

CHAPTER **Returning to** **38 Peace and** **Prosperity** (1945–1960)

230 Truman on the **Railroads**

With the end of World War II in 1945, the United States began to make the change from a wartime to a peacetime economy—a change known as reconversion. A smooth transition was one of the major goals of Harry S. Truman, who became President when Roosevelt died in the spring of the year. As this account indicated, President Truman's task was not an easy one.

READING FOCUS

1. Why was the union threatening to strike?
2. How did Truman propose to settle the railroad strike?

The labor-management pot came to a boil late in 1945. The dire forecasts of massive unemployment had not materialized. But wave upon wave of strikes shut down one major segment of industry after another. Workers battled management for peacetime wages to match their wartime earnings and for pensions, welfare funds, union security, and other fringe benefits.

As the new year of 1946 opened, 900,000 workers, led by Walter Reuther's auto workers, were already on strike. Within weeks they were followed by 700,000 steel workers, 263,000 packinghouse workers, 200,000 electrical workers, 50,000 communications workers. Never before had the nation been faced with such a workers' revolt. The year was to register a total of 116,000,000 man-days of work lost due to strikes, which was three times

higher than it ever had been before (and twice as high as in any year since then). In February, an even more menacing prospect darkened the picture—a general strike on the nation's railroads.

Months of fruitless negotiation between the twenty powerful rail brotherhoods and railroad management reached a final dead end on April 18. An arbitration board had proposed to settle the unions' demand for a \$2.20-a-day wage increase at \$1.28 and to put off a decision on work rules for a year. The carriers accepted and the unions rejected the proposal. Eighteen of the brotherhoods agreed to further negotiation, but the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, headed by Alvaney Johnston, and the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, whose president was A. F. Whitney, said they were through with negotiation. They called a strike of their members in thirty days—for May 18.

Both Johnston and Whitney, paunchy, shrewd old veterans of the labor wars going

President Harry S. Truman



Adapted from The Truman Presidency by Cabell Phillips.

back to the turn of the century, were old political friends of the President. They had given him a boost in his 1940 campaign for reelection to the Senate and were among his strongest backers for the Vice Presidential nomination. Until April 18, their defiance of Truman's arm's-length effort to settle their differences with the carriers had been conducted in good spirits. Now their attitude was to stiffen in cold hostility.

With the collapse of bargaining negotiations in April, President Truman took the rail dispute into his own hands and put John R. Steelman to work on the problem as his personal representative. Weeks of consultation and wheedling followed, but to no avail. On Wednesday, May 15, three days before the strike deadline, the President summoned the management representatives and the leaders of the twenty brotherhoods to his office. He talked to them and found that leaders of eighteen of the unions were willing to settle on the basis of the \$1.28 arbitration award. But not Whitney and Johnston. Between them, they could bring every wheel on the railroads to a stop, and that was what they proposed to do. Peering coldly through his thick glasses at his two old friends, the President said:

"If you think I'm going to sit here and let you tie up this whole country, you're crazy."

"We've got to go through with it, Mr. President," Whitney said. "Our men are demanding it."

Truman got up from his desk, ending the conference. "All right, I'm going to give you the gun. You've got just 48 hours—until Thursday at this time—to reach a settlement. If you don't, I'm going to take over the railroads in the name of the government."

By now, an angry uproar from Congress and the press was arising from all across the country. The threat of paralysis in the transportation system seemed intolerable.

When the Thursday deadline came without a break in the deadlock, Truman called the railroad leaders again to his office to watch—and to be on public view to the news photographers—as he signed an executive order carrying out his threat of seizure of the railroads. Whitney and Johnson grudgingly agreed to postpone their strike for five days, but not an instant longer. That made the new and final deadline 4 o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday, May 25. On Thursday, Steelman called the

leaders in for another all-day session at the White House. When it was over, Whitney and Johnston continued to hold out. That night they wrote the President a curt letter saying: "We have told you many times that the present agitation among the men is extremely serious and their demands cannot be abandoned. Therefore your offer is unacceptable."

When Harry Truman's mad is up, his eyes glint coldly behind his spectacles and his mouth is a thin, hard line pulled down at the corners. This was the image as he stalked into a specially called meeting of his Cabinet that Friday morning. In the manner of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, he had summoned them not to ask their views but to tell them what he was going to do. He was going to Congress in person the next day and demand the stiffest labor law in history—one that would give him authority to draft strikers into the armed services without respect to age or dependency when their strike threatened to bring on a national emergency. When the Attorney General raised a question about the constitutionality of such a move, the President brushed him aside. "We'll draft 'em first and think about the law later," he said.

Next, he turned to Charley Ross, his press secretary, and told him to arrange a coast-to-coast radio hookup for him that night so that he could explain to the people what he was about to do.

"Here's what I'm going to say," he snapped. "Get it typed up. I'm going to take the hide right off those so-and-so's."

Ross's blood pressure rocketed as he read what possibly will stand for all time as the angriest public message ever written in a President's own hand. It accused the labor leaders of having tried to sabotage the war effort while America's young men faced death on the battlefield. Now they were sabotaging the peace by "holding a gun to the head of the government." He called on the ex-soldiers who had been his comrades in arms to help "eliminate the Whitneys and the Johnstons," and to "hang a few traitors and make our country safe for democracy."

It is hard to guess what might have happened if this blast had reached the public. Happily, Charley Ross was the kind of old friend who could go to the President and say, "Look, Harry, this just won't do." Which is basically what he did, and with the help of Clark Clif-

ford a greatly toned-down version of the speech was hammered out before the President went on the air at 10 o'clock that night.

Even so, that speech was one of the sharpest attacks on a group of individuals by a President that has ever been uttered. In it Mr. Truman said:

My fellow countrymen—I come before the American people tonight at a time of great crisis.

The crisis of Pearl Harbor was the result of action by a foreign enemy. The crisis tonight is caused by a group of men within our own country who place their private interests above the welfare of the Nation. . . .

I assume that these two men [Johnston and Whitney] know the havoc which their decision has caused, and the even more extreme suffering which will result in the future. . . . This is no contest between labor and management. This is a contest between a small group of men and their government. . . .

If sufficient workers to operate the trains have not returned by 4 P.M. tomorrow, as head of your government I have no alternative but to operate the trains by using every means within my power. . . .

Saturday—the next day—was as packed with drama as a Hollywood cliffhanger. Steelman was locked in a room at the Statler Hotel with Whitney and Johnston in a last-ditch effort to make them relent. Clifford and Sam Rosenman, in the Cabinet room at the White House, were battling against both time and uncertainty trying to draft the President's speech to Congress. Would, or would not, the strike be settled by the time the President got to the Capitol? Steelman telephoned Clifford that an agreement might be signed any minute, but he couldn't be certain.

"That was going to put us in a fix if it were settled at the last minute, and we had this speech," Clifford recalled. So he and Rosenman wrote out a couple of alternative pages that might be substituted at the last minute. The President had already left for the Capitol with the original text when they finished. Hatless, Clifford set out in pursuit, only to find on arrival at the office of Speaker Sam Rayburn that the President had already entered the House Chamber and was about to begin his speech.

Five minutes later, Clifford got a call through to Steelman at the Statler, who told

him breathlessly: "It's signed!"

Clifford scribbled a note on a scrap of paper: "Mr. President, agreement signed, strike over," and gave it to the Secretary of the Senate who scurried across the corridor and into the House Chamber and thrust the note on top of the text from which the President had already begun to read. Truman halted in midsentence and then looked up with a grin:

"Gentlemen, the strike has been settled," he said. There was an outbreak of applause and shouts from the packed Chamber.

READING REVIEW

1. List two reasons why the railroad workers were going to strike.
2. (a) What proposal did President Truman offer to end the railroad strike? (b) How did Congress react to Truman's proposal?
3. In what way did President Truman's actions set a precedent for future negotiations?

231 The Middle of the Road

The election of Dwight D. Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952 brought a Republican to the White House for the first time in twenty years. This victory did not mean, however, that all the programs of the previous Democratic administrations were to be discarded. Instead, Eisenhower and his advisers followed a middle-of-the-road approach, maintaining many New Deal policies but modifying others. They called their philosophy Modern, or New, Republicanism.

The meaning of New Republicanism is outlined here by Arthur Larson, who was Eisenhower's Undersecretary of Labor. He placed New Republicanism midway between two outlooks of the past: the probusiness approach of 1896 (when Republican William McKinley was elected President) and the prolabor approach of 1936 (when Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt won a second, overwhelming victory).

READING FOCUS

1. According to Larson, what were the characteristics of New Republicanism?
2. How did President Eisenhower establish the "Authentic American Center in politics"?

AMERICA NEEDS



EISENHOWER

An Eisenhower campaign poster

In the nineteenth century, there was not enough government regulation and not enough labor strength and freedom. Result: unruly business expansion at the expense of the rights of people. In the nineteen-thirties there was too much government regulation and not enough business incentive and freedom. Result: deadened business activity and a long depression, accompanied by much humanitarian concern for the victims of the depression.

Now we have as much government activity as is necessary, but not enough to stifle the normal motivations of private enterprise. And we have a higher degree of government concern for the needs of people than ever before in our history. At the same time, the government is pursuing a policy of restoring responsibility to individuals and private groups. This balance, together with the restoration of a better balance between federal and state governments, is allowing all these elements in our society to make their maximum contribution to the common good.

Adapted from A Republican Looks at His Party by Arthur Larson.

By bringing together these best forces in American life, President Eisenhower and his associates have, for the first time in our history, discovered and established the Authentic American Center in politics. This is not a Center in the European sense of an uneasy midpoint between large and powerful left-wing and right-wing elements of varying degrees of radicalism. It is a Center in the American sense of a common meeting-ground of the great majority of our people on our own issues. [It is set] against a backdrop of our own history, our own current setting and our own responsibilities for the future.

What are the reasons for this recent emergence of the American Consensus? There are at least five.

First should be noted the common social and historical background which makes this high degree of agreement possible. We have not entered this period trailing centuries of class consciousness and class warfare. We did not, as a nation, start from a beginning-point in which people were divided into aristocrats and serfs, or into rich capitalists and propertyless laborers. Of course, during Revolutionary times there were some "aristocrats" of a sort, but they did their best to play down that fact. And there were struggling laborers, but they in turn never thought of themselves as a fixed "lower class." Above all, the great majority of people, whether farmers, pioneers, or workers, largely identified themselves in the one great enterprise of making their fortunes in a young and expanding country.

Reinforcing this common social origin was an ideological position. The American Revolution was part of a period of brilliant thought on political philosophy. The nation's leaders, in the *Federalist Papers*, the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence, laid down a solid platform upon which all later American thought could build.

A third reason for the appearance of the Consensus is the gradual moving-together of the interests which have provided our principal conflicts. Responsible labor and business leaders are proclaiming the doctrine that labor and management have far-reaching interests in common. The business community has come to accept a wide range of governmental measures, formerly opposed as "interference," as highly helpful to business. The antagonism between farmers and "Eastern bankers," which

loomed so large some years ago, seems to have dissolved. [This may be due to] the increase of ownership by farmers of their own farms, and with agreement on the need for special measures to protect farm income.

These are factors of a long-term or gradual kind which have made the Consensus possible. But why has it appeared just now?

For this there are two main reasons.

One is that there is arisen in the world an ideology—that of the Communists—which actively challenges and menaces almost everything we stand for. Principles that we have always taken for granted as the air we breathe are now denounced and denied over a large part of the world. We may even have allowed ourselves at times to think of these principles as trite—suitable perhaps for a fourth-grade civics course, but not the sort of thing you would make the subject of serious discussion among adults.

Now we suddenly find these familiar ideas to be our rallying-point in a grim struggle for the highest stakes in history. A common danger has forced us all to think about what we really think. In doing so, we are finding that we think more like each other than we ever realized, because the essential likeness of our thoughts shines out against the looming black cloud of a system of thought we hate.

The second reason why the American Consensus has now so clearly emerged, is that the Eisenhower Administration has defined it, given voice to it and put it into practice.

This point is of crucial importance. If one were to go no further than to show that a wide area of agreement on fundamentals had been achieved, this would no doubt provide an interesting contribution to the history of political science. But it would have no practical impact on current political events. Under our two-party system, the decisive issue becomes: under which party banner does this American Center rally to carry forward these agreed principles?

The answer here given is: the New Republicanism as exemplified by the Eisenhower Administration.

The primary reason is that it is the Eisenhower Administration that "invented" the successful formula, the genius of which lies in bringing together all that is best in American life, whatever its origin.

Historians may someday very well con-

clude that the Democratic Party was the party adapted to radical reform and free-wheeling experimentation at a time when things were badly out of joint [during the Great Depression]. They may find that the Republican Party was the party designed to carry a more mature America forward on a course of steady progress and expansion, backed by the broad support of the American Consensus.

Given the continued existence of the two-party system, then, the Center will have to express itself in much the way it did in electing President Eisenhower in 1952. That is, [it will have to add] to the vote of one party both the independent vote and a considerable portion of the vote of the other party.

To summarize: in politics—as in chess—the man who holds the center holds a position of almost unbeatable strength.

READING REVIEW

1. What were characteristics of New Republicanism as stated by Larson?
2. What reasons did Larson give for the emergence of the "American Consensus"?
3. Why, as Larson saw it, was the Democratic Party unable to be the party of the center?

232 McCarthy's Anticommunist Crusade

In the years immediately after World War II, communism was expanding aggressively in Europe and Asia. Was the same thing happening in the United States? Many Americans were afraid of Communist subversion, and their fears were stimulated by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. He accused the government itself of employing "known Communists."

Political reporter Richard Rovere here summarized McCarthy's career as a crusader against communism. He called the Senator a demagogue, meaning a political leader who appealed to people's prejudices and hatreds.

READING FOCUS

1. What did "McCarthyism" mean?
2. How did McCarthy influence politics in America?