



Harry S. Truman with Chaim Weizmann. Truman officially received Weizmann on May 25, 1948, the first time the head of the new Jewish state was received by a U.S. president. On that occasion, Weizmann acknowledged Truman's role in the recognition of Israel by presenting him with a set of Torah scrolls. Abba Eban recalled that Truman was not fully briefed by his staff. Not understanding what was within the purple velvet covering, Truman responded, "I've always wanted a set of these." Courtesy of The Bettmann Archive.

Harry S. Truman as a Modern Cyrus

Despite concerted opposition from his advisors, who saw the move as strategically unwise, Truman ignored strategy and recognized Israel for humanitarian and religious reasons.

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Without question the “puzzle of Palestine” (as Secretary of State Dean Acheson referred to it) “posed singular difficulty” for the administration of President Harry S. Truman “in terms of humaneness, conscience, diplomacy, strategy, intrigue, oil, domestic politics, prejudice, and personal pressure.”¹ Notwithstanding many mitigating factors, the historical record reveals that Truman’s decision to grant recognition to the nascent Jewish state was based primarily on humanitarian, moral, and sentimental reasons, many of which were an outgrowth of Truman’s religious upbringing and his familiarity with the Bible. His controversial action to grant recognition was subsequently “sanctified” by foreign policy officials at the State Department for strategic reasons. Given the similar strategic motivations of both the United States and Great Britain in the Middle East, parallels are readily evident. In adopting the Balfour Declaration, which restored to the Jews their ancient homeland, the British were compelled by dual considerations: first, a debt of conscience owed to the people of the Bible, and second, a strategy of empire which required that the British establish a presence in Palestine.²

In conversing with me about the above conclusions, John Lewis Gaddis, the visiting Harmsorth Professor of Modern History at Queen’s College, Oxford, remarked that such a thesis is on the right track. Nevertheless, he noted, one *must* emphasize the religious nature of Truman’s decision and the ways his actions diverged

from typical policy making. Otherwise, there is no way to explain why Truman did what he did, because his decision to grant recognition is an aberration when viewed within the historical context. Examining the president's actions through the prism of politics, strategy, or common sense renders the decision inexplicable.³

At the time, I did not mention a Mormon elder by the name of Orson Hyde, his mission to Palestine, and the way Harry S. Truman's recognition of the nation of Israel in May 1948 might be viewed as a partial fulfillment of Hyde's 1841 dedicatory prayer.

Elder Hyde's Mission to Palestine

Sometime after Orson Hyde's baptism, the Prophet Joseph Smith gave Elder Hyde an extraordinary blessing:

In due time thou shalt go to Jerusalem, the land of thy fathers, and be a watchman unto the house of Israel; and by thy hands shall the Most High do a great work, which shall prepare the way and greatly facilitate the gathering together of that people.⁴

As a literal realization of that blessing, Elder Hyde set out nearly a decade later on what may be one of the most arduous missions ever undertaken by a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. His harrowing voyage to Palestine via London, Rotterdam, Constantinople, and Beirut is a matter of record. On arriving in Jerusalem on October 21, 1841—after nearly nineteen months of travel—Elder Hyde recorded his first impressions of the Holy City: "My natural eyes for the first time beheld Jerusalem; and as I gazed upon it and its environs, . . . a storm of commingled emotions suddenly arose in my breast, the force of which was only spent in a profuse shower of tears."⁵

Early on Sunday morning, October 24, 1841, Elder Hyde crossed the Kidron Valley and ascended the Mount of Olives; there he built an altar and "in solemn silence, with pen, ink, and paper" offered a dedicatory prayer.⁶ His prayer contained the following petition:

Thou, O Lord, did once move upon the heart of Cyrus to show favor unto Jerusalem and her children. Do Thou now also be pleased to inspire the hearts of kings and the powers of the earth to look with a friendly eye towards this place, and with a desire to see Thy righteous purposes executed in relation thereto. Let them know that it is

Thy good pleasure to restore the kingdom unto Israel—raise up Jerusalem as its capital, and constitute her people a distinct nation and government, with David Thy servant, even a descendant from the loins of ancient David to be their king.⁷

Orson Hyde thereby enunciated a vision of the return of the Jews to their ancestral homeland fifty-six years before Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland.

I should mention that I do not intend to discuss the policies of the modern state of Israel. Members of the Church have been counseled repeatedly to avoid taking sides in the apparently intractable Middle Eastern conflict. For example, President Howard W. Hunter observed: “We do not need to apologize nor mitigate any of the prophecies concerning the Holy Land. We believe them and declare them to be true. But this does not give us justification to dogmatically pronounce that others of our Father’s children are not children of promise.”⁸ Church leaders have continued to “plead for peace and for coexistence with all the peoples who lay claim to old Jerusalem and the Holy Land: Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and others.”⁹

Nonetheless, given the eventual unfolding of the Lord’s purposes in the Near East, the Jewish return to Palestine is an astonishing phenomenon which cannot be divorced from the events that prophecy has foretold will transpire there. Professor Daniel Peterson concludes, “We need only think for a moment about the sheer improbability of the whole thing to begin to see its miraculous character.”¹⁰

Some, however, are quick to note that a Jewish return to Palestine “should not necessarily be seen as a ‘fulfillment’ of the spiritual promises made through the ancient and modern prophets.”¹¹ “I have occasionally heard Western Christians, including Latter-day Saints,” records Peterson, “talk as if we must support every action and every policy of the government of Israel, because that government is the leadership of God’s chosen people. This is false. Worse, I believe it is idolatrous.”¹² Elder Bruce R. McConkie has been even more explicit:

Let there be no misunderstanding in any discerning mind on this point. This gathering of the Jews to their homeland, and their organization into a nation and a kingdom, is not the gathering

promised by the prophets. It does not fulfill the ancient promises. . . . This gathering of the unconverted to Palestine—shall we not call it a political gathering based on such understanding of the ancient word as those without the guidance of the Holy Spirit can attain, or shall we not call it a preliminary gathering brought to pass in the wisdom of him who once was their God?—this gathering, of those whose eyes are yet dimmed by scales of darkness and who have not yet become the delightsome people it is their destiny to be, is nonetheless part of the divine plan. It is Elias going before Messias; it is a preparatory work; it is the setting of the stage for the grand drama soon to be played on Olivet.¹³

Notwithstanding the disparate perspectives *vis-à-vis* the role of the establishment of Israel in the eternal scheme of things, one would certainly be hard pressed to disagree with this caveat: the establishment of the state of Israel represents a modern political miracle.

In this article, I will focus on the consummation of a specific plea in Elder Hyde's petition to the Almighty: "Do Thou now also be pleased to inspire the *hearts of kings and the powers of the earth to look with a friendly eye towards this place*, and with a desire to see Thy righteous purposes executed in relation thereto."¹⁴ Neither time nor space will allow for the treatment of Great Britain's role in restoring the Jewish people to Palestine and the subsequent fulfillment of Elder Hyde's prophecy that "England is destined, in the wisdom and economy of heaven, to stretch forth the arm of political power, and advance in the front ranks of this glorious enterprise."¹⁵ Rather, I will focus on what might be considered a very unlikely means of fulfilling Elder Hyde's dedicatory prayer: the thirty-third president of the United States, Harry S. Truman.

I hasten to add that I am not the first to emphasize the significance to the Latter-day Saints of President Truman's role in restoring the Jews to their Zion. Eliahu Elath, former Israeli ambassador to the United States and president of the Hebrew University, made this interesting observation in 1977:

When Harry was sixteen, the Truman family moved to Independence, a small town in the western part of Missouri. During the 1850's [1830s], it had been one of the centers of activity of the Mormons. Joseph Smith, founder of the sect, insisted that it had been revealed to him in a dream that Independence was the site of the Garden of Eden. He changed its name to Zion. Mystics may discover a hint here of the historic role a son of Independence-Zion was to play in the restoration of Israel to its ancient homeland in Zion.¹⁶

Chief Executives and the Question of Palestine

The first chief executive to express a desire to see the Jewish people restored to their ancient homeland was John Adams. In an 1818 letter to Major Mordechai Noah, Adams wrote, “For I really wish the Jews in Judea an independent nation, for as I believe, the most enlightened men of it have participated in the amelioration of the philosophy of the age.”¹⁷ “A century later Jewish nationalists would stir their faithful by recalling” Adams’s message, “discreetly omitting” the concluding phrase: “Once restored to an independent government and no longer persecuted they would soon wear away some of the asperities and peculiarities of their character, possibly in time becoming liberal Unitarian Christians.”¹⁸

While every American president beginning with Woodrow Wilson has gone on the record in favor of a Jewish national home, U.S. involvement in the Palestinian conundrum would begin in earnest with the administration of Harry S. Truman in the mid-1940s. Truman recalled in 1961 that the Palestine question was “an exceptional kind of a problem of a unique people and of a unique country” which, he contended, “could not be dealt with in the routine, customary manner in which subjects of a political character were generally treated.”¹⁹ Ambassador Elath observed: “[Truman’s] actions regarding Palestine, his support of the Zionist cause and the Jewish desire for statehood, were motivated by deeper, more noble considerations than mere political and personal gain.”²⁰ White House Counsel Clark Clifford noted:

The ethical and moral, humanitarian and sentimental reactions that the President felt toward Israel were very, very important to him. . . . I know why he fought for Israel. I know that, for instance, he believed that in the Old Testament there were references to the fact that ultimately there would be a Jewish homeland. . . . He felt a desire to see that these people who had been so mistreated all through their lives and all through their history would be given a chance.²¹

Truman’s Religious Upbringing and Studies of History

As a young boy, Harry, who was neither as athletic nor social as his fellow classmates or his younger brother Vivian, spent most of his time reading books. He especially liked a red-backed,

four-volume set of biographies by Charles Francis Horne, *The Lives of Great Men and Famous Women*. Recalled Truman, “When I was a boy I was something of a bookworm, in part because my eyesight kept me out of a good many games and sports. . . . By the time I was twelve or fourteen years old I had read every book in the Independence Library, including the encyclopedias.”²² Margaret, Truman’s only child, recorded: “My father’s second preference, after Horne’s biographies, was the Bible. By the time he was twelve, he had read it end to end twice and was frequently summoned to settle religious disputes.”²³ Young Harry’s regular Bible study instilled in him a seriousness quite marked for a boy his age. He could quote many verses at random, and “in a childlike way he knew their beauty and could understand the allegorical significance.”²⁴

Though he was a regular church attender before assuming the presidency (he retained his membership in the Baptist Church of Grandview, Missouri), Truman very rarely attended church during his seven years in the Oval Office, explaining that he attracted too much attention and distracted other worshippers.²⁵ Despite such irregular church attendance, Truman was a deeply religious man (the *Christian Century* called him “one of our more religious presidents”²⁶), and his biblical upbringing was clearly manifested in correspondence, speeches, and public statements. Many of these communications “exhibited distinct theological attitudes—reverence for the Holy Scriptures, belief in a Supreme Being, support for a spirit of toleration among the various religious faiths, and support for the ecumenical movement.”²⁷ Shortly after announcing his candidacy for the Senate in 1934, Truman wrote in his diary: “And now I am a candidate for the United States Senate. If the Almighty God decides that I go there I am going to pray as King Solomon did, for wisdom to do the job.”²⁸

Truman’s “later public addresses and papers are studded with Biblical references.”²⁹ His final address to the nation as president in January of 1953 is evidence of his deep-seated attachment to the Bible and his penchant for historical analogies:

Think what can be done, once our capital, our skills, our science—and most of all atomic energy—can be released from the tasks of defense and turned wholly to peaceful purposes all around the

world. There is no end to what can be done. I can't help but dream out loud just a little here. The Tigris and the Euphrates Valley can be made to bloom as it did in the times of Babylon and Nineveh. Israel can be made the country of milk and honey as it was in the time of Joshua.³⁰

In a 1959 interview, Truman observed, "As a student of the Bible I have been impressed by the remarkable achievements of the Jews in Palestine in making the land of the Holy Book blossom again."³¹

When asked about the numerous references to God and the Bible in Truman's addresses, White House aide and speech writer, George Elsey, answered that in this regard Truman led and his staff followed:

The staff certainly did not deliberately compose phrases or paragraphs of this sort, and inject them. This was very much a part of President Truman's own personal belief and feeling. Many of these phrases and sentences were added by him in longhand very near the final draft of a speech. . . . One could find long before he had ever had a staff helping him in matters, references of this sort, back in his early campaign speeches, in his senatorial days in the '30s and '40s, so this a reflection of Mr. Truman's own beliefs.³²

A Providential President?

Initially humble, insecure, and overwhelmed, Truman commented to reporters upon hearing of President Franklin Roosevelt's death: "Boys, if you ever pray, pray for me now. I don't know whether you fellows ever had a load of hay fall on you, but when they told me yesterday what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me."³³ The unlikely chief executive from Independence expressed humility and self-deprecation so frequently that his own vice-president, Alben Barkley of Kentucky, finally "took him aside and told him to cut it out." The people of the United States, according to Barkley, "would lose all confidence in him if he did not show confidence in himself. 'God raises up leaders,' [Barkley told Truman.] 'We do not know the process, but in the wisdom of Almighty God, you have been made President.'"³⁴

Vice-president Barkley was not the only one to believe that Truman's assumption of office came about by providential intervention. Zionist leaders saw the failed Midwestern haberdasher as

the instrument whereby the Jews would attain their state. In a particularly terse letter to the president just weeks before Ben-Gurion's historic announcement of May 1948, Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, exhorted: "The choice for our people, Mr. President, is between statehood and extermination. History and providence have placed this issue in your hands, and I am confident that you will yet decide it in the spirit of the moral law."³⁵

One of the most revealing comments relative to Truman's providential role came from David Niles, a White House aide who worked for Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. On more than one occasion, Niles expressed doubts "that Israel would have come into being if Roosevelt had lived."³⁶ Indeed, Roosevelt's mercurial record on the Palestine issue has left more questions than answers. As a former State Department official summarized, "In many ways President Roosevelt's handling of the Palestine question remains an enigma. He left no coherent policy for his successor and some of his statements and actions are difficult to understand."³⁷ Conversely, Truman's continued support of partition and of the establishment of a Jewish state elicited some of the "bitterest, the most venomous" opposition he was to face during his time in the White House.³⁸

Opponents to Truman's Palestine Policy

Truman's support for a Jewish homeland is all the more astounding given the political climate of Washington in the late 1940s. Despite the unremitting pressure he endured from nearly every side, Truman held firm to the conviction that the Palestine issue was unique and would ultimately be decided by a different standard. When his secretary of defense, James Forrestal, reminded him of the critical need for Saudi Arabian oil in the event of war, Truman said he would handle the situation in the light of justice, not oil.³⁹ Forrestal continued to register his concerns about the accessibility of oil as late as the winter of 1948, arguing that without Middle Eastern oil the European Recovery Program [known as the Marshall Plan] had a very slim chance of success. In his opinion, as well as that of many others at Foggy Bottom, the United States simply could not supply the European continent

while meeting the demands for its own consumption.⁴⁰ Max Ball, director of the Oil and Gas Division at the Department of the Interior, insisted that Middle Eastern oil resources had to be developed as quickly as possible for “the supply of Europe, to prevent European industry from collapsing and falling to Communism or to the dogs.”⁴¹ Notwithstanding such dire prognostications, “oil meant less to Truman,” recalled Ambassador Elath “where human suffering and the future of a people depended upon the results of their desperate struggle for physical and national survival.”⁴²

White House counsel Clark Clifford recalled a conversation he had with Forrestal early in 1948:

We were talking together one time—I had breakfast with him every week. He said, “Clark, I don’t understand why you fellas at the White House view the Jewish problem the way you do.” I replied, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, it’s very clear to us that there are 35 million Arabs and there are 400,000 Jews and the 35 million Arabs are going to push the 400,000 Jews into the Mediterranean. It’s just a question of numbers.” And I said, “Well Jim, with President Truman it is not a question of numbers. It is a question of the ethics and morality of the problem.” Forrestal just kind of shook his head.⁴³

Truman adhered to the belief that the Palestine issue should be decided on moral grounds.

However, State Department officials and military leaders thought in purely strategic terms, for which they cannot be faulted. Nonetheless, they tended to ignore humanitarian and moral considerations. Their assessment of the situation, as outlined by George Kennan, the director of the State Department’s policy planning staff, included strategic and economic politics and an interest in the world of *realpolitik*. The assessment was separate, Kennan argued, from the altruistic, moralistic, or humanitarian motives existing in American foreign relations.⁴⁴

All of Truman’s most trusted foreign policy advisers were absolutely opposed to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Truman faced the formidable front of General George Marshall, Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, Secretary of the Navy (and later Secretary of Defense) James Forrestal, Policy Planning Staff’s George Kennan, State Department counsel Charles Bohlen, and Dean Acheson, who was Marshall’s successor. As Acheson stated: “I had learned to understand, but not to share, the mystical

emotion of the Jews to return to Palestine and end the Diaspora. In urging Zionism as an American governmental policy they had allowed, so I thought, their emotion to obscure the totality of American interests.”⁴⁵

These men argued that however humanitarian a Jewish homeland might seem, “it posed a real risk to United States national security.” Although some might “sense more than a whiff of prejudice” among these arch-WASPs, “it is probably more accurate to describe the attitude of Lovett and others as intellectually unsympathetic, not viscerally anti-Semitic. Pragmatists all, these men were really quite bloodless about an issue that aroused such passion in others.”⁴⁶ Former Israeli ambassador to the United States Abba Eban observed: “You would have expected with a president normally—for something so controversial—that the ‘Wise Men’ would be divided: some for and some against. But there was *nobody* for this issue in what I would call the influential group.”⁴⁷

The May 12 Oval Office Showdown

Several months after the United Nations’ vote to partition Palestine, Truman met with the “chemist from Pinsk,” Chaim Weizmann, on March 18, 1948. While the Truman and Weizmann accounts differ slightly on various points, both agree Truman attempted to emphasize that his “primary concern was to see justice done without bloodshed.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, as best as can be determined, Truman gave his pledge that if the Jewish state were declared, the United States would recognize the new state immediately. As Truman recalled: “And when [Weizmann] left my office, I felt that he had reached a full understanding of my policy and that I knew what it was he wanted.”⁴⁹ Weizmann confided to intimate associates that he had received a specific commitment from the President: Truman “would work for the establishment and recognition of the Jewish State.”⁵⁰ Indeed,

the move was typical of Truman, a statement of personal integrity and intent, uncluttered by bureaucratic options and provisos. It was the word of one amiable citizen to another, one from Independence, the other from Pinsk. Yet it was as binding as an act of state. Truman never notified the State Department of his promise.⁵¹

According to Clark Clifford, Truman told Weizmann, “You can bank on us. I am for partition.”⁵² Truman’s promise to Weizmann is all the more important when one considers the events that transpired shortly thereafter.

Due to a myriad of factors and events—among them Truman’s reticence to discuss with anyone his promise made to Weizmann—the political picture in Washington became more convoluted in subsequent weeks. The apex of the State Department’s opposition to Truman’s stated position and his support for Zionist aims occurred on May 12, 1948, in what Clark Clifford has called “The Showdown in the Oval Office.”⁵³ In attendance were President Truman; Secretary of State George Marshall; Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett; White House staff members Clark Clifford, David Niles, and Matthew Connelly; Fraser Wilkins of the Near East Agency; and Robert McClintock of the United Nations office.⁵⁴

Before the meeting, Truman issued this ominous warning to Clifford: “General Marshall is opposed to our recognizing Israel. He’ll bring his assistants with him. . . . I think that between the two of us maybe we can convince Marshall of the rightness of our cause.”⁵⁵ The president began the proceedings by saying that he was seriously concerned as to what might happen in Palestine after the scheduled departure of the British in two days. Undersecretary Lovett was then called on to present the State Department’s position of opposing any hasty recognition of the new Jewish state. Counsel Clifford was called upon next. His statement mentioned—explicitly and for the first time—recognition of the new Jewish state by the United States.⁵⁶

“As I talked,” remembered Clifford, “I noticed the thunder clouds gathering—Marshall’s face getting redder and redder.” By the time Clifford finished, “General Marshall’s face was absolutely beet-red. I think he had grave difficulty containing himself during the presentation.”⁵⁷ Clifford concluded by explaining the Balfour Declaration and quoting the following lines from Deuteronomy 1:8, verifying the Jewish claim to a homeland in Palestine: “Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them.”

Lovett then offered a rebuttal to Clifford's presentation, arguing *inter alia* that premature recognition would be a blow to the prestige of the president and would signify a "very transparent attempt to win the Jewish vote."⁵⁸ To recognize the Jewish state prematurely would be the equivalent of "recognizing a pig in a poke." Lovett then "pulled out a file of reports suggesting again that large numbers of the Jewish immigrants were Communists or Soviet agents."⁵⁹ How did the United States know what kind of Jewish state would be established? The undersecretary concluded by reading "excerpts from a file of intelligence telegrams and reports regarding Soviet activity in sending Jews and Communist agents from Black Sea areas to Palestine."⁶⁰ "I felt that this was preposterous," recalled Clifford. "Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe in fact were specifically fleeing the Communists."⁶¹

Lovett's rejection of Clifford's proposal for recognition was merely a precursor to the blow yet to come from the "greatest living American," as Truman called General George C. Marshall.⁶² Immediately after the meeting, Secretary Marshall dictated from memory what he had said. He concluded:

The counsel offered by Mr. Clifford was based on domestic political considerations, while the problem which confronted us was international. *I said bluntly that if the President were to follow Mr. Clifford's advice and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the President.*⁶³

Marshall's rejoinder, recalled Clifford, "was so shocking that it just kind of lay there for 15 or 20 seconds and nobody moved."⁶⁴ Needless to say, it brought the meeting to a grinding halt. In trying to evoke the feeling in the room at the time, Clifford would recall years later: "There was really a state of shock. The President, I think, was struck dumb by it. There was this awful, total silence."⁶⁵ This was as strong a personal rebuke as Marshall had ever tendered, given the tremendous respect both men had for each other, and was certainly not what the underdog from Missouri needed to hear in May 1948, just two months before a Democratic convention he did not yet control and six months before a presidential election which he appeared sure to lose.

Nevertheless, Truman showed little emotion. He simply raised his hand and said that he was "fully aware of the difficulties

and dangers in the situation, to say nothing of the political risks involved which he, himself, would run.”⁶⁶ Seeing that his secretary of state was still quite agitated, Truman turned toward Marshall and remarked: “I think I understand the question involved and I think we need no further discussion of it. I think we must follow the position General Marshall has advocated.”⁶⁷ Clifford recalled: “Lovett, who felt as I did that this awful meeting should be ending as quickly as possible said, ‘Well thank you very much Mr. President. I think we’ve pretty well covered it.’ They got up and left.”⁶⁸ Truman turned to Clifford and said, “That was rough as a cob.”⁶⁹ The president told his counsel not to feel badly. As a trial lawyer who had lost cases before, Clifford confessed, “Well, I didn’t ever think I was going to win every case but I’m little afraid that I may have lost this one.”⁷⁰ To this Truman replied, “Let’s not agree that it’s lost yet.”⁷¹ The president continued, “I never saw the General so furious. Suppose we let the dust settle a little—then you can get into it again and see if we can get this thing turned around. I still want to do it. But be careful. I can’t afford to lose General Marshall.”⁷² Any leak—particularly in the midst of the most difficult months of the Cold War—of the astonishing events of that afternoon would have been catastrophic.⁷³

According to Fraser Wilkins, “the State Department representatives came away from the meeting . . . with the [distinct] impression that recognition of the new Jewish state would be put off indefinitely.”⁷⁴ However, Truman’s endorsement of the State Department’s position was—according to Clark Clifford—merely an attempt not to “embarrass General Marshall in front of the others.”⁷⁵ “Because President Truman was often annoyed by the tone and fierceness of the pressure exerted on him by American Zionists,” recalled Clifford on another occasion, “he left some people with the impression he was ambivalent about the events of May 1948. This is not true: he never wavered in his belief that he had taken the right action.”⁷⁶

Years after leaving the White House—and in typical Truman-esque fashion—the former commander-in-chief recalled:

I’d recognized Israel immediately as a sovereign nation when the British left Palestine in 1948, and I did so against the advice of my own Secretary of State, George Marshall, who was afraid that the Arabs

wouldn't like it. This was one of the few errors of judgment made by that great and wonderful man, but I felt that Israel deserved to be recognized and didn't give a damn whether the Arabs liked it or not.⁷⁷

As one can see, Truman had already made up his mind long before the now-famous May 12 Oval Office meeting.

Conclusion

Two days later, unbeknownst even to the American delegation at the United Nations, Truman had the United States be the first country to recognize the Jewish nation, reborn after two millennia. In speaking of his decision to recognize Israel immediately, Truman stated matter-of-factly in his *Memoirs*: “I was told that to some of the career men of the State Department this announcement came as a surprise. It should not have been if these men had faithfully supported my policy.”⁷⁸ The president from Independence had kept his word to the chemist from Pinsk. “The old Doctor will believe me now,” quipped Truman.⁷⁹

Harry S. Truman, according to one of his closest associates, was the “one American who had more to do with assisting in the creation of Israel than any other” individual.⁸⁰ For Trygve Lie, first secretary general of the United Nations, Truman’s influence in the establishment of the Jewish state could not be overemphasized: “I think we can safely say that if there had been no Harry S. Truman, there would be no Israel today.”⁸¹ To be sure, Truman has been eulogized by Jews around the globe for his instrumental role in recognizing the nascent state. He himself expressed some discomfort with the extent to which his name and actions were extolled. In a letter to a former staff assistant, Max Lowenthal, Truman—in his familiar deferential and self-effacing style—wrote: “You know how those Israelites have placed me on a pedestal alongside of Moses, and that is the reason I wrote you as I did because I wanted you to have the credit.”⁸² Still trying to downplay his role, Truman told a large Jewish organization in 1952, “I take no special credit for having recognized the State of Israel. I did what the people of America wanted me to do.”⁸³

Notwithstanding such attempts to discount the monumental role he might have played, an experience related by Israel’s first

prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, highlights the sheer historical significance of Truman's courageous decision. A few years after retiring from public service, Ben-Gurion recalled:

At our last meeting, after a very interesting talk, just before [the president] left me—it was in a New York hotel suite—I told him that as a foreigner I could not judge what would be his place in American history; but his helpfulness to us, his constant sympathy with our aims in Israel, his courageous decision to recognize our new State so quickly and his steadfast support since then had given him an immortal place in Jewish history. As I said that, tears suddenly sprang to his eyes. And his eyes were still wet when he bade me good-bye. I had rarely seen anyone so moved. I tried to hold him for a few minutes until he had become more composed, for I recalled that the hotel corridors were full of waiting journalists and photographers. He left. A little while later, I too had to go out, and a correspondent came up to me to ask, "Why was President Truman in tears when he left you?"⁸⁴

Clifford believed he knew the answer:

I believe I know. These were the tears of a man who had been subjected to calumny and vilification, who had persisted against powerful forces determined to defeat him, who had contended with opposition even from within his own Administration. These were the tears of a man who had fought ably and honorably for a humanitarian goal to which he was deeply dedicated. These were tears of thanksgiving that his God had seen fit to bless his labours with success.⁸⁵

"Did Truman act out of—fundamentally in the long run—moral, ethical, historical principles?" asked David McCullough rhetorically. "Yes, absolutely."⁸⁶

When Israel's chief rabbi paid President Truman a visit in early 1949 and told him, "'God put you in your mother's womb so you would be the instrument to bring about the rebirth of Israel after two thousand years,'" tears rose to the president's eyes.⁸⁷ The rabbi then opened the Bible he was carrying with him and read the words of King Cyrus from the book of Ezra: "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kindness of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (Ezra 1:2). One of Truman's aides present at the meeting, David Niles, thought the chief rabbi was "'overdoing things, but when I looked over at the President, tears were running down his cheeks.'"⁸⁸ When I asked David McCullough about this incident

and the president's propensity for such public displays of emotion, he responded: "Truman was not a cry-on-the-spot kind of fellow. I have about three instances where Truman cried in public. They are very few and they are always real."⁸⁹

Shortly after leaving the White House in 1953, Harry S. Truman paid a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, accompanied by his former haberdashery partner, Eddie Jacobson. During a conversation with Professor Alexander Marx and seminary president Professor Finkelstein, Jacobson—"waving his hand toward Harry S. Truman—proclaimed: 'This is the man who helped create the State of Israel.'" Without so much as a moment of hesitation, Truman retorted: "What do you mean, helped create? I am Cyrus, I am Cyrus!" thus "evoking the biblical imagery of Cyrus [the Great,] who made possible the return of the Jews to Jerusalem."⁹⁰ Subsequently, some within the Jewish intelligentsia have not been able to resist the historical parallels:

Harry S. Truman's name will go down in history as the man who knew the arrival of an historic moment and he linked it promptly with American history. He saw the emergence of an oppressed people as a free sovereign state, and he used his great office to extend to that people a friendly hand. For that reason, we say that he is The Modern Cyrus. . . . Cyrus's deeds are recorded in four Biblical books—Ezra, Isaiah, Daniel, and Second Chronicles. Truman's name is indelibly written in modern Jewish history, to be remembered by all generations to come.⁹¹

"The Jews who wish for a State shall have it," wrote Theodor Herzl in the summer of 1895, over a half-century after Orson Hyde's prophetic prayer offered from the Mount of Olives on October 21, 1841.⁹² And while Elder Hyde would probably never have thought that someone like the irascible "Man from Missouri" would someday help realize the petition that God "inspire the hearts of kings and the powers of the earth," history has confirmed that Harry S. Truman truly was a modern Cyrus.

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NOTES

¹Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 312.

²Barbara Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: How the British Came to Palestine* (New York: New York University, 1956), vii.

³Gaddis made these remarks during my doctoral qualifying examination at Oxford in November 1992. When I related this experience to Truman's most recent biographer, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough, his response was as follows: "I'm thrilled Gaddis reacted the way he did, because I sometimes think graduate students dehumanize these people. They suck all the warm blood out of them, somehow, in the process of getting their Ph.D.s., so that the human equation is never one to take seriously. Because sentiment and affection and memory and the chemistry of personality are always affecting how history turns. Always. And you can't measure it, you can't quantify it, you can't document it." David McCullough, interview by author, Martha's Vineyard, Mass., May 28, 1993.

⁴Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 4:375 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

⁵Orson Hyde, *A Voice from Jerusalem* (Boston: Albert Morgan, 1842), 7.

⁶*History of the Church* 4:456-59.

⁷*History of the Church* 4:457.

⁸Howard W. Hunter, "All Are Alike unto God," *Ensign* 9 (June 1979): 74.

⁹Truman G. Madsen, "Zionism," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel Ludlow, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1626.

¹⁰Daniel C. Peterson, *Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East* (Salt Lake City: Aspen, 1992), 357. See also the review of *Abraham Divided* in this issue of *BYU Studies*.

¹¹James B. Mayfield, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A Mormon Dilemma?" *Dialogue* 4 (Summer 1969): 34.

¹²Peterson, *Abraham Divided*, 364.

¹³Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 229.

¹⁴*History of the Church* 4:457 (emphasis added).

¹⁵Hyde, *Voice from Jerusalem*, 14.

¹⁶Eliahu Elath, "Truman: The Man and the Statesman," lecture given at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Israel, May 18, 1977, Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace Library, 8.

¹⁷Max Kohler, "Some Early American Zionist Projects," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 8 (1900): 85.

¹⁸Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), 6.

¹⁹Elath, "Truman: The Man and the Statesman," 40.

²⁰Eliahu Elath, "The 14th of May 1948 in Washington, D.C.," in *Truman and the American Commitment to Israel: A Thirtieth Anniversary Conference*, ed. Moshe Máoz and Allen Weinstein (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 105.

²¹Clark Clifford, "Preserving the Free World," in *The Truman Presidency: Intimate Perspectives*, Vol. II of Portraits of American Presidents, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 18.

²²Harry S. Truman, "Me and Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 19 (March 1958): 99.

²³Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 52.

²⁴Frank McNaughton and Walter Hehmeyer, *This Man Truman* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1945), 13.

²⁵Merlin Gustafson, "Harry S. Truman as a Man of Faith," *Christian Century* 90 (January 17, 1973): 75.

²⁶Gustafson, "Harry S. Truman as a Man of Faith," 75.

²⁷Gustafson, "Harry S. Truman as a Man of Faith," 76.

²⁸William Hillman, *Mr. President: The First Publication from the Personal Diaries, Private Letters, Papers and Revealing Interviews of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Young, 1952), 194.

²⁹Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (London: Greenwood, 1980), 9.

³⁰Harry S. Truman, *Public Papers of the President*, 1953 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 1201.

³¹Louis L. Gerson, *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1964), 95.

³²George Elsey Oral History, 95-96, July 6, 1970, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri (hereafter cited as HSTL).

³³Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, 2 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1955), 1:19-20.

³⁴Bert Cochran, *Harry Truman and the Crisis Presidency* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1973), 118.

³⁵Chaim Weizmann to Harry S. Truman, April 9, 1948, Z5/3141, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Israel. A copy of this letter was sent to General Marshall with accompanying cover letter; both are on file at Weizmann Archives, Rehovot, Israel. Weizmann received no reply from Truman.

³⁶Alfred Steinberg, *The Man from Missouri: The Life and Times of Harry S. Truman* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), 304; Evan Wilson, *Decision on Palestine* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution, 1979), 56; and Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, 156.

³⁷Wilson, *Decision on Palestine*, 55.

³⁸*Congressional Record*, "Joint Meeting of the House and Senate Held Pursuant to the Provisions of House Concurrent Resolution 126 in Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of Harry S. Truman," 98th Congress, 2d Session, May 8, 1984, vol. 130, pt. 8, p. 11330.

³⁹Henry Wallace, *The Price of Vision* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 607; and David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 597.

⁴⁰Steinberg, *The Man from Missouri*, 306-7.

⁴¹Michael J. Cohen, *Truman and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 94.

⁴²Elath, "Truman: The Man and the Statesman," 36.

⁴³Clark M. Clifford, interview with author, Washington, D.C., December 15, 1993.

⁴⁴George Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900 to 1950* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952), 91-103.

⁴⁵Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 169.

⁴⁶Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 451.

⁴⁷Interview with author, December 19, 1993, New York, New York.

⁴⁸Truman, *Memoirs* 2:161.

⁴⁹Truman, *Memoirs* 2:161.

⁵⁰Abba Eban, "Tragedy and Triumph," in *Chaim Weizmann: A Biography by Several Hands*, ed. Meyer W. Weisgal and Joel Carmichael (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 306.

⁵¹Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, 278.

⁵²George Elsey Oral History, 95-96, July 6, 1970.

⁵³Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 3-25.

⁵⁴Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir*, 9-10.

⁵⁵Clark Clifford, "The Unique and Inspiring Leadership of President Truman," in *Harry S. Truman: The Man from Independence*, ed. William F. Levantrosser (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 386.

⁵⁶Clifford remembered that no one during those days knew exactly what the name of the new Jewish entity would be: "We knew that it would not be called Palestine, but were unaware that the Jewish leaders were going to call their new country Israel. My information was that they were going to give it the name of Judaea." Clark Clifford, "Recognizing Israel," interview by Bernard A. Weisberger, *American Heritage* 28 (April 1977): 8-9.

⁵⁷Clark Clifford, "The Legacy of Harry S. Truman," interview by Walter Cronkite, HSTL; Crossroads Series, videotape.

⁵⁸*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948*, 9 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), 5:975 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*).

⁵⁹Clark M. Clifford, "Factors Influencing President Truman's Decision to Support Partition and Recognize the State of Israel," in *The Palestine Question in American History* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 40.

⁶⁰*FRUS* 1948, 5:975.

⁶¹Clifford, "Factors Influencing," 40.

⁶²Robert G. Nixon (October 9-November 23, 1970), interview by Hess, Oral History Collection 6, HSTL, 927-28.

⁶³*FRUS* 5:975 (italics added). The confrontation between Marshall and Truman, according to McCullough, turned "on their terrible concern on what is going to happen in Europe. Where is the oil going to come from? And what about the Marshall Plan? It's going to fail!" McCullough interview.

⁶⁴Interview with Clifford.

⁶⁵McCullough, 616.

⁶⁶*FRUS*, 1948, 5:976.

⁶⁷Daniels, notes, 46.

⁶⁸Clifford interview.

⁶⁹McCullough, 617.

⁷⁰Clifford interview.

⁷¹McCullough, 617.

⁷²Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 15.

⁷³The Palestine predicament was hardly the only pressing international concern in early 1948. The fate of Czechoslovakia was sealed in February when a violent coup backed by the Red Army imposed a pro-Communist government in a matter of days. (See Bruce Evensen, "The Limits of Presidential Leadership: Truman at War with Zionists, the Press, Public Opinion and His Own State Department over Palestine," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23 [Spring 1993]:269-81.) A feeling of revulsion swept much of the world, as it had only ten years previous when the Nazis had seized the same country; it appeared as if Italy and France were headed for the same destiny. The *New York Times* compared Russia's "imperialistic mission" to Hitler's quest for world domination in 1939 (*New York Times*, February 29, 1948, Sec. 4, 10E). Former British prime minister Winston Churchill could see "the menace of war rolling toward the West" (*New York Times*, March 7, 1948, 18). Senator Arthur Vandenberg, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged immediate action "to avert a Third World War" (*New York Times*, March 2, 1948, 1). Truman wrote to his daughter, Margaret: "Things look black so that we are faced with exactly the same situation with which Britain and France were faced in 1938/39 with Hitler" (HST to Margaret Truman, 3 March 1948, cited in *Letters from Father: The Truman Family's Personal Correspondence* [New York: Arbor House, 1981], 108). On March 5, General Lucius Clay, U.S. military governor of the American-occupied zone in Germany, cabled the U.S. Army's director of intelligence in Washington to warn that war with the Soviets might come "with dramatic suddenness" (Jean Edward Smith, *Lucius Clay: An American Life* [New York: Henry Holt, 1990], 466-67). Columnists Joseph and Stuart Alsop reported that "the atmosphere of Washington today is no longer postwar. It is a prewar atmosphere" (cited in McCullough, *Truman*, 603). Truman even went so far as to reintroduce conscription in late March 1948. (Congressional Record, 80th Cong., 2d Sess., 1948, 94, pt. 3:3038.) This war-scare atmosphere in the United States projected relatively small Palestine onto the world stage, thus imbuing it with a symbolic meaning that ranged well beyond the eastern Mediterranean.

⁷⁴Wilson, *Decision on Palestine*, 143.

⁷⁵Clifford, "Recognizing Israel," 9.

⁷⁶Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 25.

⁷⁷Harry S. Truman, *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman*, ed. Margaret Truman (New York: Warner Communications, 1989), 64.

⁷⁸Truman, *Memoirs* 2:164.

⁷⁹Eban, "Tragedy and Triumph," 312.

⁸⁰Trude B. Feldman, "Truman Was Israel's Friend," *Washington Star*, December 30, 1972, vertical file, Palestine, HSTL.

⁸¹"Credit for a New Nation," *Kansas City Times*, October 21, 1954, vertical file, Palestine, HSTL.

⁸²Robert Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Penguin, 1980), 402.

⁸³Quoted in I. L. Kenen, "Personal Reflections," in *Truman and the American Commitment to Israel*, 73.

⁸⁴Moshe Pearlman, *Ben Gurion Looks Back* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 116.

⁸⁵Clifford, "Factors Influencing," 45.

⁸⁶McCullough interview.

⁸⁷Steinberg, *Man from Missouri*, 308.

⁸⁸Steinberg, *Man from Missouri*, 308.

⁸⁹McCullough interview.

⁹⁰Moshe Davis, "America and the Holy Land: A Colloquium," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 62 (September 1972): 43. The Cyrus analogy was certainly not lost on these Jews, who saw Truman's role as providential: "The Jewish Republic throughout history will recognize Harry Truman as its second Cyrus who helped its rebirth" (*Intermountain Jewish News*, January 22, 1953, 16, vertical file, Palestine, HSTL). In speaking of this incident, Clark Clifford recalled:

Harry Truman was a very modest man, even to a certain extent a humble man. The presidency certainly did not change him. But I think every now and again he allowed himself a little freedom to congratulate himself on important accomplishments. So this would be one of those rare instances in which he was perfectly willing to accept the commendation that had been offered him and to agree with it. (Clifford interview)

⁹¹Philip Slomovitz, "Harry S. Truman: The Modern Cyrus," *The American Jewish Outlook*, January 23, 1953, 11, vertical file, Palestine, HSTL.

⁹²Preface to *Der Judenstat* by Theodor Herzl, quoted in Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Siege* (London: Collins, 1988), 71.