

PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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AMERICA IN THE  
COLD WAR

*Twenty Years of Revolutions  
and Response, 1947-1967*

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## SERIES PREFACE

This series is an introduction to the most important problems in the writing and study of American history. Some of these problems have been the subject of debate and argument for a long time, although others only recently have been recognized as controversial. However, in every case, the student will find a vital topic, an understanding of which will deepen his knowledge of social change in America.

The scholars who introduce and edit the books in this series are teaching historians who have written history in the same general area as their individual books. Many of them are leading scholars in their fields, and all have done important work in the collective search for better historical understanding.

Because of the talent and the specialized knowledge of the individual editors, a rigid editorial format has not been imposed on them. For example, some of the editors believe that primary source material is necessary to their subjects. Some believe that their material should be arranged to show conflicting interpretations. Others have decided to use the selected materials as evidence for their own interpretations. The individual editors have been given the freedom to handle their books in the way that their own experience and knowledge indicate is best. The overall result is a series built up from the individual decisions of working scholars in the various fields, rather than one that conforms to a uniform editorial decision.

A common goal (rather than a shared technique) is the bridge of this series. There is always the desire to bring the reader as close to these problems as possible. One result of this objective is an emphasis of the nature and consequences of problems and events, with a de-emphasis of the more purely historiographical issues. The goal is to involve the student in the reality of crisis, the inevitability of ambiguity, and the excitement of finding a way through the historical maze.

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## II NSC-68: How to Prepare for an Indefinite Period of Tension and Danger (April, 1950)

*After the fall of China and the first explosion of a Russian atomic bomb in the autumn of 1949, President Truman ordered a top-secret review of American policies and tactics. By the early spring of 1950 (several months before the Korean War began), a committee of top Administration officials, who represented particularly the Defense and State Departments, had formulated a document that was to be known as NSC-68 (National Security Council paper No. 68). The paper accurately forecast the economic, political, military, and diplomatic policies that the nation must follow if it hoped to wage the Cold War successfully. Whether these policies would have been put into effect if the Korean War had not occurred of course, is speculative, but certainly that war allowed the Truman Administration to implement much of NSC-68 rapidly and forcefully. The results were to shape American foreign relations for the next decade and a half at least. The following selection is a paraphrase of this document, which remains classified. How does NSC-68 assess Soviet motives and how does this assessment differ from the Mr. "X" and Lippmann views (Readings 6 and 9)? Is NSC-68 a logical result of the Truman Doctrine (Reading 7)? How do the premises laid down in the early part of the document lead to the final selection of the fourth policy alternative as "inescapably the preferred one?" If these premises are mistaken, would the fourth policy, alternatively, remain preferable? What does this policy paper suggest the American position to be if revolutionary disturbances occur?*

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Events since the end of World War II have created a new power relationship in the world which must be viewed not as a temporary distortion but as a long-range and fundamental realign-

SOURCE: From a paraphrase in Cabell Phillips, *The Truman Presidency* (New York, 1966), pp. 306-308; reprinted by permission of the Macmillan Company. Copyright 1966 by Cabell Phillips.

ment among nations. This has arisen out of two historical events: the Russian revolution and the growth of the Communist movement throughout the world; and the development of nuclear weapons with their capacity for unlimited destruction. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are the terminal poles of this new international axis.

Kremlin policy has three main objectives: (1) to preserve and to strengthen its position as the ideological and power center of the Communist world; (2) to extend and to consolidate that power by the acquisition of new satellites; and (3) to oppose and to weaken any competing system of power that threatens Communist world hegemony.

These objectives are inimical to American ideals, which are predicated on the concepts of freedom and dignity. . . .

It must be assumed that these concepts and objectives of American life will come under increasing attack. If they are to be protected, the nation must be determined, at whatever cost or sacrifice, to preserve at home and abroad those conditions of life in which these objectives can survive and prosper. We must seek to do this by peaceful means and with the cooperation of other like-minded peoples. But if peaceful means fail we must be willing and ready to fight.

Conceding the possibility of such a war, what are the relative capabilities of the U.S. and its probable allies, and the U.S.S.R. and its probable allies?

As a first consideration, Russia's progress in the development of atomic bombs probably means that an approximate stalemate in nuclear weapons will be reached by about 1954. The United States might extend its advantage for a few years longer if the hydrogen bomb should be perfected, but success in that effort is uncertain.

While the economic and productive capacity of the U.S.S.R. is markedly below that of the West, its potential for growth is great, and the Communist nations are striving more determinedly than the West to realize full potentials for growth.

In spite of these weaknesses, the Communist military capability for conventional, or nonatomic, warfare is now substantially superior to that of the West and is continuing to improve at a more rapid rate. This imbalance can be expected to continue for

at least as long as it takes to achieve the economic rehabilitation of Western Europe and the full implementation of the NATO alliance.

Could the crisis between the two great powers be reduced through negotiation and particularly by mutual arms reduction? The prospects at present are poor, given the immutability of Soviet objectives and its advantage in military power. The West cannot abandon its efforts to negotiate, particularly to neutralize the threat of a nuclear holocaust, but it must act in the realization that Stalin respects the reality of force a great deal more than he does the abstraction of peace.

Based on these premises, an indefinite period of tension and danger is foreseen for the United States and for the West—a period that should be defined less as a short-term crisis than as a permanent and fundamental alteration in the shape of international relations. To meet this new condition, four possible lines of action are open to the United States:

1. It can continue on its present course of reduced defense budgets and limited military capabilities, but without reducing its commitments to free-world security.
2. It can abandon these commitments, maintain its military capabilities at the present level, and withdraw behind the shield of a "fortress America."
3. It can attempt through "preventive war" a quick, violent but possibly more favorable redress in the world balance of power.
4. It can strike out on a bold and massive program of rebuilding the West's defensive potential to surpass that of the Soviet world, and of meeting each fresh challenge promptly and unequivocally. Such a program must have the United States at its political and material center with other free nations in variable orbits around it. The strength of such an alliance should be insurmountable as long as each of its members remains strong.

This fourth alternative is inescapably the preferred one. Its fulfillment calls for the United States to take the lead in a rapid and substantial buildup in the defensive power of the West, beginning "at the center" and radiating outward. This means virtual abandonment by the United States of trying to distinguish between national and global security. It also means the end of

subordinating security needs to the traditional budgeting restrictions; of asking, "How much security can we afford?" In other words, security must henceforth become the dominant element in the national budget, and other elements must be accommodated to it.

The wealth potential of the country is such that as much as 20 percent of the gross national product can be devoted to security without causing national bankruptcy. This new concept of the security needs of the nation calls for annual appropriations of the order of \$50 billion, or not much below the former wartime levels.