The Truman White House
Heller, Francis H.

Published by University Press of Kansas

Heller, Francis H.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84002
Mr. Truman set out to do the best job he could; I suspect that his ambition was to be a good president rather than a great president. I believe his experience demonstrates that if one does a good enough job of being a good president, he becomes, in fact, a great president. I suspect it is also true that one who strives too hard and too consciously for greatness might end up being not even a good president.

Mr. Truman’s approach to the presidency involved many elements that one might usefully bring to any job. By his very example, he was a great teacher. Many of the lessons he taught are transferable not only to other occupants of the Oval Office, but to the whole spectrum of human affairs.

I wish to speak first of President Truman’s gift for simplification. Not only could he simplify complex matters, he could also keep simple matters simple. Both are important. I mention this gift for simplification first not because it is necessarily of first importance, but because of its pertinence to my purpose here. I wish to deal as clearly—and, therefore, as simply—as I can—with some rather complex matters, as well as with some other critical matters so simple they are frequently overlooked in discussing the awesome office of the presidency. Unfortunately, my talent for simplification is not nearly as great as President Truman’s.

Some forty-odd years ago—just after the repeal of Prohibition—a witness for the California wine industry was appearing before the Senate Finance Committee in support of an amendment to liberalize the labeling of wine. He complained about the federal Alcohol Administration’s restrictive interpretation of the existing law, saying, “They have reduced the amplitude of the purview thereof to an inconsequential latitude.” Well, if President Truman had been making the same point, he certainly would not have said it that way, and everyone would have understood what he meant.
He said that his idea of a speech was “a direct statement of the facts without trimmings and without oratory.”

To express one’s self in language that is simple and also precise requires, first of all, precise thinking. This is excellent mental discipline; and if it is practiced hard enough over the years, it can get to be a way of life. I believe this was the case for President Truman. I do not know the extent to which it is a natural talent or an acquired skill, but I do believe he felt he had mastered an idea only when he could express it in simple terms. And I must say that on more than one occasion when we were wrestling with an idea together, I didn’t understand it either until he put it in simple terms.

When speaking of the American presidency, it may be asking too much to say “keep it simple,” but serious efforts in that direction are likely to produce good results.

I will not dwell at length on how hard Mr. Truman worked at his job as president; this is not an unusual trait among American presidents. I will simply record that for seven years and nine months he spent virtually every waking moment working at being president.

It is hard to convey the intensity that this continuous effort requires. The most nearly comparable effort which occurs to me, and one that is widely shared, is “cramming” for and taking examinations. If you think of stretching those few days of intensive study into a continuous period of almost eight years, you begin to get the idea. Fortunately, the human mind and body are sufficiently adaptable to sustain this kind of continuous effort provided one has the will.

Mr. Truman was an orderly president. He was not a fanatic about this kind of thing, but he was neat in his dress, neat in his personal habits, and he had a regular daily schedule which he followed closely unless there was some particular reason for departing from it. And when he did rearrange his schedule, it was usually to accommodate others.

Some may think that it is relatively unimportant for the president to follow a regular schedule, but they are wrong. The president must accomplish an enormous amount of work and he must have people to help him. To have an opportunity to do their part, they need to be able to plan their own schedules and to keep them. Thus, it makes a great deal of difference in Washington if the president has his lunch regularly at the normal luncheon hour.

President Truman understood very well the importance of regulating his own schedule to fit the needs of his staff for timely guidance and directions. For example, “speech conferences” with the staff were set more often at times of my suggestion than of his. If his schedule was so tight that they could not be fitted in during the day, he would come back
The White House Staff: Later Period

to the Cabinet Room in the evening—and he would come cheerfully. It is a unique experience to be telling the president of the United States he has come back to the office for a meeting after dinner—and, of course, I never put it in just that way.

Speaking of the staff, when I think of President Truman I often think of an advertisement that was current some years ago: "Tough but, oh, so gentle." In many ways, President Truman really was as tough as a boot, but with his personal staff he was extremely gentle. In fact, he was more lenient at times than he should have been, and that got him into trouble more than once. On the other hand, the staff returned his kindness with an extraordinary amount of hard work, voluntary overtime, and wholehearted, single-minded devotion.

The ways in which he showed consideration for his staff were countless, and Mrs. Truman joined him in this. I am sure that on her part, this was a natural manifestation of the nobility and generosity of her nature. I am sure, too, that this was the real motivating factor for him. But I also suspect he was quite conscious of the dividends this approach brought him in terms of extra effort from his staff.

There are different kinds of inspirational leadership. This particular kind might be the goal for almost anyone in a position of leadership. I commend Mr. Truman's style to executives everywhere as a possible means of getting more work, better work, and happier work from their employees. But remember that one prerequisite for its success is that the man at the top has to work harder than anyone else.

From start to finish, Mr. Truman regarded the office of president of the United States with enormous respect and his tenure there as a trust of the highest order. He was not sanctimonious; at the same time, however, he was completely incapable of doing anything as president that he thought was wrong. The problems of the presidency are so complicated and unprecedented that—for all of Mr. Truman's wisdom and talent for simplification—it was frequently difficult to tell what action was right and what was wrong in a particular situation; but what he thought was right was what he did.

He used to say to me, "Murph, I can't do that. It wouldn't be right." He didn't say, "I won't"; he said, "I can't." That was the only reason he gave and the only reason he needed. If I pressed him about some of these things, as I did on occasion, he would get more formal and call me "Murphy."

Much has been said about President Truman's courage, but I do not know how much credit he is entitled to on this score. I have frequently heard that the highest form of courage is to be brave even when you are afraid. As far as I was able to tell, however, President Truman was never
afraid of anything. So that leaves me with the philosophical question of how courageous a man can be if fear is absent from his make-up.

President Truman never stopped studying, never stopped learning. As long as he was in the White House, he made a conscious and deliberate effort to learn how to be a better president. He was almost sixty-one years old when he came to the presidency, almost sixty-nine when he left it. But few men at any age have such an intensive, productive, and successful learning experience.

He learned by choice, not just as a by-product of experience. Although he was by far the wisest and most knowledgeable man among the group that worked with and for him, he always kept trying to learn something from the rest of us. He made it extremely easy for his staff to tell him what they really thought—whether it was yes, no, or maybe. Harry Truman was not surrounded by yes-men. We all knew who was boss, and we accepted his decisions and followed his orders. But we were encouraged to be both honest and candid in expressing our views.

I have heard, with some amusement, discussions of an alleged battle between liberals and conservatives for President Truman's mind. I would note first that he had a mind of his own and made it up for himself. And on most of the issues that usually distinguish liberals from conservatives in our political idiom, he was a liberal before he came to the White House and remained one all the time he was there. His liberalism was based on practical knowledge from earlier experiences and on his study of history; they were views he held with deep conviction.

He was not what you would call a professing liberal. Indeed, he seemed to have some distaste for persons who flaunted their liberalism. But on the issues, there was never any real doubt in my mind about where he stood and was going to continue to stand. Within his official family he always had a few conservatives whose views on social and economic issues differed sharply from his own. I asked him why he did this. His answer essentially paraphrased his words in *Mr. President*:

> I like to have people understand each other, and that is why I have every shade of public opinion in my Cabinet. . . .

> I have got a cross section of the thought and economics of the whole population of the United States in the Cabinet, from left to right. And this makes for valuable discussions, and the only way you can get ideas. And I let everybody have his say before I come to a conclusion and decide on a final course of action.

I have heard it said that President Truman was not aware of the battle for his mind that was going on around him. It would be closer to the truth, I think, to say that he was drawing up the battle plans for both sides.
President Truman did not take the liberal position on every economic question. For example, he had an unshakeable belief in the virtues of a balanced budget. He carried this belief with him when he left the White House. In 1963, President Kennedy recommended a tax cut at a time when he did not expect it to result in a balanced budget. President Truman, in New York City at the time, was asked about this on his morning walk by a newspaperman; the former president replied that he did not think taxes should be cut until the budget was balanced. Understandably, the comment bothered President Kennedy, who sent me to talk to President Truman about it. I did so. Finally President Truman said that although he was extremely sorry to have caused any trouble for President Kennedy, he could not retract what he had said because that was what he believed. But he said he would try to keep quiet on the subject thereafter. I reported this to President Kennedy, and so far as I know, that ended the matter.

I spoke earlier about President Truman's orderliness. This was manifest also in his continuing and substantial moves to improve the organization of the presidential office—the institutional aids to the presidency. The need for this was brought home to him very sharply by his own sudden succession to the presidency and the lack of preparation for that transition. I believe that Mr. Truman had seen President Roosevelt privately only three times, each very briefly, since his inauguration as vice-president and that no provision had been made to keep him informed of matters in the executive branch. This was far less troublesome in the domestic field than in defense and foreign affairs because Mr. Truman's experience in the Senate had given him an intimate knowledge of domestic issues and problems.

In defense matters and in foreign affairs, the new president felt his lack of current information very keenly. He did several things about this. First, he resolved to try to see that those who might succeed to the presidency thereafter would be fully and currently briefed on defense and foreign affairs. He arranged such briefings for the man in line to succeed him in the event of death or disability; and during the 1948 and 1952 campaigns, he also arranged such briefings for the Republican candidates. This was Mr. Truman's idea. Next, when he first came to the White House, he set about studying day and night until he had caught up on the information that was available. And soon he set about improving the machinery for gathering and evaluating information.

He put it this way in *Mr. President*:

One of the basic things I did was to set up a Central Intelligence Agency. Admirals Leahy and Souers, and the State, Defense, Treasury and Commerce Departments all helped me to set it up...
Strange as it may seem, the President up to that time was not completely informed as to what was taking place in the world. Messages that came to the different departments of the executive branch often were not relayed to him because some official did not think it was necessary to inform the President. The President did not see many useful cables and telegrams that came from different American representatives abroad. . . .

I decided to put an end to this state of affairs. . . .

The Central Intelligence Agency now co-ordinates all the information that is available to the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the individual offices of the Army, Navy and Air Force, the Department of Commerce, and the Treasury. In this way I am able to get a concentrated survey of everything that takes place. If I need any elaboration I ask for it. I get a report from the Central Intelligence Agency every morning. In cases of emergency I get special reports. I get special reports on the situation in Korea throughout the day. I get a special report every day from the Secretary of State covering the entire diplomatic field. And once a week the director of the Central Intelligence Agency comes to see me and makes a personal report.

Next we should note the creation of the National Security Council as a major presidential staff agency to provide continuing analysis and policy advice on defense, foreign policy, and security matters. The NSC became an extremely valuable aid to the president.

As I look back to consider who was President Truman's principal White House staff man for defense and foreign policy, I conclude that he himself was. It also occurs to me, somewhat ruefully, that perhaps this is why his presidency is so much more highly regarded in terms of foreign policy than in some other respects.

Intelligence reports were brought in each morning by the staff of the National Security Council and the president's naval aide, who spent about thirty minutes going over them with the president. Once each week, the director of the CIA joined these meetings for a more extensive review. No other staff members were present.

The president met periodically with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Usually, no one else attended these meetings.

He met frequently with the secretaries of state and defense, both together and separately. It was usually in these meetings that policy questions in the fields of defense and foreign policy were raised and settled. These cabinet officers usually got "the word" firsthand from the president himself.

No part of the civilian White House staff had a major and continuing responsibility for staff work in the defense and foreign policy fields such as apparently exists today. The National Security Council and its staff perhaps performed much of this function. Otherwise, the White House staff was generally assigned to work on matters in these fields on
The White House Staff: Later Period

an ad hoc basis. For example, one of my early assignments in 1947 was to work with Gen. Lauris Norstad and Adm. Forrest Sherman in preparing the "unification" bill which created the Department of Defense [initially, the National Military Establishment], the National Security Council, and the National Security Resources Board. Later that same year, I was assigned to work on drawing up the program of interim aid for Europe that preceded the Marshall Plan.

The special counsel to the president received more assignments in the foreign policy and security fields than other members of the White House staff because of his regular responsibility for the staff work on presidential speeches and messages to Congress. The president, of course, made speeches and sent messages on most of his major policies and actions. It follows that those who worked on the speeches and messages got a crack at almost everything. Frequently, the work went on at two levels—president to cabinet members, White House staff to departmental staff. This system worked pretty well, but sometimes with amusing side effects.

I remember once we had labored long, through many drafts and many conferences, on an important message to Congress and finally met for the final "freezing session" with the president and cabinet members. General Marshall, who must have been secretary of state at the time and who had not participated in the earlier drafting sessions at the White House, pulled a document from his pocket and from time to time during the discussion would ask about including in the message some language he would read from this document. After several of these interventions, Clark Clifford, who was then special counsel, said, "General, may I ask, what is that document from which you are reading?" General Marshall replied, with some emphasis, "It's a copy of the draft I sent to you as my recommendation as to what the message should say." I'm afraid he thought his views had not been given "due process."

When I became special counsel, I got into the foreign policy and defense problems more deeply than before—largely by the speech-message route. In fact, my initiation in 1950 was quite vigorous, with NSC-68 and Korea. This was a strenuous period that involved a basic redirection of our defense posture. A number of messages were sent to Congress reporting on the situation in Korea and asking for additional legislation and appropriations. Toward the end of the year, the president sent a special message requesting massive new appropriations for defense. The need was urgent as well as great. At the staff level, we were struggling mightily; our efforts reflected the decisions we had been handed, but there were some critical gaps in these decisions. One was the exact amount of money to be requested. We could not get an esti-
Charles S. Murphy

mate from the Department of Defense, and time was running out.

I was thoroughly persuaded by then that whatever we asked for would not be enough. So I filled in the blank space in the draft with the highest number I had heard anyone mention and sent it to General Marshall for clearance. His response was to send a message to the president saying that he would like to know who was secretary of defense—Was it he or was it someone on the White House staff? But I got my number!

In the domestic field, President Truman delegated or assigned a great many responsibilities to members of his White House staff on a continuing basis. While it is true that a line cannot be drawn separating the assignments of all his staff members between domestic and foreign affairs (the press secretary, for example, obviously dealt with both), I do tend to think of the organization of the staff predominantly in terms of domestic affairs.

The Truman staff operated as staff rather than as line officers. Cabinet members and agency heads had direct access to the president as a matter of right and were not subject to orders from the White House staff. The president insisted on dealing personally with the director of

President Truman looks on as Charles S. Murphy is sworn in as special counsel by Tom C. Clark, associate justice of the Supreme Court, February 1, 1950.

125
The White House Staff: Later Period

the Bureau of the Budget and the Council of Economic Advisers and other Executive Office unit heads, although these personal dealings were supplemented by much joint work at the staff level.

I believe that President Truman had his staff organized just about right in terms of achieving a balance between definite, continuing responsibilities and the flexibility to meet special problems, having enough institutionalization but not too much, distributing responsibility among staff members so that they could operate effectively but were not unduly tempted to build their own empires, and keeping the number of staff members who reported directly to him both manageable and diverse. Incidentally, President Truman was quite an ego deflator in a gentle way, and a couple of his staff were even more effective, in a way that was not gentle at all.

During the Truman administration there were also major changes in the parts of the president's staff that are within the Executive Office but outside the White House office. Notably, these include the establishment of the Council of Economic Advisers in 1946 and the National Security Council and the National Security Resources Board in 1947. The NSRB later was superseded by the Office of Defense Mobilization to meet the exigencies of the Korean War.

Overall, I believe that President Truman did so much to strengthen the institutional aids to the presidency that the changes can properly be regarded as a "quiet revolution" of major proportions. Most of the reforms he instituted appear to have endured, though there have been subsequent changes, of course. I am not prepared to say whether all these changes are improvements or not; I believe that some of them are.

Much has been said—and rightly so—about President Truman's great decisions. Nothing can account for the correctness of so many momentous decisions except his own ultimate wisdom and judgment. Nevertheless, he did have a technique for mobilizing brains, as well as facts, to help him reach decisions and to help him plan for the future—a talent worthy of more attention than it has received. I can do little more here than list some examples, but I hope this can be the subject of more extensive study.

Before President Truman decided to drop the atomic bomb, he appointed a very distinguished civilian committee to study and advise him on the moral and political issues as well as the military ones.

The critical decision in favor of civilian control of nuclear energy was reached with the advice of a distinguished committee that studied the questions in great depth.

The ultimate commitment to the Marshall Plan was preceded by
Charles S. Murphy

studies of three special committees as well as very extensive study within various government departments and agencies.

The decision to resist aggression in Korea was reached over the course of two days and nights of intensive discussions with the government's top civilian and military leaders, drawing upon all the knowledge, skills, and judgment they possessed.

The order to relieve General MacArthur of his command was issued only after the president had discussed the matter for days with the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his special assistant for foreign affairs and had received their unanimous advice that the action was necessary.

Another group of examples of President Truman's technique of organizing brains is represented by the commissions he appointed to study and make recommendations on important national problems and policies. These commissions included:

1. National Commission on Higher Education
2. Advisory Commission on Universal Training
3. President's Committee on Civil Rights
4. President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Forces
5. Commission on Migratory Labor
6. Advisory Committee on Management
7. President's Scientific Research Board
8. International Development Advisory Board
9. President's Communications Policy Board
10. President's Airport Commission
11. President's Commission on Immigration and Naturalization
12. President's Materials Policy Commission
13. Water Resources Policy Commission
14. President's Commission on Health Needs of the Nation

Although this list is not complete, it is impressive. I have long felt that the range of President Truman's studies and policy statements covered every topic of significance to the American government at least once. All of us could profit from a review of the reports of the study committees and commissions he appointed. His mobilization of this kind of talent is clearly the work of a man who had his eyes on the future as well as the present.