Interview: Walter LaFeber, HistorianOther Interviews

Walter LaFeber is a Historian and retired professor specializing in American foreign policy. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE interviewed LaFeber about key points in Truman's foreign policy during his presidency.

Truman's Soviet Policy

The first moment of truth for Truman as far as foreign policy was concerned was 11 days after he became President. And he was still trying to find out what his foreign policy was all about. The Russian foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, passed through Washington on his way to San Francisco and the United Nations conference. And he stopped in Washington to talk with Truman about what was the key issue. And that was, how the Russians were dealing with Poland. They were imposing a Communist government on Poland and Truman thought this was not the way that Roosevelt and Stalin had agreed to deal with Poland at Yalta four months before.

Before Truman meets with Molotov in the White House, he calls a meeting of his top advisors and those advisors split. Probably the most distinguished person in the cabinet, 77 year-old Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War, tells Truman that he must be very, very careful in dealing a Molotov on the Polish issue because Poland is the key issue of Russian security. It's been Poland through which the Germans have attacked Russian twice in 30 years and, consequently, he warns Truman that this is an extremely sensitive issue.

But there are other people around the table, including Averill Harriman, who's just returned as U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, tells Truman that the Soviets have not been upholding the agreements that they had made with Roosevelt and that this is the time to draw the line.

Truman listens to all of this advice and then dismisses Stimson and the people who had agreed with Stimson and talks with Harriman and the people who'd agreed with Harriman about how to approach Molotov. He then walks into the room with Molotov and has a very, very tough conversation in which he tells Molotov that the Soviets are not carrying out their agreements on Poland. And Molotov says, "We are." And according to Truman's record of this, "I then explain to him in words of one syllable," Truman said, "exactly why they were not." Molotov apparently said, "I have never been talked to like that in my life," and Truman said, "Carry out your agreements and you won't be talked to like that." Truman then walked out of the room, saw a top State Department aide and said to the State Department aide, "I just gave him a straight one-two to the jaw." And then he stopped and looked at this man and said, "Do you think I did right?" Which, I think, was extremely revealing not only in terms of Truman's toughness at this point without really knowing what he was going to be tough about, but also this incredible insecurity that Truman had in the first weeks after he became president.

I think the thing that has to be understood about this story is that when Truman did find out what Roosevelt and Stalin had agreed to, he essentially backed away and allowed the Soviet-dominated government of Poland to take its position and the United States recognized that government as a official government of Poland. In other words, after this show-down with Molotov, Truman found out what the foreign policy was and backed down, but by that time the relationship between the two powers, between, particularly, Truman and Stalin at this point, had soured. And the Polish issue became the issue that divided, I think, Truman and Stalin to a degree that it was very difficult to bridge.

The Atomic Bomb

The first time that Truman found out about the bomb was about 12 days after he became President. Stimson had mentioned the weapon to him before, but about April 25th, Stimson sat down and explained in some detail exactly what this weapon was all about that was being developed out in New Mexico. Truman and Stimson immediately began to see the diplomatic implications of the bomb, that the bomb would give them something that they didn't have in terms of leverage on the Soviet Union, as well as on the Japanese. The remark became common at those times that if somebody around Truman said, "If this thing works like we think it will, we'll certainly have the hammer on those boys." And I think "those boys," in this context, meant both the Japanese in terms of winding up the war, and the Soviet Union. The question became again, how do you translate this weapon into diplomacy? It's a very difficult thing to do. What Truman did was try to hold off dealing with the Russians until he was certain that the bomb was going to work.

From the time that Truman found out about the bomb from Stimson in late April of 1945, I don't think there was ever any doubt but that Truman intended to use it. The bomb had been built to use. It was built initially to use against Germany, but now that the Germans were on the edge of surrender and they were going to surrender within several weeks, it was clear that the bomb would be used to shorten the war with Japan. Roosevelt had built this bomb to be used. Truman was going to carry out Roosevelt's policy. Billions of dollars had been put into the bomb project. Truman was not going to waste that money.

Moreover, it was quite clear that the bomb, if it did work, if it would go off, would give Truman tremendous diplomatic leverage that would not only shorten the war, but it could be the kind of weapon that the other powers with which Truman had to deal would be in awe of. And Truman understood the nature of this right from the start. Consequently, the question was never whether or not to use -- the question was when to use it.

Now the question of when to use it and how to use it in Japan, I think, had been made much easier for Truman because of the massive bombing raids that the United States had carried out over Japan during the previous months. Several of those raids, the raids on March 8th and 9th, 1945, for example, had killed 80,000 Japanese in Tokyo. It had turned glass to liquid. I mean it had been an inferno in Tokyo and in some of the other Japanese cities, as well. In fact, things were at the point in April and May of 1945 that Stimson said to Truman at one point, "I'm not sure if we can find a city that's still standing enough to show just exactly what the bomb can do." And Truman, according to Stimson's diary, laughed and said, yes, he understood. There wasn't a whole lot left standing in Japan by May and June of 1945. But they did find several cities that hadn't been bombed extensively. Those cities -- the first city was, of course, Hiroshima. The second city, which was actually an alternative site for the August 9th bombing, was Nagasaki. Consequently, there was no question about whether or not Truman was going to use the bomb. The question was when and how and where.

The Potsdam Conference

Truman recorded in a letter just before he went to Potsdam, he said, "I hate to make this trip." He did not want to go to Potsdam, but "if we go, we must win." He clearly was insecure, as would be understandable since he was to meet Stalin and Churchill for the first time. When he got to Potsdam, he met Stalin. The two got along rather well and Truman said, "I think I can do business with Stalin." "He's very honest, but he's also smart as hell," is the way Truman described his initial impressions of Stalin.

Truman was very uncomfortable at Potsdam until apparently July 17th. He had been there several days and then that day he received news that the atomic device that had been exploded in New Mexico had worked and that he was going to have an atomic bomb to use in several weeks on the Japanese. Stimson, who was at Potsdam with Truman, immediately recorded in his diary that President appeared to be "all pepped up." And Churchill later said that Truman, once he heard the news that the atomic bomb worked, was, quote, "a changed man." It was quite clear to Truman now that he had, as he would later say, "an ace in the hole and an ace showing." That is to say, the ace in the hole was the atomic bomb -- the ace showing was American economic and military power. And he was going to use these and he was going to use them particularly for two things that he wanted out of Stalin at Potsdam. And he became very aggressive at Potsdam now. The insecurity changed to a very interesting kind of aggressiveness.

The first thing that he wanted from Stalin was an agreement on Germany that essentially would prevent the Russians from taking industrial goods and resources out of Germany. Without Germany, the rest of Western Europe could not be rebuilt, Truman knew, and consequently it was important to keep the Russians out of Germany. He made a series of deals with Stalin that went back on the deals that Roosevelt and Stalin had made four months earlier the Yalta. Particularly, he went back on the deal that said that the Russians would be able to take $10 billion worth of reparations out of Germany. The $10 billion was now changed to a percentage. And a percentage of zero is zero, and that is essentially what the Russians got out of Western Germany.

The second objective of Truman, once he found out that the atomic bomb was going to work, was to keep the Russians out of the war in Asia. Now this was a very touchy situation because the key to U.S. policy in Asia had been for the last six months to get the Red Army involved in the invasion of Japan. Roosevelt had given Stalin a lot of territory and a lot of rights in Asia at Yalta earlier in 1945 in order to get Stalin to come into the war so that not as many American soldiers would be killed in the invasion of Japan. Now Truman and Stimson understood, as Stimson put it, "We don't need the Russians any longer." With a bomb, they could end the war very quickly. They could do it without the Russians. And they could keep the Russians away from the Japanese home islands. And that's exactly what they sat out to do.

So, as a consequence, Truman, as he said to Stimson, "I'm going to go in and I'm going to get an open door in Manchuria." That is, "I'm going to make Stalin back down from what he got from Roosevelt. I'm going to force him to open up the ports in Manchuria to the United States and to other trading nations." And, as a consequence, when he finished dealing with Stalin on this, Truman came back to his rooms and said to Stimson, "I've just clenched the open door in Manchuria." That is to say, "I've made Stalin back down from the agreements that he had made with Roosevelt." Now, Truman thought, the United States was going to be in much, much better shape in Asia because with the bomb they would end the war. They would end the war before Soviet troops got very far in Asia, and now the United States would be able to deal in Asia as an equal with the Soviet Union. Truman approached Stalin at the Potsdam conference and very casually said to Stalin that he had this new weapon. Much Truman's dismay, Stalin was very passive in response and Truman did not know exactly how to interpret this.

What we know now is that Stalin knew exactly about the development of the bomb because of Soviet spies at Los Alamos in New Mexico. We also know that as soon as Stalin walked out of that room after the conversation with Truman, Stalin immediately got in touch with the man who was the director of the Soviet atomic bomb project and said that he must get to work and accelerate the project. This man immediately told Stalin that he didn't he enough room to expand Soviet labs, that the forests in the area where they were developing this project were simply too immense, at which point Stalin hung up the phone, picked it back up, dialed one of his military commanders and ordered two tank divisions immediately to go out to this area and clear away these forests. In other words, Stalin took this information that Truman had passed on to him very seriously.

I think Potsdam marks the point at which Truman and Stalin don't have a whole lot to say to each other anymore. Their armies are essentially doing the talking. The Soviet army is occupying Eastern Europe and parts of Central Europe, moving into Germany. The American Army is driving towards Japan and the American air force is essentially going to bring Japan to its knees before the Russian army can get to the home islands. Consequently, what we find now is that the armies have essentially set up the diplomatic situation, and the question is, how do you negotiate the Russian armies out of Central and Eastern Europe? This is a question that Truman could never solve, not even with the atomic bomb. He could never figure out exactly how to play what Stimson called his "royal straight flush," the atomic bomb, how to play those cards in terms of getting what Truman wanted out of Stalin in Eastern Europe.

Western Europe

The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan dealt with two separate problems that Truman faced in the early part of 1947. The first problem was Soviet pressure in Turkey and Communist pressure, which, incidentally, was not entirely Soviet, on Greece. The Truman Doctrine dealt with that problem. In other words, the Truman Doctrine was a military and political response to what Truman perceived to be a military expansionism on the part of the Communists in the Eastern Mediterranean.

But there was an entirely different set of questions that Truman had to deal with, and I think to many people, including the President, this was the more important set of questions. This was, how do you save Western Europe, which historically had been the key part of the world for American exporters, for American culture, for the United States since the 19th century. Western Europe was in terrible, terrible shape. The way to solve this problem was not to build a military alliance in Western Europe.

In 1947, I think Atcheson put it very well when he said that "Unless the Soviets are absolutely crazy, there's not going to be any war in Western Europe." And nobody thought that Stalin was crazy. The threat in Western Europe was not the Red Army. The threat in Western Europe was starvation. The threat in Western Europe was that unless somehow the Western European governments were not helped, they could be a swing, through elections, towards the left, toward socialism and Communism in Western Europe. The way to deal with this was not militarily. The way to deal with this was economically. Consequently, the Marshall Plan was a response to that particular set of problems. Atcheson told the Senate, and I think very accurately, that even if the Red Army never existed, there would still be this problem in Western Europe. We would still need the Marshall Plan. The problems was one of Western capitalism, not Western military security. That was the question that the Marshall Plan was developed to address.

The problem, as it turned out, with the Marshall Plan was Germany. Most of the Marshall Plan aid was targeted towards Germany because Germany was the industrial hub of Europe. It had been throughout the 20th century. Once, however, the Soviets saw that the United States was intent upon rebuilding Western Europe, because only then did Americans believe you could rebuild the rest of Western Europe, once Stalin began to see Germany come back, Stalin began to get very, very distressed. After all, this was the nation that had invaded the Soviet Union twice in 30 years and this was the nation that Stalin had essentially fought World War II for to keep down forever.

By the early part of 1948, the German economy essentially rests on Lucky Strike cigarettes. The currency in Germany is so weak that Lucky Strike cigarettes are the common currency. And somebody said that the way Truman could really help the Germans, if he wanted to, is to send them 150 million cartons of Lucky Strike cigarettes. That's how bad the situation was. Consequently, what Truman did was begin to pour money into Germany to bring the German economy back. Stalin immediately responded. The way Stalin responded was to try to put pressure on Truman to back off. And he did this by blockading Berlin in the spring of 1948. Truman, in other words, had started out with an economic policy to save Western Europe for the sake of U.S. interests. He ended up within a year facing a Russian military threat in the very center of Europe at the most important point of American interest in Europe.

The blockade on Berlin that Stalin imposes in the spring and summer of 1948 occurs in a context that is extremely dangerous as far as U.S. observers are concerned, because in the spring of 1948, Czechoslovakia has fallen behind the Iron Curtain. Czechoslovakia was probably the most pro-Western of all the East European countries. It was a country with which the United States had very closely identified for years and years. Suddenly in March of 1948, Czechoslovakia falls to Communism. The consequence of this is that Truman now begins to believe that the Soviets have thrown off the restraint and that they are beginning to get quite irresponsible in terms of putting pressure not only in Czechoslovakia, but now, with the Berlin blockade, at the very center of Europe itself. What Truman doesn't understand, I think, is that he had helped bring this on, in part, unintentionally, and I think with good reason, by trying to bring Germany back to help the rest of Western Europe, to help the United States, which was something that Stalin simply couldn't tolerate for Soviet national interests.

MacArthur and Nuclear Weapons

In January and February of 1951 the military situation looked particularly bleak. It now seems that Truman was ready to order nuclear weapons in place in U.S. air fields in Okinawa for the possible use in the Korean War. He actually ordered the bombs to be sent across the Pacific. He had second thoughts, apparently, and stopped the bombs at Guam instead of moving them on into Okinawa, where they would have been operational.

What this did, I think, was, on the one hand, to show how frightened Truman was and how concerned he was about the course of the war now that the Chinese had intervened. The other thing that it did, however, was to show the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington that Truman was very serious about fighting this war and that in the long run this perhaps worked to Truman's advantage because when he moved to replace MacArthur in April of 1951, the Joint Chiefs had no doubt but that Truman was not relieving MacArthur because he was going to stop fighting the war, but he was relieving MacArthur because MacArthur had crossed him in the decisions about how to end the war.

The military situation becomes stabilized in February of 1951. I don't think Truman really at that point, and afterwards, considered using nuclear weapons in a serious way. The question then was, how do you negotiate your way out of this? The Chinese seemed to be receptive. Truman was certainly receptive to some kind of armistice negotiations.

The person who was not receptive was Stalin, who, if he had had his wish, would have had the Chinese and the Americans fight each other to the death. And the other person who was not receptive to this, along with Stalin, was General MacArthur, who essentially wanted this war to end in a glorious victory for the UN forces that he commanded. Consequently, as Truman was indicating that the United States was willing to talk about some kind of armistice discussion, MacArthur undercut this by summoning the commanders from the other side to meet him in the field, as he said, in order to discuss the possible surrender. That's when President Truman began to think seriously about recalling General MacArthur.