



Harry S. Truman

Harry S. Truman, who inherited the presidency during the closing months of World War II.

7 of 9

Harry S. Truman: Suddenly Responsible for the World

President he succeeded: Franklin D. Roosevelt

Term of office: April 12, 1945–January 20, 1953

Eleanor Roosevelt summoned Vice President Harry S. Truman to the White House and told him that Franklin D. Roosevelt had died. A stunned Truman asked whether there was anything he could do for her.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” she reportedly replied. “For you are the one in trouble now.”

Truman had been vice president for only eighty-two days. Roosevelt had told him little about wartime strategy, and Truman did not know that the United States was developing an atomic bomb. He suddenly inherited responsibility for a world war and an emerging confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Germany surrendered less than a month after Truman took office. In August, he authorized the use of atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrendered shortly afterward.

Supporters argue that the bombs ended the war without an invasion; critics contend Japan might have been defeated without destroying two cities. The decision remains intensely debated.

Truman then helped shape the postwar order. The Truman Doctrine promised support for countries resisting communist pressure. The Marshall Plan aided Europe's economic recovery, while NATO created a lasting military alliance. Truman also recognized Israel and ordered the desegregation of the armed forces.

At home, Truman proposed a "Fair Deal" that included national health insurance, expanded Social Security and civil-rights protections. Congress rejected much of the program, although it approved increases in the minimum wage, public housing and Social Security coverage.

Pollsters expected Truman to lose the 1948 election, but he conducted an energetic campaign and defeated Thomas Dewey in one of the nation's greatest political upsets.

His second term was dominated by the Korean War. Truman's dismissal of General Douglas MacArthur affirmed civilian control of the military but was deeply unpopular. War, inflation, labor disputes and scandals drove his approval rating to historic lows.

His reputation rose considerably after his death. Historians came to admire his decisiveness and role in building the postwar international system. Truman entered office unprepared, but he did not shrink from its responsibilities.