
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE 1948 ELECTION

“Already the Truman mythmakers are at work, glorifying here, touching up there, and busily digging up signs of ‘early promise.’”

So complained journalists Robert S. Allen and William V. Shannon in **The Truman Merry-Go-Round** (Vanguard, 1950), published soon after the president’s triumph at the polls in 1948.

Emboldened by his victory, the authors said, Truman had broken through his “outer shell of submissiveness and timidity.” Yet, they insisted, the “new” Truman was still a mediocrity—an inept politician and an uninspiring leader.

As surprising as it may seem to Americans who now remember Truman as the jaunty, straight-talking man from Missouri, this harsh post-1948 assessment was widely shared at the time. Truman’s “approval” rating in the polls never exceeded 32 percent between 1950 and 1953, when he left office after deciding not to seek another term. (Truman later said that he had privately ruled out a re-election bid after his 1948 victory.)

It would be more than a decade later, as the nation endured the travails of Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, before journalists and academics began to see Truman as he had always hoped they would. Yet, the Truman literature remains uneven in quality and coverage.

Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman (Putnam’s, 1973), a best seller by journalist Merle Miller that appeared one year after the ex-president’s death, did much to revive Truman’s popular reputation.

When he was in the White House, Truman told Miller, “I just never got to thinking that I was anything *special*. It’s very easy to do that in Washington, and I’ve seen it happen to a lot of fellas.” Moreover, he assured the author, he had never abused his official privileges—even buying his own three-cent postage

stamps to mail his personal letters.

Truman’s dignified two-volume memoir, **Year of Decisions and Years of Trial and Hope** (Doubleday, 1955, 1956), reflects little of his personality and suffers (as does *Plain Speaking*) from his idiosyncratic memory. Truman claims credit, for example, for the strong civil rights plank that liberal Democrats forced into the 1948 party platform.

Why did Truman fail to win over the Congress and the American people after his electrifying victory in 1948?

He returned to the capital from Missouri by train on November 4, 1948, greeted by a cheering crowd numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Liberals were elated: The voters had also restored the Democrats to power in both houses of Congress.

“Convinced that their cause was right,” observes Alonzo L. Hamby in **Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism** (Columbia, 1973), “the progressives never perceived that the public might be indifferent to their program.” In fact, many voters favored the status quo; they had cast their ballots *against* the radical Washington “housecleaning” promised by Dewey’s Republicans.

One by one, during 1949 and afterward, Truman’s “Fair Deal” initiatives met stalemate or defeat on Capitol Hill. Attempts to repeal the “anti-union” Taft-Hartley Act failed; civil rights proposals were sidetracked; Truman’s national health insurance scheme never got off the ground.

In **The Truman Presidency** (forthcoming), a useful collection of papers presented at a Wilson Center conference and edited by Michael J. Lacey, historian Robert Griffith argues that the Fair Deal was snuffed out by a concerted lobbying effort mounted by Big Business, determined to shape a “new postwar order”

after nearly two decades of New Deal intervention in the economy.

As Earl Latham shows in **The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy** (Harvard, 1966), the capital was also increasingly distracted by a Red Scare. In 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, and China fell. In 1950, accused spy Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury; Senator Joseph McCarthy charged that the State Department was riddled with Communists; and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested for passing atomic secrets to Moscow.

Whatever prospects remained for the Fair Deal vanished on the afternoon of June 24, 1950, when 90,000 Soviet-backed North Koreans began a surprise invasion of South Korea.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson had implied only months earlier that the United States would *not* defend South Korea if the Communists attacked, notes Robert J. Donovan in his detailed chronicles of the Truman era, **Conflict and Crisis and Tumultuous Years** (Norton, 1977, 1982).

As demoralized South Korean troops fell back toward Pusan on the south coast, the president authorized the use of U.S. sea and air power to aid them. After the United Nations called for international help on June 27, Truman sent U.S. troops from Japan. By early August, some 47,000 G.I.'s were desperately defending the Pusan Perimeter.

Despite several years of Cold War tensions, the United States was ill-prepared. During the summer of 1950, reserve and National Guard units were hastily mobilized for active duty. Unlike Lyndon B. Johnson, who sent troops to Vietnam some 15 years later, Truman told his countrymen that they could not have both guns *and* butter. As Donald R. McCoy observes in **The Presidency of Harry S. Truman** (Univ. Press of

Kansas, 1984), he put the Fair Deal on hold and raised taxes.

Like LBJ, however, Truman never asked Congress to approve his U.S. troop commitment—the beginning, argues historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., of the post-World War II **Imperial Presidency** (Houghton, 1973).

In South Korea that September, even as Pusan remained under siege, General Douglas MacArthur ordered his famous “end run” amphibious assault on Inchon, landing 70,000 Marines and soldiers deep behind enemy lines, near the 38th Parallel that divided North and South Korea. The UN forces then recaptured Seoul and virtually destroyed Kim Il Sung’s People’s Army.

It was an “astonishing achievement,” observes David Rees in his classic account of **Korea: The Limited War** (St. Martin’s, 1964), but, in retrospect, an ambiguous one. The rout of the North Koreans encouraged Washington and the UN to allow an optimistic MacArthur to cross the 38th Parallel.

In late November, as the UN columns swept toward the Yalu River (Korea’s border with China), Beijing entered the war, throwing some 300,000 “volunteers” against the overextended UN forces. The battered U.S. Eighth Army fell back 275 miles, “the longest [retreat] in American military history,” according to Rees, while the surrounded First Marine Division desperately fought its way south to the sea in the heroic Chosin Reservoir campaign. Seoul was lost. Eventually, the UN forces regrouped and pushed the Communists back to the 38th Parallel, but the bloody war of attrition would devastate Korea and cost 32,629 American lives in battle before it ended in July 1953.

In the United States, the stunning setback, along with MacArthur’s increasingly public demands that Truman carry the war to China itself, shook Washington and touched off what historians call “the Great Debate.”

As Richard Rovere and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote in **The General and the President** (Farrar, 1951), the Republicans, who had backed Truman's original intervention in Korea, now attacked him. Senator Robert A. Taft and other neo-isolationists clamored for war with China, yet opposed a permanent U.S. military presence in Western Europe under the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Public discontent over Truman and his costly "limited war" became widespread. In April 1951, after Truman finally fired MacArthur for insubordination, the general enjoyed a hero's welcome when he addressed a joint session of Congress.

Frustrated by Korea and alarmed by the Red Menace at home, the country was in a sour mood during the 1952 presidential campaign. The G.O.P.'s Dwight D. Eisenhower ran as the "peace" candidate. At the same time, however, Ike promised to abandon Truman's "negative, futile and immoral" policy of containment, and to pursue the *liberation* of Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe—a notion that faded after Election Day.

As journalist Samuel Lubell reported in **The Revolt of The Moderates** (Harper, 1956), the Democratic campaign theme in 1952—"You Never Had It So Good"—backfired. Many Americans felt guilty about "blood money" reaped from the war boom.

On Election Day, the voters chose Ike by a landslide over Adlai E. Stevenson, and sent G.O.P. majorities to both houses of Congress. Twenty years of Democratic rule had ended.

"I suppose," Truman said in his farewell address in January 1953, "that history will remember my term in office as the years when the 'cold war' began to

overshadow our lives."

In fact, only six years later, historian William Appleman Williams fired the first shot in what was to become a periodic battle between "revisionist" and "post-revisionist" scholars: Who was to blame for the Cold War?

In **The Tragedy of American Diplomacy** (World, 1959), Williams blamed Truman's pursuit of a century-old U.S. policy of "imperial expansion." Stalin, he said, sought only postwar reconstruction of his country and security against foreign attack. In **The Limits of Power** (Harper, 1972), Joyce and Gabriel Kolko led the revival of such arguments, which enjoyed a vogue in academe during the Vietnam War.

But in **The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947** (Columbia, 1972), John Lewis Gaddis replied that while American officials exaggerated the Soviet threat, they did so only after efforts to placate Stalin had failed. And he pointed out that Americans could "bring themselves to accept a large peacetime military establishment" only after several shocks culminating in North Korea's surprise attack on its southern neighbor.

Truman's foreign policy legacy included military aid to U.S. allies (including the French in Indochina) and economic assistance to the Third World. He helped create the United Nations (1945), the World Bank (1945), the International Monetary Fund (1946), and NATO (1949). In so doing, writes Robert A. Pollard in **Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1950** (Columbia, 1985), the man from Missouri ensured Western security and fostered an open world economy that, for all its flaws, has "yielded unprecedented prosperity."