

## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

### Introduction

---

It has none of the catch phrases or warnings of other, more famous presidential inaugural or farewell addresses, no cautions against permanent alliances or military-industrial complexes, no appeals to better angels or declarations about fear. What President Harry Truman's farewell address of 1953 does have is an abiding sense of optimism that the United States is on the right track and is well positioned to win the Cold War, beliefs that were proven correct nearly forty years after he left office. His support for these beliefs—that the “fatal flaw in [communist] society” is that “theirs is a godless system, a system of slavery” with “no freedom in it, no consent”—is a far cry from political scientists' and historians' arguments about internal contradictions, a precipitous drop in oil prices, and a loss of will on the part of Soviet leaders, but his assertions were unwavering. “Whether the Communist rulers shift their policies of their own free will,” he said, “or whether the change comes about in some other way—I have not a doubt in the world that a change will occur.”

The excerpt below focuses on milestones from the early days of the Cold War. Truman acknowledged that “history will remember my term in office as the years when the ‘cold war’ began to overshadow our lives.” Calling it “a conflict between those who love freedom and those who would lead the world back into slavery and darkness,” with the atomic bomb “always in the background,” he recounts various crises, only briefly touching on Soviet nuclear technology and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Truman devotes particular attention to the Korean War, referring to his decision to involve US troops as the most important of his presidency. He looks forward to the end of the Cold War, “when we can use the peaceful tools that science has forged for us to do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on earth.”

### Excerpt

As the free world grows stronger, more united, more attractive to men on both sides of the Iron Curtain—and as the Soviet hopes for easy expansion are blocked—then there will have to come a time of change in the Soviet world. Nobody can say for sure when that is going to be, or exactly how it will come about, whether by revolution, or trouble in the satellite states, or by a change inside the Kremlin.

Whether the Communist rulers shift their policies of their own free will—or whether the change comes about in some other way—I have not a doubt in the world that a change will occur.

I have a deep and abiding faith in the destiny of free men. With patience and courage, we shall some day move on into a new era—a wonderful golden age—an age when we can use the

## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

peaceful tools that science has forged for us to do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on earth.

Think what can be done, once our capital, our skills, our science—most of all atomic energy—can be released from the tasks of defense and turned wholly to peaceful purposes all around the world.

There is no end to what can be done.

### Questions for Discussion

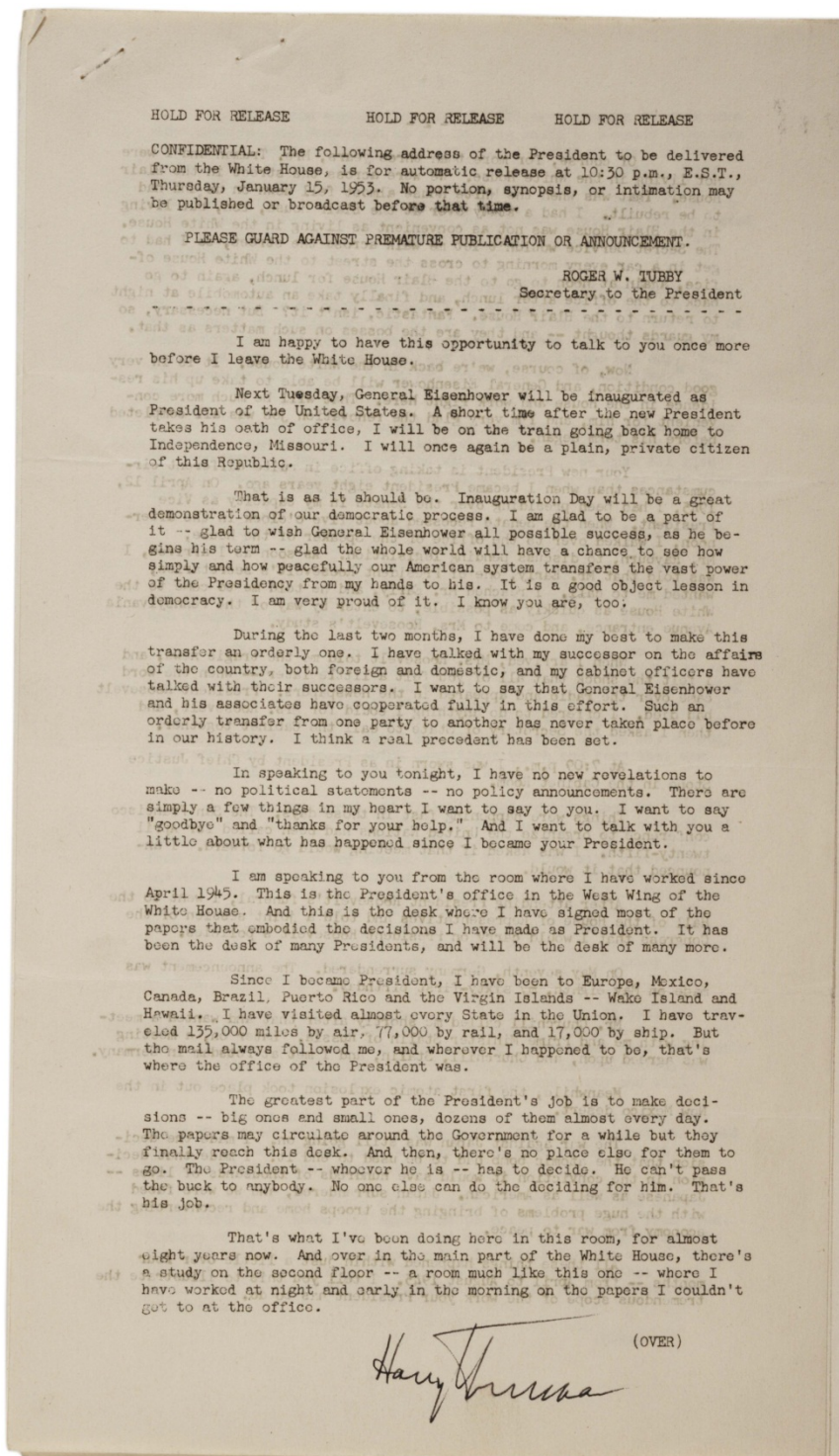
---

Read the document introduction and the excerpt and view the document images. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow. (Note: Questions may be modified for non-AP/IB classes or for classes where the entire address is not available.)

1. What does Truman say about the differences between US actions at the end of World War I and those at the end of World War II?
2. How did Truman explain his belief that the United States would prevail over the Communist system?
3. Did the United States win the Cold War in the way that Truman predicted?
4. Truman spoke of his decision to send troops to Korea as his most important, implying that it was difficult, and only made bearable because he had the support of the American people. List examples of times when other presidents have sent troops into combat without the backing of their constituents.

## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

### Image



Harry S. Truman, Farewell Address, 1953. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06802)



## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

Of course, for more than three years, Mrs. Truman and I were not living in the White House. We were across the street in the Blair House. That was when the White House almost fell down on us and had to be rebuilt. I had a study over at the Blair House, too, but living in the Blair House was not as convenient as living in the White House. The Secret Service wouldn't let me walk across the street, so I had to get in a car every morning to cross the street to the White House office, again at noon to go to the Blair House for lunch, again to go back to the office after lunch, and finally take an automobile at night to return to the Blair House. Fantastic, isn't it? But necessary, so my guards thought -- and they are the bosses on such matters as that.

Now, of course, we're back in the White House. It is in very good condition, and General Eisenhower will be able to take up his residence in the House and work right here. That will be much more convenient for him, and I'm very glad the renovation job was all completed before his term began.

Your new President is taking office in quite different circumstances than when I became President eight years ago. On April 12, 1945, I had been presiding over the Senate in my capacity as Vice President. When the Senate recessed about five o'clock in the afternoon, I walked over to the office of the Speaker of the House, Mr. Rayburn, to discuss pending legislation. As soon as I arrived, I was told that Mr. Early, one of President Roosevelt's secretaries, wanted me to call. I reached Mr. Early, and he told me to come to the White House as quickly as possible, to enter by way of the Pennsylvania Avenue entrance, and come to Mrs. Roosevelt's study.

When I arrived, Mrs. Roosevelt told me the tragic news, and I felt the shock that all of you felt a little later -- when the word came over the radio and appeared in the newspapers. President Roosevelt had died. I offered to do anything I could for Mrs. Roosevelt, and then I asked the Secretary of State to call the Cabinet together.

At 7:09 p.m., I was sworn in as President by Chief Justice Stone in the Cabinet Room.

Things were happening fast in those days. The San Francisco conference to organize the United Nations had been called for April twenty-fifth. I was asked if that meeting would go forward. I announced that it would.

After attending President Roosevelt's funeral, I went to the Hall of the House of Representatives and told a joint session of the Congress that I would carry on President Roosevelt's policies.

On May seventh, Germany surrendered. The announcement was made on May eighth, my sixty-first birthday.

Mr. Churchill called me shortly after that and wanted a meeting with me and Prime Minister Stalin of Russia. Later on, a meeting was agreed upon, and Churchill, Stalin, and I met at Potsdam in Germany.

Meanwhile, the first atomic explosion took place out in the New Mexico desert.

The war against Japan was still going on. I made the decision that the atomic bomb had to be used to end it. I made that decision in the conviction it would save hundreds of thousands of lives -- Japanese as well as American. Japan surrendered, and we were faced with the huge problems of bringing the troops home and reconverting the economy from war to peace.

All these things happened within just a little over four months -- from April to August 1945. I tell you this to illustrate the tremendous scope of the work your President has to do.

(REVO)



## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

- 3 -

All these emergencies and all the developments to meet them have required the President to put in long hours -- usually seventeen hours a day, with no payment for overtime. I sign my name on the average 600 times a day, see and talk to hundreds of people every month, shake hands with thousands every year, and still carry on the business of the largest going concern in the world. There is no job like it on the face of the earth -- in the power which is concentrated here at this desk, and in the responsibility and difficulty of the decisions.

I want all of you to realize how big a job, how hard a job, it is -- not for my sake, because I am stepping out of it -- but for the sake of my successor. He needs the understanding and the help of every citizen. It is not enough for you to come out once every four years and vote for a candidate, and then go back home and say, "Well, I've done my part, now let the new President do the worrying." He can't do the job alone.

Regardless of your politics, whether you are Republican or Democrat, your fate is tied up with what is done here in this room. The President is President of the whole country. We must all give him our support as citizens of the United States. He will have mine, and I want you to give him yours.

I suppose that history will remember my term in office as the years when the "cold war" began to overshadow our lives. I have had hardly a day in office that has not been dominated by this all-embracing struggle -- this conflict between those who love freedom and those who would lead the world back into slavery and darkness. And always in the background there has been the atomic bomb.

But when history says that my term of office saw the beginning of the cold war, it will also say that in those eight years we have set the course that can win it. We have succeeded in carving out a new set of policies to attain peace -- positive policies, policies of world leadership, policies that express faith in other free people. We have averted World War III up to now, and we may already have succeeded in establishing conditions which can keep that war from happening as far ahead as man can see.

These are great and historic achievements that we can all be proud of. Think of the difference between our course now and our course thirty years ago. After the first World War, we withdrew from world affairs -- we failed to act in concert with other peoples against aggression -- we helped to kill the League of Nations -- and we built up tariff barriers which strangled world trade. This time, we avoided those mistakes. We helped to found and to sustain the United Nations. We have welded alliances that include the greater part of the free world. And we have gone ahead with other free countries to help build their economies and link us all together in a healthy world trade.

Think back for a moment to the 1930's and you will see the difference. The Japanese moved into Manchuria, and free men did not act. The fascists moved into Ethiopia, and we did not act. The nazis marched into the Rhineland, into Austria, into Czechoslovakia, and free men were paralyzed for lack of strength and unity and will.

Think about those years of weakness and indecision, and World War II which was their evil result. Then think about the speed and courage and decisiveness with which we have moved against the communist threat since World War II.

The first crisis came in 1945 and 1946, when the Soviet Union refused to honor its agreement to remove its troops from Iran. Members of my Cabinet came to me and asked if we were ready to take the risk that a firm stand involved. I replied that we were. So we took our stand -- we made it clear to the Soviet Union that we expected them to honor their agreement -- and the Soviet troops were withdrawn.

(OVER)



## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

- 4 -

And then, in early 1947, the Soviet Union threatened Greece and Turkey. The British sent me a message saying they could no longer keep their forces in that area. Something had to be done at once, or the Eastern Mediterranean would be taken over by the communists. On March twelfth, I went before the Congress and stated our determination to help the people of Greece and Turkey maintain their independence. Today, Greece is still free and independent; and Turkey is a bulwark of strength at a strategic corner of the world.

Then came the Marshall Plan which saved Europe, the heroic Berlin airlift, and our military aid programs.

We inaugurated the North Atlantic Pact, the Rio Pact binding the Western Hemisphere together, and the defense pacts with countries of the Far Pacific.

Most important of all, we acted in Korea.

I was in Independence, Missouri, in June 1950, when Secretary Acheson telephoned me and gave me the news about the invasion of Korea. I told the Secretary to lay the matter at once before the United Nations, and I came on back to Washington.

Flying back over the flat lands of the Middle West and over the Appalachians that summer afternoon, I had a lot of time to think. I turned the problem over in my mind in many ways, but my thoughts kept coming back to the 1930's -- to Manchuria -- Ethiopia -- the Rhineland -- Austria -- and finally to Munich.

Here was history repeating itself. Here was another probing action, another testing action. If we let the Republic of Korea go under, some other country would be next, and then another. And all the time, the courage and confidence of the free world would be ebbing away, just as it did in the 1930's. And the United Nations would go the way of the League of Nations.

When I reached Washington, I met immediately with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and General Bradley, and the other civilian and military officials who had information and advice to help me decide what to do. We talked about the problems long and hard.

It was not easy to make the decision that sent American boys again into battle. I was a soldier in the first World War, and I know what a soldier goes through. I know well the anguish that mothers and fathers and families go through. So I knew what was ahead if we acted in Korea.

But after all this was said, we realized that the issue was whether there would be fighting in a limited arena now or on a much larger scale later on -- whether there would be some casualties now or many more casualties later.

So a decision was reached -- the decision I believe was the most important in my time as President.

In the days that followed, the most heartening fact was that the American people clearly agreed with the decision.

And in Korea, our men are fighting as valiantly as Americans have ever fought -- because they know they are fighting in the same cause of freedom in which Americans have stood ever since the beginning of the Republic.

Where free men had failed the test before, this time we met the test.

We met it firmly. We met it successfully. The aggression has been repelled. The communists have seen their hopes of easy conquest go down the drain. The determination of free people to defend themselves has been made clear to the Kremlin.

## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

- 5 -

As I have thought about our world-wide struggle with the communists these past eight years -- day in and day out -- I have never once doubted that you, the people of our country, have the will to do what is necessary to win this terrible fight against communism. Because I have been sure of that, I have been able to make necessary decisions even though they called for sacrifices by all of us. And I have not been wrong in my judgment of the American people.

That same assurance of our people's determination will be General Eisenhower's greatest source of strength in carrying on this struggle.

Now, once in a while, I get a letter from some impatient person asking, why don't we get it over with? Why don't we issue an ultimatum, make all-out war, drop the atomic bomb?

For most Americans, the answer is quite simple: we are not made that way. We are a moral people. Peace is our goal, and justice and freedom. We cannot, of our own free will, violate the very principles that we are striving to defend. The whole purpose of what we are doing is to prevent World War III. Starting a war is no way to make peace.

But if anyone still thinks that just this once, bad means can bring good ends, then let me remind you of this: We are living in the eighth year of the atomic age. We are not the only nation that is learning to unleash the power of the atom. A third world war might dig the grave not only of our communist opponents but also of our own society, our world as well as theirs.

Starting an atomic war is totally unthinkable for rational men.

Then, some of you may ask, when and how will the cold war ever end? I think I can answer that simply. The communist world has great resources, and it looks strong. But there is a fatal flaw in their society. There is a godless system, a system of slavery; there is no freedom in it, no consent. The iron curtain, the secret police, the constant purges, all these are symptoms of a great basic weakness -- the rulers' fear of their own people.

In the long run, the strength of our free society, and our ideals, will prevail over a system that has respect for neither God nor man.

Last week, in my State of the Union Message to the Congress -- and I hope you will all take the time to read it -- I explained how I think we will finally win through.

As the free world grows stronger, more united, more attractive to men on both sides of the iron curtain -- and as the Soviet hopes for easy expansion are blocked -- then there will have to come a time of change in the Soviet world. Nobody can say for sure when that is going to be, or exactly how it will come about, whether by revolution, or trouble in the satellite states, or by a change inside the Kremlin.

Whether the communist rulers shift their policies of their own free will -- or whether the change comes about in some other way -- I have not a doubt in the world that a change will occur.

I have a deep and abiding faith in the destiny of free men. With patience and courage, we shall some day move on into a new era -- a wonderful golden age -- an age when we can use the peaceful tools that science has forged for us to do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on earth.

Think what can be done, once our capital, our skills, our science -- most of all atomic energy -- can be released from the tasks of defense and turned wholly to peaceful purposes all around the world.

There is no end to what can be done.

I can't help but dream out loud a little here.

(OVER)



## President Truman's Farewell Address, 1953

- 6 -

The Tigris and Euphrates Valley can be made to bloom as it did in the times of Babylon and Nineveh. Israel can be made the country of milk and honey as it was in the time of Joshua.

There is a plateau in Ethiopia some six to eight thousand feet high, that has sixty-five thousand square miles of land just exactly like the corn belt in northern Illinois. Enough food can be raised there to feed a hundred million people.

There are places in South America -- places in Colombia and Venezuela and Brazil -- just like that plateau in Ethiopia -- places where food could be raised for millions of people.

These things can be done, and they are self-liquidating projects. If we can get peace and safety in the world under the United Nations, the developments will come so fast we will not recognize the world in which we now live.

This is our dream of the future -- our picture of the world we hope to have when the communist threat is overcome. I've talked a lot tonight about the menace of communism -- and our fight against it -- because that is the overriding issue of our time. But there are some other things we've done that history will record. One of them is that we in America have learned how to attain real prosperity for our people.

We have 62½ million people at work. Businessmen, farmers, laborers, white collar people, all have better incomes and more of the good things of life than ever before in the history of the world.

There hasn't been a failure of an insured bank in nearly nine years. No depositor has lost a cent in that period.

And the income of our people has been fairly distributed, perhaps more so than at any time in recent history. We have made progress in spreading the blessings of American life to all of our people. There has been a tremendous awakening of the American conscience on the great issues of civil rights -- equal economic opportunities, equal rights of citizenship, and equal educational opportunities for all our people, whatever their race or religion or status of birth.

So, as I empty the drawers of this desk, and as Mrs. Truman and I leave the White House, we have no regret. We feel we have done our best in the public service. I hope and believe we have contributed to the welfare of this Nation and to the peace of the world.

When Franklin Roosevelt died, I felt there must be a million men better qualified than I, to take up the Presidential task. But the work was mine to do, and I had to do it. I have tried to give it everything that was in me. Through all of it, through all the years that I have worked here in this room, I have been well aware I did not really work alone -- that you were working with me.

No President could ever hope to lead our country, or to sustain the burdens of this office, save as the people helped with their support. I have had that help -- you have given me that support -- on all our great essential undertakings to build the free world's strength and keep the peace. Those are the big things. Those are the things we have done together.

For that I shall be grateful, always.

And now, the time has come for me to say good night and -- God bless you all.

*Harry Truman*

(REVO)