TRUMAN AND THE PENDERGAST MACHINE

LYLE W. DORSETT

On a Monday in late January, 1945, Vice President Harry S. Truman flew to Kansas City from the nation's capital in an Army bomber. He had come to pay his final respects to his friend, Thomas Joseph Pendergast. Over one thousand people attended Pendergast's funeral. But perhaps no one there owed more to the one-time powerful boss than Harry Truman. On the other hand, there were few men to whom Pendergast owed more than Harry Truman. It is unlikely that Truman ever would have reached the United States Senate without the aid of boss Pendergast. Likewise it is certain that Pendergast's machine would never have reached the zenith of its strength without the support of Harry Truman.

The relationship between Truman and the Pendergast machine has never been analyzed satisfactorily.[1] Hopefully, this study will demonstrate the complexities of machine politics and the dependence of the machine upon its members. Likewise an attempt has been made to show that progressivism was not dead in Jackson County, Missouri, in the 1920's, and that a reformer and man of integrity could exist within the framework of a corrupt political machine.

Throughout the teens and early twenties Tom Pendergast was building a powerful machine in Kansas City. During this same period he was trying to expand his power into rural Jackson County.[2] It was Harry Truman who would help make this a reality.

In the early 1920's Tom Pendergast's brother, Michael, was in charge of the machine's county organization. Mike Pendergast was the county license inspector. With this foot in the door the machine was able to make some headway toward controlling county affairs by offering favors to select businessmen. However, no one could hope to build a strong political organization in Jackson County without dominating the county court. The court was an administrative rather than a judicial body, composed of two district judges and one presiding judge. A Jackson County newspaper editor summed up what control of the county court included. He who controls the court has "the big patronage which the court holds, the big road fund, about $6,000,000 a year and the revenue fund, about a million dollars a year from which salaries are paid, and the general management of some of the county offices. The purse strings of the county are therefore the prize."[3]

Tom Pendergast had controlled the lucrative county court between 1917 and 1920 but his judges, especially one Miles Bulger, were so blatantly corrupt that they were under constant attack from the local presses. In 1920 the boss lost control of the court. The Harding landslide no doubt partially explains the machine's defeat in 1920. Pendergast, though, believed that its defeat was due in no small part to the shabby publicity that it had received for excessive spending and giving highly questionable contracts to favored construction firms.[4]

In the summer of 1922 Tom Pendergast re-thought his strategy regarding the county machine. The boss decided that the essential thing for him to have was the patronage from the county court. He needed a man who could win in rural Jackson County despite the antagonism that had grown up against the city boss and the inefficient, corrupt court which he had dominated through Miles Bulger. Desperately wanting to regain his hold on the rich county patronage, Tom Pendergast decided that he would be willing to relinquish if necessary such assets to his machine as special favors to contractors, in order to be able to hold on to the patronage. As subsequent events show, this is exactly what Pendergast was forced to do once he selected Harry Truman to become the machine's candidate for county judge.

The Pendergast machine needed a good vote-getter to be able to win in rural Jackson County in 1922. Truman was selected to run for eastern district judge for several reasons. First of all, James M. Pendergast, Mike's son, was becoming very active in the organization. He had served in World War I with Truman, and he suggested him to his father as a possibility. Not only did Jim Pendergast know and trust Truman, but the man from Independence, Missouri, had some important assets on his side. He was well known throughout the county because he had lived there since he was a small boy, had relatives scattered throughout the rural precincts and was a Baptist, a Legionnaire and a Mason. Likewise Truman was not tainted with being a city politician who was hoping to tell the country boys what was best for their district.[5]

The beginning of the Truman-Pendergast story was based on mutual need. Pendergast needed a county resident who could attract votes. And Truman, whose haberdashery partnership with Eddie Jacobson was failing, was in need of employment.[6]

Truman won the nomination in August, 1922, and then waltzed on to victory in November. The day that he was elected was an important turning point for Pendergast in Jackson County. Corruption would cease in the court with Truman's victory, but boss Tom's organization would dominate the county administration until his machine collapsed in 1939. Truman did lose when he ran for re-election in 1924, but that was due to a tactical error on the part of the Pendergast machine. Joseph Shannon, a Democratic factional leader who had thrown his support to Truman in 1922, was

given almost no county patronage.[7] Thus Shannon refused to support Truman in 1924, and it cost the Democrats just enough votes to cause Truman to fall victim to his Republican opponent. At some other election the Pendergast organization could have won without the Shannon organization's votes, but the Coolidge landslide brought so many votes to the Republican candidates that the Democrats needed every vote they could muster.[8]

Truman ran again in 1926, this time for presiding judge. He won and was destined to keep the Pendergast organization in power until he left Jackson County for the United States Senate in 1935. Truman became such an important cog in the machine that when Mike Pendergast died in 1929, the presiding judge was tapped to take over the leadership of the county arm of the organization.[9] Truman refused to bestow special favors upon the contractors who were friends of the machine and had been given special treatment by Miles Bulger. No company received a contract to do county work unless it was the lowest bidder. This included the new company which Pendergast had recently started -- the Ready-Mixed Concrete Company. In 1928, for example, when Truman was successful in getting a $6,500,000 road building program adopted by the voters, 225 miles of road were paved and Ready-Mixed Concrete Company succeeded in paving only three-fourths of one mile out of the total project.[10]

Truman would not deal in graft. Nevertheless, he was successful in managing the Pendergast machine in rural Jackson County because he was an astute organizer who used the patronage to the organization's advantage.[11] Moreover, Truman managed the court so efficiently, and accomplished so much while in office, that he won an enormous following. The Kansas City Star, for example, never supported Pendergast candidates, and neither did the Examiner, which was published in Independence. Both of these papers, however, praised Truman's record and threw their editorial support to him each time that he ran for re-election.

Truman's political career on the county court accentuates the complexities of machine politics. The general assumption that bosses and reformers were at loggerheads does not apply to the Pendergast machine. Truman was an important part of a machine which dealt in the rankest sort of graft and corruption on occasions.[12] But the future president of the United States was actually an honest reformer, reminiscent of some of the pre-war progressive traditions. Truman was committed to honest and efficient management of government. He successfully worked toward cleaning up the graft in the county government and increasing the court's efficiency. At the same time he was able to survive as a key member in the machine.

Judge Truman's work with Walter Matscheck demonstrates this phenomenon. Matscheck, a Richard T. Ely student from the University of Wisconsin, was a leading and respected reformer. He went to Kansas City to organize and head the Civic Research Institute. Matscheck's organization was financed by a number of civic leaders who were dedicated to the belief

that "democratic government can be efficient." The Civic Research Institute studied local government and made suggestions for improvement. The Institute brought reforms to fruition in the 1920's that progressives had been seeking for years.[13] Matscheck loathed Tom Pendergast and most of the important members of the machine. But for Harry S. Truman, he had nothing but praise. Matscheck considered Truman a reformer who greatly improved county government. For example, the head of the Institute worked side-by-side with Truman to reorganize the county court. They developed a plan which gave Jackson County a model government. Their plan erased awkward bureaucracy and made the government much more efficient.[14]

The county judge worked hard to build an efficient county government that would be free of the corruption and waste of the Bulger days. Indeed, in his typical blunt and straightforward manner, Truman volunteered to have his court investigated by a grand jury. He offered to appear before a grand jury himself, and he said, "I am inviting the closest investigation, because I am proud of the record of the County Court."[15]

By leaving Truman alone to manage the county administration as he saw fit, Pendergast lost the graft which he had bestowed upon some of his associates during the Bulger regime.[16] On the other hand, by letting Truman have things his own way, the Pendergast machine controlled the patronage of the county court because Truman's excellent reputation allowed the machine to remain in power. Truman did give the machine charge of the court's patronage. He saw nothing wrong with that because he believed that the victors deserved such spoils.[17]

Rewarding loyal party workers with patronage was one of the rules of the game in Truman's eyes. When he went to the United States Senate he gave immeasurable assistance to the machine which sent him there. The patronage which Truman funneled through the organization helped Tom Pendergast expand his power beyond Kansas City and Jackson County into the entire state of Missouri. But Truman realized that he was deeply indebted to Pendergast. Without the machine's support in 1934, he would not have won the senatorial nomination.

Truman was not Pendergast's first choice for the senate in 1934. The Kansas City boss offered his support to Joe Shannon, the factional leader who had blocked Truman's victory in 1924. (Since that time, Shannon had buried the hatchet and worked as a loyal member of the Pendergast organization.) Shannon declined, though, because of ill health and old age.[18] The chairman of the Democratic State Committee, James Aylward, Pendergast's right-hand man and ablest organizer, was promised the machine's backing but he refused it because he had no interest in running for office.[19] After Aylward refused the offer, he and Jim Pendergast called on Harry Truman, asked him to run and he accepted.[20]

The only scholarly study of Truman's nomination and election in 1934 was done by a historian who argues that Shannon and Aylward turned down

Pendergast's support because they hesitated to run for office with the stigma of Pendergast attached to their candidacy. Professor Eugene Schmidtlein maintains that Truman had to overcome this stigma to win the election.[21] The evidence suggests several reasons why this thesis needs revision. First of all Shannon had not hesitated to run with Pendergast's backing before. Second, the Missouri Democrat, May 11, 1934, reported that Aylward refused to run simply because he had no desire to be a senator. This is reasonable inasmuch as Aylward had many opportunities to run for public office prior to 1934 and had never once demonstrated any desire to do so. Never in his long political career did he seek public office. Likewise if Pendergast support was more of a liability than an asset by 1934, it would be impossible to explain sagacious Lloyd Stark's determined effort to win his backing for the gubernatorial nomination in 1936. Stark, the politically active apple grower from Louisiana, Missouri, worked throughout 1935 for Pendergast's support. He wrote to United States Representative Clarence Cannon in 1935 and said that he would not seek support in St. Louis because "half of them [in St. Louis] will follow Kansas City anyway and several of the boys tell me they will all follow if we get the Kansas City support."[22] Stark also wrote to Tom Pendergast, asked for his support and commented that "thousands of Democrats in rural Missouri are looking to the Kansas City organization for . . . leadership . . . . I firmly believe with the announcement that the Kansas City organization has decided to support my candidacy, there will be no serious opposition."[23] Stark won Pendergast's support and became governor of Missouri.

Pendergast's support was no more of a handicap for Truman than it was for Stark. As a matter of fact, Truman almost certainly would have lost the primary if it had not been for Tom Pendergast. It was a four-cornered race with Truman running against Jacob L. "Tuck" Milligan (who was backed by Senator Bennett Clark from St. Louis), Congressman John Cochran and an unknown named Cleveland. The precise events that took place after Truman agreed to run are shrouded in obscurity, but when the various shreds of evidence are placed together it appears that Pendergast made one of the shrewdest moves of his political career in his determined effort to win the senatorial race. A political observer in St. Louis suggested that Pendergast had a trick up his sleeve, writing that "Pendergast never did hunt ducks with a brass band. It has always been hard to tell what he is doing, but easy to tell what he has done the day after the election."[24] The St. Louis politician who wrote this letter, G. H. Foree, wrote a series of letters in which he reported what he was discovering about the senatorial race. This man was a perceptive observer because he quite accurately predicted that Senator Bennett Clark's candidate, Tuck Milligan, would lose. Foree also said that Clark would then realize that he could not stand up against Pendergast's powerful organization, and consequently, after the 1934 primary, Clark would jump on the Pendergast bandwagon and do what

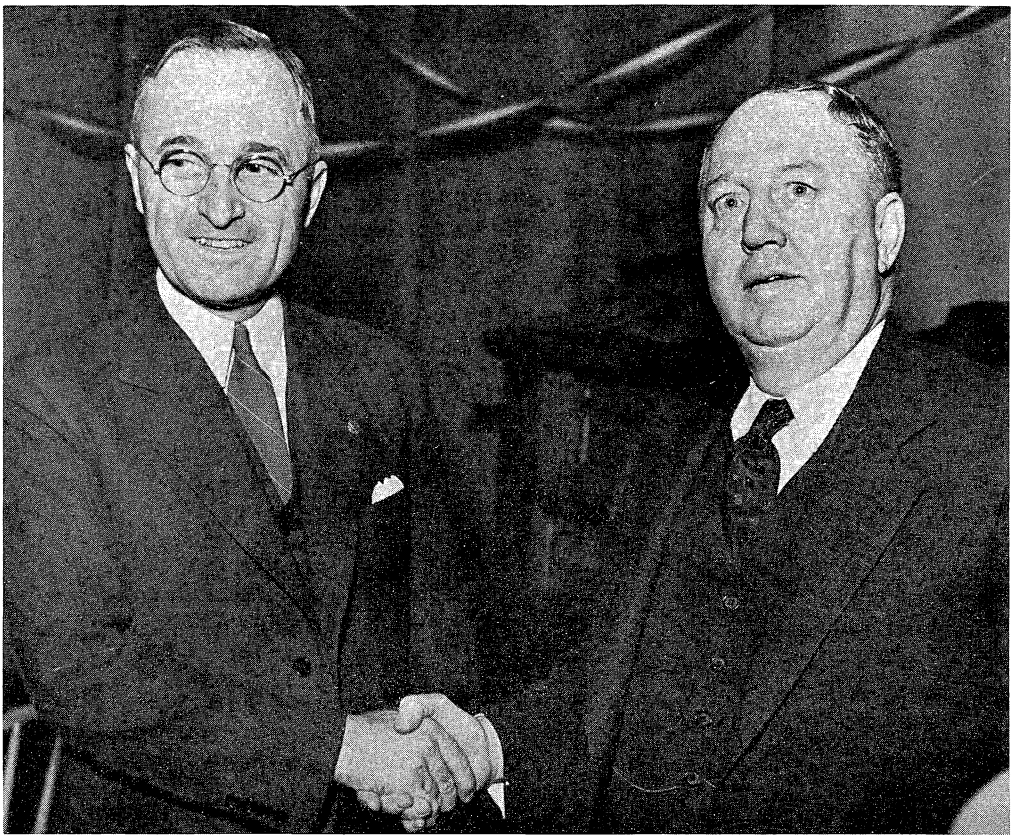
Truman and the boss wanted in order to obtain the machine's support for his own re-election in 1938.[25]

Foree maintained that if Truman could get the Igoe-Dickmann faction in St. Louis to support him he would defeat Milligan. When Congressman John Cochran of St. Louis entered the race against Milligan and Truman, Foree argued that he was placed there to take votes away from Milligan in the St. Louis area. He said that a dummy candidate was put in the congressional primary in place of Cochran, and that as soon as the primary was over, that person would withdraw and Cochran would run and succeed himself for congress in the general election. This plan was arranged, according to Foree's account, when Joe Shannon went to St. Louis and had a conference with Bill Igoe and John Cochran, and later when Igoe went to Kansas City for a second meeting. Cochran himself went to Kansas City and called on Pendergast, and immediately after the series of conferences Cochran entered the senatorial race.[26]

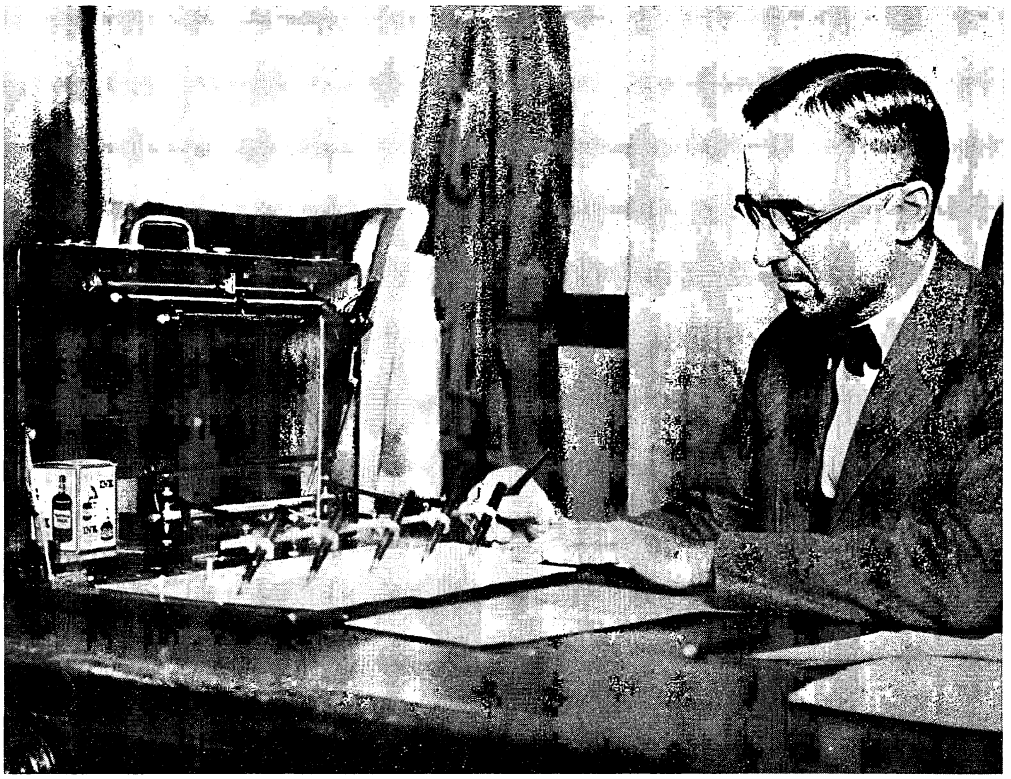
This is not an implausible analysis when several other factors are added. First of all, in other campaigns Pendergast had been working closely with the Igoe-Dickmann faction in St. Louis.[27] It is significant too that Pendergast supported Cochran in 1932 for the congressional nomination.[28] Cochran was a member of the Igoe organization. Indeed, he had been Igoe's secretary when the St. Louis factional leader was a member of the United States House of Representatives.[29] It is interesting as well that somewhat prematurely the Pendergast organ, the Missouri Democrat, announced that if Truman decided to enter the race he would have the Igoe-Dickmann faction's support,[30] suggesting that some kind of agreement had already been consummated between the St. Louis men and Pendergast. And even more fascinating is the fact that just as Foree predicted, Cochran lost in the primary but stepped in to succeed himself in the congressional race that November, and won.[31]

It seems safe to assume that there was an agreement between the Pendergast and Igoe crowds. Politics often makes strange bedfellows but this relationship is perfectly understandable. Both Pendergast and Igoe had an interest in seeing Bennett Clark's power curbed. Therefore it is not at all unnatural that they would work out a plan together. Igoe's faction could merely have supported Truman over Milligan but it was much wiser to place another man in the race who was from St. Louis. In this way Cochran, a popular congressman, would have a much greater chance of cutting into Clark's area of strongest support than would a Kansas City man who was not as well known in the eastern part of the state.

In any case the Pendergast machine swung into action with all that it could deliver for Truman. For well over a month at least, the organization did not put on a Truman drive in St. Louis. The Cochran headquarters, on the other hand, was booming in the big city.[32] In the outstate areas it was a different matter for the county judge. Robert Holloway, the secretary of



TRUMAN AND MISSOURI POLITICS. ABOVE: Harry S. Truman, the 1934 Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate seat for Missouri, greets Congressman John J. Cochran at a St. Louis campaign rally. Cochran, who was from St. Louis, was one of Truman's three opponents for the nomination. Professor Dorsett feels that Cochran entered the race at the request of Pendergast to draw votes away from Jacob L. "Tuck" Milligan, Truman's major opponent (see page 21); Professor Schmidtlein argues that Cochran was sincerely trying to get the nomination for himself and ran a very strong race (see pages 32-33). (Photo courtesy of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.) UPPER RIGHT: Judge Harry S. Truman, Presiding Judge of the County Court, Jackson County, Missouri. (Photo taken September 24, 1927.) LOWER RIGHT: "Boss Tom" Pendergast. Matt Goree, city editor, and John Doohan, librarian, of the Kansas City Star have identified the pictures on Pendergast's desk. On the back row, left to right, are a religious picture; the wedding photo of Pendergast's daughter, Marceline, and William E. Burnett, Jr.; and a photo of another daughter, Aileen Pendergast. In front, left to right, are a photo of James Pendergast, a brother, and a religious picture. (Photo courtesy of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the State Historical Society of Missouri.)



of the Missouri Public Service Commission, was granted a leave of absence to take charge of Truman's outstate headquarters in Jefferson City.[33] The evidence indicates that in some areas of the state at least, Governor Guy B. Park, who owed his nomination and election to Pendergast,[34] had state employees working diligently for Truman. One employee of the state wrote to the governor that "the Grain Department and Police Department are thoroughly organized and there are few who have not fallen in line. . . . All of we heads of departments are strong for and working daily for Mr. Truman."[35]

Pendergast aided Truman in yet another way. He provided Democratic State Chairman Jim Aylward to direct the future senator's campaign.[36] This was a major asset because Aylward had connections all over the state. Harry Truman, however, had some assets of his own which surely provided him with additional support. His excellent record as county judge certainly helped, and no doubt made it easier for such respected individuals as William T. Kemper, Jr., the son of a prominent Kansas City banker, to promote a "Young People's Truman-for-Senator Club."[37] The candidate's early life helped too. For example, a rural Missouri newspaper, The St. Clair County Democrat, threw its editorial support behind Truman because he, "unlike the other candidates seeking office, was born on a farm. He was reared between the plow handles . . . ."[38]

Truman's own assets, plus the well organized support from the extensive Pendergast machine, enabled him to win by slightly more than forty thousand votes over Cochran who placed second. Milligan ran a poorer third and Cleveland was never even in the race. Milligan might have done considerably better in a race against Truman alone because Cochran carried the city and county of St. Louis by enormous majorities.[39] The Igoe machine could have delivered a portion of the St. Louis vote to Truman, but Congressman Cochran was a popular man who drew support to himself despite Senator Clark's active campaign for Milligan.

Truman did not forget his debt to Pendergast. After he entered the United States Senate he continued to adhere to his belief that the patronage belonged to those who toiled in the political vineyard. When the question of who was going to direct Missouri's federal work relief arose, Matthew S. Murray, a loyal member of the Pendergast machine, was recommended by Senator Truman. Senator Clark went along with the recommendation because, as one friendly attorney suggested: "He was quite independent when he first went into office. Now he realizes, of course, that he must go along with Pendergast or be defeated for the nomination."[40]

Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's WPA administrator, granted the senators' wishes. Murray was appointed Director of Federal Public Works in Missouri.[41] Consequently, Pendergast's labors to elevate Truman to the Senate paid rich dividends. It was abundantly clear that the machine absolutely controlled the relief program. When one citizen wrote to Governor Park

and asked for assistance in securing employment with the WPA, he replied that she must go through Matthew Murray.[42] Truman also refused to help people find federal relief employment without first going through the machine. When one Kansas City man sought the senator's support, Truman replied, "If you will send us endorsements from the Kansas City Democratic Organization, I shall be glad to do what I can for you."[43]

Pendergast's control of federal work relief in Missouri was a tremendous boon to his machine. Thanks to Truman's loyalty, the boss was able to use federal patronage as a strong lever to strengthen his hold on the entire state. It enabled Tom Pendergast to become the most powerful man in Missouri.[44]

From the first days of their political association in 1922, down to the collapse of the Pendergast machine in 1939, Pendergast and Truman had benefited each other. Harry Truman would never have reached national prominence without the boss's support, and likewise Tom Pendergast could not have strengthened his hold on Jackson County and the state of Missouri without Truman's loyal assistance. That day in January, 1945, when the Vice President went to pay final tribute to the dead boss, symbolizes in a kind of intangible way how the two politicos had always provided mutual aid. Truman's appearance at the funeral added some dignity to the boss's tarnished reputation. Likewise, despite the criticism he received for attending Pendergast's funeral, Harry Truman added a few inches to his stature in the minds of those who admired his loyalty and courage.[45]

University of Southern California

Footnotes:

[1] No scholarly study has been published on Truman and the Pendergast machine. Frank Mason, Truman and the Pendergasts (Evanston, 1963), is a sensation-seeking journalist's account which is full of interpretative and factual errors. Incomplete, but sound on the early years are: William Reddig, Tom's Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend (New York, 1947), and Jonathan Daniels, The Man of Independence (New York, 1950).

[2] Lyle W. Dorsett, "A History of the Pendergast Machine" (doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1965), chs. IV-VI.

[3] Independence Examiner, August 3, 1914.

[4] Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine," ch. V.

[5] Harry S. Truman, Memoirs by Harry S. Truman (2 vols., Garden City, 1955-1956), I, 136-137; Daniels, Man of Independence, 109-113.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Kansas City Star, December 28, 1922; Truman, Memoirs, I, 137-138.

[8] Independence Examiner, November 5, 1924. The fact that Truman was defeated in 1924 shows the falsity of the statement by Maurice M. Milli-

gan, Missouri Waltz: The Inside Story of the Pendergast Machine by the Man Who Smashed It (New York, 1948), 23, when he argues: "If honest votes were not enough to swing an election the machine could always come up with the necessary quota of dishonest votes. It made no difference in the end. Pendergast candidates always won."

[9] Reddig, Tom's Town, 269. Truman also was appointed second Vice-President of the Jackson Democratic Club, Inc., in May, 1929. This was the "parent club" of all of the Pendergast ward and district clubs. See Missouri Democrat, May 3, 1929.

[10] Eugene F. Schmidtlein, "Truman the Senator" (doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1962), 35-37.

[11] Reddig, Tom's Town, 265-270.

[12] For details of the graft and corruption see Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine."

[13] Matscheck and his supporters drew up a reform charter in 1924 which called for a city manager form of government. It became law in 1925. See A. Theodore Brown, The Politics of Reform: Kansas City's Municipal Government, 1925-1950 (Kansas City, 1958); Donald B. Oster, "Kansas City, Missouri Charter Movements, 1905-1925" (master's thesis, University of Kansas City, 1962).

[14] Walter Matscheck, "History of the Kansas City Civic Research Institute" (unpublished manuscript, 1963), in the possession of Professor A. Theodore Brown at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Some of the information was received by the author from a personal interview with Matscheck, April 12, 1963, in Kansas City, Missouri. Truman's plan to reorganize the county government is outlined in a speech which he delivered to the Real Estate Board in Kansas City and is printed in the Missouri Democrat, October 9, 1931. For Matscheck's praise of the Truman county road project see Walter Matscheck, Harry S. Truman Oral History Collection, 28.

[15] Missouri Democrat, November 10, 1933.

[16] Truman informed Jonathan Daniels that John J. Pryor, William D. Boyle and W. A. Ross were "the crooked contractors that caused the scandals under Bulger." Daniels, Man of Independence, 147.

[17] This was Truman's frank attitude as he expressed it to Walter Matscheck who worked with him on plans to reorganize the county government. Matscheck related this to the author in a personal interview in Kansas City, April 12, 1963. Independence Examiner, August 1, 1924, reported that under Truman "the hangers on in politics are fewer than they have ever been although there are still entirely too many."

[18] Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine," ch. VIII.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Missouri Democrat, May 11, 18, 1934. The post of county collector was prized because that officer was paid a percentage of the taxes which he collected. The collector's income was usually quite high.

[21] Eugene Schmidtlein, "Truman's First Senatorial Election," Missouri Historical Review, LVII (January, 1963), 128-155.

[22] Copy of letter to Clarence Cannon from Lloyd Stark, February 25, 1935, Lloyd C. Stark Papers (Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri).

[23] Copy of letter from Lloyd Stark to T. J. Pendergast, September 26, 1935, Stark Papers.

[24] G. H. Foree to Ewing Young Mitchell, June 19, 1934, Ewing Young Mitchell Papers (Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri).

[25] Foree to Mitchell, May 21, 1934, Mitchell Papers.

[26] Foree to Mitchell, June 14, 26, 1934, Mitchell Papers.

[27] Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine," chs. VII, VIII.

[28] Ibid., 151.

[29] State of Missouri, Official Manual, 1933-1934 (Jefferson City, n. d.), 412-413; Official Manual, 1935-1936 (Jefferson City, 1936), 45.

[30] Missouri Democrat, May 11, 1934.

[31] The Democratic State Committee had to appoint Cochran to the vacated spot on the ticket.

[32] Foree to Mitchell, June 15, 26, 1934, Mitchell Papers.

[33] Missouri Democrat, July 6, 1934.

[34] Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine," 147-167.

[35] Orestes Mitchell to Guy B. Park, July 25, 1934, Guy B. Park Papers (Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri).

[36] Missouri Democrat, July 27, 1934.

[37] Ibid., July 13, 1934.

[38] Clipping dated July 12, 1934, in Park Papers, Box 66.

[39] Official Manual, 1935-1936, 410-411.

[40] Haywood Scott to Mitchell, March 26, 1936, Mitchell Papers.

[41] Clipping dated May 10, 1935, Stark Papers, Box 315.

[42] Copy of letter from Park to Hester B. Miller, June 21, 1935, Park Papers.

[43] Photocopy of letter from Truman to L. T. Slayton, February 5, 1935, Jesse M. Barrett Papers (Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, University of Missouri).

[44] For details of Pendergast's increased strength through federal relief programs see Dorsett, "Pendergast Machine," ch. VIII.

[45] Harry S. Truman Papers (Harry S. Truman Library, Independence). The Vice Presidential file contains dozens of letters praising Truman for attending Pendergast's funeral. These letters far outnumber the letters criticizing his actions.