

**Alan K. Simpson
Acceptance Speech
Truman Award Luncheon
May 9, 2017
Kansas City, MO**

Thank you so much. Of all the introductions, I've ever had – that was the most recent!

Now let me tell you from the heart, this is a tremendous honor to receive this Award, created by friends and neighbors of Harry S. Truman, honoring his great spirit of being a “good neighbor” which he exemplified so well in his own life.

When I received the invitation from Mike, he sent along a bit of material about who had been honored before at this little caper! After looking at the list I nearly canceled out! A most amazing cast of Americans and now I am deeply honored to be part of this lineage! Actually, I felt a bit like a jackass at the Kentucky Derby. I knew I couldn't win but I thought the association would be helpful!

I always believed in my heart and especially in my life in politics – I always felt, with a severe sense of smugness – not hubris now – that I shared some of the traits of Harry S. Truman. The number one for him, “The Buck stops here.” I always believed that in my own political life. No excuses, no scapegoating, take your lumps, if you get your foot in your mouth (and mine is a 16EEEEEEE *six E*) then pull it out of your own gullet! My rule of thumb, “When they're after your ass, answer the phone!” A staff person might say, “No, no, wait til we can get a spin on this. You really goofed on this one and you made yourself look like a nut.” And I would say, “I was. I made a big mistake and they have questions and I have the answers. When they say “why did you do this” I'll tell 'em. It might not sit well with them but it made me feel better and then I didn't have gas, ulcers, heartburn and B.O.”

I had a very rugged father who was much like Harry Truman in temperament. He served as Wyoming's Governor and U.S. Senator. He had guts and heart and humor. He played his cards face up (when the game called for that that is!) He loved to take on the big powers and in the toughest political decision of his life – which actually led to his defeat for reelection as Governor – he was faced with the fact that under Wyoming law if a person was found guilty of murder and the jury came in with the death penalty and after appeal, the Wyoming Supreme Court still came in with the death penalty – the law then said at that point, the final death penalty decision would rest with the Governor. My mother was a bit like Bess Truman in that it took my mother a long time to get Dad to use the word “manure!” But she worked him over and said, “Dear, don't forget, it was the Lord who said, “Vengeance is mine.”” That sunk in with Pop and he commuted a guy's sentence who had committed cold blooded murder. Imagine that happening in Wyoming where in the old days you simply had a quick trial under a tree with 6 guys standing around with a rope and you strung him up! But he could make the tough decisions, just as Harry could! And Harry's library records them all!

Let me say too, what a great honor it was to speak at the Truman Library several months ago. You have a great leader there in Kurt Graham who you stole from us in Cody, Wyoming because he was once our librarian at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. I don't hold any grudge there, But Mike DeVine? Where did you get him? From the University of Wyoming and here he is at work with your foundation. Lay off takin' our people – we're a small state and we can't afford to lose anybody!

Another tie to this wonderful institution is the fact that our granddaughter Beth was one of the Truman Scholars for Wyoming. She went on to graduate summa cum laude from Notre Dame and now works with the Kellogg Foundation in South Bend.

Oh, where is Harry when we need him!!!!? Where are the extraordinary traits of saltiness and goodness, earthiness and good humor of Harry Truman?? His extraordinary ability to communicate and work with his fellow humans and try to find the “best angels of their nature” as Lincoln commented. In my 85th year of life I can well remember Harry Truman’s entry on the scene. He and Abe Lincoln shared much the same entry into politics. They were made fun of, belittled, joked about, ignored, ridiculed, portrayed as buffoons, clowns and crooks, and much more. Pretty bad reviews from your fellow citizens when you enter into politics wouldn’t you think? And look how they handled it – with courage and an uncommon degree of common sense, whatever the hell happened to common sense in this world? Harry would be here to tell us. These two were direct, humble, patriotic, plain speaking, they spoke in a way that might have escaped the understanding and complexity of the overwrought mind but struck to the heart of the guy on the street who had been inoculated against B.S. I won’t put that in the western earthy vernacular! That was his power. That was part of his leadership, his core belief.

More about what “they” said about Harry. On April 12, 1945, I was walking home on a sunny day at Cody High School and told that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died. Died! America died with him. A most amazing President of our time and people were saying, “Who do we get now?” Well we get a guy named Harry Truman -- Well who the hell is he? He was a haberdasher and a crook there with the Pendergast machine in Missouri -- he doesn’t know anything! And he’s taken the place of one of our greatest presidents. What did Harry do? He pulled together a few of his Congress friends and said, “I have a big job coming up and you’re going to have to help me.” He poured himself a glass of whiskey and dug in. There’s a saying out in our rodeo country, “Sit deep in the saddle, grab a tight rein, throw open the chute and hollar, Let ‘er buck!” Not only did he let ‘er buck and ride it, he kept that buck right in front of him, the one that said, “It stops here!”

Speaking of whiskey out in Wyoming, when we talk about whiskey and precious water in our semi-arid state we say, “Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fightin’ over!” Harry liked a little whiskey and card playing, and shared his wonderful earthy humor with friends. Not the humor that makes fun of somebody but the humor that makes you laugh way down deep in your gut – where you toss your head back and just laugh to beat hell!

They even made more fun of him. One of the great jokes that went around -- and they’ve adapted it to present times a time or two, that he was riding in a plane and Harry was supposed to have said, “You know, I have a \$100 bill here -- should I throw it out and make one person happy or throw out 100 \$1 bills and make 100 people happy?” A guy whispered, “Why don’t you throw yourself out and make everybody happy?!”

Harry knew that politics was a contact sport. It ain’t bean bag. And sometimes Harry would respond pretty tartly to his inquisitors -- and I had a penchant for that too! Somebody said to me once, “Al, are you thin-skinned?” I said, “You bet I am.” Because the one thing about politics, you’re entitled to be called a fool, boob, idiot, bonehead, butthead, stupid ass, and I could go on but you know where this could take me!! – but you’re never entitled to let them distort who you are! I never allowed that. Everything I dealt with in my legislative career was involved with emotion, fear, guilt or racism.

Anytime folks tried to use those tools on me I would do exactly what Harry did – do my homework – prepare – read – outwit ‘em, out-wait ‘em, and come back hard and fair.

When they tried to distort who I was I would respond – and the people who love you the most – your wife, husband, mother, father, brother, sister, kids are telling you not to react, “You’re not going to get down on their level are you?” And I’d say, “You bet!” Because an attack unanswered is an attack believed. In fact even worse, an attack unanswered is an attack agreed to. You wake up one night at 2 am and you say, “Wait a minute. That’s MY name they are disparaging. That’s ME they’re chopping up, ridiculing, and spewing hate. And it’s just not true!” And so I let ‘em have it. I never lost an election. I can tell you that! – but I sure got my size 16 “Six E” shoe in my craw many a time.

They could have added a couple of alphabetical letters on that beautiful tombstone of Harry’s at the library, the letter “L” – L for Loyalty, and L for Leadership. Unalloyed loyalty to Bess, and Margaret, to his country, to the military, to the office of the presidency and to his own moral code of life. Leadership – oh yes, it’s tough to describe but it’s sure easy to witness. And it’s tough because leadership means usually taking a risk. The Dilemma:

To laugh is to risk appearing a fool.

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk involvement.

To expose feelings is to risk rejection.

To place your dreams before the crowd is to risk ridicule.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To go forward in the face of overwhelming odds is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing. He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he cannot learn, feel, change, grow or love. Chained by his certitudes, he is a slave. He has forfeited his freedom. Only a person who takes risks is free.

Sounds like Harry?? Sure does!

It’s going against the grain. I did that in my personal and political life – Harry did it -- But you move on in life with determination and perseverance.

Harry wasn’t just crusty and outspoken and a bit ornery after he left the presidency, he did it while he was there! As a sponsor of the Clean Air Act which George H.W. Bush signed I was called a “soot covered slob” with coal dust all over me and yet – if Wyoming was a country, we would have been the largest coal producing country on earth – 460 million tons a year. I chaired the Veterans Affairs Committee – and I am a proud Veteran – and I said, “I don’t know why we have to give the same benefits we give to a combat vet to some guy who served only 6 months, never left Camp Beetle Bailey and doesn’t know a mortar tube from either end.” That’ll get you in trouble with the VFW -- of which I am a lifetime member – or the American Legion – and as trying to assure the solvency of Social Security I said, “Don’t let the AARP get into this one. Forget ‘em! They are 37 million Americans bound together by a common love of airline discounts, RV discounts, insurance and investment deals, scooters, cruises, walk-in bathtubs and erectile dysfunction ads, and they care precious little about their children and grandchildren.”

Leadership is about hard choices. You do your homework. Get to know more than the other guy who “babbling into the vapors” and looks so impressive but who hasn’t done their homework and are using those clubs on you -- emotion, fear, guilt and racism – and you beat ‘em, and you win because you prepare and prepare and prepare, and out work ‘em and you do your best and then some. Senator Pat Moynihan (Dem., NY) said, “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion but no one is entitled to their own facts.” You don’t have to be some wizard to be a leader. I think it was Harry who also once said, “The world is run by C students!”

You have to make up for any lacks or fears you might have with dogged determination, guts, energy, courage, spirit and humor – ah, always humor – and Harry sure had that. It always throws off the opposition. My mother taught me that “humor is the universal solvent against the abrasive elements of life.” So it is. I can’t think of a leader I’ve ever known – and I served under 4 presidents, and personally met 11 – who didn’t admire that trait of Harry Truman.

These things are tough to hold on to -- loyalty and leadership, especially when someone has violated their confidence or trust in you – or you in them – and still stay loyal. We weren’t placed here on earth just to ask and receive, we have to give in order to get. You have to have integrity. “If you have integrity nothing else matters, and if you don’t have integrity nothing else matters.” And humor really irritates the serious people who are “after you.” A great Senate friend of mine told me that an old grizzled trial attorney once told him, “Never let your face show how hard they’re kickin’ your ass!” Harry knew that one and he knew another great trait about leadership. How to put people around you who are smarter than you are. I learned that long ago. And Harry did it beautifully when he decided to appoint George C. Marshall to his cabinet as U.S. Secretary of Defense and State. Many on his staff said, “No, no Mr. President. You don’t want Marshall. He’s very articulate and sound, and he’ll be a favorite of the Press, a really smart guy, and we don’t mean to say it but he might outshine you.” Harry said, “That’s exactly why I want him and I’m going to take him.”

I’ll never forget my dad’s retort when he was campaigning for Governor while out talking to a bunch of guys on the shift change during the sugar beet harvest and Dad put out his hand, and the guy pulled his back and said, “Simpson I wouldn’t vote for you if you were Jesus Christ.” The old man shot back, if I was Jesus Christ you wouldn’t be in my precinct!

He also had a great credo I never forgot – “if you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t – then do!!”

Harry knew another thing about his own personal life and religion – you have to “know where to turn when you don’t know where to turn.” Yeah, I know that sounds pretty corny but we all learn that one – and if you don’t, you never really get it all together. That is a truth and I’m not preaching!

A leader is also a believer. A believer in something higher. A believer in the people he leads. A believer in truth, a believer in ethics, a believer in morality and a believer in his own self. All of us want to be loved, all of us – especially we politicians!! And we want to be ever popular. But it ain’t always gonna work that way if you’re a leader.

Here’s my credo – all mine!

“In politics there are no right answers. Only a continuing flow of compromises among groups, resulting in a changing, cloudy and ambiguous series of public decisions where appetite and ambition compete openly with knowledge and wisdom.”

Harry was a pretty good chum of Sam Rayburn, former Speaker and leader of the Democratic Party in the House. Rayburn said, “We’re in the minority now but we’re still going to be helpful and constructive. Remember, any jackass can kick over a barn door. It takes a carpenter to build one.” There’s jackass and carpenter in all of us – Sam Rayburn knew the role of a good leader was to bring out the carpenter. Hope they hear that in Washington!

Of course he had at his side, the marvelous Bess. You have to have an amiable companion “at your side” -- that makes all the difference. Harry had that. I had that. If you come home after a horrendous day of dealing with crowds and VIPs and real jerks, and share it with someone who loves you and will also criticize you in a kindly way – and speak to them in Shakespearean prose or lyrical profanity – and so it is with this woman here at my side. *Introduce Ann*

Since I’m really trying to be a very “good neighbor,” I’d better wind this up!! I understand one previous recipient went overly long and I don’t want to be one known as lacking the proper terminal facilities!

Thank you for continuing the legacy in memory of this amazing man. He knew the Good Book well and where it says there, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” – you’ll want to look at that one again pretty carefully. Because sometimes in our own pettiness and our own selfishness, we really aren’t treating ourselves very well. If so -- the neighbor is getting the short ration that’s for sure! Harry never gave anybody a short ration. He gave ‘em the whole load and they loved it – and they loved him. I hunch what you might sift from these remarks of mine, is that I have always thought, way back there “in the eye of my mind,” when I was in a tough spot – what would Harry do? So I share with you this day – he was my idol!!

God Bless you.