

*First meeting with President Truman* (19)

Within four or five days after the death of President Roosevelt I decided to go to Washington in order to have an operation which I had needed for about a year. I had been discouraged on several occasions from having this operation take place by both the President and the Secretary, who kept asking whether it had to be done at the time. The difficulty which needed attention was causing me a great deal of inconvenience and unhappiness and I should have had the operation at least a half a year before. I therefore telegraphed the Department that I was coming up in order to go to the Naval Hospital at Bethesda and that I would be arriving on a Monday morning and going immediately to the hospital. I arrived by plane early in the morning in Washington and went immediately to the Metropolitan Club in order to wash up and have breakfast and intended to go to the hospital by about 9 o'clock. Shortly before 9 I had a telephone call from the White House saying that the President would like to see me before I went to the hospital. I was very much surprised as I did not know that the White House had any knowledge of my coming and I had made no communication to the President and had not requested the Department to inform it.

I had never met President Truman. I had naturally read and heard a great deal of him. I had admired the work that he had done on the Truman Committee. When I arrived at the White House shortly after 9 o'clock Nat Connelly, who was the President's secretary, said that the President would see me immediately and he showed me into the President's office. The President received me very cordially and said that he had heard that I was going to the hospital for this operation and that he had wished to see me just for a moment before I went out. He went on to say that he had not had any desire to sit in the chair where he was sitting, that he was sitting there was entirely unexpected. He said, "I will need all the friends that I can possibly have. I want you to know that our good friend (meaning President Roosevelt) has frequently spoken to me about you. I know how much he appreciated the work that you have done from time to time and how much he valued your judgment. The task which I have before me is a very

difficult one and as I said before, I shall need all the friends that I can possibly have, and I need friends like you to help me. I would like to feel, Messersmith, that I can depend upon you as you helped our good friend."

I was really very much surprised to hear this expression from the President. He made the statement in a very simple and greatly sincere way. He had not known me personally at all, and I did not know how much he knew of my actuation. I was all the more surprised as I did not know that President Roosevelt had talked over many things with Senator Truman which lay outside of the scope of the work in which Senator Truman was principally interested. I was a little moved by the courtesy of the President and by his obvious sincerity and simplicity. I said to him, "Mr. President, it is true that I did everything I could to help our good friend. I have always tried to do my work to the best of my ability. So far as being of assistance to you, I do not know of what assistance I can be but you can be assured that in any way that I can be helpful to you, I am at your command." I said, "You know, Mr. President, an Ambassador is not only a representative of our country but according to tradition in our country he is also the personal representative of the President. As such I have a direct responsibility to you. I am deeply appreciative of your courtesy and your generosity and I can assure you that in any way that I can possibly be of any assistance to you, I wish to do so."

The President then went on to say he did not wish to keep me, as he knew I had planned to go to the hospital very early in the morning. He said that after I left the hospital he wanted me to plan to stay in Washington for some days as there were a number of matters he wished to talk over with me. He then added that he had planned and promised to go to the chapel at the Bethesda Naval Hospital the following Sunday morning to the church service. He said, "I will come up and see you after the church service." I told the President that he was being too kind, that that was too great an honor and that I would be very happy to let

him know as soon as I was able to leave the hospital and able to come to the White House to see him. He replied, "We will see each other on Sunday."

I had the privilege of having the most unusual care at the Naval Hospital. Dr. Thompson, of the staff of the Mayo Clinic and who was one of the great surgeons of that time and I am sure is today, was in the service of the Navy for the period of the war. He performed the operation and I found that he was not only a great doctor and a great surgeon but also an unusually fine human being. Everything went very well after the operation and on the following Saturday I told Dr. Thompson that I understood the President was coming to the chapel on Sunday morning and that he had said something about coming to see me in my room afterwards, and that I really thought it was a little bit too much courtesy for the President to show and might create some unnecessary attention. Dr. Thompson said, "There is no reason why you shouldn't go down to the chapel on Sunday morning if you so wish." He said, "You can be taken down to the chapel in a wheel chair and it will be all right for you to walk into the church." During the course of the week and shortly after the operation John Snyder, the Secretary of the Treasury, who was an old and valued friend, came in to see me and indicated that the President would wish to see me after I had left the hospital. On Sunday morning I went down to the chapel and the President and his family came in and occupied pews in the front of the church. After the service was over the President and his family naturally left the chapel first, and as he passed the pew where I was he saw me and he spoke to me and said something about going up to my room, and I told him that I was getting along so well that I was going to be able to leave the hospital and go down town, so that I would be able to come to the White House to see him at any time he wished to see me. The President said that I should keep in touch with him and as soon as I was able to get about easily, that we could have several talks before I returned to Mexico City.

I have often thought, in view of events as they developed afterwards, of this conversation. President Truman, like all of us, had many virtues and a



number of failings. He was a man essentially simple and I think very human. In all the relationships that I had with him until after the decision was reached to move me out of the Argentine in the spring of 1947 our relationships had been as cordial as they could possibly be and I had always found him generous and understanding and very human. I had always found him to be a man of his word. I had in fact great regard for the President so far as his conduct of foreign relations was concerned. I think he was a man of courage and a man of great common sense. He was brought up in a small community and he realized that the problems of a family of nations are not much different from the problems of a small community and must be viewed in that way, at least in their essential aspects. It has always been a matter of regret to me that the way in which he accepted my resignation after I had done exactly what was expected of me by my government towards the middle of 1947, that it naturally created a situation where I had no desire to see him and he had a certain reluctance, I think, to see me as, being a man in many ways of fine feelings, it was rather distressing to have to look me in the face. I will refer to this in another memorandum.