



The **Ike & Harry THAW**

A Presidential Aide Sought to Restore Cordiality between Two Presidents

By Samuel W. Rushay, Jr.

For most of his presidency, Harry S. Truman maintained a friendly relationship with General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Truman knew a hero when he saw one, and Eisenhower was viewed as a national hero for leading the Allied invasion of Normandy that helped bring about the demise of Hitler's Third Reich.

Truman even indicated he would support Eisenhower for President on the Democratic ticket in 1948, with Truman stepping down to be Vice President once again.

But the bitter 1952 election campaign put an end to the cordiality that had developed between the two.

Truman, campaigning for the Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, made several attacks on Eisenhower, the Republican nominee. Truman's attacks included an accusation that Eisenhower had abandoned his principles and displayed "moral blindness" by refusing to defend Gen. George Marshall from attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others.

The charges involving Marshall were particularly painful for Eisenhower, who had served under Marshall at the General Staff in Washington during the early years of World War II. Marshall had dearly wanted to lead the Allied invasion of Europe but stayed in Washington at President Franklin D. Roosevelt's insistence. Marshall recommended Eisenhower instead.

General Eisenhower, then Chief of Staff, receives his fourth Distinguished Service Medal from President Truman, February 7, 1948. The two were then still on good terms.



Eisenhower, a relative newcomer to presidential politics, took Truman's campaign attacks personally and was bitter about them for years. Emmet John Hughes, an Eisenhower speechwriter, wrote that the "mere mention of Harry Truman's name brought fast flashes of antipathy" in the GOP candidate during the campaign.

Relations between the two men remained chilly during and after the 1952 campaign. On Inauguration Day in 1953, Eisenhower refused to leave his automobile to pay a courtesy call on the Trumans in the White House. The ride to the inaugural ceremony at the Capitol included a snippy exchange of words between the two men concerning the 1949 inaugural.

Eisenhower remained angry with Truman for most of his presidency. He never asked Truman for his advice or his participation in any of his administration's affairs. The once regular correspondence between Truman and Eisenhower during the Truman administration stopped almost entirely (a few weeks into his presidency, Eisenhower wrote Truman to thank him for returning a globe to him). For more than five years, from January 1953 until May 1958, Eisenhower extended no invitations to Truman.

Attempts to Bring Together Eisenhower and Truman

Enter Bryce Harlow. Harlow served in the Eisenhower administration as administrative assistant to the President, special assistant to the President, and deputy assistant to the President for congressional affairs.

In a conversation recorded on recently opened Nixon White House tapes, Harlow recalled his efforts in the late 1950s to repair poor relations between Truman and Eisenhower. It came during a conversation with President Richard Nixon on June 14, 1973.

By then, Harlow was back at the White House as counselor to the President, a cabinet-rank position. On that day, Harlow recalled for Nixon his efforts to get Eisenhower and Truman together before Eisenhower left office in 1961. Harlow told the story to illustrate to Nixon that he (Harlow) would always tell him the truth and not be a "yes-man." Nixon needed someone like Harlow to help him manage the Watergate scandal that was engulfing his presidency in June 1973.

Harlow set the scene for Nixon.

In 1958, probably in May, Harlow took it upon himself to break the ice between the

Truman meeting with President-elect Eisenhower in 1952. Ike was unsmiling and tense in the meeting, still upset by Truman's campaign attacks alleging, among other things, that Eisenhower had refused to defend Gen. George Marshall from attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

two Presidents. He did not tell Nixon why he wanted to do this. Perhaps he was motivated by his realization that Truman and Eisenhower were great men and contemporaries who could be benefitting from each other's counsel and friendship. He knew that Truman had done a lot for Eisenhower's career, having appointed him as chief of staff of the Army and the first Supreme Allied Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Harlow knew that bringing up the subject of Truman with Eisenhower would require as much support as he could get. It would not be easy. Everyone around Eisenhower was well aware of the President's quick temper, which likely would flare when a sensitive subject—such as Truman—was mentioned.

His first stop was Sherman Adams, chief of staff. He pointed out to Adams that Ike had never invited Truman to the White House. Harlow felt strongly that Eisenhower couldn't leave office without inviting Truman. Not inviting Truman would, in Harlow's words, "make [Eisenhower] feel bad for the rest of his life. We mustn't let him do that to himself." Adams's reaction was "'Have you lost your mind? Are you going to go in and tell him?' . . . I'm not."

Failing to get Adams's backing, Harlow went to Wilton "Jerry" Persons, deputy assistant to the President for congressional liaison, telling him that his proposal was for the President's "peace of mind." Persons was unwilling to help, saying "I'll be goddamned if I'm gonna tell him that."

Next, Harlow went to Thomas Stephens, appointments secretary; then to James Hagerty, press secretary; and finally to Ann Whitman, Eisenhower's personal secretary.

Harlow told Whitman that the President had a bunch of “pusillanimous bastards” around him who would not tell him anything he did not want to hear. He planned to discuss the subject of Truman with Eisenhower but asked Whitman to leave the door open in case he needed to rush back out.

Harlow Confronts Ike, And Gets a Surprise

After conferring with Whitman, Harlow entered the Oval Office alone to discuss with Eisenhower extending an invitation to Truman. Perhaps sensing he was about to receive unwelcome news, Eisenhower initially gave him the “five-star look.” (Nixon, who had served as Vice President under Eisenhower, knew the look and recalled Ike’s “cold blue eyes” when he was unhappy.)

Author Evan Thomas has noted that Ike’s “power did not come from a strong jaw but from dark blue eyes that could flash with anger or twinkle with humor.”

Harlow also noted the eyebrows that started “tickling” at him. Harlow warned Eisenhower that he was about to give him unwelcome news, news that might be so unpleasant that the President might throw Harlow out of the office before he could finish delivering it.

Harlow said Eisenhower reacted very emotionally to his suggested invitation to Truman, describing him as “crazy as hell” at the notion. Summoning his courage, Harlow stood his ground, convinced that the President would eventually be “bothered” by his refusal to make peace with Truman. Perhaps to Harlow’s surprise, Ike continued to listen, but concluded, “He [Truman] won’t come.”

Harlow then suggested a plan.

He proposed that the President invite Harry and Bess Truman to join the President and Mamie Eisenhower to attend the dedication at Arlington National Cemetery of the nation’s second Unknown Soldier, for the Korean War. The war had begun during the Truman administration and ended with an armistice during the Eisenhower administration.

Eisenhower agreed to issue an invitation, which Truman declined, noting his plans to go to Europe. Therefore, Eisenhower sent him a second invitation, which also was declined. According to Harlow, Truman denied that he had ever been invited. On tape, Nixon can be heard concluding that Truman “lied through his teeth” about Eisenhower’s supposed refusal to invite him to Washington during his presidency.

Harlow’s claim notwithstanding, staff at the Harry S. Truman Library could not find direct evidence that Truman ever made a public comment to the effect that he had never been invited to the White House by Eisenhower.

A story in the *Washington Post* on May 5, 1959, reported that Truman was “miffed because he hadn’t been invited to any White House functions since he stepped down as President.” The *Post* reported that this information came from “friends of Mr. Truman.” Perhaps Truman was reflecting on the absence of invitations to the White House up to that time.

In fact, there had been a third invitation from Eisenhower. Just before the *Post* story appeared, Eisenhower invited Truman to a stag dinner for former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Truman declined

this invitation as well, saying he had to be in New York. Truman wrote to Dean Acheson that he could not be present for the Churchill dinner “because the invitation came too late—as intended.”

Why Didn’t Truman Accept Eisenhower’s Invitations?

In part, Truman declined Eisenhower’s invitations because on two of the three occasions, Truman was given relatively little advance notice and he had already made travel plans. There was only a seven-day



Bryce Harlow served President Eisenhower in several capacities, including as administrative assistant. He attempted to reconcile Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, believing that they both had much to gain from each other’s counsel and friendship.



Harlow and President Nixon in the Oval Office. Harlow’s efforts to repair the Truman-Eisenhower relations came to light with the recent release of the Nixon White House tapes.



Presidents Truman and Eisenhower met at President John F. Kennedy's funeral in 1963. Truman had refused three invitations to meet with Eisenhower, although they did meet at several funerals.

span between the date of Eisenhower's letter to Truman (April 30) and the date of the Churchill dinner (May 6).

As for the other two invitations that Eisenhower extended to Truman, there was just an 11-day gap between the date of Eisenhower's letter (May 20, 1958) and the date of the Arlington ceremony (May 30, 1958). There was a two-month advance notice between Eisenhower's letter (January

30, 1959) and the NATO foreign ministers meeting (April 2–4, 1959).

There may have been other reasons why Truman declined Eisenhower's invitations. Truman surely felt hurt by Eisenhower's cold behavior toward him during and after the 1952 campaign. In one example, Truman recalled the "frozen grimness" of President-elect Eisenhower throughout a transitional meeting, to which the incoming President arrived "unsmiling" and looking "tense."

Truman also suspected that Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon had unknown political motives in trying to reach out to Truman. Truman also had real political and policy differences with Eisenhower, including his feeling that Ike had "surrendered" in Korea and had abandoned a bipartisan foreign policy.

Finally, Truman may have felt "sour grapes" toward his successor, who enjoyed great popularity and who had cruised to reelection in 1956.

For Truman, history proved that former generals could not be good Presidents

because they were unfamiliar with the problems and lives of civilians, whom generals are inclined to think are inferior to them. Eisenhower's success seemed to contradict his theory.

For his part, Truman reached out to Eisenhower at least once. In 1953, when Eisenhower visited Kansas City, Truman telephoned him because he wanted to pay his respects. Truman claimed that whoever answered the telephone said the President was too busy for Truman to call upon him.

Eisenhower, who was staying at the Muehlebach Hotel, later claimed that he never received the call but that he did try to determine if Truman had called. It doesn't appear that Truman invited Eisenhower to the dedication of his presidential library in 1957. For that occasion, Eisenhower sent a terse message that the administrator of the General Services Administration read during the dedication ceremony.

Truman wrote sarcastically to Dean Acheson, who had served as his secretary of state, "I hope you were impressed with Ike's telegram to the peepul! What in hell makes some of us tick?"

Truman and Eisenhower did meet briefly at funerals for Fred Vinson, former Chief Justice of the United States, General of the Army George Marshall, House Speaker Sam Rayburn, and Eleanor Roosevelt. The two men also met at the Truman Library, where Truman gave Eisenhower a tour in 1961. Eisenhower was planning his own presidential library and wanted to see how Truman's library was set up.

Immediately following the funeral for President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, Truman and Eisenhower had a long, warm meeting at Blair House and then at the White House. They met for the final time at a United Nations luncheon in Kansas City in 1966. Eisenhower's brother Milton, who sat with them, observed that "all the old animosities were forgotten" and that they "had quite a good time together."



To learn more about

- Harlow's conversation with Nixon in 1973, go to

www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/tape940/tape940.php. The conversation begins at approximately 00:50:04 on tape 940-15.

- President Truman, go to www.trumanlibrary.org.
- President Eisenhower, go to www.eisenhower.archives.gov.

Harlow's Efforts Failed, But There's Credit for Trying

Harlow's inability to bring the two Presidents together during Eisenhower's presidency does not diminish the importance and the courage of his efforts to do so. Harlow had not been told to bring up the subject of Truman with Eisenhower. He wanted to do it—and felt compelled to do it—even without any support.

At any point before entering the Oval Office alone, he could have dropped the matter. And upon entering the office, he weathered Eisenhower's stormy initial reaction to the mention of Truman and found Eisenhower receptive to Harlow's suggested invitation.

Harlow's courage is even more remarkable given that not only was he meeting with the President of the United States, he was meeting with a President who was known to insiders (but not to the public)

for his temper as much as for his smile, and a President whose past credentials would have been intimidating to even those with the toughest skin.

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tions with Presidents.
Instead, he returned
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tion in April 1974.

Harlow was not punished for discussing this matter with Eisenhower. Later in 1958, he was promoted to deputy assistant to the President for congressional affairs. Harlow's lonely act of courage, if initially unsuccessful, helped lay the groundwork for the eventual thaw in relations between the two Presidents.

Harlow never wrote a book about his relations with Presidents. Instead, he returned to private business practice, with Proctor & Gamble, after he left the Nixon administration in April 1974.

A native of Oklahoma, he was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1977. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan awarded him the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award. In 1982, the Bryce Harlow Foundation was established. The foundation has awarded the prestigious Bryce Harlow Award to individuals who have worked to advance business-government relations. Harlow died in 1987. **P**

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author wishes to thank the staffs of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, and Beatrice Roelofs, for their assistance with this article.

Most of this article is based on a conversation contained on Nixon White House tape 940-15, which the Richard Nixon Presidential Library at College Park, Maryland, opened to the public on August 21, 2013. The portion of the conversation that refers to the Truman-Eisenhower relationship is about four minutes long and is a part of a longer conversation between President Nixon, Harlow, and Chief of Staff Alexander Haig and others about a variety of other subjects. A tape subject log, which is an outline or guide (not a transcript) to tape 940-15, is available on the Nixon Library's website at www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/finding_aids/tapesubjectlogs/oval940.pdf (see pp. 54-5). To hear the conversation, go to www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/tape940/tape940.php. The conversation begins at approximately 00:50:04 on tape 940-15.

A source for President Truman's offer of the 1948 presidential nomination to General Eisenhower is Truman's 1947 diary. That diary is located in the Truman Papers, President Secretary's Files, Diaries File. Truman would do this if Gen. Douglas MacArthur returned from Japan and ran as a Republican in 1948. Truman knew that Eisenhower could defeat MacArthur in a head to head contest.

The quote from Eisenhower speechwriter Emmet Hughes comes from William Lee Miller, *Two Americans: Truman, Eisenhower, and a Dangerous World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 255.

The reference to the 1949 and 1953 inaugurations is

contained in Alonzo Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 618.

Steve Neal, *Harry and Ike: The Partnership that Remade the Postwar World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), is the source for the comparison of correspondence between Truman and Ike (pp. 282-89). Neal also documents Truman's dropped call to President Eisenhower at the Muehlebach Hotel (pp. 290-291) and the various (mostly fleeting) occasions during which Harry and Ike met during Truman's post-presidential years. See pp. 290, 307-308, 317-323.

The reference to Eisenhower's eyes as the source of his personality's power comes from Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), p. 160.

Truman's claim about not having been invited to the Eisenhower White House is found in "Truman Declines an Invitation to Ike's Dinner for Churchill," *Washington Post and Times-Herald*, May 5, 1959.

Eisenhower's three invitations to Truman during the former's second term are located in Truman's Post-Presidential Papers, Secretary's Office Files, Eisenhower, Dwight D.—General [1 of 2] folder, at the Harry S. Truman Library & Museum.

Truman's recollection of the tense White House meeting with President-elect Eisenhower is found in the *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman: Volume II: Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Signet Books, 1956), pp. 579, 587.

Truman's views of his successor's foreign policy are contained in a letter to Dean Acheson of October 14, 1958.

Truman's insistence that Eisenhower's invitation to attend the Churchill dinner was made intentionally late, and his suspicions of Ike and Nixon's motives, are documented in a letter from Truman to Acheson of August 22, 1959. In that letter, he accuses "Tricky Dick" Nixon and "Alibi Ike" of "trying to take me into camp." Truman's letter to Acheson of July 10, 1957, concerns the terse telegram that Eisenhower issued on the occasion of the dedication of the Truman Library. All three letters appear in *Affection & Trust: The Personal Correspondence of Harry S. Truman & Dean Acheson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pp. 171-72, 206, 224-26.

Truman's views of generals as Presidents are outlined in Margaret Truman, ed., *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), p. 55.

Biographical information about Bryce Harlow is located at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bryce_Harlow, which the author accessed on September 26, 2013.



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