Presidents, Religions, and Nuclear Decisions

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Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan

By

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PREFACE

More than almost any elementary school memory, I recall my vivid fascination with the Bayeux Tapestry, particularly with the figure of Bishop Odo, half-brother of William the Conqueror. Amidst the chaos of the Battle of Hastings, Odo was easily identifiable, not so much because of his stature or position, but because he wielded a club. I was intrigued when our teacher explained that this choice was influenced by Odo's status as a cleric, bound by Jesus's admonition to the apostle Peter in the twenty-sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Thus, Bishop Odo would not fight with edged weaponry. This observation, striking and symbolic, planted the seeds of my interest in the complex ways religious heritage can shape ethical and practical decisions related to force and its use.

My schoolteacher's explanation, though arresting, does not tell the full story. Although some scholars support her explanation to my class,[1] the work of other historians suggests that the choices made by Bishop Odo and others reflect deeper, more intricate considerations than merely religious prohibition; indeed, contrary to many conventionally-oriented contemporary historians and reform-minded medieval theologians, not even medieval canon law spoke univocally regarding martial activities and the clergy.[2] Nevertheless, this anecdote about Bishop Odo highlights how religious heritage can be both a guiding principle and a source of complex, context-dependent decision making. It opens a window into how deeply intertwined religious heritage and practical decisions can be, and how interpretations, and consequently applications, can vary.

This complexity in interpreting religious teachings on bearing arms in medieval society mirrors the multifaceted considerations surrounding nuclear weapons. The Cold War era, marked by intense geopolitical tension and the pervasive threat of nuclear conflict, provides a unique context for examining how religious heritage shaped the decision-making processes

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[1] David C. Douglas and George W. Greenway, eds., *English Historical Documents: 1042-1189*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 282.

[2] Lawrence G. Duggan, *Armsbearing and the Clergy in the History and Canon Law of Western Christianity* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2013).

and nuclear policies of Presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan.

The religious heritage of these four presidents played a significant role in their nuclear decision-making processes. Each, influenced by their unique religious perspectives, approached nuclear issues through lenses that integrated their ethical beliefs, governmental philosophies, and personal convictions. Just as medieval clergy grappled with the implications of bearing arms, these leaders faced the profound implications of controlling nuclear technology, shaped by their religious heritage in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways.

One might expect this book to use just war thought as a lens through which to assess these presidents' decisions. Indeed, just war offers a structured approach for evaluating the morality of engaging in and conducting warfare, articulated by thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas through principles like legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention, as well as corollary criteria such as proportionality and last resort. However, the complexities of this era cannot be fully captured by just war thought alone. The Cold War's unique nature—characterized by ideological struggle, nuclear deterrence, and the threat of widespread destruction—necessitates a broader philosophical framework.

While just war thought offers valuable insights—given the significant contributions of many Christian traditions to this ethical school—a more encompassing perspective on Christian philosophies of ethics, government, and human nature is necessary to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of these decisions. Just war reasoning remains relevant and should not be discarded; however, it must be recognized as a specialized, limited application within the broader Christian ethical framework.

To address these limitations, this book employs a broader framework that encompasses, but extends beyond, familiar concepts such as sovereignty (viewed as responsibility for the common good), force (understood as proportionate, with disproportionate force considered violence), *bellum* (translated as war but better understood as the public authority's recourse to force for the public good), *duellum* (the true opposite of *bellum*, and indicating recourse to force by private authority for private interest), and *tranquillitas ordinis* (literally "tranquility of order," but perhaps better expressed in our times as the "well-ordered peace" per George Weigel[3]). These and allied concepts, rooted in classical Christian articulations of justice in war, integrate

[3] George Weigel, *Tranquillitas Ordinis: The Present Failure and Future Promise of American Catholic Thought on War and Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

just war principles within a wider context, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of ethical, governmental, and human considerations.

The broader ethics-government-nature framework, drawing heavily from James Turner Johnson's recovery of the just war tradition within an expanded context,[4] offers a richer, more varied perspective, encompassing Catholic and Protestant approaches to war, pacifism, and alternative viewpoints on force, diplomacy, justice, recompense, and peace. Such an expansive view is essential for understanding the nuclear landscape navigated by Cold War presidents.

Comparative analysis of the four presidents highlights both the similarities and differences in how their religious heritage influenced their nuclear decisions. By leveraging the insights provided by just war reasoning while also embracing the broader framework of Christian philosophies of ethics, government, and human nature, this book offers a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of Cold War nuclear decisions. Presidential case studies will draw on just war terminology when appropriate but will do so within the more general and expansive philosophical framework of ethics, government, and human nature, recognizing just war thought as a specialized subset within this larger context.

Such an approach, at once historically grounded and forward looking, allows the book to handle the assorted ways in which religious heritage shaped the decision-making processes of these four Cold War presidents, providing a fuller, more refined understanding of their nuclear policies.

Before proceeding further into this book, I must express my profound gratitude to several individuals without whom this project would never have come to fruition. Foremost, my heartfelt thanks go to my friends and family, especially my mother of happy memory, Carol Muzas, whose unwavering love and support were my bedrock until she passed away on Thanksgiving Day, 2024. I am immensely grateful to the dedicated archivists at the Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan Presidential Libraries and Museums for their indispensable assistance. Special thanks to the staff at the Carter Library, whose encouragement to attend one of President Carter's Sunday school lessons in Plains led to a memorable meeting with both him and his wife. The Donald D. Harrington Fellows Program at The University

[4] An accessible summary of what is most pertinent to this book is James Turner Johnson, "Just War as It Was and Is," *First Things* (January 2005), accessed June 23, 2024, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/01/just-war-as-it-was-and-is. The same author's *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton, 1981) and *Ethics and the Use of Force: Just War in Historical Perspective* (Routledge, 2011) together cover, respectively, ancient times to the early modern period and the modern era to contemporary conflicts.

of Texas at Austin provided crucial support, allowing me to spend extended periods at presidential libraries. Similarly, the Stanton Nuclear Security Fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations enabled me to refine my book proposal and continue my work during the pandemic shutdowns. Additionally, the Seton Hall University Priest Community generously provided professional development funding that sustained the research and writing of this book, and supportive colleagues at Seton Hall University's School of Diplomacy and International Relations have provided a stimulating environment that enriched this work. My dissertation mentors, Frank Gavin and Will Inboden, whose guidance during my doctoral studies and whose exemplary writings inspired this book's scope and depth, deserve my sincere appreciation. Additionally, I thank my colleagues Tom Guarino, Joe Accardi, and Nicole Costa for their insightful feedback on early drafts, and the two anonymous peer reviewers, one for urging a thorough explanation of the choice of presidents and the other for suggesting a focus on philosophies of ethics, government, and the human person beyond conventional just war thought. Marina Krakovsky and Barry Fox's astute feedback was invaluable in refining respectively the proposal and the final draft, and special thanks go to Alison Duffy for her faith in this project, Adam Rummens for his support through the publication process, and the Cambridge Scholars Publishing team for ensuring a quality publication. Despite the collective contributions that have shaped this book, any shortcomings and errors remain solely my own.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Alongside each religion is found a political opinion
that is joined to it by affinity."
—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

Religion has long played a role in leaders' decision-making frameworks, oftentimes a powerful one. For example, in ancient India, King Ashoka the Great transformed the Mauryan Empire most profoundly through the adoption and propagation of Buddhism, shaping his reign around its ethos of tolerance and nonviolence rather than the intense violence that characterized his early rule. In the Middle Ages, Pope Urban II urged Christian Europe to undertake what became known retrospectively as the First Crusade to free the churches in the eastern Mediterranean regions, yet he also restricted the use of the crossbow within Christendom as an inhumane weapon that he saw as hateful to God. Closer to our own times, 20th century Hindu activist Mahatma Karamchand Mohandas Gandhi was deeply influenced by Hindu teachings on self-realization, universal love, and *ahimsa* (non-violence), which led him to develop the concept of *satyagraha* (devotion to truth) as a political principle for resisting oppression without resorting to violence. And Shia Muslim cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini's decision to lead the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which overthrew the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was motivated by his desire to establish an Islamic republic.

But understanding the role of religion in decision-making frameworks is not a simple matter of predicting that adherents of one religion will go to war slowly and reluctantly, while followers of another faith will race to arms at the drop of a hat. Throughout history, religious heritage has informed mindsets about conflict in ways that are both commonsense and counterintuitive. John Calvin and Martin Luther, key figures in the Protestant Reformation, exemplify this contrast. If a commonsense idea of religion stresses concepts like peace and fraternity, then Calvin's statement that wartime leaders "must not be borne headlong by anger, nor hurried away by

hatred, nor burn with implacable severity"[1] is expected. On the other hand, Luther's position that "it is both Christian and an act of love to kill the enemy without hesitation, to plunder and burn and injure him by every method of warfare until he is conquered"[2] is a stunning attitudinal contrast– and would seem even more so with the nuclear option in play.

One finds similar contrasts in the words of Jesus Christ. In the King James Version of Matthew 26:52 one reads, "Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." But in Luke 22:36, there is a contrasting attitude: "Then said he [Jesus] unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." We can also contrast sentiments expressed by Martin of Tours and Augustine of Hippo. Martin, bishop of Tours in the 4th century, said, "I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight."[3] In the next century Augustine originated the term "just war," writing in his *City of God*, "But, say they, the wise man will wage just wars. As if he would not all the rather lament the necessity of just wars, if he remembers that he is a man; for if they were not just he would not wage them, and would therefore be delivered from all wars."[4]

Given the frequent instances of religious influence on leader's decision-making frameworks throughout history, it is no surprise that scholars have probed the effects of religious heritage on the actions of presidents of the United States, who have, certainly since the mid-20th century, been among the most powerful leaders in the world. It is, however, a surprise to find that relatively little attention has been devoted specifically to the influence of religious heritage on nuclear questions: that is, observing how religious heritage can help link a single president's diverse decisions and sharpen contrasts among presidents.

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[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.20.12), trans. Henry Beveridge, accessed July 6, 2024, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.txt.

[2] Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, International Relations and Security Network, Primary Resources in International Affairs (PRIA), 20, accessed June 12, 2024, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/125470/606.pdf.

[3] Quoted in Michael Walsh, ed., *Butler's Lives of the Saints* Concise Edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 371.

[4] Augustine, *De citivate Dei contra paganos*, XIX, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 2, translated by Marcus Dods, edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), revised and edited by Kevin Knight, accessed July 6, 2024, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm.

This work will focus on whether and how religious heritage may shape decision-making specifically among Christian leaders, for every American president has been, at least nominally, Christian. This book takes as its starting point the 1945 decision to drop two atomic bombs in quick succession, for it was with President Harry Truman's action that nuclear power moved from the laboratory to the bomb bay, and speculation about what President Franklin Roosevelt, who had initiated development of the atomic bomb, might have done, and what framework he might have used to guide his thinking, instantly became a subject demanding analysis and understanding for each of his successors.

Acknowledging that the task is difficult, this book explores the impact of religious heritage on presidential nuclear decisions during the Cold War by drawing on archival material and secondary sources relating to Presidents Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan. Incorporating even non-nuclear decisions, it traces how religious heritage was a source of ideas and frameworks for these four presidents at the individual level. By examining these presidents' decision-making frameworks, this book explores how these frameworks may have influenced their nuclear decisions. It highlights that these decisions reflect their religious backgrounds and are not only understandable but are also connected to their overall decision-making processes.

Cold War nuclear decisions: complexity and perspectives

When the two atomic bombs fell on Japan in August of 1945, killing and injuring some 240,000 people between them, the spectrum of American reactions demonstrated a fair amount of moral and religious anxiety. One writer lamented, "The destruction of Hiroshima by an atomic bomb fills me with horror," and denounced the first atomic strike as "a stain upon our national life." He continued, "If the use of this terrible power can be confined to war personnel and war material, all right; but if it will result in the killing of 100,000 women and children, it is all wrong." He predicted, "When the exhilaration of this wonderful discovery has passed we will think with shame of the first use to which it was put."[5] Another person testified, "I am horrified at the indiscriminate, inhuman and un-Christian bombing of cities which we are committing," and pronounced, "It is simply mass murder, sheer terrorism on the greatest scale the world has yet seen." The writer insisted that "we have meanwhile sunk to the spiritual level of the Nazis. If there is any moral order in the universe, our disregard of human

[5] William Church Osborn, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, August 11, 1945.

values will as surely make forfeit any claim of ours to moral hegemony as did the crimes of the Nazis and Fascists."[6]

Many other people weighed in on the decision, including Truman, the man who chose to deploy this new and ruinous weapon not once but twice. On August 9, 1945, the day the second bomb devastated the city of Nagasaki, Truman wrote a letter to Richard B. Russell, a U.S. Senator who had called for unrestricted atomic warfare against Japan. In his missive Truman expressed some doubt about his own decision: "I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner."[7] A mere two days later, however, Truman seemed to have changed his mind. In a letter to the Federal Council of Churches, a nationwide, non-governmental ecumenical Protestant organization that had taken a strong antinuclear stance, Truman wrote, "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true."[8]

Based on these two letters from two days apart, Truman could appear to be of two minds, but is this really the case? At the very least, this inconsistency captures in microcosm a pattern we can see in the actions of many presidents, including the four this book focuses on: Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan. That all four made nuclear decisions which, for each, ranged from belligerent to accommodating, aggressive to restrained, is unsurprising. After all, each wrestled with severe challenges during key moments of the Cold War; confronted significant ethical and geopolitical issues; and applied unique perspectives and leadership. As such, each individual nuclear decision made by each man can be seen as a product of unique circumstances and pressures, not necessarily tightly linked to other nuclear decisions made by the same president.

This creates a significant problem for coming to grips with nuclear history, namely, how to analyze and understand numerous nuclear decisions when each is the product of unique circumstances and pressures, further complicated by the fact that various and varying political, economic, and other factors may have to be included in the analysis for each decision. Scholars have proposed different ways to think about nuclear decisions, so

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[6] Francis Walton, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, August 11, 1945.

[7] Harry S Truman to Richard B. Russell, August 9, 1945, Official File, Truman Papers, accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/harry-s-truman-richard-russell.

[8] Harry S Truman to Samuel McCrea Cavert, August 11, 1945, Official File, Truman Papers, accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/correspondence-between-harry-s-truman-and-samuel-cavert.

it is worthwhile to briefly consider some other approaches on which this book builds.

Cold War literature is often sorted into three groups called orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist. The orthodox school, the first and oldest, is exemplified by Pulitzer Prize-winning Herbert Feis. Feis argued that after Allied conferences in Yalta (attended by President Roosevelt) and Potsdam (attended by President Truman) had set the conditions for the peace that would follow World War II, Stalin's aggression in Eastern Europe triggered the Cold War and left the balance of power in the Soviet Union's favor.[9] The second school, the revisionist school, became prominent during the Vietnam War era and is typified by Gar Alperovitz. Alperovitz argued that the U.S. decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic weapons was made not to defeat an already-beaten Japan but to demonstrate American strength, intimidate the Soviet Union, prevent Soviet expansionism, and gain leverage to shape the postwar world according to U.S. preferences.[10] These two schools were followed by the post-revisionist school represented by John Lewis Gaddis, who argued in the 1970s that neither the Soviet nor American side was solely responsible for the Cold War, although domestic politics placed constraints on U.S. policy.[11] A decade later, Gaddis offered a synthesis of the revisionist position which was questioned by Melvyn Leffler. This challenge led to an extended back-and-forth between the two scholars and their supporters about whether it was expansive Soviet actions or American social, economic, revolutionary, and security fears that prompted U.S. attempts to shape the postwar world.[12] It is important to note that none of these three schools highlight religion in any significant way.

Not all Cold War literature falls neatly into the orthodox, revisionist, or post-revisionist camps. In the 20th century, British historian E.H. Carr painted the Soviet Union as being progressive, the United States as

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[9] Herbert Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Herbert Feis, *Between War and Peace: The Potsdam Conference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). The latter book won the Pulitzer Prize.

[10] Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

[11] John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

[12] John Lewis Gaddis, "The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 7, no. 3 (1983): 171-190; Melvyn P. Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945-1948," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (1984): 346-381.

obstructionist, and the Cold War as American aggression.[13] In the 21st century, scholars have taken the mental and emotional dimensions of the human person into account, for example, as Frank Costigliola does when he argues that postwar US-Soviet relations were shaped by the "attitudes and rhetoric" of key policy makers.[14]

Although they cut against the grain, some schools of thought allowed for the possibility of religious heritage influencing decision making. One of these is the "operational code" literature[15] which, while not usually treating religion, proposed "ten questions" having to do with philosophical and instrumental beliefs. The answers to five philosophical questions reveal attitudes about the fundamental nature of politics, while the answers to the five instrumental questions reveal attitudes about the relationship between the means and ends of political activity:

Philosophical

1. What is the "essential" nature of political life? Is the political universe one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one's political opponents?
2. What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one's fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic or must one be pessimistic on this score, and in what respects the one and/or the other?
3. Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
4. How much "control" or "mastery" can one have over historical development? What is one's role in "moving" and "shaping" history in the desired direction?
5. What is the role of "chance" in human affairs and in historical development?

Instrumental

1. What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
2. How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?

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[13] R.W. Davies, "'Drop the Glass Industry': Collaborating with E.H. Carr," *New Left Review* 145 (May-June 1984): 56-70.

[14] Frank Costigliola, "After Roosevelt's Death: Dangerous Emotions, Divisive Discourses, and the Abandoned Alliance," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (2010): 1-23.

[15] George, A. (1969). "The 'operational code': A neglected approach to the study of leaders and decision-making." *International Studies Quarterly* 23: 190-222.

3. How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?
4. What is the best "timing" of action to advance one's interests?
5. What is the utility and role of different means for advancing one's interests?

As is clear from these questions, operational code analysis delves into the cognitive and affective beliefs, as well as worldviews, of political leaders in a way that allows for nuanced consideration of how religious heritage could influence their politics and leadership. For example, long-term goals could reflect religious heritage, with beliefs from faith guiding objectives towards particular social or moral outcomes. Moreover, religious heritage could inform how leaders perceive humanity and the world, influencing their views on international events as potentially divinely ordained or guided. Furthermore, obstacles to these goals might be viewed through a religiously tinted lens, with certain ideologies or practices seen as challenges due to religious understandings, while political actions could be legitimated by referring to religiously grounded principles. Norms and values rooted in religious doctrines could play a role in shaping policy decisions, and faith communities could also be seen as the wherewithal for achieving political objectives, showcasing the influence of religious resources. Such analysis offers a broad understanding of how religious heritage shapes a leader's worldview, values, and decision-making processes, shedding light on the intricate relationship between religion and politics.

Philipp Rosenberg explicitly treated religion and politics using operational code analysis. Writing about Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, he observed:

> The primary similarity is a belief that the principles which should guide human behavior are not man-made but rather dictated by God. The other two similarities are a belief in an individual's responsibility for his own actions and a common belief in Man's obligation to help those less fortunate than himself.[16]

Taken as a whole, Rosenberg's article demonstrates that the operational code framework can be made to incorporate religious heritage. Granted, the exploration of religious heritage was relatively rare in the Cold War scholarship of the time for a variety of reasons, including the complexity of religious beliefs, analytical challenges, and methodological issues. Religious

[16] J. Philipp Rosenberg, "Presidential Beliefs and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Continuity during the Cold War Era," *Political Psychology* 7, no. 4 (December 1986): 733-751.

traditions can vary widely, making it difficult to pinpoint precisely how leaders' beliefs directly influence their decision making. Furthermore, religious influences can operate at a deep level without being explicitly stated. Moreover, much scholarship avoided exploring religious heritage during that period, for the secularization thesis, which argues that religions lose sway as societies modernize, was ascendent at that time.[17]

Nevertheless, the conventional Cold War debates leave room for the approach of this book. Consider Melvyn Leffler's *A Preponderance of Power*. This work attempts to tie together all of Truman's decision making using an approach which introduces a psychological component into the dynamics of conflict escalation called the spiral model. This model–whereby rival states, by taking action to increase their individual security, lead each other to fear for their own safety because each does not know whether the other intends to use its growing strength to attack–runs through Leffler's analysis of the Truman administration. The model serves as a unifying thread to draw all the decision making together, and is most thoroughly applied to the US-Soviet dispute over Iran in 1945-1946.[18] However, Marc Trachtenberg explains why "one is struck by how weak the evidence is" to support the spiral model,[19] and Wilson Miscamble notes overall that Leffler's approach "neglects the sheer messiness of the policymaking process … despite the drama of his broad subject and the brilliant cast of characters involved."[20] He further notes, "Only in a piecemeal and staggered manner did the Truman administration decide upon the major elements of the American response to the Soviet Union and each element resulted from a complex of both particular and constant factors—political, economic, strategic and personal."[21]

Finally, recent literature probes Cold War decision making at the level of individuals. For example, Brendan Rittenhouse Green points out that the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) should have produced a nuclear stalemate. Instead, he concludes that the rival camps "don't appear to have believed" the theory of MAD and that the nuclear competition of the late Cold War "occurred because American leaders chose it … because

[17] William H. Swatos, Jr., and Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 209-228.
[18] Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
[19] Marc Trachtenberg, "Melvyn Leffler and the Origins of the Cold War," *Orbis* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 448.
[20] Wilson D. Miscamble, "Was the United States Responsible for the Cold War?" *The Review of Politics* 55, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 364.
[21] Miscamble, "Was the United States Responsible?" 365.

they thought it served their strategic purposes."[22] In brief, Green contends that conventional concepts like MAD do not fully account for Cold War decisions. Rather, leaders made choices outside what those conventional frameworks would predict.

As the reader has undoubtedly surmised, there is no settled and agreed-upon framework for understanding the causes of the Cold War, let alone analyzing and categorizing presidential nuclear decisions made within the crucible of that conflict. However, in recent decades, scholars have begun to emphasize the importance of personal characteristics, such as religious heritage, in the mix of influences upon presidents when making nuclear decisions. With this in mind, and fully respecting the difficulty involved, this book contends that the seemingly unconnected nuclear decisions made by Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Regan share underlying but overlooked commonalities based in religious heritage. Thus, this book uses religious heritage to help understand presidential decision making–including differences within a single president's term as well as differences between presidents–providing a principle of continuity even among a single president's changing attitudes, decision-making contexts, and decision types, as well as a principle of differentiation across the decisions of different presidents.

Religious heritage and ethical grounding

Heritage, in general, encompasses the beliefs, thoughts, teachings, traditions, qualities, actions, artifacts, and more shared among the members of a particular group and passed from generation to generation. Heritage can exert powerful influence on the decision-making processes of individuals belonging to a particular group, as well as, to a lesser extent, on those who have encountered that heritage and been exposed to its beliefs, thoughts, and the like.

Religious heritage specifically refers to the cultural, historical, and spiritual elements associated with a particular religion or faith tradition, as opposed to a community's broader shared cultural and historical legacy. There are several channels through which such religious heritage might be transmitted to a president and taken into his decision-making framework. Many individuals are first introduced to religious heritage within their families and communities, which pass on religious beliefs, values, and philosophies from one generation to the next via traditions, rituals, and cultural practices. Similarly, formal religious education programs, such as

[22] Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2, 8.

Sunday schools and religious study groups, provide structured opportunities for individuals to learn about religious heritage, including religious history, theology, ethics, and sacred scripture. Moreover, worship services, ceremonies, and rituals convey foundational beliefs and principles experientially, not just intellectually. Insights into the values, narratives, beliefs, and philosophies of religious heritage can be expressed and received culturally, too, through art, music, media, and literature—sometimes broadly within American culture, sometimes narrowly in religious settings and communities. Certainly, personal practices of reflection, meditation, and prayer allow individuals to explore their own relationships with religious heritage and deepen their understanding of its significance in their lives, including their public-facing roles and responsibilities.

While religious heritage as a broad concept is well-understood, scholars have wrestled with defining and applying it, arriving at different understandings of, or frameworks for, the concept. For example, religion scholars Robert Ellwood and Barbara McGraw offer a framework for understanding the world's religious heritage which builds on Joachim Wach's three forms of religious expression: the theoretical (such as beliefs and doctrines), the practical (such as customs and rituals), and the sociological (such as leadership and organization). To this, Ellwood and McGraw add ethics, religious experience, and art, all while conceding that these latter three forms could fall under Wach's theoretical or practical forms, or both.[23] These two frameworks are offered here not to say that they are the only way to understand how religious heritage influences one's life and thoughts, but rather to show that there is no universally agreed upon definition.

This book emphasizes three elements of religious heritage. First is philosophical ethics. Religious heritage often provides the moral framework and behavioral guidelines that shape the thought and conduct of its followers in the form of theories of good and bad and right and wrong. By understanding the ethical teachings within a religion, one can gain insights into the principles that guide personal conduct, relationships with others, and responses to moral dilemmas. Second is philosophy of government. Many religions offer perspectives on authority, leadership, and the relationship between rulers and the ruled. These perspectives form the basis of questions such as what are the legitimate capacities, duties, aptitudes, and competencies of civil government according to the religious heritage, and

[23] Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944); Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, "Understanding the World's Religious Heritage," in *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: Women and Men in the World Religions*, 11th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 1-22.

what is the attitude toward the secular realm, positive and hopeful or negative and fearful? Understanding different philosophies of government can shed light on the role of different religious heritage in shaping attitudes toward political systems and institutions, or even the systems and institutions themselves. Third is philosophy of the human person, or philosophical anthropology. Religious traditions often provide perspectives on the nature of the human person individually, and humanity collectively, including beliefs about origin and destiny, the purpose of human existence, and the potential for growth. Exploring these teachings can offer a deeper understanding of how religions perceive human beings' place in the world and their roles in society.

Taken together, these ethical approaches are shaped by beliefs about human nature and the relationship between humans and the divine. Governmental principles reflect these moral values as well as one's understanding of humans as both rulers and those ruled. Views on human nature influence the development of ethical guidelines and perspectives on how governing should be conducted. More simply, ideas about right and wrong can come from beliefs about people and their connection to the divine. These beliefs can also shape how one thinks governments should work and how they should treat people. In turn one's understanding of human nature helps develop rules for ethical behavior and informs attitudes towards government and leadership.

In exploring four presidencies, this book does not presuppose that the only religious heritage that matters is that to which a president adhered. Presidents could be influenced by ideas and philosophies originating outside their own personal faith commitments. Interactions with individuals–including friends, neighbors, and colleagues from different religious traditions–expose people to diverse perspectives and experiences of religious heritage, potentially from any of the channels mentioned above; some of these ideas are attractive or useful enough to be incorporated by presidents into their decision making. Additionally, this investigation does not presuppose that the four presidents would necessarily practice the religious heritage in which they had been reared, nor necessarily be expected to have read Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and others; conversely, neither does it rule out an influence from reading or experiencing a different religious heritage, Christian or not. Rather, this book documents religious heritage wherever it is found in the decision-making frameworks of these presidents, including in their values and ethics, worldviews and perspectives, policy priorities and initiatives, or rhetoric and discourse. Finally, this book makes no presuppositions about presidential religiosity, understood in the sense of piety, devotion, depth of spiritual commitment,

frequency of religious practice (personal prayer, worship attendance, ritual observances), or the extent of identification with a particular religious tradition. Such religiosity can vary widely among individuals within the same religious community or tradition, reflecting differences in personal faith, spiritual experiences, and religious upbringing. This book finds, for example, that Truman and Carter are very different Baptists, both in religiosity and the other categories.

Exploring the dimensions of nuclear decision making

The expression "nuclear decision" needs to be clarified, for the term is a broad one that encompasses several types of nuclear choices. The nuclear decisions considered in this book, whether unilateral or negotiated, include examples of the use of nuclear weapons (such as Truman's decision to employ atomic bombs in World War II but not in the Korean Conflict), the threat to use them (such as Truman's ultimatum to Stalin over Iran or Eisenhower's policy of MAD), technological development (such as Truman's pursuit of thermonuclear technology or Carter's cancellation of the neutron bomb), and technology sharing (such as Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program or Reagan's willingness to share ballistic missile defense technology with the Soviet Union).

This book focuses on nuclear decision making for a series of overlapping reasons, including:

- *Magnitude of consequences*: The unparalleled consequences of nuclear technology make focusing on nuclear decisions a matter of great urgency. Certainly, the power to develop, deploy, and possibly use nuclear weapons carries immense responsibility due to the potential for catastrophic loss of life and long-lasting environmental effects. This reality places ethical issues in stark relief. Additionally, decisions on peaceful uses of nuclear technology, such as power generation and scientific exploration, can have far-reaching consequences for safety, pollution, and technological advancement.
- *Global politics*: Nuclear decisions carry global implications. The use, possession, or threat of nuclear weapons affects the whole international community, shaping norms, diplomacy, alliances, and the balance of power. Similarly, decisions related to peaceful nuclear uses impact international cooperation, energy policies, and scientific collaboration, all of which bear upon a president's engagement with global issues beyond military strategy.

- *Technological advancement*: Nuclear weapons are arguably the pinnacle of technological advancement in warfare, while peaceful nuclear applications promote or showcase innovation and progress. Thus, how presidents engage with both weapon and non-weapon nuclear technologies reflects their decision-making frameworks, displaying their stances on scientific progress, innovation, and the balance between military needs and civilian benefits.
- *Crisis management skills*: Handling nuclear crises demands strong management skills from a president. How presidents navigate tense moments, diffuse conflicts, and communicate during nuclear crises speaks volumes about their leadership abilities and decision making in high-stakes, time-sensitive situations.
- *Symbolism and leadership*: A president's approach to military and civilian nuclear issues signals the nation's stance on peace, security, and technological progress, so his nuclear decisions stand in for broader issues and reflect a president's philosophy on defense, deterrence, arms control, non-proliferation, energy, science, technology, and development.
- *Personal legacy*: Both weapon and non-weapon nuclear decisions help define a president's historical legacy because choices regarding nuclear weapons, energy, and scientific research can shape how a president is remembered and evaluated by future generations. The historical weight bearing down on a president encourages an examination of the circumstances, considerations, and outcomes of decisions across the spectrum of nuclear issues.

Overall, the examination of both weapon and non-weapon nuclear issues yields profound insights into a president's leadership style, decision-making processes, and values, as well as the broader challenges facing the nation and the world in the realms of security, diplomacy, energy policy, science, technology, and development.

Why these presidents

There are compelling reasons to study Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan. First, these presidents presided over significant periods in nuclear history, including the advent of atomic weapons in World War II (Truman), the escalation of the Cold War arms race (Eisenhower), efforts to mitigate nuclear tensions and pursue arms control (Carter), and the end of the Cold War (Reagan). Their policies and decisions had a substantial impact on nuclear proliferation, deterrence strategies, and international

relations. Second, each of these presidents brought distinct perspectives and approaches to nuclear policy making. Truman made critical decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons in wartime, Eisenhower emphasized deterrence and nuclear strategy, Carter prioritized arms control and non-proliferation efforts, and Reagan pursued strategic defense and landmark arms reduction treaties with the Soviet Union. Third, Truman's decision to use atomic bombs against Japan, Eisenhower's advocacy for peaceful coexistence, Carter's emphasis on human rights and disarmament, and Reagan's pursuit of peace through strength all raise ethical and moral questions about the use and control of nuclear technology. Studying their nuclear choices provides insights into how different presidents grappled with these complex dilemmas.

While studying the nuclear policy making of other presidents is also valuable, focusing on Truman, Eisenhower, Carter, and Reagan provides an extensive view of key moments, as well as diverse approaches and ethical considerations, in U.S. nuclear history. Each president's tenure offers unique insights into the challenges and complexities of managing nuclear arsenals and navigating international security dynamics. For example, President Truman's nuclear decisions were not confined to the Second World War. He contemplated employing atomic bombs during the 1948 Berlin Blockade and the Korean Conflict. Furthermore, Truman chose to seek thermonuclear bombs, devices that can be orders of magnitude more powerful than atomic weapons. Although he opposed the Soviet Union with nuclear ambiguity during the 1946 Iran crisis, Truman's positive response to the Acheson-Lilienthal Report and his backing of the Baruch Plan–both of which raised the prospect of internationalizing atomic technology–contrast with his more belligerent decisions.

President Eisenhower led the United States through the final part of the Korean War, the 1954–55 Asian crises, the Suez crisis, the Lebanon and Taiwan Straits crises, and the Berlin Deadline Crisis (which was intertwined with the later Cuban Missile Crisis under President John Kennedy). However, the Solarium exercise and the New Look policy demonstrate that Eisenhower had more flexibility on nuclear issues than simply counting crises would suggest. Moreover, Eisenhower's "Cross of Iron" and "Atoms for Peace" speeches are peaceable.

President Carter's nuclear decisions were shaped by a commitment to arms control and reducing nuclear risks. Although he oversaw several important developments in nuclear weapons technology and policy, Carter notably halted the neutron bomb program in 1978. Within a broader framework of détente, Carter also engaged in substantial arms control efforts, negotiating and signing the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty

in 1979 but withdrawing SALT II from ratification after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. President Reagan oversaw a nuclear (and conventional) buildup that included a contentiously debated ballistic missile defense initiative. Nonetheless, Reagan proposed sharing strategic defense technology with the Soviet Union, embarked on a campaign of "quiet diplomacy," and responded strongly to the apparent war scare occasioned by the Able Archer 83 military exercise. He also reacted profoundly to the televised movie *The Day After* and wanted to abolish nuclear weapons.

In addition to presiding over key periods in nuclear history, these four presidents had distinct religious heritages. Truman was a lifelong Baptist who held his faith seriously and had significant contact with Presbyterian and Episcopalian Christianity. Eisenhower, in contrast, was raised in a pacifist River Brethren/Mennonite milieu, had significant contact with the broad middle of American Protestantism throughout his military career, and chose to be baptized Presbyterian in office. Although both men could be considered mainstream Protestants, an attentive observer might expect that the influence of his pacifist upbringing might make Eisenhower more restrained than Truman in his approach to just means in war. Such turns out to be the case.

In contrast, Carter was raised a Baptist in the South, but he underwent a born-again experience common among Evangelical Christians. Reagan, although he often spoke in Evangelical terms, belonged to the Christian Church–Disciples of Christ (DOC). Although he had a DOC mother, Reagan's father, first wife, and children were all Catholic; moreover, Reagan attended non-DOC churches. In this case, one might expect Carter to exhibit decision making influenced by just war principles moderated by a constrained vision of the state and an expansive vision of human rights common among his variety of Baptist Christianity. Reagan, on the other hand, might be expected to exhibit overtones of just nuclear defense and peace through strength. Again, this turns out to be true.

The plan of the book

The unresolved elements of conventional Cold War analyses—exemplified by the debate among Leffler, Trachtenberg, and Miscamble—show the attractiveness of searching for common elements that tie historical episodes together and the appropriateness of studying individual actors in the process of doing so. The nuclear proliferation literature's consideration of psychology, preferences, and logics directs our attention to the frameworks within which leaders make decisions.

Therefore, this book takes the following approach. Religious heritage can be a source of ideas germane to a decision-making framework. Specifically, religion can provide notions about: ethics – what is good or bad, and right or wrong; government – what governments are good or bad at doing, what governments should or should not be involved in; and human beings, including their nature, condition, and values.

Thus, by helping to shape the decision-making frameworks of presidents, these philosophies can serve as three sources or channels through which religious heritage can influence presidential nuclear decisions.

This book uses secondary and primary sources, including archival material, to explore how the presidents' religious heritage influenced their nuclear decisions. By examining a range of decisions, the book both reveals patterns of thought and behavior that illustrate each president's worldview and provides a framework for understanding their nuclear decisions. Each of the upcoming four chapters delves into a single president's life, examining his religious heritage, beliefs about life and politics, and intellectual and behavioral patterns encompassing philosophies of ethics, government, and human nature, often within a just war context. By so doing, each chapter highlights the coherence between each president's nuclear decisions and his religious heritage.

The final chapter reviews the findings and includes appropriate comparisons among the four presidents. The presidents' unique backgrounds, challenges faced during their tenures, and responses to nuclear issues are summarized through the lens of religious heritage.

CHAPTER 2

TRUMAN: PERMISSIVE MEANS

In August of 1945, President Harry Truman startled the world by announcing the dropping of an atomic bomb. His speech touched upon key themes relating to his approach to nuclear decision making:

> The atomic bomb is too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world. That is why Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, who have the secret of its production, do not intend to reveal that secret until means have been found to control the bomb so as to protect ourselves and the rest of the world from the danger of total destruction.
>
> As far back as last May, Secretary of War Stimson, at my suggestion, appointed a committee upon which Secretary of State Byrnes served as my personal representative, to prepare plans for the future control of this bomb. I shall ask the Congress to cooperate to the end that its production and use be controlled, and that its power be made an overwhelming influence towards world peace.
>
> We must constitute ourselves trustees of this new force—to prevent its misuse, and to turn it into the channels of service to mankind.
>
> It is an awful responsibility which has come to us.
>
> We thank God that it has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.[1]

Truman's announcement of the atomic bomb clearly incorporated religious overtones, though his address was also pragmatic. He not only recognized the "tragic significance of the atomic bomb" but declared the bomb "too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world." For this reason, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States would not reveal the secret of the bomb's production "until means have been found to control the bomb so as to protect ourselves and the rest of the world from the danger of total

[1] Harry S Truman, Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference, August 9, 1945, accessed July 7, 2024, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/230985.

destruction."[2] These pronouncements preceded a thanksgiving to God and a petition for God's guidance.

A credulous person who took Truman's words at face value might be struck by his religious language, while a more cynical hearer might dismiss the religious language as rhetorical flourish and give more weight to Truman's pragmatic language. How, then, can one best understand Truman's nuclear decision-making thought process?

This chapter explores President Truman's religious heritage and nuclear decisions, linking his ethical philosophy, views on government, and understanding of human nature to a just war decision-making framework influenced by Christian principles, which is expected to shed light on his nuclear decisions. It then examines Truman's nuclear decisions during World War II, the Berlin Blockade crisis, and the Korean Conflict. Next, this chapter treats two interrelated affairs, the Iran Crisis and the Baruch Plan to internationalize nuclear energy. Finally, the chapter explores Truman's decision to pursue thermonuclear weaponry.

Truman's religious heritage

Truman was brought up as a mainline Protestant in a "vehemently"[3] Baptist family that derived its childrearing guidelines from the Bible.[4] Prior to beginning school, Truman's mother taught him to read the family's Bible and by the age of 12, he had read the Bible twice over[5] and had memorized many passages, including the famous Sermon on the Mount as told in the Gospel of Matthew.[6] He acquired "remarkable familiarity with the Bible, citing texts and stories from it with a range and aptness unusual among modern statesmen …"[7]

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[2] Harry S Truman, Radio Report to the American People on the Potsdam Conference, August 9, 1945, accessed July 7, 2024, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/230985.

[3] Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S Truman* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

[4] David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1992), 54.

[5] Edmund Fuller and David E. Green, *God in the White House: The Faiths of American Presidents* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968), 209.

[6] McCullough, *Truman*, 54-55.

[7] Fuller and Green, *God in the White House*, 209.

At age 18, Truman "felt a sense of salvation."[8] He was baptized by immersion[9] and was a lifelong member of the First Baptist Church of Grandview, Missouri[10] despite the fact his wife was Episcopalian, and they wed in that church. Although Truman rarely referred to Jesus using terms like "crucified savior" or "redeemer of humankind," he did often mention passages he had memorized in childhood, including the Sermon on the Mount (a passage that emphasized love and humility over force and arrogance, and that elevated common people such as the poor in spirit and the persecuted) and the Golden Rule (to treat others as one would wish to be treated[11]). For instance, Truman declared after the Second World War, "Though we may meet setbacks from time to time, we shall not relent in our efforts to bring the Golden Rule into the international affairs of the world;"[12] similarly, he identified the Sermon on the Mount as "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."[13] When Baptist minister and famous evangelist Billy Graham told Truman that following the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule were not enough to assure salvation, Truman disagreed. Alonzo Hamby related that Truman differed from Graham theologically but did not deny Christ's divinity;[14] Graham himself stated that Truman got up and concluded the conversation.[15] No matter how this incident played out, it would not be proper to categorize Truman as an evangelical Christian; in fact, Truman identified himself as a "Lightfoot

[8] Hamby, *Man of the People*, 21.
[9] Bliss Iseley, *The Presidents: Men of Faith* (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1953), 255.
[10] William G. Clotworthy, *Presidential Sites: A Discovery of Places Associated with Presidents of the United States* (Blacksburg: McDonald and Woodward, 1998), 231.
[11] The reciprocity inherent in the Golden Rule involves the psychological (empathy), sociological (individual-individual, group-group, and individual-group relationships), and philosophical (perceiving one's neighbor as an "I" or a "self"). For how Christian religious heritage has dealt with these aspects, see Walter Terence Stace, *The Concept of Morals* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1937).
[12] Harry S Truman, "Address on Foreign Policy at the Navy Day Celebration in New York City," October 27, 1945, accessed July 18, 2022, online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/230702.
[13] Fuller and Green, 209.
[14] Alonzo L. Hamby, "The Mind and Character of Harry S. Truman," in *The Truman Presidency*, Michael J. Lacey, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1989), 21-22.
[15] Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: Harper San Francisco/Zondervan, 1997), xx.

Baptist."[16] In this he followed the path of his mother who, as he put it, "taught [her children] the moral code and started [them] in Sunday School."[17]

Even with uneven churchgoing, Truman prayed "when he needed guidance."[18] Moreover, he approached God with a sense of responsibility: His first year as president, Truman wrote about how he could not grasp his state in life "except to attribute it to God. He guides me, I think."[19]

If Truman's religious devotion and philosophy of the human person held that people prosper under God's guidance, his attitude toward right conduct revealed his philosophical ethics. Truman's approach accorded with that of his Baptist grandmother: "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."[20]

Similarly, Truman believed that ethics aligned with both philosophical and political realism. His associates were impressed by his integrity: he refrained from using his public office for personal gain, demonstrated unwavering loyalty to his wife by writing to her daily when they were apart, and avoided any situation that could suggest improper behavior. The *New York Times* noted: "He has the kind of experience, in short, likely to make a realist sympathetic to the problems of the varied groups rather than to produce the doctrinaire or the zealot."[21] Thus, Truman was both a philosophical and political realist. He believed in an objective reality that exists independently of human perception and trusted that through reason and observation, people can reach accurate conclusions about facts and values.

Although open to many sources, Truman indicated his high regard for Jesus when he summarized integrity and ethics in 1952:

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[16] Harry S Truman to Bess Wallace, March 19, 1911, "Correspondence from Harry S. Truman to Bess Wallace Truman, 1910-1959," Collection HST-FPB: Harry S Truman Papers Pertaining to Family, Business and Personal Affairs, 1876-1959, Harry S Truman Library and Museum, Independence, MO.

[17] William Hillman, *Mr. President* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Young, 1952), 153. These and other quotations make clear that the term Lightfoot should not be mistakenly associated with the 17th century English churchman and scholar, John Lightfoot, who was an original member of the Westminster Assembly which originated the Westminster Confession, amended versions of which were adopted by Baptist and Congregational churches in England and New England in the 17th and 18th centuries.

[18] Hamby, *Man of the People*, 21.

[19] Quoted in McCullough, *Truman*, 390.

[20] McCullough, *Truman*, 571.

[21] Quoted in McCullough, *Truman*, 321.