

The Truman Doctrine and Containment Policy

On Dec. 31, 1946, President Truman declared an end to the period of World War II hostilities. Early in 1947 the British said they could not support the Greek government after March 31. Many diplomats feared that the Soviet Union would then spread its power throughout the Middle East. President Truman met the problem by asking Congress for 400 million dollars to aid Greece and Turkey to prevent the rise of communist governments. Congress approved the money. This policy of aid, popularly known as the Truman Doctrine, was an American challenge to Soviet ambitions throughout the world. As U.S. efforts to check Soviet power around the world grew, this doctrine evolved into a more general effort, commonly referred to as containment policy.

The Marshall Plan

On June 5, 1947, Secretary of State George C. Marshall spoke at Harvard University and outlined what would become known as the Marshall Plan. Europe, still devastated by the war, had just survived one of the worst winters on record. Something had to be done, both for humanitarian reasons and also to stop the potential spread of communism westward.

The United States offered up to \$20 billion for relief, but only if the European nations could get together and draw up a plan on how they would use the aid. For the first time, they would have to act as a single, free market based economic unit; they would have to cooperate with each other. Marshall also offered aid to the Soviet Union and its allies in eastern Europe, but Stalin called the program a trick because the free market requirement would undermine the Russian economic model that was based on a communist model, and because all participating countries had to disclose all of their assets and liabilities; something Stalin was unwilling to do. For these reasons Russia and Russia's allies refused to participate.

Berlin Crisis

The victorious Allies of World War II divided Germany into occupation zones: the American, French, and British zones in the west and a Soviet zone in the east. Within the Soviet zone lay Berlin, formerly Hitler's capital, also divided into four sectors, each administered by one of the wartime allies. The only guaranteed way to get to isolated Berlin was by air. The Soviet Union had granted each of the three Western Allies a 20-mile-wide air corridor leading from their respective occupation zones to the city; but no such arrangement controlled travel by road or railroad--that depended upon the continuing cooperation of Soviet authorities.

Scarcely had the war ended when relations between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union began to deteriorate. Eastern Europe came under Soviet domination. As early as 1946, Britain's wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in a speech in the U.S., warned: "From Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent." Behind that curtain, Soviet control tightened; a sphere of influence became a ring of satellite states, as happened to Czechoslovakia in February 1948 when a Communist group seized control of the government. Shortly afterward, the Soviet Union began exerting pressure on the overland routes leading into Berlin, imposing restrictions on access, such as temporarily halting coal shipments and, on 24 June, establishing a blockade. Because Berlin was entirely inside the Soviet section of Germany, this left France, Britain, and the U. S. with only one way to get to their sections of Berlin - by air.