

Harry s Truman, “the common man’s common man”
From the New Deal to the Fair Deal

Harry S Truman

1. became President in 1945
2. was nearly a political unknown
3. served as Roosevelt's vice president for only three months
4. had to negotiate how to continue Roosevelt's New Deal policies
5. faced an increasingly conservative Congress

America Post WWII:

1. the 1940s a spirit of new conservatism arose
2. the groundwork for the Eisenhower era of the 1950s
3. Truman tried to continue FDR's policies
4. sent to Congress a host of New Deal-style bills
5. not bold new endeavors but extensions of policies already in place:
 - a. Raise the minimum wage from \$.40 to \$.65
 - b. Extend and expand Social Security coverage
 - c. Slum clearance and a national housing plan
 - d. National health insurance plan
6. All of these were unsuccessful
7. In Congress, a new conservative coalition had arisen out of opposition to
 - a. New Deal liberalism
 - b. FDR's internationalism
8. conservative coalition brought together
 - a. Southern Democrats
 - i. fiscally conservative
 - ii. socially conservative
 - iii. politically conservative
 - iv. opposed Truman's liberal stance on civil rights for African-Americans
 - b. Northern Republicans
 - i. generally opposed government involvement in the economy

The 1946 Elections: "To Err is Truman "

1. 1946 Truman was attacked from two sides
 - a. Liberals pined away for Roosevelt and criticized Truman's labor policies
 - b. Conservatives had the fuel of post-war inflation to add to their anti-Truman fire.
2. Truman's approval ratings dropped significantly
 - a. 87% when he took office
 - b. 32% in early November, 1946
3. midterm congressional elections of 1946,
 - a. Republicans ran under the slogan "Had enough?"
 - b. GOP gained:
 - i. 11 seats in the Senate
 - ii. 56 in the House
 - c. This was the first Republican-controlled Congress since 1928

The 1948 Elections: "The Comeback Kid"

1. classical political upset
2. showed liberalism was still alive in the United States
3. Democratic National Convention, forced to nominate Truman
4. The Republican candidate was Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York.
5. There were also two candidates representing groups that had splintered from the Democratic Party:
 - a. Progressive Party
 - i. Candidate: Henry A. Wallace, former VP under FDR
 - ii. not of the same as Teddy Roosevelt
 - iii. leftists seeking nationalized banking and greater socialization of the economy
 - iv. backed by the Communist Party of the United States.
 - b. States' Rights Party - "Dixiecrats"
 - i. Candidate: Strom Thurmond (SC)
 - ii. 1948 Democratic Convention, Hubert Humphrey (MN) introduced a platform plank committing the government to civil rights.
 - iii. In protest, southern delegates stormed out and formed the States' Rights party
6. Harry Truman had progressive views on civil rights and was a strong advocate of Humphrey's proposal
7. Democratic Party split three ways
8. Dewey's win was inevitable
9. Truman went on a whistle-stop campaign across the nation
10. Truman attacked the "do-nothing Congress."
11. Why Truman won:
 - a. Republicans were overconfident
 - b. he had shown courage in the face of incredible odds
 - c. revived the New Deal coalition of labor, farmers, & African-Americans

The Fair Deal

1. Truman set out to prove that New Deal liberalism was not yet dead
2. proposed the Fair Deal programs
3. New Deal with its dual policy of relief & reform were no longer what US needed
4. The Fair Deal
 - a. redistribute income among people of various classes
 - b. transfer money from the very rich to the very poor
 - c. Truman's Fair Deal goals came down to six major federal initiatives:
 - i. Civil rights
 - ii. Federal housing programs
 - iii. Unemployment insurance benefits
 - iv. New tax cuts for poor
 - v. Federal funding for education
 - vi. Federal health care and health insurance program
5. The Fair Deal was largely a failure
 - a. few of these initiatives were made into law
 - b. no national health care program
 - c. very little done in education (exception: the G.I. Bill)
 - d. unemployment benefits were extended only slightly

- e. civil rights legislation would have to wait
- 6. conservative coalition blocked Truman at every turn
- 7. Truman did succeed in getting a major housing initiative passed in 1949
- 8. US was moving further and further to the right

An Economic Shift to the Right

- 1. The economy also showed that the country was moving more to the right
- 2. Aftermath of World War II, two major problems faced the American economy:
 - a. reconversion of the wartime economy
 - b. labor unions

Reconversion - The problem of reconversion had three main parts:

- 1. *Spiraling inflation.* During the war, the Office of Price Administration had controlled prices and wages, but after the war's end, conservatives wanted to eliminate these controls. However, consumers had money-burning holes in their pockets and nothing to buy. When demand outruns supply, prices are driven up and the economy becomes inflationary without controls to keep prices in check. In the spring of 1946, conservatives succeeded in freeing prices. Prices shot up, feeding inflation.
- 2. *Wartime to peacetime production.* One reason for the continued shortage of consumer goods was the transition necessary to move from wartime to peacetime production. Business leaders had not known of the atomic bomb, and weren't prepared for such a quick end to the Pacific war. Industry was still making planes and tanks instead of radios and washing machines.
- 3. *What to do with the returning G.I.s.* To prevent the situation after the First World War, when servicemen came home to find no jobs, few educational opportunities, and a housing crunch, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was passed in 1944. The G.I. Bill (as it was popularly known) committed billions of federal dollars for support for housing, education, health benefits, and job training and retraining.

Labor - The 2nd crucial post-war issue was labor, as a wave of strikes swept the nation.

- 1. In 1946, 400,000 miners struck not once, but twice.
- 2. In all, 4.6 million workers struck at one time or another that year.
- 3. Taft-Hartley Act of 1947
 - a. The conservatives' reply to the labor problem
 - b. This act is still on the books and has been invoked by two presidents.
 - c. Act has four main points:
 - i. Prohibited the closed shop
 - ii. Prohibited secondary "sympathy" strikes
 - iii. Prohibited political contributions by unions
 - iv. Gave President power to impose a cooling-off period to avert strikes
 - d. Taft-Hartley Act may have strengthened big labor
 - e. forced various groups to work together in the face of heavy opposition
 - f. Over the next decade, the conservative attack on unions encouraged them to share strategies and resources
 - g. 1955 two competing unions joined forces:

- i. the American Federation of Labor (AFL)
- ii. the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)
- iii. combined AFL-CIO became the largest federation of labor unions in the United States
- iv. represents over 70% of the unionized labor force

Questions to Answer:

1. What was the "conservative coalition" that kept Truman's reform programs from being put into effect? How and why was this coalition formed?
2. Why did conservatives dislike Harry Truman? Why did liberals dislike Harry Truman?
3. Why was inflation such a problem after WWII?
4. What was the Taft-Hartley Act and why was it passed? Was it effective in achieving its goals?