

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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Down with Doctrines

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April 1, 2011

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I have been struck by the congenital aversion of Americans to taking specific decisions on specific problems, and by their persistent urge to seek universal formulae or doctrines in which to clothe and justify particular actions... We like, by the same token, to attribute a universal significance to decisions we have already found it necessary, for limited and parochial reasons, to take...

Whatever the origins of this tendency, it is an unfortunate one. It confuses public understanding of international issues more than it clarifies it. It shackles and distorts the process of decision-taking. It causes questions to be decided on the basis of criteria only partially relevant or not relevant at all. It tends to exclude at many points the discrimination of judgment and the prudence of language requisite to the successful conduct of the affairs of a great power.

-George F. Kennan, [Memoirs: 1925-1950](#)^[3], pp. 322-324

The [national](#)^[4] [effort](#)^[5] to discern an [Obama doctrine](#)^[6] from our attack on Libya is likely to be futile. If it succeeds, it will be harmful. No one can make foreign policy [without](#)^[7] some theory or strategy. But as Kennan's lament about the Truman Doctrine points out, doctrines tend to be post-hoc rationales of actions that confuse policy later. If taken seriously, they typically encourage foolish wars.

Kennan attributed the American desire for doctrines to our love of law and rules. I see it more as a product of divided power, which heightens the [need](#)^[8] for sales. Doctrines have a pseudo-scientific air that helps legitimate policy. They endow the messy process of presidential decision-making with false order. They over-generalize.

Our most renowned doctrine, named for President Monroe but largely the work of his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, [came in reaction](#)^[9] to Russian efforts to monopolize the Alaskan fur trade and worries that Spain's inability to run its colonies would invite European intervention in Latin America. The doctrine warned European powers that Americans would view efforts to establish new colonies in this hemisphere or transfer old ones as dangerous. Contrary to popular lore, the doctrine [did not](#)^[10] threaten to defend Latin America nations against European

intrusions. The U.S. military lacked that ability. The British continued to meddle in Central and South American for decades after Monroe's 1823 address. Rather than take the doctrine as a call to arms, American leaders in that era sensibly looked the other way. The doctrine gained prominence only much latter when growing U.S. power allowed more intervention.

Since then, American foreign policy doctrines have been less considered. Almost all justified decisions already made and tempted trouble. The Truman doctrine exaggerated our interests in Greece and Turkey to sell Americans on the need to aid them. Its implication that we should fight Communism everywhere helped pave the way for NSC-68 and foolish American interventions, including Vietnam.

The Eisenhower doctrine served [11] Ike's successful effort in 1957 to get a blank check from Congress to give military and economic aid to Middle-East nations. It conflated Communism with Nasser's pan-Arabism and subsequently helped justify our first pointless intervention into Lebanon. The little-known Johnson doctrine rationalized intervention in the Dominican Republic. The Nixon doctrine justified [12] drawing down in Vietnam. The Carter doctrine was invented [13] for a speech explaining the President's newfound hawkishness after the invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution triggered overwrought fears about Soviet incursions into Middle-East. A desire to meddle [14] in civil wars in the name of anti-Communism gave us the Reagan doctrine. The Bush doctrine was PR for the invasion of Iraq.

Thankfully, these doctrines rarely influenced latter decisions. But to the extent they did, their appeal to universalism confused the stakes. Because all but Nixon's were invented to justify military actions of some kind, they tended to encourage wars. Because they came from presidents, they eroded Congressional power. So we should be grateful for President Obama's disinclination [15] to make a doctrine out of his rash decision to bomb Libya and stop trying to invent one for him.

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[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/03/29/is-there-really-an-obama-doctrine/the-risks-of-the-obama-doctrine>

[5] <http://nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/a-work-in-progress-for-obama-s-doctrine-20110211>

[6] <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/jacob-heilbrunn/the-obama-doctrine-5097>

[7] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/foreign-policy-without-foreign-policy-theory/>

[8] <http://www.amazon.com/End-Liberalism-Second-Republic-United/dp/0393090000>

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[11] http://books.google.com/books?id=284WAQAAIAAJ&q=america+russia+the+cold+war+lafeber&dq=america+russia+the+cold+war+lafeber&hl=en&ei=0RiWTZzkDcqz0QH6uZCBDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAQ

[12] http://books.google.com/books?ei=axmWTfXqLOjE0QHfIcmHDA&ct=result&id=G1grAQAAIAAJ&dq=robert+a.+divine&q=%22Nixon+doctrine%22#search_anchor

[13] <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1148247>

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[15] <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/03/obama-has-no-doctrine/73171/>