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NATO before the Korean War: April 1949–June 1950

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NATO before the Korean War

April 1949–June 1950

Lawrence S. Kaplan

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Conventional wisdom has the Korean War putting the “O” in NATO. Prior to that time, from the signing of the treaty on April 4, 1949 to the North Korean invasion on June 25, 1950, the treaty allies were just going through the motions of establishing an organization. The alliance spawned a host of committees in this period that pretended to develop a credible defense posture for the United States and its European partners, partly to appease congressional critics in Washington, partly to prop up the morale of vulnerable European members, and partly to envelop West Germany in the transatlantic fold. The Soviet menace was the glue that held the alliance together.

In reality, little was accomplished in that first year beyond promises that were not being fulfilled. Like the Western Union Defense Organization (WUDO), NATO could be compared to a Potemkin village, all show and no substance. Only the sudden onset of the Korean War could shock the alliance into fashioning an effective military organization. Such is the image that NATO projected before the Korean War. It still informs most students of NATO’s history.

This book aspires to provide a detailed examination of the state of NATO in its first fourteen months to judge if the image is accurate. It is a period I have touched on in other studies, particularly in *A Community of Interests: NATO and the Military History Program, 1948–1951* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, 1980) and in *The United States and NATO: The Formative Years* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984). Essentially the book is a sequel to *NATO 1948: The Birth of the Transatlantic Alliance* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), in which I examined the fifteen months in which the alliance germinated.

While there are a few documents in the NATO archives and some useful material in the archives of the Western European Union, both in Brussels, the bulk of the unpublished primary sources for this volume are in the National Archives II in College Park, Maryland. These are clustered in Record Group 59, contain-
ing records of the U.S. State Department and, to a lesser extent, Record Groups 330 and 218, the Defense Department and Joint Chiefs of Staff, respectively. The British National Archives in Kew provided supplemental documents. The most valuable contributions from the European allies derived from memoirs of leading statesmen and diplomats. Major British and French newspapers complemented the *New York Times* for insights as well as sources. My bibliography covers only those primary and secondary materials used in the preparation of this book.

This was a time of American domination of the alliance, evidenced by the events of the fourteen months of NATO’s history before the Korean War. Limits of American authority were also evident in this period. The U.S. archives not only provided the most detailed information about NATO’s development but frequently opened a window permitting access to the views of most of the allies in this period.

As usual, this author needed help from scholars and librarians. It was available in abundance. Without exception the requests I made of archivists at home and abroad were honored quickly and positively. My first acknowledgment is to the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for the travel grant that permitted me to spend a week at the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, in May 2010. Archivist Randy Sowell anticipated many of my queries, while Lisa Sullivan did much more than discharge her responsibilities as financial officer. An old friend from my Ohio days, Mike Devine, director of the library, made my stay particularly pleasant.

Through correspondence with Malgosia Myc, assistant reference librarian at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan, I was able to locate important correspondence of Senator Vandenberg in 1949. Similarly, Christine A. Lutz, assistant university archivist at the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library of Princeton University, and Vera Ekechukwu, Fulbright Papers research assistant at the University of Arkansas Library, provided useful documents from the Kennan/Dulles and Fulbright collections, respectively. I am grateful for their help. In conversations with Ineke Deserno, NATO archivist, and her colleague, Anna-Marie Smith, I discovered that there were materials in Brussels before the Korean War. Those documents were made available to me, and I am grateful for their cooperation. As with *NATO 1948*, I was able to take advantage of the archives at the Western European Union in Brussels. Visits to Britain’s National Archives in Kew gave me an opportunity to consult its NATO materials from this period.

I owe a continuing debt of gratitude for the support the Georgetown University librarians have given me in this project, most notably Maura Seale. The government documents librarians Kristina Bobe and her successor, Jason D. Phillips, have been particularly helpful, as have Meaghan Corbett and her successor, Shane Hickey, of the Interlibrary Loan office. I also thank the staff of the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, for facilitating my explorations of the rich resources of NARA II.

Once again, I have benefited from the advice of knowledgeable friends, particularly Stanley Kober, Diego Ruiz Palmer, Steven L. Rearden, and Stanley R. Sloan.
I am pleased to express my appreciation for the support of Will Underwood and Joyce Harrison, director and acquiring editor, respectively, of the Kent State University Press, and to Mary Ann Heiss, editor of *New Studies in U.S. Foreign Relations*, for her perceptive commentary on the manuscript. It has been twenty years since I last had an opportunity to publish with the KSU Press, and I am happy to return with this contribution. My wife Janice was always helpful with her advice on choice of words. This is also an opportunity for me to recognize the important effort that Morris Honick has made on behalf of this book as collaborator in this project from his presence in Brussels. I am pleased to dedicate this volume to him.
Origins of the Alliance

The Nervous Celebration

President Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and the foreign ministers of the eleven nations that signed the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4, 1949 were well aware of the significance of the occasion. For the United States it marked the termination of a tradition of non-entanglement with the political and military affairs of the Old World, notably the powers of Western Europe that had colonized North America. The one and only entangling alliance that the United States had made had been with France in 1778, which ended in 1800 in mutual dissatisfaction. For the European allies the treaty was a major step toward ensuring an American guarantee of their security in the face of internal and external Communist challenges. The economic revival of Europe after the devastation of World War II required the psychological comfort that the new transatlantic bond would create, without which the Marshall Plan aid would fail in its effort to rebuild a unified Europe freed from the destructive rivalries of the past.

The U.S. organizers, conscious of the historic moment, made every effort to mark the event as special without excessive pomp. The customary diplomatic dress was replaced by ordinary street clothes, although almost half of the signatories showed up in striped pants in spite of the State Department’s advice. The speeches were brief, with each foreign minister emulating Secretary Acheson’s short address. And President Truman’s equally brief support of the treaty won a standing ovation from the 1,080 invited guests seated on the auditorium floor and 245 more in the balcony.\footnote{1}

Granted that the magnificence of the stately Interdepartmental Auditorium in Washington militated against excessive modesty, as did the gold chairs where the foreign ministers and ambassadors of the eleven members sat in alphabetical order, nevertheless the use of plain black dip pens to sign the treaty, as each minister solemnly signed the document, underscored the atmosphere of informality the chief of protocol tried to instill in the hall. Worrying that fountain pens might run
dry, as had happened in the past, a State Department official stood by and wiped the pens clean after each signing, and then returned the pens as souvenirs.2

The president did his best to foster this spirit by his homely identification of the treaty as “a neighborly act. We are like a group of householders, living in the same locality, who decide to express their community of interests by entering into a formal association for their mutual self-protection.” But the treaty was intended to be more than “a simple document” that would have prevented two world wars if it had existed in 1914 and 1939.3 The president was echoing the text of the treaty, with its wording that, as Theodore A. Achilles, chief of the State Department’s Division of Western European Affairs, put it, would be understood by an Omaha milkman.4 Unlike the flowery pretentious terms used in the Brussels Pact, the “High Contracting” was removed from the text; the plain language of “the Parties” would be more appealing to the common man. Conceivably, according to the Jesuit magazine, America, the extravagant promises of the failed Locarno Pact of the 1920s was an inhibiting factor.5 Yet members of all the delegations were aware that potentially they were opening a new chapter in transatlantic history and perhaps in European history as well.

The schizophrenic element in the ceremony has often been noted in the Marine Corps band playing two irreverent songs from George Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess—“I’ve Got Plenty of Nothin’” and “It Ain’t Necessarily So”—at the start of the ceremonies.6 Much more embarrassing, however, was the failure of the State Department to respect the delicate sensitivities of U.S. senators at this critical moment. The problem was the list of invitations. The State Department initially failed to invite any of the rank and file in the Senate. Its assumption had been that the presence of the vice president, the speaker of the House of Representatives, and the entire membership of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee would suffice. That both Democrats and Republicans were represented should have been perceived as a triumph of bipartisanship. If this was the intention, it did not work. Senators of both parties felt insulted by their exclusion. Tom Connally of Texas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was embarrassed. He criticized the State Department for “poor taste and bad finesse.” Connally said he understood that any senator “can get in if he cares to go. I had nothing to do with the arrangements, and neither did our committee.” The Democratic leader in the Senate, Scott W. Lucas of Illinois, was more specific in his complaints: “The State Department has been very lax. Certainly this has been something of a blunder. After all, they have got to depend on the United States Senate for ratification of the pact. They might better have looked out after the Senate than someone else.”7

The small squall over the invitation began at 11 A.M. when the Senate convened on the morning of April 4, but had blown over by 2 P.M. when Senator Lucas announced on the floor that “a slight misunderstanding” had been corrected. All
senators were welcome. Most, but not all, accepted the belated and somewhat begrudging invitation. While disclaiming any involvement with the original plan, Senator Connally made a point of noting that the seating capacity of the auditorium was limited. Still, the feelings the “misunderstanding” aroused were to be reflected in what was to be an extended debate before the treaty would be ratified.8

Background of the “Atlantic” Treaty

That the ratification of the treaty in the U.S. Senate would be a long and complicated process should not have come as a surprise to any of the participants. The American hosts had a right to be nervous about the prospects of the treaty, given the complicated negotiations that preceded the signing of the document. Nor had they forgotten that the weight of the tradition of non-entanglement may not have been fully lifted. While the new European partners had their own reservations about the alliance, they were more concerned with how the senior partner would manage the process than they were about the reactions of their legislatures. Admittedly, Communist-led protests would mark debates in Italy and France, but the protesters were marginalized in those countries. The leaders of the many factions were as anxious to secure the treaty as were the more unified governments of Northern Europe.

The initiative for the alliance, after all, was European, not American. The desperate economic plight of Western Europe in the wake of World War II seemingly led such vulnerable countries as France and Italy into the arms of Communist parties supported by the Soviet Union. Only the United States had the resources to cope with this challenge, and in 1945 it was not clear that Americans, victorious over the Axis powers but tired of international obligations, would rise to the Communist challenge, or would revert to its familiar isolationist positions of the past.

The untried Truman administration did not offer a clear answer in 1945 and 1946. It veered between efforts at accommodation with Stalin’s USSR and refusal to accept the Communist actions bringing Central and Eastern Europe into the Soviet orbit. None of the meetings of the foreign ministers of the victors of World War II yielded any concessions from the Soviet leadership. On the contrary, sensing weakness in Washington and impotence in London and Paris, the Soviets not only consolidated their control of Poland and Hungary, but increased their demands for more authority over divided Berlin.

Not until George Kennan, a Soviet specialist and minister-counselor at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, sent his famous long telegram in 1946, urging containment of Soviet expansion, was the Truman administration able to forge a consistent policy toward the Soviet Union. It assumed the impossibility of dealing with the Soviets in customary diplomatic terms, and recommended a firm support of forces in Europe and elsewhere that would counter the attractions of Communism. Kennan’s
assumption included an expectation that patient application of political and economic pressure would expose its flaws and ultimately lead to its demise. Conventional diplomacy was irrelevant to the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Guided by Kennan’s advice, the Truman administration issued in the following year the Truman Doctrine, which promised U.S. military support of nations under Communist threat, and the Marshall Plan, which promised economic help to Western European economies in their resistance to Communist blandishments. Greece and Turkey were the initial beneficiaries of the Truman Doctrine. Western Europe would be restored to economic health through the implementation of the Marshall Plan.9

While Europeans applauded the renewed engagement of the United States with the outside world, and particularly with the plight of their economies, their leaders were convinced that the new face of American foreign policy was insufficient either to protect them from the USSR’s external pressures or from internal subversion by domestic Communists. Economic aid, massive though it would be, was not sufficient to revive the economies of the West if Europeans lacked a sense of security in the face of the Soviet adversary in the East, and of parties devoted to the Soviet Union in their midst. Nor would military aid instill the confidence Europe needed to recover and revive. Much more was needed in 1947. It would require a guarantee of American commitment to the defense of Europe, a commitment that was not present in the two world wars of the twentieth century. The isolationist tradition that dominated America’s history even into the mid-twentieth century would have to be terminated before Europe could be assured that America would be at its side. Had the United States been there in 1914 instead of 1917, or in 1939 instead of 1941, both world wars might have been avoided. Such was the thinking that circulated among Western European leaders.

In many respects the Marshall Plan pointed the way. In exchange for the economic reconstruction of shattered Europe, the United States expected Europeans to abandon the divisive policies that fostered wars in the past, and replace them with a path toward the economic and potentially political integration of Western Europe. The spirit informing the Marshall Plan spoke to the missionary impulse in American history that had inspired the liberation of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898. It also fed into a national sense of self-interest in which a prosperous West would not only be a bulwark against Communist expansion but also bestow advantages on the United States as a trading partner. None of these considerations was lost on European leaders, along with the danger of becoming victims of an American imperial presence in Europe. But that future was far less intimidating than the immediate threat of a Communist Europe that U.S. power could counteract. The Europeans responded with the establishment of the Committee (later the Organisation) of European Economic Co-operation in July 1947 to implement
the aims of the Marshall Plan. The Council of Europe, which emerged two years later, was a product not only of American encouragement for political as well as economic integration of Europe but also of movements in Western Europe nourished during the war to create a new order in the West.10

But in 1947 the prospect of a united Europe, backed economically by a supportive United States, was only a vision. The reality was that the Atlantic Ocean separated America from Europe while the Soviet Union was a close neighbor. Together, British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin and his French counterpart, Georges Bidault, agreed that the United States must be persuaded to participate in a military alliance with Britain and France as the guarantor of Europe's survival. Once America participated in a European defense arrangement, the confidence Western Europe needed to promote integration and rebuild their economic and social systems would be in place.

Making an entangling alliance with the United States would require Americans to abandon a tradition of non-entanglement with Europe that went back to the founding of the republic. The only alliance the United States made with a European power was in 1778 with France in order to secure independence from Britain. The alliance fitted a typical eighteenth-century model, a temporary arrangement wherein a weaker party enlists a stronger partner to win a specific objective without intending France to replace Britain as controller of its destiny. For its part France sought to use the colonial rebellion to weaken Britain, but only to the extent of inducing it to join an Anglo-French common front against Eastern European powers. The new nation was an instrument for France to achieve that goal. Both parties achieved their objectives. This classical European alliance of convenience became irrelevant immediately after the war and dissolved in mutual discontent in 1800. The aggressive behavior of France appeared to threaten the stability of the new nation. When the Convention of Mortefontaine was signed with Bonaparte's consulate, the memory of the alliance deepened American distrust of the Old World that would require 150 years to erase.11

The collapse of the foreign ministers' meeting in December 1947 over the status of occupied Germany provided the incentive to set in motion the Anglo-French grand design. This was the beginning of a long and arduous process of convincing the United States to accept a military alliance with Europe that was to consume the entire year of 1948 and the first few months of 1949. To assure the United States that Europe had turned a new leaf, Britain and France formed the Brussels Pact with the Low Countries in March 1948, creating a Western Union in keeping with the premise of the Marshall Plan—to collaborate in the economic rebuilding of Europe. This was an earnest of their good intentions. While the language of the pact centered on economic issues, an important article promised that "if any of the High Contracting parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the other High Contracting Parties, will, in accordance with the provisions of
Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, afford the party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power.”

Their hope was that the United States would become one of the “High Contracting Parties,” and they had some grounds for optimism in the winter and spring of 1948. Soviet behavior had become more aggressive, as Czechoslovakia fell under complete Communist domination and Norway came under pressure to sign a non-aggression pact with the USSR, an invitation reminiscent of Hitler’s overtures on the eve of World War II. Over Germany, the relations between the former allies had become so toxic that by summer the Soviets had instituted a blockade denying the West ground access to Berlin. Moreover, the British and French had won over influential U.S. diplomatic officials to the need for an alliance with Western Europe, if not membership in the Brussels Pact. It is noteworthy that immediately after the Brussels Pact was signed, the United States, Britain, and Canada sent delegates to a secret meeting in the Pentagon who recommended the creation of an Atlantic security pact to cope with potential Soviet aggression against Western Europe.12

But the operative word in the Pentagon negotiations was “secret.” The Truman administration was not prepared to support such a radical departure from the American tradition of political and military non-entanglement with Western Europe. It had to deal with the remnant of the isolationists whose size and influence had shrunk in World War II but who included such powerful members as Sen. Robert Taft (R-OH). Additionally, the U.S. military, disturbed as they were over the administration’s low ceiling for the defense budget, worried that a military alliance would open the floodgates to Europe’s demand for arms and equipment. The military was skeptical that Europe, even with U.S. aid, could stop a Soviet invasion. But the most daunting challenge to the State Department was the negative reaction of former isolationists, now fervent internationalist supporters of the United Nations. Would a European–American alliance undercut the role of the UN as the world’s peacekeeper? If so, the European allies would give a low priority to the putative incompatibility between the North Atlantic Treaty and the United Nations Charter, a conflict that disturbed their American colleagues.

Terms of the Treaty

The Truman administration inched toward accommodation with the Europe’s demands, first by promising military aid to the new Western Union but without participating in the organization, and then agreeing to a conference in Washington in the summer of 1948 that would work out, again in secret, the terms of U.S. engagement. The key requirement, from the U.S. perspective, was to win the backing of Sen. Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI), the powerful chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. His overriding concern before he would support an alliance was to
ensure that a treaty would accord with the terms of the UN Charter, and that the military component, particularly military assistance, would be minimized.

The Europeans were willing enough to accommodate the Americans by paying obeisance to the United Nations in linking the Atlantic Pact to the charter. They were less comfortable with the Truman administration’s insistence on expanding the membership of the alliance by encompassing the Scandinavian countries and Portugal, and they were most uncomfortable with the terms the United States required for responding to an attack on members of the alliance. The Western Europeans wanted to include the clear language of the Brussels Pact’s Article IV, making an attack against one member the equivalent of an attack against all. This guarantee was at the heart of the alliance from the European perspective. But the most they could extract from the United States was Article 5, a seemingly evasive promise that “if such an armed attack occurs, each of them . . . will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” In deference to the Senate’s fears about infringement of its power to commit the United States to war, the wording of the article was designed to ensure that its constitutional prerogatives would be safeguarded. The Europeans did manage to insert “the use of armed force” into the text. They were comforted by the understanding that should a crisis arise, the United States would have no choice but to accept the obligations the treaty imposed on it. Bevin felt that the language of Article 5 would not matter in the event of war, despite the exclusive constitutional right of the Congress to declare war. The treaty would have set up the machinery of entanglement.13

Concern over Article 5 pushed into the background the Western Union’s reluctance to extend membership to peripheral nations with the probable negative impact on its own central role in the alliance. Although the military aid anticipated from the alliance would have to be shared by too many other parties to the treaty, this shortcoming could be corrected in negotiations with the United States after the treaty was signed. Moreover, the Western Union leaders understood that bringing Denmark or Portugal into the alliance provided stepping-stones needed for air or sea military assistance to Europe. Lost on many of the allies, however, was the significance that the inclusion of Canada and Iceland in the alliance had for the American psyche. Their presence emphasized the “Atlantic” as opposed to the “European” character of NATO, which was vital for the treaty’s acceptance in the United States.14

What particularly captivated the European allies was an illusion that should American membership in the alliance fail to deter Soviet aggression, the United States was capable of dispatching B-29s, equipped with atom bombs from their base in Nebraska, to cope with any emergency. They were unaware just how few bombs the U.S. Strategic Air Command possessed and how limited its capabilities
were without access to bases that future allies could supply.\textsuperscript{15} The importance of Iceland, Norway, Denmark, and Portugal in the alliance for the facilities their territories would afford aircraft-carrying military assistance took time before it registered with the Western Union.

From a European perspective, the next step after the signing of the treaty was quick ratification of the treaty in order to secure substantial U.S. military aid. The path to ratification, like the path to the signing ceremony, would be longer than the allies assumed, and for much the same reason that the negotiations in 1948 were so protracted. American hesitation over abandoning its 150-year-old tradition of non-entanglement with European political and military affairs had to be overcome.\textsuperscript{16}