



Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE from Harry S. Truman's Letter to His Daughter

In this excerpt, Truman tells of first becoming president and of his meeting with Churchill and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference near Berlin. As you read, think about the challenges Truman faced at the beginning of his presidency.

As you know I was Vice-President from Jan. 20 to April 12, 1945. I was at Cabinet meetings and saw Roosevelt once or twice in those months. But he never did talk to me confidentially about the war, or about foreign affairs or what he had in mind for the peace after the war. . . .

Well the catastrophe we all dreaded came on April 12 at 4:35 p.m. At 7:09 I was the President and my first decision was to go ahead with the San Francisco Conference to set up the U.N.

Then I had to start in reading memorandums, briefs, and volumes of correspondence on the World situation. Too bad I hadn't been on the Foreign Affairs Committee or that F.D.R. hadn't informed me on the situation. . . . Then Germany

folded up. You remember that celebration that took place on May 8, 1945—my 61st birthday.

Then came Potsdam. . . . Stalin was a day late, Churchill was on hand when I arrived, I found the Poles in eastern Germany without authority and

Russia in possession of East Prussia, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, as well as Rumania and Bulgaria. Churchill had urged me to send our troops to the eastern border of Germany and keep them there.

We were about 150 miles east of the border of the occupation zone line agreed to at Yalta. I felt that agreements made in the war to keep Russia fighting should be kept and I kept them to the letter. Perhaps they should not have been adhered to so quickly. . . .

Perhaps if we had been slower moving back we could have forced the Russians, Poles, Bulgars, Yugos etc. to behave. But all of us wanted Russia in the Japanese War. Had we known what the Atomic Bomb would do we'd have never have wanted the Bear [symbol of Russia] in the picture. You must remember no tests had been made until several days after I arrived in

Berlin [for the Potsdam Conference]. Adm. Leahy told me that he was an explosives expert and Roosevelt had just thrown \$2,600,000,000 away for nothing. He was wrong. But his guess was as good as any. [Senator Jim Byrnes thought it [the A-bomb] might work but he wasn't sure. He thought if it did we would win the

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1. According to his letter, what challenges did Truman face when he became president?
 2. What does Truman's letter reveal about his attitude toward the Soviet Union?
 3. How well do you think Truman handled foreign affairs right after he became president? What could he have done differently?

from Margaret Truman, ed., *Letters from Father: The Truman Family's Personal Correspondence* (New York: Arbor House, 1981), 103-108.

Japanese War without much more losses but we still needed the Russians. That was one of my prime objects in going to Berlin—to get the Russians into the Jap War. Well, many agreements were made at Potsdam, the Foreign Ministers Conference was set up, I suggested that the Danube, the Rhine, . . . the Black Sea Straits all be made free waterways and that no trade barriers be set up in Europe. The last suggestion got nowhere. Had it been adopted all Europe's and the World's troubles would have been half over.

We entered into agreements for the Government of Germany—not one of which has Russia kept. We made agreements on China, Korea and other places none of which has Russia kept. So that now we are faced with exactly the same situation with which Britain + France were faced in 1938/39 with Hitler. A totalitarian state is no different whether you call it Nazi, Fascist, Communist or Franco's Spain.

Things look black. We've offered control and disarmament through the U.N., giving up our one most powerful weapon for the world to control. The Soviets won't agree. They're upsetting things in Korea, in China, in Persia (Iran) and in the Near East.

A decision will have to be made. I am going to make it. I am sorry to have bored you with this. But you've studied foreign affairs to some extent and I just wanted you to know your dad as President asked for no territory, no reparations, no slave laborers—only Peace in the World.