we are to understand why those conceptions developed in the manner that they did.

The question of how important implementation of the American conception of national security was to the beginnings of the Cold War is one that Professor Leffler raises but does not satisfactorily answer. The suggestion in his conclusion that Soviet policies may have been formulated in reaction to U.S. policies and conditioned by legitimate apprehensions about U.S. intentions has the ring of reasonableness and balance. It appears consistent with a litany of American policies that historians have cited to explain certain aspects of Soviet behavior toward the United States in the early Cold War.¹ But his argument needs careful scrutiny—and not merely from the standpoint of chronology.² To be convincing, he needs to provide us with a better understanding of the Soviet conception of national security. As stated in his essay, however, he does not pretend to discern the objectives and motivations of the Soviet Union.

Vojtech Mastny, a historian who has attempted precisely this endeavor, has

¹ These policies include the delay in the opening of a second front, unilateral decision making (such as the establishment of a separate U.S. and British Control Commission in Italy), the abrupt cancellation of lend-lease, and the failure to accept international control of atomic energy.

² In a paper he delivered in 1983, Leffler argued that developments based on strategic considerations, which exerted an important influence on the course of American foreign policy toward Turkey from the time of the Truman Doctrine, may well have accentuated Soviet fears, magnified their sense of weakness, and intensified their suspicions of American intentions. The problem with this argument is that it discounts the importance of Soviet policies toward Iran and Turkey in 1944–46, casts those policies in the context of a legitimate reaction to unspecified U.S. policies, and ignores their *major* influence on decision makers responsible for determining U.S. strategic imperatives. As a result, subsequent Soviet behavior is characterized as a response to action *initiated* by the United States, Turkey, and N.A.T.O., 1945–1952,” paper presented at the Seventy-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, held in Cincinnati, April 6–9, 1983.

convincingly argued, I believe, that Stalin's objectives were not very different from the traditional goals of Russian imperialism; the primary source of conflict between East and West, he asserted, was Russia's striving for power and influence far in excess of its reasonable security requirements. Mastny suggested that Stalin, premising success on the ability to rule his empire without arousing alarm about his intentions, could have taken a more enlightened and less exaggerated view of what security meant only if he had not been Stalin.³ Professor Leffler, apparently, rejects Mastny's interpretation. Here and in earlier writings on the subject, Leffler's treatment of Soviet policies in the Near East raises a problem that is symptomatic of his analysis. He plays down the significance of serious Soviet pressures on Iran and Turkey, placing such actions, whose importance is central to the debate, in the context of contradictory evidence of Soviet intentions. The disagreement between us on this matter is profound and will not be resolved here,⁴ but it may be useful to speculate how Soviet leaders themselves viewed Stalin's behavior toward Turkey, which, along with Iran, was a focal point of U.S.-Soviet confrontation during the early Cold War.

In spite of Soviet attempts to distort the record of their relations with Turkey,⁵ former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs, corroborated by voice print, give some indication of what may have motivated Stalin's policies. According to Khrushchev, Lavrenti Beria, head of Stalin's huge police network, and, like Stalin, a Georgian, teased and goaded Stalin into demanding the return of territories that had once (from 1878 to 1921) been part of Georgia. Beria argued that Turkey was weakened by World War II and would be unable to resist such demands. As Khrushchev himself acknowledged, Beria and Stalin "succeeded only in frightening the Turks right into the open arms of the Americans. *Because of Stalin's note to the Turkish government, the Americans were able to penetrate Turkey and set up bases right next to our borders.*"⁶ In a note of May 30, 1953, Stalin's successors, less than three months after his demise, informed the Turks that the governments of Armenia and Georgia had renounced their territorial claims against Turkey; they also stated that, after reconsidering the question of the Straits, they believed Soviet security could be assured by conditions acceptable to Turkey—an unusual public retraction and tacit admission (repeated again in 1965 by Soviet President Podgorny) of Stalin's irresponsible international ambitions.⁷ How we should regard such fragments of evidence, admittedly, will always be problematic. If Professor Leffler intends to argue that the development of U.S. capabilities affected Soviet behavior

³ Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism, 1941–1945* (New York, 1979), 35, 283, 292, 306.

⁴ For our respective views, see Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, 1980); and Melvyn P. Leffler, Review of my *The Origins of the Cold War*, in "From Cold War to Cold War in the Near East," *Reviews in American History*, 9 (1981): 124–30, esp. 128, and "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War."

⁵ See Kuniholm, *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, 220 n. 19, 262 n. 135, 264 n. 143.

⁶ Strobe Talbot, trans. and ed., *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament* (Boston, 1974), 295–96 (italics added). Also see Kuniholm, *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, 358–59.

⁷ Firenc Váli, *Bridge across the Bosphorus: The Foreign Policy of Turkey* (Baltimore, 1971), 174–75. Also see the statement by Podgorny in Izmir on January 11, 1965. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily-Report*, January 6, 1965, pp. M1–3, January 7, 1965, pp. M1–5, and January 11, 1965, pp. M1–4.

to the extent he suggests, however, he cannot avoid the tough questions—how it did so, when it did so, and what evidence supports the assumption that it did so—and then ask us, at the end of his argument, to consider the very question that his analysis begs.

The real issues between us appear to be the norms that one should apply to the difficult judgments that historians make: how does one define “legitimate” security concerns, and to what extent can dominant perceptions and policies (whether Soviet or American) be seen as “legitimate” in the period under consideration? Given “legitimate” Soviet security concerns, the question is whether Soviet behavior in 1944–46 was appropriate to those concerns. Professor Leffler appears to think that it was. I think that it was not. Our answers to this question qualify our different definitions of “legitimate” in the next question: given “legitimate” U.S. security concerns, was U.S. policy in 1946–47 appropriate? Leffler appears to think that it was not. I think that it was. It is one thing not to expect an attack against North America; it is quite another thing to be concerned that intimidation, over time, could make possible the expansion of excessive Soviet influence. In the case of the Near East, the problem for U.S. officials was hardly ever whether or not a Soviet attack was imminent, but whether Soviet intimidation, unopposed by the United States, would force the countries on its southern flank to accommodate Soviet interests; the extent to which those countries might have to do so; and whether the United States, the only power that could oppose Soviet pressures, should reject requests for assistance by the governments in question and acquiesce in such developments. From the point of view of U.S. officials, the issue, ultimately, was how to respond to repeated Soviet pressures—before rather than after they became a problem—in a manner consistent with reasonable interpretations of what the Soviets were doing, sufficient to deter but not precipitate Soviet initiatives, and comprehensible enough to ensure domestic support from a public confused by wartime rhetoric. Recent history indicated to U.S. and other, foreign officials that the Soviets would not act in a manner appropriate to reasonable standards of international behavior and that something had to be done about it. The driving fact in the region was inauspicious Soviet behavior that provided a context within which developing (but not yet formally accepted) strategic conceptions gained currency. Not to have anticipated such Soviet behavior, particularly after the long and drawn-out crisis in Iran in 1945–46, and in view of previous pressures on Turkey, would have constituted a dereliction of responsibility.

If, as Professor Leffler asserts, the Soviets had legitimate security interests in Eurasia, their actions in Iran, following as they did their expansion into Eastern Europe and the Far East (accompanied by extremely harsh methods of control), superseded the bounds of what a majority of the international community was prepared to accept. What would be done to oppose similar Soviet actions elsewhere along the Middle East’s “Northern Tier” or Europe was not clear. The mood of the American public was uncertain. That is why, in spite of its shortcomings, something like the Truman Doctrine may have been necessary. Whether Soviet pressures on Iran and Turkey can be justified by the USSR’s enormous losses during World War II, or by the assertion, made by some, that the United Nations advanced

American interests and power at Soviet expense, depends on one's point of view.⁸ What is striking is the extent to which, in the eyes of those whose territorial integrity was in question, U.S. interpretations of events were seen as more accurate and U.S. concerns were seen as more legitimate than those of the Soviet Union. U.S. involvement in the affairs of Iran and Turkey, finally, was encouraged by those countries, because their governments wanted the United States to serve as a counterweight to the USSR, whose influence was resented and feared.

The problem posed by Iranian, Turkish, and finally Greek requests for support and assistance raises the fundamental question of what strategic imperatives were reasonable for the United States in view of Britain's traditional role as a balance to Soviet power in the region, the decline of the British Empire after World War II, and Soviet policies toward Iran and Turkey in the early Cold War. Was the U.S. conception of national security, as gradually implemented in the Near East, excessive and hence "illegitimate"? Should the Near East have been incorporated within a Soviet sphere of influence? Did history sanction such an arrangement? Should the United States have agreed to it, and, if so, what would the consequences have been? Would it have been right for the United States to have done less than it did? The answers to all of these questions, I would submit, is "No." If the USSR did not have the wherewithal to stop the emergence of an offensive threat on its southern border in 1947–48, as Professor Leffler has noted elsewhere,⁹ neither did the Turks and Iranians, short of outside assistance, have what was necessary to deter (they could not have stopped) the Russians in 1944–47.¹⁰ What was known of Soviet pronouncements on the Balkans, and the inferences that could be drawn from the Soviet Union's performance in Iran and Turkey, moreover, strongly suggested that the Soviet Union would take advantage of any situation that proved favorable to its interests in the region. If Mastny was correct in asserting that, after Potsdam, Stalin's policy was irrevocable, that Stalin tightened his grip wherever it reached, and that he tested soft spots in the hope of grasping still more, the Truman Administration's policies along the Northern Tier, while overreactive and provocative in Leffler's view, would appear to have been consistent with the kinds of policies that former Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov believed the United States should have pursued in Eastern Europe and the Balkans during World War II.¹¹

⁸ For elaboration of some of these issues, see Kuniholm. *Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*, 160–63, 205–07, 428–32.

⁹ Leffler, "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War," 18.

¹⁰ Soviet inability to carry a war to the United States, it should be noted, was not *very* reassuring. Even if defense officials were confident the Soviets did not feel strong, the Soviets did have overwhelming conventional capabilities. U.S. war plans assumed a rapid takeover of Eurasia, as Leffler notes, and countries like Czechoslovakia could be taken over without any alteration in Soviet tactics.

¹¹ Mastny, *Russia's Road to the Cold War*, 283, 305. In June 1945, Litvinov told the journalist Edgar Snow that the United States should have begun opposing the Soviets in the Balkans and Eastern Europe as far back as 1942; a year later he told CBS correspondent Richard Hottelet that differences between East and West had gone too far to be reconciled and that the root cause was the prevailing ideological conception in the Soviet Union of the inevitability of conflict between the communist and capitalist worlds. Asked if Soviet suspicions of the West would be mitigated if all Russian demands were granted, Litvinov saw little hope and volunteered that there was nothing one could do inside a totalitarian state to change it. For records of the two conversations, see Edgar Snow, *Journey to The Beginning* (New York, 1958), 357; James F. Byrnes Papers, Clemson University Library, Clemson, SC, folder 638; and *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946*, 6 (Washington, 1969): 763–65.

WHAT THIS INTERPRETATION SUGGESTS is that, contrary to Professor Leffler's view, a fuller understanding of Soviet perceptions and intentions during the early Cold War might well have resulted in more or less the same policies that the United States pursued. Leffler may be reluctant to make judgments about what Soviet perceptions and intentions were, but American policy makers in the 1940s were unable to afford such a luxury. Their conceptions of national security interests required difficult judgments about the Soviets that had to be made on the basis of available evidence, without the knowledge of how history would turn out. Although their analyses clearly could have been more subtle, and their policies better managed, the conceptions they began to develop were not inconsistent with emerging postwar realities and do not appear to have been unreasonable in view of Soviet behavior. While I share Professor Leffler's concerns about U.S. policies toward the Soviet Union in the 1980s and believe that the questions he raises are extremely important, I do not believe that such concerns, however warranted in theory, actually legitimate Soviet policies in the 1940s; as a result, I am unconvinced by his explanation of the beginnings of the Cold War and do not share his judgment that "the American conception of national security," in and of itself, was as important as his title suggests it was in explaining how the Cold War began.

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