

The National Security Legacy of Harry S. Truman

The National Security Legacy of Harry S. Truman
Truman Legacy Series, Volume 1

Based on the First Truman Legacy Symposium
Harry Truman and National Security
June 13–14, 2003
Key West, Florida

Edited by
Robert P. Watson
Michael J. Devine
Robert J. Wolz

THE NATIONAL
SECURITY
LEGACY of
HARRY S. TRUMAN

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Volume 1

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TPL Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum and Library

LWH. Harry S. Truman Little White House Museum

Foreword

One of the things about being Harry Truman's grandson is that wherever I go, people ask me to talk about him. I'm honored to do that, but I'm no expert on Harry Truman. He did not get many chances to impart political and historical wisdom to me. I had only been alive for fifteen years when he died, and he'd had to spend much of that time telling me to keep my feet off the tables and quit running in the house. As a result, much of what I know about his career comes from reading and listening to experts, people who worked with him and for him. In that regard, I've been very lucky, because my grandfather surrounded himself with some of the smartest, most dedicated people in government.

George Else, Ken Hechler, and Milton Kayle, who have contributed to this book, served the Truman administration honorably and effectively. All went on from the White House to distinguished careers—Milt as a prominent attorney, George as head of the American Red Cross and the White House Historical Association, and Ken as a congressman and secretary of state of West Virginia. (At nearly ninety-one, he was a percentage point away from being elected again!) Joining them in the following pages is General Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to two presidents, who is able to put into perspective the effect my grandfather's mid-twentieth-century policies have had on U.S. foreign policy and national security to this day.

My grandfather was famous for saying that there was nothing new in the world but the history you don't know, and I think that philosophy was one of the things that made him a great president. He knew very well the mistakes that leaders and nations had made over millennia, and he knew history would only repeat itself if he didn't do things differently. In doing just that, he reshaped the world for the better.

Clifton Truman Daniel
June 2003

Foreword

Many great people contributed to the unique Truman Legacy Symposium upon which this book is based. I say unique because it is rare that one has the opportunity to hear about the history of our world from such eminent scholars as those who contributed to this book, but it is even more rare that one gets to hear about history from people who were there to shape it.

Legacy is an interesting word. Too many people in elected positions try to plan their legacies. This is a serious mistake because legacies are not decided upon by those who leave them, but are determined more often than not by circumstances during one's tenure in office. And what a person leaves behind is not considered a legacy until it has been tested by the passage of time and by the careful consideration of its consequences by those who follow.

I believe the legacy of Harry Truman speaks for itself. In this book, you will read a great deal about it from those who lived through Truman's presidency and helped shape it, and from those who are studying it, many of whom were not even born until decades after his presidency ended. But assessing legacies is an evolutionary process; scholars will be constantly working at it and it will continue unfolding for generations to come. Harry Truman's legacy is becoming greater with each passing year largely because he made his decisions by surrounding himself with great people and then trying to do what all great leaders should do at the end of the day—the right thing. And he did so without thought to what those decisions might mean generations later in terms of legacy. By listening to his advisors and by making each decision according to what he believed was right, he was able ultimately to know that “the buck stopped here”—with him. The right decision needed to be made at the right time. And I think that is part of the true genius of Truman.

I suspect my connection to Harry Truman is that we shared something in common in public life. I had the pleasure to serve

for five years as Florida's lieutenant governor, and Truman served his country as Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president before becoming president. There is a story about lieutenant governors and vice presidents, both of whom often find themselves awash in a sea of anonymity: A woman gave birth to twin sons, one of whom went off to sea, while the other became a lieutenant governor (or vice president). It seems that neither was ever heard from again!

But I have had the pleasure of becoming the president of Florida Atlantic University, which is honored to be an official sponsor of the Truman Legacy Symposium and this book. Both projects mark the first in a series of efforts to assess Truman's legacy and his connection to south Florida and the Little White House in the Florida Keys, a home where Truman spent 175 days during his presidency. Florida Atlantic University is pleased to have helped to bring together people of such great historical significance as George Elsey, Ken Hechler, and Milton Kayle, all of whom worked for President Harry Truman. The symposium organizers and editors of this volume—Robert Watson, Michael Devine, and Bob Wolz—have brought together a wonderful group of men and women to assess Truman's legacy. It gives me great pleasure to introduce this book and these individuals.

“Give 'em hell, Harry!”

Frank T. Brogan, President,
Florida Atlantic University
June 2003

Preface

Harry S. Truman called Key West, Florida, his second favorite place—second only to his hometown of Independence, Missouri. In fact, Truman was so fond of Key West that he ended up spending a total of 175 days of his presidency at the “Little White House,” as his presidential retreat came to be known. The president even joked that he was of a mind “to move the Capitol to Key West.” The thirty-third president made eleven trips to Key West during his presidency to escape the pressures of office and the nation’s capital. But the Little White House and tropical allure of Key West proved to be more than a relaxing vacation site or Truman’s version of Camp David; rather, the facility was a working White House. Truman studied legislation, signed executive orders, and met with politicians and advisors during his time on “America’s Caribbean Island.” Truman and his family even returned to Key West several times after his presidency.

So it is fitting that the historic occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of Truman’s presidency was celebrated in Key West with public and scholarly programs dedicated to examining Truman’s presidential legacy. This book is an outgrowth of the Truman Legacy Symposium, which was held on 13–14 June 2003 in Key West, Florida. The purpose of this symposium, the first in a series, was to assess Truman’s national security legacy. Each symposium and its accompanying book will focus on a different facet of Truman’s legacy, and perhaps no other issue was as timely on the date of the first symposium as national security. Likewise, although the Truman presidential record is as impressively wide as it is deep, no other issue has stood out over the years in defining Harry Truman’s legacy so much as national security.

Historians credit Truman with establishing the twin policies of containment and collective security, approaches to national security that defined U.S. foreign policy for a half century. In a larger sense, from the rise of the Cold War to the collapse of the Soviet Union, these twin pillars guided the international order and the

West's response to communist threats and international instability. Harry Truman presided over the creation of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the organization of a unified Department of Defense, the modern Air Force, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and National Security Council (NSC), and the use of foreign aid and food aid as major tools in promoting stability, democracy, and U.S. foreign policy—a formidable record indeed. As Truman, himself a dedicated student of history, suggested:

When history says that my term of office saw the beginning of the Cold War it will also say that in those eight years we have set the course that can win it. We have succeeded in carving out a new set of policies to attain peace—positive policies, policies of world leadership, policies that express faith in other free people. We have averted World War III up to now, and we may already have succeeded in establishing conditions which can keep that war from happening as far ahead as men can see.

Still, it must be remembered that Harry Truman's accomplishments were not immediately apparent to his contemporaries. The tough decisions we now praise Truman for making also made him, at times, an unpopular president. Since presidential approval polls have been taken, Truman has the distinction of having the lowest recorded rating (in the 20s), even lower than Richard Nixon on the eve of his resignation from the office. But the years have been good to Truman, as his stature among presidents and his image among the public have improved considerably.

When thinking of pivotal figures from the past, many students of history are tempted to speculate about what these voices from yesteryear would say about today's issues. It is also irresistible to ponder what they would say to these larger-than-life leaders from history. As historians and Truman aficionados, we often find ourselves thinking about Truman in this light. Our hypothetical conversation with Truman goes this way: we would tell him to make sure he is seated because he is not going to believe that he is now universally admired! More presidential candidates—of both parties—in recent elections have cited Truman as their role model than any other president. In evaluating Truman and his legacy, historians now judge him to have been one of the great presidents.

Truman had great faith in the American people (even when they opposed him) and an almost uncanny ability (and foresight) to be on the right side of the issues, however challenging and

controversial they were. These qualities must certainly be a part of his legacy. Part of the process of assessing presidential legacies is to assess the impact of the office on the man. In many ways, the man who entered the office in 1945 was the same man who stepped down from power in 1953. Truman was always humble, hard working, and honest. This humility can be seen in his surprise after leaving office at finding a crowd of five thousand people gathered to welcome him home to the Trumans' house on Delaware Street in Independence. In typical fashion, Truman admitted, "I was overcome." But also in typical fashion, Truman added, "It was the pay-off for 30 years of hell and hard work."

Another facet in the process of determining a president's legacy is to judge the impact of the president's service. Did he leave the office and nation better off than when he entered the White House? In contemplating legacies, Truman once remarked, "The best epitaph I ever saw was on Butte Hill in Tombstone, Arizona. It said 'Here lies Jack Williams. He done His damndest'." It must be said that Harry Truman did his damndest, and both the office and nation are better off because of him.

As the conveners of the Truman Legacy Symposium and editors of this book, our effort to examine Truman's legacy was greatly enhanced by three distinguished gentlemen who were with Truman in the White House (and in Key West). George Elsey, Ken Hechler, and Milton Kayle, all former aides to President Truman who went on to remarkably successful post-White House public careers, lent their formidable talents and personal experiences to the task of assessing Truman's record and Truman the man. It is easier to understand the extraordinary accomplishments of the Truman administration once one is afforded the opportunity to appreciate the abilities and dedication of those Truman chose to surround himself with. This project also benefits immeasurably by the participation of General Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor to two presidents and one of the foremost national security experts of our time. We were also fortunate to include the work of four very well-regarded scholars of the presidency and national security: Meena Bose of the U.S. Military Academy, Douglas Brattebo of the U.S. Naval Academy, John Davis of Howard University, and Tom Lansford of the University of Southern Mississippi.

We also wish to thank the hosts of the inaugural symposium, without whom neither that event nor this book would have been

possible: the Harry S. Truman Little White House, the Truman Presidential Museum and Library, the Florida Keys Community College, and Florida Atlantic University. Many individuals are to be credited with helping to make both endeavors a reality. It is not possible to name everyone but, in particular, we acknowledge Wanda Coury, former clerk and secretary in the Truman White House; Niel Johnson, noted Truman impersonator; Kathy Knotts and Donna Denslow of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute; Barbara Hayo and Monica Muñoz of Historic Tours of America; Lydia Esteñoz, Michael McPherson, and William Seeker of the Florida Keys Community College; Rebecca Tomlinson of the Tennessee Williams Theater; Mary Dean, Richard Yon, David Cantor, and Shawn Pennell of Florida Atlantic University; Raymond Frey; Wesley Truman Daniel; and Debra Corona of Simple Office Solutions. A special thanks to the Crowne Plaza La Concha Hotel in Key West for accommodating the symposium participants and guests, to Key West's popular Conch Train for providing transportation for symposium participants and guests, and to the Truman State University Press for their enthusiastic reception of this book project.

Four individuals threw their support behind our vision for an annual symposium and book series to assess Truman's legacy and, in doing so, made our task much easier. To Ed Swift, President, and Chris Belland, CEO, of Historic Tours of America; to Frank T. Brogan, President of Florida Atlantic University; and to Clifton Truman Daniel, grandson of President Truman—thank you for your commitment to historic preservation, community educational programs, and Harry Truman's memory. Lastly, a number of individuals and organizations underwrote the symposium and, indirectly, this book. We are grateful for the generosity of Charna Larkin and the Alan B. Larkin Family, the John D. Evans Foundation, Historic Tours of America, the Harry S. Truman Library Institute, the Key West Harry Truman Foundation, and the Monroe County Tourist Development Council.

We hope you find the book to be informative and interesting.

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June 2003

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