CHAPTER 1

Prelude to Cold War Crisis

Wednesday, March 12, 1947, was a warm and welcoming day, appreciated all the more by residents of Washington, D.C., after two major snowstorms in recent weeks had nearly brought the city to a standstill. One storm had even forced Pres. Harry Truman to abandon his usual early-morning walk.[1]

On March 12, the mild weather promised the arrival of spring, but this optimistic expectation contrasted sharply with anticipation of a very different sort about the president's address to Congress scheduled for that afternoon.

For weeks, newspaper, magazine, and radio coverage had been saturated with chilling stories that foreshadowed a dramatic change in the U.S. relationship with its wartime ally, the Soviet Union, change marked by an impending crisis in the Mediterranean. Newspapers reported on February 28 that Great Britain had informed the United States that it could no longer continue to provide military and economic support to the Greek government, which was in danger of falling to Communist rebels. In turn, Truman had met privately with congressional leaders to request that the United States assume Britain's burden.[2] After the sacrifices of World War II and the tumult of the postwar economy, most Americans had little interest in involvement abroad. Yet media reports in the weeks leading up to the president's speech emphasized the danger of the situation and how urgent it was for the United States to check Soviet expansion. An editorial in *Newsweek,* for example, opined, "If Greece is lost, a Communist scythe will curve around the head of Turkey, which already has Communist bayonets at its back. Russia would, or could, control the Eastern Mediterranean." In his March 7 commentary, ABC's Earl Godwin told listeners that "somebody has got to do something and they're all looking at your Uncle Sam." A *New York Times* headline went so far as to declare, "Survival of Western Civilization Is Held to Depend on Our Actions."[3] Still, there had been no direct word from the president himself on the matter. After nearly two weeks of news coverage devoted to the issue, citizens, journalists, and members of Congress anxiously awaited Truman's speech. As an editorial in the *Washington Daily News* expressed, "We hope President Truman's expected statement on the Greek crisis will take the American people fully and frankly into his confidence."[4]

At 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the Truman White House also was highly aware of the import of the moment. Eben Ayers, assistant press secretary to the president, walked to the South Portico where cars had arrived to transport the presidential party to Capitol Hill. The president got into his car at 12:40 P.M., accompanied by his aides and Adm. William Leahy, but when the president saw Ayers, he had the car door opened so that he could shake Ayers's hand. Bess Truman and Margaret Strickler, Margaret Truman's music teacher, no sooner entered the second car than Mrs. Truman discovered that she did not have her card for the congressional gallery. A Midwesterner to her core, the First Lady never wanted others to feel she was taking advantage of her position, so the oversight flustered her. Eventually, however, Mrs. Truman accepted the assurances of a White House usher, Wilson Surles, that her omission was not a problem. The third car of the procession carried Charlie Ross, the president's press secretary and friend since their youth in Independence, Missouri; William Hassett, correspondence secretary; John Steelman, assistant to the president; Matt Connelly, appointments secretary; George Schoeneman, commissioner of internal revenue; and Clark Clifford, special counsel. According to Ayers, Margaret Truman also came to see everyone off, handkerchiefs strategically placed over her head and around her throat for protection since she was recovering from bronchial pneumonia. Margaret empathized with her father's nerves because she suffered from stage fright herself and was awaiting her radio debut as a coloratura soprano. As the cars pulled away, Margaret said to Ayers, "I know how Daddie feels."[5]

The president and his party reached the Capitol a few minutes later to find it crowded not only with members of Congress but also with distinguished guests and, dressed gaily for spring in correspondence with the weather, "all the wives of high officialdom who could wrangle a ticket from their husbands," as the State Department's Joseph Jones would later put it. The uplifting splash of spring color aside, however, the atmosphere was grim as audience members anticipated the critical nature of Truman's speech, the major arguments of which had circulated freely in the media in the preceding days. Bess Truman and Margaret Strickler tried to make their way to their front row seats but without a great deal of success, eventually prompting a White House aide to announce the First Lady's arrival in order to clear a path. A few minutes before 1:00 P.M., the doorkeeper announced members of the cabinet, who entered the chamber. They were followed by Senators Tom Connally, Robert Taft, and Wallace White, and Representatives Charles Halleck, Charles Eaton, and Sam Rayburn, who all escorted the president.[6]

As Truman made his way down the center aisle, dressed sharply in a dark blue suit, he paused at the sight of a blonde, seven-year-old girl who was in the aisle, the daughter of Rep. Thomas Abernathy, an opponent of the New Deal from Mississippi. Her hands were clutching a notepad and pencil intended to keep her occupied during the president's speech. When he came to her, Truman bowed, shook her hand, and said hello. A few moments later, he stopped again to shake hands with Rep. Joseph Mansfield, age 86, who was seated in a wheelchair. Observers recalled that the president appeared glum, drawn, and somber.[7] No doubt the importance of the moment weighed heavily on him. What many observers did not know, however, was that Truman was feeling poorly that day. While he had always been prone to suffer from stress, the president was also still recovering from an upper respiratory infection that had plagued him since late January. The combination of stress and illness had taken its toll, sapping Truman of his usual energy.[8]

When he reached the podium, the president opened the black looseleaf notebook that he typically used for formal presentations and took a long drink of water. Then Truman looked at his audience, his blue eyes enlarged by his thick eyeglasses, and began to speak. "Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Congress of the United States," he intoned in a voice that was slightly hoarse. "The gravity of the situation which confronts the world today necessitates my appearance before a joint session of the Congress. The foreign policy and the national security of this country are involved." In the nineteen minutes that followed, Truman spoke at a rate that was slower than his usual pace and more deliberate, as he detailed for his listeners how the Greek government, besieged by the "terrorist activities of several thousand armed men, led by Communists," was on the verge of falling. The president not only argued that the United States should help Greece and neighboring Turkey but also made a more sweeping statement of policy. According to Truman, "I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." The president claimed that inaction on the part of the United States could lead to the "collapse of free institutions and loss of independence [in Greece and Turkey that] would be disastrous not only for them but for the world."[9] Truman's address articulated a new policy—the Truman Doctrine—and marked a turning point in U.S. foreign policy, setting a new course for the nation's relationship with the Soviet Union and with the world. As a call to Cold War crisis, the speech also would have far-reaching consequences that represented both the best of the United States—the Marshall Plan—and its worst—the arms race and repeated military intervention abroad. This book seeks to understand the rhetoric of Truman's address, as well as the corresponding persuasive campaign of which it was a part.

The Truman Doctrine Speech as a Crisis Campaign

The fact that the Truman Doctrine speech depicted a momentous decision through the language of urgency and disease (the "collapse" of Greece and need to stop the "spread" of Communism) is not surprising once one looks at the etymology of the term *crisis.* According to the *Oxford English Dictionary, crisis* refers to "the turning-point of a disease for better or worse," to "a conjunction of the planets which determines the issue of a disease or critical point in the course of events," and to a "vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything."[10] The rhetoric of crisis is seductive, for it strives to frighten its audience, typically depicting the world in black and white terms rather than shades of gray and serves to justify particular policies as the only course of action possible by arguing that time is of the essence if devastating consequences are to be avoided.

In this book, I argue that the Truman Doctrine speech can best be understood as part of a concerted crisis campaign that set the stage for routine episodes of presidential foreign crisis promotion and management in the decades that followed. Cold War and post–Cold War presidents have frequently made use of rhetoric to convince citizens that a crisis existed or to magnify crisis perceptions that already were held. By doing so, they have attempted to create a sense of urgency sufficient to legitimize their foreign policy resolutions.[11] The Truman Doctrine speech and accompanying campaign served as a prelude to these later events.

Generative and Strategic Functions of Rhetoric

By examining the Truman Doctrine speech and the administration's related communication efforts as a crisis campaign, I am *not* arguing that Truman and his administration dealt with rhetoric rather than reality, for these are not opposed concepts. Zarefsky explained their relationship when he said, "Rhetoric is not different from reality; it is a set of choices that invites us to see one reality rather than another."[12] For example, individuals armed with weapons may exist, but the terms we use to describe them—"Communist guerillas" versus "freedom fighters"—help to construct two very different realities, as well as point the way to distinctly different policies as the best way to deal with those realities. In their fine but often overlooked volume, *The Cold War as Rhetoric,* Hinds and Windt argued that the Cold War in the United States was largely a "rhetorically constructed ideological reality that was first accepted within the ruling circles of government, then publicly conveyed through major speeches and writings to Americans who generally accepted it as the reality of both foreign and domestic politics."[13] The rhetorical dimensions of the Cold War become clear, Medhurst held, when one examines past policy decisions made by intelligent government officials who drew on the evidence at hand. "That we today can see flaws in the Munich analogy and the domino theory simply underscores the point: reality did not change, only our ability to read and interpret that reality—a reality *that was our own construction in the first place.*"[14] Hence, the language that policymakers use themselves to talk and write about issues, whether intentional or not, has an impact upon their perceptions of reality. In turn, they often unconsciously convey these depictions of reality to journalists and citizens through their communication with these individuals. Simply choosing to speak about troop movements in a country far from our shores heightens the perceived importance of events there. Likewise, a president may believe that a Caribbean coup is a "crisis" and call it by that name, thereby influencing others to see the event in the same way.

Foreign policy in general and the Cold War in particular are also rhetorical in the sense that Aristotle described: "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." That is, rhetoric can also be strategic or a means to an end.[15] Truman in 1947 had no individuals on his staff devoted solely to speechwriting or the art of strategic rhetoric. Rather, as George Elsey, Clark Clifford's assistant in the Truman White House and one of the chief architects of the Truman Doctrine speech, recalled, he was a "Jack-of-many-trades," one of which included speechwriting.[16] And while Elsey may not have been conscious of how terminological choices in the discussion of policy could subtly influence the perceptions of those in government and those without, he did recognize the strategic uses of rhetoric. Elsey told an interviewer in 1969 that his job as a speechwriter had been taking "the hard facts and problems the President of the United States had to cope with and setting those forth in words that would appeal and could be understood by the American people at large."[17] Analysis of the Truman Doctrine reveals how rhetoric functioned both generatively to shape perceptions of reality and strategically to win public and congressional approval for a new presidential policy.

Conclusion

In late February 1947, the U.S. State Department learned that Great Britain intended to end its aid to Greece and Turkey, a shift in policy that might well lead to the demise of the Greek government. The corruption of the reactionary government, including its violation of civil liberties and refusal to implement economic reforms, did not necessitate that its fall be perceived as a mortal threat to democracy, nor its need for aid as a monumental crisis.[18] Yet this is exactly how Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, especially, and other members of the administration understood the issue. They then quickly mounted an elaborate effort at strategic rhetoric to persuade others—members of Congress, journalists, and citizens—to their point of view. Through the nature of their congressional consultations and through news management—an effort made possible by the State Department's new focus on "public affairs"—members of the Truman administration made adroit use of advance work for the speech. The address itself emphasized the ideas and characteristics of crisis established in the pre-speech congressional and media conditioning. As a result, the Truman administration's rhetoric served as a benchmark, establishing the themes, lines of argument, and language that would appear in presidential foreign crisis rhetoric for decades to come. Even in the war on terror, the Truman Doctrine's impact persists.