The Truman White House

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DISCUSSION

LOUIS W. KOENIG (chair): To begin, I would like to ask those present who were members of President Truman’s cabinet to describe what they saw as President Truman’s concept of the cabinet member. I have read some comment to the effect that during the Truman years there was something of a restoration of the departments, compared to the Roosevelt period. Governor Harriman, you, of course, had experience in both administrations. Would you care to comment on whether that is a valid description, and if so what the justification for it might be.

W. AVERELL HARRIMAN: Well, I think it was a matter of the personalities involved. Some members of the Roosevelt cabinet played a very great role, others did not. President Roosevelt wanted Mr. [Cordell] Hull for his secretary of state because of his great prestige, but he chose to do business through the undersecretary, Sumner Welles, because he did not want to get into arguments over the things he wanted done. Mr. Hull complained to me on a number of occasions that things were done without his full approval.

I knew something of the role of the Department of Commerce during the Roosevelt era because I was chairman of the Business Advisory Council for three years. Mr. [Daniel C.] Roper, who was F.D.R.’s first secretary of commerce, was not a particularly aggressive individual, but then came Harry Hopkins and the department became quite assertive. Of course, we know that Hopkins was not the only Roosevelt cabinet member who made his presence known. Harold Ickes and Henry Morgenthau certainly played important roles. I won’t go down the full roster, but I think we would all agree that Henry Wallace played an extremely important role.

Now, during the war period, there was a general reduction in the role of the cabinet—and this may be the basis for the statement referred to by Professor Koenig. I was in Britain for two and a half years during
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the war. There the war cabinet directed the war effort. The members of the chiefs of staff were advisers to the war cabinet, and they would never think of reporting to the Parliament. But in this country, the president is commander in chief of the armed forces, and the chiefs of staff reported directly to Mr. Roosevelt; even the secretaries of war and of the navy services were sometimes left out. So it was not surprising that some of the other cabinet members were left out as well, especially when you remember how many war agencies had been set up. Certainly, the members of the cabinet did not play the role during the war that they had before. Men like Mr. Stimson and Mr. Knox and then Mr. Forrestal were to some extent, set aside. So was the State Department, because so many of the decisions made during the war were made by Mr. Roosevelt himself, without full consultation with Mr. Hull or the State Department.

KÖNIG: While you are speaking of the State Department, would you discuss President Truman’s relations with the secretary of state?

HARRIMAN: Mr. Truman had four secretaries of state. The first one was Mr. Stettinius, who did remarkably well. He has not been given full justice, because his tenure of office was rather brief and because he came from business and was not well known in the diplomatic field. As soon as he had finished the United Nations Conference in San Francisco, he was supplanted, and Mr. Truman appointed Jimmy Byrnes. I always thought that there were two reasons for that appointment: one was the fact that the successor to the presidency was the secretary of state, and Mr. Truman did not think it appropriate to leave Mr. Stettinius in that position. Mr. Byrnes was the logical man as successor; and then he had gone to Yalta—but I think Mr. Truman was under the impression that Mr. Byrnes had had more experience in international affairs than was really the case.

The relationship did not work entirely satisfactorily. I really believe that Mr. Byrnes always thought that he should have been president, and he assumed authority which President Truman did not give him.

There was the incident after the first meeting of the foreign ministers in Moscow (where I was ambassador at the time). I’m sure you all remember the rumors of what happened. Byrnes announced on his way home that he was going to make a report to the nation on radio. When Mr. Truman heard that, he sent word to Byrnes that he had better report to the boss before he reported to the nation.

There has been a difference of opinion as to exactly what occurred in that discussion on the Potomac, but if one is to believe the Truman version, Mr. Truman told Mr. Byrnes in no uncertain terms that he was president and the secretary of state got his orders from him. Mr. Byrnes
has a different version. Which version is true I do not know, but, knowing Mr. Truman, I would accept his as being the more accurate. Byrnes did stay on for a period of time until General Marshall came back from China and was appointed secretary of state.

That was a very happy relationship. President Truman had great respect for General Marshall. He respected him as a soldier; he respected him as a man of unquestionable character; and he respected his judgment.

Dean Acheson was very active in the early days. He had been undersecretary under Byrnes and under Marshall up to June 1947, when he left the government for about eighteen months. Mr. Truman called him back when General Marshall asked to be retired. The Truman-Acheson relationship was very close and very happy. Mr. Truman had great respect for Mr. Acheson's judgment, and Mr. Acheson had great respect for the president. And that closeness lasted until the end of Mr. Truman's tenure and well beyond.

It was a very different relationship than had existed between Mr. Hull and Roosevelt. Nothing was done in the international field that was not discussed fully with the secretaries of state during the Truman administration.

When I became secretary of commerce in October of 1946, a year and a half after Mr. Truman had become president, he had had plenty of time and opportunity to deal with personnel questions—but he allowed me to make all of my appointments without any question. I made three principal appointments; one was Bill Foster, who is a Republican, as my deputy. I thought it would be good for Republican businessmen to feel that they had someone in the department they could talk to who was not affiliated with the New Deal. Then I selected David Bruce as assistant secretary for foreign and domestic commerce and Adrian Fisher as my legal adviser. Mr. Truman never questioned me about them. I said I would like to appoint them and he said, "Fine." He never asked what their positions had been in regard to supporting him. He gave me a completely free hand.

Koenig: As far as the choice of your principal associates went, Secretary Snyder, did you have a similar freedom? And then a second question. There was during your administration a very important reorganization of the Bureau of Internal Revenue; what was the president's relationship, and also that of the White House in general, to the reorganization?

John W. Snyder: I quite agree with Governor Harriman about the freedom of choice. I do not recall that Mr. Truman ever declined to
back me on an appointment that I made. I did not come into the Truman administration willingly. I had planned to be with the First National Bank of St. Louis—I was about to become its president. When Mr. Roosevelt died, Mr. Truman sent for me; and when I came in the room the morning after Mr. Roosevelt’s death, he said, “How soon can you get down here with me?”

I said, “Mr. President, I can do you more good out there with the bank than I can here.”

But he said, “I want you here with me.”

About that time Jimmy Byrnes came in and Mr. Truman told him: “Jimmy, John’s backing out of our plan.”

Byrnes said, “Don’t pay any attention to him. Remember who you are: order him to do it.”

It was, of course, a great privilege to have had the opportunity to serve the entire period of Mr. Truman’s administration with him in the cabinet. I was his first major appointment, to the Federal Loan Administration job which was open at the time. I quickly moved on to the OWMR [Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion] where there was a myriad of difficult decisions to make—transferring from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy—and I will say that the president stood foursquare on important decisions that had to be made. Governor Harriman remarked about how many agencies had been set up to run the war and that the cabinet members had lost some of their functions. Well, our job at OWMR was to put those functions back where they belonged and to discontinue a great number of the agencies that had been set up largely for the war. Judge Sam Rosenman and I were appointed as a committee by the president to push this program along.

We tried to do it politely, inviting agency heads in and telling them that they had finished a fine job and that now we were going to close it up. Before we could get back to our desks, however, there would be a call from a congressman or a senator saying that we couldn’t do that. So we went over to see the president and said, “We need your authority.”

He said, “You have it. Don’t worry me with the details, go ahead.” So we began to close up the wartime agencies as their work ran out. The point is that President Truman would back you if you had an important matter that had to be done, and he had confidence in your capacity to carry it out.

As to the Bureau of Internal Revenue, that was something that was rather evident from the day I first went into the Treasury. We had had a war, we had had a great manpower demand for the armed services, and we had had a great demand for capable accountants in the huge
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plants that were built. As a result the Treasury, and most of the government, had suffered a slacking off in its operations.

I started from the second month to try to organize a plan to bring the internal revenue service up to par because the income from taxes had grown enormously, and we needed more people to process the tax returns. O. Max Gardner was undersecretary at the time, and I gave him the job of starting to see what could be done with the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Before he left to go to the Court of St. James's, he gave me a memo that said, in substance, that we had to reorganize completely.

Lee Wiggins then came in as undersecretary and I gave him the same assignment. Wiggins had been head of the American Bankers Association and was a banker of stature. He went to work on it, and within a year or so came back with a report. We found that we had to completely change the internal revenue set-up. All the appointments, from the commissioner on down through all the local men in charge, were political, and some of these people had failed to live up to their responsibilities. But there always was a man in Congress who would back them because the appointment had been part of his patronage. We were going to stop that.

I went to see Mr. Truman and outlined a plan for a complete reorganization of the Internal Revenue Bureau. It was a hard decision for him to make. Internal Revenue had been set up and run in the existing, political fashion since its beginning. It was a political operation because of the opportunity for congressmen and senators to get their friends into well-paying jobs. But we rewrote the act entirely, and it took us some months to get it through Congress. Fortunately, before the Truman administration went out of office, we had the reorganization in full operation.

KOENIG: Justice Clark, I have a two-part question for you. One has to do with the naming of federal judges and United States attorneys and the selection procedure during your term as attorney general. Second, on the matter of initiating major law suits, did you consult with the president or with members of the White House staff? Would you comment on these two points?

TOM C. CLARK: Taking them in reverse order, the only suit that I remember the president and I talked about was the one against John L. Lewis [United States v. United Mine Workers and John L. Lewis, 330 U.S. 258 (1947)]. Frankly, I was not enthusiastic about the suit. So the president suggested that I talk to Clark Clifford, which I did, and then we filed a suit to get an injunction against Mr. Lewis. You remember
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he had refused to let his men work in the coal mines. We won the case in the trial court and then went directly to the Supreme Court.

Mr. Truman and I were in Waco, Texas, where he was receiving an honorary degree from Baylor University, when I got a telegram from my deputy saying that the Supreme Court had decided the case in favor of the government. I put the telegram on the lectern while Mr. Truman was speaking, and he read it to the audience.

He used to kid me about that case. He said, “Well, you won the case, in spite of the fact that you did not have your heart in it.”

I have been accused of filing cases against Communists in order to bolster the president’s image in that regard, but there is no truth to this. The president never talked to me about it at all.

Sometimes I would take up a case with him—for example, when we indicted the congressman from his district. I told him about that before we did it, but he never expressed any view about whether we should indict or not. He said, “If you have the evidence, why, go ahead.”

Treasury Secretary John W. Snyder and President Truman discuss the reorganization of the Internal Revenue Bureau, November 2, 1952.
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We also indicted several other congressmen, mostly on income tax charges, and I never even consulted him about those cases although they were full of dynamite. And he never told me that I should have consulted him.

As you know, before he was president, he was the chairman of what was known as the Truman Committee. I was the chief of the War Frauds Division in the Department of Justice at the time. Senator Truman would send his reports, including the testimony before his committee, to the attorney general, and from there they would go through my boss (who was Thurman Arnold) to me. I would sift through all the material and then go over and confer with Mr. Truman. Many times, as a result of our talks, he would reopen his hearing, bring out points that we thought were appropriate, and in that way, enable us to get things off the ground pretty quickly.

So when he first appointed me, we knew each other fairly well; by that time I was the head of the Criminal Division in the Department of Justice, appointed by Mr. Roosevelt. Mr. Truman called me over to the White House and said, “Tom, I want you to be attorney general.” We talked about it a while, and then he said, “Now, you go on back over there and do whatever you think is right.”

From that day on, he never talked to me about any cases other than this John L. Lewis matter.

On the other point, the appointment of federal judges, I had a practice of sending Mr. Truman three names whenever a vacancy occurred. An attorney general should always attempt—and do his best—to find out in advance when there is going to be a vacancy, because the minute one does occur, terrific pressures set in on him from senators and congressmen and governors and everybody else to get a particular candidate appointed. When I went around and talked to the judges at their conferences, I would always try to get them to send their letters of resignation directly to me or to let me know of their retirement, but quite often they would send the notice to their senators. Senator [Alben] Barkley, for example, would call me up and talk to me about a vacancy from Kentucky on the Court of Appeals. I would say, “There is no vacancy there, Senator.” And he would come right back: “Oh yes, there’s a vacancy. I have the retirement papers right here,” and he did.

Among these three names of judicial candidates, I would try to include one senator or congressman. Mr. Truman, of course, knew all the senators and most of the congressmen. Presidents often do, and as a result there is always quite a percentage of former congressmen and senators on the federal bench. So, I would include one. For example, on the first vacancy which happened on the Supreme Court, one of my
three candidates was Harold Burton, another was Bob Patterson, and I have forgotten who the third one was. At first, I thought Mr. Truman was going to select Patterson, but over the weekend he changed his mind. He called me on Sunday and said, "Get up the papers on Burton."

The second appointment to the Supreme Court was Chief Justice Vinson. You remember, Chief Justice [Harlan] Stone died quite suddenly in 1946 and there had been a rift in the Court. Justice [Robert] Jackson was in Nuremburg [as chief prosecutor in the war crimes trial] but he heard pretty quickly of Chief Justice Stone's death and guessed that Justice [Hugo] Black was going to be appointed. Jackson held a press conference in Paris, in which he blasted Justice Black for not having withdrawn from some cases that his former law partner had argued before the Court.

Justice Black had been in Washington for nearly twenty-five years, so there could not have been much to the charge, but it eliminated him from consideration.

The president suggested that I talk to retired Chief Justice [Charles Evans] Hughes. So I called the chief justice and told him what I had in mind. He said, "That's an official matter: I'll come to your place, I wouldn't let you come to my place."

So he came down to the department, and he thought a while and named three or four names. Then he said, "You know, one name comes to me—there is a former judge that I have a high respect for—Fred Vinson. I designated him as head of the OPA Court [the Emergency Court of Appeals]." (The chief justice could designate sitting judges—and Fred, at that time, was on the Court of Appeals—to any court and so Hughes had designated Vinson to the OPA Court, which was an expediting court.) Hughes said Vinson had done a wonderful job there. I, of course, knew of the warmth that Mr. Truman felt for Fred Vinson and so it was a simple matter after that: he appointed Vinson chief justice.

I was the president's third Supreme Court appointment. He called me up one day and asked me to come over. He seldom asked me to come over unless it was something important that he wanted to discuss—not always just matters assigned to the department. For example, he had talked to me before he appointed his Committee on Civil Rights. I thought something like that was on his mind. But when I came into his office, he said, "I have a package job for you. Remember, when you came down here and I talked with you about being attorney general, I told you to select your second person so that if I decided to put you somewhere else, you would have somebody who would not have to start from scratch?"
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I said, "Yes, I remember that and I remember that my retort was that you must not expect to keep me very long. You were going to have a successor real quick."

He laughed and said, "Well, now that was Howard McGrath, and I've been thinking about it. We have this vacancy on the Court, and I thought that I would put you on the Court and put Howard in your place, and I'd like for you to talk with him about it." So I did and Howard agreed. We went to the White House together and talked to the president, and those appointments were effected.

Justice [Sherman] Minton was appointed when Justice [Wiley B.] Rutledge died, soon after I went on the Court. That was Mr. Truman's fourth appointment, but because I was on the Court by that time, I had nothing to do with it. Mr. Minton was on the Seventh Circuit at the time and had served President Roosevelt—as one of those assistants who love anonymity—after he had been defeated in his own bid for reelection in Indiana. But, before that, he had also been on the Truman Committee; evidently the president had had Judge Minton in mind before.

As attorney general I would usually select as one of my three candidates one person out of the Senate or the House, one sitting judge from either the federal or the state system, and one practicing attorney. I have been accused of putting my name down for all three slots when I was appointed. The story goes that the first name was Tom Clark, the second name was Tom C. Clark, and the third name was Brother Clark. But the president moved on my appointment before there was any list.

KOENIG: If we can switch the discussion a bit, I was wondering about the kind of clearance process involved in the development of plans and programs?

CHARLES F. BRANNAN: I hope my experience in this connection may be helpful. Perhaps the most controversial proposal to come out of the Department of Agriculture was the so-called Brannan Plan. It was discussed during its formative stages with the White House staff, whose comments were constructive and helpful. Development of the plan extended over a two-year period. It started during the time that Clinton Anderson was secretary. He had assigned me, as assistant secretary, to the task of developing a long-range program for agriculture following the close of World War II. A series of subject-matter committees were created not only from the staff in Washington but also from all of the department's major field offices. When the studies and deliberations of these committees had produced a series of recommendations which we thought were worthy of presentation to the Congress, they were submitted to Secretary Anderson for his review. The recommendations in-
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cluded all phases of the department's activities, from agricultural research to soil conservation. But the areas of highest sensitivity were the proposals dealing with farm income and prices.

After Secretary Anderson reviewed the recommendations and made his own modifications, he took them to the Congress for presentation in separate hearings before the House and Senate committees on agriculture. He did not adopt the price and income recommendations but submitted his own views which generally paralleled the existing programs.

Shortly after the hearings Secretary Anderson resigned and went back to New Mexico to run for the Senate.

The Congress, in general, was also concerned with fall elections, and little attention was given to the department's recommendations. Most everybody expected that a new Congress would be dealing with the department in 1949 under President Thomas E. Dewey.

Hence, it was with some surprise that we found ourselves confronted after the election with a request from Congress to offer another set of proposals.

The proposals submitted by Secretary Anderson were reviewed once more by the same department committees and discussed with the White House staff. Few changes were made except in those proposals dealing with farm prices and income. The revised recommendations were then taken to President Truman and discussed one by one. When the president and I came to the very last price and income proposal, I advised the president that, in my opinion, it would subject the department and, by inference, the administration to a great deal of criticism. The plan provided for a payment to farmers of the difference between a fair price, as determined by a revised parity formula, and the average price received by all farmers for that commodity in the marketplace during that marketing season; it also provided that there would be a top limit on such payments paid to any one farmer. I said I thought it would be characterized as communism and socialism and all the other taboos.

The president studied it for a few minutes, then looked up at me and said, "Charlie, after all, it is right, isn't it?" I responded that I believed the plan was right and also that it was the only way a fair income for farmers could be assured at an acceptable cost to taxpayers.

Without further hesitation, the president stated, "It stays in." He was thoroughly aware of the political problems, including the charges of communism, and had made his decision solely on what he considered to be right.

Well, I presented the proposals to a joint meeting of the Senate and House committees on agriculture on April 7. I remember telling Mrs. Brannan, "We have worked like the dickens on this, but after this is over
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I am going to get a rest.” Well, as many here will remember, there was anything but a rest after that day, and in the end the Brannan Plan was defeated. As expected, all the charges of communism and socialism and the like were indeed leveled. But there were two factors that I think were more important than anything else in the defeat of the program. The first was the charge that it would be tremendously expensive. And then, the Korean War broke out and farm prices began to go up, so that farmers worried less about their problems and quit communicating with their congressmen. If I had to put my finger on what really knocked us off, I would say it was, first, the Korean War, second, the charge of excessive cost, and only third, the charge of communism or socialism.

But the point is that the president himself made the decision to go ahead. He made it quickly after having gone through all of the material. I don’t know how much he was briefed by the White House staff in advance of that meeting, which lasted maybe an hour, but I do know that he made the decision promptly, and he was not deterred by the possibility of further attacks as being “soft on communism.” It was, in my judgment, a very courageous and forthright decision.

PHILLEO NASH: I am curious about the relationship of Secretary Anderson to the Brannan Plan. I had the notion that this was not something that he favored, that he was essentially a nonsupport theorist in agriculture.

BRANNAN: You are right. Although Secretary Anderson initiated the studies out of which the so-called Brannan Plan proposals evolved, he never accepted the concept of “differential payments” and refused to present such views to the Congress in 1948. Furthermore, after his election to the Senate, he openly criticized the department’s new proposals at numerous Farm Bureau meetings—notwithstanding the fact that the president had strongly endorsed them.

FRED I. GREENSTEIN (Princeton University): I would like to ask Justice Clark, in pursuit of this matter of Mr. Truman’s seeking and getting a good bit of advice from many sources before making decisions, did he ever seek advice from you or, as far as you know, from Mr. Vinson after you were on the Court?

CLARK: No, he never asked me any questions after I was on the Court. I think he thought that that would be inappropriate. There is some rumor that he did talk to Fred, but I rather doubt it.

While I was attorney general, he talked to me quite often about a variety of matters. One that comes to mind is when we were having trouble in Italy, he asked me to make some speeches that would be
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recorded and played in Italy—in Italian—telling the Italians that they would not be allowed to come to the United States if the country went Communist.

Then he talked to me one time about the Civil Rights Commission that Charlie Wilson chaired. If you read the report, *To Secure These Rights*, which Mr. Truman signed, it laid down a blueprint on civil rights in 1945–46 that has now been adopted by the Congress and the courts. Mr. Roosevelt, whom I admired but did not know very well, did not integrate the armed services; Mr. Truman did. And while Mr. Roosevelt had set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee [FEPC], Mr. Truman was more realistic on race questions.

I found Mr. Truman to be one who would make decisions not on the spur of the moment, but after talking with many people. He used to have a little luncheon over there on Tuesdays, with two or three cabinet people, and we would talk about the problems he had on his desk.

I remember at least two occasions when he went down the line in the cabinet. One was when General Marshall came back from China with his report on what the Chinese were doing with our munitions, and

Cabinet meeting, February 11, 1949. *Clockwise from bottom left*: Julius A Krug (Interior), Charles Sawyer (Commerce), Alben W. Barkley (vice-president), Maurice J. Tobin (Labor), Charles F. Brannan (Agriculture), Jesse M.Donaldson (postmaster general), James V. Forrestal (Defense), Dean G. Acheson (State), President Truman, John W. Snyder (Treasury), Tom C. Clark (attorney general).
Mr. Truman asked each cabinet member about it. Another time was when someone had proposed that we give the atomic bomb secrets to the Soviets, and we talked that out in a cabinet meeting. Things like that he would quite often bring up in a cabinet meeting, but he had a habit of consulting people either in his office or on other occasions.

His greatest attribute was that he made decisions and then he put them aside; he did not worry about them. He had enough problems to decide tomorrow, so he put today’s thinking on tomorrow’s problems not on yesterday’s, ones he had already decided. And that is why he was a great president. Most presidents are not able to do that. That’s why he was able to make so many decisions that were needed, and were right, and came at just the right time.

ROGER W. TUBBY: Along these same lines, I was going to ask Governor Harriman about his recollection of Prime Minister Churchill’s judgment of President Truman.

HARRIMAN: I know that Mr. Churchill had a very high regard for Mr. Truman. Of course, you remember that Mr. Truman invited him to Fulton, Missouri, where he made his famous speech. After that, Churchill spoke to me in the most glowing terms about Mr. Truman.

I think that we ought to get into the record that President Truman did have a weekly cabinet meeting; other presidents have not. It was very useful for members of the cabinet to hear each other bring up with the president the subjects they wanted to have raised. The cabinet never voted on any matter; the cabinet never made the decisions; it was always Mr. Truman, but it was very informative for all of us to know what was going on and to know the president’s mind on matters which were overlapping.

I had a very close relationship with both Mr. Anderson, who was then the secretary of agriculture, and with the secretary of labor [Lewis B. Schwellenbach], and I used to have many discussions with them before going to Mr. Truman. Sometimes we went together and talked about our mutual problems. The president was always ready to see cabinet officers, but he did not very often call us to his office. He would sometimes telephone, but he expected us to come to him if we needed some assistance. Otherwise he counted on us to do our jobs. He allocated to the secretaries of the departments the direction of their departments, and he did not interfere. Of course, the staff of the White House did play a role and so did the director of the budget. President Truman used the director of the budget to see that each department was carrying out the programs assigned to it. The control of the purse was one of the ways he controlled the departments.
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Snyder: It was very important that the cabinet meeting gave you an opportunity, every week, to bring up what was important to you. President Truman would bring up any matter that he had and then ask each one of us, "Did you have something to say?" And he also gave us the opportunity to come to talk later with him if the subject was not germane to the whole operation.

The budget was indeed very important to Mr. Truman. President Truman understood the budget better than nearly any other president. He dug into it carefully, and he wanted to know what was necessary and how it was going to affect the people, more than how it was going to affect him or the party. He would hold a press conference on each budget and spend hours with the press going through it. Of course, the budget director and I were there to back him up, but it was rare that he had to call on us for help on a budget matter.

Dorothy James: Following up on the point that Governor Harriman made: Stephen Hess, in his book *Organizing the Presidency*, asserts that the problems of the more recent presidents were present in small form, in seed, during the Truman administration. He asserts that there was the beginning of the development of a staff that would interfere or intervene between the president and the cabinet members; this, of course, has become a very major problem for the presidency. Did you gentlemen have a feeling that this was occurring when you served in the cabinet?

Snyder: Since I was in the cabinet longer than any one individual, I will say that that never occurred insofar as the Treasury Department was concerned. President Truman wanted to get his information straight. I do not know of any staff member interjecting himself between a cabinet member and Mr. Truman. Of course, he would use all sorts of outside help and he would rely on a great deal of the staff work, but he would always go back to the cabinet member.

Harriman: But President Truman also developed staff work in the development of policy. I think the classic example of the White House staff developing policy for and with the president was the Marshall Plan. That program was thought out by the staff, and the White House staff played a very major role in its development.

Snyder: But that was not a case of the staff coming between a cabinet member and the president.

Harriman: The president never used the staff to interfere with cabinet members' operations.

Brannan: I certainly agree.
CLARK: I was in the cabinet before any of the others here tonight. I came in soon after Mr. Truman became president, on July 30, 1945, and during my period in the cabinet I suppose I was over at the White House as much as any cabinet member. At no time did I ever have any staff member—and I knew them all fairly well—try to impose any view on me or dictate any decision I should make. Indeed, I found just the opposite: I would call on them to give me their views, particularly Clark Clifford, who was the special counsel. There had been quite a rift between the counsel of the president and the attorney general during Mr. Roosevelt's time: the attorney general did not think that the president should have a counsel—after all, the attorney general was his counsel. But I found that Clark Clifford worked with me 100 percent; he never asked me to do anything that I regarded as an imposition or an interference with my job.

CHARLES MURPHY: I would like to comment in response to Professor James's question. There was not only a lack of interference by the White House staff between the president and his cabinet, but, to the contrary, there was an extraordinary degree of cooperation between the White House staff and the staffs of the various departments. I participated in this in a good many different ways and one of my functions, after I succeeded Clark Clifford as special counsel, was to oversee the staff work on messages to Congress and on speeches. We had a regular operating practice to permit any department with a legitimate interest in the subject of a message to have a staff person participate in the work on that message. Sometimes this got to be quite cumbersome, but it was always done.

KOENIG: Since Stephen Hess's book has come up, let me raise another point that he makes. He says that within the Truman administration there was a group that might be called liberal and another group that might be called conservative. The names given by Hess on the conservative side are Dr. Steelman and Secretary Snyder; and on the liberal side, Mr. Murphy, Mr. Clifford, Mr. Keyserling, and Mr. [Oscar R.] Ewing. I was wondering, Secretary Snyder, if you have any comment? Are you satisfied with that conclusion?

SNYDER: I am perfectly satisfied to say that I was a conservative. We must remember that a president has a large group of counselors and advisers; and he is entitled to have at least one or two on the conservative side when there is always such a willing and anxious group on the progressive or liberal side. If something was important for the people, President Truman was as liberal as anyone could be, but he did not want extensive expenditures or plans that would not be productive or good.
There are many historians who contend that Mr. Truman should have sponsored more programs for the welfare of the people while he had control of the Congress. But Mr. Roosevelt, in his last years, did not have control of the Congress and Mr. Truman certainly did not have control. The revisionists who try to make this look like a failure on the part of Mr. Truman simply do not know their facts. He came forward definitely and at all times for the things that were for the good of the people—even with conservatives sitting on the side, occasionally raising a question or two.

HARRIMAN: I would like to go back to something very important that Charlie Brannan said. The president always wanted to know what the right thing to do was. He never asked you what his options were.

Snyder: When I would go to him with my kind of problems, the first thing he would say was, “Now, let’s get at how this is going to affect the people, not how it’s going to affect your budget, not how it’s going to affect the Democratic party, but how it is going to affect the people.” That was the first thing he wanted to know about any new proposal that you brought to him.

Clark: As I said, when he appointed me he told me, “Go on back over to your department and do what you think is right.” R-i-g-h-t. And he always stuck by that.

Brannan: Just to reiterate: on almost every occasion when I had a specific problem on which I wanted the president’s advice, the paramount factor in his decision was whether or not the proposed solution was right.

Koenig: Dean Acheson, in his memoirs, Present at the Creation, puts a great deal of stress on Truman’s procedures. Acheson thought that for the first time among modern presidents, Truman established the written decision as an aspect of doing business. Acheson also commented on the procedure by which decisions were made known—that is, a basic equality among the members of the cabinet.

Harriman: I think that is quite true. Churchill spent his entire day writing memoranda to different departments or to people he wanted to communicate with. Mr. Churchill started at 7 o’clock in the morning, and he used to write an infinite number of letters, sign them with a red pen, make certain corrections with red ink; and then he distributed twenty or thirty sometimes between 7:00 and 8:00 in the morning. But that was his way of communicating. Truman very frequently telephoned, I rarely got a written message from him; he did not operate like
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Churchill. But I think Acheson’s point was that Truman wanted his decisions recorded.

BRANNAN: I would just like to say that Mr. Truman once made a decision and gave me an oral directive on the basis of which I spent $2.5 billion in the course of forty-eight hours, and there is not one written word giving me authority or showing that he ordered, directed, or permitted the action.

HARRIMAN: That raises a serious question about the Acheson statement.

CLARK: I never got a memorandum from the president on any matter the whole time I was attorney general, which was about four and a half years.

SNYDER: I got plenty.

KOENIG: I want to ask about the weekly luncheons. I understand that the president would meet at luncheon with three or four members of the cabinet on a rotating basis. Is there anyone who could speak about that experience?

SNYDER: I think every one of us can, because that was one of his standard procedures. He would bring together cabinet members who were acquainted with the particular subject that he had on his mind. He also frequently used his trips down the Potomac that way. Many times he’d call people over not for a meeting, but just to sit around and talk for a while; he was careful, however, to select those who could contribute to the subject that was puzzling him at the time.

CLARK: That is my understanding too. Of course, when I went down the river or to the White House or other places, and played a little poker with him, he never discussed any business at all.

BETH CAMPBELL SHORT: David Halberstam in his book [The Best and the Brightest] says that Acheson really did not respect President Truman. The only experience I had was that Secretary Acheson had tremendous respect for President Truman. Was that your experience, you who knew him so much better than I?

BRANNAN: Definitely.

SNYDER: Yes.

HARRIMAN: Acheson was in real trouble in 1950. Almost every Democrat who was running for public office wanted the president to
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relieve Acheson because of his unpopularity, for reasons which we don't have to go into here. Acheson said to me at the time that Mr. Truman was his great friend, a man who supported him and saw him through that trouble. In that day, he never looked down at President Truman. President Truman saved him from a great deal of difficulty; and anyone who thought that Acheson looked down on Mr. Truman did not understand the relationship between the two men. Acheson would not have survived had it not been for President Truman, and I think that Mr. Acheson understood that thoroughly because he told me so during the summer of 1950.

SNYDER: Acheson says so in some of his books. He speaks very positively about how fortunate he was to have had a chief like President Truman, a man who could make decisions and would back them up. And you have respect for a man if you make a statement like that.

HARRIMAN: Acheson did have a good deal of contempt for certain people that he did not think were his equals.

SNYDER: We were not talking about all the people, we were just talking about Truman.

HARRIMAN: But as far as President Truman was concerned, I know what I am talking about in the statement that I have made.

ROBERT L. DENNISON: One time I asked Dean Acheson why he had not written a book about President Truman (this was before Present at the Creation), and he said, "Well, I have such a high regard for him, and I am so fond of him, that I feel I could not possibly be objective." I have talked to Dean through the years a number of times, and I can promise you that he had the highest regard for the president, regardless of their different personalities.

EDWARD HOBBS: I believe the record shows that Dean Acheson said that President Truman was the most remarkable man that he had ever known.