

Start of the Cold War: The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan

Overview

- In 1947, President Harry S. Truman pledged that the United States would help any nation resist communism in order to prevent its spread. His policy of containment is known as the Truman Doctrine.
- The Truman Doctrine demonstrated that the United States would not return to isolationism after World War II, but rather take an active role in world affairs.
- To help rebuild after the war, the United States pledged \$13 billion of aid to Europe in the Marshall Plan.

The Truman Doctrine

The world was in flux in the aftermath of World War II, and political upheaval reigned in many countries. Already wary of communism thanks to George Kennan's Long Telegram, the US government was dismayed when a number of countries in Europe and Asia adopted communist governments in the late 1940s.

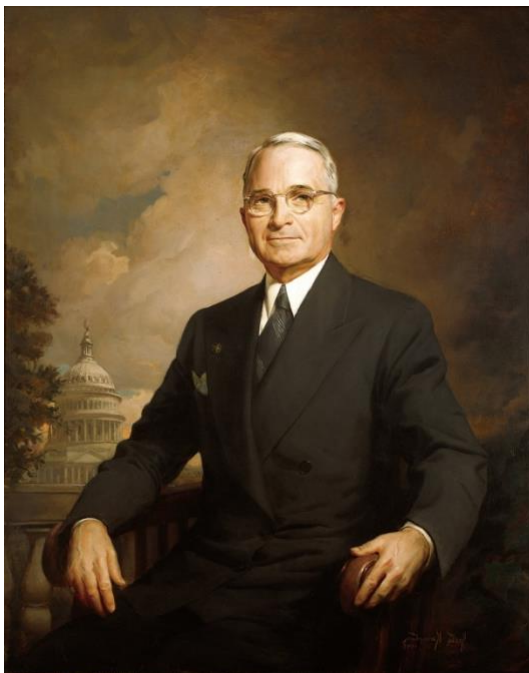


Figure 1: Official White House portrait of Harry S. Truman, painted by Greta Kempton, 1945.

When the United Kingdom notified the United States that it could no longer afford to fight communist insurgencies in Greece and Turkey, US President Harry S. Truman issued what would become known as the Truman Doctrine: a promise that the United States would do whatever was necessary both economically and militarily to contain the spread of communism around the world.

With this step, the United States signaled that its role on the world stage would not conclude after World War II, ending a century and a half of isolationist foreign policy in America.

During Truman's presidency, the Truman Doctrine would result in another conflict in Asia, this time in Korea, as the US government attempted to prevent the unification of Korea under a communist government. Truman's policy would continue to drive American interventions through the 1980s.

The Marshall Plan

One of the most pressing problems in the immediate aftermath of World War II was the reconstruction of Europe. The war left a swath of destruction that crippled infrastructure and led to massive food shortages in the winter of 1946-1947.

The US government feared that a hungry, devastated Europe might turn to communism (as China would do in 1949). To stabilize the European economy, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall proposed a plan to provide Europe with \$13 billion in economic aid.

The Marshall Plan proved enormously successful, helping to rehabilitate European nations that accepted the aid. It also provided a boost to the American economy, since Marshall Plan funds were used to purchase American goods.

What do you think?

1. Why did the United States end its long history of isolationism after World War II? Would it have been possible for the US to return to an isolationist foreign policy?
2. What were the benefits and potential pitfalls of Truman's offer to support any country trying to resist communism?
3. Which was more successful in combatting the spread of communism: economic aid or military force? Explain.