

The Iron Curtain:
A Performative Expression Which Brought
the Cold War into Being

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2025

Introduction

The Cold War (1947-1991) began as a metaphor.¹ When Orwell first described this “cold” conflict, he framed it as a state of tension just short of an open war, sustained by a tacit agreement never to use the bomb – an uneasy peace that was anything but peaceful.² The power of this rhetorical device to describe the subsequent forty-four years of conflict between the United States and the USSR shows that figurative expressions pervade everyday thinking. From the Greek *meta*, meaning beyond and over and *pherein*, to bring or to bear, the word metaphor’s etymology shows that it transfers, and carries over meaning.³ A metaphor, then, is the binding of one word or group of words to another, the extension of their realities to each other, which forms an alternate description of the world. Underhill adds to this definitional draft that metaphors lead listeners into “rigid assumptions of identity between language and fact”, meaning that they hold the comparisons they make to be true.⁴ Thus, metaphors can be used to shape perceptions.

When Winston Churchill delivered his *Sinews of Peace* speech at Fulton, Missouri, on March 5th, 1946, saying that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an *iron curtain* has descended across the continent,” he contributed, with the expression “iron curtain”, to curating public opinion, on both sides of the curtain towards thinking in binary terms, locking policymakers in a good versus evil logic that would soon lead to a diplomatic stalemate.⁵ Like a fire that spread, communism had to be isolated to prevent it from consuming the entire stage of world affairs, since it had already cast a shadow over Eastern Europe as the West looked on. Iron has connotations of hardness, while the curtain is often associated with concealment: the expression created an

¹ Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann, "Introduction: The Cold War as an Imaginary War," in *Understanding the Imaginary War*, ed. Matthew Grant and Benjamin Ziemann (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1.

² George Orwell, "You and the Atomic Bomb," *Tribune*, October 19, 1945, np.

³ W. R. Underhill, "Semantics of the 'Iron Curtain' Metaphor," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 33, no. 3 (1976): 293.

⁴ W. R. Underhill, "Semantics of the 'Iron Curtain' Metaphor," 295.

⁵ Winston Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')," International Churchill Society, March 5, 1946, np.

assumed reality of militarization and secrecy, which turned into a self-fulfilling geopolitical prophecy.⁶

This essay thus argues that the iron curtain metaphor was not merely a rhetorical tool describing US-Soviet tensions, but a performative expression instrumental in bringing the Cold War into being and defining its enduring logic of opposition. To demonstrate this, this essay will first examine how the iron curtain was deliberately constructed as a political reality to justify a harder stance towards the USSR, penetrating public opinion on both sides to frame the opposing party as evil. It will then analyze how the metaphor justified the policies of containment and militarization, shaping Cold War strategy and global engagements.

I. The iron curtain: deliberate political construction closing diplomatic avenues

1. Strategic use of the iron curtain metaphor justifying harder stance regarding the USSR

The War rhetoric of the Soviet “gallant ally” was fading since 1945, when Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe was becoming undeniable. Changes accompanying the end of the War in the presidency and in the geopolitical landscape left a strategic vacuum that the iron curtain metaphor was deployed to fill. Indeed, a little more than a year before Churchill’s Fulton speech, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death placed Harry Truman into the presidency of the United States. Truman’s early foreign policy approach was shaped by the continuity of Roosevelt’s ‘one world approach’. However, unlike Roosevelt, his commitment to Allied unity was pragmatic rather than ideological: it relied on the fact that the American Chief of Staff needed Soviet participation to finish the War on the Japanese front.⁷ Even before coming into office, Truman had little

⁶ W. R. Underhill, "Semantics of the 'Iron Curtain' Metaphor," 299.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 412.

sympathy for his Soviet ally – he argued during his term as Senator that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were “morally equivalent”, as they were both dictatorships.⁸ Thus, when Stalin's alteration of Poland's Western and Eastern borders, imposition of Soviet puppets in government, and violation of the Yalta agreement on free elections revealed unchecked Soviet expansion, Truman soon aimed to abandon naïve cooperation. George Kennan's long telegram, which argued that Soviet foreign policy mixed a communist ideological framework with an “old-fashioned tsarist expansionism” entrenched the fact that the friction between the US and the Soviet Union did not arise from misunderstanding but from the Soviet Union's perception of the world, focused on “patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it.”⁹ This reinforced the idea that the goals of the U.S. and the USSR were irreconcilable, creating a clear need for a shift in foreign policy. The unfolding Soviet actions and Truman's response – his “get tough” policy in 1946 and stark opposition to Soviet control in Eastern Europe – had already established a binary opposition between the two powers: the US positioned itself as the guarantor of peace, while Soviet expansionism was framed as a direct threat.¹⁰ A memorable symbol like the iron curtain metaphor therefore, became necessary to publicly symbolize this divide and justify a more aggressive stance against the USSR.

In that strategic vacuum, Winston Churchill, now leader of the British conservative opposition, delivered his Fulton speech, on the invitation of president Truman.¹¹ This would cement the divide between the West and the Soviet Union for the forty-five years to come. While the US government denied any prior knowledge of the content of the speech and distanced itself from its hard stance over the Soviet Union, Byrnes confirmed in *All in One lifetime* that he had read it, and while Truman might not have directly perused it, he met with Churchill beforehand to

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 411.

⁹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 434, 435.

¹⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 412.

¹¹ Henry B. Ryan, “A New Look at Churchill's ‘Iron Curtain’ Speech,” *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 4 (1979): 901.

discuss its content and thus was far from blindsided – he was in agreement with Churchill’s analysis.¹² Furthermore, Truman insisted on the importance of press presence at the speech, ensuring its widespread dissemination. Thus, he strategically paved the way for a shift towards increasingly aggressive policies.¹³ The two words put together erased the complexity of postwar relations to push the world into binary oppositions. Surely, the two years before the speech had shown that the USSR was strengthening its grip into Eastern Europe, but the metaphor “directed Americans to look for certain conditions in Russian moves and actions” – the Soviet Union no longer thought in terms of security, as had been the perception during the war, but in terms of expansion – as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁴ To Stalin, the iron curtain speech was considered to be the beginning of the Cold War.¹⁵

2. The iron curtain as staged political reality

Once the iron curtain metaphor was in the media, it began to permeate public perception of the USSR and its actions in Eastern Europe. The metaphor was particularly effective because it did not have any referent in the real world – the iron curtain had not materialized, thus, the possibilities of imagination surrounding it were limitless.¹⁶ Additionally, the term iron curtain had been used for centuries to refer to a metal installation that prevented fires linked to stage equipment from spreading in theaters. It was first introduced in the French city of Lyon in the 18th century, and was adopted throughout Europe during the 19th century, where in some places like Paris or Germany, it was legally mandated.¹⁷ During his speech, Churchill built on the

¹² Henry B. Ryan, “A New Look at Churchill’s ‘Iron Curtain’ Speech,” : 903.

¹³ Henry B. Ryan, “A New Look at Churchill’s ‘Iron Curtain’ Speech,” : 909.

¹⁴ W. R. Underhill, “Semantics of the ‘Iron Curtain’ Metaphor,” : 299.

¹⁵ Cristina Vatulescu, “Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under,” *Perspectives on Europe* 45, no. 1 (2015): 27.

¹⁶ W. R. Underhill, “Semantics of the ‘Iron Curtain’ Metaphor,” : 298.

¹⁷ Ignace Feuerlicht, “A New Look at the Iron Curtain,” *American Speech* 30, no. 3 (1955): 186.

theatrical images the ‘iron curtain’ had in his audience’s mind – very much present since the theatrical curtains were known by many–, wielding theatrical rhetoric to create a postwar *theatrum mundi* (theater of the world): he travelled all the way to Missouri to position himself as a distant observer, described the West as a spectator of Soviet expansion, of which Eastern Europeans were the victims.¹⁸ The Soviets, the “sinister operators” of this iron curtain, were gradually strengthening their grip over Europe, threatening world peace, with the goal of dominating the world.¹⁹ This theatrical framing intensified the narrative of an inevitable tragic ideological showdown, setting the stage for a global struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. As the play allowed for no resolution beyond the survival of one side, moments of respite – like was the *détente* – could never hold. The iron curtain remained the conflict’s defining topos, a heavy, unyielding backdrop to a drama driven by the imperative to contain the communist fire before it consumed the stage.

It is important to note that while this theatricalization of the speech increased the impact of the metaphor, the theater iron curtains were lowered to prevent fires from spreading – thus, it would not have been the Soviets who would have lowered the postwar curtain, but the West, which was hence not a distant observer. In fact, Churchill had played a key role in the partition of Eastern Europe: in 1944, in Moscow, he discussed with Stalin its portioning according to percentages, thus being a mastermind of the show.²⁰ The metaphor was therefore an imperfect stage account of postwar realities that underplayed the role of the West, which enabled Western countries to consider themselves as mere reactive actors to a tense international climate they had not created.

¹⁸ Cristina Vatulescu, “Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under,” : 28.

¹⁹ Cristina Vatulescu, “Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under,” : 28.

²⁰ Cristina Vatulescu, “Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under,”: 28.

Yet, the theatrical topos was used by both sides, when Stalin, in his response interview in Pravda, described Churchill's speech as a tragedy that came into fruition because of Churchill's desolation of being on the losing side of the British elections.²¹ Stalin portrayed Churchill as "a ridiculous Don Quixote", hiding his true intentions of dominating the world with imperialism.²² He did not use the iron curtain expression, instead hinting on its fiery connotations to portray Churchill as an arsonist, instigator of the division: there was a clear will of undermining the metaphor which portrayed the Soviets as villains, and instead, to shift the blame to the West.²³

In the Soviet media, the metaphor held, however, but, having received the labels "capitalist" and "imperialist", it belonged to an alternative *theatrum mundi* where the West was shielding its true imperialist intentions by deflecting responsibility on the USSR.²⁴ Western media took the opposite stance: the speech was so publicized that opinions rallied with Churchill on the matter— 68% of the American population had heard the address, and 58% then believed that the USSR's goal was to become the ruling power.²⁵ Hence, the metaphor crystallized public opinion around impassable differences from both sides and played into the fears of each party, precipitating the world into a diplomatic stalemate.

After the divide was entrenched in public opinion, it had two self-reinforcing effects – it could be used by governments to justify increasingly aggressive policies to the public, and precipitated the closing of diplomatic avenues and the advent of these aggressive policies because of public pressure.

²¹ Cristina Vatulescu, "Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under," : 32.

²² Cristina Vatulescu, "Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under," : 32.

²³ Cristina Vatulescu, "Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under," : 33.

²⁴ Cristina Vatulescu, "Translating Secrecy: The Birth of the Iron Curtain Viewed from the West, the East, and Right Under," : 35.

²⁵ W. R. Underhill, "Semantics of the 'Iron Curtain' Metaphor," : 298.

II. The iron curtain justifying containment and militarization

1. The iron curtain making containment appear inevitable

Kennan's long telegram had laid the intellectual foundation for American understanding of the Soviet Union's foreign policy behavior, which would lead to the framework of containment.²⁶ The role of Churchill's speech – and its iron curtain metaphor – in such an environment, was to make action an urgent imperative for the safeguard of peace and democracy. On April 1st, 1946, the state department submitted a memorandum to an interagency committee which contended for the first time that Soviet Union-America disputes were an endemic feature of the Soviet system.²⁷ This highlighted a progressive shift, where the USSR's "long shadow" became increasingly conflictual and demanded American action. Indeed, as the only belligerent country which had not been destroyed by the Second World War, the USA was in a considerably good position compared to European states, bombed and indebted. In 1947, due to its dire domestic economic situation, Great Britain had to withdraw from important international engagements – notably Greece and Turkey – and US Chief of Staff Dean Acheson said, commenting on the event "There are only two powers left.": here, he meant the USA and the USSR.²⁸ Churchill, sounding the alarm on the Soviet threat, had paved the way for greater American engagement in the face of European weakness. Truman's speech to congress, delivered on March 12, 1947, built on that new mandate when Truman said "The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms."²⁹ He did not specifically use the term "iron curtain" but built his address around the same rhetorical logic which constructed a stark division between free – democratic – and unfree – communist – nations, showing how the essence of the

²⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 434.

²⁷ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 435.

²⁸ Quoted in Paul C. Avey, "Confronting Soviet Power: U.S. Policy during the Early Cold War," *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): 161.

²⁹ Harry Truman, "Truman Doctrine (1947)," March 1947, np.

metaphor was becoming embedded in official discourse. In this speech, Truman explained that “nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life”, framing the opposition as a civilizational struggle with an overarching moral component in that communism “relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.”³⁰

The Truman doctrine’s first interventionist policy was passed in the form of the Greek and Turkish Assistance Act, of which the objective was to provide economic, financial and military aid to Greece and Turkey, which were undergoing communist rebellions, and risked falling into the trap of a “militant minority, exploiting human want and misery.”³¹ If the USA failed to aid Greece and Turkey, this would destabilize the entire Europe and Middle East. With that logic, the USA operationalized containment which Kennan later clarified in an influential article entitled *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* as a policy which aimed to present a counter-force to the Soviet where they attempted to advance their reach, threatening world peace.³² The iron curtain had thus successfully divided the world into two, and the US was actively trying to prevent the communist fire from spreading onto ‘free’ countries.

In this context, the Marshall Plan emerged as another essential mechanism to reinforce the division the iron curtain had set in motion, by addressing the economic root causes that made countries susceptible to communist influence. While framed in humanitarian terms and proposed to every European state, the plan would reinforce the east-west divide because it implied a greater alignment on the US. Indeed, while Marshall’s 1947 speech stated that the plan was not directed against any specific doctrine, it hinted to communism when it outlined the reasons for its implementation: talking about Europe, he said “she must have substantial additional help, or face

³⁰ Harry Truman, “Truman Doctrine (1947),” March 1947, np.

³¹ Harry Truman, “Truman Doctrine (1947),” March 1947, np.

³² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 441-442.

economic, social and political deterioration of a very grave character.”³³ The Soviet Union thus rejected the plan and created the Cominform in response – institutionalizing the iron curtain at the economic level.

2. Full scale development of the iron curtain

As tensions escalated in Europe, the iron curtain materialized as a rigid and militarized divide between East and West. The Czechoslovak coup from 1948, ending the Third Republic, came from a wave of increased communist control over Eastern Europe after the announcement of the Marshall Plan, materializing Soviet expansionist ambitions, as the plan had left Stalin paranoid over his allies’ loyalty.³⁴ This once again exemplifies the reactiveness of US and USSR policies, fueled by fears of the other side: the iron curtain logic thus precipitated the conflict as it forced the West into containment and pushed the USSR towards increased expansionism to counter Western policies. This coup, in turn, awakened fears that the Soviets aimed to support similar takeovers throughout Europe, which prompted the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into existence in 1949. As the US’s first peacetime military alliance, its goal, framed as entirely defensive, was to strengthen the “balance of principle” against military aggression, and war as a whole – this almost messianic framing perceived the USSR as the warlike country against which democracies had to fight.³⁵

With the creation of NATO, the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), composed of the American, British, and French zones of occupation made the iron curtain increasingly physical. The border existed well before the Berlin Wall, erected in 1961 and both Western and Eastern policies showed refusal to make headway on diplomatic cooperation, physically separating Europe.³⁶ In 1952, the USSR announced security policies designed to halt

³³ George Marshall, "Speech," *The George C. Marshall Foundation*, June 1947, np.

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 444.

³⁵ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 445.

³⁶ Sagi Schaefer, “Hidden Behind the Wall: West German State Building and the Emergence of the Iron Curtain,”

emigration and assert its sovereignty, which led to forced relocation of thousands of border residents into the German Democratic Republic (GDR) interior to prevent defections as it was becoming increasingly diplomatically isolated: this represented the first important “physical construction of the border”.³⁷ In fact, clear sign of the increasing tension, the FRG adopted in 1955 the Hallstein doctrine, which was going to guide it until 1970: it was a claim to exclusive representation, which implied severance of diplomatic relations with any country recognizing the GDR.³⁸ Beyond that, administrations at the local levels had strict instructions against cooperation on both sides, which crystallized the divide.³⁹

The iron curtain was thus established as a physical and military border in Europe. Yet, its shadow was expanding to encompass all cold war battlegrounds, refusing any sort of moderation to protect nations from communism. This gave way to other metaphors such as the “domino theory”, drawing on the same principles used by Truman for intervention in Greece and Turkey – that if one country fell to communism, it would greatly impact the others. Popularized by Esienhower to justify involvement in Southeast Asian battlegrounds, it made the iron curtain limitless.⁴⁰ Public opinion, entrenched in the iron curtain and its subsequent metaphors, also played a key role. While support for the Vietnam War rapidly declined, leading to widespread counter-war actions and protests, involvement was partly motivated by the fear of appearing soft on communism. This issue was bipartisan: although democrats faced most criticism – which was

Central European History 44, no. 3 (2011): 508.

³⁷ Sagi Schaefer, “Hidden Behind the Wall: West German State Building and the Emergence of the Iron Curtain,” *Central European History* 44, no. 3 (2011): 509.

³⁸ Sagi Schaefer, “Hidden Behind the Wall: West German State Building and the Emergence of the Iron Curtain,” *Central European History* 44, no. 3 (2011): 514.

³⁹ Sagi Schaefer, “Hidden Behind the Wall: West German State Building and the Emergence of the Iron Curtain,” *Central European History* 44, no. 3 (2011): 517.

⁴⁰ Terence P. Moran and Eugene Secunda, “The Domino Theory War—Vietnam,” in *Selling War to America: From the Spanish American War to the Global War on Terror*, 1st ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007): “A cornerstone of the Eisenhower administration’s foreign policy was the formulation of the “Domino Theory,” a political proposition suggesting that if one nation in a region fell to the Communists, all the others in the surrounding area would follow. “You have a row of dominoes set up, and you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it goes over very quickly, so you have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences,” President Eisenhower said.”, 93.

one of JFK's motivation for following through on the Bay of Pigs invasion plans – even Eisenhower's Republican government, which had criticized Truman's lack of appreciation of the communist threat in Korea and China, was criticized by ultra-anticommunists.⁴¹

The challenge that posed “international communism” led the US to support dictatorial regimes rather than letting communist forces takeover, based on the paternalistic premise that some peoples were not yet trained to govern themselves democratically and needed supervision not to fall into communism.⁴² Covert operations in countries where communist governments had been elected, such as Jacobo Arbenz's Guatemala, put in place US sponsored authoritarian governments. Because of the binary framing of the metaphor, US governments had to do whatever they could to prevent communism, such as adopting the ‘lesser of the two evils’ doctrine.⁴³ Nevertheless, the iron curtain rhetoric did not just push policy makers into conflicts based on ideology: it enabled a simplified policy agenda, providing leaders an all encompassing mandate to fight communism when this often covered economic interests.⁴⁴ In Guatemala, Carlos Castillo Armas was put in place by CIA-operation PBSuccess in 1954 partly because the agrarian reform Arbenz aimed to lead conflicted with the interests of the Boston operated United Fruit Company in which Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and CIA Deputy Chief Allen Dulles had interests – being on its board of directors. This complex interplay of state and private interest meant that

⁴¹ David F. Schmitz, "Thank God They're On Our Side: Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dictators," in *Thank God They're On Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-65* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 178; Terence P. Moran and Eugene Secunda, "The Domino Theory War—Vietnam," 93.

⁴² David F. Schmitz, "Thank God They're On Our Side: Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dictators", 180-182.

⁴³ David F. Schmitz, "Thank God They're On Our Side: Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dictators": "It was, therefore, considered a gamble to support such governments when the Soviet Union appeared to be active in all areas and communists were apparently poised to take advantage of instability or nationalist reform movements. Dictators who protected Western interests, provided stability, and suppressed communism were a much better bet.", 181.

⁴⁴ David F. Schmitz, "Thank God They're On Our Side: Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dictators", "(...) the United States was supporting a “conditional” nationalism in the Third World, which in the long term bred antiAmerican feelings that would eventually erupt. As long as these nations aligned with the West and did not threaten private business, the United States would support them against European colonialism. But when efforts at reform challenged private property or threatened too much independence in international relations, such governments had to be opposed. Guatemala provided a perfect case in point”, 193.

there was an important push towards extreme action – orchestrating a coup.⁴⁵ The iron curtain thus created a stage where actors performed to defeat their enemies as the only dénouement to the play, but without any asides—no moment of transparency that might reveal their true intentions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the iron curtain metaphor was not a mere rhetorical flourish: it was a performative political construction that both described and shaped Cold War realities. Chosen because it resonated with a broader audience and enabled a simplified policy agenda to fight the “evil” of the USSR, the iron curtain metaphor entered the minds of the population entrenching the divide and pushing each side towards an increasingly aggressive stance built on perceived moral righteousness. From the Truman Doctrine to NATO’s formation and interventionist policies worldwide, Cold War strategy was dictated by the assumption that the world was divided by an impenetrable boundary that had to be defended at all costs. The iron curtain created a play in which the total defeat of the enemy was the only possible dénouement – while the USSR focused on expansion to reach this goal, the US adopted containment to prevent the communist fire from spreading. The world became divided in two blocs, two ideologies which prevented any nuance, and rendered policy makers reactive to each other’s every move, as each action was interpreted as the fulfillment of expansionist or imperialist agendas.

⁴⁵ Aaron Coy Moulton, “Anti-Communist Bananas: The United Fruit Company versus the Guatemalan Revolution,” 474. The article further dives into the importance of lobbying led by the United Fruit Company to justify and push for involvement in Guatemala. Techniques such as short films like *Why the Kremlin Hates Bananas* were used to maintain favorable public opinion – they “denounced international communism for seeking to undermine how U.S. multinationals improved Latin American economies, educational systems, and health care, repeating the self righteous laurels the company and its lobbyists always espoused. “(492) This highlights the economic interests at play in the cold war that used the iron curtain divide to further the corporate agenda.

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