

Cold war assignment

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| Offner, Arnold, "Provincialism and Confrontation: Truman's Responsibility" in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II. Gaddis, John Lewis, "Two Cold War Empires: Imposition vs. Multilateralism," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II The Cold War was the longest war in which the United States has ever partaken and is the only war that involved little to no fighting.

After researching the events, reading historical opinions, and listening to lectures in class, I have come to the realization that the war was just an exaggerated argument between two neighbors over which model fence, wood or metal, they would allow in their yards. One neighbor, President Truman, wanted Democracy, and the other neighbor, Stalin, wanted Communism. The problem is that they each had a valid argument for their type of fence and neither side would appease the other. It is important to realize that the Soviet Union has been invaded multiple times in the last couple decades and twice by their eastern neighbor, Germany.

Therefore, Stalin's attempt to protect his country is through maintaining control of neighboring governments like Poland, Northern China, and Germany. His means of doing so were through instilling Communist governments, which is not as terrible as it is made out to be. The basic idea of Communism is that the working class should have control verses a few individuals who are on top, and many Americans right now might see this idea to be in their favor. However, while the basic idea of Communism might be good, implementing it in a functional society is difficult and almost impossible.

While the Soviet government, Communism, was indeed flawed and Stalin was definitely a cruel dictator, Democracy is not always in check either. The point is that no government is perfect and therefore, in a moral society, it is difficult to decide which side is right and which is wrong. Arnold Offner, historian, believes that Truman was at fault for causing the Cold War and John Lewis Gaddis, historian, believes that Stalin and the Soviets were to blame. In this essay, I will compare the two different opinions and offer my own opinion based the information given in the two essays.

Arnold Offner argues that throughout the Truman presidency, he remained a parochial, narrow-minded nationalist who lacked the vision and leadership to move the United States away from conflict and towards a better future. Instead, he promoted an ideology which uses threats and power to confront his enemies and gain his goals. Arnold believes the Soviets and Stalin only aimed to restore “ Russia’s 1941 boundaries, establish a sphere of influence in border states, provide security against a recovered Germany or Japan or hostile capitalist states, and gain compensation, notably reparations, for the ravages of war” (Arnold 215).

Truman’s desire to make quick decisions and his “ be tough” policy clouded his sight, making him unable to compromise and prevented him from trying to understand the Soviets’ motives. Truman decisively stated that the United States would win peace on its terms. His administration believed that Germany was the key to the balance of power in Europe and began uniting the three zones of Germany that the Western Allies controlled. Of course Stalin saw this as a threat; he feared that he was no longer being seen as an equal among the great powers.

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Stalin said, “ The West will make Western Germany their won, and we shall turn Eastern Germany into our own State” (Arnold 222). However, Truman and the United States had the ace of spades, the atomic bomb, and were able to hold that over the heads of the Soviets which only added to the conflict. In addition, Truman refused Russia’s bids for industrial reparations and withdrew from the Yalta accords. According to Arnold, Truman’s simplistic analogies, exaggerated beliefs in U. S. supremacy, and limited grasp of world affairs worsened conflicts with the Soviet Union and China.

For example, Arnold believes that Truman’s decision at the Potsdam Conference to engage in “ atomic poker” and outmaneuver the Soviets in Europe and Asia led him to brush aside all proposals to forgo the use of atomic bombs on Japan. Truman believed that if Russia got Greece and Turkey it would then get Italy and France and the “ iron curtain” would extend to western Ireland and to the United States. Arnold posits that Truman’s views were excessive. Stalin never challenged the Truman Doctrine or western dominance in Turkey, which was under U. S. military guidance, and Greece.

Arnold states, ” [Stalin] provided almost no aid to the Greek rebels and told Yugoslavia’s leaders in early 1948 to halt their aid because the United States would never allow the Greek Communist to win and break Anglo-American control in the Mediterranean” (221). Arnold believed that President Truman more often than not narrowed rather than broadened his options. Truman’s insecurity also reinforced his liking to view conflict in black-and-white terms, to categorize all nations as either free or totalitarian, to demonize his opponents, and to ignore the complexities of historic national conflicts.

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In sum, despite Truman's claim to have "knocked the socks off the communists," he left the White House with his presidency in tatters, military spending at a record high, McCarthyism rampant, and the United States on Cold War footing at home and abroad. John Lewis Gaddis offers a different opinion of the one responsible for the Cold War. He believes that Stalin's authoritarian vision was a minor issue; the big issue was that Stalin also had an imperial vision. In a changing world where imperial nations had begun withdrawing their influence from their colonies, Stalin was beginning to do the opposite.

From the West's perspective, the question of whether the Soviets would expand their influence beyond whatever land they occupied after the war began going through the heads of Western leaders. Stalin had suggested, according to Gaddis, that the Soviet Union would impose its own social system as far as its armies could reach. However, Stalin was determined to do nothing that might involve the Soviet Union in another devastating war unless he was certain they could win it.

Gaddis also states that the Soviets at no point were willing to challenge the United States or Great Britain where they made their interests clear. Therefore, backing up Truman's policy of being "tough" and not allowing previous policies of appeasement to take place. Gaddis later states that Truman should have acted sooner, but nevertheless, Truman was right in his "be tough" policy. Like Arnold, Gaddis also emphasizes that Stalin was aware that the United States and Great Britain would never allow its influence in the Mediterranean to be broken.

According to Gaddis, the fact that the Soviets were not willing to act at the time only means that they were in no hurry to expand their influence until Stalin believed he could win. Another reason for the initial lack of resistance to Soviet expansionism was that Soviet intentions did not become immediately clear. The United States were not as worried about authoritarian regimes because they posed no serious threat to the security of the United States. However, an authoritarian expansionist does; Germany, Japan, and Soviet Union all showed tendencies of expansionism.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor gave birth to this realization that the United States could be targeted at home. Truman and the rest of Americans realized that with new military technology the United States could be targeted on its home land. Gaddis proudly stated that the United States managed to merge their original vision of a single international order built around common security with a second, and according to Gaddis, belated, concept sought to counter the expanding power and influence of the Soviet Union.

That concept would be containment and would be formally instilled in the Marshall Plan. Gaddis believed if geopolitical stability could be restored in Europe, time would work against the Soviet Union and favor the West because as long as Stalin had no vision of victory, he would never attack. This policy of containment would be sustained by the next several presidents following Truman. After reading and analyzing the two essays by Arnold Offner and John Lewis Gaddis, I have come to realize that there is no simple answer of who is right and who is wrong.

As I stated in the beginning, the war was just an exaggerated argument between two neighbors over which model fence they would allow in their yards. While I definitely agree that Stalin was not a model human being, he is still a human being and over the past decades his country has had to face the aftermath of war. If my neighbor attacked my house twice and I finally had the power to protect it, I sure as hell would. However, the United States had just been dragged into two world wars and feared a third.

Their past experience with Hitler gave them every reason to fear a Soviet expansion. Subsequently, the problem is there were two countries that were trying to protect themselves while at the same time also trying to advance their economies and influence. Truman had plenty of evidence that suggested the Soviet Union was trying to expand its influence upon sovereign nations. On the other hand, Stalin had plenty of evidence that the United States was trying to do the exact same thing, and recent history would reinforce that fact.

I do agree with the Marshall Plan and Truman's policy of containment. However, I do not agree with how the Truman administration implemented that policy. Each nation should be allowed to choose the best form of economy and government that suits its needs best. Rather than let those nations do so for themselves, Truman's idea of containment was to not let the Soviets to spread communism to other nations. In a fair world, Stalin would also be able to say that the United States should not be allowed to spread Democracy or Capitalism where it sees fit.

In reality, a peaceful coexistence, as Arnold suggested, is only possible with foreign policy similar to FDR's appeasement or negotiations from both sides. The United States became the power it is today because of the actions of Harry Truman and the decisions he made. While I do not agree with his decision to use the atomic bomb or his "tough" policy with the Soviet Union, he did put the United States on top of world affairs. Whether this is a good thing or not is a different analysis all together.