

Address given by Harry S. Truman (Washington, 4 April 1949)

Caption: At the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington on 4 April 1949, the US President, Harry Truman, gives an address on the importance of the future alliance and on the need to maintain peace across the world.

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Address by President Truman (Washington, 4 April 1949)

Your Excellencies and fellow citizens:

On this historic occasion, I am happy to welcome the foreign ministers of the countries which, together with the United States, form the North Atlantic community of nations.

The purpose of this meeting is to take the first step toward putting into effect an international agreement to safeguard the peace and prosperity of this community of nations.

It is altogether appropriate that nations so deeply conscious of their common interests should join in expressing their determination to preserve their present peaceful situation and to protect it in the future.

What we are about to do here is a neighborly act. We are like a group of householders, living in the same locality, who decide to express their community of interests by entering into a formal association for their mutual self-protection.

This treaty is a simple document. The nations which sign it agree to abide by the peaceful principles of the United Nations, to maintain friendly relations and economic cooperation with one another, to consult together whenever the territory or independence of any of them is threatened, and to come to the aid of any one of them who may be attacked.

It is a simple document, but if it had existed in 1914 and in 1939, supported by the nations who are represented here today, I believe it would have prevented the acts of aggression which led to two world wars.

The nations represented here have known the tragedy of those two wars. As a result, many of us took part in the founding of the United Nations. Each member of the United Nations is under a solemn obligation to maintain international peace and security. Each is bound to settle international disputes by peaceful means, to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territory or independence of any country, and to support the United Nations in any action it takes to preserve the peace.

That solemn pledge – that abiding obligation – we reaffirm here today.

We rededicate ourselves to that obligation, and propose this North Atlantic Treaty as one of the means to carry it out.

Through this treaty we undertake to conduct our international affairs in accordance with the provisions of the United Nations Charter. We undertake to exercise our right of collective or individual self-defense against armed attack, in accordance with Article 51 of the charter, and subject to such measures as the Security Council may take to maintain and restore international peace and security.

Within the United Nations, this country and other countries have hoped to establish an international force for the use of the United Nations in preserving peace throughout the world. Our efforts to establish this force, however, have been blocked by one of the major powers.

This lack of unanimous agreement in the Security Council does not mean that we must abandon our attempts to make peace secure.

Even without that agreement, which we still hope for, we shall do as much as we can. And every bit that we do will add to the strength of the fabric of peace throughout the world.

In this treaty, we seek to establish freedom from aggression and from the use of force in the North Atlantic community. This is the area which has been at the heart of the last two world conflicts. To protect this area against war will be a long step toward permanent peace in the whole world.

There are those who claim that this treaty is an aggressive act on the part of the nations which ring the North Atlantic.

That is absolutely untrue.

The pact will be a positive, not a negative influence for peace, and its influence will be felt not only in the area it specifically covers but, throughout the world. Its conclusion does not mean a narrowing of the interests of its members. Under my authority and instructions, the Secretary of State has recently made it perfectly clear that the adherence of the United States to this pact does not signify a lessening of American concern for the security and welfare of other areas of the world, such as the Near East. The step we are taking today should serve to reassure peace-loving peoples everywhere and pave the way for the worldwide stability and peaceful development which we all seek.

Twice in recent years, nations have felt the sickening blow of unprovoked aggression. Our peoples, to whom our governments are responsible, demand that these things shall not happen again.

We are determined that they shall not happen again.

In taking steps to prevent aggression against our own peoples, we have no purpose of aggression against other people.

To suggest the contrary is to slander our institutions and defame our ideals and our aspirations.

The nations represented here are bound together by ties of long standing. We are joined by a common heritage of democracy, individual liberty, and rule of law. These are the ties of a peaceful way of life. In this pact we are merely giving them formal recognition.

With our common traditions we face common problems. We are, to a large degree, industrial nations, and we face the problem of mastering the forces of modern technology in the public interest.

To meet this problem successfully, we must have a world in which we can exchange the products of our labor not only among ourselves, but with other nations. We have come together in a great cooperative economic effort to establish this kind of world.

We are determined to work together to provide better lives for our people without sacrificing our common ideals of justice and human worth.

But we cannot succeed if our people are haunted by the constant fear of aggression, and burdened by the cost of preparing their nations individually against attack.

In this pact, we hope to create a shield against aggression and, the fear of aggression – a bulwark which will permit us to get on with the real business of government and society, the business of achieving a fuller and happier life for all our citizens.

We shall, no doubt, go about this business in different ways. There are different kinds of governmental and economic systems, just as there are different languages and different cultures. But these differences present no real obstacle to the voluntary association of free nations devoted to the common cause of peace.

We believe that it is possible for nations to achieve unity on the great principles of human freedom and justice, and at the same time to permit, in other respects, the greatest diversity of which the human mind is capable.

Our faith in this kind of unity is borne out by our experience here in the United States in creating one nation out of the variety of our continental resources and the peoples of many lands.

This method of organizing diverse peoples and cultures is in direct contrast to the method of the police state, which attempts to achieve unity by imposing the same beliefs and the same rule of force on everyone.

We believe that our method of achieving international unity through the voluntary association of different countries dedicated to a common cause is an effective step toward bringing order to our troubled world.

For us, war is not inevitable. We do not believe that there are blind tides of history which sweep men one way or another. In our own time we have seen brave men overcome obstacles that seemed insurmountable and forces that seemed overwhelming. Men with courage and vision can still determine their own destiny. They can choose slavery or freedom – war or peace.

I have no doubt which they will choose. The treaty we are signing here today is evidence of the path they will follow.

If there is anything certain today, if there is anything inevitable in the future, it is the will of the people of the world for freedom and for peace.