Adherence to
Agreements

Yalta and the Experiences of the Early Cold War

On April 23, 1945

President Harry S. Truman had a stormy meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister V.M. Molotov. In what many historians consider the first round of the Cold War, Truman denounced Soviet violations of the Yalta agreements. When Molotov sought to defend Soviet actions, Truman bluntly retorted that the Soviets would have to adhere to their agreements if cooperation were to continue.¹

During the next year Truman lost faith in the Kremlin. He grew frustrated with the tedious deliberations among the foreign ministers; he became alarmed by the Soviet consolidation of power in Eastern Europe; and he was frightened by the sociopolitical turmoil throughout much of the world. In July 1946 he ordered two White House aides, Clark Clifford and George Elsey, to write an assessment of Soviet compliance with wartime and postwar agreements. If the Kremlin did not adhere to past accords, it made little sense to try to reach new agreements. Knowing the Chief Executive's wishes, Clifford and Elsey solicited the views of top officials in the Truman Administration and wrote a devastating critique of Soviet adherence to wartime and postwar agreements. Interpreting their assignment very broadly, they went on to attribute Soviet actions to Marxist–Leninist ideology, to claim that the Soviets sought world domination, and to recommend adoption of a series of measures to assist prospective allies, augment American strength, and redress the balance of power.²

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2. For the Clifford–Elsey report, see Arthur Krock, Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), pp. 422–482. For input into this report, see especially the materials in the George Elsey Papers, Harry S. Truman Library (HSTL), Independence, Missouri, Box 63; Clark Clifford Papers, HSTL, Boxes 14 and 15; also see Clark Clifford, Oral History, HSTL, pp. 11–17, 75–90, 180–186.

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Taking another look at these early Cold War developments seems appropriate at a time when influential policymakers are using allegations of Soviet duplicity and non-compliance to extricate the United States from the SALT II and ABM treaties, to thwart progress toward new arms control agreements, and to help justify the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). On the eve of the 1985 Geneva summit, Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger denounced the Soviet record of adherence to recent accords. He urged President Ronald Reagan to resist any new commitments that would obligate the United States to observe the SALT II agreement, that would limit SDI research, development, or testing, or that would obscure the pattern of Soviet arms control violations. According to Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, one of Weinberger’s closest advisers, it is “a great mistake” for the United States to honor past accords when the Soviets disregard their key provisions. Although the Administration thus far has been reluctant to renounce the SALT II and ABM treaties formally, the temptation to do so will mount as new nuclear submarines are deployed, as “Star Wars” research generates new demands for testing and development, and as additional B-52 bombers are converted to carry cruise missiles.3

In effect, Weinberger and Perle are claiming that Soviet noncompliance constitutes a threat to vital American interests, justifies unilateral measures to enhance American security, and obviates the utility of negotiation. This line of reasoning closely resembles the arguments of Clifford, Elsey, and Truman at the onset of the Cold War. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to look at the historical events surrounding the disintegration of the great wartime coalition in order to clarify the records of compliance of the United States and of the Soviet Union. In fact, the Soviet pattern of adherence was not qualitatively different from the American pattern; both governments complied with some accords and disregarded others. American policymakers often exaggerated Soviet malfeasance and disregarded the strategic calculations that may have influenced Soviet actions. Driven by the need to safeguard vital American interests and impelled by a sense of power afforded by the atomic bomb, Truman Administration officials themselves sometimes violated key provisions of wartime agreements. And these transgressions could be construed as endangering vital Soviet interests just as Soviet violations may have imperilled critical American interests.

Of course, Clifford, Elsey, and Truman did not see things this way. They were convinced of Soviet duplicity and American innocence. Their self-deception could serve as a lesson to contemporary officials. By their very nature, great power agreements demand compromise and are wrapped in ambiguities. Pressures to interpret provisions, even unambiguous ones, to comport with national self-interest are relentless on both American and Soviet officials. Leaders of both countries tend to act opportunistically yet demand punctilious behavior from their adversaries. Their sense of expediency and self-righteous hypocrisy endanger efforts to regulate competition through international agreement. If competition is to be channeled into constructive avenues and conflict contained, both great powers must abandon the temptation to use the issue of adherence to agreements as a morality play or a propaganda ploy; both sides must wish to define their security in terms of compliance and accommodation rather than in terms of other priorities that compete with and may take ascendancy over a cooperative relationship.

The Transition from Roosevelt to Truman

During World War II, the major allied governments—the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union—signed agreements with one another and with many less powerful governments regarding postwar military, political, and economic developments. The most controversial of these were the agreements signed at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin. Because the Yalta accords have assumed almost mythic proportions in the history of the Cold War, they shall receive primary attention in this analysis. But what can be observed in the record of adherence to the Yalta accords can be reconfirmed by carefully scrutinizing the pattern of compliance with other wartime agreements. In this respect, the treaties obligating Britain and the Soviet Union to withdraw from Iran six months after the war and similar ones calling for American withdrawal from advance bases in the Azores, Iceland, and elsewhere are of particular interest. Finally, because the Potsdam accords on Germany gave rise to so many recriminations, it will be worthwhile to look at them, if only in a cursory fashion.

The Yalta agreements have received much scholarly and popular attention. During the McCarthy era, partisan critics charged that alleged communist advisers, like Alger Hiss, were instrumental in undermining the American bargaining position and extending unnecessary concessions. Even sympa-
thizers of President Franklin D. Roosevelt acknowledged shortcomings in the Yalta accords and attributed these flaws to Roosevelt’s declining health. After the Department of State published many of the confidential papers and memoranda regarding Yalta in 1955, a number of scholars put together a collection of essays on the Crimean meeting. John Snell, Forrest C. Pogue, Charles F. Delzell, and George A. Lensen provided a careful scholarly assessment of the negotiating trade-offs at Yalta and emphasized the constraints on American actions. The desire for Soviet intervention in the Pacific War, the reality of the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe, and the hope for postwar cooperation within a United Nations circumscribed the options available to American officials.4

The Snell volume constituted a first-rate assessment of Yalta by a group of eminent scholars whose reputation for objectivity was beyond dispute. Their analysis led to the conclusion that the Yalta agreements were not inherently flawed. These accords reflected power realities in Eastern Europe and wartime exigencies in the Far East. What went wrong, they concluded, was subsequent Soviet violation of these agreements.

However, as scholars have probed more deeply into the immediate post-Yalta period, the meaning of the agreements has become ever more difficult to assess. During the last twenty years, historians have come to emphasize the reciprocal concessions made by Roosevelt and Stalin at the Crimea Conference. These concessions were dictated by the realities of the military situation and by Roosevelt’s complex aspirations for the postwar era. The President realized that the Kremlin had legitimate interests in Eastern Europe that had to be accommodated if there were to be any hope for postwar cooperation. He desired a cooperative relationship not because he was complacent about Soviet intentions, but because he was altogether well aware of the imponderables that lay ahead. He thought accommodation of legitimate Soviet objectives might enable him to safeguard at less cost more vital American (and British) interests elsewhere around the globe. But Roosevelt also desired to preserve the nation’s atomic and financial leverage should the Kremlin prove recalcitrant on matters of critical importance to the United States.

In his dealings with the Kremlin, however, Roosevelt felt it imperative to cloak his concessions in the ambiguous language of the Declaration on Liberated Europe. In this way he hoped to satisfy Stalin without disappointing domestic constituencies whose support he still needed for many legislative enactments, including American participation in the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Paradoxically, then, Roosevelt’s carefully concealed concessions were prompted by a desire to cooperate with the Kremlin, by a recognition of Soviet preponderance in Eastern Europe, and by a desire to ensure active American participation in world affairs, which, if necessary, could take the direction of the containment of Soviet power. Roosevelt evidently hoped that Yalta might allow Stalin to safeguard Soviet strategic interests without too overtly violating American principles. Elections in Eastern Europe were promised, but they were to be held without allied supervision and under the aegis of provisional governments that were for the most part the creation of Soviet occupation forces. Democratic forms would be adhered to, thereby satisfying American predilections, but the results would comport with the Kremlin’s need for friendly governments. In return, the Soviets would be expected to restrain their ambitions elsewhere and to respect Anglo–American interests.5

Roosevelt’s goals were difficult to implement. Scholars have shown how Roosevelt refused to acknowledge his Yalta concessions to the American public lest he trigger a wave of cynicism and a return to the isolationism of the interwar era. Moreover, when he died on April 12, 1945, he left his foreign policy in the hands of Vice President Harry S. Truman, a man with whom Roosevelt almost never discussed foreign policy. Truman, by his own repeated admissions, had absolutely no idea of the intricacies of the Yalta agreements and knew very little about the motivations that lay behind Roosevelt’s diplomatic and domestic posturing. The new President had to rely on Roosevelt’s advisers to explain to him the meaning of the Yalta agreements and the objectives of Roosevelt’s diplomacy. Yet because of the improvised way in which Roosevelt used his advisers, because of the bureaucratic morass and the wartime subordination of the State Department, and because of

Roosevelt's own deceptive behavior, no one could convey to Truman the full meaning of Roosevelt's concessions and aspirations. Although historians have made substantial progress in putting together a picture of Roosevelt's intentions, few of his contemporaries grasped the multifaceted dimensions of his policies.6

During his first months in office, Truman received a set of explanations and advice from one group of advisers, including Secretary of State Edward I. Stettinius, Ambassador to the Soviet Union W. Averell Harriman, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, and Admiral William Leahy, the President's chief of staff. He often received contrasting opinions from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, Secretary of Commerce Henry C. Wallace, Anna Boettinger, Roosevelt's daughter, and Joseph Davies, former ambassador to the Soviet Union and prominent Democratic fund-raiser. Ironically, Truman came to rely heavily on James F. Byrnes, former senator, supreme court justice, and wartime director of mobilization and reconversion. Although Byrnes had been spurned by Roosevelt as a vice presidential candidate at the Democratic convention in 1944, he reluctantly agreed to accompany Roosevelt to Yalta and to serve as public salesman of the Crimean accords before retiring to his native South Carolina. As Robert Messer has shown, Byrnes was not privy to all the discussions at Yalta partly because he had to rush back to Washington to lead the domestic media blitz before the final settlements were reached between Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill. Nevertheless, Truman looked to Byrnes, who had had little previous familiarity with Roosevelt's foreign policy, for the most definitive explanation of the meaning of Yalta. His dependence upon Byrnes was revealed by his decision to designate him secretary of state as soon as Stettinius completed work on the founding of the United Nations at the San Francisco Conference.7


The above depiction of events is well known to historians who have examined the closing events of World War II and the succession from Roosevelt to Truman. The implications of these developments, however, have not been fully explored. Although recent historians like John Lewis Gaddis and Robert Messer fully acknowledge the chasm between Roosevelt’s concessions at Yalta and the information disseminated to the American people, they focus attention on the American public’s growing disillusionment with Soviet behavior. But the purposeful misrepresentation of the Yalta compromises, the unilateral interpretation of some of the Yalta provisions, and the clear abrogation of others had an important bearing on Soviet–American relations because these developments represented American efforts to extricate the United States from commitments and restraints that were no longer considered desirable. At the same time, the unqualified American denunciations of Soviet compliance with the Yalta accords and with other agreements constituted American efforts to define permissible Soviet behavior in as narrow a way as possible in order to circumscribe Soviet influence in Europe and Asia.

_Differing Interpretations of the Yalta Accords_

The Yalta agreements addressed five important topics: Poland, liberated Europe, Germany, the Far East, and the United Nations. Initial rancor revolves around the provisions for Poland and liberated Eastern Europe. With the definition of Poland’s eastern border pretty well resolved at Yalta, the post-Yalta dispute focused on the procedures for establishing and the composition of the provisional government for Poland. When Soviet armies advanced through Poland in late 1944, the Kremlin put together and recognized a government of pro-communist Poles at Lublin as the Provisional National Government; the British and the Americans, however, still carried on wartime relations with the Polish government-in-exile in London. The State Department favored the establishment of a “fully representative” government inside Poland, to consist primarily of non-Lublin Poles from outside and inside Poland. When British Prime Minister Winston Churchill advocated this po-

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sition at Yalta, Stalin was obdurate. Emphasizing the need for a Polish government friendly to the Soviet Union in order to guarantee future Soviet security and to safeguard lines of communication to Soviet armies in Germany, he wanted Churchill and Roosevelt to recognize the Lublin Poles.

Wisely or unwisely, Roosevelt mediated the Churchill-Stalin dispute. The final agreement stipulated that "the Provisional Government which is now functioning in Poland [i.e., the Lublin Government] should therefore be reorganized on a broader democratic basis with the inclusion of democratic leaders from Poland itself and from Poles abroad." There was no mention of this government becoming "fully representative." Although there was a reference to the holding of free elections, it could not conceal the critical importance of acceding to short-term Lublin control and of eliminating language calling for supervised elections. Roosevelt had made a critical concession which he understood at the time and which he again acknowledged, however unhappily, in a letter to Churchill on March 29, 1945. "You will recall," Roosevelt wrote,

that the agreement on Poland at Yalta was a compromise. . . . The wording of the resulting agreement reflects this compromise, but if we attempt to evade the fact that we placed, as clearly shown in the agreement, somewhat more emphasis on the Lublin Poles than on the other two groups from which the new government is to be drawn I feel we will expose ourselves to the charges that we are attempting to go back on the Crimea decision.9

In other words, the language of the Yalta agreement did concede Lublin predominance in a provisional government, albeit a reorganized one.

Notwithstanding this admission, Roosevelt assented to efforts to try to dilute the meaning of his Yalta concession. Churchill and many American officials sought to regain what had been given away by underscoring the importance of the post-Yalta talks in Moscow. The Crimean accord authorized Harriman, Molotov, and British Ambassador Archibald Clark Kerr "to consult in the first instance in Moscow with members of the present Provisional

Government and with other Polish democratic leaders from within Poland and from abroad, with a view to the reorganisation of the present Government along the above lines [that is, on a broader democratic basis]." Churchill, under great criticism in Parliament for the Yalta provisions on Poland, sought to use these deliberations in Moscow to circumvent the Yalta language. Our goal, he wrote Roosevelt, is "to promote the formation of a new reorganised Polish government sufficiently representative of all Poland for us to recognise it." Harriman, too, struggled tenaciously to narrow the preeminence of the Lublin Poles. He demanded that consultations take place with leaders from outside Poland, and that the Lublin government have no veto over who could participate in these talks. Molotov argued that conversations should be held initially with representatives of the Lublin government and that Poles who opposed Yalta should not be consulted. Whatever the merits of the Anglo–American and Soviet positions on the procedural matter, the real dispute was over the composition of the reorganized provisional government. Harriman and Clark Kerr sought to establish a new government "broadly representative of Democratic elements of the Polish State," while Molotov sought reaffirmation that the Lublin government would constitute the "basis" for the reorganized government.

The deadlock on the formation of the Polish provisional government was complete when Roosevelt died. Harriman immediately rushed to Washington to brief Truman on Soviet perfidy and treachery in Poland and Eastern Europe. Before the ambassador reached Washington, the new President took his first look at the Yalta agreements and expressed shock and disappointment that they were not more clear-cut. On the very morning of the President's acrimonious interview with Molotov, Truman's advisers discussed the meaning of Yalta regarding Poland. Admiral Leahy, the chief of staff to the President, although well known for his tough-nosed, conservative, and anti-Soviet views, acknowledged that the Yalta language on Poland was susceptible to contrasting interpretations. Previously he had told Roosevelt that the language was so vague that the Soviets "could stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without ever technically breaking it." Thus when Truman met with Molotov later that same day, the President knew that the Soviet position was not an unreasonable interpretation of Yalta. But fearful

10. For Churchill's letter, see Kimball, Roosevelt and Churchill, Vol. 3, p. 564. For the Yalta language on the consultations in Moscow, see Clemens, Yalta, p. 306.
11. FRUS, 1945, Vol. 5, pp. 134–252; for the quotations, see pp. 180–181. Also see Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, pp. 426–431; and Lukas, Strange Allies, pp. 147–151.
of the Kremlin's growing strength and the emerging vacuum of power in central Europe, Truman unqualifiedly accused Molotov of transgressing the Yalta provisions on Poland. "The United States Government," Truman insisted, "cannot be party to any method of consultation with Polish leaders which would not result in the establishment of a new Provisional Government of National Unity genuinely representative of the democratic elements of the Polish people." By focusing on results and calling for a new and "genuinely representative" government, Truman shifted attention from the procedural issue of the Moscow consultations, on which the United States position was reasonable, to the substantive question regarding the make-up of the provisional government, on which the American interpretation was unfounded.

Soviet leaders were angered by the American interpretation. Before Roosevelt's death, Stalin charged that the American position amounted to a claim for "the establishment of an entirely new government." This thesis, Stalin argued, was "tantamount to direct violation of the Crimean Conference decisions." The day before Molotov listened to President Truman's dressing-down, he met privately with Joseph Davies. Molotov explained that Poland was an absolutely vital interest to the Soviet Union, and expressed dismay that Roosevelt's subordinates and successor were seeking to reverse and redefine the meaning of Yalta. From the Soviet perspective, Truman's attempt to force Soviet acceptance of the American interpretation reflected America's failure to adhere to the substantive concessions accepted by Roosevelt. At the Crimea Conference, Stalin wrote Truman on April 24, 1945, we agreed that the government now functioning in Poland "should be the core, that is, the main part of a new, reconstructed Polish Government of National Unity." American abrogation of the understanding, Stalin insisted, manifested American indifference to Soviet strategic imperatives: "Poland is to the security of the Soviet Union what Belgium and Greece are to the security of Great Britain."
Davies agreed with Molotov's and Stalin's viewpoint. Moreover, during the next two months, Davies spent many hours with Truman at the White House seeking to explain how the Soviets viewed their vital interests in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, Byrnes, too, endeavored to ascertain more information about the last minute concessions made by Roosevelt at the Crimea meeting. By early June, Byrnes confidentially admitted to Davies, “There was no justification under the spirit or letter of the agreement for insistence by Harriman and the British ambassador that an entirely new Government should be created. . . .”

When Harry Hopkins visited Moscow at the end of May and listened to Stalin's strenuous defense of the Kremlin's Polish policy, the American emissary did not seek to justify the American position with a legal or textual analysis of the Yalta accords. Instead, Hopkins alluded, rather lamely, to the sensibilities of American public opinion. In effect, Hopkins conceded that the Soviet position on the preponderant role of the Lublin Poles in any new provisional government comported with the substantive compromises worked out at Yalta. Truman acquiesced to this bitter reality.

The recognition of the Lublin Poles meant acceptance of predominant Soviet influence in postwar Poland. This point Roosevelt had conceded at Yalta, but he hoped to elicit at least minimal Soviet adherence to democratic forms. The Soviets, however, had little tolerance for such symbols, as reflected by their arrest and imprisonment of anti-fascist leaders inside Poland. Nor did the Kremlin ever show any willingness to support free elections or tolerate basic freedoms. The resilience of the anti-Soviet Polish underground and the persistent American pleas for open trade, economic data, and Polish coal (for Western Europe) helped to perpetuate Soviet suspicions about the future orientation of postwar Poland and reinforced the Kremlin's determination to have a friendly government susceptible to Soviet influence notwithstanding the democratic trappings of the Yalta provisions.

14. Diary entry, June 6, 1945, Davies Papers, Box 17. Walter Lippmann told Davies that Clark Kerr also disagreed with the Anglo-American interpretation of the Yalta provisions on Poland. But Churchill had squelched his ambassador's view. See diary entry, June 9, 1945, ibid.; also see Messer, End of an Alliance, pp. 64–84.


Moscow nor Washington, then, demonstrated much inclination to adhere to the meaning of Yalta regarding Poland, but American policymakers paid almost no attention to the significance of their own desire to disengage from one of the most significant aspects of the Yalta accords, that is, the provision on the composition of the Polish provisional government.

After the Yalta Conference, rancorous disputes also emerged over the implementation of the Declaration on Liberated Europe. The Declaration contained no mechanisms for the enforcement of its lofty principles on self-government and self-determination. Indeed, during the discussions at Yalta, Molotov inserted language that weakened even the implication of great power collaboration in the enforcement of the declaration. The Yalta agreement simply obligated the signatories to "consult together on the measures necessary to discharge the joint responsibilities set forth in this declaration." And this consultation would occur only "When in the opinion of the three governments, conditions . . . make such action necessary." Nothing Roosevelt said or did at Yalta suggested that he had much concern for developments in Eastern Europe except insofar as they might influence the political climate in the United States. With no language to implement its rhetorical flourishes, the Declaration on Liberated Europe did little to dispel the sphere of influence arrangements that had been incorporated into the armistice agreements and that had been sanctioned in the Churchill–Stalin percentages agreement of October 1944.17

The armistice accords denied the Soviet Union any significant influence in Italy and gave the Kremlin the preeminent role in Rumania, Finland, Bulgaria, and Hungary. For all intents and purposes, Soviet officials had a legal claim to run things as they wished in Rumania and Finland until peace treaties were completed and in Bulgaria and Hungary at least until the war was over. The Churchill–Stalin deal complemented the armistice accords and assigned the Kremlin 90 percent influence in Rumania, 80 percent in Bulgaria, and 80 percent in Hungary, while allotting the British predominant influence in Greece and allaying British apprehensions over Soviet support for the leftist partisans in northern Italy. Notwithstanding its inspirational language, the Declaration on Liberated Europe never received much attention at Yalta and never superceded the clarity of the armistice agreements or the realpolitik.

17. The Declaration on Liberated Europe may be found in Clemens, Yalta, pp. 303–304; also see ibid., pp. 204–207, 262–264; Dallek, Roosevelt, pp. 503–516; and Gaddis, Origins of the Cold War, pp. 163–164.
encompassed in the Churchill–Stalin accords. And despite Churchill’s self-serving disclaimers in his magisterial history of World War II, the documents now demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that the percentage agreement was neither designed as a temporary accord pending the end of the war nor contingent upon American acceptance.18

Yet shortly after the Yalta meeting, Churchill sought to renege on the meaning of these previous concessions and to circumscribe Soviet domination. By the spring of 1945, British forces had put down the insurrection in Greece. Stalin said nothing. He even withdrew Bulgarian troops, now under Soviet tutelage, from Thrace and Macedonia. But when Stalin’s emissary, Andrei Vyshinsky, forced the Rumanians to reshuffle their government and sign a bilateral trade agreement with the Kremlin, Churchill remonstrated and the State Department protested. Roosevelt, however, cautioned Churchill to tread carefully because “Rumania is not a good place for a test case. The Russians have been in undisputed control from the beginning, and with Rumania lying athwart the Russian lines of communication it is moreover difficult to contest the plea of military necessity and security. . . .” Although Roosevelt had not signed the percentages accord and was not obligated to abide by it, he knew that Soviet actions could not be construed as incompatible with the armistice agreement, especially while the war against Germany was still being waged.19

After Roosevelt died, however, Truman sought to constrict Soviet predominance in Eastern Europe. American policy was more circumspect but no less intent than the British on reversing the real meaning of the Churchill–Stalin agreement, the armistice accords, and the Yalta compromises. Pending Soviet retrenchment in Eastern Europe, the State Department initially decided to refrain from discussing a postwar loan to the Soviet Union and to stiffen the conditions of lend-lease assistance. Truman refused to recognize the provi-

sional governments set up by the Kremlin in Rumania and Bulgaria until they were reorganized and made more representative. At Potsdam, Byrnes endeavored to enlarge the influence of Anglo-American officials within the Allied Control Commissions in occupied Eastern Europe. After Potsdam, American diplomats pressed the Bulgarians to postpone their impending and obviously rigged elections. While rejecting proposals to monitor elections in Eastern Europe and disregarding pleas from American diplomats to intervene more directly in internal Rumanian affairs, Byrnes nonetheless continually prodded Molotov to reorganize the Rumanian and Bulgarian governments, to hold free elections, and to accept self-determination in Eastern Europe. At the London Conference of Foreign Ministers in September 1945, Molotov bluntly told Byrnes that the Kremlin interpreted his requests as efforts to establish unfriendly governments in Rumania and Bulgaria and to jeopardize Soviet security.20

Byrnes disclaimed any such intention. From his perspective, he sought no more than Soviet adherence to the language of the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe which emphasized "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live. . . ." Byrnes did not dispute the Soviet claim to a sphere of influence. Prodded by Charles Bohlen, one of the ablest Kremlinologists in the State Department, Byrnes publicly declared that the United States sought neither to impose hostile governments on the Soviet Union's periphery nor to encourage behavior unfriendly to it. Indeed, Byrnes proclaimed a willingness to accept the notion of an "open sphere," wherein Eastern European governments would conduct their foreign and defense policies within parameters set by the Kremlin (much like Latin American nations had to mold their policies within the confines established by Washington). The caveat, however, was that the Kremlin had to refrain from intervention in the strictly internal affairs of these countries and to accept the principles of open and non-discriminatory trade, free elections, and the unimpeded movement of Western journalists.21

21. Memorandum, by Charles E. Bohlen, October 18, 1945, National Archives (NA), Record
In the abstract, this orientation constituted a means of reconciling the Soviet interpretation of Yalta as mandating a Soviet sphere with the American claim that Yalta underscored the principles of self-determination and personal freedom. But throughout Eastern Europe, except perhaps Bulgaria, free elections portended the emergence of anti-Soviet governments; open trade meant the eventual influx of Western capital, goods, and influence. Indeed the planning documents for the Yalta meeting reveal that American officials conceptualized the open door and self-determination as means to exercise leverage and to maintain some influence within a Soviet sphere. Harriman, for example, advocated free elections as a means to circumscribe Soviet predominance. Likewise, U.S. State Department officials championed the right of journalists to travel in Eastern Europe because they anticipated that reports of Soviet repression might generate public support in the United States for a more sustained diplomatic effort to achieve American objectives.22

Although Eduard Mark has made a persuasive case for the view that American policy was designed to support an “open sphere,” it was an illusion to think that the conflicting interpretations of Yalta could be reconciled through this concept.23 Wartime ravages, historical experiences, and traditional ethnic rivalries confounded the notion that free elections could lead to governments friendly to the Soviet Union. “A freely elected government in any of these countries,” Stalin acknowledged at Potsdam, “would be anti-Soviet, and that we cannot allow.” At the Moscow Conference in December 1945, the Soviet dictator reminded Byrnes that Rumanian troops had marched to the Volga, Hungarian armies had reached the Don, and Nazi naval vessels had moved unhindered through Bulgarian waters. Nor was Stalin unaware of the potential political leverage inherent in the principle of equal commercial


22. Harriman realized, for example, that his interpretation of Yalta would mean the demise of the Lublin Poles and other pro-Soviet governments. See, for example, the memorandum of his conversation with Truman, April 20, 1945, FRUS, 1945, Vol. 5, p. 233; and Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, p. 517. For the use of journalists to mobilize support for American goals, see FRUS, Conference of Berlin (Potsdam), 2 vols. (Washington, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 319 (hereinafter cited as FRUS, Potsdam). For the planning documents on Yalta, see FRUS, Yalta, pp. 230–248.

opportunity. The open door was no different from a foreign military invasion, Stalin told Chiang Kai-shek’s son. And unlike Truman, who suspected that German power was unlikely to revive very quickly, Stalin anticipated a German economic resurgence and expected another conflict within ten or fifteen years.24

Leaders in Moscow and Washington, then, had reason to feel exasperated with one another’s actions and attitudes toward Eastern Europe. However restrained might have been the use of American leverage on behalf of an open sphere and the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe, the constant American allusions to free elections, self-government, and open trade, the American eagerness to conclude peace treaties, and the American desire to expedite the withdrawal of Soviet troops cast doubt on the American commitment to accept a Soviet sphere, as defined in the Kremlin.25 But at the same time, Moscow’s refusal to ensure free elections and to establish representative governments constituted clear-cut violations of wartime agreements and engendered legitimate consternation in Washington.

While officials in Moscow and Washington could charge one another with violations of the meaning of Yalta in Poland and Eastern Europe, the situation in Germany was initially less ambiguous. At Yalta, Stalin and Churchill argued heatedly over the amount of German reparations. Ultimately they agreed to create a Reparation Commission in Moscow. The commission was to apply the principles under which Germany was obligated to “pay in kind for the losses caused by her to the Allied nations in the course of the war.” The United States and the Soviet Union concurred that the “Moscow Reparation Commission should take in its initial studies as a basis for discussion the suggestion of the Soviet Government that the total sum . . . should be 20 billion dollars and that 50% of it should go to the Union of Soviet Socialist

24. For Stalin’s remark at Potsdam, see Herz, Beginnings of the Cold War, p. 140. For his comments at Moscow, see FRUS, 1945, Vol. 2, pp. 753–754. For his view of the open door, see Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, p. 538. For his expectation of a German revival, see Milovan Djilas, Conversations with Stalin (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 114. For Truman’s view of German enfeeblement, see Memorandum of Conversation between Truman and Charles DeGaulle, August 22, 1945, HSTL, Harry S. Truman papers (HSTP), President’s Secretary’s File (PSF), Box 177.

25. Once it was clear to Byrnes that he could not persuade the Soviets to accept free elections in Eastern Europe, his major focus switched to the negotiation of the peace treaties with Germany’s ex-satellites, upon the ratification of which he hoped to secure Soviet troop withdrawals from Eastern Europe. With a diminished Soviet military presence, Byrnes believed prospects for the autonomy of Eastern European governments would improve. See “Political Aspects of the Meetings of the Council on Foreign Ministers,” by Bohlen, no date, RG 59, Bohlen Papers, Box 6.
Churchill still refused to accept this compromise, but Roosevelt supported it. Based on the discussions at Yalta, Stalin had good reason to believe that the American government sympathized with his desire for large reparations, so long as they were not paid in cash. Moreover, American officials knew that Stalin expected metallurgical and other capital goods factories from the western zones. These reparations in kind would help rebuild the Soviet Union as well as guarantee Germany’s postwar emasculation. Indeed throughout the Crimean deliberations Roosevelt did not contest the amount of reparations with Stalin; the ambiguity of the final agreement represented an American–Soviet attempt to accommodate British objections.

In the months between Yalta and Potsdam, however, American priorities changed significantly. In February, Roosevelt still sought Soviet cooperation to guarantee Germany’s defeat and to perpetuate the wartime coalition into the postwar era. By July, Truman sought to revive Germany’s coal production as a means to resurrect Western Europe and to contain the forces of revolution, even if it meant jeopardizing Soviet–American relations. Between February and July, the war in Europe ended and American officials became fully aware of the prospects for chaos, famine, and upheaval. In April, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy visited Germany and Western Europe. When he returned, he talked to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and President Truman. “He gave me a powerful picture of the tough situation that exists in Germany,” wrote Stimson, “—something that is worse than anything probably that ever happened in the world. I had anticipated the chaos, but the details of it were appalling.” During the following weeks, Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew as well as Acheson, Clayton, and Byrnes became alarmed by portentous signs of revolutionary upheaval. On June 24th, Truman wrote Churchill, “From all the reports that reach me, I believe that without immediate concentration on the production of German coal we will have turmoil and unrest in the very areas of Western Europe on which the whole stability of the continent depends.” A few days later it was decided that the President would issue a directive to ensure the export of 25 million tons of coal from Germany by April 1946. This objective was to take priority

26. For the Yalta language on reparations, see Clemens, Yalta, pp. 304–305. For the negotiations at Yalta regarding Germany, see Clemens, Yalta, pp. 158–172; Messer, End of an Alliance, pp. 48–49; Snell, Meaning of Yalta, pp. 53–63; and Bruce Kuklick, American Policy and the Division of Germany: The Clash with Russia over Reparations (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 76–86.
over all other considerations except the health and safety of occupation troops and the redeployment of Allied forces to the Pacific.27

These considerations decisively shaped American attitudes at Potsdam and impelled American officials to distance themselves from the position taken by Roosevelt at Yalta. Byrnes sidestepped proposals for four-power control of the Ruhr industries, rejected the $20 billion reparation figure, argued that the Soviets should take reparations from their own zone in Germany, and proposed a settlement that safeguarded the potential resources of the Ruhr, Saar, and Rhine for Western European recovery. Molotov and Vyshinsky went to see Joseph Davies, whom Truman had invited to Potsdam as one of his closest advisers, and expressed disbelief at the overt violation of the meaning and spirit of the Yalta compromises. Neither Davies nor Byrnes nor Clayton really disputed Soviet claims. From the perspective of the State Department, however, new circumstances dictated new priorities and a reinterpretation of Yalta. It was now evident that Germany could not pay $20 billion without risking economic chaos and revolution throughout Western Europe and without imposing a permanent drain on American financial resources. Nor could the Soviets be allowed to use their claim for reparations as a means to gain leverage over economic developments in Germany’s industrial heartland. So a new formula had to be devised that entitled the Kremlin to reparations primarily from their own zone in eastern Germany rather than “from the national wealth of Germany . . . ,” as stipulated in the Yalta accord. Transfers from the western zones to the Soviet Union were made contingent on a number of variables that the Kremlin had little means of controlling.28

Stalin grudgingly accepted these conditions in return for Truman’s equally grudging acquiescence to the Kremlin’s position on the western border of Poland. Unlike the Soviet concession on reparations, which represented Soviet acquiescence to American backtracking both on the amount and the

27. For Stimson’s comment, see diary entry, April 19, 1945, Stimson Diaries. For McCloy’s report to the President, see Memorandum, April 26, 1945, HST, PSF, Box 178. For State Department apprehensions, see, for example, FRUS, Potsdam, Vol. 1, pp. 524–525, 623. For Truman’s letter to Churchill, see ibid., p. 612. For the directive to Eisenhower, see ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 1028–1030.
sources of reparations, the American acceptance of the Oder–Neisse line did not constitute any capitulation to a new Soviet demand or to a reversal of the Yalta language. Indeed the Crimean accord “recognise[d] that Poland must receive substantial accessions of territory in the North and West.” The question at Potsdam was where to draw the new lines. Although Truman did not like the Soviet position, he could not claim that the Soviets were repudiating a previous commitment. On the other hand, Soviet feelings about the reversal of the American position on reparations would remain a sore point because that issue was so integrally related to Soviet reconstruction needs and to Soviet fears of a revitalized Germany. A year later, taking advantage of a very rare moment when Molotov seemed cordial and communicative, Byrnes inquired, “what is really in your hearts and minds on the subject of Germany?” Nothing more than had been asked at Yalta, Molotov responded: ten billion dollars in reparations and four-power control of the Ruhr.29

Apprehension that revolutionary forces in Western Europe might bring Soviet influence to the Atlantic and Mediterranean impelled American officials to repudiate the Yalta agreements on Germany just as fear that democratic forces might bring Western influence and unfriendly governments to the Danube impelled the Kremlin to ignore the principles in the Yalta Declaration on Liberated Europe. And both sides perceived that the actions of the other constituted threats to national security interests. The Americans saw Soviet domination of Eastern Europe as a means to abet Soviet recovery, set back rehabilitation in Western Europe, and lay the groundwork for revolutionary advances in Western Europe and the Mediterranean, thereby enhancing the Kremlin’s long-term economic potential and strategic capabilities to wage war against the United States, should it choose to do so in the future. In turn, the Kremlin suspected that the Anglo–Americans might be trying to absorb Germany’s industrial heartland into an anti-Bolshevik coalition.30

29. For the Byrnes–Molotov exchange, see Yergin, Shattered Peace, p. 232. For the Yalta language on Poland’s western border, see Clemens, Yalta, p. 306.
The East Asian provisions of the Yalta agreements also generated recriminations and ill will on both sides. During the Crimean meeting, Roosevelt secretly negotiated a Far Eastern protocol with Stalin. Almost no one but Harriman was privy to the details of the Stalin–Roosevelt discussions. Roosevelt wanted a Soviet pledge to go to war against Japan shortly after Germany’s capitulation. Stalin agreed, provided that the United States recognized the status quo in Outer Mongolia, Soviet annexation of the Kuriles and southern Sakhalin, a Soviet naval base at Port Arthur, and preeminent Soviet interests in the port of Dairen and on the Manchurian railroads. Roosevelt worried about making a deal behind Chiang Kai-shek’s back. He agreed to Stalin’s conditions, however, provided the Kremlin recognized Chiang, offered no support to the Chinese communists, and accepted Chinese national sovereignty over Manchuria. Stalin concurred. Significantly, Harriman warned Roosevelt that he was giving away too much and that the Soviets could easily interpret the language to mean Soviet domination of Manchuria. But the President felt that he was getting much of what he wanted if he could secure Stalin’s support for Chiang, if he could tie down Japanese armies in China with Soviet forces, if he could devote American attention to the occupation and control of the Japanese mainland, and if he could secure formal Soviet recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria.31

As soon as Roosevelt died, Harriman pressed for a reevaluation of the Yalta protocol on the Far East. Although few officials knew exactly what it contained, there was widespread disaffection with the prospect of Soviet gains in East Asia. During May and June, the highest level officials in the War and State departments continually discussed options for constraining Soviet gains in East Asia, including repudiation or renegotiation of the Yalta provisions. Stimson, Marshall, and Army officials cautioned against repudiation because they realized Soviet armies would be able to march into Manchuria and do as they pleased unless restrained by some accord. Abrogating Yalta would not contain the Kremlin in Northeast Asia; indeed outright repudiation might alienate Soviet leaders and whet their appetite. Instead Harriman and the State Department sought to define the language Roosevelt accepted at Yalta in ways that would promote American self-interest and that would circumscribe postwar Soviet influence in Northeast Asia.32

32. Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, pp. 461–462, 482–483; diary entries, May 13–16, 29, 1945,
In this respect, the successful testing of the atomic bomb on July 16 exerted an important influence on American policy. During the spring of 1945, top military officials gradually revised their view on the need for Soviet intervention in the Pacific War. Prior to the Trinity test, however, Truman sought Soviet participation. He travelled to Potsdam with this objective among his foremost concerns. But once the President received a comprehensive account of the atomic test’s huge success, his attitudes changed. He checked with Stimson and Marshall on the need for Soviet participation in the war against Japan. Reassured again that intervention was not a military necessity, Truman immediately sent a telegram to Chiang Kai-shek, encouraging him to pursue further negotiations with the Soviet Union until the Chinese secured an interpretation of the Yalta accords acceptable to them and compatible with American interests. Since the Soviets had stated that they would not go to war until the Chinese accepted the substance of the Yalta agreements, Truman and Byrnes now hoped that a stalemate in the Chinese–Soviet talks would delay Soviet intervention and would allow the atomic bomb to end the Far Eastern war before the Soviets could consolidate their Yalta gains. Byrnes “determined to outmaneuver Stalin on China,” noted the secretary of state’s closest aide. “Hopes Soong [the Chinese Foreign Minister] will stand firm and then Russians will not go in war [sic]. Then he feels Japan will surrender before Russia goes to war and this will save China.”

While Leahy thought this strategy was naive, Truman and Byrnes were intent on bringing the war to a rapid conclusion and containing Soviet power in East Asia. Much to the chagrin of Stalin and Molotov, the American and British governments issued the Potsdam ultimatum to the Japanese without consulting Soviet officials. Moreover, when high level Soviet–Chinese talks

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June 6, 19, 26–30, 1945, Stimson Papers; Memoranda, May and June 1945, George A. Lincoln Papers (United States Military Academy, West Point, New York), War Department Files; FRUS, 1945, Vol. 7, pp. 868–953; and Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 577–580.


36. Walter Brown log, July 20, 1945, Byrnes Papers; Millis, Forrestal Diaries, p. 78; and Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, p. 492.

resumed in Moscow after the Potsdam Conference, Ambassador Harriman again urged Soong to contest Soviet privileges at Dairen and Soviet controls over the Manchurian railroads. Although the Yalta accords called for the restoration of Soviet rights in Manchuria as they had existed prior to the 1904 Russo–Japanese War, Harriman made a tenacious effort to define the “preeminent interests” of the Kremlin in as narrow a way as possible. Stalin was willing to accept numerous concessions, yet remonstrated that Harriman appeared to be seeking to reverse the meaning of the Crimean accords, especially as they related to Soviet security rights around Dairen. At the very least Harriman’s actions contravened the American obligation, as specified in the Yalta accords, to “take measures in order to obtain [Chiang Kai-shek’s] concurrence” with the provisions on Outer Mongolia and the Manchurian ports and railroads.38

In fact, Truman and his closest advisers often acted as if the United States had never entered into any secret agreement on the Far East. At the first cabinet meeting after he returned from Potsdam and after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman denied the existence of any agreement relating to Manchuria.39 At almost the same time, the President sent a message to Stalin asking for American base rights in the Kuriles. The Soviet dictator replied with a stinging rebuff, causing Truman much embarrassment and prompting him to redefine his request. Notwithstanding this development, Secretary of State Byrnes still refused to acknowledge the concessions made at Yalta, and Under Secretary of State Acheson publicly intimated in

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January 1946 that the Kremlin had no right to the Kuriles. In response, the Kremlin released a statement quoting the exact language of the secret protocol signed at Yalta. The equivocation of American officials was partly due to Truman’s ignorance of the terms of Yalta and partly due to Byrnes’s fear of facing a domestic political debate over the Yalta provisions. But whatever their motives, American circumlocution could not have but triggered doubts in the Kremlin about American willingness to adhere to the Yalta language that called upon “The Heads of the three Great Powers [to ensure] . . . that these claims of the Soviet Union shall be unquestionably fulfilled after Japan has been defeated.”

Soviet actions in East Asia, of course, did not always encourage American confidence. Much to the disappointment of the Truman Administration, the Soviets dismantled and carried off Japanese factories in Manchuria. On several occasions, Soviet commanders relinquished Japanese arms to Chinese communist partisans and allowed them to consolidate their hold in several localities. Furthermore, Soviet troops remained in Manchuria several weeks beyond the February 1946 deadline for their withdrawal, and Chinese communist propaganda often resembled that emanating from the Kremlin. The difficulty was in reconciling the Soviet pledge to respect Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria with the Yalta language which also recognized the Soviets’ “preeminent interests” on the two key Manchurian railroads and in the port of Dairen. Yet Russian officers often collaborated with Chiang’s forces, a fact that was dramatically underscored when Chiang repeatedly requested that Stalin delay Russian troop withdrawals. In so doing, the Soviets completed their Yalta commitments “to render assistance to China with its armed forces for the purpose of liberating China from the Japanese yoke.” The Kremlin certainly wished to enhance its influence in China, as did the United States, but according to Walter Robertson, the American Chargé in China, there was no proof of collusion between Chinese communist and Soviet forces in early 1946. In fact, General George Marshall, who spent most of that year in China seeking to mediate the internal strife, held the Nationalists, rather than the Communists, more responsible for the persistence of civil conflict and for the initial breakdown of his peacemaking efforts.

40. For the Kuriles, see FRUS, 1945, Vol. 6, pp. 670, 687–688, 692. Also see Messer, End of an Alliance, pp. 119–125, 145–158, 169–170. For the Yalta language, see Clemens, Yalta, p. 310.
Recriminations Over Other Agreements

Neither America’s own lackluster commitment to Yalta nor the ambiguity and tentativeness of Soviet actions caused Truman to reassess his initial conviction that the Soviets were violating their agreements. If any doubts persisted, the Soviet failure to withdraw Russian armies from northern Iran by March 2, 1946 appeared irrefutable proof of the Kremlin’s nefarious intentions. No one could question the clarity of the 1942 agreement between the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and Iran that called for the evacuation of British and Russian troops from Iran six months after the end of hostilities. At the Potsdam, London, and Moscow conferences, Byrnes inquired whether the Kremlin would adhere to its commitment to withdraw. When Stalin and Molotov equivocated and talked of Soviet strategic concerns in the Caucasus, American officials sneered at the implication that Soviet interests could be endangered in an area where there was no formidable adversary, present or potential. When Soviet troops did not depart in February and when Soviet leaders entered into negotiations with the Iranian government over prospective concessions in northern Iran, American officials were infuriated. In dramatic moves underscoring the rift in the grand alliance, the United States prodded Iran to bring charges against the Kremlin before the United Nations; Byrnes made a tough public speech; and George Kennan presented a formal diplomatic note to the Kremlin calling for an explanation of the Soviets’ failure to adhere to agreements.42

The public sanctimoniousness of the American position nicely concealed the considerations that were prompting American officials in Washington to make some of the same decisions that their counterparts were making in Moscow. In January and February 1946, American policymakers faced the fact that their own wartime agreements with many countries, including Portugal, Iceland, Equador, Denmark, and Panama, called for the evacuation of American troops from bases established during the war against the Axis. Several of these governments were pressing for American withdrawal and

resented any infringement on their sovereignty now that the wartime emergency was over. American officials fretted as they contemplated the prospect of withdrawing from critical bases in the Azores, Iceland, and Greenland (and from not-so-critical ones in Galapagos and the environs surrounding the canal zone in Panama). In April the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) resolved that “There are military considerations which make inadvisable the withdrawal of U.S. forces from overseas bases on the territory of foreign nations in every instance in strict accordance with the time limitation provision of the existing agreement with the foreign government concerned.” State Department officials concurred in this viewpoint.43

Secretary of State Byrnes, Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, and Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson often discussed this issue at their meetings. They were embarrassed by the prospect that American actions in areas of strategic importance to the United States might contradict the high moral tone taken by the American government over the Soviet presence in Iran. Since Galapagos was not so essential, Byrnes, Patterson, and Forrestal agreed to withdraw, provided it was understood that if trouble arose, American troops would be reinserted with or without an agreement. As for the Azores and Iceland, temporary agreements were quickly negotiated that paid obeisance to Portuguese and Icelandic sovereignty and that nicely camouflaged the retention of many American base privileges, sometimes with the use of military personnel dressing in civilian garb.44 Yet when the Kremlin worked out a deal with Iran that provided for an oil concession to the Kremlin in return for the evacuation of Soviet troops, American officials ridiculed it. They pushed for the total excision of Soviet influence lest Soviet leaders use the concession as a cloak for furthering Soviet military goals or for retaining Soviet troops disguised as civilians.45

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43. For an analysis of the considerations bearing on the withdrawal, see Joint Planning Staff (JPS) 784, “Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Bases on the Territory of Foreign Nations,” February 13, 1946, NA, RG 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), CCS 360 (12-9-42), Sec. 15; for the quotation, see JCS 1648, March 24, 1946, ibid. The State–War–Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC) supported this position on April 18, 1946. In July the State Department reiterated the advisability of negotiating new agreements prior to withdrawal, even if this meant violating existing accords. See FRUS, 1946, Vol. 1, pp. 1181–1182.
44. For the discussions of the Secretaries of State, War, and Navy, see the Minutes of the Meetings of the Committee of Three, April 2, 17, 1946, June 26, 1946, July 10, 1946, December 18, 1946, NA, RG 107, Records of the Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson, Safe File, Box 3; Patterson to Byrnes, June 12, 1946, ibid., Box 4; Patterson to Byrnes, June 19, 1946, ibid., General Decimal File, Box 10; Patterson to Acheson, December 7, 1946, ibid., Box 9. For the negotiations with Portugal over the Azores, see FRUS, 1946, Vol. 5, pp. 962–1022.
The ironic parallels, of course, went unnoticed by American officials. While American actions and contraventions of agreements were ennobled by national self-interest and the strategic imperative of defense in depth, American officials would not attribute similar motives to the Kremlin. Although the considerations prompting both the retention and then the belated withdrawal of Russian troops from Iran still remain obscure, one suspects that Soviet military planners were eager to capitalize upon the presence of Soviet troops in Iran to safeguard their strategic interests, especially to help protect their petroleum fields and refining industry. They certainly must have known, as did American planners, that in 1940 the British and French contemplated bombing Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus in order to deny petroleum to the Nazis. Soviet planners, having observed the functioning of the Persian Corridor during World War II, must also have been wary of its future use in wartime if it should be controlled by an adversary. If they were not, they would have been remiss because the initial (and tentative) plans of the United States for waging war against the Soviet Union envisioned, among other things, an air assault from the south (from bases at Cairo–Suez). These war plans also denoted a route through the Balkans or through Iran as one of the few likely avenues for a land invasion of the Soviet Union, should it ever become necessary. If such ideas, however preposterous they may now seem, turned up in American war plans, it is not too improbable that Soviet leaders may also have been worrying about these contingencies, especially as they would have impinged on Soviet vital interests.

Just as the Iranian crisis was ebbing in May 1946 and the Soviets were completing their belated troop withdrawal, General Lucius Clay formally and unilaterally suspended delivery of reparations from the American occupation zone in Germany. The Soviets protested but to no avail. Clay’s action was in response to the failure of the four occupation powers to agree on the economic unification and administration of Germany, as provided for in the Potsdam agreement. Indeed, a few months after Clay’s decision, Clifford

and Elsey cited the Soviet Union’s actions in Germany as one of the litany of items demonstrating Soviet perfidy and untrustworthiness. Yet Clay himself did not blame the Soviet Union for the impasse in Germany. Nor did his superiors in Washington. In June 1946 Secretary of War Patterson and Assistant Secretary Howard C. Petersen, the officials responsible for the implementation of occupation policy, wrote the President that however much the Soviets might benefit from economic unrest and chaos in the western zones of Germany (and in Western Europe), it was the French, not the Soviets, who were the source of the problem and who were most egregiously disregarding the Potsdam accords.47

The Potsdam agreements were imprecise and provided ample opportunity for self-serving interpretations. Two of the most knowledgeable historians dealing with occupation policy refrain from assigning any special responsibility to the Kremlin for the breakdown of allied unity in Germany. The policies of both the United States and the USSR were beleaguered with contradictory impulses; each government tried desperately to define Potsdam in ways that promoted its own interest. By the summer of 1946, for example, the United States had determined that the reconstruction needs of Germany and Western Europe meant that no reparations from current production could go to the Soviet Union. Since Potsdam did not explicitly mandate such transfers, State Department officials argued that the Kremlin was not entitled to them (even though they had been explicitly mentioned in the Yalta agreements). Most foreign governments, including the British, did not share the American view. Yet the Americans were reluctant to modify their position—not because the legal case was unassailable—but because they were much more concerned with the “first charge” and economic unification principles, also incorporated in the Potsdam provisions.48

The “first charge” principle meant that reparations should not be paid until German exports were sufficient to finance German imports (thereby reducing


U.S. occupation costs and abetting economic reconstruction in Western Europe). Yet the “first charge” principle was of little importance to the Kremlin, whose representatives continually insisted that the Western powers should comply with the reparations obligations spelled out at Yalta and Potsdam. Their argument was well founded because section 19 of the Potsdam agreement on economic principles explicitly exempted the transfer of equipment and products from the western zones to the Soviet Union from the application of the “first charge” principle. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of their position, Soviet leaders’ contempt for the “first charge” principle and their tacit support of French opposition to the economic unification of Germany provoked Byrnes in mid-1946 to threaten a reconsideration of Poland’s western border.49 Since the boundary had been the key Soviet achievement at Potsdam and the trade-off for Soviet acceptance of Byrnes’s reparation formula, the American threat must have prompted Soviet officials to wonder who indeed was adhering to agreements.

Assessments of Compliance

The record of adherence to agreements at the onset of the Cold War is not a simple one to assess. Truman and his advisers correctly emphasized substantial shortcomings in the Soviet performance. Soviet leaders violated the Declaration on Liberated Europe in the Balkans and never carried out their pledge to hold free elections in Poland. They meddled in the internal affairs of Iran and were slow to withdraw from that nation. They interpreted “preeminent interests” in Manchuria broadly. They placed more emphasis on the extraction of reparation payments than on the economic unification of Germany. Notwithstanding these facts, the indictment of Soviet compliance written by Clifford and Elsey and articulated by Truman grossly simplified reality. The Soviet understanding of the Yalta provision on the Polish Provisional Government, the Soviet view of the Yalta and Potsdam provisions on Germany, and Soviet expectations in Manchuria were not inconsistent with reasonable interpretations of those agreements. And prior to the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine and the announcement of the Marshall Plan, the Kremlin’s actions in Eastern Europe did not consistently contravene

Yalta's democratic principles. However much American officials remonstrated about Soviet perfidy in Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria, they acknowledged that free elections initially occurred in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and that acceptable governments were established in Austria and Finland.50

By citing Soviet violations, however, American officials excused their own departure from wartime accords and rationalized their adoption of unilateral measures to safeguard American national security interests. But these American initiatives were not simply responses to Soviet transgressions; for the most part Soviet violations did not trigger and cannot be said to have legitimated America's own record of non-compliance. Most Soviet actions in Eastern Europe during the winter and spring of 1945, for example, were legally permissible under the armistice agreements and were compatible with a host of Anglo–Soviet understandings.51 However reprehensible was the imposition of a new government on Rumania, the Soviets were acting within their rights. Since the war against Germany was still under way, since Rumania was governed by the armistice agreement of September 12, 1944, since the Soviet High Command was authorized to act on behalf of the Allied powers, and since the Declaration on Liberated Europe did not supplant the armistice accord, the Soviets were not behaving illegally. Likewise, the Soviet position on the composition of the Polish Provisional Government, the issue that more than any other at the time engendered acrimony, was well within the bounds of any reasonable interpretation of the meaning of the Yalta compromises.

The officials who encouraged Truman to talk tough to Molotov in April 1945 were not motivated by legal niceties. Harriman, Leahy, and Forrestal were frightened by the great vacuums of power that were emerging as a result of the defeat of Germany and Japan. They recognized that the Kremlin would be in a position to fill those vacuums. Although they did not seek a rupture in the great wartime coalition, they were convinced that Soviet power had to be limited. If it were not, and if Soviet leaders proved to have unlimited ambitions, they might use their predominance in Central and Eastern Europe to project their influence into Western Europe, the eastern

Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Prudence, therefore, dictated a policy of containment. The Yalta agreements provided a convenient lever to try to pry open Eastern Europe and to resist Soviet predominance, a predominance that temporarily (and regrettably) had been accepted in the armistice agreements (and, for the British, in the percentages deal) because of wartime exigencies.52

But by April 1945, the European war was in its concluding weeks, and American officials were reassessing the need for Soviet intervention in the Far Eastern struggle. The factors that had demanded compromise and concession at Yalta were no longer so compelling. Prodded by General John R. Deane, the head of the United States Military Mission in Moscow, the JCS formally reevaluated American dependence on Soviet assistance and concluded that however desirable Soviet military aid might be, American foreign policy should not be governed by this consideration. On the very day that Truman lectured Molotov on Soviet compliance, Admiral Leahy wrote in his diary, “It was the consensus of opinion . . . that the time has arrived to take a strong American attitude toward the Soviets, and that no particular harm can now be done to our war prospects even if Russia should slow down or even stop its war effort in Europe and in Asia.” At the same time, Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew and other high level foreign service officers repeatedly emphasized that the Soviet Union was incomparably weaker than the United States. If Washington asserted itself and acted with determination, the Soviets would retreat and perhaps even accept a “genuinely” representative government in Poland. This way of thinking prompted Truman’s bellicose approach to Molotov on April 23.53

A curious mixture of fear and power, not legal considerations, impelled American policymakers to disengage from their own commitments at Yalta. With the war ending in Europe, officials in the White House, the State Department, and the War Department looked at the prospects for postwar

52. For Harriman’s views, see, for example, Harriman and Abel, Special Envoy, pp. 441–454; Memorandum of Conversation, by Bohlen, April 20, 1945, RG 59, Bohlen Papers, Box 4; FRUS, 1945, Vol. 5, pp. 231–234, 839–846. For Leahy’s views, see, for example, ibid., Yalta, p. 107; diary entries, April 20, 23, 1945, Leahy Diaries; also see Millis, Forrestal Diaries, pp. 39–41; Joseph Grew to Truman, May 1, 1945, FRUS, 1945, Vol. 4, pp. 202–203; Mark Ethridge, “Summary Report,” December 7, 1945, ibid., Vol. 5, p. 637; John D. Hickerson to Byrnes, December 10, 1945, ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 407–408.

stability and were appalled by what they saw. The magnitude of economic dislocation and sociopolitical turmoil was frightening. "There is a situation in the world," Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the Senate Committee on Banking and Currency in July 1945, "which threatens the very foundations, the whole fabric of world organization which we have known in our lifetime and which our fathers and grandfathers knew." In liberated Europe, "You find that the railway systems have ceased to operate; that power systems have ceased to operate; the financial systems are destroyed. Ownership of property is in terrific confusion. Management of property is in confusion. Systems of law have to be changed." Not since the eighth century, when the Moslems split the world in two, had conditions been so portentous. Now again, the situation was "one of unparalleled seriousness, in which the whole fabric of social life might go to pieces unless the most energetic steps are taken on all fronts. . . ." 54

Acheson never mentioned the Soviet Union in his testimony; it was not to blame for the conditions he described. But Soviet leaders might exploit these conditions to enhance their power. Hence action had to be taken to cope with these circumstances. While Acheson pleaded for Senate ratification of the Bretton Woods agreements, his colleagues struggled to safeguard German coal, to boost German productivity, and to circumscribe the availability of reparations from the western zones, even if this meant a reversal of some of the understandings reached at Yalta. Likewise, State Department officials remonstrated over Soviet controls in Poland and Hungary not simply because the Yalta provisions on self-determination were being violated but because Polish and Hungarian natural resources, if left open to the West, could aid European recovery. 55

If fear of revolutionary turmoil inspired an autonomous reevaluation of American interests and of American commitments under the Yalta agreements, the atomic bomb stimulated an autonomous reconsideration of American military and diplomatic capabilities. No one was more enamored of the bomb as a diplomatic lever than was Secretary of State Byrnes. From the day in early May that Stimson first briefed the secretary-designate on the Manhattan Project, Byrnes could not resist thinking that the bomb would be his

54. U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Bretton Woods Agreements (Washington, 1945), pp. 19–21, 48–49; diary entry, April 19, 1945, Stimson Papers; and Rosenman to Roosevelt, March 14, 1945, Byrnes Papers, 73 (1).
55. For American concern with Polish coal and Hungarian resources, see, for example, FRUS, 1945, Vol. 5, pp. 374–376, 702–704, 883–925.
trump card. On the one hand, it might precipitate a quick Japanese capitulation, thereby preempting Soviet intervention in Manchuria and obviating the need to make good on the concessions accorded Stalin in Yalta’s secret protocol on the Far East. On the other hand, Byrnes also felt that “our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe.” Just how this would occur, Byrnes never made clear, but American possession of the bomb certainly boosted his (and Truman’s) initial determination to seek the revision of the reparation provisions of the Yalta agreement, to extricate the United States from the Far Eastern protocol of the Crimean accords, and to elicit Soviet compliance with the American interpretation of the application of the Declaration on Liberated Europe to Bulgaria and Rumania. In his diary, Davies noted that Byrnes felt the “Bomb had given us great power, and that in the last analysis, it would control.”

Roosevelt’s death catapulted Byrnes to the forefront of American diplomacy. Since Truman depended on him for a correct interpretation of Yalta, Byrnes’s mistaken understanding of the provisions regarding Poland and the Declaration on Liberated Europe initially contributed to the President’s erroneous impression that the Soviets were violating the meaning of Yalta. But by the time of the Potsdam Conference in July 1945, Truman and Byrnes certainly grasped the fundamentals, if not all the details, of Yalta’s provisions on Germany and the Far East. Their efforts, then, to safeguard the open door in Manchuria and to limit reparations from the western zones of Germany did not stem from ignorance of the Crimean decisions but from their estimation of American needs and capabilities. They were responding not to Soviet transgressions, but to the real and prospective growth of Soviet power. By seeking to backtrack on concessions granted at Yalta, however, they stimulated legitimate queries from Soviet leaders about their own compliance record.

In fact, after the capitulation of Germany, American officials assessed the risks and benefits of compliance and concluded that they had little to gain from adherence to many wartime agreements. On the one hand, compliance might allay Soviet suspicions, temper Soviet ambitions, and encourage Soviet officials to define their self-interest in terms of an interdependent relationship

56. For the quotations, see Sherwin, A World Destroyed, p. 202; and diary entries, July 29, 1945, Davies Papers. Also see Brown log, July 20, 1945, Byrnes Papers; diary entries, May 2, 3, 8, 1945, June 6, 1945, July 21, 23, 24, 30, 1945, August 12–September 4, 1945, Stimson Papers; and Messer, End of an Alliance, pp. 71–117.
57. Messer, End of an Alliance, pp. 39–70.
with the United States. On the other hand, compliance might lock the United States into a strait jacket while the Kremlin consolidated its power in Eastern Europe and Manchuria, capitalized upon economic chaos and political ferment in Western Europe, and exploited anti-colonial sentiments in Asia. Given the risks, American officials chose to define compliance in ways that sought to circumscribe Soviet power in Eastern Europe, maximize American flexibility in western Germany, and buttress Chinese Nationalist interests in China. This orientation meant that, from the onset of the postwar era, American officials were interpreting the wartime accords in ways that placed a higher priority on containing Soviet power and projecting American influence than on perpetuating the wartime alliance.

The Soviets, too, had to weigh the benefits of compliance. On the one hand, compliance might moderate American suspicions, elicit American loans, and reap large reparation payments from the western zones in Germany; on the other hand, compliance might lead to the establishment of hostile governments on the Soviet periphery, risk the incorporation of a revived Germany into a British (or Anglo–American bloc), and arrogate the Kremlin and Eastern Europe to a position of financial and economic dependency. Given these parameters, Soviet officials chose to define compliance in ways that maximized their authority in Eastern Europe, circumscribed Western power in eastern Germany, and enhanced the Kremlin’s flexibility in China. These decisions meant that Soviet officials preferred to place higher priority on unilateral safeguards of their security than on preserving a cooperative approach to postwar reconstruction.

As both Moscow and Washington were prone to see the costs of compliance greatly outweighing the benefits, they began to take tentative steps to jettison or reinterpret key provisions of wartime accords. Each such step magnified the suspicions of the potential adversary and encouraged reciprocal actions. Before long, wartime cooperation was forgotten, the Cold War was under way, and a new arms race was imminent. Neither side was innocent of responsibility; each side felt vulnerable, maneuvered to take advantage of opportunities, and manipulated or violated the compromises, loopholes, and ambiguities of wartime agreements.

Lessons for Contemporary U.S. Policy

It is worth remembering the past when contemplating the future. The Weinberger/Perle thesis, like the Clifford/Elsey report, offers a beguilingly simple
approach to the conduct of American diplomacy with the Kremlin. Briefly stated, their thesis is that Soviet violations of agreements constitute a threat to national security; hence the United States should free itself from constraints and take unilateral action to safeguard its vital interests. Before accepting this view, its premises and conclusion deserve careful scrutiny. The history of compliance at the onset of the Cold War can be instructive.

Although charges of Soviet malfeasance in the fulfillment of their international obligations ring true because of the noxious nature of their internal regime, these allegations should be investigated carefully. The Kremlin’s pattern of compliance with wartime agreements in the immediate aftermath of World War II appears no better or worse than the American record. American disillusionment was great because American leaders misled the American public about the real meaning of wartime agreements. American policymakers hesitated to discuss their concessions; hence Soviet officials and the American public possessed contrasting expectations about what constituted acceptable behavior. Deception created neither understanding at home nor trust abroad.

Allegations of Soviet violations, therefore, need to be checked against the negotiating history of the agreements in question. The records of the Yalta Conference make clear, for example, that the Soviet expectation for Lublin predominance in the Polish Provisional Government was a reasonable interpretation of the Crimean agreement. Likewise, the Soviet belief that the United States conceded a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe was a reasonable inference for the Kremlin to draw from Roosevelt’s acquiescence to the deletion of enforcement provisions from the Declaration on Liberated Europe. Stalin never concealed his view that free elections and self-determination had to be reconciled with his determination to have friendly governments on his borders.

The temptation to make unqualified allegations of Soviet duplicity should be resisted because unsubstantiated charges can distract attention from more fundamental threats to national security. In 1945 and 1946, socioeconomic strife and revolutionary nationalist ferment constituted a much graver danger to the core interests of the United States than did Soviet violations of wartime agreements, numerous though they were. Alleged Soviet violations of the Yalta accords in Manchuria, for example, hardly accounted for the real problems in Northeast Asia. Likewise, Soviet infractions of the Yalta and Potsdam provisions on liberated Europe and Germany hardly constituted the source of Europe’s travail in the aftermath of depression, war, and Nazi domination.
But policymakers in the Truman Administration, including Clifford and Els-ey, felt they could evade ambiguities, clarify options, and mobilize domestic support most effectively by dwelling on Soviet behavior rather than on indigenous unrest. The result was to confuse cause and effect: Americans were educated to view Soviet transgressions as the cause of postwar turmoil and as the principal threat to American national security rather than to see the Kremlin as the primary beneficiary of socioeconomic unrest and revolutionary nationalist upheaval.

The result was that Americans never really grasped the reasons for and the extent of their own government’s disengagement from the wartime agree-ments. The United States backslid on its own commitments and moved toward a policy of unilateralism because American officials believed that the capitulation of Germany and Japan and the spread of postwar unrest jeopardized the entire balance of power on the Eurasian land mass. From the time Truman took office, which nearly coincided with the end of the Euro-pean war, his advisers sought to extricate the United States from many wartime commitments in order to buttress democratic capitalism in Europe and to contain communism and revolutionary nationalism in Northeast Asia and elsewhere around the world. Finally, in the spring of 1947, claiming that the Soviets had not abided by a “single” agreement, Truman insisted that he had to resort to “other methods” and embarked on a policy of unrestrained competition.58 Unilateralism produced benefits, but one should not minimize the costs. The total clampdown on Eastern Europe followed, rather than preceded, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan; the blockade of Berlin followed rather than preceded the decisions to suspend reparations, boost the level of German industry, and carry out the currency reforms in the western zones. In other words, unrestrained competition helped expedite the recovery of Western Europe and Japan, but it also contributed to the division of Europe, the American conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, and the dissipation of trillions of dollars on the arms race.

Yet Weinberger and Perle, like their predecessors in the Truman Admin-istration, still wish to use allegations of Soviet noncompliance as a smoke-screen to legitimate the lifting of restraints on American actions and to justify a policy of unilateralism. The advantages and disadvantages of a policy of unrestrained competition merit discussion. But the proponents of unilater-

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alism commit a disservice and engage in historical distortion when they unqualifiably charge Soviet treachery in the implementation of agreements and when they exploit Americans' self-image of wounded innocence. The experiences of the early Cold War reveal that wartime agreements were violated not by the Soviets alone but by all the signatories and not necessarily because of evil intent but because of apprehension and expediency. Moreover, the greatest threats to American security emanated not from Soviet actions but from exogenous factors. Such knowledge should not cause despair. Notwithstanding the tarnished record of compliance in the past, there is still hope for the future if officials in Moscow and Washington can resist the temptations of unilateral advantage and if they can remain vigilant in the enforcement of their own behavior as well as that of their adversary.