

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

CONTAINMENT
AN EVOLVING POLICY

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The policy of Containment as understood in 1947 is fundamentally similar to American foreign policies since the beginning of the American Republic. American foreign policies have had many names, but the goals behind each policy make the terms synonymous in certain respects. Each has been driven by the same underlying national interests, but has progressively expanded in scope as the United States has grown in power. For instance, in the 19th Century, the Monroe Doctrine declared U.S. hegemony in the western hemisphere. Containment was the Monroe Doctrine of the 20th Century, extending the focus from the Western Hemisphere to all nations within the American Free World. Just as the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed to the rest of the world, “Hands off”¹ of the American Continents, containment was meant to keep Soviet hands off of American interests, now much more broadly defined. Containment’s expanded role, however, was not merely to maintain U.S. hegemony, but also to work toward Americanizing global interests. Containment had many weapons, including those of an economic, military, cultural, and political nature. Throughout the Cold War, containment achieved both success and failure using these weapons, primarily succeeding economically and culturally, while failing militarily and politically. Eventually, the end of the Cold War proclaimed success in maintaining American Hegemony while Americanization had triumphantly expanded national interests to becoming international interests.

Before forming the American Republic, early Americans were faced with global decisions. Professor Norman A. Graebner argued, “The Founding Fathers discovered early that the European equilibrium would be the essential source of American security.”² After declaring independence, Americans successfully managed this Balance of Power in Europe to their benefit. By aligning itself with the opposing party, the United States was able to drive both the French and English out of its interests within a few decades. Beginning in the Revolutionary War

against the British, the United States signed a Treaty of Alliance with the French, but not without procuring American interests. The Model Treaty provided “that free Ships shall also give a freedom to Goods, and that every thing shall be deemed to be free and exempt, which shall be found on board the Ships belonging to the Subjects of either of the Confederates.”³ In other words, the United States wanted to maintain economic freedom of the seas, or, freedom to trade without hindrance.

After the policy of containment was established, nearly 170 years later, the Marshall Plan maintained this freedom of trade, but expanded it in range to include Americanizing the economic world. It “provided, that no assistance to the participating countries herein contemplated shall seriously impair the economic stability of the United States [and] that continuity of assistance provided by the United States should, at all times, be dependent upon continuity of cooperation among countries participating in the program.”⁴ The Marshall Plan was meant to benefit the European nations toppled by the war, but not at the expense of American economic stability. The Marshall Plan was initially offered to the Soviet Union, but was rejected outright “as an American plot to subjugate Western Europe.”⁵ Stalin regarded it as “incompatible with his economic, political, and foreign-policy goals.”⁶ Indeed it was, for it was an attempt at Americanizing the economic world, fostering a world of capitalism rather than communism. Ultimately, the economic weapon of containment succeeded by the end of the Cold War, as Soviet Communism fell, and nations across the globe implemented capitalist systems in a world of free trade, governed even by a World Trade Organization.

Containment policies continued to follow early models of American foreign economic policy, while following America’s understanding of the balance of power. After American independence, France and England were again at war with each other, and the United States

continued to manipulate the balance of power, signing Jay's Treaty. It provided freedom of trade, only this time with Britain, proclaiming "a reciprocal and perfect liberty of commerce and navigation."⁷ Under containment, the United States followed the same pattern, focusing on the "negotiation of treaties of friendship, commerce and navigation with non-Communist countries of Asia."⁸ The game was the same, but the players had changed. The United States and Soviet Union now formed the balance of power, and American policies were framed to prevent American decline and promote American interests. The National Security Council developed containment policies in Asia, with the objective of growing "the nations and peoples of Asia on a stable and self-sustaining basis in conformity with the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter."⁹ To obtain this objective, the United States was to "exert an influence to advance its own national interests; and initiate action in such a manner as will appeal to the Asiatic nations as being compatible with their national interests and worthy of their support."¹⁰ In other words, encouraging conformity to the United Nations was synonymous with conformity to American interests. For the United Nations outlined in its charter its purposes, which included "respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples."¹¹ The United Nations was America's platform of Americanizing the world using these fundamentally American principles. The National Security Council later reiterated this when it stated "[America's] overall policy at the present time may be described as one designed to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish."¹²

The American understanding of manipulating the balance of power was also implemented in its involvement with respect to Communist nations. In 1949, the National Security document NSC-48 suggested, "the United States should exploit, through appropriate political, psychological and economic means, any rifts between the Chinese Communists and the

USSR.”¹³ The goal was to contain communism by turning communists against each other “while scrupulously avoiding the appearance of intervention.”¹⁴ Despite the United States being involved in the highest balance of power, it applied the same principle of manipulating balances of power on lower levels to overcome any opposition.

President Truman outlined containment as it was meant to work “primarily through economic and financial aid,”¹⁵ while avoiding direct military confrontation. This was reiterated in NSC-48, but only one year later, the National Security Council suggested “a more rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength.”¹⁶ As the United States built up its military strength to balance possible Soviet growth, the military weapon of containment became a stronger focus during the 1950’s. The Korean War ensued, but America’s reasons for fighting under the doctrine of containment were no different than past wars. The Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 were both fought claiming a list of grievances forced upon the American people. In asking Congress to declare war on Mexico in 1846, President Polk declared, “As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism.”¹⁷ In the same language, General Douglas MacArthur defended the Korean War, asserting, “once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end.”¹⁸ The doctrine of Containment, therefore, fostered the justification that any war, anywhere, could be a defensive war, thus continuing the American idea of justified armed conflict.

The most controversial of America’s military actions under containment, were those in Vietnam. Following World War II, Ho Chi Minh, along with fellow Vietnamese nationalists, drafted a Declaration of Independence. It mirrored the American Declaration, breaking Vietnam away from its French colonial rule. Despite its comparisons to American Independence from

British colonial rule, America was an ally of France, and, as such, provided aid to the French. After the French were ultimately defeated, the United States refused to acknowledge the Geneva Conference, which stated, “The military demarcation line [at the seventeenth parallel] is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.”¹⁹ The United States continued to support a government south of the seventeenth parallel under Ngo Dinh Diem and “endorsed cancellation of the electoral provisions of the Geneva Accords, thereby thwarting unification.”²⁰ As the North Vietnamese gained support in the south from the National Liberation Front, tensions continued to rise. The United States continued to be involved in Laos and Vietnam, escalating military operations throughout the South China Sea. “Saying nothing about destroyer operations against the North [Vietnamese], [President Johnson] charged the enemy with deliberate aggression in international waters,”²¹ and in 1964, Congress authorized the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Permission was given to the President to take “necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”²² Once again, defensive war was authorized to repel attack from the Communist North. History has shown, however, that, defensive or not, military strategies of containment were largely a failure, costing American lives along with the morale and faith in the American government.

American wars during the Cold War were no less different than its previous wars, containing both reasons of defense and protests of American aggression. In 1848, Senator Daniel Webster protested the war with Mexico, claiming it “was waged for the purpose of creating new States.”²³ Nearly a Century later, as the Vietnamese denounced the Americans as invaders and imperialists, Senator J. William Fulbright decried America’s “arrogance of power.”²⁴ He invoked the words of John Quincy Adams, who warned America against “enlisting

under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, [or] the fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.”²⁵ Indeed, containment had fostered those very actions, for the Truman Doctrine claimed “the free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining *their* freedoms,”²⁶ but it was not the first time America took banners foreign to herself. In 1898, President McKinley asked Congress to authorize war on Spain “to secure in the island [of Cuba] the establishment of a stable government, capable of maintaining order and observing its international obligations, insuring peace and tranquility and the security of its citizens as well as our own.”²⁷ The policy of containment simply enlarged these obligations from one nation to being all nations that America considered part of the free world.

The words of John Quincy Adams were not entirely ignored, especially as policies of containment included their cultural implications. Adams proclaimed, “[America’s] glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.” This practice of marching forth with such a motto was continued during the Cold War. However, whereas Adams was in support of leading the world by example, the Cold War era placed America as an international leader, and the example was directly taken to foreign nations in the appearance of the Peace Corps. In 1961, President Kennedy established the Peace Corps “to permit [American] people to exercise more fully their responsibilities in the great common cause of world development.”²⁸ This helped to spread American culture, but was not without competition. As a volunteer in Ghana recorded, the people were “interested in any and all things American,” while adding, “there are a great many [Russians] here, and more are coming.”²⁹

Culturally, containment could not prevent the Soviet Union from sending its influence abroad, but it was still successful in spreading American ideas and customs.

Containment continued to fight culturally against the Soviet Union, spreading American society through literature and film. Anti-communist literature often led to film, as evidenced in the account of Matt Cvetic, who wrote about having infiltrated the Communist Party in Pittsburgh, which was later made into the film “*I Was A Communist For The F.B.I.*”³⁰ Other films were released in the early 1950’s, including a John Wayne film, *Big Jim McClain*, “a story about a Communist effort to seize control of the labor movement in Hawaii.”³¹ Spreading American culture to the world through film was not a new idea either. In 1925, Edward G. Lowry wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post*, “The sun, it now appears, never sets on the British Empire and the American motion picture.”³² Lowry responded to a British newspaper reporting “the film is to America what the flag was once to Britain. By its means Uncle Sam may hope some day, if he be not checked in time, to Americanize the world.”³³ Indeed, but film was only one form of Americanizing power, and just as America used it in the 1920’s, the policy of containment continued to incorporate such cultural weapons as film, while additionally applying economic, military, and political weaponry.

Containment found its greatest failures when using some degree of direct force, either military or political in nature. In the case of Iran, it is seen how the United States increased its economic strategies to incorporate political and military tactics. After so doing, the United States found temporary success, only to end in complete failure. Economically, the United States understood in 1948 that “unrestricted access to the oil resources of the Middle East is essential to the complete economy of the United States.”³⁴ The preceding four years had seen a struggle between the U.S. and Soviet Union over oil concessions in Iran. The U.S. acted

militarily in sending units to Iran “primarily to facilitate Lend-Lease shipments to the Soviet Union.”³⁵ Eventually, the Soviet Union became more aggressive, supporting a North Iranian rebellion, but the United States again acted militarily when “Iranian armed forces, advised by Major General Robert W. Grow of the U.S. Army, crushed the insurrection.”³⁶ Politically, the United States attempted to support Iranian regimes friendly to American economic interests. After Iran nationalized its oil industry, Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq attempted to manipulate the balance of power between U.S.-U.K. relations and the Soviet Union. In a meeting with U.S. Ambassador Loy Henderson, “Mossadeq placed great stress on [the] Communist danger facing Iran”³⁷ after being told that the U.S. would not give financial aid to Iran. After only a couple years, the United States grew weary with Mossadeq’s negotiations, and, fearing Communist take-over, the C.I.A. assisted in his overthrow and the placement of the Shah Reza Pahlavi in his stead, a political ally of the U.S. for the next two decades. The Shah was eventually overthrown and replaced by a radical Muslim regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. A hostage crisis ensued, as 52 Americans were held for 444 days, and “the United States had lost an ally with a large army, huge quantities of oil, intelligence posts that yielded critical data on Soviet missile tests, and billions of dollars to spend on American-made weapons.”³⁸ Politically, the communists did not succeed either, but a more radical form of government did, showing the result of force compared to liberty.

Containment policies ultimately failed when focusing on political or military means, as they led American policies to support regimes in South America that at first seemed anti-communist, rather than pro-American. The C.I.A. became more involved, organizing an overthrow of Guatemalan elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, and replacing him with Carlos Castillo Armas, who “set Guatemala on a course of government-sponsored terror that by

1990 had left 100,000 Guatemalans dead.”³⁹ The United States became increasingly unpopular throughout South America, as evidenced by Vice President Richard Nixon’s unwelcome visit to varying countries in 1958.⁴⁰ The United States also supported the military dictator Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, who was overthrown in 1959 by Fidel Castro who “launched a revolution to expel U.S. economic and military interests from the island.”⁴¹ Fidel Castro and the Cuban experience soon proved to be the greatest challenge to American containment.

The Cuban Missile Crisis set the stage for America to determine what was of greater importance between the Monroe Doctrine and its broader policy companion, Containment. The United States’ western hemispheric dominance was challenged, while threatening the security of American cities. American interests and commitments abroad were also being challenged. After President Kennedy’s insistence that the Soviets withdraw their weapons from Cuba, Premier Khrushchev demanded that the United States recognize its right to maintain the same security that the United States desired. He proposed a trade, removing the missiles from Cuba if the United States removed its weapons out of the Soviet Union’s neighboring Turkey. Whether the Cuban Missile Crisis was handled with astute consideration or distracted impulsiveness, it provided the most important question with regards to American foreign policy. Was security against the threat of a nuclear attack on American soil more important than maintaining weapons in foreign lands for the security of Europe? In the end, the United States was forced to step away from its international interests, and return to its national interests. The Monroe Doctrine was defended at the expense of the Containment Doctrine.

America’s foreign policy can be traced progressively since the early American Republic leading to Containment. In his farewell address, President George Washington explained, “the period is not far off [...] when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may

at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel.”⁴² That interest, however America has progressively defined it as, has guided the counsel of every American foreign policy. As the United States grew in power, its interests expanded to include the entire western hemisphere against foreign encroachment. In 1823, President James Monroe declared “that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.” American interests continued to grow and seemed to include the manifest destiny of establishing “freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, [and] universality of freedom and equality.”⁴³ Upon entering World War I, President Woodrow Wilson declared, “The world must be made safe for democracy.”⁴⁴ He further called upon Americans to fight “for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.”⁴⁵ American interest was now global interest. The idea of containment specifically was meant to prevent opposition to this interest. It could easily be seen in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s policy of quarantine, wherein “the peace-loving nations must make a concerted effort in opposition to [...] humane instincts which today are creating a state of international anarchy and instability from which there is no escape through mere isolation or neutrality.”⁴⁶ At times, however, America’s global interest was challenged, forcing the nation to return to less aggressive interests, as illustrated when President John F. Kennedy reiterated the Monroe Doctrine, by applying “the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States.”⁴⁷ After the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, American interest returned

again to its global objectives. With setbacks in Vietnam, the Middle East, and South America, American foreign policy needed to readjust its focus.

To replace the policy of Containment, Détente was introduced as a way to soften tensions in an increasingly dangerous and nuclear world. Détente recognized “that in the nuclear age the relationship between military strength and politically usable power is the most complex in all history.”⁴⁸ Experience had shown that military and political actions under the Containment Doctrine had proved ineffective, if not dangerous to the security of American interests. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved it dangerous to American safety and security. Détente returned the focus on “the preservation of human life and human society [and] a relationship [which] must provide advantages to both sides and that the most constructive international relationships are those in which both parties perceive an element of gain.”⁴⁹ In other words, détente returned the focus of American foreign policy toward the cultural and economic aspects of Containment that proved effective.

In the end, the Cold War ended due to the economic and cultural strengths of America, though political and military aims were highlighted. Leading up to the Soviet collapse, President Ronald Reagan reiterated America’s political and military focus, condemning communism and introducing a Strategic Defense Initiative.⁵⁰ This was before the eyes of the American people, but deep inside the Soviet Union, a new thinking had emerged, positing economic reforms through *glasnost* and *perestroika*.⁵¹ Prior to its collapse, in the 1970’s the Soviet Union allowed translations of Western films to be shown increasingly to the Russian public. Professor Stephen Kotkin explained this cultural impact as “an important role [...] played by images and details of consumerism,”⁵² as Soviet viewers observed economically superior lifestyles as depicted in the West. America and the West succeeded through economic and cultural imperialism, despite a

series of failed attempts to force containment through military and political means.

Unintentionally, these strong arms of American consumerism extended beyond containing the Soviet Union, and led eventually to its collapse.

Ultimately, no one can say whether Containment was a success or failure, for it was both, embodying various branches of American foreign policy. Experience has simply shown that in the 20th Century, culture and economy far outweighed military and politics. Containment, in and of itself, is merely a word. The very same term can be used to explain all of American foreign policy. During the years of the Early Republic, America wanted to *contain* European colonialism by maintaining a balance of power. America's assertion of freedom of trade sought to *contain* economic aggression from usurping power on the high seas. The Monroe Doctrine required the *containment* of foreign intervention in the Western Hemisphere. The War with Mexico and Indian Removal resulted in *containing* interference with continental expansion. American involvement in World War II achieved *containment* of the Axis powers from gaining the competitive advantage to American hegemony. George Kennan did not invent Containment, nor did President Truman first incorporate it into policy. It was an American idea nurtured through all of American foreign relations, evolving as American interests expanded. It was understood and practiced as early as the year when the Founding Fathers proclaimed separation from Britain, and independence from the world. Perhaps an investigation will reveal its origination in some civilization that existed long before the Puritans even set foot on the land that would ultimately *contain* its own freedom and liberty.

NOTES

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³ "Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France, 1778," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume 1: To 1920, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 37.

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⁵ "Soviet Opposition to the Marshall Plan." July 2005. The Library of Congress. For European Recovery: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Marshall Plan. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/marshall/mars8.html> (20 March 2007).

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⁸ "The National Security Council Extends Containment to Asia, 1949," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 252.

⁹ Ibid., 250.

¹⁰ Ibid., 251.

¹¹ Article 1, "Charter of the United Nations, 1945." Copyright 2000-2007. United Nations. <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/> (20 March 2007).

¹² "The National Security Council Paper No. 68 (NSC-68) Reassesses the Soviet Threat and Recommends a Military Buildup, 1950," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 205.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 253.

¹⁵ Harry S. Truman, "The Truman Doctrine Calls for Aid to Greece and Turkey to Contain Totalitarianism, 1947," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 203.

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¹⁷ James K. Polk, "Polk Asks Congress to Declare War on Mexico, 1846," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume 1: To 1920, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 202.

¹⁸ Douglas MacArthur, "MacArthur's 'No Substitute for Victory' Speech, 1951," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 263.

¹⁹ "Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, 1954," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 419.

²⁰ Thomas G. Paterson, J. Garry Clifford, Shane J. Maddock, Deborah Kisatsky, and Kenneth J. Hagan, American Foreign Relations, Volume 2, A History: Since 1895, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 325.

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²² "The Tonkin Gulf Resolution Authorizes the President to Use Force, 1964," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 421.

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³³ Ibid., 84.

³⁴ "The National Security Council Weighs U.S. Options in the Middle East, 1948," in Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume II: Since 1914, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 541.

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³⁹ Ibid., 304.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 304.

⁴¹ Ibid., 305.

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⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 462.

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