



# **Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War**

*John Lewis Gaddis*

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When *Strategies of Containment* was first published, the Soviet Union was still a superpower, Ronald Reagan was president of the United States, and the Berlin Wall was still standing. This updated edition of Gaddis' classic carries the history of containment through the end of the Cold War. Beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt's postwar plans, Gaddis provides a thorough critical analysis of George F. Kennan's original strategy of containment, NSC-68, The Eisenhower-Dulles "New Look," the Kennedy-Johnson "flexible response" strategy, the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of detente, and now a comprehensive assessment of how Reagan - and Gorbachev - completed the process of containment, thereby bringing the Cold War to an end.

He concludes, provocatively, that Reagan more effectively than any other Cold War president drew upon the strengths of both approaches while avoiding their weaknesses. A must-read for anyone interested in Cold War history, grand strategy, and the origins of the post-Cold War world.

## Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War Details

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# **From Reader Review Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War for online ebook**

**Mike Hankins says**

Strategies of Containment is an ambitious work that attempts to synthesize United States foreign policy throughout the entire Cold War into a unified whole. John Lewis Gaddis succeeds in this by asserting that the ideas set forth by George Kennan as head of the Policy Planning Staff defined the terms of containment that lasted throughout the period. Dividing the war into five stages (the expanded edition identifies a sixth), Gaddis demonstrates that each shift in National Security policy was either an embrace of Kennan's concepts, a reaction against them, or a reconciliation of these two poles. The book covers a large span of time, and thus overgeneralizes at times. Nevertheless, Gaddis' analysis is insightful and serves as a wonderful introduction to the complexities of the Cold War.

Each of the five major periods he identifies is split into two chapters, one discussing the theories and doctrines of the period, the other its implementation and outcome. The revised edition adds a final chapter which discusses both the theory and implementation of the Ronald Reagan administration. The first period deals directly with Kennan's "long telegram," which outlined the concept of containment. As defined by Kennan, containment sought to prevent the Soviet Union from reshaping the international order. Kennan's conception for accomplishing this was based on "strongpoint defense," wherein the United States prioritized threats and responded accordingly.

His successor, Paul Nitze, drafted NSC-68, a document that guided the second half of the Harry Truman administration, the second distinct phase of the Cold War. It abandoned the strongpoint defense plan and encouraged "perimeter defense." This view encouraged the equal protection of all points around the globe simultaneously. Accomplishing this necessitated massive increases in government military spending. Gaddis criticizes this period as "deeply flawed" and blames it for the Korean War.

The third distinct period is the rise of "New Look" strategy, as defined by Dwight D. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. The focus of the New Look policy revolved around maximizing security and minimizing costs. This strategy relied heavily on the deterrent effect of the threat of massive retaliation, but it did incorporate other methods, such as covert action, psychological warfare, and international alliances. Eisenhower's ideas revived Kennan's asymmetrical "strongpoint" concept, but added the President's idea of making nuclear war the only option, in order to eliminate war itself as a viable option.

John F. Kennedy's presidency ushered in the fourth period. His strategy of "flexible response" returned to a symmetrical, "perimeter defense" concept which also emphasized increases in military spending. Both Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson held a "Zero sum game" view of the world in which any gain for the Soviet Union was a loss for America. Additionally, Gaddis asserts that both of these administrations were obsessed with psychological factors – that they worried as much about appearances as reality. Thus, avoiding humiliation and the appearance of weakness became an end unto itself. Gaddis uses the Vietnam War as a test case for "flexible response," judging it as a "clumsy overreaction." His analysis of the war, although brief, is well done, and serves as a good introduction to the major issues discussed in Vietnam War literature.

The partnership of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and their strategy of détente defines Gaddis' fifth period. As a return to Kennan's ideas, Gaddis praises it while admitting its narrow ideological focus. He

asserts that Nixon's ideas largely succeeded, although he was heavily criticized for his deception regarding the bombing of Cambodia and his poor handling of other domestic and international issues (such as the sale of arms to Iran) due to his preoccupation with the Soviet Union. The book is remarkably apologetic of Nixon and Kissinger, who are often criticized or maligned.

The expanded edition of the book explains Reagan's policies of pushing the Soviet Union via increases in American military spending and political pressure. Gaddis correctly identifies that while Reagan may have provided the final shove, internal issues that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union had been building for some time. Gaddis ultimately asserts that Kennan's ideas laid the foundation that allowed the United States to perform as well as possible in the Cold War.

Overall, Gaddis has succeeded remarkably in crafting a synthesis of Cold War strategy. His conception of the two poles of symmetrical and asymmetrical approaches creates a useful context for understanding the intricacies of the administrations he discusses. Although the book at times overgeneralizes the period, that is a nature of such broad works of synthesis, and not a fault of the author. His work points to further areas of study and should be required reading as an introduction to the Cold War.

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### **Rosie Tighe says**

One of the key texts to read if/when trying to understand the cold war period and US attitudes and policies during this period. For those for whom this is "history", it is essential to understand the mindset that framed policy in the Cold War Era. Dismissing this as dated or irrelevant is a huge mistake. There are lessons to be learned here that should not be forgotten.

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### **Brad Trefz says**

While Gaddis's early 80s account (and the revised version of this book published in 2005) is now "the" book on the subject it is not without its problems, especially for a critical reader familiar with the topics under consideration. Gaddis was the official biographer of George Kennan (author of the Long Telegram), handpicked by him for the purpose. That book, *George Kennan: An American Life*, won a Pulitzer in 2012. That is why Kennan plays such a central role in this book. Gaddis was a close friend and long time admirer of Kennan.

That is the first, and maybe foremost, problem with this work. Gaddis's account of the varied forms containment policy took across each administration from Truman to Nixon, if you read the original 80s version, or Truman to Bush 43 if you read the revised version, is largely sound. For those unfamiliar with the Long Telegram, NSC-68, the New Look, Massive Retaliation, and Flexible Response, this is a great introduction, as it was when it was first published. Going first sets the terms of the argument, and Gaddis did that. His version of American Cold War history and containment is essentially the accepted view, though not without critics.

Kennan's role is foremost among critics of the Gaddis/Kennan thesis. Kennan was out of policy making for all intents and purposes by the mid 1950s. It was NSC-68 that first established a containment policy for the Cold War, and that was written by Paul Nitze. Kennan loathed the military focus of NSC-68 and all subsequent policy, but he argued from an ivory tower. Reading the long telegram and his Mr. X article does

not leave the reader with a clear strategy a government could implement. Further, the Soviet threat in 1948 and in 1950 were quite different. Kennan's argument for political containment ignored the immediate military threat, and while he was critical of the "symmetrical" model of NSC-68, his own pronouncements on Containment largely failed to differentiate between vital and peripheral interests.

Paul Nitze, who was in the policy trenches from WWII to the end of the Cold War had a much more influential role in shaping American containment policy than Kennan, who while his friend, remained his intellectual foil for most of their lives. Gaddis barely makes mention of Nitze even when he notes the importance (in the revised edition) of the Reykjavik summit. One begins their examination of Cold War history, perhaps, with Kennan, but there his story ends. Nitze's continues. The dude abides, seriously. Nitze is the Forrest Gump of the Cold War, he pops up everywhere. He was one of the first into Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and was one of the last Cold War arms negotiators - alpha and omega. Kennan, he wrote a 19 page "telegram."

Further, Kennan was not the sole father of containment, far from it. If anyone could lay credit to the theory, it was probably the Soviets themselves. But as far as American policy goes, Kennan's voice was not the sole one in 1948, and he was a relatively junior figure. While his telegram had impact, it was in a milieu where many of the ideas he expressed were already "in the mix," not least in the impetus behind the Marshall plan.

One of the other major criticisms of Gaddis's work beyond his Kennan-centric focus is his lack of consistent methodology in evaluating the various permutations of containment policy. The only semi-consistent methodology is his constant relation back to Kennan. In his revised edition he takes this to the extreme in his examination of Reagan's policy, which was hardly containment, had little resemblance to Kennan (unlike Kissinger's), and was actually vociferously opposed at the time by Kennan himself. Kennan (post-Cold War) moderated his views on Reagan and Reagan policy, but it was reluctant and more than a little self-serving. At least Nitze was able to admit he might have missed the forest for the trees at Reykjavik. (Incidentally, Ken Adelman's Reagan at Reykjavik is the best account so far on that subject, though Nitze's own accounts are worthwhile).

Gaddis's account makes it sound like the Cold War was full circle. From on high George Kennan descends with his policy of Containment. And the word was good. But then everyone misunderstood and did it wrong, until they didn't, and the Cold War ended. But it was all due to George Kennan's original version of the policy. Sorry, but that's just poppycock. Even Gaddis has to shade this argument some, acknowledging that Reagan's policy was arrived at independently, and uniquely his. Yet he just can't help but go back to Kennan anyway. Its like one of those professors that writes his PhD thesis and then never stops rewriting and teaching it from then on.

This is not the best book on American Cold War policy, but it was one of the first, and is still a good one. As stated at the outset, it remains a good introduction. But it is vital for readers of Gaddis to take it with a grain of salt and dig deeper. Further, his analysis of Vietnam is especially superficial and not without it's own problems. Because this book mixes history with opinion, and that opinion is not always clear as to whether it is Gaddis's or Kennan's, it is best read with a focus on the history.

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## **Mark Bowles says**

### **A. Synopsis:**

1. This is a "lumper" account of US security policy during the Cold War (since WWII). IT looks at the

evidence not through a window of economic, diplomatic, ideological, or a military perspective. Instead it focuses on strategy. Gaddis employs this “strategic” perspective on the central preoccupation postwar national security policy--the idea of containment.

B. There are five specific “strategic” or “geopolitical” codes in the postwar era that correspond to each presidential administration. These are a set of assumptions about the world that tend to govern how a person responds to crisis.

1. George Kennan’s original strategy of containment articulated between 1947-49 and largely implemented in the Truman administration. He thought the goal of policy should be to protect the security of the nation and advance the welfare of its people. He saw the Soviet challenge as psychological.

a) His first stage in his strategy was to not divide the world in American and Soviet spheres of influence. He sought the emergence of long term powers in Europe and Asia

b) Once the balance of power was restored he sought to reduce the Soviet Union’s ability to expand beyond her borders.

c) The third step was to convince the Soviet Union to reject their universalism and adopt particularism in favor of national diversity. This could be achieved through counter-pressure

2. The assumptions surrounding NSC-68 between 1950-53 as a result of the Korean War. Following the loss of China to Communism and the Soviets detonation of an atomic bomb and NSC-68, which defined the course of US policy, was written. This was a stricter definition of containment. The new belief was that the Soviet’s had to change themselves and that no diplomacy could achieve this.

3. Eisenhower-Dulles “New Look” which lasted from 1953-61. They sought to avoid isolationism and take an active role in containing Communism. They held great fear of the “domino theory” in Indochina. The New Look included 3 main points: continuation of Truman’s strategy of containment; a strategy of deterrence which involved drawing clear borders and defending them; the use of liberation (political, psychological, economic, and covert means) to “roll back” Communist influence.

4. Kennedy-Johnson “flexible response” strategy from 1961-69. Wanted to distance himself from his predecessor whose policy he felt was becoming unwieldy. The ultimate goal was to prevent one bloc of nations from overcoming the US. The goal was not to remake the world, but balance the power within it. But, this view did not change from the zero-sum assumptions of the IKE administration (this was the belief that any victory for communism was a defeat for the US). Flexible Response was to prepare the US for responding in any of a number of ways to Communist aggression (Viet Nam was a test case for Flexible Response)

a) Bolster conventional, nuclear, and unconventional (guerrilla warfare) military capabilities

b) The strategic missile build up (which proceeded even after the myth of the “missile-gap” had been exposed)

c) A renewed effort to solidify alliances

d) A new emphasis on non-military instruments of containment

e) Attempts to manage more effectively domestic resources vital to defense

f) An expansion of IKE’s efforts to open up areas of negotiation with the Soviets.

5. The complex of ideas referred to as détente put forward by Nixon and Kissinger in the early 1970s and continued by both Ford and Carter until the invasion of Afghanistan. Détente was a relaxing of tension between nations. But, through détente Nixon and Kissinger believed that they could contain the power and influence of the Soviet Union.

a) Three philosophical changes

(1) The first stage was to recognize the multidivisional nature of power. Nuclear weapons were spreading parity throughout the world. The zero-sum game must be abandoned.

(2) Accept that conflict and disharmony were a part of life and the international order. This meant giving up the attempt to change the internal nature of other societies.

(3) The third stage was to recognize the limits of foreign policy. The defense policy shifted from “superiority” to “sufficiency.”

b) Requirements for implementing a strategy of détente

(1) Engagement of the Russians in serious negotiations on substantive issues.

(2) "Linkage." This was the belief that all issues were fundamentally related. This was difficult for the Russians because they liked to compartmentalize issues.

(3) The effort to establish links between the US and USSR's chief rival in the Communist world as a means of putting further pressure on Moscow. This was achieved through Nixon's trips to China.

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## **Greg says**

This is an excellent analysis of the US national security policies beginning with Truman and ending with Reagan. The author evaluates the various strategies of successive administrations according to the criteria of whether ends and means are distinguished, on the axis of symmetrical and asymmetrical responses to provocation and the prevailing political climate (politics are the art of the possible). Truman is evaluated as a pioneer. Ike gets a very negative appraisal as does Johnson. Nixon gets a fair hearing. Carter gets a more sympathetic treatment of his strategy than you would expect, and a lot of Reagan's achievement is rightly attributed to Gorbachev, explicitly citing Kennan's prediction in the "X" article that change in Soviet behavior would only be possible with a new generation of leadership.

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## **Ryan says**

Motivated by current events, I recently reread this for the first time in many years. It continues to be an excellent treatment of the Cold War, in large part because of Gaddis' systematic list-based narrative.

Relative to my previous reading, the book was more work for me this time because it assumes the reader already knows Cold War history well. That was fine when I was still reading a lot of Cold War material, but in this recent read I was less familiar and had to spend a lot of time with Wikipedia.

George Kennan continues to hold up remarkably well; how many political thinkers of the 2nd half of the 20th century hold up that well? Other items that struck me on this read:

- The foreign policy bureaucracy has its weaknesses, but ultimately ignoring it has cost us on a number of occasions (eg, under Nixon/Kissinger, think of Portugal, Pakistan, Cyprus, Israel).

- That said, I still have a hard time with the modern popular view of Nixon and Kissinger. Says Gaddis, "It is difficult to think of anything the Nixon administration could have done that would have produced a more dramatic shift in world power relationships of greater benefit to the United States at lower cost" (295). They pulled this off while reducing defense budgets and so on.

- The doctrines of the Eisenhower admin really have not aged well--New Look, tactical nukes, etc. I don't so much blame Ike and Dulles for this; really it is about the learning curve of the nuclear world. Truman and Ike were really on the steep part of that learning curve, and McNamara learned as well. It is scary to think of modern administrations coming in with no familiarity with that history.

Overall a great read, and well worth the reread.

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## Joseph Stieb says

This is the best account of US foreign policy during the Cold War that I know of. It is also one of the best books about strategy I've ever read. Gaddis argues that USFP consistently and, ultimately, successfully pursued a policy of containment towards the USSR during the Cold War. However, there was a broad range of options and emphases within containment in terms of how to see and address the Soviet threat. Most of the book is devoted to explaining these shifts.

Gaddis mainly argues that the US oscillated back and forth until the 1980's between asymmetrical and symmetrical containment. In asymmetrical containment (Kennan, New Look, Detente) the US tried to avoid playing to Soviet strengths (conventional arms, for instance) and defined American interests more narrowly, usually by focusing on threats that combined hostility, capability, and a vital area of the world. Rather, the US sought to compensate for Soviet strengths by working with other areas in which the US was stronger (economic power, appeal to allies, nuclear deterrence) and making stricter divisions between core and peripheral interests. Under symmetrical containment (NSC-68, flexible response, Reagan's early years), the US sought to meet Soviet strengths at all levels of conflict (nuclear weapons, conventional arms, unconventional warfare) and defined American interests very broadly under the basis of domino effect and credibility arguments. Gaddis seems to prefer asymmetrical containment, but he does a great job across the board in explaining how these different strategists saw the geopolitics, US goals, US capabilities, and designed strategies.

Unlike many if not most historians, Gaddis has a great sense of the weight and responsibility of national leadership. He realizes that these actors were trying to balance a number of priorities and achieve the means-ends balance that is so crucial in good strategy. He is, in short, a fair and mostly impartial judge of historical actors. These points especially come through in his discussion of Reagan, whom most academics and policy makers considered a neanderthal of strategy. I have long been perturbed by Reagan's moral Manicheism, or his willingness to tolerate the most horrible abuses by American allies or proxies while calling out other states for their crimes. Nevertheless, Gaddis shows that Reagan's defense buildup and intense rhetoric pushed the already crisis-ridden and declining USSR to abandon geopolitical competition and embrace both domestic reform and . Reagan didn't cause the Soviet reorientation of policy, but he pushed it along at just the right time, and then adjusted towards a policy of cooperation with Gorbachev. It's hard to deny that for all of his faults, Reagan's overall strategy worked very well in bringing about a victorious and peaceful conclusion to the Cold War. Gaddis adds that Reagan's crucial insight was that in his consideration of the expenditure of resources, he focused more on the Soviet system than the American one because he understood that the US could set such a high bar that the Soviets would break their system in trying to reach it or just give in without trying.

"Strategy" is one of the most overused words in our modern lexicon. People tend to throw it into sentences as a way of making them sound more focused or goal-oriented, but they would often have trouble clearly defining the word. Instead of reading an abstract text, I recommend that anyone interested in strategy check out Gaddis for an exploration of how historical actors in different contexts developed and deployed strategies. The historical lens is probably the most rewarding and nuanced way of approaching the defining and evaluation of strategies. This book is much more complicated than what I can get across in this review, but let me just end by saying that anyone who studies US foreign policy has to read it.

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## **John Poor says**

In-depth coverage of US cold war policy

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## **Dan Gorman says**

Spring 2017: Deep and serious analysis of the American government's response to the Cold War, but with analytical and dry prose, reflecting the inquiry of political science and not the literary flair of the average narrative history. Gaddis shows the brilliance of George Kennan, who wanted America to take a firm line in defense of its morals, but not to try to undermine the Soviet Union by force. Containment was a policy of patience. Many ensuing presidents failed to exhibit Kennan's patience. Only Reagan succeeded in fusing symmetric containment (defending boundaries) and asymmetric containment (defending key points), and then moving beyond these two binaries to try new approaches, such as playing off internal Soviet dynamics. Gaddis understates the importance of Gorbachev, compared to Melvin Leffler's brilliant "For the Soul of Mankind," but Gaddis better understands the dynamics of power and the shallowness of some leaders' claims to ideology than I think Leffler does.

Spring 2018: Reading this book again, I can follow more of Gaddis's argument. It's still an info dump and not exactly thrilling to read. But I can better appreciate how different administrations followed or diverged from Kennan's recommendations. Nixon negotiated with Russia more than Kennan wanted, but implemented Kennan's mixture of friendly and aggressive influences on Russia. Kennedy and Johnson's "flexible response" led to constant escalation and obsession with other countries' perception of America, the opposite of what Kennan wanted.

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## **Maciek says**

Strategies of Containment should not be categorized as good supplement reading in a Cold War history course: it should be considered essential reading. The book can be considered dense with the information it imparts, but Gaddis's lucid penmanship makes it a surprisingly easy read, even to people without previous background in U.S. foreign policy. Gaddis is the best American historian of the Cold War and, from all his books, this one constitutes the backbone of the best Cold War history education one can hope to attain.

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## **Mario And says**

### **Fantastic read providing lots of inspiration for think long term**

Very valuable book that helped me see a lot more subtlety and vision associated with US leaders in the Cold War era. Ends with a summary of what can be transferred to future grand strategies.

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## **Meg says**

This book is essential for anyone who wants to learn more about the Cold War. I learned so much from this book.

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### **John says**

This was a very fascinating book for me. Growing up in the tail end of the cold war, I always wondered how we got to where we were with the soviets and nuclear weapons. I wondered why Korea and Vietnam were so important to our national security. I had a hard time understanding why the world was carved up the way it was. In *Strategies of Containment*, John Lewis Gaddis clearly lays out the public policy on national security policy and how it evolved over time. He analyzes each administration and provides insights into their thought processes and the key players. Although this book is a bit dated, it is critical for anyone trying to understand modern foreign policy and national security. Things have changed, that's for sure, but we are where we are now because of decisions that were made decades ago.

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### **Frederick says**

This is an essential book for students of American history. It covers the time from Kennan's 'Long Telegram' in 1946 outlining the grand strategy of containment and how that was fleshed out through different presidential administrations. It is an excellent and clearly written book that discusses policy at the highest levels, and both it's successes and failures. It is a very important work of scholarship and one of the handful of books for which I bought a physical copy AND a Kindle copy. My pages abound with notes and my Kindle copy is heavily bookmarked and yours will be, as well, if you get you a copy. I am indebted to my instructor on the Cold War at American Public University, Dr. Christi Bartman, for inspiring my interest in the subject.

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### **Jesse says**

Probably one of the best texts on the construction and execution of the policies of containment. Gaddis' approach of breaking down how each administration and leader saw the requirements of containment and then how they executed the policy based on those perceptions is outstanding. highly recommended for any serious student of the Cold War.

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