

HARRY S. TRUMAN AND  
THE PENDERGAST MACHINE

GENE SCHMIDTLEIN

. . . In a perfect democracy, free from bosses, string-pulling and finagling at the polls, Harry Truman would probably never have reached Washington. He was Tom Pendergast's hand-picked candidate, yanked out of obscurity so deep few Missouri voters had ever heard of him.

No one yet knows exactly why Boss Pendergast picked Truman for the Senate. One theory: The Boss was in the whimsical mood of a socialite, sneaking a pet Pekingese into the Social Register. A better theory: The Boss was impressed by the Midwestern adage that every manure pile should sprout one rose -- he saw in Truman a personally honest, courageous man whose respectability would disguise the odors of the Pendergast mob. Certainly Truman was no statesman in 1934. Neither had he ever been touched by scandal.<sup>1</sup>

By 1934 considerable scandal had touched Pendergast and more was to come. As Pendergast approached the senatorial election in that year, he knew without doubt that he needed a strong candidate to win. The facts spoke for themselves. First of all, Pendergast's senatorial candidate in 1932, Charles Howell, had been defeated by Bennett Clark who had piled up a margin of 100,000 votes over Pendergast. Clark's victory showed that the Kansas City vote could be neutralized easily by the St. Louis and/or rural vote. St. Louis politician, L. J. Gualdoni, supported Clark but went with Truman in 1934. Gualdoni emphasized the ease of swinging back and forth to be with a winner.<sup>2</sup> To win state-wide elections, Pendergast had to have candidates with strong outstate support. Secondly, the litany of crime and voting irregularities emanating from Kansas City seemed so endless and of such enlarging proportion that state and national dissatisfaction intensified acutely in 1934. Many Missourians still remember some of the following events:

1. The Union Station Massacre in Kansas City in June, 1933, wherein four police officers were killed, and also Frank Nash whom the mobsters were trying to free. (Pretty Boy Floyd was one of the attackers in this incident.)

2. The Kansas City spring election killings in March, 1934, wherein four people were killed and eleven seriously wounded.
3. The shooting of John Lazia in July, 1934. Lazia had become Pendergast's chief lieutenant on Kansas City's North Side. Henry Morgenthau, Secretary of the Treasury, called him the Al Capone of Kansas City. He was machine gunned entering his apartment building one warm July evening. He died with these words on his lips: "Tell Tom Pendergast that I love him." He was killed by the same submachine gun used in the Union Station Massacre. There are rumors that a few weeks before his death Lazia had drawn a knife on Pendergast, and consequently Pendergast had him eliminated.
4. A running gun battle across the state of Missouri and finally ending in an Ohio corn field where law officers shot and killed Pretty Boy Floyd.
5. Raymond Moley's nationwide statement denouncing the Kansas City Police Department as the most corrupt in the nation.
6. John Dillinger's death in Chicago.
7. Bruno Hauptmann's trial for the Lindbergh kidnapping which occupied the front pages throughout the campaign.

Even though the last two events had no connection with Pendergast, they kept public attention focused on the prevalence of crime. Nevertheless, Pendergast seemed at the apex of his power in 1934 with complete control in Kansas City and Guy B. Park in the governor's mansion. But it was only a semblance of invincibility. An astute observer could see that Pendergast's power outside of Kansas City had limitations, and Pendergast was the most astute of political observers. The fact that Pendergast's out-state power was unstable can be seen in several ways. First of all, the 1932 at-large election was an oddity that redounded to Pendergast's benefit, but not in a permanent way. Franklin Mitchell has even questioned the extent of Pendergast's influence in the short run. Mitchell admitted that in some of the congressional races Pendergast's support was crucial, but in others it was either ineffective or inconsequential. John D. Taylor of Keyesville, a close friend of Pendergast, received Kansas City's full support and lost. Two incumbents, Milton A. Romjue and Clyde Williams, won without the machine's help because of their strong rural support.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, it was also fortuitous that Pendergast was able to place Guy B. Park in the governor's mansion. Francis Wilson had won the Democratic primary, but then died unexpectedly. Even though Pendergast had picked Wilson to run, many observers are of the firm opinion that Wilson would have been much more independent of Pendergast than Park proved to be.<sup>4</sup> It is also highly doubtful if Pendergast could have won with Park from the very beginning. Wilson won the primary because of his own personal strength and appeal in the rural areas and St. Louis, in addition to having Kansas City. If a Pender-

gast candidate did not have strength in the rural areas and/or St. Louis, his chances were precarious. One student of Missouri politics in this era expressed it this way: "Pendergast could not dictate the nomination of a candidate unless the person made a striking appeal to rural voters. In reality then, Pendergast did not possess dictatorial powers, but balance of power."<sup>5</sup>

The weight of these difficulties became apparent as Pendergast sought a good candidate for the Senate in 1934. Joseph Shannon has said that Pendergast most wanted Jim Reed. This is doubtful since Reed was 72 by then and speaking out so vehemently against FDR and the New Deal that he would have been too much of a liability. Probably the strongest and most desirable candidate to Pendergast was James Aylward who had been Pendergast's right hand man since 1925. Aylward declined to run and I suggest that his reason was primarily not wanting to undergo the personal abuse that would be directed against a Pendergast candidate, especially outside of Kansas City. Aylward never ran for public office, and the reason could easily be the one stated. He seemed to always consider running, hesitate and then decline. Some have suggested that he was not only sensitive about being a Pendergast man, but also about running as a Catholic in the outstate areas. Some people have also said that Aylward had regrets in later years for not entering the 1934 race.<sup>6</sup>

Another strong possibility, Joseph Shannon, turned down Pendergast's request to run. Shannon was safe in his congressional district in the Kansas City area. I contend that he was reluctant to undergo the abuse directed against a Pendergast candidate in the outstate areas and St. Louis. To the objection that Shannon had run before as a Pendergast candidate, I would reply that he had never run outside of Kansas City, and it was one thing to run in Kansas City as a Pendergast man, and another thing to run outstate. (In this connection, Professor Dorsett has wondered why the "sagacious Lloyd Stark" would be so determined to obtain Pendergast's support in 1936 if such support entailed liability. First of all, I would suggest that Stark was not from Kansas City and would not be identified as a Pendergast man to the extent that Aylward or Shannon would have been. Also, before Stark asked for Pendergast's support, it was most clear that he had strong outstate support in many areas that would keep the Pendergast reaction to a minimum.)

That Pendergast realized his limitations is evident by the way in which he rejected the attempts of lesser men to get his backing for the 1934 senatorial candidacy, particularly Ralph Lozier and Roy McKittrick. Pendergast remembered only too well his lesson from 1932 and Howell.

In the end, Pendergast turned to Harry S. Truman. Truman hesitated because of the abusive and slanderous campaign sure to come, but finally acceded to run. Although some have said that ". . . he was yanked from obscurity so deep that few Missouri voters had ever heard of him . . ." the evidence does not support this contention. Truman had many assets and the

type of reputation as a public official necessary to counteract some of the nefariousness of Kansas City.

Although Truman's opponents spoke of him as being obscure and lacking political experience above the county level, and although Truman's opponents had held jobs that outranked any of Truman's positions, perhaps Truman's political experience was of such a nature as to give him "grass roots" support. He had been president of the Missouri County Judge Association; consequently, he had maintained close contact with the 342 county judges throughout the state. The "courthouse gangs" helped spread the Truman name and accomplishments to the far corners of the state. Because the county judges often held important posts in the party's organization, their support could be most helpful. George Creel, a national writer on the Missouri political scene, has called the Judges' Association one of the most powerful political organizations in the state. Being aware of its power, Truman had sent to every county in the state a copy of the book entitled Jackson County -- Results of County Planning. Throughout the book photographs clearly indicated the advancements made in Jackson County under Truman. Such publicity proved that Truman took maximum advantage of his successes throughout the whole state.

In addition to his judgeship activities, Truman received favors from Governor Park which provided several opportunities to become better known in the state. Upon the Governor's request, Truman had gone to Washington to petition more federal relief for Missouri, had served as head of the Missouri Re-employment Service and had spoken in thirty-five counties in the spring of 1934 for the statewide \$10,000,000 bond issue for improving the penal and eleemosynary institutions. The Re-employment Service position proved most beneficial in that it required a trip to Jefferson City once or twice a week, thus providing him with an invaluable opportunity to increase his acquaintances in the state administration as well as to meet the vast number of people who would be served by such an agency during the depression. On the national level, he met Frances Perkins and Harry Hopkins, both of whom Truman grew to like very much.

Certainly, the basis for Truman's "grass roots" support was quite pervasive. His membership in veterans' organizations, the Masons and the Baptist Church broadened his political appeal. Having been a farmer, he appeared to understand the hardships experienced at that time in rural Missouri. Finally, he had been a small businessman who had failed, and this brought about unwittingly a bond with some small businessmen who were in danger of the same experience as a result of the depression. They admired in particular the determination with which Truman was paying back his debts. Finally, Truman put his wholehearted effort into the campaign and worked unceasingly in his travelling and speaking, especially in the rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

Even with all these assets, Pendergast and Truman could not be sure of the victory. They had two strong opponents: Jacob (Tuck) Milligan and John Cochran. Milligan was backed by Senator Bennett Clark who was anxious to repeat his victory over Pendergast from 1932. Milligan, a respected congressman, seemed to have the support of the national administration. Vice President John Garner had been urging Milligan for some time to run for the Senate. James Farley praised the Missourian's work in the House of Representatives and opined that Milligan would do justice to Missouri as a senator. Milligan also listed Harry B. Hawes, a former Missouri senator, among his stalwart supporters. Hawes had played a most influential role in placing Garner on the ticket with FDR in 1932, and Farley acclaimed Hawes as one of the keenest political analysts in the Democratic party; even more reason why Milligan expected Roosevelt's endorsement.

John J. Cochran also entered the race from St. Louis. He had served in the House of Representatives since 1926. Previously he had been secretary to Senator William Joel Stone during World War I when Stone had been the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. One Washington correspondent, Marquis Childs, has written glowingly of Cochran, believing that he was by far the best candidate in the 1934 senatorial race. A group of Washington news correspondents testified to Cochran's ability and leadership by naming him as one of the five or six most useful members in Congress. After Cochran announced his candidacy, William Hirth pledged the support of the Missouri Farmers' Association to the St. Louisan. Most important of all, Cochran counted upon the backing of the Igoe-Dickmann machine in St. Louis which had the ability to amass the kind of support that Pendergast mobilized in Kansas City.

Professor Dorsett has contended that Cochran was actually a stalking horse put in the race by Pendergast himself so as to take votes away from Milligan and allow Truman to win. The source of this contention is the opinion of a G. H. Foree, a St. Louisan who followed Missouri politics from the sidelines. Foree cites visits to Pendergast by Igoe and also Cochran in the spring of 1934. I have seen no other evidence for such visits. Even if they did take place, Foree is only conjecturing as to what transpired at the visits. Even if Cochran had gone to Kansas City, he could have asked Pendergast's support for his own candidacy since Pendergast was having a difficult time finding an adequate choice. Asking for support and offering to run as a stalking horse are two quite different proposals. A number of people who knew Cochran well have expressed strong opinions that Cochran never would have permitted himself to be a stalking horse for Pendergast. His character simply would not have permitted it. Moreover, Cochran really wanted to be senator in his own right and his credentials indicated that he would have been outstanding in that capacity. The senatorship would have been an excellent climax to a worthy career. And, for a stalking horse

he certainly waged an energetic rural campaign. In two months he travelled close to 6,000 miles and made approximately 250 speeches.<sup>9</sup>

Also, it is interesting to look at the election of 1934 in view of the Foree-Dorsett thesis. Truman won over Cochran by a margin of close to 40,000 votes (Truman received 276,850; Cochran 236,105; and Milligan, 147,614). Truman carried 39 counties and Kansas City; Cochran 39 counties and St. Louis city; Milligan 36 counties. One of the strong Pendergast alliances was supposed to be the one with J. V. Conran in southeast Missouri, but Truman won only three of the six counties in the bootheel. He even lost Conran's New Madrid County to Cochran. Truman was able to win only six of the twenty counties comprising "Little Dixie," and many felt it was the Pendergast affiliation that hurt Truman the most in this area. Truman also lost Greene County and Springfield to Cochran. I am arguing here only that it was a close election and the "stalking horse" almost walked into the winner's circle.

A final argument. Dorsett begins his chapter -- "The Pendergast Machine and New Deal Politics" -- with the following quote from Edwin O'Connor's novel, The Last Hurrah:

. . . the old time boss was destroyed because FDR took away his source of power. He made . . . [that] kind of politician . . . an anachronism . . . All over the country the bosses have been dying for the last twenty years, thanks to Roosevelt . . . If anybody wanted anything -- jobs, favors, cash -- he could only go to the boss, the local leader. What Roosevelt did was to take the handouts out of the local hands.

Dorsett then denies that this is true in Kansas City and with Pendergast. He argues that Pendergast had much too broad a base of power and served too many interests to be undercut by the New Deal. In fact, instead of the New Deal weakening Pendergast, it actually strengthened his position since so many of the New Deal programs were administered through Pendergast men such as Matthew Murray in the WPA.<sup>10</sup>

I would grant that Pendergast had the inside track on the New Deal through such appointments as Matthew Murray, Foster W. Amick, A. R. Hendrix and even Joseph Amend in St. Louis. But, I would heartily agree with James Farley's comment that although in the short run Pendergast benefitted, in the long run the New Deal took away his power.<sup>11</sup> Before the New Deal, Pendergast was the source of his handouts to the poor, his jobs, his Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and so forth. Pendergast himself determined what was given and to whom it was given and also by whom. If the intermediary official or politician did Pendergast's bidding, then he kept his position. If the intermediary was unfaithful, then Pendergast dropped him. But when Washington became the source, Pendergast was relegated to an intermediary role, and he had to come up to FDR's and the New Deal's

standards or be pushed aside. Pendergast was corrupt before the New Deal but no one could challenge him adequately. After the New Deal, Washington could and did challenge him. Others were vying with Pendergast to be intermediaries -- Lloyd Start, Bennett Clark and St. Louis politicians Dickmann, Igoe and Hannegan. Farley was close to Pendergast but also to Senator Clark and Governor Stark and the St. Louis people. Consequently, I see this shift as an "essential" alteration in character, while Dorsett does not.<sup>12</sup>

One should note how quickly FDR abandoned Pendergast after the election frauds of 1936. Truman tried to block the reappointment of Maurice Milligan as Federal District Attorney in Kansas City, but FDR insisted upon and won Milligan's appointment. Also, if the force of the New Deal had not begun to swing over to Stark, it is doubtful if Pendergast's James V. Billings would have lost to Stark's James M. Douglas in the crucial Missouri Supreme Court election of 1938. If Pendergast had remained the source, I doubt if Billings would have lost, and I doubt if Matthew Murray and A. R. Hendrix would have been sent to jail.

I am simply arguing that Pendergast's power had grown before the New Deal through legitimate and illegitimate means. In fact, the corruption and malpractices enhanced his power. The New Deal took away Pendergast's freedom of action and relegated him to the role of intermediary bound to meet FDR's standards. A sufficient power now existed to defeat Pendergast. If Stark had not been able to call upon the federal government, he probably would have lost to Pendergast.

One other point. Professor Dorsett argues persuasively that Pendergast played the role of broker to many interests in Kansas City -- the underprivileged, the middle class in the residential districts, the professional classes and the business community. Pendergast constantly searched for ways to serve and to find areas of strong agreement. Even in the insurance payoff, many others participated besides Pendergast and McElroy. The impression is given that the businessmen were willing cooperators. I would simply suggest that there was considerable intimidation. Many businessmen went along because they feared to have their tax assessments raised, their buildings condemned as fire traps or their lives threatened by mobsters. Voters were driven from the polls, and the police placidly watched while ballot boxes were being stuffed.

I would only suggest that support was not always freely extended to Pendergast. The fact that the New Deal jobs could be taken from Pendergast meant that allegiances were not so firm after 1933.

In conclusion, I would disagree on the following points.

1. Pendergast had trouble finding a good candidate in 1934 because of the malicious and slanderous campaign which a Pendergast man would have to undergo.
2. I deny that Cochran was a stalking horse for Pendergast in 1934.

3. I think the New Deal did undermine Pendergast in the long run.
4. Also, I question how good a broker Pendergast was in Kansas City by calling for a more thorough investigation of his techniques of intimidation.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mitchell and Dorsett in revealing Pendergast's role in the 1932 Democratic Convention wherein FDR was nominated. I contended that Pendergast had opposed FDR rather strenuously, and subsequent relations were not too intimate. This is not so, as Mitchell has shown. But I am still left with a dilemma. When Truman went to Washington in 1935, he definitely felt that he was being given a cold shoulder by FDR. He was very sensitive about being known as Pendergast's senator. Maybe overly sensitive. Maybe, too, the relations between FDR and Pendergast were cooler by 1935 because of the Kansas City record.

#### Stephens College

#### Footnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Time, March 8, 1943.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with L. J. Gualdoni, August 18, 1965.
- <sup>3</sup> Franklin Dean Mitchell, "Embattled Democracy: Missouri Democratic Politics, 1918-1932" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1964), 272.
- <sup>4</sup> Interview with L. J. Gualdoni, August 18, 1965; interview with Michael Kinney, March 2, 1966; interview with Dean Thomas Brady, April, 1959; interview with Dean William Bradshaw, April, 1959.
- <sup>5</sup> Mitchell, 254.
- <sup>6</sup> Gualdoni, Bradshaw, Brady interviews.
- <sup>7</sup> Lyle W. Dorsett, "A History of the Pendergast Machine" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1965), 187.
- <sup>8</sup> E. F. Schmidlein, "Truman the Senator" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1962), 66-68.
- <sup>9</sup> Dorsett, 188-189. Interviews with Marquis Childs, July, 1964; Raymond Brandt, July, 1964; also with Gualdoni and Kinney (see footnote 4).
- <sup>10</sup> Dorsett, 168 ff.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with James Farley, September 9, 1965.
- <sup>12</sup> Dorsett, 236.