



Mr. Civil Rights, Harry S. Truman, now 75, "stuck neck out farther, risked more in terms of own political future to espouse first class citizenship for the negro," says author Carl Rowan, "than any other president in nation's history."

IN THE LATE hours of the 1956 Democratic national convention, a



Rep. William L. Dawson, leading Democrat from Illinois, enjoys joke with President Truman and daughter Margaret during Labor League for Political Education (AFL) dinner in Chicago hotel, 1952. Guest of honor Truman made nationwide address.

# HARRY TRUMAN AND THE NEGRO

Was he our greatest civil rights pr

BY CARL T. ROWAN

principles to achieve harmony," Truman replied. "It neve. I've had anything to do with it. That was a good plank

arty for years: civil rights—or more specifically, what the party was willing to promise the nation's 15 million Negro citizens.

Just when it appeared that the party would split again over this notion-packed issue, Texas' Sam Rayburn and a few other party leaders ordered that a microphone be set up in the public gallery. In a few minutes, a short, jaunty man with steel-gray hair was delivering an unprecedented lecture to the convention.

"I say that this is a good civil rights plank," he declared, "and I'm the greatest civil rights president the country ever had."

The speaker, of course, was Harry S. Truman, former president of the United States and a man who obviously felt that his civil rights record entitled him to this somewhat egotistical declaration. Many Negro delegates and observers were angry and shocked. How, they asked, could Harry Truman, a man with a satchelful of plaques and awards honoring his "uncompromising fight for civil rights," now urge upon his party a civil rights plank that Negroes considered the baldest kind of compromise?

The convention accepted the proposed plank, and, as the delegates trudged back to their hotel rooms that night, one Negro politician said to me: "Well, even old Harry sold us out. It was worse than finding out that there really is no Santa Claus."

In a recent interview with Mr. Truman at his library in Independence, Mo., I mentioned that convention and asked what pressures made him support the compromise plank. Was it merely to preserve party harmony?

"I have never believed that the Democratic party should desert its

would endorse the Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation regarded the plank adopted as a useless compromise.

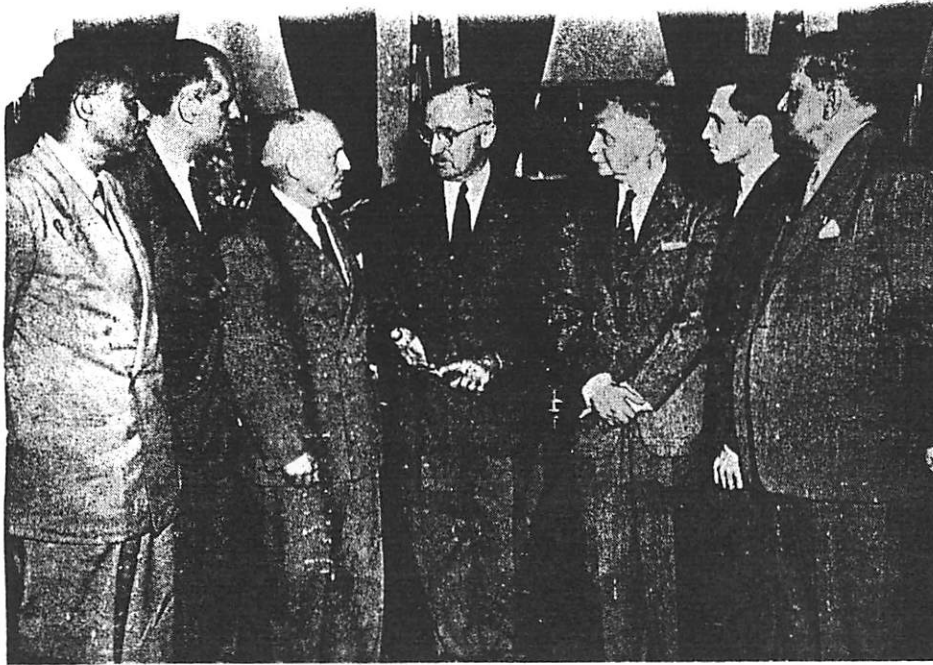
Mr. Truman sensed quickly some suggested doubt as to his sincerity in the field of civil rights. He leaped from his chair quickly and picked up a leather-bound volume from the bookcase behind him.

"This is where I stand," he said. "It's all in here. This is where I stand."

He was holding a copy of "To Secure These Rights," the 1947 report of a civil rights committee that he had appointed. It was this committee which shocked the nation with its documentation of lynchings, of the denial of voting rights, of inequality of educational opportunities, of discrimination in our armed forces. It was this committee's report, perhaps, as much as any other single thing in recent decades, that drew the people's attention to the special problems of the Negro in America and to the need for government to do something about them.

How much credit for that report and its ultimate impact should go to Harry Truman? I wondered. What prodded him to appoint that committee? What was his real relationship to, his private opinion of, the American Negro? Was Harry Truman just a shrewd Missouri ward politician out to corral Negro votes in the crucial states of the North and West, or was he really the nation's greatest civil rights president?

A look at the record shows this: no president in the nation's history stuck his neck out farther, or risked more in terms of his political class future or of the nation's well being in order to espouse



**National Emergency Against Mob Violence** group meet with Pres. Truman in 1946 urging special Congressional session to enact civil rights laws. Delegation includes union and church leaders, late Walter White (3rd fr. r.), Channing Tobias (r.).

## TRUMAN AND THE NEGRO *Continued*

On February 2, 1948, Harry Truman made perhaps the most daring civil rights speech, took one of the biggest political gambles, of any president in history. In a special message to Congress, he called for a 10-point program to secure the civil rights of all the nation's citizens.

Before an audience that was in part bitterly hostile, he said:

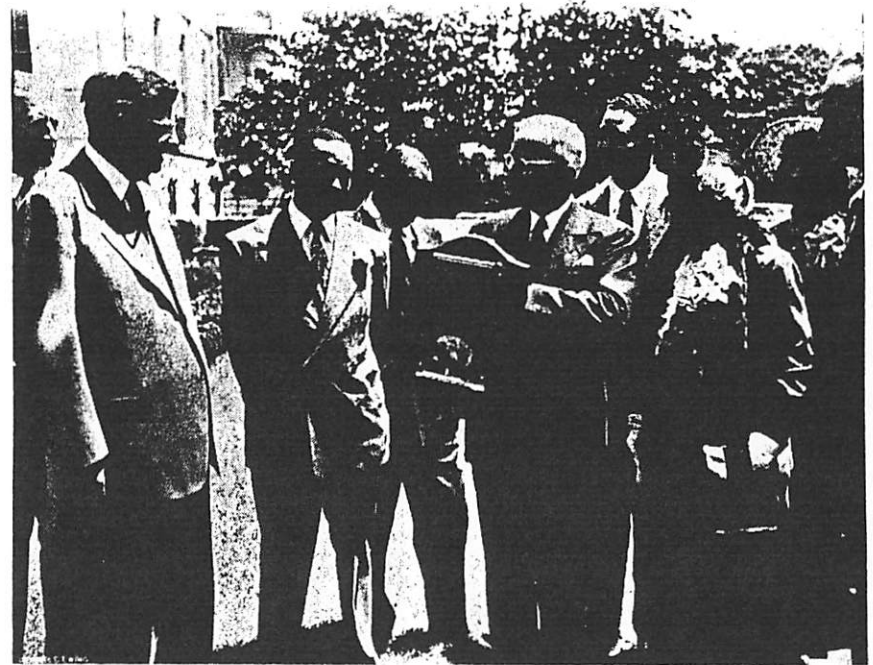
"We shall not . . . finally achieve the ideals for which this nation was founded so long as any American suffers discrimination as a result of his race, or religion, or color, or the land of origin of his forefathers.

"Unfortunately, there still are examples—flagrant examples—of discrimination which are utterly contrary to our ideals. Not all groups of our population are free from the fear of violence. Not all groups are free to live and work where they please or to improve their condi-

of life by their own efforts. Not all groups enjoy the full privileges of citizenship . . . in the government under which they live.

"We cannot be satisfied until all our people have equal opportunity for jobs, for homes, for education, for health and for political expression, and until all our people have equal protection under the law."

Harry Truman then went virtually down the line with his committee, asking for: 1) A permanent commission on civil rights, a joint Congressional committee on civil rights and a civil rights division of the Department of Justice; 2) The strengthening of existing civil rights statutes; 3) Federal protection against lynching; 4) More adequate protection of the right to vote; 5) A federal Fair Employment Prac-



**Receiving** Robert S. Abbott award for making most significant contributions to democracy in 1948, Truman expresses appreciation to delegation which included Chicago Defender Pub. John H. Sengstacke (3rd fr. l.), late Mary McLeod Bethune.

omic chaos and there was fear that Communism would overrun the continent unless Congress voted the aid necessary to produce economic recovery. Still, Truman refused to back down. He gambled that he could defy Deep South congressmen and still get the laws and funds that he needed to save Europe. Truman won that gamble.

Negroes and others began to acclaim Truman for his "guts." The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance of Greater New York awarded him the annual Franklin D. Roosevelt award for "the greatest contribution to the cause of human rights." In 1949 the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association gave him the John B. Russwurm award for "his courageous leadership and uncompromising stand in the fight for civil rights." That same year the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith bestowed upon him its American Democracy Legacy medal.

Harry Truman was hailed, not without justification, as a better friend of the Negro than Roosevelt—or even Lincoln. Time had allowed Lincoln's contributions, had draped them in a sort of halo that obscured the fact that Lincoln really did only what the terrible pressures of his time decreed that he must do. The freeing of the slaves was as much a gift of fate, or history, as of any belief Lincoln had in racial equality. As for Roosevelt, his gifts to the Negro were largely by-products of what he gave the entire nation. In pulling the country from a dreadful depression, FDR more than doubled the earnings of the average white man, and at the same time more than tripled the earnings of the average Negro. Roosevelt's New Deal

Hawaii and Alaska and more self-government for other U. S. territories; 9) Equalizing opportunities for residents of United States to become naturalized citizens, and 10) Settlement of the evacuation claims of Japanese-Americans.

Angry Southern congressmen threatened to sabotage the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) and desert the president in his fight against a six and one-half billion dollar tax cut being pushed by the Republicans. Truman now was faced with the traditional Southern threat: "If you persist in your civil rights efforts, we will wreck the rest of your program. You cannot afford to have us do that." According to Mrs. Roosevelt, similar threats often have forced FDR to back away from civil rights proposals, primarily because he was convinced that some Southern congressmen would sabotage his legislative program and risk the country's losing World War II in peonage. Roosevelt felt that he could not afford to gamble.

These threats also came at a crucial period in Truman's life. Europe was in economic

stop thinking about his stomach and begin agitating for the basic rights that gave other Americans a sense of dignity and pride.

In urging laws to secure these basic rights, in throwing the weight of the Presidency against segregation in the armed forces, in transportation, in schools, Harry Truman was waging an infinitely less popular battle than either Lincoln or Roosevelt dared wage. If all you asked was that Negroes not be held in slavery, or that they not be left to starve to death, millions of Americans North and South would go along; but when you demand the end of racial separation, the ranks of supporters got thin. Truman found this out, for even his closest advisers opposed his civil rights stand. They complained that the party would be split and the Democrats would lose the Presidency in 1948 if Truman persisted.

Truman says that, at the 1948 nominating convention in Philadelphia, "I did not stand for any double talk on this vital principle" [of civil rights], and the Deep South figured he meant business.

As J. Strom Thurmond, then governor of South Carolina, led the Dixiecrat bolt from



At Truman dinner in Washington, D. C., former president whispers message to the Rev. Arthur Elmes. President from 1945 to 1953, Truman travelled over 18,000 miles.



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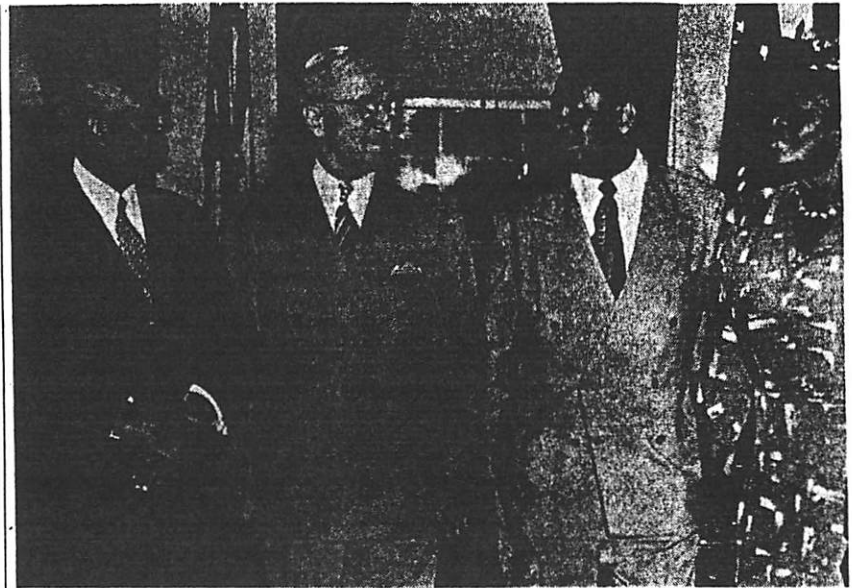
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Baptist leaders, late Rev. D. V. Jemison (l.) and Nannie Burroughs, are received at White House. Congressman William Dawson accompanied religious leaders to President's office. Jemison was president of powerful National Baptist Convention.

## TRUMAN AND THE NEGRO *Continued*

the convention, a reporter said, "Why are you walking out? All Truman is doing is following the Roosevelt platform."

"I know, but that s.o.b. Truman really means it," Thurmond reportedly replied.

But in one of the great political coups of all time, Truman won a smashing victory in the presidential election. He carried the crucial states of California by 17,865 votes, Illinois by 33,612 and Ohio by 7,107, and in each state the Negro vote was decisive. Had 15 per cent more Negroes voted Republican in that election, Thomas E. Dewey would have been president.

Truman said later that his civil rights stand was "shamefully distorted and misrepresented by political demagogues and press propaganda . . . The basic constitutional privilege which I advocated was deliberately misconstrued to include or imply racial miscegenation and intermarriage."

He called it one of his great achievements that he won ~~not~~ out the Wallace element or the Dixiecrats.

## Vetoes New Discriminations

Now Harry Truman's reputation as "Mr. Civil Rights" was solidly established. Still he continued to hammer away on the issue, in both public utterances and in messages to Congress, where he repeated his request for legislation in the area.

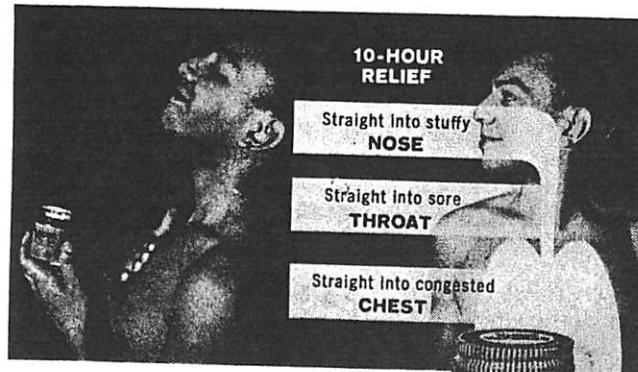
In 1951 Congress passed a law that would have required "racial segregation in schools built by the United States in defense areas in performance with the laws of the United States."

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are located."

In refusing to sign the bill, Truman said: "Step by step we are discarding old discriminations. We must not adopt new ones."

Even as Truman made these remarks, Sen. Harry F. Byrd of Virginia and other Southern Democrats were calling for a new southern revolt against him. Truman's advisers still were pleading with him to soft-pedal the race issue. But in addressing a Howard University commencement audience in 1952, Truman said: "You can't cure a moral problem, or social problem, by ignoring it."

Mr. Truman became the nation's first president to say unequivocally that the federal government has primary responsibility to secure the basic civil rights of minority group citizens.

"I am not one of those who feel that we can leave these matters up to the states alone," he said, "or that we can rely solely on the efforts of men of good will . . .

"Our federal government must live up to the ideals professed in our Declaration of Independence and the duties imposed upon it by our Constitution.

"The full force and power of the federal government must stand behind the protection of rights guaranteed by our federal constitution."

By 1952, however, Harry Truman and his civil rights activities were under heavy criticism by Dwight D. Eisenhower, Republican candidate for president. Ike told one audience that Truman, "who claims to be the only true friend our Negro citizens have," voted as

*Continued on Page 50*

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## TRUMAN AND THE NEGRO *Continued*

a senator in 1942 against "lifting the poll tax restriction, even for members of the armed service then fighting for this country in the war." This aroused a question that had bothered a great many people for years: why was Harry Truman, President, such a civil rights advocate, when Truman the senator from Missouri was a civil rights opponent in 1942? I asked Mr. Truman if, while in the White House, he met Negro leaders who influenced him and changed his views on racial matters.

"Absolutely not," he replied sharply. "My views in the White House were exactly the same as when I was back in Jackson County, Missouri. I grew up with Negroes. I was always friendly with them, and they were just like part of my family. I learned a long time ago that the composition of the human animal is about the same no matter what color the skin is." Truman implied that as president he had power to do things he could not do as a senator.

During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower also criticized Truman for proposing a federal FEPC law. "Would a true friend advocate a measure to improve race relations so extreme as to be certain of uncompromising opposition?" Ike asked.

### Espouser Of Unpopular Views

The verbal exchange made it clear that the outgoing president and the president-to-be were men of widely differing opinions about the way to solve the race problem. Truman, who entered the White House with no reputation whatsoever as a great leader, obviously believed in leading; he felt the president's remarks and actions should be in advance of views held by the general public. Thus, Truman offered proposals that neither Congress, other party leaders nor great segments of the public were ready to accept. On the other hand, Eisenhower, who entered the White House with the reputation of a great leader, is inclined not to get ahead of the public. He urges patience, and in effect asks Negroes to place their ultimate faith in time. As president, Mr. Eisenhower's role has been that of mollifier, of "peacemaker," rather than that of the espouser of unpopular views and causes. Truman declared civil rights to be a basic federal responsibility; Eisenhower is in many respects "states righter," and he has made this clear even when bold federal action has been forced upon his administration.

Nothing highlights the difference between these two presidents more than their stands on the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation. Mr. Eisenhower has urged that the rulings of the federal court should be obeyed "even if they are unpalatable"—leading many to believe that Ike himself finds the 1954 decision unpalatable. He has refused to state publicly his approval or disapproval of the ruling.

In New York last October Truman told a Democratic party rally that the 1954 decision not only is the law of the land but "it is morally right."

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Court's decision was morally right." Thus, by failing to give "proper leadership at the proper time," Mr. Eisenhower left the door open

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Truman's speech before a segregated audience in Raleigh, N. C., kicked up a storm of controversy. Former president was also criticized by Negroes for compromise Civil Rights plank which he put in the Democratic Party's 1956 official platform.

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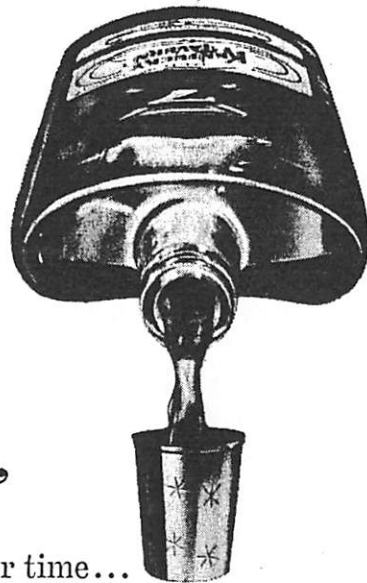
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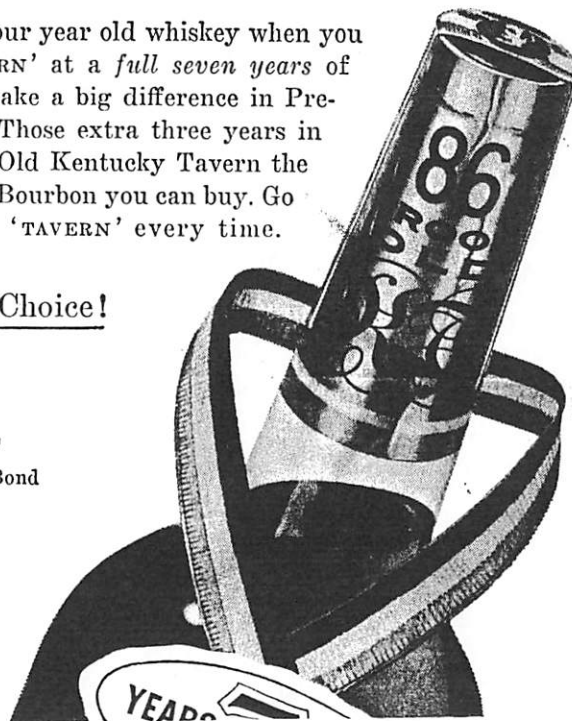
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Sergeant in integrated air force, Edward Williams of St. Louis, exchanges hearty handshake with Truman. Many brass strongly opposed his policy of armed services integration, but he persevered. Former president forced the Navy to desegregate.

## TRUMAN AND THE NEGRO *Continued*

Rep. J. Frederick Neal, Kansas City druggist and long-time battler for Negro equality, says Truman's influence in achieving greater freedoms and opportunities for Missouri Negroes has been incalculable.

"Until Mr. Truman became president, the only difference between Kansas City and Jackson, Miss., was that Negroes could register and vote in Kansas City. Even then, someone else voted for the Negro.

"All that changed after he became president. Missouri has made more progress in civil rights than any other Southern or border state. School integration is completed in all but three counties in the state.

"Look at what he's done in Independence. That was one of the most prejudiced communities in the country years ago. The slave block is still in the square. But after the Supreme Court decision, Independence immediately integrated both students and teachers. What did Mr. Truman have to do with it? Well, Mrs. Floyd Snyder, the president of the Board of Education, is one of Truman's closest friends. You can bet that Truman helped her to get the people together on this problem.

"We've got a Howard Johnson restaurant on the edge of Kansas City that refuses to serve Negroes, but the Howard Johnson restaurant



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humiliating Negroes in years past have changed their ways out of respect for Mr. Truman's position on civil rights.

"A few years ago, the National Bar Association wanted to meet in Kansas City but the hotels were reluctant to accept Negro lawyers, so the group was about to go elsewhere. Mr. Truman called some of the hotel people and told them that he would consider it an affront to him personally if the convention left town. The hotels accepted the Negroes, with the result that any respectable Negro citizen coming to Kansas City now can get decent hotel accommodations and receive courteous treatment."

Neal, a state lawmaker for 14 years, says that all the civil rights legislation passed in Missouri has had behind-the-scenes backing of Mr. Truman.

There is one question that haunts those who admire Truman's "guts" on civil rights: What would Harry have done in 1957 when Gov. Orval Faubus of Arkansas used troops to block integration of the Little Rock schools.

Mr. Truman ducked the question in our interview, asserting that he didn't want to be "a Monday morning quarterback."

"I recall that in Sen. Joseph McCarthy's heyday you said that if you had a demagogue like that in your party, you would kick him out," I said. "Are you in favor of kicking Faubus out of your party?"

"I think we'd better let Faubus alone," said Truman, "for nobody wants to make him a hero in the South. If you want to make him a

**Continued on Page 54**