

President Harry S. Truman

Synopsis: Harry S. Truman was born in Missouri on May 8, 1884. He was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's vice president for just 82 days before Roosevelt died and Truman became the 33rd president. In his first months in office he dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, ending World War II. His policy of communist containment started the Cold War, and he initiated U.S. involvement in the Korean War. Truman left office in 1953 and died in 1972.

Early Life: Truman was the first of three children born to John A. Truman, a farmer and mule trader, and his wife, Martha E. Truman. Harry was named in honor of his maternal uncle, Harrison Young, but his parents couldn't decide on a middle name. After more than a month, they settled on simply using the letter "S" as a tribute to both his maternal grandfather, Solomon Young, and his paternal grandfather, Anderson Shipp Truman.

Truman grew up on the family farm in Independence, MO, and did not attend college. He worked a variety of jobs after high school, first as a timekeeper for a railroad construction company, and then as a clerk and a bookkeeper at two separate banks in Kansas City. After five years, he returned to farming and joined the National Guard.

Military Career: When World War I erupted, Truman volunteered for duty. Though he was 33 years old—two years older than the age limit for the draft—and eligible for exemption as a farmer, he helped organize his National Guard regiment, which was ultimately called into service in the 129th Field Artillery. Truman was promoted to captain in France and assigned Battery D, which was known for being the most unruly battery in the regiment. In spite of a generally shy and modest temperament, Truman captured the respect and admiration of his men and led them successfully through heavy fighting during the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

Early Involvement in Politics: After the war, Truman returned home and married his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth "Bess" Wallace in 1919, with whom he had one daughter, Mary Margaret. That same year, he made a foray into business when he and Eddie Jacobson, set up a hat shop in Kansas City. But with America experiencing an economic decline in the early 1920s, the business failed in 1922. With the closing of the business, Truman owed \$20,000 to creditors. He refused to accept bankruptcy and insisted on paying back all the money he borrowed, which took more than 15 years.

About this time, he was approached by Democratic boss Thomas Pendergast, who appointed Truman to a position as an overseer of highways, and after a year, chose him to run for one of three county-judge positions in Jackson County. He was elected judge, which was an administrative rather than a judicial position, but he was defeated when he ran for a second term. Truman ran again in 1926 and was elected as a presiding judge, a position he held until he ran for senator.

Senator: Truman was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1934. In his first term, he served on the Senate Appropriations Committee, which was responsible for allocating tax money for FDR's New Deal projects, and the Interstate Commerce Committee, which oversaw railroads, shipping, and interstate transport. Truman began investigating railroads, and in 1940, he initiated legislation that imposed tighter federal regulation on the railroads, helping him establish a reputation as a man of integrity.

By the time Truman was up for reelection in 1940, Thomas Pendergast had been convicted of tax evasion and associated with voter fraud. Many predicted Truman's connection to Pendergast would result in a defeat. Truman didn't try to hide or distort his relationship with Pendergast, and his reputation as a frank and ethical man helped him win reelection.

In his second term, Truman chaired a special committee to investigate the National Defense Program to prevent war profiteering and wasteful spending in defense industries. He gained public support and recognition for his straightforward reports and practical recommendations, and he won the respect of his colleagues and the populace alike.

Vice President and President: When FDR had to choose a running mate for the 1944 presidential election, he deemed his acting vice president, Henry Wallace, unacceptable. Wallace was disliked by many of the senior democrats in Washington, and since it was apparent that Roosevelt might not survive his fourth term, the vice presidential pick was especially important. Truman's popularity, as well as his reputation as a fiscally responsible man and a defender of citizens' rights, made him an attractive option. Truman was initially reluctant to accept, but once he received the nomination, he campaigned vigorously.

Roosevelt and Truman were elected in November of 1944, and Truman took the oath of office on January 20, 1945. He served as vice president just 82 days before Roosevelt died of a massive stroke, and he was sworn in as president on April 12, 1945.

With no prior experience in foreign policy, Truman was thrust into the role of commander in chief and charged with ending a world war. In the first six months of his term, he announced the Germans' surrender, dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—ending World War II—and signed the charter ratifying the United Nations.

After the War: In spite of these early successes, Truman's diplomatic situation was beset with challenges. Although the Soviet Union had been a powerful ally to the U.S. during the war, international relations deteriorated quickly when it became apparent that the Soviets intended to remain in control of Eastern European nations that were expected to be reestablished according to their pre-Hitler governments. This, along with the exclusion of the Soviets from the reconstruction of Asia, began the Cold War.

Re-Election: Republicans won both houses of Congress in 1946, which was seen as a judgment of Truman's policies, and polls indicated that reelection was all but impossible. So certain seemed the victory of New York Governor Thomas Dewey that the "Chicago Tribune" famously went to press with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" before many polling locations had released results. The final outcome was a win for Truman with 49.5 percent of the vote, compared with Dewey's 45.1 percent, one of the greatest upsets in the history of U.S. elections.

The Korean War: Truman announced his domestic policy initiative, the "Fair Deal" program, in his 1949 State of the Union address. Building on FDR's "New Deal," it included universal health care, an increase in the minimum wage, more funding for education and a guarantee of equal rights under the law for all citizens.

The program was a mixed success. In 1948, racial discrimination was banned in federal government hiring practices, the military was desegregated and the minimum wage had gone up. National health insurance was rejected, as was more money for education.

The Korean War broke out in June 1950, and Truman swiftly committed U.S. troops to the conflict. He believed that North Korea's invasion of South Korea was a challenge from the Soviets, and if left unchecked, it could escalate to another world war and to further communist aggression. After brief public support for his decision, criticism mounted.

Truman initially endorsed a rollback strategy and encouraged General Douglas MacArthur to breach the 38th parallel, bringing forces into North Korea in order to take over the government. But when China sent 300,000 troops to the aid of North Korea, Truman changed tactics. He reverted to the containment strategy, focusing on preserving the independence of South Korea rather than eliminating communism in the north. MacArthur publicly disagreed. To Truman, this was insubordination and a challenge to his authority, and he dismissed MacArthur in April of 1951. MacArthur was a popular general, and Truman's already-weak approval rating declined further.

Steel Strike: Truman's challenges were not limited to international affairs. On the home front, he was struggling to manage a labor dispute between the United Steel Workers of America and the major steel mills. The union demanded a wage increase, but the mill owners refused to grant it unless the government allowed them to increase the prices of their consumer goods, which had been capped by the Wage Stabilization Board. Unable to broker an agreement and unwilling to invoke the Taft-Hartley Act, which was passed in spite of his veto in 1947 and would have allowed him to seek an injunction that prevented the union from striking, Truman seized the steel mills in the name of the government.

The steel companies responded by filing a suit against the government, and the case, *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company v. Sawyer* went before the Supreme Court. The Court found in favor of the steel mills, and forced Secretary of Commerce Charles Sawyer to give the mills back to the owners. Truman's handling of this dispute further tarnished his reputation with the American people.

Post-Presidency: In March 1952, Truman announced that he would not run for reelection. He gave his support to Governor Adlai Stevenson, the democratic nominee, though Stevenson was distancing himself from the president because of his poor approval rating.

After retiring from the presidency, Truman returned to Independence, Missouri, where he wrote his memoirs, oversaw the construction of his presidential library and took long walks. He died on December 26, 1972, and is buried next to Bess in the courtyard of the Truman Library.

Masonic History: M.W.B. Truman was raised on March 18, 1909 in Belton Lodge No. 450, Belton, MO. He became proficient (letter perfect) in all three degrees. In 1911, several Members of Belton Lodge separated to establish Grandview Lodge No. 618, Grandview, MO, and Brother Truman served as its first Worshipful Master. He entered the Scottish Rite Lodge of Perfection and Chapter Rose Croix in Kansas City in **1912** and completed the Scottish Rite Degrees in **1917** before going on active duty. In the York Rite, he received the Chapter and Council degrees in Kansas City in 1919, and the Commandery Orders in Palestine Commandery, Independence, in 1923. He was also honored as a Knight

Companion of the Red Cross of Constantine in Mary Conclave, Kansas City. President Truman was created a Noble of the Mystic Shrine in Ararat Temple, Kansas City in 1917. He was appointed District Deputy Grand Master and Lecturer for the newly formed 59th Masonic District in **1925**, serving until **1930**. In 1930, Truman was made a Royal Jester in Kansas City, and in 1943, he was initiated in Gallipolis Grotto, Mystic Order, Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm. He served as Orator of Ararat Shrine Temple in 1933 and Second Ceremonial Master in 1934. Upon his election to the U.S. Senate that year, he resigned from the divan line due to official and Grand Lodge duties.

At the Annual Session of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, **September 24-25, 1940**, Brother Truman was elected the 97th Grand Master of Masons of Missouri, and served until **October 1, 1941**. He was only the second Masonic President to serve as a Grand Master--Andrew Jackson served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee. It was during Mr. Truman's term that the Missouri Lodge of Research was reorganized. He served as Master of that Lodge in **1950**, while he was President. Brother Truman was made a Sovereign Grand Inspector General, 33°, and Honorary Member, Supreme Council on **October 19, 1945** in Washington D.C., and was the Exemplar for his Class. He is the only President to be accorded this honor. As a result of his military service, President Truman was a member of the National Sojourners, an organization of Masons who were officers in one of the armed forces of the U.S. or the Public Health Service. Truman was invited to attend the national convention of the Sojourners in 1948. In regretfully declining, he wrote the Secretary. "Fraternal bonds, always strong, are further strengthened by the close association incident to a common peril. The responsibilities that you were called upon to discharge during hostilities were exacting and heavy. In war and in peace, the ideals and teachings which we hold as brother Masons should be an inspiration to lofty patriotism and faithful service." It is interesting to note that his Sojourner mail was always addressed to "Col. Truman, White House."

On **May 18, 1959**, Brother and Former President Truman received a fifty-year award, the only U.S. President to reach that golden anniversary in Freemasonry.

The President was the recipient of many honorary memberships in Masonic bodies throughout the world.

- Honorary Grand Master of the International Supreme Council, Order of DeMolay. Honorary Deputy First Grand Principal of the Supreme Grand Lodge of Royal Arch Freemasons of Scotland.
- Honorary Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Israel, and awarded its Medal for Merit.
- Gorgas Medal by the Northern Jurisdiction of the Scottish rite for "notably distinguished service in the cause of Freemasonry, humanity or country."