

Truman and His Doctrine: Revolutionary, Unprecedented, and Bipartisan

by Elizabeth Edwards Spalding

In February 1947, the British government privately told the United States that it would no longer be able to guarantee the security and independence of Greece and Turkey. President Harry S. Truman had known this time would come and had already initiated research into military aid to the two countries in August 1946. The Soviet Union had been acting offensively since the end of World War II, throughout Europe as well as in Asia and the Turkish Straits, and especially with respect to Iran, Greece, and Turkey. Truman grasped that the United States would have to make an extraordinary and unprecedented commitment to Greece and Turkey, in the region he referred to as the “gateway” between East and West.

Truman knew that any policy he proposed would be unprecedented. After the Second World War, most Americans wanted a return to ordinary times. Until 1946, many still thought of the Soviet Union as either an ally or a normal great power. Even when Americans started to become wary of the USSR, they expected the United Nations to resolve any problems. Through rhetoric and action, Truman had been educating his fellow Americans since 1945 about the nature and stakes of the Cold War. Given the limitations of the United Nations—notably, the USSR had a veto vote as a permanent member of the Security Council, and the UN did not even have enough funds to build its own headquarters—Truman realized that the United States was the only power that would be able to lead the free world. He had no idea how long the struggle last, but he perceived that the Cold War between East and West would be fought on political, strategic, economic, and moral terms.

Thus, Truman set out to frame the American strategy that would become known as containment. His statesmanship was central to the conception and implementation of this strategy. His words and actions reflected his understanding that the president—a unitary, chief executive able to act with energy, secrecy, and dispatch in times of emergency—is primary in foreign policy. But Truman also realized that, constitutionally and institutionally, he needed both to involve and persuade the legislative branch.

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At the end of February, a few days after hearing from the British, Truman invited congressional leaders to the White House for an important meeting about the situation in Greece and Turkey and its connection to the growing Cold War. Everyone from the majority and minority leaderships to the chairmen and ranking members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Appropriations committees was in attendance. Truman knew these men to be internationalists, but some were focused on Europe, while others placed their trust in the United Nations. These legislators were



Winston Churchill, Harry S. Truman, and Joseph Stalin at Potsdam, 1945.
(Gilder Lehrman Collection)

leery of appropriating large funds for non-constituents while a domestic economy that had been plagued with labor strikes was still making a postwar conversion to peacetime.

After preliminary remarks, Truman depended on Secretary of State George Marshall to make a compelling case to the congressional leaders. Though the famed World War II general was respected—truly, revered—by all, Marshall failed. Truman then turned to Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, who had been contending with the main aspects of the crisis (especially with Marshall frequently on diplomatic travel in Europe). By all accounts, Acheson was both forceful and persuasive. A long silence followed his presentation, and then the new Senate majority leader, a Republican, said, “Mr. President, if you will say that to the Congress and the country, I will support you and I believe that most of its members will do the same.” The formal strategy of containment was born.

Truman invited the congressional leaders back for another White House meeting on March 10. Then, on March 12, 1947, he gave the speech for which he will always be remembered. In the struggle America faced, said Truman, “One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.” By contrast, he continued, “The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority” and relies on terror, oppression, and the negating of free will and choice. Truman stated outright that the United States had to help “free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity” against aggressive movements from totalitarian regimes. “This is,” he said, “no more than a frank recognition that totalitarian regimes imposed upon free peoples, by direct or indirect aggression, undermine the foundations of international peace and hence the security of the United States.” Truman made his remarks knowing that the way ahead would be difficult and that much would be required of him as president. At the same time, he proceeded knowing he had the support and confidence of congressional leaders of both parties.

The nature and exigencies of the Cold War drew out of Truman a strategy that was American rather than partisan. Truman started with first principles. When he considered an international environment that would sustain and advance the free world, he talked about freedom, justice, and order; and he deliberately put these principles in that precise order. Truman wanted peace for the world’s peoples, but he saw that freedom must precede order because freedom would provide the first and deepest roots for peace. Next, Truman understood that the regime of a people was decisive in both domestic and international politics. He expressed his understanding of justice as a reflection of the principles of the specific regime. He maintained that the principles held and practiced by liberal democracy—unlike those of communist totalitarianism—grew from and toward concerns of justice. Truman associated order with a free people first embracing and then maintaining liberty and justice through a fair system of laws. To him, order was not merely a synonym for stability.

Truman was president after two great Democratic Party models of expansive presidential power: Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Truman admired both of these men in key regards, but he did not worship them. He looked to them as examples, but he also held up George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson as superior models. All of these men were precedent setters in presidential power—using their powers according to the circumstances of their time—and Truman followed their lead.

The extraordinary nature of the Cold War prompted Truman to exercise presidential power in a sharp and often assertive way. Truman spoke morally in black-and-white terms. For him, the Cold War was a conflict between good and evil, freedom and tyranny, liberal democracy and totalitarianism, capitalism and communism. Truman wielded presidential power in a combination of political, military, and economic

programs and policies. Consider the revolutionary nature of the containment strategy. Containment committed the United States to world politics as it had never been before. Consider its main programs and policies: the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift, NATO, the decision to go forward with the hydrogen bomb, NSC-68, and the police action called the Korean War. Truman implemented containment with the help of both Republican and Democratic Congresses, but he was the driving force throughout.

Truman understood the primacy of the presidency in decision-making, but he also respected the role of Congress. He served nearly ten years in the US Senate before being tapped for the vice presidency. During World War II, he chaired the influential "Truman Committee"—which redirected and saved millions of dollars in defense expenditures (and many lives)—and, as part of a small number of bipartisan teams, he went on the road with a GOP colleague from the House, Walter Judd of Minnesota, to promote a postwar international organization. When Truman left the Senate, he also left behind many colleagues and friends, including Arthur Vandenberg, Republican from Michigan, who, in 1945 and 1946, had been one of the White House's representatives at the UN conference in San Francisco and subsequent General Assembly meetings, and in 1947 was the new Senate majority leader and the new chairman of the all-important Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In 1946, Truman had not wanted to lose the Democratic majority in Congress, but the defeat turned out to be a blessing. Many of his fellow Democrats were anti-communist but enamored of the United Nations. Republican anti-communists, however, were either UN supporters who believed that the organization was being tainted by the Soviet Union, or UN skeptics. In terms of establishing the American leadership necessary to fight the Cold War, Truman accomplished more with the GOP majority in the 80th Congress of 1947 and 1948 than he would have with a Democratic majority. He was indeed fortunate to have Vandenberg on his side.

Another significant reason Truman excelled at bipartisanship was his success at executive-legislative cooperation. This is further testimony to Truman's statesmanship, since presidents do not always make simultaneous distinctions and connections between bipartisanship and executive-legislative cooperation. Some tension must exist between and among our branches of government to ensure that each does its job as vigorously as possible, and checks and balances and separation of powers must be maintained. In the case of foreign policy, however, some or much—depending on the circumstances—cooperation is required. Truman not only had congressional experience, but he was also a keen, lifelong student of the presidency. He found it natural to invite members of Congress to the White House for frequent, ongoing conversations and to send top advisors to meet, work, and socialize with senators and congressmen. Truman ultimately sought their cooperation on his terms, but he included congressional leaders of both parties in the major components of containment, realizing that he needed their help in order to pass policies and put them into practice.

On this note, Truman was a canny tactician. He built bipartisanship into containment, in order to secure support for an extraordinary new era in US foreign policy. The Truman Doctrine was an unprecedented commitment on part of United States—Truman had in mind more than just Greece and Turkey, and \$400 million would not be the last expenditure in Cold War foreign policy—and Truman included all the Republican and Democratic congressional leaders in his efforts to get them on board. He did not intend for the new doctrine to be named for him, although it was within several days. The Marshall Plan was also unprecedented in US foreign policy. Truman was now talking about tens of billions of dollars, rather than the hundreds of millions of the Truman Doctrine. In another brilliant move, he pushed for the European Recovery Program to be named for Secretary of State George Marshall, because of Marshall's national and international status. The great World War II general was known as the man who

refused to join a party and called himself “non-partisan.” NATO was still another unprecedented commitment in US foreign policy. No one could predict either the expiration date or the financial cost of this alliance. Truman—especially through Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, a Republican who was close friends with Vandenberg—asked Vandenberg to take the lead. With White House backing, Vandenberg steered the Vandenberg Resolution through the Senate, making it legitimate for the United States to join the North Atlantic Alliance and other regional collective defense arrangements. In so doing, Truman built a bipartisan strategy that addressed political, military, and economic requirements.

Harry Truman is many Republicans’ favorite foreign policy president. For Democratic proponents of liberal internationalism, he is also a model. Truman was as partisan as they come—this was clear during the 1948 election campaign—but he understood that the country’s political parties had to be united in foreign policy. Truman based his foreign policy on concepts that were distinctively American, rather Democratic or Republican, and he laid the public and enduring foundation for the strategy that would eventually win the Cold War.

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