

Letter to President Harry Truman about the Murder of Harry T. Moore

Megan Jones

In late December of 1951, a news story out of Mims, Florida, shocked the nation. The story contained elements of prejudice, discrimination, injustice, lynching, rape, bombings, and murder. The story not only made headlines across the country, but also the world. On the evening of December 25, a bomb was placed under the floor joists of the bedroom of Harry T. Moore, a former schoolteacher and the executive secretary of the Florida chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, while he, his wife, and daughter slept in their beds. Moore had drawn attention to himself through his civil rights activities, which included registering African Americans to vote, fighting against unfair labor practices, and exposing cases of lynching and police brutality. His campaign against what he believed was the wrongful conviction of three African American males accused of raping a white woman, known as the Groveland case, however, attracted the immediate attention of the Ku Klux Klan. Moore died as a result of his injuries, followed by his wife nine days later. He was the first NAACP official murdered in the modern civil rights struggle.

The public outcry following the shocking murder of Harry and Harriette Moore was swift. Letters, cards, and petitions poured into the White House from labor unions, private citizens, community organizations, and schoolchildren from across the country. According to White House mail clerk R.G. Moore, by March 1952, approximately 6,245 cards were being held in the mailroom regarding the bombing in Florida. One of those letters addressed to President Harry Truman was written by Miss Arden Rappaport, a student at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. She challenged the president,

We, as a nation standing for freedom and equality for all men, must pursue the ruthless undemocratic men who killed this citizen for trying to assert the natural rights of his people. These men should be apprehended and punished as living examples that

the United States not only preaches high moral values, but lives and acts by her own dictates and principles.

As with the others who wrote to the president, she expected him to do something. The writers all implored, directed, and told the president,

You, as President, must bear the full burden for the shocking murder of Harry Moore ... your civil rights proclamations are fine, but actions speak louder than words.

—Vivian Schatz, a citizen from Brooklyn, NY

What are you going to do about it, Mr. President? We call upon you to enforce our Constitution.

—A petition issued and signed by

members of the 7th South Club, American Labor Party

I am white, born Christian and Protestant, but I know the history of Nazi Germany, where such incidents started with actions against Communists, then spread to labor union reprisals, the actions against Jews and finally against Catholics, Protestants, conservatives, including those who had looked aside in the beginning. I am only too well aware that our treatment of the Negro, of Jews and of other minorities in the North leaves much to be desired. I can only say that I do as much as I can to change conditions here for the better, and that I feel sure that conditions should be improved all over our country so that it will be a better place for all of us to live in.

—Mary E. Kiplinger,
a citizen from
New York, NY

Teaching Method

Rappaport's letter and the others suggest a potential teaching method. Just as they ask the president to do something, you can ask your students to take on the role of the president and insist that they do something. Begin by providing students with a copy of the letter. Encourage additional research into the life and civil rights activities of Moore and the

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M. P. Neal

Sarah

Lawrence College - Bronxville, New York

To file

1/23

January 21, 1952

FILE - M.V.C.

Dear Mr. Truman,

I am a student at Sarah Lawrence College, and for the past eight or nine years, my schooling has emphasized principles that our country stands for — freedom to think and act as an individual, equality for all men, protection for the citizen to maintain his ideals. I cannot help but feel puzzled when I read about such incidents as the murder of Harry T. Moore and his wife. Is our philosophy of action different from the high ideals which we advocate?

It seems to me that the course that we, as a nation standing for freedom & equality for all men, must take is to pursue the ruthless undemocratic men who killed this citizen for

trying to assert the natural rights of his people. These men should be apprehended and punished, as a living example that the United States not only preaches high moral values, but lives and acts by Her own dictates & principles.

Sincerely,

(Miss) Arden Rappaport

treatment of African Americans in Florida between 1934 and 1951. Direct students to respond to Rappaport's letter as though they were President Truman. Remind students to consider what actions the president can take according to powers of the executive branch outlined in the Constitution (e.g., ensure that laws are faithfully executed, refer the case to the Department of Justice, deliver a speech to Congress and the American people) as they craft their responses. Suggest that their responses be in the form of a letter, a speech, or a list of action items. Invite students to share their responses during a class discussion.

Additional Information

After discussing their responses, tell students that on October 11, 1952, Truman gave a speech in Harlem, NY, that encapsulated much of his actual response, and highlighted the efforts of his administration:

It was also last year that the Nation was shocked by the bomb murder in Florida of Harry T. Moore and his wife. These tragic deaths came shortly after the bombings of synagogues and Catholic churches and of the housing project at Carver Village. For several months the FBI has been gathering

evidence on the mobs responsible for these outrages. And this week the United States Government began to present evidence to a Federal grand jury at Miami.

The federal grand jury he referenced in the speech had been convened as a result of the FBI investigation in 1951. Immediately following the Moore bombing, over 75 special agents were sent to Brevard County, Florida, where they interviewed over 1,500 people.

In June 1953, the federal grand jury described the Klan activity in Florida as a "catalog of terror." The presiding judge, however, dismissed the case, ruling there was no federal jurisdiction in the incidents. As a result, the investigation was officially closed in 1955.

That was not the end of the story, though. In 1978 and again in 1992, the case was re-opened by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, but no new evidence was uncovered until 2005. On August 16, 2006, Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist announced the conclusion of his 20-month investigation. The report named four suspects found to be directly involved in the bombing, two of whom had been suspects in the original 1951 investigation. All four suspects were members

of the Ku Klux Klan, but were deceased by the time the report was released. To this day, the Moore case remains unsolved. 

Additional Resources

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/truman_civilrights/index.php

Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore from PBS. www.pbs.org/harrymoore

The Harry T. & Harriette V. Moore Cultural Complex, Inc. www.harryharriette.moore.org/

About the Featured Document:

Letter from Arden Rappaport to President Harry Truman, January 21, 1952; Case File 114-18-208, section 7; Classified Subject Files, 1930-1987; General Records of the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Record Group 60; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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