

An appreciation of a great Missourian by a youthful admirer

Unpublished

HARRY TRUMAN, 1884-1972: A POLITICIAN BEFORE A STATESMAN

Harry Truman has finally become a statesman. As he once explained, “A statesman is a dead politician.” Eulogists will bury the man in statesman’s robes, according to the principle of de mortuis non nisi bunkum. (About the dead say nothing except bunk). This does not do justice to an old politician.

Politics was about important issues in Harry Truman’s family, for his parents and grandparents had lived through the troubled times of raids as Southern sympathizers in a border state during the American Civil War. Politics was about party. He was a Democrat because his family, as Southerners, were against the Republican carpetbaggers. Politics was also about jobs. There were jobs for poor people, especially at election time, and jobs for successful candidates. Truman was elected a judge in Kansas City in 1922 not because of his learning in the law (he had none), but because he needed something to do after his shortlived haberdashery business had failed.

Kansas City politicians took people as they found them. If citizens wished to drink or gamble when the law said this was illegal, ways would be found to get around the law. If they wished to exchange votes and money for favours at City Hall, a deal was quickly done. If blacks wished to dance, drink and gamble in their own unlicensed clubs with local musicians like Count Basie, Lester Young and Charley Parker playing in the background, they could do so while white people enjoyed themselves in lilywhite surroundings, listening to the respectable music of Guy Lombardo and Lawrence Welk.

Kansas City politicians also took money wherever they could find it. The Federal Courts finally sent the leader of the machine, Boss Tom Pendergast, to gaol on the same charge used against Al Capone: income tax evasion. Harry Truman was not implicated in the scandals, for by this time he had gone to Washington to do the party’s will as a United States Senator. The Senate was congenial to him, for it was filled with small-town Democrats, wise in the ways of courthouse politics.

The death of Franklin D. Roosevelt catapulted Truman from his obscure job as presiding officer of the Senate to a world stage. He picked himself up after the shock of landing in the White House, and continued as before. In domestic politics Truman endorsed welfare measures such as health insurance that failed to win Congressional approval only because they were two decades ahead of their time. Racial segregation was abolished in the armed forces not because Truman was an integrationist, but because he was a prudent politician willing to move with the times, not least when it meant pleasing loyal black Democrats.

The obituaries in the English press will undoubtedly stress Truman's role in making America as much a source of aid for the peacetime reconstruction of Europe as it was for defeating the Axis. He also succeeded in making America the leader of a worldwide military alliance to contain Communist nations.

Throughout his nearly eight years in the White House, Harry Truman remained a politician. He named as Chief Justice of the United States a crony, Fred Vinson, a former Kentucky police judge, Friends from Missouri days were given presidential appointments. When they were indicted for graft, he attacked those who attacked them. When people criticized his daughter's singing, he did what any ordinary person would do: he criticized the critics. His language was not richly ornamented with quotations from Burke and Yeats. Instead, in the days when crap was an unprintable four letter word, his language reeked with expletives derived from the language of Missouri muleskinners.

Notwithstanding his plain origins, Harry Truman's career might have followed a different route to the White House. He could have gone from family farm to the State University and thence to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. On returning home, he could have become a respectable corporation lawyer, and entered the Senate as a 'clean government' candidate. Once there he might have surrounded himself with intellectuals and the elite of the press corps, building up a reputation for style and intelligence in circles where smart people met.

Would the United States have been better governed from 1945 to 1953 if its President had been raised to be a statesman rather than a politician? Harry Truman's answer will almost certainly be repeated by historians, albeit in more prolix and convoluted terms than a straightforward Missouri phrase such as "Hell, no".