

Truman's White House

If Harry Truman had taped his private White House conversations, they would not titillate, disillusion, shock or turn up on drug store counters as \$2.95 paperbacks. If transcripts were available—which they will never be because no conversation was recorded—they would merely confirm the impressions the American people have long held.

Truman was serious about his job, sentimental about his family and friends, old-fashioned in personal ethics, stubborn in defense of the rights of citizens, relaxed with his staff and very, very firmly in command. All this and more came through in the 9 a.m. conferences each morning with the small staff who, sitting on a couple of sofas or in small chairs dragged across the Seal of the President incised in the green carpet, formed an arc around the old presidential desk. Talk was free and easy. Matt Connelly, appointments secretary, ran through the day's schedule with sardonic quips about self-important political or public figures. Charlie Ross and later Joe Short mentioned in casual tones the current interest of boys in the Press Room. (Women became prominent in later administrations.)

The staff was unbelievably small to observers of the White House of the 60's and 70's, never more than a baker's dozen. Although there was a certain hierarchy that recognized Assistant John Steelman and Special Counsel Clark Clifford (succeeded in February 1950 by Charles Murphy) as being senior to military aides and administrative assistants, it was all first name camaraderie. Only 5-star Admiral Leahy, relic of Roosevelt's High Command, was treated with the respect of position and age. No one stood between Truman and an agency head; no one second-guessed a cabinet officer; policy decisions were made by the President after direct discussion with those who would execute them; a White House staffer ill-enough advised to treat a Senator or a Secretary with disdain had very short tenure. A primitive system—but it seemed to work.

H. S. T. opened one of his 9 a.m. meetings husky voiced and moist eyed. He had just been told by the Secretary of the Army of a widespread cheating scandal at West Point. He felt the blow as keenly as if every cadet involved had been a son or nephew. He could not comprehend how young men in whom such trust had been placed could violate a solemn oath.

A sense of personal ethics prevailed that astounded all who perceived Truman as no more than a Pendergast

Leaving aside their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon's tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the character of the President and the men around him, and of their way of transacting business. Today, in the fourth of a series of articles by associates of other Presidents, former White House Administrative Assistant George M. Elsey reminisces about the ambiance in the Truman White House.

product or who assumed that a mink coat accepted by a witless White House stenographer typified the man's moral code. After a presidential meeting with congressional leaders in the Cabinet Room as the MacArthur issue was developing, an aide picked up a manila envelope left behind in error. It was clear from annotations on the face that it not only belonged to a Republican Senator but that the contents dealt with Republican congressional strategy. The envelope was promptly carried into the oval office. Did the President want to see it? The response was as emphatic as Henry Stimson's had been when, as Herbert Hoover's Secretary of State, he had closed down the department's cryptographic unit with the statement that "Gentlemen do not read other men's mail." Truman's sentiments were the same, more earthily expressed. The envelope was returned unread to the Capitol by messenger.

Truman's vocabulary in all-male company reflected his three decades on a farm. The language seemed natural and neither inappropriate nor crude. Anyone who has milked a cow—or tried to—could readily understand that Truman was predicting failure and frustration when he spoke of a particular candidate for office: "He's just pulling on the hind teat." Truman laughed heartily at locker room jokes but rarely told them himself. As a raconteur, he preferred political lore.

All Presidents have problems with the press. Here, as in many other fields, H. S. T. sometimes fired off a letter in the dawn's early light; more

often he would let someone on the staff hear a long-hand draft, turn pale and then gasp out reasons why the letter should not be mailed as written. Occasionally he could be talked out of it altogether as I succeeded in doing

with one scorcher addressed to Sulzberger of the New York Times. The problem to Truman was usually a publisher, rarely a reporter. Reporters were his friends. He liked their straightforward, no-nonsense lack of obsequiousness.

Truman valued the citizen's right of privacy; the guarantees of the Constitution were real. Although conventional political wisdom argued for a tough "loyalty program" as the 80th Congress became increasingly exercised over Communist infiltration, Truman stalled. The idea of investigations into the personal lives of civil servants smacked to him of police state tactics. Loyalty oaths were repugnant. He admired the F. B. I. for its criminal work, but he balked at letting it investigate job applicants. He sent me to explore



with Frances Perkins and her colleagues whether the Civil Service Commission would take on the chore.

"If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen" was a favorite quotation of his long before some anonymous admirer had a small placard painted for the edification of visitors to the oval office. The heat was really on one morning when he called me in. A letter of his with caustic remarks about the Marine Corps had found its way into the Congressional Record. Could I possibly find in a hurry some statements in which he had praised the Corps? I could not. The press office reported the thermometer rising by the hour. No point in pretending he had not called the Marines the Navy's police force or had not said its propaganda machine was the equal of Stalin's; he had. And so Truman asked the Commandant of the Corps if he could accompany him to the reunion of one of the Corps' feistiest divisions then meeting at the Mayflower Hotel to make his apologies in person. The way to meet critics was to confront them, with an engaging grin when you knew you had been wrong (as on this occasion) and a bristling salvo of facts when you were sure you were right.

But all this was long ago, in a simpler time, when cabinet officers were more directly responsible for their departments, when the President relied on the Department of Justice for legal advice, when White House staff members knew they had no independent authority and when everyone in town knew that the buck stopped on the Boss's desk.

Thursday: James Rowe on President Roosevelt.