

# The American side of the iron curtain

## The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism

Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security, 1946-1948.

By Richard M. Freeland.

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Reviewed by STEPHEN E. AMBROSE

"If you want this program," Senator Vandenberg told President Truman, "you will have to scare hell out of the American people." It was late February, 1947, and Truman had just explained to a select group of senators that he intended to ask Congress for economic and military aid for Greece and Turkey. Vandenberg's advice may have helped escalate the request for aid to a statement of general principles—the Truman Doctrine of containment—but, as Richard M. Freeland demonstrates in this masterful study, the Truman Administration had already decided to wage a vigorous scare campaign built around the supposed threat of both external and internal communism.

Freeland skillfully traces the beginnings of the doctrine in what amounts to a summary of New Left interpretations of the origins of the cold war. Even before World War II ended and Roosevelt died, the State Department had begun intensive efforts to create out of the chaos a free-trade, multilateral, Wilsonian world patterned on the American model. By 1946, however, it was clear that the Soviets would not cooperate—i.e., open their own country and Eastern Europe to American economic penetration—so the Administration set out to build an integrated military and economic anti-Soviet bloc in Western Europe. The success of the program depended on a revival of the Western European economy, which in turn required a massive transfusion of American money. But the Republicans controlled Congress, having won the 1946 elections on a program calling for lower taxes and reduced federal expenditures. How to get the necessary money out of the Republicans became the great problem, the one to which Freeland directs his attention.

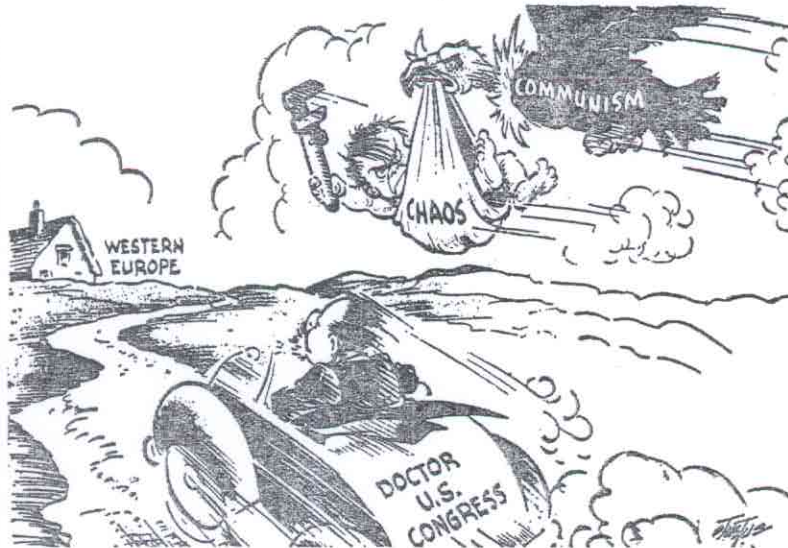
Truman's solution was to paint a picture of the Mongols pounding at the gate, aided by sympathizers inside who were prepared to open the latch. The foreign aspect of this policy is well-known—the Truman Doctrine speech amounted to a declaration of war against the Soviet Union and Truman made Stalin appear to be just as much a madman as Hitler. To drum up support for aid to Greece and Turkey, and beyond that for the Marshall Plan, the Truman Administration launched a propaganda campaign designed to make the American people feel insecure, even terrified.

Freeland adds to this old story the domestic component of the scare campaign. Truman began a loyalty program within the federal bureaucracy that ruined hundreds of careers and went far beyond anything Roosevelt had thought necessary even in wartime. The Attorney General, Tom Clark, published a list of "subversive" organizations, a list which Freeland argues represented

a deliberate attempt by the Department of Justice to neutralize various political organizations that were, among other subversive things, impeding the Administration's efforts to win support for Cold War foreign policy.

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## STEP ON IT, DOC!



Cartoon by Roy Justus in *The Minneapolis Star*, 1947

In his speeches Truman emphasized the internal nature of the threat almost as much as he did the Red Army; the government matched his rhetoric by arresting Communist aliens and holding them without charges. Truman's record on civil liberties during this period (i.e., before McCarthy's rise to prominence) was about as bad as it could have been.

"The campaign for Cold War foreign policy was a spectacular success when viewed from the limited perspective of the effort to win acceptance of large-scale foreign aid," Freeland writes,

but the ideological rhetoric and propagandistic machinations of this campaign also had consequences which were not entirely foreseen or desired by the Administration and became a major problem for both domestic politics and foreign policy.

In short, backlash. The Republicans took Truman at his

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word, agreed that the threat was both immediate and overwhelming, and then demanded to know why he had not done more about it. Why, for example, did the Truman Administration stop aiding Chiang Kai-shek at the critical moment in the Chinese Civil War? Why did Dean Acheson defend Alger Hiss and refuse to fire the traitors who filled the State Department?

Such charges, which were widespread long before McCarthy's famous Wheeling speech about Communists in the State Department, caused the Truman Administration no end of embarrassment and contributed heavily to Eisenhower's victory in 1952. But, Freeland argues persuasively, the Democrats had no one to blame but themselves. McCarthy and the Republicans merely reaped where Truman

and Acheson had sowed. Or, as Freeland puts it,

Senator McCarthy has been indignantly reviled by his adversaries in the Truman administration. Their moralism is unbecoming, for it was they that cultivated the public atmosphere in which he thrived.

And again,

In 1947-48 Truman and his advisers employed all the political and programmatic techniques that in later years were to become associated with the broad phenomenon of McCarthyism. . . . Many of the practices of McCarthyism were Truman's practices in cruder hands, just as the language of McCarthyism was Truman's language, in less well-meaning voices.

The only major problem with this book is Freeland's casual attitude towards motivation. Nearly every action, speech, decision, and policy of the Truman Administration he attributes to cynicism, which may be true enough, but he cannot have it both ways. According to Freeland, Truman scared hell out of the American people in order to raise money for a thoroughgoing foreign economic program—thus what the president did on the domestic front he did because of the requirements of foreign policy. Yet towards the end of the book, Freeland argues that Truman's major foreign policy decisions—to enter the Korean War, to support Chiang on Formosa, to help the French effort in Vietnam—were made on the basis of domestic considerations, the primary one being the need to protect his flank from Republican charges that he was soft on communism. Freeland argues that the situation had changed precisely because of the success of the scare campaign, so Truman had only himself to blame, but the explanation is too pat. Truman had many reasons to emphasize the Communist threat in 1947, not the least of which was his own view of the world, just as he had many reasons to enter the Korean War that went far beyond domestic political pressures. Freeland's overall point, nevertheless, is well taken. We all suffer because of the partisan use of anti-communism. Still, a little more complexity would be a welcome addition to this otherwise admirable study. □