The Truman White House
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THE CABINET

Four persons who had served in President Truman's cabinet discussed the operations of the Truman White House from the perspective of their experiences: (in alphabetical order) Charles F. Brannan, Tom C. Clark, W. Averell Harriman, and John W. Snyder.

Charles F. Brannan was assistant secretary of agriculture when Mr. Truman succeeded to the presidency in 1945. Brannan was appointed secretary of agriculture in 1948 and served in that position until the change of administrations in January 1953, when he returned to his hometown of Denver. He has been a practicing attorney since then and is general counsel to the National Farmers Union. He is a member of the board of directors of the Truman Library Institute.

Like Mr. Brannan, Tom C. Clark was elevated from a subcabinet position (assistant attorney general) when President Truman chose him in 1945 to head the Department of Justice. He served as attorney general until 1949 when he was named to the Supreme Court of the United States. Justice Clark retired from the Court in 1967 but remained active, both as a senior justice and as director of the Federal Judicial Center. Justice Clark died June 13, 1977.

W. Averell Harriman served in the Truman administration as ambassador to the Soviet Union (1943-46), ambassador to Great Britain (1946), secretary of commerce (1946-48), U.S. representative in Europe for the Economic Cooperation Administration (1948-50), special assistant to the president (1950-51), and director of the Mutual Security Administration and senior adviser to the president on foreign and military policy (1951-53). He was elected governor of New York in 1954 and served in a variety of high-level diplomatic assignments during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Governor Harriman is a member of the board of directors of the Truman Library Institute.

John W. Snyder holds the record for longest continuous service in the Truman cabinet, having served as secretary of the treasury from 1946
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to 1953. Secretary Synder is a member of the board of directors of the Truman Library Institute and chairman of the board of the Truman Scholarship Program.

In their essays prepared for this volume, Messrs. Brannan, Harriman, and Snyder all stress the importance to the White House operations of President Truman's attitudes and work habits. All three agree that having selected those who should work for him, Mr. Truman placed full trust in them and delegated authority to the widest extent. Justice Clark whose untimely death accounts for the absence of an essay from his pen, confirms these impressions in the course of the discussion.

All four discussants deny the validity of Stephen Hess's assertion that the Truman staff began the trend toward White House staff dominance that became so ominously evident in more recent years. The recollections of the four cabinet officers are clearly to the contrary.
As secretary of agriculture my relations with President Truman and his staff in the White House were as pleasant as anyone could ask. I never found the president unwilling to listen. His responses came promptly and clearly and were never evasive. It was a wholly efficient and productive method of operation from my point of view. I must assume that the president found the arrangement satisfactory or he would have changed it or his secretary of agriculture.

I conceived it to be my responsibility to minimize the number of matters which needed to be referred to the president for his personal attention; and I believe that during Mr. Truman's administration the Department of Agriculture demanded a minimum of his time and gave him few occasions for concern. I also believed it to be our duty to support the president's goals and objectives to the fullest extent possible although another government agency may have had the primary responsibility for them. I have always been convinced that effective administration and efficient service to the particular constituents your department served were the best possible politics, but my support in political terms did not stop there. I think President Truman had similar views.

A few examples may be the best way to corroborate and support these conclusions.

One of the statutory duties of the secretary of agriculture during the Truman administration (it is not so now) was to announce annually the secretary's estimate of the total domestic consumption of sugar for the coming year. This was a highly important decision to sugar producers, both domestic and foreign. If this estimate was relatively high as compared to the historic average consumption, import quotas for sugar produced abroad would be increased, and at the same time the domestic wholesale price of sugar would decline. If the estimate was below the historic average, the effect would be to raise the barrier against sugar imports and, thereby, to strengthen prices for domestic producers. Ob-
viously, the secretary’s estimate had wide-ranging political implications. Hence, the first time I was confronted with this duty, I thought it advisable to discuss my proposed announcement with the president, and so I secured an appointment. I took along a brief memorandum reflecting the applicable statistics for the president’s review. I thought it also might be helpful to give the president some background on the history of sugar legislation. So, I opened our conference with a brief description of the Costigan-Jones Sugar Act. The president politely interrupted to advise me that he had been the floor leader for the bill that extended this legislation and understood it very well. That he also understood the political implications became immediately clear, for upon finishing the memorandum, he asked me if I had discussed the proposed consumption estimate with Senator [Allen] Ellender who was not only the ranking Democrat on the Agriculture Committee but also one of the chief spokesmen in Congress for both domestic cane- and beet-sugar producers. Fortunately, I had talked with Senator Ellender and could report that the senator agreed with my proposed estimate. The president thereupon indicated his concurrence. He then went on to instruct me that when it became necessary to make this annual estimate in subsequent years, if I were able to reach a satisfactory agreement with Senator Ellender, it would be unnecessary to review the matter with him or with anyone in the White House. During the succeeding five years, the annual domestic consumption estimate was reviewed first with Senator Ellender and his concurrence obtained, thereby eliminating the necessity for the president to concern himself further with this matter.

This demonstrates the president’s inclination to delegate broad responsibility. The president apparently had concluded that his secretary of agriculture would do a conscientious and thorough analysis of all the available facts and reach a proper conclusion for the benefit of both domestic producers and foreign suppliers and that Senator Ellender’s concurrence was sufficient assurance that political reactions to the decision would not be a source of trouble.

During the entire period of time that I served as secretary under Mr. Truman, I received only one instruction directly from him to employ someone. The persons and circumstances involved are so unusual that I think it merits repeating.

One afternoon, early in 1949, I answered the White House telephone on my desk to find President Truman on the other end. He informed me that he was sending Mr. Paul Stark, a prominent horticulturist, to see me and that he wished me to employ Stark as an adviser on my staff, effective the same day. It should not be considered unusual that the president himself should evidence interest in the employment of a particular per-
son. But in this case he was directing me to hire the brother of the former governor of Missouri, Lloyd Stark, who had been Mr. Truman’s opponent in a bitter contest for the United States Senate. Governor Stark’s campaign tactics would not have earned the commendation of the Fair Campaign Practices Committee had it then been in existence. But however President Truman may have felt about his opponent in that campaign, it did not carry over to the governor’s brother. Mr. Paul Stark was employed forthwith and became a useful member of the staff. No reference was ever made to the former governor.

Major appointments were always discussed with Don Dawson who handled these matters for the president. And from time to time cabinet officers received suggestions and recommendations from Mr. Dawson. But at no time was any “pressure” applied by the White House staff for the employment of anyone.

One example of Mr. Truman’s willingness to delegate responsibility to his subordinates is demonstrated by an occasion following the outbreak of hostilities in Korea.

At the first cabinet meeting following the entry of the United States into the Korean conflict, the president instructed me to submit proposals for preventing the anticipated escalation in food prices, especially sugar, which, newspaper reports indicated, was already being hoarded by housewives and merchants. Two days later I returned to the White House with a brief memorandum pointing out the total ineffectiveness of existing price-control legislation which had been emasculated by the Capehart amendment. I argued that the only effective way to prevent a rapid advance in the price of sugar would be for the United States to buy up Cuba’s entire stocks and its forthcoming production. The United States had a contractual right to do this. The president asked how much money it would take. I responded: about $2.5 billion. He then asked where the money would come from. I reminded him that the Commodity Credit Corporation had almost unlimited borrowing power. The president thought for a little while and asked me again if this was the only way I thought a drastic price rise could be avoided, and when I assured him that it was the only effective and quick way available to us, he merely said, “I guess that’s what you will have to do.” I left the president’s office and by noon of the second day the United States owned or controlled practically all of the world’s supply of sugar. As a result, the price of sugar did not rise during the Korean War.

It is very significant, however, that there is not one written word of authorization from the president to me for the expenditure of over $2 billion of U.S. funds in about a twenty-four hour period. (This story is told much more readably in Mr. President, which was published in 1952.)
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It was my experience that President Truman relied primarily upon department and agency heads for the proper performance of their administrative duties and communicated directly with them on matters of major significance.

My relationships and contacts with the White House staff were frequent and cordial. In my judgment, President Truman's staff was the most efficient crew that ever served any occupant of the White House. Yet I do not recall ever having imposed upon them to present a matter to the president for me or having received through the staff instructions from the president on a major matter of policy or operations.