In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as E[conomic] R[ecovery] P[rogram]), and “white” propaganda, to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.


At a recent conference on “George Kennan, the Cold War, and the Future of American Foreign Policy”, Marshall Shulman, who served in the State Department in the early 1950s, warned against historians “who often tend to impose on the objects of their inquiry a pattern and a sense of design that were not there”. Shulman’s injunction was richly pertinent and ironic. It was pertinent because the historian’s search for coherence had converged in the 1990s with a contemporary quest for coherence when the framework of a Cold War against the Soviet Union had collapsed, ironic because the subject of the conference had been a talisman for that coherence even as scholars debated at length what he did or did not mean by “containment”. Although he had only served among the second-tier of policymakers in the State Department and (briefly) an American Ambassador to Moscow and Belgrade, more than forty years after he left Government service, Kennan was still a divining rod for many academics trying to lay out an American foreign policy of clarity and consistency.

While Kennan undoubtedly occupied a key space in the formulation and implementation of US foreign policy from 1947 and 1950, we wish to put an alternative to the assumption of Kennan providing strategic coherence for US foreign policy. Beyond the simple but nevertheless important point that many officials were involved in deliberations over the US response to Soviet Communism, we assert that “strategic coherence”, as applied to US foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is a myth. Kennan’s significance – a characteristic that as a whole can, and should, be applied to the Policy Planning Staff he led – lay not in the development of a comprehensive US strategy but in the establishment and execution of operations in the absence of that strategy. More importantly, the rationale for those operations, developed through the
term “political warfare”, not only re-shaped the nascent strategy that began to emerge at the end of 1948; it also obscured strategic tensions in objectives and methods that were never fully resolved by the Truman Administration or, indeed, by its successor.

On a primary level, political warfare sought the integration of every possible method, short of war, to achieve US objectives. Diplomatic, economic, military, cultural, and covert initiatives were to be augmented and function as greater than the sum of its parts. Political warfare supported the notion of the Cold War as a total conflict against communism, fostering a bureaucratic structure to oversee and implement a coordinated campaign with the participation of state and private actors.

Specifically, the Policy Planning Staff’s “Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare,” originally set out in April 1948, was the first explicit attempt at a comprehensive approach to fight the Cold War through an integrated set of overt and covert operations. However, this attempt occurred before policymakers in the Truman Administration had established the objectives for that Cold War. Indeed, we wish to argue that political warfare, de facto, began to define those objectives through the operations it entailed. This functionalist approach offered the foundation for Kennan and his staff the first opportunity to seek the fulfillment of American aims through a coordination of political, economic, and military measures rather than through the positing of general principles. It could not, however, provide the comprehensive resolution the PPS sought given that they did not have the authority to link methods to integrated objectives.

We propose this view of American foreign policy between 1948 and 1950 through the “prism” of political warfare to offer new insights into long-standing assertions that the tensions in the US confrontation with Soviet Communism lay in a disparity between means and ends, and beyond, we posit that this outlook poses an even greater challenge; namely that there was a distinct lack of a coherent “end” for US foreign policy. Those who were making policy at the highest level, particularly the members of the National Security Council (NSC), remained hesitant and vague in the development and confirmation of a global strategy. The key phrase “the retraction of Soviet power” was reiterated on numerous occasions from 1948 to 1950 but such “retraction” was never fully defined. NSC 68, the purported blueprint for a global offensive against the Soviet Union, and its ideologically-charged prose held in tension the possible objectives of US global policy, declining to move beyond generalities on what constituted “victory” over Moscow. In the absence of a resolution of objectives, it muddled the delineation of methods sought by Kennan and the PPS, and placed greater emphasis on a militarized conflict while still endorsing, in fact expanding, aspects of political warfare.

Because of the PPS’s position vis-à-vis planning and operations in the Washington bureaucracy in 1948, Kennan had a unique opportunity to move from the “tactical” of political objectives to the “strategic” of American global
objectives. This attempt, which rested upon the linkage of containment and liberation by reconciling Western and Eastern Europe through a new policy on Germany, failed because of specific political, economic, and military challenges, but significantly, was not challenged by an alternative strategic conception. Instead, in the continued absence of such a conception, “political warfare” rested uneasily beside the abstracted notion of the Soviet enemy. Its operations would be pursued, not as the implementation of a coherent American strategy, but as part of a continuing bureaucratic impetus that would take US overt and covert interventions beyond Eastern Europe into “the non-Soviet world”.

Expressing his growing disillusionment to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1949, Kennan bemoaned, “I am really not interested in carrying on in government service unless I can feel that we have at least a sporting chance of coping with our problem – that we are not just bravely paddling the antiquated raft of US foreign policy upstream, at a speed of three miles an hour, against a current which is making four.” In fact, the lack of strategic coherence did not necessarily mean US foreign policy would struggle hopelessly against its purported enemies or suffer crippling setbacks in the short term. Yet, if Washington was able to press ahead with individual policies and projects – aided in no small part by preponderant military and economic might – the failure to link political warfare to a coherent set of objectives would remain an ever-present tension at the heart of American foreign policy.

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The United States might have embarked upon a Cold War against the menace of Soviet Communism, but as of autumn 1947, the notion of “political warfare” had yet to be explicitly raised in discussion of US foreign policy. Overt methods had been curbed by President Truman’s initial emphasis on demobilization after World War II, by reorganization of Government departments, and by Congress’s deep cuts in the budgets for information programs. With the Executive Branch focused almost exclusively on reconstruction efforts in Western Europe, discussions as to covert methods were led by the military and limited to the notion of ‘Psychological Warfare,’ which was somewhat mistakenly defined to encompass all variations of propaganda and operations. A subcommittee of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC, later designated SANACC to incorporate the Air Force), assigned to consider the issue from 1946, dealt exclusively with psychological efforts in wartime. The concept of peacetime psychological warfare, defined as all types of covert propaganda and operations, was not formally considered before the end of 1947.

Particular units and individuals did pursue operations to undermine Communist control in Central and Eastern Europe, although they were noteworthy in so far as they were ad hoc and ineffective. The Office of Special Operations (OSO), initially re-housed in the War Department and then the
Central Intelligence Group in 1946, was directed by the military to prepare plans “for long-term penetration...of the key institutions of the Soviet Union and its satellites”. Responding to a further request from the Joint Chief of Staff, the OSO sought the organization of an underground army in Romania and began collecting intelligence on other resistance movements in the Soviet bloc. Working under his own initiative, US Ambassador James McCargar, pursued a covert network to maintain an “independent” Hungary.\(^\text{12}\) These initiatives were also subordinate to the consideration of the State Department, from the Ambassador in Moscow, Walter Bedell Smith, to Secretary of State George Marshall, which pressed for a re-invigorated information effort to challenge the Soviet Union’s “intensive and growing campaign...to discredit American institutions and policies... Materials will be used which will sharpen the contrast between US policies and way of life and those of [the] Soviet Union and its satellite regimes, in terms of human values.”\(^\text{13}\)

Strategically, nascent US efforts at political warfare concentrated upon consolidating its position by reinvigorating the “health” of Western Europe.\(^\text{14}\) In November 1946, the Central Intelligence Group warned, “[The] communists now have sufficient strength to seize power in France whenever they may deem it desirable to do so.” An informal committee of Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Secretary of War Robert Patterson, and Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett subsequently began working “with a number of prominent citizens with access to private funds” to bribe French union and business leaders to counter the threat. In support of this effort, US agencies established an intimate working relationship with the American Federation of Labor and particularly its influential Paris-based representative, and covert operations specialist, Irving Brown.\(^\text{15}\)

In Italy, where the combined efforts of local politicians and the American Ambassador to Rome, James Dunn, were confronting the “psychological challenge” that US policy faced from local communist elements, the Voice of America boosted broadcasting and covert funding was provided to select parties and propaganda initiatives. With Dunn warning that the Italian Communists might “assume” power through “legal means” and Forrestal querying how the US would respond to a “Russian demarche accompanied by simultaneous coups in France and Italy,” the NSC was belatedly pressed to consider urgent action toward Italy in March 1948. NSC 1/3 sanctioned agencies to “continue efforts, by all feasible means including unvouchered funds, to detach the Italian Left-wing Socialists from the Communists,” “assist the Christian Democrats and other selected anti-Communist parties by all feasible means including the initiation of clandestine financial support, and in organizing within those parties para-military groups capable of opposing Communist control,” and to “provide the anti-Communist Italian underground with financial and military assistance.” However, without a clear structure for orchestrated campaigns these initiatives were ad hoc, sporadic, and reliant on local and private operators. Far from setting a comprehensive plan for political
and economic intervention, Kennan and the PPS had concentrated on hypothetical US action in the event of a Communist seizure of power in northern Italy. The Director returned to the notion of a demarcated Italy shortly before the election but was rebuked by colleagues.16

Parallel to the discussions over Western Europe centered in the State Department, the SANACC group, which itself operated on an ad hoc basis, finally delivered their long-awaited report, proposing a National Psychological Warfare Organization “to provide unified direction and authoritative coordination of the national psychological warfare effort and activities, and operations related thereto”17. The new Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, holding out against assigning psychological warfare to a specific agency, responded by calling for the SANACC subgroup to study whether the US should pursue its national security objectives with psychological warfare at that time.18 The group persisted with consideration of “black” as well as “white” operations and in November 1947 presented guidelines “to ensure that all psychological activities were coordinated with our foreign policy and our information program”.19

The SANACC proposal raised a fundamental difficulty in regard to organizational accommodation of the proposed group. Marshall, fearing the public damage that could result from exposure of covert activities, resisted any association with the State Department and even objected to the incorporation of the word “warfare” in a meeting of the NSC.20 Officially, the CIA could not immediately fill the gap given that it was established to collect and analyze intelligence: a problem exacerbated by the unwillingness of its Director for the Agency to engage in anything aside from mandated duties.21 The NSC, beset by a sense of crisis amidst “the vicious psychological efforts of the USSR, its satellite countries and Communist groups to discredit and defeat the aims and activities of the United States and other western powers,” avoided the bureaucratic and legal technicalities by agreeing on the dual-track NSC 4 series that split responsibility for overt and covert initiatives. It instructed the State Department to oversee “the immediate strengthening and coordination of all foreign information measures of the US Government designed to influence attitudes in foreign countries in a direction favorable to the attainment of its objectives,” while in a top-secret annex, it authorized the CIA, “in the interests of world peace and U.S. national security,” to supplement “the foreign information activities of the U.S. Government...[with] covert psychological operations”.22

In the organizational vacuum, arrangements were cumbersome and had little to do with the practical demands of interventions in cases such as France and Italy.23 Meetings of an interdepartmental committee on “foreign information”, led by Assistant Secretary of State George Allen, bogged down in procedural detail. On the covert side, units such as the Special Projects Group (SPG), set up within the CIA’s Office of Special Operations to “develop...ideas on sabotage
and subversive practices preparatory to their use”, were not integrated into the bureaucratic system. The initial support of Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett for proposed SPG operations, such as launching balloons, carrying pamphlets, and radio broadcasts into Eastern Europe, was overturned by the PPS as the “time was not ripe” for “incendiary” propaganda. The SPG’s chief, Thomas Cassady, repeatedly requested a liaison officer and asked the State Department for basic information such as the weekly policy directives for the Voice of America, but it was indicative of his situation that Cassady was even unable to correctly spell Kennan’s name in internal communications.24

It was in the context of this muddle and conflict over political warfare that the thoughts of George Kennan on the need for harmony between overt and covert means, as well as between means and ends, assumed importance. In the Long Telegram of February 1946, Kennan had presented the mirror image of a possible American approach through his depiction of “Soviet policy…conducted on two planes: (1) official plane represented by actions undertaken officially in the name of the Soviet government; and (2) subterranean plane of actions undertaken by agencies for which the Soviet government does not admit responsibility.”25 Returning from Moscow to lecture at the National War College, Kennan further linked this to the development of methods “not [to be used] hit-or-miss as the moment may seem to demand, but in accordance with a pattern of grand strategy no less concrete and no less consistent than that which governs our actions in war.” The United States could no longer treat peacetime and wartime strategy independently. Instead “we must work out a general plan of what the United States wants in this world and we must go after that with all the measures at our disposal, depending on what is indicated by the circumstances.”26

In this proposal for a new US foreign policy Kennan, noting that democracies were traditionally inferior to totalitarian states in their understanding and employment of the “psychological” dimension, did not propose a separate, distinct psychological strategy. To the contrary, he warned, “It would be a mistake to consider psychological measures as anything separate from the rest of diplomacy… [The US must] appreciate the fact that everything it does of any importance at all has a psychological effect abroad as well as at home.” Significantly, given the inception of the Marshall Plan and Kennan’s role in its development, he noted, “Economic assistance is a weapon, and what you do with it has political repercussions...It should be carefully coordinated with political purposes and with psychological warfare.”27

For all the possibilities in Kennan’s attempted integration of methods, there remained a frustrating lack of clarity, even of consideration, of the objectives for which those methods would be deployed. Far from setting out a fully-developed notion of “containment”, Kennan focused more narrowly, if abstractly, on “problems” in relation to methods:
The problems we are faced with today in the international arena are not problems just of the adjustment of disputes. They are problems caused by the conflict of interests between great centers of power and ideology in this world. They are problems of the measures short of war which great powers use to exert pressure on one another for the attainment of their ends. In that sense, they are questions of the measures at the disposal of states, not for the adjustment of disputes, but for the promulgation of power.  

Kennan’s application of this to a general aim was limited to the insistence the US should “keep up at all times a preponderance of strength in the world.” Beyond the ambiguity over “power” in these speeches and writings – whether it was an instrument for the attainment of American objectives or a dominant objective in itself – and beyond the vague consideration of the relationship between the military and the political in relation to power, Kennan posted immediate caveats. For example, “it would be a very dangerous thing for any outside force in the world to contemplate overthrowing the Soviet government.” Any overt or covert assault upon the Soviet Union would likely rally public support around Stalin’s regime even as it posed the greater question of what national entity or entities would replace the USSR. Unwilling to confront such difficulties, Kennan retreated to a general, introductory proposition: “Our government officials concerned with policy should ask themselves very seriously what we really want from the Soviet Government? Do we want it to be destroyed or do we want it to alter its behavior?” This only returned the strategist to the absence of an end for his methods since he could not, or would not, identify the US interests and objectives towards which Soviet behavior would be altered. His injunction was a woolly, arguably far from realistic, appeal implying but not mentioning “liberation”: “Anything we can do to keep on bringing home to the Soviet people that the propaganda of their own government is false, that the outside world is not hostile to them, that it is only their leaders who stand in the way–everything along these lines just increases the strain on the system, and is all to the good in the end.”

Kennan may have articulated the general challenges facing US foreign policy to important officials at the National War College, but he had not filled the strategic vacuum that beset the Government since spring 1946 when the State Department attempted a comprehensive assessment of Soviet foreign policy and the Pentagon responded that the approach lacked clearly defined means, priorities, and objectives. The subsequent Clifford-Elsey report of September collated almost uniform “worst case” assessments from military, diplomatic and intelligence officials; significantly, however, the authors did not seek the view of Secretary of State James Byrnes, who was leading the US delegation at Council of Foreign Ministers meetings. The outcome was a report that met the Soviet threat with the sweeping but limited claim that “the language of military power is the only language which the disciples of power politics understand”. There was little or no delineation of diplomatic, economic, or cultural measures
to accompany this military power and no consideration of objectives beyond the confrontation of the unspecified danger of Moscow.32

Nor did Kennan fill the vacuum when he returned to the State Department in May 1947 to head the newly created PPS. Instead, the Staff pointedly eschewed pursuit of a grand strategy, not attempting to “give any complete or global answer to the problems of United States foreign policy”, with its initial work focused on “individual areas of policy in which, for one reason or another, there was particular need for an orderly and integrated approach” given that this could not occur elsewhere in the Department.33 The situation was further complicated by Kennan’s public projections, notably his ‘Mr. X’ article in *Foreign Affairs* in July 1947. Far from clarifying means and objectives, the essay, with its strident language, risked a dangerous misstatement of global ambitions. As Kennan later wrote, a “great deficiency” of the article “was the failure to distinguish between various geographic areas, and to make clear that the ‘Containment’ of which I was speaking was not something that I thought we could, necessarily, do everywhere successfully, or even needed to do everywhere successfully, in order to serve the purpose I had in mind”.34

Kennan was on much firmer ground when he used the Marshall Plan to further a practical approach to an integration of methods.35 Identifying and breaking “particular bottlenecks” in European production and distribution was not just an economic approach, as the strategist explained, “The purpose of this action would be on the one hand psychological – to put us on the offensive instead of the defensive, to convince the European peoples that we mean business, to serve as a catalyst for their hope and confidence, and to dramatize for our people the nature of Europe’s problems and the importance of American assistance.”36 In the case of Eastern Europe, the offer of aid was made predominantly for psychological, rather than economic, impact, as both Kennan and his close friend and fellow Soviet expert, Charles Bohlen (correctly) assumed that the Soviet Union would prevent any Communist country from accepting US money. The forced rejection would not only place responsibility for worsening Soviet-American relations upon the Kremlin but would also sow seeds of dissent behind the Iron Curtain.37 Kennan enthusiastically noted to Marshall that the “Russians [had been] smoked out in relations with satellite countries... Events of past weeks the greatest blow to European Communism since the termination of hostilities.”38

As Kennan later noted, “The psychological success at the outset was so amazing that we felt the psychological effects was four-fifths accomplished before the first supplies, arrived.”39 The Marshall Plan did not constitute an organized, coordinated approach to political warfare, however. The interventions in Western Europe co-existed with the inertia of general planning under NSC 4 and the SPG’s erratic schemes for “propaganda” behind the Iron Curtain. Planning by SANACC was hindered by the strict division of operations between those in peacetime, to be carried out by the State Department, and
those in wartime, which fell under the military’s jurisdiction. Frustrated by the lack of progress, the military establishment called for a separate psychological warfare agency that would report to the NSC, a demand that the State Department resisted as an encroachment on its domain.\(^{40}\)

It was in this bureaucratic context that Kennan, or rather the PPS, offered the first proposal for “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare”.\(^{41}\) While the Italian campaign may have brought de facto containment, the PPS and other State Department officials agreed that the ad hoc nature of planning and operations was not suitable beyond the short term. The US Government needed to acknowledge that the battle against the Soviet bloc required long-term orchestration of bureaucracy and methods:

This Government has, of course, in part consciously and in part unconsciously, been conducting political warfare. Aggressive Soviet political warfare has driven us overtly first to the Truman Doctrine, next to ERP, then to sponsorship of Western Union, and finally into the covert activities in which we engaged during the Italian elections. This was all political warfare and should be recognized as such. Understanding the concept of political warfare, we should also recognize that there are two major types of political warfare – one overt and the other covert. Both, from their basic nature, should be directed and coordinated by the Department of State... Having assumed greater international responsibilities than ever before in our history and having been engaged by the full might of the Kremlin’s political warfare, we cannot afford to leave unmobilized our resources for covert political warfare. We cannot afford in the future, in perhaps more serious political crises, to scramble into impromptu covert operations as we did at the time of the Italian elections.\(^{42}\)

The “Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare” was an attempt to clear the obstacles encountered under the NSC 4 directives, and to establish responsibility for the direction and coordination of an approach incorporating overt and covert activities. The memo dramatically noted, “The time is now fully ripe for the creation of a covert political warfare operations directorate within the Government. If we are to engage in such operations, they must be under unified direction. One man must be boss. And he must, as those responsible for the overt phases of political warfare, be answerable to the Secretary of State, who directs the whole in coordination”.\(^{43}\)

Ideally, Kennan would have liked the CIA to have day-to-day oversight, but his dislike for Hillenkoetter, shared by other officials, led him to write, “At the present time, the CIA set-up in respect both to personalities and organization is not favorable to such a development.” Although State Department and military personnel continued to respond positively to the case for political warfare, the NSC could not agree where a new covert agency should be located.\(^{44}\)
Increasingly frustrated, Kennan dramatically appealed to Lovett: “We are concerned here in the Staff about the political warfare question. If the Executive Branch does not act soon to firm up its ideas as to what should be done along these lines, the possibility of getting secret funds out of Congress for covert operations will be lost. If this is not done now, it will mean that this Government has given up hope of conducting effective political warfare activities for the duration of this administration.”

Kennan initially pursued a solution where Allen Dulles would take over as DCI, or failing this, as head of the new political warfare division. However, when Dulles refused to return to Government service, Kennan set out his alternative: since political warfare had emanated from the PPS, “if [covert operations] are to be done at all, [they] must be done under the intimate direction and control of this Department”. In principle, the NSC’s resolution of June 1948, NSC 10/2, mandated supervision through “an Operations Advisory Committee composed of one representative of the Secretary of State and one representative of the Secretary of Defense”; in practice, Kennan had taken matters into his own hands by ensuring that the PPS would have oversight through its liaison with the new entity.

Had the PPS limited itself to issues of structure and control, “The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare” might have been simply one of many contributions to a discussion that culminated in June 1948 in the adoption of NSC 10/2 and the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). However, Kennan’s Staff also devoted much of their attention to specific programs. Bolstered by the formal authorization of the ERP by Congress as well as the ‘perceived success’ in Italy, the PPS used the April 1948 memorandum to pursue consolidation of an allied Western Europe. There would be support of “Indigenous Anti-Communist Elements in Threatened Countries of the Free World” and “Preventive Direct Action in Free Countries.”

Equally important, the PPS proposed a plan of battle for Eastern Europe that could use the instruments and organization developed by the Staff for political warfare. This was a fundamental shift for Kennan, who had remarked in September 1946: “Sorry, but the fact of the matter is that we do not have power in Eastern Europe really to do anything but talk. You see what I mean. It seems to me this issue is a rather theoretical one. There is no real action we can take there except to state our case.” Although Kennan never considered Eastern Europe in the Mr. X article, he began to reconsider his position, pondering before audiences whether “a communist regime…which turned on its masters, repudiated the Kremlin’s authority and bit the hand which had reared it, might be…favorable to the interests of this country and to world peace.” He began to redress the strategic oversight in late 1947 through the addition of George Butler and John Paton Davies to the PPS, both of whom suggested close attention to the region. By February 1948 the Staff, noting the US was “ill equipped to engage in the political and psychological conflict with the Soviet
world now forced upon us,” proposed the use of refugees from the Soviet Union to assist psychological warfare efforts and to provide information to US intelligence services.53

State Department officials overseeing European affairs, such as Llewellyn Thompson, immediately lodged objections to the aggressive nature of these operations, worrying that they could hamper diplomatic efforts:

I believe it would be a serious error to sponsor the establishment of “Freedom Committees” if so called. This is not simply a matter of nomenclature but a question of substance. If established, such [committees] would presumably attract the principal political refugees of all nationalities in this country. If the avowed purpose of these committees is the freedom of the countries concerned, or in other words the overthrow of the governments now there, this Government would be seriously handicapped in any relations with them, for...we would furnish an excuse to these countries for the breaking of relations.54

Thompson’s argument, in line with most opinion in the Department, indicated that efforts should concentrate on Western Europe, but undeterred, the PPS continued to propose the penetration of the Iron Curtain through encouragement and even covert support of anti-Communist elements in the satellite states and within Russia itself. Political refugees, propaganda, radio and private US citizens and organizations would all be utilized, and resistance groups would be supplied with weapons and equipment for “active opposition measures”. In mid-April, four PPS proposals were presented to officials of the European and Near Eastern and African desks and Bohlen, the Counselor for Political Affairs, for comment. The meeting discussed only the two more moderate proposals, rejecting the idea of ‘liberation sub-committees’ and limiting efforts supporting anti-Communist elements to countries outside the Iron Curtain.55

“The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare” was no less than an attempt to override such objections. Yet it had taken on significance beyond the intra-State Department dispute over liberation. For Kennan and the Staff, future action regarding Eastern Europe was now inextricably linked to American plans for the western part of the continent. The Marshall Plan and political and military structures to support it, interventions in France and Italy, and liberation committees had now – in practice if not in a strategic blueprint – been integrated. Making explicit reference to “Underground Activities Behind the Iron Curtain”, the document mandated the liberation committees to “(a) act as foci of national hope and revive a sense of purpose among political refugees from the Soviet World; (b) provide an inspiration for continuing popular resistance within the countries of the Soviet World; and (c) serve as a potential nucleus for all-out liberation movements in the event of war.”56 Two months
later, considering Tito’s split from the Soviet bloc, the PPS noted, “A new factor of fundamental and profound significance has been introduced into the world communist movement,” and contended, “The possibility of defection from Moscow…will from now on be present in one form or another in the mind of every Communist leader.” While the SPG offered proposals to exploit the assertion of “national communism” in Yugoslavia, the PPS furthered its consideration of how to weld refugees, émigrés, and defectors in North America and Europe into an effective anti-Soviet force.

When the proposal for support and use of defectors and refugees from the Communist bloc was sent to Lovett and Executive Secretary of the NSC, Sidney Souers, they deemed it unnecessary to table it before the Council. In effect the PPS had been sanctioned, against the objections of others in the State Department, to reinforce the American position in Western Europe, but also, support operations behind the Iron Curtain. The Staff’s authority was further bolstered since, with the failure of the CIA to take responsibility for operations, PPS took up supervision of covert activities. Davies developed the Staff’s initiative for an institute for émigrés, put forth incentives to increase the number of defectors, and began to identify specific individuals of intelligence and operational value, working with contacts such as Carmel Offie and Frank Wisner, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Areas, who Kennan would later propose as the candidate to head the OPC.

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The US confrontation of Soviet Communism in Europe was being shaped not by a strategic blueprint but through the PPS’s “functional” definition of responsibilities and operations. Yet if the Staff and political warfare were de facto pressing the US Government towards certain objectives, the core problem remained: without a clear statement of strategic aims, how far could operations and planning be developed and implemented?

In March 1948, the first attempt to define aims had been presented in NSC 7. Reiterating the declaration of the Clifford-Elsey Report that “the ultimate objective of Soviet-directed world communism is the domination of the world,” it suggested that Moscow’s defeat was “vital” to US security and concluded that the US should “take the lead in organizing a world-wide counter-offensive aimed at mobilizing and strengthening our own and anti-communist forces in the non-Soviet world, and at undermining the strength of the communist forces in the Soviet world.” The statement had little immediate impact, however, given that it emanated from the NSC Staff rather than the PPS or another established agency. The only enthusiasm for the guidance came from the military, while it was given short shrift by key State Department officials such as Bohlen, Dean Rusk, Loy Henderson, and John Hickerson who considered the paper “too general...[T]he recommendations are not clear and specific enough, and...it is not a satisfactory document for approval by NSC on an important
problem.” While some members of the PPS felt there were certain recommendations worthy of consideration, Kennan stalled and asked for time to prepare a paper on the topic.\textsuperscript{61}

Instead, it was another “functional” debate that finally led to consideration of a grand strategy. This time the initiative came from Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, who in May 1948 requested clarification of the objectives towards which mobilization and positioning of US military forces should be directed. The PPS responded by producing PPS 33 on “Factors Affecting the Nature of the U.S. Defense Arrangements in the Light of Soviet Policies,”\textsuperscript{62} but Forrestal persisted with his objection that the guidance was insufficient. Whether or not he welcomed the challenge to link the PPS’s own functional approach on political warfare to strategic objectives, Kennan could not defer the wider issue of American aims any longer. He reported to the PPS on June 7 that he had completed a draft considering “Objectives of U.S. Policy towards USSR”.\textsuperscript{63}

It was with the unexpected news of Yugoslavia’s break from the Soviet Union that Kennan’s reaction became an opportunity to press the PPS’s wider vision of a pan-European approach. The Staff concluded:

A new factor of fundamental and profound significance has been introduced into the communist movement by the demonstration that the Kremlin can be successfully be defied by one of its own minions... The possibility of defection from Moscow, which has heretofore been unthinkable for foreign communist leaders, will from now on be present in one form or another in the mind of every one of them.

If the PPS moved with caution on the specific issue, urging US acceptance of any Yugoslav demonstration of “a wish to establish better relations with the west”,\textsuperscript{64} it seized the initiative in the first presentation of Washington’s global objectives. To curb the power and influence of Moscow and to bring about a “basic change in the theory and practice of international relations” by the Soviet regime, PPS 38 suggested that the US pursue the “retraction” of Soviet power by means short of war and “encourage by every means possible the development inside the Soviet Union of institutions of federalism which would permit a revival of the national life of the Baltic peoples”.\textsuperscript{65}

The weakness of PPS 38, despite the case of Yugoslavia, was the broad assertion of retraction did not actually lead to endorsement of a specific program of political warfare operations. State Department officials such as Hickerson and Sam Reber maintained the challenge of early 1948, questioning whether “retraction” was tantamount to a call for regime change.\textsuperscript{66} At one level, the PPS blustered, “We are entirely within our own rights, and need feel no sense of guilt, in working for the destruction of concepts inconsistent with world peace and stability and for their replacement by ones of tolerance and international
collaboration… In doing so, we are entitled to let the chips fall where they may in terms of internal development.” Still it hesitated, even with cases such as Tito’s split from Moscow, to “raise issues of prestige for the Soviet Government which would automatically make war inevitable.”

Considering an area of opportunity such as the Baltic States, the PPS declared that the US might logically believe it should seek “something at least approaching a decent state of freedom and independence”, but it would have to accept “merely to induce Moscow to permit the return to the respective Baltic countries of all of their nationals who have been forcibly removed from there and the establishment in those countries of autonomous regimes generally consistent with the cultural needs and national aspirations of the peoples in question.” Caugh between the ambition for liberation and a recognition of the dangers in pursuing it, the PPS retreated to the magical, non-military attraction of the Marshall Plan, which was “forcing the Russians either to permit the satellite countries to enter into a relationship of economic collaboration with the west of Europe which would inevitably have strengthened East-West bonds and weakened the exclusive orientation of these countries toward Russia or to force them to remain outside this structure of collaboration at heavy economic sacrifice to themselves”. This would “tear off the veil with which Moscow likes to screen its power and which forces the Russians to reveal the crude and ugly outlines of their hold” over the satellite countries.

Three months of consideration by departments and the NSC did not address these complications. NSC 20/4 adopted the objectives of “the gradual retraction of undue Russian power and influence from the present perimeter areas around traditional Russian boundaries and the emergence of the satellite countries as entities independent of the USSR,” and “a revival of the national life of groups evidencing the ability and determination to achieve and maintain national independence.” However, it linked these to the aim of “comp[elling] the Soviet Government to recognize the practical undesirability of acting on the basis of its present concepts and the necessity of behaving in accordance with precepts of international conduct”. The Truman Administration had both offered a vision of the break-up of the Soviet bloc and accepted the possibility of co-existence through negotiations with Moscow if the Soviet leadership demonstrated appropriate “conduct”. No high-level official made clear whether the United States would be negotiating with the Communists from an unassailable position of strength, eroding and finally overturning the enemy’s position in Eastern Europe, or whether liberation was simply a tactic to bring about an accommodation and long-term agreement, advantageous to US interests, over areas such as Western Europe and Asia.

Kennan had not only anticipated these ambiguities but had tried to confront them even as PPS 38 was being discussed. It would not be enough to link operations in Western and Eastern Europe through general statements. Instead political warfare would have to be built into a strategic approach giving
substance to the prospect of liberation, an approach which not only highlighted the “negative” of Communist regimes but offered the “positive” – as with the Marshall Plan – of benefits to Eastern European peoples if they joined a US-led economic and political system. Specifically, to “avoid congealment of Europe along the present lines…[the] entrance into a free European community of the present satellite countries” would be encouraged through the unification of Germany.71

Kennan’s proposal soon ran into trouble, however, before the objections of key officials in the State Department and in the US High Commission in Germany. The PPS Director offered reassurances that a united Germany would be within the ERP and that the Soviet Union would not have a major role in reparations or supervision of German affairs, initially winning the support of prominent consultants such as Dean Acheson. The effort was to no avail, however, as Secretary of State Marshall supported the view of subordinates that US policy must “bring Western Germany into close association with the free democratic states of Western Europe”.72

With the failure to build political warfare into a pan-European policy fulfilling NSC 20/4’s mandate, Kennan and the PPS pressed on with OPC operations that might constitute a comprehensive program.73 In early August Kennan, opening with the declaration that “political warfare was an instrument of foreign policy”, met with Wisner, Hillenkoetter, military representatives, and the Executive Secretary of the NSC. Primarily, the gathering was to agree the procedures for oversight of the OPC, but Kennan was already pursuing implementation of the program for political warfare. He asserted, “It might be desirable for the new operation to be able to work through some kind of public ‘‘American freedom committee’ in dealing with foreign nationality groups in the United States.” To ensure his control of the program, Kennan insisted that he would need “to have specific knowledge of the objectives of every operation and also the procedures and methods employed in all cases where those procedures and methods involved political decisions.”74

By the end of October 1948 Wisner, who had been meeting Kennan on a weekly basis, informed Hillenkoetter that an overall program of activity had been agreed with “high-level, security-cleared representatives of Army, Navy, Air Force, JCS and State”. The agreement outlined four functional groups for psychological warfare, political warfare, economic warfare, and “preventive direct action”, as well as a miscellaneous group for front organization, war plans, and administration. The 16 programs under the functional groups ranged from press and radio operations to “poison pen” campaigns, to counterfeiting, to sabotage, and support of resistance movements. In one instance that would later prove significance, OPC officials met with advisors like Allen Dulles and Dewitt Poole to set up a broadcasting operation for Eastern Europe.75 Finance came through an agreement with high-level officials of the Economic Cooperation Administration under which the OPC gained access to five percent
of Marshall Plan ‘counterpart funds’. One OPC official summarized, “We couldn’t spend it all… There were no limits and nobody had to account for it. It was amazing.”

Commenting to Wisner on the OPC’s proposed projects for 1949-50, Kennan not only gave full encouragement but also hinted that he would press for a more assertive approach: “This presentation contains the minimum of what is required from the foreign policy standpoint in the way of covert operations during the coming year. There may be one or two instances in which we have to ask you to add to the list of functions set forth in this representation.” This operational response to the strategic vacuum was embodied in two initiatives on either side of the Iron Curtain.

For Germany, Kennan pursued political warfare through the handling of defectors and refugees. He ensured cover for the OPC’s Operation Bloodstone, which envisaged the recruitment and mobilization of an émigré force for intelligence, espionage, and paramilitary operations, by informing Lovett, “Mr. Wisner is going to encounter, as one of his first major obstacles, the problem of cooperation with the Army in Germany. He has asked us to give him a boost in this respect.” Lovett in turn formally requested the support of Forrestal, as “this political warfare program in Europe will be effective only if it receives the whole-hearted cooperation of the United States military authorities.”

Meanwhile Kennan’s concept of liberation committees, supported covertly by the US Government through a private organization, was established in April 1949 as the National Committee for Free Europe. The NCFE, formally lodged as a non-profit body in the state of Delaware but overseen by the State Department and the OPC, would work with Eastern European émigrés in a “propaganda” effort including books, pamphlets, a university in France, balloon operations, and Radio Free Europe. John Paton Davies pressed ahead with the policy on the use of defectors from Eastern Europe, considering whether to use all “weapons in the armory of clandestine operations” given “the propensity of the revolution to devour its own”.

Bolstered by definitive evidence of Tito’s break with Moscow, the PPS and OPC also won support from other agencies for their campaign to destabilize the Communist system: “Titoism as a disintegrating force in the Kremlin monolith and should be stimulated and encouraged by all devices of propaganda.” A new policy paper, modifying Kennan’s initial response of summer 1948, not only considered economic aid and ad hoc military supplies to Tito, but also proposed an approach to the Yugoslav leader “on the Albania question with a view to preventing action…which would endanger or unduly complicate our policy”. This “demonstration” in Albania would fulfill the promise of political warfare by “(a) assisting in the overthrow of [the] present pro-Kremlin regime by a pro-Tito gang or (b) assisting in the setting up of a new regime which
would be anti-Communist and therefore pro-western”. Spurred by the PPS, Undersecretary of State James Webb told Wisner, “Tito’s performance and the Tito heresy are causing the Cominform more disturbance and woe than any single thing which has occurred since the war…We should put considerable effort into spreading the story of the Tito heresy, and moreover…we should endeavor to induce similar developments in other Communist areas and within the Communist Parties of free areas.” The NSC followed in December with conversion of a PPS paper into its first policy on Eastern Europe: “The time is now ripe for us to place greater emphasis on the offensive to consider whether we cannot do more to cause the elimination or at least a reduction of predominant influence in the satellite states of Eastern Europe.” The ultimate objective would be “independent, non-totalitarian, and non-communist governments willing to accommodate themselves to, and participate in, the free world community.” In the short term, however, political warfare would “foster communist heresy among the satellite states and, without compromising the morality underlying US support of freedom and liberty, encourage the emergence of non-Stalinist regimes as temporary administrations even though they be communist in nature”.

Eighteen months after its seminal memorandum, the PPS’s mobilization of political warfare still offered the prospect of a definition of American objectives through specific operations. Reviewing the situation in October 1949, John Paton Davies noted that the Staff had fostered the creation of a “Russian non-returnee organization in Europe…to conduct psychological warfare against the Soviet regime” and had prepared for civil disturbances in the Soviet Union in time of war. He proposed the extension of these activities, including large-scale leaflet drops by balloon, to foster suspicion and denunciations within Soviet borders and suggested that the US should also “overtly enlist small cadres from anti-Soviet elements among the various ‘nationalities’ of Soviet non-returnees, training them as airborne paratroopers to fight a guerrilla war”.

However, neither Davies nor his boss could resolve the strategic challenge left by NSC 20/4: how was liberation related to the contest with the Soviets over Western Europe? Renewing the fight over ‘Program A’ for Germany after Dean Acheson’s installation as Secretary of State in January 1949, Kennan announced that as the American goal of saving Western Europe from communism had “been achieved to a great extent, our objective now must be to obtain the retraction of Soviet power from Eastern Europe. If we can do this, war should not be necessary.” Following the end of the Berlin Blockade, he followed with the assertion before the NSC that the Soviet Union “recognized their weakness” in Germany and “appeared to have adopted a containment policy as we have”. However, Kennan ultimately failed to win support from superiors inside and outside the State Department for his vision of a unified strategy.
Further isolated by his opposition to the creation of NATO, he could not obtain both the aggressive pursuit of liberation in Eastern Europe and an accommodation with Moscow over the center of the continent.⁹⁰

A similar, if secondary, scene was being played out over the impending Chinese Communist revolution. In April 1949, Kennan’s staff and the OPC had liaised over propaganda operations, and in October, meetings with State Department officials agreed upon increased use of radio and pamphlets and covert operations in areas bordering China.⁹¹ Kennan pulled together the strands for Dean Rusk, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East: “Some of these mouthpieces will inevitably go bad on us or get off the track. That is a risk which any imaginative and aggressive covert organization must take…but only by intelligently taking such risks will we achieve the initiative, prolific and catholic appeal necessary to produce quickly in Communist China a widespread reaction against Soviet imperialism.”⁹² One of those risks may have been Wisner’s purchase of General Claire Chennault’s Civil Air Transport, to supply guerrillas and carry out propaganda. Even more provocatively, Kennan suggested that these operations were complemented by the unilateral assertion of American authority over Taiwan.⁹³

These initiatives did not constitute a considered strategic vision, such as the driving of a “wedge” between Beijing and Moscow.⁹⁴ To the contrary, the emphasis on “black” propaganda and support of anti-Communist forces cut against any possible exploitation of tensions between Mao Zedong and the Soviet leadership, even before Mao’s declaration of June 1949 of a policy “leaning to one side” towards Moscow. As late as December 1949, the NSC continued to endorse the “soft” pursuit of rollback of Chinese Communism, “maintain[ing] so far as feasible active contact with all elements in China … [with] our cultural and informational program at the most active feasible level”. At the same time the Council, in language reflecting its cumbersome, hesitant, and incoherent approach, imposed limits upon intervention: “The US should continue the policies of avoiding military and political support of any non-Communist elements in China unless such elements are willing actively to resist communism with or without US aid and unless such support would mean reasonable resistance to the communists and contribute to the overall national interests of the United States.”⁹⁵

With the failure to integrate methods and objectives, the PPS could only claim a Pyrrhic victory for operations in the midst of strategic setbacks. Yet even this achievement of political warfare was threatened when Paul Nitze replaced Kennan as PPS director at the end of 1949. Soon after joining the PPS,⁹⁶ Nitze had set out a “militarized” approach towards the enemy, declaring that the US must make clear its intention to use atomic weapons and becoming a firm advocate of the hydrogen bomb. While he did not go as far as to argue that the Soviet Union would directly start a military conflict with the US, Nitze contended that Moscow could prompt a clash through provocation of the
Kennan sent valedictory messages to Acheson to ensure that political warfare survived him: “Remember, Russians haven’t attacked anyone militarily since V-J day. Their successes, such as they have been, have been primarily in the minds of men.” The appeal rang hollow, however, for without a European program, Kennan could no longer establish what political warfare would achieve. Bolstered by a new Joint Chiefs of Staff study that Soviet “sufficiency” negated American atomic superiority, Nitze counter-attacked by elevating Moscow’s threat beyond the “political”, ironically using the event that first brought Kennan to prominence:

Stalin’s election speech of 1946 was an open declaration of hostility and since that time the USSR has given every sign that it neither intends to abandon the struggle, other than on its own terms, nor pause in its prosecution... This approach, on the one hand, that it can achieve success over the US without ever resorting to an all-out military assault. On the other hand, it leaves open the possibility of a quick Soviet decision to resort to military action, locally or generally.

Nitze asserted that “the USSR considers this a favorable and necessary moment for increased political pressure and, when feasible, taking aggressive political action against all or most soft spots in its periphery” but, unlike his predecessor, he linked this to “a possible use of force in local areas, which might lead to an accidental outbreak of general military conflict”.

But, if he had eclipsed his predecessor, Nitze had to confront the recurrent question: what were American objectives beyond the general stand against Soviet Communism? The “solution” was to offer no specific resolution of the relationship between containment and liberation, particularly in the European context. Instead the general portrayal of the Soviet menace and the US willingness to meet that menace would become, in and of itself, the defining objective of American policy.

In this abstracted conception of the Cold War, power would no longer be exercised to achieve defined strategic objectives; rather, the exercise of power was a sufficient end for policymakers. Significantly NSC 68, the April 1950 extension of NSC 20/4 drafted by Nitze and the State-Defense Review Group, did not reject political warfare. It simply placed this alongside the hydrogen bomb, an expansion of conventional forces, redoubled US economic and military aid to allies, covert operations, and an invigorated “information program” without defining the relationship between the methods, let alone the connections between methods and aims. Removing any meaningful distinction between political warfare and a militarized conflict, Robert Lovett summarized: “We are now in a war worse than we have ever experienced. It is not a cold war. It is a hot war. The only difference is that death comes more slowly and in
In a 1985 article, George Kennan asserted, “Excessive secrecy, duplicity and clandestine skullduggery are simply not our dish...[since] such operations conflict with our own traditional standards and compromise our diplomacy in other areas.” Reflecting on the development of US foreign policy between 1948 and 1950, however, this statement is more a reductionist caricature of operations than a renunciation of the concept of political warfare. The caricature was not a complete falsehood, of course; long before the traumas of the Vietnam era, dramatic attempts at liberation had collapsed in Albania, Poland, the Baltic States, and Hungary. Only four years after “The Inauguration of Political Warfare”, the NSC Senior Staff was opining, “The encouragement of communist heresy in the satellites, as an intermediate stage between Kremlin domination and democratic freedom, had been proven to be an unrewarding and unrealistic policy.”

The fundamental problem, however, was not simply a set of misguided operations; it was that the PPS’s functionalist approach was never linked with a defined set of objectives. Kennan’s complaint in late 1948 that US foreign policy was “the gross product of a series of isolated and haphazard actions, uncoordinated among themselves and only vaguely related to specific concepts” was not answered by NSC 68, instead, the prospects for political warfare were suspended as other officials placed an emphasis on “hard power”. Three months before the presentation of the document, Kennan complained, presciently but with little effect, to Acheson:

[There is] no automatic means of “stopping communism” on our part, particularly where it is primarily a matter of men’s minds. Military occupation or direct military action [are] not always [a] fool-proof remedy.

Ironically, Kennan had created some of the obstacles to strategic success, notably through his belated consideration of the relationship between operations and aims across Europe. In his memoirs, he lamented that the “failure to mention the satellite area of Eastern Europe” in the Mr. X article contributed to the larger mistake of not articulating “the political containment of a political threat”. In retrospect, that conception of political warfare should have been promoted through “not one but twenty” public statements.

When Kennan finally pursued an integrated approach in 1949, it is clear that he no longer had sufficient organizational status or influence to bring weight to bear on the situation. Yet speculation as to whether Kennan would have experienced greater success if he had done so during 1947 is idle. At that point, he was not prepared to fill the gap between specific operations and a general
statement, even as he confessed, “If I thought for a moment that the precedent of Greece and Turkey obliged us to try and do the same thing in China, I would throw up my hands and say we had better have a whole new approach to the affairs of the world.” Indeed, with the possible exception of PPS 38 in August 1948, the PPS pursued its mission not through grand strategic concepts but through stimulation of and involvement in operations.

To the extent that this attention to operations brought the integration of overt and covert methods, the PPS achieved short-lived but significant success in assuring that the instruments of US foreign policy worked coherently, or at least more so than previously. Testimony to that success can be read in repeated attempts at coordination throughout the 1950s, from Truman’s Psychological Strategy Board to Eisenhower’s Operations Coordinating Board. Yet it would never meet the challenge set out by Kennan at the National War College in September 1946: “We have to learn to reclassify our weapons not primarily by whether they are military in nature or measures short of war, but by the purpose we are going to use them for.”

Kennan and his Staff were not felled by an alternative approach that linked means and ends, but succumbed to an abstracted notion that eschewed any such connections. Bureaucratically, Kennan’s attempt to develop political warfare through the unification of Germany was blocked by colleagues’ accusations of unacceptable compromise, Congressional opposition, and Western European sensibilities. Strategically, the broad and rather confusing response of NSC 68 was to claim “total war” against the monolithic Communist threat in an environment where the possession of atomic weaponry and the size of Soviet conventional forces made actual war, at least in a direct confrontation with Moscow, unthinkable. So, while Kennan’s specific course of action was rejected, the tools and organization he fostered were not only sustained but also expanded. The outcome was a curious inversion beyond the particular and the universal: the so-called “total” military buildup embraced by NSC 68, accompanied by a generalized, even caricatured rendition of the Soviet foe, led to an uneasy co-existence even as the legacy of Kennan’s “political warfare” continued to hold out the prospect of victory through subversion and economic pressure.

Publicly and privately, US policymakers could not resolve this paradox. If events in Korea established all too clearly the perils of military “liberation,” then high-level indecision, particularly over Eastern Europe, meant that political warfare was never specifically endorsed as the basis of a non-military liberation. The injunction to retract the Soviet Union continued to provide the rationale, first to the OPC and then to the CIA, to pursue operations behind the Iron Curtain, albeit with the NSC’s caveat, “We do not feel confident that we have sufficient strength to make the risks of [liberation] acceptably low.” Mallory Browne, revisiting the issue in May 1952 as a member of the Psychological Strategy Board, identified the nettle that had never been and
would never be grasped:

An offensive concept of psycho-strategy requires less an official change of policy than a frank recognition of what is really implicit in our existing policy objectives, i.e.:

a) abandoning “containment” and openly espousing “liberation”;

b) scrapping – not necessarily in public but in our strategic planning – the passive wishful thinking of “coexistence” and adopting a positive approach that acknowledges the vital necessity of overthrowing the Kremlin regime;

c) discarding our present strategy of fighting a defensive delaying action in the cold war while we prepare primarily to defend ourselves in a hot one, and substituting, therefore, a fully planned and phased global strategy of offensive underground fighting.\(^{112}\)

Or, as the CIA concluded even more succinctly, “The U.S. has been unable to arrive at a definitive answer for the fundamental question of whether it is possible to live with the Kremlin or whether it must be destroyed.”\(^{113}\) In this atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty, it was so much that US foreign policy was “working towards a coherent strategy”\(^{114}\) as that coherence was never pursued, let alone achieved, after 1950.

One could respond to this charge of incoherence with a “so what?” Having declared total conflict, even though one was unthinkable, the US Government could then select under this umbrella any particular method and specific objective it might wish to pursue. To the extent that this rationale overlay the consolidation of the American position in, and relationship with, Western Europe and other “stable” areas of the Free World, one might even claim success. Similarly, if political warfare could return more acceptable regimes in countries from Iran to Guatemala to the Dominican Republic, then who could complain, even if these interventions had a tenuous connection to the Soviet threat?

Alternatively, one could posit that the tension between objectives such as containment and liberation was overlaid by a more significant consistency, in essence, the “strategic object [of] the massive mobilization and assertion of US power” for its own sake.\(^{115}\) “Dominance” did not necessarily lay in the attainment of specific political, economic, or military goals, but in the display of capabilities and resources that might attain them. Provocatively stated, the goal might not be victory in the Cold War but a never-ending advance towards it. Whether or not the “success” of US policies was actual or illusionary was immaterial; what was essential was a \textit{perception of success} in which US operations fulfilled the ideological mandate of the battle for the Free World against Soviet tyranny.
In either case NSC 68’s foundation was not necessarily, as one historian framed it, that “the very existence of the Soviet Union constituted a nightmare,” but that the existence of the Soviet Union could be constructed as a nightmare to rationalize the use of power. The problem with such a construction was that cases would always arise that highlighted the gaps between methods and unattained objectives, in the process, exposing the limits of power. For success in the arena of Western Europe, there was the public collapse of liberation in the East in 1956; for the interventions that secured pro-American leadership in a British Guiana or an Indonesia, there were prominent failures from Syria to Cuba to North Vietnam. And, when the abstracted deployment of “power” ended, not in the defense and extension of the American position set out in “The Inauguration of Political Warfare,” but in a cycle of setbacks within and eventually beyond the Cold War, Kennan would lament, “The political warfare initiative was the greatest mistake I ever made…it did not work out the way I conceived it.”

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http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/intel/index.html, Document 269. [henceforth FRUS Intell, followed by Document number.]


The best-known incarnation of this notion of Kennan is John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). See also the Revised and Updated edition, 2005.

The major work on Kennan and the Policy Planning Staff is Wilson D. Miscamble, George F. Kennan and the Making American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), which emphasizes the absence of a grand design and suggests various “on-site builders” such as Kennan who contributed to the emergent US foreign policy. Recently Miscamble has warned against the dangers of misinterpreting Kennan’s role and the consequences for contemporary conceptions of US foreign policy. Miscamble, “George F. Kennan, the Policy Planning Staff, and Containment,” (paper at SHAFR 2006 Annual Meeting).

See, for example, Gaddis’ uncritiqued assumption in Strategies of Containment (p. ix) that American policymakers act on “strategic” or “geopolitical” codes that are stable and consistent.


Kennan to Acheson, January 3, 1949. Box 48, Lot 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


While political warfare endorsed methods considered under the rubric of “psychological warfare”, the concepts are not synonymous. Significantly, US agencies from 1948 established a clear demarcation between the two. See William Daugherty & Morris Janowitz, A Psychological


14 For a discussion of Kennan’s concern and desire to reinvigorate “‘western health”, see Anders Stephanson, Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 52, 95-96.


16 Kaeten Mistry, “The Case for Political Warfare: Strategy, Organization & US Involvement in the 1948 Italian Election” Cold War History (August 2006): 306-17, NSC 1/3, “The Position of the United States with Respect to Italy in Light of the Possibility of Communist Participation in the Government by Legal Means,” November 14, 1947. NSC Meetings, Box 176, PSF, Subject File, HSTL; PPS, “Possible Action by the U.S. to Assist the Italian Government in the Event of Communist Seizure of North Italy and the Establishment of an Italian Communist ‘Government’ in That Area,” September 24, 1947. FRUS, 1947, III, 976-81. A month before the election and with tensions at a heightened state, Kennan dispatched an infamous memo from Manila suggesting the Italian Communist Party be outlawed in order to prevent a electoral defeat for pro-US forces. Acknowledging the strong probability this would provoke a Civil War, Kennan suggested a militarily divided Italy was a better option. Calmer heads prevailed and John D. Hickerson of the Office of European Affairs promptly rejected the proposal. Kennan to Secretary of State, March 15, 1948. FRUS, 1948, III, 848-49, note 3. Following their paper on a hypothetical demarcation of Italy in September 1947, the PPS paid little attention to the case in the lead up to the election, with Kennan himself in Asia when he made his hasty suggestion, which in reality, was never likely to be adopted.

17 Moseley (Secretary of SANACC) to Lovett, October 15, 1947. FRUS Intell, Document 242.

18 Hillenkoetter to SANACC, October 22, 1947. FRUS Intell, Document 244.


27 Kennan, “Measures Short of War (Diplomatic),” MSW: NWC, 9-10. See also the subsequent discussion in George F. Kennan Papers, Folder 12, Box 16, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. For a contrasting view of Kennan’s approach to “counter-force”, see Stephanson, Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy, 96-77.

28 Kennan, “Measures Short of War (Diplomatic),” MSW: NWC, 4-5 (original emphasis).


30 Kennan, “Structure of Internal Power in U.S.S.R.,” and subsequent discussion, MSW: NWC, 42. Kennan’s redress of these dilemmas, in his promotion of “containment” of the Soviets to audiences throughout 1946 and 1947, was a timeframe for a Soviet Union which either collapsed from within or, more likely, had to negotiate with the United States from a position of weakness. However, this timeframe varied widely – from six months to 15 years – depending on the nature of his listeners. More importantly, the timeframe was simply an aspiration and was not based on a sustained development of means and ends. See the summary in Walter Hixson, George F. Kennan: Cold War Iconoclast (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 36-7.

31 State Department Policy and Information Statement, “Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,”


35 See in this regard Miscamble, *George F. Kennan*, 40.


41 There is some doubt as to how much of the memo the Director actually drafted. Bedridden with ulcers upon his return to Washington at the end of March after a trip to Asia, Kennan did not return to his desk until April 19, 1948. Kennan, *Memoirs*, 404. Indeed, it serves to confirm the notion that ‘political warfare’ was far from the creation of a single, far-sighted strategist: instead, it was developed by a group fighting for bureaucratic position and for organization of disparate approaches and operations.


46 Kennan to Lovett and Marshall, May 19, 1948. *FRUS Intell*, Document 276. Dulles, as one of the three members of the CIA Survey Group, presented an interim report warning against covert intelligence and operations bring “farmed out,” since it would “jeopardize their effectiveness and involve serious security risks. In particular, it would be dangerous to have several unrelated and uncorrelated clandestine operations carried out in such sensitive areas as those behind the Iron Curtain.” Intelligence Survey Group to Souers, “Interim Report 2. Relations between Secret Operations and Secret Intelligence,” May 13, 1948. *FRUS Intell*, Document 275.


48 NSC 10/2, June 18, 1948. *FRUS Intell*, Document 292. Despite the immediate bureaucratic victory, Kennan was still dissatisfied over the failure to establish a long-term solution over authority, accepting NSC 10/2 as “probably the best arrangement we can get at this time.” His qualms were to prove well founded. Kennan to Lovett & Marshall, 16 June 1948. *FRUS Intell*, Document 289.

49 NSC 10/2, June 18, 1948. *op.cit.*


54 Llewellyn Thompson to Butler, April 7, 1948. Box 11A, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.

55 PPS to Bohlen, Hickerson, Henderson, Butterworth, Woodward, April 22, 1948. Box 8, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


61 Butler to Lovett, April 9, 1948; Forrestal to NSC, “The Position of the United States with Respect to Soviet-Directed World Communism”, April 17, 1948. Box 8, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


63 Minutes of PPS Meeting, June 7, 1948, cited in Miscamble, George F. Kennan, 189.


67 PPS 38, August 18, 1948. op.cit.

68 PPS 38, August 18, 1948. op.cit.


70 The confusion dated back to Kennan’s comments on the Clifford-Elsey report of September 1946: “I would like to see it emphasized that we cannot hope to achieve any basic change in the Soviet outlook toward us by high-level conversation or negotiations with Russian figures... Our best chances of influencing the Soviet Government consist in keeping it confronted with a set of circumstances which make it unmistakably clear that action contrary to our conception of a decent world order will rebound to the disadvantage of the Soviet regime whereas friendly and cooperative action will pay dividends.” Kennan comments, September 16, 1946. Folder 3, Box 63, Elsey Papers, HSTL. See also Stephanson’s evaluation of Kennan’s “intermittent incoherence” regarding negotiations with the Soviet Union. Stephanson, Kennan and the Art of American Foreign Policy, 103.


72 See Leffler, A Preponderance of Power, 230-1; Miscamble, George F. Kennan, 151-54.

73 The PPS liaison with the OPC, Robert Joyce, was so supportive of covert action, including the plan to topple the Albanian Government, that OPC staff considered him “more CIA than the CIA”. Quoted in Evan Thomas, The Very Best Men: Four Who Dared: The Early Years of the CIA (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 40.

74 Memorandum of Conversation and Understanding, August 6, 1948. FRUS Intell, Document 294; Kennan to Wisner, August 31, 1948. Box 11A, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


Quoted in Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 40-41. The General Counsel to the CIA, Lawrence Houston, commented, “Wisner would think these things up and get them cleared by Bob Joyce at State. He tried to keep me out of it. But his recruits would come to me and say, ‘What are we doing?’ There was a lot of consternation.” Thomas, *The Very Best Men*, 41.

Kennan to Acheson, January 3, 1949; Kennan to Wisner, January 6, 1949. Box 11A, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


Lovett to Forrestal, October 1, 1948; Forrestal to Lovett, October 4, 1948; Kennan to Lovett, October 29, 1948. *FRUS Intell*, Documents 301, 304-305. See also Wisner to Staff, June 1, 1949, *FRUS Intell*, Document 310. By 1952 the OPC would have 1,200 personnel working in Germany. Gregory F. Treverton, *Covert Action: The CIA and American Intervention in the Postwar World* (New York: Basic, 1987), 38.


Davies memorandum, “Political Warfare Against the Soviet Union”, October 19, 1949. Box 11A, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


“Preliminary Areas of Agreement with Respect to Ideological Campaigns in China,” October 6, 1949. Box 20, Lot File 53 D 47, RG59, NARA.


An effective refutation of the hypothesis of a coherent “wedge” strategy is offered by Miscamble, *George F. Kennan*, 235-8.


Ironically, in light of the subsequent shift in bureaucratic power, Kennan had pressed for the addition of Nitze to his staff against the advice of Dean Acheson. Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of American Foreign Policy*, 204.


In contrast to Miscamble’s analysis, it was this lack of an “objective” for political warfare, rather than a failure “to inculcate his ideas and vision even among his closest collaborators,” that meant Kennan’s staff would easily swing their support behind Nitze’s alternative ‘militarized’ conception in NSC 68. Miscamble, *George F. Kennan*, 310.

Nitze study on recent Soviet measures, February 8, 1950. *FRUS*, 1950, Vol.I, 145-47. Kennan framed the contrast between his approach and that of Nitze: “When there was talk of intentions, as opposed to capabilities, [Nitze] would say, ‘How can you measure intentions? We can’t be bothered to get into psychology; we have to face the Russians as competitors, militarily.’” Quoted in Strobe Talbott, *The Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 57.

Quoted in Talbott, *The Master of the Game*, 55. Kennan’s mission was reduced to a letter to Undersecretary of State Webb at the end of March 1950, asking to be relieved of his responsibility for overseeing the OPC and calling for an overhaul of the arrangements for covert activity. He received no response, and days before leaving the State Department in July, he had to remind Webb that the procedures for supervision of covert operations, set out in NSC 10/2, were effectively suspended. Kennan to Webb, March 30, 1950; June 21, 1950. Box 34, Lot File 64 D 563, RG59, NARA.


Quoted in Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, p. 42

Kennan address, December 21, 1948, quoted in Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy*, 177.


On strategy vs. tactics, see Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of American Foreign Policy*, 197.
This focus upon Kennan has risked the oversight that he was only one actor – albeit a highly influential one – amongst numerous protagonists that debated and developed US foreign policy in the Truman Administration. Specifically, the work of the PPS demonstrates that although Kennan directed the group, the Staff were instrumental in propelling the evolution and promotion of political warfare. This was most evident in the case of Eastern Europe, where Robert Joyce and John Paton Davies, while always keeping Kennan informed, were given relative autonomy to develop projects. Indeed, the continued role of such figures within the PPS after Kennan's replacement by Nitze illustrates that political warfare was bigger than, and outlived the influence of, one of the key officials who had conceptualized and articulated the concept. For more on the relationship between Kennan, Joyce and Davies, see Miscamble, *George F. Kennan*, 199, 207-10.

Kennan, “Measures Short of War (Diplomatic),” MSW: NWC, 17.


Quoted in Lucas, *Freedom’s War*, 149. This recognition of NSC 68’s failure to address the core strategic questions, by covering the shortcoming with an abstracted portrayal of the Soviet menace, exposes the limitation of assertions that the document was merely a continuation of NSC 20/4 with “more, more, and more money to implement the programs and to achieve the goals already set out.” Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin*, 57; Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power*, 356.

PSB Staff Study, “Overall Strategic Concept for our Psychological Operations,” May 7, 1952. Box 15, PSB Files, SMOF, HSTL.


There is much to consider in the irony that Kennan’s failure in 1950 to establish a coherent policy fulfilling American objectives led him to a speculative conclusion supporting, rather than refuting, this shift regarding “power” in NSC 68: “Governments have a purpose: the exercise, preservation, and sometimes expansion of power. Power is a clear, identifiable relationship.” Quoted in Stephanson, *Kennan and the Art of American Foreign Policy*, 188. See also Anders Stephanson, “Liberty or Death: The Cold War as US Ideology,” in *Rewriting the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (London, Portland: Frank Cass Series, Cold War History 1, 2000), 90.
