

Harry S. Truman at the National Press Club: May 10, 1954, April 12, 1958, December 8, 1958, and November 2, 1961



Harry S. Truman (left) with John P. Cosgrove (right), November 2, 1961. Photo by Benjamin E. Forte, News Associates, Inc. National Press Club Archives.

Following his presidency, Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) visited the National Press Club on a number of occasions during return trips to Washington from his home in Independence, Missouri. As he often told the press, he liked and respected the working reporters who covered his administration and valued the institution of the press conference. As president, he tried to hold weekly press conferences, giving a total of 324 during his two terms (1945-1953). The four post-presidential National Press Club talks presented here exhibit an air of camaraderie and friendly challenge that he clearly enjoyed. Truman rarely pulled punches as he answered questions and told stories, displaying his scrappy “give ‘em hell, Harry” approach to partisan politics and the earthy humor that endeared him to many reporters.

In contrast to his regard for the working press, Truman believed that editors, publishers, and some syndicated columnists treated him unfairly, often misrepresenting him, to further their own agendas. Truman was not a popular president during much of his time in office. His approval rating dropped from 87 to 32 percent in his first 18 months. While he recovered for brief periods, his ratings hit a low of 23 percent in November 1951 and rose to only 31 percent by the time he left office.

The first three of Truman’s Press Club talks included here occurred during the presidency of his successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. The two presidents maintained a well-publicized feud during Eisenhower’s presidency, a time Truman characterized as “one of the most unfortunate periods in the history of American government.” During

Truman's presidency, Eisenhower had worked amicably with Truman in a number of capacities: as supreme commander of Allied forces in western Europe during World War II; Army chief of staff from 1945 to 1948; and NATO supreme Allied commander in 1951. "At one time, I thought he was qualified to be President," Truman remarked about Eisenhower during the 1952 presidential campaign that Eisenhower won, "but since he has gone into politics, he does not seem to be the same man." Their conflict began during fall 1952 when Eisenhower shared campaign platforms with two vitriolic red-baiting senators, Joseph R. McCarthy and William E. Jenner. Both had denounced General George C. Marshall, formerly Truman's secretary of state and of defense, as a traitor and part of the Soviet Union's "great conspiracy" to conquer America, according to McCarthy. Marshall, the Army chief of staff during World War II, had been Eisenhower's mentor.

Truman was most upset that Eisenhower eliminated from a speech a planned tribute to Marshall at McCarthy's request. In the December 8, 1958, Press Club question-and-answer session, Truman remarked, "I gave him hell in the 1952 campaign." Eisenhower, he said, has "been mad at me ever since. I don't give a damn." Truman also was greatly rankled by the comment of Eisenhower's running mate, Richard M. Nixon, who charged that Truman, his current secretary of state, Dean Acheson, and Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson were "traitors to the high principles in which many of the nation's Democrats believe." Truman's animosity toward the man he called "Tricky Dicky, the political opportunist" was expressed in these Press Club talks.

May 10, 1954

Truman's talk of May 10, 1954, on the need for bipartisanship in foreign policy came at a time when his loyalty to America had come under attack. The tradition of forging bipartisan agreement regarding international affairs began during the 1944 election campaign when meetings on postwar international planning were held between representatives of the two presidential candidates. A two-party foreign policy agenda continued during Truman's first term, as a centrist, internationalist coalition in Congress worked to marginalize isolationists and the liberal left. Bipartisan accomplishments included the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift, the National Security Act of 1947, and NATO, but the coalition fell apart during the latter half of 1949 as Republicans, after losing big in the 1948 elections, blamed Truman's administration for the loss of China to communist rule and the development of an atomic device by the Soviet Union. In February 1950, McCarthy charged the Truman administration with harboring hundreds of communist spies who furnished the enemy with secret information. Truman countered in a press conference the next month that McCarthy's attacks aided the Soviet Union by sabotaging the nation's bipartisan foreign policy efforts.

Despite these attacks, a new bipartisan coalition formed in 1951 when Truman, in order to get Congress to pass a peace treaty with Japan and agree on an Asian security organization, shifted his views to correspond with those of the "China Bloc," a group of senators who advocated expanding the policy of containment to East Asia. President

Eisenhower continued to strive for a bipartisan consensus even as he refused to publicly challenge McCarthy and others, who called Democrats traitors.

In the Press Club talk, Truman blamed Eisenhower for failing to disavow these charges. Truman was incensed by an accusation leveled against him in November 1953 by Eisenhower's attorney general, Herbert Brownell, Jr., that he had promoted a known Soviet spy, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Harry Dexter White, to the sensitive position of director of the International Monetary Fund. Outraged, Truman characterized the charge as "without parallel, I believe, in the history of our country." "I have been accused, in effect," he seethed, "of knowingly betraying the security of the United States." In February 1954, McCarthy delivered a series of speeches sponsored by the Republican National Committee, in which he characterized the period of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations as "Twenty Years of Treason." Jenner likewise accused the Democratic administrations of having "tampered with the security of the United States and permitted traitors to bring us close to military defeat."

Eisenhower warned against indulging in extreme partisanship during dangerous times, but did not publicly rebuke McCarthy even when McCarthy began a Senate investigation into supposed communist infiltration of the Army. The Army-McCarthy hearings, televised live, exposed McCarthy's methods to a large nationwide audience for 36 days beginning on April 22, 1954. Truman's Press Club talk, coming in the midst of the hearings, made front-page headlines when he advised Eisenhower to "Get Rid of the 'Political Assassins.'" In the next two days, both the Senate Republican leader, William F. Knowland, and Eisenhower repudiated attacks on the loyalty of Democrats, though Eisenhower claimed he was not responding to Truman's appeal. McCarthy's approval ratings, while high in January 1954, dropped sharply during the hearings. The Senate censured him in December as his power dissipated.

At the Press Club, Truman was asked if he would as president send troops to war-torn Indochina, where three days earlier in Vietnam, French soldiers, fighting to protect a pro-French puppet government, surrendered at Dien Bien Phu to Chinese-backed Viet Minh forces following a 56-day siege. Truman in 1945 had acquiesced in France's re-colonization efforts in Indochina, and in 1950 began to send military aid. By 1954, the U.S. was providing nearly 80 percent of the budget for French forces. Eisenhower had enunciated the "domino theory" at a press conference in April 1954, predicting that if Vietnam fell to the communists, other nations in southeast Asia might also fall, Japan might suffer from the loss of trade and turn toward the Communists to survive, and Australia and New Zealand also might be threatened. Although the French requested American air strikes at Dien Bien Phu, and some in Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated the use of nuclear weapons, Eisenhower and Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway feared a Korea-like stalemate involving massive numbers of ground forces. The administration vowed only to intervene as part of a multilateral force, and because Great Britain declined to participate, there was no American military intervention at that time. Later that year, however, the U.S. began to replace France as the main Western power in Vietnam. Historians have debated to what extent the Truman Doctrine of containment delivered in an address to Congress in March 1947 may have led to a policy of U.S.

intervention in Vietnam, with its open-ended commitment “to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes.” Truman himself, in this May 1954 Press Club talk, declined to answer whether he would have committed American forces to Vietnam.

Truman also refused to speak about Federal Housing Agency scandals then under investigation by two congressional committees and an inquiry by the Eisenhower administration. The scandals involved the approval of inflated FHA-approved loans to builders and companies engaged in home repair and improvement under programs created during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations to stimulate the building of needed rental housing during the war and the postwar period.

A farmer before he entered politics, Truman was asked to comment on the “Brannan Plan,” a Fair Deal program of agricultural price supports proposed in 1949 but rejected, which recently had been in the news again. At the end of World War II, Truman, fearing the possibility of a new economic depression, had attempted to revive and expand dormant New Deal programs. The effort, later to be called the “Fair Deal,” was based on Roosevelt’s January 1944 plan to enact a “second Bill of Rights” in the postwar era. To avert the appeal of dictatorships, Roosevelt asserted, governments must provide all individuals with economic security. His proposed economic bill of rights included the right to a useful job, decent salary, adequate medical care, good education, economic security in old age and during periods of sickness, accidents, and unemployment, and freedom of businesses from unfair competition and domination by monopolies.

Truman restated Roosevelt’s goal in a message to Congress four days after the formal Japanese surrender in September 1945. In addition to areas set out by Roosevelt, he called for legislation to insure decent public housing and fair employment practices to prevent discrimination in hiring. The proposed programs were put on hold, however, for more than three years as Congress enacted legislation for reconversion to a peacetime economy and foreign policy measures to fight the Cold War.

In his January 1949 State of the Union address, Truman coined the program’s name as he declared, “Every segment of our population and every individual has the right to expect from his government a fair deal.” Some Fair Deal programs were enacted quickly, including expanded social security coverage, an increased minimum wage, child labor safeguards, and a prohibition against the purchase of company assets by competitors. Congress, however, voted down or watered down major Fair Deal programs due to factionalism, the power of special interests, the Korean War, the lack of effective lobbying, and a growing conservative outlook in Congress and the nation.

Truman’s secretary of agriculture, Charles F. Brannan, had wanted to cushion the nation’s family farms from periodic bankruptcies due to falling market prices. The Republican-led 80th Congress had passed the Sugar Act of 1948, which benefited some 56,000 of the nation’s 21 million farmers. Brannan’s plan, modeled after the Sugar Act, would subsidize remaining farmers by making up the difference between the market

price of commodities they sold and a value figured as an adjusted average from the previous ten years. To allow family farms to survive competition from large agribusiness enterprises, the plan limited payments to farmers with commodity amounts below a certain size. Brannan called the plan “the farmer’s equivalent of the laboring man’s minimum wage, social security, and collective bargaining agreements” and noted that consumers would benefit from low prices. Characterized, however, by the president of Quaker Oats as “a sugar-coated socialistic pill” and by the conservative American Farm Bureau Federation as “the road of tyranny, the end of personal liberty” that would lead to the “nationalization of agriculture and the distribution system,” the plan was defeated.

Eisenhower called the plan “monstrous” during the 1952 campaign and pledged that in his administration, “There will be no Brannan plans!” Yet in January 1954, he recommended to Congress a price support program for wool similar to the Brannan Plan. Cotton manufacturers soon lobbied for their own Brannan plan, and in the week prior to Truman’s talk, Agriculture Secretary Ezra T. Benson urged Congress to consider such a plan for butter. Truman took obvious pleasure in the irony of the situation.

April 12, 1958

Truman was in a happier mood when he appeared nearly four years later at a dinner celebrating the National Press Club’s 50th anniversary. He spoke proudly about the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library dedicated nine months earlier in a ceremony in his hometown of Independence, Missouri, presided over by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren. At the dedication, Warren, who had campaigned against Truman in the 1948 election as the Republican nominee for vice-president, noted that Truman’s presidency was “recognized as one of the most momentous periods in the history of our country and the world.” Warren stated that by making his papers available to the public for study, the Truman Library was providing a means whereby “peoples of all the earth may choose the right paths in the years to come.” Truman warmly noted Warren’s presence at the Press Club dinner.

The Truman Library was the first library built under the Presidential Library Act of 1955 that provided for a system of privately built repositories of presidential papers operated by the National Archives at the public’s expense. Although the Library of Congress had acquired papers of 23 presidents, many presidential papers had been destroyed or lost. Only three presidential libraries had been constructed prior to Truman’s. The State of Ohio created the first presidential library in 1914 for the papers of Rutherford B. Hayes. Herbert Hoover’s presidential papers were housed at the Hoover Library of War, Revolution, and Peace at Stanford University. In 1939 President Roosevelt developed a model for subsequent repositories when he signed into law an act to charter the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. Prior to 1978, presidents retained ownership rights over their papers after leaving office. In that year, Congress passed the Presidential Records Act, making papers relating to a president’s official duties government property. The Presidential Libraries Act of 1986 stated that new

libraries had to be built with money from endowments to offset some National Archives costs of operation.

December 8, 1958

Truman's appearance at the National Press Club on December 8, 1958 came one month after the Democrats won huge victories in both houses of Congress, an election in which Truman had campaigned extensively. At the luncheon, he made hard-hitting attacks on Eisenhower, Republicans, special interests, and the press, charging that editorial writers had failed to analyze the election as a "rising up" of the American people to protest the "significant change in American life" that had occurred in the six years since the Republicans came to power. The *New York Times* called the event before a standing-room-only audience "one of his best 'give-em-hell' performances."

Truman announced at the Press Club that he was in agreement with a "State of the Union message" that the Democratic Advisory Council had released two days earlier. The Council, as the party's liberal voice, criticized the Eisenhower administration's foreign and economic policies, and advocated an ambitious program calling for expansive social legislation. Among their goals, the Council hoped to reopen Southern public schools that had closed to avoid complying with Supreme Court decisions compelling desegregation; strengthen the 1957 Civil Rights Act; repeal the Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947 over Truman's veto to roll back provisions of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act; pass an anti-filibuster rule for the Senate; and give Washington, D.C. residents home rule, the right to vote in presidential elections, and voting representation in Congress.

Truman was asked by the press about his "Point Four" foreign aid plan, called a "Fair Deal' program for the world" by the *Washington Post*. The last in a program of four major courses of action to foster peace and freedom around the world that he announced in his January 1949 inaugural speech, the plan was characterized by Truman as a "bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas." He saw the initiative as a multinational cooperative enterprise to raise standards of living through increasing production in food, clothing, housing, and mechanical power.

Reporters asked Truman a few wry questions that he seemed to relish. To a query on whether he would play a piano duet with Vice-President Nixon, he answered no, but said he wouldn't mind having actress Lauren Bacall there. The response recalled his visit as vice-president in February 1945 to the National Press Club's "Servicemen's Canteen." As Truman played the piano in a stage show, the young actress was lifted to the top of the upright, where she sang to his accompaniment. The moment was captured in a famous photograph that highlighted Bacall's exposed legs as the two gazed amusedly at each other. Truman later wrote that his wife Bess was furious at the incident.

One questioner wanted to know the difference between a vicuna coat and a deep freeze. The question called attention to similarities between the recent resignation under pressure of Eisenhower's chief assistant, Sherman Adams, and a minor scandal during Truman's administration involving the questionable conduct of Truman's military aide, Maj. Gen. Harry H. Vaughan. Adams had been subject to a House inquiry concerning his acceptance of expensive gifts, including a vicuna coat, from a Boston industrialist under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission. In 1945, Vaughan had given friends, including Bess Truman, a number of scarce home freeze units supplied to him by a lobbyist.

At the end of the question-and-answer session, Truman was asked to reminisce about his years in office. He movingly related how Eleanor Roosevelt broke the news to him on April 12, 1945, that President Roosevelt had died and noted that his first decision as president resulted from a question from the press. At the end of the luncheon, the president of the Press Club reminded Truman of a promised drink he had offered members of the press covering a vacation of his years earlier at the secluded Reelfoot Lake in northwest Tennessee. In October 1945, Truman had invited reporters to drink some 20-year-old Jack Daniels sour mash whiskey at an off-the-record "old-fashioned bull session." In answer to a reporter's question, Truman made the announcement then that he did not plan to share the secret technology of the atom bomb with any other country. After he allowed reporters to quote his statement, they started off on a mad dash to find a Western Union office some 40-50 miles away. "I saved the whiskey," Truman needled his Press Club friends.

November 2, 1961

The Press Club luncheon on November 2, 1961, was held to honor the anniversary of Truman's triumph in the 1948 presidential election, called by one historian, "the biggest political upset in American history." Truman had alienated liberal Democrats who blamed him for the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1946 election. Henry A. Wallace, former vice-president and secretary of agriculture under Roosevelt and secretary of commerce under Truman, left the party and ran on the Progressive Party. On the party's right wing, a number of southerners had bolted in protest over the party's pro-civil rights platform and formed the States' Rights Democratic, or Dixiecrat, Party with South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond as their candidate.

The Republican candidate, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, led by five points in the final Gallup poll before the election. Truman's surprise victory has been judged to have resulted from his strong whistle-stop campaigning, his emphasis on New Deal accomplishments and 80th Congress failings, a good labor and farm voter turnout, a strong economy, a lackluster campaign by Dewey, little voter interest in either Wallace or Thurmond, overall voter indifference, and African-American support for Truman. Newspapers and commentators erroneously reported his loss. Truman's gleeful grin captured on film as he held a copy of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* bearing the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" has become an iconic image. Historians have noted that Truman's victory marked the beginning of a dominant bipartisan consensus still in place

during the Kennedy presidency that insured the continuation of New Deal social programs and a foreign policy of international cooperation among Western powers to contain communism.

Truman spent the night before the Press Club luncheon as President John F. Kennedy's guest in the White House, his first visit since leaving office. Kennedy held a dinner in his honor, where Truman played the piano, and invited the former president to attend an important National Security Council meeting the next day. Truman praised Kennedy at the Press Club luncheon for the "new spirit of hope" he saw revived in the country now that the Eisenhower era had passed.

Although Truman had not supported Kennedy during the 1960 primaries, once Kennedy emerged victorious and visited Truman at his home in Independence, the former president joined his campaign. When Truman reportedly remarked in Texas that Nixon, Kennedy's opponent in the election, "never told the truth in his life" and that anyone who would vote for him "ought to go to hell," Republicans demanded an apology. Truman denied making the latter comment, then told those who complained to "go to hell."

At the Press Club, the 77-year-old ex-president reminisced about the 1948 election campaign, advocated the merits of whistle-stop campaigning in comparison with television and radio, and surprisingly praised the 80th Congress that he had characterized during the campaign as "do-nothing" and "good-for-nothing." He now commended them for passing "some of the most significant foreign policy legislation in our history." During the question-and-answer session, Truman discussed his controversial decision to drop the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities in order to end World War II. He contended that the bomb saved one-quarter of a million lives on each side, and told his Press Club audience, "If I had to do it again, I would."

As usual, Truman castigated Eisenhower. He was asked to consider similarities between the recent controversy over the Kennedy administration's "muzzling" of Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker for indoctrinating troops with his right-wing political ideology, and Truman's dismissal in 1951 of General Douglas MacArthur from command in Korea for insubordination. The increased participation of military officers in politics had become an issue of debate in the country. Truman commented, with Eisenhower clearly in mind, "All generals ought to keep their mouths shut." Eight days later, however, on November 10, Eisenhower visited Truman at his Library in Independence, their first cordial meeting in nine years. Some two years later, after Kennedy's assassination, Truman and Eisenhower attended the funeral and had a long, friendly visit with each other.

*-- Alan Gevinson, Special Assistant to the Chief,
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