



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Delegate Magazine 1976**

Extracted on Apr-23-2024 04:59:20

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[[image - black and white photograph of man in suit and tie with eyeglasses]]

## BLACKS IN AND UNDER THE TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION

By Frederick S. Weaver

If there ever was a man sent from Heaven to remove from the Negro his last shackles of bondage, his name was Harry S. Truman. He may not have succeeded in his every endeavor, but the record is replete with examples that he "did his damndest."

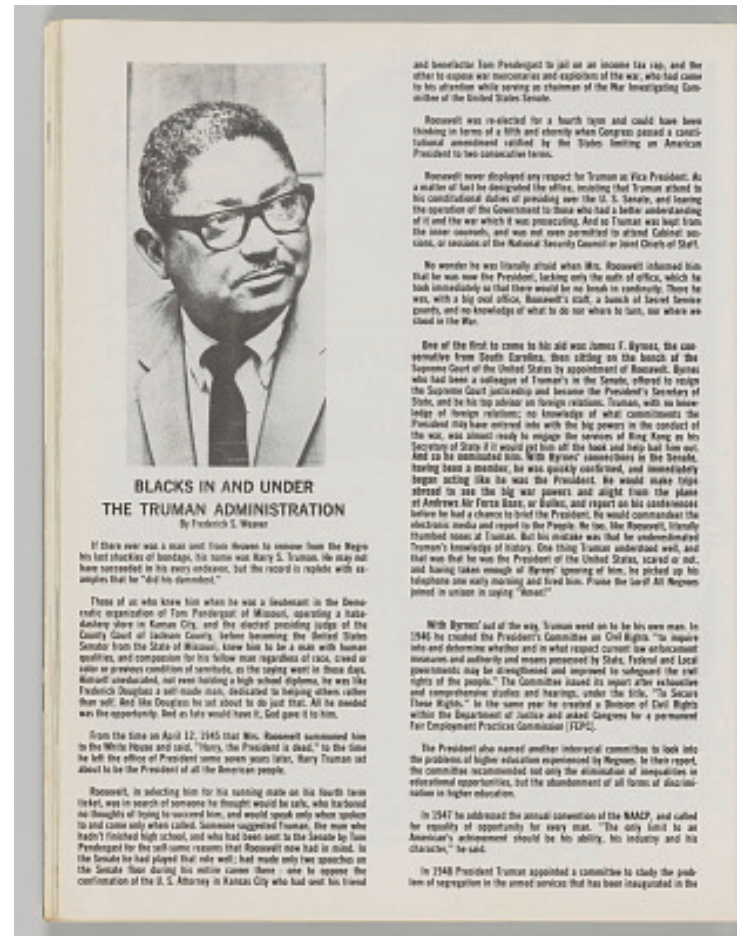
Those of us who knew him when he was a lieutenant in the Democratic organization of Tom Pendergast of Missouri, operating a habadashery store in Kansas City, and the elected presiding judge of the County Court of Jackson County, before becoming the United States Senator from the State of Missouri, knew him to be a man with human qualities, and compassion for his fellow man regardless of race, creed or color or previous condition of servitude, as the saying went in those days. Himself uneducated, not even holding a high school diploma, he was like Frederick Douglass a self-made man, dedicated to helping others rather than self. And like Douglass he set about to do just that. All he needed was the opportunity. And as fate would have it, God gave it to him.

From the time on April 12, 1945 that Mrs. Roosevelt summoned him to the White House and said, "Harry, the President is dead," to the time he left the office of President some seven years later, Harry Truman set about to be the President of all the American people.

Roosevelt, in selecting him for his running mate on his fourth term ticket, was in search of someone he thought would be safe, who harbored no thoughts of trying to succeed him, and would speak only when spoken to and come only when called. Someone suggested Truman, the man who hadn't finished high school, and who had been sent to the Senate by Tom Pendergast for the self-same reasons that Roosevelt now had in mind. In the Senate he had played that role well; had made only two speeches on the Senate floor during his entire career there - one to oppose the confirmation of the U.S. Attorney in Kansas City who had sent his friend and benefactor Tom Pendergast to jail on an income tax rap, and the other to expose war mecenaries and exploiters of the war, who had come to his attention while serving as chairman of the War Investigating Committee of the United States Senate.

Roosevelt was re-elected for a fourth term and could have been thinking in terms of a fifth and eternity when Congress passed a constitutional amendment ratified by the States limiting an American President to two consecutive terms.

Roosevelt never displayed any respect for Truman as Vice President. As a matter of fact he denigrated the office, insisting that Truman attend to his constitutional duties of presiding over the U.S. Senate, and leaving the operation of the Government to those who had a better understanding of it and the war which it was prosecuting. And so Truman was kept from the inner counsels, and was not even permitted to attend Cabinet sessions, or sessions of the National Security Council or Joint Chiefs of Staff.



No wonder he was literally afraid when Mrs. Roosevelt informed him that he was now the President, lacking only the oath of office, which he took immediately so that there would be no break in continuity. There he was, with a big oval office, Roosevelt's staff, a bunch of Secret Service guards, and no knowledge of what to do nor where to turn, nor where we stood in the War.

One of the first to come to his aid was James F. Byrnes, the conservative from South Carolina, then sitting on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States by appointment of Roosevelt. Byrnes who had been a colleague of Truman's in the Senate, offered to resign the Supreme Court justiceship and become the President's Secretary of State, and be his top advisor on foreign relations. Truman, with no knowledge of foreign relations; no knowledge of what commitments the President may have entered into with the big powers in the conduct of the war, was almost ready to engage the services of King Kong as his Secretary of State if it would get him off the hook and help him bail out. And so he nominated him. With Byrnes' connections in the Senate, having been a member, he was quickly confirmed, and immediately began acting like he was the President. He would make trips abroad to see the big war powers and alight from the plane at Andrews Air Force Base or Dulles, and report on his conferences before he had a chance to brief the President. He would commandeer the electronic media and report to the People. He too, like Roosevelt, literally thumbed noses at Truman. But his mistake was that he underestimated Truman's knowledge of history. One thing Truman understood well, and that was that he was the President of the United States, scared or not, and having taken enough of Byrnes' ignoring him, he picked up his telephone one early morning and fired him. Praise the Lord! All Negroes joined in unison in saying, "Amen!"

With Byrnes' out of the way, Truman went on to be his own man. In 1946 he created the President's Committee on Civil Rights "to inquire into and determine whether and in what respect current law enforcement measures and authority and means possessed by State, Federal, and Local governments may be strengthened and improved to safeguard the civil rights of the people." The Committee issued its report after exhaustive and comprehensive studies and hearings, under the title, "To Secure These Rights." In the same year he created a Division of Civil Rights within the Department of Justice and asked Congress for a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission [FEPC].

The President also named another interracial committee to look into the problems of higher education experienced by Negroes. In their report, the committee recommended not only the elimination of inequalities in educational opportunities, but the abandonment of all forms of discrimination in higher education.

In 1947 he addressed the annual convention of the NAACP, and called for equality of opportunity for every man. "The only limit to an American's achievement should be his ability, his industry and his character," he said.

In 1948 President Truman appointed a committee to study the problem of segregation in the armed services that has been inaugurated in the

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