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Book Author(s): Frances Gouda and Thijs Brocades Zaalberg

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American Foreign Policy and the End of Dutch Colonial Rule in Southeast Asia: An Overview

“Curiously enough,” George F. Kennan told US Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, on December 17, 1948, “the most crucial issue at the moment in our struggle with the Kremlin is probably the problem of Indonesia.” A friendly and independent Indonesia, the powerful director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department informed Marshall, was vital to US security interests in Asia. Kennan emphasized that America’s dilemma in mid-December 1948, was not merely the question of whether the Netherlands or the Indonesian Republic should govern the region and thus control the rich agricultural and mineral resources of the archipelago. Instead, the real issue boiled down to either “Republican sovereignty or chaos,” and he reminded the Secretary of State that it should be obvious that chaos functioned as “an open door to communism.”¹

In his counsel to President Truman and Secretary Marshall before December 1948, George Kennan had given precedence to the European arena as far as America’s confrontation with the Soviet Union was concerned. Until then, he had only sporadically focused his intellectual attention on the nationalist movements in South or Southeast Asia. In fact, due to the political views of his senior foreign policy advisers, among whom Kennan’s opinion weighed heavily, Harry Truman considered the anti-colonial upheavals in Asia to be an annoying little “sideshow.”² In the immediate post-war years, Kennan and his colleagues on the Policy Planning Staff found it difficult to fathom that political developments in these distant colonial outposts could jeopardize America’s preeminence in the world. In some instances, Kennan even displayed a condescending “disregard for the weak and less developed world.”³ America’s showdown with the Soviet Union, he asserted in July 1947, would play itself out primarily in the European Theater, where the dangerous stream of communism threatened to inundate “every nook and cranny... in the basin of world power,” to cite one of the ingenious metaphors he crafted in his essay on “The Sources of Soviet Conduct.”⁴ His insistence on a US containment policy designed to curb Soviet political machinations in Western Europe earned him the critical designation of “sorcerer’s apprentice.” As Kennan personally remembered, it also reduced him on occasion to the role of “court jester” and “intellectual gadfly” within the State Department.⁵

Washington’s obsession with Europe during the immediate postwar years fa-

cilitated the State Department's initial indifference to the anti-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia. After President Sukarno appealed to Washington in October 1945, Sutan Sjahrir, as the first Prime Minister of the independent Republic, turned to Harry Truman again in early December with a plea of "in your capacity as [President of] a neutral and impartial nation, [we hope] the United States will afford us the helping hand we need." However, the emerging US fear of the Kremlin's sinister intentions in Europe predominated, and thus Sjahrir's entreaty went unheeded because the recovery of the Dutch economy in a European context was paramount.⁶ Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the newly proclaimed independent Republic of Vietnam, asked for the same, but his requests were not answered either.

Despite avowals of neutrality and impartiality, US foreign policymakers quietly backed their trusted Dutch ally in its dispute with the Indonesian Republic, even though, as the year 1948 unfolded, increasingly louder voices from within the State Department began to interrogate America's implicit pro-Netherlands stance. Washington pursued a similar tactic with regard to France's suppression of Ho Chi Minh's nationalist and communist insurgency in Vietnam, but US support for French policies in Indochina was not challenged from within the State Department to the same degree. As the American diplomatic historian, Melvyn Leffler, has characterized the situation, until the early 1950's the Truman Administration thus continued to extend the same assistance and "platitudinous and self-serving" recommendations to the French as it had initially offered the Dutch.⁷ In doing so, the State Department could only aspire not to alienate and disillusion the Indonesians or the Vietnamese too egregiously, as the senior US ambassador, Stanley K. Hornbeck, summarized the situation.⁸

The Truman Administration's steadfast backing of the Dutch side in the Indonesian struggle for independence, at least until the summer of 1948, signified a conspicuous departure from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's insistence that the right to self-determination should be granted to all people on earth. This stance eventually acquired an aura of anti-imperialism in the course of his long presidency. Due to ethnic antagonisms and the problem of defining national boundaries in the Balkans in the wake of World War I, the US President in 1919, Woodrow Wilson, had been the first to formulate the right to self-determination during the negotiations of the Versailles Peace Treaty. Within the course of the 1930s, however, Roosevelt's New Deal government had taken Wilson's notion one step further by asserting its universality. This logical leap could also be interpreted as implying America's endorsement of the vibrant independence movements that had sprung up in colonized territories such as India, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

The Atlantic Charter, which Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill signed with great fanfare in August 1941, proclaimed the right of all

peoples to choose the form of government under which they wished to live. Roosevelt subsequently specified the Atlantic Charter's scope in a radio broadcast on February 23, 1942, when he said that despite its name, the Charter was not only applicable to those parts of the world that bordered on the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, the Charter encompassed the entire world. Later in the same year, US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, elaborated on the intentions and ramifications of the Atlantic Charter. He posited that Americans, remembering their ancestors' anti-colonial revolution in 1776, had a natural affinity with people who "are fighting for the preservation of their freedom... We believe today that all peoples, without distinctions of race, color, or religion, who are prepared and willing to accept the responsibilities of liberty, are entitled to its enjoyment."⁹

Until his retirement in late 1944, Cordell Hull had nurtured many optimistic ideas concerning the dismantling of European imperialism in Asia and Africa, for which America's so-called exemplary record of decolonization in the Philippines should serve as a model to emulate.¹⁰ Due to Hull's virtual exclusion from the formulation of the major policy decisions and military strategies of World War II, as Dean Acheson recalled in his 1969 memoirs, the State Department languished in a dream world and became absorbed in the "platonic planning of a utopia," while mired in a kind of "mechanistic idealism."¹¹ An array of politicians and a considerable portion of the American electorate, meanwhile, were attracted to such lofty designs for the postwar world. These hopeful projections conjured up a new political order that would put its trust in international cooperation; once the bloodshed was over, and the defeat of the Axis powers was finally achieved, old-fashioned diplomacy and balance-of-power politics should be relegated to the dustbin of history. This idealistic view of a cooperative international system in the post-World War II era also entailed a steady, but peaceful, demise of Europe's empires in Asia and Africa according to an ill-defined set of timetables.

Not surprisingly, Cordell Hull's predictions concerning the imminence of independence for all people, as long as they were "willing" and "prepared" to shoulder the burdens of liberty, found a receptive audience among many Indonesian nationalists who were more than willing. In fact, during the autumn of 1945, they were chomping at the bit, even if their Dutch colonial rulers had told them over and over again, prior to the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies, that they were not yet intellectually prepared, politically ready, or socially mature enough for an independent existence. Nonetheless, with their own contrary convictions in mind, and with the resonance of the anti-colonial rhetoric of the Roosevelt Administration echoing in the background, Indonesia's anti-colonial crusaders made the plausible assumption that America would applaud their desire for liberation from the Dutch colonial yoke.

The problem, however, was that toward the end of the war, American policy-makers had become more circumspect in pursuing Roosevelt's anti-imperialist

agenda. This reluctance was not necessarily prompted by Churchill's truculent announcement in 1942 that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to England's colonial possessions, because he had not been elected Prime Minister to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire. Instead, domestic political conditions in Europe at the close of World War II stimulated this new American reticence. Since postwar governments in countries such as France and Italy, and to a lesser extent, England and the Netherlands, confronted energetic communist parties aligned with radical labor unions, which could conceivably endanger the capitalist recovery of Europe, Truman's State Department felt its hands were tied. If Washington were to announce an unambiguous approval of nationalist movements in Southeast Asia's colonial territories, it might jeopardize its ability to influence political outcomes and economic practices in the European heartland.

American policymakers' ambivalence on this score was already discernible at the San Francisco conference in the summer of 1945, where the US was one of the leading nations responsible for drafting the articles of the United Nations Charter concerning non-self-governing territories and the structure of UN trusteeships. Even though Roosevelt's faith in the international custody of Europe's colonies had been inextricably linked to his belief that European imperial mastery in Asia and Africa should be dissolved, American participants in the San Francisco negotiations proved unwilling to make explicit statements about the desirability of terminating the colonial system. The Truman Administration's qualms about honoring the memory of Roosevelt's anti-imperialism would become even more palpable in the American treatment of anti-colonial struggles in Southeast Asia. As far as Indochina was concerned, US Secretary of State, Edward Stettinius, who succeeded Cordell Hull in December 1944, informed French representatives at the UN conference in San Francisco that Washington had never, "not even by implication," doubted France's sovereignty in the region.¹² America's equivocal reaction to Indonesia's struggle for independence was another case in point.

The Netherlands, after all, constituted one of America's staunchest allies in Europe, exhibiting an "obstinate Atlanticism" after World War II that rendered the nation's day-to-day relations with its European neighbors contingent on its "Atlantic policy, and not vice versa."¹³ Dutch politicians also agreed with US opinions regarding the desirability of rebuilding Germany's industrial capacity as a structural buffer between Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Germany should function as an economic shield, but as a barrier as well that ought to be firmly implanted in the democratic traditions and capitalist practices of the West. As a result of the Netherlands' concurrence on such basic issues, the State Department pledged its support to an ally that was extremely loyal and a "strong proponent of US policy in Europe," as Under Secretary of State, Robert Lovett, expressed it on New Year's Eve in 1947.¹⁴

A tell-tale sign of Washington's backing of the Netherlands and the legitimacy of its colonial possessions was the Marshall Plan aid, earmarked specifically for the commercial revival of the Dutch East Indies, without acknowledging the economic needs of the territories in Java and Sumatra held by Indonesian nationalists. The Netherlands East Indies constituted the only European colony to be incorporated into the Marshall Plan's blueprint. Inevitably, its financial assistance reinforced the Dutch political hold on the archipelago, if only because Marshall Plan aid buttressed The Hague's ability to impose a strict economic embargo on the independent Republic in Yogyakarta.

Washington also tacitly allowed the Netherlands Army in Indonesia to deploy American Lend Lease material, which were thus added to the significant supply of British weapons already in Dutch possession. At an earlier stage, during the autumn of 1945, the State Department issued an order to remove American insignias from the equipment and outfits used by Louis Mountbatten's South East Asia Command (SEAC) troops charged with the demobilization of Japan's military in the Indonesian archipelago. In due course, when the Royal Netherlands Army ensconced itself in Java and Sumatra in the spring of 1946, numerous Dutch soldiers could still be seen in US Marine uniforms while driving US Army jeeps.¹⁵ In addition, the Dutch government diverted a 26,000,000 dollar credit granted by the US War Assets Administration (WAA) in October 1947, allocated for the purpose of building up the Netherlands Army in Northern Europe, to purchasing arms and supplies for its military forces in colonial Indonesia. Through the use of clever accounting techniques, the procurement of weapons destined for Southeast Asia was accomplished without publicly stated American objection.¹⁶ As late as December 1948, the US still voted against the Indonesian Republic's associate membership in the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). According to the Secretary of Australia's Department of External Affairs in Canberra, this negative American decision was interpreted by the Dutch as a "green light" to go ahead with their surprise military attack on the Republic in Yogyakarta on December 18, 1948.¹⁷ It is thus reasonable to conclude that without the rehabilitation funds received from the US through the Marshall Plan and earlier credits, the Netherlands would have been forced to make much greater sacrifices in order to finance its massive military enterprise in Southeast Asia.¹⁸

During the course of 1948, however, it appeared as if the churning river of communism was shifting its course away from Europe by flowing, instead, in the direction of Southeast Asia, or so George Kennan and his colleagues on the Policy Planning Staff began to speculate. Thanks to the invigorating infusion of dollars provided by the Marshall Plan, several European economies were busily recapturing the stamina of the late 1930's, when the devastating impact of the Great Depression had started to fade at long last. Despite the dire economic and human

consequences of the exceptionally cold European winter of 1947, the industrial and agricultural productivity of the Netherlands, for example, had more or less recovered pre-World War II levels, even before the Dutch received the windfall of US financial aid. A year later, when George C. Marshall's brainchild, the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), was thriving, the auspicious progress of the Dutch and other European economies continued at a steady pace.¹⁹ The European Recovery Program (ERP) – better known as the Marshall Plan – also laid the groundwork for an efficient European economic collaboration that was based on the uninhibited transportation of goods and capital across national borders, thus cultivating the evolution of the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and eventually the European Union.

Although eligible to do so, the Soviet Union and countries in Eastern Europe abstained from requesting Marshall aid. The Kremlin's refusal, in turn, prompted Western Europe's communist parties to oppose ERP assistance because it stipulated as a prerequisite that national economic agendas be submitted to US authorities for approval. The Office of Military Government in the American zone in Germany (OMGUS), as well as its German associates who were untainted by National Socialism, for instance, accused the German Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschland* or KPD) of trying to "sabotage" the Marshall Plan.²⁰ The anti-Marshall Plan arguments mustered by communist parties in other Western European countries were also perceived as standing in the way of economic revival and growth, while illustrating, at the same time, European communism's servility to Moscow. By the late 1940's, however, the financial support provided by the ERP had begun to dilute the electoral strength of Western Europe's communist parties, thus realizing one of Washington's projected policy outcomes.²¹

As a result, the year 1948 produced a piecemeal reassessment among the State Department's senior members of the most urgent foreign policy issues facing the United States. Actual political developments in the Indonesian Republic, Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese Republic, Burma, the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines, and especially Mainland China aided and abetted this reorientation in the outlook of policymakers in Washington. In the Indonesian Republic's case, the political impressions gathered by US Foreign Service officers on location, who were professionally absorbed in the bitter realities of the ongoing struggle for independence since October 1947, also nurtured an incremental shift in the State Department's sense of priorities. US representatives working in Batavia and Kaliurang maintained regular contacts with both Indonesian and Dutch officials, and they dutifully relayed their impressions to Washington.²² During their engagement with the anti-colonial conflict, a variety of "reasonable, intelligent, compatible" Indonesian nationalists were able to convince their colleagues from America of the righteousness of their struggle.²³

Indonesian politicians succeeded in doing so by highlighting the harshness of Dutch efforts to strangle the independent Republic, both politically and economically. They also appealed to a shared belief in the peoples' right to self-determination, or they swayed US diplomats' opinions by emphasizing the common ground between the Indonesian Republic's fight for national independence and America's own anti-colonial origins. After the United Nations' Security Council established a UN-sponsored Good Offices Committee (GOC) in late August 1947, to facilitate a resolution in the wake of the Netherlands Army's first military attack on the Republic, Coert du Bois was appointed as the second American representative, replacing Frank Porter Graham in early 1948. Following in the footsteps of the pro-Republican Graham, Du Bois also became convinced soon after his arrival in Java that idealistic Indonesians were "engaged in a struggle resembling our own revolution against British rule."²⁴

In a comparable vein, Charlton Ogburn, their younger State Department colleague assigned to the GOC staff in Java, wrote a letter to his parents on February 20, 1948, about an Indonesian "guerrilla leader," with whom he had spoken at length near Jember in central Java. The young law student turned revolutionary soldier struck Ogburn as "very intelligent, well-educated, fresh, willing, and most attractive."²⁵ It should be noted that several Australian diplomats recorded equally complimentary views. One of them described Republican officials as "well-educated, restrained men," while another admired Sutan Sjahrir's "skillful political maneuvering." A third Australian commentator portrayed Sukarno as a "beautiful-looking man with a dominant, vibrant personality."²⁶ Left-of-center Dutch observers also registered their appreciation for the "moderate, Western-oriented Indonesians" who were governing and defending the independent Republic. These "kindred souls," wrote the Dutch social democrat, Jacques de Kadt, in December 1945 to his fellow *Partij van de Arbeid* (Labor Party or PvdA) member, the Indonesian Nico (Leonardus Nicodemus) Palar, "are becoming totally estranged from us, leaving them with nothing but contempt for all things Dutch."²⁷

On the opposite side of the great divide, the Dutch officials who doggedly defended the Netherlands colonial viewpoint, were not as effective in enlisting personal sympathy for their cause among the American officials stationed in Java during the period 1945-1949. In fact, another deputy of Graham and Du Bois – State Department economist Philip H. Trezise – recalled a senior Dutch negotiator as an "intensely disliked character" or a "bully boy," who did nothing but pursue a "hard line position that offered zero hope" for a mutually acceptable settlement. Later in life, he wrote that this particular Dutchman, Henri van Vredenburg, had treated Indonesians "most contemptuously" and was only happy when scoring "debating points."²⁸

Van Vredenburg did not mince words on his own behalf either. In his mem-

oers, he portrayed Graham, the first American representative on the UN Good Offices Committee, as either “intransigent and unmanageable” or as a “nervous and confused man, whose bias in favor of the Republic had blinded him.” He judged Ogburn to be an “unbalanced young fellow” who was a “sinister spirit” bent on seducing his superiors into joining the Indonesian camp. Furthermore, he characterized Du Bois’ conduct as the US representative to the GOC as one of the most “striking examples of substandard diplomacy” he had encountered in his entire career.²⁹ Whether or not they were actually ornery, diabolic, or befuddled, in both subtle and more emphatic ways these American emissaries – with Ogburn and Trezise, or their senior colleagues Graham, Du Bois, and later H. Merle Cochran as the most prominent among them – communicated their pro-Indonesian opinions to startled superiors in Washington, many of whom had not before questioned America’s residual pro-Dutch standpoint.

Washington’s reception of such compelling reports favoring the Indonesian Republic in late 1947 and 1948, coincided with the State Department’s own reassessment of the strategic areas in the world where the “Cold” War with the Soviet Union might ignite into a “Hot” War. This combination of pressures thus encouraged Washington’s slow but steady reconsideration of potential flashpoints around the globe; it also moved the colonial struggles in Indonesia and Vietnam from the State Department’s peripheral vision to an area that was closer to the center of attention. Nonetheless, it took until the autumn of 1949 before a comprehensive US foreign policy for all of Asia would be formulated, if only because during the late summer of 1949 the Soviet Union had detonated its first atomic device. Soon thereafter, the victory of Mao Tse-tung’s communist forces in China over Chiang Kai-shek’s “selfish and corrupt, incapable, and obstructive” nationalist troops – as John Stewart Service had labeled them as early as 1944 – was imminent.³⁰ As a result, the gradual changes that characterized the year 1948 would culminate in National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC 68), issued in 1949, which proposed an alarmist realignment of Washington’s global strategy.³¹

In the case of the Indonesian archipelago, however, the slow but steady transfer of Washington’s loyalties from the Dutch to the *Republik Indonesia* was already completed when the Royal Dutch Army launched its second full-scale military offensive against the Indonesian Republic on December 19, 1948, or what Dutch officials called euphemistically the second “Police Action.” Earlier in the year, a leftist coalition (*Sayap Kiri*) within the Indonesian Republic, united under the umbrella of the Democratic People’s Front (*Front Demokrasi Rakyat* or FDR), was forged among disgruntled nationalists. Inevitably, this new alliance of socialists, communists, and radical labor unionists was disconcerting to the Policy Planning Staff and Asia specialists in the State Department.³² US Intelligence analysts noted that a range of political organizations had joined forces at “the crossroads of the left,” as the Indonesian historian Soe Hok Gie aptly described the new coali-

tion. The Democratic People's Front released a barrage of criticism regarding Sukarno and Hatta in Yogyakarta – the two men Washington was beginning to appreciate as perhaps the only “moderates” who could withstand the Kremlin-directed intrigues in the Republic.³³

The left-wing forces stubbornly defied Hatta's warning that if “sentiments are fired to such heights,” supporters of the Republic might lose sight of “the fact that our independence can only be secure if we constitute a firm bulwark of unity.”³⁴ In addition to blunt criticism voiced by the leftist opponents of the Republican government, a range of work stoppages and full-fledged strikes had erupted during the spring and summer of 1948, especially in densely populated central and east Java. In addition to social unrest in such towns as Solo, Sragen, Klaten, Boyolali, and Blitar, the most antagonistic labor actions took place in Delanggu, an economically important cotton-growing area in the vicinity of Yogyakarta, where the Republican government's State Textile Board managed a network of plantations and factories. The drawn-out Delanggu strike resulted from real grievances with the allegedly corrupt practices of the State Textile Board. It was also a matter of people with hungry stomachs not being able to muster much patience. Workers suffered profoundly because wages were in arrears and food prices were rising, while the allocation of cloth as payment-in-kind had ceased.³⁵

In fact, Charlton Ogburn was appalled by the human despair that prevailed in the Delanggu region. In the spring of 1948, he embarked on a journey through the central Javanese countryside with President Sukarno and Coert du Bois, a few months after the latter had arrived as the second American GOC representative. Ogburn wrote that “the men, women, and children we saw in the fields and villages resembled castaways – emaciated, hungry, ragged.” Blaming the harsh Dutch blockade for smothering the economic viability of the Republic, he was deeply disturbed by his encounter with people in rural areas, whose faces were imprinted with starvation and who wore clothes made of “goatskin and sisal fiber, intended for gunny sacks.”³⁶ Recording similar outrage at the injustice of the Dutch economic embargo, George McTurnan Kahin, in an article in the *Far Eastern Survey* in November 1948, added that no medicine was available for the treatment of even the most ordinary tropical diseases, while the “anti-illiteracy campaign” launched under the auspices of the Republican government had come to a halt, due to a lack of books and paper supplies as a result of the Dutch embargo.³⁷

It was clear to many observers that the genuine hardships endured by workers and their families had incited the Delanggu strike. The labor protests in the region became a “political football” soon after the National Confederation of Labor (*Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia* or SOBSI) as well as other left-wing political groups became embroiled in the dispute.³⁸ Moreover, conditions in Delanggu further deteriorated, to the extent that armed clashes became an al-



A determined unit of Indonesian workers joins the struggle to defend the nation's freedom.

most daily occurrence, when units of the anti-Republican *Hisbullah*, whose efforts were dedicated to the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia, arrived on the scene to provide armed protection to strike breakers. In response, the Plantation Workers' Union of the Indonesian Republic (*Sarekat Buruh Perkebunan Republik Indonesia* or SARBUPRI) threatened to call a general strike of 150,000 workers all over Java and Sumatra; SARBUPRI's leaders called upon the Hatta government to remove the *Hisbullah* forces that terrorized the workers, because the armed Muslim units did not "respect the democratic rights" of people engaged in a legitimate labor protest.³⁹

In addition to the social tensions generated by the labor strife in Delanggu and elsewhere, the domestic harmony of the Republic during the summer of 1948 was also under siege because of the Republican government's efforts to improve and "rationalize" the efficiency of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI), the Republican Army. According to Prime Minister Hatta, the TNI's unwieldy size, insufficient funding, and lack of discipline and coordination continued to undermine the Republic's military effectiveness. On September 2, 1948, he argued that "an oversized army, far beyond the country's means, will suffer from a bad spirit, poor morale among the ranks, and reduced fighting power." As a consequence,

Hatta ruefully noted, many soldiers were resorting to undignified behavior such as “looting to provide for their own needs.”⁴⁰

From the beginning of the independence struggle, Prime Minister Hatta suggested, the existence of the people’s defense forces, consisting of numerous makeshift guerilla organizations and semi-autonomous militia units, had aggravated the situation. All of these unwieldy wildcat units had fallen under “the spell of a war psychosis,” because their members’ impulsive actions were difficult to regulate or restrain. He advocated policies that would encourage surplus TNI soldiers and volunteer guerilla fighters, who displayed an aversion to “ordinary work, looking down upon it as something humiliating,” to readjust to “normal peacetime occupations.” But leftist groups dismissed Hatta’s rationalization plans; instead, they fanned the flames of opposition by denouncing Hatta’s proposed reforms of the Republican armed forces with incendiary slogans such as “you’re discarded as soon as you have fulfilled your term.”⁴¹

Not surprisingly, Dutch authorities monitored the volatile labor unrest in Java, the tensions within the Republican Army, and the growing political unity of Indonesia’s left-wing factions with eagle eyes. By recycling a series of long-winded and hyperbolic reports, Dutch intelligence officials and diplomats brought the burgeoning communist threat to the attention of American diplomats in Batavia, The Hague, and Washington.⁴² As if to lend credence to the Dutch proposition that Republican leaders were overly responsive to Moscow’s directives, a communist-inspired uprising on September 18, 1948, in Madiun in central Java, a city filled with sugar refineries and workshops engaged in railroad maintenance, temporarily shattered the internal unity of the Republic.

The outcome of the Madiun revolt, however, was not what Dutch intelligence operatives and politicians had envisioned. Sukarno immediately condemned the uprising as a coup d’état organized by the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia* or PKI), and announced on Republican radio, “You must choose: it’s either me or Musso! (or Muso, the PKI leader).”⁴³ Once the Republican government had demonstrated its willingness to take resolute action against the Indonesian Communist Party, the US foreign policy establishment began to dismiss Dutch representations of the Republic under the “moderate” leadership of Sukarno and Hatta as a hotbed of communism. The two Republican politicians, in other words, had proven they were not merely masquerading as the “fig leaves of democratic procedure to hide the nakedness of Stalinist dictatorship,” to invoke yet another colorful metaphor George Kennan used when depicting the role of Eastern European politicians in the postwar years.⁴⁴

Dean Acheson, for example, furnished an example of America’s increasingly positive view of Sukarno and Hatta. After succeeding George C. Marshall as Secretary of State on January 20, 1949, he articulated the State Department’s approval of the two Republican leaders’ repression of the Madiun insurgents in

straightforward language. In a personal letter to a friend in New York, he also wrote that he was “signally impressed with the effective and rapid suppression by the Republic of Indonesia of a communist-inspired revolt in September 1948.”⁴⁵ This, in turn, provoked further troubling questions during the late summer and autumn of 1948, about the political logic of Washington’s tacit support for its faithful Dutch ally. At the same time, The Hague’s intransigence in the continuing efforts to find a diplomatic solution became more and more annoying to State Department officials and to H. Merle Cochran, the third American GOC representative in Java – a discomfort that Australian diplomats, stationed in Batavia, Washington, and at the United Nations in New York nourished as well as they could. Even though Dutch negotiators tried to present themselves as reasonable peacemakers, they were behaving like “cornered cats,” to summon the vivid imagery conjured by the historian Pieter Drooglever. They had been maneuvered into a very tight space and the frightened felines could do little but hiss and scratch.⁴⁶

The Royal Netherlands Army’s second effort in December 1948, to resubmit the Indonesian Republic to its colonial authority, thus constituted the final act of Dutch aggression that completed Washington’s year-long process of reorientation. This fateful military strike proved decisive in solidifying the certainty of senior US policymakers that the Republic’s desire for independence was not only legitimate, but also essential to America’s global interests. The second armed attack prompted George Kennan to contemplate whether Marshall Plan aid to the Netherlands East Indies, and even the Netherlands itself, should be cut off as a not-so-subtle form of punishment. At the same time, it stirred up an anti-Dutch “hornet’s nest” within the United Nations.⁴⁷

The Dutch military offensive, in fact, helped to crystallize a new geopolitical vision in the State Department. Once Kennan and Acheson and their colleagues began to incorporate the Indonesian struggle for independence into their appraisal of America’s Cold War strategies, the Netherlands’ insistence on keeping a political and economic foothold in the archipelago became unacceptable. Within less than a year, on December 27, 1949, the Dutch government acceded to American pressure and relinquished its sovereignty over the archipelago. In this short period of time, US foreign policymakers managed to end the “foolish dithering,” to cite Alan Levine’s irreverent phrase, that had caused the Dutch-Indonesian conflict to drag on for too long and at too great a human cost.⁴⁸

This precipitous and traumatic outcome – as many people in the Netherlands saw it – was due, in large part, to America’s power to determine the shape of international relations during the years after World War II. The postwar settlements in Europe and the Pacific, as well as the creation of the United Nations, had accorded the United States a “hegemonic position.” Even if the Soviet Union contested US preeminence in as many places as possible, America emerged as the

“anchor” of a new world order by guaranteeing its “stability and routine workings.”⁴⁹ An occasional levelheaded Dutch observer understood the implications of America’s incipient hegemony in world politics. Already at Christmas time in 1945, Henri van Vredenburg predicted that it would not be long before the US would throw its weight around in Southeast Asia; he cautioned that a successful Dutch resolution of the Indonesian question would have to accommodate the political demands and ideals of American policymakers.⁵⁰

Similarly, during the spring of 1947, when contemplating the Royal Netherlands Army’s contingency plan of mounting its first full-scale military attack on the Republic, yet another Dutch civil servant also prophesied that “without American approval, we can’t do anything.” If the US government does not endorse a Netherlands’ military strike against the Republic, Daniël van der Meulen anticipated, Dutch authorities in The Hague and Batavia will have no option but to “cease and desist.”⁵¹ Exactly fifty years later, the historian of American foreign policy, Gerlof Homan, again detailed Dutch perceptions of America’s meddling in the Indonesian question during 1948 and 1949. Many Dutch citizens in Europe and Southeast Asia were appalled, he noted, because Uncle Sam proved to be a fickle schoolteacher who had suddenly decided to take “the naughty little Dutch boy to the woodshed for some stern lecturing and a good spanking.”⁵²

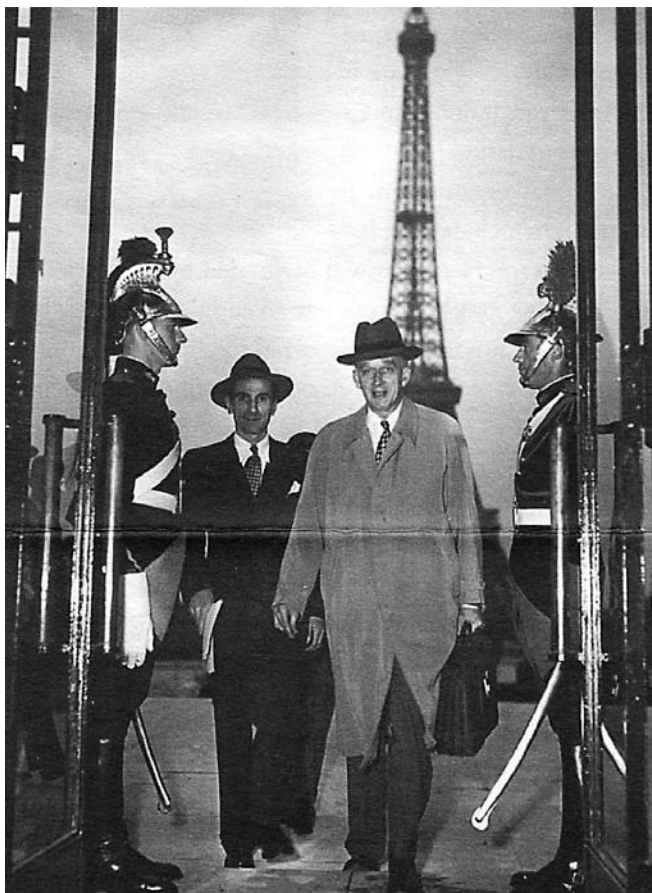
Despite their anger at what they perceived as America’s deception, people in the Netherlands were forced to acknowledge that the victory of the Allied forces over Germany, Italy, and Japan had been sustained to a great extent by the economic, technological, and human resources of the United States. They also had to concede that as soon as the Allies had obtained their enemies’ unconditional surrender, America evolved into “the locomotive at the head of mankind,” as Dean Acheson remarked with uncanny hubris, while the rest of the democratic Western world was reduced to trailing behind like feeble carriages.⁵³

As Cold War polarities were taking hold of international relations, however, the independence struggles in colonial outposts such as the Dutch East Indies and French Indochina transcended their regional significance and became implicated in both the real and imagined duality of the postwar world. In 1947, drawing upon George Kennan’s apocalyptic language or replicating Averell Harriman’s “ferocious anti-Rouski attitude” – and anticipating the panicky American perspective that would entrench itself during the Eisenhower Administration in the early 1950’s – Dean Acheson had already portrayed the Soviet Union’s intrusions into different regions of the world as a contagious disease. Because he feared Republicans in the US Congress, spearheaded by the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, might once again retreat into an isolationist stance and thus frustrate the Truman Administration’s commitment to “liberal internationalism,” Acheson occasionally exaggerated his anti-Soviet rhetoric.⁵⁴ There were other reasons for Acheson’s

tendency to demonize the Kremlin by inadvertently inciting an “anti-Communist frenzy,” like having to camouflage the “unpalatable fact” that Washington was helping both the Dutch and the French maintain their neo-colonial occupations in territories in Southeast Asia.⁵⁵ As a result, the political necessity to seek Congressional approval for his internationalist orientation sometimes obscured the fact that he was dedicated to a pragmatic resolution of the tensions between the US and Stalin’s Russia, if at all possible.⁵⁶ Agreeing with George Kennan, in this regard, he objected to a growing trend towards the militarization of America’s antagonism with the USSR, arguing, instead, that the Cold War should be fought with economic weapons first. In his personal vision, however, communism was important primarily as an ideological medium of Stalin’s “deeper interest” in expanding the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence to the rest of the world. As he noted in 1947, communism was exploited as a “most insidious and effective instrument of aggression and foreign domination.”⁵⁷

The corruption of communism, Acheson suggested, resembled “one rotten apple” in a barrel that could gradually “infect” the whole lot. The Kremlin’s post-war contamination of France, Italy, and Greece might move in an eastern or a northern direction to the Balkans. It was also possible that the virus could migrate southward to Egypt and the rest of Africa. He added that communism’s “penetration” might also spill over into Iran and perhaps much further to the northeastern or southeastern regions of Asia, and only the US was powerful enough to arrest the contagion.⁵⁸ Thus, when an authoritative State Department voice such as George Kennan’s referred to the second military assault on the Yogyakarta Republic in December, 1948, as an “incredible piece of Dutch stupidity,” the Netherlands’ attempt to maintain a viable presence in their lucrative colonial possessions in Southeast Asia was soon thereafter doomed to failure.⁵⁹

This American course of action in early 1949, however, did not emerge from a vacuum, even though many Dutch people were convinced that most foreign policymakers in Washington and the general public in the United States were woefully uninformed about the social and political conditions of the Indonesian Republic. Scores of Dutch critics charged that Americans simply lacked any form of cultural knowledge about the archipelago’s diversity of religions and ethnic groups. Such ignorance, they sneered, gave State Department officials the sophomoric impression that Indonesian nationalists could administer the vast archipelago and its rich resources by themselves. Americans’ “primitive sympathy” for Asian independence movements did not rely on any form of historical understanding, a Dutch historian wrote in 1946 in a tendentious booklet about the US press treatment of Indonesia’s anti-colonial struggle. Instead, to curry favor with the reading public for the purpose of selling newspapers and making profits, American journalists displayed a fondness for “exaggeration and oversimplification.” Reporters often wrote newspaper articles as if they were spectators at a



Philip C. Jessup (right) arrives at the Palais de Chaillot for the first Paris meeting of the Security Council, September 1948.

sporting event who instinctively cheered on the “underdogs” in the hope they would put up an interesting fight.⁶⁰ A few years later, however, the mushrooming fear of Kremlin-coordinated communism altered the tone of US journalistic assessments of the dangerous “red peril” the underdogs in the Indonesian Republic had to confront.

A high-ranking official from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, deeply involved in the Dutch-Indonesian conflict, described Frank Porter Graham – the President of the University of North Carolina before he was appointed to the GOC – as a gullible if “well-intentioned” man. While Indonesian politicians in the Republic addressed Graham as a “trusted friend of the Indonesian people,” who championed their position during his service on the GOC in 1947 and as a US Senator in Washington DC in 1949, Dr. Hendrik N. Boon recalled him as a “typical” American, who did not have a clue about the world’s complexities. Boon noted that Graham made the basic assumption that “what’s good for

the US is good for everybody.” When asked in late 1947 how elections could be organized among an overwhelmingly illiterate population, Graham apparently answered that ballots could replace bullets by handing Indonesian citizens a small red-and-white flag and a little red-white-and-blue flag, after which “voters can announce their choice by enthusiastically waving the flag they prefer.”⁶¹ In Graham’s case, though, Dutch officials were bound to be dreadfully disappointed, regardless of his actual words and deeds, if only because they had expected the US government to name a GOC member who possessed the stature of either “General Dwight Eisenhower or Dean Acheson.”⁶²

Vitriolic critiques of America’s foreign policy, however, often concealed a self-serving judgment on the part of the majority of Dutch people who found it hard to believe that Indonesians, most of whom they continued to view as childlike and unskilled, were capable of managing an independent nation without the assistance of enlightened civil servants from the Netherlands. When hearing such patronizing arguments, the American diplomat on the Security Council’s GOC, Coert du Bois, reputedly dismissed these Dutch statements during the spring of 1948 in a gravelly voice. Whether Indonesians were ready for self-government was completely beside the point, he retorted, because autonomy could simply not be withheld from “people striving for self-rule.”⁶³

Nevertheless, scores of people in the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies seized what they defined as America’s punitive anti-Dutch campaign as a convenient lightning rod. Because the incremental reevaluation of US views concerning the legitimacy of the Indonesian Republic had been an internal State Department debate rather than a public process, the Dutch community perceived America’s pro-Indonesian actions in early 1949 as a betrayal that came out of the clear blue sky. The State Department’s new policy was publicly conveyed by the US Ambassador-at-large, Philip C. Jessup, whose sympathy for the victims of European colonialism inspired the forceful proposal for UN Security Council’s sanctions after the second Dutch military attack on the Republic.⁶⁴ Through the instigation of Jessup and the US delegation, the Dutch nation was suddenly treated as “the laughingstock and doormat of the world’s comity of nations,” an arch-conservative former colonial civil servant lamented. Even worse, he moaned, was that “our government did not offer any form of dignified resistance.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Admiral Conrad Emil L. Helfrich, who retired from the Royal Netherlands Navy after World War II, wrote a bombastic “private and personal” letter to Dean Acheson’s home address in Bethesda, Maryland, after looking it up in *Who’s Who in America*. In clumsy English he chided Acheson in September 1949, that the State Department failed to realize that millions of Indonesians “fear and loathe the Republic and her communist backed or tainted, now everywhere infiltrating, elements.” He warned the US Secretary of State that the new impetus of Washington’s foreign policy would produce “a poor, ter-

rorized Indonesian people, an unsafe country [in Southeast Asia], and an impoverished little Holland on the west coast of Europe, contrary to any endeavor to create a strong West European Union.”⁶⁶

During the postwar era, Dutch characterizations of America’s policies as witless and capricious were in many instances the poignant expressions of an unwillingness to concede that the era of European colonial mastery in Southeast Asia and elsewhere was over. Scores of foreign observers, in contrast, saw the writing on the wall. An Australian foreign policy analyst depicted Dutch residents in the Southeast Asian colony in the postwar period as living in a “dream world bounded by their prewar prejudices.”⁶⁷ Similarly, the acting British Consul General in Jakarta in June 1948, faulted the Dutch for stubbornly and foolishly trying to revive a lost world.⁶⁸ Several scholars in the Netherlands, many decades later, have also characterized Dutch efforts to perpetuate the nation’s position in the Indonesian archipelago as behavior reflecting an atavistic compulsion, which acquired an aura of tragedy reminiscent of Don Quixote’s tilting with windmills. The Dutch historian Cees Fasseur, in fact, has argued that only America was able to pull the Dutch out of the murky “Indonesian quagmire” in which they had become ensnared.⁶⁹

In reality, though, the American foreign policy establishment was not as uninformed about Indonesian society as many Dutch citizens, political or military officials, or the media chose to portray it in 1949. Ironically, on the rare occasion that the US State Department in Washington actually complained about the lack of intelligent analysis of the political situation in the Indonesian archipelago, which occurred in 1947, the American diplomat posted in Batavia happened to be a man who spoke both Malay (Indonesian) and Dutch. In fact, the US Consul General in Batavia during 1945–1947, Walter Ambrose Foote, prided himself on possessing a long record of Foreign Service assignments in Java and Sumatra since the late 1920s. If his Dutch colonial friends and colleagues could have read his cables and dispatches to the State Department during the early postwar years, they would not have objected, simply because he recapitulated their own political views.

However, Washington encouraged its emissaries to apply only the most practical criteria as to what constituted useful knowledge. Desk officers in the State Department often judged arcane cultural information about the ethnic complexities or religious diversities of the archipelago to be immaterial in formulating appropriate foreign policies for Southeast Asia. It was likely that US Foreign Service personnel posted in Batavia, Surabaya, and Medan saw their complicated Indonesian environment as overly “pliable.” A peculiar American vision of international relations as a chess game that could be won by shrewdly manipulating the most powerful pieces on the board through the use of proper strategy reinforced this impulse. Such US perspectives differed from the Dutch diplomat Van

Vredenburg's view; he compared the formulation of foreign policy to a "game of chance," which prompted players to make reckless decisions due to either deficient information or a lack of intelligent deliberation.⁷⁰

Thus, many of the assessments sent back to the State Department may have skated on the surface of the cultural complexities of the archipelago, purely because American policymakers' perceived such knowledge as esoteric and therefore irrelevant. For example, when the very same US Consul General, Walter Foote, mailed a lengthy dispatch from Batavia ten years earlier filled with social and cultural details on the subject of "Netherlands India in Crisis in 1937," an official in the Office of Far Eastern Affairs scribbled in the margin that the report might contain "valuable material for a sociologist" but was utterly "useless to the State Department."⁷¹ America's international relations, resembling the diplomatic practices of most members of the world community, were forged for the purpose of preserving or enhancing the US position in the world and "to defend, not define, what America was," as Walter McDougall wrote in 1997.⁷² Moreover, the memories of the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki endowed Washington's management of its international relations with an aura of impunity. In the immediate postwar years, America's atom bomb monopoly enabled Washington to protect its national security interests and to pursue foreign policy objectives in an almost peremptory fashion, rendering careful scrutiny of the impact of US measures in the international arena less urgent.⁷³

As a result, in their efforts to make sense of the mineral-rich world of the Dutch East Indies, US analysts staked out a series of political and economic truth claims that served America's national interest during the period 1920–1945; such partisan assumptions and definitions continued to prejudice Washington's policies toward the Dutch-Indonesian conflict in the immediate post-World War II years. At the same time, deeply rooted affinities existed between American diplomats, US oil company executives, and plantation directors, on the one hand, and the many Dutch colonial administrators and captains of industry in the Netherlands East Indies, on the other, who had so profitably managed the productivity of the natural resources of the archipelago. This instinctive sense of US-Dutch compatibility in matters of business, democratic politics, and social values lingered on throughout the postwar period. Hence, Washington's willingness to back the Dutch side was only gradually, and perhaps reluctantly, suspended as the year 1948 drew to a close, when Cold War calculations in Asia demanded America's transfer of loyalty to the Indonesian camp.⁷⁴

During the crucial year of 1948, the primacy of the State Department's concerns with the Netherlands' role in Europe was progressively overshadowed by the belief that Sukarno and Hatta could withstand Moscow's ideological pushes and pulls, which would enable them to establish a pro-Western Republic on a strategically located archipelago in Asia. Washington's new pro-Indonesian stance

was communicated to the Netherlands and to the world at large in increasingly explicit language in January of 1949. This was done only after the Truman Administration and the US Congress on Capitol Hill were reassured that it was plausible to expect that the “moderate” leaders of the *Republik Indonesia* – moderate having become a synonym for non-communist or better yet, anti-communist – would deliver and secure their independent nation as a Western-oriented bulwark against Asian communism in the future.