

“Everything in My Power”:  
Harry S. Truman and the Fight Against  
Racial Discrimination

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### Abstract

Any attempt to tell the story of federal involvement in the dismantling of America’s formalized systems of racial discrimination that positions the judiciary as the first branch of government to engage in this effort, identifies the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as the beginning of the civil rights movement, or fails to recognize the centrality of President Harry S. Truman in the narrative of racial equality is in error.

Driven by an ever-increasing recognition of the injustices of racial discrimination, Truman offered a comprehensive civil rights program to Congress on 2 February 1948. When his legislative proposals were rejected, he employed a unilateral policy of action despite grave political risk, and freed subsequent presidential nominees of the Democratic party from its southern segregationist bloc by winning re-election despite the States’ Rights challenge of Strom Thurmond. The remainder of his administration witnessed a multi-faceted attack on prejudice involving vetoes, executive orders, public pronouncements, changes in enforcement policies, and amicus briefs submitted by his Department of Justice.

The southern Democrat responsible for actualizing the promises of America’s ideals of freedom for its black citizens is Harry Truman, not Lyndon Johnson. The shift in white American opinion necessary for the passage of the civil rights acts of the 1960s was generated by the cumulative effects of actions taken between 1945 and 1953.

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For Kimberly, cuius amor ducit ut experiar.

## CHAPTER I

*Truman heralded the report . . . but avoided any effort to implement it.*

---Harvard Sitkoff, historian, on the 1947 report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights.<sup>1</sup>

On 25 July 1946, the car containing George Dorsey, his wife Mae, his sister-in-law Dorothy, and her husband Roger Malcolm, was stopped outside of the town of Monroe, Georgia, by a mob of twenty-two men. The two couples were pulled from the vehicle and, some sixty bullets later, their mutilated, almost unrecognizable bodies were dumped along the banks of the Appalachian River. In another corner of the state that same evening, Maceo Snipes arose from the dinner table at his home in Butler to answer the summons of four men at his front door. He was greeted in turn by four shotgun blasts.<sup>2</sup>

Extralegal violence by whites against blacks was an all too well-ingrained feature of life in the South, and the dynamic of power relations between the races could be graphed according to its peaks and ebbs.<sup>3</sup> By the summer of 1946, lynchings were again on the rise, and for reasons that added another dimension of tragedy and injustice to the history of the American Negro. As the United States Army began demobilizing from the Second World War, thousands of black soldiers returned to the nation in whose defense

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming of Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November 1971): 612.

<sup>2</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 18-19; "Georgia Mob of 20 Men Massacres 2 Negroes, Wives; One was Ex-GI," *New York Times*, 27 July 1946, 1; "Veteran, County Lone Voter, Assassinated by 4 White Men," *Richmond Afro-American*, 3 August 1946, 1; "Federal Antilynch Law Only Answer to Georgia," *Richmond Afro-American*, 3 August 1946, 4. All newspaper citations refer to the first section unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> The designation "South" can meet a variety of definitions. It is used here to signify any state or territory that maintained both the institution of chattel slavery after 1860 and a formalized set of legal restrictions based on race after 1900.

they had risked their lives, armed with a new sense of agency and self-worth. They also returned to face a coterie of white supremacists dedicated to ensuring that colored veterans would not endanger the existing racial order of southern society.<sup>4</sup> George Dorsey, Roger Malcolm, and Maceo Snipes were but three of the black servicemen who survived the war against fascism only to be killed in the land of the free. Snipes, in fact, had recently voted in a Georgia state primary election – the only colored person in his county to do so that year. It seemed as if Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” were to be a product for export only.

The increasing incidence of violence against returning soldiers of color served only to further highlight the systemic injustice and hypocrisy that festered at the intersection of American invocations of liberty and the reality of being black in the United States. Reacting to the “horror” of the Monroe massacre, President Harry S. Truman instructed his Attorney General, Tom Clark, to use all the resources of the Department of Justice to investigate whether the Dorsey and Malcolm killings – or any of the other recently committed “crimes of oppression” – might fall under federal jurisdiction.<sup>5</sup> If so, the possibility would exist to secure the convictions notoriously absent from such cases in state courts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is the sense of the author that the terms “Negro” and “colored” are no longer employed because they are archaic, not because they are pejorative. As both were in common usage during the period treated by this study, they are retained as proper synonyms for “black.” He likewise finds it anachronistic to speak of “African-Americans” in a 1940s context; this modern convention is therefore rejected.

<sup>5</sup> As the character “S” does not stand in for a longer middle name, the name “Harry S. Truman” frequently appears without the period. Truman’s personal preference for using the period has been adopted by the author in this text; bibliographic entries and direct quotations from other sources reproduce the particular choice made in those materials.

<sup>6</sup> “Truman Orders Thorough Investigation of Lynchings,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 3 August 1946, 1; National Archives and Records Service, ed., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1946* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), 368. Hereafter, *Public Papers*.

As the federal investigators probed, the violence continued. Under the auspices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a biracial coalition of forty-seven religious, labor, and civil rights organizations formed the National Committee Against Mob Violence. On 19 September, its leadership met with Truman to press for a national response to the problem of lynching.<sup>7</sup> “While representatives of the United States labor . . . in the United Nations to create a world of peace, based on human freedom and justice,” the formal statement to the president read, “their words are made a mockery by an unprecedented wave of mob violence.” The Georgia murders were merely the most recent in a string of grotesque incidents in which “colored veterans of the late war for freedom” had “been done to death or mutilated by a saboteury equalled [*sic*] only at Buchenwald.”<sup>8</sup> One ex-soldier, Isaac Woodard, had his eyes gouged out by a local police chief in Aiken, South Carolina. Another, John C. Jones, had his hands chopped off with a meat cleaver and a blowtorch applied to his face before being executed, his remains being tossed in a swamp outside of Minden, Louisiana.<sup>9</sup> What had been allotted on the president’s schedule as a fifteen minute meeting stretched into twenty-five, and then thirty-five. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP and the unofficial spokesman for the delegation, later recalled how Truman “sat with clenched hands throughout the recounting.”<sup>10</sup> Horror after horror

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<sup>7</sup> “Truman Gets Plea to End Lynching, Mob Terror,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 28 September 1946, 10.

<sup>8</sup> “Truman Personally Given Antilynch Action Program,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 28 September 1946, 2.

<sup>9</sup> “Vet Blinded by Cops,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 20 July 1946, 1; “La. Mob Victim’s Testimony May Spur Antilynch Drive,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 14 September 1946, 1; “A Veteran Unavenged,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 March 1947, n.p., clipping in Papers of the NAACP. Part 9: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918 – 1955. Series A: General Office Files on Armed Forces’ Affairs, 1918 – 1955. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (microfilmed on 18 reels. Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1989), reel 1, frame 698.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Dudziak, 24.

was detailed for the president, who in turn reiterated his promise that the Justice Department would do all it could to successfully prosecute the offenders.<sup>11</sup>

Therein lay the problem. Clark's men were genuine in their efforts to end the racial violence, but their sphere of action was heavily restricted. Federal authorities had contributed to halting a revival of the Ku Klux Klan in New York, and were credited with helping to drive the organization back underground in other areas of the country, but their statutory authority allowed only marginal participation in lynch mob prosecutions.<sup>12</sup>

Every year a number of bills were proposed in Congress calling for a federal anti-lynching law, and every year southern legislators ensured they arrived stillborn. Except in cases where state or local law enforcement officials were known to have taken part in racial attacks, the federal executive had little authority to intervene. The Seventy-Ninth Congress of the United States (3 January 1945 – 2 August 1946) alone had seen eight such bills introduced, seven in the House of Representatives and one in the Senate. Only one received even token consideration in committee, and none survived the legislative process long enough to reach a floor vote.<sup>13</sup> Given the “inadequacy of present Federal legislation” to deal directly with lynchings, the delegation concluded their visit by calling upon Truman to press Congress “to enact such legislation as is necessary to enable the Federal Government . . . to stop lynching and to punish the lynchers.” White left the

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<sup>11</sup> One opportunity came at the end of September 1946, when Clark – a native of Texas – ordered the federal prosecution of Police Chief M. L. Shull after the NAACP uncovered a witness willing to testify that the chief had openly bragged about delivering the blow that blinded Woodard. See “Attorney General Pledges to Enforce R.R. Decision,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 28 September 1948, 1.

<sup>12</sup> “Crusade Against Klan Driving Order Underground,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 21 September 1946, 17.

<sup>13</sup> “Mob Rule Reigns as Lynch Bills Die,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 3 August 1946, 1.



meeting highly gratified by what he had observed in the president.<sup>14</sup> As Truman would demonstrate, such confidence was not misplaced.

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Walter White would not have been faulted had he dismissed Harry Truman's expressions of resolve as just more empty promises from the White House. The new president still lived largely in the shadow of his predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose dearth of achievement in the area of civil rights was matched only by the heights to which he had raised black expectations. Given the disproportionately low socio-economic standing of the Negro in America, the rhetoric surrounding Roosevelt's anti-poverty programs had resonated strongly among blacks, but the realities of the New Deal never matched the hopes it engendered. Nor did the president propose any civil rights initiatives during this period. The only aid the New Deal offered was economic, and this too was infused with the racial prejudices and qualifiers of the time. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, one of the nation's leading black newspapers, frequently criticized the Roosevelt administration for its ambivalence and "pointedly noted" (according to historian Hayward Farrar) "that if blacks had a role in the new welfare state created by the New Deal, it was a subordinate and debased one."<sup>15</sup>

Roosevelt made just one substantial effort on behalf of civil rights, and then only under duress. In January 1941, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (the first black-controlled union in America) and a tireless campaigner on behalf of greater economic opportunity for racial minorities, had begun organizing a mass protest march. Slated to be held in Washington, D.C. that summer, its

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<sup>14</sup> "Truman Personally Given Antilynch Action Program."

<sup>15</sup> Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892 – 1950* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 76.

purpose would be to demand an end to discrimination in defense contracts and federal job-training programs, and to segregation in the civil service and the armed forces.<sup>16</sup>

Given the political realities of a still-struggling economy and the growing reliance of the national Democratic coalition on northern black voters, the specter of tens of thousands of Negroes marching on the nation's capital was pregnant with disastrous consequences for Roosevelt.

He responded on 25 July 1941 by issuing Executive Order 8802. Stating that it was “the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens,” the order prohibited “discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin,” and declared that it was “the duty of employers and of labor organizations . . . to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense industries.” Vocation and training programs were to be hereafter administered without discrimination on the aforementioned grounds, and federal agencies were similarly enjoined from awarding defense contracts to bidders who engaged in such practices. To oversee implementation of the order, a Committee of Fair Employment Practices (CFEP) was to be established. Comprised of a chairman and four other members to be selected by presidential appointment, this committee would “receive and investigate complaints of discrimination in violation of [Executive Order 8802] and . . . take appropriate steps to redress grievances.” As a presidential creation, not a legislatively sanctioned body, the CFEP itself was devoid of any autonomous enforcement power; the best it could do was “recommend to the several departments and agencies of the Government of the United

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<sup>16</sup> Ronald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 8-9.

States and to the President” measures to effectuate compliance in the event of observed violations.<sup>17</sup> However, this seemingly innocuous body – soon to be renamed the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) – would in time serve as a flashpoint in the battle over civil rights within both the Democratic Party and the United States government.

Though the provisions of Executive Order 8802 fell short of his demands, Randolph suspended the march indefinitely. Faced with the possibility of civil unrest and the exigencies of rearmament, Roosevelt had responded with a very narrowly tailored pronouncement. He yielded on procurement and vocational training programs, but was far more resistant with regard to federal personnel. Where the government operated outside of the sphere of national defense, discriminatory practices were untouched by the new policy. The armed forces themselves, and those sectors of the federal civil service unaffected by the order, would remain segregated for the remainder of the Roosevelt administration. The next chief executive would not share his predecessor’s timidity in the field of civil rights.

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Taking office in 1945 as the thirty-third President of the United States, Harry S. Truman was an unknown quantity even to many leading Democrats. The unassuming junior senator from the formerly quasi-Confederate state of Missouri was far more palatable a vice-presidential choice to southern conservatives than Roosevelt’s previous running mate, Republican-turned-liberal Democrat Henry A. Wallace.<sup>18</sup> Facilities were

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<sup>17</sup> “Executive Order 8802,” [EEOC.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov), <<http://www.eeoc.gov/35th/thelaw/eo-8802.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> Although pro-Union forces in the slave state of Missouri blocked enactment of a formal ordinance of secession, Confederate sympathy within the state was high enough that the government at Richmond allowed Missouri to send a delegation to the Confederate Congress.

as formally segregated in Truman's home state as they were in the Deep South, and not even the presence of 110,000 active colored voters throughout Missouri (20,000 in Truman's power base of Kansas City alone) could soften the southern flavor of state-wide politics.<sup>19</sup>

Klan membership among political leaders was not uncommon. Truman himself would later be dogged by charges that he had been a Klansman at the start of his career; contemporary evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In 1924, during Truman's campaign for re-election to a county judgeship, the *Kansas City (Missouri) Star* ran a blistering anti-Truman column penned by Todd George, who identified himself as "President of the Independent Democrats of Rural Jackson County." The membership of his organization, George stated bluntly, was "unalterably opposed to Harry Truman." The "Independent Democrats" were also, the *Star* reported, widely recognized as a political front for the Klan, and had "centered their attack on Judge Truman" throughout the campaign.<sup>20</sup>

For a border-state politician in the first half of the twentieth century, Truman's stance on civil rights was noteworthy. As the presiding judge for Jackson County, Missouri, he labored to improve the quality of segregated facilities, especially county homes for colored orphans and the Negro aged.<sup>21</sup> Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1934, Truman added to his record. He supported anti-poll tax and anti-lynching legislation, joined the call for adding an anti-discrimination amendment to the 1940 Selective Service Act, and personally blocked two attempts to dismantle the office of recorder of deeds in

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<sup>19</sup> McCoy and Ruetten, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1950), 126.

<sup>21</sup> Harold I. Gullan, *The Upset That Wasn't: Harry S Truman and the Crucial Election of 1948* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 17; McCoy and Ruetten, 14.

the District of Columbia, a leading source of black employment in the federal government.<sup>22</sup>

Campaigning for re-election in 1940, he continually stressed the need for government to give every citizen – regardless of race – a “fair break,” while his opponent, Missouri governor Lloyd C. Stark, pointedly avoided any mention of the state’s colored citizenry.<sup>23</sup> Part of Truman’s concern for blacks was no doubt self-interested; he had entered state politics as a loyal lieutenant of Tom Pendergast, an old-style “machine” boss who leveraged his influence in Missouri’s urban centers to become one of the first Democratic leaders in the nation to gain substantial support from the Negro population.<sup>24</sup> “In the beginning,” noted one chronicler of Truman’s electoral beginnings, “Pendergast derived his political support by extending money, food, and jobs to the unfortunates of Kansas City’s northside river bottom in return for their votes.” Such activities naturally brought Truman into close political contact with Missouri’s blacks, and he maintained good relations with the editors of the state’s leading colored newspapers, the *Kansas City Call* and the *St. Louis Argus*.<sup>25</sup>

Truman’s relations with his black constituents should not however be considered solely as a political quid pro quo – addressing the unique interests of a particular minority group in exchange for support at the polls. His paramount belief in the responsibility of government to protect the economic well-being of that emotionally resonant if

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<sup>22</sup> McCoy and Ruetten, 14-15.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Gullan, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Alonzo Lee Hamby, “Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism, 1945 – 1948” (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1966), 44.

<sup>25</sup> Eugene Francis Schmidlein, “Truman the Senator” (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1962), 27, 98. As it happened, Truman’s primary race in 1940 proved extremely tight, with the incumbent winning his party’s nomination for another term by less than 8,000 votes out of some 657,000 cast. Most post-election newspaper accounts attributed Truman’s victory to the turnout in the disproportionately black precincts of St. Louis. See Schmidlein, 230-31.

definitionally imprecise archetype, the “common man,” was not qualified by any racial criterion. Having served as the state director for federal re-employment in Missouri during the early days of the New Deal, Truman witnessed firsthand both the burdens placed upon Negro workers in St. Louis and Kansas City as well as the contributions made by their labor. Philip H. Vaughan, in his study of Truman’s attitude toward race and urban affairs, noted that it was during this period of the future president’s public service that he came “to view the Negro’s welfare as necessary for the preservation of urban capitalism – an assumption closely akin to the earlier progressive recognition of the laborer as a vital element in preserving the system.”<sup>26</sup> Although he himself never expressed his sentiments in such explicitly Marxian terms, it was the interests of class, not race, that defined Truman’s politics. To the extent that working-class whites and working-class blacks faced the same burdens of capitalism, his message was inclusive. In a study of Truman’s public speeches as senator and as president, Bill W. Stacey concluded that his message to colored laborers

was not one which singled out the black man and promised to do more for him in a class struggle. Truman’s appeal to the Negro was as to any other man. One out of every ten farmers was a Negro, and he was treated as a farmer – not a Negro farmer. Negroes were a very sizable number of the nation’s labor force, and their votes were sought in the manner that applied generally to labor. And, finally, the Negro constituted a sizable number of low income consumers who felt the pinch of inflation as severely as any other consumer.<sup>27</sup>

Truman reflected the ambiguity of what it meant to be a liberal within a regime of white supremacy. That summer, speaking at dedication ceremonies for a new Negro hospital in Sedalia, Missouri, he outlined his thinking:

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<sup>26</sup> Philip H. Vaughan, “Urban Aspects of Civil Rights and the Early Truman Administration” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1971), 109.

<sup>27</sup> Bill W. Stacey, “The Campaign Speaking of Harry S. Truman in the 1948 Presidential Election,” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1968), 143-44.

I believe in the brotherhood of man, not merely the brotherhood of white men but the brotherhood of all men before law.

I believe in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In giving the Negroes the rights which are theirs we are only acting in accord with our own ideals of a true democracy.

If any class or race can be permanently set apart from, or pushed down below, the rest in political and civil rights, so may any other class or race when it shall incur the displeasure of its more powerful associates, and we must say farewell to the principles on which we count our safety.

In the years past, lynching and mob violence, lack of schools, and countless other unfair conditions hastened the progress of the Negro from the country to the city. In these centers the Negroes never had much chance in regard to work or anything else. By and large they went to work mainly as unskilled laborers and domestic servants.

They have been forced to live in segregated slums, neglected by the authorities. Negroes have been preyed upon by all types of exploiters from the installment salesmen of clothing, pianos and furniture to the vendors of vice.

The majority of our Negro people find but cold comfort in shanties and tenements. Surely, as freemen, they are entitled to something better than this. . . . It is our duty to see that the Negroes in our locality have increased opportunity to exercise their privilege as freemen. . . .<sup>28</sup>

Rejection of centuries-old inequalities in social relations, however, was not a part of Truman's inclusive vision, a point he made equally clear in a speech to the National Colored Democratic Association in Chicago while in town for the national Democratic convention of 1940.<sup>29</sup> His remarks highlighted the limits of the principles outlined in Sedalia a month previous. "I wish to make it clear," Truman told his all-black audience, "that I am not appealing for the social equality of the Negro. The Negro himself knows better than that, and the highest type of Negro leaders say quite frankly they prefer the society of their own people. Negroes want justice, not social relations." Justice, nonetheless, was more than many white Americans – of either party – were willing to

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Daniels, 339-40.

<sup>29</sup> Admitting that phrases such as "social equality" and "social relations" were often employed as euphemisms for interracial sexual activity, it is the sense of the author that Truman used the terms in their most expansive sense – to reference a sphere of interpersonal activity beyond the scope of political or economic relations.

grant. Truman, to his credit, recognized even at this date the danger to all Americans of such sentiments. "I wish," he concluded,

merely to sound a note of waning. Numberless antagonisms and indignities heaped upon any race will eventually try human patience to the limit and a crisis will develop. We all know that the Negro is here to stay and in no way can be removed from our political and economic life, and we should recognize his inalienable rights as specified in our Constitution. Can any man claim protection of our laws if he denies that protection to others?<sup>30</sup>

To modern ears, such sentiments may sound tepid and equivocal; in 1940, they were bold, even courageous, and they represented merely a baseline from which Truman's views would grow ever more progressive. With the increased responsibilities of the presidency would come an equally increased understanding of the need to fundamentally alter the way he, and the nation he now led, thought about race.

Speechwriter George Elsey recalled the atmosphere in the Truman White House:

On the matter of civil rights, I think that [the] President's perspective and outlook evolved over a period of time. His outlook on civil rights, just as on many other questions, was not fixed and constant . . . as he grew in responsibilities through his political career. . . . [T]he country was changing, times were changing, attitudes amongst the American people were changing . . . and so his civil rights stance was constantly . . . evolving.<sup>31</sup>

That process was not always smooth. "On racial matters," wrote biographer David McCullough, "Truman had not entirely outgrown his background. Old biases, old habits of speech continued, surfacing occasionally off-stage, as some of his aides and Secret Service agents would later attest. Privately, he could still speak of 'niggers,' as if that were the way one naturally referred to blacks."<sup>32</sup> Yet Truman's innate sense of

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Daniels, 338.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>32</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 588.



fairness, enunciated so clearly at Sedalia, gradually subsumed a lifetime of acculturated racism.

Long after Truman's death, his trusted political advisor and special counsel, Clark Clifford, reflected on the changes he observed in the president: "The wonderful, wonderful development in those years was Harry Truman's capacity to grow."<sup>33</sup>

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When Franklin Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage on the afternoon of 12 April 1945, he bequeathed to his successor the greatest accumulation of leadership challenges to be faced by an American president since Andrew Johnson. Though the Third Reich was breathing its last, the prospect of a prolonged and bloody invasion of the Japanese home islands loomed. Strains in the alliance between the West and the Soviet Union were already in evidence, a foretaste of the forty-five-year-long struggle to come. The domestic front was equally taxing. Adolf Hitler and Imperial Japan had succeeded where Franklin Roosevelt and his New Dealers had failed; it had taken the transformations attendant upon the outbreak of a world war to restart the moribund U.S. economy. Victory therefore presented its own dangers. Once war production ended and hundreds of thousands of servicemen returned to the American labor force, failure by the federal government to effectively manage the transition could result in a return to depression.

Facing the first peacetime session of Congress since the outbreak of the Second World War, Truman sent to the Capitol on 6 September his legislative proposals for reconversion. Any unease he may have felt at being thrust into the role of chief executive less than five months earlier was not evidenced by the ambitious program that clerks in

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in McCullough, 589.

both houses read aloud to the assembled legislators. Comprising twenty-one major initiatives, Truman's message ran more than 16,000 words – the largest presidential communication to Congress since the turn of the century.<sup>34</sup> Geared towards “re-establishing an expanded peacetime industry, trade and agriculture as quickly as possible,” while simultaneously fighting inflation and achieving full employment, it formed the centerpiece of what came to be known as the “Fair Deal” – the domestic policy agenda of the Truman administration.<sup>35</sup> To the president, the speech symbolized his assumption of office in his own right. “It was on that day,” Truman later wrote, “and with this message that I first spelled out the details of the program of liberalism and progressivism which was to be the foundation of my administration. It was my opportunity as President to advocate the political principles and economic philosophy which I had expressed in the Senate and which I had followed all my political life.”<sup>36</sup>

One such principle was the belief that “there had to be equal opportunity for all races, religions, and colors.”<sup>37</sup> Despite numerous attempts to grant legislative sanction to FEPC, not only had Congress failed to pass any of the bills authorizing a permanent fair employment commission with adequate enforcement powers, but a coalition of laissez-faire Republicans and southern Democrats in 1944 had secured passage of an amendment subjecting all future FEPC appropriations to congressional approval. The following year, shortly before Roosevelt's death, the House declined to allocate any money for FEPC at all.

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<sup>34</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, taking office after the assassination of William McKinley in 1901, had similarly underscored the change of leadership by means of a twenty thousand-word proposal to Congress.

<sup>35</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Volume One, Year of Decisions* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 484.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 481-82.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

Within two months of taking office, Truman stepped forward to champion the twin causes of funding the existing agency and establishing a new, statutory one. On 5 June he sent a letter to Adolph J. Sabath, chairman of the House Rules Committee, wherein the latest bill calling for a permanent entity was stalled. It was “unthinkable,” Truman wrote, to abandon FEPC while the war effort still required “the participation of all available workers.” Even if the nation were at peace, a commitment to fair employment had to be maintained. “Discrimination in the matter of employment against properly qualified persons,” he concluded, “is not only un-American in nature, but will lead eventually to industrial strife and unrest. It has a tendency to create substandard conditions of living for a large part of our population. The principle and policy of fair employment practice should be established permanently as a part of our national law.”<sup>38</sup> At his news conference of 13 June, Truman reiterated his call for action on FEPC by the Rules Committee, and made a direct appeal to the American people in his Labor Day address:

Today we stand on the threshold of a new world. We must do our part in making this world what it should be – a world in which the bigotries of race and class and creed shall not be permitted to warp the souls of men. . . .

We recognize the importance and dignity of labor, and we recognize the right of every American citizen to a wage which will permit him and his dependents to maintain a decent standard of living.<sup>39</sup>

Other southern Democrats recognized a decidedly different state of affairs. As the Senate attempted to take up debate on the ratification of the treaty establishing the United Nations, opponents of FEPC launched a filibuster to pressure their fellow senators into abandoning the agency. Mississippi’s senior senator, Theodore “The Man” Bilbo,

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<sup>38</sup> *Public Papers, 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), 104.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

harangued his colleagues: “If you go through the Government departments there are so many niggers it’s like a black cloud all around you. . . . Some Catholics are linked with some rabbis trying to bring about racial equality for the niggers. Some of my best friends are Catholics. But you can’t get away from the fact that some of them are rotten. The niggers and the Jews of New York are working hand in hand. . . . This is a damnable, Communist, poisonous piece of legislation.” After panting and ranting in this fashion (as *TIME* described it) for most of three days and a night, his fellow senator from Mississippi, James Eastland, took the floor. By Bilbo’s standards, he was moderate in his speech: “We are dealing with an inferior race. . . . Negro soldiers have caused the U.S.A. to lose prestige all over Europe. . . . They will not fight. They will not work. . . . They are guilty of more than half the crimes in the Army. . . .”<sup>40</sup>

To end the filibuster, a compromise was finally reached. Congress agreed to release only \$250,000 of the \$599,000 Roosevelt had requested for FEPC in his final days. It provided the presidential committee just enough money to finish one last report before fading out of existence at the end of the fiscal year, for there was now no possibility of Congress authorizing it as a permanent agency. Despite an earnest effort by Sabath for passage, the Rules Committee of the House deadlocked six-to-six on a motion to discharge the bill Truman had supported. Senate sponsors in turn decided to postpone debate on a similar proposal.<sup>41</sup>

Truman, however, had not given up the fight. He made the point clear to all early in his reconversion message of 6 September:

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<sup>40</sup> “Rule by Demagogues,” *TIME*, 9 July 1945, n.p., clipping in Papers of the NAACP, reel 13, frame 858.

<sup>41</sup> McCoy and Ruetten, 22-23.

During the years of war production we made substantial progress in overcoming many of the prejudices which had resulted in discrimination against minority groups.

Many of the injustices based upon considerations of race, religion and color were removed. Many were prevented. Perfection was not reached, of course, but substantial progress was made.

In the reconversion period and thereafter, we should make every effort to continue this American ideal. It is one of the fundamentals of our political philosophy and it should be an integral part of our economy.

The fair employment practice committee is continuing during the transition period. I have already requested that legislation be enacted placing the fair employment practice committee on a permanent basis. I repeat that recommendation.<sup>42</sup>

The new year saw the fight over FEPC begin again in earnest. In a 3 January radio address on the status of his reconversion program, Truman hammered at its opponents. “On several occasions I have . . . asked that the Congress outlaw by permanent statute un-American discrimination in employment,” but a “small handful of Congressmen” were standing in the way. “Legislation making permanent the Fair Employment Practices Committee would carry out a fundamental American ideal,” the president insisted. “I am sure that the overwhelming mass of our citizens favor this legislation.”<sup>43</sup>

Supporters were emboldened to try again. On 17 January, New Mexico’s Dennis Chavez opened the Senate debate on a permanent committee. It had been difficult enough to keep southern senators from scuttling FEPC when it was framed as a temporary war measure; with peace secured, they had no intention of allowing it to take permanent root, nor to force whites to compete with Negroes at a time of less than full

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<sup>42</sup> “Large Problems are Laid Before Congress by President in Message,” *New York Times*, 7 September 1945, 16.

<sup>43</sup> *Public Papers, 1946*, 6.

employment.<sup>44</sup> The next day, when Chavez had relinquished the floor, they launched a filibuster. In his State of the Union address on 21 January (although buried in what the *New York Times* described as an “unprecedented,” twenty-five thousand-word listing of proposals), Truman again called for adoption of a permanent FEPC.<sup>45</sup>

Until recently a senator himself, this was as far as Truman cared to intrude upon the Senate’s prerogatives. At a press conference held three days later, he was questioned about the ongoing stalemate. Truman replied that it was “a matter that the Senate must settle without outside interference, especially from the President.” He went on to note, however, that as a member of that body he had always voted for cloture on any filibuster.<sup>46</sup>

On 4 February, a cloture petition signed by half of the Senate’s members was introduced; three days of parliamentary wrangling ensued. After securing Chavez’s promise that if cloture failed to command the necessary support of three-fifths of the Senate (i.e., fifty-eight votes) he would withdraw his FEPC bill, his opponents allowed the question to be called. Twenty-five Republicans, twenty-two Democrats, and one Progressive declared themselves in favor of the motion, while twenty-eight Democrats and eight Republicans voted against cloture. Having failed to break the filibuster by ten votes, Chavez did as he promised, and the Senate moved on to other business.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Daniel Guthrie, “The Dixiecrat Movement of 1948” (M.A. thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1955), 41-42.

<sup>45</sup> “Truman Calls for Continued Price Control, Higher Wages, Labor Peace, Reduced Budget; Steel Mills Close; City Transit Strike Off,” *New York Times*, 22 January 1946, 1. The 1946 speech was the longest State of the Union address ever delivered up to that time.

<sup>46</sup> *Public Papers, 1946*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Philip H. Vaughan, *The Truman Administration’s Legacy for Black America* (Resada, Calif.: Mojave Books, 1976), 6; McCoy and Ruetten, 32-33.

A few optimists in the black community continued to hope that the House might resuscitate the legislation, but in reality FEPC was finished.<sup>48</sup> Despite the president's frequent calls for its preservation, the majority of white Americans were indifferent to its fate.

Yet the defeat was not total. At an 11 April news conference, Truman pointed out that during the fight for federal action on FEPC, "several states and a number of municipalities" had taken it upon themselves to enact their own fair employment legislation.<sup>49</sup> High-profiled civil rights efforts in Washington, even if unsuccessful, could translate into successes at the local level. It was a lesson the president absorbed.

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A captain of artillery in World War I, Truman was the first U.S. president since Theodore Roosevelt to have served in the armed forces. Thus the lynching crisis of 1946 took on an added significance. His first year in office had been marked by numerous (but uncoordinated) efforts at addressing racial barriers to economic opportunity. The fate of returning veterans like George Dorsey and Maceo Snipes now moved him to begin questioning the larger dynamic of racial inequality. Truman still remained enough of a Missourian to reject the notion of an entirely color-blind society. "But," he replied to a fellow Democrat who urged him to drop his calls for civil rights reform, "my very stomach turned over when I learned that Negro soldiers, just back from overseas, were being dumped out of Army trucks in Mississippi and beaten. Whatever my inclinations as a native of Missouri might have been, as President I know this is bad. I shall fight to

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<sup>48</sup> "The Senate Surrenders," *Richmond Afro-American*, 16 February 1946, 4.

<sup>49</sup> *Public Papers, 1946*, 192.

end evils like this.”<sup>50</sup> His private thoughts were echoed in his public pronouncements. To the annual meeting of the National Urban League, assembled that year in St. Louis, Truman sent a message asserting that government failed in its primary responsibility if it allowed the civil rights of even one of its citizens to be abused, and that the nation not only had to check racial intimidation and violence, but also work actively to develop understanding and cooperation among all citizens.<sup>51</sup>

How best to achieve that goal was the question for the Truman administration in the fall of 1946. The efforts of the Justice Department were already beginning to bear fruit. Under the leadership of Attorney General Clark, federal prosecutions were undertaken against state Klan organizations for various income-tax violations. In Georgia, thanks to the assistance of Governor Ellis Arnall (arguably the most progressive chief executive of any southern state during this era), a concerted legal effort was being undertaken to revoke the Klan’s charter, and a four-month FBI investigation had yielded enough evidence to enable Clark to announce on 28 October that a federal grand jury was being empanelled to bring indictments in the Monroe killings.<sup>52</sup> Commendable as these results were, Truman still recognized that such reactive and ad hoc measures would never yield substantive change. An issue as complex and contentious as race would require systemic remedy.

As he had demonstrated in his September 1945 reconversion plan and his 1946 State of the Union address, Truman’s preferred approach to problem-solving was to offer

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in McCullough, 588.

<sup>51</sup> “Truman, Einstein Urge Solution of Racial Ills,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 5 October 1946, 16.

<sup>52</sup> McCoy and Ruetten, 53; “U.S. Justice Dept. to Aid Ga. in Fight Against KKK,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 19 October 1946, 16; “FBI Puts Finger on Ga. Mob Members,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 16 November 1946, 1; “Ga. Pushes Klan Suit, Adds Counts,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 16 November 1946, 1.



a comprehensive solution. Accordingly, on 5 December 1946 Truman issued Executive Order 9808, the first step in what would become a historic presidential undertaking. The language of the preamble illustrated Truman's sense of what was at issue:

Whereas the preservation of civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution is essential to domestic tranquility, national security, the general welfare, and the continued existence of our free institutions; and  
Whereas the action of individuals who take the law into their own hands and inflict summary punishment and wreak personal vengeance is subversive of our democratic system of law enforcement and public criminal justice and gravely threatens our form of government; and  
Whereas it is essential that all possible steps be taken to safeguard our civil rights. . . .<sup>53</sup>

The order empanelled a committee of fifteen members to determine whether and in what respect federal, state, and local mechanisms might be “strengthened and improved to safeguard the civil rights of the people,” and report its finding directly to the president.<sup>54</sup> Privately, Truman charged it not to enumerate the strides that had been made in race relations, but to focus exclusively on the extent to which the promises of the Constitution had not been redeemed for all Americans. To prevent interference by hostile members of Congress, Truman authorized a disbursement of \$110,000 from presidential discretionary funds to finance the investigation.<sup>55</sup>

Chaired by Charles E. Wilson, president of General Electric and the former head of Roosevelt's War Production Board, the President's Committee on Civil Rights consisted of leading figures in politics, religion, labor, education and business. It was a carefully arranged mix: clergy and layman; northerner and southerner; white and black; Jew, Protestant, and Catholic. Each of them, if not directly active in civil rights, was

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<sup>53</sup> *1946 Supplement to the Code of Federal Regulations of the United States of America, Titles 1 – 8* ([Washington, D.C.]: Government Printing Office, 1947), 184.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Guthrie, 55.

experienced in social-welfare work.<sup>56</sup> Their final product would demonstrate that Truman had selected the right men and women for the task.

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The Washington saw, “If you want to avoid accomplishing anything, form a committee,” was as familiar in the 1940s as it is today. The national white press paid no attention to Executive Order 9808. Most black newspapers reacted with mild satisfaction; sympathetic words meant little to potential victims of southern lynch mobs, but they represented more of a response than previous administrations had shown.<sup>57</sup> The *Richmond Afro-American* (which, like its parent newspaper in Baltimore, was already committing itself strongly to Truman’s likely challenger in 1948, New York governor Thomas E. Dewey) was unique in its condemnation of the order. Accusing the president of resorting to “an old FDR trick of jumping the gun by taking the edge off of his opponents’ work with a counter move,” their only notice of Truman’s act was to describe it as a cynical gimmick. Weeks before, Senator Bilbo had publicly enjoined his supporters in Mississippi that “the best way to keep the nigger from the polls” was “to visit him the night before.” With Republicans gaining increased black support due to their calls for Bilbo’s expulsion, the *Afro-American* charged that the presidential commission was simply concocted as insurance against further defections by Negro voters once the blustering Mississippian received his assured exoneration from the Democrat-controlled Senate Investigating Committee.<sup>58</sup> The following week the *Afro-*

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.; Daniels, 340; McCoy and Ruetten, 52-53.

<sup>57</sup> McCoy and Ruetten, 53.

<sup>58</sup> “Truman Tries FDR Timing Trick in Naming Committee,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 14 December 1946, 16; Bilbo quoted in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 8. As it turned out, the *Afro-American* was ultimately proven wrong on Bilbo’s fate. While the Democratically-controlled committee did vote in favor of Bilbo that December, the Republican Party was due to take control of the Senate in January. Upon doing so, they

*American* was even more brutal in its attack; an editorial cartoon labeled “Two-Faced Portrait of a Noted Jive Artist” depicted a North-facing Harry Truman declaring his belief in the dignity of the individual and in equal rights for all, while a second, turned to the South – the “home of Bilboism . . . lynching[,] murder, and every outrage against colored Americans” – appealed for the vote of “every southern Democrat.”<sup>59</sup> Only the *Chicago Defender* correctly predicted the significance of Executive Order 9808. “If the committee is not hampered in its inquiry,” their editorial page announced, “and if its recommendations are not circumvented by a welter of administrative procedures, the results should be far more consequential to us than anything that has happened in the United States since the abolition of slavery.”<sup>60</sup>

The President’s Committee on Civil Rights took almost an entire year to complete its task. Only when their report was issued would Truman be prepared to take the next step. Subsequent critics excoriate him for the delay; they fail to comprehend that the administration was moving into uncharted territory. In an age when the doctrine of federalism held far greater currency than in our time, and statutory discrimination enjoyed the Supreme Court’s imprimatur of constitutional permissibility, the extent of Truman’s authority in the area of civil rights enforcement was unclear. If he was moving too slowly for the tastes of some, he was at least moving. A problem three and a half centuries in the making could not be settled in an instant.

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attempted to organize the chamber without Bilbo, provoking southern Democrats to launch a filibuster of all Senate operations. To break the deadlock, Bilbo – suffering from cancer – was persuaded to step down temporarily and lay his credentials aside until his health returned. He left the Senate on 5 January 1947 and never re-entered that body, dying on 21 August.

<sup>59</sup> “Two-Faced Portrait of a Noted Jive Artist,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 7 December 1946, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in McCoy and Ruetten, 53.

Truman acknowledged as much in his official remarks to the members of the committee on 15 January 1947. “You have a vitally important job,” the president told them. “We are none of us entirely familiar with just how far the Federal Government under the Constitution has a right to go in these civil rights matters.” What Truman did know was the result he hoped to achieve: “I want our Bill of Rights implemented in fact. We have been trying to do this for 150 years. We are making progress, but we are not making progress fast enough.” The outcome he desired was as ambitious as it was unequivocal – “I don’t want to see any race discrimination.”<sup>61</sup>

Achievement of that goal, Truman realized, could not depend solely upon mandates from Washington. “Our work,” he stressed, “has got to start at the grassroots, and in starting at the grassroots, it has got to start in the hearts of the people themselves.” Such a transformation could not be simply be brought about by presidential fiat. Legitimate constitutional questions with regard to the separation of powers and the limitations of federal authority had to be answered. “I want the Attorney General to know just exactly how far he can go legally from the Federal Government’s standpoint. I am a believer in the sovereignty of the individual and of the local governments.” The line Truman would have to walk was ill-drawn, but he had a solid enough conception of its general course. “I don’t think the Federal Government ought to be in a position to exercise dictatorial powers locally; but there are certain rights under the Constitution . . . which I think the Federal Government has a right to protect.”<sup>62</sup> Having sworn to uphold

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<sup>61</sup> *Public Papers, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1963), 98.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

that Constitution, Truman was bound by all of it – the limitations on his power as well as the responsibilities of his office.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, Truman was determined to take action. As senator he had warned that infringement upon the fundamental rights of some Americans was a threat to the liberty of all Americans. Now as president he was even more convinced. In a letter of 31 January to the chairman of the Citizens Committee in Commemoration of the 13th Amendment, Truman highlighted the toll oppression wrung from the oppressors themselves by recognizing the broader implications of slavery's demise. With the elimination of chattel slavery, he noted, "the master and the slave were both liberated; the master from the moral stain, the slave from the yoke of bondage." Although more than eighty years had since passed, the president recognized that a similar burden still tasked both races. "The cause of freedom," he continued, "is one we must work for today and every day. As long as intolerance and bigotry exist, we must work to free intolerant men from the bonds of their own prejudice, and to free the victims of intolerance from the indignities which are too often heaped upon them."<sup>64</sup>

With the struggle against communism supplanting the fight against fascism, Truman also entered the post-war environment convinced that segregation and

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<sup>63</sup> Although the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were explicit in their grant of authority to the federal government for the purpose of ensuring race-neutral applications of law, a series of decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1880s and 1890s effectively nullified both the amendments themselves and the legislation that had been passed by Congress for their enforcement. The most notable decisions in this regard were *Butchers' Benevolent Association of New Orleans v. Crescent City Live-Stock Landing and Slaughter-House Company*; *Paul Esteben, L. Ruch, J. P. Rouede, W. Maylie, S. Firmberg, B. Beaubay, William Fagan, J. D. Broderick, N. Seibel, M. Lannes, J. Gitzinger, J. P. Aycock, D. Verges, the Live-Stock Dealers' and Butchers' Association of New Orleans, and Charles Cavaroc v. Louisiana, ex rel. S. Belden, Attorney-General*; and *Butchers' Benevolent Association of New Orleans v. Crescent City Live-Stock Landing and Slaughter-House Company* (docketed as the *Slaughterhouse Cases*), 83 U.S. 36 (1872); *United States v. Stanley*; *United States v. Ryan*; *United States v. Nichols*; *United States v. Singleton*; and *Robinson & wife v. Memphis and Charleston Railroad Company* (often referred to as the *Civil Rights Cases*), 109 U.S. 3 (1883); and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Vaughan, "Urban Aspects," 124-25.

discrimination had undercut America's moral authority and its credibility as the guarantor of freedom in the world.<sup>65</sup> A National Press Club event at the end of February gave the president an opportunity to share that belief. Invited to present awards for journalistic excellence to members of the Negro press, Truman's words transcended the concerns of any one race or nation. "More and more we are learning," he told his audience,

how closely our democracy is under observation. We are learning what loud echoes both our successes and our failures have in every corner of the world. That is one of the pressing reasons why we cannot afford failures. When we fail to live together in peace, the failure touches not us, as Americans, alone, but the cause of democracy itself in the whole world. That we must never forget.<sup>66</sup>

Yet Truman's determination to rectify the injustices of racial discrimination did not emanate solely from a self-interested recognition of the manner in which such a system undermined the security of white America. In the economic conditions incumbent upon the Negro, brought into sharpest relief by the experiences of discharged black servicemen, Truman recognized an injustice that demanded correction for its own sake. Writing to L. D. Reddick, curator of the New York Public Library's Shomburg Collection (then as now the largest assemblage of Negro literature in the U.S.), the president was troubled to observe that the colored veteran returned to a nation wherein "the tasks of finding a job and housing his family" were complicated "by whatever obstacles race prejudice . . . put in his way. . . ." Having risked their lives to defend American ideals, black servicemen "returned to civilian life . . . with improved occupational skills and

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<sup>65</sup> Glenn Feldman, *From Demagogue to Dixiecrat: Horace Wilkinson and the Politics of Race* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995), 130.

<sup>66</sup> *Public Papers, 1947*, 162.

training,” only to be denied the opportunity to compete in the workplace “on the basis of individual merit and capability.”<sup>67</sup>

The challenge he had voiced to his civil rights committee emerged once more. It was not merely the laws that would need to be changed, but the conscience of America itself.

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On the twenty-ninth of June, the favorite son of the segregated border state of Missouri again made history. Standing before the Lincoln Memorial, in remarks broadcast nationwide on radio, Harry S. Truman became the first U.S. president to address a meeting of the NAACP.<sup>68</sup> He began by outlining briefly the successful American experiment in protecting citizens from the tyranny of government. Truman then told his listeners that the nation had to go further:

We must keep moving forward, with new concepts of civil rights to safeguard our heritage. The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against the government, but protection of the people by the government.

We must make the Federal Government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. And again I mean all Americans. . . .

Our immediate task is to remove the last remnants of the barriers which stand between millions of our citizens and their birthright. There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color. . . .

Many of our people still suffer the indignity of insult, the narrowing fear of intimidation, and . . . the threat of physical injury and mob violence. Prejudice and intolerance in which these evils are rooted still exist. The conscience of our Nation, and the legal machinery which enforces it, have not yet secured to each citizen full freedom from fear. . . .

[W]e can no longer afford the luxury of a leisurely attack upon prejudice and discrimination. . . . [W]e cannot, any longer, await the

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Vaughan, “Urban Aspects,” 125.

<sup>68</sup> “Truman’s Speech Makes History,” *Kansas City (Missouri) Call*, 4 July 1947, n.p., clipping in Papers of the NAACP, reel 2, frame 53.

growth of a will to action in the slowest State or the most backward community.

Our National Government must show the way.<sup>69</sup>

Was this simply another performance by the “noted jive artist”? Walter White did not think so. He spoke of the occasion in his memoirs:

President Truman called for federal, state, and individual action against lynching, disfranchisement, the poll tax, education and employment inequality, and the whole caste system based upon race or color. The applause when he finished was hearty but not overwhelming. I thought again of Lincoln – of the cool response which had been accorded the Gettysburg Address. I did not believe that Truman’s speech possessed the literary quality of Lincoln’s speech but in some respects it had been a more courageous one in its specific condemnation of evils based on race prejudice which had too long disgraced America, and its call for immediate action against them.

As he sat down, the President turned modestly to ask how I liked the speech. When I told him how excellent I believed it to be, he assured me, “I said what I did because I meant every word of it – and I am going to prove that I do mean it.”<sup>70</sup>

Truman told his family much the same. Just prior to the event he wrote a private letter to his sister: “Mamma,” he warned, “won’t like what I say because I end up by quoting old Abe. But I believe what I say and I’m hopeful we may implement it.”<sup>71</sup>

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The President’s Committee on Civil Rights delivered its final report, entitled *To Secure These Rights*, on 29 October 1947. Truman publicly thanked the members for their “unselfish, devoted service,” and urged all Americans to join him in reading and studying their recommendations. “I created this Committee,” he explained, “with a feeling of urgency. No sooner were we finished with the war than racial and religious

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<sup>69</sup> *Public Papers, 1947*, 311-12.

<sup>70</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White* (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 348. See also White’s syndicated column following the speech, “Truman’s Talk Seen Opening War on Bigots,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 July 1947, n.p., clipping in Papers of the NAACP, reel 2, frames 65-66.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Steve Neal, ed., *Eleanor and Harry: The Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 106.



intolerance began to appear and threaten the very things we had just fought for.” It was Truman’s hope, he explained, that the report would prove to be “an American charter of human freedom.”<sup>72</sup>

Running 178 pages in length, the report consisted of four sections. It began by outlining rights that the committee identified as essential to the well-being of all Americans: the “right to safety and security of the person,” the “right to citizenship and its privileges,” the “right to freedom of conscience and expression,” and the “right to equality of opportunity.”<sup>73</sup> Next it documented the myriad ways in which those rights were being denied: lynching; police brutality; racial qualifiers on the administration of justice, applications for citizenship, and land purchases; denial of the vote; discriminatory practices in hiring and wages; inadequate access to housing and education; and unequal access to public services. As for the constitutionally-permissible “separate but equal doctrine,” the report declared that it stood convicted on three grounds: “It contravenes the equalitarian spirit of the American heritage. It has failed to operate, for history shows that inequality of service has been the omnipresent consequence of separation. It has institutionalized segregation and kept groups apart despite indisputable evidence that normal contacts among these groups tend to promote social harmony.” The continued maintenance of such a system within the District of Columbia was found to be particularly problematic. Instead of symbolizing America’s “great tradition of civil

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<sup>72</sup> *Public Papers, 1947*, 479-80. Despite the unequivocal language of these public remarks, and the high visibility of his NAACP address, some authors have accused Truman of downplaying the significance of the report so as not to antagonize southern Democrats and thereby harm his re-election chances. See John E. Borsos, “Support for the National Democratic Party in South Carolina During the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1987), 7; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 35; Sitkoff, 599.

<sup>73</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947), 6-9.

liberty,” the nation’s capital – as constituted – offered only “a graphic illustration of a failure of democracy.”<sup>74</sup>

The third section, “Government’s Responsibility,” argued that the federal government should assume the role of primary guarantor of civil rights. The concluding chapter offered three reasons why the committee believed the time for immediate action was at hand: moral (“The United States can no longer countenance these burdens on its conscience, these inroads on its moral fiber”), economic (“The United States can no longer afford this heavy drain upon its human wealth, its national competence”), and international (“The United States is not so strong, the final triumph of the democratic ideal so inevitable that we can ignore what the world thinks of us or our record”). Thirty-four specific proposals were then offered, all but one calling for legislative action (either by the federal government or the individual states). The only area in which the committee believed the president could act unilaterally concerned the civil service: the president was called upon to issue a “mandate against discrimination in [civilian] government employment.”<sup>75</sup>

“This is just to tell you,” Eleanor Roosevelt wrote the president afterward, “that I read your committee’s report on civil rights and thought it very good.”<sup>76</sup>

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Even before the report had arrived, Truman and his advisors in the Justice Department were in the process of addressing some of committee’s expected recommendations. One of these had to do with the issue of discrimination in housing, a concern Truman had raised back in his 1940 re-election bid for the Senate. At first

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 87, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 139-48, 168.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Neal, 117.

glance there seemed to be little opportunity for federal action in what was perceived to be a decidedly local issue.<sup>77</sup> However, a historic opportunity presented itself in the fall of 1947. Petitioners asked the U.S. Supreme Court to hear their appeals in a number of cases challenging the practice of employing restrictive covenants based on race or ethnicity in housing contracts. In the expectation that the Court would grant them a hearing, lawyers representing the aggrieved minorities began canvassing for amicus curiae briefs – all too aware that, with the overwhelming majority of existing legal precedent supporting the use of such restrictive covenants, they would need as much non-judicial argumentation in opposition as they could find.<sup>78</sup> Both Walter White of the NAACP and Irving Miller, executive chairman of the American Jewish Congress, wrote to Attorney General Clark urging that the Justice Department submit such a brief, Miller going so far as to quote passages from Truman’s own Lincoln Memorial speech in June in support of his plea. Clark responded that he would ask the assistant attorney general for civil rights to examine the cases and make a recommendation, but that it was the policy of his office to base any such decision on the opinion of the solicitor general, the officer responsible for representing the executive branch of the federal government in all proceedings involving the Supreme Court.<sup>79</sup>

Accordingly, when that body announced on 20 October its decision to hear all the appeals related to restrictive covenants in a single proceeding, Miller fired off another missive to Solicitor General Philip B. Perlman. Writing the day after the publication of

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<sup>77</sup> A Federal Housing Administration had been established in 1934, but this agency was tasked only with the maintenance of federally secured home mortgages. Its authority covered financing for buyers, not conditions on sellers.

<sup>78</sup> Clement E. Vose, *Caucasians Only: The Supreme Court, the NAACP, and the Restrictive Covenant Cases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 160.

<sup>79</sup> Vose, 158-60; 170-71.

*To Secure These Rights*, which had called for a “[r]enewed court attack, with intervention by the Department of Justice, upon restrictive covenants,” Miller implored Perlman to “take prompt and firm action to implement and give effect” to this recommendation by the president’s committee.<sup>80</sup>

Miller need not have bothered. When the Court first announced its acceptance of the cases for review, Clark had asked for and received the approval of the White House to file an amicus brief on the petitioners’ behalf. After holding a series of informal meetings with Perlman, Justice Department attorneys began crafting their argument – before the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, the NAACP, or the American Jewish Congress ever asked them to do so. Work on the first amicus brief ever to be filed by the U.S. solicitor general on behalf of petitioners challenging discrimination based on race was already underway when Perlman sent an immediate response to Miller’s note: “The Attorney General has asked me to inform you that he has chosen to file a brief *amicus curiae* in the *Restrictive Covenant Cases* now pending in the Supreme Court.”<sup>81</sup>

In December, the brief was filed over the signatures of Clark and Perlman. Although it ran for nearly one hundred pages, the position of the U.S. government – as it was now being expressed by the Truman administration – was expressed succinctly and unambiguously in the opening paragraphs:

The Federal Government has a special responsibility for the protection of the fundamental civil rights guaranteed to the people by the Constitution and the laws of the United States. . . .

The Government is of the view that judicial enforcement of racial restrictive covenants on real property is incompatible with the spirit and letter of the Constitution. . . . It is fundamental that no agency of government should participate in any action which will result in depriving any person of essential rights because of color or creed.

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<sup>80</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, 169; Miller quoted in Vose, 173.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Vose, 173-74.

Racial restrictive covenants . . . are responsible for the creation of isolated areas in which overcrowded racial minorities are confined, and in which living conditions are steadily worsened. . . . As to the people so trapped, there is no life in the sense of the word; liberty is a mockery, and the right to pursue happiness a phrase without meaning, empty of hope and reality. This situation cannot be reconciled with the spirit of mutual tolerance and respect for the dignity and rights of the individual which give vitality to our democratic way of life. The time has come to destroy these evils which threaten the safety of our free institutions.<sup>82</sup>

In a forum dedicated ostensibly to questions related to the Constitution, the Justice Department – as mindful as White and Miller of the body of case law standing in its way – followed instead the rhetorical course laid down by the president and wrapped its equal protection argument in something more resonant, more fundamental. The position it argued stretched beyond the Fourteenth Amendment, even beyond the work of 1787. It made an appeal directly to the principles of the Declaration of Independence itself, and as with so many other statements made by Harry Truman and his lieutenants, it did so in language that transcended the narrow issue for which it had been employed.

Whether or not the principals in the Truman administration – including the president himself – were cognizant of the full import of what they had argued, the logic of their position challenged far more than the enforcement of restrictive covenants.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Philip B. Kurland and Gerhard Casper, eds., *Landmark Briefs of the Supreme Court of the United States: Constitutional Law*, 80 vols. (Arlington, Va.: University Publications of America, 1975), 46:233-34.

<sup>83</sup> On 3 May 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision in favor of the petitioners in the restrictive covenant cases. By a vote of six to zero, the justices ruled that “[e]quality in the enjoyment of property rights was regarded by the framers of [the Fourteenth] Amendment as an essential pre-condition to the realization of other basic civil rights and liberties. . . .” Restrictive covenants based on race or color were themselves allowable, provided that they were “effectuated by voluntary adherence to their terms.” However, it was found to be constitutionally impermissible for such covenants to be enforced by state or federal courts.

As a practical matter, the effect of the decision on discriminatory conduct in real estate transactions was limited. Unable to legally enforce restrictions on sellers, white supremacists shifted the burden of their regime onto those who facilitated property sales. Local real estate exchanges in many regions of the nation voluntarily zoned their respective markets into white and non-white zones, and forbade any member of

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The State of the Union address for 1948, while in no way approaching the gargantuan list of proposals the president had presented to Congress two years earlier, was wide-ranging in its focus and highlighted five major goals. George Elsey described this speech years later as “the opening gun of the campaign [of 1948]. It embodied the political philosophy of Harry Truman – what his administration stood for.”<sup>84</sup> In that regard, the sequencing of Truman’s priorities on that seventh of January is telling:

Our first goal is to secure fully the essential human rights of our citizens.

The United States has always had a deep concern for human rights. . . . Any denial of human rights is a denial of the basic beliefs of democracy and of our regard for the worth of each individual.

Today, however, some of our citizens are still denied equal opportunity for education, for jobs and economic advancement, and for the expression of their views at the polls. Most serious of all, some are denied equal protection under laws. Whether discrimination is based on race, or creed, or color, or land of origin, it is utterly contrary to American ideals of democracy.

Truman assured his listeners that a “special message to the Congress on this important subject” would be forthcoming.<sup>85</sup> Twenty-six days later, he made good on that promise.

The president had waited ten months for the findings of his civil rights committee. He acted upon them in less than four. The forthrightness, surety of purpose, and self-deprecation that constituted so much of Harry Truman’s appeal were perhaps never

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their association – under threat of being blacklisted – from selling property in white zones to non-whites. See Vaughan, “Urban Aspects,” 75; Vose, 223.

While the ruling was narrowly tailored to the question of participation by the judiciary in enforcing racial, ethnic, or religious restrictions in housing, the reasoning employed by the Supreme Court in reaching that decision followed the expansive framing of the issue advocated by the Justice Department in their amicus brief. “The historical context [of] the Fourteenth Amendment,” read the decision’s concluding paragraph, “should not be forgotten. Whatever else the framers sought to achieve it is clear that the matter of primary concern was the establishment of equality in the enjoyment of basic civil and political rights and the preservation of those rights from discriminatory action on the part of the States based on race or color.” For text of the Court’s decision in these cases, see *Shelley et ux. v. Kraemer et ux. McGhee et ux. v. Sipes et al.*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948).

<sup>84</sup> Interview granted to Bill W. Stacey on 16 May 1967, published in Stacey, 41.

<sup>85</sup> *Public Papers, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), 3.

expressed better than in his diary entry for 2 February 1948: “I am sending the Congress a Civil Rights Message. They, no doubt, will receive it as coldly as they did the State of the Union message. But it needs to be said.”<sup>86</sup>

It had needed to be said for at least eighty-two years. From emancipation onward no president had yet taken up the challenge of reconciling the disparity between the promise of America’s ideals of freedom and the reality of its injustice towards the Negro. Indeed, a legalized distinction between white and non-white stretched almost as far back in history as the founding of the American colonies themselves. Now, much as the nation had been offered a new vision of itself by the words of one president spoken in Gettysburg, so was it again by the words of another, this time read aloud beneath the Capitol dome:

We believe that all men are created equal and that they have the right to equal justice under law.

We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and of expression and the right to worship as they please.

We believe that all men are entitled to equal opportunities for jobs, for homes, for good health and for education.

We believe that all men should have a voice in their government and that government should protect, not usurp, the rights of the people.

These are the basic civil rights which are the source and the support of our democracy. . . .

We shall not, however, achieve the ideals for which this nation was founded so long as any American suffers discrimination as a result of his race, or religion, or color, or the land of origin of his forefathers.<sup>87</sup>

“The Federal Government,” the message continued, “has a clear duty to see that Constitutional guarantees of individual liberties and of equal protection under the laws are not denied or abridged anywhere in our Union.” To meet that duty, Truman called upon Congress to enact legislation directed at ten objectives:

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Gladys King Burns, “The Alabama Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948” (M.A. thesis, Auburn University, 1965), 5-6.

<sup>87</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 121.

1. Establishing a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, a Joint Congressional Committee on Civil Rights, and a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice.
2. Strengthening existing civil rights statutes.
3. Providing Federal protection against lynching.
4. Protecting more adequately the right to vote.
5. Establishing a Fair Employment Practice Commission to prevent unfair discrimination in employment.
6. Prohibiting discrimination in interstate transportation facilities.
7. Providing home-rule and suffrage in presidential elections for the residents of the District of Columbia.
8. Providing Statehood for Hawaii and Alaska and a greater measure of self-government for our island possessions.
9. Equalizing the opportunities for residents of the United States to become naturalized citizens.
10. Settling the evacuation claims of Japanese-Americans.<sup>88</sup>

Enactment of the proposed legislation would expand the legal parameters within which the administration could exercise its already-demonstrated commitment to guaranteeing racial equality in activities covered by federal authority. However, the president was not content to tether redemption of his promises solely to congressional action. In challenging the legislators, Truman did not neglect his own responsibilities. Statutory jurisdiction would prove no more effective than the willingness to enforce it, and the president gave his assurance that the executive branch was taking “every possible action” available under existing law “to improve the enforcement of [current] civil rights statutes.” Further, the constitutional separation of powers provided Truman with unilateral authority to act in regard to certain aspects of the federal regime of discrimination, and he gave notice of his determination to exercise that prerogative, as recommended by the committee:

It is the settled policy of the United States Government that there shall be no discrimination in Federal employment or in providing Federal services and facilities. Steady progress has been made toward this objective in recent years. I shall shortly issue an Executive Order

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 122.



containing a comprehensive restatement of the Federal non-discrimination policy, together with appropriate measures to ensure compliance.<sup>89</sup>

Truman's next announcement was even bolder. Instead of asking Congress to end segregation in the armed services, as had been suggested in *To Secure These Rights*, he announced his intention to do so unilaterally:

During the recent war and in the years since its close we have made much progress toward equality of opportunity in our armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. I have instructed the Secretary of Defense to take steps to have the remaining instances of discrimination in the armed services eliminated as rapidly as possible. The personnel policies and practices of all the services in this regard will be made consistent.<sup>90</sup>

In his conclusion, Truman stressed that dismantling the formalized legal regime of racial and ethnic discrimination was not simply a matter of interest to those who had been excluded, but was essential to preserving the existing freedoms of those who were currently privileged by such restrictions:

The position of the United States in the world today makes it especially urgent that we adopt these measures to secure for all our people their essential rights.

The peoples of the world are faced with the choice of freedom or enslavement, a choice between a form of government which harnesses the state in the service of the individual and a form of government which chains the individual to the needs of the state.

We in the United States are working in company with other nations who share our desire for enduring world peace and who believe with us that, above all else, men must be free. . . .

To be effective in those efforts, we must protect our civil rights so that by providing all our people with the maximum enjoyment of personal freedom and personal opportunity we shall be a stronger nation – stronger in our leadership, stronger in our moral position, stronger in the deeper satisfactions of a united citizenry. . . .

If we wish to inspire the peoples of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>90</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 125-26. See President's Committee on Civil Rights, 162-63, for the recommendation of congressional action against segregation in the military.

civil liberties, if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.

We know the way. We need only the will.<sup>91</sup>

Not every legislative recommendation offered by the President's Committee on Civil Rights found its way into Truman's message.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, it closed with an acknowledgment by the president that what he was proposing was but the "minimum program" that could be enacted by the federal government if it was to "fulfill its obligation of insuring the Constitutional guarantees of individual liberties and of equal protection under the law."<sup>93</sup> The deficiencies of the package, however, did not detract from its significance. For the first time in history, an American president had proposed comprehensive civil rights legislation aimed at combating racial discrimination.

Harry Truman had demonstrated the will. Now his fellow southern Democrats would do all in their power to stand in the way.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>92</sup> The committee had also recommended that Congress condition "all federal grants-in-aid and other forms of . . . assistance to public or private agencies for any purpose on the absence of discrimination and segregation based on race, color, creed, or national origin," and enact a law ending discrimination or segregation "in the rendering of all public services by the national government." See President's Committee on Civil Rights, 166-68.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 125.

## CHAPTER II

*Ignoring the Dixiecrats and delaying any action on civil rights, Truman strategically turned his attack leftward.*

---Grace Hale, historian, describing the campaign of 1948.<sup>1</sup>

By the beginning of 1948, the political fortunes of Harry Truman appeared to be at their end. For many Washington insiders the only question left to be answered was from where the final blow would come – the Democratic party at its convention or the Republicans in November. The sheer force of Franklin Roosevelt’s personality would have rendered the act of succeeding him a thankless task under the best of circumstances, and Truman’s had been anything but optimal. Reconversion was complex and problematic; reconciling the overwhelming demand to bring the troops home with the lack of available housing or employment for returning servicemen presented no end of difficulties. The American people, who had endured sacrifice and privation for almost four years, now clamored for the fulfillment of all their deferred desires. Unions, freed from their wartime promises to refrain from striking, went into paroxysms of confrontational activity. Industrial and transportation strikes broke out across the nation, and Truman received the brunt of ill feeling not only from those inconvenienced by the shut-downs but also the union members themselves. Long the champion of organized labor, the Democratic president now found himself in the unenviable position of either ending the strikes or watching helplessly as they brought the nation to a standstill. When he ordered the unions to resume their work, the resentment from labor leaders was

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 287.

palpable. The accumulated weight of all these peacetime dislocations was evidenced in the polls. At the start of 1946 the president enjoyed a 63 percent approval rating; by November it had dropped by thirty-one points.<sup>2</sup>

The elections for the Eightieth Congress in November 1946, replicating events in Great Britain the year before, saw the opposition party sweep into power. When that body organized in January, the Republicans would command a majority in both the House and the Senate for the first time since 1931. Responding to the loss, J. William Fulbright, then only two years into his first term as senator from Arkansas, publicly declared that the election had been a referendum on the new president's abilities and suggested that Truman should therefore name a Republican as secretary of state and then resign.<sup>3</sup> Truman ignored the suggestion from his fellow southerner, but Fulbright's anger at the nominal leader of his party was shared equally – if not as vocally – by other Democrats. Over Truman's opposition, thirteen senators and forty-seven congressmen, mostly from southern states, crossed the aisle in March 1947 to join with the entire Republican delegation to approve the Twenty-second Amendment (limiting future presidents to two terms or ten years in office) and send it to the states for ratification.

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<sup>2</sup> George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935 – 1971*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1972), 1:557, 604. There was a certain inevitability to this downturn in Truman's political fortunes. With the coming of peace, many Americans simply felt the need for stability less keenly than they had during the decade and a half of depression and world war. Indeed, FDR himself had begun to feel the desire for change building in the electorate. With military victory all but assured by November 1944, he received the lowest level of electoral support of any of his four presidential campaigns – 53 percent of the popular vote, down seven points from his 1936 landslide. See “1932 Presidential Election Results” and “1944 Presidential Election Results,” Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/USPRESIDENT/>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan A. Hartmann, “President Truman and the 80th Congress” (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1966), 14. Before the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified on 10 February 1967, no provision existed for replacing a vacancy in the office of the vice-president, and so Truman served for the entirety of his first term as president without one. Under the terms of the Presidential Succession Act of 1888 – still operative at the time of Roosevelt's death – the secretary of state was third in line for the presidency. At the urging of Truman, the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 was passed, moving the secretary of state behind both the Speaker of the House and the president pro tempore of the Senate in the order of precedence.

Although clearly a post-mortem jab at Roosevelt, and one that explicitly exempted Truman from its conditions, its passage did little to signify confidence in the current occupant of the White House.

To all these sources of Democratic discontent were added the circumstances of Truman's ascension to the presidency.

When he first came to Washington, the freshman senator was seen by many of his colleagues as little more than the puppet of a corrupt, mid-western political machine: the "Senator from Pendergast." Victor Messall, an experienced congressional staffer from Missouri, turned down an offer to work for the new arrival, expressing the view that his career in Washington would be ruined by an association with Truman – "a guy sent up . . . by gangsters."<sup>4</sup> By his conscientious performance of duty (frequently taking positions contrary to the known desires of the Pendergast organization), Truman soon disabused his colleagues of the idea that he was anyone's "office boy," but Democratic leaders remained convinced that Truman lacked the capability to build a political base of his own.

Thus, in May 1939, when "Boss Tom" pled guilty in a Kansas City courtroom to charges of evading federal income taxes on "contributions" received from fire insurance agencies doing business with the state, the consensus of the national party establishment was that Truman – although personally unconnected to the kickbacks – was guaranteed to fail in his re-election bid the following year. Early in 1940 Truman called a private meeting in St. Louis to ask for the support of state Democratic leaders; more than half of the invitees failed to attend, and those who did were unanimous in expressing the belief that he could not win a second term. Roosevelt himself sent a personal message to

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 214.

Truman conveying the same opinion, and to dissuade him from making the attempt offered him an appointment to the Interstate Commerce Commission. Truman's reply ("I would run if I only got one vote – mine") surprised the president only slightly less than the narrow victory he secured that November – a win for which Harry Truman, and no one else, justly received the credit from his Senate colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

His prestige was further enhanced by his accomplishments during that second term. In March 1941 he convinced his fellow members to establish the Senate Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, charged with guarding against the profligate waste, mismanagement, and legally questionable disbursement of federal funds that had characterized procurement policies during the Great War. Popularly known as the "Truman Committee" (in deference to its chairman), the work of this body quickly gained the respect of Roosevelt in the immediate, harried days following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The president implemented many of its recommendations (most notably, scrapping the executive branch's inefficient and jurisdictionally overlapping series of purchasing agencies and replacing them with a single organization, the War Production Board). Under Truman's leadership the committee was credited with the saving of over fifteen billion dollars during his chairmanship, and – according to his earliest presidential biographer – the junior senator from Missouri quickly came to be perceived by the denizens of Capitol Hill as the one man who "knew probably more about the overall war effort, its complexities, its faults and its failures, than anybody in Washington with the exception of the President himself."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1950), 195-98; McCullough, 225, 228.

<sup>6</sup> Daniels, 216-23.

It was hardly the stuff of nationwide political fame, however. His success in navigating and occasionally simplifying the labyrinthine ways of the federal government, though meritorious, did not lend itself readily to electoral rewards in national polls. As the time grew near for Roosevelt to announce a running mate in his unprecedented bid for a fourth term, few Americans expected to hear the name of Harry Truman. Even when it did begin to circulate, he was seen as a dark horse among several other candidates, each of whom had Roosevelt's tacit assurance that theirs would be the name quietly passed to the convention delegates as the president's choice. Truman himself, only three days before the balloting for vice-president began, supported South Carolina senator James F. Byrnes for the second slot. So when the ticket of Roosevelt-Truman emerged from the Democratic national convention in Chicago that July, there was no shortage of men who felt that they had been betrayed by FDR, and as news of the president's death flashed around the world nine months later, these men would have been less than human if they had not, if only for a moment, imagined themselves in the office Truman now occupied.<sup>7</sup>

No one had a better claim to such feelings than Henry Agard Wallace. Born in 1888, Wallace had entered politics as a progressive Republican in the Theodore Roosevelt mold, but as that wing of the party began to fade in later years, he changed allegiances, supporting Alfred E. Smith in 1928 and helping to swing Iowa for Franklin Roosevelt four years later. A fervent supporter of New Deal policies and the expansion of federal authority, Wallace was rewarded for his support by being named secretary of agriculture during the first two Roosevelt administrations, where he was responsible for

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<sup>7</sup> *The Truman Tapes: In His Own Voice* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), audiocassette; Daniels, 232-53; McCullough, 292-320; Earle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 1973), 176; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), 168-77.

setting up and administering the president's aggressive farm price support program. In 1940 he was chosen to serve as Roosevelt's vice-president, and expected to once again be the running mate when the president announced his plans for 1944.

Political realities had shifted dramatically over the past four years, however. As David McCullough described him, the vice-president "seemed to have his head in the clouds. . . . Wallace was too intellectual, a mystic who spoke Russian and played with a boomerang and reputedly consulted with the spirit of a dead Indian chief. . . . [H]e seemed pathetically out of place and painfully lacking in political talent, or even in a serious interest in politics. . . . He was too remote, too controversial, too liberal – much too liberal."<sup>8</sup> Wallace was the darling of the left, and had the support of the president's wife, but the more conservative party apparatus that Roosevelt had managed to bend to his will for so many years was regaining its political strength in direct proportion to the loss of the president's physical powers. Despite Roosevelt's own assurances to Wallace that he preferred the ticket to remain as it had been, FDR succumbed to the argument of party professionals that the campaign of 1944 would be too hotly contested to allow the luxury of keeping him on the ballot. Ironically, the vice-president's outspoken opposition to racial discrimination and the resulting outcry from among Roosevelt's white southern supporters contributed to the abandonment of Wallace and the decision to appease the disaffected bloc by replacing him with one of their own.<sup>9</sup>

To retain the goodwill of Wallace's supporters, the former vice-president was appointed secretary of commerce, securing Senate confirmation to that post on 1 March 1945. When FDR died less than six weeks later, Truman sensibly chose – in the interest

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<sup>8</sup> McCullough, 294.

<sup>9</sup> *Truman Tapes*; Daniels, 233-45; Miller, 171-72.



of continuity – not to demand immediately the resignations of any Roosevelt cabinet officers. Wallace’s presence, however, proved a constant problem for the new administration. As disenchantment with Truman grew among the more liberal members of his party – men and women who found it more comforting psychologically to blame the new president for what they perceived as the abandonment of fundamental progressive reform rather than admit the unpleasant fact that the dynamism of the New Deal had come to a close long before the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt had ended – Wallace became their idealized counterpoint, the symbol not only of what might have been but what still could be. For his own part, Wallace did little to dampen these sorts of comparisons, especially when the avidly pro-Soviet commerce secretary became increasingly alarmed by what he perceived to be the new administration’s combative and dangerously provocative stance on affairs in post-war Europe. Tensions between Truman and Wallace climaxed on 12 September 1946, when the secretary – speaking to a crowd of twenty thousand in New York’s Madison Square Garden at what had been planned as an “anti-Dewey, anti-Republican rally” – concluded an address otherwise in line with administration policy by condemning U.S. and British interference in the political affairs of eastern Europe. He attacked Truman’s “get tough” policy in East-West relations, and departed from his prepared text to single out what he felt to be the greatest threat to the peace so recently obtained. “I realize,” said Wallace, “that the danger from war is much less from Communism than it is from imperialism.”<sup>10</sup>

Before the month was out, Truman phoned Wallace and demanded his resignation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Wallace Warns on ‘Tough’ Policy Toward Russia,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1948, 1.

<sup>11</sup> McCullough, 517-18.

Over the next year, Wallace continued to stoke the fires of liberal resentment against Truman, his task made even easier by his acceptance of the editorship of the *New Republic*, an influential magazine among the progressive set. When, on 12 March 1947, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress to request military and financial aid for Turkey and Greece to help those nations resist Soviet encroachment, and outlined a formal policy of containment of communism that came to be known as the “Truman Doctrine,” another collision between the president and Wallace was set in motion. Convinced that such provocative actions, undertaken outside of the authority of the newly-formed United Nations, would inevitably lead to war with the Soviets, the ex-secretary began taking stock of his political assets. The events of 1944 made it clear that Wallace had no possibility of being the nominated by the Democratic party apparatus, so he began to examine the possibility of an independent run. Emboldened by the support he continued to command from northern liberals, Wallace made it official on 29 December 1947: he would challenge Harry Truman for the presidency as the candidate of the newly-formed Progressive party.<sup>12</sup>

Still more opposition to Truman arose from within the ranks of the Democratic party itself. Although many committed party loyalists shared Wallace’s frustration, they refused to endorse his schismatic approach. Such a move would only throw the election to the Republicans. Among the leading figures in the various constituencies comprising the old Roosevelt coalition – union representatives, southern conservatives, northern city bosses, liberal grass-root activists – an informal movement began to coalesce around a common goal: anyone but Truman in 1948. They first sounded out the secretary of state,

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Celeste Hasting, “Intraparty Struggle: Harry S Truman, 1945 - 1948” (Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 1971), 97-99; Harold I. Gullan, *The Upset That Wasn't: Harry S Truman and the Crucial Election of 1948* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 72.

George Marshall, and when he politely rebuffed their approaches, they moved on to another former general, Dwight Eisenhower. The one-time Allied supreme commander, who had just retired from active duty, was a political cipher – a blank screen upon which every nearly group in America projected its own leanings. At this date only two things were known: Eisenhower’s nationwide popularity was such that his nomination meant an assured victory, and he had already declined an overture from the Republican party to run in 1948. If, as some critics have alleged ever since, Truman’s civil rights message of 2 February was motivated not out of principle but a desire only to stem the defection of liberals from his candidacy, the “Draft Eisenhower” movement revealed that gambit to have been a failure. As Clark Clifford noted in his memoirs,

the leading liberal organization in the country, Americans for Democratic Action [ADA], was leading the effort to replace President Truman. Just as he was proposing the most far-reaching civil rights legislation in American history, this group proposed to replace him with General Eisenhower, whose political views were completely unknown, and who, when he finally surfaced four years later, turned out to be a conservative Republican. It may seem hard to believe today, but the ADA’s Committee to Draft Eisenhower was strongly backed by such influential Democrats as FDR’s three sons, Franklin, Elliott, and Jimmy . . . ; Florida Senator Claude Pepper [the only senator from the ex-Confederacy who did not condemn the president’s message]; the courageous leader of the United Automobile Workers, Walter Reuther; and a promising young mayor from Minneapolis named Hubert H. Humphrey. This was serious business.<sup>13</sup>

Serious it was indeed, but the Eisenhower boosters and the Wallace defection paled in comparison to the political convulsions triggered in the Democratic stronghold of the “solid South” by the president’s call for a comprehensive civil rights program. A

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<sup>13</sup> Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 196. Members of the “Draft Eisenhower” movement continued to hope for his entry into the Democratic primary right up until the convention itself. Less than seventy-two hours before the delegates were to assemble in Philadelphia, Eisenhower finally made the unqualified statement that he would not accept the Democratic nomination “no matter under what terms, conditions or premises a proposal might be couched.” See “Eisenhower Boom Ended as He Issues a Final Rejection,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1948, 1.

editorial cartoon in the *Springfield (Missouri) Leader and Press* captured the tenor of the times: a harried Truman was shown at a desk overloaded with stacks of papers labeled “crises,” “troubles,” and “messes” as an enormous nut and bolt (labeled “threatened southern bolt”) hung ominously over his head.<sup>14</sup> Within hours of his message to Congress, Truman was already receiving replies from its southern contingent. Tom Connally of Texas, a long-time Truman supporter in the Senate, called the proposal a lynching of the Constitution and vowed that the South would resist any effort to implement it.<sup>15</sup> Virginia senator Harry Byrd labeled the civil rights program a “devastating broadside at the dignity of Southern traditions and institutions.” In the House, Representative John Bell Williams of Mississippi offered the same pronouncement in more lurid terms: the president had “seen fit to run a political dagger into our backs and now he is trying to drink our blood.”<sup>16</sup> Some fifty congressmen from all eleven of the former states of the Confederacy signed an open letter attacking the president’s call for “antisouth, so-called civil rights legislation.”<sup>17</sup>

At the state level, hundreds of officials throughout the region adopted resolutions opposing any attempt to rejuvenate FEPC, vowing to defeat any anti-segregation, anti-lynching, or anti-poll tax laws such as had been recommended in the message, and pledging to withhold any financial backing for a Truman re-election bid. “If I were to try to formulate a program destructive of the South and more objectionable to the South,” declared Walter Stillers, speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives, “I don’t

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<sup>14</sup> Reprinted in James N. Giglio and Greg G. Thielen, *Truman in Cartoon and Caricature* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984), 43.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in McCullough, 588.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Monroe Billington, “Civil Rights, President Truman, and the South,” *Journal of Negro History* 51 (October 1996): 133.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Glenn Feldman, *From Demagogue to Dixiecrat: Horace Wilkinson and the Politics of Race* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995), 130.

believe I could have possibly formulated one as bad as this.”<sup>18</sup> In Mississippi, governor Fielding L. Wright felt compelled – for the first time in his two years as chief executive – to speak to his black constituents directly in a radio address:

With all frankness, . . . I must tell you that regardless of any recommendation of President Truman, despite any law passed by Congress, and no matter what is said to you by the many associations claiming to represent you, there will continue to be segregation in Mississippi. If any of you have become so deluded as to want to enter our hotels and cafes, enjoy social equality with the whites, then kindness and true sympathy requires me to advise you to make your home in some state other than Mississippi.<sup>19</sup>

There was no doubt in the minds of Truman’s opponents as to the motivation for his action. Representative Pete Jarman of Alabama called on the president to “discontinue his apparent emphasis on catering to minority groups at the expense of the South.”<sup>20</sup> The editorial board of the *Atlanta Constitution* called Truman’s insistence on federal FEPC and anti-lynching legislation a “contemptible use of the legislative bodies” intended “for the sounding board effect of a campaign for the Negro vote.”<sup>21</sup> The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* argued likewise:

The President’s program is designed to appeal to minority groups in an election year. It is a palpable emotional appeal for their votes. It will appeal, too, to those who were the originators of most of the proposals made by President Truman – American communists who fathered the ideas for the purpose of creating racial and sectional disturbance. All of the proposals affecting the South have been officially advocated by the American Communist party for the past 25 years. The program is something to which no southerner in Congress could give support regardless of how much his opposition might affect party unity in an national election.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Dixie Leaders Score Truman ‘Rights’ Plan,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 February 1948, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 334, n. 27.

<sup>20</sup> “Dixie Leaders Score Truman ‘Rights’ Plan.”

<sup>21</sup> “A Contemptible Use of Power,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 February 1948, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Philip H. Vaughan, “Urban Aspects of Civil Rights and the Early Truman Administration, 1946 – 1948” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1971), 36-37.

If political concerns were all that drove Truman's civil rights program, then the decision to deliver his message on 2 February in particular was a tactical error of the highest magnitude. The party's annual Jefferson-Jackson Day dinners, to be held across much of the nation in February that year, were expected to generate over \$500,000 from southern states alone for the Democratic National Committee's war chest. Instead, many state Democratic organizations chose in the coming weeks to withhold contributions to the national party coffers.<sup>23</sup> Further, a meeting of the Southern Governors Association had for some time been scheduled to begin in Tallahassee, Florida, on the ninth. By sending his message to Congress one week before, Truman gave his opponents a ready-made opportunity to coordinate resistance, and they made the most of it. Those governors who were determined to challenge the president on this issue now had a week to assess the political strength they could bring to bear in the upcoming battle, and the conference provided a ready-made organizational framework in which to maximize their effectiveness. A report issued by the attendees declared, "Our inquiry has satisfied us that the virtually unanimous will of the people of the Southern States is to take every possible effective action within their power, not only to prevent the enactment of the proposed [civil rights] legislation but also to defeat those who have proposed it and any others advocating it."<sup>24</sup>

Here in Tallahassee, the Dixiecrat movement began to coalesce. The plan they devised was three-fold:

1. Prevent Congressional passage of the president's civil rights legislation.
2. Deny Truman the nomination of the Democratic party in July.

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<sup>23</sup> "Truman's Independent Move to Run Held Effective Timing," *New York Times*, 10 March, 1946, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Vaughan, 156.

3. If this were not possible, deny Truman the electoral votes of enough southern states to either throw the election into the House of Representatives (their preference) or secure the election of the Republican nominee.<sup>25</sup>

From the outset, the Dixiecrat challenge was not about electoral victory. No one in their leadership had any illusions of capturing the White House. It was a spoiler movement from first to last. As in 1860, southern Democrats wished to demonstrate that they had the power of ultimate veto over the policies of the national party. Thus, something more than the political future of Harry Truman was at stake in the presidential election of 1948. If his fellow southerners had succeeded in their course, Truman's attempt to divorce the national party from the segregationist policies of the South would have been strangled in its crib, perhaps not to stir again for a generation.

They came far closer to that goal than many today realize.

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No one issue illuminated the tensions between the disparate factions that comprised the Democratic party better than formalized legal discrimination based on race. Those Americans who were most passionately committed to its maintenance and those most determined to see it dismantled tended to identify themselves as Democrats, and for decades the national party leaders had struggled to keep the Negro question from tearing that coalition apart. A motion to condemn the Ku Klux Klan in the party platform as an "un-American" organization led a bitter fight on the floor of the 1924 Democratic

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<sup>25</sup> Cole Speicher Brembeck, "The Persuasive Speaking of Truman and Dewey in the 1948 Presidential Campaign" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1951), 190.

national convention, and the narrowness of the final vote (543<sup>3</sup>/<sub>20</sub> to 542<sup>7</sup>/<sub>20</sub> against condemnation) demonstrated the extent to which racial issues threatened party unity.<sup>26</sup>

Race was not the only issue that divided many southern Democrats from the rest of the party, but it was the most evocative, the most visceral. Southern voters who could not be energized in opposition to the national party on issues of grave importance to their region's political leaders – the declining relative power of their region in Democratic councils or the expansion of federal involvement in private enterprise – were easily aroused by any suggestion that the South's racial order was in danger. To fully understand the Dixiecrat movement of 1948, therefore, it must be recognized that while race was the explicit terrain of difference over which the battle with Truman would be fought, for many in the Dixiecrat leadership the fight against civil rights was also a stalking horse for other, less popular concerns.

The election of Roosevelt in 1932 obscured the dissatisfaction many southern Democratic leaders had with the direction of the national party. Even before the onset of the Depression, the South represented the nation's most economically disadvantaged region; the rhetoric of FDR resonated with intensity among the mass of white southerners, stifling many of the concerns southern business and political leaders felt towards the means by which the new president promised to achieve economic recovery. As the Roosevelt years progressed, this dissension slowly found expression. With the overwhelming success of the Democratic party in several successive congressional elections, the very size of its majority eliminated the need to maintain party unity in the face of Republican opposition. Indeed, these majorities themselves contributed to

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Daniel Guthrie, "The Dixiecrat Movement of 1948" (M.A. thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1955), 29-30; Daniels, 127.



southern frustrations, for they had served to shift the locus of power in the Democratic party northward.

The concern of southern leaders over a diminution of their authority was not merely speculative. Electoral shifts in the geographic balance of Democratic power were amplified by the abandonment by the party in 1936 of a long-standing rule that required the concurrence of two-thirds of all national convention delegates for anyone to secure either the presidential or vice-presidential nomination. With this move from a super to a simple majority, the South in an instant lost one of its most effective weapons in the struggle for intra-party supremacy.<sup>27</sup> Nor were such losses occurring only at the national level. Long-established structures designed to perpetuate political power in the hands of a small number of wealthy white Democrats were also under attack within the states themselves: in 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Smith v. Allwright* that white-only primaries were impermissible under the terms of the Fifteenth Amendment.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the Dixiecrat rebellion was not simply a spontaneous expression of dissatisfaction with the racial policies of Harry Truman. Threatened by changes in both policy and procedure, the Democratic leadership in the South had begun to stir during the latter half of the Roosevelt era. In 1940 a small group of South Carolinians (less than twenty-five hundred) calling themselves “Jefferson Democrats” defected to Republican

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<sup>27</sup> Hasting, 152.

<sup>28</sup> In an attempt to circumvent the ruling, the South Carolina legislature repealed all their state laws pertaining to primary elections, paving the way for leaders of the state Democratic party to claim that their organization was a private organization and thus not under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Supreme Court. At great personal and professional risk, Judge J. Waties Waring of the U.S. District Court for South Carolina ruled against such practices in *Elmore v. Rice*. His decision was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals on 30 December 1947, and in May of the following year the U.S. Supreme Court announced that it would not review the decision. At the height of the Dixiecrat rebellion, therefore, the explicit legal barrier to voting by blacks in party primaries had been demolished – raising the stakes in November all the more. See Gullan, 77-78; John E. Borsos, “Support for the National Democratic Party in South Carolina During the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1987), 8-9.

nominee Wendell Willkie to protest the New Deal. Four years later, this group – now swollen to three times its size and calling itself the “Southern Democrats” – refused to support a third term for FDR, voting instead for Virginia senator Harry Byrd.<sup>29</sup> Unable to halt national Democratic policies of which they disapproved and faced with the reality of their waning political strength, southern Democratic leaders – as they had in 1860 – believed their only chance to reverse such a course was to threaten the future presidential hopes of the Democratic party. Again, South Carolina appeared at the center of the dispute.

In his study of the Dixiecrats as a political movement, Paul Daniel Guthrie noted that “there was no real race issue until the report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights was published” and Truman used it as the basis of his civil rights message to Congress. Before the publication of *To Secure These Rights*, southern senators employed their reliable tactic of filibuster, killed any FEPC or anti-lynching legislation supported by the president, and made no further mention of the affair. When Truman spoke on issues of race in the first two years of his presidency, southern politicians simply ignored the incidents, assuming such talk – as it had been for countless chief executives in the past, Republican and Democrat – was simply that, a sop to the colored voters of northern cities and their allies: the Jews, the Communists, Mrs. Roosevelt. By directly addressing civil rights in such a high-profile manner on 2 February and calling on Congress for an explicit and far-ranging set of legislative actions, however, the president had for the first time since Reconstruction raised the specter of genuine and fundamental movement by the federal government on this issue. In so doing, he inadvertently provided an

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<sup>29</sup> Alberta Lachicotte, *Rebel Senator: Strom Thurmond of South Carolina* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1966), 44-45.

opportunity for southern interests hostile to the New Deal to harness the backlash among their mass electorate for their own ends. By appealing to the “prejudice and emotion inherent in racism,” observed Guthrie, the Dixiecrats “hoped to recapture by means of their bolt the control of their party they had lost during the New Deal revolution.”<sup>30</sup>

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Nowhere was this interplay between racism and political advantage more evident than in the actions of the governor of South Carolina, James Strom Thurmond.

Looking back from the vantage-point of the twenty-first century, possessed of the knowledge of his deeds and words throughout the civil rights era, it is difficult for anyone to conceive of him as anything other than a virulent, instinctual racist who was driven by a fervent compulsion to do all in his power to keep the system of legalized discrimination and segregation intact. To perceive him in this way, however, is not only to examine history as if it were a film running backwards through the projector, and thereby coming to understand the first reel as the consequence of the climax, but also to overlook one of the lesser tragedies of American racism – its corrupting, decaying impact on those whom the system was designed to privilege. Racial injustice, as practiced in the life of the nation, did not simply present a controlling, omnipresent force in the lives of blacks; in the totality of its operation, whites – most notably, but by no means exclusively, in the South – were both practitioner and victim.

As Thurmond’s later senatorial career stretched across generations, he would occasionally reflect on his role in the Dixiecrat movement, each time doing so for a constituency to whom increasingly those days were not a part of their own lived history. Throughout these later years, Thurmond spoke only in terms of legal principle, of

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<sup>30</sup> Guthrie, 33, 53-54.

political philosophy and the nature of government, of legitimate constitutional questions that had been at issue. Writing at the close of the 1960s, he explained his opposition to federal civil rights legislation – both in 1948 and afterward:

In the opinion of many members of Congress, as well as officials in state governments, the Congress exceeded the bounds of the Constitution when it began to legislate in the fields of education and civil rights. . . . [T]he succession of civil rights proposals that tended to expand the power of the Federal Government provide the best examples of legislation that exceeded the bounds of the Constitution. With these proposals, the Congress has undertaken to replace and supersede state legislatures in entering the domain rights that are concerned with life, liberty, and property.<sup>31</sup>

More than a decade later, Thurmond continued to frame the question in these terms.

“When I ran for president as a States Righter,” he told two of his biographers, “some people considered that a racist fight. But it wasn’t that. They misconstrued the whole thing. It was a battle of federal power versus state power. That was my fight. That was the way I viewed it.”<sup>32</sup>

The painful, pathetic quality of these and innumerable like statements from the nation’s longest-serving senator comes not, as many today believe, from their untruthfulness but from their probity. Thurmond’s primary concern in 1948 was not with white supremacy; in that he was unerringly honest. His actions derived from other reasons: some – as he claimed – principled and high-minded, others – which he denied – perhaps personal and more selfish. But what Thurmond consistently omitted to mention in any of the justifications he offered in the decades following the collapse of legalized racial inequality was the calculated, unhesitating, and inexcusable ease with which he

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<sup>31</sup> Strom Thurmond, *The Faith We Have Not Kept* (San Diego: Viewpoint Books, 1968), 160-61.

<sup>32</sup> Interview of 22 December 1980, published in Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, *Ol’ Strom: An Unauthorized Biography of Strom Thurmond* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1998), 97.

stoked and wielded the basest hatreds of his fellow men for the sole purpose of achieving other ends.

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It was the second day of October, 1947, and Harry Truman had been the president of the United States for over two years. Though publication of *To Secure These Rights* would not occur for another twenty-seven days, he had already taken a more progressive stand on the issue of guaranteeing justice for blacks than had any other president in American history, and yet Strom Thurmond was not troubled. The short radio speech the South Carolina governor had been invited to give in Louisville, Kentucky, was entitled “Let’s Look at ’48,” and though the presidential election was more than a year off, he was already stumping ardently for his choice. Harry Truman, he told his listeners, was the undisputed choice of Democrats everywhere: “The Democratic party already has its candidate for 1948, and will re-nominate him without delay.”<sup>33</sup> No inkling of discontent could be discerned in Thurmond’s address, which concluded, “We who believe in a liberal political philosophy, in the importance of human rights as well as property rights, in the preservation and strengthening of the economic and social gains brought about by the efforts of the Democratic Party . . . will vote for the election of Harry Truman and the restoration of Congress to the control of the Democratic party, and I believe we will win.”<sup>34</sup>

One is jarred by this language only in retrospect.

In 1933, at the age of thirty, Strom Thurmond – three years a member of the South Carolina Bar – assumed his first elective office as a member of the state senate,

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Borsos, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Bass and Thompson, 87-88.

where he authored the state's compulsory school attendance law (binding on the parents of both black and white children). Five years later he won election as a judge of the eleventh state circuit, where he remained until 1942. Although far past the age of conscription, he volunteered for service with the U.S. Army and served in both the European and Pacific theaters, participating in the Normandy invasion as a member of the 82nd Airborne Division. Upon separation from the Army in January 1946, he briefly resumed his position on the bench, then chose in that same year to run as one of eleven candidates for the Democratic party's nomination as governor. Thurmond received a plurality of the vote in the primary election held on 20 August, and two weeks later emerged triumphant from the subsequent run-off.<sup>35</sup> In the overwhelmingly Democratic state of South Carolina, the general election was a mere formality.

His inaugural address, delivered the following January, was a fifteen thousand-word document of reform that any progressive of that era would have gladly accepted as his own. The new governor called for an end to the poll tax, a system of permanent voter registration, a state minimum wage, strengthening of child labor laws, workplace safety and livability improvements (including temperature controls and cafeterias in textile mills), federal aid to education, constitutional reform via popular referenda, adoption of a secret ballot law (South Carolina being the only state without one), enforcement of the state's constitutional ban on dual office-holding, state partnership in industrial development, gender equality in wages, environmental protection legislation, free treatment for sufferers of venereal disease, mandatory premarital blood tests, increased liquor license fees, and a ban on liquor advertising. Further, Thurmond's ambitious program was not intended solely for the needs of his white constituents. He also

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<sup>35</sup> Lachicotte, 9-10, 47.

advocated free textbooks for all schools, the establishment of an industrial training facility for black females, and funding for a series of area trade schools to be divided in proportion to the racial makeup of the state.<sup>36</sup> As was true of nearly every white southerner, Thurmond was unreservedly committed to the policy of separate-but-equal, but unlike most others – in and out of South Carolina – he demanded that both sides of that equation be observed. In a remarkable act for a governor of his time and region, he chose this highly visible occasion to tell the residents of his state that more attention needed to be paid to Negro education. “If we provide better educational facilities for them,” said Thurmond, “not only will much be accomplished in human values, but we shall raise our per capita income as well as the educational standing of the state.”<sup>37</sup> In keeping with the spirit of the New Deal, it was a bold vision of activist government at work in all sectors of society. Unlike the similarly exhaustive list of proposals President Truman had presented to Congress in his first major legislative request two years previous, Thurmond saw the majority of his ideas enacted into law.

The most noteworthy of Thurmond’s liberal undertakings as governor, however, occurred less than month after taking office. On 17 February 1947, Willie Earle – a black man arrested in Greenville, South Carolina, for allegedly robbing and fatally stabbing a white cab driver – was taken at gunpoint from the county jail in that city by a white mob, driven a short distance, and thereupon shot, stabbed, and beaten to death. In response to the first lynching in the state in fourteen years, the new governor acted “with a vigor,” said the *New York Times*, “new to the South’s traditions.”<sup>38</sup> Thurmond ordered an

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<sup>36</sup> Bass and Thompson, 83; Lachicotte, 47-48. In 1948, eight states still retained a poll tax: Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and New Hampshire.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Gullan, 75.

<sup>38</sup> “New Incident Causes Shock,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1947, 1.

immediate investigation into the crime, and worked actively to coordinate the efforts of state and local authorities with the F.B.I. The first arrests in the case were made the very next day. “We in South Carolina want the world to know,” announced Thurmond, “we will tolerate no mob violence,” and he named a special prosecutor to try the case.

Less than three months after commission of the crime, the trial of thirty-one men – the largest lynching trial in U.S. history – got underway. The prosecution spent five days introducing evidence, including the confessions of twenty-six of the men involved; the defense could not produce a single witness on its behalf. No one, however, would be convicted of the crime. The presiding judge issued a directed verdict of acquittal for three of the defendants on the grounds of insufficient evidence, and after two full days of deliberation, the all-white jury, later claiming to have acted out of fear of mob reprisals, found all twenty-eight remaining defendants not guilty.<sup>39</sup> Though the governor was disappointed in the verdict, he did not believe his efforts had been entirely fruitless. “I think great good was accomplished by having the accused arrested and tried,” Thurmond commented. “I believe that position will assist in the future in preventing future lynchings.”<sup>40</sup>

Willie Earle was the last black man ever to be lynched in the state of South Carolina.

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To understand how the Strom Thurmond of 1947 metamorphized into the Dixiecrat standard-bearer of 1948, one need only juxtapose him with Harry Truman. Two men – both progressives, both southerners. Where they differed was in character:

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<sup>39</sup> “Timeline of Events in Willie Earle Case,” [Greenvilleonline.com](http://greenvilleonline.com), posted 15 March 2003, <<http://greenvilleonline.com/news/2003/03/15/200303152913.htm>>.

<sup>40</sup> Bass and Thompson, 85.



one defended a popular system of racial discrimination for political gain, the other risked political destruction to challenge that system. For Truman, the essence of leadership lay in staying true to one's own beliefs, regardless of the opinion of the majority. Asked years later if the negative response to his civil rights plan within his own party ever caused him to waiver, Truman answered unhesitatingly in the negative. "A man always should do what he thinks is right," he continued. "If he does what he thinks is right and carries through, it's all right."<sup>41</sup> An editorial cartoonist for the *Washington Star* was one of the few to see the president in this light. A panel some weeks after the announcement of the civil rights message depicted Truman, arms folded in defiance across his chest, standing on a rug labeled "Civil Rights" and announcing "I stand pat!" while an astounded "Presidential Nomination" (personified, as in many cartoons of this period, as an old maid) replied, "You mean you'd rather be right than be president?"<sup>42</sup> It was this steadfastness – many would call it stubbornness – that defined Truman, and it was costing him the political support of more of his southern base with each passing week.

Thurmond, in contrast, lacked the capacity to tell his constituents what they did not want to hear. In this he was no different than most elected representatives; when discussing the maintenance of legalized racial discrimination, this seemingly obvious point is often overlooked. There is a tendency to see the regime of formalized oppression – especially in the South – as the product of the ruling elite. When observers look back on the countless attempts at passing civil rights legislation that were stifled by a handful of southern Democrats in the Senate, many err in identifying these men personally and solely as the cause of the federal government's failure to correct the

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<sup>41</sup> *Truman Tapes*.

<sup>42</sup> Reprinted in Giglio, 33.

injustices meted out to its black citizens. Such sentiments, while understandable, derive from a faulty appreciation of American political life and its dependence upon popular support. Men like Mississippi senator James Eastland could – less than twenty-four hours before Truman delivered his civil rights message to Congress – sit on a Judiciary subcommittee and call Walter White a “nigger” to his face during a hearing on anti-lynching legislation for one very simple reason: a majority of Eastland’s constituents endorsed such behavior.<sup>43</sup>

Thurmond’s constituents – at least, an electoral majority of them – did so as well. In fact, the extent of their racism could at times surpass that of their elected officials. In an 1980 interview, Thurmond claimed that he had run for president because he felt very deeply that Truman would not represent what he believed to be the best type of government for this country. ”I ran,” he said, “to give people a choice.” Given the single-issue nature of his candidacy, that choice was either to dismantle or to preserve formalized systems of racial oppression. When asked how he could defend segregation, Thurmond responded candidly: “it was the thinking of the people I represented.”<sup>44</sup>

The evidence suggests that he was all-too-aware of how his constituents thought about race when he made his decision to join the Dixiecrat movement; their reaction to the president’s civil rights message, and not his own personal response, appears to have been the impetus for his subsequent conduct. As governor of South Carolina, he was prevented by law from succeeding himself in office. Senator Olin D. Johnston, himself a former governor and a popular figure among the citizens of the state, would be up for re-election in 1950. How was it that Thurmond, fully aware of Harry Truman’s efforts in

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<sup>43</sup> “Anti-Lynch Bill Solons Termed ‘Demagogues,’” *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 February 1948, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Bass and Thompson, 99.

support of civil rights from the outset of his presidency, could stump on his behalf one day, and four months later emerge as one of the leaders of the effort to remove him? Because Harry Truman's civil rights message of 1948 had galvanized people in South Carolina in a way no other issue in the post-war environment had. Regardless of what happened in the presidential race, irrespective of whether Truman would serve another four years, the man who tried to make Truman pay the price for threatening to overturn the long-established racial order could go anywhere in South Carolina politics – even into a Senate seat held by a popular incumbent.<sup>45</sup>

To argue that his willingness to jump aboard the Dixiecrat bandwagon was nothing more than a instinctual reaction to internalized white supremacist beliefs requires one to ignore all the prior facts of his public life. Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, in their definitive biography of Thurmond, concluded that with his participation in the Dixiecrat rebellion of 1948,

Southern progressives lost a champion they could have used. Thurmond had never before exploited racial politics. Until 1948 the term “States Rights” barely existed in his political vocabulary. His leadership in prosecuting the white mob that murdered Willie Earle, his ultimately successful effort to repeal a state poll tax, and his concern about improving educational and economic opportunities for blacks provided a foundation for leading his state and region into an era of new racial relationships. Had he continued in that direction, a man of his political skill, determination, and energy might well have pulled it off.

Instead, he helped generate forces that over the next half century moved his state, his region, and his country in a different direction. The role of defending white supremacy was one he chose.<sup>46</sup>

In fairness to Strom Thurmond, it must be noted that he was not the only southern Democrat for whom opposition to civil rights and election to the United States Senate converged that year. On 22 May, an eight-term Democratic congressman from Texas

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<sup>45</sup> Borsos, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Bass and Thompson, 98.

kicked off his general election campaign for an open Senate seat to be filled in November. At a rally in Austin's Wooldridge Park the candidate told his enthusiastic crowd what he thought of the president's ideas concerning federal guarantees of racial justice: "[The] Civil Rights Program is a farce and a sham – an effort to set up a police state on the guise of liberty. I am opposed to that program. I have voted against the so-called poll tax repeal bill. . . . I have voted against the so-called anti-lynching bill. . . . I have voted against the FEPC."

Such was the proud record of Lyndon Baines Johnson in the spring of 1948.<sup>47</sup>

To judge the role played by Harry Truman in the fight for civil rights, he must be judged in the context of his times, his region, and his party.

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With regard to congressional action, the Dixiecrats – even those among them who believed genuinely that the president's program, if implemented, would usher in an era of racial amalgamation and social disintegration – seemed to have nothing to fear.

A nationwide Gallop Poll taken in April found that only 6 percent of all Americans supported passage of the Truman plan, as opposed to 56 percent in opposition. Even among Negroes outside of the South, support rose no higher than 58 percent.<sup>48</sup> The

*Progressive* hailed the message as "a daring and distinguished effort which merits the militant support of every progressive-minded American," and the *Nation* called it "a

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 82-83. Gardner writes that during the Johnson administration, the possible circulation of these statements was considered so politically damaging that White House staffers "were instructed by an official notice attached to the speech that read, 'DO NOT RELEASE THIS SPEECH – NOT EVEN TO STAFF, WITHOUT EXPRESS PERMISSION OF [Special Assistant to the President] BILL MOYERS. As background, both Walter Jenkins [Johnson's top administrative assistant] and [White House Press Secretary] George Reedy have instructed this is not EVER TO BE RELEASED.'"

<sup>48</sup> Gallup, 1:722-23.

genuine and highly admirable document,” but these were exceptions.<sup>49</sup> In much of the northern press, the entire affair was treated with a remarkable indifference. Most papers gave the message front-page coverage the following day, but few editorialized about it, and those that did were tepid in their response, as if awareness of the proposal’s likely fate were reason enough not to praise its substance. The *New York Times* described Truman’s legislative program unenthusiastically as one that “most of us can readily subscribe, at least in principle,” while the editorial page of the weekly *Richmond Afro-American* made no mention of the message in its 7 February edition. The following week it addressed only the equal employment provision – primarily as a means of recalling the ineffectiveness of FEPC as it was administered under Roosevelt.<sup>50</sup> A follow-up poll conducted by the Gallup organization in July found that a majority of Americans opposed a federal anti-lynching bill, and only 39 percent believed the federal government should have any involvement in guaranteeing non-discrimination in employment. Even on the question of mandated segregation in interstate transportation, opposition to such policies enjoyed only 49 percent support nationwide. Forty-two percent of all Americans continued to support separate seating on buses and trains.<sup>51</sup>

Its fate in Congress therefore was not surprising. In typical Truman fashion, he had offered such a vast assortment of proposals at once that there was something in it for nearly everyone to oppose. Further, the president had an unfortunate habit of failing to consult with his own party leaders in Congress before acting, thereby costing him the

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Alonzo Lee Hamby, “Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism, 1945 – 1948” (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, 1966), 212.

<sup>50</sup> “Mr. Truman on Civil Liberties,” *New York Times*, 4 February 1948, 22; “Truman’s Ten Commandments,” *Richmond Afro-American*, 14 February 1958, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Gallup, 1:747-48; “Segregation + + Favored by 42 Pct. + + Gallup Poll,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 July 1948, 1.

goodwill of legislators who may have been inclined to lend their support. Alben Barkley, the Senate minority leader from Kentucky, polled the Democratic Steering Committee after the message had been read and discovered – as had happened on numerous policy questions in the past – that not a single member had been consulted, or even alerted, by the White House as to the president’s intentions. “I’m supposed to be the catcher and I should get signals,” the senator told Clark Clifford in frustration. “I not only am not getting the signals but someone actually turns out the lights when the ball is tossed.”<sup>52</sup> As Barkley later described it, the president simply “threw a whole basketful of matters in the lap of Congress in one swing.”<sup>53</sup> When the president’s ten points were crafted into an omnibus bill some weeks later, the Democratic leader in the Senate refused to sponsor the legislation.<sup>54</sup> In the House of Representatives, the bill was likewise shunned by leading Democrats, and the most comprehensive civil rights package ever proposed by a U.S. president slid quietly into the machinery of Congress, never thereafter emerging from the various committees to which it had been sent for consideration.<sup>55</sup>

If the 2 February message had been issued only for electoral purposes, if the sole consideration had been to revitalize the president’s flagging political prospects in the face of what every seasoned observer knew was going to be a closely fought contest, it had failed abysmally. Since the Civil War no Democrat had ever been elected president

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<sup>52</sup> “Truman’s Independent Move to Run Held Effective Timing.”

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Gullan, 118-19.

<sup>54</sup> William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1970), 87. Allowance must be made for the possibility that the senator from the segregated state of Kentucky found in the president’s mishandling of political decorum an excuse to follow the course upon which he had already decided.

<sup>55</sup> The Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 were too tepid and ineffectual to even merit discussion in this context. Although major elements of President Truman’s program were finally resurrected and enacted during the Johnson administration in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a further wave of civil disobedience and the violent reaction it engendered were necessary to pressure the federal government into passing the Voting Rights Act the following year.

without capturing the electoral votes of all eleven states of the former Confederacy. By demanding that the federal government fulfill its obligation to guarantee individual liberties and equal justice under the law, victory in any of them had now been jeopardized, and all Truman had to show in return was a moribund package of legislation that was polling 6 percent approval nationwide. Nevertheless, he did not waiver from his course. On 8 March, Rhode Island senator J. Howard McGrath, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, formally announced that the president would seek re-election. This announcement too was made without the consultation of leading congressional Democrats, though (the *New York Times* noted diplomatically) they “conceded the effect this time should be helpful.” Mississippi congressman John Bell Williams, speaking on the floor of the House, was more blunt in his appraisal: “Frankly, I would suggest that he quit now while he is just 20,000,000 votes behind.”<sup>56</sup>

When asked if the South’s reaction had altered Truman’s stance in any way, McGrath responded, “I have talked to the President with respect to his civil rights message. The President’s position remains unchanged. . . .”<sup>57</sup>

The consensus of the national media was that Truman’s efforts on behalf of civil rights legislation had been fruitless, yet that was true only in the narrowest sense of the term. “The President” according to *U.S. News & World Report*, “raised the wrong issue at the wrong time when he proposed to improve the status of the Negro. He caught the South at a time of special turmoil in a changing economy. And the South bolted.”<sup>58</sup> Yet the same magazine noted that “fear of what the civil-rights program would do to the theory of white supremacy” lay in back of the resistance to Truman. In the minds of

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<sup>56</sup> “Truman’s Independent Move to Run Held Effective Timing.”

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Berman, 94.

<sup>58</sup> “Real Issues in South’s Revolt,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 April 1948, 28.

white southerners, that theory was now “facing its greatest attack in 70 years.”<sup>59</sup> In the halls of Congress, where most attention (then and since) fixed, the president indeed had little to show for his effort. If, however, one employs a standard other than congressional approval to judge the effectiveness of Truman’s 2 February message, one finds evidence of a greater yield.

Truman recognized that policy in the absence of proclivity was a doomed enterprise. Minds and hearts would not be changed simply with the passage of legislation, and without that necessary precondition all the laws imaginable could have been enacted – to no avail. For any such policies to be enforced effectively, a critical mass of support, within the nation as a whole and among the hundreds of thousands of executive branch employees in particular, had to be created.<sup>60</sup> As he told his civil rights committee in their inaugural meeting, the work had to start at the grassroots. Perhaps it was for this purpose that his civil rights message had been crafted. He had addressed himself to Congress, but the entire nation was listening, and while for a variety of reasons nearly all of them found some reason to oppose his particular series of federal remedies, the evidence suggests that his basic premise – denial of human rights was a denial of the basic beliefs of democracy – had begun to resonate. Such at least was the opinion of the Democratic National Committee as expressed in an unsigned memo to Philleo Nash, Special Assistant to the President:

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<sup>59</sup> “Gauging the South’s Revolt,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 26 March 1948, 22.

<sup>60</sup> The need to change attitudes within the rank-and-file of the executive branch itself – and the challenge of doing so – was expressed by Truman in an 11 February 1950 letter to Eleanor Roosevelt: “Our difficulty in the southern situation is due to the fact that the people we have working for these agencies of course are people who are steeped in violent prejudices affecting the negroes of the South. It is just as difficult as it can be to find people who have an idea of fair treatment for the descendents of former slaves. I am doing everything I can educationally and otherwise to overcome that feeling.” Steve Neal, ed., *Eleanor and Harry: The Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 174-75.



The effects of the President's civil rights program cannot be evaluated yet in statistical terms. Its principal importance to date lies in the fact that for the first time in many years a majority of the American people are thinking hard – and doing things – about sore spots in the American democratic system. The discussion which the President's activities in this field have evoked is invaluable from an educational standpoint. . . .

Communities all over the country are examining themselves in the light of the findings of the President's Committee and pressing for action . . . for minority groups . . . with which they were not previously concerned. Enlightened employers and labor unions are taking the words of the President and his Committee to heart and securing the employment of minority groups in ever greater numbers. Non-governmental organizations in every part of the country are urging local, regional, and national actions to make the guarantees of the Constitution real for all.<sup>61</sup>

“The jumping off point in their arguments in every case,” Democratic party officials noted, “was the report of the Committee created by the President.”<sup>62</sup> As with FEPC nearly three years before, visible defeats at the national level were translating into less obvious but no less important local triumphs.

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In the story of Harry Truman and his fight against racial discrimination, May 1948 represents an important benchmark. On the left and on the right, breakaway Democrats drew their lines and challenged the president to cross. First came the Dixiecrats. On 10 May, approximately twelve hundred Democratic leaders from southern states (including the governors of Mississippi, Arkansas, and South Carolina) gathered in Jackson, Mississippi, to continue the work that had begun in Tallahassee three months earlier. That evening, Strom Thurmond gave the keynote address:

Whenever a great section of this country is regarded as so politically impotent that one major party insults it because it is “in the bag” and the other party scorns it because there is no chance for victory, then the time has arrived for corrective and concerted action. . . .

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Vaughan, 107.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

We are going to fight as long as we breathe, for the rights of our states and our people under the American constitution and come what may, we are going to preserve our civilization in the South.

On the question of social intermingling of the races our people draw the line. And all the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches, and our places of recreation and amusement. . . .

No decent and self-respecting Negro would ask for a law to force people to accept him where he is not wanted.<sup>63</sup>

It was an effective presentation, to judge by the thunderous applause it received.

One could perhaps question Thurmond's authority to speak for the Negro, but his speech was assuredly a legitimate expression of the mind of the white South. Where he had undeniably erred, however, was in his description of what the civil rights message had asked Congress to do. Nothing the president had proposed – thus far – would have forcibly desegregated any of the institutions the governor had enumerated. Yet given the territory into which Truman would venture before the close of his administration, it is not unwarranted to ask whether Strom Thurmond was being indefensibly demagogic in his remarks at Jackson or remarkably prescient.

In either event, he recognized much more clearly than did most newspapers and magazines of the day (black or white) the historic significance of Truman's 2 February message. "Never did we dream," Thurmond told his listeners, "that a Democratic president would stab us in the back and in one fell swoop seek to impose federal laws more detrimental to the South . . . than those proposed in the Reconstruction period by the Republican party."<sup>64</sup> For the moment, the laws in question lay dormant in Congress – casualties of partisan politics, sectional division, and public apathy. The omnibus civil rights package requested by the president clearly had no chance of passage in the near

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<sup>63</sup> Bass and Thompson, 106.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph C. Ellers, *Strom Thurmond: The Public Man* (Orangeburg, S.C.: Sandlapper Publishing, 1993), 107.

future, but the Dixiecrats worried that additional agitation on the broader question of racial equality would continue from within Democratic ranks. Publicly at least, the Dixiecrats claimed they could be mollified – if the president would abandon any future reference to federal involvement in civil rights and if language enumerating such a stance were written into the national party platform that summer. If not, the Dixiecrats vowed to reconvene on 17 July in Birmingham and formalize their response.<sup>65</sup>

Such were white southern demands. From the opposite ideological pole, Henry Wallace hammered the president for failing to do enough of what Thurmond and his followers said was too much. Speaking at a campaign event in Portland, Oregon, on 24 May, Wallace told his listeners that the pressure from his candidacy was responsible for “getting the civil rights message out of President Truman.” How exactly this had been accomplished – given that the president had established his commission on civil rights nearly a year before Wallace announced he was running – the Progressive party’s standard-bearer failed to explain. Nevertheless, the challenger assured his audience that his efforts since entering the presidential field nearly five months ago had done more to advance the issue of civil rights than “all the speeches . . . in the old parties of years past.” In contrast, the president’s speeches were dismissed as “new, better-than-ever lip service.” On 2 February, Wallace reminded the crowd, Truman had promised to end segregation in federal civilian employment. “If the president’s message was more than an attempt to woo votes,” he thundered, “he will issue that executive order, and he will issue it without delay.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Gullan, 78-79.

<sup>66</sup> “Wallace Claims Rights Plan Gain,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1948, 19; Hamby, 234.

An executive order ending segregation in the civil service – that was the determinant by which liberal Henry A. Wallace told his followers to judge the president’s sincerity on civil rights. Had Wallace suspected either the speed or the forcefulness of Truman’s response, he would perhaps have set the bar higher.

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In June the president began the first of his famous “whistle-stop” tours, frequently speaking to crowds from the rear platform of his train. In this opening campaign swing, as he would even after all the other candidates officially announced their intention to unseat him, Truman focused all his energy against only one opponent: the “do-nothing” Eightieth Congress.<sup>67</sup>

In foreign affairs the president and the new Republican majority had thus far achieved a series of bipartisan accomplishments, most notably in regard to the United Nations, European recovery, and aid to Greece and Turkey. On domestic concerns, however, the new leaders on Capitol Hill had taken a decidedly obstructionist position; much of the Fair Deal legislation proposed by Truman in his first year as president still had not been enacted into law. Sensing an apparent weariness on the part of the electorate towards the Democratic party as a whole, the Republicans were convinced that as long as Truman could be denied any victories at home, November would finally usher in their long-desired change at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Civil rights was no exception. Although the Roosevelt years had witnessed a pronounced increase in black support for the Democratic party, the historic affinity

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<sup>67</sup> Both David McCullough and Lin S. Lilley noted that Truman never once mentioned either Wallace or Thurmond by name during the entire campaign. Nor, according to McCullough, did ever he mention the name of Thomas Dewey in any of his major addresses or during any of his largely spontaneous whistle-stop speeches. See McCullough, 667-68 and Lilley, “Entering the Presidential Race: A Comparison of Entrance Speeches of Minor Candidates and Major-Party Nominees” (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1992), 62-63.

between the colored race and the party of Lincoln still remained strong. In particular, the presumptive Republican nominee, Thomas Dewey, had built a record on racial matters superior to that of any previous New York governor. He had personally pushed through the state legislature a bill creating a state-wide version of FEPC, and blacks found themselves appointed to offices in higher numbers, and at higher levels of responsibility, than at any previous time in the Empire State's history. But the Republicans in Congress were divided as to the course they should follow with regard to civil rights legislation. Among the rank-and-file there was a desire to take advantage of the Democratic infighting to introduce proposals of their own, but the Republican leadership in both houses wanted nothing of the sort – at least not until after the election. With the segregationist wing of the Democratic party having made such an open break with Truman following his civil rights message, any legislative success in this area would undoubtedly resound among black voters to the president's credit. Better, they said, to delay until a Republican president could sign the bills. Therefore, when some junior Republicans followed the president's omnibus package with their own, more focused proposals on FEPC and anti-lynching legislation, the new bills fared no better than had Truman's. A bill for a permanent FEPC was reported out of the Senate Labor Committee, but the leadership refused to allow it to reach the floor, while the chairman of the corresponding committee in the House refused even to hold hearings on the proposal. In the Senate Judiciary Committee a small group of Republicans combined with southern Democrats to gut the provisions of an anti-lynching bill before allowing it to be reported only in the last week of the session, and no floor vote was ever held.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Berman, 103-04; Hartmann, 197-201.

This gave the president some room to maneuver. By blocking FEPC and the anti-lynching bill, the Republican leadership had unintentionally freed Truman from the ticklish position of having to attack fellow Democrats. Any complaints he now wished to make concerning the absence of civil rights legislation for his signature could be added on to his ever-increasing list of failings of the Republican Congress. In so doing, he also took the opportunity to reframe the entire question. For years he had pressed whites to support justice for the Negro and most had failed to do so; hereafter he would increasingly position civil rights within the context of preserving white freedom. Speaking before the Swedish Pioneer Centennial Association in Chicago on 4 June, he previewed this new emphasis:

Freedom and equality are among the greatest of human aspirations. . . .

Americans rightly expect that their Federal Government will be a friendly, vigilant protector of these ideals. This is a primary duty of government, which I, for one, accept gladly. To discharge this duty requires each of us to defend the integrity of our ideals against all who would alter or weaken them. . . .

The American people are rightly concerned these days about the attack on our ideals by international communism. . . .

You prevent communism by more and better democracy. . . .

If some of our people are arbitrarily denied the right to vote or deprived of other basic rights, and nothing is done about it, that is an invitation to communism.<sup>69</sup>

Civil rights and national security – the formula that would yield Truman his most memorable achievement in the field of racial equality.

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A Philadelphia cab driver summarized the mood of the Democratic national convention when it opened on 12 July perfectly: “We got the wrong rigs. . . . They

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<sup>69</sup> National Archives and Records Service, ed., *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), 289. Hereafter, *Public Papers*.

should've given us hearses." The atmosphere in the hall, noted the *Minneapolis Star*, was "that of a carnival in a morgue lined with unburied hopes."<sup>70</sup> When the presiding officer rebuked a number of delegates for their disrespectful behavior during a memorial service to Franklin Roosevelt on the opening night by remarking, "We are here to honor the honored dead," the laughter that rolled through the assembly signified that many appreciated his double meaning.<sup>71</sup>

Harry Truman appeared as destined to lose in November as any presidential candidate had ever been, yet there were no workable alternatives. None of the viable replacements were willing to accept the party's nomination in his stead. Even Walter White admitted to Truman's failings as a standard-bearer. "The President is accused of making mistakes," he wrote in a column published the day before the convention began. That fact, conceded White, "no reasonable person would deny." However, the NAACP chief took great exception to another common criticism of Truman – that he was "too weak to take decisive action on basic issues." As White reminded his readers, "the hard core of the most virulent opposition to him is based upon the fact that Truman did take the most decisive action of any President of the United States has taken on the basic issue of the Bill of Rights protecting to the hilt every American citizen."<sup>72</sup>

The party's stated commitment to that issue in the future dominated the opening days of the convention. The crafting of a civil rights plank was the subject of contention in the 108-person platform committee. Delegates of the Dixiecrat stripe had largely been kept off of that body, but now the disagreement raged between the moderates and the

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<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Brembeck, 184.

<sup>71</sup> "National Affairs: Democrats," *TIME*, 26 July 1948, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Robert Louis Pritchard, "Southern Politics and the Truman Administration: Georgia as a Test Case" (Ph.D. diss., University of California – Los Angeles, 1970), 144.

liberals. Delegates representing the wishes of the administration favored a plank essentially identical to the one adopted in 1944. It had not proven an impediment to any of Truman's subsequent policies, and its retention would give southern opponents few grounds for protest, since they had largely acquiesced to the same language four years earlier. Despite the urgings of many party officials to "soften the approach to the civil rights issue," the president "refused to stand for any double talk on this vital principle . . . and insisted on plain language being used."<sup>73</sup> However, Truman also saw no need to further incite southern delegates unnecessarily. For all their threats and outrage, they had not yet formally seceded from the party. If a final break could be avoided without compromising his stated principles on racial equality, Truman wished to do so.<sup>74</sup>

Accordingly, the forthright and progressive language he and his surrogates offered read:

The Democratic Party commits itself to continuing its efforts to eradicate all racial, religious and economic discrimination.

We again state our belief that racial and religious minorities must have the right to live, the right to work, the right to vote, the full and equal protection of the laws, on a basis of equality with all citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution.

We again call upon the Congress to exert its full authority to the limit of its Constitutional powers to assure and protect these rights.<sup>75</sup>

Liberals on the committee, led by Minneapolis mayor Hubert Humphrey – who days earlier had still been actively courting Eisenhower – were troubled by that last sentence. The meaning of those "Constitutional powers" was precisely what was at issue: how far *did* the power of Congress extend in the area of civil rights legislation? The president had given his answer in his civil rights message; Humphrey and his supporters

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<sup>73</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Volume Two, Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), 182.

<sup>74</sup> Nadine Cohodas, *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 164.

<sup>75</sup> Donald Bruce Johnson and Kirk H. Porter, comps., *National Party Platforms, 1840 – 1972*, 5th ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 435.



wanted it stated again explicitly in the party platform. They sought the following addition: “We call upon the Congress to support our President in guaranteeing these basic and fundamental American Principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right of security of person; (4) and the right of equal treatment in the service and defense of our nation.”<sup>76</sup> Truman had already spoken in favor of all of these goals, and had done so in a far more visible manner than that provided by party platforms, quadrennially ignored by all but a handful of Americans. The disagreement between the two sides was over political tactics, not policy substance, and on 13 July the platform committee voted out language in the form preferred by the president.

It was not enough to assuage the South. When the text of the plank was read out on the convention floor the following day, delegate Dan Moody of Texas introduced an alternate, using language reminiscent more of the Charleston convention of 1860 than the party of Franklin Roosevelt:

[T]he Democratic Party stands for the principle that the Constitution contemplated and established a Union of indestructible sovereign states and that under the Constitution the general Federal Government and the separate states have their separate fields of power and of permitted activities. Traditionally it has been and it remains a part of the faith of the Democratic [P]arty that the Federal Government shall not encroach upon the reserved powers of the states by centralization of government and otherwise.

Within the reserved powers of the states, to be exercised subject to the limitations imposed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution on the manner of their exercise, is the power to control and regulate local affairs and act in the exercise of police powers.<sup>77</sup>

As delegates from outside of the South grumbled audibly against that proposition, Humphrey saw a chance to re-fight the battle he had lost inside the platform committee.

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<sup>76</sup> Johnson and Porter, 435; Borsos, 43-44.

<sup>77</sup> C. Edgar Brown, ed., *Democracy at Work* (Philadelphia: Local Democratic Committee, 1948), 167.

In direct response to Moody's motion, he presented the liberal alternative for a floor vote as well. The states-right alternative was rejected by a vote of 925 to 309, with only eleven votes in support coming from outside of the former Confederacy. Then, as convention chairman Sam Rayburn was about to put Humphrey's amended plank to a vote, a California delegate requested that it be a roll call. Rayburn had little choice in such a public forum but to accede unhappily to this legitimate request. With the vote of every delegate in the room about to be placed on the record individually, opposition to Humphrey was no longer as viable a political option as it had been for the administration's supporters in the anonymity of the platform committee.<sup>78</sup> By a vote of 651½ to 582½, the new language was added to the party platform, whereupon half of the delegates from Alabama joined the entire Mississippi delegation in walking out of the convention.<sup>79</sup>

The next evening, 15 July, Harry Truman was selected as the presidential nominee of the Democratic party on the first ballot, receiving 947½ votes from among the 1,234 remaining delegates. Out of 278 cast from former Confederate states, only thirteen went to the president.<sup>80</sup> Grudgingly, the president made no objection as the convention ratified its next piece of business – the nomination of Senate minority leader

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<sup>78</sup> Subsequent historians have attempted to frame this debate as one pitting Truman and the Dixiecrats against the liberals under Humphrey. See "The Ambiguous Legacy: The Truman Administration and Civil Rights," in *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 287-89; Berman, 107-12; Harvard Sitkoff, "Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming Age of Civil Rights in American Politics," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November 1971): 603-11 for examples. At the time, however, the mayor did not conflate these two. His amended plank praised the president explicitly: "We highly commend President Harry S. Truman for his courageous stand on the issue of civil rights." This language too was adopted by the convention. See Johnson and Porter, 435.

<sup>79</sup> "National Affairs: Democrats," 12-13; Berman, 111-13.

<sup>80</sup> Gardner, 98-100.

Alben Barkley as his running mate.<sup>81</sup> It was nearly two o'clock the next morning when Truman entered the hall with Barkley at his side to give his acceptance speech. After voicing the requisite pleasantries, the president tore into the Eightieth Congress. He attacked its obstinacy on price controls, housing, labor relations, the minimum wage, aid to education, social security reform, and his call for a national health care program. Then he challenged it on civil rights:

Everybody knows that I recommended to the Congress the civil rights program. I did that because I believed it to be my duty under the Constitution. Some of the members of my own party disagree with me violently on this matter. But they stand up and do it openly! People can tell where they stand. But the Republicans all professed to be for these measures. But Congress failed to act. They had enough men to do it, they could have had cloture, they didn't have to have a filibuster. They had enough people in that Congress that would have voted for cloture.<sup>82</sup>

To the surprise of nearly everyone (fewer than six party leaders had been informed of his intention), Truman then dropped his bombshell. He was recalling Congress from recess into session during an election season – something that no president had done since 1856. The date he set for their reconvening was 26 July – “which out in Missouri we call ‘Turnip Day.’” Truman would give the Republican Congress one final chance to deal with these “matters of such importance and urgency.”<sup>83</sup>

The announcement galvanized the heretofore despondent convention. When Truman told the delegates that “Senator Barkley and I will win this election,” a

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<sup>81</sup> Truman had favored Supreme Court justice William Douglas – popular with the liberal-labor wing of the party – for vice-president, but the jurist rejected Truman's entreaties, just as he had those of the Americans for Democratic Action to challenge Truman for the top spot after Eisenhower had categorically refused to do so. See Berman, 113; “Eisenhower Boom Ended as He Issues a Final Rejection,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1948, 1.

<sup>82</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 408-9.

<sup>83</sup> In 1856, Franklin Pierce ordered Congress to reconvene in order to pass an Army appropriation bill. “Turnip Day” was a slightly misquoted reference to a Missouri farming adage: “On the 25th of July, sow your turnips wet or dry.” The resulting assembly was henceforth referred to as the “Turnip Day session.” See “National Affairs: Democrats,” 13-15.

correspondent for *TIME* noted that “[t]he delegates rose to a man; it was the first time they had heard anybody say ‘win’ as if he meant it.”<sup>84</sup>

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Scores of newspapers throughout the southern states echoed the sentiments of the *Corinth (Mississippi) Daily Corinthian*: “Those who manipulated the rape of the South at Philadelphia will live to rue this day.”<sup>85</sup> Even before the Democrats adjourned, delegates from sixteen different states began converging in Birmingham, and on 17 July a one-day event styling itself the “States’ Rights Democratic Convention” was held. It was a haphazard affair, suggesting how difficult it was going to be to actually mount – not merely speak of – an effective and coordinated challenge to Truman. Nearly all white southern leaders were united in their desire to punish the president, but that was as far as the consensus ran. While Philadelphia had convinced many that action against Truman would have to be taken outside of party channels, some leading southern Democrats disagreed, insisting that the only legitimate source of opposition to the Truman candidacy was the state Democratic organizations themselves. Others were less inhibited by such formal considerations, but believed that the Birmingham meeting was too hastily arranged. An entirely new party would require a resource base that as yet had not been assembled. Accordingly, the meeting in Birmingham was noteworthy for the absence of many leading figures in southern politics: Harry Byrd of Virginia, Earl Long of Louisiana, Herman Talmadge of Georgia, and Edward Crump of Tennessee.

Initially, Strom Thurmond had not planned on attending the meeting either. Believing that the Dixiecrat opposition was not yet organized enough to initiate a formal

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Susan M. Weill, “‘In a Madhouse’s Din’: Civil Rights Coverage by Mississippi’s Daily Press, 1948 – 1968” (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1998), 36.

break with the Democrat party, he had initially viewed the Alabama gathering as an inefficient use of his time, but was convinced quickly to reverse his stance after entreaties by several Dixiecrat leaders. By the time his plane landed and he arrived at the venue that afternoon, the governor was informed that a platform for the new party had already been drafted.<sup>86</sup> Further, he was also told that Arkansas governor Ben Lacey had earlier in the day declined an offer to head up the ticket. A delegation of representatives from Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama now asked Thurmond if he would consent to run, and gave him one hour to decide.<sup>87</sup>

He chose to accept. Governor Wright of Mississippi agreed to be his running mate, and at 5:30 p.m. the seven thousand-strong attendees of the convention were introduced to their candidates.<sup>88</sup> “I want to tell you,” the newly-minted presidential nominee assured his followers, “that the progress of the Negro race has not been due to these so called emancipators – but to the kindness of the good Southern people. I want to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that there’s not enough troops in the Army to force the Southern people to break down segregation and admit the Negro race into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches.”<sup>89</sup>

There was a certain irony in Thurmond’s evocation of the Army as the means by which segregation might be attacked, but this would not reveal itself for another nine days. In the meantime, the hastily arranged convention scheduled an 11 August rally in Texas’s Houston Coliseum, where Thurmond and Wright would accept their nominations

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<sup>86</sup> The States’ Rights platform was a short, narrowly focused document that pronounced support “for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race,” condemned any exercise of federal power to end racial discrimination, and called upon “loyal Americans” to aid “in ignominiously defeating Harry S. Truman and Thomas E. Dewey, and every other candidate for public office who would establish a police state in the United States of America.” See Johnson and Porter, 467-68, for text of the entire document.

<sup>87</sup> Lachicotte, 43; Ellers, 112-13.

<sup>88</sup> Lachicotte, 47.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Bass and Thompson, 112.

formally before taking the new party's message to as many southern states as possible in the three months remaining until election day.

The presidential campaign of 1948 was now fully under way – a struggle for possession of both the White House and the soul of the Democratic party.

### CHAPTER III

*He raised the art of civil rights advocacy to new heights while shying away from anything that resembled a substantive program, which could have alienated the South. . . .*

---William Berman, historian, on the presidency of Harry S. Truman.<sup>1</sup>

It was seasonably uncomfortable in the nation's capitol that twenty-sixth of July. Indeed, the stifling humidity of Washington in summer was one of the prime reasons why the mid-year recess had been instituted – a recess from which the president had now called a truculent Congress back into session. One hundred and seventy-five days had passed since Truman had asked Congress to pass his civil rights legislation, yet nothing had been accomplished with regard to black Americans.<sup>2</sup> Now, as the senators and congressmen were returning to their legislative standoff, the president underscored their inaction in the most dramatic way possible – by issuing two directives that divorced the executive branch of the federal government from racially discriminatory personnel practices.

During his fight with Congress over FEPC, the president had hoped to dismantle segregation in private employment – at least within those businesses contracting with the federal government on defense-related matters. Having failed in that endeavor, Truman now responded with a new plan for workforce integration – one for which congressional approval would not be necessary. Executive Order 9980 read in part:

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1970), 238.

<sup>2</sup> The last point in his ten-point program of 2 February – “Settling the evacuation claims of Japanese-Americans” – was passed by the Congress before their recess.

Whereas the principles on which our Government is based require a policy of fair employment throughout the Federal establishment, without discrimination because of race, color, religion, or national origin. . . .

Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States . . . , it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. All personnel actions taken by Federal appointing officers shall be based solely on merit and fitness, and such officers are authorized and directed to take appropriate steps to ensure that in all such actions there shall be no discrimination because of race, color, religion, or national origin.

2. The head of each department in the executive branch of the Government shall be personally responsible for an effective program to ensure that fair employment policies are fully observed within his department.<sup>3</sup>

The order directed that each department head designate a fair employment officer, who would not only be responsible for receiving “complaints or appeals” concerning instances of alleged discrimination, but also were empowered to “[t]ake necessary corrective or disciplinary action, in consultation with, or on the basis of delegated authority from, the head of the department.” Further, a Fair Employment Board was established within the Civil Service Commission. This new panel would coordinate fair-employment policies across the entire federal bureaucracy and “review decisions made by the head of any department which are appealed pursuant to the provisions of this order.” If in such instances their recommendations were not “promptly and fully carried out,” the case was to be “reported by the board to the President, for such action as he finds necessary.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the end of the Union military occupation in 1877, only two southerners had achieved the presidency. The first was Virginia native Woodrow Wilson, whose earliest childhood memories were of the Shenandoah Valley’s devastation during the Civil War

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<sup>3</sup> “Text of President Truman’s Executive Orders on FEPC, Equal Treatment,” *Washington Post*, 27 July 1948, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



and the ignominy of military reconstruction thereafter. With his tacit approval, many agency and department heads went about the task of segregating the federal civilian workforce during the eight years of his administration.<sup>5</sup> Now, by the stroke of a pen, the second southern president of the restored nation – himself the grandson of slave owners, reared by a mother he described as an “unreconstructed rebel” to her death – undid the pernicious legacy of the first.<sup>6</sup>

The historic changes wrought by this directive were overshadowed by those of its companion, Executive Order 9981. As the president informed Congress back in February, he had asked the Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal, to eliminate discrimination in the armed services. But Forrestal’s gargantuan department was only a year old (the War and Navy Departments having been consolidated on 25 July 1947 under the provisions of the National Security Act) and attempting to integrate these rival services with each other – as well as with the new Department of the Air Force – was proving difficult enough for the harried cabinet official. Integrating the races was simply beyond his – or any single appointee’s – abilities.<sup>7</sup> Effective action to reverse the discriminatory beliefs deeply ingrained in the services’ respective cultures could only come from the highest-possible authority in the military chain of command, and it was that very authority Truman now invoked:

[A]s Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief overview of civil service segregation under Wilson, see Kendrick A. Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> *The Truman Tapes: In His Own Voice* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), audiocassette.

<sup>7</sup> The stresses of attempting to manage the reorganization and consolidation of the entire armed might of the United States – “an unprecedented, killing task,” in the words of David McCullough – culminated in the secretary’s mental collapse early in 1949. By request of the president, he submitted his resignation on 1 March. In late May Forrestal killed himself by jumping out the window of his room on the sixteenth floor of the Bethesda Naval Hospital, wherein he had been admitted for treatment of nervous exhaustion. See McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 736-40.

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.

To effectuate this policy, an advisory committee known as the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services was to be created. While it did not enjoy the same grant of authority as Executive Order 9980's Fair Employment Board, the committee had the power to compel testimony or documents from any federal department or agency, and it could issue recommendations directly to the president, the secretary of defense, or the heads of the three service branches.<sup>8</sup>

Why had the president desegregated the military? Some critics (taking a position echoed by many subsequent historians) charged that Truman was simply repeating the cynical performance of his predecessor. In July 1941, Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 8802 – creating the first FEPC – to avoid the political embarrassment of A. Philip Randolph's march on Washington. At the end of 1947, Randolph had returned with a similar threat of politically damaging civil disobedience.

After World War II, "the Army did not demobilize," Truman recalled with distaste. "It disintegrated."<sup>9</sup> From the moment victory was declared in the European and Pacific theaters, American sentiment ran strongly in favor of bringing home the troops as soon as possible. Then, political pressures had been too great for Washington to resist; now nearly two and a half years later – with American foreign policy being driven by the "Truman Doctrine" of communist containment – re-activation of the draft was seen by the president as a national security priority. In 1947 the administration began to craft

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<sup>8</sup> "Text of President Truman's Executive Orders on FEPC, Equal Treatment."

<sup>9</sup> *Truman Tapes*.

legislation for reinstating the draft, and the President's Advisory Commission on Military Training recommended that segregation be eliminated under the provisions of the proposed act. "Nothing could be more tragic for the future attitude of our people, and for the unity of our Nation," their report read, "than a program in which our Federal Government forced our young manhood to live for a period of time in an atmosphere which emphasized or bred class or racial difference."<sup>10</sup> But when the proposal was submitted to Congress, it purposely contained no language barring discrimination. Truman's call for universal military service was facing enough opposition in Congress; asking them to also vote in favor of desegregation would be tantamount to killing the draft bill.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore Randolph organized the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training in November 1947 to protest the continuation of such a policy. As Congress debated the draft bill, Randolph made his opposition clear to all. At a White House meeting on 22 March he told the president that in his recent travels around the country, he had "found Negroes not wanting to shoulder a gun to fight for democracy abroad unless they get democracy at home." Eight days later, Randolph was even more confrontational in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "I personally pledge," he told the panel, "to openly counsel, aid, and abet youth, both white and Negro, to quarantine any Jim Crow conscription system." When asked by one of the senators if he would promote resistance to the draft if the nation were at war, Randolph said he would. Challenged that such an action would constitute treason, he

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939 – 1953* (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1979), 155.

<sup>11</sup> For evidence of the obstacles anti-segregation language presented to passage of the draft bill, see "Senate Votes to Bar Draft of 18-Year-Olds for Training," *New York Times*, 5 June 1948, 1.

replied, “I would be willing to face that . . . on the theory . . . that we are serving a higher law than the law which applies to the act of treason.”<sup>12</sup> When the draft bill passed in June, no provisions for integration had been added. Accordingly, Randolph formed a new organization, the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation. Its stated goal was simple and uncompromising: if the president did not issue an executive order ending segregation in the U.S. armed forces before the draft law went into operation on 16 August, Randolph would call upon men of all races to refuse to register. In the black community at least, he seemed able to deliver on his threat. An NAACP-conducted poll of black male college students found that seventy-one percent voiced support for resisting induction into a segregated military.<sup>13</sup> When Executive Order 9981 was issued one month after Randolph’s ultimatum, the League announced that it would no longer carry out its program to incite draft resistance. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia claimed that the executive order was “unconditional surrender . . . to the treasonable civil disobedience campaign organized by the Negroes.”<sup>14</sup> While not everyone shared this characterization of Randolph, most observers agreed with Russell’s causal linkage of the activist’s threat and the president’s response.

The truth was that Truman had already decided upon military desegregation before Randolph ever became involved. The president’s civil rights commission had made just such a recommendation in its report of October 1947, and Truman was in complete agreement.<sup>15</sup> Attacks on Negro soldiers, after all, had been the issue that galvanized his thoughts on the denial of basic rights and freedoms inherent in the

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Dalfiume, 163-64.

<sup>13</sup> “Negro Students Back Disobedience Plans,” *New York Times*, 5 June 1948, 16.

<sup>14</sup> “Rights Filibuster Hinted in Senate,” *New York Times*, 28 July 1948, 1.

<sup>15</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947), 40-47, 162.

American regime of racial discrimination. Raising the issue in Congress would have been a fool's errand nevertheless. Leaving aside the obstacle desegregation might pose to passage of the draft bill, nothing in the record of Congress suggested they would be amenable to the idea in any form. Indeed, the president's advisors had initially added language on military integration to the omnibus civil rights bill, but struck it out before sending the final draft to Capitol Hill. Unlike everything else the president was asking for in that legislation, this issue did not require congressional approval. The presidential powers as commander in chief would suffice.

None of this reasoning could be made public, however – at least not until the draft bill had cleared Congress.<sup>16</sup> All Randolph saw, therefore, was a president and a Congress once again preparing to compel blacks to fight in segregated units, and it was on this basis he publicly began demanding of the administration a policy that it had already chosen to implement.

Henry Wallace also thought little of Executive Order 9981. In much the same language he used to describe the president's civil rights message, the erstwhile vice-president and cabinet secretary argued that Truman's words were not backed by any intention to act upon them, and that the president had been forced to make even this nominal gesture due to the pressure exerted by Wallace's own candidacy:

Mr. Truman's nightmares over the rapid growth of the Progressive party have forced him to face the issue of discrimination, but once again he has made only an empty gesture. He has written in the executive order the language of the South. He task glibly of "equal opportunity" and "equal treatment," dodges always used to avoid action, but fails utterly to attack the heart of the matter – segregation.

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<sup>16</sup> Dalfiume, 156-58.

The president's order on equality of treatment in the armed forces says nothing, promises nothing, does nothing – and leaves segregation intact.<sup>17</sup>

Some modern critics second this view of the order as a meaningless statement, pointing to the language calling for implementation “as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.” In the opinion of these writers, such an open-ended deadline was tantamount to no requirement at all. If the president genuinely wished to effect this change of policy, he would have ordered its immediate implementation. The arrogance of the moral superiority claimed by such criticism is readily apparent. The president was deeply committed to guaranteeing equal treatment under law to all citizens, but that was not his only duty. As president, he was also tasked by his oath of office to preserve, protect, and defend the United States – and in the early years of the Cold War that phrase needed to be taken literally. In the three years since Truman had first assumed the presidency, a number of incidents involving the Soviets had made armed conflict a very real possibility. The summer of the Democratic convention in Philadelphia and the Turnip Day session in Washington was also the time of the Soviet blockade of Berlin, and if the combination of airlifted supplies and diplomacy had not been sufficient to break the stranglehold on the western sector of the city, the president was prepared to go to war. With the Soviets' enormous manpower advantage accentuated by American demobilization, the inevitable spectacle of Allied conventional forces being pushed out of Germany would necessitate reliance on the U.S. atomic monopoly, and Harry Truman was the one man who knew the full consequences of such an action.<sup>18</sup> Social dislocations

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<sup>17</sup> “Wallace Scores Truman,” *New York Times*, 28 July 1948, 4.

<sup>18</sup> McCullough, 646-51.

stemming from civil service integration were a cost he was willing to bear; precipitate action that risked crippling the nation's defenses was a risk the president would not assume.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Truman had no doubts as to what his executive order would accomplish inevitably. When asked in an Oval Office press conference later that week if his "advocacy of equality of treatment and opportunity in the Armed Forces" envisioned an eventual end to segregation, the president's one-word reply in the affirmative was as unequivocal a statement as could be made.<sup>20</sup> Walter White had no doubts as to the order's meaning either. On the twenty-seventh he sent a telegram to the editor of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, expressing the confidence of the NAACP that Truman "envisions abolition of segregation through implementation of his executive order. . . . That one president has had the courage to tackle these problems [civil service and military discrimination] is gratifying."<sup>21</sup> Less impressed was the *Richmond Afro-American*. An editorial cartoon showed Truman firing an enormous double-barreled shotgun (with one stenciled "Equal Opportunity in Armed Forces" and the other "FEPC in Government") at an unfazed "Jim Crow" sitting on a branch. The caption read: "Scorched Him, but the Old Bird is Still There."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The possible consequences of massive resistance to military integration were surely no less than those involved in school desegregation. Yet in *Brown v. Board of Education* – the dominant paradigm of progressive federal action on civil rights – the Supreme Court took an identical approach. More than a year passed between the striking down of segregated public education and the Court's issuance of directives for relief. These in turn called for nothing more specific than that school systems affected by the ruling "make a prompt and reasonable start towards full compliance" and that they must do so "with all deliberate speed." See *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

<sup>20</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1962), 422. Hereafter, *Public Papers*.

<sup>21</sup> Papers of the NAACP. Part 9: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918 – 1955. Series A: General Office Files on Armed Forces' Affairs, 1918 – 1955. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (microfilmed on 18 reels. Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1989), reel 12, frame 75.

<sup>22</sup> "Scorched Him, but the Old Bird is Still There," *Richmond Afro-American*, 7 August 1948, 4.

Harry Truman committed the United States government to ending racial discrimination in the armed forces for the same reason he attacked the practice in so many other areas of American life. “When you hear words and phrases too often,” the president explained years after, “they begin to lose their meaning. I had to give meaning to such phrases as ‘all men are created equal.’” He had come to understand that separate inevitably led to unequal. In the segregated armed services of 1948, less than one Negro in seventy held an Army commission, while the rate for whites was approximately one in seven. The entire Navy boasted only two Negro officers – two more than could be found in the Marine Corps.<sup>23</sup>

“That was some record to be proud of,” Truman spat, “and I was going to cure it if I could. . . . I realized that this first step would be a long, long march in the uphill fight for civil rights. I also knew that it might also be a march over my political grave, but that didn’t count with me.”<sup>24</sup>

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The day after the executive orders were issued, Truman faced his adversaries in person. Speaking to a joint session of Congress, he challenged the legislators to act on a wide-ranging series of proposals before the Turnip Day session concluded: a multifaceted anti-inflation program, a comprehensive federal housing bill, aid to education, an increase in the minimum wage and in social security benefits, alteration of the discriminatory Displaced Persons Act, a loan to the United Nations for construction of its proposed headquarters in New York, ratification of an already-concluded treaty on international wheat shipments, support for rural electrification, and reform of the federal pay scales.

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<sup>23</sup> *Truman Tapes*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.



He closed by highlighting the fact that he had accomplished more with regard to the issue of civil rights in twenty-four hours than Congress had managed in the past five months:

Finally, I urge upon the Congress the measures I recommended last February to protect and extend basic civil rights of citizenship and human liberty. A number of bills to carry out my recommendations have been introduced in the Congress. Many of them have already received careful consideration by congressional committees. Only one bill, however, has been enacted, a bill relating to the rights of Americans of Japanese origin. I believe it is necessary to enact the laws I have recommended in order to make the guarantees of the Constitution real and vital. I believe they are necessary to carry out our American ideals of liberty and justice for all.<sup>25</sup>

The animosity of many in the chamber was palpable. When the president entered, some members of Congress refused to rise from their seats. Southern Democrats had made their feelings toward Truman known for months, and the situation was little better on the other side of the aisle. Although Dewey had urged the Republican leadership in Congress to consider the president's proposals and thus disarm the criticisms of the "do-nothing" Eightieth Congress that lay at the heart of Truman's re-election strategy, they refused to accommodate their nominee's request. Ohio's Robert Taft, one of the leading Senate Republicans, was blunt in his refusal: "No, we're not going to give that fellow anything."<sup>26</sup> The rest of the party was as good as the senator's word. When the extra legislative session adjourned two weeks later, only the United Nations loan and a few minor points in the president's anti-inflation program had been enacted. On every other issue – including civil rights – Congress refused to consent.<sup>27</sup>

Over the next three months, Truman traveled the country. He took every opportunity to castigate the Republicans for their obstructionism, and wherever he

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<sup>25</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 420-21.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in McCullough, 651.

<sup>27</sup> The text of a 12 August 1948 White House release entitled "Summary of Action by the Congress on the President's Recommendations at the Special Session" is contained in a note following the president's 27 July address in *Public Papers, 1948*, 421-22.

stopped he insisted that both the press pool and his audiences be racially integrated. Even in the South, Truman's demands were carried out.<sup>28</sup> A front-page story in the *Dallas Morning News* described a Truman rally in that city's Rebel Stadium and noted with some amazement that by the time the president took to the podium, "the stands were full. . . . There was a heavy sprinkling of Negroes, and the crowd was not segregated."<sup>29</sup>

Such policies were not simply acts of public political theater. As the Turnip Day session ended and the president prepared to leave on a nationwide campaign swing, he received a letter from Ernest W. Roberts, whom Truman had known since their shared experiences of combat in the First World War. Writing to his "Dear friend Harry," Roberts begged him to drop his continued instance on civil rights before it cost him the election. "Harry," he pleaded, "let us let the South take care of the Niggers, which they have done, and if the Niggers do not like the Southern treatment, let them come to Mrs. Roosevelt."<sup>30</sup> Of all the statements that Harry Truman was ever to make on the subject, his reply to this close personal friend of more than thirty years offers perhaps the most effective riposte to the generations of critics who have doubted that his commitment to ending racial segregation was genuine. For this reason it is reproduced here in full:

Dear Ernie:

I appreciated very much your letter of last Saturday night from Hotel Temple Square in the Mormon Capital.

I am going to send you a copy of the report of my Commission on Civil Rights and then if you still have that antebellum proslavery outlook, I'll be thoroughly disappointed in you.

The main difficulty with the South is that they are living eighty years behind the times and the sooner they come out of it the better it will be for the country and themselves. I am not asking for social equality, because no such thing exists, but I am asking for equality of opportunity

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<sup>28</sup> Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 130.

<sup>29</sup> "Live Up To Talk of Unity," *Dallas Morning News*, 28 September 1948, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Gardner, 130-31.

for all human beings and, as long as I stay here, I am going to continue that fight. When the mob gangs can take four people out and shoot them in the back, and everybody in the country is acquainted with who did the shooting and nothing is done about it, that country is in a pretty bad fix from a law enforcement standpoint.

When a Mayor and a City Marshal can take a negro Sergeant off a bus in South Carolina, beat him up and put out one of his eyes, and nothing is done about it by the State Authorities, something is radically wrong with the system.

On the Louisiana and Arkansas Railway when coal burning locomotives were used, the negro firemen were the thing because it was a backbreaking job and a dirty one. As soon as they turned to oil as a fuel it became customary for people to take shots at the negro firemen and a number were murdered because it was thought that this was now a white-collar job and should go to a white man. I can't approve of such goings on and I shall never approve it, as long as I'm here, as I told you before. I am going to try and remedy it and if that ends up in my failure to be reelected, that failure will be in a good cause.

I know you haven't thought this thing through and that you do not know the facts. I am happy, however, that you wrote me because it gives me a chance to tell you what the facts are.

Sincerely yours,  
Harry S. Truman

[note in longhand] This is a personal & confidential communication and I hope you'll regard it that way – at least until I've made a public statement on the subject – as I expect to do in the South.  
HST<sup>31</sup>

The four Americans dragged from their car and murdered were George and Mae Dorsey and Roger and Dorothy Malcolm. The blinded soldier was Isaac Woodard. All had been victimized in the wave of violence against black servicemen that had taken place in 1946; all had been remembered by their president two years later.

On 25 October, at a campaign event in Chicago Stadium, the president made yet another appeal to white Americans on the need to end their system of formal exclusions based on race – if not for the sake of justice to blacks, then for the preservation of freedom for themselves. With his words being carried nationwide on radio, Truman told

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<sup>31</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 146-47.

the crowd that history was rife with examples of liberty-loving peoples who had seen their freedom disappear with tragic suddenness. He cited the experience of fascism in Italy and Germany, extinguished only by the world war that his administration had prosecuted to its close. He cited the experience of Czechoslovakia, the most recent casualty in the current war against communism. And such an experience, the president was convinced, could befall the United States as well. If anti-democratic currents at work in the nation remained unchecked, Americans could “awaken a few years from now to find that the Bill of Rights had become a scrap of paper.” Specifically, Truman identified three forces “silently undermining our democratic institutions.” The first was a desire to see inflation continue unchecked; the second, to concentrate economic power in the hands of the few.<sup>32</sup> “Racial and religious prejudice” was the final component of this unholy trinity:

The tragic story of what happened in Germany is all too fresh. We know how Hitler used anti-Semitic propaganda as a way of stupefying the German people with false ideas while he reached out for power.

This was not the first time such a thing happened. The persecution of minorities goes hand in hand with the destruction of liberty. . . .

. . . [I]n recent years there has been a new outcropping of demagogues among us. Dangerous men, who are trying to win followers for their war on democracy, are attacking Catholics, and Jews, and Negroes, and other minority races and religions. . . .

We must do everything we can to protect our democratic principles against those who foment racial and religious prejudice.

This evil force must be defeated. I shall continue that fight. And I pledge to you that I shall never surrender.<sup>33</sup>

Four days later Truman spoke in Harlem, the first U.S. president ever to visit Manhattan’s famous Negro district. On this, the first anniversary of the release of *To Secure These Rights*, he was awarded the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Brotherhood

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<sup>32</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 848-51.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 852.

Medal by the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance. In front of its representative, and an estimated sixty-five thousand people who crowded into Dorrance Brooks Square, Truman expressed his gratitude to the members of his Committee on Civil Rights, “who had the honesty to face the whole problem of civil rights squarely, and the courage to state their conclusions frankly.” Their report needed to be studied by all Americans, the president insisted. “For in the last analysis, freedom resides in the actions of each individual. . . . It means you and I must act out what we say in our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. It is in his mind and heart – and to his mind and heart – that we must eventually speak to the individual.” He reminded his listeners of the ten recommendations he had made in his own message to Congress, of that body’s refusal to act upon them, and of his subsequent decision to do “what the President can do, unaided by the Congress.”<sup>34</sup> As in Chicago, he linked the struggle against racism with the survival of American freedom:

Today the democratic way of life is being challenged all over the world. Democracy’s answer to the challenge of totalitarianism is its promise of equal rights and equal opportunity for all mankind.

The fulfillment of this promise is among the highest purposes of government.

Our determination to attain the goal of equal rights and equal opportunity must be resolute and unwavering.

For my part, I intend to keep moving towards this goal with every ounce of strength and determination I have.<sup>35</sup>

It was powerful and it was compelling, but it differed little from much of what Truman had said on countless other occasions. What was perhaps most noteworthy on this day was the language he used early in his address to the mostly colored audience:

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<sup>34</sup> “President Renews Civil Rights Plea,” *New York Times*, 30 October 1948, 1; *Public Papers, 1948*, 923-24.

<sup>35</sup> *Public Papers, 1948*, 924-25.

We Americans have a democratic way of acting when our freedoms are threatened.

We get the most thoughtful and representative men and women we can find, and we ask them to put down on paper the principles that represent freedom and a method of action that will preserve and extend that freedom. In that manner, we get a declaration of purpose and a guide for action that the whole country can consider.

That is the way in which the Declaration of Independence was drawn up.

That is the way in which the Constitution of the United States was written.

The report that the Civil Rights Commission prepared is in the tradition of these great documents.<sup>36</sup>

His linking of *To Secure These Rights* with the fundamental charters of American freedom was significant, but no less so was his frequent use of the first person plural.

We. Our. The inclusiveness of the language was itself a powerful signifier of how far the grandson of slaveholders had traveled from his segregated Missouri roots.

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On 2 November 1948, nearly forty-nine million Americans went to the polls. The photograph of a beaming Harry Truman holding up an early edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* with its premature, eight-column headline is perhaps the most familiar image in the history of U.S. presidential campaigns. Far less recognized is how close Truman came to being denied a victory – not by Thomas Dewey, but by Strom Thurmond.

Truman had pulled 49.55 percent of the popular vote to Dewey's 45.07 percent. In the electoral vote total, Truman's lead was more commanding, with 303 against Dewey's 189. Thurmond had only pulled 2.41 percent of the popular vote, but the regional nature of his campaign had belied the seeming anemia of these results. The

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 923.

States' Rights ticket appeared on the ballot in every ex-Confederate state.<sup>37</sup> In four states – South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama – their electors appeared on the Democratic party line (in the first three, the Truman-Barkley electors were relegated to a third-party position on the ballot; in Alabama they did not appear on the ballot at all). Accordingly, Thurmond received the entire thirty-eight electoral votes possessed by these states.<sup>38</sup>

Under the terms of the Twelfth Amendment, a presidential candidate must receive a simple majority of the electoral votes to keep the issue from being decided “immediately” by the House of Representatives. In 1948, the electoral college contained 531 electors; 266 electoral votes were needed, therefore, to command a majority. At first glance, Truman’s 303 appears to be a comfortable margin of victory, but a closer analysis of the data demonstrates how close Thurmond came to throwing the entire election into the Republican-controlled House:

| <b>State</b>   | <b>Popular Votes Cast</b> | <b>Truman</b> | <b>Dewey</b> | <b>Thurmond</b> | <b>Wallace</b> |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Alabama        | 214,980                   | 0             | 40,930       | 171,443         | 1,522          |
| Louisiana      | 416,336                   | 136,344       | 72,657       | 204,290         | 3,035          |
| Mississippi    | 192,190                   | 19,384        | 5,043        | 167,538         | 225            |
| South Carolina | 142,571                   | 34,423        | 5,386        | 102,607         | 154            |

Even if the entire Progressive vote in these states had gone to Dewey instead of Wallace, in no instance would the Republican governor have captured a single electoral

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<sup>37</sup> The States' Rights party also made the ballot in California, Maryland, Kentucky, and North Dakota, though in none of these did Thurmond poll better than 1.27 percent. See the appendix for returns from all forty-eight states.

<sup>38</sup> Thurmond also gained one additional electoral vote in Tennessee, which did not apportion its electors under a winner-take-all system.

vote. As a result of the Dixiecrat challenge, therefore, Truman was deprived of thirty-eight electoral votes he would have otherwise possessed.

Had Truman lost an additional thirty-eight electoral votes anywhere in the country, he would have failed to reach the necessary total of 266. Truman won Ohio's twenty-five electors by a margin of only 7,107 votes, 0.24 percent more than Dewey polled. California's twenty-five electors were captured by the president with a margin of 17,865 votes, or 0.44 percent. A swing of 3,554 votes from Truman to Dewey in the former state and 8,933 in the latter were all that would have been needed. Strom Thurmond and his party had come within 12,500 votes of achieving their goal.<sup>39</sup>

But those votes never materialized, however, and so Harry Truman continued in the office of president – and continued to push for congressional action on civil rights. Those who had tried to console themselves that Truman had only raised the issue as a political ploy were soon disabused of that notion by his 1949 State of the Union Address. “The civil rights proposals I made to the 80th Congress,” he told the newly organized body, “I now repeat to the 81st Congress. They should be enacted in order that the

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<sup>39</sup> The evidence strongly suggests that it was the president's policies on race that won him Ohio. A letter from state Democratic official William J. Corrigan to Truman campaign staffer Matthew J. Connelly dated 11 November 1948 explained that, while Dewey held a plurality of 35,141 votes outside of the city and county of Cleveland, the metropolitan area went for Truman by a plurality of 53,587, enabling him to carry Ohio by 18,446. Four city wards – “practically 100% Negro” and “[h]eretofore . . . Republican strongholds” – gave Truman 25,081 votes to Dewey's 10,437. Quoted in Bill W. Stacey, “The Campaign Speaking of Harry S Truman in the 1948 Presidential Election” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1968), 143.

However, it is a mistake to charge – as many historians do – that such results provide evidence that Truman's policies were motivated by a recognition of the northern black votes that were to be had. See Berman, 128-32; Harvard Sitkoff, “Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming Age of Civil Rights in American Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November 1971): 597-616; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 288 for examples. These arguments fail to concentrate on the net effect of civil rights on the 1948 election. Truman could only gain black votes in the north at the expense of white votes in the south. Ohio's twenty-five electoral votes – which were in question until election day – must always be considered in relation to potential of losing all 127 electoral votes in the former Confederacy, to say nothing of the other states that continued to maintain formal policies of segregation into the 1940s.



Federal Government may assume the leadership and discharge the obligations placed upon it by the Constitution. I stand squarely behind those proposals.”<sup>40</sup> Raymond E. Cathell of Wilmington, Delaware captured the sentiments of many when he wrote to the president in response, “I wish to register my strong protest against an equal rights bill for negroes . . . [which] I thought you would drop . . . after election, when the going got rough. The Republicans always have.”<sup>41</sup>

As far as Congress was concerned, Cathell need not have worried. In the election of 1948, the president’s party had regained control of both houses of the federal legislature, but Truman would find his party no more accommodating on civil rights than the Republicans had been. If anything, the Democratic victories in Congress had made passage of any such legislation more problematic, for the rules of seniority now placed a number of southern Democrats in the chairmanship of key committees – especially in the House of Representatives, wherein individual congressmen did not share their Senate colleagues’ ability to move legislation directly to a floor vote. The new Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn of Texas, had assured his constituents but a few months earlier that he would do everything he could for his state to protect their segregation laws. “I think we can work out our local problems without any interference from the outside,” Rayburn commented, and now that he and his fellow southern Democrats were in control in both chambers they could guarantee that Congress would not involve itself.<sup>42</sup>

An attempt by administration supporters in the Senate to amend the rules regarding filibusters was defeated on 11 March, and though the president once again

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<sup>40</sup> *Public Papers, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Monroe Billington, “Civil Rights, President Truman, and the South,” *Journal of Negro History* 51 (October 1996): 138.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Harold I. Gullan, *The Upset That Wasn’t: Harry S Truman and the Critical Election of 1948* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 205.

submitted his omnibus civil rights legislation, it fared no better in this Congress than it had in the last. By the middle of March, the new Senate majority leader, Scott Lucas of Illinois, proposed that any further civil rights proposals be dropped “for the time being” to enable consideration of pressing international issues.<sup>43</sup> In an editorial of 18 March, the *New York Times* declared that the Senate “was giving funeral honors to the President’s civil rights program. . . . In the matter of federal action on civil rights we will continue to be ruled from Birmingham.”<sup>44</sup>

The *Times* had overstated the situation. It was true that congressional action was a dead issue. Indeed, Congress would refuse to pass any of Truman’s civil rights proposals for the remainder of his presidency. In every State of the Union message, Truman would thereafter raise the issue. He would issue challenges to Congress time and again at press conferences. At countless public appearances, he would call on the legislators to act.<sup>45</sup> Nothing, however, could make them budge, and after the summer of 1949 domestic issues of any stripe were thereafter subordinated to international concerns. The communist takeover of China, the detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviets, the

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<sup>43</sup> “Drive on Filibuster Opened in Senate on Truman’s Order,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1949, 1; Lucas quoted in Gardner, 150.

<sup>44</sup> “Not the Last Word,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1949, 24.

<sup>45</sup> For relevant portions of Truman’s later State of the Union messages, see *Public Papers, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 9; *Public Papers, 1951* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 12; *Public Papers, 1952 – 53* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 16, 1117. For representative incidents of his referencing congressional inaction on civil rights at press conferences, see *Public Papers, 1949*, 169, 237; *Public Papers, 1950*, 42, 134, 194-95; *Public Papers, 1951*, 22. An excellent sampling of his later statements at public events can be gathered from the following: “Address at a Luncheon of the National Conference of Christians and Jews,” *Public Papers, 1949*, 561; “Address at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Negro Women, Inc.,” *Public Papers, 1949*, 566; “Address Before the Attorney General’s Conference on Law Enforcement Problems,” *Public Papers, 1950*, 157; “Address at the Laying of the Cornerstone of the New U.S. Courts Building for the District of Columbia,” *Public Papers, 1950*, 495; “Address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen,” *Public Papers, 1951*, 548; “Commencement Address at Howard University,” *Public Papers, 1952 – 53*, 420-24; “Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights,” *Public Papers, 1952 – 53*, 1077-79.

outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula, and the resultant hysteria of McCarthyism all combined to monopolize executive-congressional relations.

But there was more to federal action than Congress. As Truman had demonstrated in his first term, the power of the president to act unilaterally was substantial. The amicus strategy of the Department of Justice that had been so successful in the restrictive covenant cases was continued, and when Truman selected Tom Clark to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court in August 1949, his successor as attorney general, J. Howard McGrath, maintained the department's efforts in this regard. McGrath was no stranger to civil rights; as senator from Rhode Island it was he who had re-introduced the president's omnibus bill in the Eighty-First Congress. Now he oversaw work on cases begun under Clark's tenure. In *Sweatt v. Painter*, the Justice Department filed an amicus brief agreeing with the petitioner that the decision of the University of Texas Law School to refuse admission to a black student because a new law school for Negroes offered "equivalent" opportunities was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. A similar brief was offered in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education*, arguing that the decision of the University of Oklahoma to allow a black student entrance into a doctoral program in education, but simultaneously require him to be seated in segregated areas, was yet again a violation of equal protection.<sup>46</sup>

The most remarkable action by Truman's Justice Department involved the case of *Henderson v. United States*. At issue was a decision by the Interstate Commerce Commission – an executive agency – that the operation of segregated dining cars by privately-owned and operated railway companies did not violate the Interstate Commerce

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<sup>46</sup> *Sweatt v. Painter et al.*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950); *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education et al.*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950).

Act’s prohibition against subjecting persons to “any undue or unreasonable prejudice or disadvantage in any respect whatsoever.”<sup>47</sup> For the ICC, the Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* – wherein the doctrine of separate-but-equal was ruled to be constitutionally permissible – reconciled the railroads’ practices with the statute in question. Instead of defending the ICC, however, the solicitor general took the unprecedented step – in both his written brief and in oral arguments – of agreeing with the petitioner both on the merits of his particular claim and on the broader question of the need to overturn the flawed *Plessy* decision. In its brief, the United States government told the Court,

Segregation as enforced by the regulations imports the inferiority of the Negro race. Enforced racial segregation in itself constitutes a denial of the right to equal treatment. Equal treatment means the same treatment. . . . [I]f the Court should conclude that the issues here cannot be decided without reference to the “separate but equal” doctrine, the Government submits that the legal and factual assumptions upon which *Plessy v. Ferguson* was decided have been demonstrated to be erroneous, and that the doctrine of the case should now be re-examined and overruled. The notion that separate but equal facilities satisfy constitutional and statutory prohibitions against discrimination is obsolete. The phrase “equal rights” means the same rights.<sup>48</sup>

On 5 June 1950, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously for the petitioners in all three cases, but the justices were not willing to go as far as Perlman and McGrath had argued in *Henderson*. The decision of the appeals court to uphold the ICC’s position was overturned, but only on the grounds that *Plessy* did not supersede the explicit language of the Interstate Commerce Act.<sup>49</sup> Not for another five years would the nation’s highest court reach the position held by the Truman administration had in 1949 – that *Plessy* was itself a mistake.

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<sup>47</sup> Interstate Commerce Act (1887), 49 U.S.C.S. § 3 (1).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Gardner, 178-79.

<sup>49</sup> *Henderson v. United States*, 339 U.S. 816 (1950).

At least one justice, however, was already prepared to take that step. Because of his involvement in the amicus brief for the restrictive covenant cases as well as the Justice Department's initial efforts in *Sweatt*, *McLaurin*, and *Henderson*, the Court's newest member, Tom Clark, recused himself from hearing any of the three appeals. Yet that did not prevent him from insisting in a memorandum to his fellow justices that the task of re-examining the doctrine of separate-but-equal "must be met" in their deliberations. At a minimum, he urged that his colleagues find in the petitioners' favor. "If some say this undermines *Plessy*," wrote the most junior member of the Court, "then let it fall, as have many Nineteenth Century oracles."<sup>50</sup>

The Truman administration had failed to overturn *Plessy* in 1950, but the very fact that it had made the effort – and the degree of concurrence that it had drawn from the Court on the need to correct the specific racial injustices suffered by the petitioners in *Sweatt*, *McLaurin*, and *Henderson* – signaled that its demise was rapidly approaching. NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall responded to the verdicts by announcing that the "complete destruction of all enforced segregation" was now "in sight." Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia came to the same conclusion, though he gave the rulings a decidedly different connotation than had Marshall. "The threats that have been held over the South for four years," the governor railed, "are now pointed like a dagger ready to be plunged into the very heart of southern tradition."<sup>51</sup>

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After the election of 1948, Harry Truman was unquestionably president in his own right. No longer could he be viewed as the constitutionally mandated caretaker of

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Gardner, 183.

<sup>51</sup> "Made Illegal by Three Rulings," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 17 June 1950, 1; "South in Turmoil Over Sweatt Rule," *Austin American Statesman*, 6 June 1950, 1.

the Roosevelt administration. By the time he took his second presidential oath of office, the last of the Roosevelt appointees were leaving their posts in the executive branch. Those who were chosen as their replacements fully appreciated the president's commitment to dismantle segregationist policies wherever the opportunity presented itself.<sup>52</sup> Just as Executive Order 9980 had mandated that agency heads would be personally responsible for overseeing the implementation of race-neutral hiring and promotion policies in the civil service, so too were they expected by the president to eliminate any vestiges of racial discrimination in the operation of their agencies not explicitly mandated by Congress.

Thus in December 1948, the Civil Aeronautics Administration ordered private concessionaires to desegregate their dining facilities in Washington National Airport.<sup>53</sup> The following year, the Justice Department and the Federal Housing Administration announced that federal funds and loan guarantees would be denied to any project that discriminated on the basis of race.<sup>54</sup> Integration of swimming facilities in the District of Columbia was realized early in 1950 as a result of personal efforts made by the Secretary of the Interior, Oscar L. Chapman, and by September of that year the *Washington Post* was able to report that “[n]o disturbance or unhappy incident of any kind occurred in the

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<sup>52</sup> One Truman appointment during this time particularly underscored the new tenor of executive actions with regard to race. On 15 October 1949 the president appointed William Hastie – former dean of the Howard University Law School and a one-time counsel for the NAACP whom Truman had named four years earlier as governor of the Virgin Islands – to a seat on the Third Circuit Court of Appeals (with jurisdiction over courts in New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and the Virgin Islands). After nine contentious months of Senate confirmation proceedings, Hastie became the first black judge to sit on any federal court outside of the territories.

<sup>53</sup> “CAA Orders End of Racial Segregation at Washington National Airport in Virginia,” *New York Times*, 28 December 1948, 1.

<sup>54</sup> “2 U.S. Agencies Bar Aid to Housing with Bias Pacts Filed After Feb. 15,” *New York Times*, 12 December 1949, 1. When established under Roosevelt, the Federal Housing Administration had encouraged the placing of restrictive covenants on government-assisted building projects. This was halted by the Truman administration in 1947, an action that received the commendation of the President's Committee on Civil Rights. See President's Committee on Civil Rights, 70.

course of the season.”<sup>55</sup> As with so many of Truman’s other actions on race, the effects resonated throughout the country – even in his own segregated home state. Eleanor Roosevelt conveyed the news directly to the president:

Mr. Joseph D. Lohman of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capitol has just written me of the great success they have had in St. Louis in keeping their swimming pools unsegregated.

He tells me that the courageous attitude shown by the administration in supporting democratic principles in the Washington situation has helped the situation all over the country. You . . . have shown great courage in bringing this about. It is these step-by-step achievements which will in the end bring us real equal rights in our own nation.<sup>56</sup>

Even the president’s inauguration was itself transformed into an opportunity to further the work of collapsing racial barriers. Margaret Truman recalled that on “direct orders from Dad, for the first time in history black Americans were admitted to all official and unofficial functions.” Soon, “white” and “colored” signs began disappearing from hotels and restaurants throughout the nation’s capitol.<sup>57</sup>

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In 1951, the issue that had vexed Truman for so many years – FEPC – finally moved towards a resolution. Since the Roosevelt administration, Congress had thwarted any attempt by the executive branch to compel defense contractors to adopt non-discriminatory hiring practices, and as the branch of government constitutionally empowered to control all appropriations it maintained final authority in such decisions. The outbreak of the war in Korea, however, led to the passage in January 1951 of a bill

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<sup>55</sup> “Swimming Pools,” *Washington Post*, 10 September 1950, section M, 12.

<sup>56</sup> Steve Neal, ed., *Eleanor and Harry: The Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 184.

<sup>57</sup> Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1973), 403; Neal, 184.

ceding much of this congressional authority over procurement to the executive.<sup>58</sup>

Although the purpose of the legislation had been to enable the executive to unilaterally modify defense contracts, in the interests of national defense, without the other party having any recourse to judicial redress, Truman quickly perceived that it could be used for other purposes. On 2 February 1951 – the three year anniversary of his civil rights message – he issued Executive Order 10210. Many of its provisions followed the intent of Congress. One was entirely the product of Truman’s ingenuity: “There shall be no discrimination in any act performed hereunder against any person on the ground of race, creed, color or national origin, and all contracts . . . shall contain a provision that the contractor, and any subcontractors thereunder shall not so discriminate.”<sup>59</sup> A subsequent executive order – 10308 – made it the explicit responsibility of the heads of any defense-related contracting agency of the federal government to enforce these new non-discrimination provisions, and granted them the authority to take whatever measures were necessary “for obtaining compliance” from any contractor or subcontractor.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The bill in question was “An Act to amend and extend title II of the First War Powers Act, 1941,” Public Law 921, 81st Congress.

<sup>59</sup> “Executive Order 10210,” *Federal Register*, 6 February 1951, 1049, 1051.

<sup>60</sup> “Executive Order 10308,” *Federal Register*, 6 December 1951, 12303; “A New F.E.P.C.,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1951, 32. Berman rejects the claim by the *Times* that the orders created “a new FEPC.” The evidence cited for his assertion is a comment by Philleo Nash at a 3 December press conference specifically rejecting such a characterization and stressing the strictly advisory role to be performed by the Committee on Government Contract Compliance. See Berman, 193. However, Berman never acknowledges the enforcement powers that now lay in the hands of executive agency heads – a power retained by the Congress in the 1940s. He also fails to consider that Nash’s comments may have been consciously disingenuous; having thwarted the long-standing will of Congress on the issue of non-discrimination rules for defense contractors, the necessity of maintaining some semblance of good relations with that body would make it extremely politic to deny that any such subversion had in fact occurred.

Further, Berman revives the tired cliché of attributing Truman’s motives entirely to electoral concerns (in this case, the need to galvanize black support for the presidential election of 1952). See Berman, 185. In reality, Truman had decided more than eighteen months earlier that he would retire at the end of his second term – a decision he announced publicly only a few months after signing Executive Order 10308. For evidence of Truman’s decision not to run in 1952, see his diary entry of 16 April 1950, reprinted in Ferrell, *Off the Record*, 177-78; for the public announcement of the president’s retirement, see the eight-column lead story “Truman Announces He Will Not Run Again; Says He Served Long, Feels ‘No Duty’ to Stay; News Stuns Democratic Leaders at Dinner,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1952, 1.



It had taken more than six years, but Harry Truman had finally disentangled both halves of the American military establishment – personnel and procurement – from the business of racial discrimination.

Critics of Truman fail to appreciate the degree to which he effected changes, preferring instead to focus upon all that remained to be accomplished. Desegregation of the armed services provides an excellent example. Total integration was not completed before the president left office, but the progress made toward the achievement of that goal was staggering. On 23 June 1949, Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews issued the following directive to all ships and stations:

It is the policy of the Navy Department that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the Navy and Marine Corps without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

In their attitude and day-to-day conduct of affairs, officers and enlisted personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps shall adhere rigidly and impartially to the Navy Regulations, in which no distinction is made between individuals wearing the uniform of these services.

All personnel will be enlisted or appointed, trained, advanced or promoted, assigned duty and administered in all respects without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.

In the utilization of housing, messing, berthing and other facilities no special or unusual provisions will be made for the accommodation of any minority race.<sup>61</sup>

Three years later, Assistant Secretary of Defense Anna M. Rosenberg was able to write Minnesota senator Humber Humphrey that “at the present time there is no segregation in the Navy or Marine Corps.” In that same letter, she noted that “integration has been accomplished in all [Army] training divisions and in replacement training centers throughout the United States.” The Far East Command had been fully desegregated since May 1952, and all other commands were rapidly doing the same. Of

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<sup>61</sup> President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, *Freedom to Serve: Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 70.

the 385 all-Negro units the Army had maintained in June 1950, that number had fallen to 251, none of regimental-size or higher. (One year later only eight-eight colored units would remain, comprising less than 15,000 of the Army's estimated 199,000 Negro soldiers.) The Air Force issued its policy on non-discrimination in training, assignment, and housing on 11 May 1949. At that time it possessed only 167 units containing Negro personnel. By December 1951 the Air Force counted 3,145 units, and its personnel were now assigned throughout the world solely on the basis of their job classification – save only in Iceland, where blacks were not yet deployed at the request of the Department of State.<sup>62</sup>

In his landmark study of race and the U.S. military, Richard M. Dalfume concluded,

By the end of 1954, segregation and discrimination were virtually eliminated from the internal organization of the active military. Integration and equal treatment was the official policy in such on-base facilities as swimming pools, chapels, barbershops, post exchanges, movie theaters, and dependents' housing as well as in the more direct areas of assignment and promotion. Military life had developed a unique interracial character unlike that found in the other major institutions of American society.<sup>63</sup>

That such a fundamental restructuring was completed in less than seven years should be seen as a credit to the efforts of Harry Truman, not a criticism.

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In 1948 Strom Thurmond had warned his supporters that Truman would try to bring the Negro into their homes, their places of recreation, and their schools. In the

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<sup>62</sup> Letter of Anna M. Rosenberg to Hubert Humphrey, 6 October 1952, in Papers of the NAACP, reel 12, frames 183-85; "Army is Hastening Segregation's End," *New York Times*, 13 September 1953, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Dalfume, 220.

immediate years that followed the president had justified Thurmond's concern in regard to the first two areas. Now at the end of his term of office, Truman addressed the third.

A corollary to the housing deficit of the Truman years was a similar paucity of schools. Wartime construction halts and a post-war increase in births combined to generate critical shortages of classroom space. In the fall of 1951 Congress moved to partially address this deficiency with the passage of H.R. 5411, authorizing federal funds "for the construction, maintenance, and operation of elementary and secondary schools in those localities where defense activities of the Federal Government have created unusual burdens." Truman acknowledged that the purpose of the bill was "meritorious," and it harmonized with his frequent calls for increases in federal aid to education. Buried within the legislation, however, was a provision that had been added in the final days of the congressional session, thus escaping notice or comment from those who would have otherwise objected to its inclusion. It required schools already in existence on federal property to conform to the racial laws of the states in which they were located, effectively mandating that a number of heretofore integrated facilities now be segregated. For the entirety of the Truman presidency, Congress had resisted his attempts to curtail segregation; now it was actively expanding that institution.<sup>64</sup>

The president's veto message of 2 November was direct and unequivocal. He would gladly sign H.R. 5411 if the next session of Congress presented it "without the objectionable provision," but as the proposal now stood its enactment,

would constitute a backward step in the efforts of the Federal Government to extend equal rights and opportunities to all our people. During the past few years, we have made rapid progress toward equal treatment and opportunity in those activities of the Federal Government where we have a

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<sup>64</sup> *Public Papers, 1951*, 616.

direct responsibility to follow national rather than local interpretations of non-discrimination. . . .

We should not impair our moral position by enacting a law that requires a discrimination based on race. Step by step we are discarding old discriminations; we must not adopt new ones.<sup>65</sup>

The national press took little notice of the president's action. Harry Truman had prevented the elected representatives of the United States government from extending segregation. In the *New York Times* the next morning, the only reference to this collision of the legislative and executive positions on racial equality could be found in its "Proceedings in Washington" column. Under the heading, "The President," a single sentence appeared: "Killed Federal Aid Bill for local school construction."<sup>66</sup>

The final act of the Truman administration regarding civil rights received almost as little attention – at the time or since. Again it involved education.

At the start of its 1952-53 term, the Supreme Court chose to hear a series of cases regarding segregation in elementary and secondary public schools. The individual appeals were bundled together for consideration and docketed as *Brown v. Board of Education*. As it had in civil rights cases for the past five years, the Department of Justice chose to submit an amicus brief on behalf of the petitioners. The task this time fell to a new Attorney General, James P. McGranery (Howard McGrath having been fired in April 1952 after mishandling an investigation of charges of corruption in the Bureau of Internal Revenue). The brief for the United States filed on 2 December 1952 was as powerful and uncompromising an indictment of legally codified racial discrimination as anything the NAACP attorneys would argue before the Court.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 616-17.

<sup>66</sup> "The Proceedings in Washington," *New York Times*, 3 November 1951, 8.

It began, appropriately enough, by quoting Harry Truman's civil rights message of 2 February 1948: "In recent years the Federal Government has increasingly recognized its special responsibility for assuring vindication of the fundamental civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution. The President has stated: 'We shall not . . . finally achieve the ideals for which this Nation was founded so long as any American suffers discrimination as a result of his race. . . .'"<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, it was the position of the government that

racial discriminations imposed by law, or having the sanction or support of government, inevitably tend to undermine the foundations of a society dedicated to freedom, justice, and equality. The proposition that all men are created equal is not mere rhetoric. It implies a rule of law . . . under which all men stand equal and alike in the rights and opportunities secured to them by their government. Under the Constitution, every agency of the government, national and local, legislative, executive, and judicial, must treat each of our people as an American. . . . The color of a man's skin . . . does not diminish or alter his legal status or constitutional rights.<sup>68</sup>

The brief outlined a number of precedents that provided the Court – should it choose once again to avoid addressing *Plessy* directly – with grounds for granting the petitioners' appeal.<sup>69</sup> The government, however, argued passionately in favor of taking the boldest possible course of action. Citing its own briefs filed in *Sweatt*, *McLaurin*, and *Henderson*, it concluded

that the doctrine of "separate but equal" is wrong as a matter of constitutional law, history, and policy. . . .

The Government submits that compulsory racial segregation is itself, without more, an unconstitutional discrimination. "Separate but equal" is a contradiction in terms. . . . The constitutional requirement is that of equality, not merely in one sense of the word but in every sense.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Philip B. Kurland and Gerhard Casper, eds., *Landmark Briefs of the Supreme Court of the United States: Constitutional Law*, 80 vols. (Arlington, Va.: University Publications of America, 1975), 49:117.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 49:118-19.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 49:123-32.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 49:132-33.

Finally, the government called for ending formalized exclusions based on race – not simply in the public schools, but in America. It ended its presentation as it had begun, by quoting the message Harry Truman had sent to Congress nearly five years earlier:

The subordinate position occupied by Negroes in this country as a result of governmental discriminations . . . presents an unsolved problem for American democracy, an inescapable challenge to the sincerity of our espousal of the democratic faith.

In these days, when the free world must conserve and fortify the moral as well as the material sources of its strength, it is especially important to affirm that the Constitution of the United States places no limitation, express or implied, on the principle of the equality of all men before the law. . . .

The Government and the people of the United States must prove by their actions that the ideals expressed in the Bill of Rights are living realities, not literary abstractions. As the President has stated:

“If we wish to inspire the people of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their civil liberties, if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.

We know the way. We need only the will.”<sup>71</sup>

After considering the case for several months, the Supreme Court ordered a second round of arguments, which began on 7 December 1953 – one year into the Eisenhower presidency. On 17 May 1954 it finally announced its decision in favor of the petitioners, overturning – as the Truman administration had urged in 1949 – the doctrine of separate-but-equal.

All nine justices signed the decision. One-third of them had been appointed by Harry S. Truman.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 146-47.

<sup>72</sup> The three were Harold Burton (sworn in on 1 October 1945), Tom Clark (24 August 1949), and Sherman Minton (12 October 1949).

## EPILOGUE

*Who in the hell is Harry Truman?*

---Admiral William Leahy, military advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt, speaking in the summer of 1944.<sup>1</sup>

On 11 October 1952, Harry Truman returned to Harlem. The occasion, as it had been on his historic first visit to the emblematic neighborhood, was his acceptance of another Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial Brotherhood Medal. That at least was its stated purpose, but this was an election year, and – apart from the fact that the stumping now was on behalf of Adlai Stevenson’s presidential aspirations – much of what Truman had to say replicated the standard Congress- and Republican-bashing rhetoric of his own 1948 campaign. But there was another reason for his coming, revealed in that portion of his address which was anything but political boilerplate. Four years earlier he had outlined for his listeners in Dorrance Brooks Square the role he wished to see the federal government assume in relation to civil rights. Now he provided an accounting of some of the wishes he had actualized:

When the Congress refused to act [on civil rights], I went ahead to do what I could within the executive branch itself. . . .

First I acted to stop racial discrimination in the armed services. . . .

I also had a Fair Employment Board set up in the Civil Service Commission. Today, every Federal agency has a fair employment practices program that is working. Any Federal employee, or applicant for Federal employment, who feels he has been discriminated against because of race can now ask for and receive justice.

At my request, the Solicitor General . . . went before the Supreme Court to argue that Negro citizens have the same right to enter State colleges and universities on exactly the same basis as any other citizens. And we won that fight. And more than a thousand Negro graduate and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1950), 247.

professional students have been accepted by 10 State universities that had barred their doors to Negroes before. . . .

At my request, the Solicitor General . . . argued against the vicious, restrictive covenants that had prevented houses in many places from being sold to Negroes and to Jews. It was a great day in the history of civil rights when we won that case. . . .

As one result of that decision, more Negroes are homeowners today than ever before in American history. . . .

It is the clear duty of the Federal Government to stand behind local law enforcement agencies, and to step in if they fail to control mob action. That is exactly what we have been doing through the FBI and through the civil rights section of the Department of Justice. . . .

These are examples of how your Federal Government – under a Democratic President – stands behind the constitutional guarantees of human rights.<sup>2</sup>

Truman's desire to generalize about his party in an election year was understandable, but this last sentence was too self-effacing. Four previous Democratic presidents had served since the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, and none had made any such stand for racial justice. What this list actually demonstrated was how one unique individual – breaking with the precedents of his party, his region, and his office – had effected some measure of redemption for the country's systemic non-compliance with its own fundamental law. Henceforth, all Democratic nominees for the presidency would be bound by the example of his progressive stance.

Moreover, Truman's record of accomplishment extended beyond his own direct actions. There was also the demonstrable evidence of changes in American thinking about race – incremental, anecdotal, but occurring nonetheless – that his words and deeds at the federal level had provoked. Whenever these attitudinal shifts translated into local initiatives, Truman could justly take some credit as well:

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<sup>2</sup> *Public Papers, 1952 – 53* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 798-800. The very existence of the Justice Department's civil rights division was also something for which the president might have claimed credit. Requested in point one of his ten legislative proposals of 2 February 1948, the creation of the division shared the distinction, with the settlement of Japanese-American evacuation claims, of being the only element enacted by the Congress during his administration.



In the last few years, [nine] States and [eight] cities have forbidden discrimination or segregation in public housing. . . .

. . . [eleven] States and [twenty] cities have enacted fair employment practice laws. . . .

[T]here are only five poll tax states left in this Union. . . .

In the last five years, two States have enacted antilynch laws. Five states and forty-five cities have passed laws against wearing masks in public – which will strip the hoods off of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>3</sup>

Most important of all, this second visit to Harlem afforded the president the perfect opportunity to reply to a legion of critics who had questioned his motive for making the fight against racial discrimination a centerpiece of his administration, and to share with the entire public a glimpse of how the long-settled fates of five victimized Americans never released their claim upon his sense of justice:

[M]any people have wondered how I came to have such a deep interest in civil rights. I want to tell you about that. Right after World War II, religious and racial intolerance began to show up just as it did in 1919. There were a good many incidents of violence and friction, but two of them in particular made a very deep impression on me. One was when a Negro veteran, still wearing this country's uniform, was arrested, and beaten, and blinded. Not long after that, two Negro veterans with their wives lost their lives at the hands of a mob.

It is the duty of the State and local government to prevent such tragedies. But, as President of the United States, I felt I ought to do everything in my power to find out what caused such crimes and to root out the causes.<sup>4</sup>

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Harry Truman fulfilled the task he had set for himself, and the consequences of his actions continued to reverberate long after he had left public life. Prior to his term of office, a president could maintain the complicity of the executive branch in the federal government's participation in formalized racial discrimination merely by inaction. Afterward, occupants of the White House were deprived of that luxury. Support for

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 799.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 798.

segregation would now require positive action, which increased in difficulty as northern white opinion began to coalesce slowly in favor of federal efforts against legally-sanctioned discrimination, and as southern blacks migrated northward, where – among the opportunities they found – was the ballot box.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of the northern white consensus that proved essential for passage of the civil rights laws of the 1960s did not generate spontaneously. It was the product of a gradual process of re-education that had its genesis in the actions of the Truman administration. Justice Tom Clark, when questioned in 1972 about the civil rights

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<sup>5</sup> A few incidents from the succeeding Republican administration serve to illustrate this point. A native of Kansas (the segregated education policies of which resulted in the *Brown* appeal to the Supreme Court) and a career officer in the white southern-dominated culture of the U.S. Army, Dwight Eisenhower was loathe to take any public leadership role in addressing racial injustice. See Robert Frederick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 23-30. Nevertheless, the attention given to civil rights by the outgoing Truman administration forced the 1952 Republican nominee to half-heartedly endorse the creation of FEPC agencies in all forty-eight states and call for the completion of Truman-era policies aimed at ending segregation in the District of Columbia. See Burk, 18. When as president he dismantled Truman's Fair Employment Board in 1955 and allowed discriminatory policies to seep back into the civil service, he felt compelled to mask the decision by the establishment of the President's Committee on Government Employment Policy, which – though possessing little of the authority or resources of the Truman board – was publicly promoted by Eisenhower officials as a substantive improvement upon its predecessor. For background on Eisenhower's personal opposition to civil rights, see Burk, 71.

The Supreme Court's call for re-argument of *Brown* in December 1953 posed a similar quandary for the Eisenhower team. The president wished to avoid the entire question of segregated education, but the fact that the Truman administration had committed to U.S. government to a position in the case with its amicus brief made it politically impossible for the new Justice Department leadership to withdraw from the proceedings entirely. Instead, the new attorney general, Herbert Brownell, Jr., filed a "supplemental brief." Where the Truman administration had presented a short, unqualified endorsement of the petitioners' position and called for the overturning of *Plessy*, the new brief described itself as "an objective non-adversary [*sic*] discussion of the questions stated in the Court's order of reargument," and made "[n]o attempt . . . to reexamine other questions briefed and argued at the last term." See Philip B. Kurland and Gerhard Casper, eds., *Landmark Briefs of the Supreme Court of the United States: Constitutional Law*, 80 vols. (Arlington, Va.: University Publications of America, 1975), 49:865.

Its conclusions were four-fold: (1) the history of the Fourteenth Amendment "as has been declared by the [Supreme] Court" was to abolish all legal distinctions based on race and color; (2) the legislative history of the amendment in the Congress was "not conclusive"; (3) information regarding its ratification was "too scanty and incomplete" to justify any conclusions as to how the states may have believed the amendment applied to public schools; and (4) it was within the power of the judiciary to eliminate segregation in the schools. See Kurland and Gerhard, 49:1053-54.

In short, the Eisenhower supplement took seven times the length of the Truman brief to state that the executive branch no longer had any opinion as to how the Court should rule.

successes of his lifelong friend, Lyndon Baines Johnson, recalled the debt they owed to Clark's one-time boss:

Mr. Truman took the position that we had to have some immediate action on it, and he proposed legislation to the Congress, some of which became law. Eventually, the housing legislation which Mr. Johnson was able to get through in the middle sixties was really a refinement of Mr. Truman's proposals. He also made proposals with reference to voting[,] public accommodations and things of that kind. So, I rather think that [Johnson's civil rights legacy] had its inception back there. . . .

. . . Mr. Truman's civil rights program inspired much that has been accomplished – it was largely inspired by him. It was the beginning of the civil rights crusade that eventually got us where we are today.<sup>6</sup>

How was it that proposals for federal involvement in civil rights, which enjoyed little support when first suggested in the 1940s, reached a critical mass of acceptance less than two decades later? The dominant narrative contends that the power of mass media – specifically, televised images of southern white violence against demonstrators, beamed directly into the homes of previously-apatetic northern whites – was the agent of this change. Such images unquestionably played a role, but one still must explain how they found a receptive audience. At least a portion of the answer lies in the increased contacts between the races fostered by Truman-era policies. Every classroom or workplace or swimming pool or railroad car or housing development that was desegregated served two functions: it offered blacks an opportunity to participate more fully in American life, while offering whites an opportunity to replace their fears of what integration might trigger with evidence that their concerns were groundless.

Consider military integration in the 1950s. If asked to envision what that involved, most would conjure up images of white and black soldiers on patrol in Korea – a scene not unlike that cast in stainless steel at the recently completed national memorial

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 83, 222.

to the soldiers of that war. Left unimagined would be the larger reality: hundreds of thousands of young white males – for whom integration had thus far been an abstraction, and largely an unpleasant one – sent to training camps throughout America and suddenly required to perform all of the mundane tasks of everyday life in tight-knit, racially integrated quarters for the duration of their service, and then being reintroduced into the civilian world. In October 1945, the War Department released the results of an experiment conducted during the last three months of combat operations in Europe, wherein all-black rifle platoons were attached to white companies in seven infantry divisions. Sixty-four percent of the white soldiers stated that they had viewed the prospect of serving with Negroes unfavorably at the outset; seventy-seven percent recorded that their feelings toward blacks had become more favorable by V-E Day, and in no case had a white soldier reported his attitude as being less favorable for the experience.<sup>7</sup> Imagine that experiment being replicated for years on a nation-wide scale, and one begins to understand the full effect of Executive Order 9981 in American life.

Then there was the political impact of Truman's stance. For nearly seventy years southern leaders had dictated national Democratic policy on race by threatening the withdrawal of their support in presidential elections. In 1948, Harry Truman called their bluff, and the result was perhaps the single most devastating electoral defeat the forces of segregation ever suffered. Not only had the target of their wrath succeeded in winning re-election, but even the voters of the old Confederacy itself largely failed to embrace the States' Rights ticket. Within those eleven states, Strom Thurmond received only 22

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<sup>7</sup> Papers of the NAACP. Part 9: Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918 – 1955. Series A: General Office Files on Armed Forces' Affairs, 1918 – 1955. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C. (microfilmed on 18 reels. Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1989), reel 10, frames 841-45.

percent of the total votes cast by a nearly all-white electorate.<sup>8</sup> In an instant, the limit of segregationist political strength was revealed. Never again would a presidential nominee of the Democratic party feel the need to appease that bloc. Truman recognized as much immediately after his election, writing to Eleanor Roosevelt on 13 December: “At least the Democratic Party is no longer in a position whose tail wags him. We . . . are free of the so-called solid South and I hope to see a Democratic Party from now on that will really be a Democratic Party and represent all the people.”<sup>9</sup>

Instead of occupying a central position in the story of the presidency and civil rights, however, Harry Truman has been all but expunged from the narrative. Indeed, if referenced at all in a given work, he is likely to receive no more than a paragraph’s mention – and then only in the first twenty-five pages. In the dominant paradigm of the past three decades, the explanation of the federal government’s role in dismantling legalized racial oppression is told as a two-decade, two-stage process: Supreme Court decisions in the 1950s, presidential calls for legislative action in the 1960s. According to this tale, it was only through the persuasiveness of Thurgood Marshall and his associates in the NAACP’s legal division that the monolithically implacable white power structure experienced its first defection when the Supreme Court reversed course suddenly in the *Brown* decision.<sup>10</sup> In perhaps the ultimate historical injustice, Harry Truman is not only

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<sup>8</sup> Thurmond received 1,161,536 votes out of a total of 5,215,284; “1948 Presidential Election Data - National by State,” *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/USPRESIDENT/>.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Neal, ed., *Eleanor and Harry: The Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 151.

<sup>10</sup> For an archetypal sampling, see Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds. *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History* (New York: Trident Press, 1968); Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960 – 1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990); Rhoda Lois Blumberg, *Civil Rights: The 1960s Freedom Struggle*, rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); David Chalmers, *And the Crooked Places Made*

denied his deserved acclaim in academic scholarship and popular understanding as the chief executive most responsible for the ending of formalized racial discrimination in America, but that honor is bestowed upon Lyndon Johnson, whose accomplishments – however noteworthy – must be measured alongside the incontrovertible fact that when Truman attempted to bring about the same changes fifteen years earlier, Johnson was one of hundreds of southern politicians who actively opposed him in that task.

As the nation moved on race, so did Lyndon Johnson. A commendable act, to be sure, but Harry Truman moved the nation.

Nevertheless, this is not the story one finds in the civil rights historiography. On those rare occasions when Truman does appear, the accomplishments of his era are usually framed as having occurred despite his efforts, not as a result of them.<sup>11</sup> If

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*Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, eds. *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954 – 1990* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson & Civil Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Mark Grossman, *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the Civil Rights Movement* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO Information Services, 1993); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954 – 1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Jack Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts: How a Dedicated Band of Lawyers Fought for the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> The wellspring for depictions in the civil rights literature of a reactionary Truman who nevertheless supported civil rights for political ends is William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1970). The first work to deal exclusively with the issue of race during the Truman presidency, its thesis was simple: “By 1948, it was clear that Truman would need [Negro] votes in order to retain control of the White House. Out of that need emerged the Truman administration’s civil rights program.” See Berman, x. Similar portraits – often citing Berman directly as their source – can be found in Barton J. Bernstein, “The Ambiguous Legacy: The Truman Administration and Civil Rights,” in *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Harvard Sitkoff, “Harry Truman and the Election of 1948: The Coming Age of Civil Rights in American Politics,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November 1971): 597-616; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890 – 1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Matthew Holden, Jr., “Race and Constitutional Change in the Twentieth Century,” in *African Americans and the Living Constitution*, eds. John Hope Franklin and Genna Rae McNeil (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

Mary Dudziak departs from her study of the interplay between the civil rights movement and the struggle against communism just long enough to assert that “in the context of the [1948] election, Truman advocated civil rights reform.” See Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 26. Steven F. Lawson presents a resistant and politically pressured Truman in both *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America*

positioned as the agent of change, the motivation assigned invariably is political self-interest. This is not to say that electoral considerations did not enter into the president's thinking; indeed, representative government would lose all meaning if the wishes of the voter were never considered in policy-making. Framing the issue as a choice between good politics or good policy – as many Truman critics do – is a false dichotomy. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, as she demonstrated in a letter to Democratic National Chairman Robert Hannegan in June 1945, never lost sight of political calculations in advocating progressive policies on race:

Governor Dewey certainly learned from the last campaign that he could not ignore the colored vote and, at the expense of some of his most conservative support, he is now playing up very strongly to the minority groups in this state and also to the liberals.

On the other hand . . . , we are still going to have a strong fight by the conservative southern Democratic senators on our hands. If they filibuster on the FEPC and on the Poll Tax, I think we will have a big group of people feeling that there is a chance[,] even though there is a conservative moneyed power group in the Republican Party, that the Republican Party may be more liberal from the point of view of racial and religious questions. We may lose a certain number of people to that party who would ordinarily be Democrats, but who want to serve notice that there is one issue on which they will vote with the party which they consider is doing the right thing on that issue.<sup>12</sup>

Those who depict Truman's actions in 1948 as being driven solely by self-interest point to a White House memorandum drafted on 19 November 1947 by Clark Clifford. In it the special counsel to the president argued that the best way to negate the effects of the likely possibility of challenge from the left by Henry Wallace would be to promote an agenda of civil rights, because polling data suggested that a three-way race would be decided by the colored vote in the key battleground states of California, Illinois, New

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(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) and – most outrageously of all – in his introduction to a recent reprint of *To Secure These Rights*. See Lawson, ed., *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S Truman's Committee on Civil Rights* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 10-36.

<sup>12</sup> Neal, 32-33.

York, and Ohio. Even if one grants the dubious contention that the president followed Clifford's advice slavishly, the fact remains that those who wish to damn Truman with this single piece of evidence inevitably fail to mention its exculpatory conclusion: "[I]t is inconceivable that any policy initiated by the Truman administration no matter how 'liberal' could so alienate the South in the next year that it would revolt. As always, the South can be considered safely Democratic. And in forming national policy can be safely ignored."<sup>13</sup> The political apple with which Truman is so often accused of being tempted was in fact predicated on the belief that there would be no southern bolt. But when that turned out not to be the case, and a sizeable net gain in electoral votes failed to materialize early in 1948, Truman made no effort to back away from his support of civil rights. Instead, he pushed the unpopular issue even further.

So ingrained has the dominant narrative become in our national consciousness that historians who specialize in the field of civil rights often fail to ask one important question: is it true?<sup>14</sup> This is particularly disturbing when one recognizes how accessible is the record of events. In all but a few instances, every public action described in this work can be found in one of two places: in the eight volume compilation of President Truman's public papers, or above the fold on the front page of the *New York Times* for the years between 1945 and 1953. Both are indexed extensively and available in any respectable college library. That neither are cited with any frequency in civil rights

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in John E. Borsos, "Support for the National Democratic Party in South Carolina During the Dixiecrat Revolt of 1948" (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1987), 7-8. Those who see Clifford's memo as a smoking gun in their case against Truman are guilty of a common logical fallacy: *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. The fact that Truman's actions resembled the plan suggested by Clifford and yielded the results predicted in no way proves that the policy adoption was caused by the political advice.

<sup>14</sup> The notable exceptions are Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973), 1973; Philip H. Vaughan, *The Truman Administration's Legacy for Black America* (Resada, Calif.: Mojave Books, 1976); Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights*.



literature – even when that literature nevertheless addresses events and attitudes during this period – is nothing short of professional malpractice.

The second of February, 1948, has been all but forgotten. It should stand as a culminating moment in the story of freedom. On that date – without prior consultation of congressional or party leaders – Harry S. Truman became the first U.S. president ever to propose civil rights legislation. That Congress enacted only the most tangential aspects during the remainder of his presidency in no way diminishes the significance of the effort. A *Washington Post* illustration by renowned editorial cartoonist “Herblock” (Herbert Lawrence Block) captured the moment perfectly, showing Truman – in a shirt labeled “Civil Rights Message” – using the total weight of his body to ring the Liberty Bell.<sup>15</sup>

“If the President wanted to play politics,” Walter White wrote at the time, “he would have followed the course of his predecessors of evading or postponing action on this most explosive of American issues.” Nor was the president an eleventh-hour convert to the cause. White continued,

I can add a personal footnote on the history of the President’s position on lynching, disenfranchisement, discrimination in employment and segregation. Few men in public life have ever had so consistent a record as has been that of President Truman. As a member of the Senate, long before he or anyone else dreamed that he would sit in the White House he voted consistently for anti-lynching legislation and other measures which were included in his memorable address to Congress on February 2nd. He did this in a quiet, diffident way without any fanfare or publicity or boasting.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Reprinted in James N. Giglio and Greg G. Thielen, *Truman in Cartoon and Caricature* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Gardner, 83, 89.

Few presidents have ever been tasked with so many momentous issues during their tenure as was Harry Truman: overseeing final victory in the Second World War and reconverting to a peacetime economy; fighting a cold war in Europe and a hot one in Asia; responding to the communist takeover in China, detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviet Union, and the resultant rise of McCarthyism in the United States.

Yet it is entirely appropriate that the remainder of his life was bracketed by recognition of his accomplishments in a different struggle. The week before he left Washington to assume the only office he still desired – that of private citizen – Truman received a letter from Roy Wilkins, White's deputy at the NAACP. It read in part:

I want to thank you and convey to you my admiration for your efforts in the civil rights field, for your pronouncements and definitions of policy on racial and religious discrimination and segregation. . . .

[N]o Chief Executive in our history has spoken so plainly on the matter as yourself, or acted so forthrightly. We have had in the White House great men. . . . Some of these have recognized inequality as undesirable, as being at variance with the democratic principles of our country; but none has had the courage, either personal or political, to speak out or act in the Truman manner.

You spoke, Sir, when you knew that many powerful influences in your own party . . . would not heed you. You reiterated your beliefs and restated your demands for legislation when political expediency dictated a compromise course. This is sheer personal courage, so foreign to the usual conduct of political office – high or low – as to be unique in the annals of our government. . . .

In urging that America erase inequality between its citizens . . . , you were outlining a component of the complex mosaic for peace in the world: the hope, dignity and freedom that democracies offer mankind in contrast to the offerings of totalitarianism. Your sure realization of the truism that preachment without practice would be powerless as a force for peace is a measure of the quiet greatness you brought to your high office.

As you leave the White House you carry with you the gratitude and affectionate regard of millions of your Negro fellow citizens who in less than a decade of your leadership, inspiration and determination, have seen the old order change right before their eyes. . . .

. . . Mr. President, you have been responsible through the pronouncements from your high office, for a new climate of opinion in this broad area of civil rights. By stating a government policy, by relating

that policy to the cherished ideals of our nation, you have recalled for the American people that strength of spirit, that devotion to human welfare and human liberties, that made our country man's best hope for the things all men hold dear.<sup>17</sup>

Three months before his death on 26 December 1972, the ailing former president was honored in absentia at a ceremonial dinner given by the National Association of Human Rights Workers – an umbrella organization comprising many of the civil rights groups that had labored so hard in the 1960s to secure passage of his proposals from the 1940s. Engraved on the award Tom Clark accepted on his behalf that evening was the legend:

In tribute to President Harry S Truman  
who turned the nation's conscience to the task of making equality a reality.  
Nothing he did aroused more controversy or did him greater honor.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Alonzo L. Hamby, ed., *Harry S Truman and the Fair Deal* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1974), 178-80.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Gardner, 228.

APPENDIX: The Election of 1948<sup>1</sup>  
(popular vote winner in bold/italics)

| State | Electoral Vote | Total Vote | Margin of Victory | % Margin | Truman           | Dewey            | Thurmond       | Wallace |
|-------|----------------|------------|-------------------|----------|------------------|------------------|----------------|---------|
| AL    | 11             | 214,980    | 130,513           | 60.71%   | 0                | 40,930           | <b>171,443</b> | 1,522   |
| AZ    | 4              | 177,065    | 17,654            | 9.97%    | <b>95,251</b>    | 77,597           | 0              | 3,310   |
| AK    | 9              | 242,475    | 98,700            | 40.71%   | <b>149,659</b>   | 50,959           | 40,068         | 751     |
| CA    | 25             | 4,021,538  | 17,865            | 0.44%    | <b>1,913,134</b> | 1,895,269        | 1,228          | 190,381 |
| CO    | 6              | 515,237    | 27,574            | 5.35%    | <b>267,288</b>   | 239,714          | 0              | 6,115   |
| CT    | 8              | 883,518    | 14,457            | 1.64%    | 423,297          | <b>437,754</b>   | 0              | 13,713  |
| DE    | 3              | 139,073    | 1,775             | 1.28%    | 67,813           | <b>69,588</b>    | 0              | 1,050   |
| FL    | 8              | 577,643    | 87,708            | 15.18%   | <b>281,988</b>   | 194,280          | 89,755         | 11,620  |
| GA    | 12             | 418,764    | 169,591           | 40.50%   | <b>254,646</b>   | 76,691           | 85,055         | 1,636   |
| ID    | 4              | 214,816    | 5,856             | 2.73%    | <b>107,370</b>   | 101,514          | 0              | 4,972   |
| IL    | 28             | 3,984,046  | 33,612            | 0.84%    | <b>1,994,715</b> | 1,961,103        | 0              | 0       |
| IN    | 13             | 1,656,214  | 13,246            | 0.80%    | 807,833          | <b>821,079</b>   | 0              | 9,649   |
| IA    | 10             | 1,038,264  | 28,362            | 2.73%    | <b>522,380</b>   | 494,018          | 0              | 12,125  |
| KS    | 8              | 788,819    | 71,137            | 9.02%    | 351,902          | <b>423,039</b>   | 0              | 4,603   |
| KY    | 11             | 822,658    | 125,546           | 15.26%   | <b>466,756</b>   | 341,210          | 10,411         | 1,567   |
| LA    | 10             | 416,336    | 67,946            | 16.32%   | 136,344          | 72,657           | <b>204,290</b> | 3,035   |
| ME    | 5              | 264,787    | 38,318            | 14.47%   | 111,916          | <b>150,234</b>   | 0              | 1,884   |
| MD    | 8              | 596,735    | 8,293             | 1.39%    | 286,521          | <b>294,814</b>   | 2,476          | 9,983   |
| MA    | 16             | 2,107,146  | 242,418           | 11.50%   | <b>1,151,788</b> | 909,370          | 0              | 38,157  |
| MI    | 19             | 2,109,609  | 35,147            | 1.67%    | 1,003,448        | <b>1,038,595</b> | 0              | 46,515  |
| MN    | 11             | 1,212,226  | 209,349           | 17.27%   | <b>692,966</b>   | 483,617          | 0              | 27,866  |
| MS    | 9              | 192,190    | 148,154           | 77.09%   | 19,384           | 5,043            | <b>167,538</b> | 225     |
| MO    | 15             | 1,578,628  | 262,276           | 16.61%   | <b>917,315</b>   | 655,039          | 42             | 3,998   |
| MT    | 4              | 224,278    | 22,301            | 9.94%    | <b>119,071</b>   | 96,770           | 0              | 7,313   |
| NE    | 6              | 488,940    | 40,609            | 8.31%    | 224,165          | <b>264,774</b>   | 0              | 0       |
| NV    | 3              | 62,117     | 1,934             | 3.11%    | <b>31,291</b>    | 29,357           | 0              | 1,469   |
| N.H.  | 4              | 231,440    | 13,304            | 5.75%    | 107,995          | <b>121,299</b>   | 7              | 1,970   |
| N.J.  | 16             | 1,949,555  | 85,669            | 4.39%    | 895,455          | <b>981,124</b>   | 0              | 42,683  |
| N.M.  | 4              | 187,063    | 25,161            | 13.45%   | <b>105,464</b>   | 80,303           | 0              | 1,037   |
| N.Y.  | 47             | 6,177,337  | 60,959            | 0.99%    | 2,780,204        | <b>2,841,163</b> | 0              | 509,559 |
| N.C.  | 14             | 791,209    | 200,498           | 25.34%   | <b>459,070</b>   | 258,572          | 69,652         | 3,915   |
| N.D.  | 4              | 220,716    | 19,327            | 8.76%    | 95,812           | <b>115,139</b>   | 374            | 8,391   |
| OH    | 25             | 2,936,071  | 7,107             | 0.24%    | <b>1,452,791</b> | 1,445,684        | 0              | 37,596  |
| OK    | 10             | 721,599    | 183,965           | 25.49%   | <b>452,782</b>   | 268,817          | 0              | 0       |
| OR    | 6              | 524,080    | 17,757            | 3.39%    | 243,147          | <b>260,904</b>   | 0              | 14,978  |

<sup>1</sup> "1948 Presidential Election Data - National by State," Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, <<http://www.uselectionatlas.org/USPRESIDENT/>>.

| State | Electoral Vote | Total Vote | Margin of Victory | % Margin | Truman         | Dewey          | Thurmond       | Wallace   |
|-------|----------------|------------|-------------------|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------|
| R.I.  | 4              | 327,702    | 52,949            | 16.16%   | <b>188,736</b> | 135,787        | 0              | 2,619     |
| S.C.  | 8              | 142,571    | 68,184            | 47.82%   | 34,423         | 5,386          | <b>102,607</b> | 154       |
| S.D.  | 4              | 250,105    | 11,998            | 4.80%    | 117,653        | <b>129,651</b> | 0              | 2,801     |
| TN    | 12             | 550,283    | 67,488            | 12.26%   | <b>270,402</b> | 202,914        | 73,815         | 1,864     |
| TX    | 23             | 1,249,577  | 520,768           | 41.68%   | <b>824,235</b> | 303,467        | 113,920        | 3,918     |
| UT    | 4              | 276,305    | 24,749            | 8.96%    | <b>149,151</b> | 124,402        | 0              | 2,679     |
| VT    | 3              | 123,382    | 30,369            | 24.61%   | 45,557         | <b>75,926</b>  | 0              | 1,279     |
| VA    | 11             | 419,256    | 28,716            | 6.85%    | <b>200,786</b> | 172,070        | 43,393         | 2,047     |
| WA    | 8              | 905,059    | 89,850            | 9.93%    | <b>476,165</b> | 386,315        | 0              | 31,692    |
| W.V.  | 8              | 748,750    | 112,937           | 15.08%   | <b>429,188</b> | 316,251        | 0              | 3,311     |
| WI    | 12             | 1,276,800  | 56,351            | 4.41%    | <b>647,310</b> | 590,959        | 0              | 25,282    |
| WY    | 3              | 101,425    | 4,407             | 4.35%    | <b>52,354</b>  | 47,947         | 0              | 931       |
| Total | 531            | 48,793,535 | 2,188,055         |          | 24,179,347     | 21,991,292     | 1,176,074      | 1,157,326 |

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*Detroit New*  
*Federal Register*  
*Nation*  
*New York Times*  
*Richmond Afro-American*  
*Richmond Times-Dispatch*  
*Time*  
*U.S. News & World Report*  
*Washington Post*

### Online Resources

Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, <[www.uselectionatlas.org](http://www.uselectionatlas.org)>.

*Greenville (South Carolina) News* online, <[www.greenvilleonline.com](http://www.greenvilleonline.com)>.

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, <[www.trumanlibrary.org](http://www.trumanlibrary.org)>.

United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, <[www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov)>.

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