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**Paul C. Avey. "Confronting Soviet Power: U.S. Policy during the Early Cold War."** *International Security* 36:4 (Spring 2012): 151-188. DOI: 10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00079. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00079](http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00079)

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My old tennis partner, Ernie May, liked to say that political scientists had a habit of making historians feel like waiters at a feast – providing the eternal backdrop for theorists' experiments.<sup>1</sup> I certainly knew how he felt. I had seen this many, many times. But I certainly don't have that feeling with the article under consideration, "Confronting Soviet Power: U. S. Policy during the Early Cold War," by Paul C. Avey, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Notre Dame. In this impeccable piece of scholarship, Avey successfully bridges history and political science, arguing that U.S. policy during the early Cold War years was principally directed toward challenging Soviet state power, moving beyond broad concerns to block Soviet expansion in Eurasia and to restore a balance of power in Europe and Asia (152). At the same time, he does not suggest that ideology – read ideational explanations – does not matter. What he does argue is that "ideology did not dictate confrontation with the Soviet Union or decisively shape the origins of U.S. policy" (188).

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<sup>1</sup> Also see, George Lawson, "The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 18 (September, 2010): 203-226.

Avey also contends that works in the realist tradition, with their emphasis on balance of power concerns, “often sidestep the role of ideas, blur the role of power and ideas,<sup>2</sup> or incorporate them into their analysis” (151). There is a pretty good reason for this. Most realists presuppose that the nature of the Cold War was basically ideological *and* political—a point of view generally held by the principals themselves. In the words of Norman A. Graebner, recognizing “the significant relationship between the intellectual milieu in which a foreign policy is conducted and the foreign policy itself,”<sup>3</sup> early Cold War documents, not unlike the pamphlets examined by Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn in *The Ideological Origins of The American Revolution* forty-five years ago, reveal an exceptional “*explanatory*” quality, not merely positions taken but the reasons why positions were taken, the very motives, intentions and values that informed America’s world view. The records of early Cold War policy makers indicate—again, in the words of Bailyn about an earlier time of troubles—“that there were real fears, real anxieties, a sense of real danger behind these phrases and not merely a desire to influence by rhetoric and propaganda the inert minds of an otherwise passive populace.”<sup>4</sup>

The “revolution” that occurred in American diplomacy in the late 1940s, was, in fact, a revolution that had occurred first in the hearts and minds of Americans—to steal some thunder from John Adams. By this, I mean it is impossible to comprehend, in Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.’s felicitous expression, “the brave and essential response of free men to Communist aggression,”<sup>5</sup> without understanding the intellectual world of the Americans who articulated this view. These were the same politicians, policymakers and diplomats who had experienced the disillusionment of the Versailles system and the folly of isolationism; had struggled through the Great Depression which had reduced half of America’s population to penury; had witnessed the rise of Communism (with its forced collectivization and purges), Fascism and Nazism; had recoiled from the West’s abandonment of Czechoslovakia to Hitler in 1938 under the aegis of appeasement; and were dragged into a second world war in their own lifetime, the death toll this time probably reaching 60 million, a figure which included the 6 million murdered because they were Jewish. They also perceived a shrinking world in which war and peace were judged indivisible—the hard lesson of Munich, learned on both sides of the Iron Curtain and the analogy that shaped a generation of diplomacy. Moreover, modern warfare, with its awful weapons of mass death and destruction and the equally awful contemplation that they could be delivered anywhere with impunity, caused the majority of Americans to rethink past policies and their role in the world. Pushed by the guilt of the past for abdicating their part in the League of Nations, which had been prescribed by the Versailles Peace Settlement, and pulled along by their felt responsibility for the future, especially the future of their children, usually cautious Americans placed their faith in collective security of the fledgling United Nations. The fact that the UN

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<sup>2</sup> Here Avey takes direct aim at Norman A. Graebner, Richard Dean Burns, and Joseph M. Siracusa, *America and the Cold War, 1941-1991: A Realist Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA.: Praeger, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), vii.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), vi, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Origins of the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (October, 1976), 22-52.

would not or could not play this promised role became the moment of truth: whether or not the U.S. would play the keeper of the balance of power. That the answer would be in the affirmative is what W.W. Rostow once described as the “American Diplomatic Revolution” to an Oxford audience long ago.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of the problem was to make sense out of the USSR. Americans were as perplexed about the motives and intentions of the Soviet Union in late 1944 as they were in November 1917. How does a nation deal with a regime that regards it as the root and branch of all evil? In the end, American attitudes towards the Bolsheviks revolved around a single question: whether Soviet Russia was based upon a messianic ideology in the service of a traditional Great Power or was a traditional Great Power in the service of a messianic ideology. Uncertain initially, fearful perhaps, and with the taste of the Nazi experience still in its mouth, America, with the prompting of the British, chose to believe the worst. Post-Cold War revelations from Soviet archives proved Washington (and London) right: Stalin could be a monster, with the soul of a killer. As a Cold War opponent, he was an opportunist and a realist: he would take what he could, but he understood the limits of power. What “we now know,” to borrow a line from John L. Gaddis, has turned out to bear an uncanny resemblance to what Western diplomats thought they knew then. Those who contend that it could have been otherwise, miss, I submit, this historical revulsion to totalitarianism in general and to Bolshevism in particular, and fail to place proper emphasis on it. Both threatened American ideals of individualism—politically, culturally, and economically—and America’s place in the world. For, if it is assumed that policymakers in the West were so moved by such images, and I think we can, then it would have been well-nigh impossible to expect them to have behaved differently. Pragmatic realists to the core, they drew the line in the sand and chose to fight even if it meant asking Americans for continued sacrifice. Is it any wonder, then, that members of the early Cold War generation believed their critics had “no ground to stand on”?<sup>7</sup>

In any case, Avey begins to develop his thesis by outlining the ideological and power-based explanations for international conflict, showing that scholars often employ ideology – defined “as a set of shared beliefs within a society through which a society identifies and interprets events and selects appropriate policy responses” (153) – to explain the origins of U.S. Cold War policy. The ideological arguments, in turn, fall into two categories: “liberal expansionism” and the “clash of ideologies,” drawing on the work of Michael C. Desh, Mark Haas, and John Owen IV. (See footnotes 7 and 9.) He then seeks to establish how power and ideology changed during the early Cold War period.

Avey is right to point out that that U.S. did not initially confront the Soviet Union, as the Truman administration’s restraint in Eastern Europe amply attested, conforming to power-based expectations: “There the United States pursued a spheres-of-influence peace with the Soviets” (166).<sup>8</sup> It was only after Stalin’s February 1946 election address – but not because of it – that

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<sup>6</sup> W. W. Rostow, *The American Diplomatic Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946). Also see, Joseph M. Siracusa, *The American Diplomatic Revolution: A Documentary History of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 258-259.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Governor Averell Harriman to the author, October 30, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> See Joseph M. Siracusa, *Diplomacy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55-83.

American policymakers highlighted the dangers of an unstable balance of power and Soviet expansion to vital areas. Avey locates these concerns in George F. Kennan's influential "Long Telegram" of February 22, 1946, and the report of the Joints Chiefs of Staff of February 21, 1946. The actual break began in the spring of 1946, beginning with the Soviet push in northern Iran and concluding with Soviet attempts to place bases on the Turkish Straits; by mid-1946, U.S. policy also began changing in Germany as well, as the Kremlin went its own way. The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan followed, and the Berlin Blockade, pressure on Japan to play its part, and the Korean War were close behind.

Avey's explanation of the America's role in the development of early Cold War rivalry is plain: "Balance of power logic largely explains the U.S. decision to confront the Soviet Union. U.S. efforts to challenge the Soviets grew as the balance of power worsened" (174). Most resulting policies were, of course, made in the upper reaches of government and then sold to Congress and the public. The country's foreign policy elite had, once again, found their enemy. In any case, Paul Avey's article should prove the perfect vehicle to re-open this important debate as Americans rethink their ideals and their place in the global world emerging from the ashes of 9/11.

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