



## Truman acted alone, too

Max Boot

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When he delivered the West Point commencement address last month, President Bush compared his efforts to stand up to terrorists to Harry Truman's efforts to stand up to communists during the early years of the Cold War. Liberal pundits were outraged. How dare this Republican cite a sainted Democrat as his inspiration? Commentators such as Peter Beinart, the former New Republic editor, suggested that Bush should instead learn from Truman about the need to recognize the limits of American strength, eschew grandiose rhetoric and unilateral action and encase American power in a "web" of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and NATO.

This is a refrain that has been heard since 2001, and it is worth correcting the historical record before this mythology becomes accepted as fact. The reality is that Bush is far more

multilateral and Truman was much less so than commonly assumed.

For all of Bush's diplomatic stumbles, he has won the assistance of many allies in Iraq, the Horn of Africa and beyond. Much of the military effort in Afghanistan is being turned over to NATO, which, at Bush's urging, has gotten involved in a conflict outside Europe for the first time. Bush also has been active in pushing free trade, just as Truman did, through treaties (which many Democrats now oppose) such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Bush, like Truman, has increased foreign aid. And in his approach to the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, Bush has been scrupulously multilateralist. Not successful but hardly unilateralist.

Truman, for his part, was less multilateralist than some of his admirers claim. True, he did preside over the

founding of the United Nations, and he sometimes expressed grandiloquent hopes for this "parliament of man." But in practice his viewpoint was closer to that of his hardheaded secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who believed that the U.N. Charter was "impracticable" and who scoffed at the idea that "the way to solve this or that problem is to leave it to the United Nations."

Acheson did make effective use of the U.N. in 1950, when he secured a resolution authorizing an armed response to North Korea's invasion of South Korea, but only because the Soviet delegate was boycotting the Security Council. In any case, Truman had already committed air and naval forces to combat before the vote. As he wrote to Acheson, a U.N. failure to act would not have altered his plans — "we would have had to go into Korea alone." Truman was equally clearheaded about the U.N.'s limitations in an earlier crisis — the British cutoff of aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947, which left those countries exposed to communist aggression. Truman told Congress: "The situation is an urgent one requiring immediate action, and the United Nations and its related organizations are not in a position to extend help of the kind that is required." So the U.S. offered \$400 million on its own.

The same pattern is evident throughout Truman's presidency. The decision to nuke Hiroshima and Nagasaki? A unilateral U.S. initiative. The Marshall Plan to aid European recovery? Ditto. The 1948-49

airlift to break the Soviet blockade of Berlin? More unilateralism.

Even when Truman seemed to be the most multilateralist, there was usually more to the case than met the eye. Consider the Baruch Plan — which he floated in 1946 — to turn over all nuclear facilities and materiel around the world to international control. This seemed like an incredibly generous offer because the U.S. was the only atomic power at that point. But it contained "poison pill" provisions — mandating, for instance, "immediate and certain punishment" of violations, not subject to a Security Council veto — that astute observers realized would make it unacceptable to Josef Stalin. Truman never seriously considered unilaterally giving up the U.S. atomic arsenal, as liberals such as Henry Wallace urged.

This is not meant to denigrate Truman's diplomatic initiatives. The creation of NATO in 1949 was particularly important. But not nearly as important as the decision to keep U.S. troops in Europe, even before NATO existed.

Multilateral camouflage like NATO can make the exercise of U.S. power more palatable, and it should be employed wherever practicable. But, whether in the late 1940s or today, progress on tough problems requires American action, alone if need be. That's something that both Bush and Truman understood — and that too many liberals still haven't come to terms with.