

AN APPRAISAL OF THE US COLD WAR POLICY OF CONTAINMENT, 1947-1953.

Paul Chukwudi Uba

Department of History and International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

The Containment Policy of the United States of America in the 1940s was one of the most crucial and strategic post-war policies ever employed or implemented by a Western superpower in the face of adversity, warfare and strife in the history of Western civilization. World War II was coming to a close and the Soviet Union was advancing its influence and political will in Europe and other parts of the globe. In order to quell such influence marching and advancing from the Soviet Communists, the United States government conceived a divisive and inconceivable policy at the behest of the country's political and economic survival in order to maintain US hegemony and military monopoly in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. This paper examines the role of the US Cold War Containment Policy in international politics during the 1940s and 1950s and the ways in which the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan influenced the policy in America's dealings with the Soviet Union and China, her antagonizing rivals in the Cold War. This paper also analyzes the nature of the Truman Doctrine in the world of international affairs and the pivotal importance or significance the doctrine played in importing Western democracy and hegemony to Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East.

Key words: Policy, Containment, Truman, Soviet Union, Doctrine, Marshall Plan.

Introduction

Chief Obafemi Oyeniya Awolowo (1909-1987), the late Nigerian statesman and nationalist, once said, *Those who desire to reach,*



*and keep their places at the top in any calling must be prepared to do so the hard way*¹. These words ring so true in any war drama, especially in the Cold War drama between the United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the era of the Cold War ranging between 1947 and 1989. The United States of America, at the end of World War II, feared that the Soviets would advance and occupy liberated European countries in order that Communism could be established and systematically enforced in countries once occupied by the Nazi Third Reich of Germany². The Americans perceived that Soviet occupation of East European countries such as East Germany, Poland, Eastern Romania, Estonia, Lithuania, East Finland, Latvia, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria would serve as a beginning of Soviet influence and military power in world politics and couldn't dream of giving up any territory or nation in their sphere of influence and political might to the Soviet Communists in the name of appeasement, restitution, or reparations. The violation of the Yalta Agreement by the Soviets concerning Poland sent wrong or negative signals to the US government at the time that the Soviet Union was unreliable and untrustworthy in terms of political agreements and negotiations and saw the hand writing on the wall that the Soviets might expand their influence and political manipulations to different parts of the world, particularly territories colonized by the United States such as the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, North Mariana Islands, and US Virgin Islands³. Another warning signal was the Soviet Union's first atomic bomb launched at Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan on August 29, 1949⁴. The Soviet Union's RDS-1 sent shivers to the spinal cords of the Americans and was an indication to the United States that the Soviet Union needed to be liquidated militarily and economically for the sake of the so-called *Free World*⁵.

In order that the Soviet influence and political will were quelled or defeated indefinitely, the United States government under the



administration of President Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) devised a policy which was in its nature strategic, meddling, egocentric, and goal-setting-oriented in every imaginable way to undermine and frustrate the foreign interests of the USSR, maintain and promote the imperialist interests of the United States globally. This policy was referred to as the *Policy of Containment*, and this policy was designated by the Truman administration to limit the spread of Soviet power and Communist ideology in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. As the *Policy of Containment* implemented by the Presidency of Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) is carefully and thoroughly explored, discussed and examined in this academic paper, the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan will be empathetically evaluated in their role and significance in shaping the principles of Truman's Policy of Containment against the USSR during the height of the Cold War.

Origin of the Policy of Containment

The *Policy of Containment* originated from an eight-thousand-word telegram sent by an American Diplomat named George Frost Kennan (1904-2005) to Washington D. C. in 1946. This telegram was known as the *Long Telegram* and in this telegram, Kennan wrote that Soviet leaders exploited the idea of capitalist encirclement in order to justify their totalitarian rule at home. The Soviets would seek to expand everywhere⁶. They would not negotiate in good faith⁷. They understood only the logic of force⁸. Kennan's telegram was greeted with enthusiasm in Washington⁹. His hard-line attitudes resonated with many influential career diplomats at the U.S. Department of State and many leading officials in the Pentagon¹⁰. When General George F. Marshall (1880-1959) became Secretary of State in early 1947, he asked Kennan to head a new Policy Planning Staff in the Department of State¹¹. Kennan was encouraged to disseminate his views widely. In July 1947, he wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs*, the most prestigious journal of international relations in the United States



under the pseudonym "X". Titled, *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, he argued that the political personality of Soviet power was the product of ideology and circumstances in the present reality¹². Kennan was by himself a genius with his philosophy of containment. He believed that the only option to facing the Soviet Union's aggression towards US hegemony and imperialist goals in international politics was to contain her expansion in a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant manner¹³. Many foreign relations experts believe that Kennan thought that the Soviet Union was fundamentally weak and could not survive economically due to her Communist economic system. He might have come to the conclusion that the Soviet Union might change dramatically from the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies if the unity and efficacy of the Soviet Communist Party were disrupted or sabotaged¹⁴. With George Kennan's policy of containment, the United States shaped her political strategy and manoeuvres in her relations with the USSR which proved to be tactical and relevant in the Cold War years. In November 1948, the newly formed National Security Council approved a policy enumerating U.S. objectives with regard to the USSR. In times of peace as well as times of war, U.S. goals were:

- To reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat to the peace, national independence and stability of the world family of nations.
- To bring about a basic change in the conduct of international relations by the governments in power in Russia, to conform with the purposes and principles set forth in the UN charter¹⁵.

Kennan's policy of containment played a pivotal role in re-assessing the flexibility of the Soviet Union and revolutionized US approach to the Soviet Union and her foreign interests in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and East Europe in a way that had never been operated or preceded throughout the



history of the United States of America. The policy did not only take centre stage in US foreign policy throughout the Cold War years but took a centre stage in the US foreign policy of the Truman Administration. The Harry Truman Administration which lasted between 1945 and 1953 took delight in applying Kennan's policy of containment in its foreign policy initiatives due to the possibility of Communist penetration and infiltration growing in North America, Latin America, Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The Policy of Containment helped in enshrining its principles and ideological perspectives in two important Cold War policies of President Harry S. Truman's administration which were as follows:

- The Truman Doctrine.
- The Marshall Plan of 1947.

The Truman Doctrine

According to Roxanna Sjo"stedt, the Truman Doctrine was *a more general call for the U.S. to take the lead in a global struggle against Communism*¹⁶. President Truman's doctrine on containment was grounded on the assertion that international communism needed to be contained and liquidated in order to safeguard the national interests of the American people. Following the February 1948 coup d'état in Czechoslovakia which was inspired, organized and carried out by Czech Communists under the support and financial funding of the Soviet Union, an international solidarity was forged by several Western nations and organizations under the influence of Truman's doctrine of containment to combat the spread of Communist aggression and infiltration in Europe and other parts of the world. After several talks and deliberations, a treaty known as the North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington D. C. by prominent Western nations, particularly the USA, Canada, Portugal, Italy, and Norway, and exclusive members of the Western Union on April



4th, 1949¹⁷. This treaty later laid the groundwork or foundation for the formation/establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that same year which is presently dedicated to protect peace and the territorial integrity of its member states, and to work towards peaceful resolution of disputes¹⁸. By helping to establish NATO, the Truman administration was making its point extremely clear- international communism and its great ally, the Soviet Union would soon be on the verge of chaos and oblivion and would not be playing with the imperialist interests of Western Europe and America.

Truman consciously believed from his own personal point of view that the Soviet Union was an aggressive animal that desired scavenged lands and natural resources of other nations which were like chocolate cakes or goat meat for the sake of its political and economic survival as an Eastern European nation, and such an animal of such nature needed to be contained or sabotaged in the name of Americanism, and Eurocentric values, aspirations and norms. Such an animal, according to Truman, posed a socio-economic threat not only to the Western nations and multinational companies and establishments, but to the entire economic aspirations and values of a capitalist world. Truman's doctrine of containment effectively reoriented U.S. foreign policy, away from its usual stance of withdrawal from regional conflicts not directly involving the United States, to one of possible intervention in faraway conflicts. Both governments of these countries had sent delegations to seek assistance from the United States, even though the United States and the United Kingdom had previously pledged undying support for these countries facing immediate Soviet aggression and military manpower. The rapid weakening economy of the United Kingdom forced the British to discontinue their military and economic support for Greece and Turkey. Due to the recent developments in the United Kingdom, the Truman administration dispatched military aid to ensure that



Turkey would retain chief control of the Turkish Straits and fight off Soviet aggression¹⁹. It provided Turkey the sum of \$100 million in economic and military aid, and the U.S. Navy sent the country the Midway-class aircraft carrier USS Franklin D. Roosevelt²⁰. This was done by the Truman administration in order to accomplish the national goal of countering Soviet influence in the Middle East. The Truman administration feared that if the Turkish government were not given what it wanted, it might be forced to succumb to Soviet pressure and give up the Turkish Straits to the Soviet Union and this would definitely affect the imperial interests of the USA at the economic and political level²¹. The Greek government, on the other hand, was provided \$300 million in military and economic aid by the Truman Administration as a result of the growing casualties of the Greek Civil War arising on the side of Greek monarchists and the urgency of the monarchist government for American assistance²². The Truman administration thought that the provision of economic and military aid was the only strategic step for the United States to help the monarchist regime of King George II (1890-1947) to defeat and sabotage the ELAS and its moral allies which the ELAS had in the persons of the USSR and the Kremlin. Truman and his advisers knew that the ELAS was morally and financially supported by the Soviet Union and understood the significance of Soviet support to the ELAS²³. To cripple such backing from the Kremlin, the United States found it crucial to send aid to the government of Greece in order to counter the Kremlin and its influence in Greece, particularly in the country's civil war.

Though strategic and meddling in its nature, the Truman Doctrine was a policy of radical proportions which served the purpose of liquidating the influence of the USSR and squeezing the Communist ideology into nothingness in different parts of the world, particularly in Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The Truman Doctrine pushed the ideals and



concepts of Americanism which were by symbolism the human torch that moved in its voltage and speed around the world against the influence and military power of a Communist country which by its sudden rise and development in 1917 proved to be a strong and deadly python which the United States of America chose to play with in the 20th Century. It should be noted that the doctrine was the first step in the direction of containment of communism in the world of international politics and a formal renunciation of its policy of isolationism²⁴. The Truman Administration adopted this doctrine because the military and political advancement of the Soviet Union after the end of the Second World War in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East was growing extensively in an uncontrollable nature that was indescribable and rough to comprehend. Most historians understand that the Truman Doctrine was a necessity that proved to be very resourceful, calculative and productive for the United States of America (USA), but manipulative, exploitative, meddling, imperialistic, self-serving, and egocentric in the guise of democracy and human rights to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Truman Doctrine was a significant factor in the establishment of the Central Intelligence Agency on July 26th, 1947, with Allen W. Dulles as its first Head. The CIA, under the directive of the Truman Administration, was later instrumental in liquidating Soviet influence in Europe through interfering in national elections and assassinating European leaders alleged to be Communists or Soviet sympathisers. In the case of Italy, the CIA was successful in influencing the 1948 Italian election in favor of the Christian Democrats²⁵. The \$200 million Exchange Stabilization Fund (equivalent to \$2.5 billion in 2023), earmarked for the reconstruction of Europe, was used to pay wealthy Americans of Italian heritage. Cash was then distributed to Catholic Action, the Vatican's political arm, and directly to Italian politicians. Other heinous activities of the CIA orchestrated by the United States government would later be carried out in



other areas of importance in Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Carribeans. All these activities would be accomplished under the foreign policy objectives of the Truman Doctrine ranging between 1947 and 1953.

The Marshall Plan

Officially called the European Recovery Fund (ERF), the *Marshall Plan* was a US initiative enacted in 1948 to provide foreign aid in Western Europe. The United States transferred \$13.3 billion (equivalent to \$173 billion in 2023) in economic recovery programs to Western European economies after the end of World War II. Replacing an earlier proposal for a Morgenthau Plan, it operated for four years beginning on April 3, 1948, though in 1951, the *Marshall Plan* was largely replaced by the Mutual Security Act. The goals of the United States were to rebuild war-torn regions, remove trade barriers, modernize industry, improve European prosperity and prevent the spread of communism²⁶. In 1947, two years after the end of the war, industrialist Lewis H. Brown wrote, at the request of General Lucius D. Clay, *A Report on Germany*, which served as a detailed recommendation for the reconstruction of post-war Germany and served as a basis for the *Marshall Plan*. The initiative was named after United States Secretary of State George C. Marshall. The plan had bipartisan support in Washington, where the Republicans controlled Congress and the Democrats controlled the White House with Harry S. Truman as president. Some businessmen feared the *Marshall Plan*, unsure whether reconstructing European economies and encouraging foreign competition was in the US' best interests²⁷. The plan was largely the creation of State Department officials, especially William L. Clayton and George F. Kennan, with help from the Brookings Institution, as requested by Senator Arthur Vandenberg, chairman of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations²⁸. Marshall spoke of an urgent need to help the European recovery in his address at Harvard University in June



1947²⁹. The reconstruction plan, developed at a meeting of the participating European states, was drafted on June 5th, 1947. It offered the same aid to the Soviet Union and its allies, but they refused to accept it, under Soviet pressure (as was the case for Finland's rejection) as doing so would allow a degree of US control over the communist economies³⁰. President Harry S. Truman signed the *Marshall Plan* on April 3rd, 1948, granting \$5 billion in aid to 16 European nations. During the four years that the plan was in effect, the United States donated \$17 billion (equivalent to \$240.95 billion in 2023) in economic and technical assistance to help the recovery of the European countries that joined the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation. The ERP addressed each of the obstacles to post-war recovery. The plan looked to the future and did not focus on the destruction caused by the war. Much more important were efforts to modernize European industrial and business practices using high-efficiency American models, reducing artificial trade barriers, and instilling a sense of hope and self-reliance³¹. The *Marshall Plan* was one of the first elements of European integration, as it erased trade barriers and set up institutions to coordinate the economy on a continental level—that is, it stimulated the total political reconstruction of Western Europe³². The *Marshall Plan* proposed the reduction of interstate barriers and the economic integration of the European Continent while also encouraging an increase in productivity as well as the adoption of modern business procedures.

Though sympathetic and compassionate in nature, the *Marshall Plan* was another ploy by the United States to destabilize and liquidate Soviet influence in Western Europe due to the sudden occupation of Eastern Europe by the USSR which sent an early warning signal to the United States government that the USSR was extremely radical about her expansion of her influence around the continent of Europe. In order to counter the *Marshall Plan*



designated by the Americans, the Soviet Union rejected the benefits of the *Marshall Plan* and blocked such benefits to the Eastern Bloc countries, including Romania and Poland which were controlled by the Soviets. This was done by the Soviets to ensure that the United States did not undermine their national interests and autonomy in the Eastern Bloc countries. The Soviets established the Molotov Plan in retaliation to the United States and the Plan was designated to provide aid to rebuild the countries in Eastern Europe that were politically and economically aligned to the Soviet Union. Proposed by Soviet Foreign Minister, Vyacheslav Molotov (1890-1986), the Plan was implemented to serve Soviet interests and ensure that the Eastern Bloc countries never leave the Soviet sphere of influence. It was intended to be portrayed as a Russian version of the *Marshall Plan* the United States had implemented and drafted. Significantly, the *Marshall Plan* implemented by the United States made outstanding and at the same time, poisonous or contagious changes in Western Europe culturally, economically and politically. These changes included:

- Industrial production increased by 35%.
- Agricultural production substantially surpassed pre-war levels.
- The poverty and starvation of the immediate post-war years disappeared, and Western Europe embarked upon an unprecedented two decades of growth that saw standards of living increase dramatically.
- The Plan subtly Americanized European countries, especially Austria, through new exposure to American popular culture, including the growth in influence of Hollywood movies and rock n' roll.



- The *Marshall Plan* aid allowed the nations of Western Europe to relax austerity measures and rationing, reducing discontent and bringing political stability.
- The Communist influence on Western Europe was greatly reduced, and throughout the region, communist parties faded in popularity in the years after the Marshall Plan.
- The trade relations fostered by the Marshall Plan helped forge the North Atlantic alliance that would persist throughout the Cold War in the form of NATO.

Henry Hazlitt, an American journalist criticized the *Marshall Plan* in his 1947 book, *Will Dollars Save the World?*, arguing that economic recovery comes through savings, capital accumulation, and private enterprise, and not through large cash subsidies. Austrian School economist, Ludwig von Mises criticized the *Marshall Plan* in 1951, believing that *the American subsidies make it possible for [Europe's] governments to conceal partially the disastrous effects of the various socialist measures they have adopted*³³. It is certain that the Marshall Plan was a political soccer ball aimed at winning the Cold War and securing the political and cultural influence of the United States. By helping Western Europe recover from the destructive effects of World War II, the USA was emphasizing on her foreign interests and military influence in Western Europe and maintaining her economic power base in the continent of Europe. Though the nature of the *Marshall Plan* is considered imperialistic and objective towards dominance, monopoly and autonomy, others see the *Marshall Plan* as a political upliftment from totalitarianism, tyranny and domination which was alleged to be the part and parcel of Communism.

Conclusion

Like the Green Anaconda crawling relentlessly for its prey in the jungles of South America, the United States of America desired to



devour the Communist threat and eat it up and spit it out to decay. The US-Cold War Policy of Containment was a political machine that was essential to the survival of the United States and her imperial status as a superpower. The United States as an imperial superpower was worried that the Soviet Union was advancing her influence in Europe and doing everything possible in her power to frustrate the power grab mechanism the US was using to undermine Soviet autonomy and sovereignty on key issues of international politics. The Truman Administration was very relentless about preventing Communist influence and ideology advancing not only in Europe, but in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Carribeans. President Harry S. Truman was very adamant about the threat of the Soviet Union and was not ready to give in to any concession that would threaten the foreign interests of the United States (US) and undermine US economic monopoly in Europe. His containment policy is recognized by historians and foreign policy experts as one of the most strategic and tactical policies ever implemented and designated by a Western superpower to determine her survival as a world economy and as a political Western entity.

End Notes

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