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Review of *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice* By Robert Shogan

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Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice. By Robert Shogan. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. 248 pp.

Robert Shogan gives us a readable, well-researched, and inviting account of Truman's role in civil rights. Shogan peppers his text with brief chronological historical narratives that help us understand Truman's motives and actions. These summaries are useful in emphasizing the highly political nature of the drive for civil rights in the United States in the mid-1940s through the early 1950s. Truman is convincingly portrayed as a principled populist whose dedication to the Constitution and sense of justice drove him to support the civil rights agenda, despite the backlash he received from opponents within the Democratic Party and without. Shogan's savvy historical and detailed political analysis demonstrates how Truman overcame his own background, which included some not insignificant barriers to an appreciation of equal rights for minorities including, among others, the fact that he was a grandson of slaveholders, associated for a time with the Ku Klux Klan, and had a history of racist remarks. Truman's long association with the Pendergast political machine tested his political acumen and allowed him to both appreciate and benefit from the art of coalition politics. In fact, Truman's entire political experience prepared him for representation of folks who would form the coalition of key constituencies that

would ultimately lead to his upset victory in the 1948 presidential campaign.

Here, of course, African Americans played a central role.

Shogan's efforts may seem to have been largely already rehearsed by others, perhaps most recently in Michael Gardner's *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002). But the key to the particular book under review here is that Shogan tempers Truman's "moral courage" with a well-defined analysis and explanation of Truman as an astute political operative driven by constitutional principles and a populist sense for defending the underdog. Truman's commitment to the "rightness" of the cause of civil rights for African Americans can also be traced back to Truman's experiences with African American World War II veterans who returned home to violence and brutality as they sought to reintegrate themselves into civilian society. It was clear that Truman was also concerned about the public relations problem of promoting U.S.- style democracy in the international area as a keystone in the emerging new cold war while basic human rights were flaunted routinely on the home front. Truman clearly felt the need to stanch this glaring inconsistency. Inaction would continue to solicit international opprobrium.

Shogan argues Truman matched words with action. His appointment of the President's Committee on Civil Rights resulted in a visionary document, *To Secure These Rights* which the president used to introduce comprehensive civil rights legislation. And while he ultimately was unable to get a recalcitrant Congress to pass his legislation, he turned to executive action and the courts. 's discussion of Truman's role in these two areas is particularly illuminating. Executive orders 9980 and 9981, the former established policies designed to ensure non-discrimination in federal employment practices; the latter called for desegregation of all U.S. military services, serve as concrete measures that had lasting impact. My own judgment is that the desegregation order was the most important civil rights initiative in the Truman presidency.

Shogan also makes a strong case for Truman's direct encouragement of Justice Department amicus curiae briefs intent on influencing key civil rights Supreme Court cases, including intervention in two cases on restrictive covenants: *Shelley vs. Kramer* (1948) and *Hurd vs. Hodge* (1948), and two cases on university and college admissions: *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) and *McLaurin v. University of Oklahoma State Regents* (1950). In addition, an amicus filing by the Justice Department in *Henderson v. United States* (1950), a case which took up a Louisiana law that upheld segregated passenger train travel (endorsing "separate

but equal,” similar to *Plessy v. Ferguson*), proved pivotal. Shogan argues that when combined, these court cases were precursors to the ultimate downfall of *Plessy*. Finally, Shogan makes clear that it was the Truman administration that also filed an amicus brief in the *Brown v. Board of Education* bundle of cases that attacked the thorny and intractable segregation in the nation’s public schools.

Divining the scope and impact of Harry S. Truman in the civil rights arena has summoned differing judgments based on differing criteria. This has resulted in a disputed legacy. Part of the dispute also lies in the civil rights accomplishments of Truman’s successors. For example, David A. Nichols argues that “Eisenhower was more progressive in the 1950s than Truman, Kennedy, or Johnson.” (*A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 278]). According to Robert Dallek, John F. Kennedy introduced “the most far-reaching civil rights bill in the country’s history” (*An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2003, p. 604]). Robert A. Caro rightly points to LBJ as reaching the quintessential 20th century presidential civil rights benchmark, having launched “a crusade for social justice on a vast new scale” in both word and deed. (*The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, p. 602]).

Regardless of differences in evaluative judgments, Shogan's highly competent and insightful treatment provides more than ample reason to reacquaint ourselves with Harry S. Truman's legacy on civil rights. This finely honed and insightful study makes it harder than ever to disavow Truman's significant and lasting influence. As Shogan summarizes, "To compare Truman's civil rights record to that of any of his predecessors in the White House is like comparing Gulliver to the Lilliputians" (p. 180).

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