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Almost Successful Recipe:
The United States and East European Unrest
prior to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

Throughout the Cold War the United States tried to maintain a delicate balance in its policy toward the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe.* It sought to promote enough disaffection to loosen their ties to the Soviet Union but not so much as to provoke violence and brutal retaliation by the local Communist regimes or Moscow. In a 1953 remark that applied to the entire region, U.S. High Commissioner for Germany (HICOG) James Conant said the aim in East Germany was to "keep the pot simmering but not to bring it to a boil."¹ When the pot boiled over, as it did there in 1953 and in Poland and Hungary in 1956, the Eisenhower administration made clear, as would later administrations, its unwillingness to intervene militarily, a move that might precipitate war with the Soviet Union. Over the years labels attached to the policy meant little. Whether called containment or liberation, bridge building, a gentle nudge, or détente, the approach toward the Soviet bloc, with temperature adjustments and varying emphases, basically followed the same recipe. (U)

The administration's passivity in responding to unrest masked an internal debate inherited from Truman's over how best to maintain the balance.² Early studies

* This study treats East Germany as one of the East European satellites, along with Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, although policymakers often viewed East Germany separately from the others or as linked to the overall German question.

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emphasized the apparently more aggressive nature of Eisenhower's policy, giving much weight to Republican rhetoric during the 1952 presidential campaign that seemed to signal a break with Truman's approach, and to the persistent recommendations of Eisenhower's activist aide, C. D. Jackson.³ They contended that the goal was to "roll back" Soviet control of Eastern Europe, words that appeared infrequently in policy papers or government officials' private and public statements. Later works have pointed out that the administration early on abandoned thoughts of overthrowing the satellite regimes and instead sought to encourage their evolution along the lines of Tito's national communism in Yugoslavia.⁴ Other recent scholarship has argued that while Eisenhower may not have pursued as aggressive a policy as once thought, in effect he talked a tough game. As a result, the administration's bellicose rhetoric needlessly prolonged the Cold War and laid the groundwork for a U.S. "national security state."⁵ (U)

U.S. interest in the region, dating back to World War I and derived from emotional ties felt by Americans of East European descent, assumed a military aspect after World War II. In its dealings with the USSR, the Truman administration tried to use American resources and power to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence, a policy promulgated by diplomat George Kennan that became known as containment. When communists seized power in one East European country after another and threatened to do so in France and Italy, the administration countered with strong measures, including Truman Doctrine assistance to Greece and Turkey, Marshall Plan aid to Western Europe, airlifting food and supplies into West Berlin during a Soviet blockade, and taking the lead in establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). (U)

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The operative policy paper on Eastern Europe, NSC 58/2 of December 1949, noted that the westward advance of Soviet power had been checked, at least for the time being, and substantial progress had been made in developing the defensive capabilities of the Western European nations. "The time is now ripe for us," the paper stated, "to place greater emphasis on the offensive to consider whether we cannot do more to cause the elimination or at least a reduction of predominant Soviet influence in the satellite states of Eastern Europe." It continued:

These states are in themselves of secondary importance on the European scene. Eventually they must play an important role in a free and integrated Europe; but in the current two-world struggle they have meaning primarily because they are in varying degrees politico-military adjuncts of Soviet power and extend that power into the heart of Europe So long as the USSR represents the only major threat to our security and to world stability, our objective with respect to the USSR's European satellites must be the elimination of Soviet control from those countries and the reduction of Soviet influence to something like normal dimensions.

The paper stressed that only measures short of war were to be employed. A resort to war "should be rejected as a practical alternative,"⁶ an injunction which guided policymakers throughout the Cold War.

To help achieve the objective U.S. intelligence and military organizations established contact with resistance elements in the communist-dominated countries. The outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950, raising fears that the Soviet Union might launch an attack on Western Europe, made such contacts seem more important. A decision was made to try to develop large-scale underground forces in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, to retard the advance of the Red Army if war came and to assist U.S. airmen downed behind enemy lines. In part to meet this possible military requirement in Europe and also because of the war in Asia, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), the CIA's

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covert operational arm, expanded dramatically. Between 1949 and 1952 personnel strength increased ten-fold and its budget soared from [REDACTED]

Expectations varied as to what could be accomplished behind the Iron Curtain. Army and Air Force representatives thought much "could be done by clandestine means in Eastern Europe to develop resistance mechanisms capable of producing a massive retardation contribution." State, CIA, and some Defense officials put aside their belief that these representatives "were engaging in a very great deal of wishful thinking" and "went along."⁷ (U)

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The 1952 Election Campaign: Tit for Tat

The 1952 election, which saw Eisenhower decisively defeat Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson and the return of the Republicans to the White House after an absence of two decades, represents an illusory watershed in policy toward Eastern Europe.⁸ The issue dominated the early part of the campaign, with Republicans denouncing the Truman administration's policy of containment as too defensive. Eisenhower and others, particularly the party's chief foreign policy expert, John Foster Dulles, who had resigned his position as ambassador at large to take an active part in the campaign, called for greater U.S. initiative in weakening the Soviet hold on the satellites without promoting violence, what they called the "peaceful liberation" of countries behind the Iron Curtain. Although their words were obviously aimed at Americans of East European descent, they believed in what they were saying. The rhetoric was not just a gimmick designed to win votes. But the harsh attacks produced a sharp response from Democrats, who castigated the talk of liberation as recklessness. Partisan hyperbole thus obscured the two parties'

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underlying agreement on how to deal with Eastern Europe and left the impression that the new administration would pursue a more forceful policy than it intended. (U)

In addition to Dulles, the campaign brought to prominence C. D. Jackson, an executive with *Time-Life* and President of the National Committee for a Free Europe (later renamed the Free Europe Committee). Jackson, who had worked under Eisenhower during World War II on psychological warfare operations, arranged an unusual meeting in May 1952 in Princeton, New Jersey, to discuss ways to strengthen efforts in this field. Participants included academics, representatives from Radio Free Europe (RFE), and prominent government officials, including CIA Deputy Director Allen Dulles and State's Charles Bohlen. Jackson told the group that RFE had created salients in Eastern Europe but was not prepared to follow up, because no one thought it could have been done "as deep and as fast." He claimed that U.S. high-level officials had failed publicly to state a long-term desire for the satellite peoples to be free. Yet "two billion people are looking over our shoulder all the time, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and they are going to get encouragement or discouragement or faith or despair out of what our big men say. The 'big man' doesn't have to be precise."⁹ (U)

After much discussion the group drafted a statement for a high-level official to make. Allen Dulles preferred that it be issued soon, before the political parties' nominating conventions in July. If it appeared to be an electoral appeal, "it will lose its effect abroad to the people to whom it is addressed." He was not too concerned about its impact on the satellite populations:

I am not sure that one of the things that we have lacked in these countries is maybe a martyr or two to inspire these people. This thing is never going to come about unless there are people who are ready and willing to stand

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up and be counted and take the consequences. After all we have had over a hundred thousand casualties in Korea—but there are more than eighty million in Eastern Europe, and if we have been willing to accept these casualties, I wouldn't worry if there were a few casualties or a few martyrs behind the Iron Curtain without desiring to stir up a situation of a revolt.

Dulles thought that the United States had essentially been on the defensive in conducting psychological operations. Perhaps the time had “come when in certain areas, among them the ‘satellite’ states, we should go over to the offensive.” Bohlen did not feel the proposed statement contained anything Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson had not already said. Although he and Dulles agreed to work on getting the government to release it, nothing seemed to have come of their efforts.¹⁰ (U)

Jackson had more success elsewhere. He sent a copy of the conference proceedings and statement to the person he hoped would become the “big man,” his former boss, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Eisenhower, who had recently declared his candidacy for president. Impressed with Jackson's call for a more vigorous psychological warfare program, Eisenhower used him during the campaign as an adviser and speechwriter.¹¹ It is perhaps more than coincidental that many of the ideas the Princeton group discussed appeared a fortnight later in a magazine article written by Foster Dulles, Allen's brother, which strongly criticized the administration's containment policy.¹² His views were nothing new. He had said much the same thing in a 1950 book in which he argued that history had shown how dictatorships could “be shaken from within” by peaceful methods.¹³ (U)

At its July convention the Republican Party adopted a foreign policy platform plank, largely the handiwork of Foster Dulles, promising that it would repudiate secret

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understandings entered into during World War II, specifically the Yalta agreement, which, it charged, had consigned Eastern Europe to the Soviet sphere of influence. It would also make clear that the United States, "as one of its peaceful purposes, looks happily forward to the genuine independence" of the satellite nations. What gave the plank a partisan bite was the declaration that the new policy would "mark the end of the negative, futile and immoral policy of 'containment' which abandons countless human beings to a despotism and godless terrorism." The Democratic Party platform said some of the same things, yet in a milder way: "We look forward to the day when the liberties of Poland and the other oppressed Soviet satellites . . . will be restored to them and they can again take their rightful place in the community of free nations." It promised to expand Voice of America (VOA) programming "for penetration of the 'Iron Curtain,' bringing truth and hope to all the people subjugated by the Soviet empire."¹⁴ (U)

Before launching his campaign, Eisenhower met with Republican Congressman Charles Kersten (Wis.), sponsor of an amendment to the 1951 Mutual Security Act appropriating \$100 million for the purpose of recruiting, training, and arming East European refugees to support the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹⁵ Kersten, who talked about forming the refugees into units for use in overthrowing the satellite governments, tried to elicit from the candidate an endorsement of his objective. Eisenhower refused. While Democratic nominee Stevenson privately expressed alarm over the Republicans' anxiety "to create the illusion of some positive foreign policy of their own," the British Embassy in Washington thought their comments at the beginning of the campaign were "surprisingly mild and reasonable." Instead of condemning the Truman administration's basic policies, Eisenhower and Dulles maintained that these

policies had been poorly implemented. "Indeed, if we leave aside the legitimate political rhetoric—upon which much of the discussion by the press and politicians has naturally been focused," the Embassy remarked, "we find like the Red Queen that after all this running we are very much where we were before." It noted that Dulles had explained "emphatically that he does not want a series of bloody uprisings and reprisals, but rather to preoccupy the Kremlin with its own homework and with holding down the restiveness of its captives." He had been reticent to describe specific actions, proposing little that was not already "covered by present policies, save for the emphasis on greater coherence which is in fact needed." The Embassy regarded his statements and the platform "as almost straight electioneering, albeit electioneering with as wide an eye open as possible to the likelihood that opportunities for radical change will not look so brilliant when the facts have to be faced." Hence, Dulles had made "great efforts to describe a policy which really seems to be different and more forthright but at the same time to avoid commitments to specific action which might boomerang dangerously."¹⁶ (U)

The liberation theme produced the campaign's initial major disagreement, with the Republicans firing the opening salvo. In late August, before the American Legion convention in New York, Eisenhower delivered his first major campaign speech, declaring that "the American conscience can never know peace" until the satellite peoples "are restored again to being masters of their own fate." The U.S. Government "must tell the Kremlin that never shall we desist in our aid to every man and woman of those shackled lands."¹⁷ (U)

However, W. Averell Harriman, Director for Mutual Security, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and an unsuccessful contender in 1952 for the

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Democratic presidential nomination, warned that the notion of liberation was a "trap" that would lead to premature uprisings, like the 1944 Warsaw uprising.* Dulles called Harriman's view "nonsense." The only trap he saw was in the Democrats' platform, because "they look forward to liberation of all these peoples, but they aren't willing to do anything about it. That's a trap to get votes. . . ." He denied that Eisenhower's policy meant violent revolution. Instead, "quiet" methods like passive resistance, work slowdowns, and industrial sabotage would be employed.¹⁸ (U)

Republican statements brought a rebuke from Stevenson, who called them "irresponsible and dangerous." He suggested that Dulles "could serve the country better with more candor and less claptrap." Speaking in a heavily Polish-American Detroit suburb, he said that Eisenhower's speech "had aroused speculation here and abroad that if he were elected, some reckless action might ensue in an attempt to liberate the people of Eastern Europe from Soviet tyranny." He vowed he "would not say one reckless word on this matter," because the "grip of Soviet tyranny upon your friends and relatives cannot be loosened by loose talk or idle threats." Elsewhere in Michigan on the same day, Stevenson declared that he had no fundamental difference with Eisenhower on foreign policy, which he described as "building the unity and collective strength of the free countries to prevent the expansion of Soviet dominion and control" and "gradually but surely lessen the relative power of the Soviet Union on world events." President Truman

* On 1 August 1944, as the Red Army approached Warsaw, Polish resistance forces within the city rose up against the Germans. During the 63 days of fighting that followed, Soviet forces did not enter the city. As many as 15,000 Polish insurgents and upwards of 150,000 civilians were killed.