

Harry S. Truman
The Foremost Freemason of the Twentieth Century
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Truman is said to have proven that an common man could become President, but in fact, he was really an uncommon man and he was an uncommon youngster. While children his age were playing games, he was studying. He believed that before he reached the age of twelve he had read every book in the public library of Independence, Missouri.

He was particularly interested in biographies and history, all which helped him in later years. Referring to Andrew Johnson, the Mason from Tennessee, and his being thrust into the Presidency of the United States, Truman said: "When the same thing happened to me, I knew just how Johnson had coped with his problems, and I did not make the mistakes he made."

And Truman didn't. From the moment he took the oath of office as President of the United States he assumed the full responsibility and authority of the position. In doing so he shocked politicians, businessmen, detractors, and especially the media. The latter, for the most part, never forgave him for proving it was wrong.

Actually, there should have been no surprise about the leadership abilities of Truman. It began with his service in the National Guard and continued during his tour of duty in France during World War I. There he took over a battery of mostly Irish Catholics that had destroyed the careers of four former commanding officers. Captain Truman turned it into the best battery in France. He continually bragged about its accomplishments, and the men raved about their commander. They never forgot him and supported him throughout his political career.

Truman's leadership ability continued after his election as a judge in 1922, although the media and his detractors would continually claim falsely he was a bankrupt haberdasher

from Missouri. During his term as judge he traveled throughout his county at his own expense becoming familiar with every road, building and institution in it. After he was elected presiding judge he again traveled, at his own expense, throughout the country to find ways to improve his county. He found poor roads, public buildings and a huge debt.

So well did Truman do his job he was re-elected in 1930 by an overwhelming majority for another term. When he left, office buildings, institutions and roads had been rebuilt and the debt had been dissolved. His county was one of the few in the state that was solvent.

Yet, while he was doing a monumental job in public office he always found time to work for Freemasonry. In 1924 he was appointed District Deputy Grand Master and District Lecturer. He had been an excellent ritualist almost from the day he became a Master Mason on March 18, 1909, in Belton Lodge No. 540. In 1910 he was appointed Charter Master of Grandview Lodge, later to become No. 618. While he courted the "girl with the golden curls" he kept her fully informed about what he was doing as a Master Mason.

In 1930, the year he was reelected presiding judge, the incoming Grand Master, a Republican, considered Harry Truman for appointment to the bottom of the Grand Lodge line. He consulted two other Republicans, one of them Ray V. Denslow, the in-coming Deputy Grand Master. They were unanimous in the decision to appoint Harry S. Truman, a Democrat. They knew Truman was his own man and had proven conclusively that he lived by the principles of Freemasonry that he taught others.

Ironically, Truman almost didn't become Grand Master of Masons in Missouri. In the same year, 1940, he had to fight two battles, one for the United States Senate, to which he had first been elected in 1933, the other to become Grand Master. To his credit, he did not use either to benefit the other.

His first term as Senator earned Truman the respect of the members of the upper house. So much so that after he had won his hard fought battle for reelection, his colleagues gave him a standing ovation when he entered the chamber.

Throughout his first term as Senator, Truman continued to work for Freemasonry, and not only in Missouri. Yet, the opposition to him for the first elective office in the line, that of Junior Grand Warden, was so strong he won by only 53 votes. He considered quitting the line because he thought too highly of Freemasonry to let the opposition experienced destroy it. His friends, fortunately, stopped that notion. Then, because the Deputy Grand Master resigned in 1939, Truman had two major battles in 1940, for the Senate and Grand Master. He won them both.

As Senator he served as Chairman of the Special Services Committee. The committee found graft, incompetence, and cheating throughout business and labor unions. This was stopped wherever it was found. The little businessman and the people were the beneficiaries of the committee's "watchdog" tactics.

In spite of his back-breaking schedule in the Senate, the Grand Master from Missouri found time to work with and for Freemasonry. He added credence to the almost defunct Masonic Service Association with speeches for and about it, and by traveling to open service centers for the Armed Forces.

Truman didn't want to be Vice President of the United States, but he reluctantly agreed to run when Franklin Roosevelt, the Mason from New York, said he would be breaking up the Democratic Party if he didn't. After his election to a job he considered "as useless as the fifth teat on a cow," he planned on changing the image. There wasn't time. Eighty-three days later Roosevelt died and Truman was sworn in as President of the United States.

It was typical of the man that in spite of his sorrow and the decisions he knew he had to make on that April 12, 1945, he remembered his Masonic obligations. The son of a Past

Master of Grandview Lodge was to be balloted on in Alexandria Washington Lodge that evening; Truman had planned to speak for him. Truman's new national obligations prevented him from going to the lodge. But he sent three members of Congress to do it for him.

Roosevelt had not confided in his Vice President, so Truman found his childhood habits of study came in handy. He surrounded himself with the best men he could find, and informed them he wanted no "yes men." It wasn't easy, but he brought the war in Europe to a successful conclusion. Then he concentrated on the Pacific. When the Japanese Empire gave no signs of surrendering, he gambled and ordered an atom bomb dropped on a likely target. When this didn't work, the second and only other such bomb in existence, was ordered to be dropped.

Each year the controversy over this action grows more bitter. For those who fought in World War II, Truman was a hero. Dropping the bomb worked. Millions of Japanese and American lives, and those of America's allies were saved. Perhaps Truman's most important achievements was in keeping the Soviet vultures from feasting on the remains.

The American citizens were better off economically and many other ways than ever before in 1948, but the man in the White House had to fight for his political life. The Democratic Party was severely split; the Republican candidate, Thomas E. Dewey, a Freemason from New York, was a ten to one favorite to win the Presidency. The odds would remain the same until the voters had spoken.

Truman, the candidate, the Freemason, did many remarkable things during that trying campaign. Among them was proving again what an uncommon man he was. Although he didn't have the time, he took it to attend little Beech Grove Lodge No. 694 in Indiana. Why? Because he learned one of the sailors aboard the Presidential Yacht Williamsburg was going to be raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on October 15, 1948. The sailor was Donald Earl Bauermeister. And Truman, who insisted on being received not as President of the United States, but as a Past Grand Master of Masons in Missouri,

witnessed the degree. He then presented the candidate with a Masonic ring from his parents.

Mary Conclave of the Red Cross of Constantine held a reception for its most famous member on November 1, 1948. Truman told its members that he wasn't a wagering man, but if they wanted to make some easy money to bet on him to win the election. Then, after making a non-political radio address the evening of the election he went to bed while reporters, supporters, and opponents stayed up all night expecting him to lose.

At 6 a.m. on November 3, Truman joined the weary and bleary-eyed folks at the Muehlebach Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri. At 10:14 Dewey conceded. The whistles blew and the bells rang for the home town boy who had pulled off the upset of the century!

As he had during his first term, the President continued to work for his country and its people. And he continued to work for Freemasonry and its principles.

His one major goal after he had returned to private life was to build a library and museum. He wanted this in Grandview, but Independence was the more likely place. His efforts, his writings, his speeches were all aimed at that one goal. The money he received went into that project. He could have obtained it easily by exploiting the office of the Presidency, but that he refused to prostitute.

The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum was built. And Truman repeated as he had many times before: "This library will belong to the people of the United States. My papers will be the property of the people and be accessible to them. And this is as it should be. The papers of the Presidents are among the most valuable sources of material for history. They ought to be preserved and they ought to be used."

Truman was asked after his election as President of the United States: "How much of an influence did Freemasonry have on the life of Harry S. Truman?". His answer was:

"The greatest honor that has ever come to me, and that can ever come to me in my life, is to be Grand Master of Masons in Missouri."

Some of you may, or may not know, that M.W. Harry S. Truman attended the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of New Jersey in 1945 and was the keynote speaker. It is also important to note that the Annual Communication was held in this very building.

Although I will not read it in its entirety, as it addresses World War II, I found a large portion of it relevant today:

It is a great privilege to be the guest this evening at the 157th Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of New Jersey. The history and traditions of this Grand Lodge should be a source of pride to every member. It was founded in the spirit of brotherly love and friendship. It was dedicated to the service of God and country.

This history of America, its fight for freedom, its growth to the country we know, and the history of Masonry in America are one and the same. Again, today, when American freedom is in peril, when America is being attacked on every side – when American lives are being lost and American ships are being sunk – Masons and their sons are fighting as they have always fought in the past, with honor and with glory.

The applications of the principles of the founders of this great Fraternity, sound morality, honesty to God and country, in the strength of charity, has brought forth a new civilization, changes in our way of life, and progress then undreamed of. By their example, we know that all progress, all material success, must be based on the solid foundations of faith in God and charity toward one's fellowmen. Their contributions, and the contributions of their brothers and sons who followed them, in the formation and growth of this nation, have become a keystone of democracy. Throughout the succeeding years, their principles have been carried on by each generation of the members of Grand

Lodge, many of whom have made the supreme sacrifice for those principles on the battlefields of the world.

Today we are engaged in another struggle for the preservation of our heritage of freedom and democracy. We are spurred by the grim determination to wage this war relentlessly on all fronts and on all seas until all those who have chosen to live by the sword have perished by it. When time comes for the historians to write the record of our participation in this great struggle they will undoubtedly state that at this present period we had reached the turning point of the war. I do not pretend that they will write that within these past two years we had accomplished any major part of the fighting which gained final victory. The success of our arms, both on land and sea, are only an indication of the greater victories which must lie ahead. They do not prove that our Military and Naval forces are courageous, well trained, competently led, and are impelled by the knowledge that they fight for the right.

I do not suggest that the historians will say that at this stage of the war the battle of production had been won. There remains long months and years of toil for the uncomplaining men and women who are producing the food and materials for war. But I do think that the writers of history will say that at this date our countrymen had conditioned themselves to win the war. We have grimly resolved that no sacrifice is too great for the end we must attain – the complete annihilation of the aggressors who so seriously threaten our democratic existence and ideals. At this point our people are prepared to see their sons die and to return wounded from the battle, to offer their goods, their minds, and their muscles for the benefit of the country we love. Because we have reached this state of mind and have made this high resolve, the victory is certain. It may be long delayed, it may be difficult to attain, but it is no longer doubtful. That, I think, will be the estimate of our present position by those who later describe our participation in this war.

Actuated by this high resolve to exert every ounce of our strength and to spare ourselves no sacrifice until we have won, each American must daily ask himself, "Am I doing my

part for my country? Am I contributing my full share to the national effort?" Every American must become a part of our industrial and agricultural or military establishments. There is some worthy contribution – be it large or small, important or seemingly trivial – that every citizen can offer. Each one of us who remains at home is a very necessary member of the "Army of the Home Front." It is this Army – composed of agriculture, labor, industry, and the home – which must work and toil and sacrifice so we may produce more food, more guns, tanks, planes, and all the material of war for our gallant men and women who wear their country's uniform. Let each of us in civilian life reappraise our efforts in this terrible conflict and, through our efforts, preserve for our fighting men a nation *worth fighting for!* That in truth, is your job and mine.