

# Challenges faced by Truman| A1 Sample answer

## What challenges did Harry Truman face as President?

When Harry Truman assumed office upon the death of his predecessor Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he faced a number of uphill challenges in the areas of both foreign and domestic affairs. F.D.R had managed to revolutionise the American welfare system, lift the US economy from the great depression of the 1930s and bring the allies to the victory in WW2. Truman was tasked with continuing the reform laid out in the new dear, boosting the economy and carving out the predominate position of the US in the post war world. Most of the external challenge she faced revolved around the worsening relations with the ideologically opposed USSR. At home he faced the challenges of the red scare, welfare and economic problems.

But the first challenge Truman faced was ending the Second World War. The war in Europe had ended in many of '45 but America still faced the Japanese threat. Military estimates of the time estimated that the US would suffer almost 475,000 casualties in an invasion of Kyushu, one of the Japanese home islands. Instead, Truman ordered the dropping of two atomic bombs, one on the city of Hiroshima and another one on Nagasaki a few days later. These bombs had been developed by the 'Manhattan Project' a group of scientists working at Los Alamos under Dr. Robert J Oppenheimer. Thousands were killed in the blast and tens of thousands more died as a result of nuclear fall-out. However, the strategy was successful in forcing Japan to surrender. However, unleashing the power of the atom would provoke an arms race which meant that the earth would hover on the brink of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) for the next twenty years.

The recurring problem of Truman's presidency was the growing threat of communism in the free world. When the red army 'liberated' large tracts of Eastern Europe in WW2 they set up satellite states and installed local rulers loyal to the Kremlin. Truman was duly worried about the spread of communism. He believed in the domino theory i.e. that if one country fell to communism its neighbours would too. He felt that economic prosperity was the best guard against communism. Thus he launched the European recovery programme or 'Marshall Aid' named after his secretary of state George Marshall. Over 5 years the Marshall Aid programme would cost the US \$17bn. Countries with active communist threats benefited most e.g. Greece received \$175m in 1949 alone. The Russians tried to respond to this with their own brand 'Molotov Aid' but they simply did not have the resources to match the US. Truman successfully responded to this challenge preventing the spread of the iron curtain.

Berlin was a flashpoint throughout the cold war. One challenge Truman faced was maintaining a hold on Berlin, which had been divided into four zones after the war. In keeping with his policy of speeding up the European recovery, Truman introduced a new currency to West Berlin, the deutschmark. This angered the Russians who wanted to keep Berlin impoverished and economically dependent. As a result they closed off all road and rail links to the city, but Truman was determined to stay, "We are going to stay, Period". He launched Operation Vittles to supply all necessities by air. Between June '48 and May '49 the allied forces landed over 200000 flights in Berlin and brought in 4700 tonnes of supply per day. This was a great demonstration of American resolve and turned into a huge propaganda victory for the US.

Another communist challenge came in the south pacific region, when soviet backed North Vietnamese forces overran the US supported South Vietnam. In 1949 China had fallen to red forces and Truman was determined to make a stand in Asia. He assembled a UN taskforce

from over twenty countries (88% American), led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. They landed at Inchon, relieved the beleaguered South Vietnamese forces and pushed them back across the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel. However, MacArthur did not heed Chinese warning to stop advancing north and so in October 1950, over 250,000 Chinese forces attacked across the Yalu River. This led to a bloody stalemate situation which ended three years later, after 50,000 Americans had died, with the border being reset at the 39<sup>th</sup> parallel and a DMZ being established there. Truman's response to this challenge was disproportionate and therefore flawed.

The spread of communism also proved a political annoyance for Truman on the home front. The demagogue Sen. Joe McCarthy's popularity, as well as the activities of HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee), led to an atmosphere of fear and tension. People believed, falsely, that the country, and particularly the state department, was heavily infiltrated by communists. Truman responded by trying to calm the mass hysteria saying there was not a "single word of truth" to McCarthy's allegations. He also tried to reassure the public by establishing a federal employee loyalty scheme. However, he did veto the McCarran Internal Security Act, designed to expose and remove the civil rights of suspected communists. Because of this he was accused of being 'soft' on communists. Overall, he dealt poorly with the red scare, failing to quell the public disquiet and paranoia.

Truman also embarked upon a programme of social reform called the 'Fair Deal, but his twenty one point programme was defeated in congress. As a result, he was limited in what he could do. He increased spending on health and welfare and passed the GI Bill to provide training, education and housing for demobilised veterans. But he failed to bring education under federal control. He was also concerned by the issue of civil rights and made some steps forward in this regard. For example he was the first president to address the NAACP (National

Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples); he desegregated the armed forces and extended the power of the Fair Employment and Practises Committee.

Truman's major economic challenge was to convert the economy from wartime to a peacetime one. He wanted to preserve the nearly full employment seen during the war, and so he set up the council for economic advisors and passed the Employment Act. In his first term, as people rushed to buy consumer goods, inflation skyrocketed, but in his second term he got to grips with the problem by borrowing to make up budget deficits,

Truman faced a vast array of challenges as president. He dealt with some of these effectively, notably the Berlin Blockade, and others ineffectively such as the Korean War and the mounting red scare at home.