

# AMERICA'S FAILING EMPIRE:

U.S. FOREIGN RELATIONS SINCE THE COLD WAR

Warren I. Cohen





★ AMERICA'S FAILING EMPIRE ★

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- 1 *America's Failing Empire*  
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FOR MY CHILDREN,  
GEOFF AND ANNE  
AND MY GRANDCHILDREN,  
GRACE AND TESS  
AASE MARIE AND MIRIAM,  
ALL OF WHOM  
WOULD HAVE MADE MY FATHER,  
MURRAY COHEN (1909–63),  
VERY PROUD





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## INTRODUCTION: THE COLD WAR AS HISTORY, 1945–89

In 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, signaled to the world that he was withdrawing Moscow from the confrontation with the United States, generally known as the Cold War. For more than 40 years, the two great empires had competed to make the world safe for their respective visions. What had begun as a familiar great power contest in an anarchic world had become an ideological crusade as well, perceived on both sides as a struggle between liberal democracy and communism. Now Gorbachev had concluded that his nation could no longer afford the effort. The Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse and his only hope of revitalizing it was to surrender its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, reduce military spending, and end subsidies to its friends around the world. The Cold War was over. Among American leaders, a profound and persistent suspicion of Soviet motives would slowly give way to a sense of having triumphed in an epic struggle.

When World War II ended in 1945, the men who had led the United States to victory were determined to do whatever was necessary to protect the interests and security of their country. They concluded that Americans, their values, and their friends abroad would be safe only if American power, economic, political, and military, was sufficient to deter any potential transgressor. Although there were many bumps along the way, the decisions Gorbachev made in 1989 indicated that the “wise men” of 1940’s Washington had been successful.

The economic dominance of the United States had been assured by the international economic regime created at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. Meeting in New Hampshire in July of that year, the representatives of 44 nations agreed to the outline of a postwar monetary regime. The

principal goal of the conference was the creation of mechanisms for assuring stable exchange rates to facilitate the expansion of international trade. To that end the participants created the International Monetary Fund (IMF), designed to provide member nations with assistance whenever their balance of payments (the balance between funds coming in through exports, services, tourism, remissions, etc., and funds expended for imports, overseas travel, and investments by one's nationals) was in deficit. They also created a bank for reconstruction and development which came to be known as the World Bank to provide or guarantee loans private bankers might find unattractive. In addition, beyond the scope of the conference, the American planners envisioned an international trade organization (initially the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and subsequently the World Trade Organization (WTO), that would gradually eliminate restrictive trade practices.

The United States, as the wealthiest nation in the world, with an economy that had rebounded from the Great Depression and manifested extraordinary productivity during the war, would provide much of the funding required by these institutions – and maintain a commensurate degree of control over their operations. There was never any doubt, anywhere in the world, that the Bretton Woods system was designed to serve the long-term interests of the United States. In a willing suspension of disbelief, the leaders of other nations accepted the idea that what was good for America would be good for the world; that the world would benefit from the responsible and generous position to which the United States had committed itself.

Politically, American leaders expected to exercise influence through the United Nations. They were of a generation that had been taught that the failure of the United States to join the League of Nations after World War I had invited Japanese, Italian, and German aggression in the 1930s. They would not repeat that mistake. The United States would join the new international organization. Washington – and the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council – would be able to veto substantive (as opposed to procedural) measures of the Security Council guaranteeing that the UN could never take effective action against American interests. In the 1940s, however, it seemed highly unlikely that the UN would ever oppose the United States when so many of its members were dependent upon American largesse. Ostensibly an organization for collective security, American leaders perceived it as an instrument of American foreign policy. The validity of that perception did not come into question until the 1960s – and then in large part because of the great expansion of membership as the decolonization process created new independent states.

In the course of World War II, the United States had constructed an enormously powerful military machine and the admirals and generals who ran it were loath to dismantle it. American troops had conquered scores of Pacific islands once controlled by the Japanese. The U.S. Navy had no intention of surrendering any of these. They would become part of the new empire, the fortified positions that would make the Pacific an American lake. In Japan, in Europe, and in the Middle East, during and after the war, the American military gained control of the bases that the men in Washington perceived as vital to assuring the dominance of the United States in the parts of the world that they considered critical. There was nothing sinister about their efforts: they were charged with assuring the security of the nation and facilitating the expansion of its influence and they acted as they deemed necessary to meet their responsibilities.

The principal obstacle to ensuring American predominance in the immediate postwar era was the unwillingness of most of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress to make any further sacrifices. After the Japanese surrender in August, 1945, they saw no need to keep their fathers, brothers, and sons overseas, or even in uniform. The threat from Germany and Japan had been eliminated.

They demanded and won an extraordinarily rapid demobilization of the armed forces. The United States had joined the United Nations. It had a monopoly of nuclear weapons. Surely it no longer needed its military. The popular attitude toward taxes was comparable. The people had tightened their belts to pay for the war. Now they wanted to spend their money on all the goods they had done without. Shrewd politicians were quick to promise tax cuts.

In this context, admirals determined to maintain a two-ocean navy, and air force generals eager for a postwar role, scanned the horizon for danger – and the Soviet Union was the obvious candidate. Only months after General Douglas MacArthur accepted the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay, Washington buzzed with concerns over the Soviet threat.

With the access to Soviet archives gained after the Soviet collapse, there can no longer be any doubt of Josef Stalin's hostile intentions toward the West. American leaders who were troubled by Soviet actions in Eastern Europe and worried about possible conflict with the Soviet Union were unquestionably perceptive. But they also knew that the Soviets did not pose an imminent threat to the United States or its friends in Western Europe. The Red Army was not coming, at least not any time soon.

The challenge to those who led the country in the late 1940s – Harry Truman, George Marshall, Dean Acheson – was to persuade the American people and the Congress to make immediate sacrifices to stave off a danger

that *might* emerge five or ten years down the line. The United States would have to reconstitute its military power and project it all over the world to assure American dominance – and, presumably, world peace. Only an American imperium, a Pax Americana, would protect the best interests of humankind – and that would cost billions of dollars, taxpayers' dollars.

Acheson proved equal to the challenge. He explained to a Congress elected with a mandate to cut government spending and taxes that the Soviet Union had embarked on a course of conquest, beginning with Greece and Turkey, then the rest of the Middle East, spreading its influence like the rot in a barrel of apples across Africa, South Asia, Europe – and tomorrow the world. Stalin could be stopped, but only by the United States, and only if Congress recognized the danger and appropriated the funds the government needed to save what came to be known as the “free world.”

The elected representatives of the American people gave the government what it wanted. They funded aid to Greece and Turkey to help “free peoples” resist communist pressures. They passed the European Recovery Act – the Marshall Plan – to facilitate the reconstruction of Western European economies, a prerequisite to implementation of the Bretton Woods system. Wisely, the United States allowed the Europeans to design their recovery program rather than imposing one made in Washington. American dollars and American military advisers began to move into distant regions. The new American mission to control as much of the world as possible to contain the evil of Soviet communism was under way.

The British and other Europeans closer to Soviet forces did not have to be persuaded of the threat. Indeed, the British had feared the Americans were insufficiently concerned. Several European leaders urged the United States to post troops in Western Europe and to forge the alliance that emerged as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). A prominent Norwegian scholar called it “empire by invitation.” Most Europeans were prepared to accept the idea that an American presence would be benign.

Acheson and his staff also concluded, after a study known as NSC-68 which was presented to the president early in 1950, that the American military budget would have to be tripled to build the kind of force that could counter the Soviets or their proxies anywhere they probed. Truman thought it ludicrous, politically suicidal – and unnecessary. But Stalin rescued the plan when he enabled Kim Il Sung's North Korean army to attack South Korea in June 1950. The nature and imminence of the Soviet threat appeared obvious, and in the process of leading those forces repelling the North Koreans – and the Chinese Communists who came to their defense – the United States began a major military build-up. When the war ended,

40,000 American troops remained in Korea to deter a future attack. Based in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and on a long string of Pacific islands, American troops attempted to halt the spread of Soviet influence in the region.

There was one other part of the world that became enormously important to the United States after World War II: the Middle East. Historically, Americans had not perceived any vital interest in the area. The United States was, after all, a net exporter of oil until the 1950s. But an assured flow of oil at a reasonable price was essential not only to American military and industrial power, but to that of its friends and allies as well. The oil of the Middle East was a vital ingredient of the international economic system Washington advocated – and American oil companies were eager to have access to it. A symbiotic relationship developed between the United States and Saudi Arabia, possessor of the world's largest petroleum reserves. The Saudis kept the oil flowing and the Americans offered protection from radical Arab states, such as the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser or the Iraq of Saddam Hussein. Control of the Persian Gulf, through which much of the world's oil traveled, came to be viewed as a vital American interest.

Although access to oil was the principal concern of the United States in the Middle East, a second concern – for the well-being of the state of Israel – greatly complicated American involvement in the region. After World War II, many European Jews who survived the Holocaust, victims of the world's earlier indifference and persecution, were allowed to migrate to Palestine and promised a homeland there. The return of the Jews to their ancient land displaced thousands of Palestinian Arabs who did not move aside voluntarily. The Palestinians and their Arab neighbors fought war after war against the Israelis and both sides manipulated the superpowers to obtain aid for their respective causes. Truman, contrary to the advice of his secretaries of state and defense who were fearful of antagonizing the Arab world, had been quick to recognize Israel when it declared its existence in May, 1948. His domestic political advisers thought it urgent to lock-in the pro-Zionist vote before the November election. The Eisenhower administration attempted to remain aloof from the Arab-Israeli conflict, but in the 1960s, as the Soviets aided several Arab countries, the United States became Israel's principal backer and *de facto* ally. Increasingly hostility toward the Jewish state among Arabs and other Muslims was directed toward the United States as well.

As the confrontation with the Soviet Union and its allies developed, the United States retreated from its historic opposition to colonialism. This was

most apparent in East Asia, where American aid to metropolitan France and the Netherlands facilitated efforts by those countries to reimpose their control over Indochina and the East Indies. Revolutionaries in both colonies had hoped for American support, quoting Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, or Wilson in their appeals for self-determination. But American leaders were reluctant to antagonize their European allies and fearful of communist influence in the independence movements. They pressured the Dutch to withdraw only after becoming convinced that non-communist nationalists would control a free Indonesia – and that continued warfare played into the hands of Indonesian communists. In Indochina, the Americans muted their criticism of the French early, began aiding them in May, 1950, and ultimately supplanted them in the mid-1950s. After all, Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese leader of the struggle against France, was a communist.

Similarly, Washington withheld criticism of Belgian and Portuguese imperialism in Africa. American actions failed to match the traditional anti-imperialist rhetoric that had fired the imagination of so many of the colonized peoples of the world. And among the peoples of what came to be called the Third World, mostly nations aligned with neither the Americans nor the Soviets, the United States began to be perceived as the power that allowed for the persistence of colonialism, that propped up the European imperialists who oppressed them.

America also ceased to be viewed as the beacon of democracy – although the American people stubbornly held to that image of their country. Commitment to democratic norms and respect for human rights no longer seemed an important criterion for obtaining support. Virtually any regime that espoused anticommunism, however abhorrent its government, could count on American military and economic assistance – Francisco Franco in Spain, Antonio Salazar in Portugal, the Colonels in Greece, the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, the Shah of Iran, Muhammad Zia-ul Haq in Pakistan, Chiang Kai-shek in China and Taiwan, Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, and Chun Doo Hwan in Korea, Suharto in Indonesia, Joseph Mobutu in the Congo, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, to name a few.

Earlier in its history, the United States had not hesitated to intervene in the internal affairs of Mexico and various states in Central America and the Caribbean whenever the men in Washington considered their country's strategic or economic interests at stake. Sometimes they perceived themselves as merely giving lessons in good government. In the context of the Cold War, this practice was extended across the globe.

As early as 1948, the United States secretly poured funds into Italy to support candidates it preferred in a democratic election. In the 1950s, it removed suspect leaders in Iran and Guatemala and tried unsuccessfully to



do the same in Indonesia and Laos. It installed a government of its choosing in Vietnam and encouraged a coup against it in 1963 when it no longer behaved to Washington's satisfaction. Efforts to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba failed, despite subcontracting his planned assassination to the Mafia, but the United States moved quickly to prevent alleged Castro supporters from taking control in the Dominican Republic in 1965. It conspired to bring down the democratically elected government of Salvatore Allende in Chile. In each instance, American presidents – Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon – acted to preserve or enhance the security of the empire, with little cost in American lives and with minimal awareness among the American people.

Intervention in Vietnam proved to be a very different story. In 1954, the Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh, forced the French to withdraw from Indochina. As part of the Geneva Agreements that halted the fighting, Vietnam was divided *temporarily* at the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel to permit the opposing forces to disengage. The country was to be reunified after an election in 1956 in which Ho was the overwhelming favorite to win popular support. Eisenhower described him as the George Washington of his people. Unwilling to allow the communists to gain control of the entire country, Eisenhower intervened to prevent the election. The United States had claimed success in containing Soviet influence in Europe. American leaders were determined to do as well fighting the Cold War in Asia, where the principal communist threat appeared to come from Moscow's Beijing ally. The Chinese had aided Ho in his struggle against the French and were assumed to have great influence over his government. Eisenhower described Vietnam as the first in a set of potentially falling dominoes in Southeast Asia. He and his advisers chose to draw the line at the 19<sup>th</sup> parallel, south of which communism would not be permitted to spread. The United States attempted to create a separate state out of southern Vietnam and supported Ngo Dinh Diem, a prominent anticommunist nationalist to head its government.

The attempt to create a nation in southern Vietnam failed miserably. Unable to accomplish its goal of establishing a viable anticommunist regime through financial and technical assistance, Washington, beginning with the Kennedy administration, turned the assignment over to its military with traumatic results. To the astonishment and horror of the American public, the deployment of more than 500,000 American troops by President Johnson and the use of all sorts of advanced military technology, did not suffice to win the day. The mighty United States was defeated by a Third World people unwilling to yield to overwhelming power, and prepared to pay any price to assure its independence.

Worst of all, from the perspective of American leaders, more than 50,000 young Americans died fighting in Vietnam. Public support for the war eroded and increasing numbers of Americans became convinced that maintaining such imperial outposts was not worth the cost – a feeling intensified by the impact of the war’s financing on the nation’s economy.

The so-called Vietnam syndrome put a brake on American interventionism in distant lands for a few years. After withdrawing ignominiously from Vietnam in 1973, empire building seemed to lose momentum. Activities that required large-scale American military forces were out of the question; so, too, were costly covert operations employing local troops or mercenaries, as in Angola. Congress asserted itself against the White House, against the “imperial presidency,” insisting that the urge to expand the influence of the United States was not contributing to the security or well-being of the American people. There were few advocates of isolationism, but there was a widespread feeling that the nation had over-reached itself, that the foreign policy elite, the “best and the brightest,” had led the country astray. The crusade against communism faltered.

Indeed, for a few years in the early 1970s, as the United States extricated itself from Vietnam, the question of whether the containment of communism was the ultimate purpose of American foreign policy seemed worthy of debate. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, pursuing a policy of *détente*, had ended decades of hostility between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. They had both traveled to Beijing to court Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist leader responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of his own people. Their goal was not to persuade him to improve his government’s performance in human rights, but rather to align his nation with the United States against their common Soviet adversary. Meeting with a significant degree of success, they used the rapprochement with China as a lever with which to win the moderation of Soviet behavior. For a few years, Cold War tensions eased. However fleeting, it seemed that this was the triumph of Nixon/Kissinger *Realpolitik* over ideology.

Unfortunately, the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, had no intention of ending the competition with the United States in the Third World. He certainly had no intention of surrendering any influence the Soviet Union had gained since the end of World War II. In 1968, when Soviet-backed forces crushed a Czech communist government planning to create a multiparty system, he had claimed the right to intervene to preserve “socialist” regimes – the “Brezhnev Doctrine.” The doctrine was still very much in force a decade later when the communist government of Afghanistan verged on collapse. It marched the Red Army to the rescue, horrifying the men and women in Washington who had visions of ending the Cold War. President

Jimmy Carter had normalized relations with China, his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, was working frantically to strengthen *détente* with the Soviets, and Carter had dreamt of being remembered for efforts worldwide on behalf of human rights. Hyperbolically, he pronounced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to be the gravest danger to world peace since World War II and began a new arms buildup in the United States. A new era of confrontation between the two great empires began.

The Soviets were shocked by the forcefulness of Carter's response and went on the defensive in the court of world opinion. Their war in Afghanistan gradually drained resources from their already seriously troubled economy. Their army, no matter how brutally it performed, could not crush Afghan guerrilla forces, supplied primarily by the United States and China, with enormously important assistance from Pakistan. From across the Muslim world, *jihadis* traveled to Afghanistan to fight alongside the local *mujahadin* against the Soviet infidels. By the mid-1980s, American Green Berets were slipping into Afghanistan to train anti-Soviet forces in the use of shoulder launched Stinger antiaircraft missiles to take out Soviet helicopters. The Soviets had met their own Vietnam and their economy proved far less resilient than that of the Americans. Moscow could no longer bear the cost of empire.

Throughout the confrontation with the Soviet Union, the men and women who directed the course of American foreign policy perceived the United States as the leader and protector of friendly states across the globe. Few, if any, among them thought of their country as an imperial power dominating half the world, controlling the destinies of billions of people. Friendly nations were allies, not subjects. In theory, major decisions were made in consultation. Leaders of allied states were not puppets. Washington could not dictate to Charles de Gaulle, the haughty French president who withdrew his forces from NATO command, or to Park Chung Hee, the Korean general who seized power in Seoul, or to Ferdinand Marcos, who decided to end democracy in the Philippines. Japan could not be forced to open its markets to American goods and services.

But no American leader in the Cold War era doubted that the United States was the dominant power in the noncommunist world; that all major decisions would be made in Washington. The commitment to consulting with friends and allies was genuine and generally respected, but the Americans were always prepared to act unilaterally. There were no important instances when arguments from other states stopped the United States from doing what its policymakers thought necessary. In the case of Korea in 1950, the United States won the support of a compliant UN, fought the

war under the UN flag, but provided the military leadership, controlled the military decisions, and provided the largest number of foreign troops participating. On that occasion, it obtained key support from Great Britain and significant support from several other UN member states. In Vietnam, however, American allies were far less willing to join the fray. Much of the little outside support was bought and paid for, as, for example, the Korean contingent, funded entirely by the United States.

The unsuccessful war to prevent a communist victory over all of Vietnam was overwhelmingly an American war, directed, financed, fought, and lost by Americans. Increasingly in the 1980s, American interventions found little or no support from the nation's friends as it sent troops to Lebanon and Grenada, planes against Qaddafi's Libya, and aid to the contras in Nicaragua.

As the Cold War wound down in the mid-1980s, largely as a result of Gorbachev's recognition of the internal rot in the Soviet Union and its East European allies, the United States was also staggering. Many analysts wrote of its imminent decline. The Yale historian Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), stressing the danger of imperial "overstretch" became a bestseller. In particular, the American economy was in trouble. American industry was performing poorly, falling behind foreign competitors, specifically the Germans and Japanese, widely perceived as the real "winners" of the Cold War. The administration of Ronald Reagan had run up an enormous deficit in the federal budget, cutting taxes at the same time that it increased military spending. In the 1980s, the world's leading creditor nation since World War I became the world's leading debtor nation.

There were other problems as well. The United Nations was no longer an instrument of American foreign policy. Third World countries, usually supported by the Soviets and their allies, had turned the organization against the United States. The UN could do little harm to American interests, thanks to the veto, but as a platform for opposition to those interests and to American values, it was now perceived in Washington as an irritant rather than an asset. Congress began withholding American dues to the UN, hindering some of its operations.

The brightest spot remaining was military power. No nation, not even the Soviet Union, could match American military power. American military technology, specifically the design of so-called "smart" weapons that could home in on selected targets, was intimidating. Only the Soviet Union, with its huge conventional forces, its missiles and its nuclear weapons, could deter the United States from using its power when and where it pleased.

If the Cold War did end, what new course might American policymakers choose? Most of the international economic system the United States had created at Bretton Woods – the IMF, the World Bank, GATT – remained in place. By 1989, even the People’s Republic of China was eager to play a part in it, working toward a market economy “with Chinese characteristics,” attracting foreign capital and expanding its international trade exponentially. The Soviet model, the command economy, was discredited. If a future administration in Washington could get the deficit under control, if American industry could recover its competitiveness – very big “ifs,” indeed – the United States could continue to lead if not dominate the international economic system.

And if the Soviet Union chose to play a more constructive role in the world, perhaps even to collaborate with the United States in shaping a new world order, America’s political leadership might be retained. The United Nations might once again be responsive to Washington’s influence and vision.

A world freed of superpower confrontation might be a world without war, a world in which Americans did not have to send their children to fight and die in distant lands. The arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union would end and defense spending could be cut sharply. American taxpayers’ dollars could be used for education, and the environment, and health care. More attention might be paid to the problems created by globalization – the widening gap between rich and poor nations, the spread of diseases such as AIDS, Ebola, West Nile, and SARS, the opportunities open borders provide for terrorists and drug traffickers. Non-governmental organizations struggling to improve human rights performance around the world, to rid the earth of landmines, to find peaceful solutions to conflicts large and small, to protect the environment might have a greater chance for success.

But first the Cold War would actually have to end – and George H.W. Bush, the man who succeeded Reagan as president of the United States, would have to work with Gorbachev to end it peacefully. Then the Bush administration would have to decide how that tremendous military power of the United States would be used, if at all. Most of all, Bush and his advisers would have to choose a new course in foreign policy if containment of the Soviet Union, the overarching aim of American policy for more than four decades, was no longer necessary.

## THE END OF THE COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

In November 1988, the American people elected as their new president a man very different from their beloved Ronald Reagan. Whereas Reagan, long-time actor, sometime voice of General Electric, and two-term governor of California entered the White House with no experience in international affairs, George Herbert Walker Bush was one of the most experienced and best qualified presidents ever called upon to oversee the foreign policy of the United States. He had served as ambassador to the United Nations, head of the liaison office in Beijing, and director of the Central Intelligence Agency. As Reagan's vice president for eight years he had remained deeply engaged in international issues, perhaps more than the president.

Reagan had had a few big ideas – build-up American military power, protect the country against nuclear attack, defeat communism – but notoriously left details to his subordinates. Briefings generally bored him and he often fell asleep as his aides debated issues. In his last years, he may have been slipping into the dread grip of the Alzheimer's disease that subsequently ravaged his mind. Bush was less ideological and widely perceived as pragmatic – a problem solver. Philosophically, he was closer to the *Realpolitik* of Henry Kissinger than to the ideological purity demanded by conservative Republicans. His work style was radically different from Reagan's. On major policy issues he was in near constant contact with his national security adviser and secretary of state. On policy toward China, he was so deeply enmeshed in every detail that others involved joked that he had replaced the officer in charge of the China desk at the Department of State. In short, Bush was everything the foreign policy elite in the United States could have hoped for as the foundation of the Cold War system eroded.

In addition, Bush put together an able and experienced staff to assist him. Brent Scowcroft, his national security adviser, had served with distinction