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## AMERICAN PRESIDENCIES FROM THE FIRST TO THE SECOND TERM: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This paper focuses on the theme of continuity and change from the first to the second term of a Presidency, from an historical perspective, examining the case of two US Presidents who from 1945 to our days spent more than four years in office: the Truman Presidency - a democratic Presidency, born out of the legacy of the previous administration and renewed for the following four years, which allows us to reflect upon political continuity and change at the origin of the Cold War and the Ronald Reagan Presidency, the case of a Republican President, elected twice over, which offers an opportunity to focus on the last stages of the bipolar era.

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## Premise

The launch of Obama's second term of office sparked lively debate in the specialized press on the subject of the components of continuity and discontinuity that the President would impress on his policies with respect to his first four years in office.

An in-depth reflection on this issue could not be undertaken without looking into it from the historical perspective, as over the last sixty years a mere four Presidents have held the position for a single term only (Kennedy, Carter, Ford and Bush Senior). Certain distinctions must be made, however: between those presidents who actually won two consecutive elections (Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton, and Bush Junior) and those who served two terms because they "inherited" the first from their predecessors (as happened to Truman on the death of Roosevelt and Johnson after Kennedy's assassination); between those who saw out their second term and those who did not (such as Richard Nixon, who was re-elected in 1972, only to have to vacate the White House just two years later, as a result of the Watergate scandal).

Having made these preliminary distinctions, this article aims to look more closely at two cases, that of Truman, a Democratic presidency "inherited" from the previous administration and then reconfirmed for a following four-year term, which enables us to reflect on the phase in which the foundations of the Cold War were laid, and that of the Reagan Presidency, of a Republican head of state elected for two consecutive terms, which allows us to focus on the last days of the bipolar era.

In order to better understand the evolution and the turning points in foreign policy matters, this assessment will address the continuities and discontinuities etched by both presidents during their first terms in office with respect to the foreign policy of the administration that preceded theirs and the influence exercised, during their second terms, by what we may, for the sake of simplicity, define "the legacy issue". This is a variable doomed to occupy a place of honour among the priorities of a president reconfirmed in office for a second – and constitutionally last – term: free of constraints imposed until then on his political action by electoral concerns and officially a member of the "Club of the Greatest", the president will act for the next four years to consolidate his place in history, trying to shape the image future generations will have of his presidency.

## Truman

"A period of creation" is how Dean Acheson, firstly Undersecretary and later Secretary of State, defined the Truman years in his memoirs<sup>1</sup>; years

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<sup>1</sup> D. ACHESON, *Present at the Creation. My Years in the State Department*, New York,

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of major transformation, in which US foreign policy distanced itself from both the isolationism of the 1930s and the large scale global cooperation of the war years, moving towards a policy of containment of the communist adversary which, in all its various forms and evolutions, was to shape US foreign policy throughout the entire Cold War period.

A quick glance through the opening pages of Truman's memoirs is enough to confirm the force of continuity evident in the early months of his presidency, just after the death of Roosevelt in April 1945. On offering his condolences to Eleanor Roosevelt some hours after her husband's passing, Truman enquired "Is there anything I can do for you?" to which she is said to have replied: "Is there anything *we* can do for *you*? For you are the one in trouble now"<sup>2</sup>. The anecdote neatly expresses the substantial lack of experience in matters of foreign policy of Truman, who unexpectedly became the thirty-third President of the United States of America during the last, crucial months of the Second World War. The Senator from Missouri, chosen as Vice-President for the major role he could play in relations between the White House and Congress, had been kept far away by Roosevelt from any important decision-making on the war. He did not attend the Yalta Conference and was practically unknown to the main international leaders.

It may have been this lack of experience which led Truman for some time to follow the lines traced by Roosevelt, both in relation to the people he chose to surround himself with and in terms of US foreign policy aims and priorities.

While political continuity there may have been, the same cannot be said for the manner, style and tactics employed by the new president.<sup>3</sup> Again, the pages of Truman's memoirs dedicated to his first meeting with Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, in Washington on April 22 and 23, 1945 offer fascinating insights. The two discussed the same issue as had been addressed by Roosevelt in a heartfelt letter to Stalin at the start of the same month<sup>4</sup>: Poland and the USSR's failure to abide by the terms of the agreement reached at Yalta. However, the American interlocutor had changed, Truman was less tuned into the timing and ways of his Russian counterpart, and his intransigent and pressing manner caused Molotov to react brusquely, stating that he "had never been talked to like that" in all

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W.W. Norton, 1969.

<sup>2</sup>H.S. Truman, *Memoirs. Year of Decisions*, vol. one, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, 1955, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>"Tactical reversal and strategic continuity" in the words of the historian Miscamble. W.D. Miscamble, *From Roosevelt to Truman. Postdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>The letter is reproduced in *Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt, Attlee, and Truman. Papers 1941-1945*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1957, p. 648.

his life<sup>5</sup>. The episode was subsequently given even more emphasis by the Soviets, and indicated as emblematic of a radical political shift, thus later enabling Moscow to lay the blame for the new climate of tension firmly at Truman's door. Although the "ways" and "perceptions" changed, no substantial amendment was made to the political agenda, as the administration continued to follow Roosevelt's line throughout 1945 and into 1946.

The first signs of effective discontinuity were seen towards the end of 1946 and early part of 1947 when a pressing interweaving of events and reciprocal oppositions led Truman to undertake international commitments which were heretofore unthinkable: the process of creating satellite states in eastern Europe; the crystallization of the German situation; the perception of a growing threat from communism in the eastern Mediterranean area that was to lead to the setting up of a scheme to assist Greece and Turkey which, when announced to Congress in March 1947 was called the Truman Doctrine. This plan set out the US's unconditional commitment to help those nations under threat of external attack by the Soviets or from within by communist-orchestrated revolt.

By March 1949 the Cold War had officially begun, and from that moment on US foreign policy was to focus on containing the spread of the Soviet Union. This issue also played a role in the 1948 electoral campaign that returned Truman to office. His victory came as a surprise to many American analysts, the majority of whom had put their money on Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate, both because of the internal divisions rife in the Democratic Party and due to the good health enjoyed by the Republican Party, which had been controlling both houses of Congress since 1946. Yet Truman won. One of the reasons behind this unexpected victory surely lay in the fact that the president still in office could capitalize on the prosperity being enjoyed by the country at that time, as well as the crucial historical turning points occurring on the international scene. The events of 1948 – the *coup d'état* in Czechoslovakia in February, the tensions in Italy connected to the April 18 elections and, lastly, the Berlin crisis in June of the same year – contributed to reinforcing what would come to be known as the "Cold War Consensus", a consensus able even to provide the executive with bi-partisan backing not only in Congress but also from public opinion. The Berlin Blockade in particular offered Truman a further advantage over his electoral adversary, demonstrating all the power of containment policy

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<sup>5</sup>H.S. TRUMAN, *op. cit.*, 1955, p. 82.

when Britain and the US responded to Stalin's blockade by setting up an airlift service which contributed to helping west-Berliners while at the same time serving to remind the Americans how efficient the administration was at standing up to the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

"From containment to its militarization" may be an apt definition of the transition from Truman's first term to his second: firmly following the line of continuity with the first, yet with a crescendo of tones and instruments, first and foremost the signing of the Atlantic Alliance, with which in 1949 the United States inaugurated a program of military cooperation with European states which has been a feature of Euro-Atlantic relations to the present day, but also the consequences for US foreign policy of the double blow, again in 1949, of losing its monopoly over atomic power, and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China. These events led the way for a strategic review of containment to be undertaken and approval of a 300% increase in defence spending, the fruits of which would first be seen in the Korean War.

Truman affirmed in his memoirs that he had taken the decision not to run for nomination as the Democratic candidate for the 1952 elections shortly after being sworn in in 1949, attributing his decision to the importance he placed in renewal of US leadership after nearly two full mandates. "In my opinion eight years as President is enough and sometimes too much for any man who serves in that capacity"<sup>7</sup>. While this may well be true, we also know that the Korean War played a pivotal role in the 1952 electoral campaign, as well as in the Democratic Party's decisions and Truman's own. He was aware that he had lost much of his popularity during the two years of war, and in particular with his opposition to General MacArthur, who had given voice to some of the most bellicose anti-communist sentiment of a large part of the US Republican entourage.

While the Republicans accused Truman and Acheson of being weak and remissive, if not of complicity with the Soviet or Chinese enemy, containment policy was actually at its most forceful in that climate of widespread anti-communism and witch-hunting of the early 1950s.

Continuity was therefore the prevailing force in the Truman years. Discontinuity, on the other hand, was what was most evident in those of Reagan, both in relation to the outgoing administration before him and to the transition from his first to his second term of office.

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<sup>6</sup>On the 1948 elections, see Z. KARABELL, *The Last Campaign. How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election*, New York, Knopf, 2000; R. DIVINE, *The cold war and the election of 1948*, «The Journal of American History», vol. 59, no. 1, June 1972, pp. 90-110.

<sup>7</sup>H.S. TRUMAN, *Memoirs. Years of Trial and Hope*, vol. two, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1956, p. 488.

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## Reagan

The 1980 presidential election was one in which foreign policy bore significant weight. The state of the US economy was of great concern in a period characterized by alarming rates of inflation and unemployment, as was the dramatically vulnerable position that America appeared to have fallen into on the international stage. The events of 1979 had signalled a watershed: the Iranian revolution in January of that year, which had deprived the US of its traditional ally in the Persian Gulf, and in November the holding of the American hostages in the embassy in Teheran; the *coup d'état* in Nicaragua in July; and lastly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December. All of this had weighed heavily on the outcome of the election, which rewarded the Republican candidate Ronald Reagan who had repudiated Jimmy Carter's policies with a simple campaign slogan inviting voters to reflect on the question "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"<sup>8</sup>. Reagan was to emerge as the "Great Communicator" of US politics for the following eight years, leaving the White House with the highest approval rating achieved by an American president during the second half of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

As previously mentioned, there was a clear distinction between Reagan's two terms as far as foreign policy was concerned. The first was dominated by anti-Soviet propaganda against the "empire of evil", the second by the start of a dialogue with Mikhail Gorbachev, elected Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, the great interlocutor who was to lay the foundations for putting an end to the Cold War.

Without doubt, discontinuity with respect to the Carter Administration characterized Reagan's first period in office; there was a strong reaction against what was seen as the Democratic presidency's underestimation of national security issues in favour of an ambiguous emphasis on human rights issues and a blind trust in the deception of *détente* which resulted in the failure to note Soviet aggression in peripheral areas of the world, such as Africa and Latin America. In Reagan's opinion, only from a position of strength could the US negotiate, and could co-existence with the Soviets be achieved in which *détente* would be distinct from giving in to the other side's demands, or what is known as *appeasement*. Such premises, as expressed in his inaugural speech<sup>10</sup>, led to a policy of

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<sup>8</sup> R. REAGAN, *An American Life. The Autobiography*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1990 p. 221.

<sup>9</sup>J. EHRMAN – M.W. FLAMM, *Debating the Reagan Presidency*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2009, p. VII.

<sup>10</sup> R. REAGAN, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1981, The American Presidency Project, (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>).

conventional and nuclear re-armament, and the building up of an anti-missile defence system was among the priorities of Reagan's first term in office, having the dual aim of strengthening the US and weakening the Soviet Union by forcing it to compete in an arms race which it would be unable to face in the period of decline that it was currently experiencing. The doctrine expressed by Jeane Kirkpatrick, appointed as ambassador to the United Nations, that the US should show tolerance towards non-communist authoritarian regimes as in time they might well accept democratic principles, and adopt an attitude of zero tolerance towards totalitarian communist states, which instead would never be able to produce a real liberalization, replaced that of Carter, centred on human rights issues<sup>12</sup>. To this must be added support for foreign movements of resistance to what was increasingly perceived to be a communist threat. In southeast Asia, where Reagan faced the Soviet presence in Afghanistan by giving economic and military support to Pakistan and by large-scale backing of the Afghan resistance; in Angola, where the United States assisted UNITA forces and, especially, in Central America, which by the end of the 1970s had become "the most important place in the world" as Jeane Kirkpatrick put it.<sup>13</sup> And it was in Nicaragua that the Administration placed much of its credibility on the line by funding the anti-Sandinista guerrilla Contras. "We must obtain the funds to help these freedom fighters" explained Reagan to his closest aides in June 1984<sup>14</sup>, towards the end of his first term. The wish to achieve this goal led the administration over the following months to find a way around the rules of Congress that prohibited the US from providing military assistance to the Contras, relying instead on funds gathered by foreign governments and private organizations, and with the secret sale of arms to Iran. When the Iran-Contra scandal broke during Reagan's second term, it marked the lowest ebb in the Reagan Presidency, and placed the President at risk of impeachment.

However, in the end the Iran-Contra scandal was not the issue that principally characterized the administration or left the most indelible mark on the collective memory of the Reagan years; rather, what contributed most to his legacy was his having taken part, during the last years of his Presidency, in the process which was to lead some years later to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Just as the Cold War had brought debate as to its origins with it, so too the end of the bi-polar years

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<sup>12</sup> For further insights on the topic see the remarks made in D.F. SCHMITZ, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorship, 1965-1989*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 194 ff.

<sup>13</sup> J. EHRMAN - M.W. FLAMM, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> NSC, National Security Planning Group Minutes, "Subject: Central America", June 25, 1984, *The Iran Contra Affair 20 Years on, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book n. 210*, 2006, (<http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/>).

prompted equally lively discussion around the personalities with whom the responsibility – or the merit – for putting an end to it lies. At the centre of the debate are Ronald Reagan and Mikhail S. Gorbachev, and scholars are split between those who attribute greater responsibility to Gorbachev’s reformist policies, to the turning points represented by *glasnost* and *perestroika*, as well as to the re-defining of relations with the United States required to make domestic reform possible, and those who attribute to Reagan and the pressure he put on the Soviet giant, the merit for its downfall. This effectively shared responsibility saw the two leaders centre stage between 1985 and 1988, during the meetings that marked the last four years of Reagan’s Presidency, in a climate of absolute discontinuity with respect to Reagan’s first term of office. This period saw the principle of nuclear arms limitation being replaced by a policy of their destruction which would be formalized in the Start Treaty under the next president, George Bush, who had been Reagan’s Vice President, and which would accompany the break-up of the former Soviet colossus.

### Conclusions

Only a few days after Reagan was sworn in for the second time, Tom Korogolos, Adviser to the White House, suggested to the President that he set out his entire second term as a function of what he wished his “legacy” to be after leaving office. “What is he going to be the most proud of when he’s sitting at the ranch with Nancy four and five years after his Presidency?”, we read in his memorandum at the Reagan Presidential Library; “Is it going to be an arms control agreement? Is it going to be a balanced budget? Is it going to be worldwide economic recovery? Is it going to be a combination of all of this: peace and prosperity? After this cosmic decision, then the structure, strategy, personnel and like decisions all should be fitted toward the long range goal. Every speech; every appearance; every foreign trip; every Congressional phone call and every act involving the President should be made with the long-range goal in mind”<sup>15</sup>.

The legacy issue played a significant role in certain crucial political turning points for both Truman and Reagan; one could almost say that the ambition to leave a positive image of oneself for posterity is destined to replace that of electoral victory when that option is no longer available. On January 15, 1953 Truman remarked in his farewell address to the American people “When history says that my term of office saw the beginning of the Cold War, it will also

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<sup>15</sup> *Memorandum from Tom C. Korogolos to the Honorable Charles Z. Wick Director, U.S. Information Agency, January 24, 1985, Whorm Subject File, FG001, casefile number 273252, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.*

say that in those eight years we have set the course that can win it”<sup>16</sup>. More than forty years later it would be Ronald Reagan himself who “won the Cold War for liberty and did it without a shot being fired”<sup>17</sup>.

What will Obama’s place in history be, once he has left the White House? Again, this is a question that political analysts and advisers began to ponder after his re-election. Which policies does he hope to be remembered for? Domestic policy and health care reform? Foreign policy and his historical reaching out to Iran? The greatest challenge Obama will face may be that of balancing these two political dimensions, and of finding on the home front the essential backing needed to enforce his foreign policy.

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<sup>16</sup> *The President’s Farewell Address to the American People*, January 15, 1953 (<http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3355>)

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *Statement on the death of President Ronald Reagan*, 2004, June 5 (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110356>)