

The Making of a President:

Truman's First 10 Days

What kind of President is President Truman turning out to be? Ten days ago, when the fateful mantle of power was thrust upon him, there were widespread hopes and fears about how he would wear it. Would he be strong enough, decisive enough, knowledgeable enough, liberal enough?

It would be foolish to say that we now have the final answer to these questions. But we do have a 10-day record of Truman as President, and on the basis of those 10 days my answer is that thus far President Truman has turned out to be an impressively good President. I may have to eat my words tomorrow, which I would do in great sadness. But thus far the record is first-rate, and the Nation can enter the longer stretch with the feeling that the auspices are favorable, and the leadership honest, straightforward, liberal, and crisp.

Let me add that I do not base this judgment on President Truman's general declarations that he will carry out the Roosevelt policies. All but a few Vice Presidents who have succeeded to the Presidency have made such general declarations. The real test is rather in the specific decisions, appointments, and commitments that the President has made. I turn to those.

The most important decisions, for some time to come, will be those in the international field. This is also the area in which the greatest fears were felt about President Truman's knowledge and experience. Yet he has done well in this area. He made it clear immediately that the San Francisco Conference is the first order of business, and nothing must interfere with it. He secured Stalin's decision to send Molotov to San Francisco. He came out unreservedly for the Bretton Woods legislation, whose defeat or serious weakening in Congress would knock the underpinning from the San Francisco structure. He committed himself to the pending bill for continuing the reciprocal trade agreements program. He made it clear that he intends to continue the series of conferences begun at Teheran and Yalta, but also that the Yalta decision about the Polish government and its composition must stand, despite Russian requests to have the Warsaw government represented at San Francisco.



President Truman

These are only sketchy outlines for an international policy, but they are something to work on. In his stand on the reciprocal trade agreements—that is, on the tariff question—Truman has hit a blow at the Republican protectionists. And we must remember that, however much the champions of a high protective tariff may refuse to call themselves isolationists, that is what they are—economic isolationists. The Bretton Woods stand is even more important: what it amounts to is the conviction that nations must be economic partners after this war if they are to avoid being military enemies in the next.

What is not yet wholly clear is Truman's Russian policy. What he has done thus far is good, but it can lead in either direction, and everything depends on what follows it. Everything depends also on whether Truman shows he has the biggest skill Roosevelt had—skill and flexibility in negotiation with the leaders of the other Great Powers.

But most of the guiding straws have been in the winds of national policy. This is where Truman has been under the greatest pressure to abandon Roosevelt's policies and purge his personnel. Has he done it?

Issues Faced Squarely

The answer is that he has not. He committed his support unreservedly to the Office of Price Administration, which has been under bitter Congressional attack recently. Ditto for the new Selective Service Act. He committed himself to the creation of a Missouri Valley Authority, and also gave his support strongly to the program of the Federal Power Commission, which is generally the bugbear of the big hydro-electric power companies.

Going out on a limb still further, he committed himself to the legislation for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, a proposal which has stirred the fury of the Negro-baiters, who fear that an equal opportunity for Negroes in industry will spell the end of their world. Finally, he went out of his way—both at his press conference and after it—to point to his Senatorial record on the Negro question and to assure the Negroes of America that President Roosevelt's death would in no way weaken their position.

I have left for the end of the record the question of appointments and of postwar economic policy on the domestic front, because these are the most crucial tests of the liberalism of any President in our time. Legislation never is any stronger than the men whom the President chooses to carry it out—the administrative personnel of the Government. And the most important area in which it can operate is that of the postwar employment and production policies,

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where the pressure from the big economic power groups is fiercest.

Look at the record in this area. President Truman appointed John W. Snyder as Federal Loan Administrator—the job that Congress took away from Henry Wallace because it would give him strategic power in the postwar economy.

However puzzling may be the cheers with which both Jesse Jones and the administrative liberals in Washington hailed the choice, there is no doubt it was far better than the alternative which was powerfully urged on Truman—the appointment of E. W. Pauley, Democratic Party treasurer.

Even better was Judge Vinson's appointment of Robert Nathan to be Deputy Director of his office in charge of plans for the reconversion of war industries to civilian uses. If there is one man in the country fitted for that job, it is Nathan. Add to these the transfer of some surplus property functions from the Treasury to Secretary Wallace's Commerce Dept.

Record Is Good One

This is a good record in a troublesome and dangerous field. It is easy to be liberal in words, but the test comes when you put the right men in the important economic posts. And hardly less important in any Administration is the President's own secretariat. President Truman's choice of Charles G. Ross as his press secretary is again a liberal appointment. Ross is an old friend of Truman's, but he is also one of the best of the liberal group of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* correspondents in Washington. A reactionary in that post could do a lot of harm, a trimmer could kill a lot of good. Ross, I am told, has both courage and liberalism.

Thus the man whom the reactionaries tried to stampede into abandoning Roosevelt's policies has shown he means to hold on to them, and that he is determined not to be stampeded. There are still, of course, a lot of unanswered questions that Truman's later acts and decisions will have to answer. How far will he play ball with the political crowd with whom his rise to the Presidency has been associated? Can a man who has been associated with the Pendergast machine be able to keep the panting politicians and bosses out of the gravy? Harding became their prisoner after Wilson's death: will Truman be able to escape becoming their prisoner after Roosevelt's death? This will take real independence, and courage in resisting the whole parallelogram of pressures that comes crushing in on a President.

But Truman has shown that he does have courage. Without swinging sharply to the right as soon as he came into office, he still might have chosen to mark time, to stall, to wait for a favorable chance to make his swing.

He did not make that choice. He has been shrewd enough to make use of the tremendous wave of unity feeling that has swept the country. But he has used it for making commitments rather than avoiding them. He has extended a friendly hand both toward the Republicans and the conservative Democrats in Congress. He will need all the support he can get from them, especially in getting the World Security Treaty through the Senate when the time comes.

He Must Look Ahead

One thing not to forget is that Truman is a good political craftsman. Otherwise he could not have been the successful compromise candidate at the Chicago convention. And, as a politician, he must have his eye not only on the immediate years ahead, and the tasks they will bring, but also on 1948. He must know that if he makes a good record as President, it will be hard to beat him for re-election. He must know that he will not be the Republican choice in 1948, so he had better make a good record as a Democratic liberal. He must know that if the people will want to choose a conservative, the Republicans always can get the inside track, since they have had so long an experience in picking conservatives. He must know that Roosevelt was elected four times with the support of both branches of labor, of the liberals, of the Negroes, of the impoverished farmers. He must know that the next election will be decided by the ten million servicemen who will have returned with notions of their own on international and domestic liberalism—notions not formed with the help of press and radio reactionaries. He must know that he and his party must keep the support of these groups if the country is not to turn them out in 1948.

I do not say this is President Truman's only motivation, or even his principal one. But it is a rather compelling one for anyone who has shown in the past that he has political shrewdness. For the rest, Truman has other elements that have strengthened his stand. The Republicans have been unable to attack him openly or immediately, although there are signs that they finally are coming to the disillusioning conclusion that the President who succeeded Roosevelt is not a Republican. Moreover, Truman as a past Senator is a member of the most powerful gentlemen's club in the world. This will operate both ways: it may stay his hand in a number of instances, but it also makes it impossible for his opponents to muster against him the bitterness with which they attacked Roosevelt.

President Truman thus far has met the test. The demands of the crisis, the magnetic suction of his predecessor's greatness, the great traditions of the office, the calculations about the political future, and the nature of the man himself have combined to make the first 10 days heartening ones. No man in the history of the Vice Presidential succession has grown in stature so fast or so visibly.

—MAX LERNER

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