

## Who was at fault for the Cold War?

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**Abstract:** In this essay I seek to puncture the teleological view of Cold War history. In critiquing the current “victorious” version propagated by its chief proponent, John Lewis Gaddis, I hope to redeem a debate which Gaddis himself has declared is largely over. I utilise Gaddis’ own systematic approach but argue that this reflects more unfavourably on the US, and favourably on the USSR, than he would like to admit. I contend that a new, genuine post-revisionism is needed that can cope with nuance and allocates blame fairly to both sides.

**Keywords:** Cold War; John Lewis Gaddis; post-revisionism; US; USSR; Cold War historiography

The happy, dialectal view of Cold War historiography tells the story of academics rejecting fallacious extremes and moving towards a more reasonable synthesis<sup>1</sup>. There are three main schools of thought on the explanation of the cold war<sup>2</sup>. The first is exemplified by George Kennan’s Long Telegram<sup>3</sup>. The orthodox interpretation, favoured by the contemporary U.S administration, places the U.S on the moral high ground, simply reacting to Soviet aggression and expansionism. In the 1960s the revisionist school rose in response and instead blamed rampant American economic imperialism, which conflicted with reasonable Soviet security worries. Unimpressed by these simplistic, black and white interpretations a post revisionist school came to the fore. In this explanation both superpowers pushed their own agendas while misunderstanding and distrusting the others intentions. However, it seems to generally owe more to the traditionalist school; while regarding them both as blunderers the U.S was seen as the benevolent actor. In this essay I intend to evaluate the merits of the dominant brand of post-revisionism, which may be more accurately labelled the neo-orthodox. I will pay particular attention to the eminent John Lewis Gaddis who seems quite dominant in this area of scholarship.

In response to the ideology laced rhetoric of traditionalists some revisionists sought to excuse the Soviet Union as merely exhibiting the behaviour of a traditional great power. They were not forcing a dogma driven world revolution but simply practicing realpolitik. The post-revisionists have found it relatively easy to adjust their critique of soviet expansionism

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, ‘The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War’, *Diplomatic History*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (July., 1983)

<sup>2</sup> Timothy J. White, ‘Cold War Historiography: New Evidence Behind Traditional Typographies’, *International Social Science Review*, Volume 75, Numbers 3/4, (2000)

<sup>3</sup> George Kennan, The Long Telegram, February 22, 1946, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>, Date Accessed: 24/11/10

as traditional grasping for power rather than an ideological war, although Gaddis argues for both<sup>4</sup>. However, they seek to bracket together Stalin's diplomacy with his peculiar domestic operation and thus attribute the Cold War to Stalin's paranoia and the very nature of authoritarianism. When Gaddis contends that 'Americans had begun to suspect... that the internal behaviour of states determined their external behaviour'<sup>5</sup> he is also indentifying the main thrust of his own argument. Indeed, Vojtech Mastny suggests that Stalin's actions were a logical extension of 'the Soviet system which had bred him... that system was the true cause of the Cold War'<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, they are subtly, perhaps insidiously, attempting to bring a moralistic tone back into the debate. Gaddis spends much of his first chapter characterising the two nations, contrasting autocratic tyranny with idealistic democracy. The U.S is then portrayed as carrying this idealism into international relations, a reluctant empire<sup>7</sup>, their only crime not being harsh enough with the Soviets<sup>8</sup>. This narrative runs through their interpretation of the evidence but it does not bear close scrutiny.

Post revisionists disagree over whether Soviet expansionism was an extension of Stalin's personality or his necessary response to powerful forces within his government<sup>9</sup>. It seems clear that while Stalin's power did approach supremacy he was quite willing to use it to limit the expansionist tendencies of his more doctrinaire allies<sup>10</sup>, in this case in Greece. This seems to indicate Stalin was seeking to adhere to the famous percentages plan as agreed with Churchill, which paints a far more reasonable picture of the man. Much of Gaddis' argument places far too much emphasis on Stalin's paranoia and mistrust. He contends that Stalin's espionage activities in relation to the Anglo-American bomb development project prove that he was a paranoid, unreliable ally<sup>11</sup>. The fact that two of three wartime allies failed to include the third in developing a revolutionary new weapon seems to escape his notice. Gaddis instead contends that the secrecy of the project was chiefly motivated by concerns over the Nazis<sup>12</sup>, Stalin being kept in the dark apparently an oversight. Gar Alperovitz draws on numerous U.S government documents to highlight just how central the Soviet Union was to American policy concerning the bomb<sup>13</sup>. He reveals that major military authorities concluded that the bomb wasn't necessary to effect a Japanese surrender free of American casualties. These dissenters included Admiral Leahy<sup>14</sup>, Supreme Commander Eisenhower<sup>15</sup> and the U.S Strategic Bombing Survey<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the bombing survey concluded that Japanese surrender may even have been brought about without a Soviet invasion. The bomb was not just designed to limit the expansion of Soviet interests in Asia but to alter the balance of power in Europe. Even Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War,

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<sup>4</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, , 1997), pp.13-14

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.35

<sup>6</sup> Vojtech Mastny, *'Russia's Road to the Cold War: Diplomacy, Warfare, and the Politics of Communism', 1941-1945*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.306

<sup>7</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp.36-39

<sup>8</sup> Mastny, *Cold War*, pp.309-310

<sup>9</sup> Randall B Woods & Howard Jones, *Dawning of the Cold War: The United States' Quest for Order*, (University of Georgia Press, 1991), pp.13-14

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp.244-245

<sup>11</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p.21; pp.92-96

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.93

<sup>13</sup> Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1995)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.3

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.4

was concerned that the bomb was being used as stick to beat the Russians with<sup>17</sup>. This not only challenges the idea that the collapse of the wartime alliance was the Soviets fault but seriously undermines the picture of America as an innocent, principled nation.

Indeed, the evidence of the bomb highlights the usefulness of taking the Post-Revisionist paradigm to its logical conclusion. The idea of foreign policy as an expression of the system, the domestic machine, can be fully extended to the U.S. The simplistic idea that the democratic sentiments of America restricted or stifled imperial tendencies<sup>18</sup> seems to rest upon seeing the best in humanity, a naive stance. Woods and Jones suggest the end of mediation was triggered by the “Republican party’s decision... to challenge the democrats openly on foreign policy issues”<sup>19</sup>. Truman then had to placate the increasingly powerful anti-soviet sentiment to maintain his political power. Daniel Yergin seems to contradict this interpretation of American policy by suggesting the American people were actually more isolationist than the political elite<sup>20</sup>. However, to gain the support for any coherent foreign policy diplomats like John Hickerson wanted a political speech to “electrify the *American people*”<sup>21</sup>. Sensationalist rhetoric resulted in a political and emotional response that quickly moved beyond the ability of more reasonable politicians to control. It seems that Stalin’s power was able to absorb irrational pressures on foreign policy far more than a political class who depended on the whims of the populace for their careers.

In this post-revisionist narrative Stalin’s unwillingness to co-operate in the new world order marks him at fault for the Cold War. The two superpowers were ideologically incompatible but it was the communists’ uncompromising, ultimate aim of world revolution, their picture of all capitalists as exploitative enemies, that was the true problem. Gaddis argues that Wilson’s vision of the post war world was one of multilateralism, of “collective security”<sup>22</sup>. It was Stalin who refused to embrace this principled vision, his unilateralism meant the U.S.S.R sought to ‘maximise security for itself, while attempting to deny it to others’<sup>23</sup>. It was Stalin again channelling the violent, authoritarian system of Soviet governance that made any rapprochement impossible<sup>24</sup>, the U.S was seeking to preserve its interests against aggressive Soviet expansionism. However, Melvyn Leffler suggests “The American Conception of National Security” was far more similar to the Soviet plan<sup>2526</sup> than historians like Gaddis and Bruce Kuniholm like to admit<sup>2728</sup>. When Leffler reasserts his argument that America planned for ‘American hegemony over the Atlantic and Pacific

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.429

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp.13-16, 38-39

<sup>19</sup> Woods and Jones, *Dawning of the Cold War*, p.98

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978) p.282

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp.12-13

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.13

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>25</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48, *The American Historical Review*, Vol.89, No.2 (April., 1984, The University of Chicago Press), pp. 346-381

<sup>26</sup> Melvyn P. Leffler, ‘Reply’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol.89, No.2 (April., 1984, The University of Chicago Press), pp.391-400

<sup>27</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, ‘Comments’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol.89, No.2 (April., 1984, The University of Chicago Press), pp.382-385

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Kuniholm, ‘Comments’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol.89, No.2 (April., 1984, The University of Chicago Press), pp.385-390

oceans'<sup>29</sup> he suggests Gaddis has a limited understanding of the methods of control<sup>30</sup>. Gaddis' explanation of the American empire certainly seems limited<sup>31</sup>. He portrays it as more of a broad alliance based on political self determination and economic integration than any relationship based on dominance. Indeed, he makes the remarkable contention that America 'made no systematic effort to suppress Socialism within its sphere of influence'<sup>32</sup>. In fact as early as 1947 the Americans were willing to extend their commitments in Europe to do exactly this by taking over British responsibilities in Greece<sup>33</sup>. The broad system of military bases and the numerous regime changes effected by the U.S<sup>34</sup> certainly casts doubt on his idealised view of American foreign policy. Moreover, Leffler suggests the fact that American intervention in Greece, before the often cited Turkish and Iranian crises, is crucial<sup>35</sup>. It shows how America's expansion of its sphere of influence, its empire, was not a reaction to Soviet belligerence but a fear of sweeping radicalism across Europe. It responded to this independent socialist sentiment by using any means to crush the democratic far left. While the Soviet Union was certainly expansionist it was cautious, reactive and even Gaddis agrees that it certainly would have appeared to Stalin that America was remaking the world in its own image<sup>36</sup>. Misunderstanding and uncompromising visions of national security on *both* sides helped lead to the Cold War. However, America's view of any socialist activity as Soviet backed certainly helped ramp up the ideological polarisation of the conflict.

Stalin was certainly ruthless, autocratic and brutal; a paranoiac and murderous perpetrator of genocide. He was expansionist in the grand tradition of European great powers. However, these traits do not necessarily mean that he, or the Soviet Union, were at fault for the development of the Cold War. The U.S was far less principled and far more aggressive than Gaddis and his colleagues would like to portray. This does not mean an exoneration of the Soviet Union, a return to the problems of the Revisionist school. It instead demands a far more nuanced and balanced approach to the evidence that apportions blame appropriately to both sides. The breakdown of wartime relations was not due to Stalin's paranoia, he truly had reason to worry about the U.S led nuclear arms race. The very system of U.S government led to their foreign policy at the minimum matching the Soviet's level of aggressiveness. Moreover, ideological inflexibility on both sides helped lead to misunderstandings and regrettable responses. All this leads to the conclusion that the "Post-Revisionist Synthesis"<sup>37</sup>, this growing consensus, is in urgent need of being reconsidered.

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<sup>29</sup> Leffler, *The American Conception of National Security*, p.349

<sup>30</sup> Leffler, 'Reply', p.393

<sup>31</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, pp. 33-40; 43-46

<sup>32</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis*, p.174

<sup>33</sup> Robert Frazier, *Anglo-American Relations with Greece: The Coming of the Cold War, 1942-47* (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1991)

<sup>34</sup> Michael Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008)

<sup>35</sup> Leffler, 'Reply', pp.394-396

<sup>36</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p.36

<sup>37</sup> Gaddis, 'The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis'

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