Harry S Truman

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To Secure These Rights

"We can't be leaders of the free world and draw a color line on opportunity."
-- Harry S Truman

"No citizen of this great country 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."

With those 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. Determined to act on those views, President Truman succeeded in bringing the issue of civil rights to the forefront of national attention.

The Senator From Missouri

Harry Truman's civil rights views surprised many people, because they seemed to contradict his southern heritage and his family. On June 28,1947, the day before becoming the first president to speak to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Truman wrote to his sister in Grandview. "Mamma won't like what I say because I wind up quoting old Abe. But I believe what I say and I am hopeful we may implement it." 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 had seen first-hand the plight of African-Americans in urban areas. Truman's military experience as an officer in World War I and post-war business dealings with a Jewish partner, Eddie Jacobson, also broadened his perspectives. By 1940 as he sought re-election 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: "But 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, then violently beat and blinded him. These events left a deep impression on the President in a way that no statistics ever could

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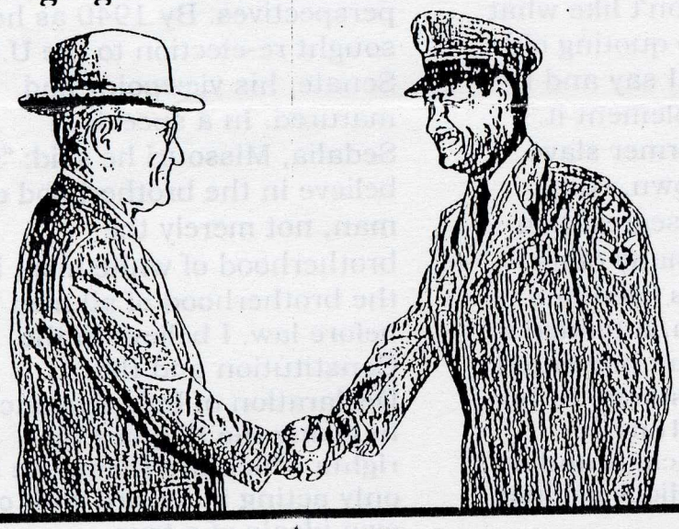
In late 1946, Harry Truman established "The President's Committee on Civil Rights." He instructed its members: "I want our Bill of Rights implemented in fact. We have been trying to do this for 150 years. We're making progress, but we're not making progress fast enough." The committee released its report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

On February 2, 1948 President Truman presented a daring civil rights speech to a joint session of Congress. Based on the committee's findings, he asked congress to support a ten point civil rights package that included; a permanent commission on civil rights; a strengthening of existing civil rights laws; federal protection against lynching; a ban on discrimination in interstate transportation; 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. In the November election, many Southern Democrats ("Dixiecrats") voted for South Carolina's Strom Thurmond for President. Despite this split, Truman narrowly upset the Republican Thomas Dewey. The Truman administration enacted little civil rights legislation because some Southern congressmen, who believed in segregation, blocked its recommendations.

De-Segregation of the Armed Forces



In July 1948, President Truman issued Executive Orders prohibiting discrimination in federal employment and to ending segregation in the Armed Forces. African-Americans had been in constant military service since the middle of the Civil War over eighty years earlier. But they served in separate units, where they often performed minor duties and were commanded by white officers. By 1954, a year after the Korean War ended the Army disbanded its last all-black unit.

Civil Rights And The Truman Legacy

Harry S Truman believed racial discrimination was wrong. He 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. President Truman made civil rights an important part of his domestic policy from 1945 to 1953. Some critics point out that he should have done more, while others thought he went too far.

Considering the climate of the time, it took a great deal of political courage for Truman demonstrated political courage while standing up for his convictions. Although Harry Truman never entirely overcame all of his personal prejudices, he was the first modern president to champion civil rights, paving the way for the legislative successes of the 1960's. Mr. Truman's heart-felt sense of fairness and his deeply rooted faith in the U.S. Constitution brought the issue of civil rights to the center of national concern.