

Domestic Constraints,
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Incoherence of Grand Strategy:
The United States, 1938-1950

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Great Powers in the international system exercise power and influence beyond their own borders. Necessarily, they make commitments to others whose survival they find vital and procure the military capability not just to defend themselves, but also to meet any international commitments they have made. For the United States, the transition from potential to full-fledged Great Power was delayed by domestic political constraints on military spending and on extending overseas commitments. Knowledge of these constraints, not typically discussed in international relations theory, is an essential prerequisite to understanding an otherwise inexplicable incoherence in U.S. grand strategy in the late 1930s and 1940s.

In general, successful deterrence requires both commitment and capability. Capability, essential to credible threats of retaliation, must be matched by believable commitments and clear signals of desires and intentions. A strategy of deterrence cannot succeed if an adversary does not know how it is expected to behave and does not believe threats of retaliation. This is especially true if a state hopes to extend

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deterrence, to prevent attacks against others as well as against itself.¹

U.S. grand strategy in the twentieth century has been geared to maintaining the balance of power abroad and providing extended deterrence to others. In service of these objectives, the United States entered two world wars. Since 1945, it has maintained bases and stationed troops overseas and made extensive security commitments to other nations.

Yet procuring the capability and making the commitments to extend deterrence overseas have stirred domestic opposition in a nation unaccustomed to sustaining sizable peacetime armies or joining alliances. This wariness found institutional support in the U.S. system of divided government, which separately locates responsibility for both capability and commitment. The executive branch procures, deploys, and integrates capability into operational plans, but Congress funds it. Presidents can, and have, made national commitments without congressional approval, but Congress retains the constitutional power to approve treaties and constrain commitments. Moreover, although the president extends U.S. commitments, it is the military that must create plans and request forces to fulfill them. There is nothing in the process that ensures a coherent grand strategy – one in which commitments and capabilities are matched.

In this chapter I contrast U.S. grand strategy before World War II with that before the Korean War and argue that Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman were politically incapable of securing the requisites for extended deterrence until international crises tipped the political scales at home. Roosevelt and many members of his administration clearly understood the security challenge posed by Germany (and Japan) and expanded the nation's military to deal with the threat. Yet domestic political opposition prevented the administration both from making the military commitments that might have prevented war and, once hostilities broke out in Europe, from becoming a cobelligerent until the United States was attacked. In contrast, the Truman administration could extend peacetime security commitments to a host of countries, but found itself unable to procure the requisite military capability to fulfill those obligations until after the invasion of South Korea. In both cases, domestic politics underlay an incoherence in U.S. grand strategy that was resolved only by war.

¹For a review of empirical assessments of the requisites of successful deterrence see Jack Levy, "Quantitative Studies of Deterrence Success and Failure," in *Perspectives on Deterrence*, ed. Paul Stern, Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, and Roy Radner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 98-133.

THE CONTRASTING REALIST VIEW

For realists, the core assumption of international politics is that states are first and foremost concerned with their own survival. Existing in an anarchic international environment, states adopt foreign and defense policies (and even domestic policies, for that matter) in order to ensure their security amid hostile and threatening outsiders. They necessarily focus on national power and especially on their own power relative to others'. They react to adverse changes in the balance of power by increasing their levels of mobilization or by finding allies. Such self-interested and autonomous responses result in the emergence of an international balance of power.² That balances of power recur and that their recurrence assures stability and peace are the core propositions of this dominant school in the study of international relations.³

Such a view of international relations presumes that states pursue security policies without any domestic complications, that they maintain the balance of power via alignment or internal mobilization without domestic constraints on their responses to changes in the international environment. Any disequilibrium in the balance of power generates pressures that return the international system to equilibrium irrespective of institutional structures or politics within any nation.

Yet balances sometimes fail to recur or do not do so readily. That is, states do not always respond to adverse changes in the balance of power. There are two ways in which Great Powers may respond inappropriately to international shifts in the balance of power: they may fail to alter either their international commitments or their capability. And it is the very failure of states immediately to respond to the aggressive expansion of others that has led some international relations theorists to argue, seemingly contradictorily, that states must sometimes fight wars to restore the balance of power. These theorists do not, however, address the failure of the equilibrating process that leads to war. They do not analyze why states would not respond immediately and commensurately to adverse changes in the distribution of power, why self-interested nation-states do not always deploy sufficient capability to deter attack. Minimally, the failure of equilibrium to reemerge is also a failure of the imperatives of the system to determine fully the nature of state actions.

²This is the field's equivalent to the invisible hand in economics – to the proposition that individual self-interest assures the maximal collective welfare.

³Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

The problem of war and the failure readily to reestablish an equilibrium balance of power for realist theory is akin to the problem of involuntary unemployment for economics. In a competitive market, prices are supposed to adjust constantly and so equilibrate supply and demand. Similarly, wages (the price of labor) should adjust to equilibrate supply and demand in the labor market, ensuring that there not be any involuntary unemployment. But since sustained involuntary unemployment does exist, the equilibrating mechanism must work imperfectly, at best. In international relations, prolonged departures from an equilibrium balance of power must also be explained by some form of stickiness in the equilibrating process.⁴

THE PROBLEMS OF OVER- AND UNDEREXTENSION

Domestic political constraints and imperatives can affect both of the critical dimensions that underlie the grand strategy of a Great Power: the extension and retraction of international commitments and changes in the deployment of military capability sufficient to fulfill international commitments and assure the success of extended deterrence. Since political constraints can operate differentially across these dimensions, they can generate incoherence in a state's grand strategy if commitments and capabilities are not fully synchronized.

A Great Power is overextended when it extends commitments that it cannot support because of insufficient capability.⁵ This can occur when political elites are politically unconstrained from extending commitments or are even impelled to make them, while being econom-

⁴In this chapter I argue that this stickiness is a function of domestic constraints on central decision makers. An alternative explanation for sustained departures and the failure of balancing stresses the problems posed by uncertainty and misperception. For an application of recent work in microeconomics to international relations, one that demonstrates the role of uncertainty in the failure to obtain the balancing predicted by realists, see Paul Papayoanou, "Economic Interdependence and the Balance of Power: The Strategy of Commitment and Great Power Politics" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1992), chap. 2.

⁵Overextension can occur even when commitments and capabilities are in sync, as when states expand, but it may generate so many enemies in the process that they create their own self-encirclement. This is the classic case discussed in international relations theory in which expansion becomes self-defeating because of the countervailing balancing responses it generates. The second prototypical case of overextension is when states make commitments that they cannot fulfill. This can occur for geopolitical and technical reasons, because countries are in no position militarily to fulfill their obligations. Thus, for example, there was no physical way in which Britain could fulfill its guarantee to Poland in 1939 without obtaining the agreement of the Soviet Union. Similarly, the United States could not have made good its commitment to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in 1990-91 without the consent and support of Saudi Arabia.

Table 5.1. Domestic constraints on commitments and capabilities

		Commitments	
		Constrained	Unconstrained
Capabilities	Constrained	Unresponsiveness to international events (1)	Overextension (2)
	Unconstrained	Underextension (3)	Realism Extended deterrence (4)

ically or politically constrained from procuring the requisite capabilities to make good on those commitments.

The possible asymmetry of commitments and capabilities leads to the four possible situations delineated in Table 5.1. The realist world of extended deterrence and smooth responses to international changes in the balance of power presumes that both commitments and capabilities are politically unconstrained (Cell 4). Overextension results where constraints exist on capability but not on commitments (Cell 2). Such situations can be dangerous for both revisionist and status quo states, which define interests they cannot credibly defend. In contrast, underextension occurs where commitments are constrained and do not reflect capabilities and interests (Cell 3). Revisionist states so constrained do not challenge, and status quo states cannot extend deterrence. Most dangerous for status quo states (unless revisionist states are similarly constrained) is when both commitments and capabilities are domestically constrained (Cell 1).

Great Powers, especially on first achieving such status, on the one hand can be underextended, making insufficient commitments in relation to their power and interests. Critics of U.S. foreign policy have made such arguments about the interwar period.

Mature Great Powers, on the other hand, are more likely to become overextended. The possibility that commitments and capabilities can become politically disjoined raises the prospects of good faith commitments that states could conceivably fulfill but that they are incapable of fulfilling because of domestic political constraints. Assessments of U.S. grand strategy in the 1980s as overextended are of this character. The United States had commitments that exceeded its military and fiscal capabilities, and thus, many concluded, it should have retrenched. No sustained analysis held that the United States could not fulfill its obligations. Rather, domestic political constraints suggested

that the capabilities would simply not be provided to fulfill the entire array of the nation's international commitments. Those who saw overextension took the constraints as fixed and suggested that commitments be appropriately trimmed. Their critics argued that the nation could afford its commitments and needed only to change its spending priorities and get its fiscal house in order. They argued, in effect, that the nation was not overcommitted but undermobilized.⁶

The argument developed below is that the United States was underextended prior to World War II and overextended in the early years of the Cold War. In the former era, domestic political constraints prevented commitments from matching capabilities and interests, whereas in the latter period, domestic political constraints prevented the procurement of the military capability to assure the fulfillment of military commitments. In both eras, domestic political constraints left U.S. policymakers unable to align commitments and capabilities.

U.S. Underextension: Neutrality and Preparedness in a World at War

In the 1930s, U.S. policymakers responded to German and Japanese challenges to the existing international order with policies intended to constrain those nations ambitions while still avoiding war.⁷ Although President Roosevelt secured a massive expansion of U.S. military capabilities, he was prevented by congressional legislation and public sentiment from making the kinds of commitments that might

⁶The debate was triggered in 1988 with the publication of Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). For critical assessments see, among others, Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Political Economy of Grand Strategy," *World Politics* 41 (April 1989): 381-406; and Charles A. Kupchan, "Empire, Military Power, and Economic Decline," *International Security* 13 (Spring 1989): 36-53. Others' assessments, typically critical of Kennedy, include Henry R. Nau, *The Myth of America's Decline: Leading the World Economy into the 1990s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); and Richard N. Rosecrance, *America's Economic Resurgence: A Bold New Strategy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

⁷This discussion draws especially on the following: Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation, 1937-1940* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952); William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940-1941* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953); C. A. MacDonal, *The United States, Britain, and Appeasement, 1936-1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981); David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-41: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-1939* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

deter aggression. Roosevelt's immediate response was rhetorical and economic, imposing sanctions against Germany and Japan.⁸ Even as war approached, Congress enacted a series of neutrality laws that required the United States to institute a mandatory and nondiscriminatory arms embargo should war break out between other nations.

Prevented from doing anything more, Roosevelt cautiously signaled the possibility of U.S. involvement in hopes of both deterring Hitler and maintaining British and French steadfastness. During the Czech crisis in 1938, even as FDR assured British Ambassador Sir Ronald Lindsay that the United States would give Britain limited support in the event of war, he also told Lindsay that disclosing the substance of their discussion could result in his impeachment.⁹ But as Lindsay explained to his superiors, the president's personal willingness to provide Britain everything but troops and loans was essentially immaterial. What Britain actually received would depend on U.S. public opinion and domestic politics.¹⁰

Roosevelt also tried to create German doubts about the U.S. dedication to neutrality and even hinted at the possibility of U.S. intervention. In the middle of 1938, the navy held its annual fleet exercise in the Atlantic rather than in its usual Pacific venue. In September the United States established an Atlantic naval squadron, sending two of its warships to British ports. Yet Roosevelt had also to make gestures aimed at reassuring Americans that the nation would not go to war. The decision to send warships to Britain, for example, was followed by a denial that the United States was promoting a "stop Hitler movement."¹¹

Throughout this period, Roosevelt conveyed mixed signals because he had multiple audiences. He wanted to use the possibility of U.S. involvement in a European war to deter further German aggression, he hoped to assure the British and French of U.S. support, and he

⁸I find the characterizations "noncommitment" and "anti-intervention" better than "isolationism," which is the standard historiographic label. As some have pointed out, the use of labels such as "isolationism" and "internationalism" itself adopts Roosevelt's framing of the debate during the 1930s and represents a political judgment (see David Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness: The Language of Politics in America from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987)).

⁹Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 164-65.

¹⁰Reynolds, *Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 34-35. Reynolds argues that British hopes for support in war were mixed with worries about U.S. reliability and fear of the liability of the United States as an ally. See also John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989).

¹¹MacDonald, *U.S., Britain, and Appeasement*, pp. 95, 97. Economic sanctions were invariably the easiest way politically to signal U.S. displeasure. For a brief compilation, see Frederick W. Marks III, *Wind Over Sand: The Diplomacy of Franklin Roosevelt* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 131.

needed simultaneously to convince Americans and Congress that he would not lead them into the fray.

FDR was as concerned about an insufficient capability to deter Hitler as he was worried about his inability to commit the United States. In 1938, after the Czech crisis, he complained that “I must have something to back up my words. Had we had this summer 5000 planes and the capacity immediately to produce 10,000 per year, even though I might have had to ask Congress for authority to sell or lend them to the countries in Europe, Hitler would not have dared to take the stand he did.”¹² Despite the neutrality acts, he thought he could still have deterred Hitler had he possessed the requisite capability.

Beginning in 1938, and accelerating late in that year, the United States began to increase its military spending. In the late fall, FDR undertook a major effort to rebuild U.S. defenses.¹³ The president saw the specter of war in Europe and wanted the United States to construct an adequate navy and air force before hostilities began.

Roosevelt was able to secure increased capability by selling it as a purely defensive program, but he remained constrained from making any commitments to use it. Although those who supported neutrality legislation split on the question of increased defense spending and rearmament, they uniformly opposed U.S. involvement in foreign wars and wanted the nation to avoid entangling commitments. Some supported increased defense expenditures to augment the nation’s security, but others opposed new appropriations for fear of increasing the chances of the nation’s involvement in war. And although military spending requests were always approved, they invariably elicited congressional questions about the intentions and commitments of the United States.

The president wanted to extend military commitments as well as to rearm, however, so his revision of the neutrality acts and rearmament were the twin focuses of his January 1939 state of the union address. He argued that repeal of the neutrality laws was central to any U.S. attempt to reassure the Allies and to deter Adolf Hitler from further aggression.

Ironically, even as the international situation worsened, FDR grew politically weaker at home and less able to obtain changes in the nation’s neutrality laws. In the latter half of his presumably lame-

¹²Henry Morgenthau quoting FDR. John Morton Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of Urgency, 1938-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 49.

¹³MacDonald, *U.S., Britain, and Appeasement*, argues that the United States shifted from a policy of appeasing Germany to one of containing it in October 1938, before Britain did, and was irritated by continued British appeasement early in 1939.

duck second term, he faced enormous domestic problems and constant political challenges. In the wake of the renewed economic decline of 1937-38 and following the crisis created by his plan to pack the Supreme Court, Roosevelt confronted an intransigent congressional opposition that had been strengthened by the 1938 election. Neutrality reform failed in Congress.

Roosevelt's concern with the German challenge was also reflected in the evolution of U.S. war plans, which, as late as the mid-1930s, had still focused on the prospects of a war in the Pacific. As German aggression became increasingly evident, though, U.S. planners began to develop blueprints for a two-ocean war. By the spring of 1939 they had suggested giving priority to the Atlantic.¹⁴

The nature of the U.S. strategic problem changed with the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939. FDR could no longer hope to prevent war in Europe; only the character of eventual U.S. involvement remained uncertain. Domestic sentiment, although clearly sympathetic to the Allies, showed that people still favored keeping the country out of war. Thus, when Roosevelt again decided to ask Congress to revise the nation's neutrality laws, he couched his request in terms of keeping the nation out of war. Although Congress repealed the embargo on weapons shipments to belligerents, it imposed cash and carry provisions, which denied credit to foreign buyers and required them to transport their weapons purchases in their own ships. Although Congress agreed to eschew strict neutrality, it would make no commitment to support the Allies by financing their purchases of U.S. military supplies. And by insisting that such goods be carried on foreign ships, it sought to keep the United States out of the war by insuring that there would be no pretext for firing on U.S. ships. The nation exchanged neutral noncommitment for nonbelligerency.

The German attacks of spring and summer 1940 did increase the pace of U.S. rearmament. Germany invaded Denmark and Norway in April and Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and France in May. In August German bombers attacked Britain. Following the attack on France, Roosevelt made a special defense request of \$1.2 billion. Within two weeks, he asked for an additional \$1.3 billion. By midyear, Congress had provided \$5 billion.

Although the United States expanded its military arsenal in response, it refused to enter into military commitments. Throughout

¹⁴James R. Leutze, *Bargaining for Supremacy: Anglo-American Naval Collaboration, 1937-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 37. But concrete steps to reflect changing assumptions had to be taken in secret. The resumption of naval staff conversations with Great Britain in early 1939, for example, took place in secret so as not to endanger the revision of neutrality legislation.

1940 the president was beseeched by the French and British not only for military equipment but also for a military pledge. With his nation under assault, the French premier told the U.S. ambassador that he would ask the U.S. president either to declare war against Germany or to announce “that the United States in defense of its vital interests could not permit the defeat of France and England.” Since Roosevelt was hemmed in, he responded that he would provide all material possible but would make no military commitments. In one instance, he asked the British and French to keep secret his communications regarding what support the United States could provide, and he constantly stressed that his statements and messages had included “no implications of military commitments,” which were the prerogative of Congress.¹⁵

Although Congress balked, FDR became bolder in circumventing the U.S. neutrality laws. Throughout 1940 and 1941, he sought politically acceptable ways to aid the Allies. In order to arrange a much-needed transfer of destroyers to a cash-poor Britain, he handled the matter as an executive agreement.¹⁶ And since U.S. law prevented loans to belligerents, the presidential decree substituted basing rights for cash.

The election of 1940 illuminated the degree to which the United States remained unprepared to go to war. Unlike many past elections in which foreign policy played no role at all, the U.S. relationship to the war in Europe played a pivotal role this time. The campaign forced Roosevelt to promise no greater involvement with the Allies.¹⁷

Although the election pitted against each other two internationalists whose parties had adopted noninterventionist platforms, foreign policy came to dominate the campaign. Wendell Willkie, the Republican candidate, began to emphasize isolationist themes. Fearing electoral defeat, he began to argue that Roosevelt’s reelection would bring the United States into the war. The strategy seemed to work, for his standing in the polls surged, at one point coming within 4 percentage points of FDR.

The Willkie strategy forced a shift in FDR’s rhetorical position. The

¹⁵Dallek, *FDR and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 222, 230.

¹⁶Ironically, U.S. rearmament and concerns about self-defense and the needs of the U.S. military came into conflict with the objective of aiding the Allies. Isolationists who supported rearmament argued (and received support from some military quarters) that the United States could not militarily afford to sell desperately needed equipment and supplies to other nations whose continued survival was not assured in any case. As a result, the administration constantly had to reassure Congress that equipment sold to the Allies was outdated or surplus.

¹⁷See the discussion of the platforms in Cole, *Roosevelt and the isolationists*, pp. 391-94.

president had simultaneously emphasized his commitment to build up the nation's defenses, his determination to keep the nation out of the war, his loathing of the aggressors, his sympathy for those attacked, and his rejection of appeasement. But pressed by party leaders to respond to Willkie, Roosevelt declared that "through all the years since 1935, there has been no entanglement and there will be no entanglement." On the possibility of war, he promised, "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."¹⁸

In 1941 the president continued publicly to limit U.S. commitments while looking for ways to aid the Allies and engaging secretly in joint military planning with Britain. In January he proposed the Lend-Lease Act, an arrangement by which the United States would lend Britain equipment that would be returned or compensated in kind when the war was over. This could be done without altering U.S. laws that prevented the extension of credit and required cash payments. As Congress debated and enacted the Lend-Lease Act, and while the administration repeatedly denied that it had made any plans to send U.S. troops abroad, the government secretly entered discussions with Britain and Canada to develop military strategy for waging the war. The Allies agreed on joint war plans to fight Germany first, even though the United States could not make an outright commitment to enter the war.

By August 1941 FDR had met with Churchill to hammer out joint war objectives. Churchill very much wanted a U.S. commitment to enter the war. FDR refused the request and pointed to Congress as the stumbling block. Reporting to his Cabinet, Churchill noted that President Roosevelt "was skating on pretty thin ice in his relations with Congress," and that "if he were to put the issue of peace and war to Congress, they would debate it for three months." Rather, Churchill noted the president's view of the course he would take: "The President said he would wage war, but not declare it, and that he would become more and more provocative. If the Germans did not like it, they could attack American forces.. Everything was to be done to force an 'incident.' The President.. made it clear that he would look for an 'incident' which would justify him in opening hostilities."¹⁹

¹⁸Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, pp. 399-400. FDR was neither the first nor the last president to play the peacemonger during an election and then lead the nation into war. Wade understood what it all meant. "That hypocritical son of a bitch!" he fumed, "This is going to beat me." Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 376.

¹⁹Reynolds, *Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 214-15. The president had

The president opted for a policy of aid short of war and did not alter it even as the situation in Europe worsened. He never believed he could get a declaration of war and involve the United States. In October 1941, although many Americans had come to favor complete repeal of the neutrality laws, FDR submitted legislation that only sought a small change, approval for arming U.S. merchant ships. The revision passed, but by very narrow margins, winning in the House by a margin of eighteen votes.

Even the event that precipitated U.S. entry into the European war did not do so immediately. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor triggered a White House debate about whether to declare war on both Germany and Japan or just against Japan. The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt overruled some of his advisers and asked Congress for a declaration of war against Japan alone. A U.S. declaration of war against Germany would await a German declaration of war against the United States. Germany obliged, and solved Roosevelt's problem.²⁰

Hitler was not deterred by U.S. actions, and perhaps he could not have been. He certainly did not have a sophisticated understanding of the United States. But he was aware of U.S. domestic politics and the constraints imposed by public opinion and the neutrality acts. He thus dismissed U.S. statements and actions as "Bluffpolitik."²¹

Moreover, Hitler implicitly recognized the nature of the constraints operating on FDR and was guided by that understanding. Throughout 1940 and 1941, as the United States sent increasing amounts of equipment to Britain and as the U.S. Navy expanded its defensive opera-

even earlier told many of his staff that he believed that the United States would eventually join the war but that he wanted his hand forced. For a compilation of the evidence for Roosevelt's desire to be forced into war, see p. 347, n. 38.

²⁰Reynolds, *Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance*, pp. 220-21. Much has been written on the German decision. See Saul Friedlaender, *Prelude to Downfall: Hitler and the United States, 1939-1941* (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 306-9; H. L. Trefousse, *Germany and American Neutrality, 1939-1941* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1951), pp. 137-51; Holger H. Herwig, "Prelude to Weltblitzkrieg: German's Naval Policy Towards the United States, 1939-1941," *Journal of Modern History* 43 (December 1971): 649-68; Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *American Historical Review* 69 (July 1964): 1006-21; Milan Hauner, "Did Hitler Want a World Dominion?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (January 1978): 15-32; Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Germany's Declaration of War on the United States: A New Look," in *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II*, ed. Weinberg (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1981), pp. 75-95; and Herwig, "Miscalculated Risks: The German Declaration of War against the United States, 1917 and 1941," *Naval War College Review* 39 (Autumn 1986): 88-100.

²¹MacDonald, *U.S., Britain, and Appeasement*, p. 181. See also James V. Compton, *The Swastika and the Eagle: Hitler, the United States, and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1968), p. 31.

Table 5.2. Expenditures on U.S. national defense, 1934-1941 (in millions)

Fiscal year ^a	Total expenditures ^b	National defense expenditures	National defense as a percentage of total	Annual percentage growth in national defense expenditures
1934	7,105	480	6.8	–
1935	7,376	534	7.2	11.2
1936	8,880	764	8.6	43.3
1937	8,001	844	10.5	10.4
1938	7,409	934	12.6	10.6
1939	8,707	1,140	13.1	22.1
1940	8,998	1,580	17.6	38.6
1941	12,711	6,301	49.6	298.8

SOURCES: U.S. Bureau of the Budget, *Budget of the United States Government*, annual volumes, 1935/36-1942/43. Figures come from the general budget summary and supporting schedule 2. The figures for 1938 are estimates drawn from the 1938/39 annual.

^a Fiscal year ending June 30. The figures for 1939, for example, represent expenditures between July 1, 1938, and June 30, 1939.

^b The figures for national defense spending exclude nonmilitary components of Navy and War Department expenditures. The War Department, for example, did work on rivers and harbors, as well as on flood control, none of which are included under national defense expenditures. Thus, for the years 1935-40, actual expenditures for the army and navy exceed those provided above. The figures for national defense include relevant expenditures by departments other than War and Navy and include defense aid expenditures such as Lend-Lease. In 1941 the proportion spent on national defense exceeded that expended by the War and Navy Departments.

tions in the North Atlantic, the German navy sought the freedom to treat the United States as the hostile belligerent they believed it to be. Yet Hitler steadfastly ordered German ships to avoid a confrontation with the United States.²² He also responded mildly to increasing U.S. involvement. Germany did not protest congressional passage of Lend-Lease at all, and it never went so far as to break off diplomatic relations.

Although Congress constrained U.S. involvement in the European war, it supported Roosevelt's efforts to build the nation's military. From a low point in 1934,²³ military spending grew annually and quite dramatically, by double-digit percentages for the remainder of the decade and beyond. Even in fiscal 1938, when overall government spending declined, the national defense budget grew by more

²²Compton, *Swastika and the Eagle*, chap. 10; Trefousse, *Germany and American Neutrality*; Herwig, *Politics of Frustration: The United States in German Naval Planning, 1889-1921* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

²³Based on army, navy, and air force expenditures as a percentage of the federal total for the years 1789 to 1970. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (1976), data series Y457, Y458, Y459, Y460.

Table 5.3. Presidential requests and congressional dispositions, War Department, 1934-1941

Fiscal year ^a	Column A	Column B	Column C		
	President's budget estimate	Appropriations ^b	Appropriations and allotments from emergency funds	Percentage of change, ^c col. A to col. B	Percentage of change, col. A to col. C
1934	281	281	378 ^d	0.2	34.6
1935	289	284	293	-1.8	1.3
1936	320	359	369	12.0	15.0
1937	391	402	420	2.8	7.4
1938	429	439	514	2.4	19.9
1939	619	617	648	-0.3	4.8
1940	869	861	880	-0.9	1.2
1941	11,208	13,469	13,469	20.2	20.2

SOURCE: *Congressional Record*, June 23, 1942, pp. 5493-5494.

^a Fiscal years ending June 30. Figures are rounded to millions of dollars.

^b Includes annual War Department bill, contract authorizations, and supplemental appropriations.

^c Percentage changes are calculated on full figures, prior to rounding. Figures are solely those of the War Department and do not include the Navy Department.

^d The president impounded \$62.6 million of this amount, leaving \$315 million appropriated.

^e The 1941 appropriation figures are much higher than 1941 expenditures because of various supplementals and different accounting definitions.

than 10 percent. Overall, spending on national defense went from less than 7 percent of government spending in 1934 to more than 13 percent in fiscal 1939, more than 17 percent in 1940, and to almost 50 percent in fiscal 1941 (see Table 5.2).

In fact, Congress did more than acquiesce to the president's desires; often, it went beyond them. In 1934, when so little spending went to military purposes, Capitol Hill was prepared to spend more than the president, who impounded over 16 percent of that year's appropriations for the War Department. From fiscal 1936 on, Congress not only acceded to presidential requests but often increased them (see Table 5.3).

These extensive increases in defense spending provided the United States the wherewithal to undertake a major buildup of power that quickly led to its outstripping the efforts of its prospective enemies. It was able, for example, to respond so emphatically to Japan's growing naval strength that by June 1939 it had already put a halt to the relative slide in U.S. tonnage and had begun to increase its naval superiority over Japan once again (see Table 5.4).

The growth of U.S. air power was even more stunning. In 1935 the

Table 5.4. Total tonnage of major combatant naval vessels

Year ^a	United States	British Empire	Japan	Japan/U.S.
1935	1,084,910	1,188,284	748,997	.69
1936	1,080,715	1,224,329	772,797	.72
1937	1,083,330	1,216,398	745,594	.69
1938	1,100,890	1,295,303	918,499	.83
1939	1,240,040	1,381,373	985,394	.79
1940	1,310,260	1,308,019	1,016,574	.78

SOURCE: *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1935-1940*. Unfortunately, subsequent reports did not continue to provide these comparisons.

^aData as of June 30 of each year.

NOTE: The vessel categories included are those for which there were negotiated limits in the Washington and London naval treaties. They include capital ships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.

United States produced less than half as many military aircraft as Japan and less than one-sixth as many as Germany (see Table 5.5). But before becoming a belligerent at the end of 1941, the United States was already outproducing both nations in military aircraft, while still retaining an extensive commercial aircraft production capacity that it could readily convert to wartime purposes.

By 1941, without even embarking on a wartime mobilization, the United States had acquired a military production capacity that exceeded that of Germany and Japan combined. In terms of mobilized military capacity, World War II was effectively over before Pearl Harbor.

Congressional isolationists did not retard the nation's own military preparedness campaign, but they were able both to prevent U.S. commitment before the outbreak of war in Europe and, later, to constrain the nature of U.S. involvement. For until it declared war, the United States could play the role of virtual cobelligerent, with coordinated strategy and war aims, but it could not become militarily involved.

During the prewar years, President Roosevelt's dilemma grew out of the peculiar constraints under which U.S. policy operated. Rearmament and preparedness could obtain political backing at home, but U.S. commitments of support and assistance could not. After war broke out in Europe, the constraints loosened, the pace of rearmament quickened, and assistance short of war became possible. With every nation that fell to the dictatorships, the United States could and did do more, until it essentially pursued an undeclared war against Germany. But more direct involvement, and even a public acknowledg-

Table 5.5. Aircraft production, United States, Germany, and Japan, 1935-1942

Year	Japan	Germany	U.S. military	U.S. total (civilian and military)
1935	952	3,183	459	1,710
1936	1,181	5,112	1,141	3,010
1937	1,511	5,606	949	3,773
1938	3,201	5,235	1,800	3,623
1939	4,467	8,295	2,195	5,856
1940	4,768	10,247	6,019	12,804
1941	5,088	11,766	19,433	26,277
1942	8,861	13,409	47,836	47,836

SOURCES: Germany: Richard J. Overy, *The Air War, 1939-1945* (New York: Europa Publications, 1980), pp. 21, 150. For some years, Overy has slightly modified the figures provided by the Strategic Bombing Survey. Care should be taken in using Overy's tables. The two tables in the book that provide cross-national data on aircraft production use different U.S. data. One table, for the years 1932-39, uses U.S. figures for production of military aircraft. The second table, for the years 1939-45, uses the U.S. figures for total aircraft production, both civilian and military. Not surprisingly, therefore, the two tables give quite different figures for U.S. aircraft production in 1939. These two tables in Overy's book are reproduced by Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 324, 354.

U.S.: Rudolf Modley and Thomas J. Cawley, eds. *Aviation Facts and Figures: 1953* (Washington, D.C.: Lincoln Press, for the Aircraft Industries Association of America, 1953), p. 24.

Japan: *The Japanese Aircraft Industry* (United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Aircraft Division, May 1947), p. 155. Also see p. 1. The data seem to be for total aircraft production, although that is not altogether clear. The impression is that 1941 and 1942 data are solely for military aircraft production. The data include the production of gliders. Still another source suggests that the 1939-42 figures for both Germany and Japan are for military aircraft, see Irving Brinton Holley, Jr., *Buying Aircraft: Materiel Procurement for the Army Air Forces, United States Army in World War II, Special Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, Office of the Chief of Military History, 1964), p. 555.

NOTE: The figures for 1935-38 for Germany and Japan may include some production for civilian use. The sources are simply unclear on this point.

ment of the extent of actual cooperation, still proved politically impossible.

Indeed, preparedness measures adopted even following the outbreak of war in Europe were considered politically marketable only on the grounds that they would keep the nation out of war. In fall 1940, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, which authorized conscription. But the law stipulated that draftees could not serve outside the Western Hemisphere except in U.S. territories. In the middle of 1941 the administration asked Congress to extend the period of service from twelve to eighteen months. The House agreed by just one vote. Despite its desire to lift the ban on service outside the

Western Hemisphere, however, the administration never even put that change to a vote. Opposition to the removal of this prohibition was too great. In short, preparedness could proceed only if constrained, and only if conjoined with assurances that the United States was not being taken into the war.

The result was that U.S. isolationism in the 1930s represented involvement without commitment. The nation often took clear positions, undertook diplomatic initiatives, and used economic instruments to punish and reward. As a description of this policy, “isolationism” is a misnomer. The heart of what is typically called “isolationism” was a consistent unwillingness to extend security commitments to defend vital interests overseas and deter threats to those interests. The United States procured the capability to meet the international challenges of the late 1930s, but was never able to make the commitments to deter nor to become openly involved once deterrence failed.²⁴

Shifts in the international balance of power were met with increased military mobilization at home but without the extension of military commitments. U.S. underextension, the incoherence of U.S. grand strategy, is explained by the domestic political constraints under which it was formulated. President Roosevelt opposed the dictatorships and wanted to commit U.S. power to defend former allies in order to deter Germany. But U.S. commitment was rendered impossible by political constraints imposed by Congress. The United States developed the military capability to project power overseas, but could not make credible commitments. Even after war broke out, the nature and terms of U.S. assistance were shaped by congressional constraints rather than by executive judgment and military assessment. Only after it had been directly attacked and after war had been declared upon it could the nation align its commitments with its capability and interests.

Postwar Overextension: Demobilization and Cold War Commitments

U.S. grand strategy following World War II was quite different than it had been during the 1930s. The nation was politically prepared to play a global role that involved extensive international commitments;

²⁴Not only is isolationism then a misnomer, but the scholarly debate is miscast. Those who argue that Roosevelt was constrained by domestic politics are correct, but only as regards U.S. commitments. In contrast, those who argue that Roosevelt accomplished a great deal and could have done more are correct, but only as regards U.S. capability. Presidential leadership was eminently evident in U.S. preparedness and rearmament, but it most patently failed and was constrained by domestic politics on the dimension of commitment.

ironically, however, it debated them less extensively than it did the procurement of new capabilities. Even as it accepted the role of Great Power, the country remained unwilling to pay for a military establishment capable of fulfilling its growing obligations. In the initial years of the Cold War, political constraints prevented the nation from procuring military capabilities congruent with its increasing global commitments, and led to a grand strategy of overextension for the United States.²⁵

During World War II, it became clear that the United States would have extensive military commitments in the postwar world, ones that would entail substantial capabilities.²⁶ Minimally, the war's end would leave the United States with occupation duty in the defeated nations and, therefore, with forces based around the world.²⁷

Heightened military commitments and the need for a substantial military capability were caused by growing tensions with the Soviet Union. The policy of containment, although often described as a political and economic policy, was, in fact, a consensus policy that reflected the views of those in the Department of State, the White House, and the military. Even before the circulation of George Kennan's famous 190 telegram on the nature of Soviet expansionism, military strategists had begun planning for a possible war with the USSR.²⁸ By the middle of 1946, the Joint Chiefs of Staff echoed Kennan, describing a Soviet Union bent on "eventual world domination." As a result, they advocated the development of an immediately usable military force – one that did not require mobilization time – as a "de-

²⁵This discussion draws especially on the following: James F. Schnabel, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 1: 1945-1947 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979); Kenneth W. Condit, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 2, 1947-1949 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979); Walter S. Poole, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 4, 1950-1952 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1979); Steven L. Rearden, *The Formative Years, 1947-1950*, vol. 1, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, 1984); and Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond, and Glenn H. Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962). See also John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

²⁶On the military side, see Michael S. Sherry, *Preparing for the Next War: American Plans for Postwar Defense, 1941-45* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), and especially Melvyn P. Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-48," *American Historical Review* 89 (April 1984): 346-81.

²⁷This would require obtaining overflight rights as well as basing rights around the world.

²⁸The evolution of U.S. war plans during this period is detailed in Steven I. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950* (New York: Garland, 1988).

terrent” to Soviet aggression.²⁹ The State Department agreed that the country had to rebuild militarily so that it could display firmness and resolve in dealing with Soviet expansion.

The need for overseas commitments and military forces was reinforced by new technical challenges that also shaped U.S. grand strategy. No longer could the nation rely on its relative geographic isolation and its allies to give it time to mobilize for war. Rather, the nature of new weapons – missiles and atomic bombs – mandated overseas bases and a forward military posture. Because missiles would not soon have extensive range, the nation would need bases from which to launch them. At the same time, the United States had to keep any potential enemy’s weapons as far as possible from U.S. shores. These dual requirements, the Joint Chiefs declared in the fall of 1945, required “forces and installations disposed in an outer perimeter of bases.” Foreign policy could no longer be based on “long term potential”; mobilization might take too long for the nation “to avert disaster in another war.”³⁰

Ironically, the need to maintain a sizeable military establishment developed even before the end of the rapid demobilization that followed World War II. But as the nation’s policymakers envisioned an expansive role for the United States in the postwar era and as they came to see an implacable rival bent on world domination, they bowed to public pressure to bring the boys home. The U.S. armed forces, which slightly exceeded 12 million at the end of June 1945, dropped to just under 3 million a year later. Congress allowed the Selective Service Act to expire at the end of March 1947, and by June 30, fewer than 1.6 million served.

Not surprisingly, defense budgets shrank concomitantly, from \$42 billion for fiscal year 1946 to \$14 billion for fiscal 1947. At the same time, the purchasing power of those fewer dollars declined, and the administration tried to combat the substantial postwar inflation by reducing spending even more. Military expenditures dropped from a full 37.4 percent of GNP at their height, in fiscal 1944, to just 4.4 percent of GNP in fiscal 1948, an even lower proportion than the 5.4 percent spent on rearmament in fiscal 1941.³¹

²⁹Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1945-1947*, pp. 103-8, 163-64. This assessment of Soviet objectives came in response to a request from the White House. Clark Clifford and George Elsey expanded on the Joint Chiefs’ report and concluded that “the United States should maintain military forces powerful enough to restrain the Soviet Union and to confine Soviet influence to its present area.” The Clifford-Elsey report is in Arthur Krock, *Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), pp. 417-82.

³⁰Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1945-1947*, pp. 138, 148, 90-92.

³¹Rearden, *Formative Years, 1947-1950*, p. 310.

Overall, domestic political pressures had brought a speedier demobilization than the armed services thought wise. Yet, Secretary of State James Byrnes complained, many of those who wanted rapid demobilization also pressed for a tough line on the Soviet Union. Drawing the contrast with Theodore Roosevelt's injunction, he complained that his critics wanted him "to speak loudly and carry a twig."³²

Ironically, as U.S. capability shrank, world events and U.S. responses to them generated new security commitments. In March 1947, following Britain's announcement that it was withdrawing troops from Greece, President Truman asked Congress for aid to both Greece and Turkey. Late that year, Truman approved an official statement of U.S. policy declaring that "the security of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East is vital to the security of the United States."³³

But throughout 1947 and into early 1948 the military held that it could not defend these newly defined U.S. interests. Already overextended, the nation could not make new commitments without increased appropriations. If additional forces proved necessary, partial mobilization or compulsory military service would be required.³⁴ In 1948 the Joint Chiefs responded similarly to discussions about the possibility of a U.S. association with the European nations (United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) that had joined in a treaty of mutual defense known as the Brussels Pact. Since the nation did not have the capabilities essential for existing national objectives, the chiefs argued, new military commitments should be eschewed until the armed forces were strengthened.

But congressional actions reduced the nation's military establishment. It reduced the president's fiscal 1948 defense budget by almost 10 percent. With the end of the draft, the military's personnel strength even fell below authorized levels. The administration responded to congressional requirements and submitted a fiscal 1949 budget further cutting defense spending. The administration also called for a 13 percent reduction from the previous year's military manpower ceiling.

Yet relations with the Soviets were worsening and the inadequacy of U.S. forces was becoming ever more apparent. In March 1948 a war scare led Truman to ask Congress for a supplemental defense-spending request of just over \$3 billion. Less than the \$8.8 billion the military wanted, the figure was selected to ensure that the fiscal 1950

³²Schnabel, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1945-1947*, pp. 220.

³³Condit, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1947-1949*, p. 26.

³⁴Condit, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1947-1949*, pp. 18, 26, 43-44, 48.

and 1951 budgets remained in balance.³⁵ Even in the midst of crisis, political constraints prevented fulfilling the nation's military commitments.

Growing worries about the Soviet threat generated a series of strategic reassessments; all reaffirmed earlier conclusions. An early 1948 National Security Council paper on U.S. interests and Soviet policy (NSC7), for example, described the "ultimate objective" of the Soviet Union as "domination of the world." In response, it held, the United States should strengthen its armed forces and support friendly nations militarily should they face aggression. A slightly later document (NSC20/3) presented a similar view. "Within the foreseeable future," it judged, "the greatest single danger" to the nation lay in "the will and ability of the leaders of the USSR to pursue policies which threaten the security of the United States." Although it did not see war as imminent, this analysis stressed the Soviets' ability to grab control of Western Europe and the Middle East. Given that reality, U.S. objectives should have been to develop adequate military forces to deter Soviet aggression and to fulfill military commitments.³⁶

The Joint Chiefs responded to these general statements, and to a group of more specific position papers, by reiterating its view that the nation, already vastly overcommitted, would simply not be able to fulfill its military obligations "either promptly or effectively." Hence, it emphasized the need to match commitments with capabilities.

Indeed, in this context, the military continually underlined the importance of avoiding still further commitments. The Joint Chiefs accepted the logic of collective defense, but reacted uneasily to planning for the soon-to-be-established North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and held that "its scope should not be such as to result in undue disparity between our commitments and our present and prospective strength." Despite the military's wariness, however, the nation did, for the first time in its history, enter a nonhemispheric peacetime alliance. In joining the new organization at its inception in 1949, the United States pledged to maintain its capacity to resist military attack and to use armed force to aid any ally that came under assault.³⁷

³⁵The internal administration debate about the size and composition of the supplemental is detailed in Rearden, *Formative Years, 1947-1950*, chap. 11.

³⁶Condit, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1947-1949*, pp. 2.16, 22.2, 2:4-25.

³⁷Condit, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1947-1949*, pp. 377, 381, Joining NATO led to a shift in U.S. war plans. Prior plans had presumed that Europe could not be defended, but that Allied forces could retake the Continent as they had in World War After the creation of NATO, however, U.S. war planners sought to establish the

Even as the nation's leaders accepted both the basic view of the Soviets as expansionist and that assessment's bleak ramifications for U.S. security, and even as the nation increased its overseas defense commitments in response, the short-lived rearmament of 1948 gave way to renewed economy efforts. President Truman instructed Secretary of Defense James Forrestal to develop a defense program costing less than \$14.5 billion for fiscal 1950. But the Joint Chiefs could not agree on how to allocate such a budget, which it considered too low to ensure the nation's security. "Military considerations alone" would require \$29 billion, "minimum necessary readiness" would necessitate \$23.6 billion, maintaining fiscal 1949 force levels would take \$18.6 billion, and the smallest sum on which the Joint Chiefs of Staff could agree, after great pressure, came to \$16.9 billion.³⁸ The entire Defense Department budget process went for naught, however, and the administration submitted the president's original figure.

Indeed, the political pressures to reduce defense spending were evident in Congress and reflected in White House actions. The president named the more budget-minded Louis Johnson to replace Defense Secretary Forrestal and instructed the services to prepare a fiscal 1951 budget of \$13 billion.³⁹ Congress reduced the president's fiscal 1950 request, one that the Joint Chiefs had already found inadequate, given the nation's commitments and war plans. The president went them one better and announced that he would not even spend all that Congress had authorized. Shortly after submitting the 1951 budget, Defense Secretary Johnson told the military that its plans for 1952 should be based on the same amount, \$13 billion. Congressional pressures to cut spending were accepted and then internalized by the White House, and they were translated into demands that the military submit budgets with politically selected ceilings. As a result, military strength in June 1950 matched the low point it had reached in 1947, when the demobilization from World War II ended.

While defense expenditures shrank, however, world events had put new pressures on this limited budget. In fall 1949 both the Soviet Union's successful detonation of an atomic device, which ended the U.S. monopoly on atomic weapons, and the Communist victory in

requisites for a forward defense in Europe. But given budgetary constraints, such a defense would not be possible without West German rearmament, which the Joint Chiefs began to advocate. Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950*, chap. 6.

³⁸Rearden, *Formative Years, 1947-1950*, pp. 343-51.

³⁹Johnson was extremely ambitious and hoped to use fiscal stringency to catapult him into the presidency. See David Callahan, *Dangerous Capabilities: Paul Nitze and the Cold War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 102.

the Chinese Civil War served both to highlight the apparent extent of the threats against which the United States would have to protect itself and its allies and also to illuminate the need for a larger defense budget. Against this backdrop, U.S. policymakers again reevaluated U.S. policy and strategy. The result, a National Security Council document known as NSC68, has come to be considered a hallmark of the Cold War. Yet much of it merely reproduced earlier evaluations of Soviet objectives and potential U.S. responses. Indeed, NSC68 included portions of the earlier NSC20/4, which it was intended to revise, and – aside from its exceptionally fervent tone – it differed from earlier analyses only by finding the Soviet threat to be “more immediate than had previously been estimated.”⁴⁰

In addition to its assessment of Soviet policy, NSC68 also discussed U.S. capabilities and offered a prescription. Here, too, there were similarities and differences from earlier analyses. On the one hand, NSC68 reiterated the concern with the “sharp disparity between our actual military strength and our military commitments.” The key shift here from earlier NSC documents came with NSC68’s call for a “concerted buildup” that would be so costly as to “involve significant domestic financial and economic adjustments” – including reductions in nondefense expenditures and an increase in taxes. Unambiguously articulating its position on the relative importance of military considerations, it judged that “budgetary considerations will need to be subordinated to the stark fact that our very independence as a nation may be at stake.”⁴¹

Truman deferred action on NSC68 pending further analysis of its budgetary and economic implications. Requesting assessments from the Bureau of the Budget and the Council of Economic Advisers, among others, the president would not, he said, “buy a pig in a poke.”⁴² NSC68 did not emerge uncriticized, and the president let its recommendations sit unheeded until after the outbreak of the Korean War. Then, in September 1950, he approved the document.

⁴⁰*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 287.

⁴¹*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950*, pp. 261, 290, 285. The text of NSC68 appears on pp. 234-92. When NSC68 was circulated for comment, the Joint Chiefs used the opportunity to return to their 1948 requests. Rearden, *Formative Years, 1947-1950*, pp. 534-35. The document, quite purposely, did not provide any concrete figures. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 374, states that this “was not an oversight.” Estimates ranged from the \$17-18 billion range to the \$35-40 billion range. These figures come from Schilling, Hammond, and Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets*, p. 321. Paul Nitze, “The Development of NSC 68,” *International Security* 4 (Spring 1980): 170-76, puts it at \$35-40 billion (p. 173).

⁴²Poole, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1950-1952*, p. 15.

Indeed, the Korean War led to the dramatic growth in U.S. defense spending envisioned in NSC68, and so to the alignment of U.S. capabilities with commitments. Within half a year, President Truman submitted three supplemental requests for defense spending and one for military assistance. Defense spending increased from \$14.258 billion in fiscal 1950 to \$53.208 billion in fiscal 1951 to \$65.992 billion in fiscal 1952.⁴³

Alone, NSC68, would not have brought the growth of U.S. defense spending any more than had its predecessors. Postwar crises had led to small increments, but never enough even to sustain spending levels, much less bring them to the point required by U.S. commitments. But war swept away the political constraints to dramatic defense-spending increases.⁴⁴

Domestic considerations played a key role in shaping the immediate postwar military capabilities of the United States, and, as a result, had great bearing on strategy as well. U.S. military requirements were not primarily driven by international threats or considerations. Rather, domestic imperatives were preeminent: the desire to bring soldiers home and resume a peacetime existence and the need to reduce the burden of military expenditures and balance the federal budget. In effect, the nation had taken a calculated risk. It made and sustained a series of strategic commitments without providing the means to keep them. And the ramifications of that failure were far-reaching.

Indeed, the gap between the nation's defense obligations and the resources actually provided to the military constantly frustrated U.S. postwar strategic planners. The Joint Chiefs of Staff faced what one analyst calls a "continuing predicament" – the need to develop strategies that would allow the military "to meet expanding commitments with static and insufficient forces."⁴⁵ And, as strategists groped for ways to deal with the budgetary constraints imposed on them, they abandoned and revised war plans.

As a result of insufficient funding, the military wanted the nation

⁴³Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950*, p. 139. Military frugality was not the only sacrifice to the Korean War. In September 1951 the president asked for and received the resignation of Defense Secretary Louis Johnson, the man most associated with the economy campaign. Poole, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1950-1952*, pp. 63-62.

⁴⁴For discussions of the effects of the Korean War, see Rearden, *Formative Years, 1947-1950*, p. 536; Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950*, p. 139; and Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War upon the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24 (December 1980): 563-92. One scholar supports this conclusion by comparing the force requirements tentatively proposed for the fiscal 1952 budget immediately before the outbreak of the Korean War with the substantially larger force projections approved at the end of the year after the outbreak of war. See Poole, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1950-1952*, p. 71.

⁴⁵Ross, *American War Plans, 1945-1950*, p. 79.

to scale back its commitments. Fiscal pressures speeded the end of the U.S. military occupations in both Germany and South Korea. Indeed, the military wanted to be extricated from a commitment to defend Korea.⁴⁶

The impact of deficient capabilities on strategy came, for example, to mean an increasing reliance on atomic weapons. Initially primitive and not available in sufficient numbers, atomic weapons at first played only a small role in postwar military planning. But increasingly, they became central, a way to compensate for the inadequacy of conventional forces in a potential war, which military planners, having no guidance about foreign policy, assumed would be against the Soviet Union, total, and global. Even with this expanded role for atomic weapons, however, the constraints on U.S. conventional forces meant that planners expected initially that the United States would have to cede vast reaches of Eurasia to the Soviets should such a war actually occur.

In short, there was a major disjunction between U.S. strategic commitments and capabilities, and this calls certain elements of postwar historiography into question. After an initial wave of scholarship affirming the wisdom of administration decisions, Cold War histories have tended to criticize U.S. policymakers. Early revisionists focused on U.S. economic interests and ideology and emphasized the global and imperial character of U.S. actions. Yet these works downplayed, if they did not entirely ignore, strategic issues. At the same time, the early revisionists either treated domestic factors as economic imperatives or neglected them altogether. Coming later, postrevisionists accepted the revisionist emphasis on an assertive and not merely reactive U.S. foreign policy. They especially emphasized the role of domestic factors in explaining that U.S. behavior. Most recently, scholars have begun to focus on how the strategic assertiveness of the United States contributed to the Cold War by frightening the Soviet Union.

In contrast, the argument I have made here is that the development of an expansive vision of the global role of the United States was rooted in strategic calculations. Moreover, domestic factors did not impel but actually served initially to constrain the full-blown implementation of that vision. They demanded rapid demobilization, re-

⁴⁶There is a growing literature on the origins of the Korean War and the implications of reducing U.S. security commitments in the Korean Peninsula. A good place to start is Bruce Cumings, "Introduction: The Course of Korean-American Relations, 1943–1953," in *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943–1953*, ed. Bruce Cumings (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), pp. 3–55.

trenchment, and constrained rearmament. And although the Soviets may have been concerned about the extensive overseas commitments of the United States and its provision of military assistance to others, by the estimates of its own military, the United States did not develop military forces adequate to balance Soviet strength in Europe or the Mediterranean until after the Korean War.

Although U.S. policymakers saw the Soviets as posing the central postwar challenge to the United States, they did not initially see the challenge as an immediate military threat. Nonetheless, the military assessments of U.S. short-term prospects in any war were quite bleak. U.S. strategists expected hostilities to resemble World War II in its closing phases. The nation and its allies, after having been driven from Europe and the Middle East, would depend on strategic bombing to reassert their position.

Given these strategic calculations, the United States adopted a position of forward defense that entailed military support to states on the Soviet periphery. Although the military often deemed the assistance given to other nations to be inadequate in the immediate postwar years, the origins of U.S. containment policy should not be understood, as some scholars suggest, to have been determined by political and economic imperatives.⁴⁷ Domestic factors did not underpin containment, they circumscribed it. The United States adopted a security posture and then underfunded it.

Despite this frugality, strategic visions for Europe and the Mediterranean remained unchanged. Underfunding did not lead strategists to alter U.S. war plans. Only in one area, Asia, did the nation trim its commitments to fit its wallet pulling its postwar occupation troops out of Korea, for example, because of inadequate funding and because of Korea's relatively low military priority in the event of all-out war.

Although changes in the perception of the Soviet threat generated some funding increments, overall the country took a risk that initially appeared bearable because analysts deemed the danger of war with the Soviet Union to be far off. With NSC68 that view changed.

Unquestionably, the Soviet threat grew through the late 1940s. The USSR became more assertive, as evidenced by its actions in Berlin. Its capability also expanded with the Soviet development of atomic

⁴⁷The protestations by George Kennan that he was misunderstood and that containment was inappropriately militarized are at least somewhat disingenuous since the policy of containment contained explicit security commitments to others. Initially those commitments were not matched by requisite capabilities. When challenged, however, the nation would either have to make good on its commitments or retreat from them.

power. Other nations, especially the Europeans, responded by developing new security arrangements, and the United States enlarged its security commitments. Yet the growth of both the challenge and the nation's commitments did not lead to greater military effort. Still, however, funding capabilities equal to commitments remained politically untenable until the Korean war brought not only an increase in funding but an expansion of U.S. commitments as well. On the same day that President Truman announced the U.S. response to the attack on South Korea, he also announced new U.S. security commitments in Asia, including one to patrol the seas between Mainland China and Taiwan, a course the administration had eschewed until then. U.S. defense spending then took off. Within a year, the United States had committed ground forces to the defense of Western Europe. And Turkey, previously excluded from NATO, was incorporated as a member.⁴⁸

The military policy of the United States during its formative years as a Great Power reflected domestic constraints as well as international imperatives. Especially in a democracy, politics can create a disjunction between commitments and capabilities. Since there exists no mechanism to integrate them, sustained incoherence can plague national security policy.

In the late 1930s domestic political constraints precluded commitments to European democracies. Although the establishment of an extensive military establishment capable of overseas engagement became possible as the situation in Europe worsened, the administration's public posture promised the use of U.S. forces only in the Western Hemisphere. Hence, although FDR pressed the military to begin planning for a war in the Atlantic as well as the Pacific, he could only deliver the military capability, not pledge when and under what conditions the United States would enter the war. When war broke out in Europe, constraints loosened. Yet President Roosevelt still found it impossible to involve the nation in war until it was attacked.

In the late 1940s international commitments emerged from the circumstances following the end of the war. But a reluctance to fund these commitments paralleled the earlier unwillingness to extend the promises themselves. In the 1930s lacking an articulation of U.S. commitments, the U.S. economy could nonetheless sustain rearmament

⁴⁸Melvyn P. Leffler, "Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952," *Journal of American History* 71 (March 1985): 807-25.

. In the 1940s the U.S. economy could support containment, but Congress and the administration were unwilling to spend the money. And in both eras the restraints of domestic politics led to insufficient political direction, frustrating military planners who needed to base their strategies on a firm understanding of the nation's interests and commitments and expectations.⁴⁹

Domestic politics can lead a nation to overextend as well as underextend itself.⁵⁰ And overextension may reflect less a true ability to meet commitments than an unwillingness to bear their costs. During the emergence of the United States as a Great Power, the issue was not what the nation could do but what it would choose to do.

⁴⁹My argument about the ways in which domestic political constraints can generate an incoherent national security policy, one not in tune with systemic imperatives, should be contrasted with Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). I argue that war brought coherence to U.S. national security policy in both periods. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war on the United States brought the nation into battle and further unleashed its domestic production to supply both itself and its allies with necessary war materials. The North Korean attack on South Korea functioned differently. Rather than force the nation into war, it tested the purported role of the United States in the postwar global order. It raised questions about the value of the nation's commitments to others and its true willingness to pursue a forward defense. Although South Korea was not considered a part of the official U.S. defense perimeter, the violation of its borders led the United States to accept the military burdens of the commitments it had undertaken by funding them adequately.

⁵⁰Compare this argument with Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), who develops an argument about logrolling as the basis for imperial overextension.