

HARRY S. TRUMAN LIBRARY

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Biography

Harry S. Truman assumed the responsibilities of the presidency on April 12, 1945, after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. He served out the term and was elected president in 1948 and served until January 20, 1953. He was born in Lamar, Missouri in 1884 and died in 1972. Unable to attend college, Truman worked at a number of jobs before entering politics. He served as an elected judge in Jackson County, Missouri in the 1920s and was elected in 1935 to serve in the United States Senate. He was reelected to the Senate in 1940 and was highly regarded for his work chairing a committee to stop waste in government spending during World War II. Because of his acceptability to the various factions within the Democratic Party, he was President Roosevelt's choice as a running mate in 1944. He was vice-president for less than three months before he became president. By virtue of his service as commander-in-chief until the conclusion of the war and his accomplishments as president after the war, including the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, the Berlin airlift, and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Truman has been generally recognized as one of the great American presidents.

Nature of Document Search

We visited the Truman Library on April 30, 2004. The archivists at the Library assisted us in locating documents pertaining to Micronesia, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the Mariana Islands, the Caroline Islands, and the Marshall Islands in the principal collections at the Library: the President's Secretary's Files, White House Central Files, Staff Member and Office Files, and National Security Council files. We also looked for relevant documents in several of the estimated 400 collections of personal papers of President Truman's relatives, friends, and associates. In particular we examined the papers of Oscar L. Chapman (Secretary of the Interior, 1949-53), Robert L. Dennison (Naval Aide to the President, 1948-53), Dale E. Doty (Assistant Secretary of the Interior, 1950-52), George M. Elsey (Assistant to the Special Counsel to the President, 1947-49; Administrative Assistant to the President, 1949-51), and Philleo Nash (Special Assistant to the President, 1946-52).

Highlights of Truman Library Documents

President Truman made several critical decisions affecting Micronesia that are reflected in the Library's documents. He had to decide whether the Micronesian islands captured from the Japanese in 1944-45 should be governed by United States military or civilian officials. In 1947 he rejected the annexation of these islands as recommended by his military advisers and agreed instead to the creation of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under a United Nations "strategic" trusteeship with the United States as the administering authority. The debate among his Cabinet members continued, however, with respect to whether the Trust Territory should be administered by civilian officials under the supervision of the Department of the Interior or by military officials under the direction of the Department of War (later the Department of Defense). In late 1952 President Truman issued an executive order that separated Saipan, Tinian, and several smaller islands in the Northern Mariana Islands from Rota and placed them under the administration of the Secretary of the Navy. This bifurcation of the Northern Marianas, which left Rota (as well as the Caroline and Marshall Islands) under the supervision of the Secretary of the Interior, lasted under 1962, when President Kennedy terminated the Navy's administration and reunited all the Northern Marianas into a single district of the Trust Territory under the Department of the Interior.

These historic decisions take on a very human dimension when the pertinent documents are examined. Even before the Japanese officially surrendered, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal recommended to the president that that Mariana Islands be placed under the pre-war form of naval government that had existed in Guam and that consideration be given to placing all the islands taken from the Japanese "under United States control for strategic reasons, not including the Philippines." President Truman by a handwritten note on the Forrestal memorandum approved this recommendation. When Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, who had held his position since 1933, heard about this military interest in governing the islands, he was quick to assert his department's interests and prerogatives. He told the president that "It would be more in keeping with the traditions of the American people to devise suitable forms of civil administration, under civilian personnel, for the peace-time government of new overseas territories." He reminded the president that the administration of civil affairs in various U.S. territories (with the exception of Guam and Samoa) reflected a movement to coordinate their supervision under Interior's authority. Well aware of the different views held by the Secretaries of Navy and War, Ickes contended that "Neither the security nor the prestige of the United States would be served by a policy of military rule; for such a policy would appear more militaristic than that of the old colonial powers, even more militaristic than that of the Japanese themselves whose South Seas Bureau was staffed largely by civilian personnel."

Memorandum, August 11, 1945, Forrestal to President
Letter, September 12, 1945, Ickes to President

Although he continued to press his arguments vigorously with the president, Secretary Ickes did not prevail. President Truman approved naval administration of the islands "as an interim arrangement pending study and recommendation by the State, War and Navy Departments." Interior immediately sought a place on the committee and the

president at a Cabinet meeting on October 19, 1945, asked the four departments to make a recommendation “on the problems arising from the Administration of the Pacific Islands” and “without delay” to “outline a policy which is satisfactory to all four departments.” Although Secretary of State James F. Byrnes sought to defer any meeting of the committee until international agreements under discussion regarding the islands were negotiated, President Truman agreed with Ickes that the matter should be considered promptly. When the committee did meet to discuss the issue, Ickes was outvoted by the other three departments, which recommended to the president that the islands remain under military administration “until such time as the status and title of the Pacific Islands concerned should be determined.” President Truman accepted this recommendation.

**Memorandum, September 18, 1945, Forrestal to President
(handwritten notes)**

**Memorandum, October 20, 1945, Truman to Secretaries
of State, War, Navy, and Interior**

Letter, March 6, 1946, Byrnes to President

Civilian officials within the Truman administration did prevail on the question of trusteeship status for the Pacific islands. The Department of State took the lead on this issue, strongly recommending a trusteeship under the UN Charter with safeguards for the national defense and security of the United States. According to State, “Territorial aggrandizement would be contrary to the long-established policy of this Government and would seriously damage the moral prestige and political leadership of the United States.” Furthermore, such aggrandizement “would be an invitation to similar aggrandizement by other states, with the result that the whole foundation of the United Nations and of our general world security policy would be undermined.” State’s position was opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The president was informed by Secretary of State Byrnes of these differing views, which eventually found their way into the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. The Joint Chiefs of Staff made a last-ditch presentation to the president in October 1946, emphasizing that control of the Japanese Mandated Islands “in their entirety is necessary not only to afford bases for our own use but also to enable us to deny the entire area to a potential enemy.”

Memorandum, June 24, 1946, State to Departments of War and Navy

**Memorandum, July 2, 1946, Reid to Committee circulating the Joint Chiefs
of Staff memorandum dated June 28, 1946**

Memorandum, October 19, 1946, Joint Chiefs of Staff to President

Pressure for a presidential decision also came from John Foster Dulles, a U.S. representative at the United Nations, who advised Secretary Byrnes and President Truman “that he cannot criticize the trusteeship agreements now before the General Assembly with any force unless he knows what position we are going to take about the former Japanese Islands in the Pacific.” In early November 1946, President Truman announced that the United States was prepared to place the Japanese Mandated Islands under a UN trusteeship with the United States as the sole administering authority.

***New York Times*, October 29, 1946
Statement by President Truman, November 6, 1946**

While the proposed trusteeship agreement was being drafted and considered by the United Nations, Interior and the Navy Department continued to spar about the future administration of the trust territory. The new Interior secretary, J.A. Krug, personally visited Guam, American Samoa, and the proposed trust territory in early 1947. His subsequent report to the president began with a passionate call for “civil government for civilian populations under our flag in time of peace.” He expressed his “firm conviction that the United States must practice in the Pacific the democracy which we practice at home and which we hold out to the world as the American way of life.” He recommended that the United States accept the trusteeship from the UN “with a declaration of intention to establish civilian administration throughout the area at the earliest possible moment.” On July 18, 1947, Congress approved legislation authorizing the president to sign the trusteeship agreement with the United Nations. On the same day President Truman signed an executive order delegating responsibility for the administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands on an interim basis to the Secretary of the Navy. The documents in the Presidential Library reveal that for the next two years the Interior and Navy departments continued to debate when this “interim” responsibility would be transferred from Navy to Interior and what kind of organic legislation should be enacted by Congress with respect to Guam, American Samoa, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

**Letter, May 12, 1947, Krug to President
Memorandum, May 14, 1947, Truman to four Secretaries
Letters, June 19, 1947, Truman to Speaker of the House of Representatives
and President of the Senate
U.S. Congress, H.J. Res. 233, July 18, 1947**

In an effort to resolve this issue, President Truman in May 1949 advised both the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of the Interior that Interior should take the lead to develop specific time tables for the transfer of responsibility to Interior for Guam, American Samoa, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. The documents reflect the continuing discussions between these two agencies regarding the dates for such transfer of authority and resolution of related problems, especially those relating to transportation needs with the Trust Territory. The date of July 1, 1951, was set for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands and President Truman on January 4, 1951, appointed the first civilian high commissioner of the Trust Territory, his former colleague in the U.S. Senate, Elbert D. Thomas, with the rank of ambassador. One of the new high commissioner’s highest priorities was to establish a headquarters within the Trust Territory and a few months after his appointment he wrote a detailed letter to Interior recommending that Saipan be established as the new headquarters for the TTPI.

**Letter, March 10, 1949, Krug to President
Letters, May 14, 1949, Truman to Secretaries of the Navy and Interior**

**Memorandum, September 22, 1949, Clifford to President
Letter, March 20, 1951, Thomas to Department of the Interior**

This perfectly logical recommendation, however, contributed to an unexpected change in the administration of the Trust Territory. Secretary of the Interior Oscar L. Chapman testified on April 17, 1952, before the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs regarding a resolution providing for the continuance of civil government in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. He advised the Committee that the Navy did not want a civilian government set up in the islands, which explained why Trust Territory headquarters were located in Honolulu. When the matter was pursued by the Committee, Chapman commented that the hearing was an open one and that therefore he could not “tell you one of the reasons why we have been asked not to establish the island headquarters in one of the trustee islands at the moment.” Five months later, Attorney General James P. McGranery sent the president a proposed executive order transferring a portion of the Trust Territory, including the islands of Saipan and Tinian, from Interior to Navy. He advised the president that the order “was forwarded informally for my consideration” by an assistant director of the Bureau of the Budget. He reported also that he had been informed “that the Bureau of the Budget has taken no position with respect to the issuance of the order, but that you are well informed of the facts which led to the suggestion of its issuance by the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.” He advised that the State Department had no objection and it was satisfactory to the Navy Department. Efforts within the week by Interior to persuade the president not to approve the executive order were unsuccessful. With the president’s approval, the Mariana Islands district of the Trust Territory was divided into two separate entities – one administered by Interior and the other administered by the Navy – and the Central Intelligence Agency was free to establish the Naval Technical Training Unit on Saipan shortly thereafter.

**Transcript of Hearings before the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs on April 17, 1952, regarding S.J. Res. 149, 82nd Cong. 2nd Sess. (1952)
Letter, September 4, 1952, McGranery to President
Letter, September 10, 1952, Northrop (Interior Under Secretary) to Murphy (Special Counsel to the President)**