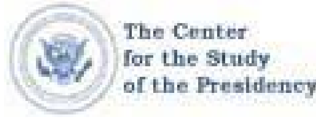

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Author(s): H. W. Brands
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Presidential Doctrines: An Introduction

H. W. BRANDS
University of Texas at Austin

"If you want war, nourish a doctrine," William Graham Sumner asserted in 1903. Sumner, one of America's leading public intellectuals, was writing in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, a conflict brought on by expansionists citing the Monroe Doctrine as grounds for forcing Spain out of Cuba. The words suited the moment, but they were also quite prescient, for while at that time American politics knew but the one presidential doctrine (Monroe's), during the next hundred years doctrines would multiply, and all would explicitly threaten or broadly imply the use of American military force.

The articles in this special issue examine several presidential doctrines, starting with the Monroe Doctrine and ending with the Reagan Doctrine. Various issues emerge in the examination, the first involving what qualifies as a doctrine. Until the twentieth century, Monroe's was the only doctrine that bore the name of a president, but it was hardly the country's only doctrine—in the sense of a clearly articulated tenet of American foreign policy. Had anyone thought to apply the label to George Washington's farewell advice to the American people about avoiding permanent alliances, the "Washington Doctrine" would have been the oldest of American presidential doctrines. William McKinley could have been credited with a doctrine when John Hay articulated the Open Door policy during McKinley's first term. An insistence on America's neutral trading rights amid other countries' wars was a staple of American diplomacy from Washington to Woodrow Wilson. And even the first doctrine of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt's extension of the Monroe Doctrine, received the label only of "corollary" (although in the present issue it receives an article, by Serge Ricard).

There are other problems in identifying presidential doctrines. If some doctrines-in-fact were not doctrines in name, the Nixon Doctrine, according to Jeffrey Kimball, was closer to the opposite: a doctrine in name rather than in fact. Chester Pach notes that the Reagan Doctrine was discovered by columnist Charles Krauthammer before it

H. W. Brands is Dickson Allen Anderson Centennial Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin. His writings on American politics and foreign policy include What America Owes the World, The Strange Death of American Liberalism, *and* The Devil We Knew. *His most recent book is* Andrew Jackson.

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came to the attention of Reagan himself. Certain of the doctrines were concisely stated by their eponymous presidents at particular moments in time; thus Mark Gilderhus can cite the few sentences from James Monroe's 1823 annual message that constitute the Monroe Doctrine, and Dennis Merrill can quote the canonical expression of the Truman Doctrine from Truman's March 1947 speech requesting aid for Greece and Turkey. Yet even doctrines that are concisely identifiable can take time to be recognized as doctrines, as Gilderhus explains regarding the Monroe Doctrine.

The nomenclature problem emerges in another respect as well. Starting with the Monroe Doctrine, standard practice has accorded presidents the named credit for the doctrines put forward during their administrations. But as Gilderhus indicates, the Monroe Doctrine should have been named for John Quincy Adams, the secretary of state who advocated and formulated the policy. Stephen Rabe reveals that what came to be called the Johnson Doctrine would have been called the Kennedy Doctrine had Kennedy not been assassinated mere days after asserting it.

Presidential doctrines have ranged in breadth from the regional to the global and in duration from the fleeting to the essentially permanent. The Monroe Doctrine warned against European aggrandizement in the Western Hemisphere. The Roosevelt Corollary applied to the same area, adding a claim of right of U.S. military intervention against unruly Latin American regimes. The Eisenhower Doctrine focused on the Middle East, promising U.S. resistance to Communist encroachment. The Carter Doctrine was even more specific, zeroing in on the Persian Gulf as a region the United States would defend against Soviet expansion. The Truman Doctrine, by contrast, was global in its pledge to resist communism, and the Reagan Doctrine was equally unbounded in promising support for anti-Communist insurgencies. The Nixon Doctrine, such as it was, was multiregional, stressing the need for America's allies in different parts of the world to shoulder the burden of their own and regional defense.

In terms of longevity, the Monroe Doctrine takes the prize. Whether it retains meaning at present is arguable, but as late as the 1980s it was regularly cited, giving it a lifespan of at least 160 years. The Roosevelt Corollary was disavowed by Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, although the policy of U.S. intervention in Latin America was revived covertly by Eisenhower and overtly by Johnson. The Truman Doctrine flourished during the 1950s and early 1960s but ran into trouble in Vietnam, and was superseded by Nixon's détente policy—which itself was superseded by the Reagan Doctrine, a more aggressive version of the Truman Doctrine. Both were retired, with honors, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Eisenhower Doctrine had a much shorter life. Announced in 1957, its principle was applied, as Peter Hahn shows, three times in quick succession before the Eisenhower administration was forced to acknowledge that Arab nationalism, not communism, was the real threat to Western interests in the Middle East. The Johnson Doctrine, of containing Castro, lost some bite upon the end of the Cold War, but its spirit still motivates the American embargo against Cuba. The Nixon Doctrine got lost in the confusion of the end of the Vietnam War and the disgrace of Nixon. The Carter Doctrine was mooted by the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.

Each doctrine articulated a particular purpose of American policy; a reasonable question is whether the doctrines achieved their purposes. Did the Monroe Doctrine

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deter the Europeans from meddling in the Americas? Did the Truman Doctrine prevent communism from sweeping the world during the Cold War? Did the Johnson Doctrine forestall a second Cuba? Did the Reagan Doctrine roll back communism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America?

Determining causation in history is always problematic. Important events invariably have multiple causes. In the case of presidential doctrines, one has to distinguish the doctrines themselves—the statements of principle—from the concrete measures taken to enforce them. On this point it is worth recalling that the presidential doctrines, with rare exceptions, had no standing in law, either domestic or international. Presidents pronounced doctrines on their own authority; only in the case of the Eisenhower Doctrine was Congress asked to give explicit endorsement, via the Middle East Resolution of 1957. When Congress approved Truman's request for aid to Greece and Turkey, the Truman administration could reasonably claim acceptance of the philosophy—that is, the doctrine—behind the request. But with respect to the other doctrines, Congress was sometimes consulted, more often simply informed.

Still less have presidential doctrines possessed international legitimacy. As Gilderhus demonstrates, the Monroe Doctrine evoked a mixed reaction in Latin America and, at least initially, derision from the European powers. As Ricard shows, the Roosevelt Corollary was uniformly condemned. The Nixon Doctrine elicited consternation among the allies to whom it was applied; the Reagan Doctrine raised charges that the United States was supporting right-wing terrorists.

Yet if they have lacked the force of law, the doctrines have hardly lacked meaning. Indeed, one might easily conclude that they have had *more* meaning for being informal and unilateral, in that they have required regular reconfirmation. The Monroe Doctrine gained credibility not from James Monroe's words but from the (eventual) adoption of policies to enforce it, including Roosevelt's corollary, which itself was taken seriously after the Rough Rider reoccupied Cuba. Truman's 1947 down payment on the Truman Doctrine, of the aid to Greece and Turkey, would have meant little had Truman and his successors not followed up with war in Korea and Vietnam.

It would seem, therefore, that the greatest effect of presidential doctrines is to summarize policies in a few words. During the Clinton presidency, as U.S. foreign policy floundered in the aftermath of the Cold War, Clinton's advisors struggled to find a policy that could be written, as one put it, on a bumper sticker. Nearly every presidential doctrine passes the bumper sticker test. "Hands off!" the Monroe Doctrine declared (in words adopted by Dexter Perkins, the longtime dean of Monroe Doctrine historians, as the title for one of his several books on the subject). Roosevelt claimed a "police power" for the Americas. Truman's doctrine achieved the ultimate distillation, into a single word: "containment." Eisenhower's could have been called "Middle East containment." Johnson's slogan was "No more Cubas." Nixon's, misleadingly or otherwise, was "Vietnamization." The Carter Doctrine might have been summarized as "Hands off the Gulf." The Reagan Doctrine resurrected a concept floated but rejected during the early Cold War: "rollback."

As one might guess, and as history shows, the bumper sticker approach to policy has a downside. At the time the Truman Doctrine was being debated within the Truman

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administration, George Kennan, among others, warned against a doctrinal response to the emergency in Greece and Turkey. Kennan preferred making policy on a case-by-case basis and argued that the open-ended commitment the doctrine entailed would come back to haunt the United States. Kennan lost the argument; eventually the United States lost the war in Vietnam. (Kennan did not forget; when the Clintonites were searching for their bumper sticker, Kennan spoke up from retirement to caution them against oversimplification.) The Roosevelt Corollary suffered from being too blunt; Roosevelt's "police power" phrasing made it an easy target for those who wished to condemn the American imperialists out of their own mouths. The Johnson Doctrine of "No more Cubas" appeared reasonable as long as the Cold War lasted; afterward it locked the United States into policies that made sense only to South Floridians and their sponsors in Congress.

For all their disadvantages, presidential doctrines have the singular attraction of seeming to elevate policy to a higher plane. Every president conceives himself a statesman and deserving of a doctrine. Clinton never found his, but George W. Bush's supporters have nominated a "Bush Doctrine" of promoting democracy around the world, by American armed force if necessary. How Bush's policy survives the current conflict in Iraq will go far toward determining whether historians account it a doctrine. By William Graham Sumner's war standard, the nomination, if not the policy, is off to a promising start.

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