

## **Were the policies of the Truman Doctrine and containment by the United States successful at stopping the spread of communism during the Cold War?**

Following the death of Hitler and the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, the alliance of Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union began to fracture. By 1947 it had broken down completely<sup>1</sup> and a new world order was emerging, dominated by the superpowers of the United States in the west and the Soviet Union in the east. These two rivals were not only militarily but also ideologically opposed, and each saw the other as a fundamental threat to the safety, security and order of the post-war world. In this fracturing, highly charged political climate, US president Harry S. Truman was heavily influenced by the views of former British prime minister Winston Churchill, a rabid anti-communist who had attempted a British-backed counter-revolution in Russia following Lenin's takeover in 1917<sup>2</sup>. During Churchill's famous 'Iron Curtain' speech of 1946, he declared that tyranny was the greatest threat to peace in the post-war world,<sup>3</sup> while just one year later, Truman would take it further and declare that the United States would create "conditions in which [the United States] and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion."<sup>4</sup> This was the beginning of what would become known as the Truman Doctrine, which would inform the foreign policy of the United States until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

The aim of the Truman Doctrine was to prevent the spread of communism and usher in a golden age of world-wide democracy.<sup>5</sup> However, these policies were also tied to the notions of American exceptionalism and a black-and-white ideological view of the world, which equated anti-communism with democracy, regardless of the reality.<sup>6</sup> Many of the governments and organisations supported by the United States under the Truman Doctrine were anti-communist, but they were also inherently authoritarian and anti-democratic.<sup>7</sup> These policies were also driven less by strategy and more by self-interest and fear, so were flawed in their execution and applied inconsistently,<sup>8</sup> which resulted in the United States overreaching where they were not wanted, such as in Vietnam, and not acting when their assistance was sought, such as in Czechoslovakia.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Miller, *To Save a City: The Berlin Airlift, 1948–1949*, United States of America, Texas A&M University Press, 2000, p.13

<sup>2</sup> A. Carpet, "'The Creeds Of The Devil': Churchill Between The Two Totalitarianisms, 1917-1945 (1 Of 3)", *International Churchill Society*, 2009, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour-extras/the-creeds-of-the-devil-churchill-between-the-two-totalitarianisms-1917-1945-1-of-3/>.

<sup>3</sup> W. Churchill, "The Sinews Of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')", *International Churchill Society*, 1946, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>

<sup>4</sup> "Truman Doctrine (1947)", *National Archives*, 1947, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>.

<sup>5</sup> C. Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, United States of America, Cornell University Press, p. 63 - 67

<sup>6</sup> E. Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, United States of America, 2nd ed., 2008

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> D. Roth, *The American Reaction to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia*, United States of America, Ohio State University, 2010, p. 14

The Truman Doctrine and its accompanying policy of containment were also catastrophic failures. In East Berlin, Cuba, Vietnam, Korea, China and multiple South American, African and Middle Eastern countries, American intervention either failed to stop the ascension of Communist governments, or led to governments that *were* anti-communist, but were also violent, repressive and acted with flagrant disregard for the rights of their citizens, such as the Mujahideen (later the Taliban) in Afghanistan and the JRG regime in El Salvador. Rather than bringing the countries of the world together in a “way of life [that] is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression,”<sup>9</sup> the Truman Doctrine ushered in a climate of fear, uncertainty and oppression. It squarely positioned the United States as a friend of dictatorships all over the world, just so long as they were not also Communist<sup>10</sup>.

This attitude was nowhere more apparent than domestically. While the Truman Doctrine and containment were focused on foreign policy, versions of these ideas also informed domestic policy in the United States. The period of the Cold War was also a period of intense social change: young people began pushing back against restrictions from their elders, minorities began demonstrating for their rights and the power of old, conservative institutions began to fade. Elsewhere, this was seen as something that needed to be addressed: youth and minorities needed to be appeased, otherwise there would be riots and many European countries worked on addressing the grievances of students, women, workers and ethnic minorities step-by-step. This was not without issues and many of the policies were still informed by conservative ideology, but progress was made and extreme violence (in western Europe, at least) was rare. In the United States of America, social change had a name: communism<sup>11</sup>.

Women demanding the right to access contraception and abortion: communism. Workers demanding the right to unionise: communism. Students demonstrating against the draft or the Vietnam War: communism. African-Americans demanding the right to *live* in their own country: communism<sup>12</sup>. While Senator Joseph McCarthy is the most famous name associated with domestic anti-communism in the United States during this period, he was only one of a number of politicians, law enforcement officials and private individuals who believed that the United States was full of communist subversives<sup>13</sup>. The actions of these individuals mirror closely the ideas of containment, a foreign policy under the Truman Doctrine, which sought to contain communist expansion<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> "Truman Doctrine (1947)", *National Archives*, 1947, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>.

<sup>10</sup> D. Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation*, United States of America p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> J. Gaddis, *Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States: An Interpretive History*, United States of America, p.200

<sup>12</sup> D. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy*. Oxford University Press. p. 175

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> G. Kennan, "February 22 1946: George Kennan's 'Long Telegram'", *Wilson Centre Digital Archive*, 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf>.

Containment was originally envisioned by American diplomat George Kennan as a political and economic tool, although he did not intend for it to be used as a basis for American foreign policy.<sup>15</sup> It called for restricting the Soviet sphere of influence and preventing them from further expansion, which would ensure their eventual collapse, however he did not intend to advocate for military containment and spoke out against military action to prevent so-called communist expansion.<sup>16</sup> His containment policy was adapted by hard-liners like McCarthy and used domestically too, where it was as much a disastrous failure as it was overseas. Attempts to stem the tide of social change by labelling protestors and activists ‘communists’ and setting the police on them did not stop them; in some cases, this kind of behaviour emboldened the activists and gave strength to their cause. It was a small-scale reenactment of what was happening overseas too: the (often violent) intervention of US troops, sent to far-flung corners of the earth under the Truman Doctrine, did not prevent the spread of communism in any country. In some cases they were able to assist in preventing large-scale expansion of individual communist regimes, such as during the Korean War, when the North Korean army was pushed out of South Korea with the assistance of US troops. However, even interventions which led to victory for anti-communists did not lead to the democratic golden age Truman had envisioned, but to repressive dictatorships which were supposed to be the enemy of all peace loving people.<sup>17</sup>

In some ways, this is not surprising, as the first two countries to receive assistance under the Truman Doctrine were Greece and Turkey.<sup>18</sup> In 1947, both were authoritarian and undemocratic, and Greece was in the throes of a violent civil war, which the US entered on the side of the anti-communist, pro-monarchy Hellenic Army.<sup>19</sup> Despite the purported love of democracy and desire for it to spread, the United States would have been aware that there had been no elections in Greece since the Nazi withdrawal in 1944, while soldiers and diplomats on the ground would have been made aware that most Greek citizens did not wish for the monarchy to return.<sup>20</sup> The Hellenic Army triumphed in the civil war mainly due to American support and their hard-line, anti-communist policies would shape Greek foreign policy for years, culminating in a military junta in 1967. The government that took power after the civil war was neither elected nor did it have any intention of holding elections in the future. It would not be until after the Greek Junta was ousted in 1974 that truly free elections occurred in Greece and the country began to heal from decades of internal divisions. However, the United States declared the “victory” in Greece to be a success for its foreign policy and proof that the Truman Doctrine could and did work.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> G. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925 - 1950*, United States of America, 2.d ed., 1983

<sup>16</sup> G. Kennan, "February 22 1946: George Kennan's 'Long Telegram'", *Wilson Centre Digital Archive*, 1946, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> W. Churchill, "The Sinews Of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')", *International Churchill Society*, 1946, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>

<sup>18</sup> "Truman Doctrine (1947)", *National Archives*, 1947, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/truman-doctrine>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> C. Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, United States of America, Cornell University Press, p. 63 - 67

<sup>21</sup> E. Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, United States of America, 2nd ed., 2008

It was sold to the American public as a victory for the United States over the Soviet Union, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had never actively supported the Greek communists, due to a private agreement between Josef Stalin and Churchill.<sup>22</sup> This initial victory set the tone for future American intervention in the name of anti-communism; while Truman and successive leaders argued they were supporting democracy, they showed little concern for the true political bent of their 'allies'. Totalitarian regimes, like the one they backed in Greece, were openly supported and mentions of atrocities were either denied or ignored. Given the preference of Americans to deny and ignore the atrocities occurring in their *own* country, it is not surprising they turned a blind eye to the reality of the governments they were supporting. However, atrocities committed by communists were exploited for political gain and often used to justify intervention under the Truman Doctrine.

An uprising by Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh against the American-backed presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem was used as a pretext for American intervention in Vietnam. Atrocities committed by Minh were seized on by the government, while nothing was said openly about Diem's persecution of Buddhists or exclusion of women from public life. Minh was initially motivated by nationalism and a desire to free his people and country from French colonial rule, but the American's support of cruel and unpopular Diem led him to embrace communism as the only ideology that was truly against colonialism.<sup>23</sup> This illustrates the American disregard for the reality of their anti-communist interventions, especially when there was no discernible benefit for the United States. Their well-known, catastrophic intervention in Vietnam not only failed to depose Minh - the government he set up still rules Vietnam today! - but caused extensive damage to the international image of the United States as a defender of the free world. While it is true that both sides in Vietnam committed atrocities, it was atrocities committed by American troops which illustrate the moral-blindness of the Truman Doctrine. Not only did the intervention propel north Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh *towards* communism<sup>24</sup> and failed to stop his takeover of the country, it saw American soldiers commit mass atrocities against civilians in the name of 'freedom'. This was a common pattern throughout the Cold War and consistent with the Truman Doctrine since its implementation. According to the black-and-white thinking of American policy makers, communism was the only atrocity and anything else that happened was an unfortunate result of fighting for the greater good.

Ultimately, by the time the cold war ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, American intervention against foreign communism had failed to create a single, democratic country. In many cases, it also failed to rollback communism entirely and instead kicked off bloody and brutal civil wars in countries which would have otherwise not had them. Success under the Truman Doctrine meant preventing the spread of communism, rather than attempting to

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<sup>22</sup> W. Churchill and J. Stalin, "The Percentages Agreement", *Images.Nationalarchives.Gov.Uk*, 1944, <https://images.nationalarchives.gov.uk/assetbank-nationalarchives/action/viewFullSizedImage?id=30941&size=800>

<sup>23</sup> H. Minh, "The Path Which Led Me To Leninism", *Marxists.Org*, 1960, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/ho-chi-minh/works/1960/04/x01.htm>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

spread democracy. Despite attempts by Truman and his successors to pretend otherwise, the policy was a disaster, which cost thousands of innocent people their lives and continues to cause strain in international relations to this day. Truman had high ideals when he first set out to make his country the defender of freedom, but the ideas he expressed were ultimately informed by national interest and his own, innate desire to be seen as more than just the successor of the great Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> D. Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation*, United States of America p. 69.

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