

Hed: "My God, Truman Will Be President!"

Dek: A day that stunned the world—Franklin Roosevelt's death, and Harry Truman's ascendancy to the White House.

"If ever I felt the awesome dimensions of history, it was in that room, that night."

—Harry Truman's daughter Margaret

On April 12, 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage, at his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia. Roosevelt had been president of the United States longer than any other man in history.

Inside the White House, at 7:08 pm, Chief Justice Harlan Stone and Harry Truman took their places facing each other by the Cabinet room's mantel, underneath a clock that marked the time. Some two dozen of Washington's most powerful officials filled the space. The 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, looked on from within his portrait on the wall. Truman held an index card with the oath printed on it, to make sure he spoke the 35 words exactly as the founding fathers had written them. The group in the room formed a semicircle behind Vice President Truman and Chief Justice Stone. Standing inches to Truman's left was his wife Bess. She looked as if her husband were stepping not into the office of the Presidency, but to the gallows. Directly behind her was their only child Margaret. Along with the Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, they were the only three women present. Truman held the Bible in his left hand, and placed his right hand on top of it. A silence fell over the room, and Chief Justice Stone began.

"I, Harry Shippe Truman," he said, thinking wrongly that the S. stood for Truman's mother's maiden name, which it did not.

"I, Harry S. Truman," the Vice President corrected the Judge.

"Do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States..."

As Truman uttered these words, the others looked on. "In that moment of actual succession, he seemed almost sacrilegiously small," Press Secretary Daniels said of Truman. A photographer captured the scene, but when it was over, the Chief Justice told Truman that he had failed to raise his right hand while he held the Bible. And so the oath was repeated. Truman uttered the final words "firmly and clearly," as one in the room remembered.

"So help you God," Justice Stone said.

"So help me God," Truman responded.

He kissed the Bible. Then he turned to Bess and Margaret, and kissed them both. He was no longer Harry. He would never be just Harry again.

Following an exhausting amount of solemn handshaking, Truman felt a tug on his arm. "Mr. President, will you come with me." It was a White House aide he didn't know (assistant press secretary Eben Ayers), and along with Roosevelt's longtime secretary and confidant Steve Early, Truman left the Cabinet room. His wife and daughter followed, along with Secretary of State Edward Stettinius. In the quiet confines of the White House Red Room, Truman had a moment to gather his thoughts. Stettinius asked him if the San Francisco Conference should be called off. This was the international meeting in which representatives of governments from all over the world were set to gather in less than two weeks, to attempt to form a charter for the new United Nations peace organization. Truman was emphatic: the conference should go on. And with that, he had made his first decision as President. Soon after, he delivered his first statement as President, which was handed to members of the press at 8:10 pm: "The world may be sure that we will prosecute the war on both fronts, east and west, with all the vigor we possess to a successful conclusion."

Bess and Margaret headed home in a Secret Service car, and Truman remained behind. It was then that the Secretary of War Henry Stimson asked to speak to him alone "about a most urgent matter," as Truman would later recall.

Stimson was a towering figure in Washington. Statesman, former Wall Street lawyer, the only Republican serving in FDR's cabinet, he was well into his 77th year. A member of the old moneyed, east coast establishment, he was a Victorian throwback who spoke as if he had walked out of a Henry James novel. There was a matter of terrific importance to discuss, Stimson told Truman, a matter of grave secrecy. "He wanted me to know about an immense project that was under way," Truman later recalled, "a project looking to the development of a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power." Truman had heard whispers of some strange military program that was costing taxpayers millions. But he had no knowledge of the details.

In fact, the matter was so top secret, Stimson explained, he could reveal nothing more as of yet. "That was all he felt free to say at the time," according to Truman, "and his statement left me puzzled." Thus the President of the United States was still in the dark, regarding the war's most grave secret—the atomic bomb.

After this brief meeting with Stimson, Truman had a moment to sit and think alone. He wrote in a diary of this moment:

I was very much shocked...I did not know what reaction the country would have to the death of a man whom they all practically worshiped. I was worried about reaction of the Armed Forces. I did not know what affect the situation would have on the war effort, price control, war production and everything that entered into the emergency that then existed. I knew the President had a great many meetings with Churchill and Stalin. I was not familiar with any of these things and it was really something to think about but I decided the best thing to do was to go home and get as much rest as possible and face the music.

When Truman walked out the White House door to the motorcade outside, he heard the traditional reception clerk's bark for the first time: "The President has left his office." The motorcade left the executive mansion's grounds, through the South Gate.

All over the globe that night, world leaders and humble citizens alike attempted to digest the news—the most revered of all men was gone.

"It finally crushed him," one of FDR's top speechwriters, the playwright Robert Sherwood, wrote. "The 'it' was the awful responsibility that had been piling up and piling up for so many years. The fears and the hopes of hundreds of millions of human beings throughout the world had been bearing down on the mind of one man."

Part of the shock was the idea of the person who had now taken his place. "Good God!" it could be heard in taverns, on buses, and in living rooms around the country. "Truman will be President!"

Already, radio stations by the hundreds were airing tributes to the fallen leader. In Truman's home state of Missouri, a close friend by the name of Tom Evans had gone on the air. "I realize," he told listeners, "that because of [Truman's] humble beginnings...there may be some apprehension today about our country's future. I wish I could speak personally to every man who feels that apprehension and say to him: *You have no cause to fear.*"

Senators and Statesmen sat with strong drinks distilling the world's anxiety into the ink in their diaries. "The gravest question-mark in every American heart is about Truman," Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg wrote that night. "Can he swing the job?"

In Moscow, ambassador Harriman phoned Stalin's number two in the Kremlin, Vyacheslav Molotov, at 1am. Surprised by the call,

Molotov insisted on coming straight over to confer with the ambassador in person at the U.S. Embassy. "He seemed deeply moved and disturbed," Harriman recorded in a cable sent to the White House the next morning. "He remained for some time talking about the part President Roosevelt had played in the war and in the plans for peace... I have never heard Molotov talk so earnestly."

Molotov expressed consternation over the new American president. "Do you know this new President Truman?" he nervously queried Ambassador Harriman. "What is he like?"

In Berlin, in Hitler's secret bunker, the Nazi leader had spent the last few days in desperate straits. The Nazi empire was all but crushed by the Allies, and Hitler was on the brink of nervous collapse, his hands shaking so violently, he found it difficult to sign his name on official documents. When he heard the news of Roosevelt's death, he rushed at once to his production chief Albert Speer. "We have the miracle I always predicted!" the Fuehrer ranted. "The war isn't lost... Roosevelt is dead!"

When Prime Minister Churchill received the news, he felt "as if I had been struck a physical blow." "Indeed, it may be said," Churchill later wrote, "that Roosevelt died at the supreme climax of the war, and at the moment when his authority was most needed to guide the policy of the United States."

In Germany, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, General Dwight Eisenhower, sat with Generals George Patton and Omar Bradley, at Patton's Ninth Army field headquarters that night, rifling through packages of cigarettes. "We pondered over the effect the President's death might have upon the future peace," Eisenhower recalled. "It seemed to us, from the international viewpoint, to be a most critical time to be forced to change leaders." General Bradley: "We talked for nearly three hours [in the middle of the night]. It seemed an irreplaceable loss... None of us knew Truman or much about him. He came from my home state, Missouri, but I had to confess almost complete ignorance."

Patton was more explicit, expressing in his diary his disgust with the idea of Truman as President, a feeling millions in America were experiencing too: "It seems very unfortunate that in order to secure political preference, people are made Vice President who are never intended, neither by Party nor by the Lord, to be President."

At the home where Truman's mother and sister lived in Grandview, Missouri, reporters came calling in the dark of the night. This was perhaps what worried Harry Truman the most: that his family would suffer the consequences of his career. He had always looked after them with fierce devotion. "As long as he lived he always seemed to think that I was his special care," his younger sister Mary Jane once said, "and no matter how busy he was he always had time to talk to me." But Harry was not there to protect his sister and mother from the hungry reporters who would do anything for a story that night.

"Mother is terribly, terribly distressed," Mary Jane Truman told them. "The news came as such a shock; we have been unable to adjust ourselves to it."

Meanwhile, at a laboratory called Los Alamos, hidden in plain sight by the stark emptiness of the New Mexico desert, word spread around a collection of the world's brightest scientists, who were at work on a project so secret, not even Harry Truman—now the President of the United States—had any in-depth knowledge of it. The chief scientist at this secret lab, Dr. Robert J. Oppenheimer, had known Roosevelt, and had corresponded with him at length about the work being done at Los Alamos. Oppenheimer—skeletal thin, wreaking of tobacco, still baby-faced now 10 days from his 41st birthday—summoned his colleagues to a flagpole near the administrative building at Los Alamos. In his high-pitched voice, Oppenheimer made a formal announcement of the death of Franklin Roosevelt. He too feared for the competence of the new President.

"Roosevelt was a great architect," Oppenheimer figured. "Perhaps Truman will be a good carpenter."

When Truman arrived at his apartment building that night, it was after 9 pm. Crowds had formed out front to glimpse the new President, who lived here in this humble tree-lined neighborhood. When Truman made it upstairs to the second floor—the building now crawling with police and Secret Service—he was able to enter once again the privacy of his quiet domicile. He felt as if the globe had flipped on its axis, but here at 4701 Connecticut Avenue, everything was situated where it had been when he had left for work that morning.

Some neighbors, the Davises, had come over and had brought cake and some turkey. “He did not say much to us,” Margaret said of her father. “I realize now that he did not feel he could talk freely with the Davises in the apartment.” Truman said he was hungry, that he had not eaten since noon, so his neighbor Mrs. Davis made the President of the United States a turkey sandwich. He ate it then retired to a bedroom to call his mother, who was awake. He was going to be very busy for a while, he told her, so he would not be able to call her often in the next few days.

“Be good, Harry,” 92-year old Mama Truman said. “But be game, too.”

Minutes later, Truman was asleep. He had a peculiar talent in this regard, to sleep when he needed to, in moments of terrific emotional strain. In the middle of the night, however, he awoke to find his wife sobbing in the bed beside his. He tried to comfort her, but there was little chance of that. What could he say? So he went back to sleep, knowing that when he awoke, millions all over the world would be asking a single question. It was the same question FDR’s Chief of Staff William Leahy had asked less than nine months earlier, when Truman’s name had suddenly and inexplicably been placed on the 1944 Presidential ticket as VP, besides Roosevelt’s own.

“Who the hell is Harry Truman?”

