

The President's Responsibility

President Harry S. Truman

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed the bill that established today's Department of Defense. Truman's intent, as he states in this article written for the September 1962 issue of Military Review, was to create an organization that would be responsive to the president as commander in chief. His tone is reminiscent of one of his most famous quotes: "The buck stops here." This article was solicited by Military Review and introduced two following articles: "The President as Commander in Chief" by Francis H. Heller, an associate dean at the University of Kansas College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; and "Our Modern Military Establishment" by then retired General J. Lawton Collins. Collins' piece was described by the editor as being based on an article for Union Worthies, a publication of Union College, Schenectady, New York.

JUST 15 YEARS AGO this past July, I signed into law the bill that set up the National Military Establishment and created the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The bill was not all I had asked for from the Congress, but it was a first step in the direction of unification. Even while World War II was still on, I had spoken out for unification. After I became President, I called on Congress to give us the kind of defense machinery that would fit the needs of the times.

As Commander in Chief, the President knows perhaps better than anyone else how much it takes to get all the services pulling in the same direction. There are a great many different factors that go into the making of a command decision, but in the end there has to be just one decision—or there is no command. I learned that lesson in France in 1918.

The Presidency of the United States is the greatest and most honorable position in history. It is actually six jobs rolled into one—and, under the Constitution of the United States, there is no way for the man who has that position to get out of any of them. You can talk about lightening the burdens of the Presidency, but no matter how the Government is reorganized there are always these six functions to be carried out,

and there are always decisions that can be made only by the man who is in the White House at the time.

There are some who would change our system of Government so that the responsibility would be more widely distributed. Under our Constitution this is not possible; and I just happen to think that the Constitution has served us pretty well for all these years. I think that it is good for the people to know who is responsible: that is the only way a democracy can function.

That is not to say that the responsibilities have not become graver and the decisions tougher than was true when Henry Knox was Secretary of War under George Washington and the whole Army had less than 5,000 men. There are five times that many today in the Pentagon alone! It is a far cry from the cavalry captain who would take his troop to rifle practice in the sagebrush to the huge organization of Joint Task Force 8 that carried on the nuclear testing this spring. The older readers will remember, as I do, the days when the mess sergeant went out and did his own shopping for the company's needs: now Mr. McNamara has set up a Defense Supply Agency—and it is high time we got it!

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Size is only a small part of the change. I suppose it takes someone of my age to appreciate the difference between horse-drawn artillery of the kind we had in World War I and intercontinental ballistic missiles, between using runners on foot and the electronic communications of our day. But you do not have to be very far along in age to understand what difference nuclear weapons make.



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Today, the defense of the United States is wherever the Free World is being defended. The strength of our allies is part of our defense, and our strength contributes to theirs. Someone has said that the President of the United States is now the Commander in Chief of the Free World; I suppose that in the sense that the United States has the responsibility of providing the leadership for the Free World, the President is the one who carries that burden.

How does he do it? I am sure that the burden has become even greater than it was when I was President, and of all the President's functions, that of Commander in Chief has grown the most in importance and in its demands upon the incumbent. But I think that the basic principles that I tried to follow have always applied and apply now.

First of all, the President has to be on top of the situation. Getting the facts, and all the facts, takes hard work and very little can be done by others. You cannot make a decision if you do not know what the alternatives are. You cannot know what the alternatives are if you do not have all the facts.

Second, the President has to find the best men he can to be on his staff and in his Cabinet. I was fortunate to have such outstanding men willing to serve as Dean Acheson, General George C. Marshall and Robert A. Lovett: they were outstanding leaders and remarkably capable organizers.

Third, the President needs an organization that can and will give full effect to his decisions. This has been the most difficult thing to accomplish because of the many traditions and special interests. I believe that we made progress 15 years ago when I signed that unification bill and that we are making progress today. We need to go on making progress. We need to use every new technique available, every bit of new knowledge, so that in the end the President will always be prepared to face with confidence the many decisions that our position in the world and his position in the Nation require him to make. **MR**

Harry S. Truman became the 33rd president of the United States following the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945. He was elected president in 1948 but chose not to run in 1952. He occupied the White House until President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration in January 1953, after which he retired to Independence, Missouri.