

FREEDOM, FOREIGN POLICY, AND PUBLIC OPINION: A STRATEGY FOR FOSTERING DEMOCRACY

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A nation, like a person, has a mind — a mind that must be kept informed and alert, that must know itself, that understands the hopes and needs of its neighbors — all the other nations that live within the narrowing circle of the world.

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

The foreign policy of the United States since 1945 can be summed in one word — containment. Simply put, the containment doctrine states that the United States will provide support, including military support, for sovereign nations struggling against Communist or other totalitarian aggressors.

The containment doctrine has weathered many storms, most notably from liberals who would seem to prefer a policy of surrender to any policy that defends the use of force.

Today, however, the most serious concerns about containment come from the opposite direction. Conservatives, including the president himself, are proposing a policy of actively promoting capitalist democracy. The Reagan Doctrine specifically calls for U.S. efforts to support freedom fighters, and we've put that doctrine to the test in Afghanistan, Kampuchea, Nicaragua, and Angola.

On one level, the results thus far are very encouraging. The freedom fighters have done at least as well as could be expected. In Afghanistan the *mujahidin* apparently are bringing down several Soviet helicopters a month, and the USSR now shows some signs of wanting out. In Angola and Nicaragua, American-supported freedom fighters have the potential to overturn oppressive communist regimes, even though U.S. support has amounted to only a fraction of what the Soviets and their proxies have poured in. In the countries where it's been applied, the Reagan Doctrine appears to be succeeding.

On another level, though, the Reagan Doctrine has had less success. Here in America, public opinion polls show most citizens do not approve of sending U.S. arms to support specific freedom fighter movements. Support for the Nicaraguan "contras" was won from Congress only after extraordinary efforts by an extraordinarily popular president — and it was won not by changing public opinion but by convincing Congress to act in spite of it.

Thus, despite its success abroad, the Reagan Doctrine is threatened with an early demise. The battle for freedom is being fought not only in the jungles of South America or the mountains of Afghanistan — it is being fought in the minds and hearts of the American people, as well as in the halls of Congress. A strategy for freedom, therefore, must be a strategy for victory here in the United States, as well as abroad.

This article proposes such a strategy, based on three main arguments. First, containment as a foreign policy doctrine is simply insufficient. Not wrong, but insufficient. Second, the doctrine of fostering opportunity abroad is the right doctrine and, combined with containment, provides the basis for a sound, successful foreign policy. Third, American foreign policy cannot be made in a political vacuum. As we should have learned from Vietnam, and have been reminded by the recent events regarding Iran, a foreign policy that lacks the support of the American people has a very high probability of failing, and failing miserably.

THE INADEQUACY OF CONTAINMENT

Containment — the “Truman Doctrine” — dates from President Truman’s March 12, 1947 address before a joint session of Congress. In that speech, Truman recognized the growing threat of communism — specifically, the threat to Greece and Turkey — and argued that the United States must “not allow changes in the *status quo* in violation of the Charter of the United Nations.”

The implicit assumption behind the Truman Doctrine was that communism, left to its own devices and isolated behind its self-imposed “iron curtain,” would either moderate towards a more liberal, less totalitarian model, or fall of its own weight. In order to prevail, therefore, it would be sufficient for the United States and its allies to pin the Soviet beast within its borders and simply wait for the inevitable.

As it has developed over nearly four decades, the geopolitical strategy of containment has come to mean maintaining the geographic *status quo* — the encirclement of the Soviet Union, by NATO to the west, Japan, Korea, and China to the east, and India, Pakistan, and Iran to the south. Any substantial break in this encirclement is seen by the strategists, correctly, as greatly increasing the Soviets’ capability to project force and impinge directly on U.S. security interests. (One recent articulation of this geopolitical viewpoint is Zbigniew Brzezinski’s *Game Plan*.)

There must be more to American foreign policy, however, than geopolitical strategy. We Americans view ourselves as holding a special place in the world: we are the disciples, and guardians, of a revolutionary idea, built around the concept of individual freedom. Our allegiance to this idea is what identifies

us as a people, and any foreign policy not built on this national ethic is bound to fail.

It can be argued that President Truman understood the need to tie foreign policy doctrine to our beliefs. As Robert Tucker points out in a recent article, Truman's containment was a doctrine of hope. It called for the United States "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." And, because it assumed communism would fall of its own weight, containment implicitly (though *not* explicitly) held out the greater goal of eventually freeing Eastern Europe and the other "satellites," and even extending freedom to the Soviet Union itself.

As it was developed and practiced during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, however, it is clear that American policy did not place sufficient emphasis on the moral basis for America's role in the world. The "domino theory," for example, is an almost entirely strategic concept, based on the self-contained notion that we must prevent the spread of communism in order to prevent the spread of communism.

In Korea, MacArthur's protestations notwithstanding, our foreign policy doctrine proved sufficient: we were able to "contain" the spread of communism and fight the North Koreans to a draw. But in Vietnam, we found ourselves confronted with a more subtle adversary, and in a less advantageous strategic position.

As the war proceeded, two sorts of cracks began to appear in America's armor. First, it became clear the U.S. military was not well prepared to fight a guerrilla war. Happily, this problem got better as the war went along and we learned from our mistakes. Second, and much worse, we came to recognize we didn't know why we were fighting in Vietnam in the first place. As the casualty reports mounted, this second crack got deeper and deeper, until it nearly split us apart as a nation.

We lost the war because we failed to either define a clear national security interest in winning or to develop a moral framework to justify our involvement on anything other than national interest grounds.

Some people learned the wrong lesson from Vietnam. Containment's liberal critics told us the domino theory had been wrong all along, and that U.S. intervention to prevent the spread of communism is (at least almost) always wrong. A more thoughtful examination of the Vietnam experience, and the postwar era it concluded, leads to a different set of lessons. Conservatives argue freedom is infinitely different from and morally superior to totalitarianism, and we are thus *morally obligated* to promote the former and fight the latter.

Because we are a compassionate people, Americans are saddened by political repression and economic deprivation, and we feel a natural desire to help. Containment is insufficient because it fails to satisfy this very moral desire to offer others the opportunity, at least, to reach for what we have. Yes, it

pledges that we will not permit the spread of communism. But, because that is all it pledges, it fails to endorse the advancement of freedom and democracy.

Containment not only fails to inspire; it fails to keep faith with the moral foundations upon which this country was built.

A HIGHER GOAL — THE REAGAN DOCTRINE

Since coming into office, President Reagan has sought to fill this moral void. In his 1985 State of the Union message, he described what has come to be known as the Reagan Doctrine. "Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few; it is the universal right of all God's children," the president said. And, he continued:

Our mission is to nourish and defend freedom and democracy, and to communicate these ideals everywhere we can. America's economic success is freedom's success; it can be repeated a hundred times in a hundred different nations. . . . We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives — on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua — to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.

Our actions under this new doctrine of opportunity are governed by two corollaries, which I call the Rule of Hungary and the Rule of Vietnam.

The rule of Hungary recognizes simply that there are instances where U.S. aid cannot help. We could not help the people of Hungary in 1956, or the Czechs in 1968, or the Poles in 1980. Through Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, through our trading relations, we can do many things to bring freedom to these nations — but assisting in armed revolution is not among them.

The rule of Vietnam is that we cannot fight others' battles for them. To be appreciated, freedom must be earned, and the Reagan Doctrine explicitly states that we will provide economic and, where needed, military assistance to freedom fighters, but will not intervene with U.S. troops to fight another nation's battles for it.

The Reagan Doctrine does not replace containment. The need to prevent Soviet expansion is still very real, and there must be no question of our commitment and ability to prevent such expansion. Instead, the doctrine supplements containment by providing a basis for expanding freedom. It transforms the United States from a status quo power, that can only stay where it is or go backwards, into a progressive force with a vision for a better world. It provides a strategy for prevailing in the struggle against tyranny.

FOREIGN POLICY AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

The Reagan Doctrine completes the intellectual basis for American foreign policy, but that alone is not enough. Foreign policy isn't made by intellectuals.

It's made by elected representatives — increasingly by congressmen — who respond to what their constituents think. For any foreign policy to succeed, it must have a foundation of political support.

Thus, the major contribution of the Reagan Doctrine is not that it provides a strategy for prevailing abroad, but rather that it gives America a foreign policy doctrine that is consistent with our national ethic of respect for freedom and optimism about the future. As a result, it creates the opportunity to form a new foreign policy consensus that includes not only the experts, but the American public.

Taking advantage of that opportunity is the major challenge for foreign policy during the coming decade. Having learned that we cannot conduct foreign policy without a public consensus, it is up to America's leaders to foster a public discussion that leads to consensus on the key issues of foreign affairs.

Some will say this goal is hopelessly optimistic. They'll cite public disinterest, as in a recent poll showing that two-thirds of American voters take no interest in foreign policy. Others will argue that the Congress and the public are too involved in foreign affairs, and reminisce about the "old days" when presidents could make foreign policy without public consent.

Whether or not there ever was such a time, it is clear Congress and the public are, and for the foreseeable future will be, instrumental in determining America's role in the world. Instead of wishing idly for fewer restrictions on executive power, our leaders have an obligation to roll up their sleeves and get to work explaining to the public what they believe America ought to do in the world.

President Reagan has made huge strides in this respect. He has been the first to take the debate to the public, explaining on national television his rationale for the Strategic Defense Initiative and the basis for our support of the contras and other freedom fighters. He campaigned on the need for stronger defenses, and converted his victory into a four-year buildup that has substantially increased our defense capabilities. His willingness to speak the truth about international terrorism and the evils of the Soviet Union has raised public recognition of the need for a strong U.S. role in the world.

Tragically, the Iran-contra fiasco threatens to undo much of the progress of the past six years. If we are to go forward with the policy of freedom and opportunity the president has charted, we must do so by winning renewed public confidence in American policy. This we can do, if we follow some reasonably simple principles.

First, *base foreign policy on American values*. Our society is based on economic and political freedom, on the sovereignty of the individual over the state, on opportunity and on hope. No policy that fails to provide hope for a better future, or that supports statism over the individual, can ever win the long-term support of the American people.

Second, *when appropriate, do not be afraid to explain U.S. policy in terms of U.S. interests.* Fostering freedom and opportunity abroad is a legitimate objective, but so is protecting the security of the United States. Thus, for example, we should not be coy or apologetic about saying that an increased Soviet presence in South America would threaten U.S. security and that we will take the actions necessary to prevent the establishment of a Soviet beach-head there.

Third, *enunciate clear policies and stick by them.* Our policy with respect to terrorists was the right policy: We don't sell arms to terrorists, and we don't trade weapons for hostages. Violating — or at least appearing to violate — those policies was a mistake, and we must rectify it as quickly as possible by stating unambiguously what our policy is.

Fourth, *be consistent.* If America is to stand for freedom and opportunity, it must be for freedom and opportunity everywhere. Our recent actions to bring about change in the Philippines and Haiti, for example, have shown that we can be on the side of freedom against nominally pro-Western dictators as well as against communists.

Consistency does not require U.S. support for any group that rises up against a repressive government. In South Africa, for example, the Communist African National Congress, if it were to succeed militarily, shows no likelihood of replacing apartheid with something better. It would simply be one form of injustice replacing another. But consistency does require the United States to seek to bring about positive change. When there is insufficient effort towards progress, as in South Africa, we are morally obligated to express our displeasure, as the current sanctions appropriately do.

Fifth, *be realistic in word as well as in deed.* Consider, for example, the idea that arms reduction agreements can give us a world free of nuclear weapons. It's an appealing notion. Unfortunately, today's nuclear weapons are so compact and easily transported that a complete ban on nuclear weapons would be virtually *impossible* to verify.

Instead, the only realistic way of reducing — and eventually eliminating — nuclear weapons is to reduce and eliminate the incentives to build them, which we can do only by building an effective defense against them.

Those who speak seriously of near-term elimination of nuclear weapons through arms agreements are misleading the public and diminishing support for needed programs such as SDI. Rather than promising politically popular results we cannot hope to achieve, we must have enough respect for our citizens to tell them the truth: realistically, arms agreements cannot completely eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons.

Sixth, *where it is necessary to use covert operations — and it sometimes is — they must be consistent with stated American policy and, therefore, capable of withstanding public scrutiny if revealed.* The attempt to rescue American hostages in 1979 is an example of a covert operation which, even though it failed, was consistent

with our overall foreign policy. Obviously, covertly trading arms for hostages is not consistent with our policy.

Seventh, *seek out and utilize mechanisms for encouraging public debate of foreign policy issues*. The administration has, until recently, done an excellent job of sparking public discussion of SDI. Unfortunately, the debate has now been pre-empted by lawyers at the Defense and State departments, who are arguing among themselves whether the ABM Treaty can be interpreted to permit further SDI development. By making this arcane subject into the central issue of discussion, they have effectively taken the debate out of the public forum where it belongs. What is needed is not fancy lawyering, but a public debate on whether SDI should go forward.

There is no shortage of different mechanisms for sparking public debate on foreign policy issues — ranging from presidential press conferences, to study commissions, to asking Congress for supporting legislation. It's up to the president to use these tools to generate productive and honest debate about key foreign policy issues.

CONCLUSION

The opportunity for freedom in the world has never been greater than it is today. The political and economic failings of totalitarian communism are self-evident, and democracy demonstrably is on the march all over the world. America is on the side of history, facing a unique opportunity to foster the spread of economic and political freedom. But we will realize that opportunity only if we move together as a nation on a path consistent with our national heritage.

