

'The death of Harry Truman' from Le Monde (28 December 1972)

Caption: On 26 December 1972, the French daily newspaper Le Monde leads with the death of former US President Harry S. Truman and looks back at the career of the man behind the 'Truman Doctrine' and his unwavering stance towards the Soviet Union.

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The death of Harry Truman

Harry S. Truman, President of the United States from 1945 to 1953, died on the morning of Tuesday 26 December in the Kansas City hospital to which he had been admitted on 5 December suffering from pneumonia. He was 88 years old.

His funeral will take place on Thursday 28 December, which will be a day of national mourning. Flags on all federal buildings will be flown at half mast for a month. Mr and Mrs Nixon, who paid their last respects on Wednesday, will not be attending the funeral.

The former President will be buried in the courtyard of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Library in Independence, Missouri. Only family members will attend the religious service. A mass will be celebrated in Washington Cathedral in the presence of foreign representatives.

The Cold War Captain

by André Fontaine

‘Well, I wouldn’t say I was in the “great” class, but I had a great time while I was trying to be great.’ This quotation from Harry Truman gives a good insight into the personality of the man who led the West during the era when the Communist bloc presented it with its most serious challenge ever. This child from Missouri, whose career ranged from being an accountant, to a haberdasher, to a captain of field artillery during the First World War, then a farmer, who had climbed up all the ranks of American political life from being a judge until being called upon by Roosevelt in 1944 to join him on the Vice-Presidential ticket, demonstrated two character traits that rarely go together: modesty and a taste for action. In many respects, he was a gambler – he loved poker – but a more serious gambler, more conscious of his terrifying responsibilities towards his people and towards all mankind than was evident from his warlike language and his lazy smile.

He was not particularly cut out for this leading role during the Cold War. But he was a Democrat, like so many other Americans, all the more convinced of the value of the institutions and the civilisation that it was his duty to defend as he was ignorant of those of his adversary. For him, totalitarianism was evil, no matter what form it took, Nazi or Communist, and he was determined to oppose it without bragging but also without yielding. A famous quotation, in which he rated as equal the ambitions of ‘tyrants’ such as Genghis Khan and Louis XIV, and Napoleon and Stalin, sums up his credo.

Having become Senator for his native State in 1935, at 51 years of age, Truman had no other ambition than to keep the seat which had fallen to him, almost by accident, as a result of complicated intrigues inside the Democratic Party ‘machine’. Even in April 1945, he was still telling a group of journalists that he had been ‘made fun of’ by those who had elected him Vice-President, his only wish being to return one day to his seat in the Senate. Two days later, Mrs Roosevelt summoned him to inform him of the sudden death of her husband. *‘For weeks,’* he wrote in his memoirs, *‘I had been living in fear that disaster would strike this great leader, but when the worst actually happened, I was not prepared for it.’*

It was not only psychologically that his lack of preparation was clear. In those days, apart from his role as Speaker in the Senate, the Vice-President was only an heir presumptive. He was not involved in major government decisions nor even in the development of general policy. But Truman came to power at a time when a series of extremely important options were put before the man who was going to sit in the President’s chair. Two and a half months after Yalta, relations between the Allies from the East and from the West were very strained because of the very individual manner in which Stalin interpreted the ‘Declaration of Liberated Europe’ adopted at the Conference and the agreement concluded on the fate of Poland.

In a few weeks, Nazi Germany would capitulate. Nothing had really been decided as to the treatment that it would receive at the hands of its conquerors. A few weeks more, and a successful test in the New Mexico desert would place at the United States’ disposal a weapon which in one fell swoop would render out-of-date

all those which, for centuries, had written the history of mankind.

As we have seen, Truman had little time for the Communist system. In 1941, he expressed the view that, if a choice had to be made between Nazi Germany and the USSR, the United States should support the one that was losing the war, in order to allow these two enemies of civilisation to kill each other off as much as possible.

The withdrawal of American troops

Shortly after entering the White House, he sent personal messages to Stalin on the subject of Trieste, which Tito's troops seemed about to annex, and Austria, where Stalin had recognised a provisional government without consulting anybody. These personal messages took the form of genuine warnings and, moreover, bore fruit. At that time, however, he wanted to avoid a complete break with the Russian Ally. Like most of the army chiefs, he was convinced that Russian cooperation was indispensable in order to defeat Japanese imperialism once Germany had been overcome. He therefore sent Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's *eminence grise*, to Moscow to sign a very ramshackle agreement on Poland with Stalin. He resisted Churchill's calls to postpone the withdrawal of American troops from the line previously agreed by Allied diplomats, and which still today separates the two halves of Germany and Europe, until we '*come to an understanding with Russia, or see where we are with her*'.

Truman made his diplomatic debut at Potsdam in July 1945 and even took the opportunity to play the piano for Stalin, who was a great lover of Chopin. The discussions were often difficult, although the two leaders did agree on a large number of issues, in particular on the quadripartite administration of Germany. But Truman was very annoyed at the dictator's out-of-hand rejection of an idea very close to his heart: that of putting the major inland waterways from the Danube to the Panama Canal under international control. He told Bob Murphy that he had decided never to speak to Stalin again. And, six months later, he wrote to his Secretary of State, James Byrnes: 'Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language another war is in the making. Only one language do they understand – how many divisions have you? ... I am tired of babying the Soviets.'

The most powerful nation in all history ...

By now, the atomic bomb had transformed the world stage. Against the advice of numerous physicists, led by the Nobel Prize winner, James Franck, Truman, prompted by Henry L. Stimson, the then Secretary of the Department of War, and by most of the army chiefs, did not hesitate for a second to use it against Japan. Immediately after Hiroshima, Truman expressed his pride: '*We tell ourselves*', he declared, '*that we have emerged from this war the most powerful nation in the world – the most powerful nation, perhaps, in all history.*'

His attitude towards the USSR changed in that instant. He had needed Russian cooperation to defeat Japan, but Russia had now become a burdensome creditor whose pretensions he strove to reduce to the minimum. It had such military might at its disposal that Roosevelt's military advisers, who dreaded seeing the Red Army advance as far as the Rhine, felt that Russia would inevitably dominate Europe, which meant that every effort had to be made to placate her. But for what would these millions of battle-hardened troops count now that the US possessed a few bombs that could bring their government to its knees? At no time was Truman tempted to follow the advice of those who urged him to use the American monopoly of the atomic bomb to force the Russians to retreat to within their own borders. But that monopoly gave him the 'umbrella' in the shadow of which he pursued – without too many risks – a policy of determined resistance to the advance of Communism beyond the 'Iron Curtain'.

On 15 August, as soon as the war with Japan was over, the President invited the competent authorities to take whatever steps were necessary to prevent the spread of information about the atomic bomb. However, a few weeks later, he declared himself ready, together with the British and Canadian Prime Ministers, Attlee and Mackenzie King, '*to communicate to other members of the United Nations and on the basis of reciprocity detailed information concerning the practical application of atomic energy in industry*', but only

‘as soon as it is possible to discover efficient methods of protection against its use as a weapon of destruction’. Moreover, the same document includes the sentence: *‘no guarantee system would be sufficient to provide in itself an efficient form of protection against the production of atomic weapons by a nation determined to commit an act of aggression’*. Unwittingly badly-phrased, perhaps, but it shows clearly that the *‘communication of this information’* was no more than a standard phrase.

From the Baruch Plan to the McMahon Act

With the Baruch Plan, Truman was actually launching in 1946 an idea such as to capture the imagination. For the first time in history, a government was suggesting that the possession of an essential source of industrial and military might could not be a matter for the sovereignty of nations. It involved nothing less than giving to an international organisation, the International Atomic Development Authority, ownership of uranium and thorium mines, of the ore and control of processing factories which would be located in an equitable manner over the entire face of the Earth. But it was too much to expect from the Russians that they would accept this transfer of sovereignty and the implicit control that went with it, as long as the United States, as a result of the composition of the UN, retained the *‘automatic majority’*. This proposal was bound to be rejected.

As soon as the Plan was established, the President signed the McMahon Act, still in force to this day, which entrusted the control of atomic energy on United States territory to a civilian commission and forbade, on pain of death, the notification of atomic secrets to a foreign power. It was thanks to this legislation that a small-time Communist engineer living in New York, Julius Rosenberg, and his wife, Ethel, were sent to the electric chair in 1953, accused by Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, of having delivered such secrets to the USSR, then an ally of the United States, before the Act had been promulgated.

The first power to feel the effects of American secrecy was Great Britain. Throughout the entire war, Britain, like Canada, had taken part in American atomic research. In November 1945, Attlee, together with Truman and Mackenzie King, signed a short memorandum expressing their intention to continue with *‘full and effective cooperation’* in the field of nuclear energy and to maintain the existing joint organisations, even if the form they took had to be changed. The McMahon Act brutally put an end to this loyal cooperation. It forced Attlee’s Government to start developing a national nuclear weapon at huge expense, without thinking for a second of calling its privileged alliance into question. This meant that it had to secure a loan of 3 750 million dollars at 2 % interest in order to cope with the serious threats which were weighing heavily on the British economy, at a time when Truman was not only ignoring Soviet demands for loans but still calling, quite in vain, for payment in respect of the *‘lease-lend’* operation granted to the USSR during the war. It fell to Mr Nixon, as we know, finally to resolve this question.

This massive aid was not, however, sufficient to allow the United Kingdom to contain on its own pressure from the USSR, which was then threatening Iran, Turkey and Greece. By deciding to take up the baton from the British in these, their traditional spheres of influence, Truman laid the foundations of the policy which would soon make the United States, throughout the world, the protector of *‘bourgeois’* systems threatened by the Communist challenge. Although his reasons for so doing were different, the decisive support given by the President to the creation of the State of Israel formed part of that policy.

The ‘Truman Doctrine’ and the Marshall Plan

From March 1946 onwards, Truman had been calling on the USSR to withdraw its troops from Persian Azerbaijan, which it continued to occupy in breach of the Potsdam Agreement and where it had installed a separatist government equipped with all the paraphernalia of a people’s democracy: he won the day, with the support of the wily Ghavam Sultaneh, the Shah’s Prime Minister at that time, and one of the few men in the world who could boast of having outwitted Stalin. In August of the same year, 1946, President Truman informed the Kremlin, which had invited Ankara to pool defence of the Black Sea Straits, that this responsibility should lie principally with Turkey and that, if this region became the target of an attack, the United States would regard it as a threat to international security. The presence of an American fleet in the Bosphorus bore witness to the strength of Truman’s determination, in the face of which Stalin, once again,

capitulated.

Finally, when Attlee informed Washington in February 1947 that he was going to have to withdraw the troops which were supporting the Royal Greek Government against the Communist partisans, who were in control of the entire north of the country, Roosevelt's successor did not hesitate for a second. '*This was the time*', he wrote in his memoirs, '*to align the United States of America clearly on the side, and at the head, of the free world*' On 11 March, he presented to Congress what was later to become known as the Truman Doctrine. Comparing the two systems which were vying for world hegemony, one which '*is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions*' and one which '*relies upon terror and oppression, ... and the suppression of personal freedoms*', and making it quite clear that this was only a beginning, he secured authorisation for loans of 250 million dollars for Greece, and of 150 million dollars for Turkey. Two years later, the Greek partisans laid down their arms; as much as the energetic activity of General Van Fleet, in actual fact it was the upheavals caused by the break between Tito and Stalin within the Communist camp which led to Stalin's ordering a ceasefire.

From 1944 onwards, Walter Lippmann had been predicting that, if the conquerors of Germany did not manage to preserve their alliance after the war, they would quickly start to dispute its spoils. That happened in the summer of 1946. In July, Molotov had opposed the annexation of the Ruhr, restrictions on industrial production and an imposed federal structure. This was sufficient reason for the Secretary of State, James Byrnes, to announce in his Stuttgart address of 6 September that the time had come to give the German people '*the primary responsibility for the running of their own affairs*'. In the March of the following year, the Moscow Conference revealed the impossibility of cooperation between the Western Allies, which France, abandoning its ideas of being a '*third force*', decided to join, and the Soviet bloc.

Truman, who had recently proclaimed his 'Doctrine' on Greece and Turkey, found himself the recipient, as he wrote, of an '*inexhaustible flow of calls for help*', and he was convinced that there was '*not a moment to lose in finding a way to put Europe back on its feet*.' On 5 June, General Marshall, who had been Secretary of State for some months, gave a speech at Harvard University in which he launched the plan for providing aid to Europe which would immortalise his name. Negotiations opened shortly afterwards in Paris; the arrival of the Soviets seemed to encourage a certain degree of hope. But, on 2 July, Molotov broke off the talks, warning that '*the European countries would find themselves placed under control and would lose their former economic and national independence because it so pleases certain strong powers*.' Europe was cut in two. Afterwards, while the Cominform denounced the efforts of American imperialism to establish its '*world domination*', Truman headed along the path that would lead his country from its traditional isolationism towards the Western world. The Treaty of Brussels was concluded shortly afterwards, no longer directed like the former alliance '*against Germany*', but at Washington's suggestion '*against all aggression*', with the first efforts at European unification being openly supported by the United States. The Kremlin reacted to the currency reform in the Western zones of Germany with the Berlin Blockade. Truman, not without hesitation, supported the Airlift that would save the city, after rejecting suggestions from those who wished to force access *manu militari*. In the spring of 1949, Stalin had to admit that he had lost the battle. But the lifting of the Blockade came too late to prevent the signing, on 4 April, of the North Atlantic Treaty. It was the unleashing of hostilities in Korea the following year that would bring the Cold War to its peak.

Truman had failed badly in his attempts to apply the theory of containment, formulated in 1947 by the American diplomat, George Kennan, to Asia. Neither the mission undertaken by General Marshall in China in a bid to mediate between Mao Tse-Tung and Chiang Kai-shek, nor the enormous help given to the Nationalist army, succeeded in preventing the final triumph of the Communists in Peking in 1949. During the 1952 election campaign, the Democrats paid dearly for the 'loss of China'.

When North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, the world waited to see what Truman would do. In January, the then Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, had openly removed Korea from the list of states given military guarantees by the United States, which had itself, a few months earlier, withdrawn occupying troops maintained there since the surrender of Japan. However, the President, without losing a moment and after having called together his senior staff, found himself in agreement with General Bradley,

Chairmen of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, that '*there were limits and that we had reached them*'. As a result, on 29 June, two American divisions based in Japan were committed to Korea. In October, they, too, crossed the 38th parallel, provoking the intervention of Chinese volunteers. What was to be done? The Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations troops, General MacArthur, advocated the bombing of Manchuria. The United States' European allies, with a politically united Britain at their head, advocated doing nothing, while in France, General de Gaulle was practically alone in advocating firmness.

General MacArthur was a particularly boisterous personality who took it on himself to advocate in public the extension of hostilities. Truman, who was seeking the return of peace upon the basis of the *status quo*, ended up by deciding to retire his fiery adviser.

Upon his return to America, MacArthur received an unprecedented welcome from millions of people who greeted him as a true hero, sacrificed to the cowardice of politicians. While Washington in its turn was celebrating the deposed General, Truman went by himself to the cinema to show that he was not flustered. However, during the debates in the commission of inquiry constituted by Congress to assess the reasons behind his dismissal, MacArthur clashed with most of the senior officers in the American army. Eventually, the excitement died down, while in the month of July, following a call from Moscow, armistice negotiations took place along the old demarcation line.

The H Bomb and German rearmament

The Korean War, the armed uprisings unleashed by the Communists in the Philippines, in Malaya and in Indonesia, the increasing aggression of the Vietminh in Indo-China, the schism between the Cominform and Tito, the show trials staged in all the people's democracies of militants with irreproachable pasts, prompted fears of a Soviet attack in the United States and even in Europe. And the USSR had successfully tested its first atomic bomb. It was against this background that Truman and his trusted advisers took the decision to build the first hydrogen bomb, first tested at Eniwetok on 1 November 1952, and that they called all possible allies to arms. Although a military agreement with Spain had to wait until the Republicans returned to power, in November 1950, the UN had repealed the boycott imposed in 1946 on the regime in Madrid in order to pay it back for its origins and for the moral support which it had given to the Axis, at least at the beginning of the war.

An arms supply agreement was concluded with Tito's Yugoslavia; regardless of geography, Greece and Turkey were admitted into the North Atlantic Treaty; it was suggested that Egypt become a member of a Middle Eastern Command, but Egypt refused to do so until British troops evacuated her territory. Significant assistance was provided to France in Indo-China. A defensive pact was concluded with Australia and New Zealand, and a separate peace treaty was signed with Japan on 8 September 1951, despite the USSR's protests. In October 1952, the Tokyo Government, which, at MacArthur's request, had agreed to enshrine a vow of perpetual neutrality and disarmament into its Constitution, created a new army, at Washington's express request, designated a 'national security corps' for the sake of appearances.

But what interested the Americans the most was the raising of German troop contingents. In September 1950, Truman and his ministers made strenuous efforts for this to be done, but French reservations and the European Defence Community project would delay its achievement until the spring of 1955. By that time, Stalin was dead, and President Truman had retired.

Having returned home to Independence, Missouri, Harry Truman lived a quiet life in the company of his wife and his daughter who was married to a journalist. Lean and upright, despite his great age, his eyes bright behind his spectacles, always smiling and often mordant, he played an active role in the various election campaigns for Democrat candidates, from Stevenson to Humphrey, including Kennedy. Now and again, a cutting remark demonstrated that his hostility towards Communism had in no way diminished. He was, no doubt, too old and had lived personally through too many decisive experiences to understand the incredible changes which, after the death of Stalin, whose reign ended two months after his own, had begun to affect the Communist world. But it is doubtful whether, without his steadfastness and without the support that he gave from the very beginning to the cause of European unification, those changes would have taken

place.

André Fontaine