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Harry S. Truman

Faith, Freedom, and the Cold War

By Elizabeth Spalding

In order to fight the Cold War, President Harry S Truman oversaw a revolution in American foreign policy. Characterized by policies and institutions such as the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the Berlin airlift, the strategy of containment redefined liberal internationalism and involved the United States in the world as never before. Despite such programs, however, the Communists made gains in atomic weapons, propaganda, Europe, and China in the late 1940s. In 1950, NSC 68 -- primarily and theoretically -- and Korea secondarily and practically -- confirmed for Truman what he already believed: In the end, the Cold War would be won or lost on moral grounds. But he could not turn to the United Nations for moral authority, since the Soviets had subverted the international organization's original intent. Instead, the president endeavored to take the moral high ground in the East-West conflict by developing a two-pronged political strategy involving the mass media and the world's major religions that also coupled the governmental and private sectors.

In this project, Truman focused first on the dissemination of public information. On April 20, 1950 -- within two to three weeks of reading NSC 68, perhaps the most important U.S. government document of the Cold War -- he launched what he called the Campaign of Truth. Central to the undertaking was an expansion of the Voice of America beyond what the president had requested in preceding years. As he explained to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Cold War "is a struggle, above all else, for the minds of men." Truman went on to argue that the propaganda used by the "forces of imperialistic communism" could be overcome by the "plain, simple, unvarnished truth." On the home front, he urged the press to enlist in the campaign by informing the American people "well and completely." "If you misinform them," he said, "their decisions will be bad; our country will suffer and the world will suffer."

On a global scale, an enlarged VOA would join with the private efforts of international businessmen, labor unions, newspapers and magazines, radio, motion pictures, and others in communicating information in simple form to people of varied backgrounds and cultures. Truman emphasized that the truth must reach people around the world or "we will lose the battle for men's minds by pure default."^[1] Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Edward Barrett, who came up with the actual "Campaign of Truth" phrase, testified before an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in July 1950 that it derived from the "inevitable conclusion" of NSC 68 "that the world situation was deteriorating and deteriorating rapidly. On the basis of that the president, on the advice of numerous people, reached the conclusion that we needed to step up [overseas propaganda] activities."^[2] William Benton, a Democratic Party senator from Connecticut who had once held Barrett's position, sponsored a Senate resolution for "a Marshall Plan in the field of ideas," in recognition "that the central issue of our time is intellectual and spiritual, and that the heart of the present conflict is a struggle for the minds and loyalties of mankind."^[3] After the Korean War began, Truman submitted an appropriation request in July for \$89 million to implement the campaign; after the House of Representatives reduced the amount by over \$20 million, he pressed in August for his original allocation.^[4]

Truman saw the dangers of what came to be known technically as disinformation and misinformation. He had seen the inroads made by Soviet propaganda in western Europe, particularly in 1947 through 1949, and believed that American will and policies had defeated the USSR's efforts to sway elections and upset the Marshall Plan. The Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and, in the following year, Radio Liberty (soon Radio Liberty) became part of the institutional fabric of containment.^[5] The president thought that he had learned correctly from recent history, and he went on to the next step of his strategy in the partnership between the public and private sectors: the moral suasion and power of faith. As leader of the strongest power of the free world, he aimed to harness and coordinate the world's religions in an effort to stop the Communists and what he viewed as their elemental godlessness.

In 1946 and 1947, Truman attempted this component of containment with mixed results. On the day after Churchill's Fulton Address in March 1946, he urged Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews to spur a "moral and spiritual awakening" in the aftermath of World War II and deploy the full power of freedom in meeting the threats of "new conflicts, new terror, and new destruction."^[6] In May 1946, he reappointed Myron Taylor as his personal representative to Pius XII, this time with the added rank of ambassador, marking what would have been the Vatican's first full diplomatic recognition by the United States. He reasoned that the Roman Catholic Church was his strongest religious ally in the moral battle against international communism, but numerous objections, particularly from Protestants, led the president to retract the proposal. Nevertheless, Truman sent Taylor on special missions to the pontiff for the next several years and in 1947 involved him in embarking on a global endeavor. As he wrote to Bess, "Had Myron Taylor in too. Looks as if he and I may get the morals of the world on our side. We are talking to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop at the head of the Lutheran Church, the Metropolitan of the Greek Church at Istanbul, and the pope. I may send him to see the top Buddhist and the Grand Lama of Tibet. If I can mobilize the people who believe in a moral world against the Bolshevik materialists, who believe as Henry Wallace does 'that the end justifies the means' -- we can win this fight." He then added, "Treaties, agreements, or a moral code mean nothing to Communists. So we've got to organize the people who do believe in honor and the Golden Rule to win the world back to peace and Christianity."^[7] The Catholic Church expressed interest, but other faiths rejected the idea and, perhaps, the implied ecumenism. Although his efforts came to naught, Truman maintained that a world crusade of religions against communism would be unbeatable over time and continued to argue that recognition of the Vatican was past due, in and of itself and as part of a Cold War strategy.

Truman resurrected the idea of a global religious campaign in 1951. At minimum, he hoped that the major religions would agree to an international conference; at maximum, he looked for the defeat of communism through a concerted religious effort, which would place before the peoples of the world the superiority and strength of what he called truth and freedom. The president laid the groundwork to renew his proposal during the course of 1950, especially after reading NSC 68 in April. Joining politics and faith, he set forth his argument for the union of strength and freedom as the precursor to genuine peace in May 1950 at Gonzaga University in Washington: "In the face of aggressive tyranny, the economic, political, and military strength of free men is a necessity. But we are not increasing our strength just for strength's sake. We must be strong if we are to expand freedom. We must be strong if free men are to be able to satisfy their moral obligations. It is the moral and religious beliefs of mankind which alone give our strength meaning and purpose."^[8] Truman considered the speech a significant address at a critical time to an important audience; because he believed that Catholic participation was crucial to an international campaign against communism, he deliberately chose to speak at a Catholic school.^[9] Myron Taylor had resigned as of January 18, 1950, and Truman wanted to replace him with an ambassador. With this speech, the president hoped to further both goals.

Truman led up to his conclusion at Gonzaga University by describing how a good society existed when men followed "the will of the Lord" based on the fundamental belief "that all men are equal before God." From this understanding flowed the securing of individual rights and equal opportunity for all citizens. Just as this belief in equality had enabled America to build a great nation of liberty, Truman added, so too could it serve as the foundation for world peace. The president held that equality before God, recognized in good government, would undergird a brotherhood of man -- much in the sense that Pius XII sketched in their Christmas 1949 exchange of messages -- around the world.^[10] Truman believed that peace would follow, not from world government but from the understanding of equality, morality and religion, strength, and freedom. "The greatest obstacle to peace," he said, "is a modern tyranny led by a small group who have abandoned their faith in God. These tyrants have forsaken ethical and moral beliefs. They believe that only force makes right. They are aggressively seeking to expand the area of their domination." But he did not claim that ridding the world of tyranny would bring eternal peace. As a Christian, he saw both the "barriers of ignorance and poverty" and the "barriers of tyranny"; as a Christian statesman, however, he concentrated his attention on the worst offender.^[11]

Shortly after the Korean War began, Truman expounded on his belief that a revival of religion and a rededication of the United States to the "unchanging truths" of the Christian religion was needed to defeat communism. He contrasted America's freedom of religion to the suppression of freedom and a concomitant denial of human rights by communism behind the "impenetrable iron curtain." To the president of the Baptist World Alliance in his home state of Missouri, Truman forthrightly disclosed these views in July 1950: "To succeed in our quest for righteousness



This week marks anniversaries for two landmark Truman signatures. On July 26, Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947, establishing the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. One year later, he signed Executive Order 9981, prohibiting discrimination in the U.S. armed forces and in the federal government.

we must, in St. Paul's luminous phrase, put on the armor of God." At the time, various religious leaders and journals of the Truman era -- notably, the *Christian Century* -- consistently criticized what they viewed as the president's simplistic religious exhortations on complex issues. [12] But Truman believed, as he explained in the letter, that problems -- including the threat from international communism -- could be best solved if free men were to use their intelligence, courage, and faith and to seek solutions in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. [13] He invoked a consistent theme of his life and presidency: that all, especially but not only Christians, could understand, accept, and act upon the message of Jesus' Beatitudes and golden rule. And by emphasizing the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, he left open the possibility that many could join in the fight against communism.

In preparing the American people and the world for what was, essentially, a religious Campaign of Truth in 1951, President Truman closed 1950 with an accent on the theme of comprehensive strength. He placed the fighting in Korea in the context of "the struggle between freedom and communist slavery" in order to remind his audience that, in respect to defense, "we need the combined resources and the common determination of the free world to meet the military threat of communism." While not playing down the military aspect of the Cold War, the president focused again on the moral and spiritual dangers from communism: "Communism attacks our main basic values, our belief in God, our belief in the dignity of man and the value of human life, our belief in justice and freedom. It attacks the institutions that are based on these values. It attacks our churches, our guarantees of civil liberty, our courts, our democratic form of government. Communism claims that all these things are merely tools of self-interest and greed -- that they are weapons used by one class to oppress another." [14]

It is unclear if Truman had a specific date in mind for the announcement of a new international religious campaign against communism in 1951, but he worked toward that end during the early part of the year. In February 1951, Truman used the dedication of a chapel commemorating four chaplains (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) who gave their lives on a torpedoed, sinking ship during World War II so that four other men could survive, to stress that the unity of the United States, as with these four men, was also unity under God. "It is a unity in freedom," he remarked, "for the service of God is perfect freedom." Truman repeated his stated 1950 goal for peace through freedom and brotherhood -- quoting the famous passage from St. John: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Using the story of heroism at hand, he argued that the United States could not lead the forces of freedom from behind. He compared the chaplains' sacrifice with that of those who fought in the American Revolution, and contrasted both with the summer soldiers and sunshine patriots rebuked by Thomas Paine. While drawing an additional parallel to the Americans dying in Korea "to save us from the terrible slaughter and destruction which another world war would surely bring," the president upheld the American model of religious diversity and political unity as an example to the world. [15]

In April 1951, between the third anniversary of the Marshall Plan's enactment and the second anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, Truman developed further his argument that faith was integral to any meaningful shift -- let alone victory -- in the Cold War. Speaking at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, he reiterated that the American republic was founded on the same principles of the moral law taught by the great religions. He contended that faith should set moral standards for domestic as well as international conduct and that "[w]e should judge our achievements, as a nation, in the scales of right and wrong." Quick to emphasize that freedom was the most important principle of American civilization, he distinguished freedom -- based upon moral principles -- from an unmoored freedom, which degenerated rapidly into selfishness and license in individuals and anarchy in society. The president then returned to familiar themes of preceding years: he tied the application of moral standards to American efforts in the world and the buildup of the country's defenses; stressed that international communism was opposed to the tenets, including the right to worship God, which Americans lived by and cherished; and concluded that religious faith gave the United States the ability to answer the false beliefs of communism. [16] This cumulative argument was, for Truman, the basis for the American understanding of the East-West conflict. He saw the United States as the primary free power of the world and believed that that was a sufficient justification for world leadership. Yet he thought that the obligation to lead stemmed from America's moral underpinnings.

To the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen in September 1951, Truman made explicit the renewed call for a religious Campaign of Truth. By this point, he believed that he had done all he could to encourage the cooperation of the world's major religions in such a movement. It was time not only to present his case definitively to the public but also to entreat, perhaps shame, his prospective crusaders. Reminding his listeners of the difficulties faced by the people of Israel, he urged American believers to live up to their religious and political heritage, since, like the chosen people, they were held to higher standards and would be judged harshly if they failed in their responsibilities. All but calling his fellow Christians hypocritical, he drew extensively on Jesus' condemnation of those "who were superficially and publicly good" yet refused to act upon their words. Truman then suggested the link between America's future and that of the world: "Today, our problem is not just to preserve our religious heritage in our own lives and our own country. Our problem is a greater one. It is to preserve a world civilization in which man's belief in God can survive. Only in such a world can our own Nation follow its basic traditions, and realize the promise of a better life for all our citizens." The president argued that the "whole human enterprise is in danger" from communist expansion, which employed the "weapons of deceit and subversion as well as military might." The enemy at the root of either totalitarian expansionism or nuclear devastation in war was communism, which, in attempting to master life, might eradicate life itself. Truman hoped that all men of goodwill would realize that acknowledging God as "the ruler of us all" and asking Him for the strength and wisdom to carry out His will would be the first step in preserving civilization throughout the world. [17]

Once again, the president called for a religious campaign -- now an international crusade -- against communism. He requested that all men who believed in God set aside their differences during the current crisis in human affairs and come together "in a common affirmation of faith." Truman insisted, as he often had in the past, that all creeds could agree on the teachings of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. And he expected that Christians, at least, would support the affirmation, testifying "to the strength of our common faith and our confidence in its ultimate victory over the forces of Satan that oppose it." He regretted that "the great religious leaders of the world" were not joined yet in such a declaration of faith, but he was especially distressed that the main Christian churches would not agree to a statement "of their faith that Christ is their Master and Redeemer and the source of their strength against the hosts of irreligion and danger in the world." [18] The president ended his forthright remarks with a prayer to unite the churches and the free world.

Despite the resistance to a common affirmation of faith, Truman held to his conviction that spiritual strength would be most effective in an organized movement and must inform and augment political strength. Less than a month after calling for the international religious crusade, he turned again to the Roman Catholic Church. Secretary of State Dean Acheson hoped that he had convinced the president to delay indefinitely an appointment of a U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. In Acheson's view, recognizing the Vatican would start a religious controversy when the need for national unity against the USSR was great. [19] Truman, however, still wanted official recognition, for political, diplomatic, and strategic reasons, which he thought he had explained well over the space of several years. After Myron Taylor retired due to health reasons, Truman nominated General Mark Clark as ambassador in October 1951, stressing that the Vatican was "vigorously engaged in the struggle against communism" and that "[d]irect diplomatic relations will assist in coordinating the effort to combat the Communist menace." [20] The president's nomination met with fierce objections from Protestants generally and from U.S. senators, especially Southern Democrats. Substantial amounts of White House mail ran six-and-a-half to one against sending an ambassador to the Vatican. [21] Although Truman remained committed to the nomination, Clark asked to have his name withdrawn from consideration in January 1952. With no support and no nominee, the president reluctantly abandoned recognition of the Vatican and, effectively, the religious Campaign of Truth.

It frustrated Truman that some of the world's main religions rejected his reasoning that faith was the most powerful weapon in the Cold War. And he was irked that Protestant denominations would not grant the Catholic Church a unique religious and political role in combating communism. Shortly after Clark's withdrawal as nominee, the president described privately his conversation with the head bishop of the Episcopal Church, who was objecting to formal and full U.S.-Holy See relations. Truman replied that his concern was not protocol but "to organize the moral forces against the [sic] immoral forces. I told him that Stalin and his crowd had no intellectual honesty and no moral code, that they had broken 30 or 40 treaties they'd made with us and the free world and that all I wanted to do was to organize Exodus XX, Matthew V, VI, & VII to save morals in the world." Apparently, the bishop disparaged the Catholic Church as another version of totalitarianism and a menace to free religion. "What a travesty," wrote Truman. "If a Baptist can see what's toward -- why not a high hat Church of England Bishop?" [22] In the president's containment strategy, the Catholic Church was always the fulcrum of a global religious movement for faith and freedom and against communism, but it was also always the main impediment in Protestant eyes. [23]

The "great purpose" of the United States, according to Truman, was to defend "the spiritual values -- the moral code -- against the vast forces of evil that seek to destroy them." [24] While admittedly a broad agenda, the president had fleshed out how to achieve such a purpose through containment, now including the widespread, accurate dissemination of information, and the previously untapped reserves of religious faith. Truman sought to combine moral and religious, political, military, economic, and rhetorical means in a grand strategy. In order to face the

extraordinary circumstances of the East-West conflict, he started with what many others refused to acknowledge: that the Cold War began and ended with a clash of moral and political worldviews manifested in opposing regime types. Harry Truman supplied what was missing from the narrow, negative version of containment that was preferred by his realist critics; in so doing, he created and implemented a different strategy entirely.

**This essay is adapted from a speech delivered at the Hauenstein Center's 2004 "Religion and the Presidency" conference.*

[1] "Address on Foreign Policy at a Luncheon of the American Society of Newspaper Editors," April 20, 1950, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1945-53* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961-1966), 1950, 260-64 (hereafter *Public Papers*). The expansion of VOA involved not only additional and improved information and educational services but also new technology to overcome Soviet jamming of the broadcasts.

[2] Edward W. Barrett testimony, "Voice of America," July 27, 1950, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Public Affairs, exec. Sess., SFRC Selected Documents, Box 10, HSTL, cited in Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 14.

[3] Quoted in Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 15.

[4] See, for example, "Letter to Senator Flanders on the Appropriation for the Campaign of Truth," August 30, 1950, *Public Papers*, 1950, 602-03. Walter Hixson points out that Truman aide Mark Etheridge recalled that Dean Acheson was not enthusiastic about the overseas program: "He didn't think information ought to be mixed with policy." See Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*, 241, note 49.

[5] The American Committee for Freedom for the Peoples of the USSR was started in 1951, and its broadcast station became known as Radio Liberty. For more on VOA during this period, see David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000); for more on RFE/RL, see Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky), 2000.

[6] "Address in Columbus at a Conference of the Federal Council of Churches," March 6, 1946, *Public Papers*, 1946, 141-44. The main thrust of this speech concerns rebuilding America in the aftermath of World War II as well as the new challenge of atomic energy. Secondly, Truman seems to be referring to the threat from communism.

[7] Truman to Bess, October 2, 1947, Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess*, 551-52. Particularly in 1946 and 1947, Truman met constant objections from Protestants, including from leaders of his own Baptist faith, about Taylor's ongoing mission in Rome.

[8] "Address in Spokane at Gonzaga University," May 11, 1950, *Public Papers*, 1950, 374-77.

[9] For the connection between the Catholic Church and larger anticommunist efforts and this particular speech, see File on Foreign Relations -- Mission to Vatican, Box 65, Papers of George M. Eelsey, HSTL. Eelsey was active in helping Truman with the Gonzaga University speech.

[10] "Exchange of Messages with Pope Pius XII," December 23, 1949, *Public Papers*, 1949, 587-88.

[11] "Address in Spokane at Gonzaga University," May 11, 1950, *Public Papers*, 1950, 374-77.

[12] See Merlin Gustafson, "Harry Truman as a Man of Faith," in *The Christian Century* 90 (January 17, 1973): 75-77 on this point. In the 1970s, Gustafson wrote this and another article on Truman's religion; in each, he misread Truman as a Calvinist determinist.

[13] Truman to Rev. Johnson, President of the Baptist World Alliance, July 15, 1950, File 220, 1949-53, Box 823, HSTP, HSTL.

[14] "Address Before the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth," December 5, 1950, *Public Papers*, 1950, 733-37.

[15] "Address in Philadelphia at the Dedication of the Chapel of the Four Chaplains," February 3, 1951, *Public Papers*, 1951, 139-41.

[16] "Address at the Cornerstone Laying at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church," April 3, 1951, *Public Papers*, 1951, 210-13.

[17] "Address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen," September 28, 1951, *Public Papers*, 1951, 547-50.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 574-75. As Acheson recalled, "At one of our meetings early in October the President observed that I was an even greater practitioner of the delaying tactic than Fabius Maximus Cunctator himself and that, if left to me, no appropriate time would come."

[20] Footnote explanation in "The President's News Conference of October 25, 1951," *Public Papers*, 1951, 601.

[21] Donald R. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 277. Clark himself was a Protestant, as was Myron Taylor.

[22] February 26, 1952, Longhand Notes (Harry S. Truman) Longhand personal memos, 1952 (folder 1), PSF, HSTP, HSTL.

[23] As Truman recalled in 1959, "I wanted the moral forces of the world to make a common front against the unmoral forces, and we got pretty well along with it. It made quite an impression on a great many of the countries and the leaders of the religious sects in various countries. The people who were most violently opposed to it were the Protestants right here in the United States." See Weber, ed., *Talking with Harry*, 290.

[24] "Address at the Cornerstone Laying at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church," April 3, 1951, *Public Papers*, 1951, 210-13.