

Political Disequilibrium, Containment, and the Cold War: How the Natural Selection of
Political Issues May Drive American Foreign Policy and the Unintended Consequences
of Political Decisions

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I. Introduction

United States foreign policy during most of the Cold War was based around the policy of containment. This policy failed to best uphold U.S. strategic interests and resulted in long-term disability around the globe. The policy contributed to a massive arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union that created greater tension and competition between the two huge powers. The United States failed to recognize (or acknowledge) differences between communist countries and involved itself in wars on the periphery of its interests, such as in the case of Korea and Vietnam. However, these actions and the objective of the defeat of the Soviet Union were not originally part of the policy of containment that had been developed by George Kennan. It is the contention of this paper that many of the above mentioned actions and failures were caused by changes and transformations of the policy of containment that occurred during the policy's implementation. The policy of containment was altered because of domestic concerns that had little to do with the problems the policy was supposed to solve.

By examining Kenneth Arrow's General Possibility Theorem and William Riker's concept of the Natural Selection of Political Issues, and then utilizing those concepts to analyze some of the events and situations that occurred during the implementation of containment during the Truman administration, it is possible to see the policy failed because it was altered to take into account domestic political considerations during a period of political disequilibrium over American Foreign Policy. The policy's alteration had many unintended and unforeseeable consequences that would be dire for the citizens of the country and detrimental to the policy's original objective of protecting American interests at home and abroad. The events and situations to be examined are, first, determining if there was political disequilibrium over foreign policy in the United States at the close of the Second World War, second, a summary of the policy of containment as framed by George Kennan, third, the adoption of the Truman doctrine, fourth, the phenomenon of McCarthyism, and finally, the United States involvement in the Korean War.

This paper will attempt to demonstrate the futility of predicting the results of political decisions. To demonstrate this phenomenon the policy of containment will be utilized. By using the rhetoric of good versus evil during the adoption of the policy of containment, to take advantage of a state of political disequilibrium in Congress, Truman opened the door for the nuclear arms race, the dark excesses of the McCarthy Era, and helped led the United States into two bloody conflicts in East Asia. Decisions about the terms in which a policy is presented may in the future lead to a situation far worse than the one the policy was attempting to rectify. The last section of this paper considers the McCarthyism and the Korean War. Both events were outside of the objectives laid down by Kennan for his policy, were not intentions of the Truman administration when it implemented the containment policy, and regressive to United States interests at home and around the globe.

II. The General Possibility Theorem and the Natural Selection of Political Issues

In 1951, Kenneth Arrow first presented the General Possibility Theorem with the publication of Social Choice and Individual Values. The theorem shows, by a process of logical implication, that any amalgamation of individual preferences by any voting method is unable to satisfy reasonable conditions of fairness and, at the same time, produce logical arrangement if there are three or more alternatives (Riker 115). Because no democratic method is able to satisfy his conditions of fairness, society is unable to assure a fair social ordering of alternatives. If it cannot assure a fair social ordering, then society is unable to know “what outcomes of a fair method mean” (Riker 119). This failure implies that all methods of choice that meet the fairness criterion fail to guarantee a transitive social ordering, and these failures condemn democratic outcomes “to the world of arbitrary nonsense, at least some of the time” (Riker 119).

Additional conundrums, beyond that social choices may not make sense or have meaning, are some practical implications and a state of politics in disequilibrium (Riker 137). The practical implications are that if there is no such thing as “the public interest” that controls the outcome of social choice (a social ordering that makes sense) then the outcomes of elections may be manipulated. This manipulation can be done in the following two ways: the manipulation of the agenda and strategic voting (Riker 137). The second implication follows from the problem that the operation of individual preferences within a voting method fails to produce transitive results (Riker 115). The result of this failure is a state of perpetual disequilibrium in politics (Riker 197). Riker explains:

All methods of amalgamation involve illogicalities in choice, which is the fundamental basis for disequilibrium. If, furthermore, choice is made over continuous alternatives by voting, especially by majority rule, then disequilibrium is an almost certain consequence. Disequilibrium is in turn the setting for a natural selection of issues. (198)

The disequilibrium Riker observes in political affairs becomes the basis for the Natural Selection of Political Issues. He concludes that the disequilibrium is what drives political affairs (Riker 197). There is a high cost losers must bear in political elections and decisions because politics involve matters of moral scarcity (Riker 205). When the issues decided upon are of a moral nature, the almost certain result is dissatisfaction for the majority of participants, which in turn, leads to political disequilibrium (Riker 207). In order to understand political events in a democracy, an understanding of how tastes and preference are incorporated into political decisions is needed (Riker 197). The operation of preference is at the center of political life, and that operation may be manipulated by those who are “smarter, bolder, more powerful, more creative, or luckier” (Riker 200). In a state of disequilibrium, the social ordering does not gravitate toward any certain point that is the preferred ordering of a group of individuals. The result of democratic decision-making, then, often is determined by a variety of factors that violate the conditions of fairness proposed by Arrow. So, in this state of politics, there are winners who manipulate the agenda in order to maintain a winning coalition, and there are losers who attempt to come up with new alternatives and issues around which a

winning coalition may be formed (Riker 209). The Natural Selection of Political Issues is the search for issues and alternatives around which winning coalitions may form.

With this understanding of Arrow's Theorem and the Natural Selection of Political Issues, it is possible to observe what may have occurred during the adoption of the containment policy. It is important to determine if there was political disequilibrium in the United States on foreign policy during the three years following the Second World War. By 1947 it was blatantly obvious to anyone who was paying attention that the policy of universalism was a failure. The Soviet Union had entrenched their position in Eastern Europe, and neither the United States nor the Soviet Union were paying much attention to international agreements. With the apparent failure of the policy of universalism and the prior abandonment of the policy of isolationism during the war, most American policy makers were searching for a new coherent foreign policy (Vasquez 652). There was no consensus as to what should be done in foreign affairs and, therefore, there was likely disequilibrium within the voting populous and voting bodies, such as Congress, over what should be done. Also, it should be noted that any adoption of a foreign policy would likely be accompanied by the extraction of domestic resources. James Richter explains this phenomenon:

To the extent that international pressures force states to undertake certain tasks for their security and well-being. These states must define new institutional missions--and, if necessary, create new institutions--to perform these tasks. They also must formulate legitimating myths about their country's world role to justify these tasks and to mobilize and extract the resources from within their territories necessary to accomplish them. (273)

The extraction of resources adds an additional dimension to the political question of American foreign policy that contributes to political disequilibrium. In addition to the moral and value allocation that occurs when the nation's position on foreign affairs is determined, there are also material and economic goods whose use will be determined by the policy that is adopted. The cost losers bear over this political issue are loss of control of American foreign policy and the loss of economic and material goods such as additional taxes imposed in order to carry out the opposition's policy. In the absence of an adopted foreign policy, the almost certain result is political disequilibrium in voting bodies in the United States.

III. The Policy of Containment as formulated by George Kennan

The policy of containment, when it was initially created, was a response to the actions and threat of the Soviet Union. The best way to examine the policy of containment before it entered politics is to look at the policy as articulated by its chief architect, George Kennan, who also gave the policy its intellectual underpinnings (Gaddis 24-26). Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was motivated by two beliefs. These beliefs were that inherent antagonism between the forces of capitalism and socialism existed and that the victory of communism was inevitable (Ambrose 46). However, he did not believe that the threat posed by the Soviet Union was a military one or that the threat could be vanquished by military means. On the contrary, he believed that the

threat posed by the Soviet Union to United States security was an economic and ideological one that should be met on those grounds (Ambrose 46).

In order to meet this threat, Kennan proposed a policy of “long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment” (Ambrose 47). He believed that the form that containment should take should be determined on a case by case basis with areas with the highest strategic importance for United States national security receiving the most economic and, if necessary, military aid (Gaddis 30-31). Therefore, he believed that there should be different levels of United States involvement for different areas of the globe. In practice, the United States should invest more in areas that it cannot afford to lose like Japan and Germany because of their industrial and military capacity than in areas like Vietnam and Iran that have marginal strategic value. He also believed that the United States should “restrain from interference in the internal affairs of other countries” (Gaddis 31). Kennan vigorously opposed the notion that the United States should resist communism wherever it appeared (Gaddis 41). The goal of containment was to provide for the development of independent centers of power in Europe and Asia that would not be beholden to either the United States or the Soviet Union (Gaddis 41-42). The goal was not to divide the world between the Soviet Union and the United States. Throughout the rest of this study, it will be important to keep in mind that Kennan’s strategy of containment was not designed to bring U.S. victory over communism but to best support the nation’s interest at home and abroad. Using Kennan’s policy as a benchmark as to what containment was before it entered the political process; it is possible to analyze the policy’s adoption by the Truman administration.

IV. Early Implementation of the Containment Policy: The Truman Doctrine

During a period in which the nation lacked a consensus on foreign policy concerns, the Truman administration formulated, adopted, and began to implement the policy of containment. In early 1947, the administration had decided that it wished to implement Kennan’s policy of containment and a crisis was needed in order to begin the policy’s implementation. The crisis the administration used was in Greece and Turkey. Following the end of the Second World War, Great Britain had been providing economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey. Both nations were on the edge of the Soviet sphere of influence. In both, there were strong communist parties that were supporting guerilla actions against their particular nation’s government (Ambrose 127-129). By February of 1947, the situation in Greece was rapidly worsening, and the crisis was further complicated by problems in Britain’s economy. The British could no longer afford to continue their support, and on February 21, 1947, the British Ambassador informed the U.S. State Department that British aid to Greece and Turkey would end in six weeks (Acheson 217). In order to stabilize the two nations, it was projected that \$400 million were needed (Congressional Quarterly 247). On February 26, Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson informed the President of the situation:

Acheson made the presentation. He emphasized that if Greece were lost, Turkey would be untenable. Russia would move in and take control of the Dardanelles, with the “clearest implication” for the Middle East. Morale would sink in Italy, Germany, and France. Acheson was describing what would later be called the domino theory, which

held that if one nation fell to the Communists, its neighbors would surely follow. In this case, Acheson said one rotten apple would infect the whole barrel. Put in those terms, the administration had no choice but act vigorously and quickly. (Ambrose 129)

The above quotation may serve as an introduction to how the policy of containment's basic tenants would shift during the period of its adoption and implementation. The rhetoric of the infamous domino theory that Acheson used made the fate of Greece and Turkey seem to determine the fate of all of Europe despite the fact there was a no evidence to support this claim. Also, this addition is a change to the policy of containment. This change, that of the domino theory, made losses of nations to communism on the periphery of United States strategic interests appear to be far more important than they were under Kennan's framework. This change may also be an example of the natural selection of issues at work within the executive department. However, such suppositions can only be conjecture. An example that may better illuminate the natural selection of issues in the development of containment is the adoption of the Truman doctrine.

The task before Truman was to sell the policy of containment to Congress. The Congress he faced had come into power in 1946 because of a rise in the cost of living that was caused by the end of the war (Brogan 610). The Republican Party had taken back both Houses of Congress for the first time since 1930 on a platform of balancing the budget, lowering taxes, and reducing overseas expenditures (Berger 222). Truman needed to find a way to break up a winning coalition that had little motivation to free up funds for aid to Greece and Turkey. The issue that he used to form his winning coalition was an exaggerated threat to the United States posed by Soviet communism. James Richter explains why Truman took this path:

[Truman] might have continued exploring different tactics against the Soviets had not the restabilization of Greece and Turkey, the Marshall plan, and the entire internationalist vision of a liberal economic order, required the mobilization of vast domestic resources. To overcome potential resistance to such expenditures in the fragmented American political process--particularly from the Republican majority in Congress--Truman oversold the communist threat to the American way of life. (279-280)

Truman went before Congress on March 12 to ask for \$400 million for aid to Greece and Turkey (Congressional Quarterly 247). The argument he gave was much like the one used by Acheson above. In order to gain public support, Truman "had to describe the Greek situation in universal terms, good versus evil, to get support for containment" (Ambrose 131). Kennan protested this use of rhetoric. He believed aid to a single nation was needed, not the set up for a worldwide doctrine of American-led opposition to communism (Ambrose 131). However, Kennan was not responsible for explaining the policy to Congress in a way to receive the necessary funds (Gaddis 51). It was Truman's responsibility to push for the legislation.

The Republican majority in Congress, in terms of foreign policy, was made up of a coalition of traditional isolationists and Congressmen who would become known as hard-line cold warriors (Stassen 101). Most members of Congress of the Democratic

Party upheld an internationalist foreign policy. If Truman, rather than presenting his case about the immediate threat of communism, had simply asked Congress for the necessary funds in order to hold up the Greek government, he would likely not have broken the Republican majority. The following are three possible outcomes of the Greek and Turkey bill:

A: No action

B: Aid to Greek and Turkey with establishment of open-ended doctrine to challenge communism

C: Aid to Greek and Turkey without such a doctrine

Truman, as with most of the Democratic minority, likely ordered these preferences *CBA* with the remainder of the Democrats ordering them *CAB*. The isolationists in the Republican Party would have ordered these choices either *ABC* or *ACB* and the future cold warriors *BAC*. There was likely disequilibrium in both Houses over this issue. The Greek-Turkish aid bill did, however, pass comfortably in the Senate and the House. There were not enough votes in the Senate to illustrate these preferences and the Natural Selection of Political Issues. However, there were enough votes in the House on foreign aid bills to possibly see how Truman was able to split the Republican majority.

On April 30, 1947, the Jonkman amendment to a foreign aid bill lowered the amount of aid from \$350 million to \$200 million and passed in the House by a vote of 225 to 165 (Congressional Quarterly 272). On this amendment, the voting was, for the most part, made along partisan lines with Democrats opposing the amendment with 35 in favor and 128 opposed, while Republicans supported the amendment with 190 in favor and 36 opposed. The House passed the Greek-Turkish Aid bill on May 9, 1947 (Congressional Quarterly 274). The vote was 287 to 108 in favor of the bill with strong Democrat support, 160 to 13 in favor. However, the Republican Party was split with 127 in support and 94 opposed. Of those who supported the reduction of the foreign aid bill, 122 supported the Greek-Turkish Aid bill. If those 122 Representatives had voted against the Greek-Turkish Aid bill, it would have failed in a vote of 165 in favor and 230 opposed. Truman was able to break the new cold warriors away from the isolationists and form a new winning coalition around foreign aid in opposition to the Soviet Union. Those within his winning coalition would have preference rankings of *CBA* and *BAC*. He had most of his own party's support because they preferred aid with conditions rather than no aid at all and most of the cold warriors because their first preference was a policy that directly challenged communism. Because of the need to break up a winning coalition in Congress, the policy of containment was altered to be more confrontational, and areas on the periphery of United States strategic interest were given greater importance than in the original framework of containment.

V. Negative Consequences of Containment: McCarthyism and the Korean War

The adoption of the Truman doctrine and the domino theory addition to the policy of containment is only one example of the Natural Selection of Political Issues' affect upon the policy of containment. The remainder of the paper will be dedicated to ascertaining some of the negative effects of the changes and possible additional changes upon the policy of containment and the world. To begin this brief section, one should begin with the Marshall Plan, a plan of American aid to Western Europe, because it flowed out of the Truman doctrine that was implemented during the Greece-Turkey crisis (Gaddis 135). The Marshall Plan was, to a large part, an effective measure for the rebuilding of Western Europe, but it had many drawbacks, which Hugh Brogan outlines:

In the first place [the Marshall Plan] marked the moment when the USA and the USSR formally and publicly became enemies. Years and years would pass before they found it possible to negotiate seriously again, years during which huge vested interests, with overwhelming stakes in the continuance of conflict, would emerge. Secondly, what began as a policy of economic containment of Soviet messianism, as promulgated by George Kennan of the State Department, soon modulated into military confrontation. The division of Europe into East and West which the Marshall Plan signaled would soon become a division between military alliances. Third, the way in which the plan was presented to the American people had unfortunate consequences. (612)

Brogan's words demonstrate how the policy of containment had been altered and took on characteristics that it was not originally supposed to have. United States actions could have easily been perceived by the Soviet Union as confirming their supposition that there existed natural antagonism between capitalism and communism (Ambrose 46, 148-149). This rise of agitation led to the development of military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Such developments, as understood in the section on Kennan's containment, were not in the interest of United States security. The nation now took on the cost of competing militarily with the Soviet Union and resulted in a long, dangerous nuclear arms race. The result of the last drawback Brogan lists is an excellent example of a violation of one of Arrow's conditions, the irrelevance of irrelevant alternatives. The dimension of communism had developed a life of its own outside of foreign policy and had a dramatic effect upon domestic elections. If Truman could use the issue of the threat of communist aggression as a way to get funding for European economic growth, other politicians could also use it for more dubious purposes. An early use of the issue could be seen in Richard Nixon's 1946 campaign for Congress in California in which he insinuated that his opponent "was a secret communist" (Brogan 610). However, a more notorious and detrimental example of this demagoguery is that of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Joseph McCarthy entered the national spotlight in 1950, following the victory of Mao in China (Ambrose 161). McCarthy had gained his seat in the Senate by accusing his opponent of corruption and passing himself off as a war hero, and by 1950, he realized that he needed a new issue in order to gain reelection (Brogan 618). The issue that he used was the accusation that there were communists inside of the government and therefore the United States was being soft on communism abroad (Brogan 618). This assumption that the cause of American failure in foreign policy was the result of communists in Washington would become generally accepted among the American

people (Ambrose 162). McCarthy used many of the same arguments used by Truman and his administration about communism; however, he took the arguments further and used them against those who had originally used them to get funds from Congress. Acheson had to defend himself and his staff from accusations that they were being soft on communism and had been acting treasonously (Acheson 365-368). Of course the accusations were absolute nonsense; however, people took them seriously because the means used to pass the Truman Doctrine had given validity to the communist threat in the minds of the American people. McCarthy was then propelled into national prominence and managed to do extreme harm during his four-year excess of mud slinging. McCarthy was a wonderful gift to Soviet propagandists; now they had someone they could quote fairly and still have the ability to be inflammatory (Brogan 619). A more detrimental effect was had upon the American people in the fear McCarthy bred among them. Individuals were paraded before McCarthy's Congressional Committee with many of them being thrown in jail or losing their jobs if they refused to testify against themselves (Brogan 619-620). A panic ran through the populace, and individuals were blacklisted on the basis of the assumption of communist sympathies. However, McCarthyism may have left a more detrimental and long-lasting legacy in that the Truman Administration had to show that it was not soft on communism and, at the same time, deal with the hostile situation of Korea.

In order to understand the development of the Korean War, and McCarthyism for that matter, it is necessary to go back to the collapse of Chiang Kai-shek's government in China. Chiang Kai-shek was unable, even with massive amounts of foreign aid, to maintain control of the country (Ambrose 160). Through a variety of blunders, he succeeded in alienating his base of support and opened the door for the eventual victory of Mao Tse-tung. Mao's victory had a great impact upon American policy and created division among the American elite (Graebner XVI). This division, as demonstrated earlier, assisted in McCarthy's rise to power and led to the false assumption of many American politicians that communist rise to power in Asia was the result of the Soviet Union's desire for expansion rather than the results of internal revolution (Graebner XIX). This assumption would contribute to the failure of American policy in Vietnam and Korea. Hugh Brogan explains how this attitude affected the United States response to North Korea's attack upon South Korea on June 25, 1950:

It was assumed, whether correctly or not may never be known[,] that the North Koreans would never have dared to act without the express authorization, indeed orders, of Stalin. The Chinese communists were discounted: they too were supposed to be mere tools of the Kremlin. This was a moment long awaited, long feared. If Stalin were allowed to succeed, the United States would be shamed for ever. (Brogan 624)

Truman's response to the attack was the expansion of the Truman doctrine to Asia and the pledge of American military involvement against the expansion of communism in Asia (Ambrose 171). Not only did Truman begin to use the U.S. Air Force to attack the North Korean advance, he gave military aid to the French in Vietnam and had the Navy defend Taiwan (Ambrose 171-172). However, the use of American air power was insufficient to hold off South Korea's collapse, and Truman had to send in American ground troops on June 30, 1950 or face communist control of the entire

peninsula. Additional factors also pushed Truman to increase the United States role in the conflict. First, Truman and the Democrats had to deal with constant Republican attacks that they had “lost China” and accusations by McCarthy and his lackeys that they were being soft on communism (Ambrose 173). The loss of South Korea could have become another rallying point for those opposing the administration. Second, the strategic importance of the peninsula and what its loss might mean to the security of Japan further urged greater U.S. involvement (Acheson 405).

The Korean War had many negative consequences: the fruits of bad policy, implementation, and unforeseen developments. Prior to the outbreak of conflict, the Truman administration had been attempting to get funds from Congress for massive nuclear arms and oversea military increase (Gaddis 109). The Korean War could not have come at a better time for the success of this effort. To highlight this success, the increase to the 1951 defense budget is illuminating. Before the outbreak of the war, Truman had committed himself to only \$13.5 billion for defense spending in the 1951 fiscal year; however, the final Congressional authorization for defense spending in 1951 was \$48.2 billion, an increase of 257 percent above the original figure of \$13.5 billion. During the war, General MacArthur, leader of the United States led United Nations military force in Korea, was successful at stopping the North Korean advance and pushing the North Koreans back to their own borders. Rather than stopping and upholding the idea of containment, he was authorized to push forward in an effort to unify Korea (Ambrose 174-175). This attack signals another alteration to the United States foreign policy. Now instead of trying to contain communism the policy became the roll back of communism. Another consequence of the war was further undermining of the United Nations and turning it into “an instrument of ideological propaganda” (Johnson 450). There are many other negative consequences other than the few listed above, but Paul Johnson’s description of the war captures the complete waste of the war:

The Korean War was a characteristic 20th-century tragedy. It was launched for ideological reasons, without of scintilla of moral justification or any evidence of popular support. It killed 34,000 Americans, a million Koreans, a quarter of a million Chinese. It achieved no purpose. All its consequences were unintended. Its course was a secession of blunders. (450)

VI. Conclusion

Arrow’s Theorem and Riker’s Natural Selection of Issues explain why the policy of containment was altered, and by examining the developments caused by those alterations, the reasons for the policy’s failure are clearer. The policy was altered in order to overcome domestic opposition to the Truman administration’s policy. This transformation was necessary for the policy to be implemented. The need for politicians to find new issues around which coalitions may form may have been one of the driving forces around the alteration of the containment policy. Changes and additions to the policy, such as the domino theory, may not have been the results of responses to world events; rather, the Natural Selection of Political Issues may have driven them. Therefore, the policy that was developed by George Kennan was not the same policy that was implemented by the Truman administration. The policy became a policy of military

build-up and intervention within areas of little strategic importance for United States security. The immediate result of containment was a dangerous bi-polar world with the power of mutual destruction, not the world of independent concentrations of power that Kennan believed were necessary for United States security. The unintended consequence of the adoption of policy of containment was the creation of a far more dangerous world than the one found in 1947.

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