

From Truman to Roosevelt Roundtable Review



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Review by Alonzo L. Hamby, Ohio University

Two Presidents, One Enigmatic Dictator, and the Origins of the Cold War

Wilson Miscamble's impressive and welcome new book is far more than top-down, president-centric diplomatic history. Nevertheless, Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman loom large in this book, simply because only they could make the decisions and establish the atmospherics that brought the United States into first a triumphant alliance, then a cold war, with the Soviet Union. Hovering over all their actions, moreover, was the effort to establish a relationship in the name of peace and freedom with one of the twentieth century's most ruthless despots.

Alonzo L. Hamby is Distinguished Professor of History at Ohio University. A graduate of the University of Missouri, Professor Hamby specializes in 20th century U.S. history, especially politics and culture. His books include: *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (1973); *The Imperial Years: The United States since 1939* (1976); *Liberalism and Its Challengers: F.D.R. to Reagan* (2d ed., 1992); *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (1995), and *For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s* (2004).

In today's world, Josef Stalin may seem to all but a handful of remaining true believers a one-dimensional tyrant of outsized proportions. In the world of global war and its aftermath, many saw him as the leader of a heroic people who made unimaginable sacrifices in the struggle against Nazism. To Roosevelt and Truman he was an enigma, a puzzle that had to be solved. A comfortable relationship with the USSR rested on a convincing answer to the question: "What does Stalin want?" Miscamble's work vividly displays the difficulties American statesmen had with that question. In the process, it diminishes the reputation of both his presidents, while displaying Stalin as a model of totalitarian consistency.

Roosevelt. Miscamble's convincing dissection of Roosevelt's foreign policy is perhaps his major contribution. Much of it will be familiar to students of World War II diplomacy -- and to historians of American liberalism. What is noteworthy is the sustained nature of his indictment. Here one finds not failures balanced against achievements, but rather a consistent lack of vision and reliance on wishful thinking instead of a clear-headed grasp of international realities.

Few presidents have been more prepared than Roosevelt to manage a nation's international relations. Born into an old and cosmopolitan establishment, he had traveled widely, received an elite education, and since boyhood known numerous individuals who represented the United States to the wider world. An avid reader of Alfred Thayer Mahan in his teens, Assistant Secretary of the Navy at the age of thirty-one, he was a genuine expert on naval strategy and capabilities. A keen observer and deep admirer of Theodore Roosevelt's diplomacy, he could legitimately feel that he was carrying on a family tradition. Leader of a World War I delegation to Britain and France in 1918, he had met with high-

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level statesmen in both nations. In 1919, he had observed the Versailles Conference close-up for six weeks.

Why then was he unable to transfer this wealth of experience to the great world crisis of the 1940s?

Miscamble's Roosevelt is a diplomatic leader who fundamentally disliked and distrusted his democratic allies, thought "Europe" had been a source of conflict in the world, saw European imperialism as an intolerable threat to future peace, and placed his hopes for world stability in a close relationship with the Soviet Union. Apparently never gauging the potential for conflict between American and Soviet interests, he seems to have believed that profuse demonstrations of good will and a personal relationship with Josef Stalin would be sufficient to resolve any disputes that might arise between their nations. In the first Big Three meeting at Tehran he attempted to ingratiate himself with Stalin by needling Churchill at every opportunity. He gave the Soviet Union carte blanche in its requests for Lend-Lease aid; Britain by contrast had to present detailed justification and engage in complex negotiations.

Publicly pursuing a rhetoric of idealism that Woodrow Wilson would have admired, Roosevelt privately considered himself a practitioner of realistic power politics. Yet he was feckless enough to assume that China would be one of the "Four Policemen" that would run the world behind the façade of the United Nations organization. It is easy to consider him a dilettante with a grossly misplaced confidence in his own capabilities and a lack of interest in using the large body of expertise housed in the Department of State and the Foreign Service. The president's closest aide in foreign relations (so long as his health held out) was Harry Hopkins, a social worker and Depression relief impresario. On Soviet affairs, he was more swayed by amateur diplomat Joseph Davies than by such Soviet specialists as George Kennan and Charles Bohlen.

Roosevelt viewed the Grand Alliance of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union not as a transitory amalgam of nations with a common interest in the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, but as the lasting foundation for a new democratic world order freed from the evils of European imperialism. Britain and perhaps China would be junior partners, the United States and the USSR the senior managers. As nearly as one can tell, Roosevelt had no concern that Soviet imperialism might be worse than French, British, or Dutch imperialism and considerably less constrained by a sense of limits.

There were legitimate explanations for some of these attitudes; perhaps Miscamble should give them more credence than he does. First and foremost, it was imperative to keep the Soviet Union in the war. Until the end of 1943, the specter of a separate peace between the USSR and Germany haunted American and British foreign policy. And once the alliance was solid, few Americans wanted a hostile relationship with the USSR after the Axis had been put down. When the war ended, there was little point in attempting to push back the Soviet sphere of dominance established by the Red Army in central and eastern Europe. Roosevelt's reduction of foreign relations to personal relations was hardly unique. It was,

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and is, a common fallacy of Western democratic statesmanship, practiced in one fashion or another by most of his successors, encouraged by a superficial press and clueless public. (Harry Truman, for example, would not be above thinking from time to time that if he could just get through to Stalin, the problems between their nations would be quickly solved. Recall the aborted "Vinson mission" of 1948.)

Finally, Roosevelt was in many respects an excellent war leader. He turned over military operations to the professionals and never interfered with them. His radio addresses and speeches, justifying the conflict in terms of the highest American ideals, were inspirational. It is hard to imagine that any other possible chief executive could have been so effective in rallying the American people.

All this said, Miscamble's criticisms are valid. They are not new, but they are brought together with impressive comprehensiveness and restraint. Most importantly, they are not personal in the mode of so much of the criticism leveled at Roosevelt over the years. The FDR that emerges from this book is not malign, simply misguided in a fashion common for his time:

Apparently he shared the sympathy of certain left-wing and progressive members of his New Deal coalition for the Soviets once they moved into the antifascist camp. It must surely be said that he flirted at least with something of the romance of many Western intellectuals regarding the Soviet experiment. That dire reality was judged not so much on what it was but rather on what it might become As the war progressed, the president even proved quite relaxed in the face of warnings of Soviet espionage Roosevelt held tough-minded critics of the Soviet Union largely at arm's length throughout the war. He preferred the counsel of those like former ambassador Davies and, most importantly, Harry Hopkins. (49)

Miscamble, in fact, sees Roosevelt not as a non-ideological opportunist, but as a rather dogmatic Popular Front liberal, persuaded that the USSR, for all its faults, was a progressive force in history, that Stalin was qualitatively different from Hitler, and that the Nazi-Soviet alliance of 1939-41 had been an aberration. The attitude was common in the liberal press during the war; read any issue of the *New Republic* or the *Nation*. Vice-president Henry Wallace in his notable 1942 speech, "The Price of Free World Victory," declared that the USSR had surpassed the U.S. in most measures of democracy. Many members of the administration shared his perspective, which perfectly expressed the dominant mood of the left. In that sense, Roosevelt was a man of his time. He was also profoundly mistaken. Whether, like most of the liberal movement, he would have come to realize that mistake and commit to the containment of Soviet power can never be known. One puts down this book thinking it doubtful.

Truman. Roosevelt's successor would go through his own period of floundering. Harry S. Truman came to the presidency with none of Roosevelt's prior experience in foreign relations, although, as Miscamble shows, he did take a keen interest in the topic and stake out positions during the war. Miscamble is somewhat more critical of Truman than I.

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Where he sees lack of direction and even befuddlement, I see sound instincts and about as rapid a reorientation of policy toward the Soviet Union as possible in the flux of postwar events.

Truman came to office sincerely committed to following Roosevelt's policies, but with different attitudes about their implementation. He had no illusions about the USSR, which he had long considered a totalitarian state. He understood the importance of power in international relations. He saw negotiation, whether in domestic politics or in diplomacy, as a process of give-and-take, not unilateral concession. At the same time, he had no interest in a hostile relationship. When he met Stalin at Potsdam, he came away thinking he had encountered the Russian version of a tough, no-nonsense American political boss, who could be trusted to keep his word. He was unavoidably dependent in the beginning on Roosevelt's trusted enablers, Davies and Hopkins. His appointment of James Byrnes as Secretary of State, while popular in Washington, provided no sense of direction to American foreign policy. Byrnes was a tactician, a deal-maker, not a strategist with a considered grasp of international affairs.

Where Roosevelt had followed a policy of postponement whenever disagreement came up, Truman wanted agreements that would stand. By the end of 1945, he was becoming increasingly doubtful. The Kennan long telegram of February 1946, the subsequent Soviet rejection of the Baruch Plan for international control of atomic energy, crises in Greece, Turkey, and Iran -- all turned him toward confrontation. The conversion of Dean Acheson, genuinely soft toward the USSR as an Assistant Secretary of State, was critical also. The real beginning of the Cold War was in the spring of 1946, about a year after Truman took office. It is hard to see how it could have started sooner.

Stalin. Miscamble probes both Roosevelt and Truman insightfully and, a few qualms aside, very successfully. Stalin is a different story. We see Roosevelt and Truman reacting to him, trying to reach out to him, and, in Truman's case, finally breaking with him. We do not get as high a level of analysis of his motivation. In general, Miscamble sees him as paranoid, unscrupulous, perhaps ideologically driven, and pressing for as much expansion as the West would tolerate. In the end, the United States was not prepared to challenge his Eastern European conquests, but ready to stand fast against his ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Western Europe. It seems pretty clear that Roosevelt would have tolerated the Soviet dominance "from Stettin to Trieste" that Churchill denounced in Fulton, Missouri. So also would have Truman. Both presidents would have hoped for a loose grip akin to that established over Finland after the war. In the end, it was Stalin's rejection of the "Finlandization" of Eastern Europe and his efforts to extend Soviet power, not American diplomacy, that made the Cold War inevitable.

The Achievement. Until recently, the major study of this period was John Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War* (1972), a literate and perceptive narrative that covers much the same ground as *From Roosevelt to Truman*. No doubt, Gaddis and Miscamble could find numerous specifics to argue about. Moreover, Miscamble's placement of blame for the forty-five year crisis that came out of World War II is far less

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ambiguous than Gaddis's. What makes this book impressive, however, is the way in which it draws on a vast array of primary and secondary sources unavailable to Gaddis and pulls them into a coherent and convincing narrative. The result is the new hegemonic work on the origins of the Cold War. Gaddis's book merited a Bancroft Prize. This one deserves similar recognition.

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