



**Judith S. Jeffrey.** *Ambiguous Commitments and Uncertain Policies: The Truman Doctrine in Greece, 1947-1952.* Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2000. xii + 257 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0046-2.



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## Greece was no Vietnam

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Historians disagree about when the Cold War began, but most would agree that by the time Harry Truman went before Congress in March 1947 to request aid for Greece and Turkey, the long twilight struggle was on. Naturally, therefore, the Truman Doctrine and its implementation has been a subject of great interest, most notably in Lawrence Wittner's *American Intervention in Greece, 1943-1949* (1982) and Howard Jones's "A New Kind of War": *America's Global Strategy and the Truman Doctrine in Greece* (1989).

The latest addition to this literature, by Judith S. Jeffrey, would seem then to be treading on some well-worn paths. Jeffrey states that her work is distinctive because it "moves beyond assessing the intervention purely in terms of the military ... to examining the efficacy of the aid program during the civil war" (p. 3-4). According to Jeffrey, the United States misinterpreted the eventual defeat of the Greek communist movement and thus learned the wrong lessons from its experience in Greece. She makes the case that American success was not due to "a well-planned and properly implemented aid policy" (p. 241). Nor was it due to military aid to the Greek government. In reality, the United States did not win in

Greece; rather, the communists lost. The long-term significance of the "simplistic and uncritical view of United States involvement," Jeffrey asserts, is that it "might well have contributed to the American tragedy in Vietnam" (p. 253).

Jeffrey certainly succeeds at giving the reader a detailed account of the aid program, particularly the difficulties American officials (both in Washington and in Greece) had in trying to use U.S. aid as leverage to bring about economic and political reform in Greece. Her case study convincingly shows that the true lesson of the Greek intervention is that "the leverage which can be exerted by an intervening nation is inevitably limited" (p. 248).

The "ambiguous commitments and uncertain policies" of the title refer to the American attitude that the Greek government must earn aid from the United States through reform, while U.S. officials simultaneously elevated the prevention of a communist takeover in Greece to an "absolute commitment" (p. 35). Thus any threat to reduce or cut off aid lacked credibility, with the predictable result that reforms were not forthcoming. Greek government officials correctly read American priorities and acted accordingly. Jeffrey demonstrates repeatedly

that the ideological and strategic imperative of keeping Greece non-communist prevailed, which rather undermines her claim that the American policy was “ambiguous” and “uncertain.” While American words may have been ambiguous, its actions were not.

In pursuit of her more ambitious goals, Jeffrey is less successful. One of the more questionable assertions made by Jeffrey is that there is a distinction between the aid program’s “original goals” of economic rehabilitation and reconstruction and the Truman administration’s later claim of success for having prevented, through military aid, a communist takeover (p. 1). The “core of the Truman Doctrine,” she says, “was the administration’s commitment to its preferred method of containment, which was through rehabilitation and reconstruction,” i.e., economic and not military means (p. 2). Jeffrey posits a sort of golden moment of containment, where “humanitarian aspects” were in ascendance, followed by the unfortunate “departure from its initial ideal” and the descent into the “militarisation of the containment policy” (p. 4).

The thesis of a dramatic change from an economic emphasis to a military one is not convincing. Jeffrey often seems to confuse the policy toward Greece with the clearly more economic Marshall Plan for western Europe. Greece was not in the same situation, American policy there was \*always\* more military. In the Truman Doctrine speech, the president made it abundantly clear that the immediate problem in Greece was a military one: “The very existence of the Greek state is today threatened by the terrorist activities of several thousand armed men.... The Greek army is small and poorly equipped. It needs supplies and equipment if it is to restore authority to the government throughout Greek territory” (*Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman*, 1947, p. 177). It was this immediate military need that the emergency aid Truman was requesting from Congress would meet.

Yes, Truman did say that stability required economic rehabilitation in the long run. The immediate danger in Greece, however, was that the government might be overthrown by force. Jeffrey notes that American officials feared in early 1947 that a communist takeover might come “within a matter of weeks” (p. 46). Additionally, the other nation paired with Greece in the Truman Doctrine, Turkey, “was in no immediate danger of economic collapse” (p. 43). The purpose of aid to Turkey was to enable it to resist Soviet political and military pressure. When Truman formally requested the aid from Congress, “half of the proposed allocation of money was

earmarked for military purposes” (p. 42). The final bill allocated \$100 million to Turkey (whose need was military, not economic), \$75 million in military aid to Greece, and \$125 million in economic aid to Greece. From the outset, the military aspect dominated.

The Truman Doctrine in application always had a significant military component to it, and the assumption was that the military situation would take short-term precedence. After all, Truman stated that the goal of American policy was that nations “work out a way of life free of coercion;” thus it was necessary for the United States to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities” (*Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman*, 1947, p. 178). Both of these phrases reflect the centrality of military force. If the Greek government lost its fight against the communist rebels, there would be no worthy recipient of U.S. economic aid. The ultimate primacy of military aid represented not so much a change as a consistent necessity.

Jeffrey recognizes that aid to Turkey was unequivocally military, and that the administration “avoided placing too much emphasis on assistance to Turkey in the President’s speech as this could be perceived as overt militarism” (p. 51). She also states that the administration sought “to direct attention towards the subject of economic aid. This was certainly necessary in response to charges that the new foreign policy was unnecessarily militant” (p. 56). These characterizations suggest not an economic policy that later became too militaristic, but a military policy cloaked in economic, humanitarian garb for political purposes.

The change Jeffrey sees as the growing military emphasis is actually due to the initial underestimation of the military problem. She observes, “Against the administration’s expectations, the Greek government forces were unable to quickly rout the Democratic Army even with the assistance of American advice and military equipment” (p. 92). Under such circumstances, a continuing (even growing) emphasis on military aid is hardly surprising. Similarly, the failure to follow through with high levels of economic aid once the military situation stabilized in 1950 does not show a change from a humanitarian to a militaristic policy (as Jeffrey would have it), but rather that the military component was always central. Once that problem was solved, there was little need to continue large-scale economic aid (particularly given the growing demands on American resources after 1950, a factor Jeffrey does not adequately consider). Unlike Marshall Plan aid, which was seen as essential to the long-

term health of the American economy, economic aid to Greece was a means to an end: the strategic imperative of denying Soviet access to the Mediterranean.

Jeffrey's argument that Americans misunderstood the reasons for their success in Greece is also problematic. She quotes Truman's memoirs and says his account typifies the "misrepresented and oversimplified" explanation for events in Greece (p. 1). Most historians would hesitate to conclude that Truman's memoirs necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government and its officials, however. Did State Department officials share this simplistic view, for example? The answer is no. They were fully aware that events beyond the control of the United States played a role, even a decisive one, in the defeat of the Greek communists.

To take one example: Jeffrey rightly notes the important part played by the split between Tito and Stalin, which became public in June 1948: "The upheaval, which by mid-1949 had severely affected the performance of the guerilla army, was the key to the outcome of the civil war" (p. 175). She therefore concludes that the Greek communist movement self-destructed, and American policy played no real role in the outcome. The Tito-Stalin split "accentuated divisions in Greece sown well in advance of either United States involvement or the 1948 division in the communist world ... the outcome ... was in truth a defeat for the guerillas rather than a victory for the GNA [Greek National Army]" (p. 185).

This is a rather strange distinction. In assessing any conflict, it is not enough to say only that one side lost or the other won. The outcome is always a combination of both – it is a symbiotic relationship, and to posit that it is one rather than the other is to distort reality. Certainly one can argue, as Jeffrey does, that the United States and its Greek ally were not winning the war prior to the communist schism, or even that the communists would have prevailed had the war dragged on. One can also imagine, however, as British and American officials clearly did, that the Greek rebels would have won as early as 1947 without American involvement. Had a Greek communist government come to power prior to the split, the Greek communists would have been in a precarious position indeed, having to choose between their Yugoslav benefactors and the more powerful Soviets. It seems unlikely, though, that the split would have led to the collapse of their government. In any event, by forestalling a communist victory long enough for the split to undermine the Greek guerillas, American intervention undeniably played a significant, even decisive, role in the outcome of

the civil war.

Jeffrey might still have a valid point if American officials were ignorant of the role played by the communist split and mistakenly believed that American aid alone had won the day. This is not the case. Jeffrey ignores the abundant evidence that the United States knowingly played an active role in exploiting the split. The United States put pressure on Tito to cut off aid to the Greek communists in return for a closer political, economic, and ultimately military relationship with the United States. As early as February 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the American embassy in Belgrade to "constantly endeavor to exert as early as possible sufficient pressure on Tito to abandon assistance to Greek guerillas" (*FRUS V*, 1949, p. 873).

Nor was the Truman administration blind to the key part played by Tito's defection in undermining the Greek communists. A March 6, 1950 progress report on policy toward Greece and Turkey explicitly concluded that "the Tito-Cominform rift, which led to the cessation of Yugoslav aid to the Greek guerilla movement and contributed to its internal demoralization ... may well have tipped the balance in our favor" (*FRUS V*, 1950, p. 345). In short, the United States was fully aware of how important the "other side" was in determining the outcome.

It seems that Jeffrey is not primarily concerned with what American officials knew and when they knew it. As noted above, she suggests that the roots of the later disaster in southeast Asia can be traced back to southeast Europe. If only Americans had realized that their policy in Greece had failed, not succeeded, they might not have been tempted to repeat it in Vietnam. Instead, they employed a false Greek analogy and "sought to apply this lesson to Vietnam" (p. 3). This is far too bold a claim to make without systematic analysis to support it. It appears in both the introduction and epilogue, but nowhere does Jeffrey attempt to make an actual argument regarding how influential this Greek "model intervention" was (p. 253).

Ironically, it may be just as likely that a correct interpretation of the Greek situation encouraged American involvement in Vietnam. In Greece, for three years the United States propped up a tottering, right-wing military government with a combination of military and economic aid. While it failed to achieve more than a stalemate on the ground, it did buy time, and eventually a change in the international climate led to success. Specialists on Vietnam might be able to speak to the degree to which Johnson and Nixon hoped that the Sino-Soviet

split might have the same debilitating impact on the Vietnamese communists as the Yugoslav-Soviet split did on the Greeks. Perhaps the Vietnamese communists learned some lessons of their own from what happened to the Greek communists.

Jeffrey does not persuasively argue her case that the Truman Doctrine abandoned its "original" humanitarian emphasis for a military one, or that American policy makers failed to understand the true reasons for the outcome of the Greek civil war and thus misapplied its

lessons in the future. Relying heavily on the work of Witter and Jones, as well as the long-available *Foreign Relations* series documents, Jeffrey's book ultimately adds little to our understanding of the significance of the American intervention in Greece.

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