

## A True Man

The Literary Club

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Many years ago, and I am coming to learn that that expression itself is reserved for those of us of a certain age, I related a not particularly interesting vignette about standing in line at the Bohemian Grove right behind Henry Kissinger waiting for the use of a pay telephone. Pay telephone indeed. How quaint. The friend to whom I was speaking, and I will not identify him because this friend was more candid than generous of spirit, and, further, because he is in the listening audience this evening, said: "I wonder if Henry Kissinger is some place this evening talking about standing in front of Paul Sittenfeld?" That cured me or perhaps only partially of a propensity for name dropping. It preceded another name-dropping event even more egregious, but that is another story.

I mention this experience because I am about to engage in something perilously close to the same: presenting a blend of personal and familial anecdotes with factual information some of which perhaps is less known. The person is someone whose star has risen rather dramatically over the last couple of decades and, especially, since the quadrennial 2016 presidential election. The actions and attributes that were arguably appreciated, if not particularly noteworthy, of my subject during his lifetime have become prized and valued if only because of their scarcity. These include but are not limited to honesty, accuracy, decency, forthrightness, and authenticity. The mere fact that qualities such as kindness and civility now stand out is an eloquent albeit sobering testimony to the world in which we live.

With the objective to speak about a recent United States president, I could have chosen a more exciting or provocative personality. Think war hero Eisenhower; or dashing young philandering Camelot figure Kennedy; perhaps coke snorting, boozing, ball team owning, Cincinnati connected Bush the younger; possibly the charismatic Svengali-like, zipper pathology Clinton; or the harbinger of the tomorrow for which so many of us hoped Obama. Do not even allow your mind to wander to the soon-to-be gone incumbent.

Instead, I selected someone whose almost pedestrian persona has a resonant relevance today.

Harry S Truman was born in 1884. The S with no period following it, is because he had no middle name. He became the 33rd president of the United States. His parents were Martha and John Truman, his father a farmer and livestock dealer. The family moved to a farm near Harrisonville, Missouri, before his first birthday. They next relocated to Belton, Missouri, and, in 1887, to his grandparent's farm in Grandview, Missouri.

In 1890, they settled permanently in Independence, Missouri, to enable Harry to attend an established local Presbyterian Sunday school. As a young fellow in Independence, he served as what is known as a *Shabbos Goy* for his traditional and observant Jewish

neighbors. This role entailed doing menial tasks for them on Sabbath, which they were prohibited from doing for themselves from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. Other luminaries who served similarly earning *bupkis*, or for those of you not conversant in Yiddish, very little, as *Shabbos Goys* include Elvis Presley, Colin Powell, and Barack Obama. Truman's mother, to whom he was especially close, interested him in reading, history, and music. He is said to have risen by 5:00 every morning to practice piano, which he studied until his 15th birthday and enjoyed playing throughout his entire life. He was also a life-long voracious reader.

Truman's first political excursion was serving as a 16-year-old page at the 1900 Democratic National Convention in Kansas City. After graduating from Independence High School in 1901, he attended Spalding's Commercial College, a business school in Kansas City, where he studied bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing. He remained for only a year. Truman was the first president since William McKinley not to be a college graduate and the only one thereafter.

Assisted by the legendarily corrupt Kansas City Democratic machine led by Tom Pendergast, Truman was elected as a county court judge for Jackson County, Missouri's Eastern District in 1922. It was an administrative rather than a judicial court, similar to the way in which county commissions function in other jurisdictions. He was defeated in his re-election campaign in 1924. Two years later, after attempting with minimal success to sell automobile club memberships, he decided to pursue public service and ran for presiding judge in a three-judge county court system. After he was elected in 1926, assisted by the Pendergast group, and re-elected in 1930, he played a key role coordinating a 10-year plan which helped develop Jackson County with public works projects. He became president of the National Old Trails Road Association and, in 1933, was named Missouri's Director of the Federal Re-Employment Program.

After serving as county judge, Truman ran as the Pendergast candidate in the 1934 Democratic primary for the United States Senate. His nomination came only after all of Pendergast's first four choices declined to stand for election. In the primary, Truman defeated incumbent Congressman John Cochran. His candidacy benefited from contacts made through his county work; from his membership in the Masons; from his role as a military reservist; and from his membership in the American Legion. In the general election, Truman defeated incumbent Republican Roscoe Patterson by nearly 20 points as the wave of New Deal Democrats rolled through the Depression weary country.

Truman's loyalty to Pendergast, unflinching loyalty itself always a core Truman value, was not surprisingly criticized when Pendergast was imprisoned for tax evasion. Subsequently, and predictably consequently, Truman's Senate reelection in 1940 was achieved by a razor thin margin of 8,000 votes. As a senator, he opposed both Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. Truman noted: "If we see that Germany is winning, we ought to help Russia. If Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany. That way, let them kill as many as possible." By the end of 1940, Truman had traveled to multiple military bases and observed rampant waste and profiteering. As chair of the Committee

on Military Affairs Sub-committee on War Mobilization, he began investigation into these abuses. His initiative impressed many of his Senate colleagues and he is credited with skill in achieving consensus while gaining himself media attention and increasing his until-then minimal national visibility. He was reported to have saved the Country as much as \$15B, well over \$200B in today's terms, and was pictured on the cover of *Time Magazine*.

In 1944, incumbent Vice President Henry Wallace, while generally well regarded, was increasingly perceived by many to be leaning too far to the left and being too accommodating to labor. Franklin Roosevelt, seeking an unprecedented 4th term, wanted to replace him with someone more acceptable and considered, among others, Truman and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. State and city party leaders preferred Truman, and after much convention jockeying, he was selected. The Roosevelt-Truman ticket received 432 electoral votes compared to the 99 for the Republican ticket of Thomas Dewey and Ohio Governor John Bricker. Only weeks after the election, Truman insisted on attending Pendergast's funeral, observing: "He was always my friend and I've always been his." After only 82 days as Vice President, Truman succeeded Roosevelt on April 12th. In response to a message to go immediately to the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt told him that her husband had died. He asked if there was anything he could do for her and, as is well known, she replied: "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now!" He was sworn in as President in the West Wing of the White House by Chief Justice Harlan Stone.

Less than four months after becoming president, Truman authorized the first use of nuclear weapons with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima on August 6 and three days later on Nagasaki. The appropriateness of that decision, in place well before his ascendancy to the presidency, is and likely will remain the subject of thoughtful debate well into the future. As president, Truman renounced isolationism and adopted an international focus on foreign policy. The end of World War II was followed immediately by Russia's determination to extend its Communist reach. In addition to East Germany, Russia absorbed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania and, soon thereafter, Romania and Bulgaria. By the end of 1945, the Lublin government, Soviet supported, controlled Poland. Next to submit were Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Yugoslavia, led by Josip Tito, was already Communist controlled.

Truman, certain that Greece and Turkey would be the next to fall, felt compelled to act. In March of 1947, he successfully requested \$400 million from Congress to provide military aid and economic assistance to both countries. This appropriation, sought by Truman in a speech to a joint session of Congress, was the inauguration of the Truman Doctrine to halt the expansion of Communism and marked the beginning of the Cold War.

The Marshall Plan, was begun in 1948, provided \$15 billion over four years for reconstruction aid to address the war's physical and economic devastation of Western

Europe. The funding was of defining significance in rebuilding efforts. The Plan produced record levels of trade with American firms and fueled a post-war economic boom in the United States. The Marshall Plan assisted Great Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Four years later, Western European industries were producing twice as much as they had the year before World War II began.

Truman ran for and was elected to his own term in 1948 with longtime Kentucky Senator Alben Barkley selected as his Vice-Presidential candidate. Barkley, a gifted raconteur and well aware of the traditional role of the post he was seeking, especially liked the story of the mother with two sons. One went to sea, the other became vice-president and neither was ever heard from again.

Their victory is best remembered for a beaming Truman holding high the iconic *Chicago Tribune* headline and photograph noting erroneously his loss to Thomas Dewey. Reflecting on his victory Truman commented: "You have to get around and listen to what people are saying: Dewey learned that in '48. He talked and he didn't say much."

In June of 1948, the Berlin Airlift began. The Soviets had blockaded all rail, water and road routes delivering food and coal to the Allied portion of Berlin and the airlift continued for 11 months.

Also in 1948, Truman submitted the first comprehensive civil rights legislation and initiated racial integration both in the military and in federal agencies. These can be noted as major initial steps toward the slow and halting progress which has followed.

In 1950, he brokered the United Nations approval of a war intervention after North Korea's invasion of South Korea.

I would imagine few of us, in our earlier years when renting or occupying temporary lodging, undertook significant alterations to such domicile. However, I would also warrant that few of us have lived, even temporarily, in the White House. In 1947, Truman decided that for architectural improvement to the White House and to open an extraordinary view of the Washington Monument, a balcony should be added off the Oval Room. Further, in those years before air conditioning, the White House is said to have burdened summer residents with stifling heat and humidity. Awnings were put up annually to afford some mitigation. By summer's end, the awnings were predictably so dirty they had to be thrown away and this custom caused an annual cost of \$20,000. A further personal incentive was the President's wish to motivate Mrs. Truman's presence because she had little interest in living in the White House and spent as much of the time as possible during her husband's Presidency in Independence. The couple's favorite place in their own home was a patio in its back yard where they would read and listen to baseball games. Whatever the combination of reasons, the balcony was added.

Far more serious were continuing emerging indications of massive structural deficiencies in the White House. For no apparent reason, chandeliers would begin to sway and creaking noises, said to have been attributed by the President to ghosts, were more and more frequent. In 1948, a leg of daughter Margaret Truman's piano crashed through the floor of her second floor sitting room and through the ceiling of the family dining room. The president himself apparently was bemused by the potential scenario of him in his bathtub falling through the floor onto a gathering of the Daughters of the American Revolution "wearing nothing more than my reading glasses."

The Trumans believed, or specifically Mr. Truman believed, that the renovation could be done safely, conveniently and cost efficiently without him relocating. However, the ceiling of the East Room began to collapse and the Trumans were ordered out and required to move to Blair House across Pennsylvania Avenue.

January 20, 1949 was Truman's Inauguration Day. His World War I buddies, from Battery D, began the day with him at a 7 a.m. breakfast where they gifted him a gold topped walking stick to use on his daily strolls. He in turn admonished them to stay sober until the end of the inaugural parade in which they would be marching. One of the group wrote a parody to "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" "So it's hello Captain Truman, with the boys you led so well; you're a great guy Harry Truman, for you, we'd march through hell."

From all indications, the Truman marriage was a great success. They had known each other since childhood. Of Bess, he said "She always helped me in everything. She was a full partner in all my transactions - politically and otherwise." When she was asked the qualities necessary for the wife of a President, she replied "good health and a strong sense of humor." In 1955, Truman came home one evening to find his wife burning her love letters to him. What are you doing?" he asked, "think of history." "Oh, I have" she said burning the rest of them.

Selecting quotes, observations, expressions and the like from famous people is risky. Do they represent the actual words of the putative speaker or a speechwriter or an overly zealous intern? Were they actually cribbed from such quotables as Mark Twain or Will Rogers? So, giving these the benefit of the doubt, here are a few of my favorites attributed to "give 'em Hell, Harry."

1. Once a government is committed to the principal of silencing the voice of opposition, it has only one way to go. That is down the path of increasingly repressive measures until it becomes a source of terror to all its citizens and creates a country where everyone lives in fear.
2. We can well afford to pay the price of peace. Our only alternative is to pay the terrible cost of war.
3. My own sympathy has always been with the little fellow, the man without advantages.

4. Three things can ruin a man: Power, money, and women. I never wanted power, I never had any money, and the only woman in my life is up at the house right now.
5. I have found the best way to give advice to your children is to find out what they want and then advise them to do it.
6. I always tell students that it's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

And, finally,

7. Children now a days have too many gadgets to fool with, and not enough chores.

This last from the 1950s. What would his take be on our grandchildren's gizmos today?

Truman co-owned what ultimately was an unsuccessful haberdashery business with his friend Eddie Jacobson with whom he had done basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1917. This began a long and seemingly close relationship with, not only Jacobson, but what appears to have been a genuine interest in, if a great deal less than a real fondness, for the Jewish community. As a consequence of being known as a friend of Truman, Jacobson, unimportant himself except for his Truman connection, was pursued by Jewish leaders nationally who leaned hard on him to gain Truman's support for the Zionist effort to establish a Jewish state. Truman, initially resistant, eventually acquiesced and the United States became, in 1948, the first country to recognize Israel.

That endorsement, however, contrasts troublesomely with stories about his and his wife Bess's personal feelings about Jews. The stories that follow are documented and part of Truman's diaries and papers housed in the Truman Library.

When Jacobson and Truman met at the Truman's Independence home, he was not allowed into the house and was required to speak to the President from the steps. Mrs. Truman explained: "No Jew ever entered my mother's house and no Jew will ever enter my house". In his own diary, Truman wrote: "The Jews, I find are very selfish. They have no concern for Poles, Estonians, Latvians, and other displaced persons; they're only interested in themselves. When they have power, physical or political, neither Hitler or Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the underdog."

Further, other diary entries discuss Jewish dignitary Henry Morgenthau Jr. Morgenthau served twelve years as Franklin Roosevelt's Treasury Secretary. After Roosevelt's death, Morgenthau insisted he be invited to the Potsdam conference or he would resign. Truman accepted his resignation with alacrity. Truman observed: "He had no business whatever to call me; the Jews have no sense of proportion nor do they have any judgment on world affairs." He referred to New York City as "kike town" and labeled Jacobson his one-time partner and ostensibly his good friend, as his "Jew clerk." Although admirable in many ways and for many reasons not the virtuous person I had envisioned.

What makes Truman and his life especially interesting to our family are overlaps which bring it closer to home. Betsy and I both grew up in Kansas City, a few miles from Independence.

During World War I, too old for the draft, Truman volunteered and served in France. He served with Betsy's great-uncle, Curtis Tiernan, who provided among other things the names of our first two children: Tiernan and Curtis. Father Tiernan, a Monsignor in the Catholic Church, and perhaps more acceptable to Mr. Truman because Monsignors are never Jewish, continued an ongoing close relationship in the ensuing years and Truman appointed him as the Chaplain of European clergy during the Second World War. Further, at its conclusion, unlike the Morgenthau incident, Truman did invite Uncle Curtis to accompany him to the July 1945 Potsdam conference where Truman met with Clement Atlee, Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill. Of Uncle Curtis, Truman wrote: "Oh, you know, petty larceny - like religious differences and political differences - never made any difference with me and with people I like. I don't care what they believe if they honestly believe it. It's up to them. But I wish you could have known that priest. He was in a class by himself." In June of 1950, when Father Tiernan was hospitalized in Kansas City, Truman, in a tip of the hat to his drinking buddy, wrote: "Maybe what you need is just a session with me and Old Grand Dad." Old Grand Dad as in their preferred brand of bourbon.

The reconstruction of the White House, noted earlier in this paper, was overseen by a Congressional commission. Supporting the commission was a committee of consulting architects and engineers. Heading that group was William Adams Delano, the leading architect of that era in the design of country mansions including Peterloon here in Cincinnati, the John J. Emery estate. Also serving was Ernest Howard, a civil engineer who designed the Delaware Bridge and 12 other bridges crossing the Mississippi River. When not addressing professional pursuits, Ernest Howard served as another of my wife Betsy's great uncles.

Truman, after his presidency, became an unusually and generously available celebrity. Many people were allowed to schedule, through his secretary Rose Conway, a visit to Mr. Truman's office in what became the Truman Library. There they were able to meet Mr. Truman. Betsy's great-aunt took her on that excursion and my father did the same for me. I choose to remember sitting on Mr. Truman's lap in his office, and my sister tells me that the lap sitting is my complete fantasy. One of our daughters, a writer, says "Daddy doesn't lie but he certainly embellishes." Regardless, I really did get to meet him. Additionally, my father and I attended Truman's daughter Margaret's wedding in 1957. Well, truth be told, we were on the street, gathered with thousands of other onlookers as we watched the bridal couple process by. I'm certain they had intended to invite us and that the invitation simply was lost in the mail.

However, a far more adventuresome experience -- and this one is completely true -- came also in 1957, when the Truman Library was dedicated. My family was in the distant bleachers observing the festivities with thousands of others. However, being

young and uninhibited, I wandered away from my parents, to the reviewing stand and climbed up the steps, seating myself near Adlai Stevenson, Eleanor Roosevelt, various Supreme Court Justices, and a gaggle of senators and other dignitaries.

My father was an active autograph collector, and it was a hobby I followed and started as a Cub Scout when I was eight. Whatever security detail was in place ignored me and I jumped up into what Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado would have noted as the Poobah section going from person to person seeking autographs from those I recognized, and, probably from some guards and people almost as inconsequential as I. It was an adventure and a happy one and I still have the autographs.

Another anecdote, certainly not familial, but reflective of both Truman being his own man and without pretense, was his enduring interest in Kansas City chili: Not Skyline; indeed, nothing like it, but the traditional meat and beans with no pasta but lots of raw onions. The name of the chili parlor of choice in Kansas City was Dixon's, and, for reasons I do not know, Mr. and Mrs. Dixon would only employ those down-on-their-luck or ex-convicts who had done their time. Every time Truman came back to Independence during his presidency and regularly afterward, he went to Dixon's for a fix. Whether this is another display of support of those without advantages or simply of appetite, is beyond historic documentation.

And there are even Literary Club connections. Long-time Cincinnati resident Judy Blair Green is a great-great granddaughter of Francis Preston Blair, a Congressional representative from Missouri and great-great niece of Montgomery Blair, Mayor of St. Louis and Lincoln's Postmaster General. Judy, originally from D.C., is a great-granddaughter of another Montgomery Blair. Her family, the Blairs, are part of what are known as Cave Dwellers... multi-generational, old guard, residents of the District, as distinct from those who come and go with the change of Presidential administrations. Her uncle was the last family resident of Blair House, which was their family home. Separately, Judy Green's former husband, no longer living, was Joseph Green who moved to Cincinnati to work for Procter & Gamble. Joe's father was a professor of history at Princeton University. However, Joe's grandfather James Albert Green of Cincinnati, headed the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Public Library board.

James Albert Green immigrated to Cincinnati from Canada with his family at the age of 10. After working as a reporter for the *Cincinnati Gazette* and the *Commercial Gazette*, he served as city editor of the *Cincinnati Times Star* before making his fortune in the iron and steel business and retiring in 1924 to devote his time to the community. His interests included being an active member of our Literary Club. He was elected to Literary Club membership in 1901, was a Trustee, and served as Vice President and President. His most important association was with the Cincinnati Public Library, where he became a board member in 1892 and served four terms as board president between 1900 and 1923 and then continuously as board president from 1926 until 1954. Early in his years of Library leadership, he went to New York to meet with Andrew Carnegie to solicit funds for building local libraries. He received a grant of \$240,000 with which were built our eight local Carnegie branches.

Returning to Harry Truman, he died in 1972 and his widow Bess a decade later. Both are buried on the grounds of the Library.

And so, I look back on a man who, aided and abetted by the bizarre quadrennial we have just completed, looms larger and more appealingly than ever before. With or without a middle name, Harry Truman, the “buck stops here” fellow and the President who kept his own 3 cent stamps on his Oval Office desk for personal correspondence, is a remarkable and arguably a heartening part of American history.

Thank you.

Paul G. Sittenfeld