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# THE ISOLATIONIST DOWNFALL WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TRUMAN DOCTRINE

## ABSTRACT

The advent of the Truman Doctrine in 1947 was a historical moment in US foreign policy, which brought a significant change of approach from traditional isolationism to internationalism. Those who vehemently opposed this unprecedented policy were congressional isolationists. The article analyzes how and why the isolationists' policy was abandoned after the Truman Doctrine was established. It can be stated that the downfall of isolationists was a process determined by the international actions of the USSR and the US' reaction. The main reason the isolationists changed their view was, on the one hand, the Truman administration's anti-Soviet policy, and on the other, a compromise approach of government administration to budget expenditures on support to the different countries, tailored to isolationists' preference. The paper is focused on almost two years of the early Truman's presidency until the signing of the Truman Doctrine (1945–1947). The primary method of research is content analysis and process tracing.

## Keywords

isolationists, Truman Doctrine, US foreign policy

## Introduction

Isolationism is a foreign policy aiming to limit political connections overseas, especially wars, to maintain the nation's security and well-being (George, 2011). Thus, isolationism advocates neutrality and opposes foreign military entanglement and mutual defense pacts. Historically, such intensified opposition emerged during the debates on participation in wars and foreign policy transformation. In the case of the US, the focus of adamant isolationist objections to changing the US approach to external affairs was the Truman Doctrine.

The Truman Doctrine was announced by President Harry S. Truman in 1947 in order to send immediate economic and military support to Greece, threatened by a communist uprising, and to Turkey under the Soviets' expansion towards the Mediterranean (Marx, 2012). The doctrine reoriented US foreign policy from the previous isolationist stance to active interventionism in conflicts abroad.

The article aims to present how international events and the Truman administration's strategy changed the isolationist view and why this happened. The text also sheds some light on the isolationists' logic. The first part of the article focuses on how the US worldview changed under the influence of the Soviet Union's actions, followed by the analysis of the isolationists' view on the foreign and domestic situation, to finally present why the Truman Doctrine changed the isolationist attitude and how it occurred.

The research question focuses on how and why the isolationists' policy was abandoned with the establishment of the Truman Doctrine. It can be stated that the isolationists' decline was determined by measures taken by the USSR internationally and the US reaction to them. The main reason the isolationists changed their view was, on the one hand, the Truman administration's anti-Soviet policy and, on the other, a compromise approach of the government to funds spent on support to different countries.

The primary research method is content analysis. The literature on the congressional isolationists' arguments and the Truman Doctrine will be analyzed, and the content of the documents (for example, Kennan's letter) and speeches of the isolationists' congressmen will be discussed. The process tracing method, which tracks pivotal events related to the Doctrine, will be instrumental in answering how the formulation of the Truman Doctrine contributed to the downfall of the isolationists. The Coercion-Extraction Cycle theory examines the American military expansion from the perspective of the function of a government in the society and reinforces isolationist arguments.

Literature on American isolationism can be classified into several categories, focusing on various aspects: firstly, foreign policy and international relations (Braumoeller, 2010; Dueck, 2010; Nash, 2013; Rose, 2021); secondly, as opposed to the administrations' interference in foreign affairs, congressional movements (Doenecke, 1979; Griffin, 1968; Jonas, 1969) and civilian movements (Cole, 1983; Cole, 2016; Doenecke, 2013; Sarles, 2003; Stenehjem & Gerber, 1976); thirdly, texts examining the Middle West as an example of vigorous regional isolationism: (Schacht, 1981; Smuckler, 1953); next, studies on thoughts of particular leading isolationists: (Edwards, 2020; Matthews, 1982; Stenehjem & Gerber, 1976; Wunderlin, 2005); and finally, the long-lasting isolationists' ideas (Kauffman, 2016; Kennedy, 2002; Kupchan, 2020). While many scholars have explored the interwar period until the attack on Pearl Harbor, a time of vibrant isolationism, few studies focus on the Truman period, although some publications mentioned above include this era.

As regards the early years of Cold War isolationism, including the Truman Doctrine period, the following texts from the above literature can be considered relevant: the congressional movement (Doenecke, 1979) and the thoughts of the representative isolationist Robert A. Taft (Edwards, 2020; Matthews, 1982; Wunderlin, 2005).

When it comes to the past studies related to the Truman Doctrine, there were some publications on general foreign policy (Kaplan, 1993; May, 1973; Powaski, 2017) and detailed analyses of the Truman Doctrine (Bilsland, 2015; Brinkley, 1993; Frazier, 2009; Kaplan, 2015; Kennan, 1946; Merrill, 2006).

The definition of isolationism varies in the literature, and there is a limited number of publications describing the thoughts of the strongest adherents of isolationist tenets that have lasted since its founding era. Many texts describe it as correlated with American foreign policy and isolationist activities. Kenneth D. Rose (2022, p. 3) offers a broad description in his latest study on the issue, defining isolationism as "unilateralism in foreign affairs and the avoidance of war". Nevertheless, such a description could include more extensive characteristics of anti-interventionists during the interwar time, such as pacifists, socialists, Catholics, and even immigrants of German origin, all of whom opposed the entanglement in the war for different reasons. It also lacks an explanation of the difference in ideas between these groups and traditional isolationists.

## 1. The rapid expansion of the USSR and the changing worldview of the US

The transformation of US foreign policy from traditional isolationism to liberal internationalism during the early period of the Cold War was the direct outcome of the American anti-Soviet measures formulated during Truman's presidency.

The Truman Doctrine, understood as a transformation of foreign policy, began with the signing of an aid bill for Greece and Turkey, then under an imminent Soviet threat, in order to prevent the spreading of Russia's military influence to other parts of the world. This was the first time the US officially declared aid for specific countries that were not at war.

It was a historical moment as isolationism had been the country's policy since its founding period. Soon after the doctrine was enforced, liberal internationalism started to be more visibly implemented through bipartisan politics, and the US-Soviet military rivalry grew more serious.

The isolationists opposed this shift so vehemently that the Truman administration had no choice but to compromise, accounting to some extent for isolationists' preferences. If the congressional isolationists had approached the issue differently, US foreign policy would likely have taken a different course that might continue to this day. However, they eventually accepted the Truman Doctrine, and the isolationist tendencies did not reappear in force until the end of the Cold War.

The US emerged as a true global power for the first time during the Second World War. In September 1945, just after overcoming Japan, the US had the world's largest economy and the strongest and most technologically advanced armed forces. The end of WWII led to substantial demobilization. Between 1945 and 1947, American defense spending fell rapidly from \$81 billion to \$13 billion, and military personnel declined from 12.1 to 1.6 million, of which 373,000 were serving abroad (Kupchan, 2020, p. 368). However, the Soviet Union emerged as another hostile superpower. Even though its victory in the war came at a high cost, the USSR continued demonstrating its military power in several corners of the world, such as Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, not heeding the agreements with Western allies. The Soviets' capability to influence other regions seemed to be much larger than that of former superpowers Britain and France, whereby no other country but the United States was able to deal with the threat of communist Russia. The heating up of the Cold War left no choice for the US but to promote the remilitarization of its

foreign policy (Kupchan, 2020). A multi-polar system that existed until the end of WWII shifted to a bipolar system with only two new great powers.

The strengthened ties between the US and the USSR during the later years of WWII (1941–1945) were expected to last beyond the end of the war to keep world peace. The sudden invasion of the USSR by Nazi Germany in 1941, carried out despite the non-aggression Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, urged the US to provide military aid to the Soviets through the Lend-Lease Act; this forged an actual military alliance although earlier relationships had been awkward up to the last minute.

However, the awaited world peace did not come with the end of WWII because of the conflict between the former allies, the West and the Soviets. The defeat of the Axis meant that the Soviets successfully eliminated both its enemies, Germany and Japan, with the considerable help of the US. Joseph Stalin, Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, was able to return to his original purpose: expanding the area of Soviet influence. Faced with the USSR's aggressive militaristic policy toward several areas, especially Greece and Turkey, the recently established Truman administration (1945–1953) had to deal with this new threat.

The Truman Doctrine was announced in 1947 at the beginning of the bipolar conflict between the two new superpowers, directly triggered by the Soviets' aggressive policy towards East Europe, Iran, and especially Greece and Turkey in 1946. One of the first Truman's advisors who warned the administration about the true intention of the Soviets was George F. Kennan, the advocate of a policy of containment of Soviet expansion. Also, Undersecretary Dean Acheson played an active role in cooperating with President Truman to shape the doctrine. Additionally, Truman and his closest collaborators received much input on foreign affairs from Poland, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Greece, who insisted that the Soviet Union was vicious and untrustworthy (May, 1973). The Doctrine was a turning point in US foreign policy, making a shift from traditional isolationism to liberal internationalism, which continues today. Many isolationists who previously opposed any involvement in the European war converted to interventionism, with the influential Congressman Arthur Vandenberg, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, providing indispensable help in passing the Doctrine through Congress.

During the war, congressional isolationists vigorously criticized the several interventions conducted by the Roosevelt administration – such as the destroyers-for-bases deal, lend-lease agreement, and convoys – which strengthened

the US-UK military relationship despite the US' neutral position and domestically unprecedented conscription.

Some isolationists vehemently condemned the administration's anti-Soviet policy even at the beginning of the Cold War. However, they eventually agreed to enforce the Truman Doctrine, recognizing the global threat, whereby their impact seriously declined and was never prominent during the Cold War.

The turning point of US foreign policy was directly triggered by two incidents in Greece and Turkey, signaling a long-term strategic commitment to Western Europe. There was a difference of opinions regarding the necessity to intervene in European affairs between the Congressional isolationists and the Truman administration and the interventionists, which generated a great debate, forcing the administration to persuade influential politicians as to the necessity of US involvement and eventually leading to amending the aid bill for the two threatened countries.

The problems across the Atlantic were the Greek Civil War and the Turkish Straits Crisis. Without warning, the British embassy in Washington notified the State Department that Great Britain was almost immediately terminating its ongoing aid to Greece and Turkey, both of which were perceived to be threatened by the Soviet Union. The British government would no longer be able to continue assisting Greece and Turkey due to its economic problems. The British would remove the 40,000 troops previously sent as immediate military aid to both states (Bilsland, 2015, p. 55).

The British government hoped that the US would take over the tasks of stopping the collapse of the Greek government in crisis and strengthening the ability of the Turks to defend themselves against the Soviet threat. British leaders worried that without the intervention of the US, Greece and possibly Turkey were in danger of becoming Soviet satellites (Frazier, 2009).

Turkey's trouble was the more straightforward of the two. At the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, Stalin cited Soviet security needs to justify demands for joint control with Turkey over the Straits of the Dardanelles. As a passageway from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, the straits offered Russia coveted access to warm water international ports. When negotiations failed, Stalin conspicuously stationed troops near the Turkish border, which promoted Turkey's appeal to Washington for help.

Meanwhile, Greece experienced severe political and economic mismanagement and civil war after the withdrawal of the German occupation forces in October 1944 (Merrill, 2006). The elections under American and British supervision gave a mandate to an essentially right-wing government, and a referendum

resulted in the restoration of the monarchy. Anti-government and anti-monarchist groups led by communists reopened a civil war (May, 1973). London, which viewed Greece as a strategic linchpin for its Middle East empire, supported its rightwing regime and helped subdue an armed insurrection by the Communist-led Greek People's Liberation Army, or National Liberation Front. Having advanced a \$25 million emergency loan to Athens, Truman dispatched Chairman of the former Federal Communications Commission Paul A. Porter as an ambassador to Greece in January 1947 to research the country's finances. Porter's report spotlighted Greece's swelling budget deficits, inflation, and black marketeering and reported Prime Minister Constantine Tsaldaris as "completely reactionary... incredibly weak, stupid, and venal" (Merrill, 2006, p. 31).

The Truman administration recognized that Greek and Turkish problems were connected to international security issues. State Department official Joseph Jones and Secretary of State George C. Marshall took up the matter on Monday, 24 February, in a meeting with Truman and the Secretaries of War and Navy. A State Department memo summed up the consensus: Greece and Turkey stood as the "last obstacles" to Soviet hegemony in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean, highlighting the threat to those regions and the oil-rich Middle East, the strategic Suez Canal, and eventually to European recovery (Merrill, 2006, p. 32). On 26 February, all department heads agreed that the potential collapse of Greece and its submission to Soviet rule posed a direct threat to US security. The US needed to send aid to support the Greek and Turkish governments (Bilsland, 2015).

The Truman administration's view of Greece as one of the oldest nations in the world and the cradle of democracy was the other factor that urged the US to proceed with the aid. As the Undersecretary, Acheson, stated: "Sometimes they lost their independence and the possibility of democracy. They would rise and get it back again and struggle on further to develop the principles of individual freedom and democracy" (Kaplan, 1993, p. 4).

In the self-perceived role of the "defender of the Free World", the US recognized that it had no choice but to intervene in Greece; otherwise, as Acheson warned, the spread of communism from Greece to the rest of the world would start. In his words, "Like rotten apples in a barrel infected one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east" (Kaplan, 1993, p. 3).

However, due to the Republicans' gain due to the 1946 midterm election, the Truman administration had to deal with the isolationists' protest against providing aid to either state.

To pass the aid bill by explaining the threat to national security to Congressmen, the foreign policy team scheduled the meeting with members of the Congress for 27 February. President Truman asked Secretary of State Marshall to describe the geostrategic implications of the Greek and Turkish crises for US policy. Marshall addressed the Congressmen sternly, saying that a power vacuum in the region had been created by British withdrawal, which led to the imminent danger of the Soviet's expansion. After Marshall's presentation, members of Congress expressed their concerns about the US involvement in the matter and its economic cost, yet Acheson managed to persuade them. Impressed by Acheson's explanation of the danger of the Soviets' ideology, Vandenberg played a crucial role in adapting the Truman Doctrine by amending the bill, the so-called "Vandenberg amendment", to meet the isolationist preferences and cooperating with the president.

President Truman was critical of US isolationism, especially that of the 1930s, and held that if the US did not intervene in European affairs, the possibility of conflict would increase and threaten the US interests and security. However, he was restrained by two factors. One was his war experiences as a soldier in WWI and as president during WWII. He did not want to lead the US into direct conflict with the Soviet Union. Secondly, as regards domestic politics, discussed later in the paper, he knew that Congress would disapprove of US military involvement in Greece (Bilsland, 2015).

As to the nature of the Doctrine, it was shaped by both geostrategic and ideological considerations. Underlying the ideological dimension was the comprehension of the strategic significance of Greece and Turkey: access to the Eastern Mediterranean and the oil resources of the Middle East. Ideologically, both countries were conceptualized as crucial barriers to stopping the spread of communism in Europe. However, the President was not the first to notice the Soviet threat (Bilsland, 2015).

In the immediate aftermath of WWII, George Kennan noticed the potential danger posed by the Soviet Union and tried to prevail over the administration, which attempted to establish a relationship with the Soviet Union for world peace. He was also an advocate of the containment policy of Soviet expansion.

The Soviet threat was conceptualized in two competing strands within the Truman administration before the Doctrine formulation. The first group of policy-makers viewed the Soviet Union as a traditional great power that sought to maximize power, influence, and security within the existing international system, as expected by Truman himself. They were concerned not with the internal workings of the Soviet Union but with its external behavior (Bilsland, 2015).



The second group, which Kennan was part of, did not accept the views of their colleagues. For them, the Soviet Union was a revolutionary state that intended to overthrow and replace the capitalist world order with worldwide communism led by Soviet thought. To explain the Soviet Union's foreign policy adequately, these analysts argued that US foreign policy must focus on ideology, not just calculations of power and interest (Merrill, 2006). Besides Kennan, the group included the three other most prominent experts on the Soviet Union in the State Department and Foreign Service: Loy Henderson, Charles Bohlen, and Elbridge Durbrow. After diplomatic relations were established with the Soviet Union in 1933, all four served extensively at the embassy in Moscow. Durbrow became the senior staff officer for Soviet matters in the State Department at the end of WWII and succeeded Kennan in Moscow when the latter returned to Washington in mid-1946. In 1946 and 1947, Henderson was the director of the Office of Near East and African Affairs, which dealt with Greek and Turkish matters, while Bohlen became a special adviser to the secretary of state (Frazier, 2009).

George Kennan articulated the central ideas of the second group in his "Long Telegram" sent to Washington in February 1946. As a senior officer in the Moscow embassy at that time, he argued that Soviet foreign policy could be perceived partly by the "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" stemming from the Russian Revolution of 1917 and compounded by Marxist-Leninist ideology. This insecurity, connected with the fear of the outside world and the dictatorship's need to protect its rule, justifies the increase of military and police power of the Russian state (Kennan, 1946). Kennan believed that "there can be no permanent peaceful coexistence" with the Soviet Union, which aimed at pursuing the ideals of worldwide communism (Merrill, 2006).

He interpreted the primary focus of the Soviet policy as a great effort to strengthen the relative power of the USSR in the international society. At the same time, no chance should be overlooked to weaken capitalist states' collective and individual strength. As Kennan (1946, p. 6) grimly concluded, the antagonistic Soviet foreign policy appeared to be "undoubtedly greatest task our diplomacy has ever faced, and probably greatest it will ever have to face".

Although Kennan was convinced of the danger posed by the Soviet Union, he maintained that the USSR did not present a military threat on the ground that there would be no open warfare in Europe. Instead, he wanted the US to pursue a policy of economic and political containment.

Nevertheless, what the administration ultimately implemented as anti-Soviet policy differed from Kennan's original intention to make it only politico-economical containment; Kennan favored aid to Greece and Turkey and advised

against a flashy ideological appeal. As a self-proclaimed realist, Kennan disdained public opinion, which he believed interfered with the balance of power politics. Consequently, his vision of restrained containment fell halfway as Washington mobilized for confrontation (Merrill, 2006).

Indeed, a confrontational military approach had consequences after Truman finally got the desired legislation passed. It was a long-run, global-scale containment policy against the Soviets, partly fueled by presidential measures, which the President could not have expected as the long-term side effect of his decision. Later, this commitment extended to the creation of NATO as the first establishment of a military alliance with Europe in 1949; a proxy armed conflict in Korea in 1950 soon followed (Bilsland, 2015).

## **2. Domestic Situation and the Isolationists' Rationale**

The reasons why congressional isolationists opposed the Truman Doctrine were mainly economic. The US was able to cut its enormous military expenditure after WWII, but the interventionist argument that the nation should be active overseas was dominant. However, once the Republicans won the 1946 midterm election and gained control of Congress, isolationists gained enough force to vehemently oppose the interventionist approach formulated in the Truman Doctrine. Under their intense criticism, the Truman administration had to compromise somewhat. Isolationists, particularly prominent senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, had ample reasons to resist the entanglement, including their standpoint on the post-war domestic situation.

In the early post-war US, the division of the views on US foreign policy among the Republicans resembled the situation preceding the attack on Pearl Harbor. Isolationist leanings were still noticeable among Republican conservatives, Midwesterners, and representatives of rural areas. They were protectionist, sceptical of multilateralism, and opposed to foreign engagement and its expenses (Dueck, 2010). One of the main concerns among Republican isolationists and conservatives after the war was how to prevent the dominance of communism abroad while maintaining the government's size restricted. Some were confident that the newly established United Nations could dissolve any international trouble (Frazier, 2009).

In contrast, the adherence to interventionism was continuously influential among urban Republican moderates and Northeasterners, as well as international traders, lawyers, financiers, Ivy League university professors, and administration staff. More than three-quarters of Americans answered in a public

opinion poll that they were ready to take a more “active part” or “larger role” overseas, including a majority of Republicans (Dueck, 2010, p. 72). Additionally, even Americans of German origin, a traditional crucial Republican constituency, no longer disagreed with US foreign military engagement.

Under these circumstances, being labeled as an isolationist had become an electoral disadvantage at the national level. Consequently, a significant force of internationalist Republicans had grown in Congress, even among conservatives and representatives of the Midwest, which used to be a vehemently isolationist region. This group, led by Vandenberg, was prepared to cooperate with the Truman administration on foreign policy issues.

With such interventionist Congress makeup, the Truman administration repeatedly requested approvals of extremely costly foreign aid measures: a billion-dollar loan to Britain in 1946, a million to support Greece and Turkey the following year, and then further billions to implement the Marshall Plan to Western Europe early in 1948.

However, the dramatic gains of the Republicans in the 1946 midterm elections changed the situation. Isolationists grabbed the control of Congress and, as fiscal conservatives, were well-positioned to object to expensive spending (Dueck, 2010).

Besides the economic perspective, isolationists criticized several other aspects of international aid regarding the reliability of Greece and Turkey, the risk of direct military confrontation with the Soviets, and the betrayal of American foreign policy traditions.

Concerning the credibility of the two target countries, isolationists claimed that a corrupt dictatorship ruled Greece, distant from the glory of the past and unworthy of American support. Their evaluation of Turkey was even worse. For some isolationists, all Turks were murderers and tyrants associated with the Ottoman Empire as enemies of Christian civilization. Generally, the two countries were seen as autocratic, far from achieving democracy.

Some isolationists also pointed out that there was no reason to interfere with the USSR’s “legitimate” goals. Senator Edwin C. Johnson declared that the Soviets had as much right to the Dardanelles Strait as the US had to the Panama Canal. He even said, “America was attempting to deny to the great Soviet Union freedom of the seas” (Doenecke, 1979, p. 77). A Chicago entrepreneur, Sterling Morton, went even further, claiming that Russia’s determined assertion of power in Hungary in May 1947 was caused by Truman’s disordered intervention in Greece (Doenecke, 1979).

Another point of severe criticism was the concern of a possible military clash with the USSR just after WWII. Several isolationists maintained that Truman's policy could not prevent World War III but might lead to it. For them, the problem was over-extended commitments and possible wartime casualties. At the same time, they feared that the American Republic would become an "imperial" power.

One of the main isolationists' arguments focused on the endless economic burden of aid for the allies. Republican George H. Bender suspected secret pledges from the US to support right-wing forces in France and Italy. The communists were excluded from governments in both countries in May 1947, which contributed to the start of the Cold War in Western Europe. Columnist Walter Lippman warned: "We are not rich enough to subsidize reaction all over the world" (Doenecke, 1979, p. 80).

Isolationists objected to the aid bill mainly because it was against American traditional isolationist foreign policy accumulated since the foundation era. They suspected that the Doctrine could significantly change the American political structure, with the executive dispossessing powers given to other federal branches.

What must be noted to thoroughly examine the background of isolationist doubts regarding proactive interference abroad is the consistent argument that involved domestic policy. Senator Robert Alphonso Taft was a representative isolationist, vocally opposing the doctrine with reasonable logic. Many quoted criticisms against Truman's foreign approach could be summed up as isolationists' traditional reasoning.

Commonly known as "Mr. Republican", Taft embodied the foreign policy stance of conservative anti-interventionism. Finding the background of his arguments against Truman's internationalist foreign policy requires comprehending the long-standing isolationist logic based on constitutional institutions, such as a limited government, a strong Congress, and civil liberty – ideas contradictory to active foreign policy and resulting military expenditures.

The son of the 27th President William Howard Taft, Robert A. Taft devoted his life to politics. He ran for his party's presidential nomination three times as a conservative Midwestern Republican candidate, losing each time to the Northeastern interventionists – Wendell Willkie in 1940, Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, and finally Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, a year before his death.

Nevertheless, in the early post-war era, Taft gained the most influence as a leader of the Republican party; thereby, he and his supporters practically controlled the right wing of this party (Matthews, 1982). As described by

Lee Edwards (2020, p. 1), a researcher at the Heritage Foundation, “[Taft] was the most powerful Republican in the Senate because of his formidable intellect, a huge appetite for hard work and long hours, and political integrity”. While Senator Vandenberg took the leadership of internationalist Republicans amidst the growing transnational concerns and attempted bipartisan cooperation with Democrats on foreign policy matters, Taft and his colleagues felt no sympathy for such bipartisan policy (Matthews, 1982).

The issue that Taft condemned the Truman administration for followed the traditional isolationist argumentation. He was concerned about a weakening of Congress as a representative of the people and the deterioration of the constitutional institution of limitation to presidential war power. Taft suspected that active foreign policy could strengthen the president’s role at Congress’ expense. Implementing Truman’s policy led to increased federal regulation of the economy and political life – the opposite of limited government, strong Congress and civil liberty. Even though Congress, especially the Senate, has a duty and power correlated with any administration’s conduct of foreign relations, negotiations with other countries have to be conducted by presidents and their administrations. Concerning presidential authority, Taft declared,

The president is responsible for what this nation says to foreign governments, but he must be very careful in his statements as to what this nation will or will not do, because unlike most executives in European countries, he has not the final power to put his foreign policy into effect (Matthews, 1982, p. 510).

Thus, according to the Senate, the imminent threat was not caused by dismantling the international order but primarily by the strengthened executive powers at home.

Taft also emphasized the dangers of secret diplomacy in constitutional terms, particularly with regard to the Teheran and Yalta conferences, where President Roosevelt signed private agreements. Taft argued it was outside open diplomacy, or “wise democratic doctrine”. In his opinion, any secrecy as the first step of general foreign policy would deprive Congress and the Senate of their power to decide on the constitutionality of such actions (Matthews, 1982, p. 512).

This limitation of the presidential war-making power required little political connection with other countries to avoid conflicts. George Washington explicitly declared this point in his Farewell Address of 1796:

The great rule of conduct for us concerning foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.

(...) It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world. (Copeland, 1999, p. 257)

Furthermore, the empowered administration would also intervene in the domestic economy sector. Taft feared that the enormous military spending following the Greek-Turk aid program would prevent the peacetime domestic economy from prospering and suppress civil liberty. The notion of his group reflected the need for domestic policy that would provide people with a comprehensive social welfare program, such as education and housing assistance, grounded in the principle of liberty and equal opportunity. Such measures would stimulate the private sector to shift away from the wartime government-controlled economy. Taft wanted the Republican Party to take the role of American liberals by introducing an improved comprehensive welfare program to offer US citizens liberty and equal opportunity.

His economic views were a capitalism-oriented approach involving limited government, individual responsibility, and personal freedom. The concept of the economic role of government advocated by the conservative Taft-led group clashed with the notion supported by the liberal administration and Democrats. As a fiscal conservative, Taft maintained that the government should not rule the civilian economy but encourage the production of goods, especially stimulate small businesses by providing suitable conditions. If the government had gained the ability to interfere in the private sector of the economy, the power of authority would have increased significantly. Contrastingly, the liberal view was that the federal government was responsible for providing the necessary amount of Federal investment and spending needed to maintain full employment. When Truman wanted to prolong the wartime price and wage control during the transformation period, Taft feared an unlimited government. The senator advocated that post-war economic measures should include transformation from wartime public enterprises and federal control of raw materials to gradual encouragement of civilian peacetime production. He also explained how the market supply and demand works, that the more producers of primary commodities get motivated the more they can supply, and that unemployment can be decreased. He argued that controls of essential items such as wheat, cotton, and lumber should be abandoned to revitalize the private sector.

Taft feared that sizable foreign spending would empower the administration and delay the revival of private businesses and was worried that the British loan, assistance to Greece and Turkey, and the Europe reconstruction plan would create an unnatural demand for American production and service. Despite

the government spending for compensation through public works or public companies' investments for foreign assistance, its compensatory support would ultimately exceed the demand of American society. Once the administration established the new production lines, stopping would be difficult until the international need was satisfied.

Furthermore, Taft pointed out the problem with the WWII Lend-Lease arrangement. The US produced many commodities provided to other countries for free, while the nation still imported goods at the global market price. In his view, the balance of this trade was negative for the US deficit accumulating over the years and severely stressing American resources. (Wunderlin, 2005).

Although Taft opposed the aid bill by citing the need for post-war economic revitalization of the private sector, he eventually reached a compromise with the administration, which will be discussed later, and accepted the Truman Doctrine.

Taft and his fellow isolationists significantly impacted Truman's developing national security policy. Defense spending was kept relatively low throughout the late 1940s, affecting America's new global commitments.

When Truman called for universal military training, which was highly likely to be approved at the time, the motion was defeated in the Congress primarily due to the opposition of Taft and others who viewed it as overly coercive, militaristic, and un-American (Dueck, 2010).

Despite the defeat of isolationists in the foreign policy debate, they would contribute to American political discussion by adjusting the Truman Doctrine's economic element to meet the American public's expectations, as excessive government expenditures not based on private demands would produce resistance and lead to domestic instability. A theoretical explanation of this situation is provided by the "Coercion-Extraction Cycle" theory (Finer, 2002), referring to the relationship between national spending and political stability.

To understand this theory, it is necessary to mention Easton's Political System Model (1965), which explores the function of a political system in its society. The political system (regime) generally works in relation to the public by making decisions (outputs) to answer public demands (inputs) and supports. According to this theory, the input comes into the political system from society, and output goes out of the system to its environment (society). The environment reacts to the result of the system's output in the form of feedback providing new demands and supports.

However, this framework sometimes works differently if feedback comes from inside the political system, from its administration rather than the environment.



Thus, a political regime requires resources to achieve its goal and implement decisions, understood as “extraction”. Such extraction involves collecting necessary goods from the social environment by coercion, while “goods” means money, people, and materials. Practicing extraction requires (governmental) coercion; otherwise, nothing can be gathered. Although extraction is usually needed to reach a goal crucial to the political system as well as to the environment – for example, completing significant public works or fighting a war – massive extraction without public consensus would lead to people’s resistance and, eventually, to political instability. If further extraction was necessary for political stability, coercion could be reintroduced, whereby the political system would enter into this negative cycle until it collapsed (Perlikowski & Bates, 2022).

In this context, Truman-era isolationists, on behalf of the environment, resisted the significant expenditures funding the aid programs and the Soviet containment policy instead of vitalizing the private sector economy. This policy was formulated in accordance with the administration’s demand (inside the political system) and did not reflect direct public benefit. Isolationists’ potential resistance could be seen in the Republican gain during the 1946 midterm election, while Taft also emphasized the importance of strengthening education, welfare, and housing programs to guarantee equal opportunity for citizens (Wunderlin, 2005). Therefore, considering 341 billion dollars spent during WWII, isolationists argued that the anti-Soviet policy should be cost-reasonable, and more money could be used to benefit the American people unless the Soviet threat to US security was imminent (Bilsland, 2015).

Let us suppose the coercion-extraction model had been applied to the Soviet Union. In that case, it might have had an advantage because the Soviet political system did not need to care for the public, with practically no practical domestic opposition to consider in the totalitarian regime. The reason for the USSR’s military expansion differed significantly from the American one: it was the innate ideological hostility towards capitalist states and the necessity of having a strong military to guarantee external security (Kennan, 1946). The US military buildup would be just a reaction to the Soviet behavior, and the more armies the Soviets deployed, the more the US had to respond to it while dealing with domestic voices of protest. The American expenditure would never end unless the Soviets collapsed or strong domestic opposition emerged.

Therefore, isolationists would agree to moderate foreign spending by forcing an economic compromise with the Truman administration in exchange for supporting the new doctrine. Historically, the US had avoided active foreign policy so as not to enter this “Coercion-Extraction Cycle” leading toward political



instability and regime collapse caused by public resistance by paying attention to the American public and having a political dialogue in a democratic system of governance (Kupchan, 2020). In this context, the congressional isolationists took a role in restoring the political feedback system to its pre-war form occurring between the political system and the environment.

### 3. The Doctrine speech and the isolationist approval

Due to the advantage Republican isolationists held in Congress, there was a need to amend the assistance program for Greece and Turkey to match their preferences.

The version of the bill that was ultimately passed demonstrated that Truman's strategy, mainly to ensure the cooperation of Vandenberg as a figurehead of the Republican interventionists before the doctrine speech, was successful. It helped to win the support of the fiscally conservative Republicans, including the Taft group, voting for the bill (Bilsland, 2015).

To gain public support, the president emphasized in his speech that American values were at stake in the face of the threat from communist ideology. At the same time, the doctrine also contained the strategic geopolitical view of the Eastern Mediterranean. Receiving adverse reactions to the speech from isolationists, Senator Vandenberg dealt with it by specifying the United Nations' military role in preventing the economic burden on the US from spreading. Finally, this compromise led to isolationists' acceptance of the Truman Doctrine.

Dean Acheson played a crucial role in formulating the Truman Doctrine. Assigned as undersecretary in 1945 from his previous post of an assistant secretary of state from 1941, he practically ran the day-to-day business of the State Department and planned recommendations for crucial decisions. After his predecessor, James F. Byrnes, resigned from office, Acheson promised to remain an undersecretary for six months when George C. Marshall began his term as secretary. Acheson recognized the threat of the Soviets early on, took part in persuading the Congress leaders, and was involved in writing the Doctrine speech.

As mentioned, Truman ordered his highest-ranking foreign policy staff to hold meetings with the congressional leaders, including Vandenberg. The president and Acheson had done the groundwork for the president's future foreign policy task to obtain influential Congressmen's support by meeting with them in the group meeting.

The first meeting, held on 27 February with on the Marshall's initiative, failed. After the Congressional response to Marshall, "Isn't this pulling British Chestnuts out the Fire?" Acheson asked permission to speak, stating that

We have arrived at a situation that has not been paralleled since ancient history. A situation in which the world is dominated by two great powers. Not since Athens and Sparta, not since Rome and Carthage, have we had such a polarization of power. It is thus not a question of pulling British chestnuts out of the fire. It is a question of the security of the United States. It is a question of whether two-thirds of the world and three-fourths of the world's territory is to be controlled by Communists (Bilsland, 2015, p. 57).

He did not present merely a theoretical speculation on this matter, but explained why he and Truman interpreted the issue as imminent. He also mentioned the ideological gap between the two great powers: while democracy and individual liberty were fundamental American values, the Soviets' absolute value was dictatorship.

Acheson's words shocked the Congressional leaders and Vandenberg, and so did Vandenberg, who came to recognize the need to prepare to support the administration's effort to pass the aid bill by amending it after the presidential speech (Bilsland, 2015).

Truman gave the Doctrine speech on 12 March 1947 before a Joint Session of Congress. He also declared Greece and Turkey a matter of national security and world peace. The main point was, "I believe 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" (Bilsland, 2015, p. 59). In this speech, Truman divided the world into two sides: free people ruled by democracy and open government and people subjugated to a minority ruling class by fear and coercion. The fall of Greece and Turkey would eventually cause a domino effect in other free countries, followed by the rule of the totalitarian regime, and ending up in global chaos.

The president also explained the rationale for the cost of the assistance program. The total cost of WWII was 341 billion dollars used to restore peace in the world, whereas the US would spend only one-tenth of that for the Greek-Turk aid. He added that the US would recognize the principles set in the United Nations Charter. This faith in the UN reflected Truman's idealistic tendencies. Being afraid of the opposition from isolationists, the president concluded: "The job is to get the facts to the country for support. We can't afford to revive the isolationists and wreck the United Nations" (Bilsland, 2015, p. 58).

The public response to the speech seemed encouraging. One editorial comment from *Life* magazine used the phrase “like a bolt of lightning”. This reaction could reflect the experience of Americans who lived in the era of economic depression, two world wars, and a weakening traditional racial and family structure. (Merrill, 2006, p. 34)

The Truman Doctrine could be described as a combination of ideological and strategic geopolitical considerations. Truman’s perception of the Soviets as a totalitarian state and a security threat to the world could justify the assistance bill and further development of US foreign policy as Greece and Turkey were key areas in terms of access to the Eastern Mediterranean, the strategic Suez Canal, and the oil-rich Middle East.

Before the Doctrine speech, Truman’s advisors agreed that the emphasis should be put not so much on the strategic importance of Greece and Turkey but on the challenge to America’s long-standing core values of representative government and individual liberty. Therefore, Acheson advised that the speech must avoid directly naming the Soviet Union, which could trigger a direct conflict since the possibility was still less likely (Merrill, 2006).

Overall, the presidential speech to Congress had a significant impact. Truman convinced the members of Congress of the need for the assistance program by stirring up the sense of crisis and utilizing ideological arguments (Bilsland, 2015).

However, the most crucial task the Truman administration still had to tackle was persuading the Taft-led isolationist group to accept the aid program. The mission was undertaken by Taft’s Republican rival Vandenberg, who devoted his efforts to passing the Truman Doctrine through Congress. In the 1930s, he used to be an isolationist and supported the Neutrality Acts. He converted into an interventionist after the attack on Pearl Harbor, claiming that the Japanese bombardment “ended isolationism for any realist” (Kaplan, 2015, p. 99).

He was a chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee from 1947 to 1949 and had more say on foreign affairs than Senator Taft, the party leader. Although Vandenberg wanted Taft’s approval in the form of a letter asking the Senate to consider interventionist foreign policy, he instinctively resisted many of the Truman administration’s foreign policy initiatives. Vandenberg needed every ounce of his authority and legislative experience to get his Republican colleagues to share his national goals because the consensus with Senator Taft to concede control in foreign affairs was always tentative, and their mutual rivalry was never far beneath the surface.

After the Truman Doctrine speech, Vandenberg upheld the essence of the Truman Doctrine without the approval of its military application (which was finally inevitable). He urged Senate members to submit questions about the aid program to deal with hard-boiled isolationists. He received 400 questions but narrowed it down to 111.

This number indicated how challenging this issue was to the Senate; there was no question more crucial to ask the administration than the one about the role of the United Nations concerning military spending. The draft created by the State Department did not include an explanation of what the U.S. intended with regard to the UN Charter's requirements. In reality, the UN did not have a relief fund, and there was no agreement among the member states for military assistance. Nevertheless, Vandenberg interpreted the absence of the role of the UN in the draft as the US proceeding with this mission (Kaplan, 2015).

Ironically, this issue of the ambiguous responsibility of the UN was one of the isolationists' alternatives aimed at curtailing US expenditures, although they generally opposed measures based on internationalist agreements. The UN supporters lamented the lack of this organization's role in the international arena. The influential journalist Walter Lippman described in his column that despite no mandatory US consultation with the UN on the matter of international aid, the essence of the UN Charter was to consult with its member states, especially with the permanent members of the Security Council, when dealing with international issues. Thus, in this political climate, isolationist Congressmen strived to argue for a reduction in spending by riding on the expected role of the UN in international aid.

Vandenberg was sensitive to the argument about overestimating the UN's international role, which could strengthen the isolationist argument regarding the reduction of US expenditure. Consequently, he added two modifications to the bill, the so-called "Vandenberg amendment", by pointing out on 23 March that, in accordance with the US principles, the US would be the one to provide aid to ensure the freedom and independence of threatened countries as long as the UN was not in the position to do so.

However, this amendment was still unsatisfactory for the bill opponents, requiring more precise engagement with the UN. Therefore, Vandenberg amended it for the second time on 31 March. This modification demanded that President Truman withdraw all aid when its goal was achieved or if the General Assembly determined that its actions rendered the assistance unnecessary, with the Security Council and the US waiving its veto to the General Assembly's decision.

As a result, the bill's passage through Congress indicated its bipartisan character; in the Senate it was 67 to 23 on 23 April, with 35 Republicans and 32 Democrats voting for the bill, and in the House of Representatives 287 to 107 on 8 May. This bill entered into force on 22 May after being signed by President Truman (Doenecke, 1979, p. 75).

The impact of the amendment was evident. In voting for the aid bill, only one-third of congressional isolationists voted against the President's proposal despite their broad criticism; this can be contrasted with the two-thirds previously opposing the British loan in 1946. The factor more crucial than others in passing the bill for Greek-Turkish aid was the effect of the amendment on the Taft group, who worried about the cost of the assistance program.

The direct reason for isolationists' acceptance of the bill could be mainly the administration's economic compromise in the form of the amendment introduced by Vandenberg. Considering the global Soviet threat, ideologically antagonistic to the core American values, and the expected lessening of the aid-related financial burden achieved through the amendment, Congressional isolationists recognized that the support for the Greek-Turkish aid bill was widespread and that there was little political gain in opposing it. Finally, they changed their anti-interventionist view to internationalism in order to maintain exceptionalism against the threat of the Soviets.

Nevertheless, Congressional isolationists regretted their unprecedented approval. They believed traditional Constitutional restraints upon presidential war-making authority would be abandoned, and the country would bankrupt its economy and risk its security. The Monroe Doctrine, a long-standing isolationist policy that implicitly recognized separate hemispheric spheres of influence between the West and the East, would be negated. Some isolationists stated that this particular proposal for Greece and Turkey would not only change the condition of these countries but also ruin the American tradition beyond repair (Doenecke, 1979).

#### **4. The US Transformation to Interventionism and the Fall of Isolationists**

From Truman's tenure onward, this political stance against the Soviets was upheld throughout the Cold War period. Under liberal internationalism supported by bipartisan politics, presidents adopted different models of foreign policy, shifting the balance between power and partnership. The period from the 1940s to the 1950s was the last moment of isolationists' political impact, and their force

remained significantly weakened until the end of the Cold War. The marginalization of isolationists can be seen in several political dialogues that have taken place since the Truman presidency.

In terms of world order, liberal internationalism would not emerge until WWII, when President Roosevelt and his successors developed it. US engagement in world affairs would prove politically sustainable because it was based on realist and idealist foundations, and the Truman Doctrine was no exception. This liberal internationalism combined interests and ideals, power and partnership. In a manner consistent with geopolitical realities, the US would extend its power abroad in pursuit of its political and economic interests. At the same time, as idealists wished, the US would seek to further its exceptionalist mission by pursuing a rules-based international order to promote global partnership and spread American values. The establishment of the United Nations was indicative of this new order.

In the view of bipartisan projects, following the adoption of the new liberal order above political divisions, isolationists were in a predicament. Although fluctuating somewhat, bipartisan support for liberal internationalism had already emerged during Roosevelt's presidency and continued throughout the Cold War. While building the new world order, Roosevelt was mindful of the partisan antipathies that had stopped Woodrow Wilson's bid to forge a long-standing internationalism. One example of this is Roosevelt enlisting Wendell Willkie, the Republican he defeated in the 1940 presidential election, to help build internationalism among Republicans.

The socioeconomic transformation also significantly strengthened bipartisanship. The war and post-war prosperity softened the class divisions and facilitated economic openness and liberalization of trade. The progress of advanced industrialization led to an unprecedented mobilization and mixing of the population as workers migrated to new production centers and ports. The situation made states homogenous enough to reduce sectionalism and regionalism, so the representatives sent to the Congress were more ideologically balanced. Thus, economic development and large-scale mobilization of people encouraged bipartisan politics with ideological moderation (Kupchan, 2020).

Under this bipartisan agreement on liberal internationalism, isolationism was marginalized to the fringes of American politics. The emergence of the trans-Atlantic military alliance in the form of NATO, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War represented the marginalization of isolationism.

When the Vietnam War was criticized for military overreaching, the term "new isolationism" emerged as part of regular political debate and was occasionally

used favorably by those who required withdrawal from Vietnam, but it was more often utilized as a pejorative label against the opponents of the war. In a 1964 public opinion poll, only 18% of respondents agreed that the US should look after its own business and let allies keep themselves safe as much as possible. By 1974, the late period of the Vietnam War, 41% of Americans agreed with the same statement.

In the case of the campaign for the 1972 presidential election, isolationists failed to express their presence. Senator George McGovern, who ran on the anti-war platform, was defeated by the incumbent president Richard Nixon. McGovern was the Democratic nominee and called for withdrawing all US troops from Korea and Indochina, reducing defense spending by one-third, and curtailing the US military presence in Europe by fifty percent. Indeed, the failure of the Vietnam War reawakened political debate on the benefits of non-entanglement. Still, the debate did not focus on ending the US's international responsibilities but rather on whether to get out of Vietnam and shrink the nation's global commitments.

Instead, the debate on American overreaching shifted the balance between power and partnership. Nixon, for example, deemphasized multilateral relations with allies by encouraging them to do more to defend themselves with the Nixon Doctrine. He also withdrew the troops from Vietnam and sought diplomatic rapprochement with Russia and China. In contrast, President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) strengthened the antagonism toward the Soviet Union, calling it an “evil empire”, boosting US defense spending and providing assistance to anti-communist movements in many corners of the globe in an attempt to “roll back” Soviet influence. However, his second-term diplomacy showed a return to the essential liberal internationalism, with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to pave the way for a dramatic de-escalation of the US-USSR rivalry; it was from then on to rely on a combination of power and partnership to finally set up the stage for the end of the Cold War (Doenecke, 1979).

Thus the common recognition of liberal internationalism supported by bipartisan politics since the early period of the Cold War demanded that Congressional isolationists transform their decades-old approach. It can be said that Truman's presidency was the last time the end of the Cold War when Congressional isolationists could forcefully promote their political ideas.

## Conclusions

The debate surrounding the Truman Doctrine between isolationists and the Truman administration was crucial for US foreign policy. If isolationists had opposed the assistance program to the end, interventionism could have been weakened, and the course of the Cold War would have been somewhat different.

As regards the danger posed by the Soviet Union, isolationists were guided by caution and prudence. They warned Roosevelt's administration about the risk of allying with that state throughout WWII. Besides, they asserted the necessity of having impregnable defenses to protect the US (Stenehjem & Gerber, 1976). History showed that the Soviet Union became a more serious threat than any other enemy country during the war. The Truman administration took years to notice the true intentions of Stalin, overlooking them until Kennan and other experts presented their analyses. The changing approach reached the phase of doctrine formulation after being directly triggered by the Soviets' activities threatening Greece and Turkey.

Congressional isolationists' view of the domestic situation must also be considered to comprehend the background of their opposition. Their ideas were founded on constitutional institutions, such as a limited government, a strong Congress, and civil liberty. The pursuit of an active foreign policy could contradict these principles. In this context, to ensure equal opportunity for individual freedom with self-responsibility and to facilitate the recovery of postwar economy, the government ideally should be small enough not to intervene in civic activities nor overwhelm the power of Congress. Thus, the administration should interfere as little as possible in foreign affairs. This was a long-standing universal American value, as the Founding Fathers started the trend of keeping their distance from Europe and the world (Kupchan, 2020).

Interestingly, even though WWII significantly weakened the well-established isolationist force, it was the intense post-war rivalry with the Soviets that led to the transformation of US foreign policy. The unprecedented scale of the Soviet sphere of influence and the USSR's adamant hostility towards capitalism, which the Doctrine speech emphasized, might have forced the US to change its foreign policy. Thus, the United States might not have ultimately had any other choice but to confront communist Russia, considering it to be their international duty.

Isolationists such as Taft could not resist the strong trend that emerged during the establishment of the Truman Doctrine, with the administration's concessions regarding the economic aspect of its aid program. Truman's strategy



to gain more advocates for the doctrine involved winning the favor of powerful Senator Vandenberg, a former isolationist.

The Cold War era brought demise to isolationists. Under liberal internationalism supported by bipartisanship, they could not gain enough traction to influence the administration's interventions, even when many Americans were against excessive foreign engagement. This situation changed only after the bipolar conflict ended in the early 1990s.

The world of the 21st century, in which bipartisanship in American politics has weakened, is no longer under the Cold War order, and thus vigorous sentiments opposing military intervention abroad have emerged again. As can be seen, Donald Trump's electoral successes indicated the revival of the long-dormant isolationist forces.

The points they have in common with the views of Truman-era isolationists are military overreach abroad and the need for economic recovery; in other words, today's isolationists recognize that unnecessary military expansion abroad is disadvantageous for the recovery of American economy. Under recent US administrations, the political climate has been conducive to downsizing the deployment of armed forces abroad, while economic frustrations are rising, mostly among industrial and energy sector workers due to marginalizing the post-industrial upper Middle West, also known as the Rust Belt. Trump's administration strove to give them jobs by revitalizing private companies to support the American economy.

The war in Ukraine seemed to once again encourage the formulation of bipartisan politics under the Biden administration to fight against Russia. Nevertheless, the recurrence of isolationist momentum can be observed as isolationist Republicans have gained the control of the House of Representatives and isolationist President Trump has run successfully in the presidential election. The consistency of isolationists' logic across centuries seems to be a recurrent trend in international politics and requires careful reflection.

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