

THE INEXPERIENCED PRESIDENT Si Frumkin

I have a confession to make. Just like Sarah Palin I didn't know what the "Bush Doctrine" was. Oh, I knew that Bush (and many other presidents, here and in other countries – Israel before the 1967 6-Day War comes to mind) supported the idea of a preemptive strike when an enemy was about to attack. What I didn't know is that this was called a "Bush Doctrine". I am also sure that most history majors wouldn't have known it but I think that they know it now. Charles Gibson taught them.

On the other hand, I am ready to agree that Sarah is not too knowledgeable about foreign affairs. I am also sure that she will learn very fast – she is a bright and capable person, probably much more so than Charles Gibson. She is also very capable and cool when submitted to an overwhelming attack by prejudiced media. She can handle it. And yes, she is a heartbeat from the presidency and I think she would be able to handle it too. After all, a president does not reach decisions by meditating and deciding alone in a locked room. He discusses the problem with advisers and experts, looks at possible solutions, weighs them and then makes a decision. This is his (or her) job.

Some of our best presidents reached the White House with much less experience than Sarah Palin, were strong enough to overrule their advisers and face calamitous approval ratings by the public, condemnation and contempt by the media, and vicious criticism by the scholarly elite only to have their greatness recognized decades later.

One of these mavericks was a small time politician, a failed businessman, a man who never went to college and whose only leadership experience was to be a captain of artillery in the Missouri National Guard during World War I – Harry S. Truman.

Truman's family couldn't afford college tuition. After finishing high school he worked as a bank clerk, local postmaster, town road overseer and national

guardsman. In 1915 he became a partner in a lead mine and a year later in an oil-prospecting business. Both failed.

His National Guard unit was sent to France in 1917. After the war he opened a haberdashery store in Kansas City which also went bankrupt.

In 1922 he won a seat as a county judge but was defeated in 1924 when Ku Klux Klan rallied against him. He went on to sell Automobile Club memberships and study, at night, in Kansas City Law School. A state bank where he became a partner went bankrupt soon after but Truman enjoyed his first business success when he organized a Savings and Loan Association in Independence.

In 1926, with the help of the Pendergast political machine that controlled Democratic politics in Missouri, Truman became the presiding judge of the county court. Truman's political career seemed to be at an end after traditional two 4-year terms but, with Pendergast machine's support, in 1935, he ran for the U.S. Senate.

He came to Washington under a cloud as a puppet for a corrupt political boss but built a reputation as a capable and honest legislator. In 1940, Tom Pendergast went to prison in a bribery scandal but Truman was re-elected in a three-man race. The newspapers rated him a distant third.

In 1944, Roosevelt picked Truman for his vice-president. This lasted just 82 days – Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945 – and Truman came to the White House completely unaware of the administration's plans and programs, including the development of the atomic bomb..

Vital decisions had to be made and Truman learned in a hurry. He participated in writing the United Nations charter, arranged for Germany's unconditional surrender on May 8, 1945, attended the Potsdam summit meeting, and approved the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He also overrode his State Department in recognizing Israel's independence.

In 1948 he ran for President against the advice of his party leaders – he faced the defection from the Democratic party of Southern Democrats – “Dixiecrats”- and the left-leaning Henry Wallace populists. He won against all odds.

During the next 4 years Truman developed the “containment” policy to counteract Soviet territorial advances: the Truman Doctrine for economic and military help to Turkey and Greece to reduce communist pressure; the Marshall Plan that enabled Europe’s economic recovery; the NATO pact of 1949 for collective security; the Berlin airlift in 1948 after Soviets blockaded the city. He established the CIA, created the “Point Four” program to help underdeveloped countries, and decided to construct the hydrogen bomb to ensure superiority over the Soviets. In 1950 he sent U.S. troops to Korea to stop the invading North Korean forces, and eventually, the Chinese who came in to support their ally. In the process he fired the enormously popular General MacArthur who advocated invading China against Truman’s orders.

There was also domestic turmoil when Truman faced off striking miners, reluctant businessmen and McCarthy supporters who claimed that the administration was infiltrated by communists.

Truman left his office in 1953. He had few vocal admirers and many influential critics who still felt that he was a man too small for his job. With time this has changed. Harry Truman is seen as one of the greatest American leaders. It is unfortunate indeed that Truman’s “inexperience” is seldom mentioned as the attacks on the “inexperienced” Governor Palin continue.