The United States did not want to keep its forces in Europe after World War II, much less join an Atlantic alliance.

Inventing
NATO

By John T. Correll

At the Allied Big Three conference at Yalta in February 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that US troops were unlikely to stay in Europe for more than two years after the end of World War II.

The war had forced the United States to depart from its traditional foreign policy of isolationism, but the nation had no intention of forming any peacetime alliances or getting entangled in European politics.

By January 1946, US troops were returning home from overseas at the rate of 300,000 a month. The Russians, on the other hand, maintained their military strength. The Red Army in central Europe outnumbered the British, French, and Americans by 30 divisions to seven, with more in reserve in the Soviet Union.

The line of Soviet occupation lay west of the Elbe in Germany—the new frontier of the Soviet Union, 700 miles closer to the

Atlantic Ocean than it had been in 1939. The Baltic states seized by the Soviets in 1940 were now "republics" in the USSR and the nations of eastern Europe were repressive Soviet satellite regimes. Never before in their history had the Russians held a position of such opportunity.

The Soviet Union, a wartime ally, was not yet seen as an adversary. President Harry S. Truman, like Roosevelt before him, hoped to gain the support of USSR

Premier Joseph Stalin for the new United Nations, upon which the postwar peace was presumed to depend.

Stalin, encountering only token objection from the Americans and British when he reneged on his promise of free elections in liberated Europe, pressed for further concessions. In western and southern Europe, communist parties with ties to Moscow promoted discontent and disruption.

BREAKUP

A series of events in 1946 drove a wedge between the Soviet Union and its former partners in the United States and Britain. A radio speech by Stalin Feb. 9 marked the end of Soviet cordiality.

In a long-winded rant, he condemned "monopoly capitalism" as the basic cause of the two world wars. He gave the Red Army and the Soviet industrial base nearly all of the credit for the defeat of Germany, virtually ignoring Allied forces and the substantial aid given to the USSR.

Stalin announced a new five-year plan to build on Soviet strength so that "our country will be insured against any eventuality." Another member of the Politburo added, "We must remember that our country continues to be in capitalist encirclement."

Left: NATO aircraft in 1970. Clockwise from top, an RAF Javelin Mk 9, USAF F-105 Thunderchief, Canadian CF-104 Starfighter, Belgian F-104G, French Mirage IIIC, West German F-104G, and Netherlands F-104G. Below: President Harry Truman signs the North Atlantic Treaty in the Oval Office, Aug. 24, 1949, flanked by representatives of Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal and US Secretary of State Dean Acheson and US Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson.

A few days later, Canadian officials disclosed the arrest of 13 persons in a spy ring operating out of Canada that had obtained US atomic secrets through espionage in New Mexico and passed them to Moscow.

The situation was further inflamed by clumsy Soviet efforts to intimidate Iran and Turkey. The US, Britain, and Russia had agreed at Yalta to withdraw their forces from Iran when the war ended, but the Soviets defiantly delayed their departure. Stalin also demanded a military base in Turkey from which the Soviet Union could dominate the Dardanelles strait and project power into the Mediterranean.

The pressure on Iran and Turkey did not end completely until the United States sent ships to the area as a show of force and created the US Sixth Fleet as a permanent presence in the Mediterranean.

In March, a conservative coalition won elections in Greece by a landslide, but a communist faction instigated an insurgency. It rapidly grew into a civil war, supported by the communist governments in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Albania. Stalin kept his distance from the fighting in Greece, but the Western powers did not make a sharp distinction between the Soviet Union and international communism.

Unbeknownst to the players on either side, events were aligning for the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

IRON CURTAIN

On Feb. 22, two weeks after Stalin's speech, Washington received early warning of Soviet intentions in the famous 19-page "Long Telegram" to the Secretary of State from George F. Kennan, chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Moscow. Kennan reported that the USSR did not want peaceful coexistence and was committed to a "patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power." Kennan urged a policy of "containment," which eventually became the cornerstone of US doctrine in the Cold War.

Kennan's telegram was not public knowledge but the "Iron Curtain" speech by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on March 6 in Fulton, Mo., made headlines around the world.

"From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent," Churchill said. "Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Eastern Europe.

Above: Ernest Bevin, Britain's foreign secretary and the man who originally proposed NATO. Above right: US transport aircraft unload at Tempelhof Airport during the Berlin airlift.

Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high, and in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow."

Churchill did not mention a European military alliance, only a continuance of the "special relationship" between the United States and Britain, but what he meant was well understood.

There was an immediate backlash from various members of Congress and liberal groups still enchanted with Stalin and the Soviet Union. Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace, who had been vice president from 1941 to 1945, denounced the speech as "an attack on a former ally."

Truman had accompanied Churchill to Missouri and was present for the speech but took political cover by refusing to comment on what Churchill had said. Before the year was out, however, the United States came reluctantly to the understanding that a return to the isolationist past was no longer possible.

In September 1946, the United States canceled the plan for US troops to leave Europe. "Security forces will probably have to remain in Germany for a long period," Secretary of State James F. Byrnes said. "I want no misunderstanding. We will not shirk our duty. We are not withdrawing. We are staying here, and will furnish our proportionate share of the security forces."

THE US TAKES A HAND

The new US policy began to take shape in 1947 with the "Truman Doctrine" and the Marshall Plan.

Speaking to a joint session of Congress in March, Truman called for economic and military support for Greece and Turkey but went beyond that to state a broad principle. "It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," he said.

Truman's message was lamented both by isolationists and pro-Russia liberals. The Progressive Citizens of America said Truman's speech "announces the end of an American policy based on one world" and "threatens the peace of the world."

However, Truman was strongly reinforced by Sen. Arthur H. Vandenberg (R-Mich.), a former isolationist and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Truman Doctrine was approved by lopsided votes in both houses of Congress.

The European Recovery Plan, known to history as the Marshall Plan, originated with George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff during the war who became Secretary of State in January 1947. It offered major economic aid to nations that agreed to participate in the cooperative rebuilding of Europe. After extensive debate in 1947, it was signed into law in April 1948.

The Russians, who wanted to keep tight control of their puppet states, complained that the Marshall Plan would lead to the Americanization of Europe. In Italy and Turkey, local communists obediently staged strikes and street demonstrations to support Soviet objections.

Eventually, 16 European nations and the three western zones in Germany received Marshall Plan aid amounting to more than $12 billion, but the Soviets would not allow their client states to receive any such assistance.

The Europeans were alarmed enough about their security to make two regional defense agreements, the Dunkirk Treaty between Britain and France in 1947 and the five-nation Brussels Treaty in early 1948. These arrangements were insufficient in scope to deal with the growing problem of the Soviet Union.

BEVIN'S PROPOSAL

The proposal that led directly to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was made in January 1948 by Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary in Britain's postwar Labour government.

Bevin, a former truck driver and trade union leader, had gone to work at age 11 and had little formal education, but is widely regarded as one of the most able foreign ministers of the century.

"I believe the time is ripe for a consolidation of Western Europe," Bevin said in a thundering speech to Parliament Jan. 22. The Soviet Union had "cut off eastern Europe from the rest of the world and turned it into an exclusive, self-contained block under the control of Moscow and the Communist Party," he said.

Winston Churchill arose immediately from the opposition bench to praise Bevin, recalling how he had said much the same thing in his Iron Curtain speech in 1946. Bevin no doubt welcomed the support, but Churchill's endorsement did him no political good with the left wing of his own party.

The big question was what role the United States might take. Marshall noted with approval that the Europeans were moving beyond their agreements for economic coordination to the consideration of a western European union. On the other hand, the isolationists and the liberal left were opposed to an American-European alliance, as were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were reluctant to divert US military resources and funding.

Once again, the heavy hand of the Soviet Union tipped the scales. In February, a Soviet-directed coup ousted the government in Czechoslovakia and replaced it with a client regime. Except for Berlin, the conquest of Eastern Europe was complete.

In June, the Soviet Union decided to blockade Berlin, the first big event of the Cold War. Berlin lay 110 miles inside the part of Germany held by the Russians, but the city itself was under four-power control. It was divided into American, British, French, and Soviet occupation zones.

Stalin, fearing the growth of US influence in Europe and disliking the attractive example West Berlin set for its East German neighbors, cut off all road, rail, and river routes into West Berlin on June 24.

However, three air corridors, each 20 miles wide, remained open. These became the routes for the Berlin airlift, flown principally by US transports, to sustain West Berlin with food, fuel, and supplies until the Russians lifted the blockade in 1949.

By the end of 1948, meetings between US and European diplomats had produced a draft treaty for a North Atlantic alliance. The main point of contention was Article 5, the "commitment clause," which obliged all signatories to go to war on behalf of any of the others who were attacked. The Europeans wanted a stronger commitment than the Americans were prepared to give.

THE CREATION OF NATO

In January 1949, Truman announced that he hoped to soon send a proposed North Atlantic security treaty to the Senate. In actuality, the Senate was a full participant from the beginning in review and modification of the draft. The *New York Times* and other newspapers carried daily blow-by-blow reports of the exchange between the White House and Congress.

The argument was mostly about Article 5. As drafted, it said that in the event of an attack on one nation, all of the others would respond with "such military or other action ... as may be required." There was significant objection to such an "automatic commitment." In the Senate, Vandenberg and Sen. Tom Connally (D-Texas), who had succeeded Vandenberg as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, led the negotiations for change.

The final draft said that an armed attack against one nation would be regarded as an attack against all, but that each of them would take "such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force." The Europeans did not like the watered-down language but understood that an ambiguous commitment was the best they were going to get.

The Russians accused the US and Britain of fomenting an aggressive policy to establish "Anglo-American world domination," which was "very menacing for peace-loving peoples."

The North Atlantic Treaty was signed April 4 by Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United States.

As the treaty moved toward ratification hearings in the Senate, the strongest opponent was a powerful Republican stalwart, Sen. Robert A. Taft of Ohio, who complained that the commitment clause could drag the US into war, bypassing the Constitutional provision that wars be declared by Congress.

Taft suggested instead "a Monroe Doctrine for western Europe" patterned on the declaration by President James Monroe in 1823 warning that the United States would regard European intervention in the western hemisphere as "dangerous to our peace and safety" and would respond by military force if required.

The US should decide for itself when and where to fight in Europe, Taft said. He was unable to persuade his colleagues and on July 21, the Senate confirmed the treaty, 83-13.

IMPLEMENTING THE ALLIANCE

In 1949, Hastings Ismay, the first Secretary General of NATO, said the purpose of the alliance was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down," but the new organization

Right: US Army 2nd Lt. William Robertson (l) and Soviet Red Army Lt. Alexander Sylvashko pose in front of a sign that says, "East meets West" near Torgau, Germany, on April 25, 1945.

East German soldiers set up roadblocks at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin in 1961, separating East Germany and West Germany.

TSgt. Paul Svetlovics (l) an AWACS weapons controller, is thanked by Gen. Joseph Ralston, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (r), for NATO AWACS missions flown in Operation Eagle Assist following the 9/11 terror attacks in the US.

was not nearly prepared to fulfill such a description.

For the first two years, NATO was essentially a political association with no military structure. Allied military forces in Europe were organized and positioned for occupation duty rather than combat, and they were badly outnumbered by the Soviet troops on the other side of the line.

The Pentagon had no intention of assigning more forces to Europe. In the US view—which was not exactly what the Europeans were hoping for—the Americans would provide a strategic bombing capability, backed by the credibility of the atomic bomb, while most of the ground forces and tactical air defense would come from the Europeans themselves.

Plans changed quickly in 1949 when the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic weapon and China fell to a communist revolution. In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. Western intelligence saw these events as interrelated parts of world communism on the march. In 1951, the United States sent four additional army divisions to Europe, increasing the total to six, and built up the US Air Forces in Europe.

In 1947, the number of USAFE aircraft had dwindled to 458 from a wartime high of 17,000. Of those, fewer than half were combat aircraft, with only three dozen of them—three B-17 bombers, two A-26 attack bombers, and 31 P-47 fighters—fully operational. With the buildup, USAFE added 25 new bases and by 1954, had 2,100 aircraft in operation. F-84 and F-86 fighters replaced the obsolescent P-47s.

Allied Command Europe, the military arm of NATO, was established in 1951 and Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) was set up in Paris.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in April 1951 as the first Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.

The communist parallel to NATO, the Warsaw Pact, was created in 1955, overseen by the Soviet Union with Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania as members. The organizational change was nominal since the Soviets had been in control all along. Suppression by the Red Army of the brief Hungarian revolution in 1956 served notice that the client states were not independent.

EXPANSION AND ENDURANCE

Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952, and West Germany was admitted in 1955. That brought membership in the alliance to 15 nations, the configuration that prevailed through most of the Cold War.

Today, NATO has 28 members, having added most of the Baltic and east European nations. Sixty-seven years after its founding, the alliance is still plugging along.

As always, NATO has its critics, foremost among them Russian President Vladimir Putin. In December 2015, Putin proclaimed a new security strategy that depicted NATO as a threat to his country.

Gary P. Leupp, an associate professor of history at Tufts University, expressed a similar assessment in "NATO: Seeking Russia's Destruction Since 1949," published in the Dec. 25, 2015, issue of *Counterpunch* magazine.

"It's clear that the US has, to the consternation of the Russian leadership, sustained a posture of confrontation with the Cold War foe principally taking the form of NATO expansion," Leupp said.

After World War II, Russia "wanted preeminently to secure its western border," Leupp explained. "To insure the establishment of friendly regimes, it organized elections in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and elsewhere. These had approximately as much legitimacy as elections held under US occupation in Iraq or Afghanistan in later years, or at any point in Latin America."

NATO was "formed to aggressively confront the USSR," he said. "Isn't it obvious that Russia is the one being surrounded, pressured, and threatened?"

The nations and peoples of the Warsaw Pact reached a far different conclusion. The Pact disbanded in July 1991, six months ahead of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As soon as they were free to do so, every one of the former Pact nations joined NATO. In addition, eight more countries in eastern Europe have established partnerships with NATO.

In 1949, the abiding concern about the Article 5 commitment clause was whether the United States might be drawn into a war to defend the European members of NATO from the Soviet Union.

Ironically, Article 5 was invoked for the first time by unanimous vote of the North Atlantic Council on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States.

Within days, NATO Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft were dispatched to the United States where they flew alongside US aircraft on the patrol of American airspace for the next five months. ✪

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine *for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "The Yom Kippur Airlift," appeared in the July issue.*