

Address broadcast by US President Harry S. Truman (9 August 1945)

Caption: On 9 August 1945, in a radio broadcast, Harry S. Truman, US President, presents a report on the Potsdam Conference and the main decisions taken there.

Source: The Department of State Bulletin. Dir. of publ. Department of State. 12.08.1945, No 320; vol. XIII; publication 2374. Washington: US Government Printing Office. "The Berlin Conference", auteur:Truman, Harry S. , p. 208-213.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_broadcast_by_us_president_harry_s_truman_9_august_1945-en-3e2b3dbb-54f5-4329-b641-ac6f97c0ce28.html

Last updated: 02/07/2015

The Berlin Conference

Report of the President to the nation¹

[Released to the press by the White House August 9]

MY FELLOW AMERICANS: I have just returned from Berlin, the city from which the Germans intended to rule the world. It is a ghost city. The buildings are in ruins; its economy and its people are in ruins.

Our party also visited what is left of Frankfurt and Darmstadt. We flew over the remains of Kassel, Magdeburg, and other devastated cities. German women and children and old men were wandering over the highways, returning to bombed-out homes or leaving bombed-out cities, searching for food and shelter.

War has indeed come home to Germany and to the German people. It has come home in all the frightfulness with which the German leaders started and waged it.

The German people are beginning to atone for the crimes of the gangsters whom they placed in power and whom they whole-heartedly approved and obediently followed.

We also saw some of the terrible destruction which the war had brought to the occupied countries of western Europe and to England.

How glad I am to be home again! And how grateful to Almighty God that this land of ours has been spared!

We must do all we can to spare her from the ravages of any future breach of the peace. That is why, though the United States wants no territory or profit or selfish advantage out of this war, we are going to maintain the military bases necessary for the complete protection of our interests and of world peace. Bases which our military experts deem to be essential for our protection, and which are not now in our possession, we will acquire. We will acquire them by arrangements consistent with the United Nations Charter.

No one can foresee what another war would mean to our own cities and to our own people. What we are doing to Japan now – even with the new atomic bomb – is only a small fraction of what would happen to the world in a third world war.

That is why the United Nations are determined that there shall be no next war.

That is why the United Nations are determined to remain united and strong. We can never permit any aggressor in the future to be clever enough to divide us or strong enough to defeat us.

That was the guiding spirit in the conference at San Francisco.

That was the guiding spirit in the conference of Berlin.

That will be the guiding spirit in the peace settlements to come.

In the conference of Berlin, it was easy for me to get along in mutual understanding and friendship with Generalissimo Stalin, with Prime Minister Churchill, and later with Prime Minister Attlee.

Strong foundations of good-will and cooperation had been laid by President Roosevelt. And it was clear that those foundations rested on much more than the personal friendships of three individuals. There was a fundamental accord and agreement upon the objectives ahead of us.

Two of the three conferences of Tehran and Yalta were missing by the end of this Conference. Each of them was sorely missed. Each had done his work toward winning this war. Each had made a great contribution toward establishing and maintaining a lasting world peace. Each of them seems to have been ordained to

lead his country in its hour of greatest need. And so thoroughly had they done their jobs that we were able to carry on and to reach many agreements essential to the future peace and security of the world.

The results of the Berlin Conference have been published. There were no secret agreements or commitments – apart from current military arrangements.

And it was made perfectly plain to my colleagues at the Conference that, under our Constitution, the President has no power to make any treaties without ratification by the Senate of the United States.

[...]

We are going to do what we can to make Germany over into a decent nation, so that it may eventually work its way from the economic chaos it has brought upon itself, back into a place in the civilized world.

The economic action taken against Germany at the Berlin Conference included another most important item – reparations.

We do not intend again to make the mistake of exacting reparations in money and then lending Germany the money with which to pay. Reparations this time are to be paid in physical assets from those resources of Germany which are not required for her peacetime subsistence.

The first purpose of reparations is to take out of Germany everything with which she can prepare for another war. Its second purpose is to help the devastated countries to bring about their own recovery by means of the equipment and material taken from Germany.

At the Crimea Conference a basis for fixing reparations had been proposed for initial discussion and study by the Reparations Commission. That basis was a total amount of reparations of 20 billion dollars. Of this sum, one half was to go to Russia, which had suffered more heavily in the loss of life and property than any other country.

But at Berlin the idea of attempting to fix a dollar value on the property to be removed from Germany was dropped. To fix a dollar value on the share of each nation would be a sort of guaranty of the amount each nation would get – a guaranty which might not be fulfilled.

Therefore it was decided to divide the property by percentages of the total amount available. We still generally agreed that Russia should get approximately half of the total for herself and Poland, and that the remainder should be divided among all the other nations entitled to reparations.

Under our agreement at Berlin, the reparation claims of the Soviet Union and Poland are to be met from the property located in the zone of Germany occupied by the Soviet Union, and from the German assets in Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Rumania, and eastern Austria. The reparation claims of all the other countries are to be met from property located in the western zones of occupation in Germany, and from the German assets in all other countries. The Soviet waives all claim to gold captured by the Allied troops in Germany.

This formula of taking reparations by zones will lead to less friction among the Allies than the tentative basis originally proposed for study at Yalta.

The difficulty with this formula, however, is that the industrial capital equipment not necessary for the German peace economy is not evenly divided among the zones of occupation. The western zones have a much higher percentage than the eastern zone, which is mostly devoted to agriculture and to the production of raw materials. In order to equalize the distribution and give Russia and Poland their fair share of approximately 50 percent it was decided that they should receive, without any reimbursement, 10 percent of the capital equipment in the western zones available for reparations.

As you will note from the communiqué, a further 15 percent of the capital equipment in the western zones

not necessary for Germany's peace economy is also to be turned over to Russia and Poland. But this is not free. For this property, Poland and Russia will give to the western zones an equal amount in value in food, coal, and other raw materials. This 15 percent, therefore, is not additional reparations for Russia and Poland. It is a means of maintaining a balanced economy in Germany and providing the usual exchange of goods between the eastern part and the western.

It was agreed at Berlin that the payment of reparations, from whatever zones taken, should always leave enough resources to enable the German people to subsist without sustained support from the other nations.

The question of Poland was a most difficult one. Certain compromises about Poland had already been agreed upon at the Crimea Conference. They obviously were binding upon us at Berlin.

By the time of the Berlin Conference, the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity had already been formed; and it had been recognized by all of us. The new Polish Government had agreed to hold free and unfettered elections as soon as possible, on the basis of universal suffrage and the secret ballot.

In accordance with the Crimea agreement, we did seek the opinion of the Polish Provisional Government of National Unity with respect to its western and northern boundaries.

They agreed, as did we all, that the final determination of the borders could not be accomplished at Berlin, but must await the peace settlement. However, a considerable portion of what was the Russian zone of occupation in Germany was turned over to Poland at the Berlin Conference for administrative purposes until the final determination of the peace settlement.

Nearly every international agreement has in it the element of compromise. The agreement on Poland is no exception. No one nation can expect to get everything that it wants. It is a question of give and take – of being willing to meet your neighbor half-way.

In this instance there is much to justify the action taken. An agreement on some line – even provisionally – was necessary to enable the new Poland to organize itself, and to permit the speedier withdrawal of the armed forces which had liberated her from the Germans. In the area east of the Curzon line there are over 3,000,000 Poles who are to be returned to Poland. They need room to settle. The new area in the west was formerly populated by Germans. But most of them have already left in the face of the invading Soviet Army. We were informed that there are only about a million and a half left.

The territory the Poles are to administer will enable Poland better to support its population. It will provide a short and more easily defensible frontier between Poland and Germany. Settled by Poles, it will provide a more homogeneous nation.

The three powers are also agreed to help bring about the earliest possible return to Poland of all Poles who wish to return, including soldiers, with the assurance that they would have all the rights of other Polish citizens.

The action taken at Berlin will help carry out the basic policy of the United Nations toward Poland – to create a strong, independent, and prosperous nation with a government to be selected by the people themselves.

It was agreed to recommend that in the peace settlement a portion of East Prussia should be turned over to Russia. That, too, was agreed upon at Yalta. It will provide the Soviet Union, which did so much to bring about victory in Europe, with an ice-free port at the expense of Germany.

At Yalta it was agreed, you will recall, that the three governments would assume a common responsibility in helping to reestablish in the liberated and satellite nations of Europe governments broadly representative of democratic elements in the population. That responsibility still stands. We all recognize it as a joint responsibility of the three governments.

It was reaffirmed in the Berlin declarations on Rumania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. These nations are not to be spheres of influence of any one power. They now are governed by Allied Control Commissions composed of representatives of the three governments which met at Yalta and Berlin. These Control Commissions, it is true, have not been functioning completely to our satisfaction; but improved procedures were agreed upon at Berlin. Until these states are reestablished as members of the international family, they are the joint concern of all of us.

The American Delegation was much disturbed over the inability of the representatives of a free press to get information out of the former satellite nations. The three governments agreed at Berlin that the Allied press would enjoy full freedom from now on to report to the world upon all developments in Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Finland. The same agreement was reaffirmed also as to Poland.

One of the persistent causes for wars in Europe in the last two centuries has been the selfish control of the waterways of Europe. I mean the Danube, the Black Sea Straits, the Rhine, the Kiel Canal, and all the inland waterways of Europe which border on two or more states.

The United States proposed at Berlin that there be free and unrestricted navigation of these inland waterways. We think this is important to the future peace and security of the world. We proposed that regulations for such navigation be provided by international authorities.

The function of the agencies would be to develop the use of the waterways and assure equal treatment on them for all nations. Membership on the agencies would include the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France, plus those states which border on the waterways.

Our proposal was considered by the Conference and was referred to the Council of Ministers. There, the United States intends to press for its adoption.

Any man who sees Europe now must realize that victory in a great war is not something that you win once and for all, like victory in a ball game. Victory in a great war is something that must be won and kept won. It can be lost after you have won it – if you are careless or negligent or indifferent.

Europe today is hungry. I am not talking about Germans. I am talking about the people of the countries which were overrun and devastated by the Germans, and particularly about the people of western Europe. Many of them lack clothes and fuel and tools and shelter and raw materials. They lack the means to restore their cities and factories.

As the winter comes on, the distress will increase. Unless we do what we can to help, we may lose next winter what we won at such terrible cost last spring. Desperate men are liable to destroy the structure of their society to find in the wreckage some substitute for hope. If we let Europe go cold and hungry, we may lose some of the foundations of order on which the hope for world-wide peace must rest.

We must help to the limits of our strength. And we will.

Our meeting at Berlin was the first meeting of the great Allies since victory was won in Europe. Naturally our thoughts now turn to the day of victory in Japan.

The British, Chinese, and United States Governments have given the Japanese people adequate warning of what is in store for them. We have laid down the general terms on which they can surrender. Our warning went unheeded; our terms were rejected. Since then, the Japanese have seen what our atomic bomb can do. They can foresee what it will do in the future.

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on war industries

and, unfortunately, thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately, and save themselves from destruction.

I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb.

Its production and its use were not lightly undertaken by this Government. But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We know now how close they were to finding it. And we knew the disaster which would come to this nation, to all peaceful nations, to all civilization, if they had found it first.

That is why we felt compelled to undertake the long and uncertain and costly labor of discovery and production.

We won the race of discovery against the Germans.

Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.

We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us.

The atomic bomb is too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world. That is why Great Britain and the United States, who have the secret of its production, do not intend to reveal the 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 toward 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.

Our victory in Europe was more than a victory of arms.

It was a victory of one way of life over another. It was a victory of an ideal founded on the rights of the common man, on the dignity of the human being, and on the conception of the state as the servant – not the master – of its people.

A free people showed that it was able to defeat professional soldiers whose only moral arms were obedience and worship of force.

We tell ourselves that we have emerged from this war the most powerful nation in the world – the most powerful nation, perhaps, in all history. That is true, but not in the sense some of us believe it to be true.

The war has shown us that we have tremendous resources to make all the materials for war. It has shown us that we have skilful workers and managers and able generals, and a brave people capable of bearing arms.

All these things we knew before.

The new thing – the thing we had not known – the thing we have learned now and should never forget, is this: that a society of self-governing men is more powerful, more enduring, more creative than any other kind of society, however disciplined, however centralized.

We know now that the basis proposition of the worth and dignity of man is not a sentimental aspiration or a vain hope or a piece of rhetoric. It is the strongest, the most creative force now present in the world.

Now let us use that force and all our resources and all our skills in the great cause of a just and lasting peace!

The three great powers are now more closely than ever bound together in determination to achieve that kind of peace. From Tehran, and the Crimea, and San Francisco, and Berlin – we shall continue to march together to our objective.

1 Delivered by radio from the White House at 10 p.m. on Aug. 9, 1945.