

Following the end of World War II, the natural inclination of most Americans was to revert to the “isolationist” sentiment that dominated before the war and support military withdrawal from most of the world. However, isolationist tendencies associated with the prewar period had been firmly discredited, especially within the elite public, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and U.S. entry into World War II. Most American leaders realized that the United States had become too powerful to minimize its global involvement following the war. Increasingly vocal forces also publicized the potential threat posed by the Soviet Union and communism. Therefore, a “great debate” took place among American leaders and intellectuals—that is, members of the elite public—about the world around them, the nature of the Soviet Union, and the proper foreign policy of the United States.

Some, like Henry Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt’s former vice-president and the 1948 presidential candidate on the Progressive party ticket, argued in support of the United Nations and the need to maintain a cooperative relationship with the Soviet Union through policies emphasizing spheres of influence and a type of *détente*. A few, like Walter Lippmann, one of America’s most eminent journalists, emphasized a more *realpolitik* post-war approach toward Europe revolving around traditional spheres of influence and balance-of-power statecraft. Others, like George Kennan, a Sovietologist and important policymaker in Harry Truman’s administration, asserted that the major threat was Soviet expansion in Europe and that the United States needed to contain the Soviet threat in Europe. Still others, like Paul Nitze, another important policymaker in the Truman administration, emphasized that the Soviet Union was a revolutionary state with designs to export communism aggressively worldwide and that the United States had no choice but to contain the Soviets militarily throughout the world.

In the late 1940s, individuals representing the two more pessimistic schools of foreign policy thought—European containment versus global containment—struggled for control of the Truman administration’s foreign policy. (See essay 4.3 on George Kennan and Dean Rusk in chapter 4.) Truman himself was initially undecided about the nature of the Soviet Union and the appropriate U.S. response. With time he became increasingly skeptical of Soviet intentions. Relations were strained by difficulties over Poland and a divided Germany, the communist coup d’état in Czechoslovakia, the “fall” of China, and the North Korean attack on South Korea. These events eventually convinced most members of the Truman administration, including the president, that the Soviet Union was indeed a revolutionary communist state attempting to achieve world domination. Therefore, they felt that they had no choice but to assume leadership of the “free world” and stop—that is, contain—communist aggression.

Not surprisingly, members of Congress and much of the public were reluctant to support such an activist international policy so soon after the country had fought a war (particularly since the Soviet Union had been seen as an ally). Yet there was an underlying anticommunist sentiment in U.S. society that could be traced to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. (See essay 6.1 on J. Edgar Hoover and the Pursuit of Security in chapter 6.) Therefore, when the Truman administration responded to the post-World War II environment with proclamations like the

Truman Doctrine, which committed the United States to assist Greece and Turkey to contain the communist threat, this produced growing public support for an overall policy of containment.³¹ The paramount lesson conveyed by World War II—that the “appeasement” of Adolf Hitler and fascism by England and France at Munich only produced more aggression—was applied to the contemporary situation: the U.S. must not appease Stalin and communism; instead, the United States needed to build up its military and contain communist aggression wherever it occurred.

These events also propelled another segment of U.S. society to the forefront of politics—people who feared that the United States was losing the cold war because it was not doing enough to defeat communism. Not only did they perceive that the United States was losing the cold war abroad, especially in Asia, they believed that the U.S. was threatened by subversion from within. Therefore, they argued that containment was not enough; a more aggressive policy was necessary that would roll back and eradicate communism. People who shared this view were most prominent within the Republican party, which had gained control of the Congress during the late 1940s and early 1950s. They attacked the policy of containment, as well as the Truman administration and its supporters, for losing the cold war (see essay 9.1 on Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism in chapter 9).

McCarthyism was not successful in getting either the Truman or Dwight Eisenhower administrations to reorient their foreign policies beyond containment. However, the challenge had two lasting effects. It reinforced perceptions held by U.S. policymakers and the American public that global communism was monolithic, controlled by the Soviet Union, and an ever-present threat. Second, foreign policy views that were critical of the containment policy and argued for a more realistic or cooperative policy (for example, as represented by Henry Wallace) lost all credibility and legitimacy during the cold war years. In short, a consensus had developed within the United States during the 1950s that the world was divided between two hostile forces: communism led by the Soviet Union and democracy led by the United States. Despite disagreements over tactics (How much force? Where should it be applied?), most Americans agreed on the nature of the threat—communism—and the necessity of using force to forestall its expansion throughout the world.

The Rise of the Liberal-Conservative Ideological Consensus. The growing anticommunist foreign policy consensus reflected a larger set of ideological patterns which evolved throughout American society. During the cold war years according to Godfrey Hodgson, “a strange hybrid, liberal conservatism, blanketed the scene and muffled debate.”³² The two major aspects of the liberal-conservative consensus were, first, belief in a democratic-capitalist political economy based on private enterprise and, second, the fear of communism. Thus, the foreign policy consensus behind containing the threat of Soviet communism abroad was part of a larger ideological consensus in American society.

Hodgson summarizes the basic tenets of the American liberal-conservative ideological consensus. First, the American free-enterprise system is democratic, creates abundance, and has a revolutionary potential for social justice. Second,