



TOP 10 REASONS WHY GEORGE W. BUSH IS NO HARRY TRUMAN

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Lately, President Bush has been reported to have invoked the ghost of Harry S Truman, who, like Mr. Bush, presided over a long war—the Cold War—and a hot one in Korea. Also like Bush, Truman saw his approval ratings fall into the 30s (and lower). Yet in survey after survey of historians and political scientists over the last two decades, Truman has been consistently ranked among the top ten presidents in American history, outranking all of his successors. No wonder Mr. Bush is fond of the comparison. But these parallels seem outweighed by a number of striking differences between the two men. For example:

#10. George Bush was born in mid-20th century Connecticut to a wealthy and distinguished family. His grandfather was a U.S. Senator, and of course his father would become a Congressman, Vice President and President of the United States. Harry Truman was born in late 19th century Missouri to a decidedly not rich farm family.

#9. Mr. Bush was educated at Phillips Academy, Yale (as a legacy admit) and Harvard, where he completed a M.B.A. Mr. Truman completed high school at a time when only small minority went that far, but was unable to attend college because his family couldn't afford it and because his poor eyesight kept him from

getting the appointment he sought to West Point or Annapolis. Approaching age 40, and having been elected a Jackson County judge, he attended the Kansas City School of Law.

#8. Despite his elite degrees, Bush is not known as a particularly well-read man, and used to brag that he didn't read newspapers. Truman was a voracious reader. By the time he was 14, he had read all the books in the Independence Public Library. He especially liked history books, and, in office, read 12 newspapers a day—unscreened. In one famous incident, he wrote a letter to a *Washington Post* music critic who had panned daughter Margaret's singing, threatening to punch the critic in the nose.

#7. Bush was bailed out of his oil business failures by family friends, and appears to have used family influence to avoid combat and minimize his military service during the Vietnam War. Truman also failed in (the haberdashery) business, but refused to go into bankruptcy and persisted for more than two years until his debts were paid off. He embraced military service during World War I, saw combat, and was chosen to lead his local regiment.

#6. Bush, a Republican, was elected President in a contested election after twice winning election as Governor of Texas. He had to campaign for the nomination as well. His rise was made possible by his family's reputation and the financial support of its wealthy followers. During his administration, even government agencies' own inspectors have reported significant war profiteering. Truman served 14 years as judge and presiding judge of Jackson County (administrative rather than judicial positions) and ten more in the U.S. Senate before being prevailed upon to accept a Vice-Presidential nomination he did not seek. His rise was made possible by his passive cooperation with Kansas City political boss Tom Pendergast. He was known nationally largely through the actions of the Truman Committee, which exposed and fought war profiteering during World War II. He became president in April, 1945, upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and won a legendary upset victory in 1948.

#5. In office, Bush governed in highly partisan fashion from the start, despite the closeness of his win. Except for the Secretary of Transportation, all his Cabinet appointees were Republicans. Truman appointed a large number of businessmen to top governmental positions and called upon non-political General George Marshall to serve as Secretary of State and of Defense at different times. The Marshall Plan to put Europe back on its feet was named after him, not Truman, and the President carefully cultivated Senate Republican Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Arthur Vandenberg to build support for the initiative. The military command in Korea was given to General Douglas MacArthur, a Republican presidential possibility.

#4. Bush's administration argued against affirmative action to the Supreme Court. Truman, whose forebears had supported the Confederacy during the Civil War, desegregated the armed forces and supported civil rights initiatives to the point that South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond bolted the 1948 Democratic convention and ran against him on a states' rights ticket, carrying 39 electoral votes from five Southern states.

#3. In going to war with Iraq, President Bush acted without the approval of key allies and the United Nations. Members of his administration proceeded to belittle both allies ("old Europe") and the U.N. Truman was President when the U.N. was born and presided over the creation of NATO. During the Korean War, Truman sought and secured U.N. approval for U.S. actions and assembled a coalition including 15 other nations.

#2. President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and other partisans have repeatedly suggested that those who opposed their policies in Iraq are not interested in victory and may be soft on terrorism. President Truman and his key aides were *targets* rather than *sources* of this sort of criticism. It was MacArthur who famously declared that "There is no substitute for victory." Meanwhile, Senator Joseph McCarthy's widespread accusations of Communist infiltration in the State Department and

elsewhere made “McCarthyism” a part of the American political lexicon. And he was not the only one to deride Secretary of State Dean Acheson as the “Red Dean,” nor to allude to opponents as “pinkos.” Truman was a tough campaigner, but it is hard to imagine him suggesting that a triple-amputee veteran like then-Senator Max Cleland of Georgia was unpatriotic because he voted against the President’s preferred version of the Homeland Security bill. (The argument was over whether employees of the new agency should be allowed to unionize—and Bush had himself initially opposed establishing a Homeland Security Agency).

#1. And the number one way in which Bush and Truman differ: Bush launched a pre-emptive attack against a state which had not initiated military action, and *expanded* American military involvement in Iraq, while his opponents sought to *limit* it. Truman moved against a state which had crossed an internationally-recognized border, much as Bush’s father had when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Though Truman, encouraged by MacArthur, made the mistake of expanding the war by re-crossing that border and attempting to re-unite Korea, the political struggle during most of the war was between Truman’s efforts to *limit* the war and his opponents’ efforts to *expand* it—even to the point of attacking mainland China and/or using nuclear weapons to force it to withdraw its forces from Korea.

Bush’s hope that his policies—especially toward Iraq—will gain more approval in the future than they have in the present may be realized. If a decade or two from now Iraq has emerged as a viable democracy, and if its example has inspired other Middle Eastern states to follow suit, historians will no doubt judge him more kindly tomorrow than his contemporaries do today. We can all hope that this turns out to be the case. Nevertheless, for all of the reasons outlined above, even if historians judge George W. Bush to have been a successful president, they are still likely to conclude that he was no Harry Truman.