The Truman Doctrine in Retrospect

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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 throughout the duration of that conflict, especially during the 1950’s and ‘60s. Given the degree to which the Cold War dominated the attentions of the United States during much of the latter 20th Century, it is unsurprising that many historians have found the Truman Doctrine a worthy topic of study. Historians have approached the Doctrine from many angles, both during the time it formed a part of America’s global strategy and after. A discussion of the Doctrine as foreign policy is most obvious, but some have found its importance stretches beyond that.


John Lewis Gaddis, in “Reconsiderations: Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?” argues that contrary to common belief, the Truman Doctrine did not represent a turning point in American foreign policy. Instead, America committed to fighting communism wherever it appeared due to events surrounding the Korean War. The Doctrine was consistent with American policy precedents regarding the balance of power in Europe; to prevent domination of
the continent by a single, hostile power. American policymakers came to see the Soviet Union as such a threat due to its actions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere after the Second World War.

Accordingly, the Truman administration took measures to oppose the Soviet Union a year before the Truman Doctrine speech. What made the speech’s proposals different was that they required money from Congress, so the speech deliberately overstated the issues to impress members of Congress and the public. Despite the language used, the Truman administration had no plan to combat communism worldwide; rather, the Soviet Union was the target of the policy.

Washington welcomed communist Yugoslavia’s break from the Soviet sphere, and tried to encourage a similar situation in China. Furthermore, the chief component of the policy was economic aid to create stable societies uninterested in communism and Soviet leadership, not military deterrence against Soviet attack. An apparent increase in Soviet aggression, including the establishment of Cominform, the crushing of the Czechoslovakian revolt, and the Berlin Blockade caused the administration to reassess whether that the Soviet Union had limited, rational goals, although subsequent study indicates these actions were defensive responses to American policies. Administration officials feared that distinguishing between vital and peripheral interests and varieties of communism would confuse the public and foreign allies; oversimplification and even deception were deemed necessary. Gaddis concludes that while the Truman Doctrine was compatible with the foreign policy of the 1950’s-60’s that perceived a monolithic communism that must be universally opposed to protect American security, that practice did not begin until 1950, three years after the Doctrine speech and after significant shifts in Administration attitudes, and it is this time that historians should study in search of turning points in American history.1

Gaddis focuses on the foreign policy aspects of the Truman Doctrine’s early days, more specifically the internal decision-making that went on inside the Truman administration, with some small attention paid to domestic concerns that affected Administration considerations. He describes the shift he sees between the Doctrine as it was proclaimed and as it was practiced in the 1950’s in terms of Truman administration attitudes and perceptions, rather than public opinion or outside influence. This is all in service of proving that historical study of the origins of the Truman Doctrine as Cold War policy would be better served to focus later than the Doctrine’s creation. Leffler explicitly directs the work at other historians, recommending direction to future study.

Taking a more narrow focus, Judith S. Jeffrey in *Ambiguous Commitments and Uncertain Policies: The Truman Doctrine in Greece, 1947-1952* examines the implementation of the Truman Doctrine in Greece. She argues that contrary to claims such as those of President Truman in his memoirs, American intervention in Greece was not as successful as it appeared and also that the final effects of the aid program were out of line with its stated intentions. Fearful of possible Soviet aggrandizement in Greece, the Truman administration planned to provide military aid to defeat communist rebels, and economic aid to end the conditions under which support for communism could flourish. Officials emphasized the economic component of the plan as primary. While the administration planned to quickly end to the war, the Greek army made very little progress. America devoted an increasing amount of aid money to efforts to defeat the rebels, but their eventual defeat is more attributable to divisions within the Greek and international communist movements. After 1950, a military emphasis in foreign aid prompted by the Korean War meant that America neglected economic aid even after peace was finally restored, betraying the Truman Doctrine’s stated belief in defeating communism by defeating
poverty. Instead, the defeat of the communist rebels seems to have satisfied the Truman administration in the heated context of the Cold War, leading to the definition of the aid program as a success. This is especially important as later administrations accepted Greece as a model intervention and tried to replicate its supposed success elsewhere, such as Vietnam; a poor lesson that led to poor results.²

Jeffrey’s focus is fairly narrow with regards to the Truman Doctrine, but her study is meticulously detailed and richly sourced. She examines not only the military and economic aid schemes during the time period in question and salient events in Greece, but also the political process by which the policies came to be and American media and public reaction during the whole course of events. She uses several personally-conducted interviews and a wealth of government documents in addition to contemporary media articles and previous scholarship. Writing after the end of the Cold War, Jeffrey is also able to take advantage of records from ex-communist countries, giving a more complete image of events. Given that Greece is where the Truman Doctrine was first enacted, Jeffrey’s work is a valuable one in understanding it.

Similarly specific, Richard M. Freeland in The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, and Internal Security, 1946-48 studies the origins of the 1950s-60s culture of fervent anti-communism in the context of the domestic political situation. He identifies events such the Soviet Union’s first atomic test and the communist takeover in China as the immediate flashpoints of public opinion, but contends that an anti-communist consensus that was in place well beforehand exaggerated the response. Truman administration created this consensus with efforts to promote the European Recovery Program (a.k.a. the Marshall Plan), a companion policy to the Truman Doctrine. The Truman

administration devised the Marshall plan to stabilize the economies of Europe to further
American economic interests by creating an America-centered commercial system, but the
Truman administration was fearful it would be unable to muster the political required as WWII-
era positive portrayals of the Soviet Union and a general optimism regarding the post-war world
made Congress unwilling to back expensive foreign policies. The Truman Doctrine speech
portrayed the world in binary opposition, demanding total support in defending against the
communist threat. The administration used propaganda to promote a worldview consistent with
the Doctrine; any diplomatic setback with the Soviet Union was presented as betrayal and
aggression. They carried out a highly publicized campaign against communist agents in the
government. They deemed support for the administration patriotic, and dissent disloyal and
subversive. They cultivated a climate of crisis. While these efforts succeeded in obtaining the
legislative support the administration needed, the effect on American political culture soon
proved to be beyond control. The “flare-up” events convinced the public that the Truman
administration’s rhetoric of a massive assault on American values was true, and that the
administration was an incompetent defender of those values for failing to prevent those events.
Republicans, most notably Joseph McCarthy, took the mantle of anti-communism from the
administration, which had little means of response as it faced its own rhetoric turned against it.
Due to the overreliance on anti-communism to build support to economically bind Europe to
America, the commercial policies needed to complete the scheme failed to pass Congress and
Europe was instead rearmed and organized into the NATO alliance. Freeland concludes that the
Truman administration created the conditions that allowed McCarthyism to exist and even
pioneered its methods, regardless of Truman’s genuine disgust with McCarthy’s actions.³

³ Freeland, Richard M. The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security 1946-
Freeland, in his introduction, explains that his curiosity about the pervading anti-communism of the 1950’s which he observed in his childhood motivated him to write the book, and his sense that the existing scholarship of McCarthyism had overlooked the specific events that allowed for it. Consequently, he focuses on domestic conditions, admitting that he makes no serious attempt to analyze the diplomatic side of the situation. In doing so, he risks overlooking important information but can also give valuable insight. His explanation of the Marshall Plan in economic rather than political or strategic terms is an example. Such a motive is not examined in any of the other sources, and has important consequences as the failure of the commercial scheme means that the Doctrine itself is largely a failure. Freeland’s analysis is limited by its largely domestic focus (the Truman Doctrine is a piece of foreign policy, after all), but it has found a valuable avenue of inquiry.

Focusing even more narrowly, Robert Frazier in “Acheson and the Formulation of the Truman Doctrine”; investigates the Truman Doctrine speech itself. He describes the motivations for its creation, the influences on its content, and the timeline of events. The focus is further narrowed by Frazier’s attention on a single person: Dean Acheson. Frazier begins by stating that the Truman Doctrine was a major change in American foreign policy that became a fundamental factor determining American behavior in the Cold War, and that it remains important today. It came to represent the idea that the Soviets were driven by ideology rather than pragmatism and were therefore highly dangerous. This worldview long prevented any easing of East-West conflict. The State Department wrote the speech to convince a Congress rife with renewed isolationism to fund anti-Soviet initiatives in Greece and Turkey, but State Department documents only mention a negative effect on the interests of the United States if Soviet influence expanded. It was at a meeting with Congressional leaders that Undersecretary of State Dean
Acheson introduced an ideological element to the discussion after Senators were unimpressed by a drier interpretation of the situation. It was Acheson’s decision to theme the speech around a conflict between democracy and totalitarianism; President Truman himself has nearly nothing to do with writing the speech. There is little evidence Truman or Acheson believed that the threat of the Soviet Union rested in communist ideology rather than strategic and economic concerns, and indeed, both detested the extremes of the later anti-communist movement. Although the speech did not explicitly target communism, its content only really made sense in the context of the Soviet Union’s recent takeover of Eastern Europe. Still, Frazier argues that it was not until the crushing of the Czech revolt and the Berlin Blockade were the majority of Americans convinced of a communist threat, and the speech retroactively seen as the announcement of a struggle with communism. Frazier concludes that the speech had several deficiencies; 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. Despite this, Frazier contends that the speech accomplished the purpose for which it was created: creating support for the foreign aid bill. In doing so, it counteracted the American people’s trend back toward isolationism following the end of the Second World War.4

In focusing so narrowly, Frazier perhaps misses much. By restricting study to Acheson and the speech and concluding he did not intend to launch an ideological struggle, Frazier leaves himself little to talk about, especially since he finds himself unable to exactly determine Acheson’s motives for many of his decisions. It is a detailed study of the speech only, with the much larger issues involved relegated to the periphery, and comes off as somewhat indulging in

minutiae. The conclusion gives some attention to the speech’s role in counteracting isolationism, something not well-covered in the other sources, but provides no depth on the issue.

Doris A. Graber, in “The Truman and Eisenhower Doctrines in the Light of the Doctrine of Non-Intervention” examines the Truman Doctrine in the light of the United States’ traditional policy of non-intervention. She defines the Truman Doctrine as a warning to the Soviet Union that the United States was prepared to intervene on behalf of any non-communist state that was attacked by any communist state, although this only implied a right to intervene, not a promise to do so regardless of the circumstances. America claimed this right under the notion that communist governments necessarily work toward the destruction of non-communist governments. In this context, the Doctrine does not contravene international law which allows intervention as a last resort to avoid irreparable national harm. Regardless, it contradicts the popular conception of non-interventionism. Graber argues, however, that non-interventionism has only ever heeded as long as it was useful. It was conceived in the earliest days of the United States, when the country was weak and early administrations hoped to deter any European desires to intervene in America. It used absolute language as it was more rhetorically effective. As the country grew stronger, policymakers amended the understanding of non-interventionism to allow for the protection of “vital” interests, and willingness to bend the concept has risen and fallen over the course of American history. The use of the Truman Doctrine has been consistent with tradition, but its claim to a right to intervene anywhere against communism without regard to circumstance, even if not always invoked, contradicts tradition. Furthermore, it has failed to deter communist aggression and bolster anti-communist resistance as U.S. intervention is not guaranteed, and even worries America’s allies who fear its assertive language may increase the risk of war. Graber concludes that although non-interventionism has been traditionally flexible,
the Truman Doctrine fails to provide advantage and may even have done some harm. It should therefore be amended or abolished.  

Graber wrote during the active use of the Truman Doctrine, lending immediacy to her analysis, and writes to assesses the Doctrine’s success and reconcile it with American diplomatic tradition. This represents some unease with the newness of the Doctrine. It is interesting to note that Graber defines the Doctrine as from the beginning a warning to the Soviet Union that America may combat communism wherever it may expand, and merely as a matter of establishing context. This interpretation of the Doctrine contrasts with many of the other sources that go to considerable effort to contend that this wide meaning of the Doctrine was a later shift, not the original intention. It is likely that this view of the Doctrine did not yet exist and Graber is a subject of the retroactive dating of wide anti-communism to the Truman Doctrine speech that Frazier describes. Graber uses very few sources for her work, and only to attribute a few quotes. The whole of the work is a fairly general diplomatic history of the United States, and Graber’s own analysis of the Truman Doctrine in relation to it, so there is little for Graber to cite.

Writing much later, Melvyn P. Leffler in “From the Truman Doctrine to the Carter Doctrine: Lessons and Dilemmas of the Cold War” examines what he sees as the flaws in the foreign policy of the Truman Doctrine era, contrasted with the behavior of the Carter and Reagan administrations, which defined the Doctrine era as successful and looked to it for precedent. He argues that 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 intervention for its defeat, but subsequent scholarship has determined that neither is true. There was a similar tendency to magnify threats to American interests; officials

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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 Plan and other American initiatives. The irony is that American policymakers intended these to be defensive moves and were genuinely uninterested in provocation. A critical lesson of the Truman Doctrine era is then that policymakers must have a grasp of how their actions affect the interests of potential adversaries. The Truman Doctrine’s commitment to global containment meant that the United States lost a degree of freedom of action and was forced to develop a vast military to be able to respond anywhere. Diplomacy failed because both sides were inflexible and suspicious, and a lack of interest in compromise and negotiation set in. Leffler contends that there was a tendency to repeat these errors during the Carter and Reagan administrations with regards to the Persian Gulf. They emphasized the security of American access to Persian Gulf oil without consideration for Soviet concerns of potentially hostile military forces close to their border. Leffler concludes by asserting that only truly vital interests are worth risking conflict over when war can mean the nuclear destruction of one’s homeland.⁶

Leffler’s writes as a reaction to current events. He is concerned that the Carter and Reagan administrations had drawn erroneous lessons from the Truman Doctrine and were committing foreign policy errors and so offers direct correction to these flaws as he sees them. To support his argument, he draws on much previous scholarship of the early Cold War to show that the Truman Doctrine was flawed and harmed America’s diplomatic position. As might be expected, Leffler discusses the Truman Doctrine from a foreign policy angle exclusively, though

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⁶ 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.
broader in scope than other works, such as Gaddis’, in that it analyzes Soviet and as well as American policy, and how they interacted.

Another of Leffler’s works, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War; The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945-1952”, examines the application of the Truman Doctrine in Turkey, aid to which, along with Greece, was the explicit proposal of the Truman Doctrine speech. After the Second World War, the Soviet Union sought several concessions from Turkey and although American officials did not believe the Soviets would use military force to compel Turkey to accede, they feared that it would be only a first step in extending Soviet influence into the Mediterranean and Near East, with dangerous consequences for American strategic interests. They admitted, however, that Soviet designs had defensive motives; vital parts of the Soviet Union would be vulnerable to air attack from Turkey in the event of war. It was exactly this vulnerability that American officials decided to exploit. As part of a general toughening of policy regarding the Soviet Union, America encouraged Turkey to resist Soviet overtures. Britain’s inability to provide further assistance to Greece or Turkey provided the rationale to arm Turkey against the Soviet Union. Despite this, obtaining public support was not easy. The administration downplayed strategic considerations in public discussion, and military aid for Turkey was briefly mentioned in Truman Doctrine speech, which was mostly concerned with the dire economic situation in Greece. Congress approved the aid, and the Turkish military was built up around the idea of slowing a Soviet offensive into the Middle East and carrying out bombing of southern Russia. The United States had hoped to gain strategic advantage from the situation in Turkey without making any commitments, but Turkish dissatisfaction with the lack of reciprocity and the threat of Turkish neutrality in a war meant that the U.S. eventually had to pressure for Turkey to be admitted into NATO to ensure cooperation. Turkey had gone from recipient of aid to
formal ally not because of the threat of Soviet attack, but because of its utility in a potential war against the Soviet Union. All of this, from the middle of 1947, angered the Soviet Union, which was fearful of exactly the situation America was trying to create. Although Leffler concludes that the plans of the United States were opportunistic reaction to the possibility of war rather than active planning to start one, they were part of the various forces that engendered distrust and fear between the United States and Soviet Union and caused the Cold War.  

This work is notable for its lack of discussion of ideology, which is a major component of the history of the Truman Doctrine, as most of the other sources show. Ideology does not enter directly into the subject of study, as it describes rival nations diplomatically maneuvering for military/strategic advantage. In this context, the Truman Doctrine simply propelled the usual geopolitical activity of nations. Leffler’s sources speak plainly to the subjects he examines, making his arguments seem fairly self-evident.

Dennis Merrill in “The Truman Doctrine: Containing Communism and Modernity” terms the Truman Doctrine as the advent of modern American foreign policy, part of an age of science, mass production, and mass consumption. It was a proactive policy of aiding allies and promoting cultural values that Americans cherished, such as democracy and individual freedom. Its backdrop was the doubt and uncertainty of the post-WWII world caused by tremendous technological and political changes. Truman used the mass-media connection between his office and the American people (a recent, modern phenomenon) to offer a means of putting the world into order; all was a struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, to which Americans must commit themselves totally. Thus Merrill defines the Truman Doctrine as a “statement of global purpose and cultural identity” rather than a real strategy. It has thus had most success with

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societies with sufficient cultural similarity to America, Europe in particular. In the different cultural climate of the Third World, its binary definition of the world met with resistance, sometimes with a rejection of both the Soviet and Western worldviews (most notably in Afghanistan). In keeping with the Doctrine’s modernism, officials accused the Soviets of being unable to adapt to modern times, something also said of Islamic fundamentalists in the 21st Century. Merrill concludes that the Truman Doctrine permanently changed American political culture by committing America to an attempt to regulate the international balance of power and influence the Third World. Subsequent presidencies have promulgated doctrines of their own: doing so has become an American ritual for establishing national direction. Lastly, Merrill asserts the Truman Doctrine helped convince American popular culture that the world was a dangerous place, a perception that has outlived the Cold War. In this way, it foreshadows the feeling of vulnerability that defined American culture and foreign policy following the 9/11 attacks.8

Merrill’s analysis is quite unusual among the sources discussed here as one lacking interest in policy and politics. Writing long after the end of the Cold War and after the rise of the very different challenge of anti-American terrorism in the 21st Century, this is not surprising. He is instead concerned with the cultural make-up of the Truman Doctrine and its enduring effects on American culture, with some emphasis on its effect on the Third World, where America’s contemporary foreign policy challenges originate. In following this approach, Merrill only accounts for the effects Truman Administration policy had on American culture, and not the other way around, a topic used in some of the other sources. In this way, the work fails to

consider how the effects it describes may have been self-generated by the culture rather than imposed as an external stimulus by the American government. The work is still quite valuable for its unusual focus.

Aside from any specific mention of each work’s use of source material already made, there are some commonalities that warrant discussion of them as a group. There are great deals of United States government papers available from the period, as well as the memoirs of some of members of the Truman administration: President Truman himself, George Kennan, Dean Acheson, and Joseph M. Jones. All of the authors discussed here make extensive use of such government papers and these memoirs except Graber and Merrill, both of whom use few sources at all: the former due to the general nature of her discussion, the latter due to the non-political, non-policy nature of his focus, and even he makes a brief reference to Jones’ memoir.

Despite the varied foci and dates of publication of the works discussed here, there is a consensus across many on one point: the meaning of the Truman Doctrine shifted during its early history (i.e. before 1950), with a general high interest in this early period of the Doctrine. Gaddis spends the bulk of his work explicating the shift and sees the Truman administration changing its assessment of the Soviet Union years after the proclamation of the Doctrine and thereafter finding new uses for its rhetoric; Jeffrey reveals a shift from economic to military aid in Greece and increasing focus on defeating communists in battle rather than stymieing them politically; Freeland examines how the anti-communist movement limited the Truman administration’s choices but sees a self-inflicted quality to the situation; and Frazier references the way public reaction to the Doctrine and subsequent international events created a vigorous anti-communist movement that ran counter to what Truman and Acheson were trying to achieve.
Graber, Merrill, and Leffler are exceptions to this view. Graber’s work concerns a version of the Doctrine after this shift in meaning and does not conceive of it being any other way. Merrill sees a deliberate cultural significance of the Doctrine with wide-ranging effects that the other works imply was unintentional. Leffler, in his work on Turkey, studies a venue of policy unaffected by the change and, in his work on the flaws of the Doctrine, contends that the ideological component of the Doctrine even pre-dated its formal proclamation, making this the only work not to agree with the idea of a shift, and not explicitly; it is merely part of the work’s presumptions. None of the works actually argues against the occurrence of a shift.

A further agreement across even more of the works is that the Doctrine failed in some way or had unintended, undesirable consequences. Jeffrey reveals a failure to complete economic reconstruction in Greece, Freeland sees the cause of McCarthyism and the failure of the commercial scheme of which the Doctrine was a part, Graber identifies a failure to deter communist aggression and an unnerving effect on allies, and Leffler detects myopic diplomatic habits and provocation of the Soviets in Turkey. Even Frazier, who credits the Doctrine with combating isolationism, also blames it for prolonging conflict with the Soviets and causing excessive anti-communism in America. There is a common picture of narrowed perception and limited choices as a consequence of the Truman Doctrine.

Study of the Truman Doctrine has come from many directions and purposes, but that many of the works here agree on particular issues, albeit stated in different words and seen from different perspectives, creates some confidence that these shared assessments are correct. Even those works mentioned here that do not lend weight to these ideas seem to be merely uninterested in or unaware of them, rather than being in disagreement. The historiography of the Truman Doctrine is varied but remarkably stable.
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