

Fear & Images: NSC68

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Presupposing that the nature of the Cold War was primarily ideological and political, the central premise of this essay is that framers of foreign policy live in a world of ideas as well as facts. Their implicit assumptions and explicit judgements clearly affect how they perceive issues and their nation's role in the world. Viewing through a post-Cold War prism, this essay seeks to delineate the constellation of beliefs, ideas, fears and assumptions that provided the framework for American diplomacy in the years of 1949 to 1950, examining both the logic and significance of NSC 68 as a manifestation of these images. Recognising, in the words of Norman A. Graebner, that "there exists a significant relationship between the intellectual milieu in which a foreign policy is conducted and the foreign policy itself"¹, this essay contends that decisions regarding foreign policy must be understood in terms of the decision-makers psychological environment. Or as Robert Jervis has observed "their beliefs about the world and other actors in it."² In the 1993 study *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68*, Ernest R. May posed an intriguing question: "Should NSC 68 be judged primarily on its internal qualities – its logic, analytical coherence and use of evidence? Or should a critique focus instead on reasons why its logic seemed so compelling in 1950, regardless of whether that logic was flawed or evidential base weak?"³ This essay will endeavour to answer this question by assessing the political and historical significance of National Security Council document 68. In short, this study is less an attempt to either criticise or justify American policy from 1949 to 1950, than it is an effort to articulate the intellectual world of its policymakers and thus understand the driving forces behind them.

It has been said that war is the great arbiter of institutions: so, one must add, was the Cold War. In its original form, the Cold War was a moral and ideological antagonism, arising in the wake of the Second World War. It involved a polarisation of the international system between two rigidly hostile blocs, nurturing an antithetical and antipathetical relationship. Essentially the Cold War entailed a "protracted conflict between the Soviet and Western worlds that while falling short of a hot war

¹ Norman A. Graebner (Ed). *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Diplomacy*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.) p.1.

² Robert Jervis. *The Logic of Images in International Relations*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.) p.4.

³ Ernest R. May (Ed). *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68*. (Boston: St Martin's Press, 1993.) p.17.

nonetheless involved a comprehensive military, political, and ideological rivalry.”⁴ In the minds of American officials, the group led by the United States pursued the preservation of individual liberty and a pluralistic international system. Their Soviet adversaries however, were committed to totalitarianism and a monistic international system, seemingly in the search to impose their way of life on the rest of the world. In what was paradigmatic of a generation of American diplomats, Arthur S. Schlesinger Jr.’s statement that the actions of policymakers in the early post-war period constituted the “brave and essential response of free men to Communist aggression”⁵ essentially accepted the notion of Soviet ruthlessness as valid and of Western firmness as necessary. The orthodox view of Cold War history, as Melvyn Leffler has remarked, was that the Soviet Union was relentlessly expansionist, and that U.S. officials “wanted to get along with the Soviets, but slowly came to realise that accommodation was impossible because of the Kremlin’s drive for world domination.”⁶

The purpose of any nation’s foreign policy is to create an international environment conducive to the survival and prospering of its institutions. Traditionally, American policymakers have been acutely aware that they were bound by a historical, political, and Constitutional obligation to serve two fundamental objectives of national society: these being both the concern for the nation’s physical survival, as well as the continuation of the American way of life. In the minds of its leaders, the irreducible national interest of the United States had been defined in terms of concepts such as survival, liberty, and economic well being.⁷ In the realm of foreign policy, it is axiomatic to suggest that prudent and responsible governments pursue this triumvirate of interest simultaneously, and that threats to any of them be considered of paramount importance. The administration of President Truman harboured the persistent view that the spread of international communism constituted the primary danger to American interests, for it was seen as an alien ideology poisonous to private enterprise, democratic pluralism, and individual liberty. In what has now become a truism, American policymakers of the early Cold War period, perceived Soviet communism and its expansionistic character as a pre-eminent threat to the American way of life.

To makers of foreign policy, the very definition of a nation’s interests, threats, and general place in the world, are functions of images. Images provide people with

⁴ Fred Halliday. “Cold War” in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, quoted in Joseph M. Siracusa, *Into the Dark House: American Diplomacy and the Ideological Origins of the Cold War*. (Claremont, Cal: Regina Books, 1998.) p.xi.

⁵ Arthur S. Schlesinger Jr. “Origins of the Cold War” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (Oct.1967) p.22-52.

⁶ Melvyn P. Leffler, & David S. Painter (Eds) *Origins of the Cold War: An International History*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co, 1987.) p.166.

⁷ Seyom Brown. *The Faces of Power: Constancy and Change in US Foreign Policy from Truman to Johnson*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.) p.8.

the mental maps without which they could not traverse the world, for as Walter Lippman once observed, people tend to base decisions on “the pictures in their heads.”⁸ The severity and presence of an image within the psyche of decision-makers, is a direct product of its contribution to the survival of the individuals holding them. For the most part, the traditional American aversion to authoritarian regimes existed as a latent assumption, emerging only sporadically in times of war.⁹ The nature of Stalin’s dictatorship and its newfound atomic capabilities, coupled with the triumph of Chinese communism necessitated a re-examination of policy at a time when the threat of international communism had never seemed greater. The creation of National Security Council document 68 was intended to be a formal statement of the “containment” policy, a response to the apparent hostility of the Soviet Union and its fundamental purpose of destroying the liberty of the free world. George Frost Kennan, under the pseudonym “X”, authored an article that appeared in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. Entitled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” it was given an aura of official pronouncement, and “containment” quickly became a capsule characterisation of post-war American policy towards the Soviet Union. Similar to the Truman speech of March 1947, the “X” article seemed to be a call for resistance to expansionism on a global basis, urging the United States to carefully guard its own vitality through “patient...firm...and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”¹⁰ At the time, Kennan’s article was the single most coherent attempt made during the early Cold War period to formulate a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union. The need for greater articulation of foreign policy caused President Truman to authorise a physical interpretation of the containment doctrine: a single, comprehensive statement of interests, threats and feasible responses capable of being communicated through the bureaucracy. The product of such was National Security Council document 68. What was quite intriguing was the fact that Kennan himself was not present to direct such a proposal, for the task of drafting such a document was designated to a small *ad hoc* committee of State and Defence department officials under the guidance of Kennan’s successor, Paul H. Nitze.

NSC 68 has continued to attract scholarly attention from a variety of academic persuasions. Preceded by occasional “leaks”, the first important treatment of the subject appeared in 1962 with the publication of Paul Y. Hammond’s pioneering essay, “NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament”. Whilst classification prevented him from

⁸ Quoted in Betty Glad & Charles S. Taber, “Images, Learning and the Decision to Use Force” in Betty Glad (Ed). *The Psychological Dimension of War*. (London:Sage Publications, 1990.) p.56.

⁹ See Daniel M. Smith “Authoritarianism and American Policymakers in Two World Wars” *Pacific Historical Review* (Vol 43, 1974.) p.303-323.

¹⁰ George F. Kennan. “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” in Thomas H. Etzhold & John Lewis Gaddis (Ed) *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.) p.84.

quoting directly from the document, Hammond instead interviewed each of the chief participants and produced what would for a generation become the standard account of the document's formulation and evolution. According to Hammond, the purpose of NSC 68 was to take a "new look at the general strategic picture, and to re-appraise it...in an attempt...at a rational projection of strategic policy requirements from the national strategic situation."¹¹ In 1966, correspondent Cabell Phillips defined NSC 68 as a "posture that set up certain basic assumptions about the new world order and our role in it."¹² In his portrait of Dean Acheson, Gaddis Smith proclaimed that NSC 68 was "the most famous unread paper of its era."¹³

Since its de-classification in 1975, NSC 68 has remained a compelling focus of study. The diversified nature of scholarly interpretation has painted an intellectual mosaic regarding both its significance and its role in the evolution of ideas regarding the Soviet "menace". In his autobiography, Nitze himself remarked that one of the major aspects of the document was its emphasis on the strengthening of US military capabilities in the face of significantly increased Soviet capabilities.¹⁴ Carrying this assumption further, Melvyn Leffler acknowledged this fact but also questioned the analytical coherence of the study, focusing on the lack of detailed examination and prescription regarding the nature of the Soviet threat.¹⁵ In a similar vein, Samuel F. Wells Jr described NSC 68 as "an amazingly incomplete and amateurish study" in that its authors were guilty of drawing broad assumptions about Soviet behaviour from a vague estimate of its capabilities.¹⁶ Conversely, Wilson Miscamble described NSC 68 as a reflection of the prevailing Cold War paradigm, and that in light of the present situation, America's policy was create a "situation of strength" in order to prescribe an effective response to what seemed to be the spectre of Soviet expansionism. However, he finds it difficult not to concur with Herbert Feis' assessment that NSC 68 was "the most ponderous expression of ideas not very coherently expressed."¹⁷

In terms of ideas, NSC 68 defined the present world crisis in terms of long range historical processes affected specifically by the Russian Revolution, the

¹¹ Paul Y. Hammond. "NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament" *Strategy, Politics and Defense Budgets*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.) p.314.

¹² Cabell Phillips. *The Truman Presidency: A History of a Triumphant Succession*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) p.308.

¹³ Gaddis Smith., "Dean Acheson" in Robert H. Ferrell (Ed). *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*. (New York: Coopers Square Publishers, 1972.) p.161.

¹⁴ Paul Nitze. *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Centre of Decision – A Memoir*. (London, 1989) p.97, quoted in Siracusa, *Into the Dark House*, p.84.

¹⁵ Melvyn P. Leffler. *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.) p.356-359.

¹⁶ Samuel F. Wells Jr. "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat" *International Security* (Vol.4, No.2, Fall 1979.) p.139.

¹⁷ Wilson D. Miscamble. *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.)

communist movement, and the development of nuclear weapons. It provided a general theory about the nature of Soviet intentions, concluding that the Kremlin had three major objectives. In order of priority, these were: (1) to preserve the internal power position of the regime and develop the Soviet Union as a base for that power; (2) to consolidate control over Soviet satellites and add them as a support for that base; and (3) to weaken any opposing centres of power and aspire to world hegemony.¹⁸ NSC 68 pictured an inherent conflict of interest between the United States and Soviet Union because of ideological differences. The incompatibility of Soviet political institutions with that of the United States made the latter a threat to all three of the Kremlin's objectives, even to the preservation of its own internal power.

NSC 68 maintained that the Soviet Union was capable of rapid economic growth whilst sustaining a large military establishment. Its authors estimated that within four years the Soviet Union would have sufficient nuclear capacity to substantially offset the deterrent capabilities of American nuclear power. In comparison it emphasised the inadequacy of the Western capability to meet limited military challenges due to a lack of conventional military forces. It rejected the possibility of negotiation with the Soviet Union except on the basis of power-political considerations. Similarly, it concluded that the prospects of achieving effective regulation of armaments were remote because the necessary methods were incompatible with the Soviet regime, for the success of these efforts would seem to promote free-world strength and cohesion.

NSC 68 illustrated four alternatives facing the United States: (1) continuing on the present course of limited budgets with no increase in capabilities and no decrease in commitments; (2) preventative war; (3) withdrawal to the western hemisphere – the “Fortress America concept; and (4) the development of free world cohesion through a program to increase free world capabilities.¹⁹ The fourth alternative it analysed in great depth, examining the relationship between the strength of the United States as the “centre” of the free world, with the strength of countries on its periphery, the relationship of economic and military programs to each other, and psychological factors of strategy. It stressed the importance of allies to Western security, the inadequate preparedness of the free world, and the need for its improvement. NSC 68 concluded that the most effective way of enhancing “free world” strength was to begin “at the centre” with the building up of American military capabilities.

Policymakers of the period who were intimately concerned with the paper, represent a nuanced perspective regarding the nature of the Soviet menace, and the

¹⁸ “National Security Council document 68” April 14 1950, quoted in Joseph M. Siracusa. *Into the Dark House: American Diplomacy and the Ideological Origins of the Cold War*. (Claremont, Cal: Regina Books, 1998.) p.214. (Referred to hereafter as NSC 68).

¹⁹ NSC 68, p.248-258.

appropriate response to it. What Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Nitze's predecessor at the Policy Planning Staff George Kennan, and Nitze himself more or less agreed upon, was the fact that the Soviets posed an ominous and foreboding danger to the West. However, the primary divergence between the ideas of these men essentially lay over the means in which to combat this threat. As the senior member of cabinet and the chief spokesman on international affairs, both to the President and the world, the Secretary of State is charged with defining and implementing the foreign policy of the United States. Norman Graebner has remarked that every occupant of the office is essentially a unique personality whose importance depends on his own qualities"²⁰ This was very true of Dean G. Acheson. What was particularly striking about him, was his unique perception of the contexts in which the Soviet threat seemed to exist. Reflecting his faith in the inherent virtues of Western democracy, Acheson was acutely aware of the ideological challenge that the Soviet brand of communism seemed to present, describing it once as "the spearhead of Russian imperialism".²¹ In his portrait of the Secretary of State, Gaddis Smith described NSC 68 as "a thoroughly Achesonian exposition"²², acknowledging the emphasis upon the antagonistic political and ideological ideals that the Soviet Union seemed to personify. Given the antithetical nature of its institutions, NSC 68 reflected Acheson's fear that the enormous power vacuum created by World War II would be filled by Soviet communism, which would thus seem to threaten democracy *per se*. In what was characteristic of the administration, NSC 68 claimed that "...the assault upon free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarisation of power, a defeat...anywhere is a defeat everywhere."²³ As he recounted later, the situation of strength that the authors of NSC 68 hoped to achieve was in aid of providing credibility for the idea of democracy. "What we expected to achieve", claimed Acheson, "was to...replace the inviting weak spots offered by Soviet probing...and to show the Soviet leaders by successful containment that they could not hope to expand their influence throughout the world."²⁴ Thinking in terms of ideals, Acheson's belief symbolised neatly the Western antipathy to Soviet ideology.

Yet at the same time, Acheson was not subsumed by a virulent sense of anticommunism, for he argued that it was essential for both American policymakers as well as the public to retain rationality: "One of the most destructive ways to go at

²⁰ Norman A. Graebner (Ed) *An Uncertain Tradition: American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.) p.v.

²¹ Quoted in Samuel F. Wells, Jr. "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat" *International Security* (Vol.4, No.2, Fall 1979.) p.116-158.

²² Smith, "Dean Acheson" p.161.

²³ NSC 68, p.215.

²⁴ Dean G. Acheson. *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1969.) p.380.

the task...before you, is to attack it emotionally. If you start thinking about your opponent in terms of intense bitterness, your mind is deflected. We must respect [the Soviets].”²⁵ Far from the doctrinaire idealist, the Secretary of State possessed a distinct undercurrent of pragmatism, and this was manifested in his prescription for dealing with the “Red peril”. Acheson’s concept of America’s proper role in world affairs reflected his “historic conservatism”²⁶, and that he did not subscribe the “Wilsonian” belief that national security was a function of moralistic-legalistic imperatives. Keenly attuned to the realities of international relations, Acheson was firmly of the belief that dealing with the Soviets was like “dealing with a force of nature. You can’t argue with a river, it is going to flow. You can dam it up, you can deflect it, but you can’t argue with it.”²⁷ Similarly, his view of foreign policy was rooted in the conviction that the Soviet Union would never respond to reason and persuasion, but only to positions of strength. He realised that diplomatic and military force were some of the most pronounced actualities in international history. As one of the principal authorities of NSC 68, its conclusion was “a real call to action, claiming that...much more was needed to be committed in effort...if the American strategic situation were not to deteriorate rapidly.”²⁸ Acting in terms of *Realpolitik*, Acheson perceived that the most prudent and effective manner in which to deal with the Soviets was to create a superior military deterrent as an alternative to communist aggression. The Secretary of State was convinced that the chief deterrent to its expansion everywhere rested upon the collective military forces of the North Atlantic community. Reluctant to put faith in diplomatic negotiation with authoritarian states, he considered it essential that the Soviets give a significant indication of assurance that they were not bent on further expansion before any prospect of compliance was considered.

The previous director of the Policy Planning Staff, George F. Kennan, did not share the conviction that superior military force was the most effective means to combat the Soviet menace. The core problem that confronted Kennan during his tenure was how to respond to the antagonism and the apparent threat of the Soviet Union. As he was to point out later, NSC 69 seemed to be an attempt to congeal and eliminate the esoteric skill of diplomacy. The militarisation of his containment policy prompted Kennan’s resignation as PPS director, and eroded his faith in American

²⁵ Quoted in David S. McLellan. *Dean Acheson: The State Department Years*. (New York: Dodd-Mead & Co, 1976.) p.174.

²⁶ Norman A. Graebner “Dean Acheson” in Norman A. Graebner (Ed). *An Uncertain Tradition: American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961.) p.269. Acheson also remarked that he did not believe in the “purpose of American policy [being] a...crusade or mission to bring about equal justice or to vindicate international law” It was rather to “protect and further the deepest and most vital interests of the United States.” *Ibid*.

²⁷ Quoted in Smith, “Dean Acheson”, p.138.

²⁸ NSC 68, p.224.

postwar internationalism.²⁹ Doubting the pre-eminence of military considerations in American foreign policy, he rather believed that political and economic factors were of supreme importance in the Cold War and that military issues were, at best, subsidiary.³⁰ Prior to the formation of NATO, the prospect of a Western military alliance represented a deviation from ideological-political containment that Kennan had envisaged. Whilst favouring assurances of American military backing in Western Europe in the event of Soviet aggression, he also opposed a military alliance that would seem to detract from combating the threat of internal communist subversion. Kennan sincerely thought that the West could win the Cold War, but only under the condition that it would focus on responding to the ideological-political threat rather than devoting its attention to, what he perceived to be, the unlikely prospect of a Soviet blitzkrieg.³¹ NSC 68 was, in essence, a call for massive re-armament, outpacing anything Kennan had ever recommended. The paper endorsed Kennan's argument for ideological-political containment, but the national security document stressed Soviet military capabilities rather than Soviet intentions.

Kennan has been loosely described as a purveyor of "realism", where national security is sought by a careful analysis of power, interests and antagonisms. When the nation's vital interests are at stake, realism, in its purest form, considers law and morality as constricting, and tends to view ideological considerations as distinctly subordinate. By both regarding international harmony as an unattainable state in world affairs and asserting the primacy of the national interest, Kennan deplored the moralistic-legalistic groundings that seemed to have pervaded American foreign relations since the era of Wilson, and was extremely reticent to concur with the prevailing mentality within the PPS after his departure. Unlike Nitze and other officials, he simply did not regard it necessary to expand American interests on behalf of an intangible concept such as the defence of democracy from communist aggression. To Kennan, an important corollary flowed from this assumption. He

²⁹ A prevalent view was that Kennan's resignation resulted from Acheson's desire to gradually exclude him from the policymaking elite in the department. In his *Memoirs*, Kennan wrote "my departure [from the PPS] took place without acrimony or hard feeling...I felt an affection and admiration [for Acheson] so strong that it would even withstand the public controversy of ensuing years." George F. Kennan *Memoirs 1925-1950*. (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1967.) p.466. Similarly, Wilson D. Miscamble has noted, "Kennan chose to resign, Acheson in no way forced him out" and that both these individuals had "high respect and even affection for each other." Wilson D. Miscamble. *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.) p.292.

³⁰ David S. Mayers. *George F. Kennan and the Dilemma of US Foreign Policy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.) p.122.

³¹ Kennan did not believe in "the reality of a Soviet military threat to Western Europe...[and he was] concerned not so much to provide protection against the possibility of such an attack as to facilitate the retirement of Soviet forces, and with them Soviet political influence." Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, p.464. See also Walter L. Hixson *George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.73-98

perceived that in terms of *Realpolitik*, not all parts of the world were equally vital to American national security. Industrial capacity, together with the access to the raw materials necessary to sustain it, was the key to power in the world. Writing in his *Memoirs*, he claimed that

Repeatedly...I expressed in talks and lectures that there were only five regions in the world – the United States, the United Kingdom, the Rhine Valley...the Soviet Union and Japan – where the sinews of modern military strength could be produced in quantity...I pointed out that only one of these were under Communist control, and I defined the task of containment...as seeing to it that none of the remaining ones fell under such control.³²

Kennan was aware that the Russians were strong militarily, but was inclined to view their strength as an exaggeration. For he contended that the Russians were already overextended and that the Kremlin would not risk an attack on Western Europe, especially not when the industrial heartland was vulnerable to air attack.³³ Kennan's Clausewitzian argument was that, to the Soviets, the disadvantages of a particular means of war far outweighed its advantages.

Regarding NSC 68's proposition that democracy be defended everywhere, Kennan thought that the internal affairs of other states was not a proper and legitimate concern for American foreign policy, and that there would have to be a sufficient involvement of national interest to justify an intervention into the domestic affairs of other states. What he perceived to be at stake was the preservation of American society, not military alliances or military credibility. Kennan's conception of containment dictated that, in terms of *Realpolitik*, there was little to be gained by proliferating American interests under an ideological premise, beyond the physical capacity to defend them. In short, George Kennan felt that military conflict with the Soviet Union was too remote a possibility to deserve attention, particularly when it overwrought military factors at the expense of diplomatic ones. To the former diplomat, American foreign policy should have concerned itself with tangible material interests rather than an "ill-defined" ideological threat.

Yet Kennan's "realism" was not as pervasive as has been thought. Hesitant to embrace the view that the Soviet Union was preparing for war with the United States, Kennan's emphasis upon diplomatic rather than military containment had its origins in the notion that Soviet leaders were just as cautious about the new world order as were the Americans. His focus upon the nature of Soviet intentions led him to believe

³² Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, p.435.

³³ Anders Stephanson. *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.) p.82.

that NSC 68's plan to counter Soviet probings everywhere contributed to the perpetuation of conflict. Whilst his realist persuasion gave credence to the notion of confining American actions in accordance with its material interests, his belief that diplomatic negotiation with Stalin would promote a readiness to withdraw reflected an idealistic faith in the merits of diplomacy. He assumed that an American willingness for concessions "would eventually stimulate a disposition on the Soviet side to do likewise."³⁴ Interestingly enough, this perspective moved away from the common realist propensity for assuming that individuals are possessed by an inherent drive for power, thus supposing that the Soviet leaders were considerably open to reasonable negotiation. On the whole, George Kennan thought in terms of power politics, but to a large extent prescribed actions on the basis of idealistic considerations.

Kennan's successor, Paul Nitze sought before all else to illustrate the motives of the Kremlin and in doing so, develop a thesis that would carry the burden of the arguments and recommendations enumerated in NSC 68. At the heart of the Cold War, Nitze argued, lay the underlying, fundamental conflict in the realm of ideas and values. "There is", he wrote, "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 under the present polarisation of power."³⁵ A free society, Nitze continued, "derives its strength from its hospitality even to antipathetic ideas."³⁶ Adhering to the supposed indivisibility of war and peace that had characterised anti-appeasers in the 1930's, Nitze postulated that in current circumstances, a defeat of free institutions anywhere, constituted a defeat of free institutions everywhere, the most recent case having been the destruction of Czechoslovakia in February in 1948. In what was symbolic of a generation of Cold Warriors, Nitze claimed posited that "when the integrity of Czechoslovak institutions was destroyed, it was in the intangible sense of values that we registered a loss more damaging than the material loss...already suffered."³⁷

Nitze envisaged the key feature of containment as being that of strength, and it seemed essential in dealing with the Soviets, to sustain such a position. To the PPS Director, there was no substitute for the preservation of superior military force:

In the concept of containment, the maintenance of a strong military posture is an ultimate guarantee of national security and as an indispensable backdrop to the conduct of the policy of containment...without superior aggregate

³⁴ Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, p.463.

³⁵ NSC 68, p.214.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.215.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.215-216.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.227.

military strength, in being ready and mobilisable, a policy of containment – which is in effect a policy of calculated and gradual coercion – is no more than a bluff.”³⁸

To Nitze, peace must now be waged in much the same way that war had been waged in the past – “by amassing and deploying military power.”³⁹ What uniquely marked Nitze’s creation, was the fact that the Soviet threat existed almost exclusively in military terms, and that the perception of Soviet-American relations was an uncompromisingly total “zero-sum” game. Illustrating his faith in the virtues of democracy, Nitze and his colleagues rejected the possibility of peaceful settlement through diplomatic negotiation unless the Soviet Union changed its political and ideological attitudes. Such was the extent of the ideological antipathy, that Nitze and his associates adopted the position that communist Russia represented a threat which the United States had to resist, if necessary by war.

Both the present Director of the PPS and his predecessor shared the view that the Soviet menace was clear and present. Both, in essence, subscribed to classical deterrence theory, namely to persuade their opponents that the risk of expansion with hostile intent would outweigh its benefits.⁴⁰ But the continuity of ideas regarding the manner in which the threat should be dealt with, was somewhat disrupted with Nitze’s succession. The new presidential review of national security now replaced Kennan’s previous assumption that it was “not probable that the pattern of Soviet intentions would not be altered by the development of the atomic weapon in Russia”⁴¹, with Nitze’s presumption that, assuming it was not already pre-existing, the Soviets could develop a “first-strike” mentality. The most visible signs of this difference stretched back to Joseph Stalin’s speech in February 1946, and the divergence of interpretation over its significance offers, as Strobe Talbott puts it, “a paradigm of Soviet-American relations.”⁴² At the time, Nitze took Stalin’s ominous references to “all possible contingencies” as a military threat.⁴³ Kennan’s reaction was something less, and the essence of his argument was that the United States should not let itself be drawn into a military confrontation or even a peacetime arms race.

It was thus apparent that policymakers of this period perceived a stark image of the Soviet menace, but differed in the means to combat this end. Despite the lack of

³⁸ Strobe Talbott. *The Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) p.54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke. *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.) p.11.

⁴¹ Quoted in Siracusa, *Into the Dark House*, p.73

⁴² Talbott, *Master of the Game*, p.43.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.42.

support his views received in the administration, George Kennan's judgements regarding American policy possessed some thoughtful and compelling rationale. "Realism" carried with it the assumption that the primary aim of American policy should be to protect vital areas of material interest, and prioritise other commitments accordingly. Kennan realised that to continue the American way of life, it was essential to preserve areas of potential and actual industrial capability. The point of difference was quite explicit. The conflicting assessments of the existing power balance seemed to hinge upon whether or not the Soviet Union would deliberately risk war in attaining its objectives. Nitze believed that Kennan's analysis failed to give proper weight to the importance of preparation for a major contingency – this being an aggressive move by the Soviets. Kennan felt that Nitze's focus was too much in that direction, and ruled out large-scale war as too remote a possibility to deserve attention, particularly when such attention was bound to over-emphasise military factors at the expense of diplomatic one. Kennan wrote in his *Memoirs* that the principal authors of NSC 68,

viewed the Soviet leaders as absorbed with the pursuit of something called a "grand design" – a design for the early destruction of American people and for world conquest. In vain I pleaded with these people that this was a chimera; that the Russians were not like that; that they were weaker than we supposed; that they had many internal problems of their own...and did not intend...to pursue their competition with us by means of general war. What we confronted with from the Soviet side...was a long-term effort of rivalry and pressure by all means short of war...It was dangerous to think in...[military] terms, for military plans had a way of giving reality to the very contingencies against which they were purported to prepare.⁴⁴

Paul Y. Hammond, among many others, has remarked that in the drafting of NSC 68, there was an inclination to deduce Soviet intentions from Soviet capabilities.⁴⁵ Kennan regarded the equation of capabilities and intentions to be a crude oversimplification, and he urged that the Soviet leaders were cautious, prone to seeking objectives at minimum cost and risk, without reference to any fixed timetable. In short, Kennan considered the Soviets to be deeply pragmatic. A reading of NSC 68 gives the impression that the impetus was on what the Soviets *could* do, as opposed to Kennan's critique which was based on what they seemed *most likely* to do. It was this assumption with which Kennan had his deepest reservations. He simply could not

⁴⁴ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, p.92.

⁴⁵ Hammond, "NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament", p.310.

fathom why his views conflicted with the “highly inflated estimates” of Russian conventional military strength that had become ingrained in the minds of American policymakers. For he was acutely aware of “a growing tendency in Washington to base our own plans solely on the capabilities of a potential adversary, assuming his to be desirous of anything he could do to bring injury to us, and exclude from consideration...the whole question of that adversary’s real intentions.”⁴⁶ He continued with “all [of] this tended to heighten the militarisation of thinking about the cold war generally, and to press us into attitudes where any discriminate estimates of Soviet intentions were unwelcome...[because] it was safely assumed that they would be hostile.”⁴⁷ To the former director of the PPS, the basing of American national security on the capabilities, as opposed to the intentions, of their adversaries was considered both symptomatic of the panic sweeping the country and the apparent pitfalls of Nitze’s highly quantitative approach to the Soviet threat. “Paul was in one sense like a child” recalled Kennan:

*He was willing to believe only what he could see before him. He felt comfortable with something only if it could be statistically expressed. He loved anything that could be reduced to numbers...He had no feeling for the intangibles – values, intentions. When there was talk of intentions, as opposed to capabilities, he would say: “How can you measure intentions? We can’t be bothered to get into psychology; we have to face the Russians as competitors, militarily. That’s where I come in.”*⁴⁸

The militarisation of containment represented a departure from Kennan’s original idea of what a response to the Soviet threat should have actually entailed. His diplomatic background led him to believe that the Soviet threat was multifaceted, consisting largely of political, diplomatic and economic considerations. As he told officers at the National War College, American policy against the Kremlin should inextricably mix military and political methods: “[to help] the military battle be won, it is we [the diplomats] who will have to help you...to give political effect to the utilisation of armed force.” The essence of this theory was that force acts as a supplement to diplomacy, and that military power served a dual purpose, acting as the ultimate sanction and lending authority to statements of the American government as it operated in world affairs. “You have no idea” he philosophised, “of how much it

⁴⁶ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, p.475.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.497.

⁴⁸ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, p.60.

contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little...force in the background.”⁴⁹

What seemed to trouble Kennan most about the study project was that the vast and complex problems of American foreign policy could be set down on a few sheets of paper without transforming them into clumsy oversimplifications. He saw this new appraisal of American policy developing characteristics he had learned to distrust: the systemisation of policymaking in which a simplified general solution was developed, but which tended to eliminate flexibility in diplomacy. He felt that the policy of NSC 68 would be better left implicit, as this would provide optimum conditions for flexibility, and professional diplomatic judgements. He argued that a policy laid out in advance would cripple the practice of the diplomatic art, and that what would be gained in consistency, coordination and preparation would be overcompensated for in terms of rigidity and oversimplification. To Kennan, NSC 68 was seen as an attempt to congeal and hinder the esoteric skill of diplomacy.

In Kennan’s mind, a major dilemma which seemed to be unresolved was the ability to discern between vital and peripheral interests. It seemed that as far as NSC 68 was concerned, it could not. The fact that its authors were preoccupied with defending the credibility of western institutions seemed to challenge the *Realpolitik* view of international relations that Kennan had come to espouse. His argument that containment necessitated a clear separation of vital and peripheral interests, seemed to no longer suffice. The creators of NSC 68 shifted the focus away from his fundamental assumption that a nation’s limited resources inevitably dictate a distinction between vital and peripheral interests be drawn. Ideological imperatives, it seemed were simply not practical. The notion of defending democracy *per se* did nothing else than to proliferate the number of interests, and then blur the distinctions between them. Similarly, its presumption that the United States could vastly expand its commitments and adjust its resources accordingly contradicted two tenets of the “realist” view: namely that policy was supposed to dictate strategy, and that resources were defined in terms of interests, not vice versa, as NSC 68 seemed to assume. Essentially, Kennan was fearful that this new direction in American policy was unwise, for its inherent logic was that of a nation’s interests being a function of threats to them. This could result in over-extension, which would severely undermine the American way of life through the great strain put on American resources.

⁴⁹ George F. Kennan, “Preparedness as Part of Foreign Relations”, p.7, January 8, 1948, File “Jan to April 1948” in Box 17, Kennan Papers: “What is Policy”, December 18, 1947, p.18-19, Box 17, Kennan Papers; Measures Short of War” p.19, September 16, 1946, File “1946” in Box 16, Kennan Papers, quoted in David S. Mayers. *George F. Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). p.122-123.

What was common to both NSC 68 and Kennan's view of containment was the idea that the United States had come to rely too heavily on the use of nuclear weapons as an effective deterrent to Soviet aggression. What was needed was the capacity to counter Soviet actions at whatever level it occurred, but without unnecessary escalation. In a sense, both Nitze and Kennan favoured what was kind of an intellectual precursor to flexible response. Once again, however, they conceived of it in different terms. In *Strategies of Containment*, John Lewis Gaddis quite succinctly describes the difference between Kennan and Nitze's conceptualisations of the containment procedure. With its assumption that war was a real possibility, NSC 68 argued for kind *symmetrical response*, of "vertical" flexibility up and down the spectrum of military capabilities, ranging from peacetime deterrence, to through to nuclear war. The indivisibility of interests that NSC 68 seemed to advocate, dictated that the United States should replicate Soviet military force configurations, and act wherever the Soviets chose to challenge American interests, be they ideological or material. Conversely, Kennan contended that what was needed was *assymetrical response*, which entailed a kind of "horizontal" flexibility. Under this assumption, the United States should simply reinforce its own strengths, and have the ability to employ military force where appropriate, but make greater use of economic and diplomatic instruments of containment. This kind of response would seemed to have helped the United States retain its sense of initiative by acting only when interests at stake where vital, conditions favourable, and means accessible.⁵⁰

Thus, it seems that NSC 68 seemed to be a departure from Kennan's original conception of containment. His "realist" view of American foreign relations, illustrated what he conceived to be potential deficiencies in current policy. Kennan's arguments regarding the appropriate response to the Soviet menace were certainly compelling and logically sound. In hindsight, the notions of assymetrical containment, diplomatic flexibility, and the prioritisation of interests according to their capacity to affect the American way of life seem to make sense. Benefiting from the acuity of hindsight, some scholars have argued that that the Soviets were never quite as strong as the West thought they were, and were never intent on fulfilling the objectives ascribed to them in NSC 68.⁵¹ Samuel F. Wells Jr doubts the validity of its logic, claiming that "the authors overdraw the monolithic and evil nature of the Communist bloc."⁵² Yet, when writing history, it is often difficult to put oneself in the same situation as the historical protagonists of which we study. The "realist" critique of

⁵⁰ John Lewis Gaddis *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.) p.97-8.

⁵¹ See for instance, Jim Garrison and Pyare Shivpuri. *The Russian Threat: Its Myths and Realities*. (London: Gateway Books, 1983). See also Michael Cox "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat: A Reply to Beatrice Heuser" *Review of International Studies*, Vol.18, No.1 (January 1992) p.82

⁵² Wells, "Sounding the Tocsin", p.139.

NSC 68 is sound as far as it goes, but it can be said that it does not go far enough. For the legitimacy of Kennan's assumptions rests on the premise that policymakers live solely in a world of "facts". What Kennan overlooks, is the notion that framers of foreign policy also live in a world of "ideas". Kennan's arguments essentially under-emphasise possibly the most important factor of all, this being the revulsion towards authoritarianism held by American decision-makers. In retrospect, it is insignificant whether or not George Kennan was correct in his judgement of Soviet intentions, for to focus on this is, I submit, to miss the point. The significance of NSC 68 lay in the fact that whilst it is easy to criticise American foreign policy during the period of 1949 to 1950, it is essential to understand the driving force behind its policymakers. Given both past and present events, merged with a concern for the future, it is difficult to criticise Nitze and NSC 68's assumptions and critical weaknesses in isolation from its historical context. As a recent study has remarked, "the root cause for the exaggeration of the Soviet threat should be traced within the structure and autonomous dynamics of decision-making bodies and their influence upon the formation of national security policy."⁵³

Joseph DeRivera has remarked that "man always determines foreign policy, though he is mercilessly affected by external forces."⁵⁴ The explosion of the Soviet atomic bomb as well as the "loss" of China did more than anything else to impel a re-examination of American national security objectives by officials in Washington. These two events created a deeply foreboding image within the minds of American policymakers, primarily because of their ideas regarding both the nature of the Soviet system and its relationship to that of the United States. In writing diplomatic history, it is of paramount importance to consider the human elements involved in the foreign policy-making process. The decision-makers must be understood in terms of their psychological environment, and their perceptions of both reality serve as an insight to the manifestation of their fears and their images. It is a truism to suggest that one fear in particular was prominent in the minds of American officials, and did more than anything else in impelling these individuals to act as they did. This individual was Joseph Stalin.

Considering the millions of deaths in the purges of collectivisation in the 1930's, the tragedy of Poland⁵⁵, his handling of threats to his political position, and

⁵³ Efstathios T. Fakiolas, "Kennan's Long Telegram and NSC 68: A Comparative Theoretical Analysis" *Eastern European Quarterly* (Vol.31, No.4, January 1998) p.415.

⁵⁴ Joseph H. DeRivera. *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrily & Co, 1968). p.3.

⁵⁵ The Polish Home Army fought the Nazi's in Warsaw for 63 days whilst the Soviet army halted on the banks of the Visual, and in Moscow, Stalin declined to cooperate with the Western effort to drop supplies to the Warsaw resistance. It appeared to be a calculated decision to let the Nazi's slaughter the anti-Soviet Polish underground, with the hopeful result that any substantial alternative to a Soviet solution in Poland would be destroyed. Stalin's extreme shrewdness was reflected by the fact that as

the general brutality and repressiveness of his regime, it proved increasingly difficult for American policymakers to ignore a sinister trend that appeared progressively more ominous. Joseph Stalin and the horrendous nature of Soviet institutions accentuated a pre-existing suspicion to authoritarian states held by Western leaders, that was in existence ever since the First World War.⁵⁶ The utter ruthlessness which characterised his handling of domestic matters, did more than anything else to erode the goodwill that the Soviet war effort had accumulated in the West, to raise doubts about future cooperation in London and Washington, and to create deep and abiding fears throughout the rest of Europe. Ultimately “the tragedy of Soviet diplomacy was their decision to extend communism on the bayonet of the Red army.”⁵⁷ “What we Now Know”, to borrow a line from the premier post-revisionist historian John L. Gaddis⁵⁸, is what we have always thought. With the emergence of new material from the Soviet archives, it has become clear that Stalin, in the words of Joseph M. Siracusa, was “a monster with the soul of a killer”⁵⁹

A chilling example of this was the Katyn forest massacre. When the Russians invaded eastern Poland in 1939, among the prisoners they took were 14,300 Polish officers, and on July 29th, 1941, shortly after Hitler’s surprise attack on them, the Russians concluded an agreement with the Pole in London ending the state of war between them. Arrangements were made to organise a Polish army in the Soviet Union out of the released Polish prisoners and refugees in Russia. What was particularly intriguing however, was the question of the whereabouts of the officers who would have been able to command them. On April 13, 1943, Radio Berlin announced a sinister discovery in eastern Poland. In the Katyn forest, a mass of graves containing the bodies of over 10,000 Polish officers was found, each one of whom had been executed long before the Germans had replaced the Russians in eastern Poland. This evidence is made all the more plausible by the earlier behaviour of

soon as the Polish Army was destroyed, Russia moved in to take over the territory lying east of the Curzon line, the population there being predominantly Byelorussian and Ukrainian. These areas were then purged of the more untrustworthy elements. See Michael McGwire “National Security and Soviet Foreign Policy” in Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter *Origins of the Cold War* *An International History*. (London: Routledge, 1994) p.58.

⁵⁶ See for instance Woodrow Wilson’s adviser Colonel Edward M. House and his assertion that “if the Allies won and Germany was thoroughly crushed, there would be no holding Russia back” House Diary, 20 September 1914, in Charles Seymour *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* 4 Vols (London: Bobs-Merrill & Co, 1926) II, p.328. See also Daniel M. Smith “Authoritarianism and American Policymakers in Two World Wars” *Pacific Historical Review* (Vol.43, April 1974) p.303-23.

⁵⁷ Joseph M. Siracusa. *New Left Diplomatic Histories and Historians: The American Revisionists*. (Claremont, Cal: Regina Books, 1993) p.42.

⁵⁸ John Lewis Gaddis. *What We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*. (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ Siracusa, *Into the Dark House*, p.xi.

Moscow when the Poles had tried to determine what happened to them.⁶⁰ The self-contradictory explanations give by the Kremlin, and the general conduct of Moscow during the whole Polish affair made it difficult to assume that the Soviets were guilt free, and in later accounts, this proved to be what the west had thought all along.⁶¹

It was evident that the American postwar policy was profoundly shaped by the *Zeitgeist*, where the spirit of the age and the “lessons of the past” called for an absolute and unwavering response to authoritarianism in general. During the war, an emphatic hostility to totalitarianism had developed, largely because of Hitler’s emergence onto the world stage. As a result, governments that had relied upon force to sustain themselves in power, it was thought, could hardly be counted on to refrain from the use of force in the world at large. The American policymakers perceived current events as analogous to the events of the 1930’s, and it was generally thought that the American government had failed to regard the Fascist and Nazi actions as independent of American interest. The conventional wisdom was such that World War II had been inevitable because Western democracies had not recognised early enough the menace to them of the expansionist drive of Fascism and had not resisted its initial manifestations.⁶² Once Truman, Acheson, and Nitze perceived developments in the late 1940’s as paralleling those of decade earlier, they applied this moral and hence resolved to behave towards the Soviet Union as they believed their predecessors should have behaved towards the expansionist states of their time. Appeasement seemed to be as dangerous to the United States in 1945 as it proved to be a decade earlier. To borrow a line from another post-revisionist, Melvyn Leffler, “prudent men simply could not take chances”.⁶³ It must not be forgotten that the experience of Nazism was still fresh in the minds of many, and as a result dictatorships were not highly esteemed in the arena of foreign relations. With the memories of authoritarianism seared onto the minds of many, appeasement with such a sinister foe would have been flagrantly immoral.

The collectivisation, the purges, and the opportunistic diplomacy of the Soviet Union compounded the pre-existing ideological aversion to communism of State Department officials. Yet they were also inwardly apprehensive that a “totalitarian” Russia might behave towards other nations as had the “totalitarian” axis powers.

⁶⁰ Louis J. Halle *The Cold War as History*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971) p.35.

⁶¹ A recent development has been the recovery of the minutes from the 5 March 1940 session of the Politburo, where the NKVD and the Soviet Secret Police were instructed to carry out the “Supreme Punishment” (execution by firing squad) of more than 25 000 Poles including thousands of Polish Army officers whose bodies were dumped in amass grave in the forests of Katyn. The documents surfaced in 1992 when Mikhail Gorbachev first admitted Soviet guilt in the murders. See Siracusa, *Into the Dark House*, p.xii.

⁶² Ernest R. May. *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.) p.32.

⁶³ Leffler. *A Preponderance of Power*, p.316.

Convinced that appeasement of “totalitarianism” powers in the 1930’s had merely encouraged aggression, American officials felt compelled to resist the “totalitarian” Soviet Union now, before its appetite fed upon itself, Soviet power increased, and as Ernest R. May remarked, “the people of the United States faced a Moloch more horrible than those to which so many lives had so recently been sacrificed.”⁶⁴ Reflecting the administration’s determination to prevent another World War II, Harry Truman’s assumptions about the Korean War, were that:

*Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger communist neighbours. If that was allowed to go unchallenged, it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the Second World War.*⁶⁵

From the lessons of history, American policymakers were acutely sensitive to the prospect that unprovoked aggression towards the West could be preceded by further attacks if the present one was not met with firm resistance. Appeasement of the 1930’s involved “spiral logic”⁶⁶ by the West, where a fear of escalation dictated a resort to concessions in order to appease an adversary on the proviso that concessions would not be met with further threats. Convinced of its inadequacy, Western leaders simply refused to take that chance again, especially considering that their adversary had possession of nuclear weapons.

In attempting to articulate the intellectual world of American policymakers involved in NSC 68, it is helpful to remember that fears and images that have been learnt over time, are based upon dramatic and memorable events occurring early in the decision-maker’s political life, oftentimes having a visible impact upon the fortunes of the individual and his nation.⁶⁷ Most of the men playing key roles in the formation of American foreign policy after World War II experienced a very prominent event – the Munich conference – during the formative phase of their political careers. As Joseph Siracusa has observed, “these were the same politicians,

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.51.

⁶⁵ Harry Truman. *Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956) Vol.2, p.332-3.

⁶⁶ Robert Jervis. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) p.255.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.63.

policymakers and diplomats who had experienced the disillusionment of the Versailles system, the folly of isolationism, witnessed the rise of communism, Nazism, and fascism and their associated horrors, recoiled from the West's abandonment of Czechoslovakia to Hitler in 1938 under the aegis of appeasement and were dragged into a second world war – all in one lifetime.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Robert Jervis contends that first-hand experience can be a powerful determinant of images, and that “being a spectator, has more impact than reading about it in history books.”⁶⁹ Is it any wonder then, that these men acted the way they did?

For with the acquisition of the atomic bomb, not only did American officials have to combat an already formidable foe who represented the very antithesis of their ideals, but the same foe who now had the capability to attack and inflict colossal destruction upon the American people themselves. The newfound ability to strike at the continental United States forced American decision makers to face the prospect of having the way of life of both themselves, and the citizens they represented, crucially altered with devastating results. Thus, Paul Nitze and the individuals who framed American policy, the decision to base national security imperatives upon the intentions, and not the capabilities of their adversary was irresponsible at best. Basing American strategy on what the Soviet Union seemed most likely to do, rather than what they actually could do, was simply not an option. It contradicted the national security bureaucracy's proclivity for worst-case analysis, of being safe rather than sorry. NSC 68 thus seemed to make sense, primarily because capabilities could be measured, intentions could not. Similarly, capabilities were much less susceptible to rapid change than were intentions. To these men, wisdom dictated the preparation for the worst possible contingency, especially given the immense implications of such a contingency. American officials were aware that both over-reactions and under-reactions could cause conflict, and rather than be ill-prepared as they had a generation beforehand, Paul Nitze and his colleagues were convinced that the former was a wiser course of action than was the latter.

The central argument of deterrence theory is that great dangers arise if an aggressor believes that one's nation is weak in capability or resolve. This belief will lead the former to test its opponents starting with small insignificant issues, and upon retreat or inaction, will encourage the aggressor nation to press harder. Even if defenders later realise their plight and are willing to pay a higher price to prevent further retreats, it will be increasingly difficult to convince the aggressor of their newfound resolve. The choice will then be between continuing to retreat and thereby sacrifice basic values, or of fighting. To avoid this disastrous situation, states must

⁶⁸ Siracusa, *Into the Dark House*, p.x.

⁶⁹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*, p.58-59.

display the willingness to wage war. The state must often go to extremes because moderation and conciliation are often taken as a sign of weakness, and civility is often misinterpreted by aggressors.⁷⁰ To the officials in the State Department, it was absolutely imperative that the United States resist the mere appearance of Soviet aggression, for what was at stake was the idea behind American institutions. Regardless of whether American material interests were involved, a defeat of democracy anywhere, was a defeat everywhere. Since the value at stake was so high, officials in Washington had to meet the threat of communism wherever it manifested itself, for the real essence of the Cold War existed in the minds of individuals. To American officials, retreat or compromise in this domain would have been costly, for it would have been a value judgement on the fragility of their institutions. Autocracy of any kind offended their deepest democratic instincts.⁷¹

What is particularly in historical retrospect, is the unique manner in which American policymakers combined elements of *Realpolitik* with that of idealism. Driven by an antipathy to the Soviet political system and the ideas from which it was determined, Americans nevertheless exercised extreme caution and dealt with the threat in terms of power politics. A belief in the inherent virtues of democratic institutions provided the impetus for a policy which, at its worst, became an excuse for rigid anticommunism, but at its best, seemed at the time to be democracy's greatest hope. We cannot easily criticise Americans of 1950 for acting the way they did. They were the first time facing the challenge of global leadership, as well as the prospect of their homeland becoming vulnerable to nuclear attack. The possession of atomic weapons by a dictator who regarded the United States as the root of all evil and whose Procrustean blunderings throughout Eastern Europe created utter terror, invoked deep-seated fears and starkly held images within the minds of the American people that not only could they face defeat, but punishment as well. Nuclear weapons were the first in history to actually have the capacity to "hurt" one's opponent, by fundamentally altering their way of life. Given this scenario, Nitze and his associates simply could not accept on faith and example the prospect that American moves to retreat would be met with similar concessions. Daniel Yergin asks "does a totalitarian practice at home necessarily produce a foreign policy that is totalitarian in intent, committed to overturning the international system and to an endless expansion in pursuit of world dominance?"⁷² Americans chose to believe the worst. Nitze and his fellow policymakers would not risk Soviet opportunism, for it was a departure from prudent and responsible government and would have betrayed the integrity of the

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.240.

⁷¹ Daniel Yergin. *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State*. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1977) p.9.

⁷² *Ibid*, p.10.

people whom they were to act on behalf of. It must be remembered that the consequences of policymakers' errors can sometimes have immediate impact on the lives of millions. To allow the Soviets the slightest advantage in spreading their "evil" political institutions was, to say the least, anathema to American policymakers.

What becomes apparent in the overall sense, is that American policymakers and their view of the world of NSC 68 can be likened to a dynamic system. Pushed by the experiences of their past, and pulled towards the hope and preventing a re-occurrence in the future, NSC 68 was a manifestation of policymakers and the perceptions of reality they experienced. It can be seen then, how the nature of the Cold War was essentially ideological and political. By illustrating the fears associated with the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons, and the images held as a result of the brutality of authoritarianism, the response of American policymakers to the Soviet menace provides us with an insight into their intellectual world. By understanding the psychological environment of historical actors, it gives the historian a view of why individuals acted the way they did. NSC 68 was in many ways a utopian document, reflecting the beliefs, ideas, fears and assumptions that provided the framework for American diplomacy in the years of 1949 to 1950. Which thus brings us to Ernest R. May's original question, that "should NSC 68 be judged primarily upon its logic, analytical coherence, and use of evidence, or, focus instead upon why its logic seemed so compelling in 1950?" I agree with its author, Paul Nitze, that "NSC 68 was very much a product of its times"⁷³.

⁷³ John Lewis Gaddis, and Paul Nitze. "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat Reconsidered" *International Security* (Vol.4, No.4, Spring 1980) p.167-176.

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