PART ONE

POSTWAR RECONSTRUCTION 1945–1949

INTRODUCTION

World War II changed world politics in ways that few people fully understood in 1945. By the end of that war, for the first time since the sixteenth century, European states were no longer the arbiters of the world's balance of power. Indeed, the destruction of German military and economic might created a vacuum of power in the center of Europe. Although Germany was occupied and governed by a coalition of powers that included Great Britain and France, its ultimate fate would be in the hands of the two extra-European powers that emerged from the war wielding unprecedented military force—the United States and the Soviet Union.

Over the course of the half-decade between 1945 and 1949, these two superpowers became locked in a struggle for world supremacy that dominated the next forty years. Europe was a theater of conflict and tension in that struggle—the West European states on one side as participants by assent in an alliance led by the United States and the East European states on the other, coerced into satellite status in a system dominated by the Soviet Union.

Between 1945 and 1948 the Grand Alliance that linked the United States and the Soviet Union during World War II came apart. In a speech in Fulton, Missouri, on 5 March 1946, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill used the metaphor of an iron curtain descending across Europe from the Baltic to the Adriatic, behind which reigned oppression and disregard for individual freedom. In a book published late in 1947, the American journalist Walter Lippmann applied an equally memorable label—Cold War—to the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The United States assumed its new role as a world leader in this struggle only gradually. At the end of the war the country expected to demobilize its military and return to a normal, peacetime existence. By degrees, however, it took the initiative in overcoming the impasse concerning German economic recovery. In the eastern Mediterranean, where Western policymakers saw Communist insurrection threatening the government of Greece and Soviet pressure threatening the government of Turkey, the United States assumed responsibilities historically exercised by Britain. In March 1947 President Harry S. Truman asked Congress for $400 million in military and economic aid to help Greece and Turkey resist internal and external threats and remain "free peoples." In his address to Congress presenting the policy that became known as the Truman Doctrine, the president expressed a willingness to extend similar assistance to any nation that faced a comparable threat.

The Marshall Plan of 1947 represented another step on the United States' path to leadership. Outlined by Secretary of State George C. Marshall in June 1947, the plan offered American economic aid to European countries willing to cooperate in the economic reconstruction of Europe as a whole. The proposal represented an invitation to create a new alignment based on shared economic principles.

In Eastern Europe, Communist parties began as minority partners in putatively pluralistic coalitions but progressively took dictatorial control of governments—Poland in January 1947, Hungary in June, and Czechoslovakia in February and March 1948. Soviet intentions seemed increasingly more threatening. On 17 March 1948, France, Britain, and the three small countries of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg signed the Brussels Pact, an agreement for their mutual defense. On the same day across the Atlantic in Washington, District of Columbia, President Truman sent a special message to Congress asking for authorization to reinstitute peacetime conscription for military service. The two events, taken together, marked the starting point for a regional security system linking Western Europe and North America. The Vandenberg Resolution, adopted in the U.S. Senate on 11 June 1948, affirmed American participation with West European states in a common military defense. It reinforced Truman's decision earlier in the spring to commit the American public to bear the burden of a standing army in peacetime. These individual steps confirmed a new direction in American foreign policy—resistance to and containment of the extension of Soviet power in Europe and around the globe.

The new policy received an immediate test in defeated Germany's historic capital city, Berlin. When the four powers divided Germany, the city of Berlin lay completely within the Soviet zone of occupation. Each of the four powers received a sector of occupation within the city and established a military presence. To gain access to the city from the rest of Germany, the Western allies had to cross territory controlled by the Soviets. The Soviets occasionally obstructed traffic over highways and rail routes through their zone into Berlin, but they agreed with the Western Powers for reasons of safety to establish unobstructed air passage through three designated air corridors. As tensions increased among the occupying powers over how to deal with defeated Germany—and with one another—the Soviet ability to isolate Berlin from overland communications became crucial. In 1948 the Soviet Union put Western resolve to the test when it blockaded land access to Berlin from the three Western sectors of Germany. Only through the air could the West gain access to Berlin without directly confronting the Red Army.

The clashes between the Western allies and the Soviet Union emerged slowly, and it was not the framework that conditioned military planning for the occupation of Germany in 1945 and for the reconstruction of Europe. The devastation of war and the collapse of society in Europe, rather than ideological conflict, drove the U.S. military to develop pragmatic solutions to immediate problems.

The war itself had challenged the technical ingenuity of the American military, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had been an integral element in meeting the wartime challenges. The Army engineers had provided technical expertise to sustain the campaign to defeat Germany. The Office of the Chief of Engineers (OCE) in Washington provided knowledge, equipment, and supplies to the combat engineer units. Engineer troop units participated in the Allied invasions of North Africa, Italy, and northern France at the Normandy beaches, and in the occupation of a defeated Germany. Technical experts attached to OCE devised new solutions, plans, techniques, and equipment for the massive problems of logistics and combat in the war. When the war ended, the U.S. Army had 323,677 engineer troops on active military duty in the European Theater, almost 11 percent of total troop strength in Europe.[1]

In 1945 the retiring chief of engineers, Lt. Gen. Eugene Reybold, observed that "American engineering capacity was the one factor of American strength which our enemies most consistently underestimated. Without American construction talent we could not have won the war." Recognizing that the challenges of peacetime reconstruction would be equally great, General Reybold added, "it is doubtful that without all of America's construction talent we can win the peace."[2]

Reybold's remarks were both a fitting tribute to the past and a prophetic comment on the future. In May and June 1945 the engineers had to address the immediate needs of the U.S. Army as it changed its mission from combat to peacetime occupation. In addition, they had to help reconstruct civil society, especially in defeated Germany, so that the army could function as an occupying force. The Army engineers undertook these tasks in an environment as challenging as the war. Indeed, the theater chief engineer in Europe at the end of the war, Maj. Gen. Cecil R. Moore, reflected two decades later that his engineers had faced circumstances after May 1945 that were "far more trying than those arising during combat."[3]