

# Harry S Truman

## Overkill

Thirty-Third, 1945-1953



**Nicknames:** "Haberdasher Harry", "High-Tax Harry", "Give 'Em Hell Harry", "The New Missouri Compromise"

**Birth:** May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1884, Lamar, Missouri

**Death:** December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Kansas City, Missouri

**Significant Events During Truman's Terms:** Hitler Commits Suicide, Mussolini Executed ... Atomic Bombs Dropped on Japan ... World War II Ends ... United Nations Formed ... George Orwell's "Animal Farm" ... Jackie Robinson Breaks the "Color Barrier" in Baseball ... The "Truman Doctrine" ... Birth of Suburbia ... Armed Forces Desegregated ... George Orwell's "1984" ... McCarthyism ... Korean War Begins ... J.D. Salinger's "Catcher In the Rye" ... Number of States remains at forty-eight

**Quotes:** *"To tell the truth, I was kind of a sissy. If there was any danger of getting into a fight, I always ran."* -- Harry Truman

*"I don't know whether you fellows ever had a load of hay fall on you, but when they told me what had happened, I felt like the moon, the stars and all the planets had fallen on me."*  
-- Harry S Truman, on taking office after FDR's death

*"Within the first few months, I discovered that being a President is like riding a tiger. A man has to keep on riding or be swallowed."* -- Harry S Truman

*"Why in hell does anybody want to be a head of state? Damned if I know."* -- Harry S Truman

*"To be President of the United States is to be lonely, very lonely at times of great decisions."*  
-- Harry S Truman

*"Democracy is based on the conviction that man has the moral and intellectual capacity, as well as the inalienable right, to govern himself with reason and justice."* -- Harry S Truman

*"This country today is in the hands of a secret inner coterie which is directed by agents of the Soviet Union. We must cut this whole cancerous conspiracy out of our Government at once. Our only choice is to impeach President Truman and find out who is the secret invisible government which has so cleverly led our country down the road to destruction."* -- Senator William Jenner, 1951

*"Everything in Russia is a conspiracy."* -- Harry S Truman

*"You, more than any other man, have saved Western civilization."* -- Winston Churchill, to Truman

*"I wasn't one of the great Presidents, but I had a good time trying to be one, I can tell you that."*  
-- Harry S Truman, on leaving office

**How his term ended:** Similar to Theodore Roosevelt's situation, Truman did not seek reelection after serving nearly two full terms.

**Other Professions:** Farmer, Mail room clerk, Bank clerk, Railroad timekeeper, Postmaster, Soldier, Partner in a Haberdashery and other businesses, Judge, Soldier

**Worst Mistake:** Truman was guilty of multiple counts of manslaughter (and womanslaughter, and childslaughter, not to mention animalslaughter) when he ordered that the atomic bombs be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See the "Notes" section for the details.

**Saving Grace:** Truman overturned Wilson (#28) and desegregated the armed forces.

**Notes:** His "S" middle name did not stand for anything (a somewhat common practice in the American South).

True to his State's image, Truman's father was a mule trader.

When FDR (#32) died shortly after being elected a fourth time, Truman was drinking at the house of a political colleague. Truman was summoned to the White House by a messenger, but did not know why. On arriving there, Eleanor Roosevelt minced no words, telling him, "Harry, the President is dead." Truman replied, "Is there anything I can do for you?" Eleanor turned the question around: "Is there anything *we* can do for *you*? For *you* are the one in trouble now."

Most 'experts' expected Thomas Dewey to defeat Truman in the 1948 election. On his upset victory, Truman held aloft a copy of the Chicago Tribune, which proclaimed "Dewey Defeats Truman." Other newspapers went so far as to scream out: "Dewey Wins In A Landslide!"

Truman's Vice President, Alben Barkley, was the last national officeholder to have been born in a log cabin, and the first Vice President to be called the "Veep," a nickname for the office that his ten-year-old grandson coined. As "Veep" in 1949, the seventy-one-year old Barkley married a thirty-eight year old widow.

Some say that Truman was the first President to take office during wartime (normally, voters don't want to "change horses in the middle of the stream," but in this case, the former President had died). This is actually not technically correct, though, as there were still some Confederate holdouts fighting the Civil War when Andrew Johnson took over for the assassinated Abraham Lincoln (#16) in 1865.

Truman was the first President in fifty years to not have a college education. Nevertheless, he was an autodidact and well-versed in history.

Truman was accident-prone as a youth, as attested to by the following litany of macabre events:

- 1) He broke his collar bone falling from a chair while combing his hair
- 2) He swallowed a peach pit and almost choked to death (his mother forced it down his gullet with her finger)
- 3) He slammed the cellar door on his foot, cutting off the tip of one of his big toes.

Additionally, Truman contracted diphtheria when he was nine, temporarily paralyzing his extremities. He was pushed around in a baby carriage for several months until he regained the use of his limbs.

Truman was never able to engage in sports, due to the thick, expensive glasses he had to wear (his parents couldn't afford to replace them if they were to get broken). His wife Bess, though, was a multi-sport athlete. She played basketball, baseball, tennis, and even fenced and engaged in the shot put. Bess did not enjoy the White House years; she lived many years after they were over, though, surviving until she was ninety-seven, in 1982.

While a bank clerk, Truman shared a room in a boardinghouse with Dwight Eisenhower's younger brother.

Truman's mother Martha (1852-1947) was raised in a pro-Confederate household. On visiting the White House during the time her son was President, she refused to sleep in Lincoln's bed. Some of her earliest memories were of the Civil War; among her last were the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that her son ordered.

An early hero of Harry Truman's was Robert E. Lee.

Regarding the bombing of Japan at the end of World War II: If Truman's priority had truly been the saving of lives, as he claimed, the better and more humanitarian course would have been achieved by allowing the Japanese to capitulate and even, if necessary, allow them to retain their Emperor as their chosen leader.

The atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed at least 200,000 people – many Japanese people were instantly incinerated, and others died agonizing deaths from radioactive poisoning within a year.

*Storia Contemporanea*, a 1990 school textbook from Italy written by Rosario Villari, presents this take on the bombing of Japan by the U.S.:

*The use of the atomic bomb in the last phase of the conflict was not essential from a military point of view, and the reasons for why that terrible decision was made have not been entirely made clear. Among other things, there was not even full knowledge of the effects the explosion would have, especially concerning the biological consequences of the exposure of a large mass of people to the radiation, and the genetic damage that the fallout would cause. The atrocious consequences of the radiation on the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their children revealed themselves over the course of the years that followed the explosions of August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>.*

*What seems certain is that that show of force, made indiscriminately at the expense of unarmed people, increased the United State's weight in post-war tensions and decisions, especially concerning the Soviet Union. It is probable therefore that Truman's decision was inspired more by post-war prospects than by calculations on the most convenient method to put an end to the conflict with Japan.*

One hundred thousand people were immediately killed by the bombings. By 1950, a total of 340,000 had died as a result of the bombing: 200,000 in Nagasaki, and 140,000 in Hiroshima. According to World War II veteran Howard Zinn in his book *A People's History of the United States*, by August 1945, Japan was in desperate shape and ready to surrender. Zinn quotes New York Times military analyst Hanson Baldwin as saying shortly after the war: "The enemy, in a military sense, was in a hopeless strategic position by the time the Potsdam demand for unconditional surrender was made on July 26. Such then, was the situation when we wiped out Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Need we have done it? No one can, of course, be positive, but the answer is almost certainly negative."

Zinn goes on to relate that even the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, which had been established by the War Department in 1944, reported a similar conclusion around the same time: "Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the

surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."

Part of the motive behind the bombing was apparently to see to it that the Japanese surrender to the Americans, and not to the Russians, who were about to attack Japan. The timing of events was: On August 6<sup>th</sup>, Hiroshima was bombed. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, Russia declared war on Japan (recall that Theodore Roosevelt had brokered a peace between Japan and Russian in 1905, so a scant two score of years later the two old enemies were about to lock horns again). On August 9<sup>th</sup>, Nagasaki was bombed. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Japan surrendered.

Perhaps the bombing was also partly a "science experiment" to see just exactly what havoc the bombs would wreak. In other words, what others submit as a reason *not* to drop the bombs may have actually been one of the reasons *to* do it.

Most damning of all to those behind the decision, General George Marshall had urged that a warning be given to the Japanese, so that people could evacuate the area and that only military targets be struck, but his humanitarian gesture was disregarded – no warning was given.

Truman brought the U.S. into the United Nations, which had been Wilson's (#28) pet project.

Truman helped to organize NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. What came to be known as the "Truman Doctrine" was basically this: The U.S. would support peoples who resist hostile takeovers (mostly meaning when Russia would try to take over countries and make them communist, as they were trying to do at that time with Greece and Turkey). Truman said, "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Another way of putting the doctrine: the U.S. could be counted on to fight Communism anywhere on earth.

During 1948 and 1949, the Berlin Air Lift took place. This was the flying in of necessities to Berlin, Germany, to thwart the blockade of that city by the Soviets. After eleven months of this, the Russians finally gave up and ended the blockade.

Truman called his package of reforms "The Fair Deal" (compare this moniker with Theodore Roosevelt's "Square Deal" and FDR's "New Deal").

Truman's only child was a daughter, Margaret. She toured the country over a period of years, singing with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (Truman himself was a pianist). Reviewing one of her 1950 performances, given at Constitution Hall, Washington Post music critic Paul Hume opined: "She is flat a good deal of the time. She cannot sing with anything approaching professional finish...She communicates almost nothing of the music she presents." The President, known for his temper tantrums, personally wrote out in longhand

and mailed Hume a critique of his own to the doubtless flabbergasted gent which read, in part: "I have just read your lousy review buried in the back pages. You sound like a frustrated old man who never made a success, an eight-ulcer man on a four-ulcer job and all four ulcers working. I never met you, but if I do you'll need a new nose and a supporter below." Since then, Margaret has written biographies of both of her parents as well as murder mysteries set in Washington.

From Taft until Truman (1909-1945, in other words during the time of both World Wars), none of the Presidents were soldiers. Although twenty-six of forty-two Presidents have been soldiers, those six, who did not personally know the horrors of warfare, were in office during the time of mankind's most deadly conflagrations. Coincidence? On the other hand, Truman, who *had* been a soldier, obviously was in office during the time Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed.

Truman was distantly related to the traitor John Tyler (#10).