

## COLD WAR ORIGINS AND U.S. INTERVENTION IN THE KOREAN WAR

### I. HOW THE COLD WAR ERUPTED: EVENTS

- A. Background: FDR hoped to continue collaborating with the Soviet Union after World War II. FDR's plan for peace: The major powers (U.S., Britain, France, the Soviets and China) would cooperate to keep peace, as the great powers did after 1815.
- B. Conflict over Poland, 1944.  
--Stalin wanted a communist Poland under Soviet control. So he set up the communist Lublin Committee as a rival to the non-communist Polish government in exile. This irked Western powers who first joined WWII to free Poland.  
--July 1944: the Soviets encouraged a Polish underground rising against the Nazis; then the Soviet Army halted on Warsaw's outskirts and let the Nazis slaughter the underground. Stalin refused even to let the U.S. and Britain air-drop supplies to them until it was too late. Not nice!
- C. Yalta summit, February 1945. Stalin agreed to reorganize the Polish government on a more democratic basis and to hold "free and unfettered elections" in Poland. But FDR agreed to let Stalin decide how much to reorganize the government, and how elections would be run. By conceding control of details to Stalin FDR in effect conceded on the substance. William Leahy, a top FDR aide, warned FDR that "this [agreement] is so elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without ever technically breaking it." FDR replied: "I know it, Bill ... But it's the best I can do for Poland at this time." In short, Yalta was a vague agreement. (Then FDR oversold the agreement by implying that Stalin conceded more than in fact he had.)
- D. Potsdam summit, July 1945. Stalin demanded territorial concessions in Turkey, Japan, and part of Libya (then an Italian North African colony). Truman refused. Some Americans read Stalin's demands to signal darkly aggressive Soviet intentions.
- E. Stalin's ominous Feb. 9, 1946 speech. He called for a rapid Soviet military buildup and spoke of the wartime alliance as a thing of the past. This alarmed westerners.
- F. Iran, March 1946. Stalin failed to pull Soviet forces out of Northern Iran until he was pressured.
- G. Turkey 1946. Stalin sent Turkey an ultimatum demanding joint control of the Dardanelles. Truman stood firm and sent the battleship **Missouri** to the Mediterranean.
- H. Greece 1947. The West wrongly thought Stalin was instigating the Communist revolution in Greece. In fact he wasn't. Greek communists got aid from Yugoslavia's communist Tito government but not from Stalin.
- I. The Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949: a scary confrontation that stemmed from the struggle for Germany.
- J. Military aspects of Soviet-Western relations, 1945-1949:
1. The illusion of Soviet military superiority. American intelligence and the Western press depicted a vast Soviet conventional superiority in Europe, and downplayed the implications of the American atomic monopoly. Hence a Soviet threat that was largely political--the Soviets had some capacity to disrupt or subvert Western Europe--was also perceived as military.
  2. The Soviet atomic bomb exploded, September 1949. Now the West was really scared. What if Stalin isn't deterrable? Western cities will be vaporized by Soviet atom bombs in an inevitable World War III!
- Western responses: the Truman Doctrine (1947); the Marshall Plan (1947); the Berlin airlift (1948-49); the formation of NATO (1949); and a vast American military buildup (1950-53). This triggered a Soviet counter-buildup.

### II. WHAT CAUSED THE COLD WAR? WHO CAUSED THE COLD WAR? SIX EXPLANATIONS

- A. Communist totalitarian expansionism? "The totalitarian Soviets were the aggressor, the democratic West the defender. Soviet aggression sprang from the aggressiveness of Communist political systems. Communist governments are aggressive because they are (a) inherently messianic--Communist ideology preaches global communist rule; and/or because they are (b) frail, hence aggressive for Orwellian reasons--they needed enemies to legitimate their totalitarian rule."  
Variant #1: Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe threatened U.S. security, causing the Cold War.  
Variant #2: The Soviets conquered the homelands of powerful U.S. ethnic groups--especially Polish-Americans--when they seized Eastern Europe. These ethnic groups then pushed Washington to respond.
- B. Communist totalitarian cruelty and barbarism? "The U.S. opposed the USSR less because the USSR was aggressive than because it was tyrannical. The Cold War was a Western human rights crusade." But if this is true, why didn't the Cold War blossom fully in 1919? Or in the 1930s, as Stalin's crimes became known?
- C. U.S. Softness? "U.S. softness early in the Cold War made things worse--the U.S. led the Soviets forward by appeasement. What if, instead, the U.S. had given Stalin an ultimatum in 1946: 'get out of Eastern Europe or we'll throw you out!'" The Soviets would have left, removing the Cold War's cause!"
- D. Capitalist expansionism? "The capitalist U.S. was the aggressor, the socialist Soviet Union was the defender. The

U.S. feared a new depression. It hoped to avoid such a depression by finding market outlets for surplus goods. It sought to control Eastern Europe to compel it to be such a market. U.S. imperialism in Eastern Europe collided with a defensive Soviet desire to maintain a neutral buffer to its west." This is the now-largely-discredited left-revisionist view. See e.g., the writings of Gabriel Kolko and Lloyd Gardner.

- E. The Unshaped Postwar European Order? "The lack of a clear Soviet-American wartime agreement on the postwar European order caused a collision of the two major allied powers in a zone of uncertainty. Had each side's sphere of influence been clearly delineated earlier the Cold War might have been milder."
- F. International System: Bipolarity and the Security Dilemma? "The world's two strongest states rarely get along well because each is the main threat to the other. They will always compete for security. The Cold War was an inevitable result of the rise of the U.S. and USSR to the pinnacle of world power."

Variant #1: The two superpowers were in fact insecure and contested for resources of real value--especially the industry and buffer room of Eastern Europe.

Variant #2: The superpowers were secure due to the nuclear revolution, their vast size, and their distance from each other. But didn't know it; and they contended for assets (Eastern Europe) of no real value. Controlling Eastern Europe made the USSR less, not more, secure by scaring the rest of the world.

Variant #3 (spiral model variant): The two superpowers felt insecure and contended for security but both thought the other pursued unprovoked aggression for non-security reasons and overreacted accordingly.

Question: what does this systemic explanation portend for the future of U.S.-China relations?

### III. THE KOREAN WAR, 1950-1953: BACKGROUND

- A. The U.S. and USSR agreed to partition Korea at the 38th parallel, 1945.
- B. The U.S. pulled its troops out of Korea, 1949. A U.S. blunder?
- C. Communist victory in China in 1949 triggered a bitter "who lost China?" debate in the US.
- D. Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech at the Washington Press Club in January 1950 delineating the "American defense perimeter in Asia." He omitted South Korea! Another U.S. blunder.
- E. North Korea attacked the South, June 25, 1950. Truman decided to intervene. Reasons:
1. To preserve American credibility. But was it engaged in Korea?
  2. Domestic politics. 1950 was a bad year to lose another Asian country to Communism.
- F. U.S. forces landed at Inchon on Sept. 15, 1950 and routed the North Korean army from South Korea. Truman then decided to cross 38th parallel and conquer North Korea in late September. Rationale: to punish communist aggression. Part of the U.S. reasoning: "We must punish the aggressors to deter them from other aggression elsewhere." Another U.S. blunder.
- G. Oct. 3 1950: China warned the U.S.: "Don't cross 38th parallel or it's war with us!" Truman and Acheson didn't listen. UN troops crossed the 38th parallel on Oct. 7. Why?
1. The warning came via an Indian diplomat not trusted by Truman.
  2. China didn't explain the reasoning behind its warning or convey the warning directly to Congressional Republicans.
  3. The Administration had already decided to cross the parallel in late September; backtracking is painful.
  4. Truman feared attacks from Republican hawks if he stayed South.
  5. U.S. contempt for Chinese military capability.
  6. Some U.S. officials argued that "China would have entered the war in July, when it had a chance to win, if it meant to enter at all. It makes no sense for China to enter now when its prospects are far worse." U.S. leaders dismissed the possibility that security fears would drive China to enter.
- H. U.S. forces encountered small Chinese forces in Korea, 26 Oct. 1950. MacArthur thought: "If this is all they can do, they'll be a pushover," and ordered an advance to the Yalu river (North Korea's northern border with China). Another U.S. blunder.
- I. Chinese forces struck on Nov. 26, 1950, routing U.S. forces and inflicting the worst defeat in U.S. Army history.
- J. A long and bloody war ensued, Dec. 1950-summer 1953, ending in a tie. (Note: this war included a long-hidden Soviet-American air war!)

### IV. KOREA: EVALUATING U.S. DECISIONS

- A. The U.S. pullout, 1949: A case of too-little U.S. intervention?
- B. The U.S. intervention, 1950:
- Should the U.S. have intervened? Was the U.S. rationale for intervention valid?
  - Effects of U.S. intervention on human rights? On U.S. credibility?
- C. The U.S. run to the Yalu, 1950: Quality of U.S. rationale? Effects of U.S. policy?
- D. The U.S. presence since 1953: Good idea? Effects? (Peace in Korea.)
- Summary: a Goldilocks intervention? First too little, then too much, then just right.