HARRY TRUMAN: PRESIDENT WHO SHOOK THE WORLD

An address by Frank K. Kelly, a 1948 Truman Speechwriter, currently the Senior vice President of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, sponsored by the Harry S. Truman Center for governmental Affairs of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, at the Plaza Branch of the Kansas City Public Library in Kansas City, on November 5, 2007

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Harry S. Truman faced the world with a fearless gaze. He changed American politics in his amazing upset victory in 1948. He had tremendous impact on all the nations through the policies he used to rebuild Western Europe after World War II, through his support for the creation of the United Nations, and his decision to use atomic bombs on Japan - a decision which shook the world and continues to have far reaching effects on the future of humanity.

When I attended a meeting of Truman’s staff in the White House in the spring of 1948, I heard gloomy reports of his standing in several key states. At the end of those negative reports,
Truman smiled and said: "Don't worry about those reports boys. I'm still going to win." When he left the meeting room, his principal advisor, Clark Clifford, said, "He really believes it too." Most of my friends had urged me not to participate in his campaign. One of them said to me, "If you work for Truman, you'll be regarded as subnormal mentally for the rest of your life."

The only persons who encouraged me to join Truman's struggle were two women - my wife and my literary agent, Mary Abbot, who said, "Whatever happens, you can get a book out of it." I had been impressed by the wisdom of women on many occasions, so I decided to try to help Harry. I had been a soldier and a war correspondent in World War II - and I had participated in the liberation of Paris and other victories, so I decided it would be a great experience to serve under such a brave President.
While the campaign was underway, the Atlantic Monthly Press had published one of my books, entitled *An Edge of Light*. It was about Truman’s successful push to get the UN to compel Joseph Stalin to withdraw Russian troops from the Northern section of Iran. Truman showed his strength just as he did when the Soviets blockaded Berlin. He used an airlift involving hundreds of planes to feed and supply the German city. Some observers thought the Soviets would use armored trains to break the blockade, but they didn’t.

I was an Associated Press correspondent covering the early days of the UN, and became convinced that Truman was dedicated to peaceful settlements of international disputes.

Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945 haunted him through the remaining years of his life. In his memoirs, he called it “the most terrible decision that any man in the history of the world had to make.” The
validity of his decision was challenged even by commentators who had deep respect for him. In a book entitled *The Pathology of Power*, Norman Cousins wrote: “The decision of President Truman to drop atomic bombs on large aggregations of human beings may be a significant example of the way even good men can incorrectly assess and mishandle unprecedented power..... It is possible that nothing that has happened since 1945 calls for more thought by the American people than that decision. It had implications on almost everything that has happened since.”

My face to face meetings with Truman convinced me that he was a man who cared about saving as many Japanese lives as possible, well as American lives in the last days of a devouring slaughter.

“It was a decision made in Hell,” he told me. “Frank, you remember what old General Sherman said: ‘War is hell.’ I wanted to get
everybody out of hell. War is the great enemy we must vanquish. WAR IS HELL. Never forget that."

I had become personally aware of the horrors of war in my childhood, when my father returned from combat service in World War I with a gaping wound in his neck and nightmares that produced screams which destroyed my sleep. He had engaged in hand to hand fighting with German soldiers in trenches, using his bayonet to rip them apart. My father had rushed into military service when President Wilson led the United States into war in 1917 - a war Wilson called a crusade for democracy, a war to end war.

In 1949, when I was asked to write a chapter about Truman for a book entitled *Men Who Make Your World*, I had a long conversation with him in the White House. He spoke to me bluntly - as one war veteran to another. "I consulted many advisors before I decided to hit
Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the new bombs”, he said with a tormented voice. “General Lemay, the commander of our B-29 bombers, thought it wasn’t necessary.” The President made a sweeping gesture with his right arm. “Lemay said we could burn Japan from one end to the other with our fire bombs.” Truman shuddered. “I didn’t want to kill millions of men, women and children that way.” He said slowly, “You know the Japanese are just as human as you and I are.” I muttered, “Yes, I thought so, Mr. President. Even though they did some horrible things. Some people called them slanty-eyed monsters.” In war, it was easy to regard our enemies as monsters, no longer human.

Dean Acheson, who served as Truman’s Secretary of State wrote a book declaring that Truman’s decision to oppose communism all over the world was “the most momentous foreign policy initiative in the nation’s history.” The authors of a book called The American
Promise, published four years ago, declared that Truman "transformed the federal government, shifting its priorities from domestic to external affairs, greatly expanding its budget, and substantially increasing the power of the president. The nuclear arms race attending the cold war put the people of the world at risk, consumed resources that might have been used to improve living standards, and skewed the economy toward dependence on military projects..."

"In sharp contrast to foreign policy, the domestic policies of the post war years reflected continuity with the past. Preoccupied with foreign policy, Truman failed to mobilize support for his ambition to assist the disadvantaged with new initiatives in education, health, agriculture, and civil rights, but he successfully defended most New Deal reforms. The boost to industry from cold war spending and the reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan contributed to an economic boom that
lifted the standard of living for a majority of Americans.

"The anti-communist hysteria that grew out of the cold war contributed to the status quo by silencing the left, stifling debate, and narrowing the range of acceptable ideas. Partisan politics and the Truman administration's constant rhetoric about "the communist menace" fueled McCarthyism, but the obsession with subversion also fed on popular frustrations over the failure of containment to produce clear-cut victories. Convulsing the nation in bitter disunity, McCarthyism reflected a loss of confidence in American power."

The American Promise book in which these comments appeared was produced by a group of teachers - all of them with outstanding records as historians and scholars. They involved James Roarck of Emory University, Michael P. Johnson of John's Hopkins University, Patricia Cline Cohen, whose work has received support
from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and is now a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, Sarah Stager, who has taught U.S. history for more than 25 years in various colleges, Alan Lawson, a professor who has written many books and articles, and Susan M. Hartman, professor of history at Ohio State University and also on the board of directors of the Truman Library Institute.

I do not think Truman overestimated the dangers of Joseph Stalin’s aggressive polices. His view of the Soviet Union’s behavior coincided with that of Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, who declared in a speech in Fulton, Missouri, that the Soviets had brought down the “Iron Curtain” across Eastern Europe. Truman was also disgusted by the behavior of Senator McCarthy, who made wild accusations of “pro-communist” activities by his White House staff.
On of the high moments of my life was to sit with my wife in the reviewing stand on the White House lawn to watch the great parade on the day of Truman’s inauguration on January 20, 1949, when he expressed his hopes for the future of humanity. We heard Mr. Truman voice many of the ideas we had emphasized in the hundreds of campaign speeches he had given with fire and fervor to audiences across the country.

I had not expected to be with him on that great day. I had served on his staff for seven months, but did not seek a federal job. After his electoral triumph in November, I had accepted an appointment on the staff of Boston University as an associate professor. I had never sought to be drawn into politics. I was primarily a professional writer, a journalist, an author of many stories in the growing field of science fiction. My imagination had ranged through the universe.
I discovered that Harry Truman had a far-ranging mind too. In his inaugural address, he asked for “the help and the prayers” of the thousands of citizens who witnessed the event. He acknowledged that he needed encouragement and support. He declared,” It may be our lot to experience, and in a large measure to bring about a major turning point in the long history of the human race. The supreme need of our time is for men to learn together in peace and harmony.”

In presenting a proposal to aid “the free peoples of the world”, Truman emphasized the fact that he invited other countries “to pool their technological resources in the undertaking” He declared, “This should be a cooperative enterprise in which all nations work together through the United Nations and its specialized agencies wherever practicable. It must be a world-wide effort for the achievement of peace, plenty and freedom. Only by helping its least fortunate members can the human family
achieve the decent, satisfying life that is the right of all people.”

Truman astonished many of his listeners by predicting that the people in the communist countries would abandon their delusions and join with the free nations of the world in “a just settlement of internal differences.” He concluded his address with an enormously optimistic statement: “With God’s help the future of mankind will be assured in a world of justice, harmony and peace.”

I was not sure that the people of the United States - and those of other countries - were prepared to act so generously for the welfare of the human family. Yet I admired Truman for speaking so boldly. In the 1948 campaign I became convinced that I worked for a man with a growing mind and a developing soul. Bill Batt, the coordinator for our speech writing group, had asked each of us to draft seven short speeches on the President’s philosophy on
major issues with each speech related to American voters’ insatiable appetite for facts. We had to show the President’s understanding of the needs for a massive housing program, for providing federal aid to the whole education system, for health care, for conserving our natural resources, for making sure of high economic standards for Americans and the alleviation of poverty everywhere. We tried to bring all these points together because we knew the President had a global vision.

A friend of mine, Joseph Guilfoyle, who was on Truman’s staff when Truman was a Senator, told me that Mr. Truman carried in his wallet a poem by the English writer, Alfred Lord Tennyson, entitled Locksley Hall, written in 1842. Tennyson had prophesied:

"For I dipt into the future far as human eye could see, 
Saw the Vision of the World, and all the wonder that could be,
Saw the Heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales
Heard the heavens filled with shouting, and there rained a ghastly dew
From the nation's airy navies grappling in the central blue.
Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the battle flags were furled
In the Parliament of Man, the Federation of the World....."

I was dazzled by Tennyson's description of aerial warfare in a poem composed in 1842, but I too had "dipt into the future." In my science fiction stories, written in Kansas City in the 1930's, I had described wars in which long range rockets were used. I had written about the development of planetary organizations and a time of peace for humanity. Like Tennyson and Truman, I was sure that the hellish activities of war would be eliminated.
So I had favored the statements made in the 1948 Democratic Platform, which I had helped to compose. The Platform on which Truman campaigned contained these powerful statements:

"We advocate the effective international control of weapons of mass destruction, including the atomic bomb." If the plan for control of the nuclear arms race had been adopted, humanity would not have been brought to the brink of annihilation in later confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Another important plank in that platform endorsed Truman’s rapid recognition of the new state of Israel. Over the opposition of high officials in his administration - including Secretary of State George Marshall - Truman had recognized Israel immediately after its formation. He played a leading role in the adoption of a UN Resolution on November 29, 1947, for the creation of a Jewish state.
Truman was accused of acting emotionally - succumbing to the pleas of Eddie Jacobson, his former partner in a clothing store, and other Jewish friends, or pandering to the wealthy Jews who financed Democratic candidates in elections.

He was certainly aware of the political significance of his decision, but it seemed clear to me and to other friends that his primary motivation came from his reading of the Bible. He believed that the Jewish people should have a home in the Middle East and access to the holy city of Jerusalem. He was one of the few American leaders who tried strenuously to save the Jews of Europe from Hitler’s concentration camps.

In April 1943, after he learned that thousands of Jews had been herded “like animals” into those death camps, he voiced his indignation in a vehement speech to 125,000 persons in a Chicago stadium. Saying that “no one can any
longer doubt the horrible intentions of the Nazi beasts,” Mr. Truman urged all the governments at war with the Nazis to help the Jews before it was too late. He asked for the opening of “free lands” for the Jews and other persecuted minorities.

“We know that they plan the systematic slaughter throughout all of Europe not only of the Jews but of vast numbers of other innocent people.” Truman said. “Today - not tomorrow - we must do all that is humanly possible to provide a haven and a place of safety for all those who can be grasped from the hands of the Nazi butchers.”

Truman called upon Americans to do more than make protests against Hitler’s evil regime. He begged his fellow citizens “to draw deeply on our traditions of aid to the oppressed and our great national generosity.”

“This is not a Jewish problem, it is an American
problem”, Harry Truman cried out, challenging the fortunate beneficiaries of America’s enormous blessings to “face it squarely and honorably.”

The United States and other allied governments did not respond to Truman’s plea for the opening of “free lands to the Jews and other people marked for extermination.”. Opinion polls showed that 82 percent of Americans were against admitting Jewish exiles. Roosevelt tried to raise the number of displaced persons allowed in annual quotas but Congress refused to expand the numbers. Many men, like myself, were overseas with the armed services and were concentrating on military victories. I had Jewish friends - in fact, the best man at my wedding in 1941 was a Jewish friend. But I didn’t believe that a holocaust was really occurring. I didn’t think that the highly civilized Germans would sink to such depths.

Many Germans refused to acknowledge the
reality of the death camps. People in neighboring towns insisted they had not known what happened in those murderous places. When allied troops liberated Auschwitz, they forced those citizens to come into the camps and bury the stacks of bodies found there. They had to realize that WAR IS HELL.

Truman was a combat veteran in World War I. He accepted his responsibility for the killing of German troops on the Western Front. When North Korea attacked South Korea in 1950, Truman sent American soldiers into bloody battles there - under the banner of the United Nations. Even though he hated war, he decided to participate in the Korean conflict because he felt that support had to be given to the UN to inflict defeats on aggressors. He thought that Stalin had encouraged the North Koreans to try to conquer South Korea.

With the authorization of President Truman, I took part in the drafting of the Democratic
platform in the presidential election of 1948. Mr. Truman made it clear to all of us that he would run on a global statement. The opening paragraph asserts that "the destiny of the United States is to provide leadership in the world toward a realization of the Four Freedoms - freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear." Those were the freedoms cited by President Roosevelt in his State of the Union message to Congress in 1941.

The Platform we prepared for our President contained this declaration: "To serve the interests of all and not the few, to assure a world in which peace and justice can prevail; to achieve security, full production and full employment - this is our platform."

We went on to say, "We support the United Nations fully and we pledge our wholehearted aid toward its growth and development....we will continue our efforts toward the
establishment of an international armed force to aid its authority.” But we also advocated “the maintenance of an adequate Army, Navy and Air Force to protect vital interests and to assure our security against aggression.”

Truman knew that he had made his share of mistakes. His “loyalty program” which included investigating thousands of federal employees had damaged many people. His creation of the Central Intelligence Agency had led to covert interventions in other nations with painful effects. He revealed his awareness of his blunders in letters to friends, in public statements, and in an interview he gave me in 1949. He did not think he was the best of all possible Chief Executives.

“When Franklin Roosevelt died, I felt there must be a million men better qualified than I to take up the presidential task.” Truman declared in his farewell speech. “But the work was mine to do, and I had to do it. And I have tried to
give it everything that was in me.”

He felt connected to every member of the human family. He reflected his heritage, the atmosphere of his age, the culture of his time. He encouraged all of us to believe that the greatness of humanity was worth appreciating and celebrating.

Throughout his life, Truman acknowledged the importance of “conscience” - the inner voice calling for doing what is “right” and rejecting what is “wrong”. Douglas Roche, a leader in Canada’s parliament, has recently published a book entitled, Global Conscience, in which he presents a very hopeful view of humanity’s future. He acknowledges the tremendous fears now shaking people in many places - of a global catastrophe caused by terrorists, a nuclear war, or rising of the oceans from global warming. Then he on to say: “But it may also be that an awakened view of the need for a more harmonious planet is, indeed, taking hold. What
is clear is that an awakened global conscience is questioning, probing and challenging existing world systems."

I hope the Truman Institute being established in Kansas City will be devoted to the demands of the Global Conscience - which can lead humanity into an age of high wisdom and compassion for all.

I hope it will become a Center for Humanity’s Future, recognizing Humanity’s Greatness - a place of light, a place of friendly explorations from all people of all backgrounds. Truman realized that there is a glorious creativity in each one of us.

An Institute named for him can help us to become fully aware that we were born to be Celebrators - celebrating the abilities we have received, and extending our awareness of our participation in the flood of creativity pouring through the universe in which we live.
The Truman Institute could present an annual celebration of Humanity’s Greatness, evidenced through a Global Celebration of Creativity. Artists of all kinds, singers, painters, dancers, poets, mystics, composers, healers, prophets, sculptors, architects, philosophers, mediators - could lead community celebrations which would be linked together around the world.

All human beings are artists and Celebrators! That annual Celebration would recognize the creativity of everyone. It could be videotaped and used on television and the Internet, to bring delight into the lives of people everywhere.

Every person in this room tonight is helping to shape the future. Let us be grateful for the life and achievements of a man who opened many doors for all of us - a man who walked our streets and shook everybody’s hand, a man who was a great servant as well as a great leader.

Thank you for giving me a chance to share these
meditations drawn from a long life in a glorious country.

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