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Which twentieth-century president was the first to propose and champion a broad and coherent civil-rights program on the national stage? The correct answer is neither of the century's great liberal champions and most inspiring orators–Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy–but rather Harry S. Truman, the thirty-third president of the United States. Even in this era of Trumanphilia, ushered in by David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, the contributions of the unassuming man from Independence in the field of civil rights go mostly overlooked.

Michael R. Gardner, a communications policy attorney in Washington, D.C., and a veteran of several presidential commissions, seeks to correct this oversight. In *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks*, Gardner argues that Truman had a greater commitment to civil rights than any president since Lincoln–and most subsequent presidents as well.

Although Gardner is an enthusiastic champion of President Truman and is correct in his assessment of Truman as a man who did what he believed was morally right, his book's narrow focus on Truman's moral beliefs as the driving force behind his activism produces a one-dimensional interpretation. Gardner wrongly deems politics irrelevant to Truman in regard to civil rights when history shows otherwise. In depicting Truman as a simple man who genuinely believed in the cause, and for that reason, acted on it, Gardner unfortunately ignores Truman's complexity–a quality central to the biographies by McCullough and Alonzo Hamby. The conventional portrait of Truman on which Gardner bases his book–that of the failed haberdasher who accidentally finds himself in the White House, where he performs with unexpected success–does not give him the credit he deserves. Further, Gardner excludes evidence that would strengthen his thesis. Also, he disregards the times when Truman did not act as a champion of civil rights due to pragmatism or political expediency. His failure to address these occasions not only leaves his book incomplete but also invites unfair criticism of Truman's legacy.

Gardner's central thesis is that Truman championed civil rights at a time when the movement was still in its infancy because of his "personal repugnance" at the brutal and deadly racist discrimination confronting returning black World War II veterans. Gardner describes the horrific violence being committed by a recently active Ku Klux Klan and devotes most of his book to depicting Truman's historic, multifaceted civil rights program.

Addressing Truman's background, Gardner accurately depicts it as an unlikely preamble to his civil rights program. Truman was born and raised as a Missourian from a racist rural background, whose grandparents owned slaves and whose family still remembered their brutal treatment by Jayhawkers and Union soldiers during the Civil War. An anecdote from the book best illustrates this point. On June 29, 1947, President Truman stood before the Lincoln Memorial and delivered a courageous speech calling for immediate state and federal action in the area of civil rights. With unprecedented resolve, he demanded that all Americans be afforded equal treatment under the law. "When I say all Americans, I mean all Americans."[1] No American President before Truman had addressed the NAACP, and no President since Abraham Lincoln had made so forceful a demand for civil rights for all people. Yet, before delivering the speech, Truman wrote home to his sister, warning her that he would be quoting Lincoln and saying things their mother might not like. "But I believe in what I say, and I'm hopeful we may implement it."

Truman built on his historic speech before the NAACP by creating, through executive order, a blue-ribbon federal commission to investigate the recent civil rights violations and propose solutions. The product of the inquiry by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, a 176-page report titled "To Secure these Rights," was the

blueprint for most federal civil rights initiatives for the next thirty years. Again, Truman went beyond these actions. On February 2, 1948, he delivered to Congress the first presidential message on civil rights, presenting a comprehensive list of ten proposals based on "To Secure These Rights." Among Truman's proposals were strengthening already-existing institutions, such as making the Civil Rights Division to the Justice Department permanent; enacting federal legislation against lynching and the poll tax; settling claims of the interned Japanese-Americans; and prohibiting segregation in interstate transportation–a statutory proposal that would directly challenge the U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

While Truman's omnibus civil rights bill languished in a Senate filled with powerful southern leaders and monolithic procedural roadblocks, he used other means at his disposal to salvage his civil rights program. On July 26, 1948, Truman signed Executive Orders 9980 and 9981: the first integrated the federal work force and the second integrated the United States Armed Forces. "With the stroke of the presidential pen" Truman brought about the most sweeping social change for African-Americans since the Civil War (p. 30). Remarkably, he took this step in a Presidential election year–one in which a survey of pollsters and journalists before the election had unanimously proclaimed Governor Thomas Dewey, Truman's Republican opponent, the victor. Further, as Gardner points out, Truman took each of these actions in the area of civil rights before the national civil rights movement had gained any steam.

Gardner also praises Truman for the *amicus curiae* briefs submitted by his Justice Department in support of the NAACP strategy of litigation to topple the apartheid system in America. Notable cases in which the Truman administration's Justice Department filed amicus briefs include *Shelley v. Kraemer*, *Sweatt v. Painter*, *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, *Hendersen v. United States*, and the five school desegregation cases later decided as *Brown v. Board of Education*. Taken together, these decisions outlawed *Plessy*'s "separate but equal doctrine" in education and declared restrictive covenants unconstitutional. Gardner credits the often over-looked Vinson Court, with its four Truman appointees, including Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson, for laying the groundwork for the great Warren Court revolution. This chapter offers a fascinating, alternative perspective on the Court's grappling with civil-rights issues–one that challenges the conventional emphasis on the Warren Court's central role.

Gardner's main contribution is to present a story that has been often overlooked by historians who credit other presidents for civil rights.[2] To demonstrate the social impact of Truman's accomplishments, Gardner includes statements from people who were involved or affected, ranging from members of Truman's inner circle, such as Clark Clifford, Tom Clark, Philleo Nash, and George Elsey, to students at Howard University who heard Truman's 1952 commencement address. Statements from Truman's diary and letters provide insight into his determined stance on civil rights. An excellent source that Gardner uses with skill is the biography of White House butler Alonzo Fields.[3] Fields's fond depiction of his friend Harry Truman speaks volumes about the President's true feelings.

And yet, Gardner scants or omits some bodies of evidence and argument even as he expertly deploys others. In Gardner's rush to tell the story of Truman's moral outrage and politically precarious response, he fails to look at a number of alternative explanations for the president's behavior.

Gardner scants the racism that Harry Truman felt and expressed in his early life. Racial slurs can be found in many of his letters to his wife Bess. Although David McCullough describes this race prejudice, it is nowhere to be found in Gardner's book. Perhaps Gardner deemed this evidence irrelevant because it pre-dated Truman's political career. Further, such views might well be expected from a farmer in that time and place. More troubling is Gardner's disregard of Truman's brief flirtation with membership in the Ku Klux Klan during his first electoral campaign. In 1922, he was running for the position of eastern judge of Jackson County, a non-judicial, administrative office akin to a county commissioner. In a highly competitive primary in which two candidates already had Klan support, a political ally of Truman advised him to join as well–on the grounds that it was "good politics." The ten-dollar membership had been paid but upon learning the Klan was against Catholics, Truman backed out. He had commanded a predominantly Catholic artillery battery in France during the World War. Truman, thereafter, became an enemy of the Klan, having his life threatened by them on occasion.[4]

Gardner repeatedly claims that Truman was motivated to act on civil rights solely by his moral outrage at the violence perpetrated against returning African-American veterans of World War II. He goes so far as to proclaim "[p]olitics had been irrelevant" to President Truman when he created the Civil Rights Committee and delivered his Civil Rights Message to Congress (p. 202). Evidence shows this statement is inaccurate.

Historians have attributed many of Truman's acts and initiatives in civil rights to ulterior political motives, which Gardner does not identify or address. In fact, Truman may have been the first President to appreciate the power of the African-American vote and court it actively. During his career as Senator, scholars have attributed his votes for civil rights legislation to his reliance on the African-American population in Kansas City, who backed the candidates of the city's political boss (and Truman's political godfather), Tom Pendergast.[5] In 1940, Truman was fighting an uphill battle for reelection–a contest foreshadowing his run for the Presidency in 1948. His Democratic primary opponent was Governor Lloyd Stark, a popular, well-financed opponent with the power of the state's executive office behind him. The Pendergast machine was in ruin, victimized by investigations and indictments (rooted in partisanship but justified by their results), including the conviction of Pendergast himself for tax evasion. Without machine backing, Truman was alone, and most Missourians counted him out. Against this background, Senator Truman made his first political speech in favor of civil rights at a stop along his campaign over the oppressively hot highways of Missouri in the town of Sedalia. His call for equality for African-Americans, before a nearly all-white crowd of Missourians, showed great courage and even greater respect for the power of the African-American vote–a factor that Stark ignored, to his ultimate cost. The success of Truman's campaign for a second Senatorial term taught him a valuable lesson about the powerful voice of this emerging constituency.

This courting of African-American voters was an embedded practice in the Truman administration, one that Gardner wrongly disregards. The Truman administration attempted to balance the liberal wing of the Democratic Party with the racist Southern Democrats, in a strategy described by aide Phileo Nash as "backtrack after the bang." The idea was to present a bold statement of intended action to satisfy the New Deal liberals and then back off from that stance to regain or preserve the support of the Southern Democrats.[6]

In the 1948 election, Truman overcame the defections of the right and left wings of the Democratic Party to defeat the Republican front-runner, Governor Thomas E. Dewey, and win reelection.[7] Some historians have attributed Truman's miraculous victory to a report entitled "The Politics of 1948."[8] The plan of this report was to court the African-American and labor vote to reassemble the New Deal coalition and ride it into the White House.[9] (Some historians and Truman advisors say the report only confirmed what Truman already knew.) This strategy required a delicate approach–an active stance on civil rights that did not alienate the South unduly. Truman himself viewed the third-party candidacy of Henry A. Wallace as the greatest impediment to his reelection. Thus, he felt that positive action on civil rights was the key to victory in 1948. This strategy has been credited as the driving force behind the President's Civil Rights Message in February 1948.[10] Although Gardner briefly mentions this pamphlet, he omits its recommendation to court African-American voters (p. 90).

Gardner's disregard of politics leads to an inaccurate history of major events. For example, consider Gardner's depiction of the debate over the civil rights plank in the 1948 Democratic party platform. A public-interest group active within the party, the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), pushed for a civil-rights plank that included all the proposals from Truman's Civil Rights message to Congress.[11] Interestingly, according to historian William C. Berman, Truman and his supporters fought the ADA and favored the milder civil rights plank from the 1944 Democratic platform, to preserve party unity.[12] Much to the chagrin of Truman and the Southern Democrats, a majority of the convention delegates supported the ADA and its strong civil rights plank. Gardner depicts this as a victory for Truman (p. 99), whereas Berman (who is cited in Gardner's bibliography) shows otherwise.[13] At the least, Gardner should have addressed this debate. In light of Truman's appreciation of the black vote from his experiences in Missouri and in light of "The Politics of 1948" pamphlet, it seems likely that Truman hoped to perform another balancing act by courting African-American voters without alienating white Southerners. At the 1948 Democratic convention, Truman fell off this political tightrope. Always a political pragmatist (and an avid poker player), Truman then played the hand that he was dealt. A map showing the path of Truman's epic "whistle-stop" campaign shows how he did so. Of the thousands of miles of train tracks traversed, none bisected the old Confederacy. The African-American and liberal votes secured as a result of the President's civil-rights activism and liberal platform proved vital in Truman's reelection.[14]

By failing to deal with these deft, sometimes devious political maneuvers, Gardner leaves his argument for the sincerity of Truman's commitment to civil rights open to serious challenge. But such challenges to Truman's civil-rights policies, stressing political ulterior motives as the roots of his civil-rights mission, do not convincingly undermine that mission or Truman's sincerity in following it. Recognizing a powerful constituency, listening to their complaints and acting to please them is

the essence of politics. Alternatively, Truman simply could have courted the disaffected Dixiecrats and moved the New Deal coalition to the right, a strategy that logically would have seemed more appealing to a grandson of slave-holders. Truman's greatness lies in his synthesis of political acumen, recognition of the gross inequities in the segregated American nation, and in taking advantage of an opportunity to protect African-American citizens and win their political support.

To Truman's credit, he often continued his push for civil rights after his purely political objective was achieved. In his drive to desegregate the armed forces, Truman pushed the military even after his reelection in 1948 and never backed down. He deemed it a personal crusade, vowing to "knock somebody's ears down" to achieve sweeping desegregation at every level and in every branch of the armed forces.[15]

Critics also take Truman to task for backing down on most of his civil rights program in Congress, but political realities necessitated it. After Truman lost a procedural battle in the Senate to reform its cloture rules (and thus lost the battle to prevent Southern Senators from filibustering any civil-rights measure to death), any hope of enacting meaningful civil rights legislation was lost.[16] To prevent the entire Fair Deal program from meeting a similar fate, and to avoid alienating Congress when he needed its help to fight the Cold War, Truman had to cut his losses. In addition, the procedural reforms to the Senate that Truman sought were considerable obstacles. It was only fifteen years later, after a series of legislative battles, that Congress enacted the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.[17]

Evidentiary oversights also prove damaging to Gardner's work. When discussing Truman's motivation to create the Civil Rights Committee, he states, "The best insight into Truman's motivation comes from his own words in his statement issuing Executive Order 9808." Better evidence in support of Gardner's thesis is available. Before the Democratic National Convention in 1948, a group of Southern Democrats asserted their complete support of the President, provided he backed off from his support of civil rights. The President commented on the similarity of their backgrounds and admitted that his experiences "would foster the personal belief that you are right." With apparent sincerity he explained how his "stomach turned over" upon hearing of the acts of cruelty and violence against returning African-American soldiers. "I shall fight to end evils like this."[18]

President Truman's belief in the principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights was a compelling motivation in his civil rights initiatives. The theme of the Constitution for all people runs throughout his career. He first referred to it in his speech at Sedalia. On creating the Civil Rights Commission, Truman set its objective as "our Bill of Rights implemented in fact."[19] When asked what sources were used in writing his civil rights message to Congress, Truman cited only the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.[20]

A statement from a critical contemporary of President Truman may be most telling in appreciating the latter's commitment to civil rights. When J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina was questioned why he was leaving the Democratic Party Convention of 1948, given that Truman was just promising the same things that Roosevelt did, Thurmond responded: "But Truman really means it."[21]

A final motivation for Truman's civil-rights activism was his stubborn determination. When Truman took on a cause, he fought tirelessly to see it through. This tenacity appears throughout his career, from the major road construction project he spearheaded throughout Missouri as county judge to the Marshall Plan. His indomitable initiative, embodied in the famous "The Buck Stops Here" plaque he displayed on his desk, also drove his civil rights pursuits.

A question that Gardner leaves unanswered is why Truman, instead of Franklin D. Roosevelt or John F. Kennedy, was the first president who championed civil rights as a near-personal quest. (Asked in a more provocative way, was Truman morally superior to the Democrats in the White House who preceded and followed him?) The answer may lie in his life story. Truman's uncommon greatness comes from his common experiences. He related to the bank teller, the night school student, the farmer, the oil speculator, the veteran, the store owner, the county executive so well because, at some point in his life, he played each of these roles. His summers were spent not on a sailboat at Campobello or Hyannisport but behind a plow in Grandview, Missouri. He was the friend of the common man because he spent his life among common men. And when his Presidency ended, he returned to a life among them, residing in the same house in Independence, Missouri where he had lived since 1919, twenty miles from his family farm and a few blocks from his high school, his church, and the county courthouse where his political career began. Merle Miller declared Truman "the last human being to occupy the White House."[22]

In sum, much of what Truman did in civil rights came

from his belief in the common decency and respect deserved by all people. His ordinary background and unassuming disposition, combined with his dedication to preserving the Bill of Rights for all people, and his self-taught knowledge of history predisposed Harry Truman to do what was right. Gardner is correct in identifying "moral beliefs" as key to Truman's work for civil rights – but those beliefs did not have only one source. The totality of these beliefs, his obstinate determination, his political astuteness, and his progressive understanding of a powerful emerging constituency ignored by his peers, led to Truman's great civil rights contributions.

Notes

[1]. Address Before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (June 29, 1947), in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S Truman, 1947* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1948), 311.

[2]. Gardner seems particularly annoyed at one oversight–that of ABC news anchorman Peter Jennings, in a 1997 television documentary, crediting John F. Kennedy as the first president to view civil rights as a moral issue (p. 32). Throughout his book, Gardner expertly disputes this claim.

[3]. Alonzo Fields, *My 21 Years in the White House* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961).

[4]. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 159-165.

[5]. William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970), 8.

[6]. Ibid., 152.

[7]. McCullough, 590.

[8]. Kenneth O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 157.

[9]. Ibid., 158. See also Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 431.

[10]. Ibid.

[11]. McCullough, 638-639.

[12]. Berman, 108.

[13]. Ibid., 113. Similarly, Hamby depicts the ADA platform fight as against Truman's "opposition," 448.

[14]. McCullough, 640.

[15]. Donald R. McCoy, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 170.

[16]. Hamby, *Man of the People*, 495.

[17]. On the titanic battle fought in the Senate in 1957 to secure even a mild, watered-down Civil Rights Act in the face of determined Southern opposition, *see generally* Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson, III* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

[18]. McCullough, *Truman*, 429.

[19]. Remarks to the President's Committee on Civil Rights (January 15, 1948), in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S Truman, 1948* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1949), 98.

[20]. President's News Conference (February 5, 1948), in *id.*, 127.

[21]. McCullough, *Truman*, 645.

[22]. Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkley/Putnam, 1974), 9.

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