



IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

**HARRY S.
TRUMAN**

JANUARY 7 - JULY 14, 1948

Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 7

“I propose that we look ahead today toward those goals for the future which have the greatest bearing upon the foundations of our democracy and the happiness of our people.

“I do so, confident in the thought that with clear objective and with firm determination, we can, in the next ten years build upon the accomplishments of the past decade to achieve a glorious future. Year by year, beginning now, we must make a substantive part of this progress.

“Our first goal is to secure fully the essential human rights of our citizens.

“The United States has always had a deep concern for human rights. Religious freedom, free speech, and freedom of thought are cherished realities in our land. Any denial of human rights is a denial of the basic beliefs of democracy and of our regard for the worth of each individual.

“Today, however, some of our citizens are still denied equal opportunity for education, for jobs and economic advancement, and for the expression of their views at the polls. Most serious of all, some are denied equal protection under laws. Whether discrimination is based on race, or creed, or color, or land of origin, it is utterly contrary to American ideals of democracy.

“The recent report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights points the way to corrective action by the Federal government and by State and local governments. Because of the need for effective Federal action, I shall send a special message to the Congress on this important subject.

“We should also consider our obligation to assure the fullest possible measure of civil rights to the people of our territories and possessions. I believe that the time has come for Alaska and Hawaii to be admitted to the Union as States.”

“We are determined that the productive resources of the Nation shall be used wisely and fully for the benefit of all.

We are determined that the democratic faith of our people and the strength of our resources shall contribute their full share to the attainment of enduring peace in the world. ”



President Harry S. Truman poses with his Cabinet seated around a table in the Cabinet Room, 1948. January 8, 1948. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum. Photograph. Accession 77-366. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.

Truman: “Message on the State of the Union, 1/7/48.” Peters and Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13005>; McCullough, Truman, 586.

Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights, February 2

“In the State of the Union Message on January 7, 1948, I spoke of five great goals toward which we should strive in our constant effort to strengthen our democracy and improve the welfare of our people. The first of these is to secure fully our essential human rights. I am now presenting to the Congress my recommendations for legislation to carry us forward toward that goal.

“This Nation was founded by men and women who sought these shores so that they might enjoy greater freedom and greater opportunity than they had known before. The founders of the United States proclaimed to the world the American belief that all men are created equal, and that governments are instituted to secure the inalienable rights with which all men are endowed. In the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, they eloquently expressed the aspirations of all mankind for equality and freedom.

“These ideals inspired the peoples of other lands, and their practical fulfillment made the United States the hope of the oppressed everywhere. Throughout our history men and women of all colors and creeds, of all races and religions, have come to this country to escape tyranny and discrimination. Millions strong, they have helped build this democratic Nation and have constantly reinforced our devotion to the great ideals of liberty and equality. With those who preceded them, they have helped to fashion and to strengthen our American faith—a faith that can be simply stated:

“We believe that all men are created equal and that they have the right to equal justice under the law.

“We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and of expression and the right to worship as they please.

“We believe that all men are entitled to equal opportunities for jobs, for homes, for good health, and for education.

“We believe that all men should have a voice in their government and that government should protect, not usurp, the rights of the people.

“These are the basic civil rights which are the source and the support of our democracy.

“Today the American people enjoy more freedom and opportunity than ever before. Never in our history has there been better reason to hope for the complete realization of the ideals of liberty and equality.

The faculty and faculty advisors of the Basic Educational School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. ca. 1949. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Records of the President's Committee on the Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services (RG 220). Photograph. Accession 63-280. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.



“We shall not, however, finally achieve the ideals for which this Nation was founded so long as any American suffers discrimination as a result of his race or religion, or color, or the land of origin if his forefathers.

“Unfortunately, there still are examples—flagrant examples—of discrimination which are utterly contrary to our ideals. Not all groups of our population are free from the fear of violence. Not all groups are free to live and work where they please or to improve their conditions of life by their own efforts. Not all groups enjoy the full privileges of citizenship and participation in the government under which they live.

“We cannot be satisfied until all our people have equal opportunities for jobs, for homes, for education, for health, and for political expression, and until all our people have equal protection under the law.

“One year ago I appointed a committee of fifteen distinguished Americans and asked them to appraise the condition of our civil rights and to recommend appropriate action by Federal, state and local governments.

“The committee’s appraisal has resulted in a frank and revealing report. This report emphasizes that our basic human freedoms are better cared for and more vigilantly defended than ever before. But, it also makes clear that there is a serious gap between our ideals and some of our practices. This gap must be closed.

“This will take the strong efforts of each of us individually, and all of us acting together through voluntary organizations and our governments.

“The protection of civil rights begins with the mutual respect for the rights of others which all of us should practice in our daily lives. Through organizations in every community—in all parts of the country—we must continue to develop practical, workable arrangements for achieving greater tolerance and brotherhood.

“The protection of our civil rights is the duty of every government which derives its powers from the consent of the people. This is equally true of local, state, and national governments. There is much that the states can and should do at this time to extend their protection of civil rights. Wherever the law enforcement measures of state and local governments are inadequate to discharge this primary function of government, these measures should be strengthened and improved.

“The Federal Government has a clear duty to see that Constitutional guarantees of individual liberties and of equal protection under the laws are not denied or abridged anywhere in our Union. That duty is shared by all three branches of the Government, but it can be fulfilled only if the Congress enacts modern, comprehensive civil rights laws, adequate to the needs of the day, and demonstrating our continuing faith in the free way of life.

“I recommend, therefore, that the Congress enact legislation at this session directed toward the following specific objectives:

- “1. Establishing a permanent Commission on Civil Rights, a Joint Congressional Committee on Civil Rights and a Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice.
- “2. Strengthening existing civil rights statutes.
- “3. Providing Federal protection against lynching.
- “4. Protecting more adequately the right to vote.
- “5. Establishing a Fair Employment Practice Commission to prevent unfair discrimination in employment.
- “6. Prohibiting discrimination in interstate transportation facilities.
- “7. Providing home rule and suffrage in Presidential elections for the residents of the District of Columbia.
- “8. Providing Statehood for Hawaii and Alaska and a greater measure of self-government for our island possessions.
- “9. Equalizing the opportunities for residents of the United States to become naturalized citizens.
- “10. Settling the evacuation claims of Japanese-Americans.

Strengthening the Government Organization

“As a first step, we must strengthen the organization of the Federal Government in order to enforce civil rights legislation more adequately and to watch over the state of our traditional liberties.

“I recommend that the Congress establish a permanent Commission on Civil Rights reporting to the President. The Commission should continuously review our civil rights policies and practices, study specific problems, and make recommendations to the President at frequent intervals. It should work with other agencies of the Federal Government, with state and local governments, and with private organizations.

“I also suggest that the Congress establish a Joint Congressional Committee on Civil Rights. This Committee should make a continuing study of legislative matters relating to civil rights and should consider means of improving respect for and enforcement of those rights.

“These two bodies together should keep all of us continuously aware of the condition of civil rights in the United States and keep us alert to opportunities to improve their protection.

“To provide for better enforcement of Federal civil rights laws, there will be established a Division of Civil Rights in the Department of Justice. I recommend that the Congress provide for an additional Assistant Attorney General to supervise this Division.

Strengthening Existing Civil Rights Statutes

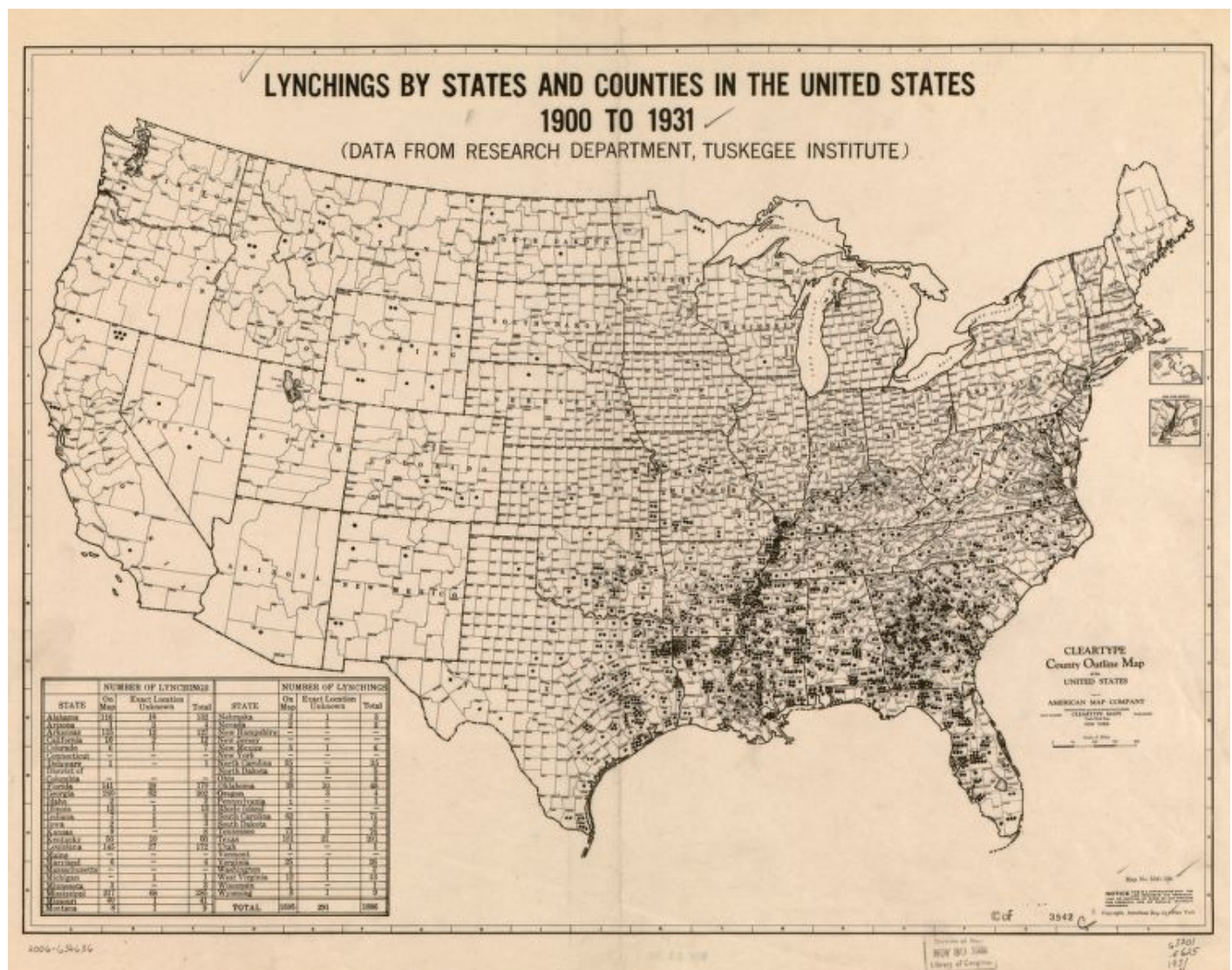
“I recommend that the Congress amend and strengthen the existing provisions of Federal law which safeguard the right to vote and the right to safety and security of person and property. These provisions are the basis for our present civil rights enforcement program.

“Section 51 of Title 18 of the United States Code, which now gives protection to citizens in the enjoyment of rights secured by the Constitution or Federal laws, needs to be strengthened in two respects. In its present form, this section protects persons only if they are citizens, and it affords protection only against conspiracies by two or more persons. This protection should be extended to all inhabitants of the United States, whether or not they are citizens, and should be afforded against infringement by persons acting individually as well as in conspiracy.

“Section 52 of Title 18 of the United States Code, which now gives general protection to individuals against the deprivation of Federally secured rights by public officers, has proved to be inadequate in some cases because of the generality of its language. An enumeration of the principal rights protected under this section is needed to make more definite and certain the protection which the section affords.

Federal Protection Against Lynching

“A specific Federal measure is needed to deal with the crime of lynching – against which I cannot speak too strongly. It is a principle of our democracy, written into our Constitution, that every person accused of an offense against the law shall have a fair, orderly trial in an impartial court. We have made great progress toward this end, but I regret that lynching has not yet finally disappeared from our land. So long as one person walks in fear of lynching, we shall not have achieved equal justice under law. I call upon the Congress to take decisive action against this crime.



American Map Company. Lynchings by states and counties in the United States, 1900-1931: data from Research Department, Tuskegee Institute ; cleartype county outline map of the United States. [New York, NY: American Map Company, 1931] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006636636/>.

Protecting the Right to Vote

“Under the Constitution, the right of all properly qualified citizens to vote is beyond question. Yet the exercise of this right is still subject to interference. Some individuals are prevented from voting by isolated acts of intimidation. Some whole groups are prevented by outmoded policies prevailing in certain states or communities.

“We need stronger statutory protection of the right to vote. I urge the Congress to enact legislation forbidding interference by public officers or private persons with the right of qualified citizens to participate in primary, special and general elections in which Federal officers are to be chosen. This legislation should extend to elections for state as well as Federal officers insofar as interference with the right to vote results from discriminatory action by public officers based on race, color, or other unreasonable classification.

“Requirements for the payment of poll taxes also interfere with the right to vote. There are still seven states which, by their constitutions, place this barrier between their citizens and the ballot box. The American people would welcome voluntary action on the part of these states to remove this barrier, Nevertheless, I believe the Congress should enact measures insuring that the right to vote in elections for Federal officers shall not be contingent upon the payment of taxes.

“I wish to make it clear that the enactment of the measures I have recommend will in no sense result in Federal conduct of elections. They are designed to give qualified citizens Federal protection of their right to vote. The actual conduct of elections, as always, will remain the responsibility of State governments.



President Harry S. Truman (left) and daughter Margaret Truman (right) voting in the 1946 election in Independence, Missouri. November 5, 1946. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum. Photograph. Accession 60-408-01. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.

Fair Employment Practice Commission

“We in the United States believe that all men are entitled to equality of opportunity. Racial, religious and other invidious forms of discrimination deprive the individual of an equal chance to develop and utilize his talents and to enjoy the rewards of his efforts.

“Once more I repeat my request that the Congress enact fair employment practice legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment based on race, color, religion or national origin. The legislation should create a Fair Employment Practice Commission with authority to prevent discrimination by employers and labor unions, trade and professional associations, and government agencies and employment bureaus. The degree of effectiveness which the wartime Fair Employment Practice Committee attained shows that it is possible to equalize job opportunity by government action and thus to eliminate the influence of prejudice in employment.

Interstate Transportation

“The channels of interstate commerce should be open to all Americans on a basis of complete equality. The Supreme Court has recently declared unconstitutional state laws requiring segregation on public carriers in interstate travel. Company regulations must not be allowed to replace unconstitutional state laws. I urge the Congress to prohibit discrimination and segregation, in the use of interstate transportation facilities, but both public officers and the employees of private companies.

The District of Columbia

“I am in full accord with the principle of local self-government for residents of the District of Columbia. I believe that the Constitution should be amended to extend suffrage in Presidential elections to the residents of the District.

“The District of Columbia should be a true symbol of American freedom and democracy for our own people, and for the people of the world. It is my earnest hope that the Congress will promptly give the citizens of the District of Columbia their own local elective government. They themselves can then deal with the inequalities arising from segregation in the schools and other public facilities, and from racial barriers to places of public accommodation which now exist for one-third of the District population.

“The present inequalities in essential services are primarily a problem for the District itself, but they are also of great concern to the whole Nation. Failing local corrective action in the near future, the Congress should enact a model civil rights law for the Nation’s Capital.

Our Territories and Possessions

“The present political status of our Territories and possessions impairs the enjoyment of civil rights by their residents. I have in the past recommended legislation granting statehood to Alaska and Hawaii, and organic acts for Guam and American Samoa including a grant of citizenship to the people of these Pacific Islands. I repeat these recommendations. . . .

Equality in Naturalization

“All properly qualified legal residents of the United States should be allowed to become citizens without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. The Congress has recently removed the bars which formerly prevented persons from China, India and the Philippines from becoming naturalized citizens. I urge the Congress to remove the remaining racial or nationality barriers which stand in the way of citizenship for some residents of our country.

Evacuation Claims of the Japanese Americans



Lee, Russell, photographer. Salinas, California. Japanese-Americans leaving for reception center. California Monterey County Salinas Salinas. United States, 1942. May. Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017818095/>

*In 1942, Japanese Americans were forced to relocate and sent to internment camps in the western interior of the United States. While Japanese disloyalty was cited as the reason, the decision was largely the result of racism.

“During the last war more than one hundred thousand Japanese-Americans were evacuated from their homes in the Pacific states solely because of their racial origin. Many of these people suffered property and business losses as a result of this forced evacuation and through no fault of their own.

The Congress has before it legislation establishing a procedure by which claims based upon these losses can be promptly considered and settled. I trust that favorable action on this legislation will soon be taken.

“The legislation I have recommended for enactment by Congress at the present session is a minimum program if the Federal Government is to fulfill its obligation of insuring the Constitutional guarantees of individual liberties and of equal protection under the law.

“Under the authority of existing law, the Executive branch is taking every possible action to improve the enforcement of the civil rights statutes and to eliminate discrimination in Federal employment, in providing Federal services and facilities, and in the armed forces.

“I have already referred to the establishment of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. The Federal Bureau of Investigation will work closely with the new Division in the investigation of Federal civil rights cases. Specialized training is being given to the Bureau’s agents so that they may render more effective service in this difficult field of law enforcement.

“It is the settled policy of the United States Government that there shall be no discrimination in Federal employment or in providing Federal services and facilities. Steady progress has been made toward this objective in recent years. I shall shortly issue an Executive Order containing a comprehensive restatement of the Federal non-discrimination policy together with appropriate measures to ensure compliance.

During the recent war and in the years since the close we have made much progress toward equality of opportunity in our armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. I have instructed the Secretary of Defense to take steps to have the remaining instances of discrimination in the armed services eliminated as rapidly as possible. The personnel policies and practices of all the services in this regard will be made consistent.

I have instructed the Secretary of the Army to investigate the status of civil rights in the Panama Canal Zone with a view to eliminating such discrimination as may exist there. If legislation is necessary, I shall make appropriate recommendations to Congress.

The position of the United States in the world today makes it especially urgent that we adopt these measures to secure for all our people the essential rights.

“The peoples of the world are faced with the choice of freedom or enslavement, a choice between a form of government which harnesses the state in the services of the individual and a form of government which chains the individual in the needs of the state.

“We in the United States are working in company with other nations who share our desire for enduring world peace and who believe with us that, above all else, men must be free. We are striving to build a world family of nations – a world where men may live under governments of their own choosing and under laws of their own making.

“As a part of that endeavor, the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations is now engaged in preparing an international bill of human rights by which the nations of the world may bind themselves by international covenant to give effect to basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. We have played a leading role in this undertaking designed to create a world order of law and justice fully protective of the rights and the dignity of the individual.

To be effective in these efforts, we must protect our civil rights so that by providing all our people with the maximum enjoyment of personal freedom and personal opportunity we shall be a stronger nation—stronger in our leadership, stronger in our moral position, stronger in the deeper satisfactions of a united citizenry.

“We know that our democracy is not perfect. But we do know that it offers a freer, happier life to our people than any totalitarian nation has ever offered.

“If we wish to inspire the peoples of the world whose freedom is in jeopardy, if we wish to restore hope to those who have already lost their civil liberties, if we wish to fulfill the promise that is ours, we must correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy.

“We know the way. We need only the will. ”

Letter to Walter White, February 4

“Dear Walter: Thanks very much for your telegram of the second.

“The objective, of course, is to implement a program of justice and fairness from the ground up and that is as much a matter of education as of legislation.

“The program which I sent to the Congress is the minimum one from a legislative standpoint but, unless we educate our people of all colors to live and get along together, all the laws in the world will not work as the Fourteenth Amendment has simply proven.

Sincerely yours,
Harry S. Truman

Truman letter to White, 2/4/48. In his telegram of 2/2/48 to Truman, White said words were “inadequate to express our full appreciation for your message to the Congress today recommending legislation necessary to insure full civil justice to all Americans. It is clear, concise, and courageous. It marks the course which must be followed by the Congress and the people of the United States to put our own house in order and make democracy a living reality. Both in Papers of Harry S. Truman, President’s Personal Files, HSTL.

Democratic Party Platform of 1948, issued July 12

“The Democratic Party adopts this platform in the conviction that the destiny of the United States is to provide leadership in the world toward a realization of the Four Freedoms.

“We chart our future course as we charted our course under the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman in the abiding belief that democracy—when dedicated to the service of all and not to a privileged few—proves its superiority over all other forms of government.

“Our party record of the past is assurance of its policies and performance in the future.

“Ours is the party which was entrusted with responsibility when twelve years of Republican neglect had blighted the hopes of mankind, had squandered the fruits of prosperity, and had plunged us into the depths of depression and despair.

“Ours is the party which rebuilt a shattered economy, rescued our banking system, revived our agriculture, reinvigorated our industry, gave labor strength and security and led the American people to the broadest prosperity in our history.

“Ours is the party which introduced the spirit of humanity into our law, as we outlawed child labor and the sweatshop, insured bank deposits, protected millions of home owners and farmers from foreclosure, and established national social security.

“Ours is the party under which this nation before Pearl Harbor gave aid and strength to those countries which were holding back the Nazi and Fascist tide.

“Ours is the party which stood at the helm and led the nation to victory in the war.

“Ours is the party which, during the war, prepared for peace so well that when peace came, reconversion promptly led to the greatest production and employment in this nation’s life...

“We reject the principle—which we have always rejected, but which the Republican 80th Congress enthusiastically accepted—that government exists for the benefit of the privileged few.

“To serve the interests of all and not the few, to assure a world in which peace and justice can prevail; to achieve security, full production, and full employment—this is our platform....

Our Domestic Policies.

“We shall enact comprehensive housing legislation, including provisions for slum clearance and low rent housing projects initiated by local agencies. This nation is shamed by the failure of the 80th Congress to pass the vitally needed general housing legislation as recommended by the President. Adequate housing will end the need for rent control. Until then, it must be continued....



President Harry S. Truman as Don Quixote with the windmill being the Taft-Hartley Act. Created by Jim Berryman, titled "Taft-Hartley Act" and published by the Washington Evening Star. July 31, 1947. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum Cartoon. Accession 58-419-08. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.

“We advocate the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act. It was enacted by the Republican 80th Congress over the President’s veto. That act was proposed with the promise that it would secure ‘the legitimate rights of both employees and employers in their relations affecting commerce.’ It has failed. The number of labor-management disputes has increased. The number of cases before the National Labor Relations Board has more than doubled since the Act was passed, and efficient and prompt administration is becoming more and more difficult. It has encouraged litigation in labor disputes and undermined the established American policy of collective bargaining. Recent decisions by the courts prove that the Act was so poorly drawn that its application is uncertain, and that it is probably, in some provisions, unconstitutional...

“We urge that the Department of Labor be rebuilt and strengthened, restoring to it the units, including the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and the United States Employment Service, which properly belong to it, and which the Republican 80th Congress stripped from it over the veto of President Truman. We urge that the Department’s facilities for collecting and disseminating economic information be expanded, and that a Labor Education Extension Service be established in the Department of Labor....

“The Democratic Party is responsible for the great civil rights gains made in recent years in eliminating unfair and illegal discrimination based on race, creed or color.

“The Democratic Party commits itself to continuing its efforts to eradicate all racial, religious, and economic discrimination.

“We again state our belief that racial and religious minorities must have the right to live, the right to work, the right to vote, the full and equal protection of the laws, on a basis of equality with all citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution.

“We highly commend President Harry S. Truman for his courageous stand on the issue of civil rights.

“We call upon the Congress to support our President in guaranteeing these basic and fundamental American principles: (1) the right of full and equal political participation; (2) the right to equal opportunity of employment; (3) the right of security of person; and (4) the right of equal treatment in the service and defense of our nation...”



Regarding Democratic Party Civil Rights Plank Adopted by the Convention on July 14, from *Memoirs To me*, party platforms are contracts with the people, and I always looked upon them as agreements that had to be carried out. That is why I was perfectly willing to risk defeat in 1948 by sticking to the civil rights plank in my platform.

“There were people around me, of course, who were anxious to prevent any sort of split in the Democratic Party, and efforts were made to soften the approach to the civil rights issue. I would not stand for any double talk on this vital principle, however, and insisted on plain language being used. Members of the Cabinet and others warned me that I was riding to defeat if I stuck to my FEPC orders and if I did not let up on the battle for civil rights legislation. But I wanted to win the fight by standing on my platform, or lose it the same way.

Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, vol. 2, 182; Garnder, Harry Truman and Civil Rights, 98-99.

Representative Jacinto F. Diniz points to a poster of President Harry S. Truman while he is attending the Democratic National Convention. July 12, 1948. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, President's Personal File. Photograph. Accession 60-190-04. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.