



**Plain Speaking**  
an oral biography of  
**Harry S. Truman**  
by  
**Merle Miller**

# PLAIN SPEAKING

*An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*

*Books by Merle Miller*

PLAIN SPEAKING  
— *An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*

WHAT HAPPENED  
ON BEING DIFFERENT  
ONLY YOU, DICK DARING!  
A SECRET UNDERSTANDING  
A DAY IN LATE SEPTEMBER  
REUNION  
A GAY AND MELANCHOLY SOUND  
THE JUDGES AND THE JUDGED  
THE SURE THING  
THAT WINTER  
WE DROPPED THE A-BOMB  
ISLAND 49

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by MERLE MILLER



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FOR DAVID W. ELLIOTT, *who has been urging me to do this book for almost ten years now, who became as familiar with and as fond of Harry Truman as I am and who, when the time came, did more than half the work and deserves more than half the credit.*

*Also for Judy Freed, who insisted that I do it and even found a publisher.*

*And, of course, for Robert Alan Aurthur and David Susskind, without whom I would never have met Harry Truman or any of the other people who inhabit these pages. They are mostly gone now, and I miss them.*



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*For, the noblest deeds do not always shew men's virtues and vices, but oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sport makes men's natural dispositions and manners appear more plain, than the famous battles won, wherein are slain ten thousand men, or the great armies, or cities worn by siege or assault.*

—PLUTARCH, *Alexander the Great*, i



## A NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE—

THE diligent reader will notice that sometimes Mr. Truman is quoted as saying “fella” and sometimes “fellow,” that sometimes he confuses “like” and “as” and sometimes does not, and that while he usually has “dinner” at twelve noon, he occasionally has “lunch” at that hour. There are other inconsistencies. Mr. Truman talked that way, inconsistently, like the rest of us.

He was a self-educated man, and he mispronounced a reasonable number of words, which in the beginning puzzled me. Then I realized that while he had often read them, he had seldom, if ever, spoken them aloud, not even in many cases heard them spoken aloud. It's like that if you're one of the few readers in town.



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## PREFACE

IT has been good to think about Harry Truman this spring and summer, the twentieth summer since he left the White House, the summer after his death, the summer of Watergate. The memory of him has never been sharper, never brighter than it is now, a time when menacing, shadowy men are everywhere among us.

There was never anything shadowy about old Harry, never anything menacing. He was never less than four-dimensional; he was always a person, a human being.

I once wrote that Harry Truman might be the last human being to occupy the White House, and considering, as he would say, "the four fellas that succeeded me," I see no reason to change my mind.

As you will see in reading this book, Harry's words were never fancy, but they were never obscure either. You never had to try to figure out what Harry was up to; he told you what he was up to. And, as they said of him back in Independence, he was a man of his word. There was not a duplicitous bone in his body. He was without guile, and when it was all over, when he and Bess came back home, after eighteen years in Washington, more than seven of them in an un-



bugged,\* unshuttered White House, neither of them thought of bringing any of the trappings of the Presidency with them. In fact, that last day in Washington, in January, 1953, Harry had thought that since the relations between himself and the incoming President were, to state it gently, strained, he and Bess might have to walk from the White House to the railroad station. Or perhaps take a taxi.

"But that wouldn't have bothered me," he told me years later. "I was there more or less by accident you might say, and I just never got to thinking that I was anything *special*. It's very easy to do that in Washington, and I've seen it happen to a lot of fellas. But I did my best not to let it happen to me. I tried never to forget who I was and where I'd come from and where I was going back to. And if you can do that, things usually work out all right in the end."

As nearly as he could remember, Harry's last act in the White House was returning a pencil or maybe it was a pen to the desk of the man he had borrowed it from.

"Everything," he said, "all of it belongs to the people. I was just privileged to *use* it for a while. That's all. And since it was only *lent* to me, and by that I'm includin' the power of the Presidency, such as it is, I had to try to use whatever it was with great care so that I could pass it on to the next fella in the best condition possible. And for the most part I think you can say I succeeded."

*Mr. President, it's been said that the Presidency is the most powerful office in the world. Do you think that's true?*

"Oh, no. Oh, my, no. About the biggest power the President has, and I've said this before, is the power to persuade people to do what they ought to do without having to be persuaded. There are a lot of other powers written in the Constitution and given to the President, but it's that power to persuade people to do what they ought to do anyway that's the biggest. And if the man who is President doesn't understand that, if he thinks he's too big to do the necessary persuading, then he's in for big trouble, and so is the country."

\*The week it was revealed that Nixon's White House was extensively bugged Major General Harry Vaughan, Truman's military aide, remembered that during Truman's first week in office he took some FBI phone taps (an extensive practice during the Roosevelt years) to the new President and asked if he was interested. Harry took a look at two pages of transcript of the doings of the wife of one member of the White House staff and then told Vaughan, "I haven't time for any such foolishness as that. Tell them I don't authorize any such thing."