The Truman White House

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INTRODUCTION

The cover of Stephen Hess's Organizing the Presidency\(^1\) shows the eagle and shield of the presidential seal neatly broken up into eight segments that are distributed on a schematic organization chart. The unidentified designer thus sought to symbolize the issue to which Hess addressed himself: "Has the growth of government outstripped a highly personalized presidency that has to rely on the involvement of the Chief Executive and his staff surrogates?\(^2\)" With a somewhat different emphasis the question is, How can the presidency be organized to serve not only the needs of the president but also the postulates of a free and open society?

The presidency has always been a subject of popular attention. There is no other office quite like it anywhere in the world; and because the United States is a world power, the manner in which the office is discharged has assumed critical importance not only for the people of this country, but for the world at large. The very uniqueness of the office, however, makes it difficult to generalize about its characteristics and requirements. It has been pointed out that academics writing about the presidency in the late 1950s and early 1960s (including the present writer)\(^3\) based their views on the presidential styles of Roosevelt or Truman, while the generally critical interpretations of the 1970s were colored by "the acid of hatred for the Vietnam War."\(^4\) It is indeed difficult to look back thirty or forty years and not be mindful of events of the

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 10.
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more recent past. Comparisons and contrasts suggest themselves at every turn. Thus Stephen Hess, in his rather brief chapter on the Truman administration, asserts that the modern presidential organization “started to come into sharper focus under Truman,” obviously a retrospective observation. The contributors to this volume were—understandably—more inclined to stress the distance between the Truman administration and more recent presidencies. But whatever their intentions, allusions to more recent practices occur more than once in their discussions.

Perhaps the most vexing aspect of the American presidency is its unavoidable blending of continuity and discontinuity. It is easy to say that the office is what each incumbent makes it. This is, of course, the underlying assumption of James David Barber’s widely acclaimed study of The Presidential Character. But no president can erase the record of his predecessors. Not only do modern budget procedures and long-term funding obligations circumscribe and inhibit his initiatives, but the public also develops certain expectations about presidential behavior which cannot easily be cast aside.

Presidents normally arrive at the White House on a wave of popular approval, buoyed by the promise that the new administration will do things differently—and better—than its predecessor. A long campaign’s oratory has projected a collage of initiatives and innovations, not the least of which is the greatly improved management of the presidential office itself. Thus, when the outgoing and the incoming teams meet to facilitate the transition—a practice started by President Truman in 1952 but surely by this time one of the “continuities” of office which the public takes for granted—there is an inevitable gap in perceptions. Those about to leave stress the merits of their ways of doing things; the new arrivals can hardly wait to show that there are better ways. This was true even in the first organized transition as the comments of the contributors to this volume indicate.

Mr. Truman’s personal interest in an orderly transition is fully attested to by his associates. It is attributed, at least by some, to his awareness of the difficulties he had encountered when, almost totally

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5 Organizing the Presidency, p. 57.
7 An example, if perhaps only of a symbolic nature, is President Carter’s decision at the beginning of his term to do away with the traditional playing of “Hail to the Chief.” Less than eighteen months later the practice was resumed, ostensibly because the public expected it.
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ignored by his predecessor, he found himself suddenly faced with the awesome responsibilities of the presidency. But it is probably also true that President Truman desired an orderly transition because orderliness was an important part of his personal make-up. 10

Orderly processes were clearly a keynote of his managerial style. His staff meetings—which feature prominently throughout the discussions reported in this volume—were not only an effective device for planning and communicating; their regularity imposed order on the working methods of the entire White House staff.

Yet the manner in which President Truman conducted the staff meetings served still another purpose: it reinforced the personal relations between “the boss” and his staff. As all participants report, the atmosphere at this daily session was open and informal. “Even the lowest man on the totem pole” was free to speak up—and evidently did.

The picture that emerges in these pages of life and work in Mr. Truman’s White House is clearly one of informality, enthusiasm, and camaraderie. Contemporary newspaper reports tended to stress conflicts and mishaps. This difference in perspective may be a case of those on the inside versus those on the outside. Another explanation may be the inherent tension between the White House and the press corps which Richard Neustadt and Roger Tubby refer to in this volume. Still another may be the general inclination of journalists to assume that a normal state of affairs simply is not newsworthy.

On the other hand, it would be rather startling if the veterans of White House, cabinet, and Executive Office service who gathered to talk about their experiences some twenty-five or thirty years ago would have had other than favorable recollections. The warmth of their memories owes just as much to the excitement of sharing in the exclusivity of White House operations as it does to the relationship they enjoyed with Mr. Truman. Their discussions redound with reflections on the family-like atmosphere that pervaded the staff and the crucial role the president played in setting the tone.

Much has been written about President Truman’s loyalty to those who worked for him. 11 This, too, was part of his style: he gave his trust and took it for granted that the support and loyalty would be returned. Anyone following the discussions in this volume will be forced to conclude that the bonds so forged withstood the test of time.

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Another element in President Truman's management of the presidential office was, from all the evidence in this volume and elsewhere, that the president himself was a prodigious worker. His familiarity with, and concern for, budgetary procedures are particularly noted—and noteworthy. Averell Harriman's story of being embarrassed by Mr. Truman's detailed knowledge of a report of which he, Harriman, had only read a summary has been repeated in countless variations by others. Part of the effectiveness of the staff meeting hinged, of course, on the fact that the president, unfailingly, had done his homework.

There is, however, nothing to suggest that the pattern that evolved in the Truman White House was the result of design or premeditation. Mr. Truman himself was not given to the pursuit of abstractions and tended to distrust people with rigid ideological minds. He was at all times a politician by instinct and craftsmanship, and many of those he asked to work for him had similar inclinations. They gave little thought to administrative theories and organizational charts. Task assignments in the White House were relatively fluid; there were no rigid job descriptions—witness the discussion in this volume over the question of whether or not the Truman White House had a chief of staff.

David Fellman has observed that "successful Presidents must have a sense of personal security and experience in politics; it is not a job for amateurs." Harry Truman was, without doubt, a professional, and he chose professionals to work for him. As Neustadt points out in his essay (and he and others in discussion), the Truman White House staff included a high percentage of people who had earned their spurs in a variety of jobs throughout the federal government. They had administrative experience and political savvy. Like the president, they were oriented toward practice rather than theory.

A number of books on the Truman presidency have highlighted a conflict between conservatives and liberals within the president's entourage, sometimes describing it as a contest for the president's mind. Truman himself said that it was his deliberate choice to surround himself with Johnson, Managing the White House, pp. 50–51; Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), p. 73.


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with associates of differing, even conflicting, views. His associates, responding to a pointed question about this reported cleavage, readily grant that it existed; those usually identified with the liberal group (Charles Murphy, for instance) assert that the president's political instincts were always with them; the conservatives (e.g., John Snyder) see the president as fundamentally in accord with their views. No better support can be found for the president's explanation than these differing perspectives.

What can be learned from the way Truman operated the presidency? The overriding theme of the following essays and discussions is that the style of the White House is—inescapably—the president's style. The White House between 1945 and 1953 was orderly because Harry Truman was an orderly person. It was profoundly human because that was Mr. Truman's way. It was a successful operation because Mr. Truman was a professional and surrounded himself with staff members who, in their different ways, were also professionals. Historical perspective is often dangerously clouded by hindsight; it is easy to say today that this or that should have been done differently. To those who wrote and spoke for this volume, it is clear that the nation was well served by the way Harry Truman managed his affairs in the White House.

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