

The more the conversation focused on Truman, the more clear it became: Truman was not a strong candidate — in fact, he was quite obscure in comparison with men such as Byrnes and Barkley. Also, there was concern about Truman's age, that he was too old. But Truman had no enemies. He would not alienate any section of the electorate. Even with his Pendergast past, he seemed the least problematic choice. Roosevelt leaned forward in his wheelchair and placed his hand on Robert Hannegan's leg.

"Now, Bob," the president said, "you want Truman."

"Yes," came the answer. "I do."

Roosevelt turned to the committee treasurer, Edwin Pauley. "Ed, do you?"

"Yes."

"Do all the rest of you?" asked Roosevelt.

All said yes.

Exactly what Roosevelt said at this point has been debated, but sources present at this meeting have him saying something very similar: "Boys, I guess it's Truman."

"Truman just dropped into the slot," recalled Ed Flynn, a powerful Democratic figure from the Bronx, who was there that night. "It was agreed that Truman was the man who would hurt [the ticket] least," said Flynn.

Still, Roosevelt refused to make any commitment. Party officials realized that he could not choose any candidate without offending other party members. Instead, he would mollify the ambitious contenders by leading them all on, then he would make no final choice at all, leaving it up to the convention in Chicago. As Pauley later recalled: "Roosevelt was ducking the whole thing."

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Two days before the convention was to open, Truman was resting in his room at the Stevens Hotel when a knock came on the door. It was Robert Hannegan. The two men knew each other well; Hannegan was from St. Louis, and Truman had helped get him his job as Democratic National Committee chairman. Hannegan gave the senator the hard sell: he should campaign to become vice president.

"Harry," said Hannegan, "the president wants you to be his running mate."