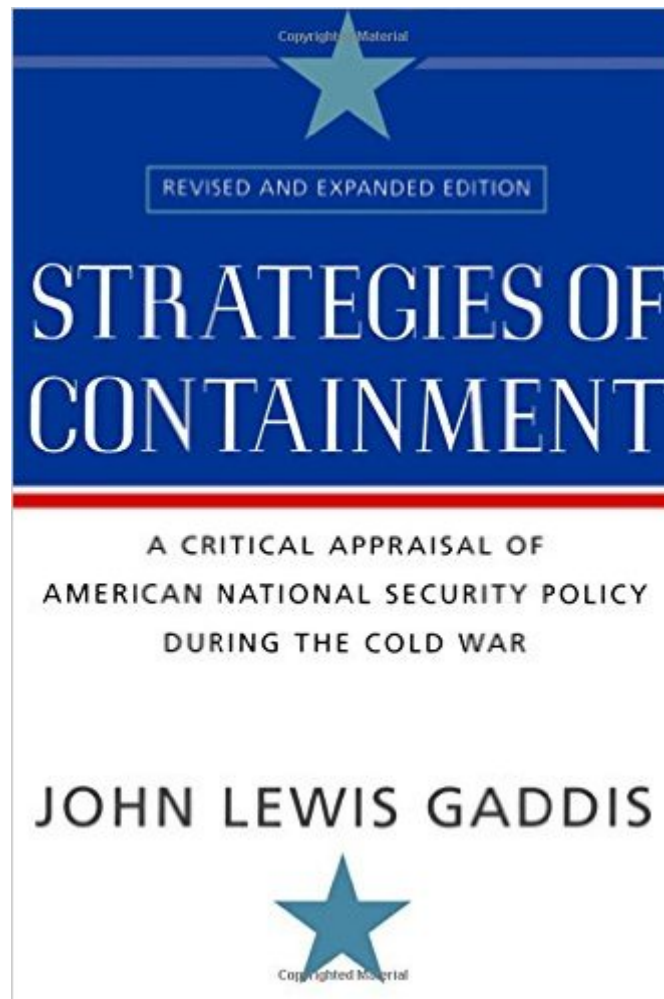


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# Strategies Of Containment: A Critical Appraisal Of American National Security Policy During The Cold War



## Synopsis

When *Strategies of Containment* was first published, the Soviet Union was still a superpower, Ronald Reagan was president of the United States, and the Berlin Wall was still standing. This updated edition of Gaddis' classic carries the history of containment through the end of the Cold War. Beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt's postwar plans, Gaddis provides a thorough critical analysis of George F. Kennan's original strategy of containment, NSC-68, The Eisenhower-Dulles "New Look," the Kennedy-Johnson "flexible response" strategy, the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of detente, and now a comprehensive assessment of how Reagan - and Gorbachev - completed the process of containment, thereby bringing the Cold War to an end. He concludes, provocatively, that Reagan more effectively than any other Cold War president drew upon the strengths of both approaches while avoiding their weaknesses. A must-read for anyone interested in Cold War history, grand strategy, and the origins of the post-Cold War world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Strategies of Containment*, by John Lewis Gaddis, is a description of the evolving strategy of containment that was the basis of US policy toward the Soviet Union from 1946 through 1989. Gaddis traces the concept of containment from its inception by George F. Kennan through the modifications applied by five administrations and assesses the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of each version. This book is more than another chronology of the cold war; it provides deep insights into strategic thinking and is essential reading for any serious student of the cold war.

Here's a brief summary: Kennan's Original Doctrine of Containment\* Identify and defend vital interests based on the centers of industrial strength - Britain, Western Europe, Japan - don't try to defend the entire world.\* Use all instruments of power: economic, diplomatic, political, and cultural power as well as military power. Rebuilding the economic vitality of the above areas is a high priority.\* Seek to divide the communist world. Our primary adversary is the Soviet Union. Other communist countries, if not actively supporting Soviet policy, may be led to serve as quasi-allies by depriving the Soviets of their support.\* General war with the Soviets is unlikely, so we can afford to take risks. We can limit our defense spending and not try to defend the world. A point defense of our vital interests is probably adequate.\* Define threats in light of US vital interests, not in terms of Soviet capabilities

Truman and NSC-68\* The policies articulated in NSC-68 moved toward a perimeter defense covering the entire world rather than a point defense of vital interests.\* Primary emphasis was switched to military power and to the entire spectrum of war\* US interests were redefined in response to perceived threats (anything that is threatened must be an interest). \* US strategy became based on a symmetric response to threats - responding in the same time, place, and with the same means as the adversary (e.g., the Korean War).

Eisenhower, Dulles, and the New Look\* Eisenhower's guiding philosophy was that defense is not just defeating the enemy - it is the preservation of our economic and political systems.\* Spending too much on defense could destroy these systems by leading to either inflation or the imposition of autocratic controls. He reduced the defense budget by 33% from Truman's last year and held it at about that level for eight years.\* Alliances relied on allies for ground forces with the US providing Air and Naval support.\* The nuclear threat became the cornerstone of deterrence across the spectrum of conflict - with goal of avoiding war - in belief that any war was all too likely to escalate to nuclear.\* Asymmetric response to threats - response need not be in same place or using same methods as Soviet threat\*

Anti-colonial Conundrum: The communists are fomenting wars of national liberation while the US is trying to rebuild Europe (the colonial powers). If the US backs decolonization, it undermines the European allies it is trying to rebuild. If the US backs the colonial powers, it loses any chance of support from the colonies. The Soviets really put us in a no-win position on this issue.

Kennedy, Johnson, and Flexible Response\* Kennedy and Johnson return to NSC-68 reasoning by lowering threat of nuclear response and replaced it with flexible response, requiring a direct, symmetric response to threats - a respond in same time and place using the same means.\* These administrations applied a circular logic: Threats create interests which demand responses which require capabilities even where no interest previously had been identified. This was articulated in the "bear any burden, pay any price" rhetoric.\* This strategy necessitated greater reliance on

military response versus economic, political, etc which increased demands on the defense budget.\* Kennedy abandoned Eisenhower's commitment to a balanced budget and relied on Keynesian fiscal policy to stimulate the economy. Spending was predicated on the potential of the economy rather than its actual performance. Lack of budgetary constraints led to inability to prioritize, to distinguish the essential from the peripheral, the feasible from the infeasible which encouraged more "bear any burden, pay any price' reasoning because it wasn't real money.\* Flexible response led to graduated escalation in Viet Nam which became "never enough to defeat the enemy, just enough to prolong the war". Stakes were repeatedly raised to prevent the humiliation of a defeat but this only made the eventual defeat more humiliating.\* Calibrated escalation yielded the initiative to the enemy - allowed him to define the terms of conflict. Deterrence can be made effective only if the adversary can be made to doubt that he can retain control of the situation. Taking the nuclear option away encouraged adversaries to call our bluff. Nixon, Kissinger and D'Átente\* Nixon and Kissinger moved the US government from a bi-polar to a multi-polar world view by positing the existence of five significant power centers: US, USSR, Western Europe, China, and Japan. They recognized that these five power centers were far from equal. Only the US and USSR were superpowers able to exert substantial influence via military, economic, political, or diplomatic means. This strategy was a return to the balance of power envisioned by Kennan.\* In the military arena, they focused on sufficiency rather than superiority over the Soviet Union and sought to persuade Brezhnev that a similar policy would be in his country's best interest as well. Sufficiency won the logical argument over superiority because the latter invariably provoked the other side into matching every military advance, producing an endless and unwinnable arms race.\* Conceptually, Kissinger and Nixon changed the country's strategic definition of US interests and threats to those interests. For most of the interval between Kennan and Nixon-Kissinger, the US strategic view had started with the USSR, its capabilities and intentions, then identified the impact these capabilities could have. These impacts became viewed as threats and US interests were defined as anything thus threatened. Nixon and Kissinger reversed the logical flow, much as Kennan did, starting with the identification of US interests, independent of any adversary. They then identified as an adversary an entity with capability and intent to harm these interests.\* Again returning to Kennan's approach, Nixon-Kissinger sought to use negotiations to influence Soviet behavior. They took a long-term approach to negotiations, discarding the tendency of previous administrations from Roosevelt on to use negotiations and agreements with the Soviets for domestic political purposes. They discarded the approach of seeking agreements on specific areas where they could be reached and adopted a strategy of linkage - maintaining that Soviet unwillingness to negotiate in good faith on military and

strategic issues of importance to the US would result in US refusal to accommodate Soviet desires for economic and trade relations and recognition of the post war division of Europe.\* The next step in the Nixon-Kissinger strategy was to seek an accommodation with China to reduce US-Chinese tensions and, thereby, free China to take a more assertive stance in its own dealings with the USSR. This was a return to Kennan's goal of dividing communism and redefined our prime enemy as the Soviet Union. Reagan continued the return to Kennan's original concept of containment.\* Adopt an asymmetric strategy - don't let the enemy determine the time, place, and terms of conflict\* Apply economic, political, diplomatic, and moral power more than military power. A prime example was his Berlin speech: "Mr. Gorbachev! Tear down this wall!" He put the Soviets in the same kind of no-win position that they had inflicted on Eisenhower over colonialism in the 1950s by setting the Eastern Europeans at odds with the Kremlin.\* He recognized that Soviet system was bankrupt financially, intellectually, morally and turned up the pressure until it collapsed.\* Reagan was also lucky. Kennan had hoped to transform the Soviet Union with the help of a new generation of Russian leaders. Gorbachev turned out to be the leader Kennan had hoped for. He and Reagan together ended the cold war and transformed the Soviet Union from a totalitarian system to one that might have evolved into a more liberal one had the 1991 coup d'État not destroyed it first.

I do not believe there is a finer overview of post-World War II American foreign policy than this important book. As a work of history as opposed to political science, it is well-suited for any reader who cares about America's relationship with the world. Gaddis explains containment as it was originally envisioned by George Kennan and then goes on to show the fluctuations between symmetrical and asymmetrical policies up through the Carter administration. He first describes each policy stance--its antecedents, influences, and applications--then describes the applicability of that policy in reality. He shows how Kennan's conception of containment was quickly lost in the enactment of NSC 68 by the Truman administration and the U.S. involvement in Korea. He describes Eisenhower's "New Look" as a shift back to a policy wherein America drew distinctions between conflicts it would and would not react to, relying heavily on the nuclear option in an all-or-nothing containment strategy. Then he dissects the "flexible response" policy of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, ascribing much importance to their Keynesian economic outlooks in convincing them that America could respond to any and all threats while still growing the domestic economy. After the debacle of Vietnam, Gaddis does a wonderful job of describing the détente policies of Nixon and Kissinger. The most important conclusion he draws is that economic realities and domestic politics seemingly play an integral part in America's oscillating policies over time. To

be more exact, the perception of means largely steers policy. Eisenhower adopted an asymmetrical policy, relying on the nuclear threat while decreasing the nation's conventional forces, because he feared the effects of overspending. Kennedy wanted to distance himself from the previous administration, and his liberal economic outlook convinced him that the American economy could be grown and controlled in such a way as to provide the funds for increasing both military and domestic spending, which would allow him to meet any threat anywhere at any time. This symmetrical policy, continued by Johnson, led America into a war in the wrong place at the wrong time against the wrong enemy. Nixon, naturally, wanted to distance himself from Johnson, and he also faced great constraints in public perception and Congressional distaste for increased military spending--under such constraints, he and Kissinger decided on a policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union, a policy that was effective to some degree but was ineffective in many ways (especially lesser regional conflicts). Carter's foreign policy was a blundering tightwalk between symmetry and asymmetry and was basically no policy at all. Gaddis is fairly objective in his assessment of the oscillating course of foreign policy, pointing out the successes as well as the failures of each strategy. He does not discuss every single incident because it would be impossible to cover everything in detail, so some issues I was interested in, such as Greek policy in 1948, the Bay of Pigs invasion, Khrushchev's shoe-thumping speech at the U.N., the Iranian hostage crisis, to name a few, were barely mentioned, but his overall synthesis and communication of ideas is illuminating. I learned a great deal from reading this book. I only wish the book had been written more recently than 1982, so it could have concluded with a study of how Ronald Reagan actually won the Cold War.

This great book by John Lewis Gaddis is a rare achievement in the field. It is a necessarily dense assessment of American post-war foreign policy but, at the same time, immensely readable and enjoyable. The focus of the book, as implied by its title, is a deep exploration of the containment strategy as originally authored by George Kennan during his stint in Russia for the State Department. Gaddis explains the origins of containment quite well, but the real genius of the book is the way he takes us on a logical examination of the strategy's evolution into the heart of the Cold War. A nice surprise is learning how American leaders misunderstood the real intentions of George Kennan himself, resulting in military investments of which Kennan did not approve. A particularly fascinating section of the book is Gaddis's descriptions of the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of opening the doors to China as a means of gaining leverage against the Soviets. In these areas Gaddis walks a high-wire balance of strict academia and joyous intrigue. Gaddis doesn't approach this material from any particular political viewpoint, but rather with his own brand of sharp and steely reason. This

book truly is a masterpiece and a must-read for anybody serious about American foreign policy. It is the stuff of genius, the core of which is Gaddis's crafty work of combining political science with poetry.

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