

Truman's Dilemma

Harry Truman was thrust into a difficult situation. In his time as vice president, he had been virtually ignored by President Roosevelt. He was **inexperienced** in dealing with foreign leaders, and his personality was aggressive and abrasive rather than diplomatic. When Roosevelt died, Truman needed to make difficult policy decisions with only limited information. Plans for conducting the victory in World War II were already made, but it was up to Truman to guide America to peace.

Truman was faced by two questions: what role was America to take in the post-war world, and what were the intentions of Joseph Stalin. As dictator of the Soviet Union, Stalin held complete control of his country's future actions. Truman needed to decide if Stalin's intentions were friendly or if they were hostile. He needed to know if the Soviet Union presented a threat to America, or if the two countries could work together to promote peace. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman viewed Stalin as a very serious threat.

America found itself in a unique position after World War II. The war had left America's enemies in ruin and its ally, Great Britain, deeply in debt. The United States and the Soviet Union were the only two remaining powerful nations. Traditionally, America had not involved itself in world affairs. The American people did not desire to rule over an **empire**. They did not wish to fight in foreign wars. America had never had a large army during times of peace. Truman, however, felt that it was time for America to assume a leadership role. Only the United States had the strength to lead after the devastation of World War II.

Truman was strongly opposed to communism, and he took a stern stance against Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union from the beginning. He viewed Stalin's actions with a skeptical eye. "Peace has to be built on power," Truman stated. Truman pushed to retain America's large army after the war despite opposition in Congress and from the public. He wished to deal with Stalin from a position of strength. A key part of that strength was the **atomic** bomb. After the war, only America had the bomb, and during World War II Truman had proved that he was willing to use it.

The alliance with the Soviet Union disintegrated quickly, and in a short time the United States and the Soviet Union were openly hostile to each other. Fearful of communist expansion in Europe and throughout the world, Truman introduced what was known as the Truman Doctrine in 1947. This doctrine stated that the United States would provide aid to any country that was resisting communist aggression (attack). This plan developed into an official policy of containment. The United States wished to "contain" communism within the countries where communists already ruled.



Harry Truman

Truman also put forth other policies. In 1948 he introduced the Marshall Plan, which gave American aid to the countries of Western Europe. These countries had been devastated by the war. The goal of the Marshall Plan was to stimulate an economic recovery for Western Europe, making these countries strong enough to resist communism. The Marshall Plan was extremely successful. Within a few years, Western Europe experienced robust economic growth. In 1949 Truman formed a new alliance with Great Britain, France, and the other nations of Western Europe called NATO, and its primary purpose was to oppose the Soviet Union. (See map on page 83.) Soon these nations were also re-arming in response to the perceived Soviet threat.

President Truman guided the United States into a role of world leadership. The choices he made guaranteed that the United States would be the leader of the democratic nations. However, his assessment of Joseph Stalin also guaranteed that the United States and the Soviet Union would oppose each other. Truman believed that the Soviet Union presented a great threat to the United States, and he took the actions that he believed were necessary to protect the United States. Some historians believe that he overestimated the danger presented by the Soviets, but other historians praise him for his actions. Clearly, he set the United States on the path that led to forty years of confrontation with the Soviet Union.

1. How did Truman become the president of the United States?

2. How was Truman's relationship with Stalin different than Roosevelt's relationship with Stalin?

3. What two nations were the only two remaining "superpowers" after World War II?

4. Immediately after World War II, what was the only nation that possessed the atomic bomb?

5. Truman promised that the United States would help any nation resist communist aggression. What was the name of the doctrine that emerged from this guarantee?

6. What was the goal of the Marshall Plan?

7. Was the Marshall Plan successful?

8. What was NATO?
