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978-0-521-19730-4 - NSC 68 and the Political Economy of the Early Cold War

Curt Cardwell

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Introduction

In 1994, James Baker, wealthy lawyer, scion of the Texas elite, and long-time Washington insider, delivered a speech before the Rotary Club of Washington, DC. The occasion was the club's annual foreign relations seminar, a subject on which Baker knew a great deal. Out of government in 1994, Baker had a distinguished record of public service, one that placed him at the center of the "Reagan revolution," as former Hollywood actor and California governor Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential campaign has come to be known. A former Marine Corps officer, Baker managed Reagan's victorious 1980 presidential run, served as White House chief of staff during Reagan's first term, secretary of the treasury during his second, and also was a fixture on the National Security Council. Part of this tenure occurred at the height of the "Reagan Cold War," when tensions between the two superpowers once again rose to a fever pitch before settling into cautious coexistence. Under George Herbert Walker Bush, Baker served as secretary of state during one of the most momentous times in modern history – the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Baker, it is fair to say, was a Cold War warrior *par excellence*, which is what makes his comments before the Rotary Club on that day in 1994 so startling. The greatest accomplishment of the period since World War II, he said, was not the defeat of Communism, not the end of the Cold War, but the creation of a "global liberal economic regime."¹

¹ Quoted from Walter LaFeber, "Technology and U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24 (Winter 2000): 1.

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I came across Baker's comment long after I was in the writing stages of this study, but it does convey, in many respects, what I am trying to accomplish in this book. The primary goal of United States foreign policy officials in the post-WWII era was to create an open, global, capitalist, liberal, economic order, or what in the study is referred to as multilateralism. It was *not* primarily to prevent the Soviet Union from fulfilling its alleged designs for world conquest, as convention holds. To be sure, blocking Soviet expansionist aims (insofar as they existed) was part of the larger project, but it was neither the sole goal nor the most important one. Our understanding of the immediate postwar era, the era in which the Cold War emerged, therefore, is flawed when we put the "Soviet threat" at the center of that narrative. As Baker's comment indicates, more was at stake than the "containment" of the Soviet Union and communism.

To bear upon that argument, this monograph offers a reexamination of the origins of U.S. National Security Council paper 68, or NSC 68 as it is more popularly known, the top-secret NSC paper written during the winter and spring of 1950 and presented to President Truman on April 7. The paper, written by the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (PPS) under the direction of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Director of the Policy Planning Staff Paul Nitze, argued that the United States needed to embark on a massive rearmament program to combat what it called "the Kremlin's design for world domination," a program that subsequently was carried out beginning in the summer of 1950, forever changing the Cold War and, indeed, the course of world history.² That NSC 68 was a key document of the early Cold War era is now generally recognized. It has entered the pantheon of such early Cold War fundamentals as the Truman Doctrine, Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech, and the Marshall Plan, to name just some. The problem is that the traditional narrative of NSC 68's origins is deeply flawed. As such, it contributes to a false understanding of the entire origins of the Cold War. This book aims to correct that misconception.

The conclusion that this study draws, explicated in the pages that follow, is that NSC 68, or rather the massive rearmament program that it engendered, was created and implemented, not solely or even primarily to cope with the threat posed by the Soviet Union, although, again, that was part of the larger project, but to overcome the systemic problems to the international economic order posed by the "dollar gap," an international

² NSC 68, April 14, 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1950 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977): 245.

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balance-of-payments problem that found western Europe, Japan, and a host of other nations in the immediate postwar era incapable of earning the dollars through the normal processes of trade that they needed to purchase U.S. exports. Although seemingly benign, the problems posed by the dollar gap were, as the evidence will show, far more potentially destructive of the American way of life, at least as defined by those in charge of making U.S. foreign policy in the Truman administration, than any threat posed by communism or the Soviet Union. As such, it is the thesis of this study that the Cold War developed less to “contain” the Soviet Union than to ensure the survival of that “global liberal economic regime” of which Baker spoke so glowingly. For the fact of the matter is that in the early Cold War, the Soviet Union was “containable,” whereas the dollar gap was, in effect, not.

This study is by far not the first to highlight the dollar gap as bearing upon the origins of the Cold War or NSC 68. As early as 1956 Richard N. Gardner in *Sterling-Dollar Diplomacy* demonstrated that the dollar gap, although he did not use the term, played a significant role in the way in which the Cold War moved from being a conflict over balance-of-power issues to a crusade that Americans came to believe they had to fight. Richard Freeland’s *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism* and Gabriel Kolko’s and Joyce Kolko’s *The Limits of Power*, both of 1972, also gave due recognition to the dollar gap as a driving force in early postwar U.S. foreign policy. Sociologist Fred Block, in his 1977 monograph *The Origins of International Economic Disorder*, was one of the first authors to demonstrate how rearmament under NSC 68 came along at just the right time to save the international economy from collapse. In a 1980 article, Block speculated further on the interconnection between NSC 68 and the dollar gap. Although he did not go so far as to say that rearmament was primarily aimed at the dollar gap, he concluded that the connections were too intertwined to be mere coincidence and argued the need for further research. In *The Pacific Alliance*, published in 1984, William Borden showed how NSC 68, parlayed through the Korean War, overcame Japan’s dollar gap and greatly aided its economic recovery. Andrew Rotter’s 1987 *The Path to Vietnam* explored the dollar gap in relation to Britain’s colonies in the Far East and how it contributed to U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Thomas McCormick, in his broad survey of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy *America’s Half-Century*, places NSC 68 in the context of global economic recovery. Melvyn Leffler, in his tome *A Preponderance of Power*, still considered the definitive work on the origins of the Cold War, at least from the U.S. perspective, explores the

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dollar gap but went to considerable lengths to downplay its significance, a fact that is dealt with significantly in the study to follow. Political scientist Benjamin Fordham's 1998 book *Building the Cold War Consensus* also locates the dollar gap at the center of NSC 68, although that is not its central argument. Rather, as the title implies Fordham is interested in, from a policy standpoint, how consensus was formed on rearmament in an environment that was generally hostile to the very idea. Importantly, Fordham draws attention to one of the central issues that gave rise to this study, that the Soviet Union's acquisition of atomic power and the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war, events that occurred roughly a month apart in the late summer and early fall of 1949, did not generate that consensus as tradition holds.³

However, despite the efforts of these authors, the dollar gap remains an obscure topic. There are innumerable books on the origins of the Cold War that make no reference to it or that reference it so benignly that the unsuspecting would have no clue as to its significance, works that, most importantly, assume that the Cold War can be explained in its absence.⁴ Such is simply not the case, as this study, building on those that came before, readily proves. Although the dollar gap was an international

³ Richard N. Gardner, *Sterling-Dollar Diplomacy: Anglo-American Collaboration in the Reconstruction of Multilateral Trade* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon Press, 1956); Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Richard Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security, 1946–1948* (New York: Knopf, 1972); Fred L. Block, *The Origins of International Economic Disorder: A Study of United States International Monetary Policy from World War II to the Present* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977); Fred L. Block, "Economic Instability and Military Strength: The Paradoxes of the 1950 Rearmament Decision," *Politics and Society* 10:1 (1980): 35–58; William Borden, *The Pacific Alliance: United States Foreign Economic Policy and Japanese Trade Recovery, 1947–1955* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987); Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992); Thomas McCormick, *America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2nd edition; Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–1951* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1998).

⁴ Examples from standard works in the field are: Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998);

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phenomenon, this study's primary focus is on western Europe. Western Europe was the area of the world with which whose economic recovery Truman administration officials were most concerned. Hence, their efforts to cope with the dollar gap were most focused there. As noted previously, Borden's *The Pacific Alliance*, a book that has been far too underappreciated, wrote about the Japanese dollar gap and how it was overcome through NSC 68 and the Korean War. No similar work has been written on western Europe. My effort here is to do for western Europe what Borden did for Japan, although, admittedly, the unwieldy nature of dealing with the many countries of western Europe has not produced as succinct an analysis as Borden did. My goal has been to lay out the broad contours of the problem associated with the dollar gap crisis in western Europe. A more comprehensive history of the entirety of the dollar gap crisis in western Europe will have to await future studies.

This study falls under the category of what is often called the economic interpretation of the origins of the Cold War, which, in an earlier time, was known as revisionism. In this, it differs from other interpretive categories such as orthodoxy, realist theory, the national security thesis, postrevisionism, and neoorthodoxy, the latter of which has become particularly prominent in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse and the supposed U.S. "victory" in the Cold War. At risk of some generalization, the economic interpretation argues that the Cold War – the containment of communism – was not the focal point of U.S. foreign policy in the postwar era but merely an offshoot, albeit a crucial one, of the larger U.S. objective of creating an open, global economy that would ensure the survival of the free enterprise system in the United States. Furthermore, it sees U.S. foreign policy as primarily growing out of domestic concerns. Hence, it takes exception with the orthodox approach to the origins of the Cold War, the approach that still most resonates with the general public, that the Cold War was simply the "brave and essential response of free men to Communist aggression," as the late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. so aptly put it in a 1967 essay.⁵ It differs with realist theory in arguing that domestic concerns, and not balance-of-power considerations alone, have had an indelible impact on U.S. foreign policy. It also takes issue

Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Arnold Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945–1953* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵ Quoted in Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Origins of the Cold War* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970).

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with the national security thesis, arguably the most popular theory of the origins of the Cold War in the present day, as being too ambiguous to be an explanatory tool for how U.S. foreign policy officials acted in the crucial years in which the Cold War developed; the national security thesis has merit, but it ultimately fails because it does not choose among the various national security interests that were primary to U.S. foreign policy officials. Anything and everything becomes “national security,” which turns policymakers into virtual automatons one-tracked to this nebulous thing called national security, not thinking, feeling individuals with interests who, we can expect, had differing conceptions of what constitutes national security and who acted in accordance with those interests. It also rejects postrevisionism and neoorthodoxy because, despite their acceptance of economic factors as crucial to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, in the final analysis they merely reassert the orthodox interpretation of the origins of the Cold War as the result of Stalin’s depravity and little else.

Although “revisionism” has become a historicized term, referring both to a “school” of diplomatic historians employing the economic interpretation and the individual historians who comprised that school known as “the revisionists,” such that I cannot and would not claim that this study is revisionist, undoubtedly it has been most influenced by the revisionist approach to the origins of the Cold War. As I have studied U.S. foreign policy, I have found that the revisionist school offers the best analysis for making sense of it during the early Cold War period. U.S. foreign policy officials in this time period were undoubtedly concerned with the Soviet threat, and to argue otherwise would be foolhardy. But they were not concerned with the Soviet threat alone, and they were, despite what they often said publicly, aware that the Soviet Union did not pose the most significant threat to their conception of how the postwar world should be constructed. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether this study validates the revisionist approach as against other approaches. I believe that it does.

There are other ways to theorize about the origins of the Cold War, of course, such as cultural analysis, ideology, world-systems analysis, dependency theory, among others. This study has been informed by such studies, but it has not explicitly employed their theories. An earlier version of this study attempted to analyze the ways in which rearmament under NSC 68 intersected with cultural developments in the United States and the world at large, particularly in terms of the spread of consumer culture as, at least in part, an outgrowth of the “military Keynesianism”

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embodied in the rearmament program. In the end, that enterprise became unwieldy, and I opted just to tell the story of NSC 68's origins as a fairly standard diplomatic history so as to set the story straight, at least as I see it. Yet, in doing so, it is my firm belief that this study will serve as a bridge to such other theoretical approaches and disciplines.

This study is based on research in the U.S. National Archives, the Harry S. Truman Library, the records of the Council on Foreign Relations housed at the Seeley G. Mudd Library at Princeton University, the British National Archives, the U.S. Library of Congress, the United States' *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, and the records of the Public Advisory Board of the Mutual Security Agency, among other archives and published primary and secondary sources. One of the key contributions that this study brings to the table is crucial evidence that this author has never seen referenced before, evidence that demonstrates conclusively that the dollar gap was a significant motivation in the decision to rearm, in fact, the most significant motivation. In doing so it challenges prevailing notions, not only of NSC 68, but of how the entire Cold War developed. It is written, however, not to silence debate, but to encourage it. The history here does not claim to be the last word on the issues that it explores. I believe that the evidence contained within this book needs to be taken seriously and not merely rejected out of hand based on ideological predilections, as sadly are so many studies that run counter to the conventional wisdom. If the argument, and the evidence used to back it up, is flawed, let that be challenged. But let us stick to the evidence.

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I

NSC 68 and the Problem of Origins

If [in writing NSC 68] we made our points clearer than truth, we did not differ from most other educators and could hardly do otherwise.

Dean Acheson, 1969

In February 1975, roughly twenty-five years after being presented to President Harry S. Truman, National Security Council policy recommendation 68, or NSC 68 as it has come to be known, was declassified.¹ Although the declassification was apparently an accident on the part of then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, NSC 68 in fact had been a part of public discourse for years. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, one of

¹ Analyses of NSC 68 are numerous. Among the most important are: Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 373–381; Robert P. Newman, “NSC (National Insecurity) 68: Nitze’s Second Hallucination,” in Martin J. Medhurst and H. W. Brands, eds., *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 55–94; Benjamin O. Fordham, *Building the Cold War Consensus: The Political Economy of U.S. National Security Policy, 1949–1951* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Michael Hogan, *Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 291–314; Thomas McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) 2nd ed., 88–98; S. Nelson Drew, ed., *NSC-68: Forging the Strategy of Containment* (Washington, D.C., National Defense University, 1994); Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, 1750 to the Present* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1994), 2nd ed., 504–507, 529–530; Steve Rearden, “Frustrating the Kremlin Design: Acheson and NSC 68,” in Douglas Brinkley, ed., *Dean Acheson and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 159–175; Ernest May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993); Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration,*

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the principal authors of the paper, began discussing its contents publicly in early 1950, even prior to its adoption as national policy, as part of his “total diplomacy” campaign to convince the American people of the need for a stepped-up Cold War.² In 1962, Paul Y. Hammond published a forty-thousand-word essay on NSC 68 based primarily on interviews with those who had seen it.³ Acheson discussed NSC 68 in some detail in *Present at the Creation*, his classic autobiography of his years in the State Department, published in 1969; although its then still top-secret status

and the Origins of the Cold War (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 355–360; Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Waiting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954,” in Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 100–152; Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision, A Memoir* (New York: Grove Wiedenfield, 1989); Walter LaFeber, “NATO and Korea: A Context,” *Diplomatic History* 13 (Fall 1989): 461–477; Robert A. Pollard, “The National Security State Reconsidered: Truman and Economic Containment, 1945–1950,” in Michael J. Lacey, ed., *The Truman Presidency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 205–235; Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987); Steve Rearden, *The Evolution of American Strategic Doctrine: Paul H. Nitze and the Soviet Challenge* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1984); Kenneth W. Condit, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy: Volume II, 1947–1949*, Historical Division, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, 271–281; William S. Borden, *Pacific Alliance: United States Foreign Economic Policy and Japanese Trade Recovery, 1947–1955* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 27–29; Jerry Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: Southend Press, 1983), 23–50; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Nitze, “NSC 68 and the Threat Reconsidered,” *International Security* 4 (Spring 1980): 164–176; Fred Block, “Economic Instability and Military Strength: The Paradoxes of the 1950 Rearmament Decision,” *Politics and Society* 10:1 (1980): 35–58; Sam Post Brief, “Departure from Incrementalism in U.S. Strategic Planning: The Origins of NSC 68,” *Naval War College Review* (March–April 1980): 34–57; Fred M. Kaplan, “Our Cold-War Policy, Circa ‘50,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1980, p. 34; Paul H. Nitze, “The Development of NSC 68,” *International Security* 4 (Spring 1980): 170–176; Samuel F. Wells, Jr., “Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat,” *International Security* 4 (Fall 1979): 138–158; Fred Block, *The Origins of International Economic Disorder: A Study of United States International Monetary Policy from World War II to the Present* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977), 86–96; Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 507–509; Paul Y. Hammond, “NSC 68: Prologue to Rearmament,” in Columbia University Press, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets*, eds., Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn Snyder (New York: Colia University Press, 1962), 271–378.

² Dean Acheson, “‘Total Diplomacy’ to Strengthen U.S. Leadership for Human Freedom,” U.S. Department of State *Bulletin* 22 (March 20, 1950): 427–430.

³ Hammond, “NSC 68.”

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prevented him from quoting from it.⁴ Prior to its declassification, NSC 68 figured in the works of many historians and other scholars as well.⁵ Such widespread knowledge of NSC 68 before its declassification led Acheson biographer Gaddis Smith in 1972 to label it “the most famous unread paper of its era.”⁶

Today, NSC 68 is declassified and open for scholars and the general public alike to explore. In some respects it has become as much a part of the history of the origins of the Cold War as the “long telegram,” the Truman Doctrine, the Berlin blockade, the Marshall Plan, and the Korean War insofar as it serves as an additional link in the chain of events that gave us the Cold War. Yet, in other respects it remains obscure. Its contents are known, a general narrative of its history has been developed, and its importance is recognized. However, in each of these aspects NSC 68 has largely been misunderstood: The focus of the content has been skewed, the standard narrative fails to explain its origins, and NSC 68’s importance has been underestimated. As way of introduction to the larger argument that this book examines, this chapter explores these themes.

NSC 68: An Introduction

On April 7, 1950, NSC 68 was presented to President Truman for his perusal and, if the authors got their way, approval. NSC 68 was primarily the result of the efforts of Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff Paul Nitze to abide by a directive the president issued on January 31, 1950, much at their behest. In the directive, the president ordered “a reexamination of our objectives in peace and war and of the effect of these objectives on our strategic plans, in light of the probable fission bomb capability and possible thermonuclear bomb capability of the Soviet Union.”⁷ As

⁴ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 373–381, passim.

⁵ For example, see Richard Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security, 1946–1948* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), 322–324; Gabriel Kolko and Joyce Kolko, *The Limits of Power*, 507–509; Samuel P. Huntington, “The Defense Establishment: Vested Interests and the Public Interest,” in Omer L. Carey, ed., *The Military-Industrial Complex and United States Foreign Policy* (Pullman, Washington: Washington State University Press, 1968), 5–7; Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–1966* (New York: Wiley, 1967), 1st edition, 90–91.

⁶ Smith is quoted in Ernest May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68*, (New York: Bedford Books, St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 15.

⁷ NSC 68, “Notes by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” April 7, 1950, U.S. State