

Essay on the american paradox ambivalence about the role of the federal governmen...

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



In his introduction to *The American Paradox*, Steven M. Gillon quoted Godfrey Hodgson to the effect that even the power and scale of the federal government increased greatly during the Great Depression and World War II they still retained the same distrust of centralized authority that had existed since the colonial period. In fact, the conflict with Nazism and fascism, followed quickly by the Cold War against communism, increased the general mistrust of powerful central governments. For Hodgson, then, the main paradox of the entire post-1945 period was that the war had “ revolutionized American society, but it did not produce corresponding changes in public attitudes.” ¹ In domestic policy, the welfare state expanded greatly in this era, particularly in the 1960s, to the point that nearly half the population received federal assistance by 2000. Despite the expansion of the federal government during this period, the economy remained essentially in capitalist hands and the political debate between liberals and conservatives was a limited one over a greater or lesser degree of government involvement in the economy and society. At the same time, capitalism changed considerably in 1945-2000 as it moved away from Fordism and mass production industries to computers, high technology and services. ² Even so, the Affluent Society with a wide distribution of wealth, strong labor unions and a large middle class that existed in the years 1945-70, was weakened greatly in the 1980s and 1990s.

George Kennan, the architect of the containment policy in 1946-49, did not regard the Soviet Union as the same type of threat as Nazi Germany. He opposed the ideas of National Security Council Memorandum 68 (1950) as a hysterical overreaction, and thought that global containment was a serious

strategic error, especially in peripheral regions like Indochina. Kennan was well aware that the main problem in Western Europe after was war-weariness and economic insecurity, and stated that “would communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.”³ If Western Europe revived and was protected by an American security umbrella, the dangers of communism and Soviet expansion would fade there. Based on this analysis, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were created in 1947-49 to contain the Soviets in Europe, and this alliance remained in place until the end of the Cold War—and beyond.

The Truman Doctrine of March 1947 warned the Soviet Union about encroachments against Greece and Turkey. A month later, Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced generous financial assistance to struggling European nations who were still endeavoring to rebuild themselves from the War. In 1949, the U. S. went ahead with its plans to reunite the three Western occupation zones into the Federal Republic of Germany, although the Soviets attempted to block this with the Berlin Blockade in 1948-49. At the same time NATO was established, which included a formal guarantee of American intervention in the event of Soviet aggression against Western Europe, although West Germany was not admitted to full membership until 1955. These Cold War lines were firmly drawn in Europe and did not change again until the dramatic events of 1989-91.

After the Soviets successfully tested their first atomic bomb in 1949, followed by the communist revolution in China in 1949, the National Security Council again revised and expanded its Cold War strategy, as outlined the

NSC 68 of 1950. Contrary to Kennan's limited, realist policy of containment, this document called for an all-out effort against global communism, including a large expansion in the military budget, more economic assistance for U. S. allies, construction of the hydrogen bomb, and for rollback of communism around the periphery of the Soviet Union. Most of these recommendations were not actually implemented until the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950, however. NSC 68 called for all methods short of war to contain and roll back communism, as well as for policies to strengthen the economy of the U. S. and its allies, and a more thoroughgoing campaign against internal subversion and sabotage. It also asserted that if the U. S. finished work on the H-bomb before the Soviets, it would be used "to bring increased pressure on the USSR".⁴ Even so, it also reaffirmed that the U. S. would not go to war except against a clear cut act of aggression, which is how the Truman administration regarded the North Korean attack on South Korea.

The years 1945-60 really were an American High, to use the title of William O'Neill's book, and the main reason for that was that every other great power in the world had been knocked so low by the Second World War. In 1945-61, the U. S. simply had no economic rivals in the world, and most of the manufacturing on earth occurred in its industrial cities. No depression or financial crash occurred in the period from 1945-73 and recessions not as long as in the 1930s, the 1980s or the present.⁵ During this era "full employment was maintained, real wages rose constantly, economies were relatively stable, and wealth and income inequalities were reduced", which was definitely not the case in the 1920s and 1930s or in the last thirty years.

6 For whites at least, the U. S. offered unprecedented opportunities to live a middle class lifestyle and obtain higher education, a house in the suburbs, cars, televisions and appliances. 7 This was one of the features of the American Dream that Vice President Richard Nixon boasted of the great U. S. consumer society in his Kitchen Debate with Nikita Khrushchev.

Blacks and other minorities were largely excluded from this affluence, though, since the suburbs were segregated and many were left behind in inner-city ghettos that would finally explode in the 1960s. In the South, Jim Crow segregation of public facilities and schools and denial of voting rights remained in place as they had been for decades. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) won a number of important victories for civil rights in Supreme Court cases during this era. By far the most important of these was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) which reversed the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and declared that segregated schools were inherently unequal. 8 Although the Court ordered desegregation and abolition of dual school systems in the South with all deliberate speed, a campaign of ' massive resistance against integration continued until the early-1970s. In Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957-58, for example, Gov. Orville Faubus openly defied a federal court order to integrate Central High School and forced the Eisenhower administration to send in troops. As in other Southern states, Faubus then ordered the school closed, and in many areas the schools stayed closed for years as white parents removed their children to private or religious schools. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was founded in 1957 and headed by Martin Luther King until his assassination in 1968. It grew out of the Montgomery

Improvement Association, which has organized a successful boycott of the segregated city bus system in 1955-56, which resulted in the city's segregation laws being declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Rosa Parks, the NAACP secretary in Montgomery, had become the test case to challenge segregated buses after she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Under King's leadership, it would go on to win a number of important civil rights victories in the 1960s, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Even so, the majority of Americans still held views more compatible with the 19th Century values of individualism, laissez faire and free market capitalism. World War II had supposedly been fought for democracy and human rights for all, yet public attitudes on race and gender changed very little before the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s. Unlike the era after World War I, the U. S. did not return to 'normalcy' after the greatest war in history, since it was now a global superpower with very high levels of military spending. From 1947 to 1990, its foreign policy centered on the containment of the Soviet Union and its satellites and it fought two major wars in Vietnam and Korea toward that end, but neither of these was popular with public opinion. According to National Security Council Resolution 68 of 1950, the U. S. would build a major nuclear arsenal capable of destroying the world many times over and would basically use its vast economic and military power to contain communism wherever it appeared in the world. In both foreign and domestic policy after 1945, Americans remained highly dubious and ambivalent about the role of the national government, even though its power

expanded far more than ever could have been imagined before the 1930s and 1940s.

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