ANOTHER SUCH VICTORY
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For Ellen, with love
Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xiii

1 Independence to Washington 1
2 First Encounters 22
3 Preparing for Peacemaking 47
4 A Stony Place: Potsdam 71
5 A Personal Declaration of Cold War 100
6 The Year of Decisions 125
7 The Die Is Cast 153
8 In Behalf of Europe: The Truman Doctrine, 1947–1952 185
9 The World Split in Two: The Marshall Plan and the Division of Europe 213
10 Cat on a Sloping Tin Roof: The Berlin Blockade, 1948–1949 245
11 “To Make the Whole World Safe for Jews”: Truman and Palestine-Israel 274
12 “Sand in a Rat Hole”: Double Policy in China 307
13 Turning Point: Containment Comes to Korea 347
14 Rollback to Retreat: The Politics of War 381
Contents

15 Double Containment: America over Europe Divided 424
16 Conclusion: Truman and Another Such Victory 456

Notes 471
Bibliography 569
Index 589
At the start of the twenty-first century, President Harry S. Truman’s reputation stands high. This is especially true regarding his stewardship of foreign policy although, ironically, he entered the Oval Office in 1945 untutored in world affairs. Moreover, during his last year in the White House the Republicans accused his administration of having surrendered fifteen countries and 500 million people to Communism and of having sent twenty thousand Americans to their “burial ground” in Korea. Near the end of his term, Truman’s public “favorable” rating had plummeted to 23 percent.1

Within a decade, however, historians rated Truman a “near great” president, crediting his administration with reconstructing Western Europe and Japan, resisting Soviet or Communist aggression from Greece to Korea, and forging collective security through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In the 1970s the “plain speaking” Truman became a hero in popular culture. In 1986 Britain’s Roy Jenkins hailed Truman as a “backwoods politician who became a world statesman.” Recently, biographers have depicted him as the allegory of American life, an ordinary man whose extraordinary character led him to triumph over adversity from childhood through the presidency. Some writers, such as David McCullough, have even posited a symbiotic relationship between “His Odyssey” from Independence to the White House and America’s rise to triumphant superpower status. Melvyn Leffler, in his prize-winning *A Preponderance of Power*, has judged Truman to have been neither a naif nor an idealist but a realist who understood the uses of power, and whose administration, despite serious, costly errors, prudently preserved America’s national security against real or perceived Soviet threats. And for the last quarter of a
century, nearly every Democratic or Republican candidate for president has claimed to be a latter-day Truman.²

Collapse of the Soviet Union and Europe’s other Communist states, whose archives have confirmed Truman’s belief in 1945 that their regimes governed largely by “clubs, pistols and concentration camps,” has further raised the former president’s standing. This has encouraged John Lewis Gaddis and other historians to focus on Stalin’s murderous domestic rule as the key determinant of Soviet foreign policy and the Cold War. As Gaddis has contended, Stalin was heir to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, as well as to Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin. The Soviet leader was responsible for more state-sanctioned murders than Adolf Hitler and treated world politics as an extension of domestic politics: a zero-sum game in which his gaining security meant depriving all others of it. For Gaddis and others, that is basically the answer to the question of who caused the Cold War.³

But as Walter LaFeber has said, to dismiss Stalin’s policies as the work of a paranoid is to greatly oversimplify the complex origins of the Cold War. Indeed, recent revelations from many sources—including Soviet, German, Eastern European, Chinese, and Korean archives, published government documents, memoirs, and oral histories—have provided an extremely complex picture of relations between and among nations and the interplay between foreign and domestic policies and ideology and geopolitical issues during the formative Cold War years of 1945–1953. Recent scholarship has put forward new information, insights, and lines of argument, but, as Leffler has pointed out, the conclusions that have emerged are highly diverse and no “single master narrative” suffices to explain the Cold War.⁴

Further, despite recent emphasis on Stalin as one who combined the worst traits of tsarist imperialism and Communist ideology, historians drawing on newly available materials seem to be of the preponderant view that the Soviet leader pursued a cautious but brutal realpolitik in world affairs. He aimed to restore Russia’s 1941 boundaries, establish a sphere of influence in border states, provide security against a recovered Germany or Japan or hostile capitalist states, and gain compensation—notably German reparations—for the ravages of war. Stalin calculated forces, put Soviet state interests ahead of Marxist-Leninist ideology, recognized the superior industrial and military power of the United States, and pursued pragmatic or opportunistic policies in critical areas such as Germany, China, and Korea.⁵

There is no evidence that Stalin intended to march his Red Army westward beyond its assigned European occupation zones. He did not intend to attack Iran or Turkey, and he afforded little support to Communist revolution in Greece and China. He also seriously miscalculated when he let Kim Il Sung persuade
him that North Korea could win a swift victory over South Korea before the
U.S. could or would intervene.

So too have new sources and new assessments provided vital insights into
the foreign policy of Mao Zedong and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As
historian Michael Hunt has shown, Mao was a Chinese populist and patriot bent
on throwing off foreign domination and imperial control of his nation and re-
storing it—the Middle Kingdom—to its rightful place in Asia and the world.
From the start of his revolution in the 1920s until the 1940s, he pursued prag-
matic alliances at home and abroad, and he was prepared to accept U.S. as-
sistance consistent with his principles. He welcomed both the first official
American visitors, the “Dixie Mission,” to his headquarters in 1944 and the
mediating mission of General George C. Marshall in 1946. Mao felt betrayed
by Marshall’s failure to effect the coalition government to which the CCP had
agreed, and by U.S. military support for Jiang Jieshi’s Guomindang (GMD) re-

gime to wage civil war against the CCP.\(^6\)

Still, Mao was amenable in 1949 to relations with the U.S. provided it broke
relations with the GMD and accepted the CCP revolution. But Truman refused
to deal with the emergent People’s Republic of China (PRC) and supported the
GMD’s counterrevolutionary war from its new base on Taiwan. This only hast-
tened Mao’s seeking an alliance with the USSR, but the Chinese leader proved
far less subservient than Stalin expected and Truman presumed. In fact, the
Sino-Soviet treaty of 1950 forced Stalin to divest his recently regained impe-
rial port and railroad concessions in Manchuria, and limited the two nations’
defensive agreement to matters of mutual interest, thus freeing the PRC from
the need to take part in any American-Soviet conflict in Europe.\(^7\)

It is also evident from new documents that Mao would have preferred to fo-
cus on domestic reconstruction rather than enter the Korean War in 1950. But
the U.S. decision to permit General Douglas MacArthur’s forces to cross the
38th parallel and march unconstrained toward the PRC border posed too great
a threat. Nonetheless, newly available Russian documents indicate that even as
late as October 2, 1950, Mao, who faced strong Politburo opposition to China’s
entering the war, cabled Stalin that the PRC lacked the necessary troops and
equipment to fight. But goaded by Stalin and fearful that opponents at home
and abroad would be “swollen with arrogance” if enemy troops reached the
Yalu, Mao committed the PRC to a war that, for many reasons, would have dire
consequences for the Chinese, American, and Korean people. Still, it is clear
that prior to October 1950 the CCP leadership had never shown the intention to
use military force to conspire with the Kremlin to upset the status quo in Asia
or drive the U.S. from the area.\(^8\)

Thus the time seems propitious, given our increased knowledge of Soviet,
European, Chinese, and Korean policies, to reconsider President Truman’s role in the Cold War. As Thomas G. Paterson has written, the president stands at the pinnacle of the diplomatic and military establishment, he has great capacity to set the foreign policy agenda and to mold public opinion, and his importance—especially in Truman’s case—cannot be denied. Contrary to prevailing views, however, I believe that Truman’s policy making was shaped by his parochial and nationalistic heritage. This was reflected in his uncritical belief in the superiority of American values and political-economic interests, his conviction that the Soviet Union and Communism were the root cause of international strife, and his inability to comprehend Asian politics and nationalism. Truman’s parochialism also caused him to disregard contrary views, to engage in simplistic analogizing, to show little ability to comprehend the basis for other nations’ policies, and to demonize those leaders or nations who would not bend to the will of the U.S. Consequently, his foreign policy leadership intensified Soviet-American conflict, hastened division of Europe, and brought tragic intervention in Asian civil wars and a generation of Sino-American enmity.

In short, Truman lacked the qualities of the creative or great leader who, as James MacGregor Burns has written, must broaden the environment in which he and his citizenry operate and widen the channels in which choices are made and events flow. Truman, to the contrary, narrowed Americans’ perception of the world political environment and the channels for policy choices, and created a rigid framework in which the United States waged long-term, extremely costly global Cold War. Indeed, before we celebrate America’s victory in this contest, we might recall that after King Pyrrhus’ Greek forces defeated the Romans at the battle of Asculum in 280 B.C., he reflected that “another such victory, and we are undone.”
I have worked on this book for a long time and have relied on many institutions and, above all, individuals who have facilitated my work and sustained and encouraged me in all of my scholarly endeavors. I am pleased to acknowledge them and to offer public thanks to all who have so generously afforded me their wise counsel, support, and friendship.

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I remain solely responsible for all errors of fact or interpretation in this book.

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