



# **Bess Wallace Truman: Harry's White House "Boss" (Modern First Ladies)**

*Sara L. Sale*

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Thrust into the world of Washington politics and power, Bess Wallace Truman steadfastly remained what she wanted to be: a representative of middle-American values and virtues. She ran the White House as she ran her own home, attending personally to details that many first ladies had left to the staff. She answered mail in longhand, took charge of bookkeeping, and carefully watched expenses. President Harry S. Truman fondly called his wife "The Boss."

The product of a small town aristocracy with nineteenth-century manners and morals, Bess Truman was repelled by personal publicity, even after ten years as a senator's wife. A woman's place in public, she observed, was "to sit beside her husband, be silent and be sure her hat is on straight." Sara Sale now casts a modern light on this traditional first lady through the first scholarly biography of Bess.

Unlike Eleanor Roosevelt, Bess did not want to be a public figure and struggled to keep the press happy. But Sale shows that, although Mrs. Truman avoided the public spotlight, in private she was a strong-minded, intelligent woman who influenced her husband's presidency—a shrewd political operator who knew how to achieve her own goals without fanfare.

Sale traces Mrs. Truman's many philanthropic efforts both before and during her White House years and places her public activities in the larger context of contemporary women's activism. She also reveals how the president discussed all of his policy decisions with her, making her his full partner.

Grounded in research into previously overlooked archives at the Truman Library and the Library of Congress, Sale's work expands our understanding of a remarkable American woman. More than a traditionalist, she worked behind the scenes to refashion the office of first lady into a modern institution by reflecting changes in the ways postwar American women lived their lives. Becoming first lady before the days of professional image making, she nevertheless served as an effective political communicator for the Truman administration even while her persona appealed to Americans of the postwar era.

For many years, Margaret Truman's official biography of her mother was the only work available. Now Sale's well-crafted history illuminates Mrs. Truman's immeasurable impact on the institution of first lady as it provides valuable insights into postwar life and politics behind the scenes at the Truman White House.

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