

Containment Doctrine and the 21st Century

At the end of World War II, the political landscape of the globe had been drastically altered even compared to just seven years prior. Only the U.S. emerged from the conflict in a position of stability and prosperity. History taught the average American that war was a disruption of usual life that would eventually end bringing things back to the way they were before. This belief had held true following the conclusion of the First World War for nearly twenty years. This fantasy would be quickly proven wrong following the Soviet disagreements over implementation of the Marshall Plan and their annexation of several Eastern European countries in the late 1940's. It was around this time that public debate in America centered on how the U.S. could best respond to the Soviet advances and to protect its post-war supremacy. In 1946, American diplomat George Kennan authored what would come to be known as the *Long Telegram*. In it, he outlined his perception of the Soviet mission and offered up his recommended course of action, *Containment*. This strategy provided the blueprint for what would become the American foreign policy until the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980's. **While the doctrine of "Containment" provided every post-war President with an uncompromising focus on the end goal of victory over the Soviet in the arenas of Geo-Strategy, International Diplomacy, and Economic Policy, it often did so at the expense of American ideological values.**

Kennan's strategy of containment fell between the two extremes of possible policy. Rather than take an isolationist stance or send weary troops to war with Moscow, containment called for continued American economic and diplomatic dominance. It was a new idea built to face a new threat that the world had never seen. In the *Long Telegraph*,

Kennan wrote “Soviet hostility did not mean the Soviets would embark on a do-or-die program to overthrow capitalism by a fixed date. Given their sense of historical inevitability, they had no timetable for conquest” (Hook & Spanier, 36). Kennan based his thinking on the belief that “industry was the key ingredient for power... The United States and its allies constituted four of these (industrial) centers, the Soviet Union just one. Containment meant confining the Soviet Union to that one” (Hook & Spanier, 37). But Kennan’s strategy was not without its detractors. After Truman’s Secretary of State Dean Acheson fired Kennan in 1950, he replaced Kennan with one of his former deputies, Paul Nitze. Nitze was known to be much more hawkish on the Soviet issue than Kennan. In a 1950 report to Truman titled NSC-68, Nitze took the stance that “The issues that face us are momentous, involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but of civilization itself” (Nitze, Section I). Nitze’s view was that Moscow was eager to build up the strength necessary to hit America and eliminate all opposition to Soviet control of the world. He also argued that 1954 represented “the year of maximum danger” where forces would strike America unless it’s military spending was to shoot up across the board. Both Kennan and Nitze realized the importance of outlining a national foreign policy that would give all successor administrations a blueprint for controlling the situation with the Soviets. Both men also realized that the new nuclear reality meant that traditional armed conflicts between the two super powers were a thing of the past. Kennan called for political and economic pressure to weaken the Kremlin’s position of power whereas Nitze was more focused on the buildup of military might in the free world. What both men failed to rectify was the fact that this general

strategy of containment would put America in a difficult position for many years to come.

In his famous speech outlining what we now know as the *Truman Doctrine*, President Harry Truman said that America could only survive in a world in which freedom flourished. His belief was that “it would not realize this objective unless it was ‘willing to help free peoples to maintain their institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes’... ‘We must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way’” (Hook & Spanier, 41). These remarks exemplified many long-standing American ideals that were known throughout the world. The doctrine put America in a position where it was to be held liable to assist in the defense of any democracy the world over, established or fledgling, strategically important or not. Hook and Spanier described this strategic bind that containment and the Truman Doctrine presented America when they wrote,

“The Truman doctrine in its immediate application was intended to be specific and limited, not global. American policymakers were well aware that the United States, although a great power, was not omnipotent; national priorities had to be decided carefully and power applied discriminately... Containment was to be implemented only where the Soviet state appeared to be expanding its power” (Hook & Spanier, 42).

Conflicts with this paradox appeared soon after Truman issued his doctrine speech. Soviet pressure was being exerted in Eurasia where Turkey, Greece, and Iran lay susceptible. The governments in those countries sought American support not because of their democratic ties, but because America sought to contain Soviet expansion. Truman sided with strategy and against morality when he authorized the funding and training of the Greek army to oppose Soviet advances. Hook and Spanier described this when they wrote,

“The United States thus confronted a classic dilemma; protecting strategically located but undemocratic nations such as Iran, Turkey, and Greece might make the containment of Soviet power possible, but it also risked America’s reputation and weakened the credibility of its policy. Yet alignment only with democratic states, of which there were all too few, might make U.S. implementation of its containment policy impossible. The purity of the cause might be preserved, but the security of democracy would be weakened” (Hook & Spanier, 43).

These efforts to root out Soviet guerrilla fighters in Greece showed the world that while America was a defender of freedom, it was a fighter of Soviet efforts first.

The containment doctrine also took on a change when in 1953, the U.S. and the U.K. worked together to overthrow the democratically elected leader of Iran. In 2013, the CIA released admission in a statement where it said, “The military coup that overthrew Mosadeq and his National Front cabinet was carried out under CIA direction as an act of US foreign policy” (GlobalPost). The Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh had been gaining popularity and planned to announce a nationalization of the country’s oil industry. The U.S. wished to secure a piece of the oil wealth there and also planned on appointing a anti-communist leader that could be counted on to resist advances from the Kremlin. This event was significant as it represented the first time that the U.S. had actively worked to overthrow the government of another democracy. If the international community had any questions about the legitimacy of America’s claims to their full support for all democracies, the Iran coup d’état proved that anti-communist measures would always come first.

The legacies of containment are still visible and felt across the political landscape today. While the 1953 CIA actions in Iran led to 26 years of an American backed leader in the country, 1979 saw a major change in the situation. Fed up with the human rights violations of the Shah, Iranians overthrew the U.S. puppet. Soon there after, the Iran

Hostage situation took place that would consume much of the newly elected Carter's only term. Hook and Spanier wrote, "This event came on the heels of the ouster of Iran's pro-American leader, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, whose decades of brutal domestic repression were justified- in Tehran and Washington- on the basis of anticommunism" (Hook and Spanier, 122). The resulting backlash saw "The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's chief religious leader and imam, or leader, of all Shiite Muslims, called America the 'Great Satan'" (Hook and Spanier, 123). This sequence of events is widely seen as a driving force behind the anti-American sentiment that still pervades the Middle East to this day. Containment in its milder form is also seen as what led President Reagan to a more détente stance once Khrushchev came to power in Moscow. Beinart describes how Reagan became alarmed at the idea that Soviet leaders could misinterpret his political stance when he writes, "he (Reagan) learned that his nuclear buildup and anti-Soviet speeches had so terrified Kremlin leaders that they interpreted a NATO war game as preparation for a real attack and put their military on high alert" (Beinart, 2010). This realization led Reagan to later proclaim that the U.S. "respects the Soviet Union's status as a superpower and has no wish to change its social system". It is today believed that Reagan's second term dovish stance allowed Gorbachev to make the reforms necessary for a de-escalation of the Cold War and even serves as a model for the Obama Administration's foreign policy strategy.

If America is to continue its mission of making the world safe for democracy, a modern "Universal Doctrine" should be adopted. Where the Bush administration declared a War on Terror and subsequently invaded two sovereign nations largely without international support, President Obama and future presidents should adopt a different

approach. Future presidents should recognize that Terror is largely a world problem without borders. International institutions should be utilized to build consensus for addressing the problem of Global Terrorism and applying pressure to Nation States that continue to fund such activities today. Where containment sought to build up the strength of the Western World in areas such as military, politics, and economy to oppose communism, a new containment should focus on the attitudes towards terror groups.

The Doctrine of Containment while controversial in its infancy later proved to be the blueprint of American foreign policy for nearly fifty years. Rather than call for the resolution of conflict with the USSR through traditional means, it outlined a long-term strategy of outdoing the Soviets in the areas of geo-strategy, international Politics, and economy. It allowed US Presidents to play to America's strengths, but also put several in a political bind when the interests of containing Russia took precedent to promoting and safeguarding democracy. It helped America prevail in its ideological struggle against communism. But it also created the political reality that we see today in the Middle East, as well as the War on Terror that is still the focus of US foreign policy today.

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