

“Truman”
David McCullough
Book Note by Dave Kraft

“One-man-with-courage-makes-a-majority”

Just after the war officially began in the spring of 1861, holding him in her lap while explaining the large print in the family Bible, she (his mother) taught him to read before he was five. It was thus, by getting along with people, he discovered, that he could nearly always get what he wanted. For his tenth birthday, in the spring of 1894, his mother presented him with a set of large illustrated volumes grandly titled in gold leaf *Great Men and Famous Women*. He would later count the moment as one of life’s turning points. He loved best the story of Hannibal, who had only one eye. “There is not in all history [he read] so wonderful an example of what a single man of genius may achieve against tremendous odds. He studied the careers of “great men.”

Above all do not appear to others what you are not. He read the Bible (twice through by the time he was twelve. He was never popular like other boys, never one of the fighters as he called them. he wasn’t considered a sissy exactly, only different, “serious,” as one recalled: They wanted to call him a sissy, but they just didn’t do it because they had a lot of respect for him. With girls of his own age he was so shy he could barely speak. His initial brush with other children in Independence was at Sunday School when the family first moved to town. Matt had sent him to the big, new red-brick First Presbyterian Church on Lexington Street, Harry met a blond-haired, blue-eyed little girl named Elizabeth Wallace and decided she was the most entrancing creature he had ever seen. But it was five years before he dared say a word to her.

Unlike his own father, John (Harry’s dad) was considered a “liberal” in religion. He professed great faith in God, but faith also in what could be accomplished through courage and determination. He had no use for a coward. He raised his children to have faith in themselves and their potentialities. The population (Independence) was six thousand and growing, but only slowly. Compared to Kansas City it was a sleepy backwater, churchgoing, conservative, rooted to the past, exactly as most residents preferred. Local merchants were described as unexcelled “in regard to integrity, uprightness and faithfulness in business affairs and cordiality and good nature in social life.” The summer of 1901, the year Harry finished high school.

Honesty was the best policy. It saved time and worry, because if you always told the truth you never had to keep track of what you said. Make yourself useful. Anything worthwhile required effort. He appears never to have questioned such dictates, any more than he questioned the established inequality of black people.

From Sunday School and his own reading of the Bible, Harry knew many passages by heart—particularly Matthew 5, 6, and 7, the Sermon on the Mount. “Ye are the salt of the earth. . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works. ”

He memorized a prayer, one he would say through much of his life:

Oh! Almighty and Everlasting God, Creator of Heaven, Earth and the Universe: Help me to be, to think, to act what is right, because it is right; make me truthful, honest and honorable in all things; make me intellectually honest for the sake of right and honor and without thought of reward to me. Give me the ability to be charitable, forgiving and patient with my fellowmen—help me to understand their motives and their shortcomings—even as Thou understandest mine! Amen, Amen, Amen.

Say what you mean, mean what you say, he was taught at home. Keep your word. Never get too big for your britches. Never forget a friend. Not everyone lived up to them, of course, but to Harry it seemed everyone ought to try. But the store accommodated the town in yet another way, as Harry soon discovered, and it was this apparently that awakened him for the first time to the hypocrisies of certain prominent citizens known for their moral rectitude, the “high hats,” as he called them. the town remained solidly Democratic.

People were born and raised Democrats as they were born and raised Baptists or Catholics. It was not something you questioned. As one said, “You were a Democrat come hell or high water. Or you were a Republican.” He grew dutifully, conspicuously studious, spending long afternoons in the town library, the library contained perhaps two thousand volumes. Harry and Charlie Ross vowed to read all of them, encyclopedias included, and both later claimed to have succeeded. “I don’t know anybody in the world that ever read as much or as constantly as he did,” remembered Ethel Noland. “He was what you call a ‘book worm.’”

He decided, he said, that men make history, otherwise there would be no history. History did not make the man, he was quite certain. In Harry’s class, largest yet at the new high school, there were thirty girls and just eleven boys. The influence of his teachers on his life, Harry later said, was second only to that of his mother, in the composition book from senior year, writing on Antonio, he said that though ideal men were few, his ideal man “should in the first place be brave; then he should fear his God . . . he must not be cold, haughty, or hypocritical; but he must have a warm heart and love someone (a woman is preferable).”

“When a man loses control of his passions he is gone,” wrote sixteen-year-old Harry Truman. I like a man who has enough worldly wisdom to take care of himself; but I like him to have time to love both his God and those around him. Measured by the time and effort expended, the most important activity in his life was the piano. Practicing two hours a day without fail, beginning at five o’clock every morning. John Truman said. “He knew Harry had ability,” Vivian remembered. “He liked the way he never had an idle moment. . . .” Where Harry and his father found common ground was in the sociability and excitement of politics. The night of graduation, high school May 30, 1901, Harry was seventeen.

At age fifty-one, John Truman was wiped out. When the work was completed six months later, and the time came to say goodbye, a foreman, wishing him well, announced to all within earshot that Harry Truman was an “all right” fellow. “He’s all right from his asshole out in every direction.” It was Harry’s first public commendation.

In May of 1905, Harry signed up with a new National Guard unit. “I was twenty-one years old in May of that year,” had things gone differently he might have wound up playing the piano in a

whorehouse, but there is no evidence he ever set foot in such a place, or that he “carried on” in Kansas City in any fashion. Ed Young, the local veterinarian, described Harry as “always bustling around getting things done.” Harry could “stir up as good a batch of biscuits as any woman” and he could admit a mistake. “Brownie, from now on use your own judgment.” And those orders were never changed as long as I worked for Harry. After three years on the farm, he joined the Masons. “You know when people can get excited over the ordinary things in life, they live,” he said at one point. He wanted money, yet he knew it to be a less than satisfactory measure of success, Harry, she said a lifetime later, never complained about anything unless there were onions in the potato salad. “Harry didn’t like onions.” As would be said later in newspaper articles, he never lost the farm habits of early rising and hard work. His mother would say the farm was where Harry got his common sense.

He turned thirty-three the spring of 1917, He had never been elected anything until now. and while an exacting disciplinarian, he knew also to treat those under him with kindness and understanding. “Personally, I think Harry is one of the cleanest fellows . . . the cleanest fellows morally that I ever saw, or know,” First Lieutenant Edgar Hinde of Independence would remember. “I never saw him do anything out of the way that would be questionable in the way of a moral situation. He was clean all the way through. I always admired him for that quality and you know when a man’s in the Army, why his morals get a pretty good test.”

And he had, as an older man, a very quiet sort of a way of serving as a leader. He was a disciplinarian but he was very fair. Mark Twain and Charles Dickens remained his favorite authors. Andrew Jackson and Robert E. Lee were to be his lifelong heroes.

He had new confidence in himself. He had discovered he could lead men and that he liked that better than anything he had ever done before. He found he had courage—that he was no longer the boy who ran from fights—and, furthermore, that he could inspire courage in others. Ethel Noland remembered Harry’s expression as he stood watching Bess come down the aisle. “You’ve just never seen such a radiant, happy look on a man’s face.” It had been nine years since the night Harry returned the pie plate. He was now thirty-five; Bess was thirty-four. “It Takes 65 Muscles of the Face to Make a Frown and 13 to Make a Smile— Why Work Overtime?”

Fifteen years after the store went under, Harry would still be paying off on the haberdashery, and as a consequence would be strapped for money for twenty years. “Most people don’t think for themselves. They lean on newspapers.” Candidate Truman opened his campaign two months short of his thirty-eighth birthday. Only someone of extraordinary energy could have maintained the pace. “If one thing did not work—he’d get into something else right away. He was never idle, always operating.”

Hinde remembered, a blond woman in a negligée opened the door. Harry spun on his heels and ran back down the hall, disappearing around the corner. Hinde thought it was a fear verging on the abnormal. He just didn’t want any women around his room in a hotel. . . . He had a phobia on it.

“Three things ruin a man,” Harry would tell a reporter long afterward. “Power, money, and women. “I never wanted power,” he said. “I never had any money, and the only woman in my life is up at the house right now

He was scrupulous over money almost to a fault, but also over the range of small favors and shortcuts, the expedient little “arrangements” by which politicians traditionally benefited—so much so that stories about him would be told for years. “Son, I don’t do business that way,” he said, and paid the bill. Since childhood at my mother’s knee, I have believed in honor, ethics and right living as its own reward. I find a very small minority who agree with me on that premise. He’s not true to his wife (and a man not honorable in his marital relations is not usually honorable in any other).

He had always thought most men had a sense of honor. Now he wasn’t at all sure. What chance was there for a clean honest government, he wondered, when a bunch of vultures sat on the sidelines? Bess had no wish for more, no desire whatever for public attention or acclaim. Margaret could not recall her father sitting down quietly at home without a book in his hand.

With the end of his term in 1934, Harry Truman would be fifty years old, have come to the place where all men strive to be at my age and I thought two weeks ago that retirement on a virtual pension in some minor county office was all that was in store for me. particularly would he remember those who treated him well when he first arrived in Washington, at age fifty, knowing almost no one and entirely without experience as a legislator.

“Harry, don’t start out with an inferiority complex,” Lewis said kindly. “For the first six months you’ll wonder how the hell you got here, and after that you’ll wonder how the hell the rest of us got here.” “He came to the Senate, I believe, with a definite inferiority complex,” wrote his boyhood friend Charlie Ross, who had become a Washington correspondent for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “He was a better man than he knew.”

Seldom did he miss a meeting of the two major committees, where, it was also noted, “He speaks rarely, listens much.” I’m perfectly willing to be cussed if I’m right. By his own staff, by others on his committees, he was perceived as dogged, productive, respectful of the opinion of others, good-natured, and extremely likable. The senator’s patience, even with the dreariest assignments, seemed infinite.

And though no one would have singled him out as exceptional in any particular way or predicted a brilliant future—“But he showed no signs of leadership,” Taylor also remembered—his reputation was clearly on the rise. “He was always going out of his way to do favors for others and you couldn’t help but like his smiling, friendly manner,” Mildred Dryden, Truman’s secretary, said, “Never in all the years that I worked for him did I ever see him lose his temper. He was always soft-spoken and very considerate to his staff. . . .” She remembered no “salty language” either, never ever if women were present.

In the eyes of those working with him, he had also shown uncommon courage. Lowenthal did not think there were a half-dozen others in the Senate who could have withstood the pressure Truman took. “When we are honest enough to recognize each other’s rights and are good enough to respect them, we will come to a more Christian settlement of our difficulties.” Legal equality was the Negro’s right, Truman said, “because he is a human being and a natural born American.”

Marshall insisted on the need for selective promotion. “You give a good leader very little and he will succeed,” he said, looking at the chairman; “you give a mediocrity a great deal and he will fail.” He was notable too for so much that he was not. He was not florid or promiscuous.

He made no pretense at being superior in any regard. He did not seem to need the limelight, flattery, or a following. “It is a very high office which consists entirely of honor and I don’t have any ambition to hold an office like that.” He was sick and tired of trying to determine which shell the pea was under,

Truman is a nice man, an honest man, a good Senator, a man of great humility and a man of courage. He will make a passable Vice President. But Truman as President of the United States in times like these? Truman, while not brilliant, had character. I think Senator Truman is one of the finest men I know. Both were men of exceptional determination, with great reserves of personal courage and cheerfulness. Roosevelt enjoyed flattery, Truman was made uneasy by it.

Harry Truman was inclined to see things in far simpler terms, as right or wrong, wise or foolish. He dealt little in abstractions. His answers to questions, even complicated questions, were nearly always direct and assured, plainly said, and followed often by a conclusive “And that’s all there is to it,”

Truman’s destiny from this point forward to be forever contrasted to Roosevelt—he was truly uncomplicated, open, and genuine. Yet Truman, as Republican Congressman Joe Martin would write, was “smarter by far than most people realized.” The President, though only two years older, To his cousin Laura Delano, Roosevelt would later remark that he liked Harry Truman. “Harry is a fine man, intelligent, able, and has integrity.

Truman would say, “There never was a greater egotist unless it was Franklin D.” Another time, describing Roosevelt to Bess, he wrote, “He’s so damn afraid that he won’t have all the power and glory that he won’t let his friends help as it should be done.” “You know how it is when you see the President,” Truman once told Allen Drury. “He does all the talking, and he talks about what he wants to talk about, and he never talks about anything you want to talk about, so there isn’t much you can do.”

To one reporter on the train, it was “the farmer-neighborliness,” the “genuineness” of the candidate that made him appealing and believable, far more than anything he said. Later, during an interview on the Hill, when Gunther asked him what he liked most, Truman answered, “People.” Truman had always been a man of his word,

In his brief remarks to the Cabinet he said he intended to carry on with Roosevelt’s program and hoped they would all stay on the job. He welcomed their advice. He did not doubt that they would differ with him if they felt it necessary, but final decisions would be his and he expected their support once decisions were made.

“Truman is honest and patriotic and has a head full of good horse sense. Besides, he has guts,” wrote John Nance Garner to Sam Rayburn,

He was straightforward, decisive, simple, entirely honest. He, of course, has the limitations upon his judgment and wisdom that the limitations of his experience produce, but I think that he will learn fast and will inspire confidence. At home in Independence, editor William Southern wrote in the Examiner that the country was “in the hands of an honorable man, not just a politician.” the war thus far had cost 196,999 American lives, Alben Barkley told Truman he must stop deprecating his ability to carry on. “Have confidence in yourself,” Barkley said. “If you do not, the people will lose confidence in you.”

“Your modesty, your humility, your earnestness, have captivated the hearts of your American people,” He was friendly, considerate, interested in them individually. Truman, for all his reluctance ever to fire anyone, could not tolerate what he called “Potomac Fever,” which he described as a prevalent, ludicrous Washington disease characterized by a swelling of the head to abnormal proportions.

“It was a wonderful relief to preceding conferences with our former Chief to see the promptness and snappiness with which Truman took up each matter and decided it,” “a keen appreciation of great personal power.” May 8 was his sixty-first birthday. He had been President for three weeks

“His sincerity and his desire to do what is right is continually evident,” observed Eben Ayers. “I am here to make decisions,” Truman said, “and whether they prove right or wrong I am going to make them.” Fields, a tall, handsome black man, would later say of Mrs. Truman that she would “stand no fakers, shirkers or flatterers,”

He liked her. “Like most Midwestern women I’d known, her values went deeper than cosmetics.” The President impressed him as someone who knew who he was and liked who he was. “I always felt that he [President Truman] understood me as a man, not as a servant to be tolerated,” It was an admirable performance. Simple. No mock heroics. Nothing complex. Straightforward! can’t understand it—except to attribute it to God. He guides me, I think.”

After only a few nights alone, Truman began feeling desolate and more than a little sorry for himself. The first Sunday, giving no advance notice, he walked across Lafayette Square to St. John’s Church and slipped into a back pew unnoticed by most of the congregation. It was where Lincoln had sometimes worshiped, he knew. “Don’t think over six people recognized me,” he wrote in his diary. “We were beginning to get our papers together and the President saw me. ‘McCloy,’ he said, ‘nobody leaves this room until he’s been heard from.’”

Mark Twain’s, “Always do right! This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

The responsibilities resting on a President, said Truman, were so heavy that if he were to keep thinking of them and considering what might happen as a result of the decisions he had to make, he would “soon go under.” A number of years later, in a conversation with Jonathan Daniels, Truman would say, “Morgenthau didn’t know shit from apple butter.”

Bohlen, too, was struck by how Truman “stuck to business,” rarely taking up time with small talk.

“It is a terrible thing,” he began, knowing he was expected to say something, “but they brought it on themselves. That’s what happens when a man overreaches himself.” It was all he could find to say. Churchill, who once called Russia “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” That Stalin was also secretive to the point of imbalance, suspicious, deceitful, unspeakably cruel, that he ruled absolutely and by terror and secret police, that he was directly responsible for destroying millions of his own people and the enslavement of many millions more, was not so clearly understood by the outside world at this point as it would be later.

“Uncle Joe” was one of the great mass murderers of all time, as much as Ivan the Terrible (his favorite czar), as much nearly as Adolf Hitler. Stalin had perfected a talent for disguise: Truman was on edge. This wasn’t at all what he had come for. “I don’t want to discuss,” he said, “I want to decide.” Bradley, a fellow Missourian, had never met Truman until now and liked what he saw. “He was direct, unpretentious, clear-thinking and forceful.” He was out of bed and dressed by 5:30 or 6:00 regularly every morning and needed no alarm clock or anyone to wake him.

He was never known to make a rude or inconsiderate remark, or to berate anyone, or to appear the least out of sorts, no matter how much stress he was under. From first to last, he remained entirely himself. He never got swellheaded—never got, you know, swagly.” “Listen, son, I married my sweetheart,” Truman said. “She doesn’t run around on me, and I don’t run around on her. I want that understood. Don’t ever mention that kind of stuff to me again.”

Truman had kept insisting on results, not talk, something in the bag at the end of every day, as Churchill observed—it “Everybody wants something at the expense of everybody else and nobody thinks much of the other fellow,” Truman wrote to his mother and sister at the beginning of autumn, 1945. “You can’t have anything worthwhile without difficulties.” Mistakes would be made. No one who accomplished things could expect to avoid mistakes. Only those who did nothing made no mistakes. It was time for everyone to “cut out the foolishness” and “get in harness.”

He “zipped” through work in what one account called “the decisive style that is now recognized as typically Truman.” the chief difference between Truman and Roosevelt was that Truman “paid much less attention to what his actions were doing towards his chances for reelection. . . . Many in Washington wondered if this was to be the pattern—taking problems as they came, rather than working to achieve large, clear objectives. Truman mused that perhaps he should add some new Kitchen Cabinet secretaries as well:

a Secretary of Inflation to convince everyone that however high or low prices went, it didn’t matter; a Secretary of Reaction, to abolish airplanes and restore ox carts and sailing ships; a Secretary of Columnists, to read all the columns and report to the President on how the country should be run; and a Secretary of Semantics, to supply big words as well as to tell him when to keep quiet. He rarely missed his half-hour nap after lunch, “In the week of his 62nd birthday, apparently nothing could shake him.” Inwardly Truman was an extremely frustrated, resentful, and angry man, worn thin by criticism, fed up with crises not of his making and with people who, as he saw it, cared nothing for their country, only their own selfish interests. leadership wasn’t worth much without some followers.

“He’s one tough son of a bitch of a man,” Harry Vaughan would say. That was the key to understanding Harry Truman. “The President is intelligent, forthright and reasonable,” Clifford had written to his mother. But just now he was also a man who could rise to the occasion. was the servant of 150 million people of the United States,” Truman himself would later say, “and I had to do the job even if I lost my political career.”

He had no regrets. Saturday morning, the 14th, his immediate staff gathered about his desk, Truman openly berated himself for having made so grave a “blunder.” To Wallace, too, Truman said he had only himself to blame for most of what had happened. He had shown, Ross told him, that he would rather be right than President. “I would rather be anything than President,” Truman said. he tried to excuse his handling of the Wallace affair by saying he had no gift for duplicity.

According to one of the latest Washington jokes in the autumn of 1946, Truman was late for a Cabinet meeting because he woke up stiff in the joints from trying to put his foot in his mouth. To Lippmann, regarded as the most thoughtful, authoritative political commentator of the time, Truman was an embarrassment. His bravado and quick decisions, Lippmann thought, were a facade for an essentially insecure man filled with anxieties.

Dean Acheson, who could be extremely hard, even contemptuous in his judgment of men he did not consider his equals, had described Truman, after Roosevelt’s death, as straightforward, decisive, honest, and if inexperienced, likely to learn fast. Felix Belair, White House correspondent for the Times, had decided that while Truman might look as much like “the average guy on the streetcar” as ever, he was a man to rise to the occasion.

So testament from experienced observers that this was a President of considerable substance—and that it would be a mistake to count him out—was Still Lilienthal had faith in Truman, faith in the man—because Truman had shown such faith in him, but also because he saw qualities of courage and candor rare in a politician.

And clearly Truman agreed. In a letter to Bess from Key West, he had vowed, “I’m doing as I damn please for the next two years and to hell with all of them.” But he, Harry Truman, would be guided by a simple idea: “to do in all cases , without regard to political considerations, what seems to me to be for the welfare of all our people. ” Pearl Harbor, he liked to say, had ended isolationism for any realist.

His reputation for hard work and standing by principle, however, his fund of knowledge and ability to cut to the heart of an issue were considered second to none in the Senate.

At sixty-six, George C. Marshall was the first career soldier to become Secretary of State. Marshall George Kennan called it—invariably courteous, he was without a trace of petty vanity or self-serving ambition. he could distinguish what was important from what was unimportant, and this made him invaluable. Truman described Marshall as “astute,” “profound,” and more of a listener than a talker.

Truman would gratefully recall. “Sometimes he (Marshall) would sit for an hour with little or no expression on his face, but when he had heard enough, he would come up with a statement of his own that would invariably cut to the very bone of the matter under discussion.”

When section heads fell into dispute in his presence, Marshall would tell them, “Gentlemen, don’t fight the problem. Solve it!” “The more I see and talk to him the more certain I am he’s the great one of the age,” Truman wrote. But Truman was neither jealous nor intimidated. He was not so constructed. “Brave men don’t belong to any one country. I respect bravery wherever I see it.”

He believed that even a wrong decision was better than no decision at all. And when he made up his mind that was it. They were devoted to him, and increasingly as time went on, the better they knew him, quite as much as those who had served with him in the Army. They liked him as a man, greatly respected him as a leader, admiring his courage, decisiveness, and fundamental honesty.

Murphy particularly admired Truman’s gift for simplification. “Not only could he simplify complex matters, he could also keep simple matters simple.”

The loyalty of those around Truman was total and would never falter. In years to come not one member of the Truman White House would ever speak or write scathingly of him or belittle him in any fashion. There would be no vindictive “inside” books or articles written about this President by those who worked closest to him. They all thought the world of him.

Time was of the essence, Marshall stressed to Truman. “The patient is sinking while the doctors deliberate,” he told the nation in a radio broadcast, April 28.

As Kennan later recalled, Marshall had only one piece of advice: “Avoid trivia.” More than once in his presidency, Truman would be remembered saying it was remarkable how much could be accomplished if you didn’t care who received the credit.

Among Truman’s own strongest qualities was “his ability to appreciate these men and to support them as they supported him.” can’t stand a man or woman who bawls out underlings to satisfy an ego. Truman said no man could carry the burden of the presidency and do it all right, but that he had good men around him now. “In all the history of the world,” Truman wrote privately a few days after final passage of the program, “we are the first great nation to feed and support the conquered.

Truman was “blessed with a tough hide and a secure conscience, so that he could roll with the punches. “What I wanted to do personally for my own comfort and benefit was not important. What I could do to contribute to the welfare of the country was important. I had to enter the 1948 campaign for the presidency.”

I can’t approve of such goings on and I shall never approve of it, as long as I am here. I am going to try to remedy it and if that ends up in my failure to be reelected, that failure will be in a good cause. . . .

Roosevelt especially had preferred people working for him to be equipped with “a passion for anonymity.” There are times in world history when it is far wiser to act than to hesitate. There was never enough time. There was always more than one reasonable, prudent course of action to take. Nothing seemed simple.

“In my opinion,” Henderson later said, “the morale and effectiveness of the [State] Department were never higher than during the period that Truman was President. The morale of the department is usually higher when the President is a man who is not afraid to make difficult decisions and who is prepared to accept the responsibilities that flow from such decisions.”

As Churchill had observed at Potsdam, Truman was a man of immense determination. “Stubborn as a mule,” others often commented. “If you can’t stand the heat, you better get out of the kitchen,” Truman liked to say, an old line in Missouri that he had first heard in the 1930s, from another Jackson County politician named E. T. (“Buck”) Purcell.

The time has arrived for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.” “There is an agreeable warm-heartedness and simplicity about Truman that is genuine,” I don’t wait for any polls to tell me what to think.

He had won against the greatest odds in the annals of presidential politics. The plain fact now appears to be that (as far as politics is concerned, at least) the press hasn’t known what time of day it is for years. On Friday, November 5, Truman returned to Washington in triumph. The welcome was the biggest, most enthusiastic outpouring for a President in the history of the capital. Now, to see Harry S. Truman, the modern Jacksonian, another “man of the common people” and “hero of the great political drama of 1948,” ride to the Capitol and take the same oath at the same place, more than a million people were gathered, more than ever before in history. Truman welcomed other people’s ideas. “He was not afraid of the competition of other ideas. . . . Free of the greatest vice in a leader, his ego never came between him and his job.”

There is a lure in power. It can get into a man’s blood just as gambling and lust for money have been known to do. “No President of the last 50 years was so widely and warmly liked by reporters as Mr. Truman,” Cabell Phillips would write. If a man’s word wasn’t any good, he said, it wasn’t made better by putting it on paper. Principle, principle, must always be above personality and it must be above expediency. MacArthur’s program to step up and widen the war with China, Bradley said, would “involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.” The fidelity of the military high command to the principle of civilian control of the military was total and unequivocal.

Many then, and more in time to come, would say that Truman’s biggest mistake had been not firing the general months before, a view with which Truman himself wholeheartedly concurred. 95 percent of Truman’s decision to fire MacArthur hinged on the relationship of the president as the Commander in Chief to his general and on civilian control of the military.” In the summer of his seventh year in office, the sixty-seven-year-old President looked the picture of health.

Clark Clifford, who dropped by on occasion, would say he never knew anyone of the President’s age who remained physically and psychologically so sound and solid. “My house is always clean,”

Truman had said at a press conference in March. Somehow, he seemed incapable of imagining any of his people doing anything illegal or dishonorable. Truman remarked, “You never know what’s in you until you have to do it.”

I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he’d taken a poll in Egypt?” he wrote privately, in an undated memo to himself. “What would Jesus Christ have preached if he’d taken a poll in Israel?”

Truman, at sixty-eight, was leaving office in better health than when he came in in 1945. What he said was that the greatest part of a President’s responsibilities was making decisions. A President had to decide. “That’s his job.”

Truman had been President for seven years, nine months, for 2,841 days, and at noon it was over.

Truman would note in his diary that Cincinnatus knew not only when but how to lay down power. For his part, Truman had neither wealth to sustain him nor any particular prospects at the moment, no plans for future employment. His only intention, as he said, was to do nothing—accept no position, lend his name to no organization or transaction—that would exploit or “commercialize” the prestige and dignity of the office of the President. the man who had never been to college, Mark Twain’s simpler admonition: “Always do right. It will please some people and astonish the rest.”

He was in steady demand now, with two to three hundred speaking invitations a month. At the age of 74, in the bright winter of his life, Harry Truman is a genuinely happy man.” That fall, in the 1958 congressional campaign, Truman was back on the trail again, delivering some twenty-five speeches in twenty different states. He was there in total six and a half days a week for nine years, longer than his two terms in the White House. To mark his seventy-fifth birthday on May 8, the Democratic National Committee staged a nationwide celebration,

“A nap after lunch is imperative and cannot be missed under any consideration,” “At 79 you go to funeral after funeral of your friends, most of whom are younger than 79—and you sometimes wonder if the old man with the scythe isn’t after you,” Truman said in another letter in May 1963, following his birthday. Celebrations of Truman’s eightieth birthday in May 1964 there was, in the words of one account, “sad amazement” expressed in the large Washington contingent over Truman’s pitifully frail appearance. In 1967, in his eighty-fourth year,

On June 28, 1969, the Trumans celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary at home. Did the President like to read himself to sleep at night, McCormick asked. “No, young man,” said Truman, “I like to read myself awake.” “I was greatly pleased by your kind and generous letter on my eighty-seventh birthday,” Truman wrote to Acheson on May 14, 1971.

Truman died in Kansas City’s Research Hospital and Medical Center on Tuesday, December 26, 1972, at 7:50 A.M. Central Standard Time. seventy-five thousand people, it would be estimated—passed by the closed casket in the lobby of the Truman Library. He was remembered in print and over the air waves, in the halls of Congress and in large parts of the world, as a figure of courage and principle. In a day of memorial tributes in the Senate chamber that he so loved, he was eulogized as the president who had faced the momentous decision of whether to use the atomic

bomb, praised for the creation of the United Nations, for the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Airlift, the recognition of Israel, NATO; for committing American forces in Korea and for upholding the principle of civilian control over the military—“decisions many of us would pale before,” said Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin.

The responsibilities he bore were like those of no other president before him, and he more than met the test. He held to the old guidelines: work hard, do your best, speak the truth, assume no airs, trust in God, have no fear. Dean Acheson had called him the Captain with the Mighty Heart; George Marshall, in 1948, had said it was “the integrity of the man” that would stand down the ages, more even than the courage of his decisions.

Sevareid, “I am not sure he was right about the atomic bomb, or even Korea. But remembering him reminds people what a man in that office ought to be like. It’s character, just character. He stands like a rock in memory now.” He had lived eighty-eight years and not quite eight months.

Bess Truman lived on at 219 North Delaware for another ten years (97)