

Harry S. Truman's Speech at the 1948 Democratic National Convention--Harry S. Truman (July 15, 1948)

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Essay by David Pietrusza (guest post)*



*Harry S. Truman at the
1948 Democratic Convention*

Not every presidential speech makes history (or even does much good), but Harry Truman's 1948 presidential acceptance address at that year's Democratic National Convention at Philadelphia certainly does—and on two levels.

First, it transformed a hopelessly bedraggled campaign into an instantly energized effort capable of ultimate victory in November.

Secondly, it is the first great political speech of the television era, moving politics past the print and even radio age, into the ascendancy of the visual, propelling images as well as words immediately into the homes of millions of Americans.

Accidental-president Truman delivered his address against a backdrop of atrocious poll numbers and a deeply-divided Democratic Party, with two of its wings (Progressives and Dixiecrats) already having bolted to form their own parties and eventually to nominate their own candidates (Henry Wallace and J. Strom Thurmond, respectively).

Carefully watching his party's fractious convention on television from within the White House, Harry Truman had received a call from Treasury Secretary John Snyder advising him that he must now board the train if he wished to deliver his own acceptance address that evening. The presidential party—the Trumans, his key advisor Clark Clifford, appointments secretary Matt Connelly, et al.—departed Washington's Union Station. In his diary, Truman wrote:

Take the train for Philadelphia at 7 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time, arrive in the rain at 9:15. Television sets [i.e., reception] at both ends of trip. No privacy sure enough now.

Hear Alabama & Mississippi walk out of the convention. Hear Gov. Donnelly nominate me. Both on the radio. Hard to hear. My daughter & my staff try to keep me from listening. Think maybe I'll be upset. I won't be....

He *should* have been upset. The convention had deteriorated into near chaos. It should have quickly wrapped up its remaining business. It had not. The balloting and the speeches and the unease dragged on and on. Southern delegates stalked out. It was, as Clark Clifford remembered, “perhaps the strangest evening of politics I ever witnessed.”

Convention officials advised Truman to await his cue at a nearby hotel room. He decided otherwise, instead holing up in a room within the hall, which Clifford dubbed, none too fondly, the “Black Hole of Calcutta.” Truman finally retreated to a balcony overlooking the stifling streetscape. “Have a pleasant time visiting with Barkley out on a balcony of the hall back of the stage,” noted Truman. “It was an interesting and instructive evening.”

Recalled his daughter, Margaret, less diplomatically, “Never have I seen so much smoke without a fire as I saw that humid night in Philadelphia. I thought sure I was going to expire. Oxygen was my only thought.”

Compounding Truman's troubles was what Clifford later carefully termed “a gastrointestinal upset”—and, perhaps, a larger problem.

He had not really prepared a speech.

A Truman speechwriter Sam Rosenman, along with thirty-nine-year-old presidential administrative assistant Charles S. Murphy, had collaborated on one version. Clark Clifford and another speechwriter George Elsey had patched together an outline, but only an outline. Harry S. Truman, his back to the wall, would now wing the singular most crucial address of the campaign—and of his career.

But before he took the platform, *near* chaos erupted into *true* chaos.

In the course of this horridly long evening, Convention Chairman Sam Rayburn had yelled himself hoarse, unsuccessfully pleading for the delegates to hold applause and the band (“I could control this convention if I could run that band”) to keep music to a minimum. They ignored him. With the convention running three hours and 43 minutes behind schedule, Rayburn, nonetheless, undertook one last chore before introducing the exceedingly patient Truman: “I want to introduce Mrs. Emma Guffey Miller, Pennsylvania delegate-at-large. She has a surprise for us which I hope the convention will enjoy.”

The plump, white-frosted, 73-year-old Mrs. Miller, younger sister of former Pennsylvania Senator Joe Guffey, had prepared an elaborate, six-foot-high floral display composed of red and white carnations, in the shape of the Liberty Bell. Imprisoned inside it for several hours were

forty-eight caged white pigeons, officially and symbolically designated “doves of peace.” In the horrible heat, a couple had already expired. The band stoked up “Hail to the Chief.” The birds that had survived nearly suffocated themselves, and now—crazed by the noise, the lights, and the heat—exploded out of the opened “Liberty Bell.”

All hell broke loose.

Pigeons flew into the rafters. They dive-bombed delegates. Men and women shouted, “Watch your clothes!”

“Though the press delicately did not mention it . . . ,” noted Clark Clifford (who did), the “doves of peace began, not surprisingly, to drop the inevitable product of their hours of imprisonment on any delegate who had the bad luck to be underneath them.”

Some birds landed on the platform. Rayburn frantically shushed them away. One nearly landed on his glistening, bald head. Another headed straight for the blades of a 36 inch electric fan, saved from filleting only by Rayburn’s quick action. “Get those damned pigeons out of here,” he screamed over live radio and TV.

“As [Truman] spoke,” “Time” reported, “pigeons teetered on the balconies, on folds in the draperies, on overhead lights, occasionally launched on a quick flight to a more pigeonly position.”

Thus, Harry Truman’s choice of a crisp, double-breasted white suit that evening may not have been the wisest choice of the campaign. Nonetheless, at 1:54 A.M., he strode to the rostrum, adjusted his microphones so he might better see the black, loose-leaf notebook containing his triple-spaced talking points, and began his talk—not just to weary, assembled Democrats, but to whatever small portion of the nation that remained awake.

Cannily, he began by referencing the most popular man in the hall—“my good friend and colleague, [and new running mate] Senator [Alban] Barkley...a great man, and a great public servant” with a line that electrified the crowd: “Senator Barkley and I will win this election and make these Republicans like it—don’t you forget that!”

Similarly feisty was his quick, almost angry, challenge to the nation’s farmers and workers:

Farm income has increased from less than \$2¼ billion in 1932 to more than \$18 billion in 1947. Never in the world were the farmers of any republic or any kingdom or any other country as prosperous as the farmers of the United States; and if they don’t do their duty by the Democratic Party, they are the most ungrateful people in the world!

Wages and salaries in this country have increased from 29 billion in 1933 to more than \$128 billion in 1947. That’s labor, and labor never had but one friend in politics, and that is the Democratic Party and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

And I say to labor what I have said to the farmers: they are the most ungrateful people in the world if they pass the Democratic Party by this year.

Truman did not mention his Republican opponent Thomas E. Dewey once. He did, however, take almost instant note of the newly minted Republican platform, harshly contrasting it with the actions of the Republican Eightieth Congress. Delving into class warfare (“the favored classes or the powerful few”), he largely glossed over foreign policy (neither the words “Communist” or “Soviet”—nor any reference, however oblique, to Henry Wallace appears in the speech), concentrating withering fire on a range of bread-and-butter domestic issues. One by one, he progressed through a list of the Eightieth Congress’s supposed deficiencies—centering on inflation and housing, but passing on to civil rights, taxes, social security, health care, the minimum wage, federal aid to education, and a recently enacted displaced-person immigration act (“this anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic law”). His delivery, however, was unsure, fumbling and halting. Again he went through the same laundry list of issues. Though momentarily roused from its torpor by mention of the hated Taft-Hartley Act, the bone-weary crowd responded listlessly....

Until, Truman spat out this challenge:

There is a long list of these promises in that Republican platform. If it weren’t so late, I would tell you all about them. I have discussed a number of these failures of the Republican 80th Congress. Every one of them is important. Two of them are of major concern to nearly every American family. They failed to do anything about high prices, they failed to do anything about housing.

My duty as President requires that I use every means within my power to get the laws the people need on matters of such importance and urgency.

I am therefore calling this Congress back into session July 26th.

On the 26th day of July, which out in Missouri we call “Turnip Day,” I am going to call Congress back and ask them to pass laws to halt rising prices, to meet the housing crisis—which they are saying they are for in their platform.

Observers almost unanimously pronounced the performance a home run. “Nothing short of a stroke of magic could infuse the remnants of the party with enthusiasm,” “Newsweek” reported. “But magic he had; in a speech bristling with marching words, Mr. Truman brought the convention to its highest peak of excitement.”

“It was a great speech for a great occasion,” marveled liberal journalist Max Lerner, hitherto no fan of Truman, “and as I listened I found myself applauding.”

“It was fun to see the scrappy little cuss come out of his corner fighting...,” observed the “New Republic’s” normally acerbic Richard Strout (“TRB”), “not trying to use big words any longer,

but being himself and saying a lot of honest things.” Elsewhere, the “New Republic” headlined: “The Funeral Is Called Off.”

The even more veteran, congenitally acerbic H. L. Mencken saw something else.

“It was the snarling and defiant harangue of a badly scared man,” said Mencken. “The more he whooped and hollered the more manifest it was that he was fighting with his back to the wall.”

Harry Truman’s back *was* to the wall, but that didn’t matter. He’d fought that way before, in Senate campaigns in 1934 and 1940. He’d fought that way before—and won.

David Pietrusza is the author of several books on presidential electoral history including “1948: Harry Truman’s Improbable Victory and the Year that Transformed America.”