



The Foreign Policies of Harry S. Truman

Curriculum Unit 79.02.01

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“Everyone’s Wild About Harry” was the title of an article in Newsweek (March 24, 1975), which indicated a resurgence of interest in Harry S. Truman. Why this new interest? Could it be a post-Watergate reaction? Even the rock group called Chicago came up with a hit tune, “Harry Truman”, Which had these lyrics:

“America needs you, Harry Truman,
Harry, could you please come home?
Things are lookin’ bad.
I know you would be mad
To see what kind of men
Prevail upon the land you love.”
(Laminations Music, Big Elk Music and CBS, Inc., 1975)

It appears that Truman’s current appeal is more a matter of style than of substance. What sticks in the mind is Truman’s bluntness and utter lack of pretension. It’s been reported that “All across America, in fact, people are hailing the 33rd president as one of the last American heroes.” How this image squares with the historical record is the underlying question of this curriculum unit.

This unit is for the high school U. S. History course. It could cover one or two weeks of classroom work, depending upon how much detail a teacher would like to stress. The unit will look into the problem of decision-making: how foreign policy is made and who makes the decisions.

From Truman’s point of view, it was never a question that the president was the decision-maker. He kept a plaque on his desk which proclaimed “The buck stops here.” He would listen to the recommendations of his

advisers and then make his decision. Truman had to face many crises and make quick decisions. This was especially true after he took over the presidency upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt when urgent situations in the concluding months of World War II demanded immediate action.

Truman epitomized the American democratic ideal: that anybody could become president of the United States. He was an average American without a college degree. However, many of his advisers were Ivy League graduates and professional diplomats.

In the early days of Truman's presidency the war in Europe was coming to an end. From the beginning Truman acted differently. While Franklin D. Roosevelt was a patrician and took time to make decisions, Truman was plain and folksy and seemed to make quick decisions, which delighted the military and civilian high-ranking officials.

This unit will examine some of the problems Truman faced and will look into the role the president and his advisers had in the decision-making process.

The Decision to Drop the Atom Bomb

Some students might wonder: Why did we build the atom bomb? Why did we use the bomb? Could it have been possible to win the war without using the atom bomb? How did this all come about?

The main motive of American scientists to urge the development of nuclear power for use in the war was their conviction that the German scientists were working on an atomic bomb and that the Germans would have no scruples in using it. They were proven right when Hitler started using new secret weapons in June 1944: the V1 and the V2, pilotless jet-propelled rockets that bombarded England. Hitler warned the Allies of more secret weapons being developed. This was not the first time that he boasted about secret weapons. The Allies knew of the German attempts to build the atom bomb. A factory in Norway where the "heavy water" was produced for the manufacture of nuclear materials was bombed.

Truman also had to take into consideration what the Joint Chiefs had told him about their plans to invade Japan and end the war. They informed him that a landing attack on Kyushu Island, one of the Home Islands of Japan, would probably cost about 31,000 American lives during the first 30 days of the invasion. General George C. Marshall reported that American air and sea power had reduced Japanese shipping south of Korea and would eventually stop it altogether. We were committed to a strategy of strangulation of their war economy by bombardment and a naval and air blockade. General Marshall's belief was that the Japanese might capitulate if the situation became hopeless with:

1. the destruction wrought by the bombardment and the blockade
2. an invasion of the Japanese Home Islands
3. the entry of Russia into war against Japan

The Joint Chiefs planned an invasion of Kyushu Island for November 1, 1945.

For the Interim Committee on the Use of the Bomb, composed of scientists, it was a foregone conclusion that the bomb would be used. The Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson claimed that this committee recommended that the bomb be used as soon as possible on a Japanese military installation or war plant surrounded by

houses most susceptible to damage, and that it should be used without a prior warning.

A wartime poll, by secret ballot, on July 12, 1945, of 150 scientists at the University of Chicago's Metallurgical Laboratory showed the following results:

15% favored full military use of the atomic bomb 46% favored limited use
26% wanted an experimental demonstration before military use
13% preferred to avoid any military use.

Unfortunately, the results of the poll never reached the men in power because it was buried among other documents.

John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, recorded that the suggestion to warn the Japanese that the United States had an atom bomb was opposed by Stimson and the Joint Chiefs because they feared that the bomb might be unsuccessful. We only had two atom bombs. If one of the bombs were used as a demonstration on an uninhabited island for the benefit of a Japanese delegation and it turned out to be a dud, it would have been a psychological setback for the United States. The Japanese would have concluded that we had no new weapon. The Japanese militarists would have prevailed over the pacifist Japanese officials to continue fighting, thus prolonging the war and raising our number of casualties.

Ralph Bard, Under Secretary of the Navy, believed that we should give a warning two or three days in advance of using the atom bomb. He felt that the Japanese should be contacted for unconditional surrender.

The general impression is that Truman made the decision to drop the bomb. In reality his decision was not whether to drop the bomb but rather *when* to drop it. Truman never lost any sleep over his decision. He believed that the bomb ended the war, and that an invasion of Japan would have resulted in a half-million soldiers on both sides killed and a million more maimed for life.

Also, James F. Byrnes, Secretary of State in 1945, advocated the use of the bomb for other reasons. He felt that the completion and the testing of it prior to the Potsdam Conference and the Foreign Ministers' Conference in Paris would give him leverage in negotiations with the Russians. Byrnes believed that the Russians were going to declare war on Japan in early August of 1945, and he wanted to keep Russia out of Manchuria and Northern China. This would be averted by the dropping of the bomb on Japan, forcing an immediate surrender of Japan to the United States only. In any event, Russia entered the war against Japan and seized control of Manchuria, North Korea and parts of Northern China. Stimson also advised Truman in April of 1945 to use the bomb for its impact on relations with Russia. Byrnes' attitude was anti-Russian and it contributed toward a state of tension in our relations with Russia, which later developed into the Cold War.

It is interesting to note that the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders showed that Japan would have surrendered in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, and certainly prior to December 31, 1945, even if the atomic bomb had not been dropped, even if no invasion had been planned, or even if Russia had not entered the war.

Truman's Decision on Korea

When teaching about the U. S. Constitution the question comes up as to who has the power to declare war. Article 1, Section 8 states that Congress has the power to declare war. This power has been given to Congress in order to make the presidential powers weaker. In order for a president to make the right decision it is absolutely essential for him to have adequate information and advice. It is the president's responsibility alone to give directions. Once a president makes his decision in an emergency situation, he then goes to Congress asking for a declaration of war.

When North Korea attacked South Korea on June 24, 1950, the State Department officials advised Secretary of State Dean Acheson to call for a meeting of the Security Council of the United Nations. Acheson telephoned Truman telling him about the news and the suggestion and Truman agreed to it. Truman had to base his decision on recommendations of the State and Defense Departments.

A meeting was called at the Blair House and Truman asked each person to state whether he agreed or disagreed with the following three recommendations:

1. to evacuate Americans from the Seoul area
2. to order General MacArthur to air-drop supplies to the South Korean forces.
3. to order the 7th Pacific fleet to move north from the Philippines to the Formosa Straits *at once*

All present at the meeting agreed to the recommendations. Truman wanted the news about the 7th fleet's movement withheld from the public until the fleet was in position. Later, Truman gave all the credit for making the decision to stop the North Korean invasion to Dean Acheson.

Avoiding World War III in Korea

Students sometimes question: "Why didn't the United States have a full-scale war with China, since we were fighting the Chinese in Korea. For what reason did Truman limit the war to the Korean peninsula? Why did Truman send the 7th Pacific fleet into the Formosa Straits when the war was being fought in Korea?"

Truman placed constraint on all his actions in Korea because he wanted to avoid war with Communist China. It was necessary to send the 7th Pacific fleet into the Formosa Strait to prevent Chiang Kai-shek from sending his troops to the Chinese mainland and to prevent the Communist Chinese from attacking Formosa. Truman also rejected Chiang Kai-shek's offer of 30,000 Nationalist soldiers for Korean duty. Why did Truman reject this offer of help? He was convinced that it would drag the United States into a major war on the Asiatic mainland, and would draw the Soviet Union into the war to help Communist China against the U.S. Truman agreed with General Omar Bradley that expanding the Korean War would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.

Truman believed that the Soviet Union trained and equipped the North Koreans for aggression. Dean Acheson and everyone else around Truman were convinced that the North Korean decision to move troops across the 38th parallel into South Korea had come from the Kremlin, and that Stalin was testing American resolution and nerve. How did the military commanders in the field feel about this decision?

General MacArthur had different ideas. He believed that all available military power of the Chinese nation,

with logistic support from the Soviet Union, was committed to a maximum effort against our forces. He felt he was operating under restrictions of not fully utilizing U. S. naval and air potential and not being allowed to cross the Yalu River into China. He also declared that it was a mistake to prevent Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist troops from attacking the Chinese mainland.

General MacArthur voiced these views publicly, a move that generated a lot of controversy. Truman felt that if the United States followed MacArthur's ideas, it would lead to a general war. A war with China would please the Soviet Union since it would entangle us in a vast conflict and would surely weaken our influence all over the world, especially in Europe. Therefore, Truman decided to fire General MacArthur. With this action, he reasserted the powers of a civilian president over the military. Truman was the Commander-in-Chief. Truman defended his firing of General MacArthur by saying that the cause of world peace was more important than any individual. He disregarded all the attacks made upon him for this decision because he felt that he was doing what was best for America.

SAMPLE LESSONS

First Lesson: Truman Takes Over the Presidency

Day 1: Foreign Policies: Ending the War in Europe

Activities (Geography lesson)

The students can become aware of how the war ended in Europe.

The teacher could distribute a blank ditto map of Europe to each student. The teacher should have the students locate and write in

1. the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Baltic Sea on the map. The teacher should also identify the following countries by writing the names on the blackboard and have the students write them on their map:

-Soviet Union

-France

-Bulgaria

-Poland

-Austria

-Greece

-Rumania

-Italy

-England

-Yugoslavia

-Germany & East Prussia

-Czechoslovakia

-Albania

-Hungary

2. The next step would be for the students to indicate on the map the different zones of occupation of Germany and the city of Berlin:

-American zone

-British zone

-French zone

-Russian zone

The students may use arrows to show the direction the armies of each nation conquered Germany, entering their respective zones of occupation.

The teacher may reduce the number of items on this map if he wishes to make it simpler for the

students.

The teacher may give individual help to students in the classroom as they request it.

If time permits, the students may indicate on the back of the map sheet what occupation zones were combined to make West Germany and East Germany.

3. *Homework* : Utilizing a map of World War II in their textbook, the students may draw on the above map or a new blank map the following items: (use different colors for each item)
 - western front
 - eastern front
 - Italian campaign front before the German surrender

The students could indicate how the fronts were during 1939, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944 and 1945.

Second Lesson: Truman's First Term (1945-1948)

Week One: Foreign Policies:

Day 1 - Ending the war in Europe (map exercise)

Day 2 - The occupation of Germany

(a) American policies toward the Germans

(b) Russian policies toward the Germans

- The Russian occupation of Eastern Europe (include the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania)

Day 3 - The beginning of the Cold War

(a) Discussion of controversy with Soviet Union over the formation of the post-war government in Poland.

(b) The Potsdam Conference and its results

(c) The decision to use the Atom Bomb (pro and con) (d) The end of the war in Japan

Day 4 - Establishing the United Nations (1945)

- The Truman Doctrine (in Greece and Turkey)

- The policy of containment

- The Marshall Plan

Day 5 - Domestic Policies:

(a) The conversion of the economy: from wartime to peacetime basis

(b) Fighting inflation and strikes

(c) The Employment Act

(d) The Taft-Hartley Law

(e) Congress passed the Presidential Succession Act (1947)

(f) Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico

Choose above items according to time available.

Third Lesson: Truman's Second Term (1948-1952)

Week Two: Domestic Policies:

Day 1 - The election of 1948

- (a) The Republican party Thomas E. Dewey
- (b) The Democratic party Harry S. Truman
- (c) The Progressive party Henry Wallace
- (d) The Dixiecrat party J. Strom Thurmond

The teacher may discuss the parties' platforms and candidates.

- The results of the election

Day 2 - The rise of McCarthyism

- (a) Tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy
 - (b) The effects of tactics upon the government, film industry, personalities
- The 22nd Amendment (the president limited to two terms).
- Truman stabilized wages and prices to fight inflation.

Day 3 - Scientific advances-

- (a) the invention of the transistor (1948)
- (b) ultra-high frequencies opened to TV channels (1952)
- (c) Truman orders development of Hydrogen bomb (1950)
- (d) The impact of the inventions on the social life of America

The class could listen to and question the students' reports on the inventors and their inventions.

Day 4 - Foreign Policies:

- The Berlin Airlift (1948-1949)
- The establishment of West and East Germany
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Day 5 - The Korean War (1950-1953)

- China's entry into the Korean War
- The MacArthur controversy

Fourth Lesson: Ending the War in the Pacific

This lesson would conclude the survey on World War II. The students should have read the appropriate pages in their textbook that covered the conduct and strategies of our armed forces in the Pacific area. The following questions could be used to open up a discussion on the use of the atom bomb and its effect in bringing about the end of the war:

1. Who was the scientist who directed the work of producing in secret the atom bomb?

Answer: The physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer

2. What country was also trying to produce an atom bomb?

Answer: Germany

3. Why was the atom bomb made?

Possible answer: To help us win the war.

4. In what way did the Japanese show that they were desperate toward the end of the war?

Possible answers:

(a)

(b)

They were "fighting to the last man" in the battles on the islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Very few prisoners were taken by the Americans. by the use of the "kamikaze" planes (suicidal plane attacks upon American warships).

5. When the Japanese government rejected the Potsdam Declaration for unconditional surrender, what did it signify?

Possible answer: It meant that the militarists who wanted to keep on fighting the war were in control of the Japanese government.

6. Was there anybody who wanted to give the Japanese a warning *before* the dropping of the atom bomb?

Answer: Ralph Bard, Undersecretary of the Navy.

7. Was anybody against the use of the atom bomb?

Possible answer: Some scientists working on the production of the atom bomb in Chicago, Illinois were against it.

8. How did Truman explain his decision to drop the bomb?

Answers:

(a)

It would save thousands and thousands of young American lives.

(b)

If the war continued, a half-million soldiers on both sides would have been killed and a million would be maimed for life.

9. Was the dropping of the atom bomb really Truman's decision?

Answer: No, because the production of the bomb was ordered by Franklin D. Roosevelt during the war, with a view of eventually using it.

10. Could any nation have made an atomic bomb at that time?

Answer: The belief among the scientists was that the knowledge to make an atomic bomb was available and that it was only a matter of time before other nations built their own.

Homework The teacher should hand out a blank map of the Pacific area and have the students fill in the following items:

- Tarawa
- Kwajalein
- Guam
- Iwo Jima

Draw arrows from each of the above islands -in the direction of Japan. Do the same for the places listed below.

- New Guinea
- Luzon Island (in the Philippine Islands)
- Okinawa
- Nagasaki (city on Kyushu Island)
- Hiroshima (city on Honshu Island)
- Tokyo (city on Honshu Island)

Special assignment for an ambitious student:

A student could give an oral report to the class on how the atom bomb affected different individuals in the city of Hiroshima. As a preparation for his talk, recommended reading: *Hiroshima* by John Hersey.

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Material for Classroom Use:

Record:

Truman, Harry S. *Harry S. Truman* . A George Garabedian Production, #706, Product of Mark 56 Records, Anaheim, California, 92805. (P. O. Box 1)

Suggest teacher to play *only* parts of the record during the class period.

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