The Origins of the Cold War

Harry S. Truman, 1884–1972

The son of a Missouri farmer and mule trader, Harry S. Truman graduated high school in 1901 before becoming a bank clerk. At the beginning of World War I, the 33-year-old Truman volunteered and was sent to France. There he solidified the qualities of leadership and integrity that would characterize his political career.

Elected as vice-president to FDR for the president’s fourth term in 1944, Truman had barely 82 days in the job before Roosevelt’s sudden death made Truman the thirty-third president of the United States. Truman said he felt “the moon, the stars, and the planets had fallen” on him. However, Truman called on those qualities he had developed throughout his life when he became president.

By 1945, Germany had surrendered but Japan had not. Truman sent the Japanese government a final demand to surrender or face “utter devastation.” The Japanese refused, forcing Truman into an extremely difficult decision: risk the lives of up to 500,000 American soldiers or use the newly developed atomic bomb on Japan. Truman ordered the bombing of the two Japanese cities, resulting in more than 100,000 men, women, and children killed. Japan surrendered within two weeks, ending the war in the Pacific.

1. What led to Truman’s decision to use the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities?

2. How did Truman become president in 1945?