Harry S. Truman - A study in failure

Alistair Cooke
Mon 1 Nov ‘48 09.46 GMT

There is often a heartless contradiction between American ideals and the general willingness to accept them in action. Mr. Truman's biography is the stuff of which all Presidents are supposed to be made. It is the character and career party campaign handbooks attribute to their chosen leader. It is on file in every Hollywood studio, heading the category of thoroughly reliable "characters" whom not even the House Un-American Activities Committee would question. It is described in the schools as the very root and flower of what is best about the American way of life. Yet it appears uneasily in the White House as is remembered as the object of characteristic jokes. Coolidge's memory is green in the popular recollection for his cracker-barrel cynicism and his opposition to sin. And now we are ready to recall 'to err is to Truman' and "Don't shoot the piano-player, he's doing his best."

Yet the fame of the Truman Investigating Committee was justly earned: it wrote the most searching and sympathetic record of a war Administration's blunders and successes. Mr. Truman's history in the Senate was that of an alert debater, a practical humanitarian, a courageous New Dealer from a state festering with political corruption which never tainted his personal history. Many a more pretentious statesman would have quietly forgotten his machine connections when that machine was exposed and punished in the law courts. But to Harry Truman it was a simple courtesy to leave Washington and his new glory as Vice-President and go home to Missouri to attend the funeral of the squalid Boss Pendergast, who came out of goal to die. Pendergast had picked Truman as his man for the Senate, and Mr. Truman came from the sort of people who despise a man who forgets a favour. Truman had come up the "folksy", traditional way of the machine politician - a road overseer, farm-tax collector, a bridge-mender, a drainer of dirt roads after heavy rains, then a postmaster, a club organiser, then tedious nights learning enough law to justify his election as a county court judge. But he knows as well as most that it is also the hard way. At various times he had gone into debt and worked at all sorts of jobs because the convention of going bankrupt was odious to him. "He ploughed the straightest line of corn in Jackson County," his mother kept on telling reporters. To Harry Truman the moral implications of that compliment are as binding as the words of a Methodist hymnal. Being present at Pendergast's funeral was an obvious duty.

INEPTITUDE

It is, I think, the acting out of such straightforward maxims in a great office that requires tact, timing and a goodly gloss of two-facedness which has bewildered Mr. Truman and made his administration in the end admittedly inept. When the late Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, made a speech in Boston and, with Roosevelt's private approval, came out for Atlantic convoys for British shipping, the grateful cries of Englishmen were as loud as the screams of protest over here. Questioned a press conference, Mr. Roosevelt said surely Mr. Knox had a right to speak for himself. Truman would have told all, as he did over the misbegotten plan to woo Stalin with
Justice Vinson. When he was a haberdasher he bought at boom prices and sold at depression prices. His shop failed, but he is not a despondent man and one can admire the sigh and the plucky grin with which he has, throughout his life, tried to learn from his mistakes. Unfortunately it is too late to learn in the White House, and Americans who admire the hard-luck story in their neighbour will not tolerate it when the that neighbour is raised to "the elective kingship."

The failure of President Truman cannot be called a failure of principle or even a betrayal of the programme he inherited. The things he has genuinely wanted to have done have been every bit as New Deal as Roosevelt. In one proposal, the uncompromising for a federal fair employment code, he went headily beyond even Roosevelt's boldness. And of all the campaigns his has made the most sense as merely the politics of survival. While Governor Dewey has promised "a firm hand on the tiller" and "a rudder to our ship." Truman has been talking about the need for veterans' housing, about drastic enlargements of the social security and sickness insurance programmes, about federal ownership of transmission lines, about the Taft-Hartley Act, about inflation, about longer terms for the Atomic Energy Commission.

UNIMPRESSIVE

But there are over sixty million Americans at work. In this time of deceptive prosperity, Mr. Truman's voice sounded somewhat hollow as he went on asking for the things that the country was ready to accept in a depression. The recoil against the New Deal is too easily interpreted abroad as a positive reaction against liberal reform. There is enough evidence in the fight for Senate seats, and in the good showing of unrepentant New Dealers even in states where Dewey will be chosen, to show that if an impressive man is spouting the New Deal doctrine he will be heeded. But Mr. Truman is by now worse than unimpressive. He has committed the unwritten, un-American crime of being out-smarted. When he took the oath of office he was helped along by the legendary assumption that, when all is said and done, homespun men are the shrewdest. His early press conferences gave pause to this comfortable notion. He made impulsive answers that had to be corrected later. The episode of Wallace's dismissal, demanded by the Secretary of State, was only the first of the rude disillusionements.

It will not do to say that greatness is lacking. Very few Presidents have had any claim on it. But mediocre Presidents must depend on careful advice and preserve in public the appearance of authority. Mr. Truman surrounded himself partly with sincere political hacks and made impressive military men substitute for the grand façade he lacked. This latter has been the most interesting and could be the most serious fault in his conception of the President's office. It has puzzled many who would expect so humble a man to be uncomfortable in the presence of so much big brass. It seems to be, however, a true character trait. As a small boy he was "mercifully ridiculed" in school for reading books from choice and, what is worse, taking piano lessons. He made up for the ridicule by boning up, in stealth, on military history. He amazed the town by applying for, and winning a place at West Point. Then he was turned down on account of bad eyesight. It must have been a shocking blow. He has revealed throughout his administration a fearful respect for the judgement of military men. And, by the same mechanism of wistful envy, the Truman doctrine was conceived the day he sat at Fulton, Missouri, in the immense shadow of Churchill.

· This article was published the day before Truman's unexpected landslide victory over his democratic challenger, Thomas Dewey in the 1948 presidential elections.

Topics

https://www.theguardian.com/world/1948/nov/01/usa
US news