

From Greece to Ukraine: 75 years of the Truman Doctrine

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15 June 2022

Seventy-five years ago this past spring, on March 12, 1947, US President Harry S. Truman went before a joint session of Congress to request \$400 million in military and economic support for the governments of Greece and Turkey.

World War II had ended less than two years earlier. But, unlike his predecessors in the White House after World War I, Truman did not talk about any postwar “return to normalcy.” He began his remarks on an ominous note, speaking of the “gravity of the situation which confronts the world today,” as though a new world war were imminent.

The bulk of the short speech that followed is forgotten. Truman’s remarks are memorable only for a line that came near the end, when the president announced what came to be known as the Truman Doctrine: *“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 by outside pressures.”*

With those words, Truman sought to arrogate to the United States the right to intervene all over the world based only on Washington’s own say-so about who “free peoples” were and were not. In this way, the Truman Doctrine committed the US to the following 75 years of wars, coups, interventions, dictatorships and massive military budgets that continue up to the present, in the proxy war in Ukraine.

In the special dictionary of American foreign policy words mean their opposite. The “free people” discovered by Truman and the 13 presidents who have followed turn out to comprise a most inglorious list: Franco in Spain and Salazar in Portugal; Marcos in the Philippines and Suharto in Indonesia; Syngman Rhee in South Korea and Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam; the Shah Pahlavi in Iran and the House of Saud on the Arabian Peninsula; Batista in Cuba and “Papa Doc” Duvalier in Haiti; Mobutu in Zaire and Mubarak in Egypt; the bloody juntas of South America and the apartheid regime of South Africa; the Contras in Nicaragua and Bin Laden’s Mujahedeen in Afghanistan; the terrorists of the Al Nusra Front in Syria and the KLA drug cartel in Kosovo. One could go on and on.

The US puppet government in Kiev is just the latest incarnation. It was created in a 2014 CIA-organized coup whose shock troops were fascists—fascists who are now being handed billions of dollars in high-tech killing machines.

Greece has the dubious distinction of being first on the list. There, the right-wing monarchist government of George II was struggling in a civil war against the partisans—the workers and peasants who had done the bulk of the fighting against the Nazi occupiers and fascist collaborators in World War II. The partisan movement was dominated by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), which, in turn, was dominated by Stalin—who was prepared to betray the country to Britain as part of the “sphere of influence” he had secretly promised to Churchill in 1944.

Stalin’s treachery in Greece was predictable. What was demanded of the KKE had already been carried out by its counterparts in Italy and France: the handing over of the working class to the bourgeois government. These actions had been at least as necessary to the postwar

stabilization of European capitalism as American arms and money. Stalin ultimately kept his promise, ordering the Greek Communists to submit in 1949.

Yet in 1947 it was still unclear that the Greek Stalinists could contain the aspirations of the masses—or for that matter, that the discrediting of the Greek ruling class, which had cooperated with Hitler and Mussolini in World War II and had supported the fascist dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas in the late 1930s, could be overcome. Yugoslav partisans under Tito had taken power just to the north. If the Greek partisans won, all of the Balkans would fall outside of the American world order. This, the Truman administration feared, would make the position of Turkey untenable. In that case the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea, then as now of paramount geostrategic importance, would be “lost.”

In any case, Great Britain, which was supposed to have been minding the area on behalf of global capitalism, was bankrupt. Indeed, the immediate impetus for Truman’s speech was a secret blue paper, delivered by Lord Inverchapel, UK ambassador to the US, informing Secretary of State George Marshall that London could no longer afford to support the monarchists in Greece, and would withdraw its 40,000 soldiers stationed there. Britain also had no capacity to prop up Turkey against Soviet demands for joint control over the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, which for 150 years the Royal Navy had tended as a gate first against the Russian tsars and then against the Soviet Union.

Truman acknowledged British imperialism’s terminal decline matter-of-factly. “The British Government, which has been helping Greece, can give no further financial or economic aid after March 31,” he told Congress. “Great Britain finds itself under the necessity of reducing or liquidating its commitments in several parts of the world, including Greece.” It is difficult to imagine a more unceremonious end to the British Empire than this, the American president announcing it as if it were the closure of some overextended second-tier bank.

No tears were shed for Britain in the joint session assembled before Truman. After all, Washington’s aim all along had been to supplant the old mother country—to put it on rations, as Trotsky had foreseen—and to achieve mastery over all the great powers. Gore Vidal’s *Washington D.C.*, in its fictional treatment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s last days, captured something of the mood:

The ravaged old President, even as he was dying, continued to pursue the high business of reassembling the fragments of broken empires into a new pattern with himself at center, proud creator of a new imperium. Now, though he was gone, the work remained. The United States was master of the earth. No England, no France, no Germany, no Japan left to dispute the Republic’s will. Only the mysterious Soviet would survive to act as the other balance in the scale of power.

Roosevelt's "high business" had fallen to Truman, whose elevation to the vice-presidency in 1945 represented a shift to the right within the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic Party. Truman replaced Henry Wallace, who had favored some form of postwar cooperation with "the mysterious Soviets." Truman, the Kansas City ward heeler risen through the patronage of the Pendergast political machine, had already expressed his thoughts on cooperation in 1941 after Nazi Germany launched its genocidal invasion of the Soviet Union, *Operation Barbarossa*. "If we see that Germany is winning the war, we ought to help Russia; and if that Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and in that way let them kill as many as possible," said Truman, then a second-term senator from Missouri.

Truman's lack of compunction over mass killing was more than rhetorical, as he showed on August 6 and 9, 1945, with the atomic incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The atomic attacks—still the only ones in world history—had no immediate military purpose, though they did give the world an object lesson, as historian Gabriel Jackson pointed out, "that a psychologically very normal and democratically elected chief executive could use the weapon just as the Nazi dictator would have used it. In this way, the United States—for anyone concerned with moral distinctions in the different types of government—blurred the difference between fascism and democracy." Truman later said that he "never lost sleep" over the several hundred thousand Japanese civilians killed.

Coldblooded as his decision was, Truman, in fact, represented the golden mean of American foreign policy thinking in the late 1940s. Well to his right were the generals George Patton and Douglas MacArthur, who agitated for an immediate, direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union, whatever the cost. Truman would later cashier MacArthur for insubordination in the Korean War, when the general's demands for a nuclear attack on China threatened world war, as well as the constitutional principle of civilian control of the military.

The president was no dove, however. His position was close to that of Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who believed, incorrectly, that the Soviet Union was hellbent on world domination. It was Acheson, in fact, who drafted the Truman Doctrine speech. A more moderate position was held by George Kennan, the Russia expert who believed, correctly, that Stalin only wanted reasonable assurances of the Soviet Union's defensive position. Kennan was alarmed by the messianic tone of Truman's speech, as well as its Manichean worldview.

Whatever the tactical differences, all agreed with *Time* editor Henry Luce that World War II had announced the dawning of "an American century" in the 20th that would surpass in glory the *Pax Britannia* of the 19th. Yet in spite of America's powerful military, its unrivaled industrial production, and the almighty dollar, there never would be a period of hegemony for Washington like that which London enjoyed over the course of the 1800s. This was not because the American ruling class faced a serious challenge from another imperialist power, but because it faced a rival that had not yet concretized itself in the time of the Victorian British bourgeoisie: world socialist revolution.

When the American ruling class first reached out to take the mantle of global hegemony under Woodrow Wilson, with the entry of the US into World War I, it was immediately confronted by the October Russian Revolution, and, simultaneously, by the powerful 1916-1922 American strike wave. Lenin and Trotsky offered a path forward to the oppressed masses, including those in the US, that went far beyond the pious and self-serving pronouncements of Wilson's Fourteen Points, which not even the Allied powers could suffer.

"Mr. Wilson bores me with his Fourteen Points," Georges Clemenceau muttered at the Versailles peace conference. "Why, God Almighty has only ten!" The American ruling class responded to obstinacy from Britain, France and Japan by retreating into "isolationism," and to the October Revolution by elevating anti-communism to the status of a quasi-state

religion.

Now, in 1947, Truman announced his intention to seize that which Wilson had in his grasp but could not hold. Yet despite its degeneration under Stalin, the Soviet Union still acted as the "other balance in the scale of power," as Vidal observed. The planned Soviet economy, though distorted by bureaucracy, had survived the devastation of the Nazi Wehrmacht and was growing strong enough to present American capitalism with a formidable military and technological rival. It was, moreover, productive enough to provide economic and military aid to the nationalist movements of the decolonizing "Third World." The economic policies of these movements—nationalization of key industries, import substitution policies, tariffs and the like—threatened the global ambitions of American capitalism. It was against just this sort of nationalism that the US, in accordance with the Truman Doctrine, anointed itself as world policeman and embarked down the path of Cold War.

The bill for aid to Greece and Turkey passed both houses of Congress by wide margins and was signed into law by Truman on May 22, 1947. This was followed on June 5 by the announcement of the Marshall Plan, which provided massive funding to Western Europe, and which laid the groundwork for the integration of the continent's economies into a common market. Then, on July 25, Congress passed Truman's National Security Act, which centralized military authority under the National Security Council and created the Central Intelligence Agency, the scaffolding for the permanent military-intelligence "deep state."

Within the specific historical context of 1947, Truman was responding as much to developments in the American class struggle as he was to developments in the Balkans and Anatolia. In 1945 and 1946, American workers had launched the largest strike wave in US history. Many of the strikes were wildcats waged in defiance of the official trade unions. This explosive postwar strike wave came within a dozen years of the 1934 citywide strikes in Toledo, San Francisco and Minneapolis—the last of which was led by Trotskyists—and the 1936-1937 sit-down strike movement, which, radiating outward from Detroit, reached near-insurrectionary proportions. The postwar strike wave also came within living memory of 1917.

The Truman administration therefore linked the crusade against communism abroad with an attack on dangerous "subversives" within the US. Senator Arthur Vandenberg, a Michigan Republican and chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had warned Truman in advance of his speech that in order to secure funds for Greece and Turkey he would have to "scare the hell out of the American people."

On March 21, 1947, just nine days after he went before Congress to request military aid to Greece, Truman issued Executive Order No. 9835 creating the Employees Loyalty and Security Program, which subjected every federal government worker to loyalty investigations by the Civil Service Commission and the FBI. Any employee could be fired if agents found "reasonable grounds" of "disloyalty," a word the order did not define. Some 3 million workers were investigated. In October 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began to issue its Hollywood subpoenas. Purges in all sectors of American public life followed, culminating in Sen. Joe McCarthy and the Senate hearing witch-hunts of the early 1950s. American intellectual, cultural, and social life has never fully recovered from the anticommunist malignancy.

Three months after launching the purge of federal employees, on June 20, 1947, Truman vetoed the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act. The veto was a cynical maneuver designed to curry favor, in advance of the 1948 presidential election, with the national union federations, the AFL and the CIO, which had condemned Taft-Hartley as a "slave labor bill" for its outlawing of the closed union shop. Truman knew full well that the veto would be overridden by Congress, which is precisely what happened. After it became law, he invoked it a dozen times in a bid to break strikes he declared a danger to "national security."

A crucial provision in Taft-Hartley required union leaders to sign affidavits that they were not members of communist or socialist parties. The CIO, the federation of industrial unions spawned by the great strike wave of the 1930s, used this mechanism to purge 11 affiliated unions containing 1 million members—precisely those socialist-minded workers who had led the struggles of the Great Depression. Rejecting any connections with socialism, the American unions staked themselves to the profitability of business and the conception that American capitalism would always be dominant, a wager symbolized by the head of the UAW, Walter Reuther, and his “Treaty of Detroit” with General Motors in 1950, which surrendered working class demands for industrial democracy in exchange for the corporation’s institutionalization of collective bargaining—for a “seat at the table” with the executives and politicians.

But American capitalism would not always be dominant. The project of saving world capitalism on the basis of the hegemonic power of one nation could not overcome the contradiction within capitalism between world economy and the nation state. And so, in paradoxical fashion, what was required to maintain the sort of American Century imagined by the Truman Doctrine simultaneously undermined it. While economic rivals, especially West Germany and Japan, emerged from the ashes of World War II, partly with the help of Marshall Plan cash, with the newest technology, Washington’s massive military spending required to “defend free peoples everywhere” distorted the US economy, left its infrastructure in decay, and contributed to endless outflows of dollars, sustainable owing only to the greenback’s status as the world reserve currency—and ultimately, from the early 1970s onward, by carrying out ever-deeper attacks on the standard of living of American workers.

There is one final issue that connects Truman’s speech 75 years ago to the present: the role of the lie in politics. The Truman Doctrine, as the ideological foundation of American foreign policy, was based on a series of falsehoods: that American imperialism conducts its foreign operations on behalf of freedom and democracy; that socialism is the mortal enemy of the American people; and that American-style capitalism and the “free market” are the endpoint of history and the best of all possible worlds.

The Truman Doctrine deepened the gap between the American ruling class’s invocation of democracy, on the one side, and the ever more violent and intolerable reality for workers in the US and the world over, on the other. That chasm, which separates bourgeois ideology from objective reality—and which imparts to official American culture its insufferable phoniness—widened over the ensuing 75 years, which saw countless crimes committed by US imperialism abroad and at home. Now, in the face of the threat of world war, the many millions left to die in the COVID pandemic, global hunger, ecological catastrophe, inflation, the rise of fascism and the blight of mass school shootings, the foundational lies of the American ruling class have reached the point where they can be stretched no further.



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