



Harry S Truman and Civil Rights



Harry S Truman and African Americans aboard the presidential railroad car "Ferdinand Magellan," 1948. Credit: Truman Library.

No citizen of this great county ought to be discriminated against because of his race, religion, or national origin. That is the essence of the American ideal, and the American Constitution. Harry S Truman

With these words President Harry S Truman summarized his views on the rights of all Americans to enjoy the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution's Bill of Rights. By acting on those views, President Truman succeeded in bringing the issue of civil rights to the forefront of national attention.

Harry Truman's Missouri Roots

Harry Truman's civil rights views surprised many people, because they seemed to contradict his southern heritage. Truman grew up in a former slave state where his small-town, rural surroundings included segregation and subordination for many of its citizens. Black residents lived in a separate section of town, attended a different school, and were prevented from shopping at most stores. In his early letters, the young Harry Truman reflected his background by frankly admitting prejudices against blacks and Asians.

Despite all this, Truman believed in fairness. While serving in Jackson County public office, he saw

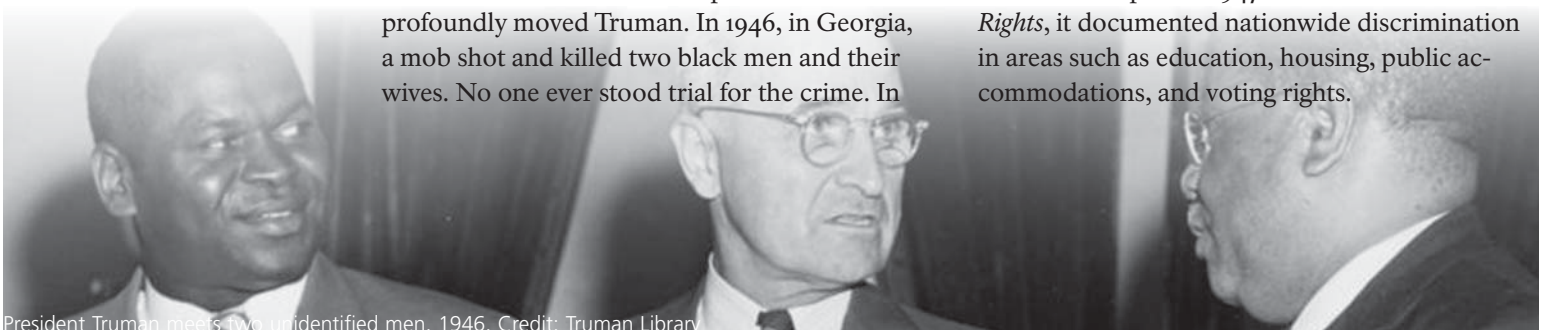
the plight of African Americans in urban areas. Truman's experience as an officer in World War I and post-war business dealings with a Jewish partner also broadened his perspectives. By 1940, as he sought reelection to the U.S. Senate, his viewpoint had matured. In a speech in Sedalia, Missouri, he said, "I believe in the brotherhood of man, not merely the brotherhood of white men, but the brotherhood of all men before law. I believe in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In giving the Negroes the rights which are theirs, we are only acting in accord with our own ideals of a true democracy."

President Truman Addresses Civil Rights

After Franklin D. Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945, President Harry Truman directed the conclusion of World War II, a war fought against racist dictatorships. Yet, black veterans returning from the conflict found poor treatment at home. Truman conveyed his alarm, "My stomach turned over when I learned that Negro soldiers, just back from overseas, were being dumped out of army trucks in Mississippi and beaten. Whatever my inclinations as a native of Missouri might have been, as President I know this is bad. I shall fight to end evils like this." Other episodes of violence profoundly moved Truman. In 1946, in Georgia, a mob shot and killed two black men and their wives. No one ever stood trial for the crime. In

South Carolina, police pulled a young African American soldier from a bus and beat him blind. These events left a deep impression on the President in a way that no statistics ever could.

In late 1946, Harry Truman established "The President's Committee on Civil Rights." He instructed its members: "I want our Bill of Rights implemented in fact. We have been trying to do this for 150 years. We're making progress, but we're not making progress fast enough." The committee released its report in 1947. Entitled *To Secure These Rights*, it documented nationwide discrimination in areas such as education, housing, public accommodations, and voting rights.



President Truman meets two unidentified men, 1946. Credit: Truman Library



African American and white soldiers, 1945. Credit: Truman Library

Political Risk and Executive Power

On February 2, 1948, President Truman took great political risk by presenting a daring civil rights speech to a joint session of Congress. Based on the committee's findings, he asked Congress to support a civil rights package that included federal protection against lynching, better protection of the right to vote, and a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission. These proposals met strong opposition in Congress and led to the splintering of the Democratic Party right before the 1948 presidential election. Still, Truman won

reelection, but little civil rights legislation was enacted during his administration because some southern congressmen blocked his recommendations. Instead, Truman turned to his executive powers and issued orders prohibiting discrimination in federal employment and to end segregation in the military. African Americans in the military served in separate units, where they often performed minor duties and were commanded by white officers. Finally, in 1954, the Army disbanded its last all-black unit.

Civil Rights and the Truman Legacy

Harry S Truman wrote, "Discrimination is a disease, we must attack it wherever it appears." Through his efforts as leader of the world's most prominent democracy, he sought to improve the opportunity of each American to lead a successful life with basic guarantees of freedom. Some critics believe that he should have done more, while, at the time, others thought he went too far.

Considering his upbringing and the climate of the times, Truman demonstrated a great deal of personal growth and political courage while in the White House. Although Truman never entirely overcame all of his personal prejudices, his heartfelt sense of fairness and his deeply rooted faith in the U.S. Constitution made him the first modern president to champion civil rights, paving the way for the legislative successes of the 1960s.



Truman shaking hands with an Air Force sergeant, 1950. Credit: Truman Library.