

Studs Terkel's oral history of World War Two is a snapshot of American opinion in the 1940s. It was America's proudest hour in world affairs and the nostalgia and memories of the 'Good War' fuelled the American struggle against Soviet aggression and Soviet Communism. "*The United States had inherited the earth ... they had been anointed by God*".¹

Harry S. Truman, the "*two bit politician*"² from Independence, Missouri had been Vice-President for less than ninety days when he assumed the presidency following the death of Roosevelt in April 1945. Truman brought to the Oval Office the baggage of a long-time Democratic Party political operator, a staunch Baptist and a Grand Master Mason.³ He shared the common American belief that the nation should have no foreign entanglements, and understood the discord between the United States and the Soviet Union to be, like Ronald Reagan, as that between good and evil.⁴ Significantly, Truman also entered office having privately decided that he wanted to secure a second term.⁵

Although Truman had a consistent record of support for the Roosevelt administration, he was not a known liberal. He supported the 'New Deal' but was not known for doing so for any ideological reason, but for the fact it was the 'party' line and Senator Truman was a product of the Democratic Party machine.⁶ After Pearl Harbour, Truman never wavered from support for Roosevelt on international questions, although he had enthusiastically voted for the pre-war Neutrality Acts. With the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 Truman, revealed his anti-Soviet hostility, he did not differentiate between the Nazi aggressor and the Soviet Union.⁷

After the war according to Henry Kissinger, Americans were just "*going to get along with everybody*" only Winston Churchill had given attention to post-war development.⁸ Although Truman himself may not have had a plan his officials had been at work for some years

and rival policies were being pursued by administration officials who were eager to advise the new Chief Executive. One group the liberal followers of Roosevelt, adherents to the grand internationalism in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson looked to the postwar world in terms of collective security and laid great store on the United Nations organisation to resolve future conflict. The alternative popular view, propounded by the conservative Right would be to withdraw into isolation. Constructing fortress America, protected by an outer ring of military bases. For the third group of officials, the 'realists', the issue was how to best win domestic support for a continued world role for America without appearing as moralists and to redefine the internationalist perspective with an increasing friction that was developing with America's Soviet ally.⁹

Henry Kissinger has written that Truman tried to follow previous policy, stressing that future world peace lay with global collective security policed by the wartime allies. To show continuity and offer reassurance, Truman used Harry Hopkins the long time confidante of Roosevelt, as his emissary to Stalin.¹⁰

John Gaddis has suggested that at the time of Roosevelt's death many of the principal foreign policy advisors such as James Forrestal, Averell Harriman and Admiral Leahy had developed a stronger line against the Soviet Union. According to Gaddis, Truman "*at first accepted their recommendation that the only way to deal with the Russians was to take an unyielding stand, even if this meant straining the Grand Alliance*".¹¹ While other officials like Harry Hopkins, Joe Davies, Henry Stimson and former Vice President Henry Wallace opposed a confrontation with Moscow and consequently policy and attitude towards the Soviet Union by the administration yo-yoed back and forth presumably depending upon to whom the President was listening.¹² In a controversial argument mainly based on Henry Stimson's recollections, Gar Alperovitz has gone as far as to suggest that Truman decided to use the atomic

bomb on Japan to gain a political advantage over the Soviet Union, or at least to curb Soviet expansion in Asia.¹³

Who won the argument? Whether Truman had preconceived views himself or was swayed by the argument, the outcome was that many of the Roosevelt 'new dealers' found themselves out of office. The foreign policy contradictions of the isolationists and the internationalists posed a serious challenge to the agenda of the Truman administration. The Wilsonian internationalists, according to Bruce Cumings, gave up their global vision for a '*second-best*' internationalism where the world would be divided between the 'free world' and the communist bloc.¹⁴ The greatest political danger to Truman came not from the liberal Left but from the shift to the Right and he conceivably may have been forced into pursuing an anti-Soviet policy because anti-communism was popular.¹⁵ A distinctive feature for western nations after the war was the support for left parties and governments except in America.¹⁶ Maybe Truman became a prisoner of that shift. In the mid-term congressional elections of 1946, the Republicans on a neo-isolationist ticket, gained control over both houses of Congress, the first time since 1928. The Republicans pursued a domestic agenda advocating cutting tax and foreign aid, and limiting the American involvement in Europe while offering the voters a choice between "*Communism and Republicanism*".¹⁷

Truman could not hold the support of the conservative southern democrats who, allied with the Republicans, not only threatened the end of 'new deal' domestic policies but also threatened the continuation of the internationalist foreign policy. Dean Acheson summed up the problem when he said, "*I can state in three sentences what the popular attitude is towards foreign policy today. 1. Bring the boy's home. 2. Don't be a Santa Claus. 3. Don't be pushed around.*"¹⁸ More significantly for a politician, Truman's own

approval ratings dropped from 87 percent when he took office to 32 percent in November 1945.

The elite of government officialdom redefined the tougher approach to the Soviet Union in intellectual terms and Acheson has been described as the architect of the new policy of containment of Soviet expansion or *realpolitik*.¹⁹ Although others may ascribe the term architect to perhaps other individuals such as George Kennan the influence of the realists was great and was to last for much of the cold war. The philosophy the realists offered was that isolationism was not an option and that 'Wilsonian' moralising had no part in foreign policy.²⁰ The solution that Kennan was to offer was that the Soviet Union had expansive designs that must be contained through

*"the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and manoeuvres of Soviet policy".*²¹

For officials like Acheson it became clear that Truman was receptive to a hard line against the Soviets and willing to alter the course of foreign policy. John L. Gaddis says that Acheson's former rowing coach Averell Harriman gave *"shape to Truman's views"*.²² The Truman meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov on April 23, 1945 set the tone for the future relationship. Truman gave Molotov an undiplomatic lecture for the Russian failure to carry out as the Americans saw it, agreements on Poland. Gaddis says, that the Soviet Foreign Minister would have been in no doubt that Truman had thrown out Roosevelt's policy of co-operation. How far was Truman preparing the ground for a future change in policy? Gaddis suggests that in the public perception, the war in Europe had still not been concluded, *"public opinion would have significantly limited"* such moves against the Soviet ally.²³

Was Truman steering a new course from the beginning? A former senior advisor to Roosevelt, Rexford Tugwell intimates that

Truman did not overtly abandon the 'Roosevelt' grand plan for the postwar world, he never attempted to put it into practice. Tugwell argues that Truman either "*did not understand it; or, if he did, he considered that close association with the Russians would have been an ideological impossibility*".²⁴ John Gaddis suggests that Truman's own 'abrasive personality' may have led Moscow to assume that the policies of Roosevelt had been abandoned.²⁵ However, only one month after assuming office, Truman in a letter to the highly influential liberal Democrat, Eleanor Roosevelt appeared to show a softer attitude to the Russians.²⁶ Nevertheless, Truman was an unelected President and required all the support he could muster and may have been attempting to keep the influential Eleanor Roosevelt on his side.²⁷

By the end of 1945 Truman was taking the view that not only was tough talk and economic measures against the Soviet Union required but also the United States should be preparing for another war. In an unsent letter to Byrnes he said, "*unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making*".²⁸

The American public was generally still unaware of the breakdown in relations between the former allies. The issue was brought home starkly to them with Truman's sponsorship of Churchill's famous 'iron curtain' speech delivered in his presence on his homepatch in Missouri. At the same time, the realists had been given ammunition on the Marxist threat from Stalin himself with his February 1946 speech announcing the communist ultimate victory over capitalism.²⁹ The analysis of the speech, the Kennan Telegram, together with the Clifford-Elsey report provided the administration with the theoretical framework for the emerging realist foreign policy.³⁰ The Clifford-Elsey report highlighted the ideological roots of Soviet expansion. George Elsey, commenting later said "*President Truman for the first time realized he didn't have a divided administration; he had strong support*".³¹

The administration may now have been united in its policies but this had not been conveyed to the American public who were swinging behind the Republicans. From the safety of the legislature not government, they were able to demand both tough action and deny the means to achieve it by pursuing tax cuts. The problem for the administration was how to sell the policy. It would require public opinion, in Acheson's phrase, to accept that the 'boys' would be required overseas and that 'Santa Claus' would need to dispense lots of dollars. The defining event for the administration to take the offensive, was the British decision to end military and economic support to Greece. Despite the paradox that America had no direct interest in Greece;³² Acheson thought that if Greece fell to communism the "*breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration*".³³

In the climate of a continuing move to the right in American politics, Truman in 1947 needed all the support he could muster. He needed to create a momentum to not only propel him into the White House for a second term but also to win his party nomination. The catalyst was the address to Congress appealing for aid to Greece and Turkey that became known as the *Truman Doctrine*. Truman took the cue from Republican Senator Arthur Vandenberg's advice to "*scare hell out of the American people*".³⁴ Walter LaFeber has described it as a "*brilliant political device*" that appealed to the anti-communism of the American public.³⁵ It was also perceived as a direct challenge to the Soviet Union by the British diplomat Gladwyn Jebb.³⁶ In a private letter to his daughter after the speech to Congress, Truman's own ill-liberal private thoughts are revealed,

"there was but one idealistic example of Communism. That is described in the Acts of the Apostles. The attempt of Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin et.al. to fool the world and the American Crackpots Association, represented by Joseph Davies, Henry Wallace, Claud Pepper and the actors and

*artists in immoral Greenwich Village, is just like Hitler's and Mussolini's so-called socialist states. Your Pop had to tell the world just that in polite language."*³⁷

The Clark-Elsey report provided further ammunition to Truman, the report warned of domestic communist espionage. Nine days after the Truman Doctrine speech there followed a loyalty program that subjected all federal workers to investigation as to their beliefs. Within months, the National Security Act was in place and the creation of the government agencies to carry out the cold war.

Truman was able to win back public support and in 1948 won his cherished second term of office. The administration vigorously continued its anti-Soviet policies to such an extent that Bruce Cumings has advanced the hypothesis that it provoked the Korean War.³⁸ According to Senator William J. Fulbright, "*More by far than any other factor the anti-communism of the Truman doctrine has been the guiding spirit of American foreign policy since World War II*".³⁹

The attitude of Truman was interpreted by the Soviet Union as a change of course in Soviet-American relations. In 1959 Khrushchev, in discussion with Harriman, confirmed that if Roosevelt had lived history might have taken a different course. He blamed Truman for the souring of relations.⁴⁰ Soviet officials reported similar concerns about Truman. Nikolai Novikov the Soviet number two at the Washington embassy sent a warning telegram home on 27 September 1946,

*"The foreign policy of the United States, which reflects the imperialist tendencies of American monopolistic capital, is characterised in the postwar period by a striving for world supremacy. This is the real meaning of the many statements by President Truman and other representatives of American ruling circles: that the United States has the right to lead the world".*⁴¹

However, it is unlikely that in the long-term, as John Gaddis has suggested, the death of Roosevelt altered the course of Soviet-American relations.⁴² Truman can be blamed to pandering to the American public and fanning the flames of anti-communism but his hostility to the Soviet Union had little effect on the course of Soviet Policy. If Stalin had been removed from the equation “*alternative paths become quite conceivable*”.⁴³ Truman, perhaps unknowingly, stumbled into an administration that was wrecked with disagreement on a new policy path, the liberal idealists of Roosevelt’s time fought for a new global vision and held up the United Nations as their mantle. The American public and many conservatives wanted a return to isolationism surrounded by a new wall of military bases whilst Dean Acheson pursued a new policy of realism that was sold to Truman and the public by pandering to overt anti-communism. Harry S. Truman the politician was receptive to a policy that would be popular, he was after all seeking re-election.

Notes

- ¹ Studs Terkel, The Good War: an oral History of World War Two, (1985), p.8.
- ² Randall B.Woods and Howard Jones, Dawning of the Cold War: The United States quest for order, (1994), p.35.
- ³ Roy Jenkins, Truman, (1986), p.47 *for the views of freemasonry see also* Robert Tate, Communism and Freemasonry, <http://www.linshaw.com/vol3no2.html>. [Accessed 14 October 2000].
- ⁴ Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy, (1994), p.447.
- ⁵ Merle Miller, Plain speaking: an oral biography of Harry S.Truman, (1974), p.266.
- ⁶ Robert J. Donovan, Conflict and crisis: the presidency of Harry S Truman, 1945-1948, (1996), p.26.
- ⁷ Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy, (1994), p.426 *this also made a strong impression on Henry Wallace see* J.Samuel Walker, Henry A. Wallace and American Foreign Policy, (1976), p.121.
- ⁸ Melvyn P.Leffler, 'National Security and US Foreign Policy', in Melvyn P.Leffler and David S.Painter (eds.), Origins of the Cold War: an international history, (1994), p.17.
- ⁹ Tony Smith, 'Making the World safe for democracy in the American century', Diplomatic History, Vol.23 (Spring, 1999), pp.173-188.
- ¹⁰ Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy, (1994), p.424.
- ¹¹ John L.Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947, (1972), p.199.
- ¹² John L.Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947, (1972), pp.198-201.
- ¹³ Randall B.Woods and Howard Jones, Dawning of the Cold War: The United States quest for order, (1994), p.66. *For the Alperovitz argument see* Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, (1965).
- ¹⁴ Bruce Cumings, The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. II, (1990), p.27.
- ¹⁵ John Kenneth White, 'Seeing Red: The Cold War and American Public Opinion', The Power of Free Inquiry and Cold War International History: National Archives Conference, College Park, Maryland; September 25-26, 1998, <http://www.nara.gov/research/coldwar/jwpap.html>. [Accessed 22 October 2000].

- ¹⁶ David Reynolds, 'The European Dimension of the Cold War', in Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter (eds.), Origins of the Cold War: an international history, (1994), p.126.
- ¹⁷ Stephen J. Whitfield, The Culture of the Cold War, (1991), p.19.
- ¹⁸ David Reynolds, 'The European Dimension of the Cold War', in Melvyn P. Leffler and David S. Painter (eds.), Origins of the Cold War: an international history, (1994), p.128.
- ¹⁹ Randall B. Woods and Howard Jones, Dawning of the Cold War: The United States quest for order, (1994), pp.18-19.
- ²⁰ Tony Smith, 'Making the World safe for democracy in the American century', Diplomatic History, Vol.23 (Spring, 1999) p.175.
- ²¹ X [George Kennan], 'Sources of Soviet Conduct,' Foreign Affairs, 25 (July 1947), 566-82. *Quoted in* Tina Klein, Cold War Orientalism: The Sentimental Culture of US Globalization, <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~cwc/klein/paper.html> [Accessed 17 October 2000].
- ²² John L. Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947, (1972), p.201.
- ²³ John L. Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947, (1972), p.206
- ²⁴ Rexford G. Tugwell, 'There could be no dealing with communists', from J. Joseph Huthmacher (ed.), The Truman Years: the Reconstruction of Postwar America, (1972), p.57.
- ²⁵ John L. Gaddis, The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947, (1972), p.200.
- ²⁶ Harry S. Truman, (Robert Ferrell ed.), Off the record: the private papers of Harry S. Truman, (1980). pp.21-22.
- ²⁷ *Similar overtures were made to Henry Wallace see* J. Samuel Walker, Henry A. Wallace and American Foreign Policy, (1976), pp.139-140.
- ²⁸ Harry S. Truman, (ed. Robert Ferrell), Off the record: the private papers of Harry S. Truman (1980), p.80.
- ²⁹ Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation: my years in the State Department, (1969), pp.150-151.
- ³⁰ Daniel Yergin, Shattered Peace: the origins of the Cold War and the National Security State, (1978), pp.241-245.
- ³¹ George Elsey interview for the Cold War - CNN production <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/02/interviews/elshey/> [Accessed 22 October 2000].

- ³² Alan Bullock, Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, (1985), p.206.
- ³³ Dean Acheson, Present at the creation: my years in the State Department, (1969), p.219.
- ³⁴ Thomas J. McCormick, America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and after, (1995), p.78.
- ³⁵ Walter LaFeber, 'Rethinking the Cold War and after: from containment to enlargement', from Allen Hunter (ed.), Rethinking the Cold War, (1998), p.37.
- ³⁶ Lord Gladwyn, The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn, (1972), p.204.
- ³⁷ Margaret Truman, Harry S. Truman, (1973), p.343.
- ³⁸ Bruce Cumings, The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. II, (1990), Chapter 13.
- ³⁹ Walter LaFeber, America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1984, (1985), p.49.
- ⁴⁰ Conversation Between N.S. Khrushchev and Governor Harriman, June 23, 1959, U.S. Department of State, Vol. X, Part 1, FRUS, 1958-60: E. Europe Region; Soviet Union; Cyprus, Office of the Historian, No. 734 Moscow, June 26, 1959.
<http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/frus/frus58-60x1/09soviet3.html>.
[Accessed 17 October 2000].
- ⁴¹ Telegram by Soviet Nikolai Novikov to Moscow, 27 September 1946,
<http://cwihip.si.edu/cwihplib.nsf/16c6b2fc83775317852564a400054b28/2530af20731bbbc1852566890072e76e>. [Accessed 17 October 2000].
- ⁴² John L.Gaddis, We now know: rethinking Cold War history, (1997), p.23.
- ⁴³ John L.Gaddis, We now know: rethinking Cold War history, (1997), p.294.

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