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Containment’s Architect: HARRY S TRUMAN

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President George McGovern? The peace-at-any-price senator lost 49 states in 1972, but his inspiration and forerunner Henry Wallace, vice-president during World War II and Franklin Roosevelt’s third term, nearly made it to the White House. A scant 11 weeks after Wallace turned over the vice-presidency to Harry Truman, President Roosevelt died. Had an ailing and distracted FDR not allowed the 1944 Democratic convention to replace Wallace with Truman, the Free World would have lost the Cold War before it started.

From 1945 to 1949 Wallace crusaded against NATO and military aid to non-democratic allies, and for world disarmament. In short, he fought the entire “containment” strategy put together by the Truman administration. When Truman crushed Wallace’s third-party drive against him in 1948, the peace-at-any-price tendency within Democratic liberalism was discredited for 20 years.

Thus, for domestic political leadership, as well as innovation in building the postwar institutions of the Free World, Harry S. Truman is a Cold War hero.

Isolationism’s Enemy

American conservatives had no affection for Truman at the time. They slammed him for “losing” Mainland China to Mao’s gangsters, for the “no-win” refusal to conquer North Korea, and for his press-conference defense of Alger Hiss. Truman’s Republican congressional opponents were one day superhawkish, the next day isolationist. Without his prodding, they never would have passed NATO or the Marshall Plan.

But, after Dwight Eisenhower defeated their leader, Ohio Senator Robert Taft, for the 1952 GOP nomination, anti-Soviet containment became bipartisan orthodoxy. All of Truman’s successors in the presidency except Jimmy Carter followed the containment strategy that Truman so skillfully developed.

Truman made nine important contributions to eventual Cold War victory:

- (1) Quickly defeating Japan (August 1945). FDR had given away Eastern Europe at Yalta to secure Soviet help in liberating Japan. That help turned out not to be needed, as Truman, by using the atomic bomb, defeated Japan without a bloody U.S. invasion or Soviet seizure of Hokkaido. Japan has since been one of America's most important Cold War allies.
- (2) Forcing the Soviets out of Iran (1946). Under a 1942 agreement with Iran, British, Soviet, and American troops came in to protect its oil from the Nazis — except that, when the war ended, the Soviets refused to leave. They tried instead to annex the border province of Azerbaijan. Two months of United Nations fireworks led, in March 1946, to a blunt private message from Truman to Stalin; Soviet forces left Iran that spring.
- (3) Updating the Monroe Doctrine (1947). The Organization of American States, created by the Rio Pact, which Truman helped negotiate, was passed 72 to 1 by the U.S. Senate.
- (4) Launching the Truman Doctrine (1947). As Soviet troops menaced Turkey, and the exhausted Brits abandoned a Greek monarchy beset by Red insurrection, Truman asked the Republican-controlled 80th Congress for \$400 million to help two undemocratic states. “Foreign aid” and “taking sides” were still vaguely un-American. Yet Senate opposition ultimately totaled only 7 Democrats and 16 Republicans; in the House, only 13 Democrats and 93 Republicans (mostly from the Midwest) voted no.
- (5) The Marshall Plan, Truman's massive aid program, reinforced European policies of tax-reduction, deregulation, and sound money; Truman's team also avoided a 1920s-style reparations merry-go-round. By 1949, all danger of famine was gone, Communist Party gains had been reversed in Italy and France, and West Germany had been secured for freedom.
- (6) The Berlin Airlift delivered, over 15 months, 1.8 million tons of food, coal, and medicine to besieged West Berliners. Joseph Stalin called off his blockade, and two million non-Communist Germans were kept free, once more without war.
- (7) NATO, during 1949, proved Truman's hardest sell yet. America's first mutual-defense pact outside this hemisphere since 1778 (when the colonies aligned with royalist France) outraged Senator Taft; he warned it “might become an incitement to war” and “make permanent the division of the world into two armed camps.” But only a dozen GOP senators joined Taft's “nay” vote.

(8) Saving South Korea (1950-53). Five-and-a-half months after Secretary of State Dean Acheson put South Korea outside the Free World's defense perimeter, the Communist North attacked. So began Truman's most unpopular Cold War campaign -- the only one that would not be achieved without war. Peace waited for successor Eisenhower to pass the word to Kim Il-Sung that tactical atomic weapons were a live American option.

(9) Institutionalization. Aply assisted by George Marshall, Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and others, Truman hammered out a Cold War infrastructure. After shrinking drastically during 1946-47, Pentagon spending tripled during 1950-52; the old OSS became the CIA, flanked by the DIA. Alliances were deepened: Greece and Turkey became part of NATO in 1951; ANZUS linked us with Australia and New Zealand the year after.

GOP Criticism

This massive legacy felt like chaos while it was being built. In 1946, Senator J. William Fulbright urged President Truman to resign. Nomination for a full term in 1948 would have been denied had the beloved "Ike" accepted overtures to run as a Democrat. Truman's approval rating gyrated much like biotech stock prices do now.

Desperation drove the "give 'em hell" upset of Thomas E. Dewey in 1948, in the only election where President Truman bested the GOP. Otherwise 1946, 1950, and 1952 were strong Republican years, with the party seizing both houses of Congress in 1946 and again in 1952.

Pearl Harbor had made Republicans internationalists "for the duration." With Hitler and Tojo gone, they hoped to demobilize the Army, deregulate America, and depart Europe. At the same time, GOP policy-makers had no Wallace/McGovern-style blindness toward the Soviet Union. They liked China's Chiang Kai-shek, and blasted Secretary of State Marshall for cutting aid and advocating coalition government with Mao Zedong.

The GOP's greatest criticism was the least defensible: Savaging Truman for sacking Douglas MacArthur as Korean Commander. (The mercurial, insubordinate "Mac" deserved it: in 1950, he had free tactical rein, assured Truman the Red Chinese army would not fight for North Korea, and came unglued when it did, calling for the bombing and blockade of China.)

But Truman had a few good Republican men, among them Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, effectively a GOP secretary of state while Taft dominated the

party's domestic policy. Vandenberg midwived the Truman Doctrine by advising this course on aid to Greece and Turkey: "Mr. President, if that's what you want, make a personal appearance before the Congress and scare hell out of the country." He did, and it worked. Vandenberg's death from cancer in 1951 was a sad day for Cold War bipartisanship.

Henry Wallace's Confession

One month after the Cuban missile crisis, at a reunion dinner in November 1962, Henry Wallace told Truman he was right about Korea, and about Russia too. Makes you wonder: Will McGovern, Carter, Mondale, or Dukakis ever admit that President Reagan was right about military strength, SDI, or Central America?

While we wait, and celebrate Communism's collapse, cast a kind thought backward to the resilient, creative Democratic president who received radio endorsements from a Hollywood actor. (The year was 1948, the actor Ronald Reagan.)

Harry Truman made the big decisions right, and thank God the buck ended up on his desk. If the honest but deluded Wallace had become president on April 12, 1945, we probably wouldn't be celebrating today.

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