

---

Benn Steil. *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.

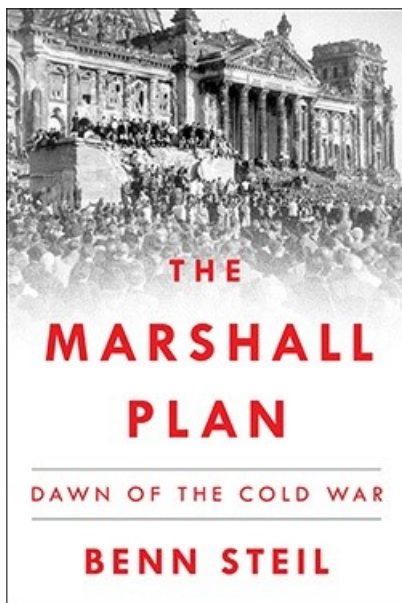
Book Review

---

Cynthia Nolan, PhD

---

States do not make foreign policy; people do. The elected and non-elected officials of the bureaucracy make the decisions that determine American foreign policy. In *The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War*, Benn Steil reviews new material from American, Russian, German, and Czech sources and reveals a chronology of the speeches, meetings, and conversations that made up the most famous nation-building event of all. Starting with 1944 and ending in 1949, the reader will learn the stories of George C. Marshall, Dean Acheson, George F. Kennan, Lucius D. Clay, Henry Stimson, and Arthur Vandenberg, among others. Steil notes that American bureaucratic wrangling and opposition in Europe almost prevented the Marshall Plan from happening. However, without the Plan, the Cold War might not have started or ended the way it did.



He organizes the book with a semi-chronological structure but readers should keep the cast of characters bookmarked, as they will want to refer to them. Steil introduces some people without providing a biography until many pages later. This makes the book somewhat structurally repetitive and complex. Indeed, the book takes some commitment; it is not a casual read.

All told, eighteen countries spent thirteen billion dollars to build up the European ideological defense through economic recovery and cooperation. Recall that the Plan was available to all countries except for the Soviet Union. Thus, the Marshall Plan set up the European cooperation that encouraged the North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Without those very practical, cooperative endeavors, trade wars, currency devaluations, personal resentments, and perhaps even the demand for reparations from Germany could have pulled apart the growing coalition against Communism.

Again, some events take on a mythological quality that obscures their origins. One might be tempted to think of the Marshall Plan as a grand humanitarian gesture after World War II, but it has more realistic origins than that. As Steil points out, the hard-boiled realists used the Marshall Plan to contain the expansionism of Josef Stalin. Without it, the communist ideology in France, Italy, and elsewhere could have grown on the economic frustrations of the citizens and of the farmers and industrialists, in particular.

So, why did the Marshall Plan become a myth that is invoked to apply to any nation-building situation? Its success made tolerable—at least to outside observers benefiting from the distance of time—the geopolitical tradeoff between freedom in the West and Soviet power in the East. That tradeoff made the Plan an essential basis for the Cold War. The Plan was a success for at least six reasons.

First, it was a grand strategy from the White House—known as the Truman Doctrine. Steil gives us the background for the famous March 12, 1947 speech before Congress and includes it in an appendix. The request for economic assistance for Turkey and Greece became the justification for a broader policy even if Congress and the wider audience did not know it was coming. The speech asserted that the economic recovery of Europe was the key to a peaceful future. Without public speeches advocating the Plan, the public might not have supported the next step: the Cold War.

Second, a prescient and relatable article published in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* by George Kennan, under the alias “Mr. X” justified the policy of containment and a certain about-face when it came to cooperation with the Soviets. The article provided a kind of end-run around the legacy of Yalta when FDR promised to cooperate with Stalin. Cooperation with the Soviets on Eastern Europe was not going to be possible.

Third, the framers of the Marshall Plan had the cooperation—albeit reluctant—from Europe. Italian and French governments promised to bolster non-communist candidates in return for aid. When the Soviets and those states in their sphere rejected Marshall Plan aid, it justified the rejection of any and all communists in Western Europe as well, thus providing more fodder for the ideological war between the two Great Powers.

Fourth, it relied upon the capitalistic underpinnings of all aid. Remember, the Plan was indeed to rebuild Europe after nearly unfathomable devastation.

Populations were starving, but economic aid needed to go beyond immediate recovery. It needed to develop and modernize Europe to create trade. By investing in West Germany's industrial capacity, the Plan ignored crippling calls by the Soviets for reparations on Germany and focused on the capital—physical and mental—needed for the future.

Fifth, it provided physical security that protected freedom and growing democracy through NATO and the American nuclear umbrella of Europe. NATO is a collective security arrangement that strengthened the collective economic arrangements within Europe. Removing physical vulnerability encouraged Western cooperation, which helped to set up the Cold War too.

Finally, the Marshall Plan bolstered cooperation within Europe. Marshall and others firmly believed that the union of the Western European states was necessary to counteract the Soviet influence. Economic recovery could not move forward without German industry or German cooperation with its neighbors. The economy was interlinked—for both the purposes of immediate recovery and defense against the Soviets.

Those variables may not apply universally; like a recipe handed down by a grandmother, some ingredients are not always available. Without the context of the wider ideological war, the Plan does not get the material or public support it needs. Indeed, witness the public debates over more recent recovery plans. Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria come to mind as places that may not have the fertile ground that the Marshall Plan sowed.

Steil's book has an astounding sum of facts, numbers, and inside conversations that bring the reader behind the scenes of the decision-making. It is a unique set of data and an interesting test case for principles like misperceptions, bureaucratic politics, rational actor model, personalities, changing grand theories, reluctance to accept new information, and even devil's advocate in groupthink. However, his book suffers from a few drawbacks. Although the list of characters is helpful, keep an atlas handy; the book would benefit from more maps.

Steil contends that the recipe for a successful foreign policy strategy like the Marshall Plan is based on a healthy dose of realism in addition to the idealistic dream and cooperative goals. Remember, the Plan was not a miracle. It bolstered the recovery that was already there, but it was definitely important. Without the practical goals of the Marshall Plan, the visionary cooperation, recovery, and leadership that the post-World War II world needed may not have existed. Steil reminds us that lofty American foreign policy has to be both visionary AND practical.