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Little Helpers: Harry Vaughan, His Cronies, and Corruption in the Truman Administration

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BOOK REVIEW

Greene, John Robert. ***Little Helpers: Harry Vaughan, His Cronies, and Corruption in the Truman Administration***. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2024. 177 pages. $40 (hardcover).

Since his earliest days in politics as a Pendergast-supported Jackson County judge, Harry Truman has been dogged by associations with corruption and machine politics. For many years, Truman's commendable service investigating the United States defense program as a senator during World War II and ascension to the presidency following Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945 overshadowed his previous reputation as the "senator from Pendergast." Without implicating Truman himself, *Little Helpers* by John Robert Greene revisits corruption during his presidency by profiling the life and scandals of Harry Vaughan, one of Truman's closest friends and advisors.

A presidential historian well-versed in this era, Greene argues that Vaughan and his unscrupulous associates exploited their access to and connection with Truman for personal gain. He also suggests that these scandals were more than isolated incidents, insinuating more pervasive corruption within the administration with Vaughan at the center. Leveraging copious historical evidence, including primary source material from numerous archives, oral history interviews, and memoirs, Greene substantiates Vaughan's pattern of official misconduct, Truman's consistent indifference toward it, and the resulting deleterious consequences thereof. Greene's close inspection of Vaughan paints an unflattering portrait of the Truman White House.

Little Helpers can primarily be understood as a political biography of Harry Vaughan. Given the dearth of scholarly attention regarding Vaughan's place in Truman's inner circle, Greene's emphasis on Vaughan is an important contribution to our understanding of his presidency. If he is mentioned at all, most Truman biographies tend to diminish Vaughan, depicting him as a sort of court jester or bit player, hanging on to serve as comic relief. Greene dismisses this characterization; instead, he describes Vaughan as a consequential figure with an outsized role within the administration (134). Vaughan carried out sensitive missions, oversaw important projects, and routinely spoke on behalf of the president. Through his formal role as a military aide to the president and his friendship with Truman, Vaughan wielded considerable political influence inside and outside Washington. After allegations of his abuse of this influence surfaced, Vaughan and his cronies were investigated by the congressional committee Truman himself once chaired.

This book complicates the historical legacy of the Truman administration. In doing so, it also revises the historical narrative of the trust gap between the federal government and the American public, tracing its origins back to the Truman administration—predating the conventional flashpoints of Lyndon Johnson's "credibility gap" regarding the Vietnam War, or Richard Nixon's Watergate cover-up. Besides examining prominent scandals in the Truman administration, *Little Helpers* enriches our understanding of important features of the emerging modern presidency. Specifically, it shows how staffing decisions in the White House critically affect the efficacy of the wider administration. After Roosevelt built up the administrative state to end the Depression and win the war, Truman came to power with unprecedented administrative capacity. The emergence of the Executive Office of the President (EOP) in 1939 further consolidated power in the White House, extending presidential reach and elevating the influence of high-level staffers. In this regard, Truman's staffers were

trailblazers. *Little Helpers* shows how effective staffers can enhance a president's capacity to control the sprawling federal government, while self-serving ones can use their access for personal ends.

Little Helpers also provides an intriguing case study of how the evolving media landscape during the Truman years reshaped the nature of government oversight and the relationship between Congress and the presidency. The Hoey Committee, which investigated the Vaughan scandals, featured an upstart senator named Joseph McCarthy (R-WI). During these investigations, McCarthy first developed some of his signature techniques to obtain publicity and dramatize alleged government misconduct (87–88). Greene adroitly assesses the impact of television in postwar congressional investigations. Comparing the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigation of Alger Hiss to the Hoey Committee investigation of Vaughan, Greene notes that while both received extensive coverage in the newspapers, only the Hiss hearings were televised, demonstrating the new medium's superior ability to captivate audiences compared to radio broadcasts and print media.

Ultimately, this short but engaging book does not definitively prove pervasive corruption in the Truman White House, as it is not a comprehensive investigation of the issue. Nor is this the aim of the study. The ambitions of this book are relatively modest; it homes in on the lives and the scandalous behavior of just a few previously obscure individuals in Truman's orbit during his presidency. However, the ramifications of this book's findings on Truman's legacy are significant. *Little Helpers* raises questions about Truman's judgment and tolerance for evident misconduct. Readers of this text are left to wonder if Truman's approach to Vaughan reflected a steadfast commitment to personal loyalty, or was indicative of a broader culture of corruption in the White House sanctioned by the president. Greene's history of Vaughan's role in the Truman White House sheds new light on postwar politics, particularly how changing dynamics between the media, Congress, and the president redefined how corruption was addressed at the highest levels.

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