

The Hard Cold Truth...by J. L. Chestnut



Politics is a strange profession that requires no qualifications whatsoever. Any fool can run for public office, and they often do and win. A majority of the elected boards, office-holders and other officials are persons who have not distinguished themselves in private life, in business, in some profession or even as husband, wife, mother or father. More than a few of these people lose several elections; but keep running until they win something or other. Some people manage to grow in public office, most do not. To be a politician, all one needs do is say he is one. What a profession!

Many Americans - and not merely African Americans - are gener-

ous in their praise of President Linden B. Johnson for his considerable achievements in civil and constitutional rights. During much of his life, Johnson was an unreconstructed racist but with a compassion for the poor because he had been poor as the proverbial church mouse until he was almost 30 years old. In 1957, two years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Johnson, as Majority Leader of the Senate, understood he had little chance of fulfilling his burning ambition to be President because of his racist record. He needed somehow to change his national image. With great cunning he pushed the first civil rights bill since Reconstruction through a Congress controlled by racist Southerners. As President, he virtually forced the Public Accommodations Bill of 1964 and the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 through the Congress.

Before he moved into the White House, President Johnson openly referred to blacks as niggers and spoke of Mexicans as if they were not human, while he tried to help the poor (even the colored poor) every way he could. He was complicated, ruthless, crooked, capable of stealing elections and doing a whole lot of other unsavory things. He appointed the first black, Thurgood

Marshall, to the Supreme Court. Thereafter he and Marshall often sat in the living quarters of the White House until the wee hours of dawn drinking bourbon and brandy water while cursing at many political personalities they despised.

How do I know that?

Thurgood visited his alma mater, the Howard University Law School in Washington, two or three times a month when Bruce Boynton and I were students there, and Thurgood informed us of that story and much more. In some ways, Thurgood was as crude, as obscene, as womanizing as Johnson. That is why they got along so well and genuinely liked each other. Politics is a very strange undertaking and often attracts very interesting people.

President Harry S. Truman achieved almost the impossible in the field of civil rights before Johnson's name had even surfaced in the congress. Truman was a proud Confederate sympathizer from Missouri and his mother, whom he loved dearly, was an unabashed racist to the day she died. There was no groundswell for civil rights in the country. Some Southern congressmen used the word "nigger" in speeches on the floor of the House. Southerners, through seniority, chaired virtually

every committee in both houses of congress. Truman had not been elected President in his own right and came to the office via the Vice Presidency after Franklin Roosevelt died. Truman, a high school graduate, really did not want the job. But in 1948 he very much wanted to be elected in his own right to the White House.

Six black men were lynched in the South the month Truman was sworn in as Chief Executive. Walter White, Executive Director of the NAACP, led a delegation of blacks to the White House to say to the President that the situation was way out of hand. Truman's popularity was already low and sinking. The conventional wisdom was no Democrat, including Truman, could win the presidency without the "solid white South." The black delegation expected that at best the president would put out a statement condemning lynching. They were surprised that Truman's outrage equaled theirs and even more surprised when he ordered the Justice Department and the FBI to open an investigation, get indictments and go to trial. Southern white juries later acquitted each of the defendants.

Truman, this white Southern racist, was now even more outraged

and over a short period of time issued three controversial executive orders that were sure to outrage the White South like nothing since Reconstruction. First, he rescinded a long-standing order issued by the grand Ku Kluxer from Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson, that had mandated a racially segregated federal work force. Truman then ordered the armed forces integrated racially. He created the Fair Employment Practices Commission and named two of the most radical blacks in the country to the commission.

The white South was so angry that some Southerners wanted literally to lynch Truman. His popularity was now down to 30%. Gov. Strom Thurmon of South Carolina and other white Southerners organized the Dixiecrat Party and nominated Thurmon as their candidate for President. That guaranteed Truman would not carry a single Southern state. Many white Southerners called Truman everything but the devil himself. There were not 10,000 black votes in all of Dixie in 1948. Hardly anyone, except Truman, thought he had any chance to win the election. They were wrong. He won. Thurmon carried Dixie and Truman damn near carried the rest of the nation.

Why did Truman take such action and risk what he wanted most of all?

Because he was one of those who grew quickly in office. He came in small but went out large, but still unpopular. He was an exception. Despite his deep-seated racism the man understood he was President of all the people. It is open to question whether he saved many American lives by dropping two atomic bombs on people of color. I have no doubt that skin color played no role in his decision. He had long outgrown such foolishness. After he had left the presidency, this well-read high school graduate, former President spoke to a group of young black doctors visiting the Truman Library in Independence Missouri and uttered the following words: "Racism is practiced, overtly and otherwise, as instinctive ritual. It seeps into all aspects of life. It is amazing how many people I love and respect still cling to the outmoded conviction that all Negroes look alike. It would be much less astonishing if blacks believed all whites look alike. We certainly have a more uniform skin color than blacks."

I cannot add anything to Mr. Truman's observation.

Peace.