

Truman Administration's Containment Policy in Light of the French Return to Indochina

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Introduction

During the first years of the Cold War, the Truman administration pursued a strong policy of containment to counter *perceived* Soviet aggression.¹ It is useful to underline that this was a perception of the American Government and, in many cases, these *intuitions* were wrong. The President and his establishment implemented the following policies (political, economic, and of course military) for three main reasons:

1. to preserve stability in the international arena;
2. to maintain a balance of power;
3. to express disapproval of totalitarian, non-democratic regimes.²

These were ideological statements and, regarding the last point, it is necessary to emphasize that United States intervened in Vietnam in order to prevent democratic elections that would have seen Ho Chi Minh elected by his people into leadership. The ideology of containment was also applied to Southeast Asia: this region was very important for the United States and Truman didn't want to return Indochina to France. Although Ho Chi Minh wasn't regarded as one of the worst American enemies, Truman (always considering his perceptions) didn't consider the option to exclude Vietnam (and Indochina) from the containment policy;³ the main reason was that after the Communist victory in China (1949), the American Government could not face the political damage of another loss to a Communist power in Asia.

It is possible to argue that the real United States' involvement in Indochina widened during the Truman administration. As Danielle Costa argues:

on V-J Day 1945, Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh stated independence from France, but the U.S. announced its support of restoring French power. In 1950, Ho Chi Minh again declared Vietnamese independence and Vietnam was recognized by Communist China and the Soviet Union. He controlled some remote territory along the Chinese border, while France controlled the remainder. Truman's containment policy (calling for opposition to Communist expansion) led the U.S. to continue to recognize French rule and the French client Government, and to amplify aid to Vietnam.

1 <http://www.indyflicks.com/danielle/papers/paper04.htm>

2 *Ibidem*.

3 *Ibidem*.

Kennan's Containment, the Long Telegram and NSC 68

George F. Kennan created the strategy of containment, probably the most used American policy for fighting the Cold War (1947-1989) with the Soviet Union and other Communist States. The strategy of Kennan, which can be considered the basis of the Truman administration's foreign policy, first came to public attention in 1947 in an article for the journal *Foreign Affairs*,⁴ the famous "X-Article."

The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.⁵

Again, it is important to specify that it represents Kennan's point of view and a starting-point for the American policies mostly based on his perceptions. He called for countering:

Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world through the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy.⁶

This kind of policy, in Kennan's idea, would

promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.⁷

For Truman and his advisors, the idea of the balance of power was predominant. As a consequence of this policy, the President increased military expenditures in Europe and Asia. "Truman implemented an assortment of aid packages to Europe, the so-called Marshall Plan⁸ (what the Marshall Plan and the billions in U.S. military aid largely accomplished was to allow the European regimes to construct their welfare states and, in the case of France, for one, to continue trying to suppress colonial uprisings, as in Vietnam) and Asia to help those Countries help themselves."⁹

Substantial American funds under the Marshall Plan enabled France to use its own resources to prosecute the war in Indochina.¹⁰

Truman believed that giving a strong economic aid to European and Asian Countries was a good strategy to fight Communism without a war.

George Kennan wrote (February 1946) the longest telegram in State Department history. This telegram stated that a direct conflict with Soviet Union was not the best option for the United States and that the

4 www.foreignaffairs.org/search/search?Sort=True&ArticleAuthor=&ArticleType=&Full+Text=kennan&x=0&y=0

5 *Ibidem*.

6 *Ibidem*.

7 www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/cwr/17601.htm

8 The Marshall Plan was created to build an economic reconstruction and with the Economic Cooperation Act of 1948 it was implemented. The United States included the former enemies, Germany and Italy, in its plan thereby preventing a reprise of the worldwide economic depression of 1929. The Marshall Plan also laid the foundation for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the eventual unification of European Countries (European Economic Union). <http://www.indyflicks.com/danielle/papers/paper04.htm>

9 <http://www.indyflicks.com/danielle/papers/paper04.htm>

10 Herring, George C., *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1976*, New York, Knopf, 1979, p. 8.

best choice was to help Western Powers and implement a global policy against Communism by assisting endangered and poor nations.

The NSC-68¹¹ was a policy statement prepared by the National Security Council (NSC) and approved by Truman (1950). This document expressed a relevant expansion of the American military budget. It showed containment's scope; for instance, "the defense of major centers of industrial power to encompass the entire world."¹²

In the context of the present polarization of power,¹³

and,

a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.¹⁴

As Danielle Costa claims:

under NSC-68, he increased military spending to \$45-50 billion a year. The perceived threat by the Soviets led Truman to pursue this strategy which he rightly considered essential. It is possible to say that probably any president in Truman's situation would have pursued the same policies of military containment because it was the only option made available to him.¹⁵

The Domino Theory

The idea of containment generated the so-called Domino Theory, "which held that if one Country fell under communist influence or control, its neighboring Countries would soon follow."¹⁶ Containment can be considered as the basis of the Truman Doctrine. This policy created several fundamental elements of the history of the Cold War, for example the mentioned Marshall Plan, NATO, the United Nations and it influenced 50 years of domestic and foreign American policy.

As Thomas J. Wheat argues:

the Domino Theory was not just exclusively applied in these regions but also throughout the world. This theory would be the impetus for incursions in Korea, Vietnam, Latin America, Africa and Asia. This was a major departure from just containing the Soviet's to one of which every revolt in the Third World was believed to be under Soviet sponsorship, of which to certain extent was a legitimate reality, and on the other, also a representation of U.S. ideological disdain for populist based class revolt when it interfered with the needs of capitalism to have raw markets at its disposal.¹⁷

11 www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/cwr/82209.htm

12 *Ibidem*.

13 www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/intel/422_435.html

14 *Ibidem*.

15 <http://www.indyflicks.com/danielle/papers/paper04.htm>

16 <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/Kennan>

17 Thomas J. Wheat, *A State of Clear and Present Danger: History of American Foreign Policy during the Cold War*, His. 188, 1998.

Truman's Containment and Indochina

The United States accepted French influence over Indochina, but at the same time American policy wanted to favor an own government and a self-government for colonial peoples.

As a consequence there was a dispute within the Department of State, “decisively won by the Europeanists, and that support for French allies came before support for trusteeship and independence for colonial peoples. This victory within the bureaucracy, was reflected in the Executive: Truman, who on August 29 told Madame Chiang Kai-Shek when asked about Roosevelt’s proposal of trusteeship for Indochina,”¹⁸ that

there had been no discussion of a trusteeship for Indo China as far as he was concerned¹⁹

and Secretary of State Stettinius had told Georges Bidault (June 22) French foreign minister, that

the record was entirely innocent of any official statement of this Government questioning, even by implication, French sovereignty over Indochina.²⁰

So, as 1945 drew to an end, and the French returned to Indochina, the U.S. opportunity to alter events significantly in Indochina had gone. As Abbot Low Moffat was to explain subsequently: with French forces back in Indochina and with all potential leverage gone, there was little that the United States could do to alter the outcome.²¹

After communism’s victory in China, it was obvious that a policy based on containment was necessary in Southeast Asia. From the Foreign Relations of the United States:

Truman recognized Saigon’s weak Bao Dai Government, hoping to strengthen it; assistance increased with the outbreak of the Korean War. The *fear of falling dominoes* began with Truman. Some months before the start of the Korean War, Truman had already initiated America’s fateful involvement in Indochina, supporting the French and their puppet ruler Bao Dai against the nationalist and Communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. Korea furnished welcome cover for stepping up aid to the French, which soon amounted to a half-billion dollars a year. The United States was thus providing the great bulk of the material resources for France’s colonialist war. The State Department defended this commitment, rather ridiculously, by citing Indochina’s production of *much-needed rice, rubber, and tin*. More to the point was the fear expressed that the *loss* of Indochina, including Vietnam, would represent a defeat in the struggle against what was portrayed as a unified and coordinated Communist push to take over the world.²²

18 FRUS, 1945, vol. 6, pp. 556-580.

19 FRUS, 1945, vol. 7, p.541, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus>

20 Herring, George C., The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina, *Diplomatic History* (1977) 1(2), 97-117.

21 Causes, Origins and Lessons of the Vietnam War, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations. United States Senate, 9, 10, 11 May 1972 (Washington 1973) Testimony of Abbot Low Moffat, p.168.

22 FRUS, 1945, vol. 6, vol.7.

Truman decided to implement a policy for preventing the Communists taking control in Indochina. It was a very important statement and it is possible to argue that Truman's policies in the years 1950-56 represented the first step of American escalation in Indochina, and in particular in Vietnam (for instance the dislocation of a growing number of military advisors); then, the origins of the conflict are in U.S. policies of the considered period.²³ As Truman declared:

I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.²⁴

Truman, with his Doctrine, stated that the United States wanted to defend *free peoples* everywhere not only in an anti-Communist perspective, but his aim was to preserve the principle of other people's freedom. It is helpful to emphasize again that this was the (rhetorical) point of view of Truman and that reality, above all in the cases of Vietnam and Indochina, was different. From the FRUS:

if we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world, and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our Nation.²⁵ And since the U.S. were determined to see Ho Chi Minh as a communist first, and a communist of course with orders from Russia, and a nationalist second, it was impossible to allow him to be leader of Vietnam, even though he was the only viable nationalist leader.²⁶

The French Government understood that it was important to find a nationalist alternative to Ho Chi Minh. Bao Dai was the first option and on March 8, 1949, he signed with the French the *Elysee Agreement*. As Karnow writes: "In it the French reaffirmed sovereignty for Vietnam but remained in control of Vietnam's defense, diplomacy and finances. It was obvious that as a real nationalist alternative this was a sham, Bao Dai himself saying contemptuously afterwards:"²⁷ what they call a Bao Dai solution turns out to be just a French solution.²⁸

Acheson (December 1949) stated:

there is no apparent alternative to Bao Dai regime other than the Commie domination of Indo-China.²⁹

In 1950, the United States recognized Bao Dai's Government after that Ho Chi Minh had convinced Soviet Union and China to recognize his Government. Always about the American perspective, as Gibbons reports: "any hope now of reconciliation or compromise between Ho Chi Minh's

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service), Harry S. Truman, 1948, pp.176-180.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ FRUS 1948, vol. 6, pp.32-33.

²⁷ Karnow Stanley, *Vietnam: A History*, New York, Viking Press, 1983, p.190.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p.191.

²⁹ Acheson quote: FRUS 1949, vol. 7, p.113.

Government, now regarded as just a front for Soviet Union by the U.S., and America had disappeared.”³⁰ As Robert Blum has written:

this hardening towards the Vietminh had already begun before the recognition of Bao Dai's regime. The nationalists had, in China, been facing defeat for over a year when they were finally ejected to Formosa in the autumn of 1949. Even so, throughout the previous year (from the end of 1948 to autumn 1949) despite the hopelessness of the situation, there had been great attempts to authorize assistance to China following on from the enactment of the China Aid Act of 1948 which had authorized \$125 million for military assistance in China. These attempts came to fruition with the Mutual Defense Assistance Bill which was passed on the 6th October 1949 and provided \$75 million to be used as aid in the general area of China.³¹ Thus with the fall of China to the communists this aid became available totally to the general area rather than to China. Not only did the loss of China provide a new momentum to the administration's efforts in the rest of Indochina, but it seems clear that the American containment policy in South-East Asia arose from the ashes of its failed policy in China.³²

This was an official declaration of the new policy on Indochina that was confirmed by National Security Council report 48/1:

the Position of the United States with respect to Asia.³³

And this strategy was legitimated by the President (NSC 48/2 - 30 December 1949):

as the Pentagon Papers concluded Thus, in the closing months of 1949, the course of U.S. policy was set to block Communist expansion in Asia. On that policy course lay the Korean War of 1950-53, the forming of the Southeast Treaty Organization of 1954, and the progressively deepening commitment to Vietnam.³⁴

Conclusion

It is possible to argue that Truman (with the creation and the implementation of his Doctrine) made the first steps towards the American presence in Southeast Asia that involved United States in Vietnam for a very long time.

An example of the application of the Truman Doctrine to Vietnam occurred in 1966 when Dean Rusk (Secretary of State) declared that “appearing before the Senate foreign Relations Committee who

30 William, C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I, 1945-1961*, prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, by the Congressional Research Service, Senate Print 98-185, Pt. 1, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1984. p. 38.

31 William, C. Gibbons, *cit.*, p. 42.

32 Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line* (New York, 1982), p. 214.

33 FRUS 1949, vol. 7, pt. 2, pp. 1215-1220.

34 PP, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press 1971), vol. 1, p. 40.

having quoted the Truman Doctrine said that is the policy we are applying in Vietnam in connection with specific commitments which we have taken in that Country.”³⁵

It is important to note though that the Truman administration was not threatened by communism per-se (as subsequent administrations would be) but more with aggression... Such was the threat of the Soviet Union. Truman also argued that it was ‘arbitrary rule in and of itself, whether Left or Right, that contributes to instability in the world’ and he was committed to containing this sort of expansion.³⁶

The Truman administration was completely influenced by the concepts of the balance of power, policy of containment and Domino Theory but, at the same time, it is possible to claim that Truman and his establishment were not just a part of an ideological war against Communism, “even at the height of the *paranoia* brought on by McCarthyism;”³⁷ in fact, all the implemented policies represented the principles of power acquisition in the international arena. This last point seems to be the most important in Truman’s foreign policy: in fact, about Vietnam and Indochina, the threat of a “Soviet aggression” was not that real and it is possible to define this *fear* as an American wrong perception (or even a false pretext) that later brought United States to fight and lose the worst war of the all American history.

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36 <http://www.indyflicks.com/danielle/papers/paper04.htm>

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