**Cold War Presidents Biographies**

**Harry S. Truman**

Harry S. Truman became President of the United States in April of 1945 when he succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt upon FDR’s death from a stroke. Truman had been Vice President for less than three months when he took the oath of office. Truman is the only 20th Century President to not graduate from college.

Truman was a small businessman in his home state of Missouri before entering politics. He operated a number of businesses, but he is best known for running a haberdashery, or a men’s accessory store that specializes mostly in hats. He got his start in local politics in Missouri and eventually hooked up with a famous Kansas City political machine. From that affiliation, he moved on to Congress as a representative and Senator to the federal Congress in Washington DC. He was chosen to be FDR’s running mate during FDR’s fourth term as president in order to carry Missouri and other Midwestern states in the election results.

Truman oversaw the closing months of World War 2 once he took office. Within a month of becoming President, Allied Forces headed by U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, marched into Berlin. As they approached the city, Hitler committed suicide. Germany surrendered soon afterward, resulting in V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day). At this point, tensions with the Soviet Union began to become very evident as both sides had different opinions on what to do with Germany now that they were defeated. The USSR wanted to destroy it for security reasons and the U.S. wanted to rebuild it to avoid the same mistakes that were made at the end of WW1 that led to Hitler’s rise and the outbreak of WW2.

In July of 1945, Truman met with USSR leader Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in Potsdam, Germany, at what is known as the Potsdam Conference. At this conference, Truman and Stalin argued over Germany’s future and found that they could not compromise, causing a split between the nations that would last for 45 years. It was the beginning of the Cold War. Stalin announced he was forcing communism on East European nations and they would operate as satellite nations. Churchill referenced the event later as an “Iron Curtain descending upon Eastern Europe.” Every country “behind” the Curtain was controlled by the Soviet Union.

Yet the USSR had bigger goals – the spread of communism across the rest of Europe and the world. So Truman issued the Truman Doctrine, which was a statement that the U.S. would fight communist aggression anywhere in the world in the defense of the freedom and independence of those not under communist rule. This was the start of the U.S. being a world-wide police force. It was the establishment of our foreign policy that would become known as **Containment**, as the US was working to contain the spread of communism.

There are two ways to contain communism – with your military, or with money. Money can be effective as those countries with prosperous people don’t like communism because it requires them to give control of their possessions to the government to redistribute equally among the people. Military can be effective, but dangerous as it puts the lives of troops, and possibly civilians, on the line. And once the Soviet Union successfully tested an atomic bomb of their own in 1949, the chances that a military encounter between the US and USSR would result in nuclear holocaust was real.

As a result, Truman chose to contain with money through the Marshall Plan, in which the US gave billions of dollars worth of aid to any European country that wanted it to rebuild their economies. This plan worked in locking down Europe.

But in 1950, Truman was faced with a dilemma in Asia. North Korea, a communist nation under protection and direction of the Soviet Union and China, invaded democratic South Korea, an ally of the United States. Now that the invasion had happened, money would not work. Military force was needed. Under the umbrella of the United Nations, the U.S. military fought the Korean War, pushing the North Koreans back across the 39th Parallel of latitude, the dividing line between the two nations. Truman had successfully enforced containment with the military. It is important to note that Truman resorted to military enforcement of the Truman Doctrine only after North Korea gave him no choice.

**Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961)**

Dwight D. Eisenhower, known better as “Ike”, followed Truman as President. He was the first Republican president since Herbert Hoover was elected in 1928. Ike was a war hero, having served as the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II. He was married, but is rumored to have a long-time mistress who served as his personal driver during the war in Europe. He ran for president with the slogan “I Like Ike!”

Eisenhower wasn’t much for using money for containment. Being a military man, and having worked closely with the Soviets during WW2 when we were allies, he believed the most effective way was simple fear. Power was something the Soviets could understand, and respect. Basically, he drew a line in the sand (existing borders of communism) and said if the Soviets caused communism to cross that line anywhere, even by one mile, we would rain nuclear bombs on them, to heck with the consequences of destroying the world. That’s why Mr. Van Brimmer says to remember his nickname of Ike, or I.K.E. which can stand for “I’ll Kill Everybody.”

It was an effective approach as the Soviets did not step out of line once during his presidency. The only real hiccup was the shooting down of American pilot Gary Powers by the USSR. But Powers was flying a U-2 spy plane over Soviet territory when shot down, so it was actually our aggression, not the USSR’s.

While this containment approach was effective, it had a lot of negative effects on society in America. People lived in constant fear of nuclear war because we didn’t trust the Soviets to behave themselves. People built backyard fallout shelters underground in case of nuclear war and children did nuclear attach drills in schools where they crawled under their desks to shelter from a nuclear blast.

Eisenhower died in 1969 in Washington D.C. His presidential library is in Abilene, Kansas. His mother was a pacifist, which means she did not believe in violence, fighting or war.

**John Fitzgerald Kennedy**

John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1961, defeating Eisenhower’s Vice President, Richard Nixon. Nixon would go on to win the presidency in 1968 during the Vietnam War and would become the only president ever to resign from office. Kennedy is the only Catholic president in U.S. history. During World War II he commanded a PT Boat in the Pacific Theater and was a hero who saved the lives of some of his fellow Navy sailors. Hollywood even made a movie of his heroics, called PT 109.

JFK, as he was called, was the son of wealthy businessman Joseph Kennedy. Joe Kennedy made the family fortune through some suspect stock buying following the crash of the stock market in 1929. JFK was not supposed to the be “successful” son, that was supposed to be Joseph Kennedy, Jr. But Joe Jr. was killed in a plane crash in Great Britain during World War II. He was a fighter pilot. So the mantle of political success fell to JFK. There were two other Kennedy boys who were successful in politics – Robert (Bobby) and Theodore (Teddy). Bobby served as Attorney General under JFK and was his closest advisor. Bobby was assassinated in 1968 while running for president. Teddy was a long-time Senator from the state of Massachusetts until his death in the early 2000s.

When JFK took office, he changed America’s approach to containment. He thought Eisenhower’s approach was too extreme and would lead us to world destruction. So he employed what is known as Flexible Response. This meant there was flexibility in what kind of response the U.S. would have toward Soviet aggression – not just nukes launched when the USSR looks at the U.S. wrong. He said nukes were still an option, just an option of last resort. He poured money into enlarging our military in terms of full-time soldiers. He also created the first Special Forces troops in the Green Berets. These would be specially trained, small units that could go into a country covertly and quickly and wreak havoc to either prevent the need for larger troop deployments, or to set the ground work for a larger invasion.

JFK also used money again, much like Truman, but wrapped it in the disguise of humanitarian aid. He created the “Aid for Progress” program in which we gave money to poor Latin American countries that would be ripe targets for communist revolutions. He also created the Peace Corps, which is an organization that still exists today. This organization sends do-gooder type Americans into poor, underdeveloped nations to set up schools, medical clinics, dig wells for clean water, etc. By doing this, it casts the United States in a good light in the eyes of those people. This is helpful when the communists come along telling them how bad the U.S. is and how we just want to destroy and enslave their country.

While this approach decreased the threat of nuclear war, it emboldened the Soviets to try to expand, knowing JFK was afraid to use nukes. During JFK’s term, the USSR put nuclear missiles in Cuba (Cuban Missile Crisis) and build the Berlin Wall. The Vietnam War started when North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam (Commies invading our allies, just like in Korea) during JFK’s term. Despite this Soviet aggression, Kennedy stood strong, forcing a withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba and staunchly supporting those residents of West Berlin who were encircled by the Wall.

JFK was kill

ed on Nov. 7, 1963 when he was shot in the head while riding through downtown Dallas, Texas, in a limousine during a kickoff event for his re-election campaign. Lee Harvey Oswald, a former US soldier with communist leanings, was arrested for the murder, but he was killed while being transferred from the Dallas jail later in the evening on Nov. 7. A Dallas nightclub owner, Jack Ruby, shot Oswald on live TV. Ruby was known to have mafia connections, which fueled a conspiracy theory that the mob was behind JFK’s assassination. It is one of many theories people have as to who was truly behind Kennedy’s death. At 2 p.m. local time in Dallas, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texan, took the oath of office and replaced JFK as president.

JFK is buried in Arlington National Cemetary in Arlington, Virginia. There is an “eternal” flame that never goes out on his grave. JFK’s wife, America’s darling while first lady, Jackie Kennedy, married a Greek shipping billionaire Aristotle Onassis, after JFK’s death.