Seven little words in the July 1947 edition of Foreign Affairs described the basic concept of a proposal for a U.S. foreign policy initiative to roll back the "Iron Curtain."

Curiously, the true meaning of the proposal was misunderstood by almost everyone who read the article--both on the hawkish right and the New Deal left--and the initiative was history by the time the American people became aware that it had even existed.

Peter Grose, a former New York Times correspondent and editor of Foreign Affairs, has carefully assembled all the elements, pro and con, good and bad, of the endeavor that came to be nicknamed "Operation Rollback." To write his book, Grose made use of both Russian and American declassified documents, interviews with participants, and the many books and articles that had already been written on the subject.

The 1947 Foreign Affairs article carried the byline "X." But it was common knowledge that "X" was the State Department expert on Soviet affairs, George Frost Kennan, who was about to become head of the newly created "Policy and Planning Staff."

Kennan wrote that U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union "must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." He went on to specify how this policy could be achieved: "Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by"--and here are the vital seven little words--"the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force." This "counter-force," he added, should be applied "at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points."

It doesn't take a Shakespearean scholar to understand that "counter-force" means meeting force with force. But that concept went right over the heads of New Deal liberals, who hailed "containment" as a sensible modus vivendi with a former ally, and right-wing conservatives, who railed against what they called "pantywaist diplomacy"--accusing containment of failing to do what Kennan's policy...

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