The Environmental Legacy of Harry S. Truman

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Truman and the Environment: Los Alamos to the Everglades
May 2007
Key West, Florida

Edited by
Karl Boyd Brooks

THE ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY of HARRY S. TRUMAN

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Karl Boyd Brooks

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“In the Mesopotamian Valley alone there could be a revival of the Garden of Eden that would take care of thirty million people and feed all of the Near East if it were properly developed. The Zambezi River in Africa and a similar area in southern Brazil could also be converted into sections comparable to the Tennessee Valley in our own country if the people of those regions only had access to the ‘know-how’ which we possess.”

—Harry S. Truman,
remarks to American businessmen,
20 October 1949

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PREFACE

Between 1945 and 1953, new technologies, ambitious national purposes, and changing popular values transformed America's natural environment. And at World War II's end, the United States, a new type of "superpower," could now project its national policy around the Earth, with profound effects on the global commons. After that July 1945 morning when a new sun burst the cool predawn darkness above the New Mexican desert, an American president would always have the awful capacity to trigger events that might jeopardize the continued existence of human life across the planet. The threat of nuclear destruction that persists today, but remains only a nightmare, surely constitutes Harry Truman's most consequential legacy for the Earth and all life that inhabits it.

Previous Truman Legacy conferences have all, in one way or another, tried to put in historic context the awesome power America attained after 1945, a world-altering capacity made manifest by this nation's creation and proliferation of atomic weapons. The 2007 Key West conference on Truman's environmental legacy for the first time tried tracing history's arc from Los Alamos, where the bomb was perfected, to the Everglades, the country's largest new national park established during Truman's presidency. As nuclear weapons certainly presented postwar Americans their most humbling problem, so South Florida's fabled "river of grass," the object of this nation's costliest and most complex experiment in environmental rehabilitation, presents citizens our most hopeful chance of remedying what was done wrong in the past.

The conferees believed knowing something about how President Truman handled the natural world might assist Americans in measuring how well his successors have discharged their constitutional duty "to promote the common welfare." Environmental history makes a signal contribution to the task of understanding our postwar past. It stitches weapons and war into the humbler fabric composed predominantly of homier problems: tract houses sprawling across new suburbs, good jobs for the burgeoning middle class, and mass consumption fueled by the welcome but unprecedented "problem" of widespread material prosperity. Environmental history has matured since the 1970s, even as it has become more disputatious and creative since the 1990s. Taking the postwar years seriously offered a wonderful opportunity for scholars, citizens, and public officials to weigh the Truman presidency's environmental legacy.

And Key West, Florida, offered the ideal location. During Truman's years in power, it not only housed the nation's preeminent submarine base and a bustling complex of navy airfields and docks, but its gracious commander's house became the new president's second-favorite home, eclipsed in his affection only by the Delaware Street residence in Independence, Missouri. Less than a decade after Truman retired from public office in 1953, Key West had become both a vital American electronic listening post and defense communications hub, and also the staging point for military and naval efforts swirling around the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the point of maximum nuclear danger in postwar history. By the twenty-first century, America's southernmost city thrived on tourism, hosting visitors whose wealth, leisure, and lifestyles would have both dazzled and disturbed the man from Independence.

A serious look at Truman's legacy for the American environment needs little defense. Administration policies in many domestic fields—economics and employment, forestry and agriculture, transportation and suburbanization, parks and power—rapidly accelerated the rate and scope of environmental change. And choices made by the president, as well as his reactions to choices made by others at home and abroad, still present Americans both serious challenges and exciting opportunities over a half century later.

Not all the environmental impacts—a term rooted in legislation signed by the president in 1946—of Truman's presidency were malign, though many were, especially those with long-term, cumulative effects on the natural world. He made executive-branch appointments that empowered men to launch basic scientific research into ecology. And at least one woman, Rachel Carson, honed her gifts for writing about science and nature in the federal bureaucracy. Together with activist members of Congress and local people, the Truman administration inaugurated conservation programs that both reaffirmed and expanded traditional definitions of the "good life." And in ways this Missouri politician would have appreciated, even if he did not fully perceive them in the immediate postwar years, his presidential initiatives actually stoked political debate and aroused popular resistance. Historians are just beginning to explore the tug and push in national politics and cultural life in the late 1940s and early 1950s that stimulated the remarkable outburst of American environmental self-criticism after 1960.

Most of the presentations collected in this volume were first delivered at a symposium entitled "Harry S. Truman and the Environment," which took place in June 2007. The fifth in a series of Truman Legacy symposia, the 2007 program assembled historians, public officials, citizen activists, and journalists to assess the meaning and significance of postwar American environmental law, politics, and policy. Both the white-hot flash of the first atomic bomb, perfected in Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1945, and the warm green glow of Everglades National Park, dedicated by President Truman in 1947, illuminated a robust, hopeful gathering.

Like previous Truman Legacy Symposia, the 2007 conference was produced through a partnership of the Harry S. Truman Library Institute for National and International Affairs, the Truman Little White House, and the Southeast Region of the National Archives. My home institution, the University of Kansas, graciously supported my work, while Florida Keys Community College also offered valuable academic and logistic assistance, especially the generous provision of its Tennessee Williams Theatre, a venue ideally suited for an event mixing scholarly interchange and frank, funny give-and-take among South Floridians in and out of public office. Support for the symposium was provided by Historic Tours of America, Monroe County Tourist Development Council, the Key West Truman Foundation, John D. Evans Foundation, Waterfront Playhouse board of directors, and the Spottswood Companies.

Special expressions of gratitude go to Ed Swift, Chris Belland, Piper Smith, and Monica Munoz of Historic Tours of America. Lydia Estenoz and Michael McPherson of Florida Keys Community College assisted in logistics. Able advice and tireless efforts came from James McSweeney of the National Archives–Southeast Region; Scott Roley and Ray Geselbracht of the Harry S. Truman Library staff; and Frank Woods, Charlie Allen, and Paul Hilson of the Tennessee Williams Fine Art Center. A special thank-you goes to Clifton Truman Daniel and Ken Hechler for their distinctive, invaluable contributions to the symposium.

As before, Bob Wolz, executive director of the Truman Little White House, and Michael Devine, director of the Harry S. Truman Library, deserve the conference organizer's deepest thanks. Mike first imagined environmental history contributing a heretofore underappreciated perspective on the Truman presidency. And Bob understood instinctively what Mike wanted to create, and labored tirelessly to stage, host, and supervise the event. My wife, Mary, and I were only two of the dozens of symposium participants who savored Key West's salubrious surroundings courtesy of Bob's and Mike's generous, accomplished spirits.

In the preparation and editing of this volume, Barbara Smith-Mandell of Truman State University Press supplied good sense, scholarly insight, and abundant patience. The researchers, policy makers, lawyers, and citizens who read this book must do the rest by carefully, empathetically, and imaginatively reconsidering and appreciating how the Truman presidency transformed America's and the world's natural environment.

Karl Boyd Brooks
University of Kansas (Lawrence)
January 2009

INTRODUCTION

Los Alamos to the Everglades— Harry S. Truman's Environmental Legacy

Karl Boyd Brooks

In the state of Harry Truman's birth, in the first autumn both of peace and his presidency, a conservationist mused about properly commemorating Allied victory in World War II. Charles H. Callison edited *Missouri Conservationist,* the monthly magazine published by the state agency charged with protecting fish and wildlife. His column acknowledged that tradition dictated the usual memorials saluting triumph in war: fluted victory columns, mighty granite blocks capped by bronzed weapons, equestrian statues of generals. For Callison, though, the peace just purchased so dearly by American blood and treasure warranted something fundamentally different. Future generations needed space and time to recall—and to forget—this terrible war's costs. "Let us raise no brazen columns," he implored *Missouri Conservationist* readers. Instead, Americans should herald war's end and the prospect of peace by dedicating parks and conservation areas.

The usual victory monuments now invited only a passing glance, Callison noted. Places set apart in nature—whether parks managed intensively by public agencies or wilder reaches preserved from invasive development—would offer peaceful citizens both solace and pleasure. In their new "victory parks," Americans might begin to forget war's horrors. Both veterans and civilians could also properly understand the high price paid to secure the peace by relaxing and recreating: fishing, hiking, hunting, boating, or just loafing after a week's hard work.

Callison's November 1945 column speculated about nature's new centrality to people who had lived for two decades under the shadows of want and war. "Nothing strips a man's thinking down to fundamentals like fighting a war," he contended. Americans had just undergone "a drastic reappraisal of values which should point the way toward more intelligent living." In their "new conception of the function of wildlife in a modern civilization," Callison believed citizens would recognize "wild creatures and the environment in which they live [as] essential to the very health and morale of the nation." Hunters and anglers, to be sure, reveled in pursuing their quarry, but "the real importance of wildlife resources … is in the recreation and pleasure they give millions of Americans, including millions who never fire a gun or bait a hook."[1]

Eight years after the *Missouri Conservationist* endorsed "parks for peace," President Harry S. Truman delivered his farewell address to the nation. Of course, he mostly told listeners and viewers in January 1953 about his administration's record in foreign policy, national security, and economic management. Those issues preoccupied most Americans. They have driven most Truman-era historical scholarship during the past half century. But the president himself encouraged his fellow citizens—and, by implication, future historians—to meditate about the links his presidency forged—and shattered—between human society and the natural world. Truman's farewell invites historians to begin assessing the president's environmental legacy as carefully and critically as they have his more celebrated legacies in national security, civil rights, and economic direction.[2]

The president's farewell "dream[ed] out loud just a little" about how to preserve American security in a dangerous, war-torn world. His "dream of the future" restated two cardinal principles that had guided his decisions about conserving and using natural resources since becoming president in April 1945. First, the national government's elected and appointed officials had to control nature with technology and capital to generate the ever-burgeoning material prosperity that undergirded community security. And second, permanent economic expansion offered the best means of guaranteeing national security against deadly enemies abroad and their potential sympathizers at home.[3]

The president cited examples from far away, in time and space, to illustrate his dream for postwar Americans. "We can use the peaceful tools that science has forged for us to do away with poverty and human misery everywhere on earth," he predicted. Drawing on his deep stock of biblical lore, Truman reminded Americans about the agricultural potential once enjoyed in the Tigris-Euphrates basin and northeast Africa's temperate savannah. His fascination with ancient history inspired him to recall how South America's jungles had once nurtured great civilizations. After American capital and skill enabled peoples now living in these once-potent places to again unlock nature's storehouse, Truman imagined "developments will come so fast we will not recognize the world in which we now live." And at home, citizens savoring their sixth consecutive year of postwar prosperity "have learned how to attain real prosperity for our people [so that] all have better incomes and more of the good things of life than ever before in the history of the world."

Historians are only now beginning to take President Truman and his administration seriously as makers of environmental history. For too long, histories of the American environment consigned Truman's presidency to the margins, interesting mostly as a precursor to the more exciting changes that accelerated after publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.[4] Even more traditional forms of conservation history, which emphasized government policy dealing with natural resources, slipped quietly past the postwar years. Neither Truman nor his successor, Dwight Eisenhower, captured the imagination of the first generation of environmental historians, who came of age during the New Frontier and Great Society. This early phase of environmental history understandably engaged the "environmental decade" of the 1970s, striving to link it to the heady reform movements that roiled the 1960s. Abetted by the first cadre of self-proclaimed environmental lawyers in the academy, historians accepted somewhat uncritically the presumptuous claim that the first Earth Day in April 1970 inaugurated the *année zéro* of environmental politics.[5]

To write a better environmental history of America after 1945, students of the Truman presidency—which encompasses more than just decisions made by the president—should stop deferring to the more glamorous, magnetic sixties. Double-breasted charcoal-grey suits deserve their due, despite popular culture's enduring fascination with bell-bottoms and T-shirts! Postwar lawmaking—understood broadly as public policy debated and implemented at all governmental levels, from village to Capitol Hill—shaped the basic legal topography upon which lawmakers raised the seventies' great monuments: the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, the 1970 Clean Air Act, and the 1972 Clean Water Act. The years between 1945 and 1956 contributed no less to American environmental history than did the dozen years after *Silent Spring*. Truman's legacy reshaped the nation's and the globe's environment. By that simple standard, his presidency's environmental legacy matters as much, and compels as searching an examination, as his better-known influences on foreign policy, military alliances, and civil rights.[6]

Truman's environmental legacy presents a historian's paradox. His Democratic successors, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, consciously sought to make their marks as "environmental presidents." Each delivered to Congress a special message embodying a variation on the theme that his administration was promoting "the new conservation." Even their

Republican successor, Richard M. Nixon, instinctively grasped the environment's political potential and public novelty. His New Year's Day nationally televised message heralding the seventies featured him signing NEPA, one of the few federal laws still best known by its acronym. Nixon's NEPA still requires every federal agency to prepare documents still best known by *their* acronym: EIS. This very term, "environmental impact statement," neatly illustrates the historian's paradox. Issues generated by the relationship between Americans and their natural world powerfully impacted the presidents who served in the sixties and seventies. Correspondingly, they tried to portray themselves as distinctively new types of "environmental presidents." Harry Truman never contended he was doing anything new about the natural world. Yet many of his decisions, and nearly every event during his presidency that highlighted Americans' dependence on the natural world, changed the history of this nation.

Just consider, as a starting place, Los Alamos, the tiny New Mexican town in which Truman's 1945 decisions to test and use the atomic bomb ignited the atomic age. The president's contributions to the proliferation of nuclear weapons are beyond the scope of this essay and the others in this volume about topics addressed by the 2007 Legacy Symposium. Undoubtedly, though, Truman's pursuit of nuclear supremacy during the Cold War made the natural world a different, more forbidding place after 1953. Weapons production and testing during the postwar years led the American government to sacrifice both human health and environmental quality. Just one federal nuclear-weapons research and production facility, the Hanford Site bordering the Columbia River in southeastern Washington State, discharged more than two hundred billion gallons of waste into the air, water, and land between 1945 and 1983. Hanford, by all definitions, is the most heavily contaminated of all the nuclear weapons sites scattered coast to coast. At this one small outpost of the nuclear establishment created by Truman's Cold War strategy, the federal government's "sole mission is now waste management and cleanup."[7]

The globe itself bears Cold War scars. More than Americans suffered and died because of governments' frantic pursuit of national security through nuclear might. Russians and Eastern Europeans, disgusted by the environmental destruction inflicted on them and their landscapes by the Soviet system, overthrew Communist dictatorships in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Citizen demands for truth-telling and environmental protection supplied some of the most corrosive acids that eroded Communist legitimacy in the former Eastern Bloc.[8]

In the United States, though, people living in the American West may have paid the highest price for President Truman's determination to build a nuclear arsenal capable of protecting not only this country but all of its Cold War allies as well. "The race for nuclear superiority over the Soviets took precedence over the safety of Americans," concludes a recent survey of American history. In the "Atomic West," citizens and their governments still must reckon "with serious environmental costs."[9] Historians of Truman-era conservation once ignored the environmental consequences of nuclear weapons, preferring to discuss federal dams, canals, and power lines. Now, though, the "Cold War West" is increasingly understood as part of "the Atomic West."[10]

Even on Truman's home ground, global military mobilization commandeered natural forces with long-lasting environmental effects. Toxic materials discharged during a half century by the federal nuclear-bomb component plant in southern Kansas City, Missouri, still pollute the lower Blue River watershed where a younger Harry Truman once rowed his "best girl," Bess, on lazy Sunday afternoons. And on the largest expanse of public land in metropolitan Kansas City, ignorance about the quantity, location, and toxicity of buried waste complicates reuse of the former Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant outside DeSoto, Kansas.[11]

War and peace, and the way in which American know-how and money could mobilize natural environments, were never far from Truman's mind during his tumultuous eight years in the White House. His first State of the Union address, in January 1946, had urged Congress to approve billions of dollars worth of new power dams and desert irrigation projects to forestall a postwar depression. As he campaigned to save his political life in 1948, he often equated his postwar agenda, dubbed the Fair Deal, with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. In full-on partisan mode, while "giving them hell" on the campaign trail, Truman passionately evoked the American majority's craving for economic security and national strength. As his great idol FDR had done so thoroughly during the Great Depression and World War II, the president wanted to put his own stamp on aggressive federal exploitation of nature. Truman belittled opponents as penny-pinchers, denigrating their skepticism about spending new billions to remodel rivers and landscapes as selfish corporate apologetics and narrow obstructionism.[12]

Listen to Truman in full campaign battle cry, midway through his presidency. To a trackside crowd in Boise, Idaho, in May 1950, he praised Democratic majorities in the 81st Congress for passing a Rivers and Harbors Act to authorize over $1.5 billion in new dams and water projects. Breathtaking in scope and size, the Truman water agenda sought to deliver on FDR's vision of planned development of nature for human betterment. Throughout the Columbia–Snake River Basin of the Pacific Northwest, the Missouri Basin in the heartland, and amid the swamps of South Florida,

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