

Harry Truman
12 April 1945 – 20 January 1953
Democrat
By David Blanchflower

Full name: Harry S Truman
Date of birth: 8 May 1884
Place of birth: Lamar, Missouri
Date of death: 26 December 1972
Site of grave: Harry S Truman Presidential Library & Museum, Independence, Missouri
Education: Spalding's Commercial College, Kansas City
Married to: Bess Wallace. m. 1919. (1885-1982)
Children: 1 d. Margaret

"You know, it's easy for the Monday morning quarterback to say what the coach should have done, after the game is over. But when the decision is up before you - and on my desk I have a motto which says The Buck Stops Here"
Harry Truman, National War College, December 19th, 1952

'Give 'em hell' Harry S. Truman was the 33rd president of the United States and also the 33rd tallest. He was born on May 8th, 1884 and died at age 88 on December 22nd, 1972. Of note also is that V-E Day occurred on Truman's birthday on May 8th, 1945. He had no middle name. His parents gave him the middle initial, 'S', to honor his grandfathers, Anderson Shipp Truman and Solomon Young. He married his wife Elizabeth 'Bess' Wallace on June 28, 1919; he had previously proposed in 1911 and she turned him down; but they finally got engaged in 1913. She had been in his class at school when he was six and she was five, and she sat in the desk immediately behind him. The couple had one child, Mary Margaret Truman.

Harry was a little man who did a lot, standing just 5 feet 9 inches tall which is short for a president. In height terms he was joint 33rd, with Millard Fillmore, out of 45. In modern times only Jimmy Carter comes close at 5 feet 9 ½ inches. James Madison was the shortest at 5ft 4 inches and Abraham Lincoln was tallest at 6 feet 4 inches. FDR was 6 ft 2ins, Joe Biden is 5ft 11½ inches and Trump was 6ft 3 ins. Also, the tallest candidates in presidential elections tend to get more votes. Thomas Dewey who Truman defeated in 1948 was 5ft 8ins tall so Truman fits the taller takes-all rule. FDR was taller than all four of the contenders he beat. Obama was taller than McCain; Reagan was taller than Mondale; Kennedy was taller than Nixon; Clinton was taller than Dole; Trump was taller than Hillary, but Kerry was taller than GW Bush and Gore was taller than GW. Clinton and Bush 44 were tied.

Neither George Washington nor Harry Truman went to college. Ever other president since the 25th POTUS William McKinley (1897-1901), has graduated from university. Truman's formal

education ended after a year at Spalding's Commercial College in Kansas City. He served in the National Guard from 1905-1919. In WW1 as a captain in the Army he served in France and in subsequent years was in the Army Reserve. He had a number of business ventures including opening a haberdashery.

Truman was a Democrat. With the help of the Kansas City Democratic machine led by Tom Pendergast, Truman was elected in 1922 as County Court judge of Jackson County's eastern district. He had no legal training although he did start courses toward a law degree and in business college at several different points in his life, although he never formally graduated or completed a degree. Truman lost his 1924 re-election campaign in a Republican landslide. Two years selling automobile club memberships he didn't like much, so he ran for presiding judge in 1926 and won with the support of the Pendergast machine; he was re-elected in 1930. Then he was elected Senator for Missouri in 1934. He won re-election narrowly in 1940 without FDR's support. Truman was sometimes called "The Senator from Pendergast." In 1939, Pendergast was convicted of income tax evasion and served 15 months in a Federal prison. During his decade as a senator Truman was the chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs Subcommittee on War Mobilization which gained him a good deal of publicity saving large amounts of money and even getting him on the cover of Time Magazine on March 8th, 1943 under the headline 'Investigator Truman; a democracy has to keep its eye on the ball'.

Harry Truman became Vice President of the United States on January 20th, 1945 although he did not campaign for the job. Henry Wallace was the sitting vice-president, but he was regarded as too liberal, by many of Roosevelt's advisers. Truman was the compromise candidate and in the short time he was vice-president Roosevelt rarely contacted him and they met alone only twice. As vice-president he did attend Pendergast's funeral.

Unexpectedly Truman became the 33rd president 82 days later on the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt at age 63 during his fourth term as president. Roosevelt was at his Warm Springs, Georgia retreat where he had gone on doctor's advice, to recover from what was believed to be exhaustion, along with his mistress Lucy Mercer. At about 1pm the president suddenly complained of a terrific pain in the back of his head and collapsed unconscious. He was pronounced dead at 3.30pm, apparently having suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

Truman had spent his time as Vice President presiding over the Senate, and he was meeting with his friend, Texas Congressman Sam Rayburn, the 43rd Speaker of the US House of Representatives, after the Senate had finished its business. A call came from the White House to go immediately to its Pennsylvania Avenue entrance. Truman was met by Eleanor Roosevelt and told the President had died. Offering his condolences, Harry Truman asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?" Mrs. Roosevelt responded, "Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now." Ultimately, Truman designated Eleanor Roosevelt as his representative to the United Nations and "First Lady of the World."

The White House press agency sent out an official bulletin at 5:47 p.m., that President Roosevelt had died two hours earlier from a cerebral stroke. Supreme Court Chief Justice Harlan Stone was then called to the White House to issue Truman's presidential oath of office in the Cabinet Room at 7pm in front of Bess Truman, Rayburn, and several Cabinet members.

Truman served two terms. Roosevelt was the first and only President to serve more than two terms. The twenty-second amendment was passed by Congress in 1947 and was ratified by the states on 27 February 1951 and says that a person can only be elected to be president two times for a total of eight years.

Under the language of the amendment, the President at the time of its ratification was exempt from the two-term limitation so Truman could have served a third term as president. Truman seriously considered a run but decided not to do so after a big loss in New Hampshire and poor polling. Prior to the ratification of the Twenty-fifth Amendment in 1967, no constitutional provision existed for filling an intra-term vacancy in the vice presidency. So, Truman had no vice-president until he appointed Alben W. Barkley as vice-president in his second term after his victory in 1948.

Famously, Truman was behind in the polls in November 1948, when he took on Republican Governor of New York Thomas Dewey with Strom Thurmond as a third candidate on the Dixiecrat ticket. Truman was widely considered to be the underdog in the race, and virtually every prediction indicated that Truman would be defeated by Dewey. The polls predicted a Dewey victory of between 5 to 15 percentage points. In the end Truman won the election with 303 electoral college votes to Dewey's 189. Truman also won 49.6% of the popular vote compared to Dewey's 45.1%. The headline from the Republican supporting Chicago Daily Tribune newspaper on the night of the election "Dewey Defeats Truman" was not a high point in journalism or of pollsters.

Just before the pandemic I visited the Little White House in Key West the southernmost point of the United States and 100 miles as the crow flies to Cuba, which is now a museum and is where Truman stayed for 175 nights while he was president. It was originally part of a US Navy submarine base and was nicely secure and warm all year round, but in the summer too much so. After 19 months in office, Truman was exhausted and went there for some rest and recuperation. It is reported that Truman liked to start his days with a nice, brisk walk and a shot of Old Grand Dad bourbon followed by a glass of orange juice. Cabinet members and foreign officials were regular visitors for fishing trips and poker games, especially in the winter months. It is alleged Truman loved to tell and hear dirty jokes. In subsequent years while in office Truman went there every November–December and February–March. Truman also loved to swim and was a frequent user of the pool FDR had installed in the White House in 1933 as therapy for his polio.

There were two assassination attempts on Truman's life while he was in office. Zionist terrorists tried to assassinate President Truman by letter-bomb in 1947. According to a Truman's daughter Margaret: "A number of cream-colored envelopes, about eight by six inches, arrived in the White House, addressed to the President and various members of the staff." They were found to contain "powdered gelignite, a pencil battery and a detonator rigged to explode the gelignite when the envelope was opened." The White House mail room discovered the letters and had them defused by Secret Service bomb experts. The second attempt occurred on 1 November 1950 by militant Puerto Rican pro-independence activists, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, while President Truman resided at Blair House during the renovation of the White House. Torresola mortally wounded White House Police officer Leslie Coffelt, who killed him in return fire. Secret Service agents wounded Collazo. Truman escaped unscathed but after that the Secret Service took the

President to various undisclosed locations for his daily walk. Several assassination attempts were made after Truman left office.

Under Truman, the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) committed the United States to a role of world leadership and brought it out of its years of isolation, having entered both world Wars late and only in 1941 when it was attacked at Pearl Harbor. That night Churchill said he had never slept so well. “Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful,” he wrote.

At the time, NATO was a military alliance established in 1949 to provide a common defense against potential Soviet and later Communist Chinese military aggression, and it was the first peacetime military alliance the U.S. had ever joined. In 1947, Truman also established the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Implemented in 1947 and 1948, the Marshall Plan provided more than \$15 billion to help finance rebuilding efforts in Europe. Named for its designer U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall, it was a four-year plan to reconstruct cities, industries and infrastructure heavily damaged during the war and to remove trade barriers between European neighbors—as well as foster commerce between those countries

Others have written on the importance of the Truman Doctrine and his foreign policy initiatives. On May 11th, 1945 Truman ended Lend-lease to Russia. George Herring argues that Stalin saw this as an attempt to extort political concessions by economic pressure. This looks like an early start to the Cold War. Truman oversaw a major confrontation with the Soviets, the Berlin airlift in 1948 that carried food, fuel and other supplies into West Berlin by plane. In March 1948, Britain, France and the United States decided to combine their sections of Berlin into one unified West Berlin. In June 1948 the Soviet Union, whose territory fully surrounded the capital, cut off all ground traffic into and out of West Berlin in an attempt to force the Allies to abandon the city. The blockade of Berlin had begun. The lift went on through April 1949.

The Truman Doctrine in 1947 established that the United States would provide assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces. The Truman Doctrine effectively reoriented U.S. foreign policy, away from its prior isolationist stance, to one of possible intervention in overseas disputes.

A low point was his announcement on June 27th, 1950 ordering US troops to South Korea, under General Douglas MacArthur to help them defend against an invasion from the north of the peninsula. He did not consult Congress for a declaration of war. Almost 40,000 Americans died in that war with around 100,000 casualties and the North Korea problem has still not been resolved. The fighting ended on 27 July 1953 when the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed. The agreement created the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a 155 mile long, 2.5 milewide zone to separate North and South Korea and allowed the return of prisoners. A notable side effect is that the DMZ has become an unintentional major wildlife preserve and bird sanctuary.

We of course must deal with the dropping of the two atomic bombs ordered by Harry Truman, which are certainly among the most monumental decisions made by any president ever. In

retrospect the decision seems even more consequential for humanity than the declaration of war by FDR on 8 December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor the day he famously said, 'that will live in infamy'.

Apparently, Truman didn't know fully about the existence of the Manhattan project or the bombs until he was briefed on April 24th, 1945. The project was so secret that FDR had not informed his fourth-term vice president that it existed. But Truman did have some suspicions that something highly secretive was going on. As part of his 1943 senatorial investigations into war-production expenditures he asked questions about a suspicious plant in Minneapolis, which was secretly connected with the Manhattan Project. Truman received a call from FDR's secretary of war, Harry Stimson, warning him to back off. When President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, Truman was informed by Stimson of a new and terrible weapon being developed by physicists in New Mexico. In his diary that night, Truman noted that he had been informed that the U.S. was perfecting an explosive great enough to destroy the whole world.

Truman went to Potsdam, Germany to meet with Stalin and Churchill from 17th July to 2nd August 1945 to discuss how Germany, that had surrendered nine weeks earlier, was to be administered. Notably France was excluded from the discussions. Lessons had clearly been learnt from WW1 which showed what not to do as a peace conference. Keynes had been part of the UK delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference but resigned and wrote about the inevitable consequences of the overly harsh reparations imposed on Germany set in the Treaty of Versailles that they would never be able to pay, by not making terms too harsh. By the end of the Potsdam conference Churchill had been voted out of office.

The successful Trinity test of the hydrogen bomb was conveyed to Stimson at Potsdam. As Diana Preston notes, the next day Stimson sent a note to Churchill saying: "babies are satisfactorily born", which Churchill failed to understand and had to have it explained explicitly. With Churchill's agreement they told Stalin, who, it turned out, already knew as Soviet intelligence had been receiving information about the project since 1941. The Potsdam Declaration for Japan, which outlined terms of unconditional surrender and threatened if they did not accede, they would meet "prompt and utter destruction". Japan rejected the terms but ultimately accepted them after the dropping of the two nuclear bombs and the intervention of the Russians in the Pacific theatre.

The Little Boy enriched uranium bomb was dropped by the Enola Gay, a Boeing Superfortress B29 bomber on Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. The UK gave permission for the attack as was required by the 1943 Quebec Agreement. Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, VC, OM, DSO & Two Bars, DFC, he of Cheshire Homes fame and subsequently life peer, Baron Cheshire, was selected to witness the dropping of the bomb and flew on the Enola Gay. Truman was informed of the project's success in the Atlantic on his way home from Potsdam. The Fat Man plutonium bomb was dropped from a B-29 named Bock's Car, on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945 causing less damage than the first bomb. On the same day, as agreed with the Allies at the Tehran Conference in November 1943 and the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the Soviet Union entered the war in the Far East within three months of the end of the war in Europe. The invasion of Manchuria began on 9 August 1945. The Soviet entry into the war and the defeat of Japan's Kwantung Army was a significant factor in the Japanese government's decision to surrender.

The second bomb was dropped not least to prove that the US had more than one bomb and to save the many allied lives that would have been lost in any invasion of mainland Japan. When asked about the decision to drop the bomb and how hard it was, in an interview Truman said "I went to bed and got a good eight-hour sleep."

Diana Preston further reported that Truman addressed the American people on 10th August 1945 in a nationwide radio broadcast.

"Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young American lives." Compelling stuff.

Apparently, the US had a couple more bombs available in August with more being prepared. The surrender of Imperial Japan was announced by Japanese Emperor Hirohito on V-J Day, 15 August. The surrender documents were formally signed by the Japanese and General MacArthur at a 23-minute ceremony on 2 September, to on the deck of the 45,000 tons battleship USS Missouri, named after Truman's home state. The ceremony took place in Tokyo Bay before representatives of nine allied countries, including Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser for the UK. The bombs worked, along with the Soviet intervention which in the end some academics have argued was even more important than the bombs. WW2 was over. The Missouri sits today as a permanent museum in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

McCarthyism raged during the final two years of Truman's second term. Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy of "have you no decency, sir?" fame, in a speech in February 1950, had claimed he had a list of "members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring" who were employed in the State Department. In succeeding years after his 1950 speech, McCarthy made additional accusations of Communist infiltration into the State Department, the administration of President Harry S. Truman, the Voice of America, and the U.S. Army. Inevitably McCarthy and Truman clashed frequently. At a news conference in Key West Truman was asked about McCarthy.

Q. "Do you think that Senator McCarthy can show any disloyalty exists in the State Department?"
The President. "I think the greatest asset that the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy."

Truman was known for having a sharp tongue.

Truman also created the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA) to the President which has an audience of one. It provides POTUS with his own economic advice and analysis. Many great economists have been appointed to its chair including, Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, Martin Feldstein, creator of the National Bureau of Economic Research - where I have been a research associate for 30 years – ex Fed chairs Alan Greenspan and Ben Bernanke, along with four distinguished labor economists - current US Treasury Secretary and another ex chair of the Federal Reserve and President of the San Francisco Fed, Janet Yellen, and the current incumbent Ceci Rouse along with two dear labor economist friends who recently passed Eddie Lazear and Alan Krueger.

The CEA has been remarkably successful and being a member and especially its chair has been a launching pad for the careers of many economists.

Wartime recoveries are always rapid and tumultuous. America had the benefit that little of its territory had been devastated but much of the rest of the world had been and there was much rebuilding to do as the troops came home. Memories of the Great Depression were still in people's minds, as the war and pre-war spending had brought full employment. The female participation rate had risen during the war and expectations were that would continue an upward trajectory which it has done in subsequent years.

A labour economist has to talk about labour markets. The war brought full-employment; in 1935 US unemployment rates were 20% by 1945 they had fallen to 1.9%. The month that Truman won re-election, November 1948, the unemployment rate was 3.8% having been 4% or lower every month that year. In November 1952 it was 2.7%: between March 1952 and September 1953 it was below 3% in thirteen months, reaching 2.5% in May and June 1953

But in the immediate post-war years Truman struggled to deal with a wave of strikes. In 1946 including by the United Auto Workers as well as among railroad workers, coal miners and steel workers. In 1947, Congress responded to the strike wave by passing, over President Truman's veto, the Taft-Hartley Act, restricting the powers and activities of labor unions. The act is still in force as of 2021. In the 1940s around a third of private sector workers were members of unions compared with 5.3% in 2020.

In 1944 the world came to talk to Keynes in Bretton Woods, at the Mount Washington Hotel up the road from my Dartmouth office in New Hampshire. Keynes wasn't well and wanted to get out of the bad air of New York City, so he came to the Great North Woods. The meeting resulted in the establishment of both the World Bank and the IMF. In his great book on the summit, Ed Conway tells the tale of why the US appoints the head of the World Bank and Europe gets to appoint the head of the IMF.

It turns out it is a spy-story, and it goes like this. On Keynes' recommendation Truman nominated Harry Dexter White, who was a senior US Treasury official and senior representative of the US at the summit, as executive director of the IMF. But White had been under surveillance by the FBI since November 1945 due to his connections with Russian intelligence. Conway notes that shortly after that Truman was notified that White was involved with Soviet espionage.

J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the FBI was concerned that even though White was unfit, removing his nomination, which had already been approved by the Senate would cause an unholy mess. In the end the top job at the IMF at its establishment in 1948 went to a Belgian, Camille Gutt.

When Truman retired, he moved back to his hometown of Independence, Missouri where he lived for the remainder of his life and established his presidential library where he spent a lot of time through the mid-60s until his health deteriorated. Truman famously had financial difficulties and did not make money from his presidency. He taught occasional classes at universities including

Yale and survived from selling an inheritance he had received from his mother. He also published a two-volume set of his memoirs which sold well.

Nuclear bombs, the CEA; the CIA; NATO; The Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift; war and peace. Plus, he recognized the state of Israel. Truman made a lasting impact on the world and the institutions he created have stood the test of time. As time has gone by Truman's reputation has risen. When he left the presidency, Harry was one of the most unpopular presidents ever. His conduct of foreign policy, tackling the Soviets, has stood the test of time. He converted the US economy from a war footing to a peacetime economy and advanced civil rights by desegregating the military and banning discrimination in the civil service. Truman even called for a national health service and a minimum wage. A number of polls have been taken in recent years on which president Americans believe were the best among voters and scholars and Truman generally ranks in the top ten. He even has a nuclear-powered Nimitz class aircraft carrier named for him, which was commissioned in 1998. Its battle flag has the phrase 'Give 'em hell' on it. It didn't hurt, that Harry S. Truman had the greatest labor market ever. Not bad for a college dropout.