The United Kingdom has just announced it can no longer support the Greek government in its fight against a communist rebel movement that threatens to bring Greece into the Soviet orbit. How should the United States respond?

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students think through what they would do if they were decision-makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:
After World War II, the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union quickly dissolved into mutual mistrust. As the victorious Allies sought to shape the postwar world, the Soviet Union set out to establish a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe by installing pro-Soviet governments and supporting communist movements in several European countries. Although Soviet expansion was initially consistent with wartime agreements among the Allies, growing communist movements in Europe and the Middle East raised suspicions among policymakers in the United States and the United Kingdom that Soviet ambitions extended beyond a regional sphere of influence.

By 1947, communist governments ruled nearly all of Eastern Europe, Greece, which had been liberated from German occupation with British rather than Soviet assistance, was the exception. Even there, however, communist forces rebelling against the monarchist government threatened to knock Greece into the Soviet Union’s orbit. Seeking to maintain influence in Greece and prevent the spread of communism, the United Kingdom supported the Greek government, spending roughly $300 million on financial aid, arms, and military training—a substantial sum at the time. Greek communists, on the other hand, received support from neighboring communist countries. British and American policymakers suspected that the Soviet Union also covertly supported the Greek communists. Western observers feared that if the Greek communists prevailed, their triumph could trigger a domino effect, expanding Soviet influence into neighboring Turkey—which controlled a strategic choke point between the Mediterranean and Black seas—and then into the Middle East. Some analysts further speculated that Soviet expansion could propel Europe back toward war.

So far, the United States had pursued piecemeal responses to Soviet expansion and was providing limited loans and arms sales to the Greek government. In the Harry S. Truman administration, however, many thought that the situation required a more systematic strategy. The Soviet Union wanted to expand communism, they argued, not only to enlarge its regional influence but to weaken Western powers and destroy democratic ideals worldwide. Accordingly, Soviet expansion directly threatened U.S. values and national security. But administration officials also asserted that the Soviet Union was cautious and would withdraw when it met resistance. Every effort to expand communism, therefore, required a response. Some policymakers opposed such a universal approach, arguing that committing to counter communism at every turn could sacrifice the United States' ability to choose its battles, potentially obligating the country to act against its interests or commit resources in disadvantageous situations. After a long and destructive war, many U.S. lawmakers were also wary of further entanglements in European affairs and questioned why the United States should be responsible for countering Soviet activity in Europe. With much of Western Europe engulfed in a postwar economic crisis, though, European powers alone lacked the strength to counter Soviet influence in Europe for long. As Soviet expansion continued, U.S. policymakers would soon have to decide how to respond.

Decision Point: Set on February 21, 1947
A particularly poor harvest and a savage winter have sent Britain’s already struggling economy into turmoil. To the shock of the United States, the British embassy in Washington, DC, has sent a message to the U.S. State Department announcing that the United Kingdom will halt its aid to Greece within six weeks and requesting that the United States take over the financial burden of supporting the Greek government in its fight against communist rebel forces. Without foreign support, the Greek government would be unlikely to prevail in the civil war. President Truman has convened his advisors to discuss a course of action regarding Greece. As they deliberate, advisors will need to consider the risks of Soviet influence extending over Greece and weigh them against the costs of further U.S. involvement in European affairs. Considering recurring Soviet efforts to expand the state’s influence abroad, advisors should also consider whether the time has come to announce a universal policy toward expanding Soviet influence.

Cabinet members should consider the following policy options:

- Provide extensive financial and military aid to Greece and announce a universal policy of containing future communist expansion. This would both provide the Greek government the best chance at victory in their civil war and potentially deter future Soviet expansion. However, this option commits significant U.S. resources to Greece with no guarantee of stability there. Moreover, it could lead the United States into future financial or military commitments that could be costly and put U.S. personnel at risk.

- Provide financial and military aid to Greece without a promise of action beyond Greece. This option could still provide the Greek government with the support it needs to win its civil war while providing limited assistance to suppress communism in Greece. However, it would also have a limited deterrent effect on future Soviet expansion. Likewise, mustering support for this aid could prove difficult without a clear strategy.

- Continue current levels of support to Greece, but do not commit further resources. This would entail selling arms, providing diplomatic support, and assisting the Greek government in obtaining loans, but nothing more. This option would prevent U.S. entanglement in a foreign war while providing limited assistance to suppress communism in Greece. However, it would likely not be enough to ensure the Greek government’s victory, leaving the United States to face the potential expansion of Soviet influence into Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East, which could destabilize the postwar order.

Additional Resources:
1. George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” (February 22, 1946)
3. Walter Lippmann’s “Critique of Containment” (1947)

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

U.S. history pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies examining foreign policy decision-making in U.S. history. Designed with a U.S. history survey course in mind, the cases do assume some pre-existing knowledge for context, but there is sufficient detail in the case to fuel a lively discussion.

For historical cases, a post-discussion debrief is crucial. After a simulation, it is important to give students a chance to step out of character and reflect on the conversation: what was difficult about the decision, what was troubling about its implications. It is also important to discuss what decision was actually made.

There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and are looking for some tips, the introduction to this page from Model Diplomacy has some great links. If you cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

**Gauge reaction:**

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

**Whiparound:**

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

**Simple simulation:**

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. You could consider assigning students certain perspectives or opinions to encourage debate. For example, different students or groups could prioritize the military, economic, and diplomatic considerations of the case respectively, and use their assigned perspectives to inform their arguments.

*Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students focus on the policy issues and do not try to simulate the personality of particular historical figures.*

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