

Note: this is a working draft of the introduction of my current book project, tentatively entitled An Organized Controversy, which tells a history of NATO from its founding to the present. A brief introduction, it should give you a sense of the book's overall approach and a few general arguments that shape the project as a whole.

Thanks in advance for taking the time to read it. I appreciate it. — SC

Introduction:

This Free-Ranging Alliance

Dignitaries filed into the Departmental Auditorium, an ornate, classical hall in Washington's Federal Triangle, on the afternoon of April 4, 1949. As they arrived, the United States Marine Band launched into a selection from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, playing popular hits like "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" and "It Ain't Necessarily So" that raised more than a few eyebrows in the assembling crowd. Some 1,500 diplomats, politicians, and other notables packed the auditorium that afternoon along with plenty of cameramen for the biggest diplomatic event the American capital had seen in decades: the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty.¹

Flanked by ceremonial flags, pink hydrangeas, and a mass of decorative ferns, Secretary of State Dean Acheson opened the ceremony with brief remarks on the purpose of the pact. The foreign ministers of eleven other nations followed suit, some in English, others in French. The two official languages caused some confusion after Jose Caeiro de Matta approached the podium. Listeners strained to hear the Portuguese foreign minister, and the interpreter repeated his speech, convinced — incorrectly, as it turned out — that the minister had delivered his remarks in French. One reporter put a kinder gloss on the situation, chalking it up to the bright

¹ Edward T. Folliard, "Warning to All Aggressors Also Emphasized at Ceremony Here," *Washington Post*, April 5, 1949; "Atlantic Pact Signed By 12 Nations," *The Times*, April 5, 1949; W.H. Lawrence, "President Hopeful," *New York Times*, April 5, 1949; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 284.

Klieg lights of the auditorium. The glare had forced him to turn away from the microphone to read his prepared remarks. “Consequently,” as the *Washington Post* put it, “his praise of the treaty could hardly be heard.”²

The first round of speeches complete, the band resumed — this time, with a selection of chamber music — to keep the audience entertained while waiting for the president of the United States, Harry S. Truman, to arrive. (Truman’s driver had tried to drop him off at the wrong door, forcing the president’s six-car motorcade to turn around in the middle of Constitution Avenue.³) After Truman arrived and delivered his remarks, the State Department’s protocol officer began calling up the signatories, starting with Paul-Henri Spaak of Belgium. Laughter rippled through the crowd when Denmark’s Hendrik de Kauffman produced his own pen to sign the treaty only to have the souvenir pen prepared by the State Department for the occasion thrust into his hand anyway.⁴

The document de Kauffman and his colleagues signed that April afternoon was short. A mere 1,040 words, the Treaty of Washington opened with a brief preamble affirming the signatories’ shared commitment to “safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law.” Fourteen articles followed, covering their responsibilities, the duration of the agreement, and sparse guidance as to how they would implement it.⁵

Canada and the United States endorsed the historic agreement, as did the critical stepping stone countries of Iceland, Denmark (with its sizable colony, Greenland), and Portugal. The United Kingdom, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway, and Italy rounded out the founders’ dozen. The original twelve were not unlike, as Truman described them, “a group of householders, living in the same locality, who decide to express their community of

² Folliard, “Warning to All Aggressors.”

³ Lawrence, “President Hopeful.”

⁴ Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer, “Official, Diplomatic Society Sees Colorful Atlantic Pact Ceremony,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 1949.

⁵ North Atlantic Treaty, April 4, 1949; “Treaty is 15 Typed Pages, Bound in Blue Goatskin,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

interests by entering into a formal association for their mutual self-protection.”⁶ On signing day, that formal association boasted some 332 million citizens and nearly 14 million square miles of territory, along with the lion’s share of global industrial power.⁷ “Grouped around the most powerful democracy in the world,” Joseph Bech, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, concluded, “the states signatory to the Atlantic pact constitute at once the most formidable and the most sincerely peaceful coalition of material and moral forces that has ever been set up by the nations to ensure their security and to spare the world of the horrors of war.”⁸

Alliances were, of course, nothing new in international politics. States had long signed pacts and formed coalitions to counter threats, wage wars, and pool precious resources, to name just a few popular reasons. But the North Atlantic Treaty’s architects hoped that it would lay the foundations for a different kind of alliance. “In the past,” Canadian foreign minister Lester B. Pearson wrote in the spring of 1949, “alliances and leagues have nearly always been formed to meet emergencies and have dissolved as the emergencies vanished. It must not be so this time.”⁹ Pearson, like many of his contemporaries, believed that the signatories’ security demanded something new: an enduring arrangement that could harness the moral, economic, and political power of the West to safeguard its freedoms and preserve a hard-won, yet fragile peace.

That required the participation of the United States. Only the United States could offset the power of the Soviet Union, the state seen as the most likely risk to the status quo. Few in official circles believed that Moscow would try and change the map of Europe using force outright. But they still worried. Leaders in the Kremlin, they feared, would rely on more oblique methods to achieve their geopolitical goals. “The whole game of the Russians,” Pearson’s

⁶ Harry S. Truman, “Address on the Occasion of the Signing of the North Atlantic Treaty,” April 4, 1949, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1949*, ed. Warren R. Reid (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1964), 196.

⁷ Ferdinand Kuhn, Jr., “‘World’ Returns to Washington After 27 Years,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 1949; Louis Cassels, “Twelve Nations Sign NATO Pact in Solemn Ceremony,” UPI, April 4, 1949; “Dedication for Peace,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

⁸ “Addresses by President Truman and Foreign Ministers at Signing of North Atlantic Pact,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

⁹ Lester B. Pearson, “Canada and the North Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1949): 378.

deputy, Escott Reid, argued, “is obviously to conquer without armed attack.”¹⁰ Fearful of indirect aggression, officials sought an arrangement that would stiffen spines in the states of Western Europe if and when they came under pressure. Support from the United States — a wealthy great power left largely unscathed by the ravages of war — would be essential to make it effective and credible.

Yet, for the United States, making that kind of commitment to Europe required a break with old articles of faith. Americans set aside an aversion to entangling alliances — any standing arrangement that would tie their country’s fate to that of the Old World — that traced its lineage back to George Washington. Instead, with the North Atlantic Treaty, they opted to throw their lot in with the Western Europeans to forge a standing alliance in times of peace. “The treaty,” as one journalist observed, “shatters 150 years of American tradition against European military alliances and in effect extends this nation’s defense frontiers to the Rhine, to the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas, and at one point, in the far northern wastes of Norway, to the very borders of Russia.”¹¹ In doing so, another argued, the United States had shed “any last remnants of isolationism in its foreign policy.”¹²

This transformation in US foreign policy, what historians later christened the “revolution of 1949,” was striking and significant but by no means unique.¹³ The same revolutionary tendencies animated many of the original twelve signatories. The United Kingdom abandoned its traditional maritime policy to make a commitment to the European continent with 1948’s Treaty of Brussels, a critical waypoint on the road to the North Atlantic pact.¹⁴ Canada agreed to take part in a standing peacetime alliance for the first time in its history. Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway, all motivated by experiences of invasion and

¹⁰ Escott Reid, *Time of Fear and Hope: The Making of the North Atlantic Treaty 1947-1949* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), 157.

¹¹ Cassels, “Twelve Nations Sign.”

¹² Bertram D. Hulen, “North Atlantic Pact Erases Last Marks of Isolationism,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

¹³ Armin Rappaport, “The American Revolution of 1949,” *NATO Letter* 12 (1964): 3-8.

¹⁴ John Baylis, “Britain, the Brussels Pact and the continental commitment,” *International Affairs* 60, no. 4 (1984): 615-29.

occupation, left behind policies of neutrality. Even newly-independent Iceland opted to do the same.

Each of these departures originated from the same impulse: the desire not to repeat the catastrophic wars of recent decades. “Our aim cannot be restricted to the winning of a war which might be forced upon us, a war which, even if we win it, would leave Europe ravaged and depopulated,” the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, insisted. “We want to avoid such a war by becoming, together, strong enough, together to safeguard peace.”¹⁵ Time and again, allied leaders echoed Schuman’s sentiments, albeit in simpler language. The point of their association was to prevent a third world war.

The North Atlantic Treaty marked, as Lord Ismay put it, “the beginning of a revolutionary and constructive experiment in international relations.”¹⁶ Early allied leaders — including Ismay, who served as the first secretary general — translated broad principles into a complex and sprawling bureaucracy. An international institution took shape, made up of consultative bodies, committees, and a network of military commands — what we know as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or more often, simply as NATO. Decades later, that alliance is still with us, and the experiment continues.

That fact colors how we understand NATO. The alliance’s history, observers often quip, is a history of crisis.¹⁷ Contemporaries fixate on the latest dust-up that threatens to divide the Western allies and, when the archives open decades later, historians return to reopen and pore over those debates. Yet, though the alliance is perpetually in crisis, it is also a long-lasting bargain. NATO’s staying power is remarkable, defying the old conventional wisdom of alliance

¹⁵ “Addresses by President Truman and Foreign Ministers at Signing of North Atlantic Pact,” *New York Times*, April 5, 1949.

¹⁶ Lord Ismay, *NATO: The First Five Years 1949-1954* (NATO, 1954), ix.

¹⁷ Stanley Hoffmann, “NATO and Nuclear Weapons: Reason and Unreason,” *Foreign Affairs* 60 (1981/1982): 327.

politics. And so, it is little wonder that those seeking to make sense of NATO gravitate toward arguments about the enduring nature of the alliance.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, the most successful alliance in history makes for a popular subject. But it remains largely the purview of policymakers, political scientists, and analysts of current affairs. Historians have, for the most part, stuck with discrete episodes from the alliance's past and shied away from writing about a phenomenon still very much in progress. (Perhaps, like me, they have received the advice that to study the alliance requires a conversion to political science.) That is a missed opportunity. After all, to examine the Atlantic Alliance is to grapple with foundational debates central to the historians' craft: the relationship between continuity and change, the role of structure versus the agency of individuals, and the degree to which the past is a product of contingency. Moreover, that history is being written and rewritten whether or not historians enter into the fray.

This book starts from the straightforward proposition that how we tell the history of the Atlantic Alliance matters. All too often, our narratives focus on a select few member states. They do so for obvious reasons: NATO was — and still is — an alliance of patently unequal equals. It operates on principles of consensus, yet few are under any illusions that each member wields the same degree of power. Plenty of policies ended up being decided in smaller configurations, removed from the formal councils of the alliance. NATO, as one Canadian permanent representative observed, operated akin to a diplomatic version of Dante's *Inferno*. “The United States, in splendid glory, occupied the first circle. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom were grouped together at the next level. Canada and Italy shared the third level, with the other countries spread out below.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Lawrence S. Kaplan, *NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance*, Updated Edition (New York: Twayne, 1994), xvi; Wallace J. Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance Since 1950* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 9; Julian Lindley-French, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: The Enduring Alliance*, Third Edition (Milton Park: Routledge, 2023); Sten Rynning, *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024), 10.

¹⁹ James Bartleman, *On Six Continents: A Life in Canada's Foreign Service 1966-2002* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2004), 187.

Our histories tend to trace those same circles. It would be inconceivable to write a history of the Atlantic Alliance without ample coverage of the United States, yet easy to justify a narrative that overlooks a member like Iceland, whose own foreign minister described it as the smallest and weakest of the founding states.²⁰ To be sure, the history of NATO as told primarily from Washington — the most popular approach by far — reveals much about the realities of power and influence in international politics. But it also obscures plenty, missing out on surprising patterns and interactions in search of the more predictable contours of the postwar world.

In what follows I tell a history of NATO and its place in international politics that encompasses allies, large and small. Like any author, I have made difficult choices about what — and whom — to include and what to leave on the cutting room floor. Had I refused to do so, the end product would have been dense and unusable — except, perhaps, as a sleep aid for the truly desperate. “The history of NATO,” as one of the few historians to take up the task of writing it, Timothy Andrews Sayle, rightly notes, “is a kaleidoscope of domestic politics and national foreign policies, and so no one book could offer a total history of the alliance.”²¹ The design of the kaleidoscope reflected in these pages is made up of NATO’s smallest and weakest members as much as its most powerful. Doing so sheds new light on a complex alliance once aptly described as “an organized controversy about who is going to do how much.”²²

That mission led me to the archives. Though plenty has been written about the alliance over the years, this history builds on the written records of the men and women who have given the treaty its life and the organization its shape over the years. I looked at the holdings declassified from NATO’s institutional records and the files of various member governments, as well as those of more than a few non-members. To augment these records, I turned to the intellectual ecosystem that grew up around the alliance, reading think-tank reports, studies from civil society and booster groups, and plenty of press commentary.

²⁰ “Addresses by President Truman and Foreign Ministers at Signing of North Atlantic Pact,” April 5, 1949.

²¹ Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 7.

²² Harlan Cleveland, *NATO: The Transatlantic Bargain* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 5.

NATO, as these sources make clear, has assumed many forms. The alliance is an agreement linking individual countries and, at the same time, an international institution with countless bureaucratic organs, civilian and military.²³ (Archival folders chock full of meeting minutes and marked-up draft communiqués — a familiar sight for any historian of NATO — certainly drive that point home.) Committees convened experts and created opportunities to hash out policy, though not all availed themselves of the opportunity. Even so, plenty of officials recognized that, in the words of one US permanent representative, “the best antidote for uncoordinated stupidity among friends is long, candid and often tedious talk about real problems.”²⁴ The same idea appeared in loftier terms — at least, in Latin — at the alliance’s headquarters in Paris and then in Brussels, where the motto “animus in consulendo liber” adorned the walls. A maxim from ancient Rome, it translated loosely to a mind unfettered in deliberation; however fraught, consultation was what longtime Belgian permanent representative André de Staercke described as “the ultimate resource and the goal of this free-ranging Alliance which we formed to safeguard our future.”²⁵

Together, the treaty and the organization formed the cornerstone of a geopolitical system, a pattern of international politics sometimes referred to, in another nod to the ancient world, as the Pax Atlantica.²⁶ And, as a result, NATO often served as a cultural touchstone: a convenient emblem for the West and an easy target for those frustrated with it. A nebulous sense of community underpinned it all, backed by talk of shared ideals and a common heritage that some cherished and others dismissed almost out of hand.

²³ This distinction between alliance and institution frames the analysis in Johnston, *How NATO Adapts*, 3.

²⁴ Marten van Heuven, “U.S. Policy, the Press, and the Atlantic Alliance,” in *The Future of European Alliance Systems: NATO and the Warsaw Pact*, ed. Arlene Idol Broadhurst (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 115.

²⁵ “Summary record of a meeting of the Council held at the NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on Thursday, 29th January, 1976 at 10.15 a.m.,” NATO, C-R(76)4.

²⁶ “Address by the Secretary General to the North Atlantic Council on the Occasion of the 40th Anniversary of NATO,” April 4, 1989, NATO, PDD PR 1989; Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 3.

To understand NATO fully requires us to understand all of these forms, no matter the contradictions.²⁷ Even the most capacious summaries of the alliance's activities — slogans like “defending the West” or “detering aggression” — only capture pieces of the story.²⁸ Put another way, NATO is more complicated and its activities more varied than we often appreciate. I am hardly the first to make this argument. “Many people,” Lord Ismay wrote in the introduction of 1954's *NATO: The First Five Years*, “will, I believe, be surprised at the range of activities covered by NATO.”²⁹ I hope readers of this book will be similarly surprised.

NATO is, as one commentator put it, “a product of history and therefore not a product of perfect logic.”³⁰ To make sense of NATO, we must make sense of its history and of the historical sensibilities that have shaped it. The subsequent chapters offer a fresh look at the enduring, peculiar, and often unruly alliance we know as NATO from its founding to the present.

²⁷ This argument extends — and, to some degree, challenges — arguments made by Timothy Sayle and Sten Rynning. Sayle emphasizes the need to understand “the broader pattern of international affairs” preserved by NATO's various institutions, while Rynning focuses on “grasp[ing] the idea that inspires government and people to invest in power”: Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, 3; Rynning, *NATO*, 10.

²⁸ William Park, *Defending the West: A History of NATO* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1986); Stanley R. Sloan, *Defense of the West: Transatlantic Security from Truman to Trump*, Second Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Peter Apps, *Detering Aggression: A Biography of NATO* (London: Wildfire, 2024).

²⁹ Ismay, *NATO*, ix.

³⁰ “NATO's New Flap, Over Poland, Is Different,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1982.