
THE

JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE SERIES




HARRY S. TRUMAN,
THE BOMB, AND THE
TRANSFORMATION OF
U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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ABOUT THE JOHN O'SULLIVAN MEMORIAL LECTURE

In the spring of 2004, a group of senior citizen students at Florida Atlantic University paid tribute to John O'Sullivan, a beloved professor of history who died in 2000, by establishing a Memorial Fund to support an annual lecture in his honor.

In keeping with John's commitment to teaching, research, and community outreach, the mission of the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lectureship is to broaden and deepen public understanding of modern U.S. history. The Memorial Fund — which is administered by the Department of History — sponsors public lectures and classroom seminars by some of the most distinguished scholars and gifted teachers of American history. The lectures typically focus on topics relevant to Professor O'Sullivan's specialties in 20th Century U.S. history, including: World War II, the Vietnam War, the nuclear age, the Holocaust, peace history, political and diplomatic affairs, and other topics.

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UNCERTAIN LEGACY

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON of April 12, 1945 Franklin Roosevelt rested in his cottage in Warm Springs, Georgia, in the comforting presence of his old love Lucy Mercer Rutherford. Suddenly he looked up and said simply: "I have a terrific headache." He slumped forward, quickly lost consciousness and died soon after. The tragic news spread quickly and set off a wave of mourning throughout the country. The great leader of the democratic cause had died on the very eve of military triumph and rightly won for himself a treasured place in the hearts of his people. Winston Churchill described FDR's as "an enviable death" for he had "brought his country through the worst of its perils and the heaviest of its toils." He led his country successfully in war and he died precisely at the right time, as the historian Patrick Maney has noted, to preserve his reputation. But he left an enormously complex, ambiguous, and challenging inheritance to his successor, Harry S. Truman.

My lecture today is largely devoted to exploring the development of Truman's foreign policy and the significance of it. To appreciate it well we must have some grasp of what he inherited from FDR. Assuredly, Truman's road ahead was not clearly charted when he took office in April of 1945.

Franklin Roosevelt rather nebulously planned for a postwar world in which continued collaboration between the wartime 'Big Four' of the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain and China would assure an era of peace and a prosperity powered by free trade among nations. In his visionary scenario Europe and

especially Germany and France would be greatly reduced in significance in world affairs. FDR expected the U.S. to be engaged in the world but he couldn't foresee any extensive and permanent American military or political commitments far beyond the western hemisphere and certainly not in Europe. He thought that Britain and the Soviet Union could oversee European developments.

In light of his according the Soviet Union such a consequential postwar role, the American leader worked during the war to build a cooperative relationship with his Soviet opposite, Josef Stalin. Rather naively, I think we can say in retrospect, he relied on his hunches and intuitions and held the hope that he could civilize or domesticate the Soviet 'beast' and establish a personal connection with Stalin. Operating on this sad delusion Roosevelt fashioned a strategy towards the Soviets based on personal connections and on significant concessions aimed at reassuring them so as to gain their cooperation.

Rather than pursuing a hardheaded political-military strategy that many of his knowledgeable advisers, such as Ambassador Averell Harriman, recommended-- especially in the aftermath of the Warsaw Uprising tragedy of 1944 -- Roosevelt pursued collaboration with Stalin to the end. Filled with idealistic hopes for the success of a new international body, Roosevelt made concessions to Stalin at Yalta to secure Soviet participation in it. He believed that the United Nations would serve as a vehicle to prevent American disengagement from world affairs after the war. He feared a return of prewar isolationism so he vested the UN with notable importance. But doing so led him to perpetuate an unrealistic and adolescent idealism among the American people on postwar possibilities while at the same time he turned a blind eye to the Soviet establishment of their control over much of Eastern Europe. Better not to confront the real issues that divided the wartime allies. Better to build the UN on foundations of shifting sand rather than honestly face the fundamentally different worldviews and interests of the major powers that inevitably dominated postwar international politics. Franklin Roosevelt, that great conjurer and juggler, left to his successor rather inflated expectations and unrealistic hopes for postwar peace that then influenced and restricted the Truman administration's policymaking for almost two years.

Now, of course Franklin Roosevelt deserves great credit for bringing the American ship of state through to the edge of victory in the greatest of world conflicts. He did so in a manner that left the United States economically and militarily the most powerful nation in the world. This is, as historians Warren Kimball and Gaddis Smith have noted, legitimate reason to pay tribute to his accomplishment. But with the exception of his international economic planning he had not effectively shaped realistic policies to guide his nation in the postwar era. The war had "irrevocably destroyed the [prewar] international system" leaving some fundamental questions: "What was to take its place? How was the readmission of the defeated powers to the society of nations to be regulated? How was new aggression to be contained? How was peace to be assured in an ideologically torn world?" And, what should be the role of the United States in fashioning viable responses to these challenges? Ultimately, Franklin Roosevelt was not called to answer such questions. The task fell to Harry S. Truman.

THE TRUMAN FOREIGN POLICY

Under Truman's leadership the foreign policy of the United States underwent a major transformation. From limited engagement and even, I would argue, irresponsible restraint in the affairs of the world beyond the western hemisphere during the nineteen-thirties, the United States assumed sweeping international obligations during the years of Truman's presidency. Roosevelt and Truman together combined to destroy American isolationism, with a major assist from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor! But under Truman's leadership the United States moved to a level of world engagement and assumed international commitments far beyond anything that Roosevelt had conceived. I will illustrate this point today largely by focusing on American policy towards Europe, but I trust this will suffice to make my case.

Motivated in large part by a desire to preserve the security of the non-communist world from Soviet expansionism, the United States worked to secure the political and economic recovery of the European democracies devastated by a brutal war, and it joined them in forging a military alliance committed to the defense of Western Europe. Furthermore, the U.S. restored and incorporated into a peacetime

alliance structure its defeated foes, Germany and Japan. Franklin Roosevelt would have been staggered to find American troops committed to a military alliance in Europe and American planes supplying the blockaded sections of Berlin—Hitler’s capital, no less--within four years of the end of World War II. This didn’t match the postwar world he had conceived and for which he planned.

But, it must be appreciated, that Harry Truman never self-consciously decided to transform the foreign policy content and approach that he inherited from FDR. Instead, external circumstances drove the creation of the Truman administration’s foreign policy. These circumstances, which I shall explore at further length, undermined the validity of the plans and assumptions FDR had developed.

And, it must be appreciated that the Truman administration moved rather slowly and in a halting manner away from the Roosevelt’s guiding assumptions on cooperation with the Soviet Union and on the importance of the U.N. There was NO sudden reversal of policies. When Truman came to office he had neither the interest nor the desire to alter Roosevelt’s policies. He sincerely wanted to implement the plans of his revered predecessor and to assure continuity in policy. His basic foreign policy assumptions placed him in the intellectual lineage of FDR. His recognition of the shameful and disastrous consequences of appeasement diplomacy and neutrality in the 1930s led him to fear any return to American isolationism. Like FDR, he wanted the U.S. to engage the world, but in a limited way. Similarly, he held great faith in the benefits of the new international organization which Roosevelt sponsored and which he had vigorously supported and promoted as a senator. He certainly hoped to continue cooperative relations with the wartime allies in securing final victory over Hitler and the Japanese militarists and in building a peaceful postwar world.

The modest tensions evident in Truman’s early dealings with Soviet foreign minister Molotov in late April of 1945 should be understood as part of his effort to secure the implementation of agreements which Roosevelt had negotiated at Yalta and thus to facilitate a successful meeting in San Francisco to form the United Nations. The dramatic character and political significance of the often-noted

Truman-Molotov clash of April 23 where Molotov supposedly heard “Missouri mule-driver’s language” has been vastly exaggerated. [This is the meeting where Molotov supposedly said: “I’ve never been spoken to like that before” to which Truman claimed he replied: “Carry out your agreements and you won’t be spoken to like that again.” I think that exchange was a later Truman embellishment.]

Whatever the case may be, the encounter was a mere tactic used in an unsuccessful effort to make progress on the issue of gaining some kind of representative Polish government. This issue threatened to disrupt the all-important San Francisco negotiations to establish the UN. Those who focus on this episode miss the forest while fixating on a single tree.

The broad sweep of American policy from April 1945 to the Potsdam conference in July of 1945 consisted of a genuine effort to maintain cooperative relations with the Soviet Union. Guided by a former ambassador to Moscow and renowned Soviet sympathizer Joseph Davies, Truman aimed to be even-handed in his dealings with Churchill’s Britain and Stalin’s Russia and to avoid any hint of Anglo-American collusion against the Soviet Union. Truman’s dispatch of FDR’s closest associate, Harry Hopkins, to Moscow in May of 1945 and his significant concessions on Poland and on withdrawing American troops back out of the assigned Soviet zone in Germany testify to his continuity with Franklin Roosevelt. Just like FDR Truman proved overly concerned about the establishment of the United Nations and in like manner to the man he succeeded he squandered negotiating power with the Soviet Union to secure their participation in it. Regrettably, naiveté with regard to Stalin and his intentions hardly ended with Roosevelt’s death. The alteration of FDR’s conciliatory approach came after only further attempts at cooperation.

Truman’s appointment of James F. Byrnes as secretary of state in July 1945 brought a somewhat different approach to the Truman administration. Byrnes was an experienced domestic politician who had served as the Democratic majority leader in the Senate in the 1930s and a man who had hoped to be FDR’s running mate in 1944. His biographer (David Robertson) rightly titled his book-*Sly and Able*. Byrnes, with Truman’s backing, favored the traditional diplomatic tactic of negotiation. He held none of Roosevelt’s illusions regarding his abilities to gain

Stalin's trust. Nonetheless, he still wanted to maintain decent relations with the Soviet Union by reaching practical settlements of the issues they faced. In light of this Byrnes largely recognized the division of Europe implicitly foreshadowed at the Yalta Conference and secured through Soviet military domination of Eastern Europe. He pursued more of a *quid pro quo* approach and accepted a spheres of influence peace hoping that this might secure a workable and stable postwar settlement. The Americans hoped for a 'soft' Soviet sphere—what we would later think of as a 'Finlandized' Eastern Europe.

This was essentially the approach that Byrnes and Truman pursued at the Potsdam Conference in July of 1945. At this conference it also should be noted Truman received confirmation from Stalin that he would enter the war against the Japanese. And it was while at this conference that Truman learned of the successful explosion of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico on July 16th, 1945.

The relationship of the atomic bomb to American diplomacy towards the Soviets and in the postwar world has been a matter of great contention among historians. It is clearly a very emotionally charged subject. I want to address some aspects of the matter here as they concern Truman and his broad foreign policy making intentions.

TRUMAN AND THE A-BOMBS

It is sometimes difficult for critics of the use of the atomic bombs to accept, but Truman raised no serious concerns regarding whether the atomic bomb was a legitimate weapon of war. Nor did he raise any questions about the plans to use atomic bombs against the Japanese. On the atomic bomb matter he acted as a sort of "chairman of the board" who validated and confirmed recommendations that came up to him from subordinates. He had stepped into FDR's shoes and also into his assumptions that the weapon should be used to secure victory in the war.

Furthermore, his approval of the use of the atomic bomb reflected the Rooseveltian preference to "achieve complete victory at the lowest cost in American lives." The A-bomb proved yet another arrow in the impressive quiver of America's "industrial might and technological prowess" which allowed U.S. casualties to be kept so light

relative to the losses of other major participants in the war. Samuel Walker correctly noted that “Truman inherited from Roosevelt the strategy of keeping American losses to a minimum, and he was committed to carrying it out for the remainder of the war.” I suspect it is the strategy that any American president would have pursued. Ask yourself what you would have done if you walked in Truman’s shoes.

Notably, no action of the Japanese government or military encouraged Truman to consider any change in strategy. Quite the opposite! Having broken the Japanese codes the Americans knew of the tentative, back-channel efforts of certain civilian officials in Tokyo to enlist the Soviet Union in negotiating some kind of peace settlement that would not require either surrender or any occupation of the home islands. But such terms were completely unacceptable to the allies. The American-led alliance intended “unrestricted occupation of Japanese territory, total authority in the governing of Japan, dismantlement of Japan’s military and military-industrial complex (“demobilization”), a restructuring of Japanese society (“demilitarization”), and Allied-run war crimes trials.” Japan would need to concede fully as had Germany. No indication of such a surrender occurred, of course, because the influential Japanese decision-makers could not countenance it.

So, the Americans waited in vain for the Japanese to respond to their Potsdam Declaration’s call for immediate and unconditional surrender. Japan’s Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro publicly dismissed the Potsdam terms on July 28 and on July 30. Privately, when referring to the terms, he confided to a senior cabinet official that “for the enemy to say something like that means circumstances have arisen that force them also to end the war. That is why they are talking about unconditional surrender. Precisely at a time like this, if we hold firm, then they will yield before we do.” He did not “think there is any need to stop [the war.]”

In the post-Potsdam period the Tokyo government held back from any official contact with the Allies through the formal channels provided by the Swiss government. Despite the thunderous bombing campaign of General Curtis LeMay’s B-29s from March to August 1945 that had left no sizable city untouched, the Japanese planned to continue their war effort. Indeed, members of the Japanese military appeared to relish the opportunity to punish American invaders who dared

intrude on their home islands. Late in July American intelligence utilizing the Ultra code-breaking system determined that the Japanese troop levels in Kyushu dedicated to repelling any invasion had now reached six divisions and more soldiers were arriving. General MacArthur's intelligence chief, Major General Charles Willoughby, even expressed the fear that Japanese forces could "grow to [the] point where we attack on a ratio of one (1) to one (1)," which, he helpfully added for even the most obtuse of his readers, "is not the recipe for victory." The prospects for the invasion, code-named Olympic, now appeared decidedly problematic and the likelihood of very heavy American casualties commensurately increased. In such circumstances none of the American military leaders either in the Pacific theater or in Washington cautioned Truman to reconsider his use of the atomic bomb. The on-the-ground reality of a Japanese military "girding for Armageddon" and convinced "that it could achieve success against an invasion," must be well appreciated by all who genuinely seek to understand why the atomic bombs were used. In short, Japan hardly stood on the verge of surrender.

Eager to force Japan's defeat before paying any invasion's high cost in American blood, Truman simply allowed the pre-determined policy to proceed. While numerous concerned commentators writing from a post-Hiroshima perspective have sought to supply all kinds of alternatives to the A-bomb for the American president's use, he operated in a pre-Hiroshima world. Truman and his associates like Byrnes and Secretary of War Henry Stimson didn't seek to avoid using the bomb and those who focus on "alternatives" distort history by overemphasizing them. As Barton Bernstein of Stanford University persuasively has clarified, the American leaders "easily rejected or never considered most of the so-called alternatives to the bomb." They saw no reason to do so because they viewed the atomic bomb as another weapon in the Allied arsenal along with such complements-not alternatives-as the naval blockade, continued conventional bombing, the threat of invasion and Soviet entry into the war. Together, they hoped, these might secure a Japanese surrender before American troops waded ashore on the southern plains of Kyushu. Forcing a Japanese surrender formed the prism through

which Truman viewed both the use of the atomic bombs and the Soviet Union's decision to enter the war.

Now it is clear that Secretary of State Byrnes hoped that America's possession of the atomic bomb might add some weight to his side in the diplomatic bargaining during the post-Potsdam period but—and this must be clearly understood—Truman authorized the actual use of the atomic bomb to defeat the Japanese and not as part of some anti-Soviet strategy. Fanciful notions of “atomic diplomacy” must be consigned to the historiographical dustbin. Most striking about America's sole possession of the atomic bomb is how little they sought to use it for diplomatic ends and purposes in the immediate postwar period.

TRANSITION & TRANSFORMATION

The period from the fall of 1945 until the late fall of 1946 constitutes a period of transition. Perceptions of the Soviet Union changed and concerns about its international behavior and ambitions deepened especially as regards Iran and Turkey that were subjected to Soviet pressures. And yet, while various general alarms were raised by the likes of Winston Churchill in his famous “Iron Curtain Address” in Fulton Missouri in March 1946, and by the diplomat George Kennan, in his so-called “Long Telegram” from Moscow in February of 1946, the American response remained rather episodic. No coherent response emerged and, much to the distress of the courageous British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and like-minded Europeans, the United States initially demonstrated **no** eagerness to step into the breach to balance and to counter Soviet influence on the continent.

But in the end Truman, initially guided by Byrnes and then by Secretaries of State George C. Marshall and Dean G. Acheson, broke free of FDR's ‘hunches’ regarding Stalin. These Americans were less enamored of their own intuition and more willing to draw conclusions from Soviet actions and intentions. They increasingly accepted that U.S. policy must resist Soviet demands and create barriers of sorts to their offensive operations. Byrnes applied the approach in Germany with his Stuttgart proposals for German economic rehabilitation and began to clarify that the U.S. would not abandon Europe. With the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall

Plan in 1947 the United States finally put to rest Rooseveltian notions that Europe's significance could be reduced and worked instead with a proper understanding of the old continent's true importance in the global balance of power. With those measures came the essential confirmation that the Truman administration had finally abandoned its hopes for cooperation with the Soviet Union and begun to contain Stalin's expansion. Policy shifted from reliance on Roosevelt's assumptions to the construction of the Truman paradigm that proved so valuable throughout the cold war.

A new conceptual worldview of America's international role surely was framed during Truman's tenure as president. When the Missourian consigned his office to Dwight D. Eisenhower on January 20, 1953, the United States stood unmistakably as a global power with global interests committed to playing a central and abiding role in international affairs.

Now, please appreciate that no well-developed, strategic analysis guided the process of transformation in its initial years. While a significant amount of strategic military planning took place within the defense establishment, the major elements of Truman's foreign policy up to 1950 did not emerge from a "process by which ends are related to means, intentions to capabilities, objectives to resources." American policy emerged in a much more haphazard manner. Of course, this is not to deny the influence on strategy of specific individuals. John Lewis Gaddis of Yale has emphasized rightly the importance of George Kennan's general notion of containment in clarifying for policymakers that their options need not be drawn from "bipolar extremes: war or peace, victory *or* defeat, neither appeasement *nor* annihilation." But the Truman administration policymakers never read from one coherent script, nor did they march to the beat of a single drummer. They disagreed on matters of both policy formulation and implementation and worked their way towards a coherent approach.

Dean Acheson captured something of the mentality of the American policymakers when he recalled in his memoir that "only slowly did it dawn upon us that the whole world structure and order that we had inherited from the nineteenth century was gone and that the struggle to replace it would be directed from two

bitterly opposed and ideologically irreconcilable power centers.” Beginning in 1947 the Americans finally recognized with some clarity that the “hoped-for new order” of FDR’s and Cordell Hull’s soothing, wartime assurances was “an illusion.” The American recognition resulted in large part from the forced prompting of the great ‘balancing’ power of the nineteenth and early twentieth century’s -the exhausted Great Britain-which could no longer play its stabilizing role in international affairs.

The Britain of late 1946 and early 1947 possessed but a shadow of its former greatness. The British scholar David Reynolds has described it as being “in a desperate predicament.” Reynolds explained further that “the growing confrontation with Russia, at a time of limited US help, necessitated military and political commitments that the economy, struggling with a huge post-war balance of payments deficit, could not sustain.” Facing major difficulties on the domestic front as well as in both Palestine and India, the British cabinet decided in late February 1947 that it must reduce its financial and military commitments. It determined to hold to an earlier decision and to end British aid to Greece as of March 31. The British so advised the Americans and set off a flurry of activity to determine an American response to this new circumstance. Thus it was a British action, rather than any positive initiative of an American official, that forced the Truman administration to begin moving seriously beyond the confusion and contradictions that had at times characterized its policymaking during 1946.

In March 1947 the United States framed a program of limited military and economic assistance (\$400 million) to assist the Greeks and also the Turks, another action that would have surprised Franklin Roosevelt, who had resisted Churchill’s wartime efforts to draw the U.S. into commitments in the eastern Mediterranean and southeastern Europe. Primarily in order to pry funds from a parsimonious Congress Truman cast his appeal in grandly Universalist terms portraying the issue as a conflict between totalitarian repression and democratic freedom. Thus was born the Truman Doctrine with its promise “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.” Despite this exalted rhetoric the Truman administration, in reality, had no overall plan to respond to the

Soviet Union. The aid to Greece and Turkey constituted but a first and restrained element of such a response. Much else was yet to be formulated.

This point has not always been well understood by some historians who describe the Truman Doctrine as virtually a prescriptive tract for global containment. But neither the Truman Doctrine nor George Kennan's celebrated article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," which appeared in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs* and which called for "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies," represented a real prescription for policy. Neither outlined in any detail what the United States should do nor charted any explicit course of action. It must be emphasized and understood that only in a gradual manner did the Truman administration decide upon the major elements of the American response to the Soviet Union. This is made most clear by tracking the outlook of the new secretary of state.

By the time that Truman delivered his famous Truman Doctrine speech to Congress General Marshall already had left for a Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Moscow. There he still sought to make progress on the reparations issue and German issues more generally in negotiations that extended for almost a month. If anything, Marshall proved more willing to engage in genuine negotiations than his predecessor might have by this stage. The decision to extend aid to Greece and Turkey had not diverted him from an effort to settle issues with the Soviet Union. Guided by Byrnes's key aide, Ben Cohen, the department's counselor, and influenced by the advice of the American Military Governor in Germany, Lucius Clay, Marshall offered real concessions on reparations in return for Soviet cooperation on treating Germany as one economic unit. He made no progress whatsoever. The obstinacy of Stalin and Molotov troubled Marshall and he drew key conclusions from the failure of the Moscow meeting regarding both Soviet intentions and the requisite American response.

From his first-hand experience the new secretary of state perceived that the Soviet Union was not content to consolidate its East European empire but hoped to take advantage of the social dislocation and economic desperation of Western Europe. "At the conclusion of the Moscow Conference," Marshall recalled, "it was

my feeling that the Soviets were doing everything possible to achieve a complete breakdown in Europe.” As he astutely saw it, “the major problem was to counter this negative Soviet policy and to restore the European economy.” Marshall began this effort on his return to Washington and under his guidance the state department seized the initiative and engaged in a remarkably creative period of foreign policy development. Truman, in sharp contrast to FDR, proved only too willing to let Marshall’s state department make the running, and it rather than the White House emerged as the principal source of policy.

The core group of state department policymakers shared Marshall’s fear that Western Europe’s deep economic problems, when combined with its political weakness and its psychological exhaustion, not only would redound to the benefit of local communists—especially in France and Italy—but also leave it vulnerable to exploitation and intimidation by the Soviet Union. Such fears, along with a genuine humanitarian concern for the European populace, drove the United States to generate a program for European economic recovery. Developed in conjunction with the Europeans led by Ernest Bevin, this program, known as the Marshall Plan, eventually provided \$13 billion in economic assistance to aid in the reconstruction and rejuvenation of Western Europe. Furthermore, it prodded the Europeans towards greater economic cooperation and integration, and it concretely revealed the American commitment to this area that now was deemed vital to American interests and national security.

The Marshall Plan was the decisive step in establishing a political balance in postwar Europe. Fortunately, and at last, the Truman administration conclusively determined that Europe mattered and that its significance in world affairs could not be easily diminished in the manner which FDR had wished. The aid program confirmed the long-term American commitment to the continent and it stymied the Soviet strategic objective of a weak and fragmented Europe. It also provoked a more intense response from Stalin, who presumably considered a politically and economically healthy Western Europe a threat to his ambitions and security. In September of 1947 the Soviets and eight other European communist parties, including the large French and Italian parties, established the Cominform—an

organization devised by Moscow to control local communist parties—and embarked on a campaign of political warfare. Furthermore, Stalin now discarded any pretense of political tolerance in Eastern Europe. Bevin, Marshall and their colleagues had risen to meet his ‘cautious and deceptive’ efforts to advance ‘socialism’ through the so-called national front strategy. So blocked, Stalin ordered the establishment of one-party, totalitarian regimes throughout the region where the Red Army held sway, utilizing the savage techniques of arrests, persecution, purges and liquidations. Surprisingly, a rather peculiar view still exists that the Marshall Plan aimed primarily to challenge the Soviet Union and to contest its hold of *eastern* Europe, thus forcing Stalin’s heavy-handed response and bringing on the division of Europe. The naiveté of this stance and the benign portrayal it offers of Stalin and his supposed desire for continued cooperation with the West is hard to match yet very easy to dismiss.

The toppling of the Czech president Eduard Benes by the communist Klement Gottwald in February 1948 gave a stunning confirmation of Stalin’s intentions and deepened the fears of West Europeans who viewed it as a precedent that might be followed in cases like Italy. The Prague Coup and the tragic communization of all of Eastern Europe, however, drew forth a courageous response from the West Europeans. Again the indomitable Bevin [You might detect that I am rather fond of him!] took the initiative and under his guidance the British signed a multilateral defense pact with the French and the Benelux countries—the Treaty of Brussels—in March of 1948. This created the Western Union and indicated a West European collaboration to guard against any future German aggression as well as a refusal to succumb to Soviet intimidation. But Bevin recognized from the outset that he would need to draw the United States into a defensive alliance for it to be truly viable and he worked towards this end throughout 1948. His endeavors would reach fruition in 1949.

During 1948 the evolving contest between the Soviet Union and the western powers in Europe culminated in a struggle over Germany. The failure of the four-power negotiations at the Moscow CFM in 1947 induced a major redirection in western policy. Impelled by a desire to develop the western portion of Germany as a contributor to European economic recovery as well as by a need to lower their own

occupation costs, the United States and Britain persuaded the French to join them in agreements, known as the London Program, which proposed the creation of a West German government and state. The Soviet Union vehemently opposed this program and aimed to prevent its implementation. To block the London Program's initial step—the introduction of a separate currency for West Germany—and in an attempt to force the western powers to accept a German settlement more to their liking, the Soviets instituted a blockade of the western sectors of Berlin that lay wholly within their zone of occupation. The Americans and the British responded imaginatively to this restriction on surface traffic into Berlin with a dramatic airlift of supplies to the besieged city which they maintained until the Soviets lifted the blockade in May of 1949. Stalin's risky gambit, intended to inflict a political defeat on the western powers and to disrupt their plans for West European economic cooperation, failed disastrously. Ironically the Soviet maneuver revealed the limits of Stalin's statecraft for it drew forth an even stronger American commitment to Western Europe.

The pressure of events like the Prague coup and the Berlin blockade, along with the requests of the British, prompted the Truman administration to consider participation in a mutual defense treaty with Western Europe. Secret negotiations in 1948 devised the basic framework of a treaty but the American government marked time while waiting the result of the 1948 presidential election and the expected change to a Republican administration. When Truman, as always a tough and resilient political campaigner, surprisingly retained office he appointed Dean Acheson to succeed General Marshall and the new secretary of state energetically proceeded with negotiations to conclude an Atlantic security pact. The North Atlantic Treaty was signed in Washington, D.C. on April 4, 1949 by the United States, Canada and ten European countries. Article 5 of the treaty lay at its heart and provided that “an armed attack against one or more [of the signatories] shall be considered an armed attack against them all.” The U.S. Senate ratified the treaty with strong bipartisan support and it formed a cornerstone of postwar American foreign policy. Ultimately, fears of Soviet exploitation of Western Europe's weakness drove the United States under Harry Truman to reverse its long practice of refusing to participate in peacetime alliances outside the western hemisphere. A certain ironic

quality attaches to the fact that this compelling expansion of American international commitments took place on the White House watch of a one-time Missouri farmer when his cosmopolitan predecessor never contemplated it.

Of course at its outset the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), formed to give substance to the treaty guarantee, possessed little in the way of military force. Until 1950 it meant little more than a political commitment of support backed by a vague threat of nuclear retaliation. After 1950 some conventional military muscle was added to the skeletal NATO structure. Nonetheless, it served as a caution and a deterrent to the Soviets and its most crucial immediate benefit lay in the reassurance it provided the citizens of Western Europe. In the end the principal benefit of NATO lay in its facilitation of European political stability and economic development. Behind the American defensive guarantee Western Europe subsequently enjoyed a remarkable period of both.

These great foreign policy achievements of the Truman administration emerged from this willingness to cooperate with the West Europeans. Truman and his policymakers moved beyond what Acheson termed the false “postulates” of wartime planning to fashion a new approach which brought the United States to the very heart of European affairs. Regardless of subsequent policy failures and missed opportunities, certain grandeur characterizes the extraordinary American effort framed during the Truman presidency. It endured for over forty years and provided the umbrella under which the West Europeans enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and experienced real security not only from the Soviet Union but also from the fratricide which colors so much of their past and which made ‘civilized’ Europe, in Tony Judt’s apt description, “the killing field of the 20th century.”

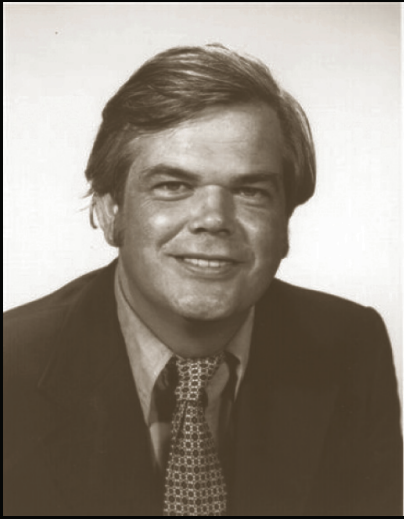
Friends, I am sure you would all want me to continue further and to explore further dimensions of Truman’s foreign policy -- especially his endeavors in East Asia and the impact of the Korean War on his decision making. But if I were to do that I would leave you with few reasons to buy my book which (as Ken mentioned) is on sale and which I would be delighted to sign for you.

Let me simply add that Truman’s presidency encompassed an enormously formative period in American diplomacy. Who would dispute Dean Acheson’s

finely understated observation that “the postwar years were a period of creation”?

Whatever the limitations and mistakes of Truman’s foreign policy they pale in comparison with its genuine accomplishments. On the essential matters Truman got it right. The American commitment to restore and secure Western Europe and to pursue stability in East Asia and to contest Soviet expansion laid impressive foundations for four decades of American foreign policy. Truman’s successors with various calibrations and changes in emphasis continued the broad political-military approach established by the Truman administration from 1947 onwards.

Despite an uncertain start during which the American policymakers worked their way beyond Rooseveltian assumptions, the Truman administration eventually grasped the essential world realities and assumed the demanding responsibilities of genuine international leadership. In circumstances of both uncertainty and even crisis it constructed a foreign policy whose main elements proved thoroughly apt and lasting. FDR established the foundations by developing American economic and military power, but it was his successor’s administration which built the enduring framework for postwar American foreign policy. You may not agree with my endorsement of the course that the Truman administration charted, but I trust you will acknowledge that it accomplished a lasting transformation of American foreign policy.



ABOUT JOHN O'SULLIVAN

John O'Sullivan was a gifted teacher and scholar who devoted his entire academic career to Florida Atlantic University. He came to FAU in 1971 after receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Since then he touched the lives of hundreds of FAU students with his brilliant and inspired teaching. An accomplished scholar, his publications included *The Draft and Its Enemies* (1974), *From Volunteerism to Conscription: Congress and the Selective Service, 1940-1945* (1982), *American Economic History* (1989), and *We Have Just Begun Not to Fight: An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service during World War II* (co-authored with Heather Frazer, 1996). Before his death in 2000, John was working on a book project related to Medal of Honor recipients and another book project with Patricia Kollander, also an FAU faculty member, on a World War II veteran. That book was published in 2005: *I Must Be a Part of This War: One Man's Fight against Hitler and Nazism*.

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