
Sustaining American Leadership Through NATO

By

President William J. Clinton

[The following is a reprint of a Presidential address at the Harry S. Truman Library Institute, Washington, D.C., on October 25, 1995.]

Because of the meetings I have just had at the United Nations and the work that we are doing 50 years after its beginning, I thought it might be worth sharing with you a few thoughts about Harry Truman's legacy and what it means for today and tomorrow.

Every American President, including my two distinguished predecessors who spoke here tonight, has followed in Harry Truman's footsteps in carrying forward America's leadership in the world. This tradition of sustained American leadership and involvement has been so successful and so consistently maintained by Democratic and Republican presidents alike that some of us forget what a bold departure it was.

Just before I came here tonight, I was with Prime Minister Rabin at another meeting talking about peace in the Middle East. Harry Truman was the first world leader to recognize the State of Israel. His commitment to giving us the capacity to lead and work for peace started a single silver thread that runs right through the terrific accomplishments of President Carter and all of the things which have been done since. But we forget what a bold departure it was. The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the NATO alliance—each was a step unlike anything before.

Indeed, NATO, which President Truman rightly considered one of his finest achievements, was our very first peacetime alliance ever. We never had a military alliance in peacetime before NATO. This decisive change grew out of the belief that was shared by General Marshall, Senator Vandenberg, Dean Acheson, and so many others that we could never again remain apart from the world. We had, after all, isolated ourselves after the First World War, and because of that, we had to fight another. Harry Truman was determined that that would not happen again. He had to face, almost immediately, the chilling prospect of the Cold War and to make all of the decisions which set in motion the policies which ultimately enabled freedom to prevail in that war.

He had to do it with a nation that was weary from war and weary from engagement, where people were longing to just focus on the little everyday things of life that mean the most to most of us. But because he did it, we just celebrated 50 years of the United Nations, with no more world war, no nuclear device ever dropped again, and now we see the movement for peace and freedom and democracy all over the world.

What are we going to do to build on his achievement? What do we have to do to secure a peace for the next century? Freedom's new gains, I believe, make it possible for us to help build a Europe that is democratic, that is peaceful, and that, for the first time since nation states appeared on that continent, is undivided.

We can build a Europe committed to freedom, democracy, and prosperity; genuinely secure throughout the continent; and aligned with other like-minded people throughout the world for the first time ever. I am committed to doing what we can to build that kind of Europe based on three principles:

First, to support democracy in Europe's newly free nations.

Second, to work to increase economic vitality in Europe with America and other partners through open markets and expanded trade, and to help the former communist countries complete their transition to market economies—a move that will strengthen democracy there and help block the advance of ultranationalism and ethnic hatred.

Finally, we are building a transatlantic community of tomorrow by deepening, not withdrawing, from our security cooperation. Today, with the overarching threat of communism gone, the faces of hatred and intolerance are still there with different faces—ethnic and religious conflicts, organized crime and drug dealing, state-sponsored terrorism, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. America cannot insulate itself from these threats any more than it could insulate itself after World War II. Indeed, we have fewer options to do so because the world is becoming a global village.

By joining with our allies and embracing others who share our values, we cannot insulate ourselves from these threats, but we can surely create a better defense. NATO's success gives us proof of what we can do when we work together. NATO binds the Western democracies in a common purpose with shared values. I strongly believe that NATO does not depend upon an ever-present enemy to maintain its unity or its usefulness. The alliance strengthens all of its members from within and defends them from threats without. If you just compare the stability, the economic strength, the harmony in Western Europe today with the conditions that existed just a few decades ago—in President Truman's time—you can see that. The alliance has brought former foes together; strengthened democracy; and, along with the Marshall Plan, it sheltered fragile economies and got them going again. It gave countries confidence to look past their ancient hatreds. It gave them the safety to sow the prosperity they enjoy today.

By establishing NATO, of course, America also did something even more important from our point of view. We established the security that we require to flourish and to grow. Now, we have to build upon President Truman's accomplishments. He said when he announced the Truman Doctrine, "The world is not static, the status quo is not sacred. We have to adapt NATO, and I believe we should open NATO's doors to new members."

The end of the Cold War cannot mean the end of NATO, and it cannot mean a NATO frozen in the past, because there is no other cornerstone for an integrated, secure, and stable Europe for the future.

NATO's success has involved promoting security interests, advancing values, and supporting democracy and economic opportunity. We literally have created a community of shared values and shared interests, as well as an alliance for the common defense. Now, the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union want to be a part of enlarging the circle of common purpose, and in so doing, increasing our own security. That is why we established the Partnership for Peace—PfP. In less than two years, we have brought 26 nations into a program to create confidence and friendship—former enemies now joining in field exercises throughout the year, building bonds together instead of battle plans against one another. This has been good for us and good for Europe.

Now those nations in the region that maintain their democracies and continue to promote economic reform and behave responsibly should be able to become members of NATO. That will give them the confidence to consolidate their freedom, build their economies, and to make us more secure.

NATO has completed a study of how it should bring on new members. We intend to move carefully, deliberately, and openly, and share the conclusions of that study with all of those who have joined us in the PFP. But we have to move to the next phase in a steady, careful way, to consider who the new members should be and when they would be invited to join the alliance. Throughout this, I will engage with the Congress and the American people and seek the kind of bipartisan partnership that made Harry Truman's important work possible.

Let me emphasize one important point: Bringing new members into this alliance will enhance, not undermine, the security of everyone in Europe, including Russia, Ukraine, and the other former Soviet Republics. We have assured Russia that NATO is as it has always been—a defensive alliance. Extending the zone of security and democracy in Europe can help prevent new conflicts that have been building up, in many cases, for centuries. For Russia and all of her neighbors, this is a better path than the alternative.

I also want you to know, as you saw from the laughing photograph with President Yeltsin, we are still building a positive relationship with Russia. Those of you familiar with the history of that great country know that its heroic effort to become a confident and stable democracy is one of the most significant developments of our time.

One of our former colleagues, President Nixon, who is no longer with us, wrote me a letter about Russia a month to the day before he died—which I still have and re-read from time to time—emphasizing the extraordinary historic significance of Russia's courageous reach for democracy and liberty.

Russia, too, has a contribution to make in the new Europe, and we have offered them a strong alliance with NATO and working through the PFP. Let me just tell you, that partnership is going to deepen. Tomorrow, U.S. and Russian armed forces will begin a peacekeeping exercise together at Fort Riley, Kansas, under the auspices of the PFP. We want our relationships with them to be daily, comprehensive, and routine. We want to go every step of the way to build confidence and security and a democratic Russia. But we do not think NATO's opening to the east and our relationship with Russia are mutually exclusive choices.

I want to emphasize one other thing. NATO is at work for us right now, as we speak, demonstrating in Bosnia how vital it is to securing the peace in Europe. The efforts of our negotiators, the military changes on the ground, and NATO's air strikes have brought these parties to the negotiating table and to an agreement on the basic principles of a settlement and a nationwide cease-fire.

Next week, in a historic meeting, the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia will travel to Dayton, Ohio, to resolve the remaining issues. The political settlement that is taking shape will preserve Bosnia as a single state and provide for a fair territorial compromise. It will commit the parties to hold free elections, establish democratic institutions, and respect human rights.

There are many people who have played a role in bring this process this far. I want to thank one of them tonight for his extraordinary efforts—President Carter. Thank you so much for what you have done.

I want to say to all of you, there is no guarantee of peace, but it is possible—in large measure, because of NATO. Let me ask you one final thing. If the peace is negotiated, NATO must be prepared to help implement the agreement. There will be no peace without an

international military presence in Bosnia—a presence that must be credible. NATO is indispensable to this to give the parties the reassurance they need to make peace.

The question I have is this: If Harry Truman were President, would he expect the United States as the leader of NATO to be a part of the force in Bosnia? I think you know what the answer is—and the answer is yes. And so must we answer.

My fellow Americans, make no mistake about this—if we are not there, many of our partners will reconsider their commitments. If we are not there, America will sacrifice its leadership in NATO. If we are not there, we will be making a sad mistake. I am determined that we will be part of this NATO mission.

I am working with Congress, engaging in an important dialogue. I met not very long ago with a bipartisan group of leaders, and I want to say a special word of thanks to Senator Nunn for his remarkable contribution to that meeting and for his remarkable contributions to our country, which we will all miss when he is gone [i.e., when he retires from the Senate, as announced, at the conclusion of the 104th Congress in late 1996].

My fellow Americans, if you want four years of bloody conflict to end, you have to support the United States being involved with NATO in enforcing the peace agreement. We have not sent troops into battle. We have not taken sides. We have not been a part of the UNPROFOR mission on the ground. But we must do this if you want your country and NATO to be as effective in our time as it was in President Truman's vision and in his time.

Let me also say again, if we do not do this, the consequences for our country could be grave indeed. This is the most serious conflict on the continent of Europe since World War II. NATO must help end it. If we fail to secure this peace, how can we achieve an integrated, peaceful, and united Europe? If we fail to secure this peace, our success around the world and much of our success at home, which has come from American leadership, will be weakened. If we fail to secure this peace, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia could spread to other nations and involve our sons and daughters in a conflict in Europe.

Let me say in closing that just a few days ago, we were fortunate to have a visit in the United States from His Holiness Pope John Paul II. I spent about a half an hour with him alone, and he started into the most unusual conversation I have ever had with him or, in some ways, with any other world leader. He said, "I want to talk about the world, and I want to know what you think." I said, "The world?" He said, "Yes, the whole deal." I said, "Well, where shall I start?" He said, "Start in Bosnia." So we talked about Bosnia. Then we went around the world. At the end he said, "You know, I am not a young man. I have lived through most of this century. The 20th century began with a war in Sarajevo. Mr. President, you must not let it end with a war in Sarajevo."

I ask you to think of this, my fellow Americans, that first war in Sarajevo—that was Harry Truman's war. That is the war that he joined even though he was old enough and his eyesight was bad enough for him to get out of it. That is the war where he showed people the kind of leadership capacity he had. Our failures after that war led Franklin Roosevelt into another war and led Harry Truman to end that war with a set of difficult, painful decisions—including dropping the atomic bomb—and led him to determine that it would never happen again. That is why he did all the things we celebrate tonight. If he were here he would say, "If you really want to honor me, prepare for the future as I did."