Introduction and summary:  
The Truman era in retrospect

MICHAEL J. LACEY

The essays in this volume were presented as papers in September 1984 at a scholarly symposium at the Woodrow Wilson Center, one of many events that occurred in that year to commemorate the centennial of Harry Truman’s birth. As a scholarly gathering, its aim was not to celebrate those aspects of President Truman’s outlook and temperament that had earned for him in the decades after he left office such a respected place in political folklore and popular consciousness, but instead to reflect critically on the major developments of the Truman era in light of recent scholarship.

Important historical questions are seldom finally settled, but rather are constantly reinterpreted. Their status changes not only with the discovery of new sources, but with the changing perspective of the historians themselves, as influenced by the currents of their own contemporary experience. In the academic community, to take the case in point, the meaning of the Truman era—its achievements and failures and its placement in the developing political tradition—is a more complex, controversial, and ambiguous problem than in the popular mind. For some, Truman represented high achievement, the protection and extension of New Deal impulses, the orchestration of the great success story in American diplomacy in the reconstruction of Europe and restructuring of a viable world economy, and the establishment of a system for the defense of the free world.

From others, in what came to be called the revisionist school of the 1960s and 1970s, a new set of themes appeared. Writing in the turbulent years of the Vietnam War and domestic protest, the civil rights and wom-
en's movements, the Watergate investigations, the revelations of CIA misdeeds, and the FBI's close monitoring of domestic dissent, the revisionists saw the Truman years as the unfortunate point of origin for the evils of the day. According to this interpretation, Truman and his colleagues were sometimes seen as the authors of the cold war, rather than as participants in the story, and Truman himself was suspected of presiding, however uneasily, over the elaboration of an undiscriminating political culture of anticommunism that failed to make important distinctions in social thinking and worked toward the suppression of dissent, the foreclosure of indigenous political possibilities, and the commitment of the country to dubious foreign struggles.

Although perhaps less militant than it was a decade ago, the revisionist attitude is still a factor in the writing of contemporary political and diplomatic history, and its presence has resulted in a more cautious approach to problems and their assessment on the part of all who participate in the conversation at its academic level. The essays in this volume were written by scholars who are familiar with both the liberal and revisionist currents of thought and hold diverse views about them. Whereas the papers do not represent an overall synthesis on the period and the emergence of a new consensus, they do offer an authoritative look at some of the major developments of the time, and they correct some of the excesses of both schools that grew up in the more strident controversies of early revisionist argument. More than that, these authors share a realization, based on a decade and more of rich scholarship on corporatism in America, that there were issues of central concern to the Truman administration that were not understood in earlier analysis to be so important, the most significant being the relationship in postwar America between the public and private sectors, the state and society. This concern to define the quality, character, and institutions of postwar liberalism did not stop at the water's edge. It provided the linkage between domestic and foreign policy in the early cold war years, and the underlying challenge in rebuilding the economies of Europe and Asia.

For all the differences of interest and emphasis the essays represent, they agree on an important starting point, that is, the overriding importance of the Truman years as the watershed for our understanding of the contemporary political system. It was Truman's misfortune to take up his duties in the shadow of Franklin D. Roosevelt and to be measured during his days in office against the memory of the most dominant American political personality of the twentieth century. Historians, too, have
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worked in this shadow, and there has long been a tendency to organize thought about modern statecraft around the controversies, achievements, and failures of the New Deal—to use it, however selectively, as a yardstick in estimating subsequent development. And there is no doubt about the importance of the New Deal in inaugurating key elements of the modern system of social policy.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that for all its motion and drama and color, the New Deal is less important as a source of underlying changes in the political order than were World War II and the Truman years that followed it. Although it is true that Truman’s most important mentor was FDR and that Truman was deeply committed to many elements of the New Deal heritage, the differences between the two men are what now stand out.

The postwar world and new international order that Harry Truman helped to shape is very different from the world of FDR and places a different agenda, both domestic and foreign, at the center of political concern. Succeeding presidents have found themselves to have more in common with the experience and outlook of Truman, as he attempted to come to terms with the new agenda, than with his more dynamic and formidable predecessor.

Economic recovery was the central aim of the New Deal, and the failure to generate prosperity was its major shortcoming. From 1937 onward it was in a stalemate position, stymied by the Supreme Court, confronted by an increasingly suspicious Congress, and vilified by a discredited but hostile business community. Thereafter the problems of diplomacy and preparation for war came to the fore, and the urgencies of mobilization and wartime production gradually generated the recovery that had been out of reach. Truman entered the New Deal political establishment rather late on his arrival in the Senate in 1935; as a freshman senator he was predictably loyal to the party line but nonetheless rather aloof from the more dramatic front-line controversies of the hour. He became an expert on national transportation policy and took an interest in the developing problems of defense mobilization. After his reelection in 1940, he was thoroughly immersed in defense issues and came to national prominence as the chairman of the Senate’s Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program. It was from this angle that his political education in governance at the national level took shape and he first encountered the intricate problems of state and economy.

The state he inherited with the death of Roosevelt in April 1945 had
been swollen by the exigencies of war and was far more extensive, powerful, deeply enmeshed in the operations of society and the economy than had been known before in this country. Those who worked within it were preoccupied with new problems and possibilities, which seemed increasingly remote from the early recovery and reform strategies of the New Deal. After the surrender of Japan, the agenda was dominated by the politics of reconversion, and it is clear that for Truman the important lessons of government were tied to the performance of the state in wartime. As he put it in his first major message to Congress, which contained his “Twenty-one Point” program for the reconversion period, “When we have reconverted our economy to a peacetime basis, . . . we shall not be satisfied with merely our prewar economy. The American people have set high goals for their own future. They have set these goals high because they have seen how great can be the productive capacity of our country.”

The economy of abundance that had been dreamed of by old progressives and New Dealers was now in view. Sustaining prosperity and generalizing it in the transition to peace were the central concerns of the new administration, and thus, as several of the essays here make clear, Truman and his advisers embarked upon the search for a new order that would enable the political leadership to cope with the problems and opportunities of the postwar world. One aspect of that search—an attempt to set the government’s house in order—is reflected in the drive to consolidate the bureaucratic heritage of the New Deal and the wartime experience; to develop the institutional apparatus for the modern, managerial presidency; and to equip the office with new capacities to handle both domestic and foreign affairs, as symbolized by the emergence of the National Security Council, the Council of Economic Advisers, and the embryonic domestic policy staff that stemmed from the roles played by Clark Clifford and his associates. A second aspect of the search was the evolution of the containment doctrine and the cold-war pattern of foreign relations. A third aspect, which was not so much the fulfillment of a plan as the outcome of conflict, points to the balance in relations between the public and private sectors that arose in the wake of the generally unsuccessful effort to advance the Fair Deal program. Truman’s losses in policy battles often provided starting points for his successors, however, indicating the existence of deep-seated, complex drives within the maturing system of interest-group politics. It is the interaction of these three aspects of the search for a new order that gives to the politics of the past four decades their distinctive texture and coherence, the feeling that the decades mark different phases in the same period.
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New Deal models and memories proved to be of limited help to Truman and his aides in the construction of the postwar order. On matters of domestic economic and social policy, the aim was not to resuscitate the 1930s but to avoid the confrontational politics and stalemate that had plagued the later New Deal years. Truman’s relations with the business community were stormy and often bitter, and the antibusiness rhetoric of his 1948 campaign even more strident than had been Roosevelt’s tilting at “the money changers and economic royalists”; on the whole, however, the new emphasis was less confrontational, less dominated by the imagery of labor and capital locked in struggle over distribution, and less concerned with reform than with the ongoing mediation of conflicts.

Despite the excesses and anxieties of the period and the suspicious intolerance of dissent fostered by the government, there was more than anticommunism at work in the muting of radicalism in the early postwar years. Attention was shifting to new topics. The drive to stabilize prosperity focused attention not only on problems of production, which traditionally pitted labor against capital, but on removing impediments to high levels of consumption as well. This concern brought with it a new attentiveness to the needs and interests of a large and expanding middle class, and the desire to swell its ranks even further through adaptive, compensatory, and stimulative programs of government.

In the Truman era, many of what would come to be known as “quality of life” issues surfaced on the national agenda—the concern with urban blight, mass housing, medical care, and education among them. The democratic coalition forged by Roosevelt expanded, became more pluralistic, and placed new demands on the political system. Although his critics may wish that he had done more, Truman plainly deserves credit for placing civil rights and social justice for minorities in a more prominent place on the agenda than previous administrations had done.

Despite occasionally severe disagreements with both labor and industry, Truman and his Fair Dealers were generally reconciled to the existing structure of the economy. Feats of wartime production had restored the public image of business leadership, and a general willingness to concede economic leadership to the corporate sector reemerged.

Truman clearly belongs in the statist tradition that culminated in the New Deal, but he and his aides conceived the tasks of government as compensatory, designed to forestall problems and to remedy those that arose from the normal workings of the system. He, like all his successors in office, hoped for voluntary cooperation on the part of the principal participants in the economic system, and his hopes, like those of his suc-
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cessors, were often disappointed, but command models of political economy held no allure. From the “Twenty-one Points” message onward, Truman was chiefly concerned to discover what government might do to build up the infrastructure of the economy without competing with the private sector—through transportation; federal aid to housing and agriculture; regional development of public works (with stockpiled plans for public employment, if necessary, as a last resort); federal aid to education; and a powerful emphasis on government’s responsibility to nurture research in science, technology, and medicine.

In foreign policy, the United States had, since Woodrow Wilson’s tenure, participated as one of several Western powers in negotiating the terms of international trade, flows of capital, and investment. In the post-World War II years, a bipolar world arose out of the chaos and destruction in Europe and Asia, and the United States had the luxury—or perhaps the responsibility—of dictating and financing postwar economic arrangements.

The essays in this volume depict the experience of the Truman administration in the struggles at home and abroad that marked the emergence of the new system. They are divided into two groups, the first concentrating on domestic politics and issues, and the second on questions of foreign policy and national defense.

As the focus of most of the essays is on the Truman administration, it is well to recall that administration is a collective noun, often personified in misleading ways that conceal the pluralism and ambiguity of communication (and the failure to communicate) on the part of those who make up the collectivity.

Domestic politics and issues

To help establish a biographical context on the president himself, Alonzo Hamby offers a concise, synoptic account of Truman’s experience. He calls attention to what seems to have been an unusually long period of maturation in Truman’s case, many years of drift filled with dead-end jobs, failed business ventures, family tensions, and uncertainty about his vocation. Truman’s first feelings of significant accomplishment and momentum came, as Hamby points out, when he was in his mid-thirties, during his service as an infantry officer in World War I. Not long after his return from the war he found he had the makings of a political career in Missouri’s Democratic party machine dominated by Thomas Pender-
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gast. Thereafter came many years of intensive political education and the search for professional competence—years, as Hamby puts it, of “Nie-buhrian compromise” that blended loyalty to the machine with the wish for some distance from it and an enthusiasm for the progressive tradition and a host of “good government” causes. The education would continue after Truman entered the Senate in 1935, in the whirlpool of New Deal politics, where he showed himself to be reserved, eager to learn, and more respectful of policy expertise and specialization than of popular oratory and reformist talk. The reputation he earned in the following several years for competence and reliability in Senate circles would land him on the ticket in 1944 as FDR’s running mate.

In trying to separate the realities presented by the increasingly copious collections of public and private documentary sources from the legend that grew up around Truman’s memory in the years after he left office, Hamby offers a balanced account of the discrepancies involved. He concedes that Truman’s vaunted decisiveness sometimes shaded off into impulsiveness and poor judgment that generated difficulties for him and his subordinates; that although outwardly affable and accessible, Truman sometimes harbored feelings of paranoia and was excessively sensitive to slights, real or imagined; and that his private opinions, even on matters of great moment, could be naive and ill-informed. Nonetheless, Hamby concludes, Truman’s public record was one of considerable achievement, and, despite his shortcomings, there was something in Truman’s temperament that appealed to the people, sustained support for him in office, and has deepened popular admiration for him since.

Robert Griffith turns his attention to the domestic scene during the years of the Truman presidency and provides a tour d’horizon of the Fair Deal battlefield, a many-sided conflict involving in confusing combinations the administration, the Congress, and the most powerful elements in the maturing interest-group system. It was here that Truman’s hopes for mutual restraint and voluntary cooperation on the part of contending groups within the private sector were shown to be naively. The administration’s attempts to find roles for government that would enable it to stabilize the economy through projects to shore up infrastructure at various points were often stymied, and Truman learned to his dismay that most attempts to alter the placement of the jumbled lines separating public affairs from private would be hotly contested.

Scholars are accustomed to seeing cold-war economic and military diplomacy in terms of the emergence of a new, postwar international
order, and in comparison with these topics the basic dynamics of development on the home front have been understudied. Griffith makes the important point that the “emerging order” theme provides an equally valuable framework for organizing thought about the trend of domestic social and economic policy. The new order is marked by a fairly stable set of public-private relationships that arise out of the struggles of the Truman period and represent a kind of “balance of power” that settles on the scene in the early 1950s. Drawing on a wide range of both published and unpublished sources, Griffith sees the new order as principally shaped by the most powerful and best financed components of the interest-group system. He concentrates on the political mobilization of the business community, which he suggests represented the most massive and systematic deployment of corporate power in the history of the country. And he draws attention to a series of coordinated efforts to determine the contours of public policy via lobbying, campaign financing, litigation, public relations, and advertising.

With a focus on the actions of the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Committee for Economic Development, and the Advertising Council, Griffith traces the ways in which the struggle was joined not just over the election of public officials and the passage of legislation, but also over the leadership and direction of executive agencies, the composition and rulings of regulatory commissions, and even over the massive diffusion of pro-business ideas and images that pervaded the discussion of public affairs. The topics that provided the occasions for struggle included fiscal and monetary policy, labor relations, farm policy, antitrust policy, natural resources and public power proposals, medical care, and housing and urban development.

Truman, as Griffith points out, was only dimly aware, as were his officials, of the scope, scale, and organization of business opposition to administration initiatives. The president harbored powerful resentments of certain features of the new corporate order, but it was only with the increasing frustrations of 1948 and the election that he rallied his supporters and launched a sustained rhetorical attack on business. On issue after issue, however, especially after the outbreak of war in Korea and the rising tide of McCarthyism at home, his administration was burdened with an overriding need for support from many conflicting groups, and so proved to be no match for the more narrowly focused goals of the opposition.

Whereas Griffith’s account brings the influence of business and indus-
try groups to the forefront, Craufurd Goodwin focuses on how events appeared from within the world inhabited by government’s economic policy-making officials. He discusses the choices with which administration officials wrestled in searching for a workable public-private relationship, because that relationship makes up the core of the “mixed” economy and is always imperiled by the need to constrain inflation without causing a recession. Mining the papers in the Truman Library and the National Archives, Goodwin isolates the economic policy conversation under way within the administration, a conversation that involved divergent and sometimes contradictory voices of Keynesians, marginalist laissez-faire advocates, and “institutionalist” reformers urging greater intervention in the doings of the private sector.

The Truman administration had invested a good deal of hope in the developing capacity of the government to influence activity at the macroeconomic level through fiscal and monetary policy. Goodwin makes it clear that the hope for a macroeconomic approach to social affairs came to a head in 1944, preparatory to support for what eventually became the Employment Act of 1946. That hope was heavily influenced by the “Americanized” Keynesian views of Alvin Hansen, who emphasized the need for government policy (1) to create the conditions under which the private economy could reach its maximum development and (2) to supplement the activities of the private sector in areas where only government could do the job.

At the center of his account are the newly created Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) and its attempts to find an effective role within the administration. Conceptions of the office ranged, as Goodwin demonstrates, from that of a mere fact-finding body, at one extreme, to an economic “general staff,” at the other.

Officials would learn during the first Truman administration that macroeconomic tools by themselves were inadequate to curb inflation and shape the direction of development; the failures of the macroeconomic approach caused them to turn their attention to problems at the microeconomic level. There they found the corporations, the labor unions, the professions, and other organized groups locked in conflict. They came to appreciate the need for both fiscalist macroeconomic measures and more interventionist approaches to microeconomic behavior. Conceiving and justifying the latter approaches and making them politically specific turned out to be an impossible task. Goodwin identifies a brief period, 1949 to 1950, in which officials began speculating about new ways of
achieving cooperation between government and the principal participants in the private sector. It was symbolized by CEA Chairman Leon Keyserling’s concern for a new “cooperative partnership” between business and industry and Commerce Secretary Charles Sawyer’s espousal of an unfortunately undefined “new liberalism” to be based on public-private cooperation. The coming of the Korean war and the incipient militarization of the economy, however, ended the administration’s search for new peacetime relationships. Goodwin concludes that the Truman administration must be judged to have left the question of the proper relationship between the public and private sectors with little more of an answer than when it first took the matter up, an appraisal that converges with Griffith’s view.

Nelson Lichtenstein’s study of labor in the Truman era fits into the same pattern of emphasis. Lichtenstein traces the decline of labor’s power from its peak in the early 1940s—when it was regarded by many as the voice of the working class as a whole, and some elements of its leadership spoke for a broad social agenda that represented the left wing of what was politically possible in the United States—to more recent decades, when labor has come to be regarded as just another interest group, one among many. Labor’s social agenda, Lichtenstein argues, was a good deal broader than collective bargaining over wages and working conditions, which had been secured and underwritten by the state in the New Deal’s Wagner Act and in wartime production arrangements; it constituted a gradual assault on management’s prerogatives and the attempt to shift power relations in a more democratic direction.

For a time those who represented this impulse within the labor movement, like some people in the business sector and in government, entertained visions of corporatist governmental arrangements, but to no avail. Lichtenstein argues that the Congress of Industrial Organizations profoundly underestimated the scope, resources, organization, and militancy of the business mobilization and the conservative political support for it. In the ensuing struggles, the enactment of the Taft-Hartley Act over the president’s veto became a symbol of the shifting relationship between unions and the government. Despite his veto of the Taft-Hartley Act, Truman was deeply ambivalent about the new unionism; Lichtenstein sees him as both an architect and a victim of the labor-management stalemates of his early years in office.

When “social unionism” failed to find any traction in the emerging polity, Lichtenstein argues, the unions turned their attention away from