

RECONSIDERATIONS

WAS THE TRUMAN DOCTRINE A REAL TURNING POINT?

By John Lewis Gaddis

MORE than a quarter of a century has now passed since Harry S. Truman proclaimed on March 12, 1947 that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures." At the time, government officials, Congressmen, journalists and other elements of the articulate public vigorously debated the merits of the Truman Doctrine, and in the intervening years historians have kept the argument going. Defenders have seen the statement as the moment when Americans abandoned isolationism once and for all, finally accepting, however reluctantly, their full responsibilities as a world power. Critics, conversely, have seen it as the beginning of the long process by which the United States became a world policeman, committing resources and manpower all over the world in a futile attempt to contain a mythical monolith, the international Communist conspiracy. But despite their differences, critics and defenders of the Truman Doctrine tend to agree on two points: that the President's statement marked a turning point of fundamental importance in the history of American foreign policy; and that U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War grew logically, even inevitably, out of a policy Truman thus initiated.

There can be no doubt that the President did employ sweeping rhetoric, implying an unprecedented commitment to resist communism wherever it appeared. But gaps between rhetoric and reality in U.S. foreign policy have often been large; indeed, such gaps might be said to constitute a defining characteristic of this country's diplomacy. Any reassessment of the Truman Doctrine, therefore, should consider first how far the statement in fact represented a radical departure from policies the United States was already following, and then to what extent the Truman administration sought to implement the wide-ranging program it so resoundingly proclaimed. I propose to argue that the Truman Doctrine, far from representing a revolution in American foreign policy, was very much in line with previously established precedents for dealing with shifts in the European balance of power; that despite its sweeping language the Truman administration, between 1947 and 1950, had neither the intention nor the capability of policing the rest of the world; and that the real commitment to contain communism everywhere originated in the events surrounding the Korean War, not the crisis in Greece and Turkey.

II

It is a truism, but no less valid for that, to say that the chief objective of U.S. foreign policy has been to maintain an external environment conducive to the survival and prosperity of the nation's domestic institutions. The

methods employed in this search for security have varied considerably over the years: utopian efforts to reform the entire structure of international relations have coexisted with cold-blooded attempts to wield power within that system; military establishments have been both massive and minute; interventionism has alternated with isolationism; multilateralism with rigid economic nationalism. In recent times there has also been a lively debate over how extensive the congenial environment must be—can the United States tolerate a world safe for diversity, or must the American way of life be imposed everywhere before it can be secure anywhere? The goal, however, has remained the same, and in this the United States has differed little from other great powers: sovereign nations, to be secure, have always required climates in which their institutions could flourish.

For the United States, in the twentieth century, the most important requirement for a congenial international environment has been that Europe not fall under the domination of a single, hostile state.¹ Concern over the European balance of power dates back at least to the turn of the century; certainly balance-of-power considerations played a large role in motivating both Woodrow Wilson's efforts to mediate World War I and our subsequent entry into that struggle. The totalitarian nature of Hitler's regime made Nazi Germany's threat 20 years later seem particularly ominous; it was clearly decisive in persuading Franklin D. Roosevelt that he could not allow the collapse of Great Britain after France fell in the summer of 1940. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor actually thrust the United States into World War II, but the Roosevelt administration had decided a year and a half earlier to risk war in order to prevent the totalitarian domination of all of Europe.

Truman, thus, was hardly breaking new ground when he described the world as polarized between democracy and totalitarianism: the American commitment to oppose totalitarian threats to the balance of power in Europe goes back at least to 1940, and possibly to 1917. What was novel about the Truman Doctrine was not that it marked any fundamental shift in the basic objectives of U.S. foreign policy, but rather that it indicated the emergence of a new challenge to those objectives in the postwar behavior of the Soviet Union.

Washington officials did not automatically equate the Soviet variety of totalitarianism with that of Nazi Germany; indeed, the tendency during and immediately after World War II was in the opposite direction. The Russians' vigorous participation in the war had purified them ideologically in the eyes of many Americans, and while the Roosevelt administration never accepted the view that Stalin's regime had become a budding democracy, it did expect cooperation from the Soviet Union in building a peaceful postwar world. FDR, whose vision of the new international order was strongly tinged with realism, was not inclined to oppose Stalin's plans to seek security through the creation of spheres of influence along the periphery of the U.S.S.R., even

¹ See, for example, Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942, pp. 448-449, 466-467; Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1943, p. 164; George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy: 1900-1950*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp. 10-11.

though acquiescence would have required compromising the Administration's frequently stated commitment to the principle of self-determination.

Roosevelt did attach two conditions to his willingness to grant Stalin's security needs, however. First, the Russian leader would have to be discreet in establishing control over neighboring countries, operating under the façade of democratic procedures wherever possible. This requirement reflected Roosevelt's concern over public opinion in the United States; having been led by Administration rhetoric to expect literal fulfillment of the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter, Americans would not tolerate too blatant a violation of those principles. Second, the Kremlin would have to abandon further attempts to spread communism outside the Soviet Union. Moscow's commitment to the overthrow of capitalism throughout the world had been the chief unsettling element in its relations with the West since the Russian Revolution, as Stalin himself acknowledged when he abolished the Comintern in 1943. Having just helped to defeat one dictator thought to have had unlimited ambitions, Americans could hardly be expected now to welcome the emergence of another.

Stalin met neither of these conditions. The crude combination of internal subversion and external pressure which marked his efforts to establish control in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, eastern Germany, Turkey, Iran and Manchuria between 1944 and 1946 made it impossible for Truman to continue Roosevelt's policy of cooperation—even FDR had come to doubt its feasibility at the time of his death. Nor did Stalin give any indication that he would be content with these gains: his own statements, together with the revived activity of the international Communist movement, seemed to offer clear evidence that the Soviet Union had embarked upon a program of unlimited expansion. We now know that this was an inaccurate perception of Stalin's intentions. His militant rhetoric was probably intended more for internal than external consumption. He even sought to discourage Communist parties in France, Italy, Greece and China from seizing power. But Stalin's restraining orders were not made public; what was public was a progressive escalation of anticapitalist propaganda and a pattern of action among Communist parties throughout the world too well-coordinated to ignore. Communism was a monolith, at least in Europe between 1945 and 1948;² hence it should not be surprising that Western observers came to see the Soviet Union as posing a threat to the balance of power comparable to that of Nazi Germany.

The actual decision to resist further Soviet expansion came early in 1946, one year before the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine. Increasing criticism from Congress and the public had made it clear that no additional concessions to the Russians would be tolerated, while simultaneously George

² Three important new works which stress the subservient attitude of the international Communist movement to Moscow's wishes are Vladimir Dedijer, *The Battle Stalin Lost: Memoirs of Yugoslavia, 1948-1953*, New York: Viking, 1971, pp. 101, 118-119; Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, New York: Knopf, 1971, pp. 474-478; and Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972, which contains new information on the famous Duclos letter of April 1945.

F. Kennan's influential but as yet unpublished analysis of Soviet behavior had convinced Administration officials that Russian hostility sprang chiefly from internal sources not susceptible to gestures of conciliation from the West. Evidence of a tougher policy appeared almost at once, with Truman's tacit endorsement of Winston Churchill's Fulton address, blunt public opposition to Soviet demands on Iran and Turkey, termination of German reparations shipments, refusal to compromise on the Baruch Plan, and the tenacious negotiating tactics of Secretary of State James F. Byrnes at the Paris and New York foreign ministers' meetings, and at the Paris Peace Conference.³ The President made his position clear in September 1946 when he fired Henry Wallace from the Cabinet for conveying a false sense of Administration softness toward the U.S.S.R. That same month, presidential aide Clark Clifford completed a lengthy synthesis of advice from within the government on relations with Russia, compiled at Truman's request. This document advocated a global policy of containing the Soviet Union through the use of propaganda, economic aid and even military force, not excluding atomic or biological warfare if necessary. The objective, Clifford wrote, should be to convince the Russians "that we are too strong to be beaten and too determined to be frightened."⁴

The crisis caused by the British withdrawal of aid to Greece and Turkey early in 1947 did not, therefore, precipitate a fundamental reorientation of U.S. foreign policy. The course of action which Truman proclaimed on March 12 was very much in line with the belief, then almost a half-century old, that American security depended upon maintenance of a European balance of power. Nor did the Truman Doctrine mark the first step in the containment of the Soviet Union—that policy had been in effect for almost a year. The significance of the Greek-Turkish crisis was rather that this was the first situation in which special appropriations were necessary to carry out the Administration's program. It was this need for congressional sanction of a policy already in effect which caused the Administration to state its intentions—or overstate them—in universal terms.⁵ While it is clear from both contemporary and retrospective sources that the men who participated in this decision felt they were living through a revolution, one gets the impres-

³ New information on the toughening of policy toward the Soviet Union in 1946 is contained in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1946*, Vol. I, pp. 1160-1171. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, pp. 282-315. Significantly, presidential assistant George M. Elsey wrote to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in 1951: "So far as foreign policy is concerned, President Truman, to use your words, 'blew the whistle on the Communists' a year earlier than you state. At his direction, the United States took the lead in March 1946 in the United Nations when Iran was first threatened by the Soviets." (Elsey to Schlesinger, October 15, 1951, George M. Elsey Papers, Box 104, Harry S. Truman Library.)

⁴ Clifford's September 1946 report is printed in Arthur Krock, *Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line*, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968, pp. 419-482.

⁵ Joseph M. Jones, *The Fifteen Weeks (February 21-June 5, 1947)*, New York: Viking, 1955, p. 143; George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1967, pp. 322-324; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, New York: Norton, 1969, p. 219; Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History: 1929-1969*, New York: Norton, 1973, p. 261.

sion that this sense of exhilaration stemmed from the *way* in which policy was formulated—not from the actual decisions that were made. For the first time in recent memory the State Department had actually done something, quickly, efficiently and decisively. This was the real revolution of 1947—and the only one.

III

During the spring and summer of 1947, the Truman Doctrine came under heavy criticism for implying a commitment to oppose communism wherever it appeared. George F. Kennan, head of Secretary of State Marshall's new Policy Planning Staff, argued privately that the Truman Doctrine had best be forgotten: the United States could not defend free peoples everywhere.⁶ Walter Lippmann, inaccurately but understandably regarding Kennan's "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* as an expression of Administration policy, blasted the whole concept of containment as a "strategic monstrosity."⁷ The actual conduct of the Truman administration, however, suggests that these criticisms were wide of the mark: despite the universal rhetoric of the President's address, the U.S. government at that time had neither the intention nor the ability to police the world against communism. Indeed, Secretary Marshall himself expressed immediate reservations about the sweeping language of the Doctrine and, upon his return from the Moscow foreign ministers' conference in April, quietly sought to focus State Department planning around more limited objectives.⁸

Thus, State Department officials went out of their way during congressional hearings on aid to Greece and Turkey in late March to emphasize that the President's program would not automatically commit the United States to resist communism everywhere. With Marshall in Moscow, Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Under Secretary of State Will Clayton even tried to avoid mentioning the Soviet Union by name in their public testimony. While Administration spokesmen acknowledged that the Greek guerrilla movement was led by Communists and did receive instructions from abroad, they carefully pointed out that the rebellion was primarily an indigenous one. There was no effort to demonstrate a comparable internal threat to Turkey: aid to that country was justified, somewhat vaguely, as a counterweight to Russian imperialism. Acheson specifically rejected any implication that the Truman Doctrine constituted a precedent for aid to other countries threatened by communism, especially China. Further requests for assistance, he said, would be evaluated individually, without reference to any general rule of policy.

Was the Administration being less than candid? Truman and his advisers

⁶ George M. Elsey memorandum of a conversation with Kennan, August 15, 1947, Elsey Papers, Box 3.

⁷ Walter Lippmann, *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Harper, 1947, p. 21. Kennan's article appeared as "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, pp. 566-582.

⁸ Bohlen, *Witness to History*, p. 261. See also Charles E. Bohlen, *The Transformation of American Foreign Policy*, New York: Norton, 1969, pp. 86-87; and a memorandum by Charles P. Kindleberger, "Origins of the Marshall Plan," July 22, 1948, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1947*, Vol. III, pp. 242-243.

may well have been trying to conceal the fact that plans for a general European recovery program were being made, but it does not follow from this that they were trying to trick the Congress into approving an unlimited commitment to oppose communism. The more plausible explanation for the reticence of Acheson and his colleagues is that, notwithstanding the language of Truman's speech, Clifford's 1946 memorandum and Kennan's article, the Administration in fact had no overall plan for the containment of communism in mind at this time. Its goal was the less ambitious one of restoring a balance of power in Europe; its choice of means for accomplishing this reflected an awareness of the limitations, rather than the omnipotence, of American power.

U.S. officials saw the chief threat to the balance of power as political and economic, not military: wartime devastation and natural calamities had so disrupted life in Europe that Communist parties in France, Italy, Greece and elsewhere were thought to have excellent chances of coming to power through coups or even free elections. This prospect was thought dangerous, not because of the general repugnance Americans felt for communism, though that certainly existed, but because the European Communist parties were regarded as tools of the Kremlin. Their victory would have placed the European continent under the control of a single hostile power, the very thing Americans had fought World Wars I and II to prevent. U.S. policy in Europe from 1947 through 1949—the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Vandenberg Resolution, the North Atlantic Treaty, and the Military Assistance Program—can best be understood as an attempt, through political, economic, and, later, military means, to achieve a goal largely psychological in nature: the creation of a state of mind among Europeans conducive to the revival of faith in democratic procedures. As Kennan later put it in his memoirs, "It had been primarily the shadow, rather than the substance, of danger which we, in contemplating a European recovery program, had been concerned to dispel."⁹

This policy reflected a keen awareness of the limits of American power, and of the consequent need to distinguish between peripheral and vital interests. During the two years from 1945 to 1947, U.S. military forces had declined from 12 million men to 1.5 million. Unilateral possession of the atomic bomb had had little noticeable impact on relations with the Soviet Union. Fears of inflation, shared even by vigorous advocates of rearmament, made substantial increases in military spending unlikely. As Warner Schilling has observed, "There was probably no more widely shared or firmly held belief regarding defense matters than the idea that \$15 billion was all the country could afford to spend."¹⁰ These constraints significantly narrowed the range of options open to U.S. officials, forcing them to concentrate their efforts where they would do the most good. Europe was given first priority; attempts were made to minimize involvement in other trouble spots, like China and Palestine, considered less vital to American security. Washington's insistence

⁹ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, p. 351.

¹⁰ Warner R. Schilling, "The Politics of National Defense: Fiscal 1950," in Warner R. Schilling, Paul Y. Hammond and Glenn H. Snyder, *Strategy, Politics and Defense Budgets*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, p. 100.

that Europeans take the lead in planning reconstruction and rearmament stemmed in part from a desire to minimize the burden on the American taxpayer. Even so, the Truman administration quite deliberately channeled available funds into the European Recovery Program, while enforcing such drastic cuts in defense spending that the Joint Chiefs of Staff could promise to defend only Great Britain and the Western Hemisphere if war came.¹¹ The assumption, of course, was that there would be no war, that restoration of the balance of power in Europe would be sufficient to ensure U.S. security.

The object of containment was the Soviet Union, not communism: the Administration's policies suggest that it did not view the world Communist movement as a monolith between 1947 and 1950. Subservience to Moscow made one a target of containment, not adherence to the doctrines of Marx and Lenin. Ideologically devout Communists willing to reject Soviet leadership could expect encouragement and even assistance from the United States. Thus, Washington was quick to take advantage of Tito's defection in 1948, despite the fact that Yugoslavia remained firmly Communist. A basic assumption behind the Point Four Program was the awareness that communism could as easily arise from indigenous roots as from Kremlin conspiracies. The Administration's China policy was grounded on the belief that serious differences existed between Moscow and Peking: "I think you will find," President Truman wrote to Arthur H. Vandenberg in 1949, "that the Russians will turn out to be the 'foreign devils' in China and that situation will help establish a Chinese government that we can recognize and support."¹² In short, the U.S. government did not, at this time, view the international situation as a zero-sum game, in which gains for communism invariably meant a loss in security for the United States.

Despite the sweeping language of the Truman Doctrine, therefore, the actual policies which the Truman administration followed between 1947 and 1950 hardly justify description as an all-out effort to contain communism everywhere. Rather, the Administration appears to have been seeking a world in which several centers of power could exist, each exerting a restraining influence upon the other.¹³ It is difficult, otherwise, to explain Washington's persistent enthusiasm for European unification and, after 1948, Japanese rehabilitation. It seems the only way to account for Acheson's desperate efforts to keep his options open in dealing with Communist China; as late as November 1950, with the Korean War on, the Secretary of State was still hoping to drive a wedge between Stalin and Mao Tse-tung.¹⁴ Even Dean Acheson's steadfast refusal to negotiate with the Russians on substantive issues was a holding tactic; it was never meant to preclude meaningful discussions once the "situations of strength" of which he liked to speak had been

¹¹ Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal Diaries*, New York: Viking, 1951, pp. 350-351, 498-538; Schilling, "Fiscal 1950," pp. 31-32, 162-199.

¹² Quoted in Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, New York: Morrow, 1973, p. 412.

¹³ See, on this point, Hadley Arkes, *Bureaucracy, the Marshall Plan, and the National Interest*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972, pp. 132-133, 202; and David S. McLellan, "The 'Operational Code' Approach to the Study of Political Leaders: Dean Acheson's Philosophical and Instrumental Beliefs," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, March 1971, pp. 66-70.

¹⁴ Gaddis Smith, *Dean Acheson*, New York: Cooper Square, 1972, pp. 201-202.

established.¹⁵ Speculation about what did not happen is always perilous, but it does seem possible that the policies of Truman, Marshall and Acheson, had they been allowed to run their course, might have resulted in the evolution of a multipolar world operating on balance-of-power principles; a world closely resembling the nineteenth-century international order which Acheson remembered so fondly; a world in which both George Kennan and Walter Lippmann might have found solace; a world not too different, ironically enough, from that now apparently sought by Henry Kissinger and Richard M. Nixon.

IV

What went wrong? Obviously the Korean War was the decisive event which destroyed this pleasing prospect, but that conflict would not have had the tremendous impact that it did had it not been for several developments which had occurred earlier. The cumulative effect of these was to make more vigorous efforts to contain communism seem both necessary and feasible.

At the time the Truman Doctrine was proclaimed, the Russian threat had seemed limited both in scope and character. Moscow's revolutionary rhetoric had done much to alienate Americans during 1945 and 1946, but few Washington officials expected any immediate effort to convert the world to communism. Rather, that ideology was regarded as dangerous because the Russians were using it as a tool with which to expand their influence in Europe. The Administration's response to this challenge had been based on the theory that the U.S.S.R. would not fight to gain its objectives. Confronted with a revived and prosperous Western Europe, it was believed, Stalin, or more likely his successors, would abandon plans for expansion and accept peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world.

Washington's perception of the Soviet Union was never uniform, however. While most officials, including the State Department's Russian experts, saw communism as the instrument rather than the determinant of Kremlin policy, there was always just enough evidence to make the alternative view at least plausible. Establishment of the Cominform revived speculation, which had never entirely disappeared, regarding the ideological component of Soviet diplomacy. Moscow's actions during the Czechoslovak and Berlin crises seemed unnecessarily provocative, leading some Americans to detect an element of irrationality in Stalin's behavior which might lead him to risk war. It now seems likely, as Kennan pointed out at the time, that these were defensive responses to the unexpected psychological impact upon Europe of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.¹⁶ Nonetheless, to those who witnessed them, such developments could not help but increase skepticism about the limited and pacific nature of Stalin's ambitions.

¹⁵ McLellan, "The 'Operational Code' Approach: Dean Acheson," pp. 70-72; McGeorge Bundy, ed., *The Pattern of Responsibility*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952, pp. 31-36. See also the analysis in Coral Bell, *Negotiation From Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power*, New York: Knopf, 1963, pp. 23-25.

¹⁶ See, on this point, Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-67*, New York: Praeger, 1967, pp. 445-455; and Louis J. Halle, *The Cold War as History*, New York: Harper and Row, 1967, pp. 146-167. For Kennan's analysis, see his *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, pp. 378-379.

Simultaneously, the geographical scope of the cold war was expanding because of the victories of communism in China. U.S. officials understood fairly clearly that Mao was coming to power because of internal conditions, not external help from Moscow. Still, Mao's increasingly vocal proclamations of solidarity with the U.S.S.R. did raise doubts about the independent base of his movement. At the very least, they suggested that for the moment Stalin had succeeded in projecting Russian influence into areas outside Europe.

Up to this point the Administration had assumed that, in the event the Russians did start a war, an American threat to use the atomic bomb would be sufficient to keep them from overrunning Western Europe; large expenditures for conventional weapons were thought unnecessary. News that the Russians had detonated their own bomb, late in August 1949, was read as an abrupt signal that the U.S. deterrent would not last. One result was Truman's decision, made early in 1950, to try to regain nuclear superiority by building a hydrogen bomb. Perhaps equally significant in the long run was a second, less dramatic conclusion which gradually emerged—that unless and until the United States could regain a clear advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear weapons, Washington and its NATO allies would have to try to counterbalance, for the first time, Russian troop levels in Europe. Restoration of confidence remained the goal of U.S. policy, but Americans and Europeans alike now came to see confidence as requiring not just economic aid, but also military assistance, the stationing of U.S. forces in Europe indefinitely, and eventually, though never with unanimous enthusiasm, the rearmament of West Germany.

Hence, even before the Korean War broke out, dominant opinion in Washington no longer held that the policies of 1947—economic aid without military involvement—would suffice to contain Soviet expansion. As in 1941, an increasingly ominous threat had convinced key Washington policy-makers that it would not be enough simply to serve as an "arsenal of democracy"; men as well as resources would have to be committed if American security was to be preserved.

While this change in the official perception of the nation's chief external threat was taking place, domestic political pressures were reducing the Administration's freedom to distinguish between peripheral and vital interests. This differentiation had been an important one, partly because Washington officials considered Soviet expansion a danger only in certain parts of the world, partly because they perceived definite limitations on their own capabilities for meeting that danger. As time went on, though, the distinction became more and more difficult to maintain. To an extent, this was the Administration's own fault: Truman and his top aides continued to use universal rhetoric to justify less-than-universal policies. Limited programs, they believed, would make a greater impression on both the Russians and a still largely isolationist Congress if stated in unlimited terms. But having pictured the Soviet Union as seeking world domination, and having described Communist parties throughout the world as puppets of the Kremlin, Administration officials found it difficult to explain why the United States should not resist communism wherever it appeared.

The dilemma was particularly evident in the case of China. Although Tru-

man and Acheson did not welcome Mao's victory, neither did they expect China, in the long run, to remain a Soviet satellite. Their strategy was to try to turn Chinese nationalism against the Russians in the hope either that Mao would be overthrown as a Kremlin puppet, or that the Chinese leader would evolve into a kind of "Asian Tito."¹⁷ But the success of this scheme depended upon maintenance of strict neutrality in the Chinese civil war, a position Administration spokesmen could not easily justify in the light of their own repeated expressions of hostility toward communism everywhere.

Growing preoccupation with internal security compounded the problem. Revelations of apparent disloyalty among a few officials, together with the determination of leading Republicans to capitalize on the issue, had by early 1950 placed the Truman administration very much on the defensive. Historians still vigorously debate the origins of McCarthyism, but the effects of that phenomenon on U.S. foreign policy are clear enough: even before the junior Senator from Wisconsin launched his own campaign to purge the State Department of questionable elements, indiscriminate anticommunism at home had severely restricted the ease with which policy-makers could distinguish between varieties of communism abroad. The Administration did try to regain flexibility through belated public explanations of its policy: the China White Paper, Acheson's National Press Club speech, and several other official statements of late 1949 and early 1950 can be seen as cautious attempts to stress the distinction between peripheral and vital interests, to argue against encouraging unity in the camp of the adversary through automatic resistance to communism everywhere. In the heated atmosphere of the period, however, these educational efforts only furnished ammunition for the Administration's critics.

Finally, a major constraint, already noted, had been the firm belief on the part of many Washington officials that the nation could not afford to spend more than \$15 billion a year on defense. Suggestions had even been made that Soviet belligerence was intended to provoke the United States into exceeding that limit, thereby spending itself into inflation and ruin.¹⁸ These assumptions came under challenge early in 1950, not from the military but from the civilian sector of the government. Leon Keyserling, soon to become chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, had begun to argue that the nation could significantly expand its productive capacity, thus generating increased government revenues, without inflation.¹⁹ Keyserling's ideas were put forward in support of Truman's Fair Deal program, but State Department planners, concerned over the strategic implications of

¹⁷ NSC-48/2, "The Position of the United States with Respect to Asia," December 30, 1949, U.S. Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Washington: 1971), VIII, pp. 265-272, especially p. 270. For an interesting attempt to use the Yugoslav situation to promote conflicts between nationalism and communism in Asia, see the State Department's statement of September 16, 1948, *Department of State Bulletin*, September 26, 1948, p. 410.

¹⁸ Schilling, "Fiscal 1950," pp. 103-106.

¹⁹ Alonzo L. Hamby, "The Vital Center, the Fair Deal, and the Quest for a Liberal Political Economy," *American Historical Review*, June 1972, pp. 663-665; Edward S. Flash, Jr., *Economic Advice and Presidential Leadership: The Council of Economic Advisers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1965, pp. 36-39.

the Soviet atomic bomb, quickly seized on them as a justification for higher defense expenditures. The result was NSC-68, the nation's first formal statement of national security policy.

Paul Y. Hammond has described in detail the origins and evolution of this still-classified document.²⁰ Suffice it to say here that it pictured the Soviet Union as aspiring to world hegemony, refused to rule out the possibility of war, and recommended a much broader, more energetic and expensive effort to counter this threat. The document left unclear the question of whether communism motivated Moscow's policy or was the instrument of it, but by defining the Soviet challenge as worldwide it encouraged the tendency to equate the interests of communism everywhere with those of the Kremlin. Coming at a time when the threat of communism appeared to have increased, and when domestic pressure for more vigorous efforts to contain it had intensified, NSC-68 indicated how a global policy of resisting communism could be implemented without bankrupting the country.

Truman still had not accepted the final recommendations of NSC-68 when the Korean War broke out late in June 1950, but that event could hardly have been better calculated to ensure their approval. The Administration assumed from the first that the Russians had sanctioned the attack, a conclusion which recent, though admittedly tendentious, evidence from Soviet sources tends to support.²¹ By suggesting that Russian ambitions were not confined to Europe or the Middle East, and that Stalin would risk war to attain them, the invasion seemed to confirm in the most dramatic way the basic premises of NSC-68. It was of little consequence that the attack occurred in a part of the world whose security the United States had not guaranteed; the blatant nature of the invasion made the defense of South Korea an urgent priority, even if it had not been before. Memories of Munich were fresh—where open aggression was concerned, distinctions between peripheral and vital interests became irrelevant.

The onset of the Korean War did not immediately dash hopes of instigating a Sino-Soviet split, but the requirements of that conflict did cause the Administration to make several moves which seriously compromised its "hands-off" policy toward the Chinese civil war. While there was military justification for the decision to send the Seventh Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Straits, the principal purpose of that order was to promote unity on the home front by placating Chiang Kai-shek's increasingly vociferous supporters in the Congress.²² Acheson had already decided in May to aid French forces in Indochina as a means of encouraging full French support for European defense; Korea, which the Administration feared might be a feint prior to a Soviet attack in Europe, reinforced the importance of that decision and brought about an increase in U.S. assistance. In September, the Administration authorized General Douglas MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel in an

²⁰ Paul Y. Hammond, "NSC-68: Prologue to Rearmament," in Schilling, Hammond and Snyder, *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets*, pp. 267-378.

²¹ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, p. 479; Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1970, pp. 400-407.

²² On this point, see John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War*, New York: Norton, 1965, pp. 61-64.

effort to "liberate" North Korea: after Inchon the opportunity to unify the country seemed too great to pass up; the dangers of restraining a successful, popular and politically outspoken general too great to risk. It should be emphasized, though, that none of these actions was directed primarily against Peking: expressions of friendship for the Chinese people continued to emanate from Washington, together with sedulous efforts to promote discord with Moscow.

Rarely has one nation more thoroughly misjudged the intentions of another. Chinese intervention in Korea, late in November 1950, demonstrated that however farsighted the Administration may have been in anticipating an eventual Sino-Soviet split, its immediate policy toward Peking had been blinded by an inability to assess the effects of its own actions, neglect of the ideological underpinnings of Mao's program, and, it must be added, a large amount of plain wishful thinking. To its credit, the Administration did not respond by launching an all-out war with China; instead it reverted to its original goal of liberating South Korea. But Chinese intervention did put an end to the assumption that there existed significant differences between varieties of communism, and that these could be turned to the advantage of the United States. From now on the prevailing view was that communism in Asia, as in Europe (apart only from Yugoslavia), was a monolith, and that, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff put it in 1952, "each Communist gain directly involves a loss to the Western world."²³

v

This reversal of policy did not take place without considerable debate inside the government, as the memoirs of George F. Kennan and now of Charles E. Bohlen have made clear. Both men had been influential in determining the parameters of containment in 1947; in 1950, neither was able to halt what each regarded as a dangerous perversion of that doctrine. An examination of why their recommendations were not followed reveals much about how the globalization of containment came about.

Neither Kennan nor Bohlen had conceived of containment as a permanent policy; the objective in their view was to demonstrate to the Russians, through the creation of viable non-Communist societies along the periphery of the Soviet Union, that their own best interests lay in a peaceful resolution of differences with the West. The sooner the Russians began to negotiate, the better. Both men made a clear distinction between Soviet imperialism, which was the real enemy, and international communism, which was to be opposed only where clearly an instrument of the Kremlin. Neither expected the Russians to risk war to gain their objectives. Both men believed in keeping diplomacy a flexible instrument, conducted by professionals with minimal interference from Congress or the public (though Bohlen attached more importance than Kennan to building public support for diplomatic policies). Both of these men were realists, aware that conflict was the normal state in relations among nations, but hopeful at the same time that it could be kept

²³ JCS memorandum to the Secretary of Defense on "United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Communist Aggression in Southeast Asia," March 3, 1952, *United States-Vietnam Relations*, VIII, p. 488.

within manageable limits by adroit diplomacy.

Simply stated, what Kennan and Bohlen wanted was specificity, whether in the perception of adversaries, the analysis of their intentions, the formulation of an American response, or its public justification. Both men disliked what Kennan later called "universalism": the tendency "to seek universal formulae or doctrines in which to clothe or justify particular actions."²⁴ The sweeping language of the Truman Doctrine represented the kind of approach they opposed; the Marshall Plan, with its concentration on specific objectives, its flexible tactics, its toleration of ideological diversity, corresponded closely to what they had in mind.

Official Washington thus was not at first hostile to the kind of precision Kennan and Bohlen advocated; for an Administration as concerned as this one was about the limits of its own power, specificity made sense. But bureaucracies rarely reflect with perfect fidelity the intentions, however praiseworthy, of those who command them. Forced as they are to operate in situations where the consequences of their actions are difficult to foresee, government officials tend to try to reduce uncertainty by relying on what Hadley Arkes has called "operating presumptions": rules of thumb which, by shifting burdens of proof from one side to another, favor particular alternatives over others.²⁵ By the spring of 1950 it had become clear that the burden of proof had shifted to Kennan and Bohlen, that universalism was more compatible with the operating presumptions of the American foreign policy apparatus than was the particularist approach which they supported.

Kennan himself tried to account for this development in the famous lectures on U.S. diplomatic history which he delivered in April 1951 at the University of Chicago. In cautious words, which nonetheless provided a springboard for much of the postwar "realist" critique of American diplomacy, Kennan traced a "legalistic-moralistic approach" which "runs like a red skein through our foreign policy of the last fifty years":

It is the essence of this belief that, instead of taking the awkward conflicts of national interest and dealing with them on their merits with a view to finding the solutions least unsettling to the stability of international life, it would be better to find some formal criteria of a juridical nature by which the permissible behavior of states could be defined.²⁶

A decade and a half later, in his memoirs, Kennan speculated that this tendency reflected the American commitment to government by laws rather than by executive discretion: "Laws, too, are general norms, and Congress, accustomed to limiting executive discretion through the establishment of such norms in the internal field, obviously feels more comfortable when its powers with relation to foreign policy can be exercised in a similar way."²⁷ Thus, Kennan blamed Congress in particular for the way the Truman Doctrine was framed.

²⁴ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, p. 322.

²⁵ Arkes, *Bureaucracy, the Marshall Plan, and the National Interest*, pp. 177-179.

²⁶ Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, pp. 82-83. See also Kennan to Bohlen, December 4, 1950, quoted in George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1950-1963*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1972, p. 34.

²⁷ Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, p. 323.

But the realist-idealist dichotomy seems a less than adequate explanation of the presumption in favor of universalism. If the cold-war revisionists have demonstrated anything (and many of their conclusions are questionable), it is that the realists' picture of American policy-makers as babes in the woods, innocently unaware of the relationship between power and interests, is seriously at variance with the facts.²⁸ Men like Dean Acheson did not see universalism as inconsistent with realism, nor were they noted for the awe with which they regarded "formal criteria of a juridical nature" in international affairs. Nor, although universalism was initially a response to the Congress, is there convincing evidence that legislators forced it on a reluctant bureaucracy. Rather, universalism rapidly became an instrument used quite deliberately by the White House and the State Department to expand their freedom of action. As the events of the 1960s have demonstrated, there is nothing incompatible between universalism and very broad executive discretion in the field of foreign policy.

The need for credibility in diplomacy provides a more plausible explanation for the persistence of universalist tendencies. Ambiguity, Coral Bell has observed, can be helpful in conducting foreign affairs: "It is always dangerous to lead the other side to believe that you intend *less* than is, in fact, the case, but it may be useful to lead it to believe that you intend rather more."²⁹ Unqualified proclamations of determination to resist Soviet expansion everywhere very likely carried greater weight with the Kremlin than would have public resolutions to act only in certain areas and circumstances. Certainly the one effort made during this period to explain limited policies in limited terms did not produce the desired effect: whether or not Acheson's National Press Club speech of January 1950 in fact persuaded Stalin that he could safely sanction the North Korean attack, there were enough people in Washington who believed that it did to ensure that the tactic was not repeated.

Moreover, it was not just American policy which had to be credible. The Soviet challenge also had to seem real if support for containment, both at home and in Europe, was to be maintained. It is not often remembered today how fragile the foundations of containment were. In Europe, the movement toward integrated programs for economic recovery and mutual defense required the submergence, not only of nationalism, but also of intense Germanophobia. Within the United States, backing for these projects depended upon the Administration's ability to overcome deeply rooted isolationist traditions which even World War II had not wholly eradicated. There was no difficulty in maintaining either consensus as long as the Russians behaved belligerently—the Czech coup, for example, did more than any other single event to ensure approval of the Marshall Plan and NATO, both in Europe and on Capitol Hill. But there were other brief periods—for example, in the middle of 1949—when Soviet diplomacy assumed a more moderate appearance. At such times, serious negotiations on issues like Germany or Japan still ran the risk of raising hopes for peace to a point which might have undermined the twin pillars of consensus upon which containment rested.

²⁸ Robert W. Tucker, *The Radical Left and American Foreign Policy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971, pp. 105-108.

²⁹ Bell, *Negotiation From Strength*, p. 92.

This is not to say that Administration policy required the deliberate stimulation of a crisis atmosphere. It is to say, though, that given the discouraging precedents of Munich and (however misconstrued) Yalta, given the ever-present possibility that association with Communists might suggest sympathy for them, given the conviction that the West was operating from a position of relative weakness, the remote possibility that negotiations with the Russians might produce results seemed to Acheson and his advisers not worth the risks, both in regard to public opinion at home and allies overseas.

Kennan thought that the Administration paid too much attention to these constraints. If Soviet expansion really was a threat, he argued, European allies and U.S. Congressmen would support containment out of a sense of their own imperiled interests. They should not have to be pressured or cajoled into doing so. But Kennan's argument assumes a consistency in the perception of interests which is, to say the least, rare. Foreign policy in a democracy can never be wholly insulated from the whims, prejudices, fears and shortsightedness of its constituency. As Bohlen points out in an unusual dissent from the views of his colleague: "The most carefully thought-out plans of the experts, even though 100 percent correct in theory, will fail without broad public support. The good leader in foreign affairs formulates his policy on expert advice and creates a climate of public opinion to support it."³⁰

There are limits, moreover, on the extent to which expert advice can be disseminated without oversimplification. The Truman administration found it necessary to obscure rather than illuminate the distinction between Soviet expansionism and international communism in order to get the Greek-Turkish aid bill and the European Recovery Program through Congress. Nor did Acheson have much success in educating the American people on the differences between varieties of communism: "I was a frustrated schoolteacher," he ruefully recalled, "persisting against overwhelming evidence to the contrary in the belief that the human mind could be moved by facts and reason."³¹ By the end of 1950 the Administration had reason to conclude that objective appraisals of the international situation only led to confusion; oversimplification, even occasional deception, might be required to persuade the American people and their allies to do what was necessary to ensure their own security. It was not an attitude conducive to the particularism and precision Kennan and Bohlen favored.

Moreover, the flexibility which these two Soviet experts advocated was difficult to reconcile with the bureaucracy's need for direction, a clear requirement in any large organization if coordinated operations are to be carried out. Paul Y. Hammond has noted the significant contrast which existed between Foreign Service officers like Kennan and Bohlen, who stressed reliance "upon the personal skills and noncommunicable wisdom of the career official," and administrators like Acheson, who accepted "the necessity . . . of forward planning with all its rigidities, simplifications, and artificialities." This distinction showed up plainly in the drafting of NSC-68. The two Russian specialists, possibly with the unforeseen impact of Kennan's 1947 "X" article in mind, argued that no assessment of Soviet behavior could be set down in

³⁰ Bohlen, *Witness to History*, p. 177.

³¹ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 302.

writing and communicated throughout the bureaucracy without seriously distorting reality; they objected, as Hammond puts it, "to what they considered an attempt to congeal and disseminate an esoteric skill."³² Acheson wanted a statement which could serve as a guide to action, even if this did require oversimplification. Professionalism in any field, it would seem, can be carried too far; one wonders if that point has not been reached when its findings become so rarefied that they cannot be communicated to those for whom they are intended.

Bureaucracies tend to perpetuate policies on which agreement has been reached. Reconsiderations consume time, energy and intellectual effort, commodities always in short supply. This, as much as anything, explains the declining influence of Kennan and Bohlen during 1949 and 1950. The two men advocated policies based on Soviet intentions, not capabilities, an approach which would have required frequent reconsiderations, since intentions can change more rapidly than capabilities. Quick shifts in policy were the last thing Truman and Acheson wanted, charged as they were with the difficult responsibility of maintaining support for containment from the American public and its European allies. The famous rejoinder which Acheson made to another group of critics is applicable here as well: the farmer who pulled up his crops every morning to see how much the roots had grown would not be very productive.

Finally, there is a presumption in any bureaucracy against taking risks. Security, after all, is a notoriously indistinct quality; only after it has been lost can one specify, with any precision, what would have been necessary to maintain it. What Kennan and Bohlen wanted were diplomatic and military policies closely calibrated to precise assessments of Soviet intentions. But intentions are difficult to predict, and it is even more difficult to know what degree of security countermeasures will produce. To continue to assert, as these Soviet experts did, that regardless of their capabilities the Russians intended no war, to continue to base policy on what Kennan himself admitted was "the unfirm substance of the imponderables"³³—all of this required considerably more faith in the arcane discipline of Kremlinology than those responsible for maintaining the nation's security were able to muster. To a threat which, to all appearances, had become universal, a response which erred on the side of safety rather than sorrow came to seem the better part of wisdom for those with ultimate responsibility.

In his pioneering study of the Marshall Plan, Hadley Arkes lucidly describes the difficulty of overcoming operating presumptions, once they have been established:

To argue for a rival position now is not to act any longer in an unstructured situation, where the issue may be open or undefined. It is to argue, instead, where premises have been established and preferences have already congealed. . . . The burdens of explicitness and argument may be extraordinarily heavy ones to carry . . . even for someone with a good argument or a zeal for dissent. But for the man who is diffident, who is not quite sure he has all the facts he needs, and who may well have to argue before committed and responsible

³² Hammond, "NSC-68," pp. 315-318.

³³ Kennan diary note, July 12, 1950, quoted in Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, p. 499.

men, this structure of discourse may simply be too forbidding to enter.³⁴

It is significant that the universalist tendencies against which Kennan and Bohlen argued persisted until, two decades later, a President and his National Security Adviser succeeded in virtually isolating the policy-making process from the bureaucracy, Congress and public opinion. The major test of the second Nixon administration, and of the Kissinger incumbency as Secretary of State, may well be whether it can create operating presumptions against universalism without undermining the credibility upon which an effective foreign policy must rest—while at the same time repairing the mechanisms for internal checks and balances which the Constitution demands.

VI

Turning points are much beloved by historians, providing as they do convenient instruments with which to structure our understanding of the past. Without them it would be difficult to make up examination questions, know where to begin and end lectures, or choose subjects for articles and books. The potential for exaggeration is vast; with industry and imagination, any event in history can be made into a turning point of one sort or another. There is an opposite tendency which is equally questionable, however, as illustrated by several recent New Left works which, in their concern to demonstrate continuity in the development of American imperialism, neglect the successive influences on U.S. foreign policy of isolationism, economic nationalism, idealism, bureaucracy and domestic politics. Discontinuities do exist in history; emphasis on turning points is, to an extent, unavoidable if they are not to be overlooked.

Unquestionably, a fundamental characteristic of U.S. foreign policy during the 1950s and 1960s was the tendency to view world order as an undifferentiated whole, and to regard Communist threats to that order anywhere as endangering the structure of peace everywhere. Within this frame of reference, no essential difference existed between peripheral and vital interests; since U.S. interests were equated with the maintenance of peace, they, like peace, were considered indivisible.³⁵

The language of the Truman Doctrine was compatible with this world view, but the policies the Truman administration actually followed between 1947 and 1950 were not. Communism was not regarded as a monolith during that period; distinctions were made, sometimes ruthlessly, between peripheral and vital interests. While conclusive judgments cannot be made without more sources and further research, sufficient evidence now exists to suggest that historians in search of turning points in American diplomatic history might more profitably concentrate their attention on the events of 1950 than on the famous 15 weeks of 1947.

³⁴ Arkes, *Bureaucracy, the Marshall Plan, and the National Interest*, p. 182.

³⁵ Robert W. Tucker, *Nation or Empire? The Debate Over American Foreign Policy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, p. 71.

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