



Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks

Adjunct Professor Michael Gardner

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Given his background, President Truman was an unlikely champion of civil rights. Where he grew up—the border state of Missouri—segregation was accepted and largely unquestioned. Both his maternal and paternal grandparents had owned slaves, and his mother, victimized by Yankee forces, railed against Abraham Lincoln for the remainder of her ninety-four years. When Truman assumed the presidency on April 12, 1945, Michael R. Gardner points out, Washington, DC, in many ways resembled Cape Town, South Africa, under apartheid rule circa 1985.

Truman's background notwithstanding, Gardner shows that it was Harry Truman—not Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, or John F. Kennedy—who energized the modern civil rights movement, a movement that basically had stalled since Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves. Gardner recounts Truman's public and private actions regarding black Americans. He analyzes speeches, private conversations with colleagues, the executive orders that shattered federal segregation policies, and the appointments of like-minded civil rights activists to important positions. Among those appointments was the first black federal judge in the continental United States.

One of Gardner's essential and provocative points is that the Frederick Moore Vinson Supreme Court—a court significantly shaped by Truman—provided the legal basis for the nationwide integration that Truman could not get through the Congress. Challenging the myth that the civil rights movement began with *Brown v. Board of Education* under Chief Justice Earl Warren, Gardner contends that the life-altering civil rights rulings by the Vinson Court provided the necessary legal framework for the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Gardner characterizes Truman's evolution from a man who grew up in a racist household into a president willing to put his political career at mortal risk by actively supporting the interests of black Americans.

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