President Truman's Personality and Leadership

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PRESIDENT TRUMAN'S PERSONALITY AND LEADERSHIP

_The New York Times_ eulogized him as a "decisive president."\(^1\) The compliment was well-deserved. Harry Truman made more than his share of major decisions while presiding over the nation as its 33rd president. The atomic bomb, the Soviet intervention in the affairs of Greece and Turkey, and the communist invasion of South Korea were only a few of the developments that required prompt decisions with far-reaching consequences. Sometimes Truman embroiled himself in controversy unnecessarily. He did not have to dismiss General MacArthur or seize the steel mills. But he never hesitated to make these decisions and others like them when he felt they were necessary. Handling so many decisions is an accomplishment in itself.

The seven and a half years of Truman's administration were anything but uneventful; the President faced one problem after another in rapid succession. Two of his decisions, the bomb and the Marshall Plan, literally meant the difference between life and death for thousands of people. Many men would have broken under the strain. But Truman did not break, nor did he push his problems aside. He faced them with courage and determination, aged very little while in office, and lived longer (to age 88) than any other president who served more than four years.\(^2\)

It is no accident that Harry Truman bore the burden of the presidency so well. His psychological

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\(^2\)John Adams and Herbert Hoover, each of whom served one term of four years, both lived to the age of 90.
makeup, reflected in his personality and style, help explain both why he made the decisions he did, and how he was able to deal with the effects of those decisions without letting the pressure take years off his life. A look at Truman's personal characteristics and some of the major decisions he made will show that his personality (how he perceived things) and style (how he did things) enabled him to make numerous major decisions, some of them highly controversial, and to deal effectively with the stress of his presidency.

Truman had no qualms about making decisions and accepting full responsibility for them. He felt this was the only way he could ever be numbered among the successful presidents. He told Merle Miller, one of his biographers,

There's always a lot of talk about how we have to fear . . . a strong man, but . . . if I read my American history right, it isn't the strong men that have caused us most of the trouble, it's the ones who were weak . . . the ones who just sat on their asses and twiddled their thumbs when they were President.3

Decision making was more than a responsibility to Harry Truman; it was the key to effective government. President Truman took a common-sense approach to making decisions. He said he always consulted with his Cabinet on major policy decisions because he considered it "much better having pooled brains on important subjects than trying to have one head do the

He learned to listen to both sides of an argument, thing about it, and then come to a decision. According to Merle Miller, the President "asked his associates to tell him how long he had to decide whatever was to be decided, and when the deadline came, the decision had been made." For him, it was as simple as that.

Coupled with Truman's ability to make a decision was his willingness to make an unpopular one. He seldom worried about how his statements and actions would affect his popularity. "He spoke his mind, reckless of the consequences for himself." He felt this was the only way he could properly exercise his role in American government. "If you keep your mouth shut about things you think are important," he said, "I don't see how you can expect the democratic system to work at all." He wrote in his memoirs: "If a President is easily influenced and interested in keeping in line with the press and the polls, he is a complete

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4 William Hillman, Mr. President (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), p. 18.


8 Miller, p. 131-32.
Truman exemplified this principle by firing General MacArthur. It was more than a controversy; it was one of the most unpopular decisions ever made by an American president.

Standing up for his principles in the face of political danger was not a quality Truman acquired in the White House; it had been ingrained in his character throughout his political career. As a country judge seeking reelection in 1924, he attended a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, not to identify himself with the organization, but to tell them off. He called them "a bunch of cheap, un-American fakers" and told them to "go to hell." After he had his say, he walked through the crowd and left. Courageous an act as it was, it did not help him on Election Day. The Klan had significant political influence at that time, and when the votes were in, Truman was out, defeated in part by his own determination to say what he thought needed to be said.

Part of the reason Truman could take an unpopular stand was that he did not fear criticism. He saw criticism as a healthy part of the democratic process. According to Political Scientist James David Barber, Truman was able to learn from negative feedback because he could "separate the moral castigations from

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11 Miller, p. 74.

12 Ibid., p. 131.
the substance of the arguments he received." 13 It did not bother him when ordinary citizens were critical of him and his administration. In 1951 he said: "If the people couldn't blow off steam they might explode. Half the fun of being a citizen in this country comes from complaining about the way we run our government . . . " 14

One of Harry Truman's more enviable qualities was that once he made a decision, he never worried about it. Former President Lyndon Johnson observed that

the great thing about Truman is that once he makes up his mind about something—anything, including the A Bomb—he never looks back and asks, "Should I have done it? . . ." he just knows he made up his mind as best he could and that's that. There's no going back. 15

Merle Miller added that there were "no regrets, no looking back, no wondering if I had to do it all over again, would I have?" 16 Truman himself explained, "Worrying never does you any good. So I've never worried about things much. The only thing that I ever do worry about is to be sure that where I'm respon-


16 Miller, p. 13.
sible . . . the job is properly done."\textsuperscript{17} Dean Acheson, Truman's Secretary of State, wrote that his chief was totally without what he called, "that most enfeebling of emotions, regret."\textsuperscript{18}

One of Truman's more questionable attributes was that he often saw things in simple terms. This made it easier to make hard decisions, but it led him to make some ill-fated decisions and created other problems. For example, he failed to understand his opponents' points of view and therefore could not see the reason behind the opposition to his national health insurance proposal. He wrote in his memoirs that he was "never able to understand all the fuss some people make about government wanting to do something to improve and protect the health of the people."\textsuperscript{19} Many would naturally wonder whether the federal government was the answer to health concerns or whether it could even afford to finance a national health insurance program. But all Truman could see was that Americans, especially the elderly, who needed health care and could not afford it, should be able to get it. He had strongly defined values, and all too often he saw things as either right or wrong, good or bad, with nothing in between.

He tended to judge people the same way. Robert J. Donovan, a former White House correspondent, wrote that "Truman was a man who saw things in very strong hues. He saw blacks and whites; he didn't see grays .

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 33.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 14.

\textsuperscript{19}Truman, \textit{Years of Trial}, 2:31.
The book *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, based on a series of interviews between Truman and Merle Miller, confirms this analysis. An example of Truman’s strongly defined values is the way he viewed two American generals, George C. Marshall and Dwight D. Eisenhower. He liked Marshall and could not say enough for him. Of Marshall not receiving a parade like other World War II generals, Truman said that "he deserved it more than all the rest put together. I gave him a decoration or two, but there wasn’t a decoration anywhere that would have been big enough for General Marshall." From Truman’s perspective, it was almost as if Marshall had never made a mistake in his life. As for Eisenhower, Truman did not like him at all and found it difficult to give him credit for much of anything. After Eisenhower warned the American people about the Pentagon’s growing power in peacetime, Truman shared the concern but refused to praise the president-general for the speech. He concluded that "somebody must have written it for him, and I’m not sure he understood what he was saying . . ." Truman was blind to the weaknesses of those he liked and blind to the strengths of those he disliked. His lack of objectivity was perhaps his most serious character fault.

In summary, Harry Truman was an interesting man because he possessed an interesting combination of positive and negative qualities. He was direct and decisive, with a sensible approach to problem-solving. He had the courage to make unpopular decisions, and

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20 McGrath et al., p. 27.

21 Miller, p. 250.

22 Ibid., p. 180.
he was never intimidated by criticism. He did not fret over past decisions; once made, there were no regrets. On the other hand, he tended to see things in black and white, which led to some oversimplifications in his thinking. He had a hard time being objective about issues and people.

All these characteristics at one time or another played a significant role in major decisions Truman made while serving as President of the United States. At least one of the above-mentioned attributes was partly responsible for each of his decisions regarding the atom bomb, the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, Point Four, Korea, the firing of General MacArthur, and the seizure of the steel mills.

President Truman had hardly taken office upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt when he was called upon to make the first and biggest of these decisions: whether to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. He had been President only three months when an atomic bomb was successfully tested in New Mexico on July 16, 1945. Now he had to decide whether to drop on over Japan in an effort to end World War II.

Truman had appointed an interim committee that recommended the use of the bomb over invasion of Japan with two million men as the administration had planned. After the July 16th test, he promptly consulted with War Secretary Henry Stimson, Generals Marshall and Eisenhower, and others. Most of them favored using the bomb. General Marshall told him that if the bomb worked it would save 250,000 Americans and perhaps millions of Japanese.23

Truman opted to drop two atomic bombs on Japan. He said this decision was the hardest one he ever

made and that he only made it after "long and prayerful consideration," but he wrote in his memoirs that he never doubted the bomb should be used.  

A B-29 bomber dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. More than 92,000 people were killed or missing; an equal number were injured. More than four and a half of the city's square miles were destroyed. The second bomb fell on Nagasaki three days later and destroyed nearly two square miles of land. At least 40,000 were killed or missing; just as many were injured. Japan surrendered five days later, and the war was over.

Two factors enabled Truman to make this decision and live with it. One was his decisiveness, reflected by his common-sense approach to problem-solving. Had an invasion of Japan been necessary, half a million soldiers on both sides would have been killed and a million more "would have been maimed for life." The bomb ended the war and saved lives. This consideration was all it took for Truman to feel he made the right decision, despite the criticisms and questions that would surface later. The other factor in his favor was freedom from regret. He never looked back with second thoughts.

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26 Miller, p. 244.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 15.
After the war, the enormous task of rebuilding Europe remained. Secretary of State George Marshall suggested that the United States take the lead in promoting the recovery, and his recommendation, officially called the European Recovery Plan, became known as the Marshall Plan. Truman said it was designed "purely for postwar rehabilitation in the countries of western Europe whose production and economy were ruined by the war." According to reports he received, Europe needed help. People were starving, and food riots broke out in France and Italy. The winter of 1946-47 was unusually cold, and to add to the food and coal shortages, tuberculosis became a problem. Truman believed the Marshall Plan was vital to help Europeans "get back on their feet," and he pushed for its congressional support.

Congress approved the Marshall Plan, which proved to be highly successful. Between 1948 and 1952, sixteen countries in Europe received $13.15 billion in aid that included food, machinery, and other products. The real GNP of those countries rose by 25 percent, with a 35 percent increase in industrial production. The increases in chemicals, engineering, and steel industries were even more significant. Winston Churchill called the Marshall Plan "the most unsordid act in history." Even Richard Nixon, a political enemy of Truman's, admitted that it "was successful in every way: it saved Europe from starvation, it ensured

29Truman, *Years of Trial*, 2:268.

30Miller, pp. 257-58.

31Ibid., p. 257.

32Ibid., p. 249.
Europe’s economic recovery, and it preserved Europe from communism.”

Truman’s tendency to see things in black and white worked to his benefit when it helped him decide to support the Marshall Plan. Although it was extremely expensive, Truman knew that countless Europeans needed food as well as protection from communism. They had to get the aid, regardless of cost, so the Marshall Plan was implemented. It became one of the crowning achievements of Truman’s administration.

Other problems developed in Europe, particularly in Greece and Turkey. The Soviet Union demanded, among other things, the right to set up air and naval bases in Turkey. In Greece, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin supplied arms and ammunition to a guerilla army of 20,000 men that threatened to overthrow the existing government.

For about six weeks Truman struggled with what he called a "terrible decision." If the U.S. supplied aid to Greece and Turkey, its action was certain to increase tensions with the Soviet Union. Also, the fact that Greece and Turkey had corrupt governments would embarrass the Truman Administration. But if

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the U.S. did nothing, these two nations would likely succumb to communism.\(^37\)

As mistrust between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, an anonymous article appeared in the journal *Foreign Affairs* that had a significant impact on American foreign policy. George F. Kennan, a civilian diplomat in the American embassy at Moscow, gained wide publicity for the article which he signed "X." Kennan used the article to share his philosophy on containment. He argued that Soviet insecurities would lead to an activist and possible hostile Soviet foreign policy. He also stated that the United States could increase the strains on Soviet leadership in a way that would produce "either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."\(^38\) Kennan took a stand on how American policy towards the Soviets should be conducted, saying "In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies."\(^39\) His viewpoint gained widespread attention and acceptance, and signaled the birth of containment policy in the United States.\(^40\)

Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf of the Uni-

\(^37\)Truman, Harry S. *Truman*, p. 376.

\(^38\)X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25 (July 1947):582.

\(^39\)Ibid., p. 575.

versities of South Carolina and Florida, respectively, argued that Kennan's point of view influenced Truman's foreign policy. They wrote: "It was not long before this intellectual assessment received such wide publicity that Truman made it the cornerstone of American postwar policy."41 Whether Truman was right or wrong, he did show a willingness to listen and learn from others, an important element in his decision-making habits.

President Truman addressed a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947 to outline his policy. He asked for $400 million in aid to strengthen Greece against Communist-led revolutions and to help Turkey resist Soviet pressure. He announced "that it must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."42 This policy, which became known as the Truman Doctrine, marked the beginning of an overt American effort to contain Communist expansion. It was the first time the United States had ever committed military aid overseas in peacetime. A new era in American foreign policy was underway.

Truman had a hard time with this decision, but it would have been even more difficult for him were it not for his decisive approach to problem-solving and his simplistic view of the situation. Barton Bernstein, an author critical of the Truman Doctrine, gave useful insights into the President's reasoning. He said Truman believed that a communist victory in Greece would probably lead to communist victories in other European nations and that the spread of communism

41 Ibid.

42 Truman, *Years of Trial*, 2:129.
would undermine world peace and thus threaten the security of the United States.43 This logic, broken down into simple terms, made it easier for Truman to formulate his policy, which helped save Greece and Turkey from communist takeovers.

Truman also made major decisions in his second term. When he was sworn into the presidency on January 20, 1949, he proposed "a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas."44 This policy became known as Point Four because it was the fourth point in his inaugural address. It was designed to use American skills, knowledge, equipment, and investment capital to help developing nations in such areas as industry, agriculture, and education. Truman said the program was not designed to be a government handout but to "help people to help themselves, with the theory that prosperity of all parts of the world means the prosperity of the whole world."45 Reporter William Hillman wrote that President Truman considered "his Point Four Program the most important peace policy development of his administration."46

Point Four won congressional approval on June 5,


44 Truman, Year of Trial, 2:267.

45 William Hillman, Mr. President (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), pp. 249-50.

46 Ibid., p. 249.
1950, and it grew rapidly. In a little over a decade, 6,000 American technicians were working in 58 nations helping the natives.

Truman used a common-sense approach that enabled him to make a decision in favor of Point Four. The inhabitants of many countries suffered a low standard of living even though those countries had immense natural resources. Since the people obviously did not know how to use those resources to their best advantage, Truman found it easy to be decisive in sending American technicians to teach them.

If President Truman thought the end of World War II would end his administration's involvement in overseas fighting, he was sadly mistaken. After the Second World War, the Soviets exercised considerable influence in North Korea. They established a communist puppet government there, organized an army of Koreans, and militarized the 38th parallel line. North Koreans also created problems for South Koreans with their program of propaganda, subversion, and terrorism. It was only a matter of time before they would clash in warfare.

The clash came on June 25, 1950. Claiming they had to repel an invasion of South Koreans, North Koreans crossed the border into South Korea and headed to Seoul, its capital city. South Koreans, caught by surprise with their forces dispersed, offered little effective resistance to the advancing troops.

President Truman was relaxing in his home in Independence, Missouri when he received word of the invasion. At his urging, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution condemning the invasion and demanding an end to the fighting. This was made possible by the absence of Soviet delegates, who were involved in a temporary boycott of the U.N. On June 27, Truman authorized the use of air and naval forces to help the South Koreans. Three days later, he ex-
tended this aid to include American ground forces. So began American involvement in an undeclared war that lasted three years and cost thousands of American lives.

Peter McGrath and his associates, in an article for *Newsweek* magazine, wrote that Truman's habit of seeing things in black and white led to his decision to commit troops to Korea. According to Merle Miller, Truman's attitude about the North Koreans was that "we've got to stop the sons of bitches no matter what..." Truman's daughter wrote that he thought the invasion would lead to World War III, and he undoubtedly felt a need to help South Korea in order to prevent such a war.

Senator Robert Taft, the Republican majority leader, recommended a joint congressional resolution to authorize intervention in Korea. Truman ignored the suggestion and committed troops on his own. Historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote that this was Truman's "great mistake," and that by disagreeing with Senator Taft the President "created the precedent of inherent presidential power to send troops into combat." In this case, Truman's tendency to see things in black and white led to a serious blunder. Because he felt that the important thing was to stop the North Koreans, and since he regarded the Commander-in-Chief clause of the Constitution as authority enough to intervene, he increased presidential power in a way that has since

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47 McGrath, p. 27.

48 Miller, p. 285.

49 Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, p. 495.

50 McGrath, p. 27.
haunted the American people.

Another major decision Truman made regarding the Korean conflict is less controversial today than it was at the time. Douglas MacArthur, a popular general who led the American troops in Korea, often disagreed with the President on how the war should be conducted. When Truman had finally had enough, he fired the general for insubordination.

The trouble between these leaders started after communist China got involved in the war. U.N. forces recaptured most of South Korea and proceeded north to the Yalu River, the border separating North Korea and China. MacArthur had received permission to destroy military forces in North Korea. Truman also let him proceed to the Yalu based on the assurance the general had given him that China would not attack. But China did attack. Chinese soldiers not only routed MacArthur's forces but drove them back across the 38th parallel.

MacArthur now felt that China should be fought as well as North Korea. He wanted to bomb supply centers in Manchuria and unleash Chinese nationalists in Taiwan to help fight the communist mainland. The President, however, stood firm in his determination to prevent World War III. The disagreement lasted for months.

The final showdown came in March 1951, when MacArthur and his men reached the 38th parallel. The President wanted him to stop there and hopefully negotiate a cease-fire, but MacArthur publicly disagreed, saying that only expansion of the war could lead to lasting peace. He proposed blockading China's coast, bombing its industrial cities, and using Chiang Kai-shek's forces in Taiwan to invade South China. After that statement, the President knew the general had to go.

The last straw broke on April 5 when MacAr-
thur's letter to Representative Joseph W. Martin, expressing his disagreement with the policies of the administration, was read in Congress. Truman fired him six days later. In the official announcement prepared for reporters, the President stated:

With deep regret, I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations in matters pertaining to his official duties . . . I have, therefore, relieved General MacArthur of his commands and have designated Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway as his successor.51

The dismissal aroused a storm of criticism through the United States. According to the Gallup Poll, only 29 percent of the American people supported the President's decision.52 Less than 5 percent of the letters and telegrams that poured into the White House favored the dismissal.53 Some Senators who supported the President said that telegrams from their constituents were running "ten to one" against him.54 Most newspapers condemned the action.55 When Truman entered Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. to watch a base-

51Truman, Years of Trial, 2:509.

52Miller, p. 333.

53Ibid.


55Miller, p. 333.
ball game, he was booed by the fans. When he left, he was booed again, and a few shouted, "Where's Mac-Arthur?" There was talk of impeachment on Capitol Hill. The President was also "burned in effigy in numerous towns, and even on a few college campuses. Something very close to mass hysteria gripped the nation."

In this day and age of persistent poll-watching, it is difficult to imagine a politician making a decision that he knew would spark such an uproar. But Truman was able to make such a decision because he had the courage to do what he felt was right at the cost of severe criticism. Letting the beloved general go was unquestionably the most unpopular decision he ever made, and his character empowered him to make it.

Truman's simplistic analysis of the situation also helped. "He disobeyed orders, and I was Commander-in-Chief, ... So I acted as Commander-in-Chief and called him home." Not all of President Truman's problems were related to foreign affairs. Labor problems were among the domestic issues that faced his administration. Strikes were a constant threat, and Truman often lost his patience with labor leaders. When U.S. steel-workers went on strike in 1952, he ordered the federal government to seize and operate the steel mills.

The Wage Stabilization Board had recommended a

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56 "Boos and Blows," *Newsweek*, 30 April 1951, p. 22.

57 Miller, p. 335.


59 Miller, p. 335.
raise of 26.4 cents an hour for the Steelworkers Union. The company would not bargain with the union and would only grant the raise on the condition they could raise the price of steel by $12 a ton.\textsuperscript{60} When an agreement could not be reached, the United Steelworkers went on strike, and "the flow of steel to Korean War armament manufacturers was effectively stopped."\textsuperscript{61}

In the name of national security, President Truman issued Executive Order 10340, authorizing federal seizure of the steel mills. The next day he asked Congress for authority to operate them. When Congress refused to act, the mills took their case to court. Federal Judge David Pines held that Truman's order was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, upheld that ruling.\textsuperscript{62}

The steel companies got their mills back, and the strike continued. It lasted a total of fifty-five days. Total losses during that time were estimated to be $2.5 billion.\textsuperscript{63}

Truman had ordered government seizure of the steel mills because he felt that victory in Korea could depend on it. National security, he reasoned, depended on defense production, which depended on steel.\textsuperscript{64}

There were several famous works about President Truman. David S. Thomson's "\textit{A Pictorial Biography: HST}\textsuperscript{61} (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1973), p. 85.

\textsuperscript{62}Truman, \textit{Harry S. Truman}, p. 583.

\textsuperscript{63}Thompson, \textit{Pictorial Biography}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{64}Truman, \textit{Years of Trial}, 2:534.
The courts did not accept this argument, and neither did historians. In his book *The American Presidency*, Clinton Rossiter, who spoke highly of Truman, condemned the steel seizure as one of his "sins of commission."65 A journal article in *Economist*, written in tribute to Truman after his death, stated that his "efforts to get tough with the unions when he considered that strikes on the railways and in the steel industry were endangering national security ended in humiliating failure."66

Truman's oversimplified perception that victory in Korea depended on consistent steel production led him to make a decision that would have been better left unmade. Ordering the government to take over the steel mills was an extreme measure not justified by the circumstances; the strike did not cause an American collapse in Korea. Truman overestimated the seriousness of the problem and overreacted, producing an embarrassing repudiation by the Supreme Court that could have been easily avoided. It was unfortunate that a president who played such a large role in ending a world war and feeding a foreign continent could not deal effectively with strikes at home.

In conclusion, Harry Truman was a man of extraordinary strengths and forgivable weaknesses. He was a president whose personality and style affected decisions that in large measure would determine his place in history. Some of those decisions, like the Marshall Plan and Point Four, needed to be made.


They improved the condition of the world and secured Truman's status as an excellent president. Other decisions, like seizing the steel mills and leaving Congress out of the decision-making process that put American troops in Korea, were serious mistakes that needlessly stained the presidency. The rightness or wrongness of other decisions, such as committing troops to Korea in the first place, is more debatable. But on the whole, the country and the world were better off as a result of Harry Truman's leadership. In the words of Arthur Schlesinger: "Truman had to face major crises and he handled them well--and without all the nonsense and the pomp of subsequent presidents."67 Truman not only handled those problems well, but he did so in a way that allowed him to preserve his health and live more than nineteen years as a former president.

One of the most eloquent tributes to Truman's service in the White House came from Richard Nixon, who many years before had been one of Harry Truman's harshest critics. Nixon was President of the United States when Truman died and issued a statement upon his passing that said, in part: "He did what had to be done, when it had to be done, and because he did the world today is a better and safer place--and generations to come will be in his debt."68

Blake Edward Adams

67 Mcgrath, p. 27.


