

What Truman Can Teach Trump

The politically astute Cold Warrior knew how to navigate the tides of populism at home while maintaining America's leadership abroad

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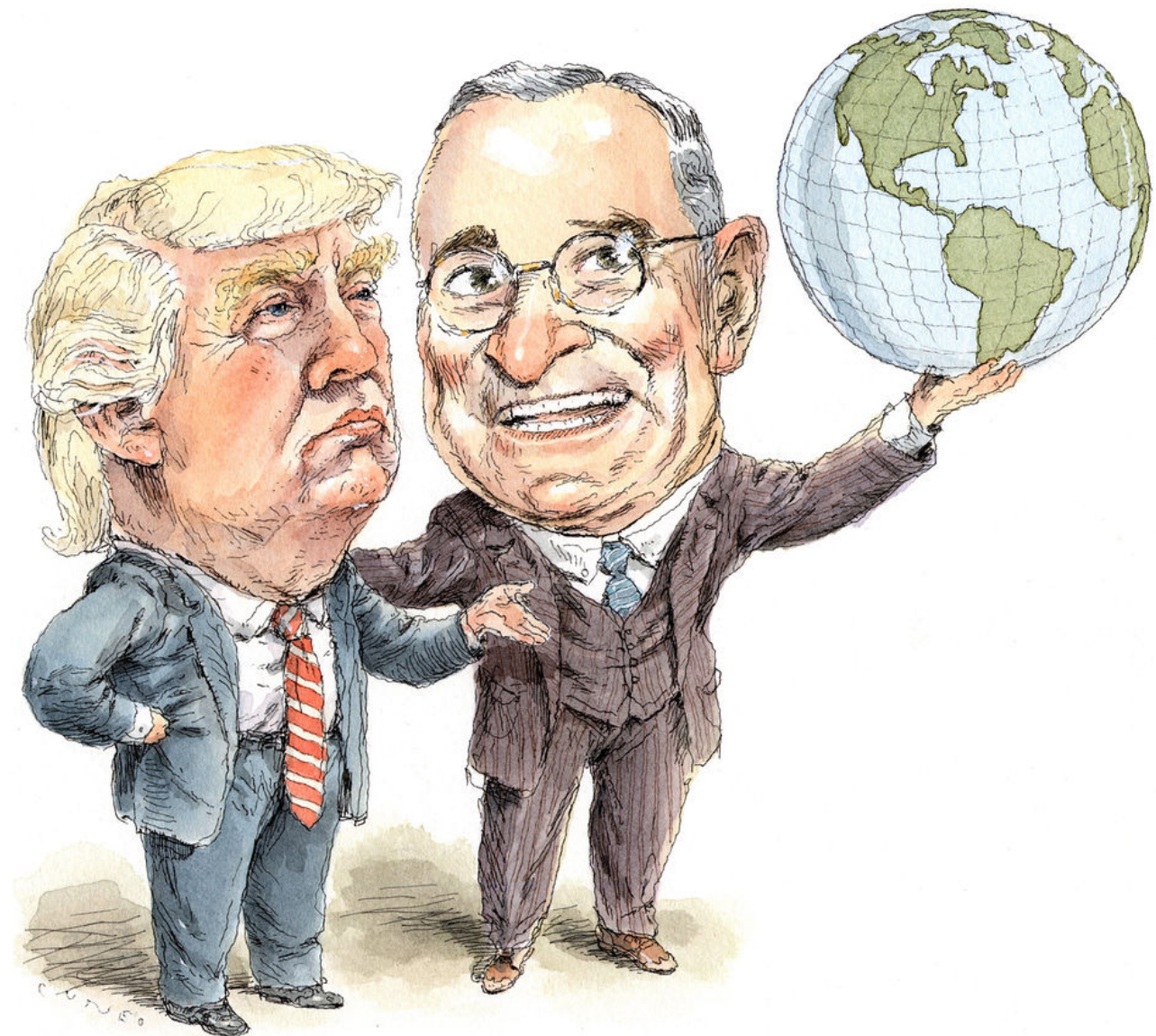


Illustration: John Cuneo

The foreign policy of the United States hasn't seen a strategic crisis this profound since 1947, when President Harry Truman summoned the American people to fight Soviet ambitions in Europe. The Cuban missile crisis was more dramatic and the agony of Vietnam more wrenching, but since Truman, American presidents have believed that a global, outward-looking, order-building foreign policy was the necessary foundation for U.S. strategy and a peaceful, prosperous world.

No longer. President Donald Trump, backed by a substantial segment of the American public, has distanced himself from some of the key foreign-policy assumptions and policies of the postwar era.

Longstanding pillars of American strategy—free trade, alliances in Europe and Asia, defense of human rights, commitment to international institutions and the rule of law—have come into question as the new president denounces today's global architecture as a bad deal for the U.S.

Responses to the shift have ranged from bewilderment to outrage. Mr. Trump's exit from the Trans-Pacific Partnership—a carefully negotiated trade agreement intended to lock the major Asian trading states into a relationship with the U.S. that would exclude China—shocked free-trade advocates and Asia experts. His repeated descriptions of NATO as obsolete and [his refusal](#) (until his recent trip to Poland) to endorse the mutual-defense commitment at NATO's heart left many wondering whether Mr. Trump still considers the alliance essential to U.S. security. A drumbeat of news stories pointing to alleged collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign has further muddied the waters, with many concluding that the president's Russia policies have more to do with his personal concerns than with the national interest.

What explains this reversal in America's priorities? A chorus of observers has identified the problem as "populism." As they see it, ignorant voters, angry about domestic economic conditions and cultural trends, were beguiled by empty promises of prosperity and driven by racism and xenophobia to back an agenda isolating the U.S. from the rest of the world.



President Harry Truman gets a farewell from Secretary of State Dean Acheson (right) at National Airport in Washington, D.C., as the president leaves to discuss Korea and other Asian issues with Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Oct. 11, 1950. Photo: Associated Press

But populism is nothing new in American politics. In 1947, when Truman, George Marshall and Dean Acheson laid the foundations of postwar U.S. foreign policy, populism was every bit as strong a force in our politics as it is now. Determined to engage with the wider world but

also deeply aware of their political situation at home, Truman and his team acted pre-emptively to head off a populist revolt. They modified their rhetoric and policies to address the concerns of a skeptical public and found ways to make their assertive Cold War policies appealing to, among others, angry heartland populists.

This is something that foreign-policy leaders in both parties have failed to do in recent years, and the election of Mr. Trump was in large part a consequence of that failure. His populist attacks on the sacred totems of establishment foreign policy probably attracted more voters to his candidacy than they scared off, and the Trump administration now threatens to undo many of the historic accomplishments of the Truman years.

For those of us who continue to believe that the policies and institutions devised after World War II served the U.S. well and remain essential today, the question is what to do now. In a best-case scenario, Mr. Trump's impressive foreign-policy team would convince their chief and his more populist advisers that Trumanism makes sense, and the president would work to make this case to his political base. Failing that, the best alternative is to convince the American people themselves that Trumanism is a better choice for the U.S. than Trumpism. Whatever the case, those of us who want to conserve the achievements of postwar American policy will need to do what Truman did: meet populists on their own turf and engage them.

In the winter and spring of 1947, as the White House followed the dismal economic and political news from Europe, Truman and his team knew that American public opinion stood firmly opposed to any big new overseas commitments, including foreign aid. Republicans had captured control of Congress, and an angry GOP majority that included the communist-baiting Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was

intensely skeptical of foreign involvement and entangling alliances.

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The Truman team was clear about its own strategic priorities. The U.S. needed to block Soviet expansionism in a shattered Europe at a time when the continent's traditional great powers had collapsed and could neither defend themselves nor

rebuild their economies without massive American help. The U.S. also needed to take on the global role that the British Empire had played at its zenith: The dollar would replace the pound as the world's reserve currency, the U.S. Navy would replace the British fleet as the guarantor of freedom of the seas, and American power and diplomacy would replace the British in building international institutions to manage the global economy and the emerging postcolonial world.

This was all very well in theory, but Truman faced widespread political resistance to this agenda. On the left, many liberals still wanted to conciliate rather than to confront our wartime ally Stalin. On the right, many conservatives were isolationists or unilateralists who had just cut U.S. spending on foreign aid. "Mr. President," Sen. Arthur Vandenberg told Truman in a meeting at the White House about the urgent need for American aid to Greece and Turkey, "the only way you are going to get this is to make a speech and scare the hell out of the country."



President Harry Truman addresses a joint session of Congress in the speech that gave rise to the Truman Doctrine, March 12, 1947. Sen. Arthur Vandenberg sits behind the president (left), next to House Speaker Joseph W. Martin Jr.. Photo: Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

Truman and Vandenberg understood something profound about the politics of American foreign policy. While foreign-policy professionals in government, the academy and the media are often motivated by hope—the prospect of building a global trading order, for example, or of making the world more democratic—the public at large tends to be more focused on fear. If the American public had no fears about emerging threats elsewhere in the world, it would be very hard to get public support for an activist foreign policy with high-minded ambitions. Truman took the fears of the public seriously and tried to give them constructive expression: They were a crucial source of the political energy needed to power America’s global engagement.

To this end, Truman and his team summoned the specter of a global communist conspiracy directed by the Kremlin and told the American people that defeating this enemy was its highest priority. Administration surrogates painted a terrifying picture of communist advances across Europe and warned that if Europe fell, America would be next. And it worked. Congress appropriated the funds and passed the key legislation that gave Truman the foreign-policy tools he needed. American public opinion would continue to support a strong anti-Soviet foreign policy through the long years of the Cold War.

The Truman administration's anticommunist rhetoric was denounced by many intellectuals and academics as crude, naive and counterproductive. George F. Kennan, one of the architects of the administration's strategy, was so distressed by what he saw as the militarism of America's subsequent containment policies that he left government and became an eloquent critic of U.S. foreign policy. Walter Lippmann, the most influential foreign-policy pundit of the day, made known his displeasure with Cold War fearmongering again and again. Sophisticated Europeans shuddered at what they saw as an excessively harsh and Manichaeian view of communism—even as they gratefully accepted the American aid and protection that Truman's rhetoric made possible.

Truman's secretary of state, Dean Acheson, defended the administration's approach in his memoirs. An official trying to gain public support for foreign policy, he wrote, is not "the writer of a doctoral thesis. Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home a point." Acheson estimated that the average American with a job and a family had perhaps 10 minutes a day in which to think about foreign policy. "If we made our points clearer than truth, we did not differ from most other educators and could hardly do otherwise."

Today's advocates of continuing U.S. global leadership and engagement need to keep in mind both parts of Truman's achievement: formulating a farsighted national strategy to address the issues of the day and then educating the public to support it.

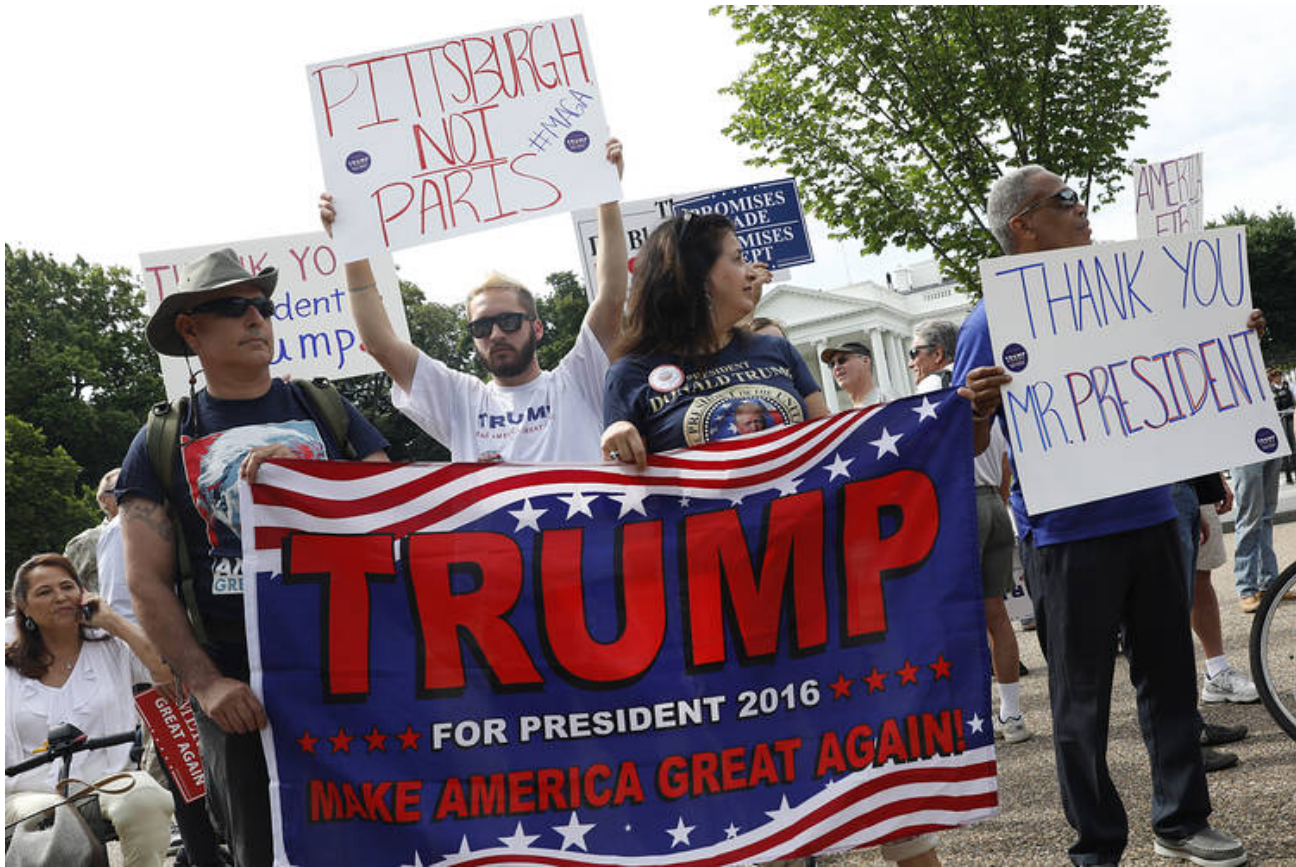
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The world is more complicated today than it was in 1947. America's challenges are more complex and, in some ways, harder to address, even if no single threat is as urgent and overwhelming as the one posed by the Soviet Union under Stalin.

But the fears of the American people are also more complex, and a national strategy that clearly addresses those concerns can succeed both in domestic politics and in the world at large.

The threat of jihadist terror on a mass scale, the growing danger of nuclear weapons in the hands of radical regimes, the possibility of debilitating cyberwarfare, the economic and political challenge posed by a rising China, the impact of globalization on American jobs—these are widely shared concerns for millions of Americans. Even in our current moment of populist retreat, such fears, together with abiding popular attachment to trusted allies such as the U.K. and Israel, are strong enough and real enough to serve as the political foundation for a new wave of American global engagement.

The same cannot be said, however, for a cause dear to many in the foreign-policy establishment: There is today very little popular support for the Wilsonian belief that the spread of democracy can solve America's most urgent foreign-policy problems.



Demonstrators gather outside the White House to show support for President Donald Trump, June 3, shortly after he said the U.S. will withdraw from the Paris climate accord. Photo: Aaron P. Bernstein/Getty Images

Promoting our values abroad remains important to many Americans, and our foreign policy cannot succeed in the long run without a clear moral basis, but the serious, recurring failures of this project since the end of the Cold War have gravely damaged its credibility. President George W. Bush turned the Iraq war into a war to make the Middle East safe for democracy. President Barack Obama tried to build democracy in the Middle East by embracing Turkey's Islamist leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and again by supporting the 2011 revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Mr. Obama then sought to make a humanitarian gesture by helping to overthrow Moammar Qaddafi in Libya.

The disasters that have unfolded in all of these countries in recent years have driven home the idea, for many Americans, that foreign-policy experts have no idea what they are doing. It is useful, in this regard, to acknowledge that it's not just populists who sometimes get foreign policy wrong.

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A Trumanist approach—popular but not populist, moral but not moralistic—would start by showing some trust in the foreign-policy instincts of the American people. To take one obvious instance where popular and elite views diverge: Ordinary Americans are inclined to favor a

firm, decisive response to jihadist threats, while foreign-policy elites tend to worry much more about the possible effects of American overreaction.

This, too, follows a familiar pattern. The same arguments were made about anticommunism in Truman's day. But just as you could then be worried about communism without wanting to nuke Russia, you can be deeply concerned about the growth of jihadist ideology and violence today without wanting to start a war with Islam.

Indeed, it is when people think that their leaders don't share their fears, or are incapable of acting on them, that popular fear often turns to populist rage. If the average American thinks that the political establishment isn't really worried about terrorism, the public is likely to become more xenophobic, not less. If the public thinks that American trade negotiators don't put the protection of American jobs first, people are more likely to become protectionist than to study the economics of

the issue. If the average American thinks that the political class doesn't really care about illegal immigration, the demand for border walls will grow, not diminish.

Truman and Acheson could have joined the intellectuals and the pundits who scoffed at the public's "naive" and "simplistic" views of the communist threat and the other challenges of the day. But they had better sense than that. They understood that connecting their strategic goals with public fears was the key to success—even if there was a certain cost to be paid at times in policy. They preferred a blunt, accessible strategy that the public and Congress would support to a more intellectually sophisticated one that could never take hold in the real world. As a result, they were able to set the U.S. and the world on a course that, for the past 70 years, has yielded an extraordinary stretch of prosperity and peace.

We must hope today that American leaders, from the president on down, can be informed and inspired by the example of that historic success. Truman's combination of strategic vision and political pragmatism is exactly what the U.S. and our turbulent world need right now.

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