

A Consequential Presidency

Harry Truman: 1945 to 1953

The sudden death of Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945, thrust into the presidency a man virtually unknown to the great majority of Americans. Harry Truman's unexpected ascendancy to the highest office in the land was greeted with dismay by much of the media and the American public. How could a poorly educated U.S. Senator from Missouri possibly fill the shoes of his great predecessor? With the nation still locked in conflict with both Germany and Japan, the alarm was understandable, but the little man from Missouri rapidly dispelled this anxiety and went on to have almost two full terms in the White House and oversaw more consequential decisions affecting America's position in the world than FDR himself.

This two-session course will look at two of the most crucial events of the Truman presidency: (1) His successful reelection in 1948, which stunned pollsters and especially Republican candidate Thomas A. Dewey; and (2) the nightmarish end to his presidency, when he struggled to contain communism in Korea and the world generally, while contending with the arrogant General Douglas MacArthur and his Republican supporters, who pushed for a wider war against the "Reds," even if it meant taking on the Chinese communist regime.

Lecture I

The immediate post-World War II years in the United States were marked by optimism, inflation, international tension, and a deep partisan divide, both on the domestic and foreign policy fronts. The vast expenditures of the war years and the lack of consumer goods meant that as soon as the fighting stopped, there would be a mad rush to buy cars, homes, and just about every conceivable consumer product. Americans had more money in their pockets than ever before, but workers still went out on strike at an unprecedented rate: railroads, coal mines, steel mills, as well as motion picture studio workers and school teachers walked off their jobs to demand higher wages, shorter hours, and additional fringe benefits, including company subsidized health insurance. The Congress had already passed the GI Bill of Rights in 1944 with great bi-partisan support and millions of the returning veterans received tuition and living assistance from the government to pursue college degrees. The law also provided low-interest mortgage loans and vocational training benefits. Instead of the feared depression, the country entered a period of almost two decades of unprecedented prosperity.

But before that happened, inflation reached almost 20 per cent in 1946, and government workers received huge pay increases to cope with the rising prices, sometimes as much as 30 per cent, with the lowest paid workers getting the largest increases. In the private sector, the strong unions that had come to dominate all of the basic industries pressed their agendas, forcing large corporations to raise wages as never before and resulting in a steadily shrinking gap between the average worker's salary and that of the company CEO.

This rosy economic picture provided the foundation for the success of the Truman Administration, which favored the unions, although often at odds with their leadership. United

Mine Workers head John L. Lewis and CIO chairman Philip Murray and other union leaders pushed strikes against the railroads, the coal mines and the steel industry. Still, Truman did veto the Taft-Hartley Act, which sought to limit union power, although it was then passed over his veto in 1947. He was pro-labor, but saw many of the union bosses as using their power to blackmail him and the nation as a whole into making extreme concessions to management.

Despite these generally positive developments during the immediate post-war years, Truman's election prospects in 1947 and 1948 were anything but bright. His inexperience in high executive office was evident. Although he will eventually develop a highly-talented group of advisors, in the White House itself he surrounded himself with old Missouri friends, some of whom engaged in petty graft. But on the larger questions, Truman made the right decisions. Faced with a deepening communist threat from Stalin's USSR, he responded in March 1947 with what came to be called "The Truman Doctrine." In a speech asking Congress for a large economic and military aid package for Greece and Turkey, Truman emphasized the relentless nature of the Soviet threat, especially in war-devastated Europe. His "doctrine" declared that the United States would come to the aid of countries, especially European democracies, in danger of communist takeover, either by armed insurrection – as in Greece – or through subversion of weak democratic governments, as appeared increasingly likely in Italy and France,

Eventually the Truman Doctrine will underpin the European Recovery Program, known as the Marshall Plan, because Gen. George Marshall, as U.S. Secretary of State, announced this immense initiative in a commencement speech at Harvard in June 1947. The passage -- with bipartisan support -- of the European Recovery Act of April 1948 started this five-year program of massive aid to the devastated European economies and marked the division of Europe into communist-dominated and non-communist countries. The Allied decision to create a single German currency, the Deutschmark, as the legal tender of both Berlin and other occupied zones, led to Stalin's decision to blockade access to Berlin in June 1948 and the beginning, shortly thereafter, of the Berlin airlift, which lasted well into 1949. All of these events on the international front shaped the situation faced by candidates for the 1948 election's nomination and election campaigns, and, ultimately contributed to Truman's surprise victory in the November 1948 presidential election.

Equally important in understanding the context of the election were the domestic programs that Truman championed and that the GOP almost uniformly opposed. This opposition became especially powerful after the November 1946 mid-term elections in which the GOP took control of both Houses of Congress for the first time since 1930. While generally supportive of Truman's adamant opposition to communist expansion abroad, the Republicans took issue with Truman's attempts to continue and expand the New Deal programs of his eminent predecessor. Already since the mid-term elections of 1938, Republicans and conservative Democrats – mainly from the southern states – had been successful in paring back many of Roosevelt's initiatives. The coming of the war, however, had inevitably greatly expanded the role of government in the lives of every American. Price controls, rationing, the institution of income tax withholding from peoples' salaries, and a host of new agencies to channel the nation's industrial might into

war production, meant that what the New Deal had not been able to achieve in the way of government directed economic policy, actually came to realization due to wartime necessities.

Right-wing Republicans – and in this era there were still moderate Republican representatives and senators – pushed the idea that the nation, and especially the federal government, was in imminent danger of subversion by domestic communists. Truman quickly instituted by executive action a program to ferret out disloyal civil servants, but the combined efforts of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his Republican supporters to uproot suspected communists fed into the general “Red Scare” hysteria that would continue through the late 1940’s into the early years of the Eisenhower Administration. Especially virulent in its veritable “witch hunt” for communists was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Its very name savored of a kangaroo court: What gave this committee the right to declare some of their fellow citizens “Un-American?” Most of the damage inflicted by this committee and its counterpart in the Senate -- known as the Internal Security Subcommittee of the Justice Committee-- on the civil rights of Americans occurred after the 1948 election, so we won’t go into detail about the Red Scare in these lectures.

With their victory in the 1946 mid-term elections and with the perception that the country was ready for a change in Washington, the Republicans exuded confidence as 1947 turned into 1948. Given the prospects of a Republican victory (which most polls were predicting), there was no lack of candidates for the presidential nomination.

Although a number of states held primary elections to nominate candidates for both parties, most delegates were still picked by political bosses and other party officials in the months before the national conventions.

The Candidates

Republicans

Dewey

--Ultimate nominee; wooden campaigner; mustache; a bit prissy

Taft

--Poor campaigner; dour personality; isolationist

Vandenberg

--Michigan senator and “favorite son”; internationalist

Stassen

--Young. Becomes perennial candidate; Inept debate performance in Oregon against Dewey

MacArthur

--In Japan, but willing to accept a draft; ko'd in Wisconsin primary

Democrats

Truman

--Some party pros attempt to “dump” Truman and lure Eisenhower in 1948

--Most state party officials were reconciled to Truman, but expected him to lose

Wallace

--Campaign largely under CPUSA control

Thurmond

--Governor of S. Carolina and leading “Dixiecrat”

The Issues

Confronting the Soviets and other communists

- Communist takeover of Eastern Europe
- Czech government overthrow
- Berlin Blockade and Airlift
- Ongoing Chinese civil war

Domestic communist threat

- Loyalty oaths
- House Un-American Activities Committee
- McCarthy and other Republican demagogues

Economic Issues

- Inflation: Truman wants price controls; Republicans do not; blames 80th Congress for not doing anything about inflation.
- Between 1946 and 1948, food prices went up 47 per cent

Civil rights

- Truman’s declaration on civil rights
- Role of Hubert Humphrey and party liberals
- Integration of the armed forces
- Calls for equal political participation, equal employment opportunity, right to “security of person”; nothing about “integration” or public schools or other facilities.

Strikes and union power

- 1946 strikes and price inflation
- Truman’s attempt to draft railroad workers (May 1946)
- Fight with union leaders

- Taft-Hartley Act of 1947

Jewish-Arab Conflict in Palestine

- Truman's support for Jewish state
- Secretary of State Marshall's opposition
- Domestic Jewish pressure

Truman's fitness for the job

- Polls all show him losing in 1948
- Ridicule: "To err is Truman"
- Editorial opposition; 70 per cent of newspapers support Dewey
- Opposition within the Democratic Party

Truman's Response

Truman attacks "Do Nothing" 80th Congress (Republican led)

Blames Congress for not doing anything to help the small farmers

Nominations and Campaigns

- For the first time, both conventions (in Philadelphia) were televised. In fact, the new Progressive Party also held its conventions in Philadelphia largely due to the new coaxial cable connecting that city with television viewers from Washington to Boston. Both CBS and NBC broadcast live coverage of the conventions of the two major parties.
- The Republican Party platform extolled the achievements of the 80th Congress where Republican majorities in both houses had sought to cancel New Deal programs which the GOP considered wasteful and, in many cases, an infringement of personal freedom. The platform cited passage of the Taft-Hartley Act as a major accomplishment and condemned Truman's vetoes of many of the Congress's cost-cutting measures. Warning of communist influence in the labor movement and the federal government, the platform promised a thorough investigation of suspected communists and their removal from sensitive positions.
- The Democratic Party platform adopted at their convention called for an end to racial discrimination in hiring, abolition of the poll tax in the Southern states, an end to segregation in schools and other public facilities. It also called for an expansion of Social Security coverage to agricultural workers and other categories not covered by the original legislation.
- The Alabama delegation walked out of the Convention the day after the civil rights plank of the platform was adopted on a rather close vote and other southern delegates eventually followed. They met later at a separate convention in Birmingham, Alabama and established a Southern Democratic Party, with Strom Thurmond as its candidate for president and Mississippi governor Fielding Wright for vice president. The so-called

Dixiecrat Party will appear on the ballot in most of the southern states, eventually winning the electoral votes of South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

Henry Wallace, who had served as FDR's Secretary of Agriculture and then Vice President from 1940 to 1944, and as Truman's Secretary of Commerce from 1945 to 1947, eventually launched a separate bid for the presidency as the candidate of the newly created Progressive Party with Idaho senator Gary Taylor as his running mate. The Progressive ticket appeared on the ballot in most states, but ultimately gained only a tiny percentage of the vote and no electoral votes. The Dixiecrats, on the other hand, took 39 electoral votes, all from the four southern states mentioned above.

The Republican convention was the last in which a candidate for the presidency did not receive the nomination on the first ballot. Thomas Dewey had the most delegates, but a number of other candidates succeeded in getting enough votes to deny him an early victory, Robert Taft and Michigan senator Arthur Vandenberg were the two major opponents. Taft represented the party's most conservative elements, which rejected the whole New Deal as socialism and vowed to return the country to its glorious free market past. Vandenberg was essentially a "favorite son" of the Michigan delegation, and he dropped out after the second ballot. Former Minnesota governor Harold Stassen seemed to many to represent an attractive alternative to Dewey. He was younger and somewhat more liberal, but his flubbing of a major factual question in a debate with Dewey in the Oregon primary proved to be his undoing. Dewey's rather weak showing at the convention betrayed a lack of enthusiasm for his candidacy among a large part of the delegates, fearing that his defeat by Roosevelt in 1944 had made him a poor choice in 1948. Polling, however, showed Dewey as the favorite in a race against Truman and his well-organized campaign team succeeded in pushing his nomination through.

The Campaigns

Dewey and his advisers believed his best strategy was to "play it safe." His public appearances and statements were highly rehearsed. He made extremely anodyne pronouncements, like, "the future lies ahead of us." He did some "whistle stop" campaigning, primarily in the East and South, but seemed content to spend most of his time in New York, where he was serving his first term of governor.

Truman, on the other hand, excited the convention crowd with a blood curdling speech denouncing the Republicans for their failure to deal with the country's challenges, from inflation to national security, and generally "gave them hell." He then embarked on a series of "whistle stop" campaign tours that took him to all parts of the country outside the Deep South, which his campaign had already written off. He portrayed himself and the Democratic Party as the architects of the nation's growing prosperity, appealing to union members, farmers, and, in the big cities, to Black voters. He and his advisers had concluded that the loss of some of the South to the Dixiecrats could be more than compensated for by turning out a large Black vote in the North. He touted his order integrating the armed forces and his plan to enforce fairness in hiring and in public accommodations. Throughout the campaign, Truman drew crowds that dwarfed

those of the other candidates. Farmers in Iowa and city dwellers throughout the East and Midwest turned out to greet the president by the millions. The obvious enthusiasm should have been a warning to Dewey and the Republicans, but they were genuinely shocked by the elections outcome.

Wallace's campaign suffered from a lack of money, but he still traveled the country with a small entourage, speaking to large crowds in the cities, but often just a few dozen people in the smaller towns. His name appeared on the ballot in most states, but he lacked a large volunteer force to "get out the vote" and the media and Democratic activists made much of his weird connection with mystical Asian gurus. Wallace also suffered from the obvious manipulation by his Communist Party handlers, although he himself did not belong to the party. His rather pacifist beliefs and, at times, overly sympathetic portrayal of Joseph Stalin, did not play well during these opening years of the Cold War.

Thurmond and his running-mate, Mississippi governor Fielding Wright, preached their segregationist line in a limited campaign confined largely to the sympathetic southern audiences. They hoped to gain enough votes to throw the election into the House of Representatives, where their outsize influence could dictate the winner and extract concessions in their battle against civil rights legislation, including an anti-lynching law being pushed by the Truman Administration. While they failed in this respect, their defection from the national Democratic Party foreshadowed the eventual migration of white southerners to George Wallace's American Independence Party in 1968 and then into the Republican Party after 1980.

The Results

Voter participation was quite low at 53.5 per cent of the eligible electorate (in the Eisenhower//Stevenson election four years later participation was 63.3 per cent) which probably affected all candidates and parties equally. Truman took 49.9 per cent of the vote and 303 electoral votes compared to Dewey's 45.3 per cent and 189 electoral votes. The popular vote totals were 24,105,812 for Truman and 21,970,065 for Dewey. Thurmond received 1,169,021 or 2.4 per cent of the popular vote and Wallace received roughly the same number of votes, but spread over many states they did not garner him any electoral votes. Since both the Thurmond and Wallace votes would normally have gone to the Democratic candidate (or not have been cast at all), it is safe to say that Truman's victory was quite decisive. Dewey actually did better in the popular vote in his 1944 race against FDR (22,006,285 and 46 per cent of the total vote).

Noteworthy was the inaccuracy of all of the major polling organizations, which predicted a Dewey victory from well before election day. In fact, Truman's 49.55 per cent of the vote was 4.55 per cent greater than the consensus polling data in October, and Dewey's results were almost five per cent lower than the predicted 50 per cent of the vote. Polling has gotten better since 1948, but it has proven quite inaccurate in several presidential elections, which are generally very close run affairs, with the winning candidate usually getting just over fifty per cent of the vote, or even considerably less when there are strong third party candidates, as in 1968 and 1992.

The most famous photo of the 1948 election shows Truman holding up a copy of the *Chicago Tribune* with the banner headline: “Dewey Defeats Truman.” In fact, Dewey had been ahead in early vote tallies during the night following the election, but this headline really expressed the unrealized desire of publisher Col. Robert McCormick, a rabid isolationist and right-wing Republican, making it all the sweeter for Truman. The Democrats also took control of both houses of Congress, making the loss even more bitter for the Republicans. But, as we shall see in the next lecture, Truman and the Democrats would face heavy sledding in the four years to come, both domestically, and in a faraway place called Korea, which most Americans in 1948 would have been unable to find on a world map.