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PART ELEVEN

Perils of the Cold War

21 Harry Truman: "One Tough Son-of-a-Bitch of a Man"

DAVID McCULLOUGH

When he learned that Franklin Roosevelt had died and that he was now president of the United States, Harry Truman told a group of reporters: "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."

He did not want to be president, and he certainly did not look like one. Though cheery and brisk and always dressed in a spotless suit "as if he had just stepped from a bandbox," as his wife said, he was short, slight, and plain looking, wore thick spectacles, spoke in a Missouri twang, and radiated ordinariness. But, as a friend said, behind that plain-looking façade was "one tough son-of-a-bitch." Though not privy to Roosevelt's war strategy and military secrets, Truman vigorously stepped into the job and confidently made decisions that led the country to victory in the Second World War.

In the postwar world, he faced a vortex of difficulties that would have daunted a lesser man. At home, the United States had to demobilize its vast military forces and convert wartime industry back to peacetime production. Abroad, the Allied victory proved to be a victory without peace. For out of the muck and rubble of the Second World War emerged a Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West that threatened the very survival of humankind. The genesis of the Cold War, as Truman learned, went back to the early days of the Second World War and involved control of eastern Europe. Russia and the Western Allies clashed over that area, and their rival strategies for the domination of eastern Europe influenced most of the wartime conferences among the big three (the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union). The West hoped to establish democratic regimes in eastern Europe, but it proved an impossible program, for the massive Red Army overran that region, and Joseph Stalin vowed to maintain Russian supremacy there. He did so not to export world communism but to ensure Soviet security from the West—to make certain no Western army could ever sweep

through Poland and invade Russia as the Germans had done. The Soviet Union had lost from 20 to 25 million people in the war against Germany; no other nation swept up in the war, not even Germany itself, had suffered such casualties. Securing its borders, Soviet leaders hoped, would prevent such a catastrophe from ever happening again.

Once the Red Army occupied eastern Europe, Roosevelt did the only thing he could do. At the Yalta Conference in February of 1945, he acknowledged Soviet hegemony in the region but pressed Stalin to hold free elections in the countries he controlled. Mainly to hold the wartime alliance together, Stalin promised free elections for eastern Europe. But obsessed as he was with Russian security, the Soviet boss never kept his promise, instead setting up communist puppet states from the Baltic to the Adriatic.

The West felt betrayed. By the time Truman came to power, the United States and many of its allies increasingly saw Stalin as a mad and devious Marxist dictator out to spread communism across the globe. In the United States especially, a profound suspicion of the Soviets and world communism swept over Washington and the Truman White House. Unlike Roosevelt, who had tried to appease the Russians, Truman in 1947 adopted a get-tough containment policy designed to block Soviet expansion and save the "free world" from communism. The purpose of containment was not to overthrow the Soviet regime or invade the Russian sphere but to prevent the Soviets from expanding the influence of communism. To do that, Washington poured billions of dollars in aid into Greece, Turkey, and Western Europe and extended American military power around the globe. American aid to Western Europe, called the Marshall Plan, rebuilt its war-torn countries and neutralized communist parties there.

From 1947 on, containment formed the basis of the United States foreign policy. When in 1948 the Soviets blockaded Allied-controlled West Berlin (Berlin was located in the Russian sector of occupied Germany), Truman ordered a massive airlift by B-29s that prevented West Berlin from falling to the Soviets. His containment policy dictated that the United States get tough with China, too, after the communists took over there in 1949 and drove Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists into exile on Formosa (now known as Taiwan). The fall of China whipped up a storm of outrage and fears of communism in the United States. In this sinister turn of events, Americans once again saw the evil hand of Joseph Stalin. At home, a terrible Red scare swept the land, as Americans saw communists everywhere—from Hollywood to Washington, D.C.—plotting to overthrow the government and hand the country over to the Soviets. Truman himself contributed to the scare by instituting a sweeping loyalty oath program and beginning extensive security checks for federal employment.

The Red scare produced, in 1950, a finger-pointing rabble-rouser named Joseph McCarthy, who claimed that the State Department itself was crawling with traitors. He even accused Truman and General George Marshall, secretary of state, of being communists. His strident accusations, which the press published with relish under black headlines, destroyed the careers of many innocent Americans. Yet not once in his crusade did McCarthy expose a single bona fide communist.

The year 1950 brought another shock. China's neighbor, Korea, was divided at the 38th parallel between a communist regime in the north and a pro-Western government in the south. That June, North Korean forces invaded South Korea in what Washington viewed as an act of naked communist aggression instigated by the Kremlin. Under the auspices of the United Nations, Truman sent in American troops, who in a few months drove the North Koreans back across the 38th parallel. By September, however, Truman had changed the purpose of the war: instead of simply maintaining the

integrity of South Korea, he resolved to invade North Korea and liberate it from communist rule. When United Nations forces under General Douglas MacArthur drove to the Chinese border, that was enough for the Red Chinese: 260,000 of them crossed the Yalu River and inflicted on MacArthur one of the worst military defeats in American history, sending him in pell-mell retreat back toward the 38th parallel. With that, Truman again changed the purpose of the war: he gave up fighting to liberate North Korea and fell back on the original United States goal of simply ensuring the sovereignty of South Korea. At that point, the Korean War bogged down in a stalemate. When a frustrated MacArthur issued public statements vehemently criticizing Truman's policies and went on to advocate an all-out war against China, the president relieved him of command on the grounds that the general was trying to force his policies on his commander in chief, which violated the constitutional provision of civilian control of the military.

In the following selection, David McCullough, Truman's foremost biographer and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, brings the tough little man from Missouri brilliantly alive in a warm and sympathetic portrait. McCullough shows us how Truman's personality and character—his no-nonsense bluntness, honesty, determination, courage, sense of history, and love of people—affected his postwar decisions and made him an extremely effective president despite his flaws and mistakes.

GLOSSARY

ACHESON, DEAN Acheson was Truman's third secretary of state (1949–1953). He was the principal force behind the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which allied the Western democracies against Russia and the Eastern bloc. After the communist invasion of South Korea, Acheson implemented the president's decision to send American troops to stop the aggression. Although Acheson was a diehard anticommunist, Republicans blamed him for the fall of China and a weak foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

BERLIN AIRLIFT From June of 1948 to May of 1949, the Soviets established a blockade of the railway and road accesses to West Berlin. Aircraft from the United States and Great Britain flew over 200,000 missions that provided 13,000 tons of food daily to the hostage city. The Soviets had failed to extend their power over West Berlin and the Western allies had won one of the first confrontations of the Cold War.

BYRNES, JAMES F. A conservative Democrat and "avowed segregationist," Byrnes was Truman's friend, advisor, and secretary of state from 1945 to 1947. He was one of the most vigorous advocates of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan. After the war, Byrnes tried to reconcile Russian and American differences, but eventually he became a harsh critic of the Soviet Union.

DEWEY, THOMAS E. Dewey was the Republican nomin for president in 1944 and 1948. Most newspapers and pol ical commentators expected the New York governor to ea ily defeat the incumbent president. Truman won th election, defying the pollsters and the odds.

DIXIECRATS Formally known as the States' Rights Dem cratic Party, the Dixiecrats were segregationist and socia conservative. In 1948, they disagreed with Truman's ci rights platform and formed a third party that nominat Strom Thurmond for president.

JESTER, BEAUFORD Jester served as governor of Te from 1947 to 1949. He supported public education refo civil rights legislation, and antilynching laws.

LESSON OF MUNICH In 1938, in Munich, Germany, t British and the French reached an agreement with Ac Hitler that allowed Germany to possess an area of Czec slovakia called the Sudetenland in exchange for Hitl promise not to seize any more European territory. Bri Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew home to Lond where he proclaimed that the Munich Pact had achie "peace in our time." It had done nothing of the kind. A y later, Hitler's mighty mechanized army invaded Poland, t setting off the Second World War. The lesson was to ne appease an aggressor.

LILIENTHAL, DAVID He was a long-time director of the Tennessee Valley Authority. In 1946, Truman appointed Lilienthal to chair the United States Atomic Energy Commission, which stressed "civilian control and government monopoly of atomic energy."

MARSHALL PLAN Also known as the European Recovery Program, it was the brainchild of George C. Marshall, Truman's second secretary of state (1947–1949) and former army chief of staff. The program distributed $12 billion in American aid that helped rebuild war-ravaged Western Europe.

McCARTHY, JOSEPH A Republican senator from Wisconsin, McCarthy earned a reputation for making fantastic accusations of communist infiltration into the federal government, especially the State Department. The cartoonist Herbert Block coined the word *McCarthyism* to describe the senator's Cold War witch-hunt in the 1950s.

PENDERGAST, TOM He was the boss of the Democratic party's political machine in Missouri. With Pendergast's support, Truman rose through the ranks from a county court judge to a United States senator.

RAYBURN, SAM This Texas Democrat, nicknamed "Mr. Sam," served as speaker of the House of Representatives for seventeen years; longer than anyone else in American history.

TRUMAN DOCTRINE In March of 1947, Truman announced to Congress that the United States was the "leader of the free world" in the struggle to contain communism. The Truman Doctrine sent aid to Greece and Turkey to resist communist movements that threatened the stability of their governments.

VAUGHAN, HARRY Truman's lifelong friend, Vaughan furnished the president with "comic relief" from the pressures of work. He was "Truman's Falstaff," Falstaff being the bawdy, brazen rascal in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

WALLACE, HENRY He was Roosevelt's vice president (1941–1945) and Truman's secretary of commerce (1945–1946). Truman forced Wallace out of the cabinet when he challenged the administration's tough policy toward the Soviet Union. In 1948, Wallace made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency as the candidate of the Progressive party.

Harry Truman was President of the United States for not quite eight years. Looking back now, we see him standing there in the presidential line, all of five foot nine, in a double-breasted suit, between two heroic figures of the century, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower. It is hard to convey, today, the feeling Americans had about General Eisenhower, the aura of the man, after World War II. He was charismatic, truly, if anyone ever was. Truman was not like that, not glamorous, not photogenic. And from the April afternoon when Truman took office, following the death of Franklin Roosevelt, he would feel the long shadow of Roosevelt, the most colossal figure in the White House in this century. He had none of Roosevelt's gifts—no beautiful speaking voice, no inherited wealth or social standing, no connections. He is the only president of our century who never went to college, and along with his clipped Missouri twang and eyeglasses thick as the bottom of a Coke bottle, he had a middle-western plainness of manner that, at first glance, made him seem "ordinary."

He had arrived first in Washington in the 1930s as a senator notable mainly for his background in the notorious Pendergast machine of Kansas City. He was of Scotch-Irish descent, and like many of Scotch-Irish descent—and I know something of this from my own background—he could be narrow, clannish, short-tempered, and stubborn to a fault. But he could also be intensely loyal and courageous—and deeply patriotic. He was one of us, Americans said, just as they also said, "To err is Truman."

He was back in the news again after the Republican sweep in November 1994, the first such Republican triumph since 1946, and so naturally comparisons were drawn. Like Bill Clinton, Truman had been humiliated in his mid-term election of 1946, treated with open scorn and belittlement by Republicans

From *Character Above All* by Robert A. Wilson. Reprinted by permission of Robert A. Wilson.

and seldom defended by his fellow Democrats. He was written off.

But how Truman responded is extremely interesting and bears directly on our subject, character in the presidency. It was as if he had been liberated from the shadow of Roosevelt. "I'm doing as I damn please for the next two years and to hell with all of them," he told his wife, Bess. And what's so remarkable and fascinating is that the next two years were the best of Truman's presidency. The years 1947 and 1948 contained most of the landmark achievements of his time in office: the first civil rights message ever sent to Congress, his executive order to end segregation in the armed forces, the Truman Doctrine, the recognition of Israel, the Berlin Airlift, and the Marshall Plan, which saved Western Europe from economic and political ruin and stands today as one of the great American achievements of the century.

He showed again and again that he understood the office, how the government works, and that he understood himself. He knew who he was, he liked who he was. He liked Harry Truman. He enjoyed being Harry Truman. He was grounded, as is said. He stressed, "I tried never to forget who I was, where I came from, and where I would go back to." And again and again, as I hope I will be able to demonstrate, he could reach down inside himself and come up with something very good and strong. He is the seemingly ordinary American who, when put to the test, rises to the occasion and does the extraordinary.

Now by saying he knew himself and understood himself and liked himself, I don't mean vanity or conceit. I am talking about self-respect, self-understanding. To an exceptional degree, power never went to his head, nor did he ever grow cynical, for all the time he spent in Washington. He was never inclined to irony or to grappling with abstract thoughts. He read a great deal, enjoyed good bourbon—Wild Turkey preferably—he was a good listener. His physical, mental, and emotional stamina were phenomenal.... There's much to be seen about people in how they stand, how they walk. Look at the photographs of Harry Truman, the newsreels—backbone American..

In the spring of 1945, the new untested President of the United States sat in the Oval Office. Across the desk, in the visitor's chair, sat a grim-looking old friend, Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House. They were alone in the room, just the two of them, and they were, in many ways, two of a kind. Rayburn knew he could talk straight from the shoulder to Truman, who had been in office only a few days.

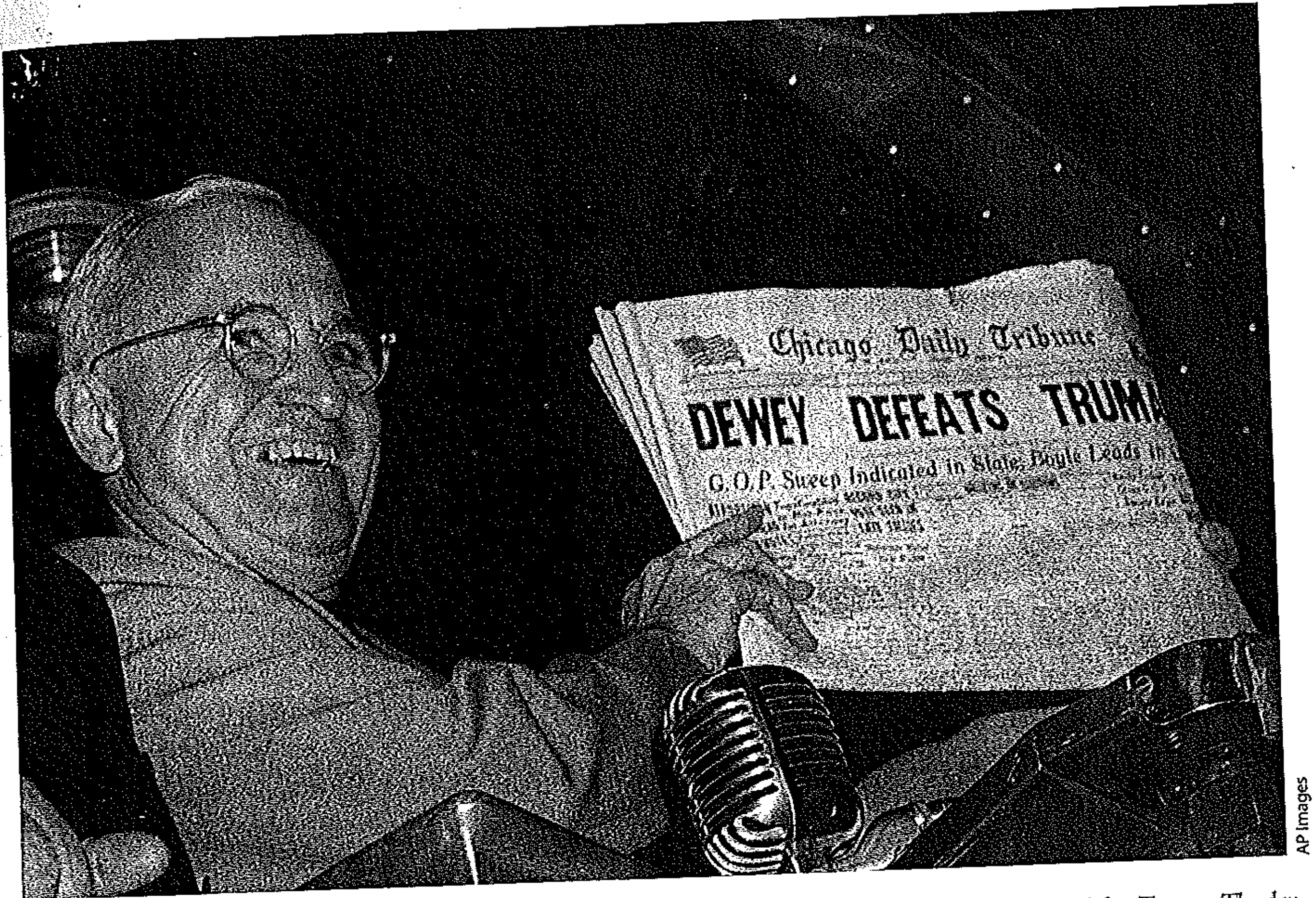
"You have got many great hazards and one of them is in this White House. I've been watching this thing a long time," Rayburn began. "I've seen people in the White House try to build a fence around the White House and keep the very people away from the president that he should see. That is one of your hazards, the special interests and the sycophants who will stand in the rain a week to see you and will treat you like a king. They'll come sliding in and tell you you're the greatest man alive. But you know, and I know, you ain't."

Truman knew he wasn't Hercules, he knew he wasn't a glamour boy, he knew he didn't have—and this is so important—the capacity to move the country with words, with eloquence. He had none of the inspirational magic of his predecessor. If Roosevelt was Prospero, Truman was Horatio.

... Character counts in the presidency more than any other single quality. It is more important than how much the President knows of foreign policy or economics, or even about politics. When the chips are down—and the chips are nearly always down in the presidency—how do you decide? Which way do you go? What kind of courage is called upon? Talking of his hero Andrew Jackson, Truman once said, it takes one kind of courage to face a duelist, but it's nothing like the courage it takes to tell a friend, no.

In making his decision to recognize Israel, Truman had to tell the man he admired above all others, no—but more on that shortly.

Truman had seen a lot of life long before he came to Washington. He was born in 1884. He was a full-grown, mature, nearly middle-aged man by the time of the Great War, as his generation called World War I, which was the real dividing line between the



AP Images

In 1948, most political polls predicted that the Republican presidential candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, would easily defeat Truman. The day after the election, the Chicago Tribune *even prematurely announced the outcome. Truman, seemingly enjoying the role of the underdog, made a whistle-stop tour of the country aboard a special train. "Give 'em hell, Harry" was the popular slogan, and Truman surprised everyone with a stunning victory.*

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nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and the turning point in his life. Everything changed in the period after World War I, which in retrospect may be seen as the first, hideous installment of a two-part world catastrophe. Even the same characters—Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, Truman, MacArthur, Marshall—reappear in World War II. Growing up in Victorian middle America, Truman came to maturity with much of the outlook, good and bad, of that very different time.

At heart he remained a nineteenth-century man. He never liked air-conditioning, hated talking by telephone. (And thank goodness, for he wrote letters instead, thousands as time went on, and as a result, it is possible to get inside his life, to know what he thought and felt, in a way rarely possible with public figures, and presidents in particular.) He disliked Daylight Saving Time and time zones. (He liked wearing two watches, one set on Eastern Standard Time, the other on Missouri time "real time," as he called it.)

He was also a farmer, a real farmer let it be remembered, not a photo opportunity or a gentleman farmer like FDR or Tom Dewey. With his father, he *worked* on the farm, facing all the perils of bad weather, failing crops, insect plagues, and debt. Truman & Son, of Grandview, Missouri, were never out of debt. He was there for eleven years, until he went

off to war in 1917, and as he used to say, "It takes a lot of pride to run a farm." Certainly on a family farm, you don't "do your own thing." Let down your end and the whole enterprise may fall. And every morning there's your father at the foot of the stairs at five-thirty, no matter the weather, no matter the season, telling you it's time to be up and at it.

There was no running water on the Truman farm, no electricity. When his mother had to have an emergency appendectomy, she was operated on by a country doctor on the kitchen table, and it was young Harry who stood beside her through all of it holding the lantern.

He was, as his pal Harry Vaughan, once said, "one tough son-of-a-bitch of a man. . . . And that," said Vaughan, "was part of the secret of understanding him." He could take it. He had been through so much. There's an old line, "Courage is having done it before."

It has been often said that Truman was poorly prepared for the presidency. He came to office not knowing any of the foreign policy establishment in Washington. He had no friends on Wall Street, no powerful financial backers, no intellectual "brain trust." When Winston Churchill came to Washington in the early 1940s and busied himself meeting everybody of known influence, no one suggested he look up the junior senator from Missouri.

But Truman had experienced as wide a range of American life as had any president, and in that sense he was well prepared. He had grown up in a small town when the small town was the essence of American life. He'd been on the farm all those years, and he'd gone to war. And the war was the crucible. Captain Harry Truman returned from France in 1919, having led an artillery battery through the horrific Battle of the Argonne and having discovered two vitally important things about himself. First, that he had courage, plain physical courage. Until then he had never been in a fight in his life. He was the little boy forbidden by his mother to play in roughhouse games because of his glasses. He was a bookworm—a sissy, as he said himself later on, using the dreaded word. But in France he'd found he could more than hold his own in the face of the horrors of battle and, second, that he was good at leading people. He liked it, and he had learned that courage is contagious. If the leader shows courage, others get the idea.

Often he was scared to death. One of the most endearing of his many letters to Bess was written after his first time under fire in France, to tell her how terrified he was. It happened at night in the rain in the Vosges Mountains. The Germans had opened fire with a withering artillery barrage. Truman and his green troops thought it could be the start of a gas attack and rushed about trying frantically not only to get their own gas masks on, but to get masks on the horses as well. And then [the men] panicked, ran. Truman, thrown by his horse, had been nearly crushed when the horse fell on him. Out from under, seeing the others all running, he just stood there, locked in place, and called them back using every form of profanity he'd ever heard. And back they came. This was no Douglas MacArthur strutting the edge of a trench to inspire the troops. This was a man who carried extra eyeglasses in every pocket because without glasses he was nearly blind. He had memorized the eye chart in order to get into the Army. And there he was in the sudden hell of artillery shells exploding all around, shouting, shaming his men back to do what they were supposed to do.

Now flash forward to a night thirty years later, in 1948, at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, when Democrats on the left and Democrats on the right had been doing everything possible to get rid of President Harry Truman for another candidate. The Dixiecrats had marched out of the convention. The liberals, who had tried to draft General Eisenhower, were down in the dumps as never before, convinced, after Truman was nominated, that all was lost. Truman was kept waiting backstage hour after hour. It was not until nearly two in the morning that he came on stage to accept the nomination. That was the year when the conventions were covered by television for the first time and the huge lights made even worse the summer furnace of Philadelphia. The crowd was drenched in perspiration, exhausted. For

all the speeches there had been, nobody had said a word about winning.

Truman, in a white linen suit, walked out into the floodlights and did just what he did in the Vosges Mountains. He gave them hell. He told them, in effect, to soldier up—and that they were going to win. It was astounding. He brought the whole hall to its feet. He brought them up cheering. Old-hand reporters, even the most diehard liberals who had so little hope for him, agreed it was one of the greatest moments they had ever witnessed in American politics.

So there we have it, courage, determination, call it as you will. Dean Acheson, his Secretary of State, much later, searching for a way to describe the effect Truman could have on those around him, and why they felt as they did about him, quoted the lines from Shakespeare's *Henry V,* when King Henry—King Harry—walks among the terrified, dispirited troops the night before the Battle of Agincourt:

> . . . every wretch, pining and pale before,
> Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks. . . .
> His liberal eye doth give to every one . . .
> A little touch of Harry in the night.

Acheson was remembering one of the darkest times of the Truman years, when, unexpectedly, 260,000 Chinese communist troops came storming into the Korean War. Through it all, as Acheson and others saw at close hand, Truman never lost confidence, never lost his essential good cheer, never lost his fundamental civility and decency toward those who worked with him. He was never known to dress down a subordinate. "Give 'em hell, Harry" never gave anybody hell behind the scenes, on the job.

His decision to go into Korea in June 1950 was the most difficult of his presidency, he said. And he felt it was the most important decision of his presidency—more difficult and important than the decision to use the atomic bomb, because he feared he might be taking the country into another still more horrible world war, a nuclear war. Yet at the time, it was a very popular decision, a point often forgotten. The country was waiting for the President to say we would go to the rescue of the South Koreans, who were being overrun by the communist North Korean blitzkrieg. The lesson of Munich weighed heavily on everyone. In Congress, the President had strong support on both sides of the aisle, at the start at least. He was applauded by the press across the country. It was only later that summer of 1950 when the war went so sour that it became "Truman's War."

But, you see, there was no corollary between popularity and the ease or difficulty of the decision. His most popular decision was, for him, his most difficult decision, while his least popular decision was, he said, not difficult at all. That was the firing of General Douglas MacArthur, by far the most unpopular, controversial act of his presidency. Attacked by all sides, torn to shreds in editorials and by radio commentators, a potent force then as today, Truman went on with his work as usual, just riding it out. He seemed to have a sort of inner gyroscope for such times. Those around him wondered how it was possible. He said he was sure that in the long run, the country would judge him to have done the right thing. Besides, he had only done his duty. The Constitution stated clearly that there will be civilian control over the military and he had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution. "It wasn't difficult for me at all," he insisted.

Truman's profound sense of history was an important part of his makeup. He believed every president should know American history at the least, and world history, ideally. A president with a sense of history is less prone to hubris. He knows he is but one link in the long chain going all the way back to the first president and that presumably will extend far into the future. He knows he has only a limited time in office and that history will be the final judge of his performance. What he does must stand the test of time. If he is blasted by the press, if his polls are plummeting as Truman's did during the Korean War, these are not the first concerns. What matters—or ought to matter—is what's best for the country and the world in the long run.

Truman probably understood the history of the presidency as well as or better than any president of

Carl Mydans/Time-Life Pictures/Getty Images

In April of 1951, President Truman sacked General Douglas MacArthur (shown in this photograph) as commander of United Nations forces in Korea. McCullough concedes that it was the most "unpopular" and "controversial act" of Truman's presidency. But the president was confident, McCullough says, "that in the long run the country would judge him to have done the right thing." Today most American historians agree that Truman, in his capacity as commander in chief, was justified in relieving the contentious and insubordinate general.

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this century with the exception of Woodrow Wilson, and in his first years in the White House he felt acutely the presence of the predecessors. He was sure the White House was haunted. This was before restoration of the old place, when it creaked and groaned at night with the change of temperature. Sometimes doors would fly open on their own. Alone at night, his family back in Missouri, he would walk the upstairs halls, poke about in closets, wind the clocks. He imagined his predecessors arguing over how this fellow Truman was doing so far.

His reputation seems to grow and will, I believe, continue to grow for the reason that he not only faced difficult decisions and faced them squarely, if not always correctly, but that the decisions were so often unprecedented. There were no prior examples to go by. In his first months in office, he made more difficult and far-reaching decisions than any president in our history, including Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. This much belittled, supposed backwater political hack, who seemed to have none or certainly very few of the requisite qualities of high office, turned out to do an extremely good job. And it is quite mistaken to imagine that nobody saw this at the time. Many did, and the closer they were to him, the more clearly they saw. Churchill, Marshall, and especially, I would say, Acheson, who was about as different from Harry Truman in background and manner as anyone could be. Acheson once remarked that he had great respect for Franklin Roosevelt, but that he reserved his love for another president, meaning Harry Truman. Acheson didn't much like Roosevelt, I suspect, because Roosevelt was condescending toward him. I imagine that if Acheson were to tolerate condescension, it would have to be Acheson being condescending toward someone else.

In the course of more than one hundred interviews for my biography of Truman, I found no on[e] who had worked with him, no one who was on th[e] White House staff, or the White House domesti[c] staff, or his Secret Service detail, who did not lik[e] him. He knew everybody by name on the Whi[te] House staff and in the mansion itself. He knew a[ll] the Secret Service people by name. He knew a[ll] about their families—and this wasn't just a politician['s] trick. If he could have picked his own father, o[ne] former Secret Service man told me, it would ha[ve] been Truman.

John Gunther, in a wonderful interview with Tr[u]man when Truman was Vice President, asked hi[m] what he was most interested in. "People," Trum[an] said without hesitation.

He had a further quality, also greatly needed in t[he] presidency: a healthy, resilient sense of humor. [He] loved especially the intrinsic humor of politics, t[he] good stories of politics. Campaigning in Texas

train in 1948, he had nothing but blue skies and huge, warm crowds everywhere he stopped. It was the first time a Democratic candidate for President had ever come to Texas to campaign. That had never been necessary before. The reason now was his civil rights program, which was anything but popular in Texas. There had been warnings even of serious trouble if ever he were to show his face in Texas. But his reception was good-natured and approving the whole way across the state and Truman loved every moment. It was probably his happiest time of the whole 1948 whistle-stop odyssey. On board the train were Sam Rayburn and young Lyndon Johnson, who was running for the Senate, as well as Governor Beaufort Jester, who had earlier called Truman's civil rights program a stab in the back.

But all that was forgotten in the warmth of the days and the warmth of the crowds, and at the last stop, Rayburn's home town of Bonham, Rayburn invited the President to come by his little house on the highway, outside of the town. When the motorcade arrived, hundreds of people were on the front lawn. Rayburn told them to form a line and he would see they met the President. The Secret Service immediately objected, saying they had no identifications for anyone. Rayburn was furious. He knew every man, woman, and child on that lawn, he said, and could vouch for each and every one of them. So the line started for the house where Governor Jester offered greetings at the door and the President, a surreptitious bourbon within reach, shook hands with "the customers," as he called them. All was going well until Rayburn, who never took his eye off the line, shouted, "Shut the door, Beaufort, they're coming through twice."

Yet for all that it is mistaken to picture Harry Truman as just a down-home politician of the old stamp. The Harry Truman of Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking*, or of the play *Give-em Hell, Harry*, is entertaining and picturesque, but that wasn't the man who was President of the United States. He wasn't just some kind of cosmic hick.

Now he did make mistakes. He was not without flaw. He could be intemperate, profane, touchy, too quick with simplistic answers. In private conversation, he could use racial and religious slurs—old habits of the mouth. In many ways his part of Missouri was more like the Old South than the Middle West, and he grew up among people who in so-called polite society commonly used words like "nigger" and "coon."

Yet here is the man who initiated the first civil rights message ever and ordered the armed services desegregated. And let's remember, that was in 1948, long before Martin Luther King, Jr., or *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision on the desegregation of schools, or the civil rights movement. When friends and advisers warned him that he was certain to lose the election in 1948 if he persisted with the civil rights program, he said if he lost for that, it would be for a good cause. Principle mattered more than his own political hide. His courage was the courage of his convictions.

Truman's greatest single mistake was the loyalty oath program, requiring a so-called loyalty check of every federal employee. It was uncalled for, expensive, it contributed substantially to the mounting bureaucracy of Washington and damaged the reputations and lives of numbers of people who should never have had any such thing happen to them. He did it on the advice that it was good politics. He let his better nature be overcome by that argument. It was thought such a move could head off the rising right-wing cry of communists in government, the McCarthy craze then in its early stages. But it didn't work. It was shameful.

His Supreme Court appointments weren't particularly distinguished. His seizure of the steel industry during the Korean War to avert a nationwide strike was high-handed and rightly judged unconstitutional, though his motives were understandable. We were at war and a prolonged shutdown of the production of steel threatened the very lives of our fighting forces in Korea.

He himself thought one of his worst mistakes was to have allowed the pell-mell demobilization that followed World War II. Almost overnight American military might had all but vanished. When we intervened in Korea, we had little to fight with, except for the

atomic bomb. That Truman refused to use the atomic bomb in Korea, despite tremendous pressure from General MacArthur and others, stands as one of his most important decisions and one for which he has been given little credit.

The idea that Harry Truman made the decision to use the bomb against Japan and then went upstairs and went to sleep is an unfortunate myth for which he is largely accountable. I think he gave that impression because he came from a time and place in America where you were not supposed to talk about your troubles. "How are you?" "I'm fine." You might be dying of some terrible disease—"I'm fine. And you?" He refused ever to talk of the weight of the decision except to say that he made it and that it was his responsibility. . . .

With the return of peace, Truman's political troubles began. The year 1946 was particularly rough. He seemed hopelessly ineffectual. He seemed to be trying to please everybody at once, willing to say to almost anybody whatever they most wanted to hear.

He wasn't at all like the Harry Truman I've been describing. He had never wanted the job and for some time appeared willing to give it up as soon as possible. He tried twice to get General Eisenhower to agree to run as a Democrat in the next election, saying he would gladly step aside. According to one account, he even offered to run as Vice President with Ike at the head of the ticket. But then after the setback in the '46 congressional elections, he became a different man.

Fire-in-the-belly for presidential glory was never part of his nature. He wasn't in the job to enlarge his estimate of himself. He didn't need that. He didn't need the limelight or fawning people around him in order to feel good about being Harry Truman.

On that note, it is interesting to see whom he did choose to have around him, as a measure of his character. . . . The list is long and very impressive. That most of them had more distinguished backgrounds than he, if they were taller, handsomer, it seemed to bother him not at all. When it was suggested to him that General Marshall as Secretary of State might lead people to think Marshall would make a better president, Truman's response was that yes, of course, Marshall would make a better president, but that he, Harry Truman, was President and he wanted the best people possible around him.

As no president since Theodore Roosevelt, Truman had a way of saying things that was so much his own, and I would like to quote some of them:

"I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt."

"God doesn't give a damn about pomp and circumstance."

"There are more prima donnas in Washington than in all the opera companies."

He is also frequently quoted as having said, "If you want a friend in Washington, buy a dog," and, "If you want to live like a Republican, vote Democratic." I doubt he said the first, but the second does sound like him.

"The object and its accomplishment is my philosophy," he said. Let me say that again. "The object and its accomplishment is my philosophy." And no president ever worked harder in office. At times, a little discouraged, he would say, "All the President is, is a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to do anyway."

Where were his strengths and his weaknesses in conflict? In interviews with those who knew him, I would ask what they believed to have been the President's major flaw. Almost always they would say he was too loyal to too many people to whom he should not have been so loyal—not as President. They were thinking mainly of the cronies—people like Harry Vaughan. Or remembering when Boss Tom Pendergast died and Vice President Harry Truman commandeered an Air Force bomber and flew to Kansas City for the funeral. "You don't forget a friend," was Truman's answer to the press.

Tom Pendergast had made Truman, and the Pendergast machine, though colorful and not without redeeming virtues, was pretty unsavory altogether.

But Truman was also, let us understand, the product of the smoke-filled room in more than just the Kansas

City way. He was picked at the 1944 Democratic Convention in Chicago in a room at the Blackstone Hotel thick with smoke. He was tapped as Roosevelt's running mate and almost certain successor by the party's big-city bosses, the professional polls, who didn't want Henry Wallace, then the Vice President, because Wallace was too left wing, and didn't want Jimmy Byrnes, another Roosevelt favorite, because Byrnes was too conservative, an avowed segregationist and a lapsed Roman Catholic. They wanted Harry Truman, so Truman it was. They knew their man. They knew what stuff he was made of. And remember, this was all in a tradition of long standing. Theodore Roosevelt had been picked by a Republican machine in New York, Woodrow Wilson by the Democratic machine in New Jersey. For Franklin Roosevelt, such "good friends" as Ed Kelly of Chicago, Boss Crump of Memphis, Ed Flynn of the Bronx were indispensable. And because a candidate had the endorsement of a machine, or as in Truman's case owed his rise in politics to a corrupt organization, it didn't necessarily follow that he himself was corrupt. John Hersey, who did one of the best of all pieces ever written about Harry Truman, for *The New Yorker*, said he found no trace of corruption in Truman's record. Nor did I. Nor did the FBI when it combed through Truman's past at the time Pendergast was convicted for an insurance fraud and sent to prison. Nor did all the Republicans who ran against him in all the elections in his long political career.

I think he was almost honest to a fault. Still he understood, and felt acutely, the bargain he made with loyalty to the likes of Pendergast, and he understood why he was so often taken to task by the Republicans or the press or just ordinary citizens who didn't care for the kind of political company he kept.

Harry Vaughan was for comic relief, Truman's Falstaff. Among the delights of Truman as a biographical subject is that he enjoyed both Vaughan and Mozart. He loved a night of poker with "the boys," and he loved the National Symphony, which he attended as often as possible. If the program included Mozart or Chopin, he would frequently take the score with him.

This same Harry Truman, who adored classical music, who read Shakespeare and Cicero and *Don Quixote*, comes out of a political background about as steamy and raw as they get. And at times, this would get to him and he would escape to the privacy of a downtown Kansas City hotel room. There he would pour himself out on paper, an innermost anguish in long memoranda to himself, and these amazing documents survive in the files of the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, along with thousands of his letters and private diaries....

He writes of being raised at his mother's knee to believe in honor, ethics, and "right living." Not only is he disgusted by the immorality he sees behind the scenes, he doesn't understand it.

But let me return to 1948, where I think we see Truman, the President, at his best. Consider first the crisis over Berlin. That spring the Russians had suddenly clamped a blockade around the city, which was then under Allied control though within the Russian zone of East Germany. Overnight, without warning, Berlin was cut off. Other than by air, there was no way to supply it. Two and a half million people were going to be without food, fuel, medical supplies. Clearly Stalin was attempting to drive the Allies out. The situation was extremely dangerous.

At an emergency meeting in the Oval Office, it was proposed that the Allies break through with an armored convoy. It looked as though World War III might be about to start. It was suggested that Berlin be abandoned. Nobody knew quite what to do. Truman said, "We stay in Berlin, period." He didn't know how that could be done any more than anyone else, but he said, "We stay in Berlin." Backbone.

An airlift had already begun as a temporary measure. Truman ordered it stepped up to the maximum. It was said by experts, including the mayor of Berlin, that to supply the city by air would be impossible, given the size of the planes and the calculated number of landings possible per day. The whole world was on edge.

"We'll stay in Berlin," Truman said again, "come what may." The supposedly insoluble problem of the limit of the plane landings per day was nicely solved:

they built another airport. The airlift worked. The Russians gave up the blockade. The crisis passed.

Among the most difficult and important concepts to convey in teaching or writing history is the simple fact that things never had to turn out as they did. Events past were never on a track. Nothing was foreordained any more then than now. Nobody knew at the start that the Berlin Airlift would work. It was a model, I think, of presidential decision making, and of presidential character proving decisive.

All this, I should also remind you, was taking place in an election year. Yet at no time did Truman include any of his political advisers in the discussions about Berlin. Nor did he ever play on the tension of the crisis for his own benefit in the speeches he made.

With the question of whether to recognize Israel, Truman faced an equally complex situation but one greatly compounded by emotion. Of particular difficulty for him, personally and politically, was the position of his then Secretary of State, George Marshall, who was gravely concerned about Middle Eastern oil supplies. If Arab anger over American support for a new Jewish state meant a cut-off of Arab oil, it would not only jeopardize the Marshall Plan and the recovery of Europe but could prove disastrous should the Berlin crisis indeed turn to war.

Marshall was thinking as a military man, determined to hold to a policy that was in the best interest of the United States. It was by no means a matter of anti-Semitism, as was sometimes charged, or any lack of sympathy for the idea of a Jewish homeland. But the fact that Marshall was against an immediate recognition put Truman in an extremely difficult position. No American of the time counted higher in Truman's estimate than Marshall. He saw Marshall as the modern-day equivalent of George Washington or Robert E. Lee and valued his judgment more than that of anyone in the cabinet. Further, Marshall was far and away the most widely respected member of the administration, and if Truman were to decide against him and Marshall were then to resign, it would almost certainly mean defeat for Truman in November. He could lose the respect of the man he most respected and lose the presidency.

Truman did recognize Israel—immediately, within minutes—and he never doubted he was doing the right thing. His interest in the history of the Middle East was long standing. He had been a strong supporter of a homeland for Jewish refugees from Europe from the time he had been in the Senate. But he also knew George Marshall and was sure Marshall would stand by him, as of course Marshall did.

I have spent a sizable part of my writing life trying to understand Harry Truman and his story. I don't think we can ever know enough about him. If his loyalty was a flaw, it was his great strength also, as shown by his steadfast loyalty to Dean Acheson when Joe McCarthy came after Acheson or the unflinching support he gave David Lilienthal when Lilienthal, Truman's choice to head the Atomic Energy Commission, was accused as a "pink," a communist. Franklin Roosevelt had not been willing to stand up for Lilienthal. Truman did. And Lilienthal was approved by the Senate.

Perhaps Truman's greatest shortcoming was his unwillingness to let us know, to let the country know then, how much more there was to him than met the eye, how much more he was than just "Give 'em hell, Harry"—that he did have this love of books, this interest in history, his affection for people, his kindness, his thoughtfulness to subordinates, the love of music, the knowledge of music, his deep and abiding love for his wife, his bedrock belief in education and learning. Though he had never gone beyond Independence High School, this was a president who enjoyed Cicero in the original Latin. We should have known that. It's good to know now, too.

A few words about the '48 campaign, which will always be part of our political lore. It's a great American metaphor, a great American story. The fellow who hasn't got a chance comes from behind and wins. Nobody in either party, not a professional politician, not a reporter, not even his own mother-in-law doubted that Tom Dewey would be the next president. The result of a *Newsweek* poll of fifty top

political commentators nationwide who were asked to predict the outcome was Dewey 50, Truman 0.

No president had ever campaigned so hard or so far. Truman was sixty-four years old. Younger men who were with him through it all would describe the time on the train as one of the worst ordeals of their lives. The roadbed was rough and Truman would get the train up to 80 miles an hour at night. The food was awful, the work unrelenting. One of them told me, "It's one thing to work that hard and to stay the course when you think you're going to win, but it's quite another thing when you know you're going to lose." The only reason they were there, they all said, was Harry Truman.

For Truman, I think, it was an act of faith—a heroic, memorable American act of faith. The poll takers, the political reporters, the pundits, all the sundry prognosticators, and professional politicians—it didn't matter what they said, what they thought. Only the people decide, Truman was reminding the country. "Here I am; here's what I stand for—here's what I'm going to do if you keep me in the job. You decide."

Was he a great president? Yes. One of the best. And a very great American. Can we ever have another Harry Truman? Yes, I would say so. Who knows, maybe somewhere in Texas she's growing up right now.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Describe Truman's background and the character traits that made him an effective president. Compare him to the popular leader Franklin Roosevelt, whom he had to follow and who is the subject of selections 16 and 17. Why was Truman's "profound sense of history" an important part of his makeup?

2 Why would McCullough refer to Truman as a nineteenth-century man? What were the "two vitally important things about himself" that Truman learned during the Great War?

3 What was the most difficult decision that Truman had to make as president? What did he believe might happen as a result of that decision? Describe how "the lesson of Munich" influenced his thinking. What was Truman's most unpopular decision, one that he felt was necessary to uphold his oath to the Constitution? Was he troubled by the uproar that followed?

4 What was Truman's "greatest mistake" as president? Describe why he made this "shameful" judgment that tarnished the reputation of many Americans. According to McCullough, what were some of Truman's other mistakes?

5 Explain why George Marshall and Truman had different opinions about the recognition of Israel. What was the relationship between these two significant Cold War leaders, and was their respect for each other strong enough to survive disagreements about major foreign policy decisions?

6 How was Truman able to maintain American influence in global affairs while avoiding a crisis that might lead to a third world war? Was there a moment during his presidency when nuclear war seemed possible?