

Oral History Interview

with

DR. EDWARD HUGHES PRUDEN

Pastor of the First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C. December 1936 to April 1969, and Pastor Emeritus of the church, April 1969 to the present. President Truman frequently attended services at this church while he was President.

Washington, D.C.  
February 17, 1971

by Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

The Harry S. Truman Library  
Independence, Missouri  
Opened September, 1976

#### NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted for the Harry S. Truman Library. A draft of this transcript was edited by the interviewee, but only minor emendations were made; therefore, the reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word.

#### RESTRICTION

This transcript, when opened to research, may be read, quoted from and cited by researchers and may be reproduced for purposes of research. Publication rights, however, are retained by the Harry S. Truman Library.

Oral History Interview  
with

DR. EDWARD HUGHES PRUDEN

Washington, D. C.  
February 17 , 1971

By Jerry N. Hess, Harry S. Truman Library

[1]

HESS: To begin this morning, Doctor, I believe, according to *Who's Who*, that you came to town in 1936, is that correct?

PRUDEN: That's correct. I began my pastorate here in December of 1936 right after the election at which Mr. Roosevelt was elected to his second term.

HESS: That was one year after Mr. Truman came to town. He came to town in 1935. What are your earliest recollections of Mr. Truman?

PRUDEN: I recall, of course, the stories concerning his activities in the Senate, his special committee on which he spent so much time, and other activities as a leader in the Senate, and a member of the delegation from Missouri; but the first time I met Mr. Truman was after he became Vice President. Knowing that he was a Baptist, one of my church officials and I went to his

[2]

office in the Capitol to extend a personal invitation to him to attend our church. I do not know whether he attended during the brief months that he was Vice President, but his first visit to our church that I know definitely about came in the fall of 1945, after he had succeeded Mr. Roosevelt in April of that year.

HESS: Approximately how often did Mr. Truman attend here during the time that he was President? Do you recall?

PRUDEN: He came fairly regularly, though his visits were spaced according to particular crises and responsibilities that he was called upon to face. Sometimes he would come within two weeks of a previous visit; at other times there would be two or three months between his visits to church.

I recall the first time he came. I was quite impressed with his sincerity, the nice way in which he greeted everyone, and the thoughtfulness he demonstrated regarding those who were around him. He participated in the service, he refused to accept any special favors because he was President. He said he wanted to be like any other worshiper and he wanted no particular notice taken of his presence. His coming was never announced previously in the newspapers; in fact, I would not know that he was coming until he had already left the White

[3]

House and someone would call to tell me that he was already walking up to church and would be there within a few moments. So there was never any opportunity, even if I had wanted to do so, to make alterations in the sermon.

HESS: Did he usually walk up from the White House?

PRUDEN: Yes, I think most of the time when the weather was good he would walk, perhaps accompanied by one Secret Service man. There may have been others at a distance, but we could never detect more than one or two after his first visit. We did feel there must have been several here on his first visit, but after it became a rather regular routine, we gathered that the force was reduced. Mrs. Truman and Margaret were Episcopalians, but they did come with him

occasionally, particularly on special occasions such as Thanksgiving and Easter, and all of them were very gracious individuals and made us feel that they wanted to be treated as average human beings.

HESS: At the times that Mrs. Truman and Margaret would come, would they ride up rather than walk up, do you recall?

PRUDEN: Yes, yes, I think when they came they would come in a car.

[4]

HESS: They left the walking to the President.

PRUDEN: Right.

HESS: Who usually came in the President's party? Were there various members of the White House staff who might come?

PRUDEN: No, he usually came alone when he was not with his family. We kept the pew reserved until the hour of worship and then if he had not come by that time, we would let other communicants use it. He was always quite punctual, getting here several moments before the service, so we knew that if he was not here by the regular time, he would not be coming. He chose to come to our early service. We had two morning services: One at 9:30 and another at 11, and he chose the earlier service because it was not as largely attended; there would be less likely to be tourists and other visitors who might be looking for him; and he preferred to worship in our smaller family service, where the parents and their children came together.

HESS: Did you ever have an opportunity to visit with Mr. Truman in some of his more relaxed moments, either here at the church or at the White House, or perhaps aboard the presidential yacht, the *Williamsburg*?

[5]

PRUDEN: Of course we had a little chance to visit each Sunday as we walked out of church together. According to long-established custom, the congregation was asked to remain seated until the President and his party had left the building, and I would always walk down to his pew and walk out with him to the sidewalk. We would have an opportunity to chat a while in that way. I called on him several times in the White House and talked with him in his office, and then one morning I had a walk with him on one of his usual morning walks around the monument grounds, and I found that to be very enjoyable.

HESS: Did you have any difficulty keeping up with him?

PRUDEN: Well, I must say that I did. I had to step a little faster than usual, because he didn't walk in a very relaxed manner, but it was a very interesting occasion. The way it came about was this: One Sunday morning in church he said, "One of the Secret Service men told me that he saw you at the airport last Wednesday when I arrived from Missouri where I had been for Christmas, and I wondered why you didn't come and speak to me?"

I replied that I didn't want to hold him up or delay his departure for the White House, and that I had

[6]

just gone to the airport primarily to let some of my relatives see him who were here on a brief visit, and who had never had an opportunity to see him in person.

"Well," he said, "if you're ever anywhere else, and I'm there, you must let me know."

So, on the spur of the moment, without any previous thought, I said, "There is something that I'd like to do sometime."

And he said, "What's that?"

I said, "I'd like to come down and go walking with you one morning, since I notice you take a walk every day."

I waited for about a month, and chose a cold, clear morning in February, and not knowing what time he would leave. I got to the Blair House where he was living at that time while the White House was being repaired, around 8 o'clock, and he met me at the door, invited me in, and asked me if I'd had breakfast. I told him no, that not knowing when he might leave I didn't take time to eat breakfast.

Then he said, "Well, I'm getting ready to eat mine now, so come and eat with me." So we had breakfast together, just the two of us, in Blair House. He told

[7]

me that Mrs. Truman and Margaret, and Helen Traubel, the opera singer, had been out at a concert late the night before, and they were sleeping a little longer than usual that morning, so there were just the two of us at the breakfast table. We had a typical American breakfast of grapefruit and scrambled eggs, bacon and toast and so on, and had a very interesting conversation. Then we put on our coats and took a walk around the monument grounds. He told me a good deal about his earlier life in political circles, and about some of his dealings with his opponents in the Congress who stymied some of his plans and desires. And I found it a very fascinating experience.

HESS: Did he at that time mention his possible association with the Pendergast organization in Kansas City?

PRUDEN: No, I believe not. The thing that occupied my mind primarily that morning was something he said to me at the breakfast table regarding his thought of appointing a full-time ambassador to the Vatican.

Just a few days before that it had been announced that Mr. Myron C. Taylor, the personal representative first of President Roosevelt and then continued by President Truman, was going to be called home, and

[8]

most of us assumed that that was the end of such a mission. So when he announced the possibility of a full-time official ambassador, it came as quite a shock to me, being a Baptist, with my background of separation of church and state. I didn't want to seem too shocked to the point of making him feel sorry he had told me, and I certainly couldn't divulge the information to anyone else, because I felt that it had come in a private conversation. So I was greatly troubled for quite a while as to what I should do, if anything, and finally I called him up two days later and asked for an appointment. His secretary said that he was tied up for several days, and that it would be four or five days before he could work me in. So I told him that I would take that, if nothing earlier was available. Well, that night when I arrived at home from the church, the telephone was ringing, and Mr. Truman was on the line to say that he had heard I had tried to reach him that morning, and that my call seemed rather urgent, and he wondered if he could do anything on the telephone before our appointment several days later.

So I thanked him and told him no, that I thought not. I simply wanted to talk a little further about

[9]

what he had told me at the breakfast table regarding the Vatican appointment. He assured me that there was nothing hasty about this, that it would be some time before anything definite was done, so that Friday, the day of our appointment, would be ample time to discuss it.

So when I went down on Friday, I took with me five typewritten pages, which I had prepared, and in which I tried to state my own position in the matter, trying very desperately to convince him that I was not anti-Catholic, or that I was doing this out of prejudice or anything of the kind, but that I really had a concern from the standpoint of church and state, and would feel equally disturbed if he were appointing an ambassador to the headquarters of the Baptist World Alliance. So while there was not time to discuss the paper while I was with him, I touched on a few of the high points, and left the paper with him.

Several days later I had a nice letter from him saying that he had read it, and thought it was an excellent expression of my point of view, and that he was sending it to the State Department where the ultimate decision would be made.

Sometime later, I had an equally nice letter from

[10]

Mr. Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State, indicating that he felt it was an excellent statement of my position and it would be put in the files to be a part of the material on which the decision ultimately would be made.

I heard nothing further regarding this matter for something like eighteen months, then suddenly one day, without any warning, the news flash on the radio announced that he had appointed

General Mark Clark as an ambassador to the Vatican. I was not only disturbed, but I was somewhat puzzled as to why this particular man was chosen, and why the choosing came at that particular time. The announcement came at the latter part of October, just as Congress was adjourning, and I knew that it would have to lie on the table for two or three months until Congress reconvened in January, which would give all of its opponents ample time to marshal their forces against it; that General Clark, being an Army general, could not serve in this capacity until Congress had passed a special act making him eligible; and in the third place, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, which would have to deal with this matter before it even went to Congress,

[11]

was Senator Tom Connally, who was not an admirer of General Clark, but who had expressed himself rather vehemently on several occasions regarding General Clark and some of his handling of the troops in southern Italy when a number of Texas troops lost their lives. So, I couldn't understand why a difficult matter of this kind should be proposed in such a difficult way.

In any case, I never impugned the President's motives, I never questioned his wisdom, and I never suggested even in the slightest degree that he was doing it, namely that he needed the information that the Vatican foreign office could provide, and that this was the only place in which he could get it. My position was that we had an ambassador in Rome, the ambassador to Italy, within telephone distance of the Vatican, and that if they had any vital information that needed to reach us, it was to their advantage, as well as to ours, to get it to us, and that this formal official Vatican ambassador was not necessary.

Now, I recognized that I was looking at it purely from the standpoint of a political layman, but at least that was the basis on which I offered my opposition, and

[12]

again and again, I tried to stress that I had high regard for Mr. Truman and I hoped nothing that I would say would seem discourteous to him, or in any way seem to impugn his implied and published motives for doing so.

This was around the time that the Puerto Ricans attempted an assassination of him at Blair House, and security measures were greatly increased, and his public appearances reduced. For the next few months of his administration, he did not return to church, and I never knew precisely whether it was because of this little disagreement on the Vatican, or whether his security measures were such that they felt it unwise for him to appear in a public place such as a church sanctuary.

I did hear indirectly one or two little humorous remarks that he made regarding the situation. Someone said they saw him at a flower show one Sunday morning and when he left around 10:30, they said, "Mr. President, are you going to church from here?"

He said, "No, my preacher and I have had a fight."

Then later on, someone said they heard him comment on what a commotion some preachers had made about this Vatican appointment, and then he added, "My preacher

[13]

is the worst one of all."

But in any case, after he had returned to Independence and had an office in Kansas City, I had occasion to be in Kansas City for a board meeting, and I called for an appointment. I was given it and went out to see him, and I couldn't have received a warmer, nicer welcome from anyone. I had visited him on numerous occasions either in Kansas City, or in his office in the Truman Library since then, and there has never been any indication that he held a grudge against me. So I feel that he probably recognized that I was acting out of conviction and not out of prejudice or any desire to embarrass him.

HESS: As you recall, the appointment of General Clark was not approved.

PRUDEN: No it was not. I was told later by an official in the State Department, that there never had been such an avalanche of mail against any Government proposal, and that this, perhaps more than anything else, led to General Clark's withdrawal of his name from any further consideration.

Let me add that this was not just a Baptist protest. Other communions expressed, through their officials,

[14]

similar views. The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Henry K. Sherrill, met with me on one occasion and expressed himself along similar lines, and also in his official capacity made statements that were similar to my own.

The Presbyterian magazine, *Presbyterian Life*, asked me to prepare an article, setting forth my views on the matter, which they published.

The Methodist Bishop, G. Bromley Oxnam, was equally outspoken in his opposition; and the National Council of Churches held a special emergency meeting to discuss the matter after the appointment had been made, and asked Bishop Oxnam and me to visit the President and expressed their views to him, which he did. He received us very kindly, and tried to explain why he was doing it and the reason for it, and I felt that he also made a very excellent case for his position.

HESS: You mentioned the time that the assassination attempt was made on Mr. Truman, and the fact that he did not attend services for some time. That was November 1, 1950. Was there a point after that and the time that he left the White House in 1953 where he started to attend regularly again?

[15]

PRUDEN: No. He never returned after that. So there were about two years. During that time, however, I had some very friendly correspondence with him.

HESS: What was the nature of the correspondence?

PRUDEN: About various things that would come up of some public interest, or where I felt maybe things regarding the church may have been misinterpreted in the public press, and I just wanted to assure him of what our position was and convince him that we still held him in high regard as we always did.

HESS: As you know, Mr. Truman, at times, used some rather blunt and colorful language. As his pastor, did that cause you any embarrassment or concern?

PRUDEN: Well, let's put it this way, there were people who tried to embarrass me by bringing it up on various occasions, but I have a little theory on that which I suppose is a layman's psychology. You will notice that in the boyhood pictures of Mr. Truman, he wore very thick glasses, and must have had some serious eye deficiency. As a result he evidently spent a good deal of time reading, where other boys were out in the rough and tumble games and other activities; and I just had a feeling that maybe when he grew up and went into the Army in the First World War, that he felt a bit of psychological

[16]

necessity to prove that he was as tough as the next one. There wasn't anything sinister or mean about it, but just a little defense mechanism by which he tried to overcome his earlier physical handicaps. In my personal contacts with him, and from observations I've had from people who worked with him, there couldn't have been a nicer, kindlier, more thoughtful person in the world.

I remember in the White House one morning speaking to one of his associates, and this great big, bear of a man said to me, "This is a strange word to use about a man, but I can't think of any other. Mr. Truman is just a sweet man. We love to work with him. He's always in a good humor, and he's always thoughtful to others." I certainly found him the same way. His family life seemed to be ideal, and I've often told people who asked me about him that he's the kind of man that I'd like to have for a next door neighbor.

HESS: Who was the staff member who mentioned that?

PRUDEN: I can't recall because it wasn't one of the key men, but it was a man out in the outer office, who evidently cleared some of those who went in to see the Appointments Secretary.

HESS: And Doctor, you showed me an album with some photographs

[17]

in it. Let's see what these are.

PRUDEN: The first one is the President leaving the church after a Thanksgiving service, I think probably the first Thanksgiving after he became President. Mrs. Truman and some of her

relatives from Independence, the Wallaces, and Margaret, are there in the picture with us as we are leaving the building going to the car.

The next picture is a picture of Mr. Truman in our Fellowship Hall of the church, during a meeting of the Baptist World Alliance Executive Committee meeting, and a public meeting was held in connection with that, and just prior to the public meeting I introduced him to the various members of the Executive Committee of the Alliance of which I was also a member.

The third picture is of an occasion at his inauguration in front of the Capitol, when I gave the invocation. And standing around me at the podium are the President and Mr. Rayburn, Speaker of the House; and Chief Justice Vinson of the Supreme Court, and Vice President Alben Barkley.

HESS: How were the arrangements made for this? Do you recall who asked you to give the invocation?

PRUDEN: I had a letter from Senator Theodore F. Green of Rhode Island who was the chairman of the Senate Committee

[18]

on Arrangements. Senator Green was an attendant of our church, and a long-time member of the First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island, the Roger Williams church. His family had been connected with the church for two or three hundred years, and knowing that Mr. Truman was attending our church, he thought it would be appropriate for me to give the invocation.

Then the fourth picture I have here, is one taken at the National City Christian Church in Washington, where Mr. Truman had just spoken to the Religious Heritage Foundation of America, and standing with the President and me, are Dr. Warren Hastings, the minister of the National City Church, and Dr. Ralph W. Sockman of Christ Methodist Church in New York City; all of whom had had a part on the program. That night, after Mr. Truman's address, during which he had used several Bible quotations, and spoken of moral principles and ethical ideals, I said to him, "It's a pity you weren't a preacher."

And he said to me, "You know, as a young man, I gave serious consideration to being one, but I decided I wasn't good enough, so I went into something else."

HESS: And we have a couple of letters from Mr. Truman.

[19]

PRUDEN: Yes. I picked out two or three among, I think, thirty or forty that I have in my possession. This one is written in his own hand, and accompanied a volume of correspondence between President Roosevelt and Pope Pius regarding the war crisis of the 1940s and '45s, and Mr. Truman thought that I would be interested in having this, and so he had Mr. Taylor autograph it and he autographed it himself.

This second letter has to do with his attendance at church and you will notice, he said:

I don't want you ever to feel that you are in any way handicapped in your freedom of speech and expression just because I happen to be there. I want to be treated just like every other citizen, and every other good Baptist. One of the things I am one hundred percent for is freedom of expression as long as it is within the bounds of reason and decency. That is one of the great guarantees of our Constitution.

There's one other there regarding the meeting, I believe, of our Baptist District of Columbia Convention, and also referring to, evidently, a suggestion that I had made as to whether he would prefer different

[20]

seats in the sanctuary. He said:

I'm perfectly comfortable in the seats which we have occupied, and as I have told you before, I get a lot of pleasure out of coming to church just for that privilege alone. But you know it is difficult now for me as an individual to do anything that I want to do without creating the impression that there is an ulterior motive.

HESS: As a personal opinion, what would be your evaluation of Mr. Truman as President and as a man?

PRUDEN: Answering the second part of the question first, as a man, as I've already indicated, I feel that he was a very able individual and a very likeable person. All of our contacts with him here at the church were remarkably pleasant. He was unfailingly thoughtful.

When the church celebrated my tenth anniversary, and it was announced in the bulletin that there would be a reception on Wednesday night following, he sent flowers from the White House for the reception; and once when I let him know that on Mother's Day we were going to give special thought to his mother, who was ill at that time, he sent flowers from the White House to be placed on the altar for that particular service.

[21]

Once while my mother was visiting in Washington, I took her to see him at the White House, and ever after, whenever he would see me, almost without fail, he would ask me, "How is your mother?" And I've seen him call Secret Service men over to the car and ask about a sick child or a wife who was away because of illness in her family. Everyone seemed to be impressed with the fact that with all the affairs of state on his shoulders and in his mind, he could still be attentive to people about their personal problems.

My wife, when she first met him, said, "This isn't the man I've been hearing on the radio, nor seeing on TV." She said, "He has a much more captivating and commanding presence than comes over the news media." She said, "All he needs to do to be re-elected is to go out and see the people," and that's exactly what he did and he was elected.

HESS: She was quite a prophet wasn't she?

PRUDEN: Yes. And as a President, I think he will go down in history as one of our several great Presidents. In fact, Mr. Churchill made an appraisal of our Presidents just before his death, and he put Mr. Truman in the list of those right near the top, and I think history will give him a very excellent place in our national historical

[22]  
situation.

HESS: One thing we should add, too, sir, what was the date of your retirement?

PRUDEN: I retired in April of 1969, just after my thirty-second anniversary here at the church. My successor had already been chosen. I had a wedding on Saturday afternoon and left immediately. My successor arrived and preached the very next morning, so there was no break in the continuity of the ministry here. I moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, so that I could be at some distance, and not have my successor feel that I was looking over his shoulder. And also, because of certain family connections we have in that area, though I have tried to impress my North Carolina friends with the fact that they should be sufficiently impressed that a Virginian chose North Carolina in which to retire!

HESS: Do you have anything else to add, any other thoughts come to mind concerning Mr. Truman?

PRUDEN: Just one other thing that I recall that impressed all of us very much. He came to church one morning unexpectedly as usual, and when I heard that he was coming, I met him at the front door, which I seldom did, and explained that the service that morning would not be according to our usual procedure, but would be a kind of

[23]  
children's program at which the children would be promoted from one section of the Sunday School to another, and that I didn't know whether he would particularly enjoy this kind of thing or not.

He said he certainly would, he was very fond of children, and for me not to worry a moment.

So, again on the spur of the moment, I asked him if he would say a few words to the children after I had given them their diplomas and he said he would be glad to. So as the service proceeded, the little children came forward with their white robes and their little mortarboards, and I presented their diplomas of promotion from one grade to the next. Then I said, "Children, your commencement speaker this morning is the First Citizen of the United States, our President, Mr. Truman."

So, he got up out of his pew and walked down the aisle and stood in front of the communion table and gave as nice a talk to a group of children as I've ever heard. And the *New York Times* picked it up and wrote an editorial about it, in which they said that it was rather impressive and

encouraging to know that the Chief Executive of the strongest nation on earth, on a Sunday morning, without any military escort and no

[24]

show of brass or military might, could walk into a church and talk to a group of Sunday School children about the advantages of growing up in a Christian Democracy.

HESS: Mr. Truman has returned to Washington a few times since leaving the White House. Has he ever dropped in to church on any of his visits?

PRUDEN: Yes, he seems quite interested in our new building, which was erected after he left, but which was being planned while he was here. He asked me about it once when I was in Kansas City, and on a later visit to Washington, he came around to see the new building and seemed to be greatly pleased with it. He said he liked the fact that it looked like a church, and not like an auditorium.

I also have visited him in his hotel room at the Mayflower when he visited here. I took our younger son, who had never seen him, because he was born about the time that Mr. Truman left Washington, and he was awfully gracious to him and I got a nice snapshot of them talking together. Here again, some of his gracious bigness showed as he dealt with a ten-year old boy, and talked to him about Washington crossing the Delaware and telling him not to take too seriously the picture showing a flag flying from the boat, because

[25]

he said, "We didn't even have a flag at that time."

HESS: Any other thoughts and reflections?

PRUDEN: No, I think that about covers it.

HESS: Fine. Thank you very much, Doctor.

PRUDEN: Thank you, Mr. Hess.

[26]

INDEX

Baptist World Alliance Executive Committee meeting, 17

Clark, Mark, and appointment as Ambassador to Vatican, 10-11, 13  
Connally, Senator Tom, 11

Green, Senator Theodore F., 17-18

Oxnam, G. Bromley (Bishop), 14

Sherrill, Henry K. (Bishop), 14

Truman, Harry S.:

- Baptist Church, attends, in Washington, D.C., 1-5, 14-17, 22-24

- Baptist Church, member of, 1-2

- Church attendance and freedom of speech, 19

- Church pastor, considers career of, 18

- Church sermon for children, presents, 22-24

- Personality of, 15-16, 21

- Walks, morning, 6-7

Vatican, U.S. Ambassador to, proposed, 7-14