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Presidential Power and Truman's Seizure of the Steel Mills

*Ken Hechler**

The blazing firestorm which greeted President Truman's seizure of the steel mills in 1952 was cleverly orchestrated. The ferocity of criticism totally overlooks the fact that Truman's actions were consistent with his theory of presidential power demonstrated during the close to eight years he occupied the White House.

Long before succeeding to the presidency, Truman had a clearly formulated concept of the difference between strong and weak presidents in American history. Seldom seen on the playground, his glasses for weak eyesight caused him to spend an inordinate amount of time in the library, and he concentrated on reading the biographies of men and women. Early on, he was addicted to Thomas Carlyle's dictum that great men create events rather than vice versa.

Truman's love of history enabled him to formulate a theory of executive leadership which extended beyond American shores to great leaders throughout the world. About to deliver a nationwide radio and television address on the Korean War, we discovered him reading a biography of Charlemagne. Andrew Jackson was a Truman hero, not only because he was the first president from west of the Alleghenies, but also for his vigorous executive leadership in measures to aid the hewers of wood and drawers of water and his populist fight against the moneyed interests represented by Nicholas Biddle and the national bank.

Among later presidents, Truman drew inspiration from Woodrow Wilson for both his domestic and foreign policies. He admired the fact that Wilson broke a century-old tradition by addressing Congress in person instead of sending a written message, and also Wilson's leadership on behalf of the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Reserve Act, and the Clayton Anti-trust Act. Wilson's internationalism, in contrast to midwestern isolationism, attracted Truman's admiration.

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Truman always had a thirst for history and the lessons for executive leadership. I recall the night before he fired General MacArthur he asked me to prepare a memorandum on the relations between Abraham Lincoln and General George B. McClellan. He immediately grasped the historic parallel between McClellan who looked down his nose at Lincoln as a midwestern clod who could not understand military strategy, and MacArthur, who had analogous contempt for the Midwestern World War I artillery captain. Truman drew on my memorandum to announce his dedication to the principle of civilian control over the military, with the comment that "the only thing new is the history you haven't read."

A fortuitous series of circumstances, including Truman's penchant for deriving lessons from history, enabled me to get my job at the Truman White House. While teaching at Princeton University in 1948, I asked George M. Elsey, one of Truman's Administrative Assistants and Princeton graduate, to visit my class to relate the inside story of how Truman won his upset victory over Thomas E. Dewey in the 1948 election. Elsey later asked me whether I could help prepare data on a Truman request for a study to enable the president to counter the claims that his Fair Deal programs were creating a "welfare state." Truman was upset that every time he proposed programs for better housing, minimum wage increases, aid to education or assistance to those at the bottom of the economic scale, he was preaching socialism and the welfare state. He pointed out that billions of Federal dollars had been spent since Alexander Hamilton on land grants to the big railroads, tax breaks and other subsidies which constituted "corporate welfare."

Clark Clifford, Truman's special counsel, passed on my comprehensive study to the president with a complimentary memorandum on December 22, 1949, that it would be used for presidential speeches. Not long afterward, I joined the White House staff. In addition to other duties, I was called on to produce a large number of in-depth studies of issues which illustrated Truman's personal desire to accumulate factual data to flesh out historical principles which he had already formulated through his extensive reading. For example, when Senator McCarthy began his hysterical tirades about communists in the State Department and other agencies, Truman asked me to prepare a historical analysis of "Witch Hunting and Hysteria" starting with the Salem Witchcraft Trials, and covering the Alien and Sedition Acts passed during President John Adams' administration, the Anti-Masonic Movement and the

Know-Nothing Party, the Ku Klux Klan, the red scare raids by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, and the manner in which all these hysterical phases in American history eventually petered out.

President Truman asked me to compile a collection of "scare words" which he described as foolish predictions made by cynical politicians when great projects were launched for the benefit of all the people. For example, when Truman dedicated the Grand Coulee Dam in 1950, he got a kick out of using a quotation I had found from a Republican Congressman names Francis D. Culkin, who had proclaimed in 1936 "that up in the Grand Coulee country there is no one to sell power to except the coyotes and jackrabbits, and there will never be." When he was in Iowa, Truman poked fun at a dire prediction made by a Congressman in 1887, who labeled a \$15,000 appropriation for agricultural experiment stations as "absolutely destroying the independence and freedom of individual conduct, and subverting the theory on which the government is based."

I discovered that when the 1936 Soil Conservation Act was being debated, Massachusetts Congressman Joseph W. Martin, Jr., Republican Speaker of the House during the 80th Congress, had denounced soil conservation regulation as "regimentation." Martin contended that farmers "are to be dominated and regimented by the New Dealers for all time. No longer are they to be free men."

Perhaps the most erroneous "calamity howler" came from the President of the New York Bankers' Association who predicted in 1934 that "if the national debt ever goes up to \$25 billion there would be a wholesale liquidation of government securities."

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, Truman was charged with having ruined American military strength by the pell-mell demobilization which followed the end of World War II. The president asked me to compile the public statements of prominent Republicans who had clamored in 1945 for a quick release of military personnel and their immediate return to civilian life. This compilation proved that not only Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur, but also all leading Republican officials were criticizing the Democrats for dragging their feet and not moving fast enough to "bring the boys home."

Frequently, observers of Harry Truman concluded that he "shot from the hip" because he made quick decisions on central issues. This criticism was leveled at Truman when he seized the steel

mills. Truman was a very hard worker and spent an inordinate amount of time in the evenings reviewing documents which related to domestic and foreign problems. Therefore, when he made speedy decisions, such decisions were made with the background of careful advance consideration and weighing of alternatives from extensive study of the issues involved.

On occasion, Truman responded very personally on the basis of his vast personal experience and basic philosophy. He hated hypocrisy. I recall during the campaign of 1952, Truman resented the holier-than-thou statements of John Foster Dulles that he was not as religious as the Republicans who were criticizing him for failure to take aggressive action to free the captive peoples behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern European nations bordering the Soviet Union. Coming east along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad from Cincinnati into Parkersburg, West Virginia, he asked me to give him a copy of the Bible so he could quote from the gospel according to Saint Matthew, Chapter 6, which reads:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets that they may be seen of men.

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

In his Parkersburg address, after quoting the Bible, he added that his grandfather used to tell him that when you hear someone praying loudly in public "you had better go home and lock your smokehouse."

Truman also had a penchant for unraveling complicated issues in order to get to the heart of what was needed for an early solution. He frequently helped the staff to realize that intractable crises were not as serious as they seemed on the surface. Martin Friedman was very upset one day when he received a phone call from a Congressional committee staff member demanding copies of all the raw F.B.I. files on every member of the White House staff. When Friedman, an assistant in the White House personnel office said this was impossible, the Congressional staff member said if the files were not delivered, Congress would cut off the appropriation for the White House. Friedman went into see the president, who was signing papers in a methodical manner. After

he breathlessly reported the crisis, Truman looked back up from his paperwork and quickly answered: "You call that fellow back and tell him we'll spend what we've got, and then we'll just close up shop here at the white house." The crisis immediately evaporated.

Winthrop W. Aldrich, Chief Executive Officer of the powerful Chase National Bank in New York, became very angry one day because President Truman kept him waiting far beyond the time of his appointment. A staff member who noted the frequent glances at his watch, the uneasy tapping of Aldrich's foot and his thundercloud expression, entered the Oval Office to remind Truman that a distinguished visitor was upset with the delay. Truman immediately related the time when, as the Chairman of the Senate War Investigating Committee, on a visit to the Chase National Bank, Aldrich had kept the Senator waiting for an hour. Truman then snapped, "Mr. Aldrich has exactly 22 minutes more to wait!"

The storm of public criticism of Truman's seizure of the steel mills made quite a point of Truman's bias in favor of labor unions, and charged he was ignoring the national interest. These charges completely overlook the fact that during the nationwide railroad strike in 1946, Truman went before Congress to propose that legislation be passed to draft the striking railroad workers into the Army.

Later in 1946, when John L. Lewis broke his contract and struck the United Mine Workers then under a Federal seizure order, Truman went to court and forced Lewis to lift the strike by fines against both the union and Lewis personally.

Two other examples of Truman's personal initiative involved assignments given to me. The president asked the State Department to prepare a popular pamphlet to explain our foreign policy. The manuscript was so turgidly worded that I was asked to take the high-level "State Departmentese" and reduce it to down-to-earth and comprehensible language. A very popular pamphlet entitled "Our Foreign Policy" was well received.

On another occasion, Truman asked me to prepare an analysis of all the occasions and Congressional votes, plus Republican appointments he had made which illustrated his determination that partisan politics should stop at the water's edge. Truman's personal friendship with Michigan Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg; the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the Republican-controlled 80th Congress, was a key factor in the

passage of the Marshall Plan, the multi-million dollar loan to Greece and Turkey and other foreign policy initiatives. The study I prepared was eventually published by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after the Democrats recaptured control of Congress in 1948.

When Averell Harriman was Secretary of Commerce, he sent a report by his department over to the White House. After reading the executive summary of the substance of the report, Harriman was caught flat-footed by Truman's questions about items he had read about in the body of the report. Harriman related that he never made that mistake again to rely on an executive summary of anything sent to President Truman.

Early in 1951, President Truman agreed with his military advisers that NATO should be strengthened by sending American troops to Europe. Senator Robert A. Taft and a number of members of the House and Senate strongly opposed this move, and one of their tools of opposition was a series of resolutions requiring Congressional approval before American troops could be sent to Europe. Truman insisted that he had the power to carry out this initiative without Congressional authorization, just as he did on the steel seizure case. The issue of troops to Europe was not tested in court, and in the year before the steel seizure case, the president prevailed.

Truman's concept of presidential power was bolstered by the following statement by Theodore Roosevelt in his autobiography:

The most important factor in getting the right spirit in my administration...was my insistence upon the theory that the executive power was limited only by specific restrictions and prohibitions appearing in the Constitution or imposed by Congress under its constitutional powers.

This statement, along with the actions recounted above, define President Truman's presidential character and provide insight into why his actions in seizing the steel mills were consistent with his theory of presidential power.