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# Is There Life After NATO?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**I**t is often claimed that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 requires the United States to defend “every inch” of NATO territory. The historical evidence, however, shows that this is not the case at all. It is also commonly claimed that until Donald Trump came along, no American president would have dreamed of threatening not to defend the European allies. This too, it turns out, is not supported by the evidence. But it is not just a question of getting the history right. Those historical claims are important because they support the more fundamental claim that the NATO system is so obviously in

America’s interest that it needs to be treated as sacrosanct. But has it been such a phenomenal success?

This paper explores that issue by looking at the policy the United States has pursued in this area since 1991. The main conclusion to be drawn from that discussion is that alternative policies are very much worth considering, and the paper concludes with a brief discussion of the most basic alternative we need to think about: a system in which the Europeans essentially defend themselves and the United States plays only a peripheral role in European affairs.



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## INTRODUCTION

On February 10, 2024, former President Donald Trump told a story about how he had gotten the NATO allies to spend more on defense. When he was president, he said, he had warned allied leaders that if their countries did not spend what they were supposed to, the United States would not defend them. The Europeans could scarcely believe what they were hearing. The president of a major NATO ally, as Trump told the story,

stood up and said, “Well, sir, if we don’t pay and we’re attacked by Russia, will you protect us?”

“You didn’t pay?” I asked. “You’re delinquent?”

“Yes,” the European answered, “let’s say that happened.”

“No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills.” And the money came flowing in!<sup>1</sup>

This was not the first time the former president had taken that line. In fact, he had actually suggested from time to time that the United States might withdraw from Europe.<sup>2</sup> But for his many critics, the comment about encouraging the Russians “to do whatever the hell they want” was outrageous. Trump had once again thrown a brick into the chicken coop and the reaction was predictable. His comment was “treasonous,” former NATO Commander Wesley Clark declared.<sup>3</sup> A White House spokesman called the remarks “appalling and unhinged.”<sup>4</sup> President Biden himself called the Trump comment “a dangerous and shockingly, frankly, un-American signal to the world,” and went on to say that “when America gives its word, it means something. When we make a commitment, we keep it. And NATO is a sacred commitment.”<sup>5</sup>

Biden alluded in this context to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. According to that article, an armed attack against any of the NATO allies would be considered an attack against them all. In the event of such an attack, each of them would take “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”<sup>6</sup> At a meeting in Warsaw, Poland, less than two weeks later, Biden reiterated his earlier remarks: “The commitment of the

United States to NATO—and I’ve said it to you many times; I’ll say it again—is absolutely clear. Article Five is a sacred commitment the United States has made. We will defend literally every inch of NATO—every inch of NATO.”<sup>7</sup>

European leaders reacted in much the same way. “Any suggestion that allies will not defend each other,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said, “undermines all of our security, including that of the US, and puts American and European soldiers at increased risk.”<sup>8</sup> German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the former president’s remarks “irresponsible and dangerous.”<sup>9</sup> And European Council President Charles Michel tweeted that “reckless statements on NATO’s security and Art[icle] 5 solidarity serve only [Russian President Vladimir] Putin’s interest. They do not bring more security or peace to the world.”<sup>10</sup> On neither side of the Atlantic, it is fair to say, was the security establishment happy with the former president’s remarks.

That reaction was not hard to understand, but as a historian who has been studying the Cold War for nearly half a century now, I had to wonder about some of the things Trump’s critics were saying. I was not sure, first of all, that Article 5 actually required the United States to use military force if a NATO ally were to be attacked. I also knew that threats of abandonment were often made during the Cold War period. What Trump had said was less anomalous than people seemed to think. Wasn’t it possible that ignoring the history made it seem that the United States was more deeply committed to the defense of Europe than it actually was? Didn’t those common arguments therefore give the impression that it was somehow improper—maybe even dishonorable—to question that commitment or even consider alternative policies? The effect might be to choke off debate on what is perhaps the most important foreign policy issue the United States will have to face in the years to come.

My goal here is to look more closely at these issues in light of the historical evidence. I begin by looking at what Article 5 was designed to do and examining how that commitment has worked in practice—that is, whether successive American administrations really thought they had a “sacred commitment” to defend every inch of NATO territory, no matter what policies the allies pursued. I then consider the more fundamental assumption that the basic US policy of guaranteeing the security of America’s

European allies is so obviously in the nation's interest that that core policy should be treated as sacrosanct. I get at that issue by looking at the policy the United States has pursued in this area since 1991. The main conclusion to be drawn from that discussion is that alternative policies are worth considering, including the most basic alternative we need to think about: a shift to a system in which the Europeans essentially defend themselves and the United States plays at most a peripheral role in European affairs. I conclude by talking about the role historical analysis can and should play as we grapple with these issues.

## INTERPRETING THE ARTICLE 5 COMMITMENT

Many observers (including Biden, as noted above) assume that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty requires the United States to use military force in the event a NATO ally is attacked, but in reality the commitment that provision established was not nearly that strong. The parties to the treaty, to be sure, had agreed that an armed attack against one would be considered an attack against all, but they promised only to take actions they considered necessary “to restore and maintain international peace and security.”<sup>11</sup> The use of armed force was mentioned as one action they might take, but they were by no means obligated to respond that way. American policymakers in 1949, the year the treaty was signed, did not want to make the same mistake they thought Woodrow Wilson had made 30 years earlier. The United States did not join the League of Nations in 1919 because many senators felt that under the League system, the use of force would be triggered too automatically. Therefore, the commitment this time would have to be considerably looser; that was the only way the Senate would ratify the treaty, which even in its looser form represented an extraordinary break with the past.

So, during the ratification hearings in 1949, government officials stressed the point that under the treaty, an act of aggression would *not* necessarily lead to war. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, for example, insisted that Article 5 did “not mean that the United States would automatically be at war if one of the other signatory nations were the victim of an armed attack. Under our Constitution,” he pointed out, “the Congress alone has the power to declare

war.”<sup>12</sup> He made that point repeatedly in his testimony. And when former Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett, who had played a key role in negotiating the treaty, was asked whether America would be bound “to consider an attack upon London, for instance, the same as an attack on our own country”—that is, whether the United States would be bound “to take such steps as we would take if one of our own cities were attacked”—his answer was very direct: “No, sir; it does not,” he said.<sup>13</sup> “I think the language is clear on that point, because it draws the sharp rule here that if an attack occurs, we consider that as an attack on us, but the measures that we take in response to that are within the determination of this Government.”<sup>14</sup> Those views were in line with prevailing opinion in the Senate at the time. Tom Connally of Texas, the Democrat who chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, declared, for example, that the Americans could not “be Sir Galahads”—ready to “plunge into war” every time they heard a gun fired “and take sides without knowing what we are doing and without knowing the issue involved.”<sup>15</sup>

And US leaders often took the line, both in public and in private, that the Western European countries would eventually be primarily responsible for their own defense. When Acheson, for example, was asked during the ratification hearings whether the United States would station “substantial numbers of troops” in Europe on a “more or less permanent” basis, his reply was unambiguous: “The answer to that question, Senator,” he said, was a “clear and absolute ‘No.’”<sup>16</sup> That remained the basic Truman administration position for over two years, even after it was decided at the end of 1950 to send a large American force to Europe and to appoint a prestigious American general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, as commander of an integrated NATO force. Acheson, in fact, was still taking the line in June 1951 that in the long run, it was “probably neither practical nor in [the] best interests of Europe or [the] US that there should be a US Commander in Europe or substantial numbers of US forces on Continent.”<sup>17</sup> He changed his mind on that point a month later, but when Eisenhower came in as president in January 1953, the original policy returned with a vengeance. The new president was determined to build up Europe—and by that he meant continental Western Europe—into a “third great power bloc” in world affairs, able to defend itself without direct American

support. As Eisenhower put it in early 1951, soon after he went to Europe to take command of the allied forces, “there is no defense for Western Europe that depends exclusively or even materially upon the existence, in Europe, of strong American units. The spirit must be here [in Europe] and the strength must be produced here. We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason than that these are *not*, politically, *our* frontiers. What we must do is to assist these people [to] regain their confidence and get on their own military feet.”<sup>18</sup>

Eisenhower’s basic policy as president was, in fact, rooted in that kind of thinking, and it was only in January 1961, after John F. Kennedy succeeded him as president, that US policy in this area shifted. As the Kennedy people saw it, the problem with the Eisenhower concept was that, given that a truly federal Europe—a true pooling of sovereignty—was not in the cards, a freestanding Europe would have to include a strong, and that meant a nuclear, West German state, since a non-nuclear Germany could never stand up on its own to a great nuclear power like the USSR.

Eisenhower’s position *in favor* of Germany acquiring nuclear weapons had alarmed the Soviets and led them to provoke the great Berlin Crisis in November 1958.<sup>19</sup> And a solution to the Berlin problem, Kennedy felt, meant a deal with Russia; a key part of that deal was that the West (meaning essentially the United States) would keep Germany non-nuclear.<sup>20</sup> German power would be contained within a system dominated by the United States. But that meant that America had to remain in Europe on a more or less permanent basis, especially because, with Germany unable to stand up to Russia on its own, there had to be some other counterweight to Soviet power in Europe; only the United States could provide it.

So, by 1961 the US government found itself committed to the defense of Europe. That system came into being not because the Americans suddenly realized they had signed a treaty in 1949 that created that kind of obligation. It came into being because US leaders concluded that there could be no purely European solution to the European security problem, and that the Americans were therefore stuck in Europe whether they wanted to be there or not. Furthermore, given that they were stuck there, they felt they had the right to basically set policy for the Western alliance as a whole—at least in the areas that really mattered. As

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, put it: “We are bound to pay the price of leadership. We may as well have some of its advantages.”<sup>21</sup>

It is somewhat misleading, however, to view the American commitment to Europe in essentially legal terms. In fact, from a purely legal point of view, there was much more wiggle room within the NATO system than people now seem to realize. Trump is often criticized for a comment he made when, as president, Article 5 was explained to him. “You mean,” he said, “if Russia attacked Lithuania, we would go to war with Russia? That’s crazy!”<sup>22</sup> But during the treaty’s ratification hearings in 1949, John Foster Dulles, already a major figure in the foreign policy community, seemed to think that a limited military action on the part of the enemy would not necessarily trigger a war. “I would think,” he said, “that if 500,000 Soviet troops marched into Norway and if the President were to try to send American troops to Norway to try to drive them out, he ought to have his head examined.”<sup>23</sup> It was thus taken for granted when the treaty was adopted that the issue of what each ally would do if another were attacked would have to be dealt with in light of both military and domestic political realities at the time.

Some remarks Biden made as a senator in the mid-1990s are of particular interest in that context. The American people, he felt, just did not understand why the United States was still spending so much to defend Europe, now that the Soviet threat was a thing of the past. People could not understand why the Europeans, given how wealthy they had become, could not defend themselves. “There was difficulty in maintaining support” for NATO, he said, even in its present form. He therefore wondered, in a 1995 Senate hearing, whether his fellow citizens would be willing to take on the additional burden of defending new members in the East:

Do you think that the American people are ready to guarantee a nuclear umbrella for Budapest? . . .  
Do you think the American people are willing to use nuclear force to sustain Ukraine if Ukraine and Russia are in a conflict?<sup>24</sup>

Biden’s skepticism was palpable. He clearly believed at the time that the country would not support going to war for Eastern Europe, and he also thought that without

public support, the US government might not be able to use force if one of the countries there were attacked. The lesson he took away from the Vietnam War, he pointed out, was that a foreign policy could not be maintained “without the informed consent of the American people”—who, as matters then stood, were not willing to go to war for the sake of Eastern Europe. And popular skepticism about the NATO commitment, in his view, was entirely understandable. People resented the fact that America was spending so much to protect Europe when the Europeans were perfectly capable of providing for their own defense: Why couldn’t “the Europeans take care of themselves? Their GDP is larger than ours. Their population is larger than ours. . . . Why do we have to be involved?”<sup>25</sup> The implication was that the United States, in practice, might not be willing to go to war to defend the NATO allies no matter what—especially if they were seen as not carrying their fair share of the defense burden.

## THE COMMITMENT IN PRACTICE

During the Cold War, American presidents certainly did not act as though the country had a “sacred commitment” to defend NATO Europe, no matter what policies the allies pursued. Practically every US administration, at one point or another, threatened not to defend the Europeans if they did not do what the American government wanted in some particular area. In September 1950, for example, Acheson told America’s two most important European allies, Britain and France, that the United States would not send substantial forces to Europe—that is, that it would not defend Western Europe on the ground—unless they agreed to permit West Germany to rearm, and moreover, agreed to accept German rearmament right away. The American government, Acheson told them, needed “to have an answer now on the possible use of German forces” in the defense of Western Europe.<sup>26</sup>

The Eisenhower administration also tried to get the Europeans to create a system that would allow them to defend themselves—and would thus make it possible for the United States to withdraw its own forces. In its first years in office, the administration badly wanted to move ahead with the creation of the European Defense Community, but the French, who had originally come up with the idea, were now

dragging their feet. To overcome French obstruction, Dulles, by then secretary of state, famously threatened in December 1953 to conduct an “agonizing reappraisal of basic United States policy.”<sup>27</sup> Seven months later, he told the French prime minister that

public sentiment in the United States was reaching a point where we could no longer tolerate indefinite delay on French action. A hornets’ nest of trouble would be stirred up if German rearmament had to be arranged without [a European Defense Community]. Indeed, if that actually happened, all further US aid to NATO would be cut off.<sup>28</sup>

Those threats, of course, were never carried out. But throughout his time in office, Eisenhower strongly disliked the fact that the defense of Europe was based, to such an extraordinary degree, on American military power. The Europeans, he felt, should have been “ashamed” that they were so dependent on the United States for protection.<sup>29</sup> And he resented the fact that as a result, the United States had to spend so much on the defense of the NATO area. The Europeans, he said in 1959, were close to “making a sucker out of Uncle Sam.”<sup>30</sup>

Under Kennedy as well, the US government used the threat of withdrawal to force a key ally into line. In January 1963, with French President Charles de Gaulle’s veto of British admission into the Common Market and with the signing of a friendship treaty between France and West Germany eight days later, it seemed that the continentals were forming a bloc with a distinct anti-American edge. US leaders were livid and made it clear to their German counterparts that if they wanted continued US protection, they would have to change course. The German government gave way. The treaty with France was amended unilaterally to emphasize the Federal Republic’s continuing commitment to the alliance with the United States. West Germany was also more or less forced to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, in effect accepting a non-nuclear status—by now a key US goal. And German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, the great German champion of the policy American leaders opposed, was soon forced from power.<sup>31</sup>

The US government also took a tough line with its European allies after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. By

early 1974, Henry Kissinger—by that point the principal maker of American policy—had come to believe that the French government, in particular, was “pursuing a more active anti-US policy in the Middle East than the Russians.”<sup>32</sup> It was far too pro-Arab for the US government’s taste. Kissinger also objected to the policy that other major allied powers were pursuing in the region, so he decided to make it clear to the main European allies that they were putting their alliance with the United States at risk. The Europeans, he said, had to be made to “recognize the abyss before which they stand.”<sup>33</sup> He told the French ambassador that the Europeans had behaved “not as friends but as hostile powers,” and that his government would reassess its relationship with the allies in light of their behavior in this area.<sup>34</sup> Kissinger also took steps designed to give the Europeans the impression that the American commitment to NATO was weakening. He instructed US officials, for example, to stop “the compulsory reassuring of the Europeans on a nuclear guarantee.”<sup>35</sup>

Ronald Reagan’s administration was also willing to put pressure on the Europeans—in effect, to put the security relationship at risk—to get them to go along with American policy. The main point of contention concerned the projected Siberian gas pipeline, which the Europeans were helping the Soviets build. The Reagan team thought it made little sense for the West to help the Soviets gain technologically advanced equipment by exporting natural gas. A stronger Soviet economy meant a stronger Soviet military and therefore higher US defense budgets. Accordingly, the US government wanted the allies to go along with what it referred to in internal documents (but not openly) as its “economic warfare” policy.<sup>36</sup>

The Polish Communist regime’s crackdown, at the end of 1981, on forces that threatened its hold on power—and especially on the trade union Solidarity—gave the administration a chance to put that policy into effect. President Reagan himself told the National Security Council that if the Polish Communists did not ease up on Solidarity, then America would “invoke sanctions (against the Soviet Union) and those (of our Allies) who do not go along with us will be boycotted, too, and will be considered to be against us.”<sup>37</sup> And he was not just thinking of using economic threats to force the European allies and Japan into line. The allies would be told “that if they don’t go along with us, we

let them know, but not in a threatening fashion, that we may have to review our Alliances.”<sup>38</sup>

As it turned out, no explicit warning of that sort was given, but the US government did forbid European subsidiaries and licensees of American firms from honoring contracts relating to the pipeline. It also imposed sanctions on companies defying those orders, even when they were ordered by the European governments to do so. European leaders, however, decided not to retaliate with sanctions of their own against US firms. They understood that a trade war would put their security relationship with the United States at risk, so they preferred to work out arrangements with Washington that both sides could live with. In the final analysis, the prospect of a weakening of the US commitment did have a major, albeit indirect, impact on the policy of America’s European allies during this period as well.<sup>39</sup>

It was not only US government officials who interpreted the Article 5 commitment fairly loosely. Many commentators have made much of the fact that Article 5 was invoked formally after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. This, it was suggested, proved how much the United States had benefited from the NATO treaty. “I would remind Trump and all those who would walk away from NATO,” Biden himself said, “Article 5 has only been invoked once—just once in our NATO history—and it was done to stand with America after we were attacked on 9/11. We should never forget it.”<sup>40</sup> And it is of course true that practically every member of the alliance sent troops to fight alongside US forces in Afghanistan. However, a slightly larger number of non-members also sent troops. Russia itself supported the operation in important ways, especially in the first few months.<sup>41</sup> It is therefore hard to see how NATO membership, and in particular the members’ legal obligations under Article 5, made much of a difference in these decisions.

More generally, in dealing with Arab terrorism, the allies felt relatively free to go their own way. In 1986, for example, Libyan agents set off a bomb in a Berlin discotheque frequented by off-duty American military personnel. More than 200 people, including at least 50 Americans, were injured, and two American soldiers were killed. The Reagan administration launched a retaliatory raid on Libya with aircraft based in Britain, but two NATO allies, France and Spain, refused to permit the aircraft to fly over their territory,

making it much harder to conduct the raid. Most European leaders, in fact, opposed the operation.<sup>42</sup>

That attitude was not entirely new. From 1970 to 1981, for example, according to the former head of France’s Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage, the French equivalent of the CIA, the French government had a tacit understanding with certain terrorist groups that “terrorists operating out of French territory, even targeting [France’s] European allies, would not be disturbed, provided no operation took place in France.”<sup>43</sup> The sanctuarization policy, as it was called, broke down in large part because the terrorists violated the understanding; a bomb set off outside a synagogue in Paris in October 1980 was particularly important in the unraveling of that arrangement.<sup>44</sup> But the sanctuarization policy itself, in effect for more than a decade, scarcely reflected a deep commitment on the part of the French government to the basic principle of allied solidarity—to the idea, that is, that an attack on one was an attack on all.

The French were not the only ones who did not take the principle of Article 5 solidarity particularly seriously. More recently, European publics in general have shown a certain unwillingness to use force if one of the NATO allies is attacked. That attitude seems to be based on the belief that the United States would carry the defense burden no matter what policy they pursued. A number of polls conducted in Europe by the Pew Research Center have been quite revealing in this regard. Table 1 sums up the results of a survey conducted in 2019.

Much the same picture emerged from surveys Pew conducted in 2015 and 2017. As Bruce Stokes, one of the Pew analysts, commented on the findings in 2015 in *Foreign Policy*, “a worrying percentage of European publics don’t want to honor the fundamental tenet of the Atlantic alliance.”<sup>45</sup>

None of this is really surprising. On the one hand, it was natural that the Europeans should want the United States to do the heavy lifting (as long as the US government was willing to do so), especially since the alternative of a

Table 1

**More in NATO countries say the US would use military force to defend an ally from Russia than say that their country should do the same**

Percent who say if Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of its neighboring countries that is our NATO ally, \_\_\_\_\_ to defend that country

Country	Our country should use military force	The US would use military force	Percentage point difference
Italy	25%	75%	<b>+50</b>
Greece	25%	65%	<b>+40</b>
Spain	41%	72%	<b>+31</b>
Germany	34%	63%	<b>+29</b>
Slovakia	32%	57%	<b>+25</b>
UK	55%	73%	<b>+18</b>
France	41%	57%	<b>+16</b>
Turkey	32%	46%	<b>+14</b>
Canada	56%	69%	<b>+13</b>
Poland	40%	47%	<b>+7</b>
Hungary	33%	39%	<b>+6</b>
Lithuania	51%	57%	<b>+6</b>
Czech Republic	36%	41%	+5
Netherlands	64%	68%	+4

Source: Moira Fagan and Jacob Poushter, “NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States,” Pew Research Center, February 9, 2020, p. 5.

Notes: Statistically significant differences in bold. United States, Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine not included.

freestanding Europe (which would necessarily include a strong Germany) was not particularly attractive. On the other hand, the Americans felt that since they were carrying most of the burden, they had the right to set policy for the West as a whole, and were often tempted to take advantage of the Europeans' dependence on the United States to get their allies to follow America's lead.

American officials understood that too strong a commitment was a source of weakness—that the more absolute their commitment, the less leverage they would have over their allies. If the United States was going to defend them in any event, the allies would calculate, why give the Americans what they want? So, the US commitment had to be less than total if the American government was to have any influence at all, and US leaders, in fact, often tried to use the leverage that less-than-total commitment gave them when they wanted to set policy for the alliance as a whole.

In light of this history, it seems that much of the criticism aimed at Trump's comments about NATO was excessive. There was never any "sacred commitment" to defend NATO Europe: Article 5 does not oblige the United States to go to war with Russia if an ally is attacked. And the whole idea that the United States had never questioned its commitment to defend the Europeans and had never threatened the allies with abandonment until Trump came along is not supported by the historical evidence.<sup>46</sup>

Why does this matter? It is not just a question of getting the history right. It matters because these historical claims have a certain political content. It is commonly believed that NATO has kept the peace for 75 years, that America has benefited enormously from its alliance with the Europeans, and that it is absurd for anyone to view the alliance as a burden. One American expert's view is typical: "We wouldn't have the position of global leadership that we do if it wasn't for our NATO allies and our commitment to European security."<sup>47</sup> Those views are essentially taken as basic articles of faith. The argument about America's "sacred" Article 5 commitment is in line with that general way of looking at things. It suggests that the United States is so deeply, so unconditionally committed to the defense of Europe that it can never pull back and, indeed, that it would be dishonorable to even think of doing so. It thus helps fend off criticism of the current policy.

The real issue here thus has to do with those fundamental beliefs about how important the NATO alliance is—about how important it is to make sure the United States remains a European power. Those beliefs—which, as noted, are both widespread and strongly held—explain at least in part why many people reacted to Trump's comments the way they did. But not everyone thinks America's NATO policy has been such a phenomenal success. That policy, especially in the form it took in the post-Cold War period, has had its share of critics. In fact, many serious scholars and well-informed observers believe that the policy the United States has pursued in Europe in the whole period after 1991 has been deeply misguided. Some of them, moreover, are convinced that recent events, especially the war in Ukraine, have revealed how bankrupt that policy is.<sup>48</sup>

## **THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPEAN SECURITY AFTER THE COLD WAR**

What, then, are we to make of America's whole policy toward Europe since 1991? That policy, it is important to remember, was not what Reagan had in mind when he left office in 1989. His aim, as he had laid it out years before becoming president, was to demonstrate to the Kremlin that "in an all-out race our system is stronger"; they would then sooner or later "[give] up the race as a hopeless cause," and when that happened, "a noble nation believing in peace extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us."<sup>49</sup>

But the Reagan policy, as some former Soviet officials bitterly note, was abandoned by his successor, George H. W. Bush.<sup>50</sup> That president and his main advisers, especially his national security adviser General Brent Scowcroft, thought of Reagan as a romantic, a dreamer.<sup>51</sup> They saw themselves, on the other hand, as hardheaded realists who had not been taken in by the illusions being spun by the reformist Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev, in their view, was a kind of wolf in sheep's clothing—despite all the rhetoric, he remained a Communist at heart. They believed that his ultimate goal, as Scowcroft put it, was a "rejuvenated and reinvigorated Soviet Union" that might well still pose a threat to the West. They were therefore pleased when Gorbachev's policies failed. To be sure, they had often expressed support for the last Soviet leader and



for what he was trying to do, and they very much wanted him to remain in power as long as possible. But this was because Bush and Scowcroft calculated that Gorbachev's policies (unintentionally, of course) were "undermining what kept [the Soviet system] together"—and it was good, in their view, that this was happening, because the United States, as Scowcroft put it, "would be better off with a broken-up Soviet Union." In fact, Scowcroft thought the Bush administration deserved credit for helping to bring about the collapse of the USSR. His "initial reaction to the Soviet flag being lowered from the Kremlin for the last time," he wrote, was "one of pride in our role in reaching this outcome." The US government, he said, "had worked very hard to push the Soviet Union in this direction."<sup>52</sup>

The Bush administration chose not to help the Gorbachev regime make the transition to a market economy—at least not in any major way. Some well-known figures in the West—most notably former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Jack Matlock, the US ambassador in Moscow until 1991—thought a more generous policy was in order. They were convinced that Gorbachev and his supporters truly wanted to transform the whole Soviet system—that they genuinely wanted their country to rejoin the civilized world—and that the United States and its allies should do whatever they could to help them reach that goal. This did not mean they were in favor of simply writing a blank check. But they felt that a program needed to be worked out to ease the transition, to both a flourishing market economy and a liberal democratic political order, the two sides of the policy being viewed as mutually reinforcing. They also felt that the Western countries should provide whatever assistance was required, in line with that program, to help the Soviet Union become that kind of country.<sup>53</sup>

The Bush administration took a very different view, however. The Soviet Union, as the president himself often pointed out, was still spending vast amounts on defense. Soviet military forces were still a major threat, their missiles were still aimed at American targets, and the Soviets were still providing billions of dollars of aid to holdout Communist countries like Cuba.<sup>54</sup> The United States, Bush thought, could scarcely provide a massive amount of assistance to a country that was using its own resources that way. He simply did not view the Soviet Union, even under Gorbachev, as a friendly power. "As long as Soviet

missiles are aimed at the United States," Bush told German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, "I know who the enemy is"—and this was in July 1991, just a few months before the final Soviet collapse in December.<sup>55</sup>

What is extraordinary is that that tight-fisted policy was continued, even when a new pro-Western regime under Boris Yeltsin came to power in Russia at the end of 1991. Seeing democracy take root there was simply not a top priority for the US government. In fact, by the end of the Bush period American leaders had decided to bring at least some of the Soviet Union's former satellite states in Eastern Europe into NATO, despite Russian leaders' clear opposition to the idea—and despite Secretary of State James Baker telling Gorbachev in February 1990 that, if the Soviets allowed a reunified Germany to remain in NATO and US troops remained in that country, the alliance's jurisdiction would not move "one inch to the east." It is, of course, often denied that any binding commitment of that sort was made, but the evidence shows that US and German leaders had given clear assurances of this sort.<sup>56</sup>

The NATO enlargement policy was by no means dropped when Bush lost his bid for reelection in 1992. Quite the contrary: His successor, Bill Clinton, decided in late 1993 that NATO needed to move east.<sup>57</sup> That decision was made even though the Clinton administration was well aware of how the Russians felt about the issue. As the US embassy in Moscow reported in late 1994, "hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the domestic political spectrum here."<sup>58</sup> The Clinton team adopted the NATO expansion policy even though it was well aware of the assurances Gorbachev had been given in February 1990.<sup>59</sup> But the new administration was determined to move ahead no matter how the Russians felt and no matter what promises had been made.

The basic US attitude was that if Moscow did not like the idea, too bad for them. "It's Russia that must move toward us," wrote Strobe Talbott, a key policymaker in this area, in early 1996, "toward our way of doing things."<sup>60</sup> There was no need for serious compromise. "We and the Soviet Union didn't meet each other halfway," he pointed out, "and we and Russia aren't going to do so either."<sup>61</sup> And if people objected that this might be "an obnoxious confirmation of our doctrine of 'exceptionalism,'" he had a ready answer: "Well, tough. That's us; that's the US. We

are exceptional.”<sup>62</sup> So there was no real need to give Yeltsin and company much of anything to get them to come along. “Russia is either coming our way,” Talbott thought, “or it’s not, in which case it’s going to founder, as the USSR did.”<sup>63</sup> Other top Clinton administration officials felt the same way.<sup>64</sup> As James Goldgeier writes, the US government, in 1995 and into 1996, was “moving further and further down the road of dictating the outcomes.”<sup>65</sup>

None of this passed unnoticed at the time. “We’re going to cram NATO expansion down the Russians’ throats, because Moscow is weak and, by the way, they’ll get used to it”—that was how the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman later characterized the Clinton administration’s approach to the issue.<sup>66</sup> The phrasing was somewhat exaggerated, since the Clinton people wanted to make what they were dishing out as easy to swallow as possible, but Friedman was clearly on to something. Clinton’s defense secretary, William Perry, remembered the response he got from other officials when he had argued that Russia would be alienated by a rapid enlargement of NATO: “Who cares what they think? They’re a third-rate power.”<sup>67</sup> Even years later, key US officials took the view that Russia was too weak to stand up to America. Remarks that Biden, then serving as vice president, made in a 2009 interview with the *Wall Street Journal* were particularly striking. The gist of what he had to say was summed up in the headline of the front-page story that reported his comments: “Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to US.”<sup>68</sup>

Those attitudes were bound to have a major impact on Russia’s relations with the Western world in general and the United States in particular, and the effect was by no means positive. William Burns—former ambassador to Russia and current director of the CIA—was well aware, looking back in 2019, of how profoundly the NATO enlargement policy had poisoned relations between Russia and the West. Russian leaders were convinced, he said, that in expanding NATO the West was taking advantage of their country’s weakness. They believed the promises Baker had made in 1990 were being violated; and that belief, in Burns’s view, was not unwarranted. The Russians had taken Baker “at his word” and now felt betrayed, Burns said; their resentment, their disillusionment, their sense of grievance—all that left “a mark on Russia’s relations with the West that would linger for decades.”<sup>69</sup> Burns thought

that “if you wanted to understand the grievances, mistrust, and smoldering aggressiveness of Putin’s Russia,” you first had “to appreciate the sense of humiliation, wounded pride, and disorder that was often inescapable in Yeltsin’s”—and he clearly believed that sense of humiliation had a good deal to do with the way Russia had been treated by the United States and its allies.<sup>70</sup>

Many other writers have made much the same point. For example, Stephen Kotkin, professor emeritus of history at Princeton and one of America’s most distinguished students of Russian affairs, referred in his review of Talbott’s memoir to “one of the main overall consequences of the Clintonites’ Russian policy: the successful inculcation of deep anti-American sentiment.”<sup>71</sup> Clinton himself could tell, looking at the crowds during a visit to St. Petersburg in 1996, that “there was a lot of alienation, a lot of anti-American feeling there. A lot of those people were giving me the finger.”<sup>72</sup> He also understood that the Americans were in some measure responsible for the way Russian feelings had shifted: “We keep telling Ol’ Boris,” Clinton said, “‘Okay, now here’s what you’ve got to do next—here’s some more shit for your face.’”<sup>73</sup>

Those US policies, many observers thought, were bound to lead to trouble. The NATO expansion policy was a particular source of concern. Talbott had the impression in 1996 that “virtually everyone I knew from the world of academe, journalism and the foreign-policy think tanks was against enlargement.”<sup>74</sup> His onetime hero George Kennan was especially outspoken. Expanding NATO, Kennan wrote in a widely noted *New York Times* op-ed in 1997, “would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.”<sup>75</sup> He felt that expansion would “inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion . . . have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy . . . restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and . . . impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”<sup>76</sup> A year later Kennan returned to the charge. NATO expansion, he told Friedman, “would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. . . . This has been my life, and it pains me to see it so screwed up in the end.”<sup>77</sup>

Kennan was in no way an isolated figure. In June 1997, a group of 50 prominent Americans, including such pillars

of the right wing of the national security establishment as Paul Nitze, Richard Pipes, and Fred Iklé, signed an open letter to Clinton calling the US-led effort to expand NATO “a policy error of historic proportions.”<sup>78</sup> Matlock also signed that letter, but he had already come out strongly against NATO enlargement in testimony before two congressional committees in 1995 and 1996. He had pointed out specifically that Gorbachev had been “given the most categorical assurances” about non-expansion in 1990; this was important testimony because Matlock, the former US ambassador to Russia, had attended the meetings at which those assurances were given.<sup>79</sup> Many other well-known individuals and former officials also criticized the policy.<sup>80</sup>

But no one in authority paid much attention to what the critics were saying. Matlock’s point about the non-expansion promises was simply ignored by the senators (including Biden) who heard him make it.<sup>81</sup> Clinton himself dismissed the critics’ arguments out of hand. “Some are against enlargement because of the fear of provoking a nationalist response in Russia,” he said, adding that that was “a silly argument.”<sup>82</sup> The critics certainly never came close to derailing NATO expansion. The first group of new members—Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—was, in fact, admitted in 1999, well before Clinton left office. And the process continued into the 21st century. Seven new members (including three former Soviet republics) were added in 2004, two other countries were admitted in 2009, and at NATO’s Bucharest summit in 2008, the alliance formally declared that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members of NATO.”<sup>83</sup>

The declaration about Ukraine was particularly serious. “There could be no doubt,” Burns wrote in his memoir, “that Putin would fight back hard against any steps” in that direction; “Ukrainian entry into NATO,” Burns had noted at the time, was “the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin).”<sup>84</sup> Other former high-ranking US officials took much the same position.<sup>85</sup> It seemed obvious that the Americans were riding roughshod over Russia’s interests in that very important neighboring country. That view was supported by some extraordinary evidence that came to light in 2014 about the US government’s deep involvement in internal Ukrainian politics.<sup>86</sup>

Russian feelings about all this were quite clear, but the West—and especially the United States—seemed

determined to move ahead regardless. The consequences were predictable. Indeed, they had been predicted by the many critics of the NATO enlargement policy. It is therefore hard to avoid the conclusion that the policy the United States and its allies have pursued for the past 30 years is in large measure responsible for creating the mess we find ourselves in today.<sup>87</sup> This was not, of course, the only factor shaping the course of events. Russian policy has obviously played an important role in the story. The point is simply that it is hard to believe that if US governments had pursued a more Russia-friendly policy from 1991 forward—the sort of policy Matlock and Thatcher and Kennan and many others called for at the time—relations between Russia and the Western powers would be as bad as they are today.

## A POST-NATO WORLD?

The critics can thus make a strong case. Other people, to be sure, take a different view. But for the purposes of the analysis here, let’s just say that the critics are basically right. What, in that case, are we supposed to do now?

If the present policy is bankrupt, it obviously needs to be changed, and various alternatives are conceivable. Of course, there can be no return to the NATO of 1991, but a policy of avoiding further enlargement, especially into Ukraine, is by no means out of the question. It is not clear, however, that the defenders of the present policy would be willing to accept a solution of that sort. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, for example, marked the second anniversary of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine by declaring, “Ukraine will join NATO. It is not a question of if, but of when.”<sup>88</sup> US leaders, including President Biden himself, take the same line.<sup>89</sup> So it may well be that if the present policy is to be changed, a more radical alternative might be necessary—that only stronger medicine has a chance of working. That is one reason it is important to think about shifting to a system where the Europeans defend themselves—where they no longer rely on the United States to protect them.

A second reason we need to think about this issue is that this sort of world may come into being in any case. Donald Trump seems determined to move in that direction, and as I write this (in July 2024), he seems to have a good chance of being reelected in November.<sup>90</sup> But it would be a mistake to focus too much on the views of a single individual.

The Trump phenomenon needs to be seen in a broader context, and the shift in opinion in recent years among US conservatives on America’s role in the world has been quite striking. According to an April 2024 study by the Pew Research Center, only 43 percent of US adults who are either Republicans or lean Republican have a favorable view of NATO; 55 percent have an unfavorable view (Figure 1).<sup>91</sup>

Over the past four or five years, in fact, the more conservative half of the country has become increasingly disenchanted with America’s traditional foreign policy; that part of the electorate wants to focus more on problems closer to home. According to another Pew study released in March 2023, for example, 71 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaners agreed that the country “should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home”; only 29 percent thought it was “best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.”<sup>92</sup> Four years earlier, the gap had been half as great; 40 percent of that part of the sample still favored an active foreign policy (for bipartisan findings, see Figure 2).<sup>93</sup> And even that figure represented a sharp decline from earlier levels of support. In 2004, for

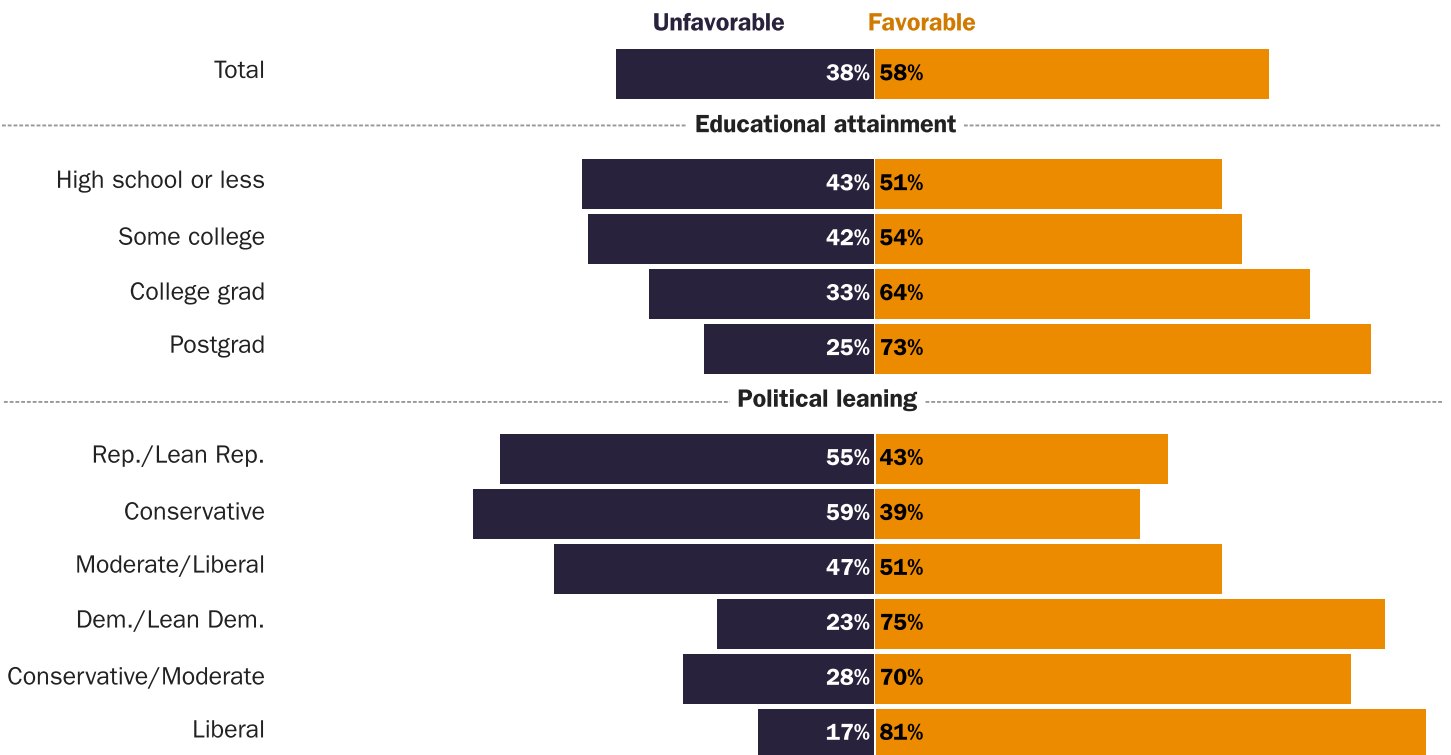
example, 53 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaners had agreed that it was “best for our country to be active in world affairs.”<sup>94</sup> The Democrats, meanwhile, had been moving in exactly the opposite direction. By 2019, 51 percent of Democrats said it was best to be involved, compared to just 37 percent in 2004 (Figure 3).<sup>95</sup>

The same trend was reflected in the survey data on Ukraine and related issues. In 2015, the Republicans had been more hawkish than the Democrats on “what to do about Russia”; 69 percent of them (but only 47 percent of the Democrats) favored the use of force “to defend a NATO ally from Russia.”<sup>96</sup> In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 49 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaners thought the United States should increase its support of Ukraine; 38 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaners took that view in the survey. But by 2024, the pattern was very different: Thirty-six percent of Democrats still thought the United States should increase its level of support, but only 13 percent of Republicans felt the same way. On the other hand, only 9 percent of Republicans in 2022 felt the United States was providing too much support; by 2024

Figure 1

**Many see NATO positively, but sharp partisan divides persist**

Share who have a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ opinion of NATO, percent



Source: Richard Wike et al., “Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024, p. 20.

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

that figure had risen to 49 percent, and by that point only 16 percent of Democrats shared that view (Figure 4).<sup>97</sup>

To be sure, many Republican leaders still support America’s traditional activist foreign policy, both in Europe and elsewhere. Ten years ago, MIT political scientist Barry Posen began an important article by talking about “the long-standing consensus among American policymakers about US grand strategy”—about how Republicans and Democrats agreed “on the big picture.” Each party, he believed, felt that the “United States should dominate the world militarily, economically, and politically” and pursue what he called “a strategy of liberal hegemony.”<sup>98</sup>

Even today one can point to many prominent Republicans who still support a strategy of that sort (although most of them would not characterize it that way).<sup>99</sup> But there is a major debate currently going on, as Ohio Senator (and now vice presidential candidate) JD Vance puts it, “between the establishment right and the populist right.”<sup>100</sup> According to Vance, “establishment Republicans” (as the journalist Ian Ward paraphrased his views) believe that “the American empire is trending in the right direction; populist Republicans believe that the American empire is on the verge

of collapse.”<sup>101</sup> And the influence of populists like Vance is growing. For example, when Vance entered the Senate in January 2023, he was “one of only a handful of Republicans who openly opposed US financial support for Ukraine . . . but since then,” according to a March 2024 *Politico Magazine* article on the senator, “over two dozen Senate Republicans have come to share his skepticism.”<sup>102</sup> One has the sense that shifts in voter sentiment—closely tied to significant shifts in the social composition of the two parties—will soon have a dramatic impact at the leadership level.

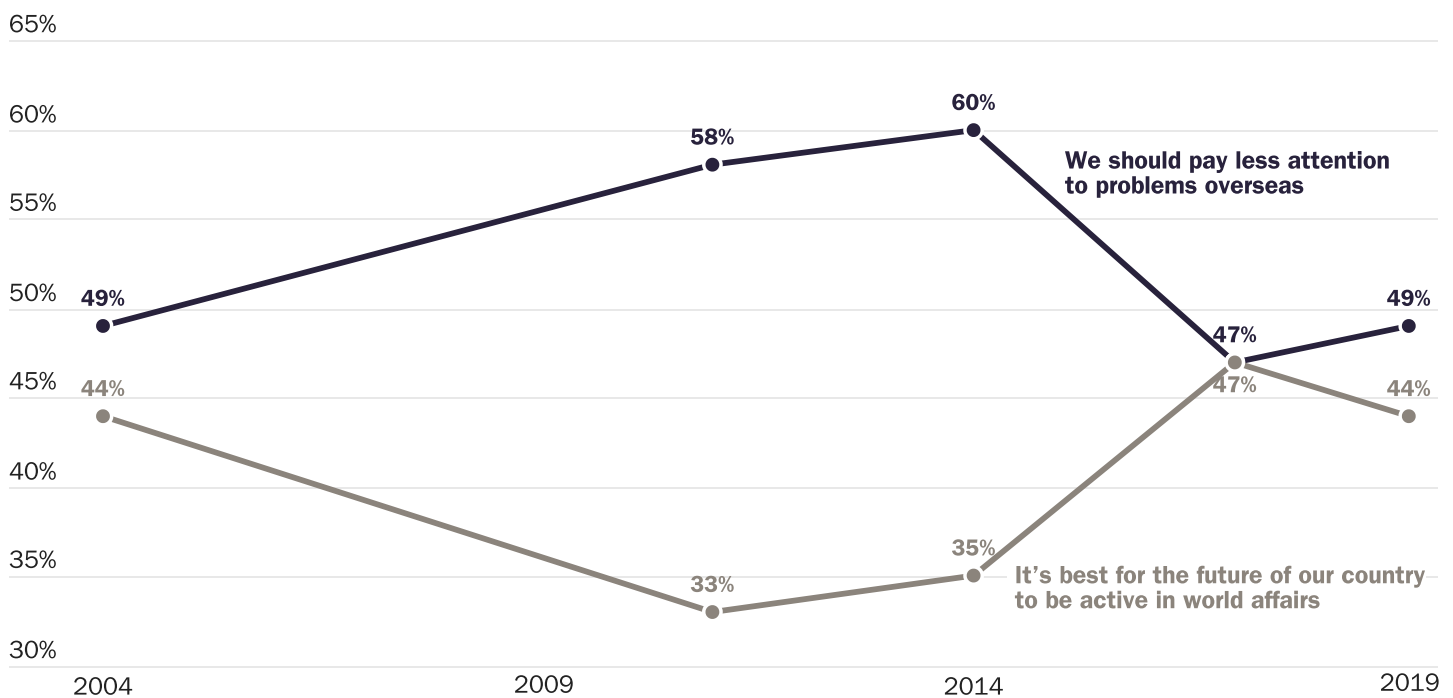
Given that shift in opinion among Republican voters, and given that Republicans will come to power at some point (perhaps for reasons having little to do with foreign policy), one has to reckon with the possibility that sooner or later the Europeans might have to defend themselves. How should we feel about that? Should we be appalled by the prospect of an American withdrawal from Europe? Or could a world in which the Europeans provided for their own defense actually be a better world than the one we find ourselves in today?

The heart of the problem concerns not Ukraine but Germany, especially the question of whether that country

Figure 2

**Public is narrowly divided on whether the United States should be active in world affairs**

Share who say \_\_\_\_\_, percent



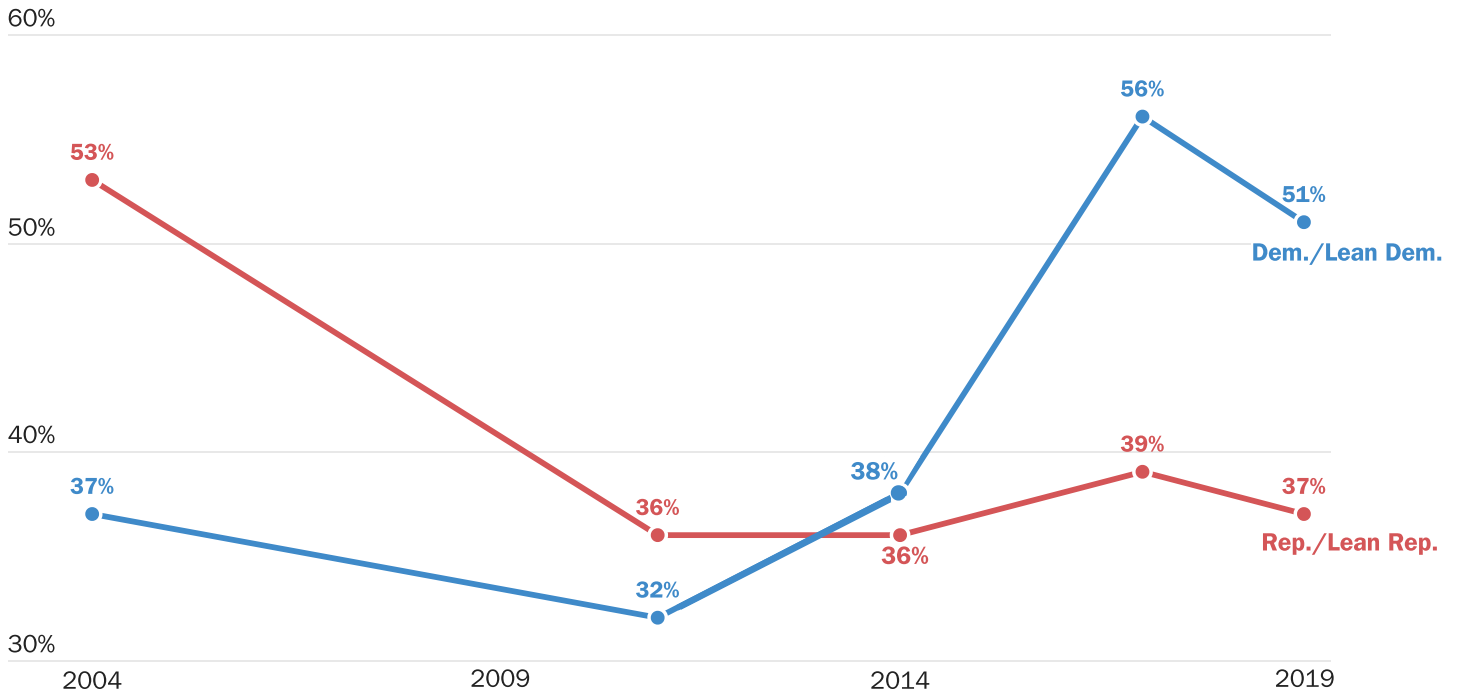
Source: “Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the US,” Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, p. 3.

Note: “Don’t know” responses are not shown.

Figure 3

### Partisan divergence on whether the United States should be active in world affairs

Share who say it's best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs, percent

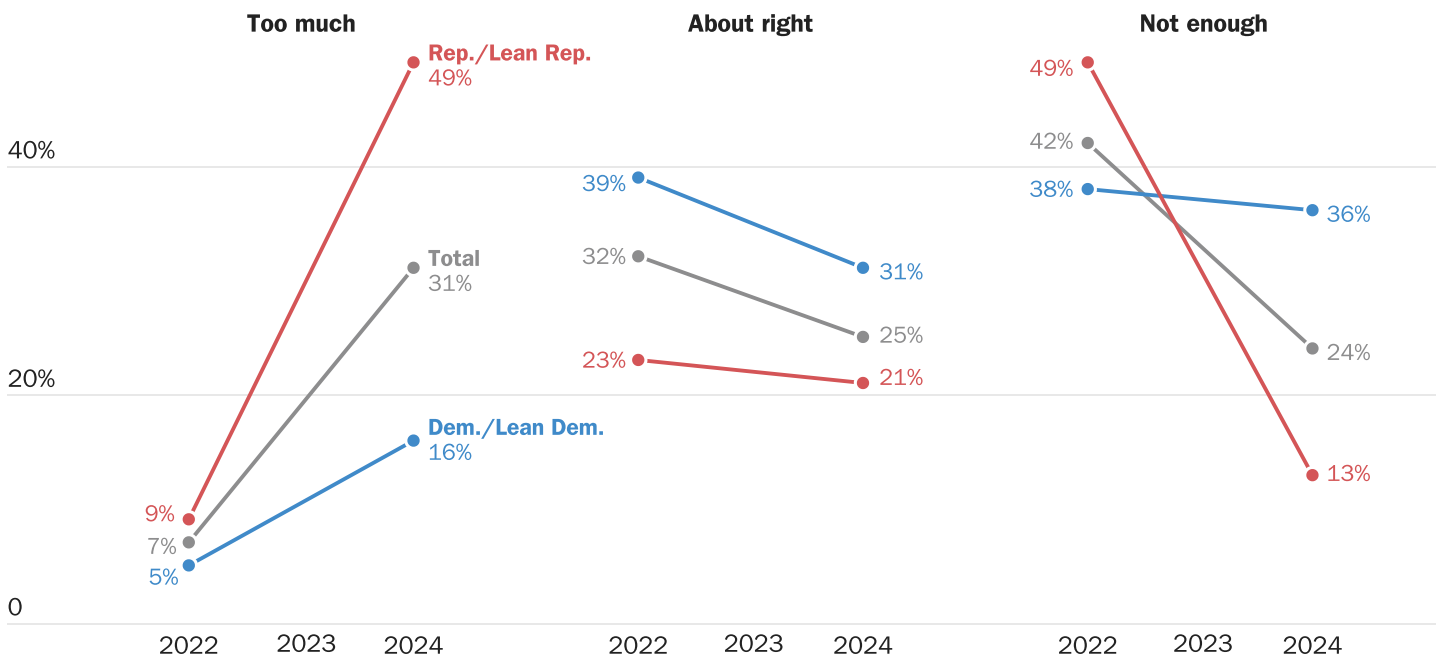


Source: "Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the US," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, p. 3.  
Note: "Don't know" responses are not shown.

Figure 4

### The partisan gap on aid to Ukraine has shifted significantly since start of war

Share who say that when it comes to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United States is providing \_\_\_ support to Ukraine, percent



Source: Richard Wike et al., "Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine," Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024, p. 5.  
Note: Those who did not answer or who answered "Not sure" are not shown.

should possess nuclear forces. It has been obvious since the 1950s that the European members of NATO, taken together, have the resources to stand on their own militarily.<sup>103</sup> But it has also been clear that to stand up to a great nuclear power like Russia, the Europeans would have to have nuclear forces of their own. That meant that Germany in particular would have to have a nuclear force under its own control; British and French nuclear forces could not provide the necessary degree of reassurance. But almost from the start, and certainly from the 1960s onward, most people professionally concerned with these issues have been dead set against the idea of a German finger on the nuclear trigger; it was clear that if Germany were to remain non-nuclear, the United States could not withdraw from Europe.<sup>104</sup>

In fact, this was the basic reason Europe never developed the capability to stand on its own militarily during the Cold War, and indeed, why the NATO system remained intact after the Cold War. For example, Matlock, the former ambassador, explained in 2017 why he had thought in 1991 that NATO had to be kept in business: “We need to keep it,” his thinking ran, “because we need to keep Germany under control. Germany unites—you want them loose from everything, or do you want them tied to an alliance, so they don’t have an independent military? What would an independent Germany that goes nuclear do to the peace of the world two generations from now?”<sup>105</sup> Biden himself saw things the same way. He explained in 1997 what he thought the purpose of NATO had been: “It was not merely to contain Russia. It was to harness Germany; it was to bring stability in Europe; and it has never, never, never only been to contain Russia.”<sup>106</sup> The implication was that the main reason NATO was still needed was that Germany still had to be “harnessed.”

Such comments are rare, at least in public. Few people, either in Germany or the other Western countries, are comfortable dealing with that issue openly. It was for that reason that US officials, when explaining why NATO had to be preserved after the Cold War, pointed instead to “instability” and “uncertainty” as the new enemies NATO would guard against. But those rationales alone were too weak to provide a politically viable basis for a continuing American presence on the Continent. Indeed, some observers think the expansion policy was adopted to provide a rationale for NATO’s continued existence that

would otherwise be missing.<sup>107</sup> Still, one wonders, especially with all the talk nowadays about an eventual American withdrawal from Europe, how long the question of how the Germans should provide for their own security in a post-NATO world—a world in which a nuclear-armed Russia is not far away—can continue to be swept under the rug. And since the Germans might well feel that they would need a nuclear force of their own in such a world, if only as a kind of ultimate insurance policy, one wonders how long the German nuclear problem can be avoided. If some future president, whether Trump or someone else, pulls the United States out of Europe or significantly reduces American involvement, there is certainly no way in which the issue can continue to be ignored.

Therefore, when we think about a post-NATO world, we need to grapple seriously with the question of whether Germany should be allowed—indeed, encouraged and helped—to go nuclear. Most people outside Germany, and even many inside that country, still think this is a terrible idea. But one has the sense that most non-Germans oppose the idea of a nuclearized Germany because they still deeply distrust the Germans on a visceral level; German behavior during the Nazi period was so horrifying that even the other Western countries cannot quite bring themselves to trust the Germans the same way they trust each other. Russian opposition is even deeper, since Russia suffered so much at German hands during World War II. Moreover, the Germans themselves have come to accept those attitudes as a given and have adjusted their policy accordingly. But intelligent policy needs to be based on hard analysis, not visceral feelings, no matter how understandable. One therefore has to consider whether fears about what a nuclear-armed Germany would do still have a rational basis.

For what was the whole Hitler phenomenon rooted in? It had many sources, but perhaps the most important taproot was the social Darwinist notion that populations inevitably expand, countries have to feed their growing populations, and countries therefore have to acquire land that can produce the food they need, since they cannot count on being able to import it forever from areas under the control of foreign powers.<sup>108</sup> The Nazi dream of conquering and settling Ukraine was clearly rooted in that kind of thinking, but the assumptions that policy was based on turned out to be utterly unwarranted. The birth

rate in Germany has been lower than the death rate every year since 1972; what demographers call the “natural rate of increase” has actually been negative, and population growth has been due entirely to immigration.<sup>109</sup>

Agricultural yields, on the other hand, have increased dramatically over the past 60 years. Wheat yields, measured in tons per hectare, more than doubled in Germany during that period after having almost tripled in the previous century; they are now over seven times as large as they were in 1850.<sup>110</sup> One finds much the same pattern when one looks at the data for the European Union as a whole. Europe today is not only self-sufficient in food production but has actually become a major agricultural exporter.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, the idea of starving a country’s people by declining to sell them food looks fanciful in light of modern global commodity markets. All these changes have been quite extraordinary. What they mean is that the world that gave rise to National Socialism, and indeed to pre-1914 European imperialism in general, no longer exists. And that in turn means that a political system without a US “orderer” (to use political scientist Kenneth Waltz’s term) cannot be expected to work in the same dangerous way the pre-1945 or pre-1914 system did.

## CONCLUSION

Would an American withdrawal from Europe, even if it were well managed—and that is a very big “if”—lead to a better world? The international political system is extraordinarily complex. All kinds of effects are therefore possible, and no one can tell in advance how things will sort themselves out. But one point is worth stressing. The United States—the world’s one remaining superpower, the “indispensable nation” (to use Madeleine Albright’s famous term<sup>112</sup>)—can pursue very ambitious policies. But a European system in which the United States would play at most a peripheral role would work differently. European ambitions would be limited to what all the major countries would support. Their policy would almost certainly be more moderate, more status quo-oriented, and more purely defensive than the policy the United States has been pursuing since 1991 and would thus be less likely to be perceived as a threat by Russia.<sup>113</sup> So, there is a good chance that a European system would be more stable than the one we are now living with. The issue, at any rate, is certainly

worth thinking about. “There are few things so bad,” as two RAND analysts remarked many years ago, “that not thinking about them won’t make them worse.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, the mere fact of this sort of thinking might have a positive impact on everyone’s policies.

This brings me to my final point, about the role that historical analysis should play as we grapple with these issues. My claim here—in fact, my basic claim in this paper as a whole—is that it has a fundamental role to play, and that one of the main reasons why we have to deal with the mess we now find ourselves in is that such an analysis hasn’t played anything like the role it should have. The case of America’s treatment of Germany at the end of and immediately after World War I springs to mind. The Germans did not surrender unconditionally; they laid down their arms after they had been given certain promises and assurances—some explicit, some tacit—about how they would be treated after the war. But the victor powers, and especially the Americans, reneged on those promises—with devastating consequences, both in Germany and eventually in the Western countries themselves.<sup>115</sup>

The full story here is not well known. When people think of the failure of the peace of 1919, they tend to blame the British and the French; Woodrow Wilson is rarely held responsible for what happened. But his policies, and especially his refusal to honor the pre-armistice agreement, played a crucial role in the story. It might have been a good idea to keep that story in mind as US policy toward Russia was being worked out after 1991. To be sure, the argument was often made that the Western powers should have pursued a more generous policy toward their former Cold War rival in the 1990s; Winston Churchill’s famous saying, “In Victory: Magnanimity,” is often cited in those discussions. But a deeper historical understanding might have given the point greater force—and thus greater emotional and therefore political salience. Historical study more generally can be of real value in this context. Trying to understand, for example, why the peacemakers in 1815 were able to lay the basis for a relatively stable international system, while their successors a century later failed to do so, can yield important lessons about how we should deal with international politics today. That includes the question of how, if at all, we should move to a post-NATO world.



So, is there life after NATO? Of course there is. The world will not end if the United States withdraws from the alliance. The Europeans, with a combined GDP (by some estimates) roughly five times as large as Russia's, are certainly capable of defending themselves, and if America withdrew, they

## NOTES

A version of this article with direct links to most of the items cited is available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/LifeAfterNATO.pdf>.

1. Donald Trump, Speech to Rally in Conway, SC, streamed live on February 10, 2024, posted by Sky News, YouTube (passage at 39:04–40:42).
2. Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Warns NATO Allies to Spend More on Defense, or Else," *New York Times*, July 2, 2018; and Eddy Wax, "Trump Vowed He'd 'Never' Help Europe if It's Attacked, Top EU Official Says," *Politico*, January 10, 2024. The meeting in question, with the president of the European Commission at the World Economic Forum in Davos, might have been what Trump was referring to at the Conway rally. See also Nick Robertson, "John Bolton: 'In a Second Trump Term, We'd Almost Certainly Withdraw from NATO,'" *The Hill*, August 3, 2023; Anne Applebaum, "Trump Will Abandon NATO," *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2023; and Philip Gordon and Ivo Daalder, "Trump's Biggest Gift to Putin," *The Atlantic*, July 19, 2018.
3. CNN interview with retired Gen. Wesley Clark, "'Treasonous': Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Blasts Trump's NATO Remarks," posted February 12, 2024, YouTube (comment at 1:37).
4. White House spokesperson Andrew Bates, quoted in Lalee Ibssa and Soo Rin Kim, "Trump Says He'd 'Encourage' Russia 'to Do Whatever the Hell They Want' if a NATO Country Didn't Spend Enough on Defense," ABC News, February 11, 2024. See also "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan," "Briefing Room," White House, February 14, 2024.
5. "Remarks by President Biden on Senate Passage of the Bipartisan Supplemental Agreement," "Briefing Room," White House, February 13, 2024.
6. North Atlantic Treaty art. 5, April 4, 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 U.N.T.S. 243.
7. "Remarks by President Biden Before Meeting with the Leaders of the Bucharest Nine," "Briefing Room," White

would have little choice but to work out some system for doing so. But how well the transition to a European defense system would be managed—assuming there will be a transition—is very much an open question. The time to start thinking about it is now.

House, February 22, 2023.

8. Simone McCarthy, "NATO Chief Says Trump's Comments on Abandoning Alliance Endangers US and European Troops," CNN, updated February 12, 2024.
9. Simone McCarthy, "NATO Chief Says Trump's Comments on Abandoning Alliance Endangers US and European Troops," CNN, updated February 12, 2024.
10. Simone McCarthy, "NATO Chief Says Trump's Comments on Abandoning Alliance Endangers US and European Troops," CNN, updated February 12, 2024.
11. North Atlantic Treaty art. 5, April 4, 1949, 63 Stat. 2241, 34 U.N.T.S. 243.
12. *North Atlantic Treaty, Part 1: Administration Witnesses: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 81st Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 11.
13. *North Atlantic Treaty, Part 1: Administration Witnesses: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 81st Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 277.
14. *North Atlantic Treaty, Part 1: Administration Witnesses: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 81st Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 277.
15. Quoted in Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 282. The basic point here was understood by informed public opinion at the time. According to one well-regarded poll taken in April 1949, of the two-thirds of a sample who had heard or read about the North Atlantic Treaty, only 33 percent thought it required the United States to "go to war, fight, defend them" in the event that one of America's treaty partners was attacked. Most of the other respondents believed the treaty required only that the country take lesser measures in such a case. Thomas W. Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and Use of*

*Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* (Kennedy School Center for Science and International Affairs, 1989), p. 115.

16. Quoted in Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 285.

17. Telegram from Dean Acheson to American Ambassador to France David K. E. Bruce, June 28, 1951, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951, European Security and the German Question, vol. 3, pt. 1, p. 802 (doc. 437)," Office of the Historian, US Department of State. The quotation has been edited to give full rather than abbreviated words.

18. Eisenhower to Edward J. Birmingham, February 28, 1951, in *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. 12, ed. Louis Galambos et al. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 76–77. Emphasis in original. On these issues, see also Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 119–22, 147–57.

19. See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 210, 247, 251–56, 262; and (for some additional evidence) Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the German Nuclear Question Under Eisenhower and Kennedy," Department of Political Science, UCLA, August 8, 2023, to be published in a forthcoming volume edited by Andreas Lutsch.

20. See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 283–402.

21. McGeorge Bundy, outline for President John F. Kennedy's talk to the National Security Council, January 17, 1962, doc. no. CK2349318930, US Declassified Documents Online.

22. Kim Darroch, *Collateral Damage: Britain, America, and Europe in the Age of Trump* (PublicAffairs, 2020), p. 201. The Trump people, moreover, are now well aware of the point that "the language in Article 5 is flexible and does not require any member to respond with military force." Michael Hirsh, "Trump's Plan for NATO Is Emerging," *Politico Magazine*, July 2, 2024.

23. *North Atlantic Treaty, Part 1: Administration Witnesses: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 81st Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 373.

24. *NATO's Future: Problems, Threats, and US Interests: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 104th Congress,*

*1st Session, April 27 and May 3, 1995* (Government Printing Office, 1995), pp. 89–91. That view was in line with what many polls conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs revealed about public feelings on this general issue (links to surveys for 1974–2022). At one point (1974), only 39 percent of respondents favored US military involvement, even "if Western Europe were invaded" (p. 18). As the editors of the Chicago Council report presenting the results of the 2014 survey noted, since that organization's first survey was conducted in 1974, respondents had "consistently expressed reluctance to use military force to solve international problems"; that skepticism, they added, "persists today, with little public support for military intervention in Ukraine in the event of Russian invasion (30%)" or in other cases. Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, and Craig Kafura, *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment: Results of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2014), p. 3; see also the polling data reported there on p. 29.

25. *The Debate on NATO Enlargement: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 105th Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 20.

26. Minutes of foreign ministers' meetings, September 12–13, 1950, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1950 Series, Vol. 3* (Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 1192, 1208. For more on this extraordinary episode, see Marc Trachtenberg and Christopher Gehrz, "America, Europe and German Rearmament, August–September 1950," *Journal of European Integration History* 6, no. 2 (December 2000).

27. John Foster Dulles, Statement to the North Atlantic Council, December 14, 1953, in *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1952–54, vol. 5, pt. 1*, pp. 461–68.

28. National Security Council meeting, July 15, 1954, p. 11, doc. no. CK2349133126, US Declassified Documents Online.

29. Eisenhower meeting with NATO Secretary General Paul-Henri Spaak, November 24, 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1958–60 Series, vol. 7, pt. 1*, p. 521.

30. Eisenhower meeting with Gen. Lauris Norstad, November 4, 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1958–60 Series, vol. 7, pt. 1*, p. 498.

31. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 370–77.

32. Kissinger telephone conversation with John McCloy,

February 8, 1974, 11:10 a.m., Kissinger Transcripts Series, Virtual Reading Room Documents, US Department of State.

33. Kissinger meeting with Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, John McCloy, et al., November 28, 1973, pp. 29, 31, item no. KT00928, Digital National Security Archive.

34. Kissinger meeting with Jacques Kosciusko-Morizet, October 25, 1973 (document is dated October 26), pp. 2–3, Electronic Briefing Book no. 98, doc. 75, Digital National Security Archive.

35. Kissinger, in secretary of state's staff meeting, November 27, 1973, pp. 1, 16, item no. KT00927, Digital National Security Archive. For more on this issue, see Marc Trachtenberg, "The French Factor in US Foreign Policy During the Nixon-Pompidou Period, 1969–1974," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 45–50.

36. See, for example, "Statement of Options: Controls on Export to the USSR of Oil and Gas Equipment and Technology," attached to Memorandum from Allen Lenz to Richard Allen, November 9, 1981, "NSC 00023 10/16/1981 [East-West Trade Controls, USSR, Oil] (1 of 3)" folder, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Meeting File; and Memorandum from Richard Pipes to Norman Bailey re. Siberian gas pipeline project, July 7, 1981, box 30, "USSR-Pipeline 2/6" folder, Matlock, Jack F.: Files; both in Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

37. National Security Council meeting, December 21, 1981, p. 7, NSC 00033, NSC Executive Secretariat Meeting Files.

38. National Security Council meeting, December 21, 1981, p. 7, NSC 00033, NSC Executive Secretariat Meeting Files.

39. There are many accounts of this affair, including one written by Secretary of State Antony Blinken when he was an undergraduate at Harvard: Antony J. Blinken, *Ally Versus Ally: America, Europe, and the Siberian Pipeline Crisis* (Praeger, 1987). See also Michael Mastanduno, *Economic Containment: CoCom and the Politics of East-West Trade* (Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 247–63; Bruce W. Jentleson, *Pipeline Politics: The Complex Political Economy of East-West Energy Trade* (Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 172–214; and George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (Scribner, 1993), pp. 135–44.

40. "Remarks by President Biden on Senate Passage of the Bipartisan Supplemental Agreement," "Briefing Room," White House, February 13, 2024.

41. See, for example, Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton

University Press, 2014), pp. 65–66 (for the initial period) and pp. 219–20, 231 (for cooperation in later years).

42. For the European response, see Bernard Gwertzman, "US Called 'Close' to 'Final' Decision on Role of Libya," *New York Times*, April 12, 1986; James M. Markham, "Kohl Warns US Against a Strike," *New York Times*, April 12, 1986; E. J. Dionne Jr., "US Disregarded Warnings of Allies, Italian Says," *New York Times*, April 15, 1986; E. J. Dionne Jr., "West Europe Generally Critical of US," *New York Times*, April 16, 1986; and James M. Markham, "Libya Raids: Behind Allies' Reaction," *New York Times*, April 25, 1986. See also Charles G. Cogan, "The Response of the Strong to the Weak: The American Raid on Libya, 1986," *Intelligence and National Security* 6, no. 3 (July 1991); and George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (Scribner, 1993), p. 687.

43. Count de Marenches and David A. Andelman, *The Fourth World War: Diplomacy and Espionage in the Age of Terrorism* (Morrow, 1992), p. 198. This is an "updated and adapted" version of Christine Ockrent and Comte de Marenches, *Dans le Secret des Princes* (Stock, 1986); see especially pp. 280–81. Marenches's account is confirmed by many other sources. See especially Edwy Plenel, "La France et le Terrorisme: la Tentation du Sanctuaire," *Politique Étrangère* 51, no. 4 (1986): 931; and Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, "The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism," *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003): 69–71.

44. See Count de Marenches and David A. Andelman, *The Fourth World War: Diplomacy and Espionage in the Age of Terrorism* (Morrow, 1992), p. 198.

45. Bruce Stokes, "NATO's Rot from Within," *Foreign Policy*, August 6, 2015. The phrase quoted is the subtitle of that article. The survey also showed, Stokes wrote, that while 69 percent of Republicans stood "ready to go to a NATO ally's defense . . . only 47 percent of Democrats support[ed] fulfilling America's Article 5 commitment." For the Pew studies, see Katie Simmons, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid," Pew Research Center, June 10, 2015, pp. 6, 9; Moira Fagan, "NATO Is Seen Favorably in Many Member Countries, but Almost Half of Americans Say It Does Too Little," Pew Research Center, July 9, 2018; and Moira Fagan and Jacob Poushter, "NATO Seen Favorably Across Member States," Pew Research Center, February 9, 2020, pp. 5–6, 11 (see chart titled "Publics in NATO countries express reluctance on Article 5 obligations"), p. 12 (see chart titled "Changing views on whether their country should intervene in a conflict between Russia and a NATO ally"), and pp. 14–15 (for the 2019 survey results; the table copied into the text is on p. 14). Public opinion polls have to be used with some care.

For two useful books on the subject, see George F. Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), and David W. Moore, *The Opinion Makers: An Insider Exposes the Truth Behind the Polls* (Beacon Press, 2008). Note also Moore's review of Benjamin I. Page and Marshall M. Bouton's *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 471–75. In a recent YouGov poll, only 20 percent of Italians, for example, were willing to use force to defend Latvia in the event of a Russian attack, and only 20 percent were willing to use force to defend Turkey. And this was not the only case one could point to. Only 37 percent of Britons, 20 percent of French, 27 percent of Germans, and 37 percent of Americans were willing to use force to defend Turkey. "Eurotrack + US NATO Results," YouGov, February 2024, pp. 5–7.

46. See, for example, the Biden campaign advertisement "Walk Away" (released February 16, 2024). "Every president since Truman," the narrator says, "has been a rock-solid supporter of NATO, except for Donald Trump." Posted by the Jim Heath Channel, YouTube.

47. Kathleen McInnis (identified as "a NATO expert who currently works as a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies"), interview by Scott Detrow, *All Things Considered*, NPR, February 11, 2024.

48. See, for example, Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), especially pp. 24–68; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), especially pp. 7, 32–33, 64, 266–67; Stephen M. Walt, "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (Yale University Press, 2018), especially pp. 171–79; and "John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis," *The Economist*, March 19, 2022. Note also Jack F. Matlock Jr., "I Was There: NATO and the Origins of the Ukraine Crisis," *Responsible Statecraft*, February 15, 2022.

49. Ronald Reagan, "Are Liberals Really Liberal?" (c. 1963), in *Reagan, in His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America*, ed. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, with a foreword by George P. Shultz (Free Press, 2001), p. 442.

50. See especially Anatoly Adamishin, "The End of the Cold War: 30 Years On," in *Exiting the Cold War, Entering a New World*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Foreign Policy Institute and Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, 2019).

51. See, for example, Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. 84. Most people in the American national security community took a particularly dim view of Reagan's ideas about nuclear weapons. Scowcroft, for example, characterized the US proposal at the 1986 Reykjavik summit to do away with ballistic missiles as "insane." See Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (Simon and Schuster, 1991), p. 51.

52. See George [H. W.] Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (Knopf, 1998), pp. 543, 563–64; Brent Scowcroft, "Gorbachev Was Doing Our Work for Us," interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 5, 2011; Brent Scowcroft Oral History Part 1, transcript of interview by Philip Zelikow et al., November 12–13, 1999, pp. 73–74, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; and Brent Scowcroft to Condoleezza Rice and Philip Zelikow, February 27, 1995, Zelikow–Rice Papers, box 1, folder 3, Hoover Institution, Stanford, CA.

53. See Jack F. Matlock Jr., *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Random House, 1995), pp. 537–39, 558–59.

54. See, for example, Nigel Wicks record of conversation, Heads Discussion, July 9, 1990, paras. 45 and 48, Houston G-7 Economic Summit, PREM19/2945, National Archives, Kew, Richmond, UK.

55. George H. W. Bush meeting with Helmut Kohl, July 15, 1991, p. 2, Memcons and Telcons, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, TX.

56. See Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?," *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/2021). On the 1992 decision to expand NATO, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Eastbound and Down: The United States, NATO Enlargement, and Suppressing the Soviet and Western European Alternatives, 1990–1992," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, nos. 6–7 (2020): especially 838. This story throws a certain light on Biden's assertion, quoted above, that "when America gives its word, it means something. When we make a commitment, we keep it."

57. For the timing, see Strobe Talbott to Warren Christopher, January 2, 1995, quoted in M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021), p. 207; and Strobe Talbott to George Kennan, February 13, 1997, George F. Kennan Papers, box 47, folder 4, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

58. Thomas Pickering cable to Warren Christopher,

December 6, 1994, Electronic Briefing Book 780, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

59. See Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Random House, 2002), p. 93. Talbott had come close to recognizing the point in a book he had coauthored just prior to taking office about the Bush foreign policy. See Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbott, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (Little, Brown, 1993), p. 185.

60. Strobe Talbott to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, quoted in M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 36.

61. Strobe Talbott to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, quoted in M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 36.

62. Strobe Talbott to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, quoted in M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 36.

63. Strobe Talbott to Secretary of State Warren Christopher, March 24, 1995, quoted in M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 36–37.

64. M. E. Sarotte, “How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 29–30; and M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post–Cold War Stalemate* (Yale University Press, 2021), pp. 222, 267.

65. James Goldgeier, “NATO Enlargement and the Problem of Value Complexity,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 167.

66. Thomas L. Friedman, “What Did We Expect?” Opinion, *New York Times*, August 19, 2008.

67. Quoted in Julian Borger, “Russian Hostility ‘Partly Caused by West,’ Claims Former US Defence Head,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2016.

68. Peter Spiegel, “Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to US,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2009.

69. William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019), pp. 55–56, 105–11.

70. William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019), p. 84.

71. Stephen Kotkin, “The Bear Hug,” *New Republic*, June 3, 2002.

72. Bill Clinton quoted in Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Random House, 2002), p. 201.

73. Bill Clinton quoted in Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Random House, 2002), p. 201.

74. Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (Random House, 2002), pp. 219–20.

75. George F. Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” Opinion, *New York Times*, February 5, 1997.

76. George F. Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” Opinion, *New York Times*, February 5, 1997.

77. Thomas L. Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word from X,” Opinion, *New York Times*, May 2, 1998.

78. George Bunn et al., Open Letter to President Clinton Opposing NATO Expansion, June 26, 1997, Arms Control Association.

79. *NATO’s Future: Problems, Threats, and US Interests: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 104th Congress, 1st Session, April 27 and May 3, 1995* (Government Printing Office, 1995), pp. 76–86 (see p. 77 for Matlock’s reference to what Gorbachev had been told); and *US Policy Toward NATO Enlargement: Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives, 104th Congress, 2nd Session, June 20, 1996* (Government Printing Office, 1996), pp. 28–32 (see p. 31 for Matlock’s reference to the commitment the US government had made).

80. See, for example, the examples cited in Richard T. Davies, “Should NATO Grow? A Dissent,” *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 1995, with a letter of support signed by 18 former US State Department officials. Davies was the US ambassador to Poland from 1973 to 1978.

81. *NATO’s Future: Problems, Threats, and US Interests: Hearings*

*Before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 104th Congress, 1st Session, April 27 and May 3, 1995* (Government Printing Office, 1995), especially pp. 76–86.

82. Memorandum of Conversation—Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, May 29, 1997, p. 3, Memcons—Memoranda of Conversation, 2012-0600-M, Clinton Presidential Library, Little Rock, AR.

83. “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” press release, NATO, April 3, 2008.

84. William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2019), pp. 230, 233, 237–38, 413. Note also John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), and Mearsheimer’s lecture, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” June 2015, posted by the University of Chicago on September 25, 2015, YouTube. The lecture has almost 30 million views on YouTube so far.

85. See Thomas Graham, *Getting Russia Right* (Polity, 2023), pp. 94–95, 170–72. Graham served for a number of years in the American embassy in Moscow and dealt with Russian issues on the National Security Council staff from 2002 to 2007.

86. Anne Gearan, “In Recording of US Diplomat, Blunt Talk on Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2014.

87. Trump now seems to hold this view. “Asked on a June 21 podcast whether he was willing to take NATO expansion into Ukraine off the table, Trump replied—in remarks that went largely unreported—that promising NATO membership to Ukraine had been a ‘mistake’ and ‘really why this war started.’” Michael Hirsh, “Trump’s Plan for NATO Is Emerging,” *Politico Magazine*, July 2, 2024. For Trump’s comments, see his conversation with venture capitalist (and Trump supporter) David Sacks and three of his friends, *All-In Podcast*, June 20, 2024, YouTube (passage at 22:58–25:03).

88. Isobel Koshiw and Amy Kazmin, “NATO Chief Says It Is Inevitable Ukraine Will Join Defence Alliance,” *Financial Times*, February 24, 2024.

89. See, for example, the Biden-Zelensky joint press conferences held July 12, 2023, and June 13, 2024. On that latter occasion, the two leaders were commenting on the US-Ukraine Bilateral Security Agreement the two countries had just signed. Other Biden administration officials have often reaffirmed America’s commitment to an eventual

admission of Ukraine into NATO. See, for instance, Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s remarks before a meeting with the Ukrainian foreign minister, April 4, 2024. For another such statement, see NSC Senior Director for Europe Amanda Sloat’s press gaggle, July 12, 2023.

90. Note the polling data in the RealClearPolitics compendium of general election polls.

91. Richard Wike et al., “Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024, p. 20.

92. Jacob Poushter et al., “Americans Hold Positive Feelings Toward NATO and Ukraine, See Russia as an Enemy,” Pew Research Center, May 10, 2023, p. 4.

93. Jacob Poushter et al., “Americans Hold Positive Feelings Toward NATO and Ukraine, See Russia as an Enemy,” Pew Research Center, May 10, 2023, p. 4.

94. “Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the US,” Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, p. 3.

95. Richard Wike et al., “Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024, especially the chart titled “Partisan gap on views of NATO is increasing,” p. 4; and “Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO Is Good for the US,” Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, p. 3 (the chart is reproduced in Figure 3). Attitudes on the right had been shifting well before Trump became a major political figure. On that point, note especially the chart titled “Conservative Republicans no longer a bulwark against isolationism” in “In Shift from Bush Era, More Conservatives Say ‘Come Home, America,’” Pew Research Center, June 16, 2011. In absolute terms, moreover, the number of people saying the country should not be active in world affairs was surprisingly high; given the way the question was phrased, one would have expected a very different response. See the chart showing how responses to this kind of question changed over the period from 1947 to 2014 in Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, and Craig Kafura, *Foreign Policy in the Age of Retrenchment: Results of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2014), p. 7, Figure 1.1. Note also p. 12, Figure 1.8, which shows the dramatic increase from 1974 to 2014 in the number of Republicans who said the country should “stay out of world affairs” (from 21 percent to 40 percent).

96. Bruce Stokes, “Republicans and Democrats Sharply Divided on How Tough to Be with Russia,” Pew Research Center, June 15, 2015, chart titled “Partisan divide in US on what to do about Russia.”

97. Richard Wike et al., “Growing Partisan Divisions over NATO and Ukraine,” Pew Research Center, May 8, 2024, especially the following charts: “The partisan gap on aid to Ukraine has shifted significantly since start of war” (p. 5) and “Republicans and Democrats widely differ on aid to Ukraine” (p. 13). For another straw in the wind, see the results of a poll conducted by the Eurasia Group Foundation in 2018. Even when respondents were told (incorrectly) that the NATO alliance required members to “defend each other militarily,” more Republicans were against using force if Russia were to invade Estonia, a NATO ally, than were in favor of a military response. Mark Hannah, *Worlds Apart: US Foreign Policy and American Public Opinion* (Eurasia Group Foundation, 2019), p. 13.

98. Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January/February 2013): 116. See also Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), p. 5: “Over the twenty-plus years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the foreign policy establishment has gradually converged on an activist grand strategy for the United States. There is little disagreement among Republican and Democratic foreign policy experts about the threats that the United States faces and the remedies it should pursue.”

99. See, for example, “Speaker Mike Johnson on the Threats to the US-Led World Order,” address to the Hudson Institute, July 8, 2024; and Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, “The Republican Party Grapples with Its NATO Platform,” *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2024. The Republicans in Congress calling for a more modest policy, the authors point out, are still greatly outnumbered by “traditional Republican standard-bearers, such as House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul,” who favor “backing Ukraine full tilt.”

100. Ian Ward, “The Grand Strategy Behind JD Vance’s Latest Push to Kill Ukraine Aid,” *Politico Magazine*, April 18, 2024.

101. Ian Ward, “The Grand Strategy Behind JD Vance’s Latest Push to Kill Ukraine Aid,” *Politico Magazine*, April 18, 2024. The first quotation is a direct quote from Vance.

102. Ian Ward, “Is There Something More Radical than MAGA? JD Vance Is Dreaming It,” *Politico Magazine*, March 15, 2024. This article is based on a series of interviews Ward had with Vance in early 2024.

103. Even today, the Europeans would probably be able to defend themselves in a purely conventional war. See Barry R. Posen, “Europe Can Defend Itself,” *Survival: Global Politics*

and *Strategy* 62, no. 6 (December 2020–January 2021); and Barry R. Posen, “In Reply: To Repeat, Europe Can Defend Itself,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 63, no. 1 (2021).

104. For my take on this issue, see Marc Trachtenberg, “The United States and the German Nuclear Question Under Eisenhower and Kennedy,” Department of Political Science, UCLA, August 8, 2023, to be published in a forthcoming volume edited by Andreas Lutsch.

105. “Jack Matlock: The US Is Not the Victor of the Cold War,” Valdai Club interview, posted January 19, 2016, on YouTube (passage at 20:40); archived on Wayback Machine November 19, 2020.

106. *The Debate on NATO Enlargement: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 105th Congress, 1st Session* (Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 81.

107. This issue is discussed in Jonathan Haslam, *Hubris: The Origins of Russia’s War Against Ukraine* (Bloomsbury, 2024). “NATO looking eastward,” Clinton himself pointed out, “will help explain the need for NATO to our domestic electorates.” Memorandum of Conversation—Prime Minister Carlo Ciampi of Italy, September 17, 1993, p. 4, Memcons—Memoranda of Conversation, 2015-0755-M, Clinton Presidential Library, Little Rock, AR. In the judgment of Robert Hunter, the US ambassador to NATO, many of the European allies were not enthusiastic about NATO expansion but went along with the policy because they thought expansion was needed “to preserve vigorous US interest in European security.” Robert Hunter cable to State Department, January 25, 1995, p. 10, Declassified Documents Concerning NATO Expansion, 2015-0792-M, Clinton Presidential Library, Little Rock, AR. The “expand or die” argument was quite common at the time. One well-informed reporter wrote that in dealing with the allies, the standard US line was that “expanding NATO will provide more political stability in central and Eastern Europe and ensure that the United States remains a power in Europe.” Michael Dobbs, “With Cold War Over, US Policy Debate Flared,” *Washington Post*, July 5, 1995.

108. See, for example, Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler’s Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power*, trans. Herbert Arnold (Wesleyan University Press, 1972), especially pp. 90–92; and Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (W. W. Norton, 1998–2000), especially pp. 1:290, 1:448, 2:xli, 2:19–21, 2:208–209. Hitler’s fundamental goals, Kershaw writes (p. 2:xli), rested on a “‘world-view’ that saw racial struggle and survival of the fittest as the key determinants in human history”; his “crude social-Darwinism,” Kershaw says (p. 1:448), “dictated his approach to the economy, as it did his entire political ‘world-view.’”

109. For the figures, see the Statistisches Bundesamt’s website, tables for births and deaths, 1950 to the present, conveniently summarized (with additional data going back every year to 1817) in the Vital Statistics section of the “Demographics of Germany” article in Wikipedia.

110. Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado, and Max Roser, “Crop Yields,” Our World in Data.

111. Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado, and Max Roser, “Crop Yields,” Our World in Data.

112. “If we have to use force,” Albright said (referring to Iraq), “it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.” Transcript of Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright interview with Matt Lauer on NBC’s *Today* show, February 19, 1998, Archive, US Department of State.

113. This is particularly true because, for the foreseeable future, any purely European successor to NATO is likely to have a confederal, rather than federal, structure that relies on consensus rather than on a top-down command structure. Most Europeans, one study revealed, would oppose a decision on the part of the European Union “to use military force if their own government disagreed.” See Matthias Mader, Francesco Olmastroni, and Pierangelo Isernia, “The Polls—Trends: Public Opinion Toward European Defense Policy and NATO: Still Wanting It Both Ways?,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (Summer 2020):

562–63. America’s own experience in the years following independence is relevant here. The system established by the Constitution enabled the country to pursue a much more muscular foreign policy than had been possible under the Articles of Confederation—and indeed, the system was changed, in large part, to make it possible to pursue such a policy. See Max M. Edling, *A Hercules in the Cradle: War, Money, and the American State, 1783–1867* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), especially pp. 18, 21; Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997), especially pp. 6, 26–28; and Frederick W. Marks III, *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Louisiana State University Press, 1973), especially pp. 50–51.

114. Herbert Goldhamer and Andrew W. Marshall, with Nathan Leites, “The Deterrence and Strategy of Total War, 1959–1961: A Method of Analysis,” RAND Corporation Research Memorandum no. 2301, 1959, p. 191, quoted in David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security* 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983): 59.

115. See Marc Trachtenberg, “America, Germany, and the Versailles Peace: A Reassessment,” in *Amerika, Deutschland und Europa von 1917 bis Heute*, vol. 1 (Festschrift for Klaus Schwabe), ed. Christian Bremen (Edition Aixact, 2022); and Marc Trachtenberg, “The United States and the NATO Non-Extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?,” *International Security* 45, no. 3 (Winter 2020/2021): Appendix IV.

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