

Primary Source

NATO Debate

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO is a political and military alliance of North American and European countries. Founded in 1949, NATO's was created to protect its members from the Soviet Union and its allies. The following two speeches argue for and against the ratification of the treaty that took place in 1949.

Speech by President Harry S. Truman to the U.S. Senate, April 12, 1949



President Harry Truman

This treaty is an expression of the desire of the people of the United States for peace and security, for the continuing opportunity to live and work in freedom. Events in this century have taught us that we cannot achieve peace independently. The world has grown too small. The oceans to our east and west no longer protect us from the reach of brutality and aggression.

We have also learned—learned in blood and conflict—that if we are to achieve peace we must work for peace.

This knowledge has made us determined to do everything we can to insure that peace is maintained. We have not arrived at this decision lightly or without recognition of the effort it entails. But we cannot escape the great responsibility that goes with our stature in the world. Every action of this nation in recent years has demonstrated the overwhelming will of our people that the strength and influence of the United States shall be used in the cause of peace, justice, and freedom....

The twelve nations which have signed this treaty undertake to exercise their right of collective or individual self-defense against armed attack.... The treaty makes clear the determination of the people of the United States and of our neighbors in the North Atlantic community to do their utmost to maintain peace with justice and to take such action as they may deem necessary if the peace is broken....

The nations signing this treaty share a common heritage of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. The American members of the North Atlantic community stem directly from the European members in tradition and in love of freedom. We have joined together in the progressive development of free institutions, and we have shared our moral and material strength in the present task of rebuilding from the devastation of war.

The security and welfare of each member of the community depend upon the security and welfare of all. None of us alone can achieve economic prosperity or military security. None of us alone can assure the continuance of freedom.

Together, our joint strength is of tremendous significance to the future of free men in every part of the world. For this treaty is clear evidence that differences in language and in economic and political systems are no real bar to the effective association of nations devoted to the great principles of human freedom and justice.

This treaty is only one step—although a long one—on the road to peace. No single action, no matter how significant, will achieve peace. We must continue to work patiently and carefully, advancing with practical, realistic steps in the light of circumstances and events as they occur, building the structure of peace soundly and solidly.

I believe that the North Atlantic treaty is such a step, based on the realities of the situation we face today and framed within the terms of the United Nations charter and Constitution of the United States.

In the conviction that the North Atlantic treaty is a great advance toward fulfillment of the unconquerable will of the people of the United States to achieve a just and enduring peace, I request the advice and consent of the Senate to its ratification.

Sen. Robert A. Taft (R-OH), Speech on the North Atlantic Treaty, July 26, 1949



Senator Robert Taft

Why did I vote against the Atlantic Pact? I wanted to vote for it—at least I wanted to vote to let Russia know that if she attacked western Europe, the United States would be in the war. I believe that would be a deterrent to war....

But the Atlantic Pact goes much further. It obligates us to go to war if at any time during the next 20 years anyone makes an armed attack on any of the 12 nations.... Under the new pact the President can take us into war without Congress. But, above all the treaty is a part of a much larger program by which we arm all these nations against Russia... A joint military program has already been made.... It thus becomes an offensive and defensive military alliance against Russia. I believe our foreign policy should be aimed primarily at security and peace, and I believe such an alliance is more likely to produce war than peace. A third world war would be the greatest tragedy the world has ever suffered. Even if we won the war, we this time would probably suffer tremendous destruction, our economic system would be crippled, and we would lose our liberties and free

system just as the Second World War destroyed the free systems of Europe. It might easily destroy civilization on this earth....

There is another consideration. If we undertake to arm all the nations around Russia from Norway on the north to Turkey on the south, and Russia sees itself ringed about gradually by so-called defensive arms from Norway and Denmark to Turkey and Greece, it may form a different opinion. It may decide that the arming of western Europe, regardless of its present purpose, looks to an attack upon Russia. Its view may be unreasonable, and I think it is. But from the Russian standpoint it may not seem unreasonable. They may well decide that if war is the certain result, that war might better occur now rather than after the arming of Europe is completed....

How would we feel if Russia undertook to arm a country on our border; Mexico, for instance?

Furthermore, can we afford this new project of foreign assistance? I think I am as much against Communist aggression as anyone, both at home and abroad.... But we can't let them scare us into bankruptcy and the surrender of all liberty, or let them determine our foreign policies. We are already spending \$15,000,000,000 on our armed forces and have the most powerful Air Force in the world and the only atomic bomb. That, and our determination to go to war if Europe is attacked, ought to be sufficient to deter an attack by armed force.

We are spending \$7,000,000,000 a year on economic aid to build up those countries to a condition of prosperity where communism cannot make internal progress. Shall we start another project whose cost is incalculable, at the very time when we have a deficit of 1,800,000,000 dollars and a prospective deficit of three to five billion? The one essential defense against communism is to keep this country financially and economically sound. If the President is unwilling to recommend more taxes for fear of creating a depression, then we must have reached the limit of our taxpaying ability and we ought not to start a new and unnecessary building project...

1. Why did President Truman believe that the U.S. should sign the North Atlantic Treaty? _____
2. Spider-Man's Uncle Ben is famous for his quote, "With great power comes great responsibility." Truman's pro treaty speech includes a similar argument when trying to convince the Senate to vote for U.S. membership into NATO. Write the first sentence of the paragraph, where we see the "With great power..." argument. _____
3. The Three Musketeers have a saying, "All for one, and one for all." How does this phrase pertain to NATO? _____
4. What did Senator Taft fear would be the Soviet Union's reaction to the alliance? _____
5. Besides the reason above, what are three reasons why Senator Taft opposed U.S. involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty? _____

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1. Why did President Truman believe that the United States should sign the North Atlantic Treaty? NATO would bring PEACE to the world
2. Spider-Man's Uncle Ben is famous for his quote, "With great power comes great responsibility." Truman's pro treaty speech includes a similar argument when trying to convince the Senate to vote for U.S. membership into NATO. Write the first sentence of the paragraph, where we see the "With great power..." argument. This knowledge has made us determined to do everything we can to insure that peace is maintained.
3. The Three Musketeers have a saying, "All for one, and one for all." How does this phrase pertain to NATO? All the members of a NATO support each of the individual members, and the individual members pledge to support the NATO.
4. What did Senator Taft fear would be the Soviet Union's reaction to the alliance? The arming of nations surrounding Russia, may look like a plan to attack Russia - Thus Russia might as well attack now.
5. Besides the reason above, what are three reasons why Senator Taft opposed U.S. involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty? 1. Gives President power to go to war without Congress. 2. Obligate U.S. into war when another nation is attacked. 3. NATO is an also an offensive plan for attack, rather than a plan for security and peace. 4. The U.S. cannot afford NATO. It's too expensive