

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO



PRESIDENT  
TRUMAN

“Exceptionally well written, genuinely illuminating without sacrificing complexity to clarity, and beautifully produced.”

PROFESSOR KIERNAN RYAN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN  
ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Patrick Andelic*

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# Introduction

Harry S. Truman was one of the unlikeliest American presidents in the 20th century. Indeed, until a few months before he assumed the office in April 1945, charged with resolving wars in Europe and Asia and then managing the transition to a “Cold War” with the Soviet Union, he may never have seriously thought about the White House at all. Modest and unassuming, Truman had failed in business before entering politics, and was widely thought to be a competent but undistinguished senator. He was an accidental president, taking the office on the death of his more popular predecessor. He would leave that office with the lowest approval ratings of any president in the modern era. Yet today many judge him one of the most important American leaders.

Stephen Graubard dubbed Truman “The Creator” in his collection of presidential biographies.\* He oversaw the US’s rise to superpower status, the huge social and economic changes that followed World War II, the opening skirmishes of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the transformation of the Democratic Party. The decisions he made in approaching these challenges were felt long after he left office. Without his administration, post-war America would have

\* Stephen Graubard, *The Presidents: The Transformation of the American Presidency from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama*, p.299

looked utterly different.

Robert Dallek ranks Truman as one of the four great presidents of the 20th century, alongside Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. But he distinguishes Truman from the others “for his ordinariness”. “How he rose above the commonplace to become so extraordinary makes Truman’s life and career a compelling puzzle”: this is the conundrum at the centre of this short guide.\*

## A failed haberdasher: from Independence to the White House, 1884-1945

Truman’s beginnings were humble. He was born on 8 May 1884, to a family of Scots-Irish farmers in southern Missouri. His early childhood memories were happy, though the family’s finances were often shaky. When Truman was six years old his family moved to Independence, Missouri, which was, in David McCullough’s words, “a sleepy backwater, churchgoing, conservative, rooted to the past, exactly as most residents preferred”.\*\*

Truman recalled later that he had not been popular as a boy. “The popular boys were the ones

\* Robert Dallek, *Harry S. Truman* (2008), p.1.

\*\* David McCullough, *Truman* (1992), 50.

who were good at games and had big, tight fists ... [T]o tell the truth, I was kind of a sissy.”\* The young Truman was very short-sighted (“blind as a mole,” he said) and this made him bookish and withdrawn. His mother bought him an expensive pair of spectacles from Kansas City, which made him something of a curiosity in his home town. He spent long hours in the Independence town library, reading reams of history books. (History provided, he said later, “solid instruction and wise teaching”.) He also loved the novels of Mark Twain and Sir Walter Scott.

Truman was one of the few boys in Independence to attend high school (girls outnumbered boys three-to-one in his class). A gifted student, he skipped the third grade and went directly into the fourth. He was a talented and enthusiastic piano player, which also marked him out from the other boys in Independence – and young Harry endured some ridicule for it.

In the fourth grade, Truman met Elizabeth “Bess” Wallace. Bess’s family lived two blocks away from the Trumans, and she sat behind Harry in most of his classes. She was popular and athletic – she played baseball and tennis, ice skated, and danced – and Truman was smitten. “If I succeeded in carrying her books to school for her and back home for her I had a big day.”\*\* Towards the end of

\* Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (1995), p.3.

\*\* McCullough, 49.

1910 (when he was 26), Truman began courting Wallace, the only serious romantic interest of his life.

Harry's father, John Truman, bankrupted himself through poor investments and the Truman family lost their farm in 1901, when Harry was 17. Truman's poor eyesight put an end to his dream of a place at America's most prestigious military academy, West Point. Instead, he did jobs in the mailroom of the *Kansas City Star*, as a railroad timekeeper, and as a bank clerk. He joined the National Guard in 1905, sporadically participating in its activities until 1911, when he let his commission lapse.

In 1906, at his father's insistence, Truman returned to manage the farm that his family had reacquired. He disliked farming and, after his father's death in 1914, began to look for new opportunities. His search proved fruitless for several years and he lost a lot of money on mining and oil-exploring ventures. He remained a farmer until 1917 when, after the US entered the First World War, he re-enlisted in his National Guard artillery unit. At 33, Truman was older than most recruits, and past draft age. But he had been inspired, he wrote later, by President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic rhetoric about the US coming to the aid of European democracy. "I felt like Galahad after the Grail," Truman wrote in his autobiography.\*

\* Dallek, 3.

In July 1918, Captain Truman was dispatched to France in command of the regiment's Battery D. When he took command, the unit had a reputation for being ill-disciplined. He distinguished himself as their commanding officer, however, winning praise and popularity among his men for his firm leadership style. Battery D saw action as part of the Meuse-Argonne offensive in late 1918, providing support to infantry battalions, though Truman's unit did not lose a single man.

In 1919, he returned to Independence and married Bess. Their daughter, Mary Margaret, was born in 1924. She grew up to become a singer and author of crime novels and biographies, including a presidential biography of her father.

Truman started a haberdashery (a men's clothing store specialising in small items for sewing such as buttons and ribbons) in downtown Kansas City with an army buddy, Edward Jacobson. The store prospered for a few years but was forced to close in 1922 in the midst of a severe post-war recession. Truman refused to file for bankruptcy and it was a decade before he was able fully to clear the debts that he accumulated from this business.

After the failure of his business ventures, politics was Truman's salvation. As he joked when asked why he had gone into politics, "I have to eat".\* His family supported the Democratic Party and had been involved to varying degrees in state Democratic

\* Aida D. Donald, *Citizen Soldier: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (2012), 74.

politics since 1900, when his father took him to his first Democratic National Convention, held in Kansas City. After the war, he became more involved with the Kansas City machine, then under the control of a boss called Tom Pendergast. Political machines were once a key feature of American politics, particularly in cities. Essentially, a machine was a political organisation headed by a powerful “boss” (or sometimes group of bosses) whose power stemmed from their ability to dole out patronage, usually jobs for supporters and contracts for local businesses.

In 1922, with the backing of the Pendergast machine – he was introduced by his friend, Jim Pendergast, the boss’s nephew – Truman was elected County Court judge of Jackson County’s eastern district. Initially, it seemed that Truman’s political career would be as rocky and short-lived as his business career – he lost his bid for re-election in 1924. However, Truman’s support from Pendergast meant that he soon returned to office. In 1926, when he ran for the post of presiding judge of Jackson County, he was elected unopposed. When he ran for re-election in 1930, his majority more than tripled. Though, while in office, he ignored the criminal activities of his patrons in the machine – corruption, graft, and election-rigging – Truman was generally respected as honest. He was proud of the fact that he never used his office to personally enrich himself. “I will be a pauper when



*President Truman signing a proclamation initiating America's involvement in the Korean War*

I’m done,” he said.\*

Truman’s time as presiding judge coincided with the beginning of the Great Depression, the deepest and longest economic recession in US history, which began in 1929 and would continue until the Second World War. As a heavily agricultural state, Missouri was particularly badly hit, and the plight of the state’s farmers would be a huge influence on Truman’s politics in the 1930s. After Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) became president in 1933 promising a “New Deal” for the American people, Truman was appointed director of the Federal Re-Employment Program, part of the

\* Donald, 90.

newly-created Civil Works Administration (CWA), putting Missourians into jobs. The appointment came from Pendergast, who had been FDR's key backer in the state, and the experience turned Truman into an enthusiastic supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal.

By now a fixture of Missouri politics, Truman began contemplating a bid for a state-wide office, either governor or senator. Initially, Pendergast was not supportive of Truman's ambitions, but he reluctantly supported Truman as Senate candidate in 1934, after being rejected by his favoured candidates. With the backing of the Kansas City machine, Truman won the primary and the general election. In the Senate, Truman was disdained by some liberals for his links with machine politics. The *New York Times* dismissed him as "a rube [yokel] from Pendergast land" while managing to get his first name wrong ("Henry").\* He was, however, generally popular in the Senate, well-liked for his work ethic and genial demeanour.

Truman's time in Congress coincided with the burst of reform legislation that historians have called the "Second New Deal", most notably the Social Security Act, which created a national pension system, and the Wagner Act, which guaranteed Americans' right to join a trade union, both passed in 1935 – with Truman's vote. Truman was largely loyal to Roosevelt, with a few exceptions.

\* Dallek, 10.

(He refused, for instance, to support FDR's chosen candidate for Senate Majority Leader, Alben Barkley of Kentucky.)

In 1939, Tom Pendergast was imprisoned for tax evasion. Truman had stoutly defended his patron throughout the trial, which damaged his reputation. When he ran for re-election in 1940, most of Missouri's major newspapers opposed him and the Roosevelt administration offered no help, but Truman was still re-elected. A key bloc in his winning coalition was Missouri's African-American voters; Truman was ahead of much of his party on the question of civil rights and had supported anti-lynching legislation in the Senate.

The Second World War dominated Truman's second Senate term, as the US began to offer increasing support to the Allies in the war in Europe. Truman was supportive of FDR's efforts to edge the US closer to the action, voting for Lend-Lease, the programme that enabled the Allies to buy US weapons and supplies on credit. Early in 1941, Truman proposed a special select committee to investigate fraud and waste among defence contractors who received contracts from the federal government to meet the nation's increasing military expenditures. The result was the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program. Though initially small and poorly-funded, what became known as the "Truman Committee" turned the Missouri senator into a national figure. Truman's committee toured the

country, held hundreds of hearings, called thousands of witnesses, issued 51 reports, and saved the US government a reported \$15 billion.\* In March 1943, “Investigator Truman” was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine.

Truman’s work as part of the select committee marked him out as a possible running mate for Roosevelt, as the president prepared to seek his fourth term in office in 1944. Democratic Party leaders had been growing increasingly worried about Roosevelt’s vice president, Henry Wallace, who they thought was too left-wing. By this time Roosevelt’s health was failing and there was a real concern that the president might not survive a fourth term. Therefore, whoever was chosen as vice president was likely to end up as president. Though Truman was a plausible option, popular with conservatives and liberals in the party, he was still not the obvious choice.

Thanks to the machinations of party leaders and the president himself, Truman was nominated at the convention, and the Roosevelt-Truman ticket went on to win the general election by a large margin. But Vice President Truman was not a confidante of Roosevelt’s. There was no effort to prepare him for the responsibilities that would fall upon his shoulders if FDR were to die. Truman recalled that, in the nearly three months he served as FDR’s vice-president, “I don’t think I saw him

but twice... except at Cabinet meetings”. However, on 12 April 1945, only 82 days after he had become vice president, Truman was summoned to the White House and told that Franklin Roosevelt had succumbed to a fatal cerebral haemorrhage at his Georgia retreat. Harry S. Truman was now president.

## The Cold War, 1945-1948

“Boys, if you ever pray, pray for me now,” Truman told reporters after he was sworn in as the 33rd president. “When they told me yesterday what had happened [Roosevelt’s death] I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me.” The challenges facing Truman were certainly daunting. He was taking command of a nation that was in effect still fighting two wars, against the Japanese Empire in the Pacific and against the Axis powers in Europe. The war against Nazi Germany and its allies was drawing to a close (and indeed the Third Reich would formally surrender within a month of Truman taking office), but the war against Japan seemed likely to drag on. Assuming both conflicts could be concluded swiftly, Truman was still faced with the problems of managing the U.S.’s return to peacetime and also of overseeing the birth of the post-war world.

Throughout his presidency, Truman suffered from comparisons with his predecessor. He lacked

\* Donald, 116.