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# THE TRUMAN PRESIDENCY: TRIAL AND ERROR

By ATHAN THEOHARIS

**A**DMITTEDLY, a postwar President encounters war-related problems that distinguish his administration from that of a peacetime President. Harry S. Truman confronted decisions concerning the federal government's role in expediting reconversion from a planned, wartime economy to peacetime, decentralized production; the rate and desirability of demobilization; and the desirability of U.S. participation in an international collective security organization. He also confronted a Congress eager to reassert its former political authority; a conservative congressional coalition seeking to check or discredit reformist programs and principles; a public eager to secure release from governmental controls; and a heightened intolerance resulting from the passions of war-involvement.

Truman was a reformist President and, at the same time, his own postwar leadership and decisions contributed to his administration's political difficulties. It is my thesis that Truman was a distinct failure as a presidential leader. An activist, Truman nonetheless lacked the leadership qualities necessary for capturing popular support to ensure congressional enactment of reform measures. Although as

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President he sought to promote peace and ensure equal opportunity, although he perceived the President's proper role as an advocate for needed reforms, in actuality Truman's achievements were minimal. This failure as a national leader stemmed from the nature of Truman's rhetoric and decisions. His anti-communist political pronouncements helped to create an anti-reformist climate; his elitist conception of the Presidency and his alarmist and partisan statements served to undermine his long-term public credibility. Ultimately, this created a political vacuum which legitimated the essentially debunking criticisms of the administration's conservative opponents. In its domestic consequences, the Cold War stifled the innovation and imagination essential for a politics of reform.

**A**CCEDING to the Presidency on April 12, 1945, Harry S. Truman had to make far-reaching policy decisions concerning domestic and international affairs: whether to continue Roosevelt's New Deal policies at home and internationalist commitments abroad. In both realms, Truman would apparently win defensive battles over conservatives in Congress. He successfully stemmed their efforts to discredit the New Deal; at the same time he established internationalism and effectively undercut "isolationism." Yet, Truman's domestic reformism and internationalism were distinctly limited in scope. Significantly, his administration failed to confront, and in some cases exacerbated, contemporary problems in the

area of civil rights, urban housing, civil liberties, education, economic consolidation, and federal corruption.

Thus, although Truman expressed sympathy with his predecessor's reform approach, his reformist commitment was more political than philosophical. A pragmatist more than a theorist or planner, even Truman's coinage, in 1949, of the term "Fair Deal" represented less a distinctive approach than a rhetorical attempt to convey his personal stamp. Not that Truman proposed no new programs: civil rights, public housing, the Full Employment Act, the Brannan Plan, and medical care insurance do reflect his legislative efforts. None of these programs, however, represented a bold, new initiative; rather they were the legislative extension or espousal of measures that had not been central to Roosevelt's New Deal.

Similarly, Truman's major foreign policy measures were less internationalist than nationalistic. Admittedly, the Truman Administration extended the scope of the United States international commitments, with policies as varied as U.S. participation in the United Nations, the British loan, the Truman Doctrine, Point IV, NATO, and the undeclared war in Korea. The rationale for these policies fortified the popular conception of American omnipotence and contributed to the militarization of U.S. and international politics. Initially responsive to public pressure for immediate demobilization, Truman successfully sustained an overseas U.S. military presence and secured the enactment of peacetime conscription. In addition, Truman initiated a loyalty-security program intended to remove subversives from the administration and restrict possible Communist intelligence or subversive efforts.

**T**RUMAN'S CONCEPTION of the office of the Presidency and his relations with the Congress and the public served to alter the framework of American politics, thereby indirectly affecting the prospects for reform. An active, dynamic President, Truman's responses were essentially administrative rather than innovative. By consolidating the executive office, Truman made the White House an effective instrument for domestic and international change. Initially, this reorganization

tended to subvert those indirect criticisms raised by conservative opponents of New Deal reforms and international involvement that had centered on the waste, inefficiency, and incompetence of the Roosevelt bureaucracy. The establishment of the First Hoover Commission in 1947 to investigate administrative procedure did focus the subsequent national political debate on the validity of the New Deal approach, not on bureaucratic excesses. One by-product of this political action was to preserve the essence of New Deal principles—to ensure an efficient bureaucracy with responsibility for formulating and executing reform proposals.<sup>1</sup>

In another sense, the First Hoover Commission confirmed what became Truman's main organizational tactic of dealing with potential criticism or controversy: the appointment of a nonpartisan, expert commission. The resort to presidentially appointed expert commissions was not original to Truman. Nonetheless, he, more than his predecessors, relied on the presidential commission as a tactic for legitimating potentially controversial recommendations. At various times after 1946 he appointed special commissions to investigate the questions of civil rights, civil liberties, internal security, immigration, unification of the armed services, and peacetime conscription. Truman also appointed presidential commissions to advise him on strictly administrative matters involving atomic energy, national security, foreign intelligence, and aviation.<sup>2</sup>

The use of expert commissions pointedly reflects Truman's administrative orientation and elitist conception of a functioning democracy. Composed of representatives of those major organizations with an interest in the particular issue, these commissions' political leverage resulted from their interest-expertise. By his appointments, Truman ensured a balanced, moderate report and revealed his political conservatism. Respecting power and seeking to

<sup>1</sup> See, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1945*, pp. 69–72, 259–261, 263–309, 546–561, 562–563; *1947*, pp. 222–229, 257–260, 338; *1949*, pp. 102–103, 199–200, 354–355, 943–944; *1950*, pp. 102–104, 160–161, 163–166, 382–385, 405–406, 423–425.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, *1946*, pp. 344–345, 509–510; *1947*, pp. 9, 12, 63, 338; *1951*, pp. 119–121, 220–221.

accommodate not confront the corporate sector, Truman indirectly sanctioned the biased expertise of powerful special interest groups and certain national personalities. In addition, this deference to prominent business or military personalities dramatized Truman's concept of popular democracy: that because the public lacked experience and expert knowledge, it should accede to the recommendations of those having the requisite inside experience and knowledge. Consistent with this orientation, Truman presented the decisions of these commissions less as recommendations than as legislative fiats. In his model of American democracy, the public's and the Congress' role in comparison with that of the executive branch was that of a Greek chorus or a Socratic dialogue; the partners were distinctly unequal.

Truman's response to congressional criticisms of his foreign policy or internal security proposals further illustrates this elitism. Congressional criticisms, admittedly often partisan and irresponsible, did represent a democratic demand for a critical assessment of executive proposals. Rather than confining his discussion to the merit of these criticisms, Truman often adopted a querulous posture of demanding uncritical support. His main tactical response to criticisms was to defend his policy on national security grounds and to equate dissent with a form of disloyalty. Thus, he refused congressional committees access to privileged information, whether FBI loyalty reports on federal personnel or classified executive agreements and policy papers, implying that the executive was the best judge of the national interest.<sup>3</sup>

Truman's efforts to expedite the formulation and implementation of executive policy further confirms his elitist administrative orientation. Confronted by a divisive Cabinet and the administrative chaos of the Roosevelt Presidency, Truman sought to streamline the executive branch. A central purpose of this reorganization was to provide the means for mediating Cabinet and departmental differ-

ences over administration policy priorities and objectives. To achieve this, Truman strengthened the White House staff, establishing an independent research and review group loyal to himself that briefed him on important policy matters. As this evolved, Truman's White House staff consisted of individuals having well-defined, specialized legislative responsibilities co-ordinated by the President's legislative counsel.<sup>4</sup>

In a related move, Truman established the Bureau of the Budget as the clearing house for departmental policy proposals. Each department was required to submit its legislative and appropriation recommendations to the Budget Bureau for review and approval. The Bureau then assessed the proposed measure in terms of executive policy priorities as delineated in the President's State of the Union address. Simultaneously, the Bureau submitted the measure for consideration to those other executive departments having related legislative interests. Through the Bureau of the Budget's legislative clearance function, the White House promoted interdepartmental harmony and at the same time remained informed about developments and differences within the executive branch.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The status of the White House staff dramatized one of Truman's administrative problems. Only after 1948 did Truman acquire a solid, well-balanced, and loyal staff. In the early years of his Presidency, he relied primarily on the advice of members of his Cabinet. See, Papers of Charles Murphy, Stephen Spingarn, Clark Clifford, David Lloyd, Donald Dawson, David Bell, George Elsey, Richard Neustadt, Philleo Nash, all in the Truman Library. For a detailed study of the White House and the Budget staffs' roles on a specific legislative issue, see Elmer Cornwell, *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1965), 237-241. Franklin Mitchell, of the University of Southern California, is presently studying Truman's White House staff.

<sup>5</sup> Under Roosevelt's Budget Director, Harold Smith, this form of co-ordination and organization was introduced. These procedures were perfected during Truman's Presidency. See, Bureau of the Budget legislative files, deposited in the National Archives and the Truman Library. See also, John Ramsey, "Role of the Bureau of the Budget in Policy Formation in the Truman Administration" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri); Richard Neustadt, "Presidential Clearance of Legislation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University); "Presidency and Legislation: The Growth of Central Clearance," in *American Political Science Review*, and "Presidency and Legislation: Planning the President's Program," in *ibid.* (December, 1955),

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1948, pp. 181-182; 1949, pp. 280-282, 292-296; 1950, pp. 120, 159-163, 177-185, 228-238, 240-241, 250-256, 267-272, 284-288, 418-423, 645-653, 679-682, 697-703.

This procedure, marking as it did a change in the institution of the Presidency, had the attendant effect of reducing executive dependence on the Congress. On the one hand, when the President acquired information and assistance independent of Congressmen, he lost his former rapport with the Congress. On the other hand, the administration's political leverage with the Congress receded because important Congressmen had neither fully participated nor been fully consulted during the formulation of policy measures. Coinciding chronologically with congressional efforts to reassert power and to reverse presidential authority, this administrative reform indirectly served both to alienate important leaders of Congress from the executive branch and to provide congressional critics with the means to criticize executive power and procedures. The elitism inherent in this strengthening of the office of the Presidency enabled conservative Congressmen to concentrate on executive procedures; they challenged executive secrecy and unilateralism, affirming that a greater congressional role would ensure a more responsive government. In this vein, Senator Joseph McCarthy later attacked Truman's secretive conduct of foreign policy and internal security, and other conservatives advocated the need either for restrictions on executive foreign policy authority (the Bricker Amendment) or the publication of secret executive foreign policy agreements (Yalta).

At first Truman attempted to resolve this problem by periodically consulting with the congressional leadership on an informal basis. After 1949 Truman adopted the more formal procedure of holding regular weekly meetings with the Democratic congressional leadership: the speaker of the House, the House majority leader, the Senate majority leader, and the Vice President. Truman, however, never satisfactorily resolved this executive-legislative liaison problem, nor did he win public acceptance of this more independent executive

role. This failure helped contribute to Truman's subsequent failure as a reformist President and national leader.<sup>6</sup>

**T**HE NATURE AND STYLE of Truman's leadership was also a fundamental factor in the postwar resurgence of congressional authority and the evolution of an anti-reformist climate. Confronted by a congressional system dominated by conservatives and unsympathetic to reform, Truman, as had Roosevelt, sought to pressure the Congress to enact his legislative program through direct appeals to the public. Unlike Roosevelt, however, Truman lacked personal charisma and was not an effective exponent of reform. Indeed, during his Presidency, Truman's political influence derived less from his own leadership than from the continued positive image of Roosevelt's New Deal. Significantly, Truman's greatest political victory, his election in 1948, was made possible by the effective exploitation of the anti-New Deal record and actions of the Eightieth Congress. In contrast, Truman's greatest political defeat, in the 1946 congressional elections, and his inability after 1949 to secure serious congressional consideration of his policy proposals occurred when his opponents centered directly on his leadership.

A review of the Truman Administration's political record documents the negative aspects of Truman's leadership. Initially overwhelmed by the responsibility of succeeding a popular Roosevelt who had monopolized national politics since 1932, and lacking self-confidence in his own abilities to respond to the complex domestic and international problems then confronting the United States, Truman from 1945 to 1947 was an indecisive, inept President. He vacillated, hesitating to act, and often when he did act he subsequently reversed himself. In addition, at various times during 1945-1946, Truman did not control his own administration. His dependence on and good faith in his advisers lent itself to abuse and contradictions. At various times important advisers and Cabinet members attempted to manipulate Truman either by not

980-1021. For an insightful discussion of the institutionalization of the Presidency, see Elmer Cornwall, "The Truman Presidency," in Richard Kirkendall, ed., *The Truman Period as a Research Field* (Columbia, Missouri, 1967); and Barton Bernstein, "The Presidency Under Truman," *Yale Political Review* (Fall, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> See, Murphy Files, Big Four Meetings, Truman Library.

informing him of their actions (Byrnes at the London Foreign Ministers Conference) or by misinforming him (Clark's editing of a Roosevelt directive and Wallace's securing of Truman's assent to his Madison Square Garden address) in order to further their programmatic objectives or priorities.<sup>7</sup>

The President's vacillation contributed to the Republicans' 1946 congressional election victory. Truman's leadership had had two effects: first, it fractionalized the progressive coalition that Roosevelt had developed and, second, it tended to support the Republican campaign appeal of "Had Enough? Vote Republican." By failing to provide the leadership necessary either to inform the public of options or to pressure the conflicting interest groups to act responsibly, Truman had created a political context wherein a protest appeal could be effective. In 1946 the public voted "no" to the Truman Administration.

The resultant Eightieth Congress, heavily Republican and with committees chaired by intransigent opponents of the New Deal, presented an insurmountable barrier to any reformist President. During 1947–1948, Truman

was able to restrain congressional efforts to emasculate the New Deal; under the circumstances no President could have done more. The Eightieth Congress subsequently became Truman's most effective political issue in his 1948 re-election campaign. Stressing the need for a reformist administration, one oriented toward the interests of all Americans, not one dominated by or responsive to "special interests," Truman successfully capitalized on popular support for the New Deal and fears of depression. In his campaign, Truman did not delineate what he would do if elected. His appeal was negative—that of an underdog, a scrappy fighter, but not a presidential leader.<sup>8</sup>

The 1948 election seemingly constituted a resounding political success for Harry Truman. Not only had a more moderate Congress been elected, but the nature of Truman's victory, despite deep divisions within the Democratic party, the partisan opposition, and biased predictions of the press, should have maximized his political leverage. Truman's victory attested to the New Deal's political appeal, a factor the congressional leadership seemingly could no longer ignore. Truman's post-1948 legislative reform record, however, was not very fruitful. Increasingly after 1950, Truman lost control of the Congress, his public support waned, and a new conservatism dominated national politics.

**WERE TRUMAN'S FAILURES** after 1949 simply the product of an irrational public disaffection? Were his problems simply those caused by a public that, because incapable of understanding and thus accepting the complex, frustrating responsibilities of the Cold War, naively responded to the McCarthyites' simplistic appeals? Historians of the Cold War period have generally represented Truman as a helpless victim of an irrational, emotional public. Popular frustration and discontent were pinpointed as contributing to the conservative congressional leadership's success in assuming the offensive.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1948, pp. 296–307, 323–330, 332–341, 347–379, 406–410, 416–424, 431–435, 449–451, 462–482, 491–492; Truman Papers, 1948 Campaign, Truman Library.

<sup>7</sup> Allen Matusow, *Farm Politics and Policies of the Truman Years* (Cambridge, 1967); Barton Bernstein, "The Truman Administration and the Steel Strike of 1946," *Journal of American History* (March, 1966); "Clash of Interests: The Postwar Battle between OPA and Agriculture," *Agricultural History* (January, 1967); "The Removal of War Production Controls on Business, 1944–1946," *Business History Review* (Summer, 1965); "America in War and Peace: The Test of Liberalism," in Barton Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past* (New York, 1967); John Gimbel, *The American Occupation of Germany: Politics and the Military, 1945–1949* (Palo Alto, California, 1968); Thomas G. Patterson, "The Abortive Russian Loan," *Journal of American History* (Spring, 1969); Athan Theoharis, "James F. Byrnes: Unwitting Yalta Myth-Maker," *Political Science Quarterly* (December, 1966); "Attorney General Clark, Internal Security, and the Truman Administration," *New University Thought* (Spring, 1968). Also contrast Roosevelt's wiretapping directive of 1940 with Attorney General Tom Clark's altered version of that directive. Memorandum, President Roosevelt to Attorney General Jackson, May 21, 1940; and Letter, Attorney General Tom Clark to President Truman, July 17, 1946; Spingarn Papers, National Defense, Truman Library. Another example is the 1946 conflict between Byrnes and Wallace over administration foreign policy that resulted in Wallace's forced resignation. For Truman's role in that dispute, see *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1949*, pp. 426–429 (questions 5 and 13 and footnote on p. 427), 431.

The reality was more complex. Indeed, Truman, unwittingly and admittedly unintentionally, had contributed to the development of this intolerant, hysteric climate. In fact, public responses, if apparently irrational, reflected the level of the postwar foreign policy-internal security debate.

The nature of Truman's rhetoric and his administration's various foreign policy-internal security decisions during the 1945-1949 period had served to shift the focus of the national debate to national security questions and to legitimate a conservative anti-communism. From an earlier concern over economic security and domestic issues, by 1950 the political debate centered on international developments and national security arguments; an appeal to anti-communism, without clearly defining what this denoted, had become the norm in post-1950 politics.

The necessity to secure popular support for the adoption of foreign-internal security policies that marked a shift away from Roosevelt's emphases had led Truman, particularly during 1947-1949, to resort to a distinctly alarmist rhetoric. Truman helped restructure the postwar political debate by defining an interventionist, power-oriented foreign policy as necessary, defensive, and internationalist and claiming that the surveillance of the political associations and beliefs of federal employees was essential to internal security while protective of individual liberties. Further, his emphasis on United States omnipotence and altruism helped create a climate of overbearing innocence. In addition, when responding to the McCarthyites' criticisms, Truman did not substantively refute their arguments but dismissed them either as partisan, without justification, or unpatriotic. Truman's overt partisanship, combined with his oversimplification of international and national security issues, in the long run contributed to the undermining of his administration's credibility.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1946*, pp. 233-235, 346-347; *1947*, pp. 255-257, 176-180, 211-216, 238-241, 254-255, 515-529; *1948*, pp. 182-190, 200-203, 231-235, 287-290, 336-340, 482-485, 815-818, 140-141, 144-146; *1949*, pp. 1-7, 44-97, 112-116, 196-198, 206-207, 230-232, 241-244, 277-279, 286-291, 395-400, 438, 455-459, 501-505, 517-525, 582-583; *1950*, pp. 120, 228-229, 138, 149-153, 159-163, 177-180, 2-11, 44-106, 181-182, 238-240, 423-425, 445-452, 473-477, 250-256, 284-288, 333-338, 342-344, 374-377.

IN the national security realm—military defense, foreign relations, foreign intelligence, internal security—a modern President has considerably greater political leverage vis-a-vis the Congress than he does in strictly domestic matters. Executive powers which enable a President to focus discussions on particular issues or to define priorities maximize presidential influence. The Congress could repudiate or support a particular policy course, but the manner of its restraint would be responsive not initiatory. When dealing with executive national security decisions, moreover, the Congress confronted actions justified as essential to the national interest. The Cold War, owing to the more sophisticated techniques of subversion and the unprecedented power of nuclear weapons, added a new dimension to this relationship. Intelligence and time acquired new significance; speed, flexibility, and secrecy became imperative and further served to increase the power of the executive branch.

A new situation had been created during the postwar years which subverted traditional checks-and-balances types of restrictions. The real restraint on presidential authority came to rest on the administration's credibility. Able leadership of public opinion, thus, acquired especial importance. Because President Truman had the opportunity to make unilateral decisions, by so doing he made possible partisan, even if irresponsible, attacks on his policies. The opposition could simply debunk and suggest the need for restraints on the executive, emphasizing its lack of identification with, and the unilateral character of, these presidential decisions. This situation, moreover, precluded the necessity of simultaneously proposing viable alternatives.

Moreover, many Americans, because national security matters were not a direct or conscious experience, responded more uncritically to foreign policy appeals than they would to domestic ones. The ability of a President to define policy responses in patriotic terms or to justify policy as responsive to alleged threats to the national interest enabled him to shape popular understanding and acquiescence. How a President defined the national interest could structure significantly the political debate. For this reason, Truman's anti-communist rhetoric, by delimiting the debate and the

public climate, ultimately legitimated attacks from the right.

In 1950 Truman faced a different public than he had in 1945. This popular suspicion of the executive had not been foreordained; indeed, in 1945 Truman had commanded uncritical popular support for executive foreign policy initiatives, partly because of popular antipathy toward Congress and the Republican leadership. In 1945 the public's prevalent fear had been that the Congress might, for either partisan or isolationist reasons (as it had in 1919), frustrate a negotiated settlement or preclude an active United States internationalist role. In addition, in 1945 Roosevelt's foreign policy leadership enhanced popular sympathy and support for executive authority.

After 1945 Truman lost this support and confronted a public concerned over success in the Cold War. In part, this change derived from Truman's decisions and leadership. After 1945 Truman had adopted a less conciliatory approach toward the Soviet Union than Roosevelt followed, relying on military strength, not the development of mutual trust or a policy based on accommodation. This shift away from Roosevelt's emphasis and procedures was gradual, though steady, and thereby tended to blur the distinctiveness. Moreover, although Truman's rhetorical emphasis centered on the United Nations, his actions represented a nationalistic and militaristic course. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine and extending to economic aid to South Korea or Yugoslavia, Truman evolved a domino-theory analysis of international developments and also described his policy proposals in emotional, crisis-oriented terms. Even this shift from Roosevelt's policies was marked by major differences in policy objectives. Initially, Truman attributed international problems to economic chaos and underdevelopment, and his proposals centered on economic aid. Gradually, his policy statements stressed military aid; he presented policy in confrontation and subversive terms and in the context of a bipolar international model. After 1949 the orientation was power-political and the administration's main commitment was to order and stability.<sup>10</sup>

This analysis provided an essentially conservative anti-communist direction to the administration's foreign policy. Each decision

carried new commitments, served to redefine the international situation, and accordingly reduced Truman's subsequent alternatives. Truman's November, 1950, request of Congress for economic aid to Yugoslavia indicates this domino theory, alarmist emphasis. Truman then observed:

The drought, the consequent crop failure, and the imminence of famine in Yugoslavia is [*sic*] a development which seriously affects the security of the North Atlantic area. These events dangerously weaken the ability of Yugoslavia to defend itself against aggression, for, among other circumstances, it [*sic*] imperils the combat effectiveness of the Yugoslav armed forces.

Yugoslavia, moreover, is a nation whose strategic location makes it of direct importance to the defense of the North Atlantic area. . . .

As a result of these factors, an immediate increase in Yugoslavia's ability to defend itself over that which would exist if no assistance were supplied will contribute to the peace and security of the North Atlantic area [and] is vital to the security of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the administration's foreign policy decisions were increasingly unilateral. Thus, Truman either bypassed the United Nations or relied upon that organization as a forum for acquiescence to U.S. policy. A nationalist, if in a different sense from Robert Taft, Truman suggested that the United States could impose its values on the postwar world and presented United States intervention in noble, altruistic terms. Rejecting preventive war and overt liberation, Truman's statements, nonetheless, exuded confidence. Truman did not aver that international problems of change or disruption, or the attainment of stability, were impossible of solution; nor did

<sup>10</sup> In an essay, "The Rhetoric of Politics: Foreign Policy, Internal Security and Domestic Politics in the Truman Years, 1945-1950," in Barton Bernstein, ed., *The Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, (Chicago, 1970), I discuss in detail Truman's foreign policy statements and the nature of their rhetorical development. The sources cited in footnote 9 provide a sketchy review of some of Truman's major foreign policy statements.

<sup>11</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1950*, pp. 718-719.



he counsel the public that the United States might fail to create a postwar world in its image. In this same vein, he represented revolutionary developments as evidence of Soviet subversion. Presumably cognizant of the realities of power, Truman never publicly defined the limits to American power posed by the conflicting objectives between the United States and an equally powerful and nationalistic Soviet Union. Instead, the President identified international conflicts and threats to the peace in moralistic terms verging almost on a crusade; in addition, his rhetorical references to the Soviet Union depicted it as the Antichrist. Because American ideals were laudable and the Soviet Union's aggressive and sustained through terror, Truman affirmed that U.S. policy would in the long run prove successful.

This conspiratorial depiction of revolution as manufactured by a small cabal in Moscow was reflected in Truman's characterization of Chinese Communist intervention in the Korean War. In a November 30, 1950, press conference, Truman asserted:

Recent developments in Korea confront the world with a serious crisis. . . . If the United Nations yields to the forces of aggression, no nation will be safe or secure. If aggression is successful in Korea, we can expect it to spread throughout Asia and Europe to this hemisphere. We are fighting in Korea for our own national security and survival. . . . We hope that the Chinese people will not continue to be forced or deceived into serving the ends of Russian colonial policy in Asia.

I am certain that, if the Chinese people now under the control of the Communists were free to speak for themselves, they would denounce this aggression against the United Nations.<sup>12</sup>

This implied that revolutions, because Soviet-inspired aggression, must be resisted lest inaction, i.e., appeasement, lead to further aggression and to a future world war. This analysis further implied that revolutionary movements, because alien and not indigenous, could be defeated or averted by the appropriate use of power. It tended to fortify popular

expectations that intervention was both altruistic and, owing to American technological and material superiority, inevitably successful. By this confident, crisis-oriented presentation of policy, that the United States must, and, should it so will, could avert disruptive change, Truman misled the public. Options were not that clear-cut and the containment of Soviet revolutionary influence neither easy nor attainable.

TRUMAN'S responses to loyalty-security matters reflected a similar confident, moralistic tone. Initially, when establishing the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, Truman presumably intended to prevent Soviet espionage or intelligence. As this program subsequently evolved, it exceeded these legitimate, limited bounds. Thus, in 1951, the standard for dismissal of an employee on "loyalty" grounds changed from overt actions confirming disloyalty to implications about the individual's loyalty.<sup>13</sup>

The program's success inevitably lent itself to a statistical assessment of the number of employees dismissed. By suggesting that the employment of "even one person of doubtful loyalty" constituted a "serious threat" to the national security and by failing to establish the subjective nature, indeed inaccuracy, of much of the information contained in the FBI loyalty reports, Truman had created the unrealistic standards by which his loyalty program was subsequently judged.<sup>14</sup>

The establishment of the loyalty program also had legitimated investigations into the

<sup>13</sup> In another essay, "The Escalation of the Loyalty Program," also in *The Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, I analyze the development and domestic impact of Truman's loyalty program. The revision of the standard of dismissal is best seen by contrasting the 1947 provision with that instituted in April, 1951. Originally, the standard for dismissal had been "reasonable grounds exist for the belief that the person involved is disloyal to the Government of the United States." The revised standard read "reasonable doubt as to the loyalty of the individual involved to the Government of the United States." Contrast, Executive Order 9835, March 22, 1947, OF252-K, Truman Library, with Executive Order 10241, April 28, 1951, RG220, Truman Library.

<sup>14</sup> See, Report and Proceedings of the President's Temporary Commission on Employee Loyalty, Murphy Papers, Truman Library; Executive Order 9835, March 22, 1947, OF252-K, Truman Library.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 724-725.

political associations and beliefs of individual citizens, and the Attorney General's list became a litmus test for judging personal loyalty. Moreover, the assumption underlying the loyalty program was that a real threat, formerly ignored, existed. Truman's post-1947 denial that this program needed improvement and his refusal to co-operate with congressional committees were seemingly contradicted by his own subsequent revisions of the program's procedures and the uncovering of the Alger Hiss, Judith Coplon, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg "spy" cases.

Lastly, Truman's reaction to criticism and his attempts to discredit McCarthyite attacks by implying that they undermined the national security reduced his own credibility. Rather than substantively confronting the McCarthyites' criticisms of his loyalty program or foreign policies, he questioned their motives, implying that they sought partisan advantage or harmed the national interest, and he sought to appear "more anti-Communist than thou." Thus, in the 1948 campaign, Truman sought to link Wallace with the Communists and contended that his Republican opponents were playing into the (Soviet) Communists' hands by encouraging the Wallace candidacy. In 1950 Truman described Senator McCarthy as "the best asset the Kremlin has," termed the McCarran Internal Security Act a measure that aided the Communists, and identified congressional defeat of the South Korean Aid Act as benefiting the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

This approach, highlighting Truman's partisanship, made it easier for conservative Republicans to accuse Truman of seeking to "cover up" for political reasons. The anti-communist nature of the postwar debate also ensured that Truman would come off second-

best; Truman's conservative critics had far better anti-communist credentials. Moreover, seeking to undercut the impact of the McCarthyites, Truman often eventually changed his position to conform more closely with their demands. The timing of Truman's more important loyalty-security decisions reflected this political submission. Thus, he established the Temporary Commission on Employee Loyalty in November, 1946, after the Republican congressional victory and not when the institution of a loyalty program had been first proposed in July, 1946. He established the President's Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights in January, 1951, after the 1950 congressional elections confirmed the political impact of McCarthyism and not in June, 1950, when the idea of the commission had been proposed by members of the White House staff. In 1947 he sought to prevent abuses of individual employee's rights when establishing the Loyalty Program, but in 1951 when confronted by McCarthyite attacks he changed the procedures and standards of that Program. He vacillated, first wholly opposing, then allowing the Tydings Committee limited access to State Department loyalty records when it became obvious that the Committee could not successfully rebut McCarthy's "Communists-in-Government" charges. These reversals indirectly credited Truman's critics; they implied that the President's original stance had been inadequate, that further surveillance had been needed.<sup>16</sup>

Truman's resort to censorship in internal security-defense-foreign policy matters further

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum, William Batt, Jr., Director, Research Division, Democratic National Committee, to Charles Murphy, September 13, 1948, Spingarn Papers, White House Assignment, Truman Library; address, President Truman, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, September 28, 1948, PPF200, Truman Library; press release, Democratic National Committee, March 11, 1948; Files of the Facts, Democratic National Committee; McGrath Papers, Democratic National Committee File, Truman Library; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1948*, pp. 186-190, 555, 801-806, 844-845, 882-886; *1950*, pp. 560-564, 571-576, 619-622, 645-653, 679-682, 697-703, 120, 228-229, 2-11, 44-106, 131-132, 238-240, 423-425, 445-449, 473-477.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, Congressman Jennings Randolph, Chairman, House Civil Service Committee, to President Truman, July 25, 1946; letter, James Webb, Director, Bureau of the Budget, to Attorney General Tom Clark, November 20, 1946; Executive Order 9806 Establishing the President's Temporary Commission on Employee Loyalty, November 25, 1946, all in OF252-1, Truman Library; memorandum, Charles Murphy and Stephen Spingarn to President Truman, May 24, 1950; Draft Executive Order Establishing President's Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights, June 1, 1950; memorandum, Stephen Spingarn to Charles Murphy, June 19, 1950; memorandum, Stephen Spingarn for the Files, June 23, 1950; memorandum to Adrian Fisher, Legal Adviser, State Department, March 9, 1950; memorandum, Charles Murphy to George Elsey, March 27, 1950, all in Murphy Files, Loyalty, Truman Library; Draft Executive Order Establishing President's Commission on Internal Security and Individual Rights, July 25, 1950, Murphy Files, Internal Security, Truman Li-

contributed to undermining his credibility. His restriction on the release of the Wedemeyer Report, his initial failure to publish the Yalta Far Eastern agreements or to inform the Congress and the public about the administration's China policy, and the March, 1948, Executive Order preventing congressional access to FBI loyalty reports caused deep public doubts about administration priorities. These restrictions, justified on national security grounds, appeared to be efforts to cover up mistakes either in policy or loyalty. Moreover, the administration's contention that the FBI's effectiveness required preserving the confidentiality of the loyalty reports was discounted by the fact that much of the information presented by Senator McCarthy and the McCarthyites had been derived from these reports. After 1948 the House Committee on Un-American Activities could also effectively point out that the Truman Administration, despite its unlimited access to these reports, had not dismissed disloyal employees—Alger Hiss, William Remington, John Stewart Service—until the committee had publicly exposed their disloyalty.

**A**N ASSESSMENT of the postwar Presidency of Harry S. Truman highlights Truman's failure as a presidential leader. Even conceding the overwhelming problems confronting a post-World War II executive, Truman failed to deal effectively or imaginatively with them. These problems transcended Truman's limited vision and abilities. At a critical time in American history when a great President possessing sensitivity and understanding was needed, a man of moderate abilities exercised power.

The nature of Truman's foreign policy-internal security decisions and their underlying

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brary; memorandum, Stephen Spingarn to Donald Dawson, September 30, 1950; memorandum, Stephen Spingarn, May 22, 1950, Spingarn Papers, National Defense, Truman Library; letter, President Truman to Herbert Hoover, November 25, 1950, OF2750-A, Truman Library; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1950*, pp. 140-141, 177-185, 229-232, 267-272; letter, Seth Richardson, Chairman, Loyalty Review Board, to Donald Dawson, June 26, 1950, OF419-K, Truman Library; memorandum, Donald Hansen, January 3, 1952, Spingarn Papers, Loyalty, Truman Library; *Washington Post*, March 17, 1950, May 5, 1950.



Society's Iconographic Collections

*Governor Oscar Rennebohm, Mrs. Truman, Mrs. Rennebohm, and Truman wave to the crowd at the old North Western depot in Madison during a 1948 campaign stop. While in the city the Trumans, together with their daughter, attended services at Grace Episcopal Church.*

rationale, by narrowly restricting the domestic political debate to national security and anti-communist themes, helped to legitimate conservatism and to undermine reform. In one sense, Truman became a victim of his rhetoric, elitism, and partisanship and not simply of war-created hysteria or a frustrated public seeking scapegoats and easy solutions.

Truman's comments at an April 17, 1952, press conference best summarize the Truman Presidency:

I have tried my best to give the Nation everything I had in me. There are a great many people—I expect a million in the country—who could have done the job better than I did it. But, I had the job, and I had to do it. . . . When he [a person] gives everything that is in him to the job that he has before him, that's all you can ask of him. And that's what I have tried to do.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to Truman's rejoinder, trying was not enough. Unfortunately for the nation, at a critical juncture in history an average man held the office of the Presidency. While his intentions were noble, his vision was narrow and parochial. In the absence of effective presidential leadership, a reactionary Congress regained the initiative. More importantly, the resolution of basic problems and consideration of other options were thereby precluded.

<sup>17</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1952*, p. 270.