

# The Reader's Digest

*An article a day — of enduring significance, in condensed, permanent booklet form*

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## Billion-Dollar Watchdog

Condensed from The American Mercury

Stanley High



A MEMBER of the President's Cabinet picked up his phone. "I understand," said the voice of Senator Harry S. Truman of Missouri, "that you're planning to allow — a million and a half for his interest in the — which is being taken over by the government."

The Cabinet member hemmed and hawed, but finally admitted that such a sum had been considered.

"Well, if that's the case," said Truman, "I think we might have to investigate. The figure's too high."

What — eventually got was \$175,000.

For, modest and self-effacing though he is, Truman speaks with an authority equaled by few men in Washington. A hint from him that the Senate Committee to Investigate the War Program — of which he is chairman — may launch a probe is frequently enough to get quick and salutary results.

During the past two years, munitions makers, bureaucrats, dollar-a-year men, and Administration offi-

"The war was too big to be undertaken, overnight, by a nation that hadn't been raised to prepare for war. Mistakes, as a result, were bound to be made. Likewise, some chiselers and profiteers and mossbacks were bound, for a time, to have their innings. What our committee has tried to do has been to smooth the way for the honest, efficient, patriotic American in the war effort and make the going tough for those who were not."

— Senator Harry S. Truman

cials have been called to explain, under the questionings of this committee, what they are doing with Uncle Sam's money and why. Uncle Sam — thanks to their inquiries — has been saved at least a billion dollars.

What was stirring in him when he proposed such a committee to the Senate was righteous indignation at certain war-production inequities brought to his attention in numerous letters from his Missouri constituents. But when the Committee had followed through to the end some of the hints contained in these letters, the taxpayers had been saved a quar-



ter of a billion dollars in the one field of army camp construction alone, according to Lieutenant General Brehon Somervell, head of Services of Supply.

Disclosures by enterprising, fair-playing, average Americans are still the Committee's most carefully considered and fruitful leads.

A draftsman in one of the government's new ordnance plants wrote that most of the 200 men in the drafting department did nothing more useful much of the time than to play checkers, shoot craps, read the papers and listen to the radio. It took just a week, when the Committee laid the facts before the War Department, to clean up that situation.

A carpenter, working on defense housing in New Jersey, found the waste and shoddiness too much for his American ideas of honest work. His official complaint, however, got nowhere. He wrote to the Truman Committee. Its investigation uncovered a bona fide housing scandal which led to the indictment of the contractor and brought widespread reforms in the federal housing procedure.

An employe of a large steel company witnessed a faked inspection of inferior steel shipped to the U. S. Navy and Maritime Commission. His protest to his superiors was fruitless, but his letter to the Truman Committee brought about a wide-open inquiry, the establishment by the government of double-check in-

spection and the indictment of the company and certain of the officials.

The Committee discovered that repair rates in West Coast shipyards were still based on a peacetime hourly rate. Therefore, under a 24-hour-a-day wartime schedule, profits were enormous. Looking into the files an investigator found a letter from one admiral to another admiral which said: "This matter of divergence of rates will be extremely difficult to explain to the Truman Committee." It was. In fact so difficult that finally a uniform rate schedule was worked out with savings to the government of millions of dollars.

Late last February, an Illinois housewife wrote the Committee: "There seems to be plenty of sugar. If the government wants us to raise fruit it must make sugar available for canning. If I can't buy sugar, I'll be buying canned peaches, using my ration points to buy something I can make myself. . . ."

The letter went into the "canning-sugar" file. By the end of March, the file had several hundred letters in it — all to the same effect. Whereupon, Senator Truman read a brief statement on the floor of the Senate: ". . . food will be scarcer next year . . . sugar for preserving food in the home should be made available . . . the Office of Price Administration, instead of facilitating home canning, is planning to make it difficult to obtain sugar . . . I have instructed that a full investigation be made immediately."



Overnight, OPA took second thought, reversed itself and made canning sugar available to the nation's housewives in greatly increased quantity and without loss of ration allotment.

Army and navy as well as civilian activities having to do with the war are liberally probed by the Committee. Recently a member, talking with army officials, discovered that camps in Florida were using canned grapefruit juice. Further investigation into army food supplies caused 30,000,000 cases of canned fruit and vegetables in an overstocked army reserve to be released for civilian use.

The Committee found that the navy was insisting on building tank-carrying invasion barges designed by its Bureau of Ships, despite the fact that in performance tests those designed by Andrew Jackson Higgins' company in New Orleans had been found notably superior and the Bureau's incapable of the use for which they were intended. Subsequently, not only did the navy adopt the Higgins design but the Committee disclosures led to a reorganization of the Navy Department's Bureau of Ships.

The Committee was authorized on February 10, 1941. Partly, no doubt, because in five years Truman had made few demands on its time, none on its patience, the Senate listened considerately to a heavily factual speech, and voted the investigation of national defense he asked for. Pretty sure that nothing much would

come of it, they gave him a shoe-string \$15,000 to get going.

With the shotgun authority of the original resolution the Committee has for two years dug into all the messy scandals of the greatest spending enterprise in history. And it has done the job on a mere \$200,000, doled out by the Senate in dribbles. With only 15 investigators and 18 clerks and stenographers, the chairman and the members have made up by their own zeal for the lack of an adequate staff. When the Committee's first annual report was issued in January 1942, it had already established itself as the public's most accessible court of appeals and the sharpest goad in the government.

The Committee's most active members are relative newcomers to the Senate. Six of the ten are freshman Senators and thus singularly free from hat-in-hand responsiveness to pressure from high places. The Committee's reports have the wholesome flavor of the grass roots. That is an important reason why the Committee has so notably succeeded.

Distinguished only for his honesty and industriousness, Truman came to the Senate in 1934 straight from a county judgeship. After nine years in the Senate, honesty and industriousness are still his chief distinctions.

From the beginning Truman tried to make sure that his committee was not a one-man show. His colleagues had special skills and talents, and Truman was determined to make use of these. They have worked to-



gether — six Democrats and four Republicans — with remarkably little friction. Almost every member of the Committee has come to the chairman at one time or another with reports of blunders in the production program. All right, Truman has invariably said, you look into that; if necessary, form a subcommittee and do a thorough job.

Counsel and chief administrator for the Committee is Hugh A. Fulton, broad-shouldered, heavy-set ex-assistant to the Attorney General. Fulton made a name for himself in New York City in the investigations which exposed the fleecing operations of Howard Hopson, former head of Associated Gas and Electric. Truman picked him for the Committee job because he had an urge for the truth and could hit hard, but had no ideological grudges.

Fulton meets Truman almost every morning, often in "Truman's Doghouse" — a small room adjoining the Senator's office. Here they go over pertinent letters, newspaper clippings, investigators' reports: here procedure and strategy — subsequently laid before the other committee members — are planned. Hard work accounts for the Committee's high average of achievement. That the Committee has never given a minority report, Truman attributes to the fact that the investigations are so completely factual

**I**F you ask Harry Truman's lifelong friend, Mayor Roger T. Sermon of Independence, Missouri, to tell you what the Senator was like as a boy, he'll shake his head mournfully.

"Harry just wasn't normal," he'll say. "He'd sit in the library all day and read."

That's confirmed by everybody around Independence, the town about 15 miles out of Kansas City where Truman grew up. Harry never went fishing or hunting, or splashed in the old swimming hole. He read. He read everything in the school library, then went to the public library and asked for history books.

Military campaigns and war heroes were his obsession. He devoured all he could find about every great general, and mapped out the major campaigns of all the wars of American history.

A friendly congressman agreed to appoint him to West Point, but the physical exams revealed a serious defect in one eye. However, he joined the National Guard and in 1918 went overseas with the 35th Division as a first lieutenant. He came back a major.

Truman's men say he never asked a soldier under him to go anywhere he would not go nor do anything he would not do. He was called "Accountability" Truman, because as an officer he was so strict about accounting for every item of government property under his charge. They say that when one of the field guns of the battery Truman commanded was blown to bits in the Argonne drive of September 1918 Captain Truman insisted upon carrying along some of the pieces to prove his official report about the loss.

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they are bound to result in unanimous conclusions.

The Committee has power to subpoena witnesses but none to enforce action or punish wrongdoing. Its sole weapon is the facts, plus publicity, plus public opinion. Much of the Committee's most effective work, however, gets no publicity. To insure quick action on Truman facts, numerous war agencies — among them, the War and Navy Departments, the Maritime Commission, the War Production Board — have

representatives attached, full-time, to the Committee.

Administration conduct in the last war was the subject of no fewer than 116 Congressional investigations — all of them made after the war. This time Congress has not waited. Its numerous investigations are going forward while it is still possible — by bettering and speeding the war effort — to do something about it. Nowhere is so much being done about it with such constructive results as in the Truman Committee

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