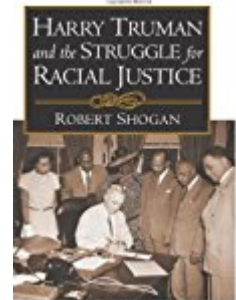


Robert Shogan. *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. xi + 233 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1911-5.



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Harry S. Truman was the first president to support the burgeoning civil rights movement of the 1940s and early 1950s. Some scholars argue that Truman's support of civil rights grew out of practical political calculations, while others suggest that Truman supported the early civil rights movement because he felt it was the morally correct thing to do.[1] In *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, Robert Shogan situates himself between these two arguments. As a young politician, Shogan demonstrates, Truman understood the importance of the black vote in Kansas City and Missouri thanks to Tom Pendergast; however, as president, Truman's "personal background and inclinations often override supposedly empirical political decisions" on the issue of civil rights (p. 182). Truman's support of the federal effort to promote civil rights resulted from his early admiration for William Jennings Bryan, his experience as a machine politician in Missouri, and, ultimately, his view that racial segregation violated the Constitution. By the end of his presidency, Truman ordered the integration of the

armed forces, instructed the Justice Department to support legal cases attacking segregation, and placed the power and prestige of the Oval Office firmly behind the nascent civil rights movement by proclaiming publicly on several occasions that he supported the end of racial segregation in America.

The book is organized into twelve chronological chapters, but can be broken down into three loosely defined sections: Truman's early life and career in Missouri; his life in Washington DC as a senator, vice president, and president; and the work of his administration in carrying out the desegregation of the armed services and supporting civil rights court cases. The book traces the development of a young man from a pro-Confederate family in Missouri, who at one point paid for a membership in the Ku Klux Klan, into a future proponent of civil rights. The author devotes the bulk of the book, chapters 2 through 9, to Truman's rise from local Missouri politician to the Oval Office. While Truman never championed civil rights throughout most of his political career, he

understood the importance of the black vote in Missouri and appealed to black voters; however, Shogan describes his stance on civil rights as “ambiguous, and considering the hopes he occasionally aroused with his rhetoric, ultimately disappointing” (p. 82). Truman’s time as senator followed a similar path as he remained ambiguous on the issue of civil rights.

As president, however, his commitment to civil rights became more pronounced. In the first two years of his presidency, he supported the creation of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) over the disapproval of southern Democrats and met with important black leaders like Walter White and Paul Robeson to discuss the problem of racial violence following the end of WWII. The outburst of racial violence in the immediate postwar years, Shogan argues, was the turning point for Truman’s concern for civil rights. After 1946, his “attitude had hardened from concern to resolve” (p. 91). Throughout the rest of his presidency, the Truman administration took the most proactive steps toward civil rights for African Americans than any previous president in the twentieth century. Truman advocated the abolition of the poll tax, antilynching legislation, the desegregation of the armed forces, and a civil rights division of the Justice Department, among other reforms. His stance on civil rights famously split the Democratic Party in the 1948 presidential election as Strom Thurmond and other southerners established the Dixiecrat Party and Henry Wallace campaigned as the Progressive Party’s candidate. Due to his stance on civil rights, Shogan counters arguments that Truman’s support for civil rights was simply a political calculation, stating, “It is reasonable to conclude that Truman did more for the civil rights cause than it did for him” (p. 144).

In the last, and most interesting, section of the book, chapters 10 and 11, Truman falls out of the narrative and Shogan delves into the work of various members of the Truman administration as

they carried out the desegregation of the armed services and supported civil rights litigation. The confines placed on presidential power by the Constitution, or what Shogan describes as “the Madisonian hamstrings of pitting the ambition and interests of one political branch against another,” forced Truman to issue executive orders and support civil rights causes from behind the scenes instead of relying on congressional legislation (p. 88). Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 eliminated discrimination in the federal government’s civilian agencies and in the armed services. Truman signed both orders into law on July 26, 1948, but the work was far from over. The success of these orders, especially the desegregation of the military, depended largely on the efforts of a committee, chaired by Charles H. Fahy, established by Truman to oversee desegregation. While the committee worked to overcome the resistance of various branches of the military, specifically the army, it turned out that the need for soldiers in the Korean War “compelled the services ... to abandon their traditions and their deep-seated prejudices” (p. 160). Similarly, much of the Truman’s administration’s championing of civil rights law suits came from behind the scenes, particularly the work of Attorney General Tom Clark. At Truman’s insistence, the Justice Department wrote a series of *amicus curiae* briefs in support of civil rights law suits being decided by the Supreme Court. Truman’s decision to utilize the *amicus curiae* briefs to support civil rights, according to Shogan, “was the crowning triumph in the department’s effort to use the courts to make the country live up to its constitution” (p. 178).

As with any biography of Truman, Shogan relies heavily on the Harry S. Truman papers and memoirs, archival material at the Library of Congress and the Truman Library, and the records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He also utilizes the extensive secondary literature that covers Truman’s life. In many instances, Shogan comes to similar conclusions as previous biographers. Namely,

Shogan and others argue that Truman decided to cast his lot with the quest for racial justice in 1946 after a series of race-related violence and a meeting with Walter White and delegates from the NAACP.[2] Shogan agrees with previous scholars who acknowledged the influence of William Jennings Bryan on Truman's political career and ideology.[3] Lastly, Shogan confirms previous scholarship that placed Truman at the forefront of the federal government's support of civil rights for African Americans.[4] Where Shogan stands out most noticeably is in his overall thesis that political calculations or moral suasion alone could not account for Truman's support for civil rights; instead Truman's ideas evolved over time as his early life and political experiences shaped his view on discrimination and race relations. Yet Shogan could have made his contribution more forceful by clearly explaining how his analysis differs from previous interpretations or how previous scholars misinterpreted Truman's actions.

Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice is wonderfully written and balanced. While Shogan clearly admires Truman, he is quick to remind the reader that despite Truman's support of civil rights, "he still clung to the sometimes self-contradictory view that while blacks were fully entitled to protection of their constitutional rights, they should also know their place" (p. 179). Moreover, *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice* illustrates the complexities of the checks and balances at the federal level and how presidents can overcome congressional obstacles, and goes into great detail explaining the process of desegregation of the army and the behind-the-scenes support lent by the Department of Justice in civil rights cases before the Supreme Court. Finally, Shogan reemphasizes the point that before Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the national guard to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; John F. Kennedy provided limited protection to freedom riders and James Meredith; and Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, Truman, the

unobtrusive machine politician from Missouri, put the weight of the federal government behind the civil rights movement.

Notes

[1]. William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1970); x; Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 30; Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); and David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 587-589, 990. For a good overview of this debate, see Raymond H. Geselbracht, ed., *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2007), xi-xxii.

[2]. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights*, 16; William E. Pemberton, *Harry S. Truman: Fair Dealer and Cold Warrior* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 114; and Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 293.

[3]. McCullough, *Truman*, 219, 272; Pemberton, *Harry S. Truman*, 12; and Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 581.

[4]. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman*, 285; Harold F. Gosnell, *Truman's Crises: A Political Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 275-276; Hamby, *Man of the People*, 433-435; McCullough, *Truman*, 586-587; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 391-393; and Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights*, 219.

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