The Truman White House

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When President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, I was in the American Embassy in Moscow. I immediately made plans to return to Washington as early as possible in order to report to President Truman on post-Yalta developments and difficulties in our relations with the Soviet government. I called on Marshall Stalin, who appeared gravely disturbed about the worldwide effect of President Roosevelt's death. This visit gave me the opportunity to tell him that he would contribute to world stability if he were to send Molotov instead of Vishinsky to the United Nations Conference in San Francisco. Against Molotov's protests, Stalin agreed.

I arrived in Washington on April 20, 1945, after a record forty-eight-hour flight across the Balkans and Italy. Much to my surprise, I found that President Truman had already read the Yalta Agreements and all the post-Yalta telegrams. He was fully familiar with the details of our difficulties and with Stalin's failure to carry out his agreements. This was my first experience in understanding just how avid a reader President Truman was. Throughout his term as president, it was my experience that he read an extraordinary number of documents and reports. In fact, once when I was secretary of commerce I was embarrassed to find that I had only read the summary and conclusions of a report I wished to discuss with him, whereas he had read the entire report. I never made that mistake again!

I found President Truman's approach to his responsibilities extremely modest. He told me, after Roosevelt's death, that he had no experience in international matters, and he wanted to know what I could tell him about Roosevelt's policies. He said that Roosevelt, not he, had been elected president and therefore that he must follow Roosevelt's policies as far as practicable. I was at first a little worried about his deference; but during the next few weeks as new problems arose quickly, he showed the courage and ability to deal with them on his own. He was a little
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overaggressive in his first talk with Molotov on Poland. He also acted too fast in stopping the Lend-Lease shipments after VE Day on the advice of [Lend-Lease Administrator Leo] Crowley. With the help of [Secretary of State Edward] Stettinius we were able to get the president to reverse that decision; but it left an unnecessary scar on our relations with the Soviet government although the Lend-Lease adjustment with the Soviets was, I felt, generous.

President Truman's first act was to ratify the call for the United Nations meeting in San Francisco, and he gave full support to Secretary Stettinius and the delegation Roosevelt had appointed. Truman was always disposed to support the members of his cabinet, but he insisted on prior consultations on important matters.

Truman was a man of very few words. I still vividly recall a talk I had with him during the winter of 1946, shortly after my return from Moscow. When [James F.] Byrnes offered me the position of ambassador to Great Britain, I explained that I could not take it as I had already been overseas for five years and planned to return to private life. He told me I would have to talk to the president about it. So, marshaling all my arguments, I called on the president. He greeted me with a brief direct statement, "We, with the British, are in difficulties with the Soviets over Iran. They are refusing to carry out their treaty obligations to withdraw their troops. This may lead to war. I need an ambassador in Britain who knows them well and I want you to go."

I could only reply, "How soon do you want me to go?"

He said, "As soon as you can."

I got up and started to leave and then thought of all my reasons for not going. So I asked him not to consider this a normal appointment but to allow me to return as soon as was reasonable after the crisis was over. He agreed, and that ended the conversation. (At about this time, the president transferred Harry Dexter White from the Treasury to the International Monetary Fund. Years later, this action led to charges of the president's being soft on communism. His blunt statement to me, however, shows how false this accusation was.)

As it turned out, the Soviet troops were withdrawn from Iran and the crisis subsided. The president did not forget his agreement with me. I hold the record of serving as U.S. ambassador in London for the shortest term, approximately six months.

In September 1946 when the president accepted Henry Wallace's resignation as secretary of commerce following the foreign policy dispute that arose over Wallace's New York speech, it crossed my mind that Truman might well ask me to return to Washington to take that job. He
telephoned me a few days later and offered me the position, which I accepted immediately.

As secretary of commerce he gave me complete latitude in the selection of the members of my staff. He approved my recommendations without question for Undersecretary William Foster, Assistant Secretary David Bruce, and Counsel Adrian Fisher, even though Foster was a Republican. All three men have since played important roles in government in many other jobs.

The president was always available when I had a problem I felt I should discuss with him either personally or on the telephone. He and his White House staff gave me the fullest cooperation in dealing with Congress. Of course, many matters had interdepartmental ramifications, such as aid to Greece and Turkey and the Marshall Plan. He expected the members of his cabinet to confer together on matters of overlapping responsibility, and he would, on occasion, meet with those members jointly on matters of importance. He held cabinet meetings regularly—as I recall, every Friday morning. Each member of the cabinet was given the opportunity to raise any subject and to report on matters of interest to the president. Not many decisions were made at cabinet meetings, but they served to keep all the cabinet members informed about important questions being dealt with by other departments and about the president's policies on these issues. This arrangement was very helpful in developing a team spirit within the administration.

In April 1948 I was in Bogota with General [George C.] Marshall attending an inter-American conference. The president telephoned me and asked me to go to Europe to be what was called the roving ambassador in charge of European operations, with headquarters in Paris. I said that I would be returning to the states shortly and that I would like to discuss the matter with him personally. When I met with the president, I told him that I would prefer to stay in Washington and help in any way I could during the coming campaign. He answered that I could do more good in Paris; he said that Paul Hoffman was insisting on it and that it was important that I go. I, of course, accepted.

Mr. Truman had given his unqualified support to the Marshall Plan. He organized preparations for the congressional passage of legislation in a most skillful manner. He appointed three committees: one, chaired by Dr. [Edwin C.] Nourse of the Council of Economic Advisers, to assess our financial and economic capabilities; a second, chaired by Secretary of the Interior [Julius] Krug, to review whether the resources were available; and the third, I chaired as secretary of commerce—a committee of private citizens drawn from business, labor, agriculture, banking, economics, and politics to analyze the European needs and to propose a
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program of recovery. Senator [Arthur] Vandenberg told me that these reports, particularly that of the citizens’ committee, assisted greatly in getting congressional approval of the Marshall Plan.

Secretary Marshall’s prestige was extremely valuable. His testimony before congressional committees and his speeches around the country were most effective. Undersecretary of State [Robert] Lovett and his carefully selected staff spearheaded the presentation.

Senator Vandenberg, the Republican chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, played a leading role in the enactment of the legislation. He introduced certain amendments to make passage of the bill possible and insisted on the appointment of a Republican businessman to head the operation. President Truman was indignant, regarding this as an interference with his constitutional responsibility to nominate his own administrators. He wanted Dean Acheson. President Truman, however, agreed to appoint Hoffman and, in fact, forced him to take the job by announcing his appointment from the White House despite Hoffman’s objection that he did not think he could take the job. I have always considered this action to be in the best Truman tradition!

(At first Vandenberg thought Paul Hoffman was too liberal for his conservative colleagues. But after going through a long list of businessmen—some of whom I pointed out were opposed to the Marshall Plan—the senator finally accepted Hoffman, who, of course, proved to be unbelievably successful.)

President Truman gave Paul Hoffman the fullest support with Congress in his annual efforts to get appropriations and the freest rein in appointments at home and aboard—many of which I, of course, recommended.

In the spring of 1950 I told the president and Dean Acheson that I thought the program in Europe was so well established that I could come home and that a successor could carry on. It was agreed that I would come home at the end of July or early in August and become the president’s special assistant on foreign policies. State and Defense at that time were at logger-heads because of the personal rift between Dean Acheson and Louis Johnson.

I was in London the Sunday that North Korea invaded South Korea, and I did not return to Paris until Monday afternoon. On Tuesday morning I had a telephone conversation with President Truman. In his memoirs he recalls calling me; my recollection is that I called him. In any event, he asked if I could come back as soon as possible because he was short-handed with the war emergency problems. I replied that I would leave at once, and I took the afternoon flight to Washington. I attended the subsequent meetings at Blair House, where the president
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was then living. The decisions the president made in those days were the finest example of his courageous and decisive character.

He agreed that I should have a small staff of half a dozen highly capable individuals. They attended the appropriate interdepartmental committee meetings on military, political, financial, and public relations matters. These men were authorized by me to attempt to get the interdepartmental committees to make the recommendations I knew the president wanted, so that there would be interdepartmental approval before a subject reached the president.

I recall one case in which the president turned down a recommendation of mine. I urged him to get a joint congressional resolution supporting his action in Korea. This would have had almost unanimous approval at the time. But he said that he would not do so because it would make it more difficult for future presidents to deal with emergencies. Much to my surprise, I learned later that Dean Acheson had recommended against the joint resolution. Later when Robert Taft and others began criticizing the president, I was convinced that the president had made a mistake. This decision, however, was characteristic of President Truman. He always kept in mind how his actions would affect future presidential authority.

Later, when I was director for mutual security, I reported to him that the committees of Congress were considering establishing a watchdog committee. I suggested that I could get along with such a committee and that it was sometimes easier to get their approval before an event than afterwards. The president refused. He objected because he considered this committee to be an invasion of the president's constitutional power and administrative responsibilities. He said that as long as he sat in the Oval Office his greatest responsibility was to protect the authority of the president against the inroads of Congress. He pointed out that if the Congress invaded presidential powers, there would be chaos. He was, Truman said, the only one who represented all the people, whereas senators and congressmen represented people of limited areas. I fully agreed with his conclusions, having recently spent two years in France when the French National Assembly controlled the executive branch, leading to a change in government every six to ten months.

In early August I went to Tokyo and Korea with Generals [Lauris] Norstad and [Matthew B.] Ridgway. The president thought it would be a good idea for me to see Douglas MacArthur. He told me that he wanted me to tell General MacArthur two things: First, to stay away from Chiang Kai-shek, as he didn’t want the Nationalist Chinese to get us into a war with mainland China. (Shortly before this, General MacArthur had paid an unauthorized visit to Taipei and had had his picture
taken kissing Madame Chiang's hand on his departure. This had caused quite a stir in the press.) Secondly, Truman wanted me to find out what General MacArthur's needs were and to assure him that the president would do everything in his power to provide for them.

I spent a day in Korea with General Ridgway and General Norstad. Our forces were then holding only the small Pusan bridgehead. We three independently came to the conclusion that Lieutenant General [Walton H.] Walker, in command of the U.N. forces in Korea, was not adequate to the task and that he should be replaced. This consensus was revealed on our return flight to Tokyo when we compared notes of our impressions.

In my two long talks with General MacArthur I made the first point—to steer clear of Chiang Kai-shek—plain, and General MacArthur said that as a soldier he would obey orders. But the manner in which he spoke gave me some doubts as to whether, in fact, he would. On the second point, MacArthur presented to General Ridgway, General Norstad, and myself the details of his plans for the Inchon landing. General Ridgway recalls that the brilliance of MacArthur's presentation fully allayed his prior concerns and completely won him over. I have a long memorandum of the talks which I gave to President Truman at the time, much of which he quotes in his memoirs.

I scheduled our return to Washington so as to permit me to call on the president at about seven in the morning. I knew this would be the best time to catch him alone. I reported on our visit, particularly the full outline of MacArthur's request for approval of the Inchon landing with the necessary support. I had made clear to the president the difficulties of the plan, including the very heavy tide which would make landing any reinforcements impossible until the next high tide.

Ridgway had prepared a memorandum for the Pentagon recommending approval of the operation; it was signed by Ridgway, Norstad, and myself. President Truman gave me the impression that he approved the operation. He instructed me to go to the Pentagon and see Secretary of Defense Johnson and General [Omar] Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I was to have them give the operation immediate consideration and report to him as soon as possible.

I went home to shave, shower, and have breakfast and arrived at the Pentagon a little before ten o'clock. Secretary Johnson greeted me with the statement, "What have you done to the president? He has been calling me up asking what we have decided to do about your report." Of course, I explained the situation to him and also to General Bradley. Within twenty-four hours the Joint Chiefs recommended approval of the operation and, as I recall it, of all the support that General MacArthur requested. President Truman forthwith authorized the operation.
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I recommended to the president that General Walker be relieved and replaced by General Ridgway or General [James] Van Fleet. He told me to take that up with General Bradley, which I did. I always thought the Chiefs of Staff were a bit reluctant to approach General MacArthur and raise the question of replacing General Walker.

The fantastic success of the Inchon landings was clouded by the later disaster following the Chinese intervention when our forces were driven back into South Korea. General Walker was killed in a jeep accident, and General Ridgway immediately took his place. Within two weeks he completely reversed the situation and was able to drive the enemy back to the 38th Parallel. President Truman then decided not to go north again but to hold the line approximately at the 38th Parallel. This decision was based on full discussions with General Bradley and others, including General Marshall, who was then secretary of defense, and Acheson. Had the president decided otherwise, our losses would be great and the political advantages doubtful. The first objective of the United Nations had been achieved, namely to stop the invasion of the North Koreans and force them out of South Korea. I believe it was a wise decision, and it was subsequently accepted by General [Dwight D.] Eisenhower when he became president.

In conclusion I will give a brief outline of the immediate events leading to the relief of General MacArthur. There had been several provocations, which I won't repeat, that culminated in MacArthur's sending a most disloyal telegram to the Republican House minority leader, Joseph Martin. I had been in New York and took an early plane back to Washington for the cabinet meeting on Friday. After the cabinet meeting, the president called Acheson, Marshall, Bradley, and myself to his office. He described his problems with MacArthur and then asked each of us whether we thought MacArthur should be relieved. Each gave the reasonable answer, indicating that he would review the question in the appropriate manner. When the president came to me, I recalled to him the doubts that I had expressed in my report in August. I said that I thought there was nothing for the president to do now but to relieve the general. We had further meetings on Saturday during which each of the four of us reported on his particular field. We unanimously recommended MacArthur's recall.

The president took no action until Monday. I have always felt that he talked with Chief Justice [Fred M.] Vinson, in whom he had much confidence, but there is no record of that talk. He may also have talked to Sam Rayburn, whose judgment he respected, but this is purely a guess. In any event, we met with the president again on Monday and he informed us that he had decided to recall MacArthur. He planned to
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have Secretary of the Army [Frank] Pace, then in Japan, inform General MacArthur that day and to release his decision to the press on Tuesday morning. Unfortunately, Pace was in Korea and General MacArthur heard the news on the radio before Pace could reach him.

This step was, of course, one of the most courageous any president has ever taken. General MacArthur was a popular hero and was received as such on his return. President Truman told me he had made a great mistake when he had not insisted on MacArthur’s return to the United States for a visit shortly after the end of the war with Japan. He told me that he had invited MacArthur then and that MacArthur had declined. In retrospect, it seems clear that MacArthur intended to have a triumphant return, leading up to a possible nomination for the presidency. As it was, he got a triumphant reception and President Truman suffered a sharp loss of popularity.

To me, this was a great constitutional crisis: should a military proconsul impose his will on American foreign policy over the objection of the president?

President Truman had the extraordinary capability to make decisions after full consideration and then to stop worrying. After reaching a decision he used to say, “I have done the best I can.” He never rehashed the problem; he relaxed, went home, went to bed and soundly to sleep.