

The Extraordinary Footprint of an Ordinary Man

By Dennis Payton Knight

America's presidents often set the course of history by the footprints they leave. George Washington, an extraordinary man, was the first, appointing our first Supreme Court and the cabinet secretaries who created our first federal agencies; Abraham Lincoln, an extraordinary man, in the face of a great and devastating Civil War, abolished slavery by the stroke of his pen, and with the might of his armies held the nation together. Franklin Roosevelt, an extraordinary man, brought us out of the Great Depression and inspired the Greatest Generation to victory in the Second World War.

Harry S. Truman, born in 1884, was a farm boy, a combat officer in France during the First World War, a haberdasher who got involved in Kansas City politics and the political machine of Tom Prendergast. He is the last president who never received a college degree. He was a most regular kind of fellow who enjoyed cussing, poker, and bourbon; an ordinary man of common sense who left an extraordinary footprint as the thirty-third President of the United States.

After succeeding to the presidency on the death of Franklin Roosevelt in April 1945 during the latter days of World War II, Truman oversaw the surrender of Germany a few weeks later, and brought the war to a conclusion using nuclear weapons against Japan. After being sworn in he asked all members of Roosevelt's cabinet to stay on, saying he was open to their advice, but insisted he would be the one making decisions. That was where he got the slogan on his desk that said, "The Buck Stops Here."

After the war, he launched the Marshall Plan devised by U.S. General George C. Marshall to rebuild the economy and stave off the advance of Communism into West Germany. He established the Truman Doctrine to give support to countries, especially those in Western Europe, threatened by Soviet advances or communist insurrection. He helped found the United Nations in 1945 and NATO in 1949. One of his great foreign policy successes was the Berlin Airlift that brought food and supplies, including coal, into the Western-held sectors of Berlin to which the Soviet Union had blocked access.

Civil rights were one of Harry Truman's moral priorities and he issued Executive Orders desegregating the armed services and beginning the integration of federal agencies.

He delighted in the moniker, "Give 'em Hell, Harry," but he took his responsibilities to heart, beset by renewed labor-management conflicts, dormant during the war years, shortages in housing and consumer products, and inflation, which at one point hit 6% in a single month.

In June of 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, and the United Nations intervened at Truman's request, authorizing multi-national troops led by U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. The war stalemated in 1951 at the 38th parallel, and Truman rejected MacArthur's request to attack north of the Yalu because he feared further escalation might lead to open war with the Soviet Union. MacArthur went to Republican Congressional leadership which leaked it to the press. Truman then fired MacArthur, one of the least popular decisions he ever made, and MacArthur returned a hero to address a joint session of Congress.

Truman declined to run for re-election in 1952 and left office with his poll numbers at their lowest. However, since 1962, scholars and historians have recognized the presidency of Harry Truman as one of the most successful in our nation's history: an ordinary man, who left an extraordinary footprint.