A Consequential Presidency: The Truman Administration and the Creation of the National Security State

Even before the end of World War II, it was apparent to many informed observers that the United States and the Soviet Union could not remain allies against Nazism and Fascism once these common enemies of communism and democracy had been defeated. The Truman Administration quickly focused on the increasingly evident hostility of the Stalin regime and from 1945 to 1952 moved resolutely and effectively to counter the threat it posed to American interests and to world peace. With the collapse of the British Empire immediately following the war, the U.S. and the Soviet Union emerged as the leaders, respectively, of the "Free World," and the "Socialist World." (note: Communists knew that "communism" was a dirty word in many parts of the world and preferred to characterize their political/economic system as "socialist," as in the Union of Soviet *Socialist* Republics.)

The stand-off between the USSR and the USA soon came to be known as the Cold War and it would last with varying degrees of intensity until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The conflict centered on Europe, much of which lay in ruins in the war's aftermath, and involved both economic and political rivalry and led to the rapid rearmament of the U.S. Americans of all political stripes wanted rapid demobilization following the victory over Japan in August 1945 and the conversion of the war economy to a peacetime, consumer-goods economy. Stalin's regime, however, saw in the disarray in Europe a golden opportunity to expand Soviet influence and, in places, outright control, on the USSR's western border. At the Potsdam Conference of Stalin Truman and Churchill/Attlee in July 1945, the western allies had little choice but to accept the expansion of the Soviet border hundreds of miles to the west, reclaiming areas lost to the Germans in World War I and depriving Poland of thousands of square miles of territory, somewhat compensated for by annexing large parts of eastern Germany into a new Polish state. Truman and Churchill also had to accept the Soviet annexation of the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into the USSR and a large part of eastern Czechoslovakia and Romania, which became again a part of an expanded Ukrainian SSR. Truman sized up Stalin at the Conference as tough and straightforward, but thought he could work with him. As the conference began, our main concern was obtaining Soviet entry into the war against Japan, but the successful detonation of the first A-bomb in New Mexico, which occurred shortly

after the Conference started, greatly eased American concerns about a quick end to the war with Japan and made Soviet entry actually undesirable.

The struggle over the future of Germany lay at the heart of the Cold War. No peace treaty with Germany was ever agreed upon by the former allies, opening the road to unilateral moves by both sides that, at times, threatened to break out into hot war.

Some of the key players on the American side were General George C. Marshall, who became Secretary of State in 1947, his chief deputy, Dean Acheson, who became Secretary of State in January 1949, following Truman's victory in the November 1948 presidential election, and Foreign Service officer, George Kennan, whose "Long Telegram" of February 1946 laid out the policy of "containment," which became the basis for the American approach to the Soviet challenge during most of the post-war period. Truman's national security policy would come increasingly to rely on the counsel of what would later become known as the "Wise Men," namely -- in addition to Acheson and Kennan -- Averill Harriman, Robert Lovett, John Mc Cloy and Chip Bohlen.

Kennan stated in his telegram that the Soviets would use every opportunity to advance their interests and the cause of communism and that only a readiness on the part of the U.S. to counter Soviet moves could check this drive for world domination. Stalin seemed to confirm this view in his speech of February 5, 1946 in which he maintained that capitalism and communism were incompatible systems and that war with the United States was inevitable, probably in the 1950's. On the other hand, research conducted by American and Russian historians after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 confirmed that Stalin thought the capitalist countries would inevitably fall to fighting among themselves in their greed for markets and that communism would naturally come to power without resort to armed conflict. Such research also showed that the Soviet's from Stalin on down had believed that Hitler's attack on the USSR in 1941 had the secret support of England and the U.S. and that the delay in opening a "second front" in the war aimed to let the Russians do most of the fighting, with the Western allies only joining in at the conclusion, when they could reap the rewards of the Red Army's efforts. The paranoia so apparent in later years had long been a characteristic of Stalin personally and of the whole regime over which he ruled with an iron hand.

On March 5, 1946, Truman invited now *former* Prime Minister Churchill to Washington for a friendly visit and then on to the tiny Fulton College in Missouri, where he made his famous "iron curtain" speech. The communists, Churchill

declared, had walled off from the West all the countries occupied by the Red Army after the war and from Stettin in the north to Trieste in the south, an "iron curtain" had descended, behind which the Soviets and their puppet communist regimes were systematically destroying all vestiges of liberal democratic government and civil liberties. Oddly, Churchill's speech elicited much criticism from the American media, many commentators, led by Walter Lippmann, characterizing it as provocative and unbalanced. Truman claimed (dishonestly) that he had not known what Churchill was going say, however, and even invited Stalin to come to the U.S. and give a rebuttal speech. Of course the Soviet dictator declined the invitation.

Also in March 1946 the Truman Administration went to the United Nations to protest the continued presence of Soviet forces in northern Iran, where they had gone during the war to protect the region's oil from Nazi advances, and were supposed to withdraw within six months of the end of hostilities.

The Truman Administration's "Eurocentric" response to the Soviet threat was certainly understandable: it was in Europe that the two adversaries most directly confronted each other, after all. But it turned out that a conflict in the Korean peninsula from 1950 to 1953, and a much longer conflict in Indochina from 1961 to 1975 would be the only instances of an actual "hot war" between the United States and the communists; and neither war involved Americans fighting Russians (although Russian pilots doubtless were flying some of the MIGs that American airmen encountered in the skies over Korea).

Republican victories in the Congressional elections of November 1946 gave the GOP control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1932. Raging inflation and a popular desire to return to "normalcy" probably had more to do with the Democrat's defeat than any foreign policy issues. It still had not sunk in with most people that the U.S. was facing an implacable foe in Europe and Americans generally supported demobilization and did not want to see the country involved in the affairs of Europe.

If one had to pick a year when the Cold War began in earnest, it would probably be 1947, and the place would be Greece, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. A communist insurgency in Greece threatened the highly corrupt monarchical government there. The British had been providing economic and military support to both Greece and Turkey, but in early 1947 the UK government of Labor Party Prime Minister Clement Attlee informed the U.S. that it could not afford to continue this aid and requested that the Americans step-in to help the Greek regime

in its struggle to thwart the communist takeover. The Truman Administration's decision to provide such assistance was a momentous one, and the president's top aides knew it would be a hard sell to the new Republican-dominated Congress.

Fortunately, Truman found in Senate Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Arthur Vandenberg (R – MI) a reliable partner who shared his fear that a communist takeover in Greece could imperil American interests and lead to further communist victories in places like Turkey and Italy. What later came to be called the "domino theory" i.e., a communist victory in one country would inevitably lead to the fall of neighboring countries, originated at this time. On March 12, 1947 Truman went before a joint session of Congress and laid out what he saw as the threat and what he asserted should be the U.S. response in what became known as the "Truman Doctrine." :

I believe, he said, *it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.*

Congress did vote funds for this assistance, but the U.S. also sent a military advisory mission to Greece, and it wasn't until Yugoslavia's communist leader Marshal Tito ceased to provide a safe haven and military help to the Greek rebels that they were effectively defeated. It also was true that Stalin himself had no interest in helping the rebels, seeing Greece as essentially outside the Soviet sphere of influence. He also distrusted Tito, who headed a rival communist regime beyond Soviet control. (The lesson of "nationalist communists" beyond the control of the Kremlin was lost on Washington, however, and later in both Korea and Vietnam it was assumed that Moscow – and Beijing – were the main forces behind the communist aggression in those two countries.)

The Marshall Plan

Nineteen forty-seven was also the year the Marshall Plan was announced, although it was not given concrete form until Truman signed the European Recovery Act of April 1948. Congressional support for the Plan was shaky, and on the vote for the Recovery Act in the Senate, Republicans and a few Democrats either voted against it, or, in the case of the GOP's Robert Taft, abstained altogether.

The Act called for a five billion dollar appropriation over the five-year life of the plan, most of which, of course, would be spent in the United States to buy food, fuel, and capital goods to put the crippled economies of the continent's democracies back on their feet. Although the Administration held out the possibility of including countries under Soviet control in eastern Europe in the Plan, the Russians eventually rejected the aid, characterizing it as an American plan to bring Europe under American economic domination. Passage of the Act was greatly facilitated by the communist *coup d'etat* in Czechoslovakia of late February 1948 and the subsequent conversation of the country into a full-blown Soviet-style totalitarian state.

Marshall, Kennan, and the new CIA all agreed that the communist takeover in Prague had been foreshadowed already two years before. Stalin had hoped to swallow Czechoslovakia through the normal electoral process, but he abandoned this plan when it became apparent that the Czech communist party faced a crushing defeat in the planned May 1948 parliamentary elections. Whatever the back story to the coup might have been, however, the upshot in Washington was widespread alarm and a rush to rearm and build up our forces in Europe. Truman proposed and Congress passed a law calling for all men between the ages of 18 and 25 to register for the draft. The State Department and the Pentagon moved toward preparing a proposal for a U.S.-Western European military alliance. What was to become the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) brought together military planners from six countries in Europe, plus Canada and the U.S. The Brussels Treaty establishing NATO was signed on March 17, 1948 was ratified by the Senate on April 4, 1949 by a vote of 82 to 13. Again Taft and the most conservative Republicans and Democrats opposed the treaty, seeing it as the entering wedge of an inexorably deepening American involvement in the troubles of Europe. But most Republicans and Democrats supported the Treaty, seeing it as a way to prevent the resurgence of strife on the continent and as a guarantee that the Red Army would not try to push into western Germany.

Interestingly, Taft sounded much like George Kennan when, in his Senate speech on the ratification he warned that the creation of NATO would "give the Russians the impression, justified at least to themselves, that we are ringing them about with armies for the purpose of taking aggressive action when the time comes." Kennan, as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, objected to extending the "North Atlantic" to Greece and Turkey, and noted that the pact's language on defending democracy made little sense if dictatorship's like those in Portugal and Turkey were included under this heading. One wonders what Kennan would have

said about the growth of NATO to include Finland, Sweden, and the Baltic Republics and the other "post-communist states of eastern Europe.

The Soviets responded to American, French and British plans to set up a separate West German state in June 1948 with a blockade of the access roads and railways linking Berlin with western Germany. The immediate reason given by the Soviets for this move was a decision by the western allies to create a new German currency to be used in their sectors of the country and in the city of Berlin. The Soviets viewed this as a pressure tactic to push for a resolution of the future of Germany, which the Russians were postponing, hoping any reunited Germany would be under a communist-dominated regime. The Americans and the British resorted to supplying the people of West Berlin with the necessities of life by airlift, running the risk that the Soviets might shoot down their cargo planes. The blockade continued through the winter of 1948-49 as did the airlift. Truman's determination to "call the Russian's bluff" finally succeeded May 1949, when Stalin lifted the blockade and called for a resumption of the Council of Foreign Ministers to deal with the issues raised by the imminent division of Germany into two states: a democratic "Federal Republic" to the west, and a "People's Republic" to the east.

The creation of what came to be known as the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) with its capital at Bonn on the Rhine River allowed the U.S., Britain and France to work with a cooperative German government on the implementation of the economic reconstruction of Germany's industrial regions that would constitute the central feature of Europe's post-war economy. Hopes for reunification of Germany in some form had perished as the Cold War intensified and it became apparent that the Soviets had no intention of reconstructing a country that had attacked them twice in the previous fifty years.

One of the reasons that 1947 is often cited as the first year of the Cold War is the decision on the part of the Congress and the Truman Administration to create a far more robust American defense and intelligence establishment. Truman signed the National Security Act on July 26, 1947, which created the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. The Defense Department came about through the merger of the old War Department and the Navy Department, essentially the army and navy, and the creation of a separate Air Force Department, which previously had been part of the War Department. At the top Truman appointed James Forrestal, a Wall Street banker and World War II administrator, to head the new department as the nation's first Secretary of Defense. The CIA's mission was to pull together information from open and covert sources that would help the nation's top decision-makers arrive at informed

choices based on a sound knowledge of the world's varied trouble spots. Only gradually did it gravitate toward "covert operations," especially during the Eisenhower Administration, when it was headed by Alan Dulles, the brother of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. The National Security Council brought together the nation's top foreign and defense policy officials supported by a small White House staff that was supposed to pull together input from Defense, State, CIA, and other relevant government departments, and prepare decisions for the President's signature.

These orderly processes might have come into being in some form even without the Cold War threat, given that the United States now stood alone as the sole "superpower" in the world and seemed to be called upon to take actions everywhere to protect its interests and to counter rival power centers.

American foreign policy under Truman had initially sought to enhance the role of the United Nations and to create a climate of multilateral cooperation between the developed, European world and the developing nations of the Southern Hemisphere. With the coming of the Cold War, however, any thoughts of peaceful cooperation with the Soviets and their emerging communist and leftist allies around the world, soon became idle. The decolonization process accelerated rapidly after World War II and the nationalism of the new states combined with the weakness of their former European masters opened the road to endless strife that eventually merged into the Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the USSR. Southeast Asia, where the French sought to reassert their colonial power after the war became one area of conflict, and the Middle East, where the birth of an independent Jewish state with American backing aroused a war between Arabs and Jews in 1948, became another area where the U.S. found itself faced with painful decisions. Secretary of State Marshall firmly opposed U.S. recognition of the state of Israel, for instance, fearing it would alienate the Arab world and endanger U.S. economic and political interests. Truman insisted on recognition, however, and his decision to back Israel's creation set the U.S. on a course that has not altered since.

Truman originally hoped and believed the U.S. role after World War II would be to provide the ruined nations of Europe with economic and technical assistance that would enable them to build prosperous economies and thereby stave off any threat of domestic communist subversion. He thought this same sort of aid would help the newly independent nations of Africa and Asia to develop functioning modern economies that would underpin democratic governments. Much of the emergency relief financed by the Marshall Plan was carried out by American voluntary agencies, with CARE being the most prominent, and the "CARE package" a

frequent symbol of American generosity and strength. In his January 20, 1949 inaugural address, Truman proposed an ambitious program of economic and technical assistance for countries in the developing world, the so-called "Point Four" program, since it with the fourth point in his speech. Although couched in humanitarian language, the aim of the program was (again) to prevent these nations from becoming easy targets for communist takeovers. These aid programs continued during the Eisenhower Administration and were institutionalized with the creation of AID (Agency for International Development) in the Kennedy Administration. Would these economic assistance and humanitarian aid programs have come into being without the communist threat?: Probably in some form, but on a smaller scale and without so much government involvement.

George Kennan had hoped that Western containment of the USSR would be possible by bolstering the economic conditions of nations like Greece, that seemed to be susceptible to communist takeovers due to domestic tensions, but his successor as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, Paul Nitze, saw military deterrence, both nuclear and conventional, as the only way to successfully counter the Soviet threat. Nitze's thinking, widely shared at the Pentagon and by Secretary of State Dean Acheson (after January 1949) was embodied in a National Security Council paper known as NSC-68. By the time this document came before the NSC in early 1950, the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb (August 29, 1949) and the Czech coup and Berlin blockade had clearly demonstrated Stalin's intention to use force and threats of force to gain advantage in his rivalry with the West. In addition, communist forces had taken control of China by October 1949, an event that had been long expected but caused a major shock to American public opinion. NSC-68 called for a massive build-up of the U.S. armed forces, both conventional and nuclear. The world view taken in this paper prevailed in the Truman Administration over objections from Defense Secretary Louis Johnson (on economy grounds) and George Kennan (disagreed about Stalin's intentions) and, with the coming of the Korean War in June 1950, led to a near tripling of the defense budget between 1950 and 1953 (from 5 to 14.2 percent of the country's GDP).

The Eisenhower Administration sought to limit the growth in defense spending by adopting a policy of "massive retaliation" (i.e., threatening nuclear war if the Soviets or Chinese endangered our vital interests), but it soon became apparent that reliance on the threat of nuclear annihilation was no substitute for a large and expensive military establishment.

In conclusion, we can accurately state that the American national security state came into being in these years with largely bipartisan support and general agreement on its broad outlines from most of the American public. Would it have taken the shape it did had there been someone else in the White House; perhaps, but historians have generally credited Truman with establishing the main lines of American foreign policy of the post-war years by the decisions he made between 1945 and 1952.

In the next lecture, we will look at how the Cold War against communism played-out in the United States itself.