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## The USA: the domestic policies of Truman and Eisenhower

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# Introduction

This chapter deals with how the administrations of Truman and Eisenhower responded to the needs of US society after the Second World War. The Great Depression, the New Deal and the war itself all resulted in profound changes in US government and society. During the 1930s, Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to tackle the effects of the Depression, but it was really the massive rearmament programme brought about by the Second World War that returned the US to full employment. The war also caused considerable economic and social change, and afterwards the US public expected its leaders to maintain the prosperity their country had enjoyed during the war years. On the international stage, the USA became a world power with global responsibilities. This affected domestic policy, as US leaders had to find the resources to maintain military forces as well as continuing the economic and social reforms begun before the war. This chapter considers the personalities and backgrounds of Truman and Eisenhower. Their main domestic policies are outlined, as well as how they dealt with the transition from war to peace. This section also discusses the economic and social issues that arose in the post-war years, including the wave of anti-communist feeling and the development of the civil rights movement.

### TIMELINE

- 1945 Apr:** Roosevelt dies in office; Truman becomes President
- May:** Second World War in Europe ends
- Sep:** Second World War in the Pacific ends
- 1946** Mid-term elections increase Republican control of Congress
- 1947 Mar:** Truman Doctrine announced
- 1948 Apr:** Marshall Aid distributed in Europe
- Aug:** Alger Hiss accused of espionage
- Nov:** Truman wins re-election
- 1949 Jan:** Truman announces Fair Deal
- Aug:** USSR explodes atomic bomb
- 1950 Jun:** Korean War begins
- 1952 Nov:** Eisenhower elected President
- 1954** Mid-term elections increase Democratic power in Congress; anti-communist senator Joseph McCarthy loses influence

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- 1956 Nov:** Eisenhower re-elected
- 1957 Sep:** Civil Rights Act passed
- 1958 Sep:** Little Rock incident
- 1960 Nov:** Kennedy elected President
- 1961 Jan:** Eisenhower warns of power of military-industrial complex

## KEY QUESTIONS

- What issues faced Truman in 1945 and how well did he deal with them?
- What was Truman's Fair Deal?
- What was the significance of divisions within the Democratic Party and Congressional opposition?
- What characterised Eisenhower's domestic policies?
- How successful were Eisenhower's domestic policies?

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## Overview

- As Roosevelt's Vice-President, Truman assumed the leadership when the President died in office in April 1945. In doing so, he stepped into the shoes of one of the USA's most popular leaders. Roosevelt had introduced radical domestic changes in the 1930s, and brought the US into a foreign war that had made the country a global superpower.
- To begin with, Truman's domestic policy with its 'Fair Deal' remained faithful to the ideals of Roosevelt's New Deal, and the new President maintained high levels of government control to ease the transition from war to peace.
- A surprise victory in the 1948 presidential election kept Truman in office. After this, he introduced the ambitious Fair Deal programme, but many of these domestic reforms could not be put into practice.
- Attempts at further reform were hindered by the USA's involvement in the Korean War, which began in 1950. By 1952, Truman's

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popularity was declining and the USA was in the grip of anti-communist hysteria.

- The Republican Eisenhower was elected President in 1952, but he did not pursue conservative domestic policies to the extent that some in his party wished. He presided over the period known as the ‘Red Scare’, but he did not openly condemn extremism.
- Like Truman, Eisenhower found himself distracted from domestic issues by foreign affairs as the Cold War developed. Despite this, Eisenhower managed to maintain and even extend certain social policies throughout the 1950s.
- Civil rights emerged as a main issue in US political and social life from 1954, and in 1957 Eisenhower pushed through the first Civil Rights Act in over 80 years.
- Having served two terms, Eisenhower could not run for re-election in 1960, and the Democrat John F. Kennedy defeated Eisenhower’s Vice-President, Richard Nixon, by a small majority.

## 2.1 What issues faced Truman in 1945 and how well did he deal with them?

**Franklin D. Roosevelt** died in office on 12 April 1945, while the USA was still at war. He was succeeded by his Vice-President, **Harry S Truman**.

### Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945):

Born into a wealthy New York family, Roosevelt rose in Democratic politics and became governor of New York. He was elected President in 1932 and soon introduced his New Deal programme of reforms, a large-scale plan to use federal government resources to combat the effects of the Depression and bring about reform in US society. Roosevelt led the USA in the Second World War, but died in April 1945, shortly after beginning his fourth term in office.

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**Political Developments in the United States and Canada****Harry S Truman (1884–1972):**

Truman came from a family of farmers, and worked as a bank clerk as well as on the family farm. He joined the army and fought in France in the First World War, rising to the rank of captain. After the war, Truman used his army connections to get into politics, and he became a judge in Jackson County, Missouri, in 1926. This was an administrative rather than a legal post, and one of his major achievements was to build new roads in the county.

The Democratic Party in Missouri was dominated by a career politician – ‘Boss’ Tom Prendergast. In 1934, Prendergast backed Truman’s campaign for the Senate, although at the time he won little attention from President Roosevelt. As a senator, Truman quickly earned a reputation for efficiency, and he got approval for a Senate committee on the National Defense Program to investigate poor performance by defence contractors. This role became a key part of the war effort after the US joined the Second World War in December 1941.

Truman was a loyal supporter of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies, and his energy and honesty made him the Democrats’ choice for Vice-President in the 1944 election campaign. He had a reputation as a straight-talking, typical American and a good family man. In fact, Truman had not wanted the nomination and had little desire to be President.

**The transition from war to peace**

On taking power, Truman was aware that the unprecedented militarisation of the USA and the increase in government control of everyday life had become unpopular. Prices, rents, wages, the supply of food and raw materials, and the drafting of civilians into war service all contradicted US traditions of freedom and limited government power. Half the working population was employed directly or indirectly by the government, and 16 million US citizens had been drafted to fight for their country. Truman knew that the American people now wanted life to return to normal.

The Republicans began calling for an end to government economic controls as soon as the war was over. However, Truman feared that a sudden withdrawal of government contracts, subsidies and controls might result in inflation and widespread unemployment across the USA.

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Above all else, he wanted to avoid another economic depression like that of the 1930s.



**Figure 2.1:** American statesman Harry S Truman (1884–1972), the 33rd President of the United States of America.

Influenced by New Deal policies, and anxious to avoid social and political unrest, Truman was careful to maintain government controls. In his ‘hold the line’ Executive Order of August 1945, he extended wartime federal powers to peacetime – particularly those of the Office of Price Administration (OPA), which set price controls and rents. In September 1945, Truman also proposed a programme to maintain full employment. This included a house-building programme and a rise in the minimum wage. The government provided loans for ex-servicemen to buy homes, and offered grants for both training and education.

Despite the wishes of the Republicans, therefore, there was no sudden end to federal economic controls, and the transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy was successful. Towards the end of 1946, prices began to rise significantly, but by this time economic activity was

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enough to ensure that wages and employment increased to keep pace with the price rises.

In the early post-war years, Truman also faced several foreign policy issues. He was more suspicious of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin than Roosevelt had been, and disliked the spread of Soviet power throughout Eastern Europe. Despite the rapidly developing Cold War, Truman's administration came under pressure to demobilise US forces and reduce the military budget. In the first year after the war, Truman reduced the armed forces from 12 million to 3 million. Eisenhower – supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe during the war – famously claimed that the US had 'run out of army' by 1946.

### Labour unrest

The Second World War led to an increase in the membership and status of labour organisations in the USA. These groups were determined that the gains they had made in wages and working conditions during the war should not be lost. By the beginning of 1946, as peacetime brought wage reductions and less favourable working conditions, major strikes began to take place in key defence industries such as coal, iron and steel, railways and electricity. At a time when the USA claimed to be facing a threat from the Soviet Union, such action was felt to be intolerable, and in May 1946 the government took control of the railroads. Truman then went even further, and asked Congress for powers to draft railroad workers into the army. The Senate blocked the proposal, believing it was a threat to the liberty of US citizens.

Truman also took control of the coal mines. Coal was essential to US power supplies and rail transport. When the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), under its leader **John L. Lewis**, refused to honour an agreement negotiated by the government, Truman took Lewis to court and the union was fined for breach of contract.

#### **John L. Lewis (1880–1969):**

Lewis was a major figure in US labor history and founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a federation of trades unions, in 1938. He was President of the United Mine Workers of America from 1920 to 1960. A major supporter of the New Deal, Lewis helped to get Roosevelt elected, but his popularity declined after he organised coal strikes during the Second World War.

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Truman believed that the strikes threatened national security, and he took extreme measures to end this threat. Although the war was over Truman maintained a wartime mentality, believing that the USA continued to face a national emergency and that the government had a right to take whatever steps were necessary to deal with this. However, his actions cost him the considerable support of the unions, which had previously been allies of the Democratic Party.

In fact, Truman was not as anti-union as the Republicans – or even some members of his own party. However, he opposed the Taft–Hartley Act, which ended the closed shop policy (by which all employees in a business or factory had to belong to a trade union), banned political payments by unions and strikes by government employees, and made it illegal for union officials to be communists. The Taft–Hartley Act was made law in 1947, despite the President's opposition.

### The mid-term elections, 1946

Despite his early successes, by 1946 Truman was becoming increasingly unpopular. Unions disliked his hard line; prices were rising and those soldiers still waiting to be demobilised were growing restless and resentful. The Republicans once more urged economic freedom. Under the slogan 'Had Enough?' they demanded a reduction in taxes and greater limits on government control. In the 1946 mid-term elections the Republicans won control of Congress, and government now became a struggle between the Executive (the President) and the Legislature (Congress). The fact that Truman had not been elected President weakened him – there were even some Democrats who felt that he was ill-equipped to lead the country.

Truman tried to boost his popularity by proposing a series of social reforms in the New Deal tradition. In truth, the country could not afford to implement these reforms – and Truman knew it. However, he also knew that the conservative-dominated Congress would not approve the proposals, so he could portray himself as a reforming President working in the interests of the people, without having to follow through on the changes. He put forward plans for health and education reforms, and suggested more subsidies for farmers and a repeal of hostile labour legislation. As expected, Congress rejected all these proposals.



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**Political Developments in the United States and Canada****ACTIVITY**

In groups, decide on the key features of the USA's domestic transition from war to peace. Write each feature on a card and give Truman a mark out of six for his handling of each one. On the back of the card explain the mark you have allocated. Report the marks you have given to the other groups, and then hold a class discussion to come to an agreement on the features and how successfully Truman handled them.

**Civil rights**

The increasing participation of African Americans in vital industries and in the armed forces raised questions about their status in the post-war USA, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) experienced a dramatic increase in membership. The USA claimed to be the champion of freedom, and had fought a war against racist regimes, yet discrimination against African Americans continued and laws dating from the 1890s still restricted their civil rights. African Americans who had served in the armed forces had witnessed the greater racial tolerance in other countries, so when they returned from war service they found discrimination at home harder to bear. This resulted in an increase in incidents of racial violence.

As racial tension grew in the South, Truman established the Civil Rights Committee to investigate the issue. The committee's report recommended changes to end abuses, and in 1948 Truman proposed measures to end restrictions on black voting in the South and to make lynching a federal offence. This would prevent local police and judges allowing race crimes to go unpunished.

Southern Democrats were furious, and in 1948 a group of them set up their own party – the States' Rights Democratic Party, or 'Dixiecrats'. In the past, reforming Democratic presidents had often had to deal with an uneasy alliance of northern progressives and southern white supremacists, but Truman was determined not to be controlled by this faction of his own party. Instead, he pursued his agenda of reform in several ways:

- He ordered desegregation to begin in the armed forces.
- He banned discrimination in federal employment and in hotels in Washington, DC.

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- He refused to give government contracts to firms that discriminated against African American employees.
- He appointed the first African American federal judge.

These measures lay within Truman's existing powers as commander-in-chief and head of the federal government. However, more general legislation depended on congressional approval, so further progress in civil rights was limited.

### SOURCE 2.1

We have reached a turning point in the long history of our country's efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens. Recent events in the United States and abroad have made us realise that it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights...

When I say all Americans I mean all Americans...

We must keep moving forward, with new concepts of civil rights to safeguard our heritage. The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against the Government, but protection of the people by the Government.

We must make the Federal Government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. And again I mean all Americans...

Each man must be guaranteed equality of opportunity. The only limit to an American's achievement should be his ability, his industry, and his character. These rewards for his effort should be determined only by those truly relevant qualities.

*Extract from a speech made by Harry S. Truman to the NAACP, 29 June 1947. From Miller Center for Public Affairs, University of Virginia, [miller-center.org](http://miller-center.org)*