
Review Essays

Melvyn Leffler and the Origins of the Cold War by Marc Trachtenberg

A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War. By Melvyn P. Leffler. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992. 711 pp. \$55.00; \$19.95, paper.)

Melvyn Leffler's *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* is a remarkable piece of work. The book's sweep is encyclopedic: it covers both military and foreign policy for the entire period from 1945 to January 1953, and deals systematically with American policy in all the important areas of the world—eastern and western Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Far East as well. The book is based on a vast amount of archival research, cited in over a hundred pages of notes, and on a large number of published works, listed in a thirty-page bibliography. It is all pulled together by one overarching theme. Leffler's goal throughout the book is to describe and analyze a way of thinking—focused directly and overtly on *power*—which in his view lay at the heart of American policy in this period.

But the book is more than just a study of U.S. national security policy. Leffler also wants to explain the coming of the cold war, and that is what I focus on here. What is important about his interpretation of the cold war is that he is not fundamentally concerned with blaming either side for the conflict. He does have certain judgments to make, but these relate not to the core of policy but rather to what were in the final analysis fairly secondary issues. The Americans, he thinks, might have gone too far with their policies, especially in extending the conflict to the Third World. But their course of action was at its heart shaped by basic security considerations, and the same was true of the corresponding Soviet policy. When one side pursued its security interests, however, the other side felt threatened. Neither sought to hurt the other, but both sides were more or less trapped: the rival's pursuit of security was seen as menacing, and actions taken by the adversary in pursuit of that goal simply underscored the need for a tough security policy of one's own. The result was

Marc Trachtenberg is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently writing a book on international politics during the cold war period.

a “spiraling cycle of mistrust,” and it was this dynamic that lay at the heart of the cold war (p. 98–99).¹

Thus Leffler’s theory of the cold war pivots on the idea that the conflict was in essence a product of the “security dilemma,” the idea that international tension may be largely rooted in the clash of essentially defensive, security-oriented policies. Indeed, Leffler makes explicit use of this political science concept. The idea runs like a thread throughout his analysis.

And in fact it takes a purer form in his conclusion than it had earlier in the book, as though in the process of grappling with the problem of the cold war Leffler became increasingly convinced of the explanatory power of

this concept. Toward the beginning of the book, he stresses the role of psychological factors in driving the security dilemma, and again he relies explicitly on the work of the leading political science theorists in this area.² American officials, he argues, “were unable to see the extent to which the position and power of their own country made it a potential menace to others” (p. 98). Their perceptions were shaped by certain well-known cognitive biases: they focused on the more menacing aspects of Soviet behavior and “dismissed the more favorable signs” (p. 51). To reduce “cognitive dissonance,” complex situations had to be simplified, and this was done by “attributing to the Russians the

most malevolent of motives and the most sinister of goals and by denying that their grievances had any legitimacy” (p. 121). The result was a policy that sought to “deter and contain rather than reassure the enemy”—a policy which Leffler views as one of the key elements generating the cold war (pp. 121, 140). The spiral of mistrust is thus seen in this part of the book as fueled largely by phenomena of a psychological nature, and the implication is that the problem was mainly in people’s minds—that if only officials had seen things more realistically, the spiral might have been kept under control. The great powers might have been able, if not to escape from the security dilemma entirely, then at least to keep the problems it generated within narrower bounds.³

Later on, however, Leffler sees the security dilemma dynamic as more deeply rooted in the fundamental realities of the international political system. Misperception may still have played a role on the margin, but it no longer lay at the heart of the problem. In 1947, in his view, “U.S. officials were altogether aware that their initiatives would antagonize the Soviets, intensify the emerging rivalry, and probably culminate in the division of Germany and of Europe. Their intent was *not* to provoke the Kremlin, but they recognized that this result would be the logical consequence of their actions” (p. 504).⁴

Leffler’s picture of Soviet policy is not a whitewash. “Graywash” would be a better term.

¹ See also, Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 81, 121, 219, 504, 506–11.

² See Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 51–52, 98, 121.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52, 99.

⁴ See also, *ibid.*, p. 219.

But whatever twist Leffler gives the theory, it is clear that the security dilemma plays a central role in his interpretation of the cold war. The security dilemma approach in general does not see international politics in terms of aggressors and defenders. Instead, it regards states as primarily interested in security—that is, in an essentially defensive goal. The problem is that, to pursue that goal, states sometimes must adopt aggressive strategies which oblige rivals, perhaps reluctantly, to take a tougher line themselves. Both sides are trapped by the dynamics of the situation; the basic problem (as A.J.P. Taylor once said in a somewhat different context) is political and not moral; the “security dilemma” interpretation of the cold war is a story (to paraphrase Taylor again) without heroes, and perhaps even without villains. And indeed in Leffler’s account, neither side comes across as particularly aggressive, nor, for that matter, as entirely without fault. Certainly, he is not out “to whitewash Soviet behavior” (p. 134); “graywash” would in fact be a better term.

Leffler’s picture of American policy is also painted in shades of gray. In toughening their line, he argues, the Americans were not essentially reacting to Soviet aggressiveness, as the old orthodox view would have it. Their policy was instead rooted in a more far-ranging set of fears—“socioeconomic instability, political upheaval, vacuums of power, decolonization”—and the emerging anti-Soviet thrust of American policy is somehow to be understood as a response to those deep-seated concerns (pp. 51–52).⁵ The U.S. government Leffler thinks, should not have allowed its policy to move so sharply in that anti-Soviet direction. American leaders should have taken a more objective view of Soviet behavior, a view that recognized Soviet restraint, at least outside “the periphery of their armies of occupation.” They should have “displayed more tolerance for risk,” and tried harder to “reassure and placate” the Russians instead of just seeking to “contain and deter” them (p. 99).

All this—this general picture and this set of judgments—is based on certain fundamental claims about the balance of power throughout this whole period. The idea that the Soviets were relatively restrained is linked to the assumption that they were also relatively weak. And indeed if they were as weak as Leffler says, then they *had* to be moderate (p. 102). Similarly, the notion that the United States held the initiative—that U.S. policy was not essentially reactive, but was rooted in the Americans’ attempt “to perpetuate their nation’s preponderant position in the world political system”—is also based on assumptions about the “overwhelming power of the United States” (pp. 55, 99).⁶ His judgments follow from the same set of assumptions: America was so strong that she could have afforded to be moderate, and could have settled for something less than “preponderance” (p. 99).

These are the aspects of Leffler’s argument that I want to focus on here. The following sections will deal first with his picture of American and Soviet

⁵ Ibid., pp. 100, 110, 124.

⁶ See also, *ibid.*, p. 96.

policy, then with his assumptions about the dynamics of U.S.-Soviet interaction, and finally with his claims about the nature of the global balance of power.

Soviet Policy and American Policy

One of the most striking features of Leffler's book is his portrayal of both Soviet and American policy. American officials, in his view, took the initiative in pressing for action that would "perpetuate their nation's preponderant position in the international system." The Americans, he says, were not essentially reacting to "unrelenting Soviet pressure"; the anti-Soviet interpretation of international developments was instead something the American government simply "latched onto" as a way of rationalizing its policies (pp. 51–52, 55, 100).

The proof that American policy was not essentially reactive is that the Soviets, in Leffler's view, were not behaving in a particularly threatening manner. They wanted to dominate eastern Europe, of course, but this was something the Americans felt they could live with.⁷ The question is whether the Soviets posed a threat beyond this area. American officials at the time certainly argued that Soviet policy was aggressive, and charges about Soviet pressure on Turkey and Iran were key counts in Truman's indictment of Soviet behavior at the very beginning of the cold war in January 1946.⁸ But Leffler takes issue with these charges, and a major part of his argument turns on the claim that there was nothing particularly aggressive about Soviet policy in the Middle East in 1945–46.

The Turkish Straits affair of 1945–46 plays an important role in Leffler's analysis, and in fact over the years he has devoted a good deal of attention to this subject.⁹ His basic claim in these writings is that Soviet policy on Turkey was relatively benign. In his view, the Soviets in 1945 "had not engaged in any threats or intimidation" directed at the Turks; "American fears" in 1946, he says, "did not stem from aggressive Soviet moves against Turkey. The Soviets had done little more than send a diplomatic note" (pp. 78, 124). The Americans

⁷ Ibid., pp. 54, 99.

⁸ The key document bearing on Truman's state of mind at this point is his famous Jan. 5, 1946, letter-memorandum to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. For the text, see Harry S. Truman, *Year of Decisions*, vol. 1 of *Memoirs* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 551–52. Although the letter was evidently never sent or even read to Byrnes, it is a genuine document and certainly captures the spirit of Truman's thinking at the time. For an analysis, see Robert Messer, *The End of an Alliance: James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt, Truman, and the Origins of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 157–65.

⁹ Leffler first dealt with the issue in a long review of Bruce Kuniholm's book *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*. See Melvyn Leffler, "From Cold War to Cold War in the Near East," *Reviews in American History*, Mar. 1981, pp. 124–28. He addressed the subject again in a rather detailed exchange with Kuniholm in 1985. See Melvyn Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–48," *The American Historical Review*, April 1984, pp. 346–81, especially p. 368. This article is followed in the same issue by Kuniholm's "Comment," pp. 385–90, and Leffler's "Reply," pp. 391–400. See especially, pp. 394–95. The following year, Leffler published another article on the subject, "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945–1952," *Journal of American History*, Mar. 1985. And, of course, the issue receives a good deal of attention in Leffler's *Preponderance*.

took a tough line following the receipt of this note; in fact, Truman spoke as if war were a distinct possibility.¹⁰ Was this a wild overreaction? Leffler's account leaves the impression that the Soviet threat was at best a figment of the Americans' rather fevered imagination; at worst, it was artificially conjured up to justify policies that had little to do with counteracting direct Soviet pressure.¹¹

Is Leffler correct in saying that the Soviets were not pursuing a policy of intimidation directed against Turkey, aimed in particular at getting the Turks to agree to Soviet military bases on the Straits? Certainly the Soviets wanted bases there and had brought up the issue with Turkey shortly before the Potsdam conference. The question was then discussed at length at Potsdam in July 1945, and was raised repeatedly in late 1945 and 1946.¹² American and British officials spoke of Soviet "pressure" and "demands," and it is quite clear from the evidence that the Russians were doing more than making a simple request that the Turks were free to turn down.

In fact, the Soviet government kept bringing up the issue. The Turks made it clear they did not want any Soviet bases on their territory, but the Russians would not take "no" for an answer. Leffler stresses the point that at the end of an interview in April 1946 with the American ambassador in Moscow, Stalin indicated that "he might be satisfied with much less than a base," but even after making this "concession," the Soviets kept asking the Turks to grant them base rights.¹³

Certainly an invasion of Turkey was never imminent, and it is also clear that the Soviets never issued an ultimatum. Leffler is correct to stress these points. But pressure can be exerted even if an attack is not imminent, and a policy can be menacing even in the absence of blunt and overt threats. The road to war may be long, but any movement down that road, any increase in political tension, is bound to generate anxiety, given what is at stake. This is particularly true when power relations are as lopsided as they were between Russia and Turkey after World War II. Given that imbalance, an insistent "request" could not be dismissed as innocuous: Soviet manipulation of tensions—the USSR's refusal to take "no" for an answer—clearly had political meaning.

And the Soviets were certainly manipulating tensions. They were conducting a press and radio campaign against Turkey, and, as Leffler recognizes,

¹⁰ Acheson to Byrnes, Aug. 15, 1946, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS], 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 840–42. By Aug. 20, Truman's position had become known to the British and thus, one assumes, to the Soviets as well. Acheson memorandum, Aug. 20, 1946, *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 849–50.

¹¹ See Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 124–25, 551 (n. 117).

¹² See U.S. Department of State, *FRUS, 1945: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference)*, vol. 1, pp. 1017–22, 1030–31; and, *ibid.*, vol. 2, especially pp. 256–60, 301–5, 365–67. For developments after Potsdam, see also, *FRUS, 1945*, vol. 8, pp. 1236–93; and, *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 801–99. See also, Bruce Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 255–70, 355–73.

¹³ Leffler, "Reply," p. 395; Wilson to Byrnes, Mar. 1 and June 26, 1946, *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 817–18, 825–27. Given this context, the provision in the Soviet note to Turkey of Aug. 7, 1946, proposing a joint defense of the Straits, is also to be interpreted as a "request" for base rights. *Ibid.*, p. 829.

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there were troop movements and other preparations of a military nature that caused concern about Russian intentions in the region (p. 78).¹⁴ These moves were of course to be understood in the context of what was going on in the diplomatic area. At Potsdam the Soviets had staked out a claim to control of the Straits, declaring it to be a basic strategic interest, equivalent to the American interest in the Panama Canal or the British interest in Suez. The implication here was that they had the right to take control of the area, no matter how the Turks felt about the idea.¹⁵

And there were other, more minor, diplomatic straws in the wind that fit in with the general idea that Soviet power was being brought to bear on this issue. In late 1945, the Soviets claimed (falsely) that their 1921 treaty with Turkey had been negotiated “under duress,” suggesting that they no longer felt bound by it, and thus vaguely hinting that they might feel free to change the border with Turkey established by this treaty, through force if necessary.¹⁶ In February 1946, moreover, the Soviet ambassador in Turkey characterized the Soviet interest in the Straits as “vital,” which in diplomatic parlance means the sort of interest over which one is willing to go to war.¹⁷

All this tended to confirm certain general impressions: that in asking for bases on the Straits, the Soviets were not just making a simple request that the Turks were free to reject, but that an attempt at what might fairly be called “intimidation” was in fact going on. The general point is quite familiar from everyday life. Suppose a teenager repeatedly asks a much smaller boy for money, and the “request” is accompanied by insults as the teenager fondles his knife. Even if no overt threat is made, can there be any doubt about what is going on?

Leffler’s handling of the Turkish affair is a good example of the way Soviet policy is treated in the book. Evidence of Soviet pressure or aggressiveness is played down, while the Americans are portrayed as far more assertive than they in fact were. Two examples of this are particularly striking: his account of American policy on Italy at the beginning of 1948, and his picture of American policy on Korea in the three-year period prior to the outbreak of the war there in June 1950.

On Italy, Leffler has the United States deciding to use military force to prevent that country “from falling under Soviet domination,” and his text strongly implies that this was true even if a Communist government came to power legally in Rome (pp. 195–96).¹⁸ But the evidence—even the evidence to which Leffler himself refers—clearly points in the opposite direction.

¹⁴ See also, Leffler, “From Cold War to Cold War,” p. 127. On Soviet preparations, see a report of Mar. 18, 1946, noting, for example, that hospitals in Bucharest were being prepared to receive Soviet casualties. *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 818–19.

¹⁵ *FRUS, 1945: The Conference of Berlin*, vol. 2, pp. 303, 365.

¹⁶ *FRUS, 1945*, vol. 8, p. 1235. On the 1921 treaty, see Kuniholm, *Origins*, p. 277n.

¹⁷ Wilson to Byrnes, Feb. 13, 1946, *FRUS, 1946*, vol. 7, pp. 815–16.

¹⁸ Leffler introduces this section by talking about how U.S. officials were considering how to deal with a Communist “seizure of power, or, more likely (and more worrisomely), a Communist electoral victory in Italy.” And two paragraphs later he reaches his conclusion: Top U.S. officials ultimately agreed that “if necessary, military power should be used to prevent Italy from falling under Soviet domination.”

NSC 1/2 of February 10, 1948, one of the documents he cites in this context, was the basic U.S. policy document on Italy at this time. It said specifically that U.S. forces were not to intervene “in a civil conflict of an internal nature in Italy.” The only exception was that if an illegal Communist government gained control of the Italian mainland, the United States, with the consent of the legal government, could send forces to Sicily and Sardinia. If the Communists came to power by legal means, a follow-on document called for a U.S. military buildup, particularly in the Mediterranean, as well as other measures; but it did not call for armed intervention in Italy to get rid of the regime.¹⁹ Leffler says top American officials—George Marshall, Robert Lovett, and George Kennan—“were willing to take risks because they wagered that Soviet leaders so much wanted to avoid sliding into a war that they would constrain local Communists” in Italy (p. 196). But it is hard to see how the Americans were in any way threatening the Soviets with moves that might result in war. Kennan and the others proposed to react to a seizure of power by the Communists in Italy by building up American power in the region. Because the USSR would find this prospect unpleasant, they thought that the specter of an American buildup might act as a deterrent.²⁰ But this is a far cry from implying that they had decided to run a major risk of general war. And the overall impression one gets from reading the published documents and the relevant section in the official Joint Chiefs of Staff history on the period is that American leaders were far more cautious, and more sensitive to their own weakness, than Leffler portrays them as being.²¹

The same general point emerges, with perhaps even greater force, from an analysis of Leffler’s treatment of U.S. policy on Korea. In his chapter on the 1946–47 period, he recognizes that top War Department officials “wanted to withdraw” from Korea, but says their views “did not prevail,” and that the administration as a whole “felt it had to hold southern Korea.” In the chapter on 1947–48, he has American officials digging “in their heels in Korea,” and concludes the section by stating that “the U.S. commitment was far from over” (pp. 167–68, 253).

To support his conclusion that the Truman administration “felt it had to hold southern Korea,” Leffler cites William Stueck’s *The Road to Confrontation*, which is indeed a first-rate study of American policy on Korea and China in the period before June 1950. Stueck’s basic picture, however, is not of an America fundamentally committed to South Korea. He portrays U.S. policy as “an increasingly desperate juggling act between conflicting pressures.” The basic

¹⁹ “The Position of the United States with Respect to Italy” (NSC 1/2), Feb. 10, 1948, *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 3, pp. 767–69; “Position of the United States with Respect to Italy in the Light of the Possibility of Communist Participation in the Government by Legal Means” (NSC 1/3), Mar. 8, 1948, *ibid.*, pp. 775–79.

²⁰ For Kennan’s views, see especially, Policy Planning Staff, “Review of Current Trends,” Feb. 24, 1948, *FRUS, 1948*, vol. 1, p. 519.

²¹ Kenneth W. Condit, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 2 (1947–1949) (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1979), pp. 65–73. Note also that the minutes of the three NSC meetings Leffler cites at this point (n. 56) deal with Greece, not Italy.

problem U.S. leaders faced, according to Stueck, was “how to arrange a graceful withdrawal from an awkward entanglement.” The Americans would of course have liked to liquidate their commitment (in the words of one key document) “without abandoning Korea to Soviet domination.” The question was whether this was possible, and top officials ultimately decided that it probably was not: “Army planners now conceded that the United States might eventually have to accept Communist domination of Korea, and the State Department agreed.” This conclusion was reached at an important meeting held in September 1947. It was decided, Stueck goes on, quoting the record of the meeting, that “‘ultimately the U.S. position in Korea is untenable even with expenditure of considerable . . . money and effort.’ The United States, however, could not merely ‘scuttle and run.’ The Truman administration should seek ‘a settlement . . . which would enable the U.S. to withdraw . . . as soon as possible with the minimum of bad effects.’” By late September, Stueck concludes, “a consensus had emerged among State and Defense planners in favor of a graceful withdrawal from Korea.”²²

Even so, Stueck argues, American officials thought that there was a certain chance, although not a very good one, that South Korea might “survive as an independent, non-Communist state.” Having it come into being under U.N. auspices—the strategy the Americans chose to pursue—would give it a certain international legitimacy and thus increase its chances of survival. The U.S. government took various additional minor steps to indicate a continuing interest in Korea so as to improve the prospects for South Korea’s survival, but on the whole, Stueck says, U.S. actions “did not fall into a consistent pattern that conveyed a deep American commitment.” In January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson placed South Korea outside America’s defense perimeter (in a famous speech whose significance Leffler minimizes, but which the North Koreans evidently took seriously); and a few months later, when Senator Tom Connally, the Democrat who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that South Korea might have to be abandoned if it were overrun, the administration issued only a “feeble” response.²³

All this, of course, is rather different from the picture that emerges from Leffler’s account. A casual reader of *A Preponderance of Power* would scarcely get the impression that the troop withdrawal from Korea had any political meaning, or even that the withdrawal had been completed by the middle of 1949. The minor rear-guard actions that were taken to indicate continuing American interest, including the decision to postpone the troop withdrawal for

²² William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy toward China and Korea, 1947–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 75, 86–88, 111. With regard to the Sept. 1947 meeting, the reference to how America could not “scuttle and run” was the only part of the record of that meeting that Leffler chose to quote. See Leffler, *Preponderance*, p. 252.

²³ Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation*, pp. 95, 153, 161; Leffler, *Preponderance*, p. 367. On North Korea and the “perimeter” speech, see the report of an interview with a retired North Korean general cited in Kathryn Weathersby, “Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives,” *Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 8* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993), p. 26.

a few months, loom much larger in importance. All this supports a picture of an America determined to do whatever was necessary to keep the Communists at bay.

One is particularly struck by Leffler's accounts of the Turkish, Italian, and Korean episodes, but these are by no means atypical examples, and the book's general picture of both U.S. and Soviet policy is somewhat skewed. The Soviets are portrayed as less aggressive than they in fact were, while the assertiveness of American policy, in the late 1940s at least, is rather exaggerated. Leffler's readiness to take American cold war rhetoric at face value—and he devotes an extraordinary amount of attention to such effusions as the Clifford-Elsey report of 1946—reflects the same general tendency to exaggerate the anti-Soviet thrust of American policy in this period. It is not that Leffler makes the Americans into devils, or the Soviets into angels. He is critical of U.S. policy, but in the final analysis not that critical, and he is by no means an apologist for Soviet policy. But the USSR and the United States are placed on the same moral plane. The logic of power is what is crucial, and it works the same way for both countries.

The Cold War Dynamic

Given a Soviet and an American policy of the sort Leffler portrays, how do we get to the cold war? The author is a firm believer in the spiral model. "Neither the Americans nor the Soviets sought to harm the other in 1945," he says. "But each side, in pursuit of its security interests, took steps that aroused the other's apprehensions. Moreover, the protests that each country's actions evoked from the other fueled the cycle of distrust as neither could comprehend the fears of the other, perceiving its own actions as defensive." And this belief is linked to a basic judgment. The Americans should have shown "more tolerance for risk"; that was the only way the ratcheting up of tension could have been prevented. The problem was that the United States generally "chose to contain and deter the Russians rather than to reassure and placate them, thereby accentuating possibilities for a spiraling cycle of mistrust"—a prudent policy perhaps, but probably not a wise one (p. 99).²⁴

So Leffler's most fundamental conclusions turn on basic assumptions about the nature of international interaction. But does the evidence in the book really support the spiral interpretation? One is struck first of all by the degree to which Leffler's picture of Soviet policy points in the opposite direction. His Stalin "is anything but a large risk-taker" in international affairs (p. 510). He is easily deterred, extremely cautious, and respectful of power realities. He is not the sort who reacts to hostile American action by taking the kinds of counter-measures that might lead eventually to armed conflict. Tensions might increase, but he is not about to let this spiral get out of control. He is in fact terrified of

²⁴ See also, Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 81, 121.

the United States.²⁵ Leffler's Stalin is so cautious that he is afraid to do things that the real Stalin actually did: "He grasped that, for the indefinite future, the correlations of strength were incalculably in America's favor. Provocative action on his part, moreover, might accentuate American suspicions, trigger the security dilemma, and ensconce American power on his immediate periphery: in southern Korea, northern China, Japan, Iran or Turkey, and, of course, western Germany" (p. 102).²⁶ Leffler's Stalin, in other words, is neither strong enough nor careless enough to allow himself to be drawn into an unconstrained spiral of conflict.

Nor does the analysis of key historical episodes from the early cold war years lend much support to the spiral interpretation. The Turkish Straits

affair of 1945–46 is once again worth considering closely. Leffler, in one of his earlier writings, cites various indicators of growing Soviet moderation in this affair, which he takes as proving that the Russians were not pursuing a policy of "intimidation" against Turkey in 1946, thus implying that the Americans were overreacting by taking an increasingly tough anti-Soviet line in the dispute. He refers in particular to the dropping of the Soviet claim for territory in eastern Turkey, and to the fact that the Soviet note of August 1946 was viewed by the Turks as "a less formidable blow than expected." He also points out that the

Russian note was not accompanied by Soviet troop movements, and that a follow-on note the next month was even milder.²⁷

Now, certainly, the Soviets were drawing in their horns as Leffler says, but this growing moderation came as the Americans were deepening their involvement in the conflict. If the Soviets were pulling back because of this tougher American position—and my own view is that that conclusion is hard to avoid—one can hardly cite this Soviet moderation as proof that the tough American policy was unwarranted. The same point applies to the coming of the Korean War: the problem was not a spiralling up of conflict resulting from excessive American involvement there, but quite the opposite: the signals—as it turned out, the false signals—given by the American policy of disengagement.²⁸

The particular episode where Leffler applies the spiral model most directly is the dispute over Iran in 1945–46, and yet even here one is struck by how weak the evidence is. America, Russia, and Britain had occupied Iran during the war, but had agreed to evacuate the country no later than six months after the end of hostilities. The Soviets repeatedly promised to comply with the agreement, but by early 1946 it became increasingly clear that they were not

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 99, 136, 442.

²⁶ As Kuniholm pointed out in his exchange with Leffler in *The American Historical Review*, Stalin's successors certainly understood what Soviet policy had been, and admitted that the policy of pressure had been counterproductive. Khrushchev in particular criticized Stalin for "frightening the Turks right into the open arms of the Americans." Kuniholm, "Comment," p. 387.

²⁷ Leffler, "Reply," pp. 394–95.

²⁸ On Stalin's calculation that the United States would not intervene, see Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, p. 161; and, Weathersby, "Soviet Aims in Korea," especially pp. 24–28.

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going to do so. They were protecting a left-wing separatist regime that had taken power in the northern area occupied by their troops. To Truman this was an “outrage if I ever saw one,”²⁹ and the old conventional interpretation is that this episode played a key role in the emergence of the sharp anti-Soviet policy in the United States at the beginning of 1946.

To Leffler, however, the Soviet intervention, though neither legal nor moral, was probably defensive in nature. The Western powers were developing bases in the Middle East, especially at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. These bases, he argues, could have served as a springboard for a U.S. attack on Soviet oil fields and refineries. The Russians were looking for “defense in depth.” “The Soviets no less than the Americans and the British,” he argues, “had to think about configurations of power and plans for future war should the great alliance fall apart.” The USSR was certainly trying to improve its strategic position in the Middle East, but this was really no different from what the United States was doing in this area at the time. The actions being taken by the two sides “did not mean that Washington or Moscow or London sought or even expected a showdown. Each government was probably acting defensively, but the cumulative effect, as the political scientist Fred Lawson correctly argues, was to trigger a spiraling crisis of misperception and mistrust” (pp. 80–81).

There may be some substance to this theory, but it is really only a theory, a point that Lawson openly admits and that is also suggested by Leffler’s tentative phrasing. Before the theory can be accepted, it certainly needs to be supported by a good deal more evidence than Leffler and Lawson provide. Their most important piece of evidence is a passage from a March 1946 Joint Chiefs of Staff document: “Soviet pressure in the Middle East has for its primary objective the protection of the vital Ploesti, Kharkov and Baku areas.”³⁰ But evidence of this sort is always a two-edged sword, because it suggests that American official circles were sensitive to the security dilemma aspect of the problem; and as Leffler is well aware, the security dilemma is most acute when this sort of sensitivity is absent—that is, when the other side’s actions are misperceived as simply hostile and aggressive. To support his view that Soviet policy is not to be understood as just unrelentingly hostile, Leffler frequently cites American officials taking a similar, balanced view of Soviet behavior. But the more effectively he makes his case in this way, the more he undermines his basic contention that the U.S. government did in fact view the Soviet threat in such simple black-and-white terms.³¹

The basic point, here, however, is that the mere fact that an American document interpreted Soviet policy along these lines does not in itself prove that the USSR was indeed motivated by essentially defensive concerns. The Joint Chiefs of Staff document is probably more interesting as a reflection of

²⁹ Truman’s unsent letter to Byrnes, Jan. 5, 1946, in Truman, *Year of Decisions*, p. 551.

³⁰ Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War,” p. 813; and, Fred Lawson, “The Iranian Crisis of 1945–1946 and the Spiral Model of International Conflict,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Aug. 1989, p. 320.

³¹ See, e.g., Leffler, *Preponderance*, p. 51.

the way professional military officers view the world than as an indicator of Soviet intentions. It is certainly odd that no evidence is given of Soviet officials, in conversation with American or British representatives, linking their policy in Iran or Turkey to what the West was doing in Dhahran or elsewhere in the region. Even a simple juxtaposition of these two issues would be suggestive. Instead, when Stalin was challenged on this subject in late 1945, he gave what Byrnes called “the weakest excuse I ever heard him make” for Soviet behavior: he needed to protect the Soviet oil fields around Baku from Iranian saboteurs.³² So putting all this together, the Iranian case really does not provide much support for the spiral model. And yet this was the case where the spiral argument was made most explicitly.

The Military Balance

Leffler's focus is on *power*. You can see it in the book's title, and if you look up “power” in the index, you find nine lines of references. And the concept of power—ultimately war-making power—lies at the heart of Leffler's analysis. He believes that the United States possessed overwhelming power throughout this period, and his account of both Soviet and American policy is rooted in that belief. The Soviets were cautious because they were weak; the Americans could be assertive only because they were strong. And this belief also underpins Leffler's most important judgments. The Americans should have “displayed more tolerance for risk,” they should have sought more to reassure rather than to deter, because they possessed such “overwhelming power” (p. 99).

There are major problems with this key part of Leffler's analysis, but before examining his assumptions in this area, one point needs to be stressed, and this is that Leffler understands military realities far better than most historians. People used to assume, a little naively perhaps, that the period of America's nuclear monopoly was almost by definition a period of American military preeminence. But the pendulum then swung in the opposite direction after the basic facts began to come out about the small size of the U.S. atomic arsenal in the late 1940s, the limited power of the early atomic bombs, and the problems of delivering an effective attack. At this point, the prevailing argument was that the atomic bomb posed a “hollow threat,” that U.S. officials mistakenly believed it was a “winning weapon,” whereas in reality the nuclear monopoly was no trump card at all.

But these conclusions were fundamentally mistaken, and Leffler understands why. They were based on a judgment about the limited effects of an *initial* atomic attack, which would indeed (as Bernard Brodie pointed out at the time) do little more than “bruise” the enemy. But precisely because an initial attack would not end the war, one had to consider how the great conflict

³² John R. Oneal, *Foreign Policy Making in Times of Crisis* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 88. See also, Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 79–80.

would run its course. Both sides would mobilize and gear up for a long struggle. The United States would fight it, in large part, with bombs and bombers produced after hostilities had broken out. With a monopoly on bomb production, the Americans could take their time, but the Soviet economy would eventually be devastated and Soviet war-making power would ultimately be crippled. So the final outcome of the war could not be in doubt. That is where Leffler basically stops, drawing the conclusion that the United States possessed overwhelming power during this period.

As far as it goes, that argument is correct. The problem is that it does not go far enough. The main additional point to be made is that if general war had broken out in the late 1940s, America would eventually have won it, but at terrible cost. The nuclear monopoly meant that the United States was able to settle for a tripwire strategy and thus avoid an expensive investment in ground defense on the European continent. But that in turn meant western Europe would be overrun if war actually did break out. The Soviets might then try to harness the European economies to their own war effort, and America would then be obliged to bomb her own allies. This bombing, together with the ground war, would leave Europe devastated at the end of the conflict, so the American victory would be largely Pyrrhic.

This situation had major political implications. To pursue a risky or belligerent policy under these circumstances would put a great strain on the Western alliance. The continentals especially would scarcely relish the prospect of such a war, even if ultimate victory for the West was certain. And the Soviets knew all this. They knew the West would be reluctant to push things too far, and thus they knew that they had considerable room for political maneuver. So political conflicts might develop, but neither side would want to push things to the limit, and this was certainly reflected in both American and Soviet policy at the time of the Berlin Blockade of 1948–49. The balance, in other words, was not nearly as lopsided in favor of America as Leffler suggests.

This rather precarious balance was broken when the Soviets exploded their first atomic device in the late summer of 1949. Although Leffler generally sees both American and Soviet policy as quite sensitive to the military balance, his views on the impact of the Soviet bomb are not totally clear.³³ But he does seem to underestimate the importance of the breaking of the American nuclear monopoly in late 1949. In his view, the Americans still held the upper hand in 1950. But when I worked on this period, I was amazed to see how frightened top U.S. officials were. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley, told the National Security Council in November 1950 that if a third world war broke out, the United States might well lose. And this general sense

³³ Compare, for example, his comment in the conclusion that “there is little reason even to think that Soviet risk-taking has been primarily inspired by their growing atomic or nuclear capabilities” with his comment in the introduction that “once the Soviets acquired their own atomic capabilities” they “showed a greater willingness to take risks.” Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 510, 14.

of weakness shaped American policy during the early Korean War period, not just in Korea, but with regard to such issues as Berlin as well.³⁴

The fear was that the United States could no longer take its time and still emerge the ultimate victor. The Soviets would try to destroy the American nuclear infrastructure—certainly bombs and bombers, but also nuclear and aircraft production facilities—just as America would try to destroy the corresponding target systems on the Soviet side. Success in this part of the war was crucial, since the side that prevailed could then go on to destroy the enemy's economy and war-making power as a whole. But success now depended on the speed and effectiveness of attack, and there was no guarantee, especially if the Soviets struck first, that the United States would win this race and thus prevail in the war.

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Does Leffler's evidence support a different conclusion? He says flatly that if war broke out at this point, "the Kremlin could not defeat the United States." "The Soviets," he argues, "had fewer than 25 atomic bombs, or so it was estimated, and no effective means of delivering them." America, on the other hand, had a much larger number of bombs and the aircraft and bases it needed to launch an attack. "For Truman, Acheson, and their colleagues," he concludes, "the conclusion was inescapable: the Kremlin would try to avoid global war, at least for the

foreseeable future" (pp. 369–70).³⁵

In support of these claims, Leffler cites two CIA documents, which, when examined carefully, show precisely the opposite. According to these estimates, the Soviets were preparing for an armed conflict and might well "deliberately provoke" a general war in the near future. A large part of the reason was that the United States no longer had an effective atomic monopoly: the Soviets were capable of launching a nuclear attack against America, and, if they did, even U.S. superiority in the numbers of bombs and bombers might not be decisive.

The first of these documents, the CIA's memorandum of August 25, 1950, on "Soviet Preparations for Major Hostilities in 1950," stated specifically that the "USSR is vigorously and intensively preparing for the possibility of direct hostilities with the US," and reported in some detail on a whole series of Soviet preparations, some of which indicated that the Russians thought war might well break out in the near future. Only in the nuclear area was the USSR judged "relatively unprepared" for major war. But even in this area, the Soviets were considered "capable of employing against the continental US the 25 bombs estimated to be currently available." A nuclear attack, using TU-4 bombers (on one-way missions) and other means "could weaken the UK and US capacity

³⁴ Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954," in *History and Strategy*, ed. Marc Trachtenberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), especially pp. 119–31.

³⁵ See also, Leffler, *Preponderance*, p. 441.

to retaliate.” The bottom line was that “Soviet leaders would be justified in assuming a substantial risk of general war during the remainder of 1950, arising either out of the prosecution of the Korean incident or out of the initiation of new local operations.”³⁶

The second CIA document Leffler cites, NIE-3 of November 15, 1950, reached similar conclusions. It stated specifically that “a grave danger of general war exists now,” and that the Soviets might “deliberately provoke” a general war with the West at a time when in their view “the relative strength of the USSR is at its maximum”—a period which, in the view of the CIA analysts, had already begun and which would last through 1954.³⁷ The general tenor of both documents was that the United States had already entered into a period of great peril in its relations with the Soviet Union, and this theme was in fact echoed in many other documents from this period.³⁸

Why are these issues important? The reason is simple: if policy is to be understood correctly, the strategic balance and the military environment must also be understood accurately. The United States was not nearly as much in the driver’s seat as Leffler makes out, at least not until the very end of the Truman administration. America’s freedom of maneuver was thus far more limited than he indicates, and the government therefore had to be more sensitive to the views of others than he realizes. A very powerful America could, for example, simply do whatever she wanted in the part of Germany she dominated. But a country that felt its position was a good deal more precarious, and which felt that it was engaged (as John McCloy put it) in a struggle it might conceivably lose, simply could not behave this way.

Leffler’s approach, moreover, does not bring out the really extraordinary shifts that were taking place, particularly in the military balance. For him, the world of NSC 68 of mid-1950 is not fundamentally different from what had preceded it.³⁹ The makers of NSC 68 wanted to create a “preponderance of power,” but that, according to Leffler, had in fact been the American goal all along.⁴⁰ One has the sense of a story being flattened. The policy ushered in by NSC 68 really was radically different from the Truman policy of the 1940s. The containment policy aimed at stabilizing the status quo, but now, in 1950, the goal became rollback, and the basic thinking became more aggressive.⁴¹ One of the great puzzles in interpreting the cold war is to understand why this

³⁶ CIA Intelligence Memorandum 323-SRC, “Soviet Preparations for Major Hostilities in 1950,” Aug. 25, 1950. Leffler gives the archival reference, but the document is also available on microfiche: Declassified Documents Reference Service, 1987/3151.

³⁷ NIE-3, “Soviet Capabilities and Intentions,” Nov. 15, 1950. Again, Leffler gives the archival reference, but major excerpts from the document were recently published. See Scott Koch, ed., *Selected Estimates on the Soviet Union, 1950–1959* (Washington, D.C.: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1993), pp. 165–78.

³⁸ See Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset,’” pp. 112–15, especially p. 114 (n. 46).

³⁹ See Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 355–57, 491.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 55, 277, 281, 284, 439, 446.

⁴¹ For the evidence, see Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset,’” especially pp. 107–15.

shift took place, but this will never happen unless people first realize how extraordinary this change in fact was.

Conclusion

A Preponderance of Power is an important book and will without question remain for many years the basic study of American national security policy during the early cold war period. But it is precisely because the book is bound to be a major point of departure for future work that a detailed examination of some of its key arguments was in order. What is the upshot of this analysis?

Perhaps the book's most striking feature is its portrayal of the cold war as the security dilemma in action. This is an appealing argument, not just to political scientists but also to historians and others who are bored by the old debates about cold war "revisionism" and who in any case would like to get away from simplistic devil theories of history. Nevertheless, it is—with one very important exception—unconvincing. Security interests led to defensive strategies, as each side "organized" its own bloc. The result, broadly speaking, was a division of the most important areas of the world into clearly demarcated spheres of influence. The *de facto* settlement that seemed to have taken shape by 1949 was based on the idea that each side could do what it wanted in its own sphere. In such a situation, at least as far as the strategically important areas of the world were concerned, there was little danger of war.

The great exception to this general picture was Germany, and here Leffler's analysis is quite astute. The Soviets really were reacting to the Western policy of building up a West German state. The western zones of Germany had to be "organized" and tied to the West; but the creation of a West German state tapped into basic Soviet security concerns. The West Europeans were also disturbed by the policy, not least because of the possible Soviet reaction, and insisted on American security guarantees. Hence the demand for something like NATO, which the Soviets were bound to view as menacing. The top American leaders, Leffler says, "did not wish to threaten the Soviet Union: they sought only to enhance American security." But each measure they took "added to the Kremlin's perception of threat" (p. 219).

Leffler evidently believes that a "policy of reassurance" in Germany would have been better, although he can understand why risk-averse American leaders preferred not to go this route.⁴² Perhaps the key point to make here is that the line between a "policy of reassurance" and a "policy of containment and deterrence" is a bit too sharply drawn in the book. Working out a "comprehensive German settlement" with the Russians was not (as Leffler implies) the only way, or even the best way, to implement a "policy of reassurance" in this key area (pp. 284, 505–6). The NATO system itself, in the

⁴² Leffler, *Preponderance*, pp. 283–84, 505–6.

form it came to have at the end of the Truman period, satisfied the USSR's most basic security interest, the constraint of German power. Indeed, this was the whole beauty of the NATO system: a structure designed primarily to contain Soviet power also served, although less overtly, as a means of keeping the Germans under control and thus of reassuring the Russians.

And in fact Leffler's own evidence and arguments sometimes point in this direction. When discussing the American government's aversion to a general German settlement, and its preference for an arrangement tying western Germany into the Western bloc, he quotes a CIA assessment approvingly: "The CIA put the matter succinctly: 'The real issue . . . is not the settlement of Germany, but the long-term control of German power'" (p. 284). Note that the "real issue" was not the use of German power to build an adequate counterweight to Soviet power: the control of Germany and not the containment of Russia was seen as the fundamental problem. And he returns to the issue in his conclusion. The prospect of a restoration of German power and independence—the creation of a German state "intent on territorial rectification and reunification"—was a real threat to European stability. The NATO system—"the retention of Allied troops in Germany, the establishment of supranational mechanisms of control," and so on—was the Western powers' way of dealing with it (p. 513). It is hard to tell whether, or to what extent, this was ever really appreciated by the Russians; or, if it was, what effect, if any, it had on their policy. Perhaps a realization of this sort played a key role in tipping the balance against war in 1950–51, but we will not know until people have a chance to go through the Soviet archives for this period.

All of which brings me to the final point, which is that it is perhaps a mistake to focus historical work in this area too narrowly on the question of the origins of the cold war. The more important question is how a stable peace came to the world of the great powers during the cold war period. If the NATO system played a key role in stabilizing international politics, and if the cold war in turn played a fundamental role in bringing that system into being, then maybe the cold war was an essential part of the process whereby the peace took shape. In other words, the cold war may not have been the problem, but rather an important part of the solution.