

THE CIVIL RIGHTS
LEGACY of
HARRY S. TRUMAN

Edited By
Raymond H. Geselbracht



Volume 2
Truman State University Press

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Cover Photo: President Truman meeting with African American leaders who want more African Americans in important positions in agencies involved in the administration's defense program, 28 February 1951. The President's prominent visitors include Mary McLeod Bethune, president emeritus of the National Council of Negro Women, Lester Granger, executive secretary of the National Urban League, Tobias Channing, director of the Phelps-Stokes Foundation, and Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP.

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Printed by: Edwards Brothers, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan USA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The civil rights legacy of Harry S. Truman / edited by Raymond H. Geselbracht.

p. cm. — (Truman legacy series; v. 2)

“Based on the Second Truman Legacy Symposium, Harry Truman and civil rights, May 14–15, 2004, Key West, Florida.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-931112-67-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Truman, Harry S., 1884-1972—Political and social views. 2. Civil rights—United States—History—20th century. 3. African Americans—Civil rights—History—20th century. 4. United States—Race relations—Political aspects—History—20th century. 5. United States—Politics and government—1945-1953. I. Geselbracht, Raymond H. II. Truman Legacy Symposium (2nd : 2004 : Key West, Fla.)

E813.C58 2007

973.918092—dc22

2007013223

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TL.	Truman Presidential Museum and Library

Preface

Eight of the eleven essays in this volume originated as presentations at a conference titled “Harry S. Truman and Civil Rights,” held at Key West, Florida, in May 2004. The conference held its opening session at the Little White House, now a Florida state historic site but once the residence of the commandant of the U.S. naval base at Key West. Truman loved going to the base to escape the pressures of the presidency. He made eleven visits between 1946 and 1952, for a total of 175 days, bringing White House staff along with him for these working vacations. Historians may never know exactly how much work was done during these getaways to the warm and friendly island of Key West, but there is no doubt that the president found them restorative.

The remaining three essays originated elsewhere. Colin Powell’s essay is based on a presentation sponsored by the Truman Library on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Executive Order 9981. This order, issued by President Truman on 26 July 1948, ordered the desegregation of the armed forces. The content of General Powell’s talk makes clear why he believed the event being commemorated justified his interrupting his vacation and flying five thousand miles to the Truman Library to be part of the program.

Carol Anderson’s essay was first presented at a July 2003 teachers institute held at the Truman Library and titled “Harry’s Farewell.” In his 1953 farewell address, Truman listed the accomplishments of his presidency; the participants in the institute examined all these claims. The editor wishes to thank the University of Missouri Press for granting permission to publish this essay, which is taken from the book *Harry’s Farewell: Interpreting and Teaching the Truman Presidency* (2004), edited by Richard S. Kirkendall.

Ken Hechler’s essay was specially written for this book. Hechler participated in the 2004 Key West conference and also in a symposium held in Kansas City in July 2006 to mark the fifty-eighth anniversary of the issuance of Executive Order 9981, but on neither occasion did he prepare a paper. One of the last living members of

Truman's White House staff, Hechler feels a responsibility to record what the Truman presidency was really like for the people who participated in it. At least some of what historians have written about Truman over the years has probably seemed strange to a man who saw the president often and who experienced day-to-day life in the White House during the years of the Truman presidency.

The efforts of many people and several institutions are reflected in this book. The Key West conference on Truman's civil rights legacy was convened by Robert P. Watson, professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University; Michael J. Devine, director of the Truman Presidential Museum and Library; and Robert J. Wolz, director of the Harry S. Truman Little White House. Florida Keys Community College provided a venue for most of the conference's sessions. The sponsors included Historic Tours of America, the Monroe County Tourist Development Council, the Harry S. Truman Little White House, the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs, the Lifelong Learning Society at Florida Atlantic University, the John D. Evans Foundation, the Florida Atlantic University Foundation, and the Larkin Charitable Trust. Gratitude is due to many people associated with all the organizations mentioned above, and especially to Ed Swift and Chris Belland, president and CEO, respectively, of Historic Tours of America; Piper Smith and Monica Muoz of Historic Tours of America; William Seeker, president of Florida Keys Community College; Kathy Knotts, vice president for development of the Harry S. Truman Library Foundation for National and International Affairs; Frank T. Brogan, president of Florida Atlantic University; Richard Yon of Florida Atlantic University; and Liz Safly and Scott Roley of the Truman Library.

INTRODUCTION

Interpreting the Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman

Raymond H. Geselbracht

On 13 April 1966, about twenty historians, political scientists, and archivists came together at the Truman Library to talk about the Truman administration and the work being undertaken by scholars to understand it. This was the fourth biennial conference sponsored by the Truman Library's nonprofit partner, the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs. It was designed to be different from the first three conferences in that, for the first time, formal papers were presented and discussed; these papers were published the following year under the title *The Truman Period as a Research Field*. The book was edited by Richard S. Kirkendall, a young historian at the University of Missouri whose involvement with Truman scholarship and the Truman Library would extend well into the twenty-first century. Besides this planned formal difference in the 1966 conference, something else was very different too. The scholars and archivists witnessed the presentation of some jarring content, the like of which had not been heard at the Truman Library before. President Truman was still alive and well and he came to the library virtually every day; he was on the Truman Library Institute's board, as were several former members of his administration. There was an unspoken understanding that the institute-sponsored conferences of scholars would be constructive and benevolent. But now, at this 1966 conference, participants heard some troubling things from some of the scholars. Perhaps the Cold War had been brought on by President Truman's unnecessarily belligerent attitude toward

the Soviet Union; perhaps his administration acquiesced in the domination of the economy by big business; perhaps he pursued his civil rights program sporadically, without deep commitment, and largely for political reasons. The President Truman put forward by some of the scholars at the 1966 conference was not a heroic figure, not a great idealist, not a partisan of all the people who did what was right because it was right. He was something smaller, a president who was complicit with existing elites, crafty if not cynical, reckless and sometimes simpleminded in his management of world affairs. Revisionist history had made its way to the Truman Library and been sponsored by the Truman Library Institute. Not everyone associated with the library and the institute liked this brand of history, and the institute in time decided to sponsor a different kind of conference, not focused on scholars and scholarship, but rather on capturing the memories of surviving members of Truman's administration and recording their typically laudatory assessments of Truman's leadership. Revisionists were too unpleasant to invite into one's own space.

It was in this environment of historiographical division that the first substantial literature relating to the Truman administration's civil rights program was created. When the Truman Library Institute brought sixteen scholars together in 1968 to discuss the Truman administration's civil rights achievements, the conversation seemed probing and largely formless. It was almost as if there were no experts among these scholars. Some were better informed and better able to generalize about Truman and civil rights than others, but as a group they did not seem to share a basic sense of the narrative of the Truman administration's involvement with civil rights.¹ The literature did not exist that would have given them a basic sense of what had happened and what it might mean.

Within five years, such a literature did exist. Between 1969 and 1973, three books and two articles established the narrative of Harry S. Truman and civil rights. The first book to appear, in 1969, was Richard M. Dalfiume's *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953*. Then, in 1970, came William Berman's *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration*, and, in the same year, Barton Bernstein's article "The Ambiguous Legacy: The Truman Administration and Civil Rights," which appeared in Bernstein's edited volume of revisionist essays, *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*. Harvard Sitkoff's article, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948:

The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics” appeared in 1971, and two years later, Donald McCoy and Richard Ruetten’s *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* was published. In five short years, an accomplished body of literature about Truman’s civil rights program had been created. It was sophisticated and thoroughly researched, making use of manuscript collections that were being opened, including the papers of Harry S. Truman and members of his administration. The different pieces of this literature can almost be read as a single work, telling the same story, or important elements of it, from different perspectives, and fractured along the same divide as was apparent during the Truman Library’s 1966 conference.

On one side of the divide were Dalfove, McCoy, and Ruetten, the “liberal” historians, according to one prominent historian who observed the unfolding of this historiography. On the other side of the divide were Berman, Bernstein, and Sitkoff, who were the “radicals” or “revisionists.” The liberals, judging Truman from the perspective of his own time, concluded that his civil rights accomplishments were substantial and important, and were motivated largely by sincerely held principle. The revisionists, while often very appreciative of what Truman did to advance civil rights, were inclined to regard his achievement as meager, hesitantly undertaken, polluted by political motives, and, when viewed from the perspective of the troubled late 1960s and early 1970s, terribly inadequate in view of what the race problem had become.² Berman’s use of “politics” as his book title’s opening word suggests his view that Truman was not always a principled advocate of civil rights; Bernstein labels the result of Truman’s efforts on behalf of civil rights an “ambiguous legacy,” and Sitkoff describes Truman as a “reluctant champion” of civil rights.

Despite their somewhat discordant interpretative framework, these books and articles established a compelling narrative of the Truman administration’s encounter with civil rights. The narrative remains compelling today, and it is found in more or less complete form in several of the essays in this book. The old dialogue between liberal and revisionist interpretations is considerably altered in these essays as a result both of the opening of new materials relating to Truman’s personal views on race and civil rights, and of the development of new perspectives on Truman’s civil rights program in response to the events of the last thirty-five years.

Some of Harry Truman’s personal writings, which were not available at the time the books and articles described above were

being written, depict a president and a person who had a deep commitment to civil rights for all Americans. It is harder now than it was in 1970 to argue that Truman approached civil rights solely or primarily as a crafty politician, trying to keep the South in the Democratic Party and to win the African American vote. He did want to do these things, but his personal writings strongly suggest that he also genuinely wanted all Americans to have the rights he believed were promised them by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Truman's personal writings also reveal a man who had all the racial prejudices of his region and his time; some of the essays in this book express the surprise many historians feel when telling the story of what one called "The Conversion of Harry S. Truman" from racist to champion of civil rights.³

The liberal versus revisionist dialogue has also been altered by new perspectives on Truman's civil rights program that have grown out of the events of the last few decades. Both sides of the historiography relating to Truman and civil rights have been affected by these events. The liberal side has become largely detached from a faded liberalism and is now associated with a depiction of President Truman as a partly mythic person and leader, almost an Abraham Lincoln of the twentieth century. The timing of the emergence of this mythic Truman, and the surprising popularity of some of the literature that has helped create the myth, suggests that the nation, beginning at about the time Truman died, longed for such a mythic figure to help it recover from the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandals. Margaret Truman's adoring biography of her father, *Harry S. Truman* (1972), appeared at about the time he died. Merle Miller's immensely popular *Plain Speaking*, which was based partly on the author's extensive interviews with a very folksy old Harry Truman and was full of appealing common sense without a hint of pretense or disingenuousness, was published in 1974. Sam Gallu's play, *Give'em Hell, Harry* (1975), continued the process of converting the real Harry S. Truman into a figure of folk culture. At the play's end, Gallu's Truman comes upon a little boy during one of his walks, and says to the young fellow, "What my job is is just to try to keep this country in some sort of working order so that when it comes time to turn it over to you young folks, it'll be in good shape." Members of the audience during the play's early performances—including President Gerald Ford, who attended the play's gala premier at Ford's Theater—probably doubted Presidents Johnson and Nixon

had measured up to this simple job description. Two collections of Truman's very artful and artless (both at the same time) personal writings, *Off the Record* (1980) and *Dear Bess* (1983), demonstrated that the real Truman was perhaps as appealing as his admirers contended. David McCullough's *Truman* (1992) brought this highly favorable view of its subject to millions of readers. The Harry S. Truman presented in this literature is not quite the flesh and blood man who was president of the United States from 1945 to 1953, but he is the Truman most Americans who think about Truman believe in, because they want to believe in their country and in the best selves of all their countrymen. This Truman was capable of undertaking the noble mission of providing civil rights to all Americans, and that is how those sharing this very favorable, partly mythic, view of Truman see his civil rights program.

The other side in the new historiographical dialogue, the successor to the old revisionist side, has also developed a new perspective in response to events. Where the old revisionist interpretation emphasized political calculation, its new successor emphasizes geopolitical calculation. The old revisionists believed Truman was moved by domestic political concerns to limit his civil rights program within narrow bounds; the new revisionists believe geopolitical aspirations caused Truman to limit his civil rights program. The new perspective views Truman's civil rights program as a function of American foreign policy, and consequently tends strongly to view it globally, in the context of the Cold War. This perspective emerges from such books as Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000), Thomas Borstelmann's *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (2001), and Carol Anderson's *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (2003). From this foreign policy and globalist perspective, Truman's commitment to so-called civil rights—a concept derived from American history and American social and economic beliefs and practices, and including rights of legal equality and the right to a broadened, if not necessarily equal, opportunity to advance oneself socially and economically—was inadequate to the needs of disadvantaged people of color all over the world, including African Americans. These people of color often lacked what the United Nations called their “human rights,” a concept which included a broad entitlement to social and economic rights as well as the right to the legal equality included in “civil rights.” Although Truman sometimes in

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Raymond Frey is a professor of history at Centenary College in Hackettstown, New Jersey. He is recipient of the Evening Division Teaching Award from Pace University, the Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching from Centenary, and the Award for Teaching New Jersey History, and was the 2005-2006 Gates-Ferry Foundation Distinguished Lecturer. He has contributed to several books on the Truman administration and first ladies, and is the author of *William James Durant, An Intellectual Biography* (1991). He was keynote speaker at the Truman Library's 2002 commemoration of the birthday of Bess Truman and is on the editorial board of the journal *White House Studies*.

Michael R. Gardner is a communications policy lawyer in Washington DC. He has taught a course on the modern American presidency at Georgetown University for eight years. His book, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks*, won the Henry Adams Prize for 2003. Gardner has served on presidential commissions under Nixon, Ford, Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

Raymond H. Geselbracht is special assistant to the director at the Harry S. Truman Library. He previously served as an archivist at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Project. He has published many articles on historical and archival subjects, including a recent series of articles on personal aspects of Truman's life and career. He has also published a descriptive map of places in the Kansas City area that were especially important to Truman, and a history of the Truman Library.

Ken Hechler was a special assistant to President Truman from 1949 to 1953. He served nine terms in Congress (1959–1977) as a representative from West Virginia where he helped organize support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He was the only sitting member of Congress to march with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, Alabama in 1965. He served as West Virginia's secretary of state from 1985 to 2001. Hechler received a doctorate in political science from Columbia University and taught at Columbia University, Barnard College, Princeton University, and Marshall University. He worked with Samuel I. Rosenman and President Franklin D. Roosevelt to edit the thirteen volume *Public Papers and Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt*. He also served as a combat historian in the European theater during World War II. He has written six books, including *The Bridge at Remagen*.

Tom Lansford is assistant dean of the College of Arts and Letters and associate professor of political science at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is author or coauthor of a number of books, including *A Bitter Harvest: US Foreign Policy and Afghanistan* (2003) and *Strategic Preemption: US Foreign Policy and the Second War in Iraq* (2004). He is also coeditor of several collections including *America's War on Terror* (2003), *George W. Bush: A Political and Ethical Assessment at Midterm* (2004), and *Transatlantic Security Dilemmas: Old Europe, New Europe and the US* (2005).

John Lewis has been a member of Congress from Georgia since 1987. He first became active in the civil rights movement while a college student in Nashville, Tennessee and became nationally recognized as a civil rights leader after his prominent role during the Selma to Montgomery marches. He became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and spoke at the March on Washington in 1963. He has been jailed more than forty times as a result of his activism on behalf of civil rights. He was elected to the Atlanta City Council in 1982 and to Congress in 1986. In 1998, he published *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir to the Movement*, chronicling his service in the civil rights movement.

Carrie Meek is president of the Carrie Meek Foundation, whose goal is the economic and community empowerment of the people of south Florida. She served in the Florida House of Representatives and the Florida Senate before being elected as U.S. Representative in 1992. During her tenure in the Florida Senate, she developed much of Florida's current housing finance policy. She holds a master's degree from the University of Michigan and has been awarded Doctor of Laws degrees by the University of Miami, Florida A&M University, and Rollins College. The *Congressional Quarterly* has recognized Meek as one of the "50 Most Effective Members of Congress," and she was awarded the LeRoy Collins Lifetime Achievement Award by business and community leaders in Florida.

Colin Powell has served as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (1987–1989), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1989–1993), and Secretary of State (2001–2005). He was the first African American to serve in each of these three positions. He served in the Office of Management and Budget under President Nixon, as an assistant to the Secretary of Energy and assistant to the Deputy Secretary of Defense under President Carter, and as senior military assistant to the Secretary of Defense under President Reagan. He was the first chairman of America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth, which he founded in 1997. In 1995, he published his autobiography, *My American Journey*.

Richard M. Yon completed his master's degree in political science at Florida Atlantic University in 2004 and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Florida. Yon has written or co-authored several

book chapters, journal articles, and book reviews relating to the presidency. He recently co-edited an encyclopedia on the presidency.

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