General Information

Source: NBC News
Resource Type: Video Mini-Documentary
Creator: N/A
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Event Date: 1945 - 1975
Air/Publish Date: 05/07/2008
Copyright Date: 2008
Clip Length 00:03:22

Description

As communist ideology expanded after World War II, western governments feared a domino effect as countries succumbed to communism. The Truman Doctrine called for action to contain the communist threat, by economic or military action, if necessary.

Keywords

Cold War, Communism, Communist Regime, Democracy, Truman Doctrine, Harry Truman, Containment, Domino Theory, Soviet Union, Ideology, World War II, Europe, United States, Turkey, Greece, The Long Telegram, George F. Kennan, Diplomat, Economic, Economy, Diplomacy, Military, Korea, Vietnam

Citation

https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=32447
The Domino Theory, Containment and the Truman Doctrine. 

NARRATOR: The United States and the Soviet Union had very different expectations of how the world would look after World War II. American leaders expected democracy to grow throughout post-war Europe. But the Soviets had a different idea. They wanted their influence – and Communist ideology – to take hold. By 1946, Communist forces were gaining strength in Turkey and Greece, threatening the pro-western governments there. To counter those Communist threats, American leaders developed a policy known as “containment.”

Professor DAVID GREENBERG (Rutgers University): The idea of containment was really the centerpiece of the Cold War that lasted until the Cold War ended. The idea was that we were not going to try to face down the Soviet Union directly through military confrontation. But that when the Soviet Union sought to expand, those efforts would be met with resistance. They would be contained.

NARRATOR: In February 1946, American diplomat George F. Kennan crystallized this idea with his “long telegram,” a cable he sent to the State Department while stationed in Moscow. He warned the U.S. of the need to “contain” the spread of Communism across Europe.

GREENBERG: It was basically his analysis of Soviet aggression. And this kind of formed the basis, then, of the containment policy, and the sense that peaceable coexistence, or warmer relations with the Soviet Union, were going to be impossible in the years ahead.

NARRATOR: Kennan’s predictions began to ring true as the Soviet Union started to extend its reach in Europe and then Asia. Many American leaders feared that one country after another – like a line of dominos – would succumb to Communist regimes.

GREENBERG: The “Domino Theory” is a phrase that got popularized in the 1950s. And what it refers to is the idea that if one country falls to Communism, that that would be a domino falling. And like a row of dominos, it would knock over the next one. The country next door to it would then go communist and so
on. And you could see all the dominoes falling.

NARRATOR: Kennan, the diplomat, and other officials recommended that the United States use economic, diplomatic, and – if necessary – military measures to contain the Soviet threat. In March of 1947, Truman used Kennan’s warnings as the basis of what became known as the Truman Doctrine. President HARRY S. TRUMAN [in speech]: It must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. Should we fail to aid Greece and Turkey in this fateful hour, the effect will be far-reaching to the West as well as to the East. We must take immediate and resolute action.

NARRATOR: Congress swiftly granted Truman’s request for $400 million to bolster the militaries and economies of Greece and Turkey – an attempt to contain Communism in those countries. But America’s economic support in this part of Europe would not be enough to end the spread of Communism everywhere. In countries like Korea and later Vietnam, America’s military forces would end up fighting Communism on the battlefield.