



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Presidential Places

Harry Truman: Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library

Presidential Places

George Washington	Birthplace
Andrew Jackson	Home and Grave
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William Clinton	Museum/Library
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Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places: Government Graft

Pending:

George Washington	Mount Vernon
Thomas Jefferson	Monticello
James Madison	Montpelier

And others as I travel America

Presidential Places

Hundreds of books, movies, and television programs are available about the homes, libraries, museums, birth, and burial places of America's Presidents. I cannot hope to replicate these works, nor do I wish to. My hope is that the essays in the *Presidential Places* series offer different and humorous perspectives about several of America's revered historical places.

Many of the places we visit in this series are called *libraries*. They are unique places containing historical information about America in general and specifically about an American president during his time in office.

Here is one definition of such a library: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept."

Here is an alternate and more accurate definition: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept away from the public."

Here is another definition of a presidential library, "A library, whose contents are forbidden to be examined by people who paid admission to enter the library and examine its contents in the first place. Therefore, Disneyland-like exhibits are created to placate the crowd."

A fourth definition: "Thinly disguised attempt to bolster the public image of a former President."

These definitions are acceptable to those who flock to presidential places. After all, presidential places are crowded places. The visitors must be curious about White House dinner menus, presidential pins, catchy campaign slogans, first-ladies' gowns, and other artifacts of American politics. Because these places vary in how they are named, I use the words *museum* and *library* interchangeably. It appears most of the places have buildings and rooms that serve both as museums and libraries.

In each of these places I visited, I had my fill of political drivel. But of more importance, I witnessed a deep sense of pride the site creators have about these places. And time and again, I beheld the thankfulness and patriotism of American citizens who were aware, while knowing America's faults, that the country offered a better way of life than many other nations. Even with tongue in cheek, I carried away a sense of American citizens' reverence for America and for America's Presidents' contributions to this legacy.

It is my goal in *Presidential Places* to provide you with some lesser-known and humorous aspects of Americana as well as a sense of the pride and patriotism of the sites' creators and visitors.

Unless otherwise noted, the cover page depicting the face of a U.S. President is sourced from Google.

Presidential Places
Harry Truman: Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library
Report One

October 7, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Reluctantly, we left Hannibal, Missouri---where we reported on Mark Twain's home in the Traveling America series---to make our way to Independence, Missouri, the home of former President Harry S. Truman. A same-day visit to Twain's, then Truman's digs might be considered a let-down. After all, some historians write off Harry as a stiff uninteresting person. But others say his conservative, conformist appearance belied a man of wit and emotion, a man with a keen intellect. Plus, he liked a good drink, poker, and camaraderie---signs of a well-rounded man.

Truman served as the 33rd President during the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. He occupied the White House from 1945-1953, one of the more interesting periods in America's foreign affairs.

We arrived in Independence in time to tour Truman's home, and the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum & Library. At the home, we learned he was born in a small frame house in Lamar, Missouri, on May 8, 1884, shown in Figure 1.¹ (I did not visit his birthplace, but plan to do so.) An interesting tidbit was the confusion about his name. Initially, he was called Harry Truman. This handle did not set well with relatives who wanted the child to be named after them. The two principal contenders were the grandfathers, Solomon and Shipp.² Debating about the implications of Solomon's and Shipp's wills, and the potential nonappearance of their names therein, Harry's parents decided to award him an initial "S" but with no middle name, thus placating both grandfathers, and keeping the inheritances intact.



Figure 1. Truman's birthplace.

When he was six years old, Harry and family moved to Independence. Shortly after his arrival, he met his future wife, Bess, although it is written they did not fall in love until later. Their initial

¹ "Harry Truman," with Larry Miller, photo researchers, Microsoft's Encarta. Direct quotes of Truman in this report are sourced from Encarta.

² David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 37. (One name was the *first* name of one granddad. The other was the *second* name of the other granddad, which further confused matters.)

encounters were in Sunday school, which put a damper on their romantic liaisons. Truman became a serious student of the piano and an avid reader of history. He read four to five history or biography books a week, and was well informed about the great wars and famous world leaders.³

Notwithstanding his studious, nearsighted countenance, Truman rose to the rank of Major in World War I by "taming" an unruly battery of men and leading them in two major battles, Saint-Mihiel and Argonne.⁴ In civilian life, and as a young man, he was a farmer. After WWI, he owned a men's clothing store, a background leading to jokes about a mere haberdasher becoming America's President. But his humble trade lowered the barrier somewhat between lofty presidents and the more lowly common folks. Truman prided himself as an honest, simple man of the people, and as an earnest church-goer.

Yet, many historians do not look kindly upon Truman's personality and his record as a politician. Let's pause briefly and make a few comparisons with other United States Presidents.

In contrast, President Nixon, known to be a crook for some of his Watergate antics, summarized his persona with the statement, "I am not a crook." Imagine a United States President thinking he had to make such a claim. This noble Jeffersonian proclamation must have inspired Americans to aspire not to be crooks. Still later, the practicing evangelical Jimmy Carter became the First Man, even though he harbored prurient thoughts about someone other than his wife. At least he was honest about it, and eased the conscience of male teenagers who spent most of their waking and sleeping hours harboring the same thoughts.

The sexual morality barrier had been lowered earlier by Catholic John Kennedy sleeping in the President's quarters...as well as in other quarters. Even the revered Thomas Jefferson sowed more than cottonseed on his plantation. Later, a former actor made President, with acting considered an even lower profession than that of a tailor. Not long afterwards, a sexual hedonist took over the Oval Office and made it his private playboy penthouse. In fairness, sexual hedonism was not his occupation, it was his hobby. Still later, the former cheerleader, George W. Bush, disguised as a rugged West Texas cowboy, took the White House reins.

I skewered Nixon only slightly. I'll let Harry finish the task. After Richard Nixon's troubles, Truman had this to say, "You don't set a fox to watching the chickens just because he has a lot of experience in the hen house."

Who Won the Cold War?

I was perplexed and bemused when, upon the death of Ronald Reagan, pundits lauded the man for "winning the Cold War." That was it, no other statements, no sidebars. Without question, Reagan was a major carpenter, one who hammered the final nails in the coffin of the USSR's claim to fame. But I disagree with this narrow take on history. As examples to counter this misconception, let's review a few facts, summarizing some events during Truman's term:

³ "Harry S. Truman," Microsoft's Encarta.

⁴ Ibid.

- **Truman Doctrine:** This program became a prototype for Communism containment. Shortly after the ending of WWII, Truman set up a \$400 million military and economic program to bolster anti-communist forces in Turkey and Greece. It was a resounding success.
- **Marshall Plan:** With knowledge gained from Herbert Hoover's postwar food commission, Truman knew something had to be done to help a ravaged post-WWII Europe. With George C. Marshall as Secretary of State, Truman implemented an extensive plan for the economic rehabilitation of Europe...which not so coincidentally, countered the influence of the USSR. This plan cost America around \$13 billion, an impressive Return on Investment (ROI). Among other benefits, it accentuated the political, social, religious, and economic poverty of the Soviet Union.
- **Berlin Airlift:** To counter the embarrassing West Germany recovery, the USSR closed the Allied roads and rails into Berlin. Truman, reacting to the blatant arrogance of Stalin, not to mention the danger to Europe if Joe succeeded, ordered a phenomenal airlift of goods and products into Berlin, which lasted for almost eleven months. The Soviets backed-down and the blockade was rescinded.
- **NATO:** Truman's Inaugural Address for his (only) full term in office led to the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The alliance is alive and flourishing, and overall, performing laudatory deeds for the world.
- **Korea:** Some Americans believe the Cold War "wars" were unnecessary. I believe the Korean conflict could not be avoided, because the North Korean despot, Kim Il Sung, decided the South Koreans would prefer his perverted rule to the messy, embryonic democracy that was trying to form to the south. It was blatant aggression; no grey areas, because North Korea, a Communist crony of China and the USSR, invaded a U.S. ally. Truman committed America to a major "war." Result: South Korea is one of the most prosperous democracies on earth.

Thanks for bearing with me through a bit of history. I conclude this part of the report by stating, "Well done, Ronald. But you had some help."

The Truman Home

As you enter the city of Independence, follow the signs to the National Park Service "Tickets," and not to the house itself. After you have your reservation and tickets, you will be given directions to the house. The National Park Service owns and operates this place. (See Figure 2.) Small tour groups are allowed to walk-through the ground floor.



Figure 2. The Truman home in Independence, Missouri.

We arrived at the house just before our group began the tour. As we were walking to the house, I asked the guide,

- "May I take photos?"
- "No, the contents of the home are originals. The camera flash is not good for them."
- "But I won't use a flash."
- "Sir, the answer is no."
- "Eh...I don't want to be a pain. But we have only ten people in the group. If anyone uses a flash, you could easily spot them and ban them from seeing the next room....Or maybe Margaret's piano."
- "Sorry, rules are rules."
- "How about chewing gum?"
- "Eh? Sure, you can chew gum."...As we entered the house. I mentioned the chewing gum incident because various monuments in America have chewing gum police watching tourists' mouths. Gum alert! Be careful at the Washington Monument and Abe Lincoln's birthplace.

A few tidbits about the house. First, a television set rests at its original location in the parlor. This position is such that a TV program could not be viewed from any of the chairs in the room.

- The guide, "Anyone notice something funny about the TV?"
- I wanted to say, *Yeah, it's off. Something rare in most homes today.* But having been duly chastised for wanting to take photographs, I said nothing.
- Tour person 1, "It can't be seen easily?"
- Guide, "Right you are! Well done! And who knows why?"
- Tour person 2, "Harry was nearsighted. He couldn't watch TV?"
- Guide, "Yes! But that is not the reason. Who knows?"
- Tour person 3, "Eh, maybe he didn't like TV?"
- Guide, "Absolutely! Good going! Let's take a look at Harry's hat rack, just over there. Do you recall what kind of hat Mr. Truman wore?"

She kept this up for most of the tour. I began to feel like a kindergarten tot, answering the marm's questions correctly, and receiving a Pavlovian verbal pat on the head. In addition, the guide informed us:

- The house was charming, because it was Victorian. (I thought: *It's charming in spite of its being Victorian.*)
- The only security precautions the Truman's had was an iron fence around the home (*And the Secret Service.*)
- The kitchen floor was worn-out, but Bess was a frugal woman and decided not to fix it. (*Bess had no income. Harry, being the bread winner, was in charge of funding floor fix-ups. Why diss the lady of the house because the controversial floor happened to be in the kitchen. Chauvinist?)*)

Your reporter was out-of-sorts about the rule against taking harmless photos of the home's interior. I've many faults. One is: I don't have much patience for rules in general and especially rules which make no sense and serve no purpose. I admit not having patience with rules in general is a big fault. For nonsensical rules, I'll wager you and I are in the same camp.

Let's do another survey: Send in your nomination for the most nonsensical rule you can think of, *and* one that you routinely ignore. I promise (and seriously) your response, while possibly made public, will not have your name associated with it.

Back to the Ticket Office

I returned to the ticket office to obtain information on the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum & Library. And for some other reasons:

- "Hello. Back again?"
- "Yep. We need directions to the museum. All the signs around the city only say, "Tickets." Tickets to what?! ...Say, I was not allowed to take pictures inside the Truman home."
- "Yes, it damages...."
- "Yeah, Margaret's piano paint. I'm speaking of flashless photos. Anyway, just up the Interstate, I took flash pictures galore inside the National Park Service Lincoln Home. And here...I can't even take completely harmless flashless pictures. Look I know you don't make the rules. but..."
- "You were allowed to use a flash camera inside Lincoln's home?!"
- "Yes, which leads me to wonder if the Park Service has a policy. Does each site wing it?"
- "Hmm. Couldn't say, sir. But I'm surprised you could take flash pictures inside the house."
- "I guess so....But it evened out."
- "How so?"
- "I could chew gum in Harry's house, but I couldn't in Abe's house."
- "Anything else sir?"
- "...Well, I still want pictures of the inside of the Truman home. But..."
- "Sure! Just over there. Our post card kiosk. Our Truman home pictures are our best sellers. We sell a lot of them, get new shipments every week."
- "I wonder why?"

Your on the Street Reporter

Presidential Places Harry Truman: Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library Report Two

October 7, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. With pictures of Harry's hat rack and Margaret's piano in hand, we made our way to the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum & Library. We were not disappointed. It contains impressive archives on Truman's life. In addition, it features many displays about mid-20th century Americana. Temporary exhibitions are located on the lower floor, where we toured an exhibit about Winston Churchill's time as the British Prime Minister.

The first exhibit is the famous motto Harry kept on his desk in the Oval Office, as seen in Figure 3. "The buck stops here!" says a lot about the character of Truman. He assumed responsibility for his actions, some still controversial today, and never blamed anyone else for mistakes made during his terms in office. But he also knew the magnitude of the job he assumed when Roosevelt died. The day after FDR's death, he told reporters, "Last night the moon, the stars and all the planets fell on me. If you fellows pray, pray for me."



Figure 3. The famous motto.

In keeping with the practice of making these reports fairly short (or attempting to), I cannot do justice to this fine museum in a few pages. So, let's spend time in one room, which displays original prints of old newspapers. They highlight several remarkable events that transpired during the first part of the Truman presidency. Figure 4 depicts the front pages of five newspapers, arranged left to right in chronological order of their publication. The headlines speak for themselves.



Figure 4. Headlines of yesteryears.

Two decisions Truman made early in office are still subjects of debate. One was the use of the atomic bomb. The other was the recognition of Israel as a legitimate state in the Middle East. I will not spend much time on the former subject, but would like to offer a few thoughts on the latter (Some of you have heard or read my views on this time in history, so you've a free pass to skip the next section. And I once again emphasize that I have nothing but admiration and respect for the Jewish culture and religion. Truth is, my religious leanings, such as they may be, are as close to Judaism as they are to Christianity. Nonetheless, facts are stubborn things, and they must not be over looked.)

The Disproportionate Ratio Effect

This Effect is defined as: The ratio $n:m$, where the value of n is very small and the value of m is very large. Here are three examples:⁵

Example one: The ratio of my net assets (n) to Bill Gates' net assets (m).

Example two: The ratio of Wilt Chamberlain (n) to Wilt's sexual partners (m).

Example three: The population ratio in Palestine of Jews ($n = 8\%$) and Arabs ($m = 92\%$) when the UN passed Resolution 181, which called for the partitioning of Palestine into separate and equal Jewish and Arab states.

Truman convened the U.S. Chiefs of Mission of Saudi Arabia and other Middle East countries to listen to their concerns about the increasing anger and fear of the Arabs about the situation:

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said the President, summing up his position with the utmost candor, "but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism; I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."⁶

A rose by any other name is a rose. A lobby by any other name is a lobby. Had unequal partitioning took place based on population, perhaps today's Middle East mess would not be so messy. Who knows? But if example three of The Disproportionate Ratio makes political sense to you, please let me know why you have this belief, because I consider it an act of political lunacy.

President Roosevelt had assured the king of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz, the United States, "...would do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people." Truman cavalierly "...tore up the promises that Roosevelt had given to the Arabs...",⁷ because these folks did not have a voting bloc or a lobby in the United States. And it worked. Truman was re-elected.

Some Arabs said if the Jews needed a place of sanctuary, they should be ceded Germany, the country responsible for moving the Zionist movement from the backwaters of foreign affairs to a UN resolution. Cruel humor for sure, but the Arabs were quite serious. No one else took note. After all, Berlin was not located in the Holy Land.

⁵ Uyless Black, *The Deadly Trinity*, Appendix, "The Rules of Life," Privately published, 2006.

⁶ Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia & the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 275.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 272.

Years ago, I was puzzled about the nuances of these events. It became clearer to me when I learned about the ratio of Jews to Arabs in the area at that time. The UN resolution seemed disproportionate to population realities. The decision seemed even more disproportionate when I read Truman's directive at the museum.

Look at Figure 5. The top figure is the original document Truman signed approving the United States' recognition of Israel. The arrow points to a blown-up image of the document. The words are difficult to make out. Here they are:

"The government has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine, and recognition has been requested by the provisional government thereof.

The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the State of Israel.

Harry Truman

*Approved,
May 14, 1948."*

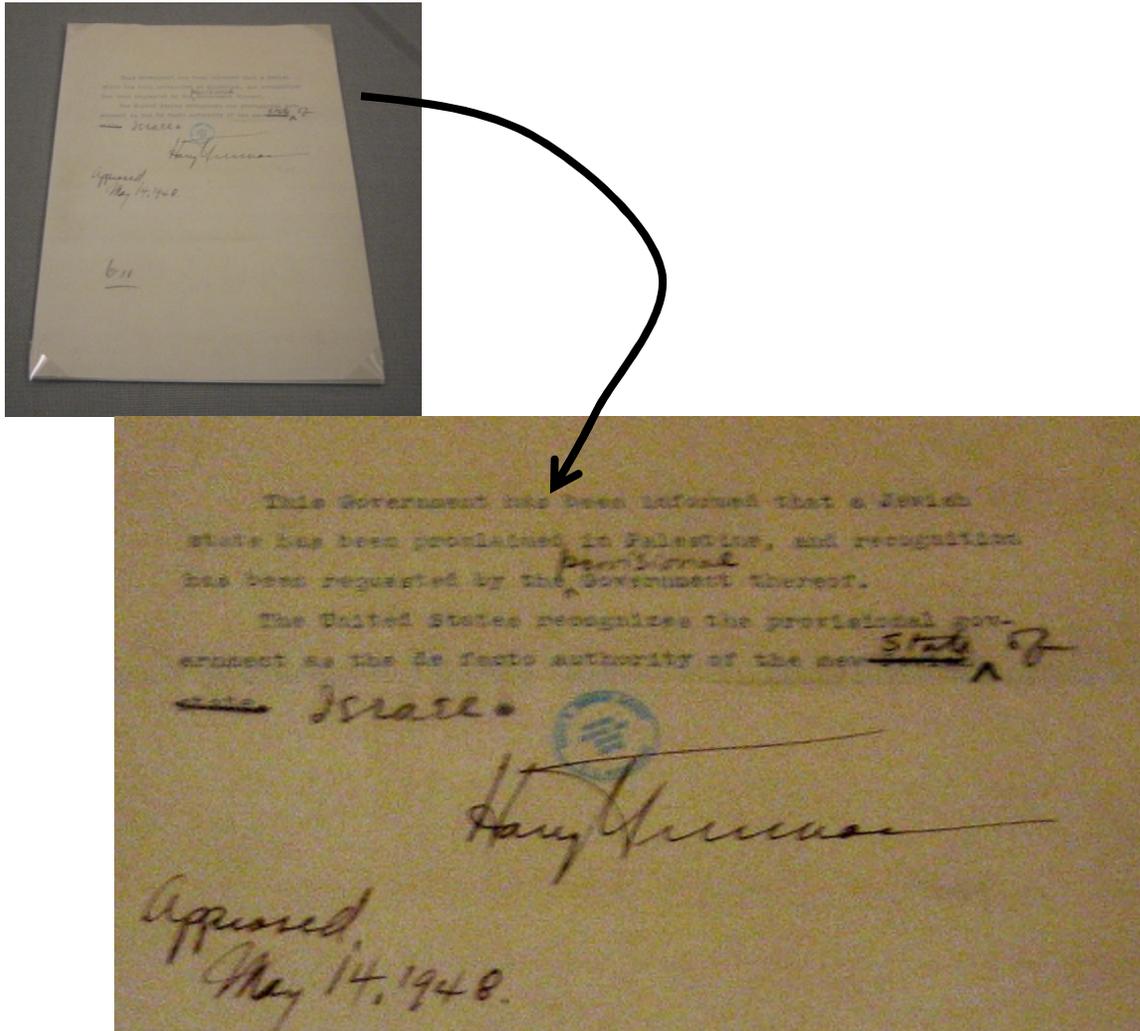


Figure 5. The document.

Not one word about the fate of 92 percent of the population! Indeed, the text excludes Arabs from having a say in the process. If I had been an Arab living in Palestine at that time, I suspect I would have been up in arms.

My right-wing Christian friends and relatives tell me about the Biblical requirement for the Jews to return to the Holy Land, as a forerunner to Armageddon (and which time the non-Christians---including any resident Jews---must be converted...or else.) They have told me the justice or injustice done to the Arabs by the aforementioned acts is immaterial because of passages in the Bible.

I am happy to report moderate Christians tell me they reject both the radical Christian views as well as the radical Islamic views on this issue. Great, but I think it is too late. The die has been thrown and the contenders for the Holy Land do not want another roll. The radicals on both sides believe their God is on their side. After all, it's a question of good or evil, and compromise is impossible with the situation cast in such a light.

I have had harsh words to say about Truman in this segment of the report. But I liked the man. He was forthright, had few pretensions, was a political pragmatist, and kept his ego in check. Plus: While an avid walker, unlike our Midland, Texas cowboy, he never pranced with a swagger.

I will also cut some slack to Truman and those in power just after WWII, because the atrocities of the Nazis were foremost on their minds, and the minds of their constituents. What is more, the Jews were looking for some way to protect themselves from centuries of exclusion and persecution. If I had been a Jew living in Palestine at that time, I suspect I would quite busy planting trees, buying up property, and planning eviction notices, which is what the Jews did.

I'm a human Switzerland. Perhaps that is one reason I never entered politics. I make the mistake of looking at both sides of an issue. I have never been able select a party to hang my hat on and have kept a Libertarian philosophy when I enter the voting booth. Anyway, on these happy notes, we return to less weighty matters.

Harry's Take on Joe

One more skewer for Harry. He had this to say about Joe Stalin, "I like old Joe Stalin. He's a good fellow...." Whoa! Harry forgot to study the behavior of this "famous world leader" during his many hours of reading history. For example, Stalin's Gulag. Not to mention his purges of political opponents and his deadly polices toward Russia's peasants.

Harry also said, "It is ignorance that causes most mistakes. The man who sits here ought to know his American history, at least." And for the Cold War, knowledge of Russian history was even more important. But no matter, as we learned in the first segment of this report, Truman met Stalin head-on.

Truman's Oval Office

Last year, we toured Clinton's museum and library in Little Rock. We saw a model of the White House Oval Office as it was set up during Clinton's stay there. The Truman museum also has a

model of the Oval Office, seen in Figure 6. I stitched together three photos. (Sorry for the different shades, but I was careful not to use a flash and thus had different light as I scanned the room.) The museum was not operated by the local branch of the National Park Service. It permitted either flash or flashless picture taking. But intimidation dies hard...I kept my flash off.



Figure 6. Truman's oval office.

More on this library in the next report.

Your on the Street Reporter

Presidential Places
Harry Truman: Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library
Report Three

October 7, 2006

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, continuing our tour of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum & Library in Independence, Missouri. Earlier, I mentioned several exhibits in the museum depict life in America at mid-20th century. Figure 7 shows one such exhibit. This display reminded me of exhibits in the Smithsonian American history building in Washington, DC, one of the best places in America to learn about America: Effortless education. No intellectual encumbrances. Succinct displays of Americana. No books. No archives to study. Life-size dioramas.

I related to those plastic covered kitchen chairs---similar ones were in our kitchen in New Mexico. And the open frig door was more than just a display of America's 1950s victuals. I came from a family of six boys. It was an unusual event when our refrigerator door was closed.



Figure 7. An exhibit at the museum.

While walking through this part of the museum, I recalled some of my readings about a major crisis in Truman's administration. He was roundly criticized for his unsuccessful effort to seize the country's steel mills to prevent a strike which he claimed would cripple the Korean War effort. He was thwarted by the Supreme Court, who declared Truman's seizures to be unconstitutional. The court informed Truman he could have used the Taft-Hartley Act to deal with the strike, but Truman, being from Missouri, was too stubborn to employ a law he disliked.

In another display, Harry had this to say about criticisms and the wisdom of hindsight, "... what I want to say to historians is that any Monday morning quarterback can win a ball game next Monday, but he can't do it on Saturday." Give 'um hell Harry!

Truman was an intellectual man, but he was not an intellectual---not a cerebral sort, not a man of letters, such as a Thomas Jefferson. As he grew into the Presidential role, he began to alienate, not only members of his own Democratic Party, but the Eastern press and the intellectuals at assorted

University of Intellectuals scattered on the northeast coast, Chicago, and Northern California. Many of the intellectuals thought the USSR's collective society was pretty cool. So, his foreign policy toward the Soviet Union was not to their liking because he, like his successors, knew the USSR's political and economic structures were destitute, dangerous, and corrupt.

This walk through America's past brought to mind an article I read many years ago. In 1967, I copied these thoughts down in my notebook:⁸

No modern nation has ever constructed a foreign policy that was acceptable to its intellectuals...Ideology can obtain exasperatingly little purchase over the realities of foreign policy.

Look at the source of these statements. They were written many years ago by an influential intellectual in America's power elite, Irving Kristol, who in my humble opinion, later betrayed the very words he wrote at that time. He let ideology overcome his (prior) realistic approach to foreign affairs. And that has been the burr under the saddle of the Bush Administration. As anon said, "Beware of ideologues. They have too many ideas."

It's time to move on. Let's close out the reports on Harry S. Truman with a look at the lobby of the museum, seen in Figure 8.



Figure 8. The lobby of the Harry S. Truman Presidential Museum & Library.

The mural has a history unto itself, which I will pass-on. Perhaps of equal interest, the door into the museum...and the display case...somewhat visible in the picture, contains Harry's desktop plaque, "The bucks stops here!"

Your on the Street Reporter

⁸ Irving Kristol, *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1967.