



“Reassessing the Marshall Plan” *Journal of Cold War Studies* (Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter 2005).

SPECIAL FORUM: The Marshall Plan Reassessed

“The Tragedy of American Diplomacy? Rethinking the Marshall Plan” by Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe

Responses:

“The Marshall Plan as Tragedy” by Marc Trachtenberg

“The Advent of Neo-Revisionism?” by Günther Bischof

“Looking for Love (or Tragedy) in All the Wrong Places” by John Bledsoe Bonds

“Was American Diplomacy Really Tragic?” by László Borhi

“The Marshall Plan and the Division of Europe” by Charles S. Maier

Rejoinder:

“The Tragedies of American Diplomacy: Further Reflections” by Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe

H-Diplo Commentary by **Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University**

Neo-Revisionism? Or the Importance of Being Earnest

Published by H-Diplo on 11 April 2005

Michael Cox and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe have taken William Appleman Williams’ *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* as a jumping off place for their effort to re-think the origins of the Marshall Plan. First published in 1959, *Tragedy* was later revised and enlarged, and has been reprinted in several later editions. It is regarded by some as the touchstone of “Revisionism” or, as one commentator put it in this forum, “New Left” history of the 1960s. It has something of the same stature as George Kennan’s *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*, as a “Realist” text on which to build future monographs. Our authors here, however, have decided to put a clever twist on Williams’s thesis by arguing that American policymakers actually violated their Open Door tenets by slamming the door shut on Eastern Europe. Hence, it is argued, the *Tragedy* developed because American policymakers ignored an opportunity to seize upon Moscow’s uncertainty about what was possible in favor of an all-out attempt to force the Soviets to capitulate across the board. They might have referenced Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s early delight at pointing out that it

was not Harry Truman’s chief advisers, but Henry Wallace, his chief critic, who called for an Open Door policy in Eastern Europe.

It can hardly be doubted that policymakers worried about what Kennan called the \$64 question: how to deal with an invitation to Russia – and, horror of horrors, the prospect Stalin might even play it straight. Dean Acheson put it more simply in a review of Desmond Donnelly’s *Struggle for the World: The Cold War: 1917-1965*. It was all about “the creation of half a world without destroying the whole.” Elaborating, Acheson reminded his readers that the Cold War was really about basic changes in the nature and location of power. The European-dominated “One World” held together by the colonial systems had collapsed, leaving two new centers of power. “This struggle is not so much for the world, as for an environment – and a spacious environment – within the world in which free nations may exist and prosper.”

I don’t think anyone has really improved very much on Acheson’s interpretation of the conflict as seen from Washington’s perspective. “The last twenty years,” Acheson wrote, were “perhaps as critical and creative years as any since the Congress of Vienna.” Now, of course, we cannot assume that all policymakers saw the Marshall Plan in the framework Acheson supplied, but it would be hard to ignore the force of his suggestion if we are to understand the mindset of those involved in the fashioning of Cold War policy. Unlike the conservative redeemers at the Congress of Vienna, however, Marshall and his aides had to deal with a public not yet ready to accept all the burdens they had inherited from the *Pax Britannica*. Put another way, aside from fear that Russia might actually accept the obligations of a Marshall Plan participant, there was another fear that the United States could not be seen as proposing the “creation of half a world.”

The idea that Stalin might favor economic exchanges with the West, that he dreaded the division of Europe, meant very little to American policymakers. As some commentators on the article have pointed out, the Marshall Plan really confirmed a situation, rather than initiated a new departure in policy. Public awareness of the full implications of that situation lagged, and besides, it was useful psychologically (in all Western quarters) to see the Soviets identifying themselves as nay-sayers about efforts to reconstruct the economies of Europe. And, it must be said, it was useful to Stalin and his aides in their dealings with Eastern Europe, to portray the Americans as capitalist exploiters who wished to take advantage of the postwar vacuum like carpet baggers after the Civil War. If there was still any juice left in Soviet Marxism, it could be squeezed out to satisfy whatever idealist thirst there was in the East European Communist Parties coming to power after a terrible war.

It is always a challenge to try to move from the specific to the general, and Cox and Kennedy-Pipe have been criticized here for attempting to shorten the time frame of the origins of the Cold War. This is inevitable, as critics will always say, “but what about ‘x’ and, before that ‘y,’ and so forth.” One might argue, however, that the wisdom of a long historiographical introduction is not really self-evident, except, of course, to stimulate debate. Where would historians be without debate? Without readers or students, presumably. The authors have chosen to place their interpretation of the Marshall Plan directly athwart presumed controversies, thereby risking that they would be labeled something, in this case “Neo- revisionists.” They have elicited comments that otherwise might not have been made in a scholarly journal. Whether the debate overshadows the content of the article becomes a question for readers to decide for themselves;

but there can be no denying that putting Williams’s title out front raises eyebrows – particularly in a journal that usually glides right by like a downhill skier around a tree.

Since other commentators on the article have stretched out the time frame as a basis for critical observations, perhaps we could also look at Potsdam once again, not for the Byrnes proposal on German reparations, with its obvious importance for the Marshall Plan, but at the Truman proposal for internationalization of key waterways. When Truman advanced the idea in response to a Soviet bid for joint control of the Dardanelles, Molotov wanted to know if the American president also included Panama and Suez in his proposal? Truman concluded from this encounter that the Soviets were planning world conquest, and, according to his memoirs, came home determined they would have no say in the occupation of Japan. We can pretty well guess what Stalin concluded about the waterways exchange from Molotov’s question.

There is an interesting exchange in the comments and the final response over something my long-time friend and colleague Tom McCormick wrote. One commentator delights, as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. once did in bringing up Henry Wallace, in citing McCormick’s statement in *America’s Half-Century*, “The Marshall Plan was arguably the most innovative piece of foreign policy in American history.” The authors respond that it may be so, but it has nothing to do with their attempt to re-think the Marshall Plan. Well, instead of treating the McCormick statement as a “quickie,” why not quote the whole thing and see where that leaves us:

The Marshall Plan was arguably the most innovative piece of foreign policy in American history. The dollar amount itself was less revolutionary than the uses to which the dollars would be put. (After all, the United States had already funneled some \$9 billion into Europe in the preceding two years through the British loan, the German occupation, and various UN relief agencies.) Aiming to correct the postwar imbalance in world capitalism, the Marshall Plan sought to shape Europe’s political make-up and its domestic public policy. It attempted to move Europe irrevocably away from nationalism and autarky toward internationalism and free convertibility. It aimed to integrate Germany into a European market large enough to be viable as a domestic market and competitive enough to hold its own in a comparative- advantage world.

With all those items on the plate, policymakers really had little room for a concern about whether the plan they were formulating was going to break down the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Certainly it was not an immediate priority. And besides, at the conference of Foreign Ministers in 1949 that came after the Berlin Blockade, Acheson himself explained the need for facilitating trade between East and West Germany, which he also classified as facilitating “the creation of half a world without destroying the whole.”

Lloyd Gardner
Rutgers University

Copyright 2005 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online
