How Would History be Different If Harry Truman's Baptist Church Had Taught Him Just Peacemaking Theory?

At the Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Historical Society in the Truman Presidential Library
Upon Receiving the Award for "Best Essay of 1998"
by Glen Stassen

Harry Truman followed Franklin D. Roosevelt, an eloquent, crusading president who had led the nation during the Second World War, and died early in his last term. I can remember as a small boy playing with my cousins, the Ericksons, when suddenly Aunt Mae called us to the radio: Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died, and Harry S Truman would become president! Many expected Truman to be a letdown by contrast. He had no college education, and had little foreign policy experience. He surprised them, as he surprised Thomas Dewey in the presidential election of 1948.[1] He was decisive, firm, clear, and ethical.

Like Lincoln, Truman came from a Kentucky Baptist family that migrated to another state--in his case, to Missouri not long before his birth. Both sets of grandparents, and his parents, "were Baptists, the Trumans vehemently so."[2] In Truman's faith, we can see several key themes that explain many of his characteristics and policies as president.

Biblical grounding: Harry's mother taught him to read before he started school, with the large-print family Bible as his textbook. He could read nothing else, his eyesight was so bad. He read the Bible through twice by the time he was twelve. During his teenage years he attended Benton Boulevard Baptist Church in Kansas City, where he was converted, and
baptized in the Little Blue River.[3] He had "a remarkably broad familiarity with the Bible, citing texts and stories from it with a range and aptness unusual among modern statesmen.... He says [in his diary]: 'The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest of all things in the Bible, a way of life, and maybe someday men will get to understand it as the real way of life.'" I dearly hope these were prophetic words for us.[4]

Doing what is right: His mother impressed him that he should be good and do his best. His devoutly Baptist grandmother had taught him the same: "Her philosophy was simple. You knew right from wrong and you did right, and you always did your best. That's all there was to it."[5] He frequently repeated Mark Twain's epigram, "Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."[6]

Baptists descend not from Martin Luther, who insisted on faith alone; but from Anabaptists, who answered Luther that "faith by itself, if it has no deeds, is dead" (James 2:17); and from Puritans, who insisted on living a life of obedience to the Lord.

Prayer and sense of duty from God: In his diary, in May of his first year as President, Truman wrote that things were going so well that he hardly knew what to think. "I can't understand it--except to attribute it to God. He guides me, I think.' It is clear again and again in his diary that prayer was important to him, shaping him and guiding him in these challenging White House days."[7]

Honesty: Throughout the historical studies of Truman, again and again you read of how everyone around him was impressed by his honesty with them and with the people, and how it raised the morale inside his administration higher than any recent one. Furthermore, from his beginnings in Missouri to the high position of the presidency, he never used his position to make money. Moreover, he stayed absolutely faithful to his wife, consistently avoiding situations that could even look questionable.
Populism and democracy: Democracy and identification with the common person are themes in Baptist life. Baptist polity is democratic, without bishops or hierarchy, and we read the Bible for ourselves and pray our own homespun prayers. Truman's frontier Baptist upbringing was more workers and farmers than the Presbyterian and Episcopalian upper class of his wife Bessie's churches. It showed in his politics. Andrew Jackson, the Tennessee populist president, was his hero.

In his first two speeches in the Senate in 1937, he attacked the greed of large corporations and their unfairness to common people. He recalled "how Jesse James, in order to rob the Rock Island Railroad, had had to get up early in the morning and risk his life to make off with $3,000. Yet, by means of holding companies, modern-day financiers had stolen $70 million from the same railroad." He proclaimed: "We worship money instead of honor.... We worship Mammon; and until we go back to ancient fundamentals and return to the Giver of the Tables of law and his teachings, these conditions are going to remain with us...."[8] In his surprise-of-the-century defeat of Thomas Dewey for the presidency in 1948, he made hundreds of energetic speeches all over the country championing the common people over against what he called the elitist greed of Dewey and his friends, who had no feel for the needs of the people.

His legislative programs throughout his eight years as President called for doing right for the common people. He called for progress in civil rights; justice for veterans, including black veterans, and for workers; for improvement in labor laws and anti-trust laws. Intriguingly for our recent history, each of his State of the Union messages called for a national health insurance program.

Doing what is right on civil rights: "During the Civil War, the Trumans and the Youngs [his grandparents] sympathized with the South."[9] But in the Senate he voted to abolish the poll tax that was designed to discourage blacks from voting, which got him the anger of most of his fellow southern Senators. His record of seeking to do right for African-
Americans as well as working people was the biggest key to his surprise selection as Vice Presidential candidate when President Franklin Roosevelt was not expected to live through the next term.

Truman integrated the Armed Services, and his annual messages to Congress "called for a federal law against 'the crime of lynching, against which I cannot speak too strongly'; protection of the right to vote everywhere in the country, the establishment of a Fair Employment Practices Commission with authority to stop discrimination by employers and labor unions alike, an end to discrimination in interstate travel...."[10]

Army Values: Focusing only on Truman's Baptist values presents an incomplete picture. In the Army in World War I, he was made a Captain. He led his troops remarkably well, performing with courage and efficiency, bringing them back safely, earning high morale and lifelong loyalty from them. "He discovered he could lead men and that he liked that better than anything he had ever done before. He found he had courage--that he was no longer the boy with thick glasses who ran from fights--and, furthermore, that he could inspire courage in others."[11] His Army experience shaped the rest of his life, including his unbaptistic practice of occasionally taking a drink, playing poker, and cussing--always in the company of the kind of comradeship that had meant so much to him in the Army. I remember the 1963 Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Kansas City at the time of Truman's birthday. We knew Truman was coming to meet with us briefly. Someone introduced a resolution that presidents should not use profanity in the White House. All in favor: the ayes echoed around the convention hall. (How could you vote against that?) All opposed: Someone just behind me stood up and yelled so the whole hall could hear, "Hell no!" (I scrunched down in my seat so they would not think it was me.) But he did not dance;[12] on this point his experience in the Army during the war did not contradict his Baptist loyalties.
Todays Shift to a Postmodern International System

And Practices of Peacemaking

We are now witnessing a shift to a postmodern international system in which nations are not the only actors, and sometimes not even the primary actors. International economic forces respect no boundaries. Traders in capital suddenly punched their computer keys and vacuumed the money out of Indonenses economy, and South Koreas, and most of Asias. International economic forces are more powerful, and much more often used, than military forces. And war no longer pays; the weapons are far too destructive. International forces under the UN or NATO intervene in nations that are severely violating the human rights of their own people, as in Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia, Uganda, East Pakistan. Human rights spread, and with them peace. International influences nudge all the nations of Latin American to switch from dictatorships to democracies, as also in India, South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Eastern Europe, and maybe even Russia. And no democracy with human rights has ever fought a war against another democracy with human rights, so peace is spreading.

Many of us are learning the effectiveness of new practices of peacemaking that topple dictatorships, reduce weapons and weapons trade, and practice nonviolent direct action, conflict resolution, independent initiatives, and basic needs policies. For us baptists, we have long said Christ is the norm for interpreting the Scripture, and we know that Jesus taught practices of peacemaking. Maybe someday people will get to understand the Sermon on the Mount as the real way of life."[13] Now we are gaining new insights into how those practices of peacemaking do make a big difference in the postmodern international system.

It suggests an interesting thought experiment, part historical and part imagination: if Harry Trumans Baptist heritage had taught him more
effectively the practices of peacemaking, how might history have been different?

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

The first question, of course, is one of Trumans first difficult decisions: whether to drop atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is a question that still calls forth deep loyalties. My own father was a Captain in the Navy in the South Pacific during World War II, fighting against the Japanese Navy.

By the beginning of August, 1945, Japan had no more defenses against the U.S. air force or the U.S. Navy. The U.S. was systematically carpet-bombing Japanese cities, destroying everything with almost no resistance. The Navy surrounded Japan, so no oil could be imported, and Japan was without energy. Japan was absolutely defeated.[14] The planned ground invasion was much feared by the U.S. military, including my own father, because they knew the fanatic resistance the Japanese had put up in the island battles across the South Pacific. But the ground invasion was not planned to take place until November. There were three months in which to try other alternatives before a decision between atomic bombs and ground invasion would have to take place.

Suppose Harry Trumans church had taught him the absolute rule of just war theory that you must not intentionally target non-combatants, and certainly not bomb cities with mass-destruction weapons like the atomic bomb. Suppose his commitment to doing what is right, combined with specific church teaching, had led him to say, as General Dwight Eisenhower said at the time, that we must not drop atomic bombs on cities. Suppose this had led him to ask for alternatives. What might have been proposed?
The Japanese cabinet was deadlocked three to three over whether to surrender unconditionally prior to the dropping of the two atomic bombs, and after Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been bombed, it was still deadlocked three to three. The difference was that the Emperor, who favored surrender before August 6th, declared this openly and announced the surrender after August 9th.

The Cabinets sticking point was their determination to keep their Emperor. They had already sent messages to their ambassador in Moscow telling him to ask for surrender so long as they could keep their Emperor. After the actual surrender, we let them keep their Emperor; we needed him to convince the Japanese people to cooperate with the peace treaty. Suppose we had told Japan in advance they could keep the Emperor?

Japan most feared that Russia might enter the war against them, so that their postwar life would be under Russian rule. Suppose we had told them what we knew: Russian was indeed about to enter the war against them, and the time to surrender was now?

Japanese scientists had been trying to develop an atomic bomb, and had failed. Suppose we announced to them that we had developed it successfully, and explained its awesome explosive force, and that to demonstrate its force, we would soon detonate one where they could see its power but too far away to destroy a city. And then had detonated one over Tokyo bay in the evening of August 6th, just after dark, so it would be seen by millions of people, and their leaders, but too far out to kill many people. And then suppose we had asked the Emperor to declare he favored surrender?

The best way to change minds is to present the combination of evidence, not in small dribbles, but all together. Suppose we had made these announcements simultaneously, and quickly followed them with the overwhelming evidence of the test explosion over Tokyo Bay. The persuasive power would have been enormous. I think it likely the
Emperor would have spoken.

Had he not spoken, there were still three months in which to try other options before so badly violating the ethics of just war.

The Vietnam War

Before World War II, Vietnam was a colony of France. During the war, the Japanese drove the French out and Vietnam became a Japanese colony. What would happen after the war? President Franklin Roosevelt was opposed to colonialism, and proposed in 1943 that Vietnam should be placed under a United Nations trusteeship after the war, not French colonial administration. That was the powerful desire of most Vietnamese, who had suffered for years first under oppressive French and then Japanese colonialism. Ho Chi Minh was the popular nationalist leader of the Vietnamese struggling against both kinds of colonialism--Japanese and French. Furthermore, he had learned English in London, had visited the United States,[15] and he sent several appeals to the U.S. government to do as Roosevelt had proposed, not to support French takeover again. In 1919 Ho drew up a plan for Vietnam's emancipation. "Today this plan, inspired by President Wilson's Fourteen Points, sounds extremely moderate. It asked for permanent representation in the French Parliament; freedom of the press; freedom to hold meetings and form associations; amnesty and release of political prisoners; government by law instead of government by decree; equality of legal rights between French and [Vietnamese]." He tried to argue his case with Woodrow Wilson himself.[16] He also joined a communist group because it, like Wilson and Roosevelt, was anti-colonialist. That was his one criterion.[17]

He had great admiration for the U.S. Declaration of Independence, for Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. He "felt a strong historical affinity with the rebels of 1776" against British
colonialism.[18] The U.S. Combat Section (Southern Command), on direct orders from General Wedemeyer, provided crucial support for his temporary takeover of Vietnam in 1945.[19] The first paragraph of the Proclamation of Vietnamese Independence on September 2, 1945, opens: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Ho had reason to hope for U.S. anti-colonial support. How history might have turned out differently!

But the leadership of the U.S. Department of State was thinking Eurocentrically. They supported France because they hoped France would help balance Russia's power in Europe, and out of that loyalty also supported French designs on regaining rule over Vietnam. (Surely having Vietnam as a colony was hardly essential to French power in Europe; in fact, it eventually drained French power, and later U.S. power, as Vietnam fought determinedly first to throw the French out and then later to throw the U.S. out.)

Truman lacked Roosevelt's commitment against colonialism. He allowed the State Department to lead the policy, recognizing French rule over Vietnam, while saying it favored eventual independence. "It was a decision for which Truman was responsible, and it was a momentous one."[20] Ho Chi Minh sent several appeals for U.S. support for independence, but was rebuffed.[21] By the end of 1946, Ho and his Viet Minh nationalist movement were turning to Russia and China for support, and the United States was turning to full support of French colonialism against the nationalist/communist guerrilla movement. The power of next-door neighbor China makes Vietnam naturally wary of the threat of Chinese dominance. No one can prove how Ho Chi Minh's course would have been different, but in view of the power of the wave of anticolonialism, which swept away colonial rule worldwide, in view of the French defeat at the decisive battle of Dienbienphu, in view of the enormous destruction of the Vietnam War, and in view of the suffering of the people of Vietnam under communist authoritarianism ever since, it is a question that makes one envision a momentously different path of
history. It may have been a huge missed opportunity due to weakness of commitment to anti-colonialism and strength of commitment to anticommunism. It is our question now as well: in the new global economy, does the United States support human rights or imperialism? A strong baptist commitment to populism, the common people, the indigenous struggle for self-rule, and to human rights, might have turned history in a different direction then, and might now.

The Cold War

Truman decided to adopt the policy of containment toward the Soviet Union, and it was he who declared the Cold War. He declared war—Cold War—over the threat that the Soviet Union was intending to swallow Iran, Greece, and Turkey. On march 12, 1947, he announced in a joint session of Congress that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." In the first decade after his presidency, he was praised by most scholars for this. Since then many historians have argued that the rigidity was overdone, and many opportunities for peacemaking were missed because of the crusading anticommunism and "steadfast refusal to negotiate with the Russians on substantive issues" that were begun by Truman.[22]

Historian Robert Ferrell writes that "In the Truman Doctrine he overstated the need to oppose the Soviet Union to get a large appropriation for Greece and Turkey through congress, and he persuaded some Americans to consider the USSR a sort of bogey rather than another, if large and important, opponent in the long series of nations that have disliked the united States and sought its discomfiture. Such exaggeration led to the belief that the United States committed itself to oppose communism everywhere."[23]
John Lewis Gaddis writes: "Leaders of great nations often see their own countries as the target of moves by potential adversaries while assuming that their actions could not possibly be interpreted by a rival as hostile. Truman operated in this manner. He consistently stressed the purity of American motives while assuming the worst of the Russians, then puzzled over why Moscow suspected sinister intentions on Washington's part."[24] Here Jesus' teaching on peacemaking could have helped: Love your enemy doesn't mean agree; but get in their shoes; affirm their valid interests; mourn with them when they mourn (Rom. 12:15). Judge not that you be not judged; first remove the log from your own eye (Matthew 7:1-5). It is a teaching of realism that self-righteous religion does not communicate effectively. We can stand some self-examination of our own heritage to ask whether we are effectively communicating this teaching of Jesus. It is crucial for peacemaking. Self-righteous persons, self-righteous countries, do not make effective peacemakers.

I am persuaded that the Soviet Union was pressuring Greece and Turkey as it had pressured Poland, and they were unstable. It could have taken them over if Truman had not decided with great clarity and decisiveness to come to their aid. He did right. But The Soviet Union was also weaker than we thought, and very insecure. What they saw as defensive maintaining of a buffer zone in Eastern Europe, we saw as imperialistic takeover and aggression.

But part of the judgment was that it was self-deception to negotiate with the Soviet Union. This exacerbated the Cold War that followed, and made it impossible to reach agreements on nuclear arms limitations or on resolving issues that might have been resolved had we talked, until the presidency of John F. Kennedy, when negotiations did begin to reap benefits on the Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty, etc.

Suppose Truman had been convinced of the importance of negotiating with your enemy. Suppose his church had taught him Jesus peacemaking command that when there is hostility between you and your brother, you
must drop your gift at the altar and get your self on over to see the brother and start talking and work on making peace while there is still time. He would still have had his realism about Soviet empire-building, and about the need to be firm and strong. But the pragmatic effort to work out problems that could be worked out, to limit nuclear weapons where they could be limited, and to reduce the risks of war where they could be reduced, could have found much more support not only in his administration, but in subsequent administrations impacted by the Cold War rhetoric that began with his rhetoric about the Greece and Turkey problem. The U.S. habit of reducing most international problems to anticommunism—that blinded policy to forces of anticolonialism, nationalism, and economic need—could have been overcome by a more complex understanding of the diverse forces in the world. --As they were overcome in part when another Southern Baptist president, Jimmy Carter, caused us to pay attention to the drive for human rights, and so put the U.S. more in line with the forces of the worldwide drive for justice, and led the countries of Latin America to turn from dictatorship to democracy.

The Korean War

Shortly before North Korea invaded South Korea, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had declared in an address that Korea was not in the area where we would fight to defend against communist expansion. Acheson was Euro-centric; Korea was not high on his priority list. It has a parallel with Ambassador April Glaspie's reply to Saddam Hussein's question, "What can it mean when the United States says it will now protect its friends?" Glaspie answered, "We have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait." Furthermore, twice before Iraq invaded Kuwait, the senior Defense Department's intelligence officer for the Middle East warned the White House Iraq was massing tanks in preparation for an attack on Kuwait, but the White House said nothing. I believe that Jesus' command to talk with your
brother when there is something between you does not mean only soothing talk; if a pending action is likely to lead to war between us, straight talk is needed.[25]

Apparently Truman authorized General MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel and invade North Korea in spite of clear warnings in straight talk that doing so would mean war with China. Historian John Lewis Gaddis suggests this indicates "the inability of Truman and his advisors to see events from the opponent's point of view."[26]

But Truman wisely chose not to engage in counter-escalation and all-out war with China; he ordered the troops to defend themselves but not to advance again into North Korea; they fought to a stalemate and truce; thus he kept the first hot war of the nuclear age limited. We can have gratitude for his humility and common sense.

The United Nations

Truman did believe in peacemaking. I hope something he had heard in church helped strengthen that belief. He said "I am as sure as I can be" that the isolationism that caused the U.S. Congress to fail to join the League of Nations caused World War I, and "I am equally sure that another and worse war will follow this one, unless the United Nations and their allies... decide to work together for peace as they are working together for victory." Truman labored hard while in Congress to commit the United States to membership in the United Nations; after becoming president he never wavered in his support" for the United Nations.[27][28]
The Marshall Plan

Surely Trumans Baptist heritage taught him something about coming to the aid of those in need. Surely living in the time of the Great Depression taught him the importance of that biblical command even more.

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[1]. This address was presented at the Southern Baptist Historical Society's banquet, held in the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, May 27, 1999. The first part summarizes part of "Baptist Presidents in the White House," Baptist History and Heritage (January 1997). The address was given upon receiving the Norman W. Cox award for the best article in Baptist History and Heritage in 1998, "Opening Menno Simons' Foundation-Book and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins alongside the Mother--Calvinist Congregationalism," and "Revisioning Baptist Identity By Naming our Origin and Character Rightly."


[6]. Hamby, 12.

[7]. McCullough 390; and 352, 353, 360, 450; Fuller and Green, 208.

[8]. McCullough, 231ff.

[9]. Hamby, p. 5.

[10]. McCullough 587.


[12]. McColough, p. 733.

[13]. See above, under "Biblical Grounding."

[14]. Dwight D. Eisenhower (then Supreme Commander in Europe) wrote that that he told the Secretary of War that he thought it would be wrong to "to drop an atomic bomb on Japan..., first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that drop-ping the bomb was completely unnecessary.... Eisenhower, Mandate For Change (Garden City: Double-day, 1963), pp. 312-313: Admiral Leahy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote: "It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshi-ma and Nagasaki was of no materi-al assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surren-der." Leahy, I Was There (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), p. 441. General Curtis LeMay, General Arnold, General Marshall, the top British military leader, General Ismay, and Winston Churchill all said at the time that the Japanese were defeated and in the process of surrender before the bomb.


[18]. Lacouture, 271.

[19]. Lacouture, 268f.


[24]. Gaddis, 208.


[26]. Merli and Wilson, 213.

[27]. Ibid., 191.