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## MEMORANDUM

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**TO:** Mr. John Hamre, CSIS President  
**FROM:** Patrick Campbell  
**SUBJECT:** Cold War Policies of the Truman Administration Toward the Soviet Union  
**DATE:** February 19, 2019

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### ABSTRACT

The following memorandum addresses the Cold War policies of the Truman administration toward the Soviet Union from 1946-1950. The proposal offers specific recommendations for correcting key elements of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan of 1947 in order to help shift the general trajectory of US foreign policy during what is widely recognized as a pivotal period in the development of US foreign policy, producing consequences that would last for the duration of that conflict and well into the present period. In so doing, this memo aims to contribute to the CSIS' mission to "provide strategic insights and policy solutions to help decisionmakers chart a course toward a better world."

## II. INTRODUCTION

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The Truman Doctrine represented the United States' first piece of Cold War foreign policy and remained one of the most important through the duration of that conflict. Many historical scholars, furthermore, recognize the Truman Doctrine policies as marking a turning point in US foreign policy more broadly (a fact evidenced in more recent history by the role they played in guiding the policies of the Carter and Reagan administrations).<sup>1</sup> The Marshall Plan is similarly important for how it served to extend the core Doctrine policies and magnify its most positive and negative effects.

### Overview of Truman's Foreign Policy

While Truman's foreign policy is often analyzed in terms of how it differed from that of his predecessor, FDR, the two presidents actually shared many of the same basic foreign policy assumptions. For one, both men were generally wary of the country reverting to isolationism after exiting World War II and envisioned the United States taking a more active role on the global stage. Furthermore, both men believed strongly in the benefits of the new international

organizations that Roosevelt sponsored as president, and which Truman also supported as a senator. Finally, Truman shared Roosevelt's hope of continuing the cooperative relationships the US had formed with its wartime allies, finalizing the victory over Hitler and Japan, and in building a peaceful postwar world.<sup>2</sup>

The period from the fall of 1945 until the late fall of 1946, however, presented a series of events that forced a shift in perceptions regarding the Soviet Union and increasing concerns about its international behavior and ambitions, especially in relation to Iran and Turkey, which were subjected to Soviet pressures.<sup>3</sup> According to Wilson (2008), it was these external circumstances ultimately drove the creation of the Truman administration's foreign policy by "[undermining] the validity of the plans and assumptions FDR had developed."

In the end, Truman, initially guided by Byrnes and then by Secretaries of State George C. Marshall and Dean G. Acheson, broke free of FDR's 'hunches' regarding Stalin [and] increasingly accepted that U.S. policy must resist Soviet demands and create barriers of sorts to their offensive operations...From limited engagement and even, I would argue, irresponsible restraint in the affairs of the world beyond the western hemisphere during the nineteen thirties, the United States assumed sweeping international obligations during the years of the Truman presidency.<sup>4</sup>

While these may seem like somewhat trivial events relative to those that would come later, they were nonetheless important for creating the initial conditions for US intervention in Europe, which sowed the first seed that would eventually grow and create the atmosphere of mutual suspicion and mistrust that would define the Cold War period.

### The Truman Doctrine

Truman's response to these events was to put together a program of limited military assistance and \$400 million in economic aid to assist Greece and Turkey, which due to Britain's weakened position, were seen as especially vulnerable to Soviet influence and aggression.<sup>5</sup> When an earlier draft of the proposal by the State Department failed to convince Congress to fund the initiative, Truman (by the direction of Undersecretary of State Acheson) chose to reframe the proposal around a conflict between totalitarian repression and democratic freedom.<sup>6</sup> The resulting speech, which came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, went far beyond the initial request to provide economic aid for Greece and Turkey, declaring it "the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures."<sup>7</sup>

As Frazier (1999) points out, the speech was successful in its primary aim of creating support for the foreign aid bill, as well as in counteracting the American people's trend back toward isolationism following the end of the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> As Kaufman (2017) observes, the Doctrine also had a number of other important foreign policy implications, including establishing the precedent of using economic aid as an instrument of foreign policy and making clear to the Soviet Union that the US would use military force not only within its own hemisphere or when democratic ideals were threatened, but also in support of any country fighting communism anywhere in the world.<sup>9</sup>

### **Key Successes of the Truman Doctrine**

- ✓ Generating support domestically for Truman's foreign aid bill
- ✓ Countering the trend back toward isolationism following WWII and establishing the US as a major global leader<sup>10</sup>
- ✓ Jumpstarting the economic recovery and rejuvenation of weakened European states

Nonetheless, Frazier also acknowledges several deficiencies in the speech, namely, "that it obscured its own purpose by avoiding mention of the threat of the Soviet Union or its nature, making possible the interpretation of the speech as the announcement of an ideological struggle, and also proclaiming a universalism that was sometimes inconvenient for succeeding administrations."<sup>11</sup> Cohen (2011) further blames this action (specifically, the declaration to "support free people everywhere...") for "[laying] the groundwork for the limitless definition of US national interests that unfolded over the next 60 years" and thus creating the conditions that would ultimately lead to the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup>

### **Key Failures of the Truman Doctrine**

- ✗ Causing excessive anti-communism in America, thus paving the way for the domestic rise and spread of McCarthyism<sup>13</sup>
- ✗ Laying the groundwork for a limitless definition of US national interests, thus lowering the boundaries that might have prevented the Vietnam War<sup>14</sup>

### **The Marshall Plan**

The Marshall Plan of 1947, a companion policy to the Truman Doctrine, provided for \$5.3 billion in additional aid specifically to support European economic recovery in the following

year. Altogether, during the period from 1948 through 1950, the US spent a total of \$12 billion in economic aid for Europe, the majority of which went to Britain, France, and West Germany.<sup>15</sup>

Despite claims such as those of German analyst Werner Abelshauser that “foreign aid was not crucial in starting the recovery or in keeping it going,”<sup>16</sup> the Marshall Plan was nonetheless worthwhile for the many tangential benefits that it produced. Many, for instance, view the Plan as the decisive step in establishing a political balance in postwar Europe, one in which the US emerged solidly as the major imperial power in the West.<sup>17</sup> It furthermore helped to cement relationships between the US and Europe by formalizing many of the trade partnerships that still benefit us today. Finally, by prodding the Europeans towards greater economic cooperation and integration, it laid the early groundwork for what would later become the European Union.

### **Key Successes of the Marshall Plan**

- ✓ Helped stabilize the political systems of the countries that received financial support, thereby reducing their vulnerability to Soviet exploitation and intimidation<sup>18</sup>
- ✓ Formalized trade relationships between the US and Europe, thus strengthening the US's global economic position<sup>19</sup>
- ✓ Strengthened ties between western European countries, laying the groundwork for the creation of the EU

According to Miscamble, the Marshall Plan “confirmed the long-term American commitment to the continent and...stymied the Soviet strategic objective of a weak and fragmented Europe.” In so doing, argues Miscamble, “it provoked a more intense response from Stalin, who presumably considered a politically and economically healthy Western Europe a threat to his ambitions and security.”<sup>20</sup> In 1947, the Soviets and eight other European communist parties established the Cominform (an organization devised by Moscow to control local communist parties) and shifted from its more conservative “national front strategy” to a more violent and aggressive campaign of political warfare utilizing more savage techniques including arrests, persecution, purges, and liquidations.<sup>21</sup> More intensification followed, including the toppling of Czech president Eduard Benes by the communist Klement Gottwald in February 1948<sup>22</sup> and the blockade of aid to western Berlin.

This increase in the number and frequency of such “flare-up” events mixed with Truman’s ideologically-charged rhetoric at home to further inflame anti-communist sentiment in the US,

thus creating a “security dilemma,” or “situation in which the actions of one state to ensure its security were seen as a direct threat to another state, which responds with its own military buildup.”<sup>23</sup> Echoing this point, Leffler (1983) argues that “a key lesson of the Truman Doctrine era is...for Americans to develop a better grasp of how their actions impinge upon the interests of potential adversaries and of how their own concept of security may endanger the perceived security of other powers.”<sup>24</sup> Thomas (n.d.) summarizes Leffler’s argument as follows:

Truman Doctrine era policymakers had a tendency to simplify geopolitical realities. For example, they blamed the Soviet Union for the communist insurrection in Greece, and credited American interventionism for its defeat, but subsequent scholarship has determined that neither is true. There was a similar tendency to magnify threats to American interests; officials saw any Soviet gain as a direct loss for America, and assumed a Soviet desire for world domination. Again, later study portrays a more nuanced view of post-war Soviet opportunism only excited into belligerence by the Truman Doctrine, Marshal [sic] Plan and other American initiatives.<sup>25</sup>

Leffler therefore concludes by asserting that “policymakers must differentiate between vital and peripheral interests and...not risk Armageddon over any situation that is truly not vital.”<sup>26</sup>

### Key Failures of the Marshall Plan

- ✘ Exacerbated the divide between Western and Eastern Europe and provoking an intensification in Soviet strategy<sup>27</sup>
- ✘ Creating a “security dilemma” between the US and Soviet Union

## II. RECOMMENDATIONS

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**R1: Revise the Truman Doctrine to (a) exclude ideologically-themed language and (b) more narrowly define the limits of US national interest and security which may provide pretext for increased militarization of US activities abroad.**

Some critics have suggested that had FDR lived out his fourth term, “tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union would have been minimized and a less militarist and dangerous conflict might have emerged.”<sup>28</sup> Whether or not a straight continuation of FDR’s foreign policies would have worked out (our analysis above suggests that it likely wouldn’t have), there is wide consensus that Truman’s policies could have benefited from more

scrupulous messaging. This recommendation presents a middle-of-the-road option which aims to strike a balance between FDR's patient optimism and restraint and Truman's shrewd realism.

Therefore, in order to minimize the extent to which US interventions in Europe contributed to rising tensions with the Soviet Union, and to mitigate the risk of activities in that region escalating into military confrontation, the Truman administration should have rejected Acheson's advice to frame his proposal as an ideological conflict between totalitarian repression and democratic freedom, and instead worked harder to persuade Congress of the benefits of his foreign aid package. Though it may seem a trivial detail, in this particular instance, it is clear that these early choices of messaging mattered and resulted in very real consequences.

## **R2. Solicit negotiations for a disarmament agreement with the Soviet Union**

In order to mitigate the extent to which our activities in Europe were seen as threatening Soviet interests, the Truman administration should have taken more concrete actions at this juncture to demonstrate the limited extent of our objectives in that region. Without stepping back from its commitments to European recovery through foreign aid, the administration should nonetheless make a greater effort to understand how our actions impinge on specific Soviet interests and act accordingly to alleviate that pressure. Recognizing how our possession and past use of nuclear weapons inevitably contributes to this atmosphere of suspicion and distrust (by presenting the risk of mutual assured destruction), this recommendation calls specifically for negotiations with the Soviet Union to formulate a plan for reciprocal denuclearization, either partial or complete, and substantial reductions of long-range munitions stockpiles, which may be leveraged against neighborhood countries. These actions should be intended primarily as a signal of good faith to counterbalance any provocation our actions may inadvertently cause.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

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The Truman administration's early Cold War policies, as expressed in the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, set the tone for US foreign policy that lasted through the duration of the Cold War and up to the present period. Unfortunately, serious mistakes were made in the early messaging with which those policies were pursued and enacted which distorted the character of those policies and significantly weakened their constructive potential. Furthermore, dangerous precedents were set in these policies with regard to how US national interest and security was

defined for the next 60 years, thus weakening the safeguards that may have otherwise prevented the war in Vietnam. Finally, insufficient attention was given to how our increased activity in Europe would impinge on Soviet interests and exacerbate the divide between Western and Eastern Europe. The worst of these outcomes could have been avoided by revising the Truman Doctrine to exclude ideologically-charged language, more narrowly defining the limits of US national interest and security to prevent increased militarization of US activities abroad, and investing greater effort in pursuing diplomatic means of deescalating US conflicts with the Soviet Union, specifically through concrete actions like reciprocal disarmament.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, Allen. "The Truman Doctrine in Retrospect." Author's private collection, n.d.  
<http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~adt49/eport/documents/his487paper.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Miscamble, Wilson D. "Harry S. Truman, the Bomb, and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy." *The John O'Sullivan Memorial Lecture Series*. Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Frazier, Robert. "Acheson and the Formulation of the Truman Doctrine." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 17 no. 2 (1999): 229-251.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufman 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Frazier 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Kaufman, Joyce P. *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 4th ed. London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas n.d.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, Michael. "The Best and Worst Foreign Policy Presidents of the Past Century." *The Atlantic*. July 30, 2011.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/the-best-and-worst-foreign-policy-presidents-of-the-past-century/242781/>.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Kaufman 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Vasquez, Ian. "A Marshall Plan for Iraq?" The Cato Institute, May 9, 2003  
<https://www.cato.org/research/articles/vasquez-030509.html>

<sup>17</sup> Miscamble 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hambry, Alonzo L. n.d. "Harry S. Truman: Impact and Legacy." The Miller Center. Accessed February 17, 2019.  
<https://millercenter.org/president/truman/impact-and-legacy>.

<sup>20</sup> Miscamble 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kaufman 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Leffler, Melvyn P. "From the Truman Doctrine to the Carter Doctrine: Lessons and Dilemmas of the Cold War." *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 4 (1983): 245-266.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas n.d.

<sup>26</sup> Leffler 1983.

<sup>27</sup> Kaufman 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen 2011

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