

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952



In this section, we will examine the presidency of Harry S. Truman. More powerful in global terms than any president had been before, Truman assumed leadership of the free world in the global conflict that arose between the two principal victors of the Second World War. We will examine the way in which hostility to communism, the political system espoused by America's opponents, came to dominate political life. We will also examine the legal (and therefore perhaps apparently insubstantial) gains made by African Americans in this period. We will look into:

- The United States in 1945 and the legacies of the world war: the powers of the presidency; the main political parties; post-war prosperity; regional, ethnic and social divisions.
- The USA as a Superpower: Truman's character and policies; post-war peace making; the Cold War and 'containment' in Europe and Asia; the response to the rise of communism in Asia.
- Truman and post-war reconstruction; the economy; political divisions and domestic problems; the rise of McCarthyism.
- African Americans in North and South: the impact of the Second World War; campaigns for civil rights; the responses of the federal and state authorities.

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952

Introduction: an accidental president

Harry S. Truman was the seventh accidental president – a vice president promoted following the death of his predecessor – but unlike the elevations of the previous six accidental presidents, his accession to the presidency cannot have come as much of a surprise. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) had seemed unwell for the whole of 1944, and there had been speculation that he would not stand again in the election of that year. Truman had not been a consistent supporter of Roosevelt; he had opposed his seeking a third term, let alone a fourth. He did, however, admire his predecessor for his war leadership and for his New Deal. Truman's career in charge of the **Senate** Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program had gained him an excellent reputation as someone who could negotiate to ensure that neither Big Business nor **Organized Labor** could be allowed to inflate defence costs during the war. His influence was recognised by *Time* magazine; he gained his nomination off the back of his administrative ability rather than his great ideas.

Truman's reputation is a difficult one to quantify. He himself had despaired of re-election in 1948, before committing himself to the campaign; in 1952, although eligible to run again, he recognised that he had no hope of victory. Following, as he did, the longest-serving president in US history – whose reputation was only enhanced by the victories that so swiftly followed his death – he was always likely to struggle to gain the affection of the public. As the man responsible for realigning the economy following an all-out ('total') war, he was always likely to shoulder the blame for disruption that would be caused. And as the first president to fight the Cold War, he found himself making some of the rules for a game the other major player of which, Soviet leader Josef Stalin, was ruthless, obtuse and opportunistic.

The United States in 1945 and the legacies of the world war

Truman, for much of the war, had been the man responsible for ensuring that America's wartime production was well directed and free from waste. Now he found himself in the Oval Office – not entirely unexpectedly given Roosevelt's obvious ill health. The war he inherited was rapidly replaced by another, this one undeclared, and then ultimately by a real shooting war on the other side of the world in Korea. He found himself with real domestic problems to face – real reconstruction to be done – but also with wars to win, communists (both real and imagined) to deal with, and a hostile Congress all too aware that his presidency had been delivered by a Democratic back-room fix and the infirmity of a revolutionary president already counted among the honoured dead of a righteous war.

When Roosevelt died on 12 April 1945, Truman was thrust into the steepest learning curve in history. He found a war machine directly managed by the president – Roosevelt had been the only member of the Cabinet with an overview of national security or of defence. Worse, Truman was briefed early in his presidency on the existence of the atomic bomb, which he would use less than four months after assuming office. Truman faced the difficulty of following a great president whose record had got him reelected three times and whom he could



Figure 1.1: Truman had this sign on his desk.

A/AS Level History for AQA: **The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980****ACTIVITY 1.1**

- List the major issues or problems that you think Truman faced when he inherited the presidency. Discuss with the rest of your class which of these issues might have been:
 - the most urgent
 - the most difficult for Truman to deal with.
- As you read this chapter, make a note of the occasions on which Truman used his presidential powers. Do you agree with his assessment that he had only the power to persuade?

hardly attempt to emulate for fear of being compared unfavourably with the great man; nor could he abandon Roosevelt's agenda. He trod carefully for his first half-year, winning the war before turning his attention to the peace.

Truman's agenda at home was centred on keeping the USA as economically sound as he could while bringing the country back from its war footing, and not risking the economy's helpful forward momentum. This was quickly joined by an agenda abroad; the uneasy alliance with the USSR had degenerated into suspicion and then into outright hostility. There were certainly communist spies in the States; there were more in the public's imagination, and Truman found himself dealing with a **Red Scare** in which enemy infiltrators were seen at the heart of American life. Truman was the president who, more than any other, would set the tone for the Cold War.

The powers of the presidency

The formal, constitutional powers of the presidency had not been changed since 1789, but the presidency Truman inherited in 1945 was more powerful than it had ever been. In theory, while presidents were entitled to propose legislation, that was really the prerogative of Congress. FDR had created an entire programme of legislation, the New Deal, designed to give the **federal government** the power to manage the economy and stimulate growth when necessary. That the federal government should do this was controversial; that the president should be in charge of it was more so. By 1933, when Roosevelt had taken over, the situation in America was so desperate because of the Depression that a radical solution was needed. His solution – the creation of federal agencies to coordinate and carry out economic policy – created a large amount of work. Truman inherited a presidency with more to do than ever before, and the civil service around him was not big enough to do it.

Roosevelt had then been faced with the Second World War. He had run the war without much reference to Congress or the Supreme Court, sometimes using **Executive Orders** to do so. The bigger the federal government, the more people were affected by Executive Orders. The precedent set by Lincoln in the Civil War and renewed by Wilson in the First World War was now established: in wartime the president had very great powers over foreign policy, and was expected to use them. The Cold War would ensure that the United States existed in a state of constant war for generations to come. The president's military power as commander-in-chief is constitutionally enshrined, but heavily circumscribed, as only Congress is allowed to declare war, and only Congress controls the military budget. So it was that the Cold War was undeclared and the Korean War was referred to as a 'police action'.

And still, the presidency was not as powerful as one might imagine. Presidents do not have, as prime ministers do, an automatic majority in their legislature. Truman found neither the Democratic Congress he inherited nor the Republican one that replaced it in 1947 to be amenable to his wishes. The man who remains the only leader ever to order the detonation in war of a nuclear device bemoaned his lack of power thus: 'I sit here all day trying to persuade people to do the things they ought to have sense enough to do without my persuading them. That's all



Key terms

Executive Orders: the use by the president of his power as head of the executive branch to make things happen, not by ordering people as their president, but by ordering them as their boss.

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952

the powers of the President amount to.’ With Truman began the image of the president as persuader-in-chief. His eventual successor Lyndon B. Johnson would go further: ‘The only power I’ve got is nuclear, and I’m not allowed to use it.’

The main political parties

The main political parties in America remained, in Truman’s time, the Democrats and the Republicans. The Republicans had taken the blame for the Depression because they had controlled all the branches of government throughout the 1920s. The Democrats, led by FDR, had won back the White House, the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1933, and in 1945 they retained them still. The Democratic Party was not entirely united – FDR had campaigned in the congressional elections of 1938 against some members of his own party. Broadly, the ‘New Deal coalition’ consisted of farmers from the Midwest, southerners and workers in the cities. Encouraged by the gains made in the New Deal, some black people had also begun to vote Democratic.

It is now fashionable to stress the importance of the anti-New Deal politics of the immediate post-war years, seeing the astonishing Republican gains in 1946 as evidence of this (the Republican slogan was ‘Had Enough?’). While the Second World War had greatly aided the ability of the government to do things (‘state capacity’ in the jargon of political science) it also rehabilitated big business who had been the arsenal of democracy and gave them huge power to achieve goals such as an end to price controls and limits on labour power as soon as peace came. The 1946 Republican intake were in a powerful position, having taken control of Congress. They were able to pass the Taft–Hartley Act, which enabled states to pass ‘right to work’ laws. At the same time the liberal New Deal alliance was fracturing – with social democrats such as Henry Wallace on one side and conservative southerners on the other.

The New Deal coalition seemed to have broken apart in the 1948 election, when Truman faced two rebellious factions, both of whom put up presidential candidates. In the ‘miracle of 1948’ he nevertheless defeated the Republicans. The main policies identified by each party at this election can be seen in Table 1.1. The media and opinion pollsters entirely overestimated the extent to which Truman would lose votes, and predicted a Dewey victory.

Henry Wallace, Truman’s left-wing Democratic opponent who identified as a progressive, opposed him largely on the issue of foreign policy – which meant communism. He had announced his candidacy in 1947, not long after leaving the cabinet. Wallace’s candidacy rested on assumptions that gained more traction at the time than they have among historians. First, Truman was overreacting in his aid programme to the countries of Europe that had suffered in the Second World War, and wasting American money. Second, Stalin would not be all that bad an opponent if only handled properly, and Truman did not handle him as well as Roosevelt. Truman was therefore being too tough on international communism, to the detriment of the United States. Early polls suggested that Wallace might get over 5% of the Democratic vote; with the benefit of hindsight we can see that his candidacy helped Truman by allowing Truman to demonstrate, in the midst of the Red Scare, that he (unlike the conciliatory Wallace) was tough on Reds.

A/AS Level History for AQA: **The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980**

Truman's other opponent, Strom Thurmond, identified himself as a **Dixiecrat**, a **'States' Rights'** Democrat, and opposed Truman because Truman had begun to advocate civil rights and supported the state of Israel. Thus began the movement that would ultimately see the Solid South re-align itself with the Republican Party, while African Americans voted Democratic instead. Moderate support for civil rights turned at the 1948 Democratic Party Convention, at which the party's presidential candidate would be nominated, to radical support. This was a political decision: Democratic bosses knew that it would split their party, but calculated that gains among African-American populations in the northern cities would more than make up for the loss of parts of the South. Meanwhile, Truman's unsuccessful attempt to **veto** the anti-labour Taft–Hartley Bill in 1947, which had been overwhelmingly popular in Congress, had given him the labour vote. The Democrats had realigned themselves to become the party of the cities. The Republicans, on the other hand, were in disarray. With no threat that their party would split they were forced into an uneasy compromise. There had been no member of Congress able to win the nomination; the compromise candidate, Thomas Dewey, was more liberal than the rest of his party, which did not approve of his agenda. Truman highlighted this by calling a special session of the 80th Congress, which he had labelled 'Do Nothing', and inviting them to pass their own candidate's legislation. They declined.

With the splits in the Democratic Party in 1948, the issue of what Democrats believed had been set for a generation: those who did not accept Truman's positions would gradually be squeezed out of the party. In the Republican Party, all that was clear was that the party was deeply split over the role of the government in regulating the economy and society. In the country, 'Do Nothing' turned out to be an unpopular position for Congress to have taken.

**Voices from the past*****The 'Do Nothing' Congress***

Extracts from 'Turnip Day in Washington' by Michael Straight, *New Republic* magazine, 26 July 1948, an article about Truman's decision to recall the 80th Congress for a special session in 1948.

On three key issues, housing, inflation and civil rights, the 80th Congress so far failed utterly ...

Housing. Four million American homes must be provided for this year. Passage of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner bill which provides for 15 million new homes in 10 years by public housing, slum clearance and aid to private construction, is the first priority ... Full hearings have been held on the bill. It was passed months ago by the Senate. Obeying the orders of the National Association of Real Estate Boards and the National Association of Home Builders, the House Republicans ... have prevented the bill from coming to the

House for a vote. Instead, they jammed through a fake housing bill. ...

Civil-rights legislation ... Both parties are absolutely committed to passage of such legislation. The Republican Party platform calls for "prompt enactment" of an anti-lynching law, and federal legislation to abolish discrimination, the poll tax, and segregation in the armed forces. The Democratic platform supports all these proposals and more ...

Inflation ... Wholesale and retail prices reached all-time peaks this month ... 13 million American families have been forced by inflation to use up most or all of their savings.¹

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952

Democratic policies 1948 (Truman and whole party)	Republican policies 1948 (Dewey)	Republican policies 1948 (Congressional leadership)
Civil rights are very important – abandons the idea of states’ rights to segregate	No need to modify civil rights laws	No need to modify civil rights laws
Workers’ rights, delivered by the New Deal, must be preserved	Expansion of social security and increased funding for public housing	Restriction of labour rights
Communism should not be allowed to spread abroad	Anti-communism	Anti-communism at home and abroad
Farmers should be supported to ensure their prices remain high	Price controls should be enacted	Protective tariffs should be enacted
Expansion of healthcare as part of social security	Federal government to take control of health and education	Reduce income taxes to stimulate growth
The president and Congress should be active in government	The president and Congress should be active in government	Government should be small and not do very much

Table 1.1: Main policy platforms of the main parties in 1948.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Look at Table 1.1. To whom do you think Truman’s policies would have appealed, and why?



Figure 1.2: The *Chicago Tribune*’s inaccurate headline, 3 November 1948.

A/AS Level History for AQA: **The American Dream: Reality and Illusion, 1945–1980**

Post-war prosperity

The USA had many advantages after the Second World War. Its competitors were crippled economically. The best-off of the European powers was probably Britain, and it was on the verge of economic collapse, shedding its empire as it collapsed. During the war Americans had saved \$140 billion as war bonds; although releasing this money back to the savers would affect the government's own finances, it would also provide them with spending power to stimulate demand in the economy, and help military producers to adapt their assembly lines for consumer goods.

The economic boom of the United States was not a given in 1941. The first issue was what to do with returning servicemen, who would need jobs which did not yet exist. The \$13 billion provided in the GI Bill of Rights of 1944 for returning soldiers to start businesses or go to college created two groups neither of which added to unemployment; both groups in different ways repaid the investment in them by bringing skills or productivity to the economy. Although he had his differences with Congress over the best way in which to manage post-war reconstruction, Truman was able to run for re-election on an economic platform, pointing to low unemployment.

Regional, ethnic and social divisions

America in 1945 had distinct regions. The Northeast, centred culturally around New England but financially on New York City, was the commercial hub. Its cities had an ethnic mix founded on decades of immigration into New York; there were also substantial communities of African Americans who had migrated to the northern cities in the 20th century. There was in this region a tension between the **White Anglo-Saxon Protestant** (WASP) communities that had existed in the area from deep in the 19th century and some of the other communities. New York City, sometimes described as a 'melting pot', was no such thing: its communities were widely dispersed, and different ethnic and cultural groups had their own areas of town – Jewish tailors in the garment district and Italians in Little Italy, for example.

The American Midwest, centred around Chicago, had much in common with the Northeast, and its cities were similarly mixed. Farming concerns carried more weight out here, and miners too. The area was also the home of the American auto industry. General Motors and Ford were based in Detroit, Michigan. There were tensions between Big Business and Organized Labor, inevitably, and also between the productive heartland of America and the financiers to the East.

The West, those lands west of the Mississippi that had been settled in the 19th century at the expense of the Native Americans, was as ever the land of farmers and ranchers, the modern-day cowboys. The small farms originally settled by the pioneers had tended to agglomerate into larger farms. Truman himself had suffered the indignity of the foreclosure of his family farm and its absorption into something larger. Agribusiness was being born. The major concern of westerners was that farm prices should be sufficiently high that farmers could make a living. The far West – the Pacific states of Washington, Oregon and California, shared many of these characteristics, although Los Angeles, CA, in particular, had similar ethnic diversity to a northern city. It was otherwise very different – western urban

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952

living had none of the high-density tenements and slums that were so common out East.

The final region, the South, had until recently relied on an agricultural system of tenant farming and sharecropping. Devastated by the Oklahoma and Arkansas dustbowls, but at least partly reinvigorated by the Tennessee Valley Authority, the agency that had, under President Roosevelt's direction, sought to bring electrical power and other infrastructure to the region, it was clear that the South would need economic development in addition to the massive transformation caused by military spending in the Second World War – most of the training camps were in the South (or the far West). The South was the home of most of the African-American population; it was also the home of segregation – although segregation happened in the North as well. The economic crisis of the 1930s and the Second World War had taken the focus away from the issue of African Americans' rights in the South, but it seemed by 1945 that this would be a problem requiring some form of action soon.

**Thematic link: prosperity**

Americans had tended to pull together during the Second World War. This is not to say that Roosevelt found that his countrymen were entirely united; there were strikes, which Roosevelt solved, and there was still tremendous poverty across the nation. By 1946, though, any sense of national emergency had dissipated. So, too, had Truman's political honeymoon. The strikes of 1946 (which are discussed in more detail in the section on Political divisions and domestic problems) were caused by a combination of inflation and consistently low wages. The depression and war that had persuaded workers to accept such conditions had gone: instead, there were fears from those who were in work (nearly everyone) that soldiers returning from the front would take the jobs of those who had stayed behind. Even in a situation of nearly full employment there were tensions between those whose position in society still seemed tenuous; these were eased by the GI Bill of Rights of 1944, which kept so many returning soldiers away from the jobs market.

That was the situation in the more industrial parts of the country. In the agricultural areas, things were slightly different. Roosevelt's New Deal policies had barely helped the worst-off farmers, and a long-standing trend continued: smallholders came under pressure to sell out to larger landowners, and 'agribusiness' – large, conglomerated farms – came to the fore. This disrupted traditional communities across the Midwest and Plains states. The concept of the family farm came to be undermined, and with it the job security of millions of Americans in states such as Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska. Southern small farms went the same way; in the South, though, the question of social standing was coming to be tied up with the question of ethnic origin. There were poor whites in the South, and there were poor blacks; the separateness caused by their different ethnicity was more important than any common feeling caused by their common poverty.

The USA as a Superpower

The USA was a Superpower because it had emerged so strongly in military and economic terms from the Second World War. That status was not impregnable, as Truman quickly realised. British sea power had now gone, meaning that the USA could not rely upon their ally to protect their interests in the Atlantic and to police the Indian Ocean; the USA would have to take on the British role, which had essentially been to ensure the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Had any one hostile nation – Germany, say – taken over Europe, US interests would have been threatened. They were no less threatened by potential Soviet dominance. From a Soviet point of view, Stalin, the leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union – a communist state founded out of the ruins of the old Russian Empire), was convinced that there would soon be a conflict between the communist and capitalist worlds. This conviction persuaded him to take actions that would help to cause this conflict. The USA had to act fast to preserve its Superpower status, preferably embedding its new status while it still possessed exclusive access to nuclear weapons.

Superpower status seemed also to bring a particular sense of responsibility with it. One area in which this was expressed was the Middle East. In 1948 the British had retreated from control there, unable to sustain their power because of their failing post-war economy. There were, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, persuasive calls for a Jewish homeland to be established in Israel. Truman backed these calls for domestic electoral reasons, as well as out of a sense of American guilt over turning Jewish refugees away in the late 1930s and in order to, as he said, see that justice was done. The identification of America as Israel's greatest ally, and the importance of the Jewish vote in New York, New Jersey and ultimately Florida, have been compelling themes in American foreign policy ever since.

Truman's character and policies

Truman had a reputation for plain-speaking honesty and high moral standards, but he was also a pragmatic politician seeking to further the interests of America and the Democratic Party, in that order. His foreign policies can be seen in this light. His presidency was largely defined – perhaps haunted – by one of his earliest decisions, which was to drop an atomic bomb on Japan not once, but twice. The bomb that destroyed Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 killed around 150 000 people. Truman used it as a way to end the war quickly; he believed that continuing the slow dismantling of the Japanese Empire would take another year and cost at least half a million lives. He did not imagine that another bomb would be needed, three days later. The ethical justification for what Truman did is debated still, and the moral significance of his decision was clear to him from the very start. In 1946, through the United Nations, he attempted to surrender the USA's atomic weapons capability to the UN, and open up to weapons inspectors, on condition that the USSR abandoned their own research and did the same. Stalin refused.

Truman had learnt about nuclear weapons only on becoming president. This was part of the reason for his creation of a **National Security Council** (NSC), of which the vice president was a member, so that no future vice president would be so unaware of something so vital, and might have more of an opportunity than

1 Truman and Post-war America, 1945–1952

Truman himself had had to prevent such a long-term plan from going ahead. The NSC also helped to pull together the work of the new **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)**, which had been created as an agency of war, and the **State Department**, in monitoring intelligence reports. Truman created the Department of Defense, realising that under Roosevelt only the president had commanded both the Army and the Navy. His professionalisation of the American war machine was partly a response to the Second World War, and partly a realisation that the Cold War was becoming embedded in American life. Just like any conventional war, there were other effects on American life: the military draft continued; military spending grew; a national-security state based on secrecy grew up, which demanded public trust without public accountability.

Post-war peace making

Truman's first overseas mission was to attend the second victors' conference of 1945, in July and August at Potsdam. His problem there was that FDR had misrepresented the first, in February at Yalta. He had told Congress that the decisions made at Yalta 'ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries and have always failed'. In fact, Yalta divided up Europe, producing a clear path for Stalin to create a sphere of influence for himself out of the countries of Eastern Europe. Stalin had perceived an impending conflict between capitalism and communism, and in that sense was more responsible than Truman for the build-up of tensions after 1941. He was not intent on provoking war, but in a long-term build-up of communist power, and in an age-old Russian goal of having some strongly defended states between the USSR and Germany, he sought to forestall any further German invasions. The imposition of communist dictatorships in eastern Europe was the most destabilising thing he did, but it had been foreordained at Yalta. Truman's problem was that he could hardly say so without accusing Roosevelt, his heroic predecessor, of lying.

The conference at Potsdam came a month after the San Francisco Conference to establish the United Nations, at which the Soviet point of view was largely ignored: the United Nations was to be founded on democratic and capitalist principles, and there was certainly no mention of the long-term Russian goal of building up a 'buffer zone' of friendly states in Eastern Europe designed to keep the Germans at bay. At Potsdam, Truman was forced to tell Stalin about the impending atomic attack on Japan – Stalin had known about the existence of nuclear weapons for some time, and did not even bother to pretend to be surprised. Truman was also forced to concede that the plans made at Yalta for free and fair elections in liberated Europe would not be honoured – there would certainly be elections, but Stalin had no intention of allowing them to be free in the countries that the Russians had liberated. The Russians did not play any part in helping to reconstruct Germany, which was divided into four zones of conquest (the others held by Britain and France). Indeed, the Soviets did not believe that the reconstruction of Germany – its planned rebuilding to ensure that it would be able to develop properly and along peaceful lines – should occur. Instead, Truman antagonised Stalin, perhaps by trying to hold him to agreements which, FDR's public statements notwithstanding, had not actually been made at Yalta.