



# Harry Truman and the Politics of a National Security Strategy

By Rudy deLeon and Aarthi Gunasekaran

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The diary entry penned by the occupant of the Oval Office was blunt: “It is hell to be President.”<sup>1</sup> Frustrations in the White House had mounted: A trouncing in the midterm elections; problems on the battlefield; disagreements with a top general; and dissatisfied domestic politics boiled over as the pressures of public opinion at home encountered the stalemate and turmoil among foreign adversaries. The president also had to consider domestic expectations to expand jobs, opportunities, and civil rights. While this may sound current and familiar, the diary’s author was actually President Harry Truman at the White House in December 1950.

The end of World War II produced no honeymoon for the new president from Missouri. The early notion that the postwar period would be dominated by four international policemen—the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—was soon shattered by financial distress in London, a revolution in the city the West then called Peking, and an iron curtain pitting the former allies of Washington and Moscow in a confrontation that would last almost a half century.

U.S. national security strategy abroad was challenged by an amalgam of conflicts: military engagements in Korea and Vietnam; diplomatic tensions regarding the race to space and nuclear arms negotiations; and the rise of nationalism in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. President Truman had to manage U.S. national security strategy alongside the demands of debate and the politics of American democracy.

Today, leaders in the White House and Congress find themselves facing a comparable situation. Key national security topics—tense negotiations with Iran; prickly relations with key allies; extremism in the Middle East; China’s ambitions and Russia’s provocations; along with rising global economic integration and a new nationalism—are reminiscent of President Truman’s tenure, when he tried to balance foreign policy, military responses, and domestic politics.

Each generation of leaders has to delicately balance the dynamic between the politics and policy of national security. Three episodes in American politics and national security from the Truman administration provide lessons for today: the Marshall Plan, the debate over Cold War containment policy, and the politics of the Korean War.

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## The Marshall Plan: Achievement abroad requires cooperation at home

In 1961, a young academic by the name of Henry Kissinger asked President Truman to name his greatest accomplishment. The former president responded by saying, “We totally defeated our enemies and then brought them back to the community of nations. I would like to think that only America would have done this.” This progressive approach to postwar engagement by uplifting the adversary from devastation—despite the struggles and resentment at home—would cement the United States as a leader committed to global economic and security stability.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge of rebuilding the war-ravaged Axis nations of Germany and Japan into viable democracies and peaceful allies would prove to be a difficult and complex process. When completed, however, it would rank as one of the great accomplishments of the 20th century. Drawing from the lessons of the failed 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which ultimately laid the foundation for WWII, President Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall recognized that an economic aid policy “directed against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos” was not just in the interest of Europe and the United States but also essential to long-term global economic health.<sup>3</sup>

At first, the U.S. Congress viewed the proposal aimed at rebuilding European economies and encouraging democracy with suspicion and sheer disbelief at the monetary commitment. It was the powerful Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Sen. Arthur Vandenberg, who crossed the aisle in order to support Secretary Marshall and President Truman’s policy direction. Sen. Vandenberg firmly stated that politics should end at the nation’s shore and reached across the political aisle to create a global role for America. As *Time* noted, Sen. Vandenberg “guided the Greek-Turkish and interim aid bills through Congress almost singlehandedly ... ward[ed] off sniping attacks from members of his own party and preserved the bipartisan foreign policy.”<sup>4</sup>

The United States’ effective use of its economic, industrial, and military tools to influence the behavior of other nations in the immediate aftermath of World War II should remind today’s policymakers that America’s foreign policy posture is not a swinging pendulum synced with global crises, but rather a strategic vision shaped by what experts believe is within U.S. capacity. Secretary Marshall’s vision and President Truman’s program was made possible by Sen. Vandenberg’s bipartisan leadership in securing congressional approval. Without such approval, Secretary Marshall could never have led the United States into its new world role.<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, the challenge du jour is a practical discussion of the proposed agreement to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapons program. The July interim agreement gives the United States and its partners the best attempt at curtailing Iran's nuclear program. This diplomatic effort, bolstered by an international coalition on sanctions, has put a significant strain on Iran's economy and the Iranian people, effectively bringing the Iranian government to the negotiating table.

However, the partisan echo chamber—filled with political pressures and polarizing rhetoric—has grown louder over the course of the summer recess in Washington. September will bring forward a crucial congressional vote on whether Congress will vote to uphold the U.N.-backed deal. Whether or not proponents and critics can work across the aisle to form a lasting policy on nuclear non-proliferation will determine the true fate of the Iran deal. It would be wise for today's policymakers—looking to President Truman and Sen. Vandenberg's example—to recognize the national security imperative before them and show true leadership by embarking on the best course to block Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions.

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### Containment policy and the rise of McCarthyism: Mistrust and fear mongering breed national security gridlock

Postwar harmony was short-lived during the Truman administration. In 1949, the Soviet Union would detonate its own atomic bomb, formally launching the Cold War arms race. This was accompanied by serious charges of espionage and the vulnerability of American secrets. Furthermore, the news from China that communist leader Mao Zedong had deposed the country's Nationalist government sparked a public debate on who lost China. These developments would see President Truman's popularity drop into the low 30th percentile, while a little-known senator from Wisconsin by the name of Joseph McCarthy saw his favorability rating begin to climb.<sup>6</sup> As the so-called Red Scare and fear stemming from the Cold War grew, American politics and national security policy entered one of its most turbulent periods. Loyalties and patriotism would be questioned; lives and careers were destroyed.

In 1946, the high-ranking U.S. State Department official George Kennan wrote his famous "Long Telegram," a lengthy cable message that outlined a U.S. strategy to contain the influence of the rival Soviet Union through both diplomatic and military alliance. The ensuing political debate regarding containment would last a generation, and amidst the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s, politics became the worst enemy of America's national security. The polarization, the distrust among colleagues, and the vigorous and emotion-driven debate on how best to preserve U.S. security would hamstring the United States' ability to put forth smart policy—particularly in terms of future policy for Asia, which contributed to miscalculation in Vietnam.

The digital age has exploded the traditional means of doing politics and has created a population with access to more information than ever before. However, it has also paved the way for a brand of selective news consumption at unprecedented levels. In 2015, the great national security challenges—how to balance delicate and nuanced debates on policy options on the Middle East, such as the resolution of the civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria, or how to maintain cooperative relationships with nations with whom the United States does not share similar ideals or values—are ripe for injections of fear and mistrust.

These matters also demand a clear-eyed and balanced debate. Looking to the Truman era, contemporary lawmakers should recognize that national security gridlock is inevitable when mistrust and fear play oppressive and outsized roles in political discourse. In the long term, this fear-driven paralysis will diminish America’s ability to respond with precision and effectiveness to emerging global crises where U.S. leadership remains essential. The challenge for today’s political leaders is to resist putting the polls ahead of the policy when the policy outcome is critical to American security and success.

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### The Korean War stalemate: Ending wars was politically difficult then and remains so today

When President Truman committed troops to Korea in response to communist aggression and attacks, he did so absent a congressional declaration, arguing that the deployment was like “the police responding to an emergency.”<sup>7</sup> Gen. Douglas MacArthur led a counter campaign at Inchon that halted the communist attack and achieved an impressive victory that boosted domestic confidence for the war effort. President Truman responded by endorsing Gen. MacArthur’s recommendation to cross the 38th parallel in an attempt to unite the Korean peninsula—an uncharacteristic departure from his preference for restrained military intervention. Had the Truman administration pursued limited objectives—much like President George H.W. Bush’s decision to end the 1991 Gulf War promptly after the Iraq forces were expelled from Kuwait—the terrible losses ahead might have been avoided.

As the war dragged on, however, and American soldiers and Marines heroically made their stand—enduring subfreezing temperatures and fierce fighting—the political climate shifted. Mothers of American servicemen wrote the president, begging, “[D]on’t let our boys be slaughtered.”<sup>8</sup> Stalemate on the battlefield and the pressures of politics at home created a demand for a new strategy. Gen. MacArthur proposed further escalation in an open letter to Congress, while President Truman proposed opening negotiations for an armistice. In the ultimate test of civilian-military relations, the president replaced his general.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, the move was politically disastrous for President Truman. Gen. MacArthur would come home to a hero’s welcome, his public opinion number surging into the 70th percentile, while the president’s would drop into the 20th percentile. Gradually,

however, President Truman's strategy was vindicated in the public eye. In an exceptional moment of Senate oversight, Sen. Richard Russell—a Democrat representing Georgia—chaired a series of hearings of the combined Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees on both the Korean War and Gen. MacArthur. The Senate hearings culminated with the Joint Chiefs of Staff presenting their military advice and sharing their opposition to Gen. MacArthur's plan to escalate the war.

The politics that surrounded President Truman's wartime leadership are quite similar to those of President Barack Obama's tenure. In 2015, U.S. policymakers are searching for a conclusion to two long wars. Yet, as the crises in Iraq and Syria—as well as the U.S. military actions in Afghanistan—continue, the region looks to the United States for leadership and sustained assistance, while the American public seeks a definitive resolution. Paradoxically, both the current administration and Congress face pressure to deliver on both objectives.

President Truman supporters' response to Gen. MacArthur was transparency with the public and the press. Together with the Joint Chiefs of Staff's testimony supporting the commander in chief, who sought a definitive resolution rather than escalation, these actions show how the president can refocus policy and objectives to reflect the realities of the battlefield. However, the reality remains that it is much easier to get into wars than it is to get out of them. While history has judged President Truman's decision to reject escalation as the right course, the politics of his era were turbulent and his popularity suffered greatly at the time.

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## Conclusion

The possibility of an accomplishment on the scale of the Marshall Plan is greatly limited by the deep political gridlock of contemporary Washington. Yet the sound, practical policy so essential to American leadership in international affairs will come only if today's generation of leaders acknowledges the destructive consequences that come when the White House and Congress are unable to find common ground.

That was the challenge of President Truman in his era. This is the challenge of President Obama and key congressional leaders today. These lessons offer a legacy, warning, and opportunity for modern leaders as they attempt to build trust and camaraderie to push forth bold and controversial ideas; manage the opportunities and limitations of new media; and pursue strategic objectives with humility and pragmatism.

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## Endnotes

- 1 David G. McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
- 2 Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).
- 3 The George C. Marshall Foundation, "The Marshall Plan Speech," available at <http://marshallfoundation.org/marshall/the-marshall-plan/marshall-plan-speech/> (last accessed September 2015).
- 4 *Time*, "Foreign Relations: The Year of Decision," January 5, 1948, available at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,794035,00.html>.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Gallup, "Presidential Approval Ratings – Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx> (last accessed September 2015); History.com, "Joseph R. McCarthy," available at <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/joseph-mccarthy> (last accessed September 2015).
- 7 James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.