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*Review of Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral  
Courage and Political Risks*

Steven R. Goldzwig

Marquette University, [steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu](mailto:steven.goldzwig@marquette.edu)

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*Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks.* By Michael R. Gardner. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002; pp xx + 276. \$35.00.

According to Michael Gardner, Harry S. Truman's civil rights initiatives were acts of "moral courage and political recklessness" (3). Gardner finds in Truman an

unlikely candidate for civil rights advocacy. The bias of family background and his hailing from a border state meant that “Harry Truman was conditioned to be a racist” (4). Gardner’s book offers a credible, often enlightening account of race relations in the United States in the post–World War II, pre–*Brown v. Board of Education* era. Even the nation’s capital’s racist practices and segregated policies were the thorny and recalcitrant norm. It was in the context of this apartheid society, Gardner argues, that Truman, under no immediate pressure or crisis, unlike Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, undertook a campaign “to do what he felt was morally right”—to place the federal government at the forefront of the attack on segregation and discrimination in the United States. An insistence on equality of opportunity and justice for all Americans was a primary motivation in the president’s stance. Gardner argues that politics was a secondary concern.

After introductory and background material, Gardner’s subsequent chapters are arranged chronologically, focusing on the president’s: (1) Committee on Civil Rights; (2) June 29, 1947, speech to the NAACP; (3) civil rights committee’s final report, *To Secure These Rights*; (4) January 7, 1948, State of the Union Address; (5) February 2, 1948, Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights; (6) relation to the 1948 Democratic Party convention and its civil rights plank; (7) Turnip Day special session of Congress and Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 issued July 26, 1948; (8) 1948 campaign and the October 29, 1948, speech in Harlem; (9) progress in civil rights despite his inability pass legislation through Congress; (10) contribution through the legacy of the Vinson Court; (11) two addresses on civil rights late in his presidency; and finally (12) civil rights legacy. The topic choices are wise, useful, and comprehensive. The chosen chronology adds to the specific argument that Truman never wavered from the cause of civil rights.

A few key items deserve further commentary. The President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) was established on December 5, 1946, just weeks after the Democrats were handed a resounding defeat in the mid-term elections. Gardner terms such a convening “politically fearless” and a “controversial unilateral action” (15). While this was certainly true, it is also the case that Truman needed the African American vote for the 1948 election, and he needed a thriving economy that included housing and a better standard of living for the returning veterans, including African American veterans. In seeking more protections for African American rights, Truman could not help but sustain a better political future for himself and for his party. Certainly the injustices experienced by returning African American veterans were anathema to Truman—and they certainly were cause for revulsion and his resolve to prevent the serious abuses, especially the egregious instances in the South. But the complexity of Truman’s decision seems underplayed in Gardner’s account. While Truman can be credited for inspiring and guiding the committee, we get very little regarding the committee’s actual deliberations and how they developed a consensus. Nor do we get a sense of how complicated those deliberations

became when the president established his Loyalty Review Board. The loyalty tests for federal employees seemed inconsistent with, if not deleterious to, the president's objectives. In fact, Executive Order 9835 created serious problems for the president's committee because activities undertaken on its behalf were responsible for abrogating free speech and civil rights. The PCCR in fact had to call for greater safeguards for federal workers who felt the fire of what often turned out to be a Communist witch hunt.

As Gardner makes clear, the June 29, 1947, speech to the NAACP did establish a number of firsts. Truman was the first president to address the NAACP, the first to "unequivocally commit" the federal government to civil rights for African Americans, and the first to make his intentions known on a national radio broadcast. He did speak with "genuine passion" (31) and did offer a "revolutionary vision" (32). The speech directly linked black civil rights to U.S. international Cold War credibility but, according to Gardner, the stance "was morally, not politically anchored" (40). One might still suspect some politics here, however. The United States was a recent signatory to the UN Charter. It would soon build NATO. The United States had an interest in being perceived as a solid and reliable partner that would and could uphold its commitments, both to human rights and to its allies.

The PCCR report, *To Secure These Rights*, was indeed groundbreaking. Both in its analysis and its 35 recommendations, this document set the federal framework for civil rights intervention for the next 50 years. The magnitude of this accomplishment cannot and should not be diminished, and Gardner gives it its proper due. Looking back on it now, the call for federal anti-lynching laws, jury reform, elimination of the poll tax and voter qualification tests, and a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, as well as a call to desegregate the military, among others, are directives that hardly seem revolutionary; yet at the time, the report surely was "social dynamite" (50). Gardner does not overstate the case in arguing that the committee's recommendations were "tantamount to a political declaration of war against Southern Democrats" (60).

Nonetheless, it is not pristinely clear that Truman's appointment of the committee or even the adoption of many of its recommendations in his submission of committee-inspired civil rights legislation were necessarily "politically reckless." Truman, after all, won the election against Dewey without the help of the Dixiecrats and despite Henry Wallace's challenge from the left. In fact, the appearance of the Dixiecrats and Henry Wallace may have actually galvanized more support from liberals than Truman would have had otherwise. One remembers that groups like the Americans for Democratic Action were looking to dump Truman at the time. Truman may have judged that he could hold the Southern Democrats together enough to win the election, despite the revolt. What appears to have been flint-eyed courage may have been political savvy and maneuvering. As to legislation, Alonzo Hamby in *Man of the People* (Oxford University Press, 1995) notes: "No perceptive

observer of Congress expected the civil rights bill to get anywhere" (435). According to Gardner, this list included the president (81). The mere proposal of a civil rights bill, however, did have *political* advantages, including courting the African American vote and using his bill to hammer the "do-nothing" 80th Congress. During the 1948 campaign, Truman seems to have actually talked very little about civil rights, suggesting a reticence to push hard on the bill in an effort to save some remnant of the old southern Democratic coalition.

In addition, whatever "courage" Truman exercised in civil rights was also aided and abetted by wider domestic and global concerns. In discussing motives, one must always be circumspect. Truman's motives may have been more political and decidedly more complex than is indicated in Gardner's account. For example, it seems clear to this reader that Truman's entrance upon a civil rights crusade was occasioned by a number of key variables, including but not limited to: Truman's personal outrage at injustice, his sense of constitutional duty, the need to revive a sagging postwar economy, revamping a postwar military defense as one particular venue for victory in the 1948 campaign, and finally, demonstrating to the world that the United States would honor human rights compacts (such as the UN Charter) at home and abroad. While many of these variables are discussed, *conclusions* about courage and political recklessness need to be tempered with a more complex reading of the context.

Gardner's book becomes a bit too repetitive at times. The multiple examples, exponential explanations, and testimonies intended to reinforce the argument that Truman's morality trumped his political instincts and motivations often felt like overkill. Moreover, some of the same people are quoted or paraphrased regarding the same topic or issue time and again. One direct quotation by Thurgood Marshall appears on page 190 and reappears in exactly the same form on page 194. A bit more care in editing would have precluded such distractions.

Truman rarely has received credit for the substantial gains he achieved in the civil rights arena. Gardner repairs our historical amnesia. He does resurrect an often overlooked story, and his discussion of the Vinson Court is a particularly helpful additive in relating the history of civil rights. I believe the integration of the armed forces was perhaps Truman's most powerful and lasting contribution to civil rights. Nevertheless, Gardner's attempt to canonize Truman contains a judgment of historical significance that is at least open to challenge. Gardner's pantheon of great leadership in civil rights links Truman directly to Lincoln and Gandhi. This linkage discounts other twentieth-century presidents; perhaps most conspicuous in that list would be Lyndon Johnson. Robert A. Caro, in his recent book *Master of the Senate* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), contends that LBJ was "among all the white government officials in twentieth-century America who did the most to help America's black men and women in their fight for equality and justice" (1009).

Despite the differing judgments and my particular cavils, this is a book that should bring renewed interest in the Truman civil rights legacy as both word and

deed. At minimum, it provides a model for how a president's strong character can be employed as a lightning rod for equality and equal opportunity. Gardner's reintroduction to Truman's progressive civil rights policies should convince many Americans that the government *can* play a crucial role in racial and social justice in the United States.

Steven R. Goldzwig

*Marquette University*